

Unavoidable

Joni Brenner

Gallery opening hours

Tuesday – Friday: 10am–6pm

Saturday: 11am–4pm
and by appointment

Art First
21 Eastcastle Street
London W1W 8D
www.artfirst.co.uk

ART FIRST

Photographs by John Hodgkiss





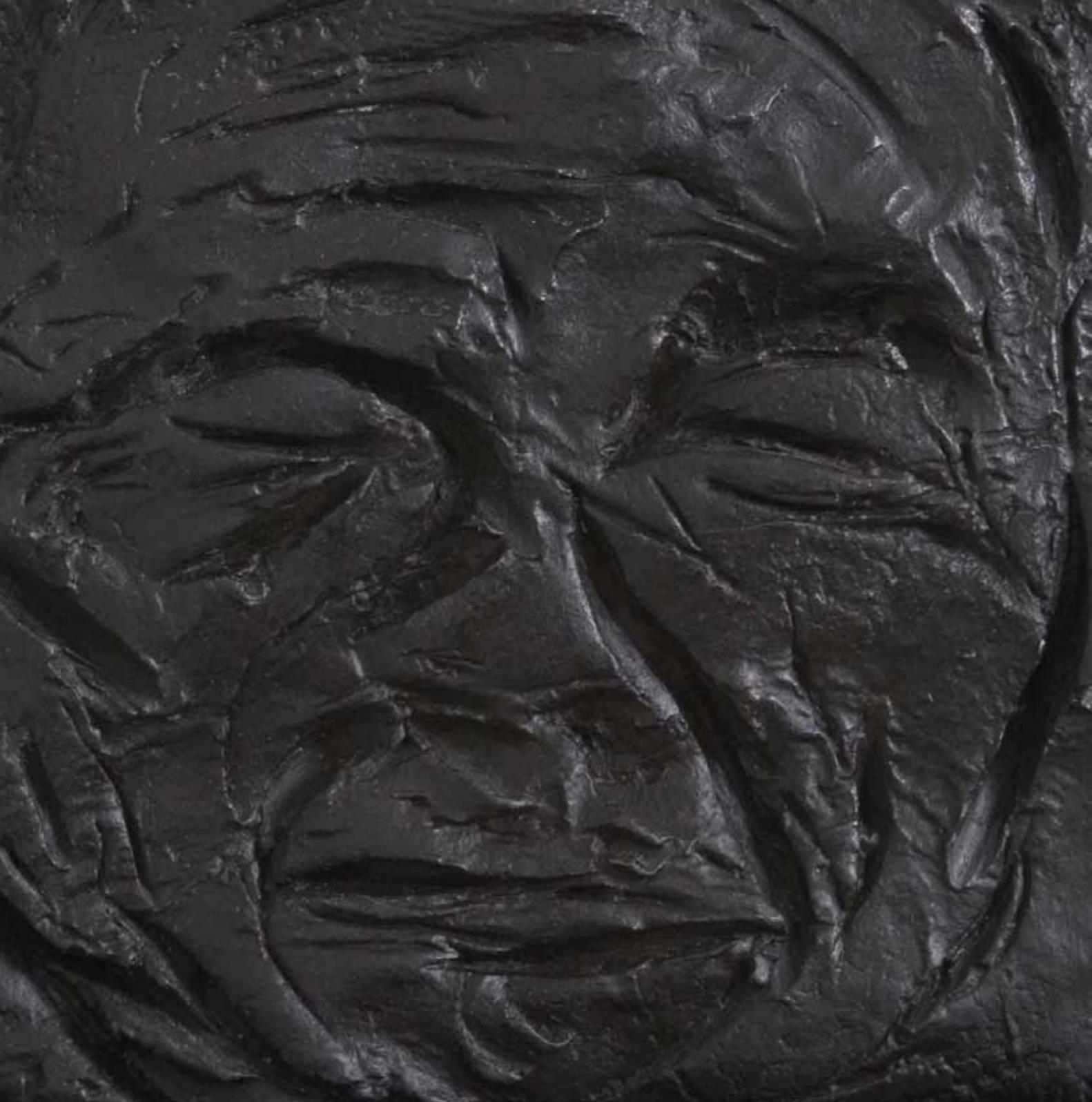
Unavoidable

Joni Brenner

29 June – 19 August 2011

Art First
21 Eastcastle Street
London W1W 8D
www.artfirst.co.uk

ART FIRST



Continuity and rupture (detail)
bronze

Unavoidable

It is all passing which is the only reason for wanting to preserve it.

