

At the Still Point

Joni Brenner

Gallery opening hours

Tuesday – Friday: 10 am–6 pm

Saturday: 12am–5 pm
and by appointment

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COVER
Brow 2015

PAGES 2-3
Heart of light 2015 (detail)

LEFT
Os 2015 (detail)

At the Still Point

Elizabeth Burroughs

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor
towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

TS Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

The new body of works is arrayed about Brenner's studio, a con-
vocation of presences, their gazes directed silently towards us. This
group of portraits of Scott Hazellhurst, Brenner's husband, have the
emotional consonance and intensity of a sonnet cycle. Shaped
within a strict set of parameters – the same sitter, similar modest
dimensions, a limited range of bony off-whites, and almost without
exception, the same frontal view – these presences are both elo-
quent and silent.



Pre 2011



Emergent 2011



Setting out 2015



Lucid Stillness 2015

British artist Celia Paul, in her catalogue for her show *Stillness* (2004: 14) observes

I think that stillness in a picture can only happen if it takes a long time (and probably many scraped-off layers and changes). It's like a newly-painted room still jangles with the presence of the decorators, whereas an old room has acquired its stillness, however turbulent the lives of its tenants.

The stillness of this cycle of portraits comes, one feels, from having taken a long time – and many scraped-off layers and changes, as Paul says: the looking, the adaptations and accommodations needed to *know* a sitter well enough to represent him well enough, the silent intimacy of attention, getting to understand the mark-making needed to render some vital aspect of the man in the present, the appreciation of the gift of a busy man's time as willing sitter. These portraits make me see feelingly why Da Vinci argued that 'painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt.' But seeing is surely simply another modality for feeling? Seeing the poetry does not exclude the possibility of intense feeling – and in the discussion with Brenner as we went through the ceremony of naming these works, the emotion I saw well up time and time

again was gratitude, a thankfulness that frequently was without words.

It has been noticeable that over the years, as Brenner and I undertake the ritual of the naming of the works for the next exhibition, we make recourse to poetry to help put into words the very nub of the feeling that has been captured in the paintings. Shakespeare, Manley Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot – so often the portraits evoke a well-loved phrase from one poem or another. The two art forms truly are objective correlatives for one another – and it so makes me wonder that Leonardo had to make a case for their equivalence in the Renaissance. In the 21st century, it is almost as if one needs to make a case for the words, not so much for the image itself – 'one picture is worth a thousand words'.

This group of portraits of Scott Hazelhurst represents an ongoing exploration – 'ceaseless exploration' Eliot would call it – which has one end, and that is to know the deep structures of the face and body and the lineaments of flesh until they are as though one's own. Some of the names of the paintings, *Pre*, *Emergent*, *Setting out*, make reference to that exploration, to the finding of the coordinates and of being able to set them out. A look at the dates of the works helps the viewer to see this process of coming to know. The recognition comes – this is the place, the face sought through

the layers and changes. But, as much as each painting is an end, it is also a beginning, giving rise to new questions that demand new answers. Satisfaction is there, but always partial, the end often less certain than certain.

Other of the paintings' names refer to the recognition of some aspect of the sitter that has emerged and made itself felt during the making of the work. Brenner has spoken of how, unlike her other sitters before, Hazelhurst does not engage in conversation. The phrase that came to mind as she spoke was Yeats's 'companionable silence' – he is there, present, giving of himself perhaps as only a mate can. *Lucid stillness* (2015) is one such of these, where the sitter's presence, his *gravitas* even is unmistakable. In her Master's thesis, Brenner spoke about the desire to reproduce the actual contours of the sitter's face and body, and in a portrait such as this, one sees it in the assured arcs of the collar bones, the confident rendering of neck and forehead, the bold brushmarks of the hair. The ineradicable desire to capture the present – to be conscious like that is not to be in time – at least for that instant squeezed between future and past which pervades these portraits, and Brenner's work strives always to be at that conscious interstice before its inescapable reduction into the past.

