

JONI BRENNER

Unavoidable

23 June – 6 August 2011

“The connections between life, death and portraiture have preoccupied me and shaped my artistic practice for many years. Recently these inter-dependent relationships collided and exploded in my world.

I’ve worked with one model, almost weekly, for seventeen years. He’s more or less been the only subject I’ve had as an artist. His name is Wilson Mootane and his presence and life has fundamentally shaped and enabled my own life and my work.

On the 19th of January last year, he died; and he died in my arms. His death was quite sudden. I had often thought that someone dying in one’s arms must be an awful and terrible thing, but having had the experience of being with Wilson in that moment, I have come to see it as his last gift to me; that event – or crisis – seemed to honour and give particular significance to our long relationship, and to our many years of work together. The critic Michel Leiris once said, in reference to the sculptor Alberto Giacometti, that there are moments that may be called crises and these are the only ones that count in life. His comment makes sense when you see how a crisis changes everything.

Over the years, in discussing my work and its relationship to the genre of portraiture, I have insisted that my work is not about a specific individual – though portraits have to be of course - but that my work reflects rather on a broader set of ideas about humanity, mortality, transience; that my choices of material embody these broader ideas. And they do: unfired and therefore vulnerable clay (sculptures that can crumble and become dust again); malleable plasticine with the potential to be changed; the melt-able fragility of wax; granite and marble stone with their references to memorial tombstones, and their longevity and durability, and the contrasting way in which stone makes the oil paintings on them seem so mortal – all these are evocative metaphors for the fragility of life, for its transience, for our need to preserve it and to remember.

But this recent crisis has brought me to see that the images I make most definitely *are* of an individual; they *are* of Wilson, every one of them. And they are inter-subjective portraits – of both him and me; co-produced in the sense that they would not be possible, would not have happened, without both of us being there. They are of us, and they mark his life, and mine. In more general terms they attest to the importance of human bonds and shared realities.” Joni Brenner, Johannesburg, 2011

Brenner’s other major project, over three years in the making, - *Life of bone – art meets science* – came to fruition in May both as a book, and as the accompanying exhibition of the same name at the Origins Centre in Johannesburg. Brenner, and fellow exhibitor and colleague, Karel Nel, are both the editors and contributors of this exceptional and fascinating publication, and they each have an exhibition at Art First in June, immediately following their museum show in Johannesburg.

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