Denton Welch

The connections between life, death and portraiture have preoccupied me and shaped my artistic practice for many years. Recently these inter-dependant 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: he, and the work I've done with two skulls that sit in my studio. 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

The end of Wilson (detail)
Oil on granite 40 x 40 x 3.5 cm 2009

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 analysing and discussing my work and its relationship to the portraiture genre, I have spent much time saying that my work is not about a specific individual – though portraits have to be of course. But I have asserted 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, to continue evolving; 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 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.

The seventeen years of portraits I have made of Wilson Mootane are in some senses a biography of a friendship, and of an intimacy of a particular kind. I worked from Wilson's head again and again;



every time as if for the first time, repeatedly looking and trying to capture the specific and the general, the exact and precise, and the fugitive or mobile. When Wilson was there, I found I had an amazing energy to work, to produce images in a range of mediums and in various sizes. I always felt I was just beginning with him, wasn't anywhere near finished. Only after seventeen years, and just before he unexpectedly died, did I move my attention to his torso.

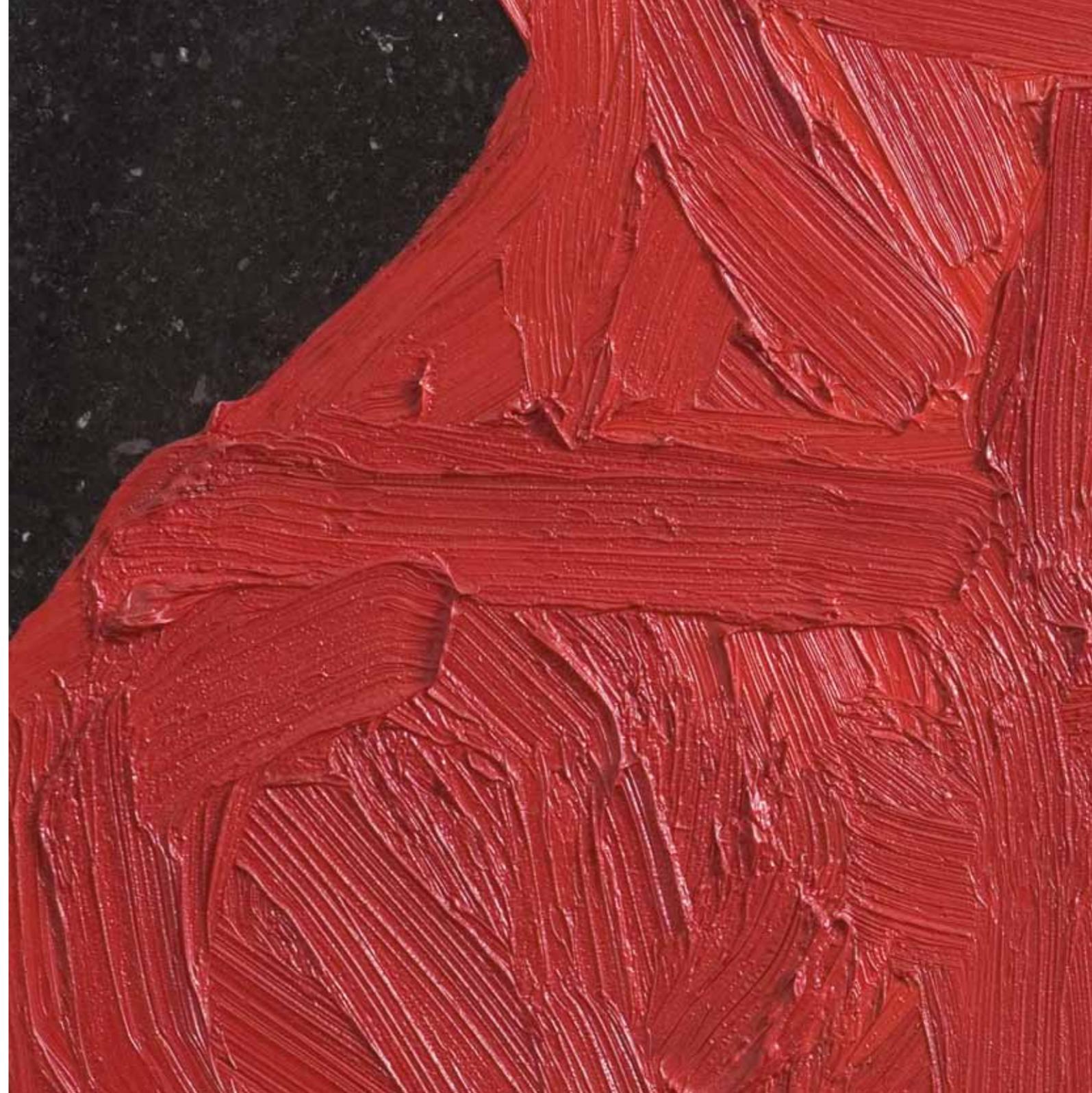
This exhibition is a focused reflection on the unavoidability of one's mortality, aging, and passage through life. At the core of the exhibition are the very last works made of Wilson Mootane, four torso's in oil – images that are utterly life affirming and present, in the very same moment that they assert his absence, and mark his end. One's mortality and unavoidable end is tied up with the legacy that is left, that continues to speak of the life of the artist and of the sitter: what is unavoidable is the trace of life, the record of being.