I have so often used Eliot's phrase, 'the still point', without hav-

ing considered the multiple meanings of the word, *point*: the first is the one we all would immediately engage with – the imaginary mark of position in space or time (or both), the axis of the turning world, which itself does not move and yet which forms the pivot for the dance. But 'point' has a secondary meaning. It also means the main or particular idea: the silent purpose of this body of work is far larger than the individual works themselves. In looking at the works during the naming, Brenner wished that the portraits could always be together as a single, composite work. If one spends time looking slowly from one to the other, it is clear that, beyond the calling of love for the sitter, the calling of love for the very act of making is also the point of the works, the intrinsic purpose.

It would be remiss only to talk about the portraits, when alongside them there are also some evocative new paintings in Brenner's skull series. Her approach to exhibitions has been to view an upcoming exhibition as a moment of summation, as a point of selection from the array of works produced since the previous one. While we were looking at the skulls on canvas, she commented on how an observation by South African artist Penny Siopis had made her rethink her approach to putting together an exhibition. Siopis, in her catalogue, *Time and Again*, (2015: 251–252) writes:



Os 2015



Cranio 2015



Shadow of the world 2015

Experiments unsettle me and I often use exhibitions as opportunities to focus this unsettlement, to feel energised by a new set of limitations. I work by setting the conditions for something unpredictable to happen. The medium and the deliberate use of chance – it sounds so contradictory – provide a strategy to unsettle the habits of the hand and the habits of looking and thinking. It's like having another author on board constantly interrupting you.

Brenner decided that she would do the same with the present exhibition. She unsettled herself by deciding to undertake a series of large watercolours of skulls on canvas, a new direction for her. Working on canvas with watercolour was, she said, a real challenge – an admixture of control and of sometimes, having moved the canvas to allow the paint to pool, a matter of having simply to walk away and to do something else, like do the shopping. The element of unpredictability was both exciting and wearing, and did provide for the emergence of the three large watercolours, *Os*, *Cranio* and *Shadow of the world*. In each of them, the radiance of the white canvas has allowed for the skulls to be painted with shadow and light, through detailed application in the mandible

and through the flow of chance in others, particularly in the volumes and curves of the cranium. The rendering of the top of the skull suggests in each case an opening: it is as if the fontanelle of infancy has re-opened in these images, allowing a streaming in and out of the head, which in many cultures, is viewed as the seat of the soul.

But the big skulls, this time on canvas, have other earlier precedents, most recently in the form of a set of bronzes she produced in 2014 for an exhibition at the Nirox Sculpture Park. Instead of working on the intimate scale that she is used to, she was encouraged by the curators at Nirox and assisted by Angus Taylor and his team to construct her forms on a much larger and more imposing scale – and she moaned about it every inch of the way! But clearly working at the foundry with Taylor's team, unsettled the habits of the hand and of looking and seeing. Those bronzes, which felt completely at home in the mottled glade of the landscape at Nirox, are clearly the forbears for these new canvases, which have both a freshness and a confidence, the incorporation of new possibilities into the range of her work.

Shown alongside this trilogy of large skulls, are six smaller,

dense works on paper, part of the *Skull* series. These watercolours, part of Brenner's ongoing daily practice and study, never cease to surprise – evidence of the fact that one comes to the practice a new person each time. The works are somehow surprisingly inchoate but also individuated, both in the process of being and becoming.

The week of thinking and writing about these works of Brenner's has also been the week in which the *Homo naledi* finds have been shared with the world. The discovery of 15 or more (semi) fossilised skeletons in a dark and almost unreachable cavern in the Cradle of Humankind – one which never seems to have had easy access to the outside – has suggested that these very early hominins may well have carried or dragged their dead into these innermost recesses to protect the bodies from scavenging creatures. Such behaviour, if it can indeed be inferred from the collection of bones which seem to have been laid there over a period of time several million years ago, would suggest that these early beings displayed both insight and foresight, as well as emotional connections that drove the living so to protect their dead.

The moment in which I write is a rich concatenation of a new



Nirox Sculpture Park 2014

past, imagined by those underground astronauts from the evidence that they sifted from the cavern's muddy floor, and a different future – how will this consciousness gleaned from stone/bone affect our view of ourselves and the other sentient beings on this planet? Brenner has long thought and spoken of a companion to *Life of Bone*, an exhibition and book she produced in 2011 with a group of artists and scientists, writers, geneticists and medical doctors that explored the significance of bones, both human and fossilised, with the small *Taung* hominin skull at the centre of the study. At the time, they considered a sequel to the project which was tentatively imagined as *Life of Stone*, a project that would continue the art-meets-science exploration of place and deep time through the consideration of other, perhaps older fossils, and what they have to share. In her own studio practice, which has long had the cyclical nature of life and death and the attendant consideration of time passing as a focus in her studies of portraits and of skulls, perhaps the perturbations caused by *Homo naledi* will serve as a new unsettlement for Brenner who has, perfectly unobtrusively, 'the universe in her mind and hands', as Da Vinci once explained about the work that painters do.





