

**JONI BRENNER** At the Still Point  
4 October – 14 November 2015

Joni Brenner takes the title for this exhibition from T S Eliot's *Burnt Norton*, the first poem in his *Four Quartets* (1943):

*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.....*

Portraits always exist on the threshold between past and future and Brenner's engagement with portraiture, her acute awareness of transience, mortality and the unrelenting passing of time fuels that ineradicable desire to capture the present.

In the catalogue for this exhibition\* Elizabeth Burroughs reflects on Brenner's intense engagement with her sitters in the studio sessions, and notes that, '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'.

Brenner's approach to portraiture is supported by the very materials she uses; unfired clay, wax, and granite and marble with their references to memorial tombstones - their longevity and durability. Yet when she paints portraits in oil on stone, *Brow* (2015) for instance, the image is at once mortal and intimate.

In an earlier catalogue essay from 2002 titled *Intimacy and Strangeness*\* Jessica Dubow captured the effects of Brenner's approach that result from a stubborn, if not futile resistance to creating any fixed representation of a sitter:

*For if portraiture is always an encounter between artist and sitter, then Joni maintains that relation as always only imminent, never realised. She never seeks to contain a face in a lasting impression but only to affirm its movements and remainders. And when at times a 'sitter's' face does appear, it erupts only as a 'flash' - like a fugitive memory - and so remains always on the edge of vision. Unclaimable, ungraspable, indeterminate, 'invisible', we are held by these faces but cannot possess them.*

The sitter in the first body of works for this exhibition is Scott Hazelhurst, Brenner's husband. As a group, Burroughs describes them as having '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 eloquent and silent.'

The second body of work marks a new departure in the arresting trilogy of large watercolours of skulls on canvas, *Os*, *Cranio* and *Shadow*. The mixture of control and unpredictability of the medium on canvas of this scale, makes for radiant images of shadow and light, evoking landscapes of the mind barely contained within the particular volumes and curves of the cranium. This looser 'mapping' of skull formation contrasts with the denser works on paper from the small *Skull Series* which are a part of Brenner's ongoing daily practice and study.

The links between portraits and skulls have been clear from the start. For Brenner, the memorial functions of portraits, and the ways in which they rest on the threshold between life and death, past and present, fuse readily with the concept of the co-presence of subject and object. Every skull has once belonged to an individual subject, and collectively, they are the most compelling of objects. They are deeply recognisable, and yet abstract - specific and yet anonymous.

Brenner's interest in skulls and their connection to portraiture as the internal architecture of the head, has extended in recent years to include a focus on the much earlier hominin

skulls, notably the small *Taung* child, the type specimen for *Australopithecus Africanus*. In 2011 Brenner co-curated an exhibition and edited a book entitled *Life of Bone: art meets science\**, and in 2014 she produced three large scale bronze sculptures of skulls that were exhibited at Nirox, a sculpture park in the Cradle of Humankind, a site where many of the famous hominin discoveries have been made, including the recent *Homo Naledi* finds which were shared with the world in September.

Explorations of deep time, the cyclical nature of life and death, and the constant consideration of time passing remain a focus in all Brenner's studies of skulls and portraits. While the portrait series brings to mind the 20<sup>th</sup> Century existential wrestle with human presence, with the figure, and its serial rendering in paint or bronze undertaken by Giacometti, by Kossoff, Auerbach and Freud, to name a few, Brenner's work with skulls is increasingly rooted in Africa, where she has access to the phenomenal, profound paleo-anthropological discoveries that keep making society stop and to re-consider itself as a species.

\*Published in 2002 by University of the Witwatersrand for Brenner's exhibition *INFRA RED*.

\**Life of Bone: art meets science*. Editors: Joni Brenner, Elizabeth Burroughs, Karel Nel, Published by Wits University Press 2011

\*Illustrated catalogue with an essay by Elizabeth Burroughs accompanies this exhibition: *At the Still Point* 2015, Art First, London.

Born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, Joni Brenner is Principal Tutor in Art History at Wits School of Arts, Johannesburg. Her work is represented in Museum and public collections in South Africa, including Johannesburg Art Gallery, Wits Art Museum, Origins Museum and Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria. She has twice been awarded residencies at the Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris. In 2006 she was an Ampersand Fellow in New York and in the same year was awarded a Lineus Palmer teaching exchange in Stockholm.