They are portraits that suggest – perhaps more so than others that I have made – the coterminous presence of life and death. They are about loss, but they are mostly about life, and presence.

Joni Brenner

Lean (detail)

Oil on granite, sprayed enamel shelf 35 x 28 x 10 cm 2009





Continuity and rupture

Oil on wax; oil on marble, oil on sandstone, bronze, sprayed enamel shelf 45 x 200 x 15 cm 2009 (details pages 12–17)









Photogene

Watercolour on marble, sprayed enamel shelf 21 x 17 x 6 cm 2009





Frank

Oil on jelutong 29 x 44.5 x 4 cm 2009



Mute to tell
Sika-guard consolidated clay, enamel paint,
sprayed enamel plinth 130 x 25 x 25 cm



After Tapiés
Sika-guard consolidated clay, sprayed enamel plinth
155 x 18 x 18cm 2008



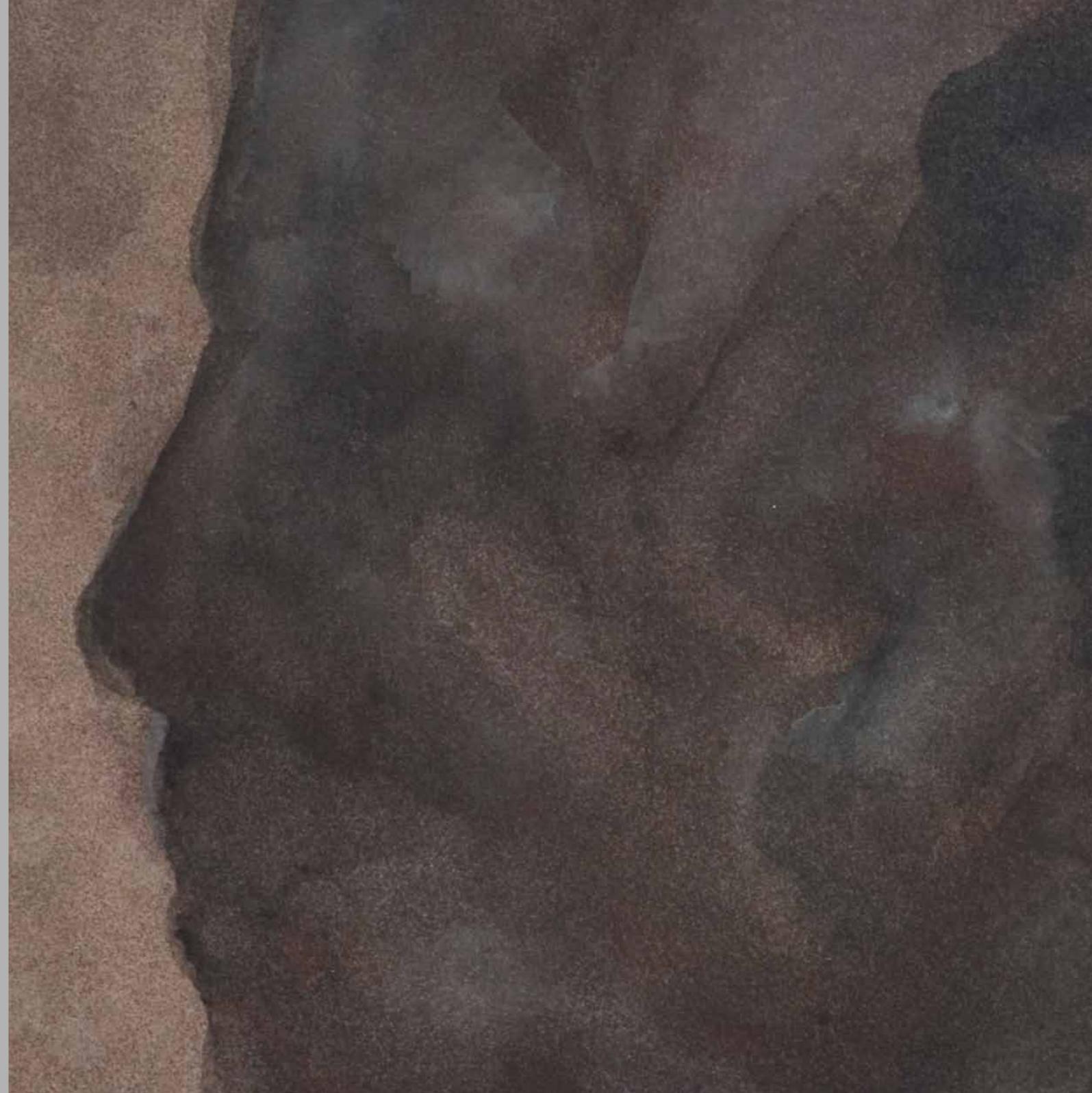
Icon for the departed soul

Oil on porcelain 30 x 29.5 x 3.5 cm 2009



Shade