Crown
2015
oil on linen
50 x 40 x 2.5 cm



Lucid Stillness
2015
oil on canvas
45.5 x 35.5 x 3.5 cm



Brow
2015
oil on granite
30.5 x 30.5 x 3 cm



Beyond
2015
oil on jelutong wood
35 x 29.5 x 3.5 cm



Setting out
2015
oil on canvas
45 x 35 x 5 cm



His mind moves upon silence

2015
oil on canvas
45.5 x 35.5 x 3.5 cm



Inner freedom

2015
oil on linen
35.5 x 28 x 2 cm



Perpetual possibility

2015
oil on canvas
61 x 46 x 3.5 cm



Heart of light

2015
oil on canvas
90 x 70 x 5 cm



Nót a moment's thought

2015
oil on jelutong wood
29.5 x 18 x 3.5 cm



Understanding

2014
oil on canvas
51 x 41 x 3.5 cm





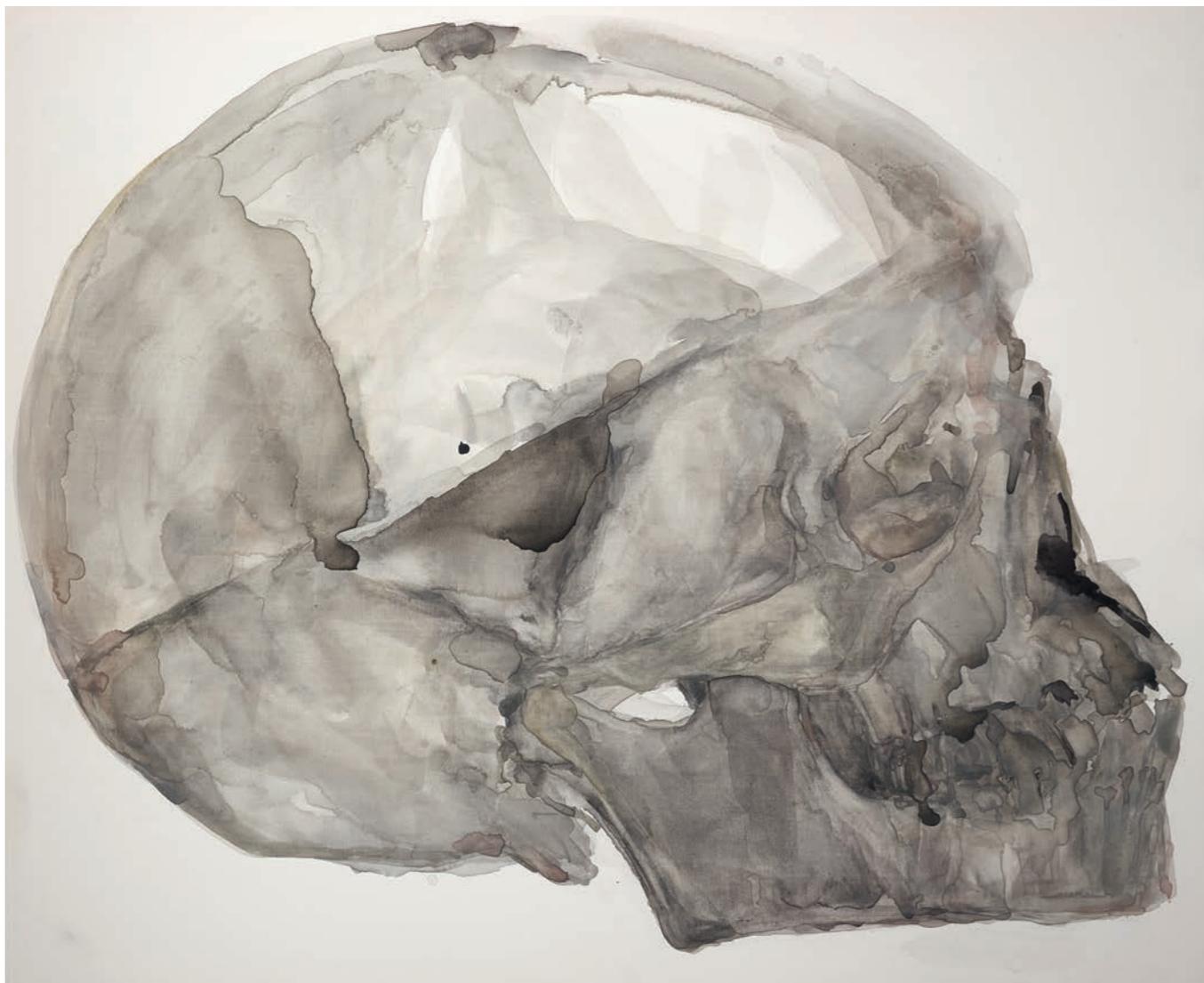
Emergent

2011
oil on canvas
20 x 15 x 3.5 cm



Pre-

2011
oil on canvas, board and plexi backing
15 x 15 x 2 cm



Os
2015
watercolour on canvas
132 x 162 x 2.5 cm



Cranio
2015
watercolour on canvas
60.5 x 75.5 x 2.5 cm

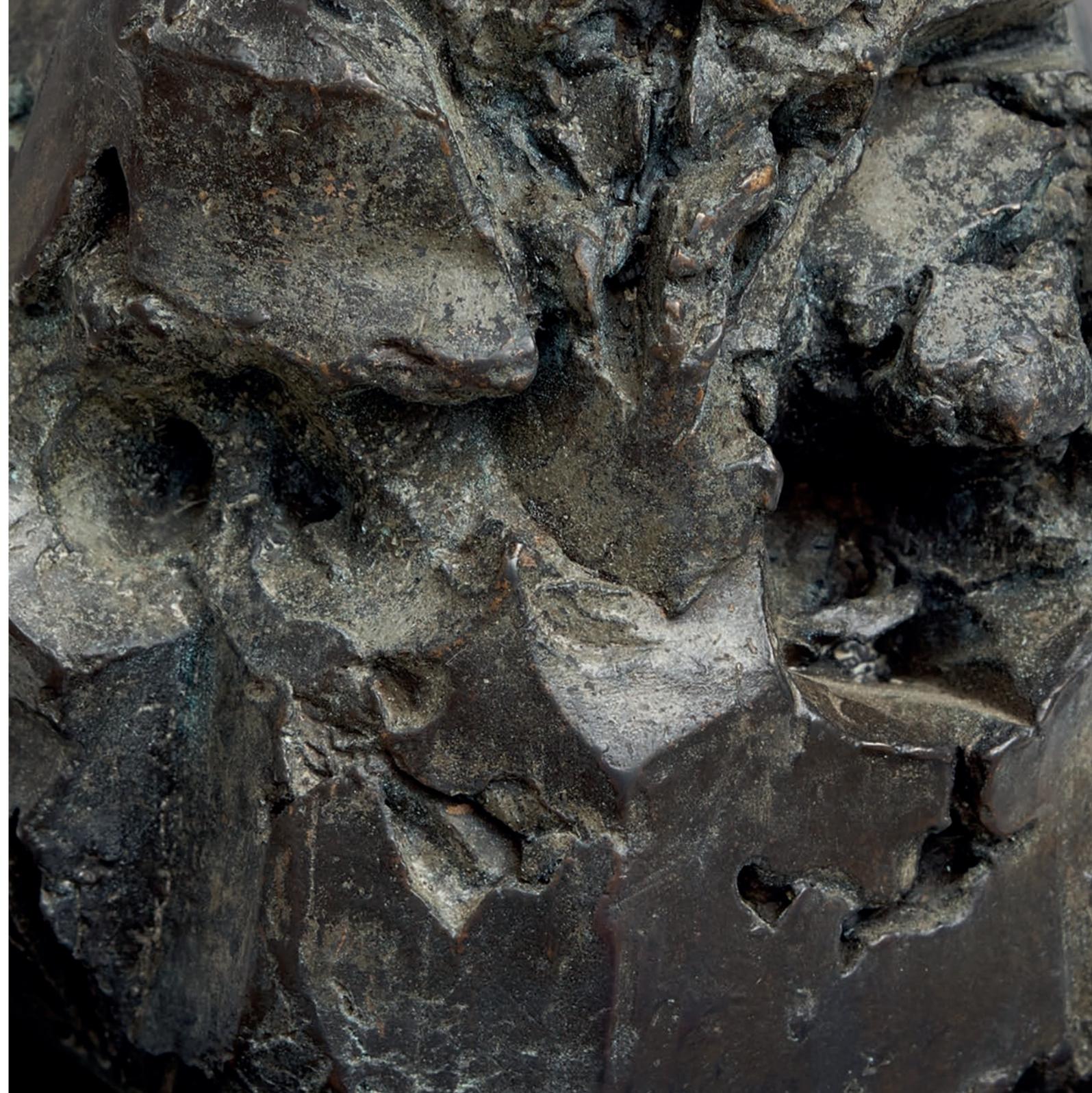


Shadow of the world

2015
watercolour on canvas
100 x 132 x 2.5 cm

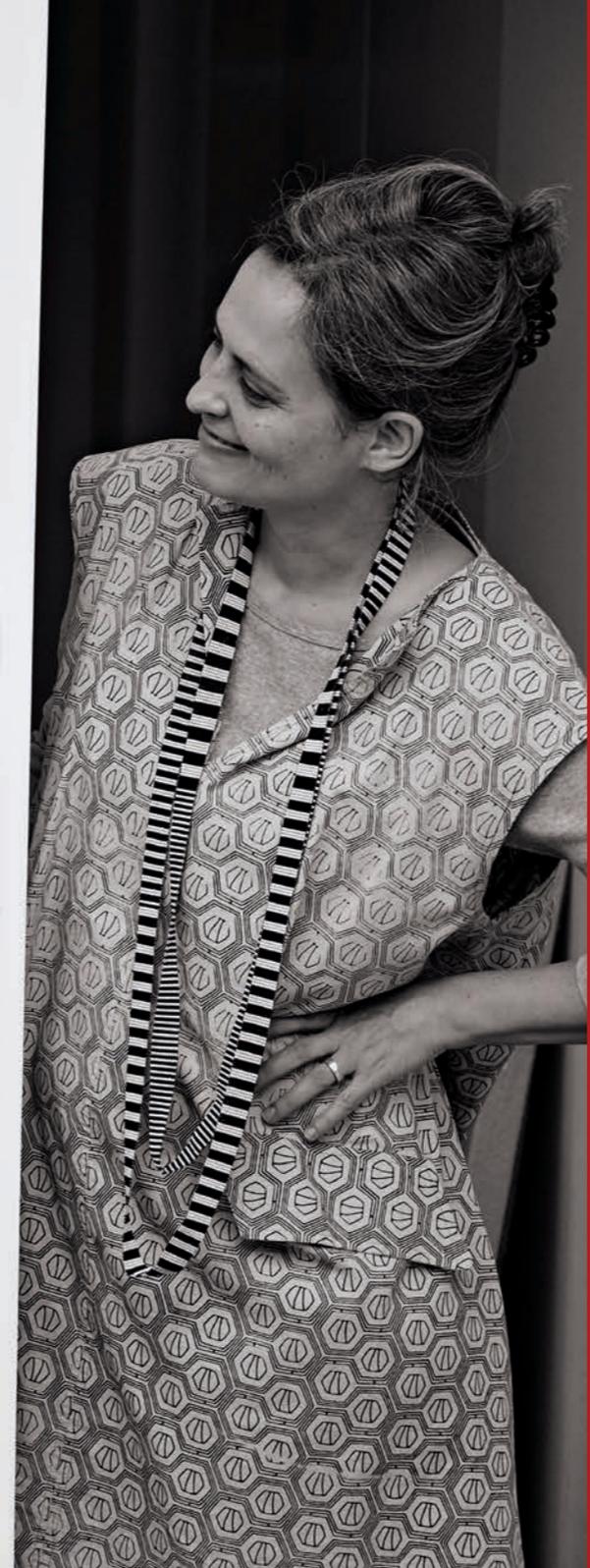


Facet
2014
Bronze
16 x 16 x 17 cm
edition of 6





Skull series (At the still point 1-6)
2014-2015
watercolour on paper
15 x 30 cm each
23 x 31 cm top right



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Photographs: James Fox; and Bob Cnoops pages 8 centre, 29, 34 and 35.

Bibliography

Feaver, W. 2004. 'Celia Paul' in *Celia Paul: Stillness*. exhibition catalogue. Marlborough: London & Abbot Hall Art Gallery; Cumbria

Olivier, G. (ed). 2014. *Penny Siopis: Time and Again*. Wits University Press: Johannesburg.

Joni Brenner

Born 1969, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Joni Brenner has a BA(FA) and a MA(FA) degree from the University of the Witwatersrand. She has been practising professionally as an artist since 1996 and has held solo exhibitions in Johannesburg and London. Her work is in several public and private collections. Brenner's primary work is in the field of portraiture though her work has moved away from traditional notions of likeness in portraiture, and presents rather, in David Bunn's words, 'a visual quarrel' with the tradition.

Brenner is a Principal Tutor in History of Art at the Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand. She was the recipient of the Vice-Chancellor's Teaching Award in 2008. The curated project *Lifelines: Object Biographies from the Standard Bank African Art Collection* received the Vice Chancellor's Team-teaching award in 2014.

Solo exhibitions

2015 *At the Still Point* Art First, London.

2011 *Unavoidable* Art First, London.

2008 *Collection* Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg.

2007 *Inventory* Art First, London

2006 *Wrest* Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg

2005 *Terra Rosa* Art First, London

2002 *Infra-red* Gertrude Posel Gallery, Wits. University, Johannesburg

1999 *Off the wall* Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg

1996 Alliance Francaise Gallery, Johannesburg

1996 MA exam exhibition at the Gertrude Posel Gallery, Wits. Johannesburg



Selected group exhibitions

- 2014 *From Sitting to Selfie: 200 years of South African portraits*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg.
- 2014 *NIROXsculpture Winter 2014*, Nirox Sculpture Park.
- 2011 *Life of bone: art meets science*, Wits Origins Centre. Book published by Wits University Press, Editors: Joni Brenner, Karel Nel, Elizabeth Burroughs.
- 2008 *Aftermath*, Art Extra, Johannesburg.
- 2006 *Figuring Faith*, curated by Fiona Rankin-Smith at Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg.
- 2002 *Once were painters*, Klein Karoo National Arts Festival, Western Cape.
No. 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Standard Bank Gallery, Wits. Fine Art Staff exhibition
ABSA Atelier exhibition, Absa bank Gallery, Johannesburg (short-listed).
ABSA Atelier exhibition, Absa bank Gallery, Johannesburg (merit award winner).
- 1999 *Emergence*, overview exhibition of the past 25 years of South African art launched at Grahamstown festival, traveled nationally.
Wedge, NSA Gallery Natal, Wits Fine Art staff exhibition.
Exchange, Sandton Civic Gallery, Wits Fine Art staff exhibition.
- 1998 *PGSI*, curated by Robert Hodgins in association with Newtown Galleries, Johannesburg.
- 1997 *Cyst – works in paint*, The Castle, Cape Town and Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg.
Lifetimes: An Exhibition of Southern African Art, curated by Ruth Sack, Munich.

Curated exhibitions

- 2015 *Life—Line—Knot: Six Object Biographies*, co-curated with History of Art and Wits Art Museum colleagues.
- 2014 *Lifelines: Object Biographies from the Standard Bank African Art Collection*, co-curated with History of Art and Wits Art Museum colleagues. For each of these exhibitions a book was published by Standard bank Gallery. Editors: Joni Brenner, Laura De Becker, Stacey Vorster and Justine Wintjies.

Public collections

- Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg.
University of the Witwatersrand – 11th Floor offices, Johannesburg
ABSA bank, Johannesburg
Sasol Headquarters
Johannesburg Art Gallery
Standard Bank Gallery
Unisa Art Gallery
KPMG
SABC
Alliance Française, Johannesburg.
PG Glass, Johannesburg.
South African Association of Art
Sandton Civic Gallery