Watercolour on sandstone 30 x 30 x 4 cm 2009



The end of Wilson

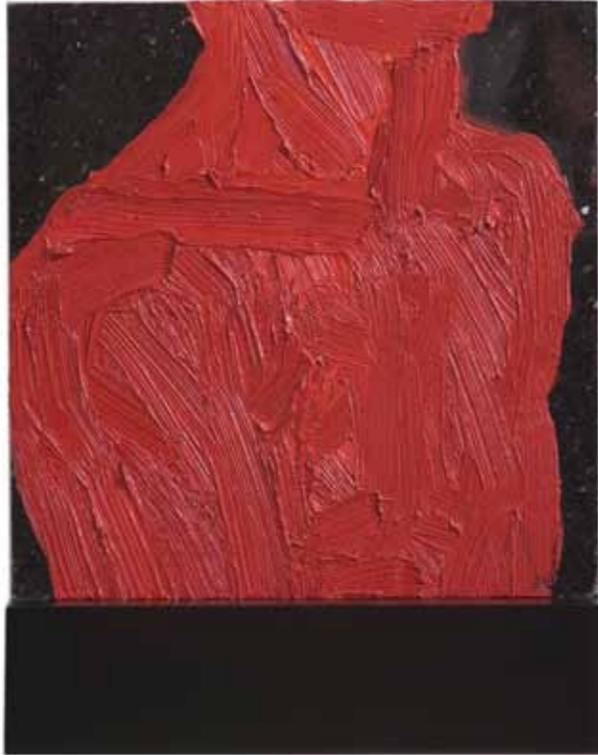
Oil on granite 40 x 40 x 3.5 cm 2009





Black body

Oil on granite 30 x 30 x 3.5 cm 2009



Lean

Oil on granite, sprayed enamel shelf. 35 x 28 x 10 cm. 2009





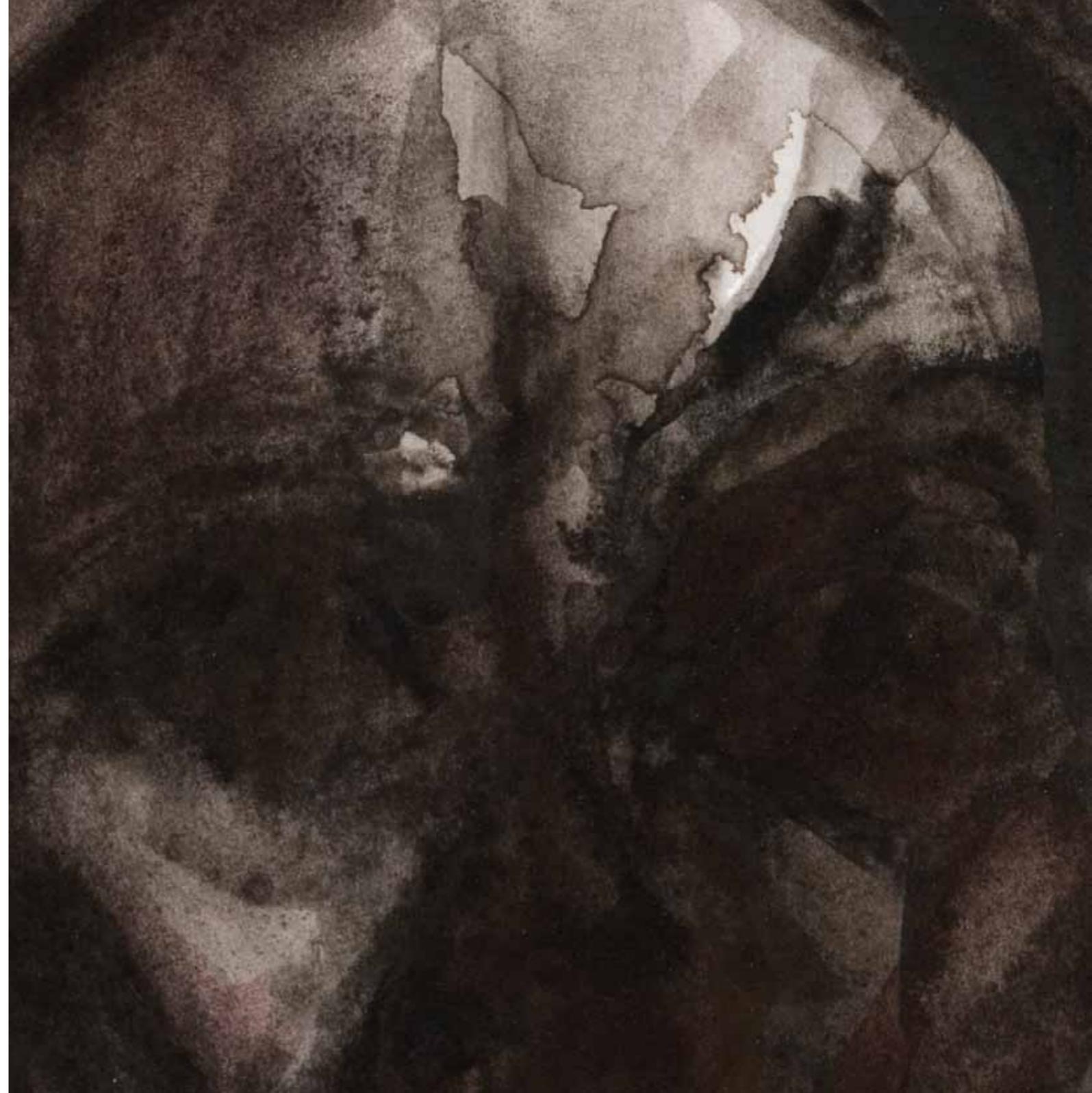
Inward

Oil on concrete 19 x 17 x 6 cm 2009



Facing myself

Watercolour on paper 20.5 x 20.5 cm 2010





Louise Bourgeois trilogy

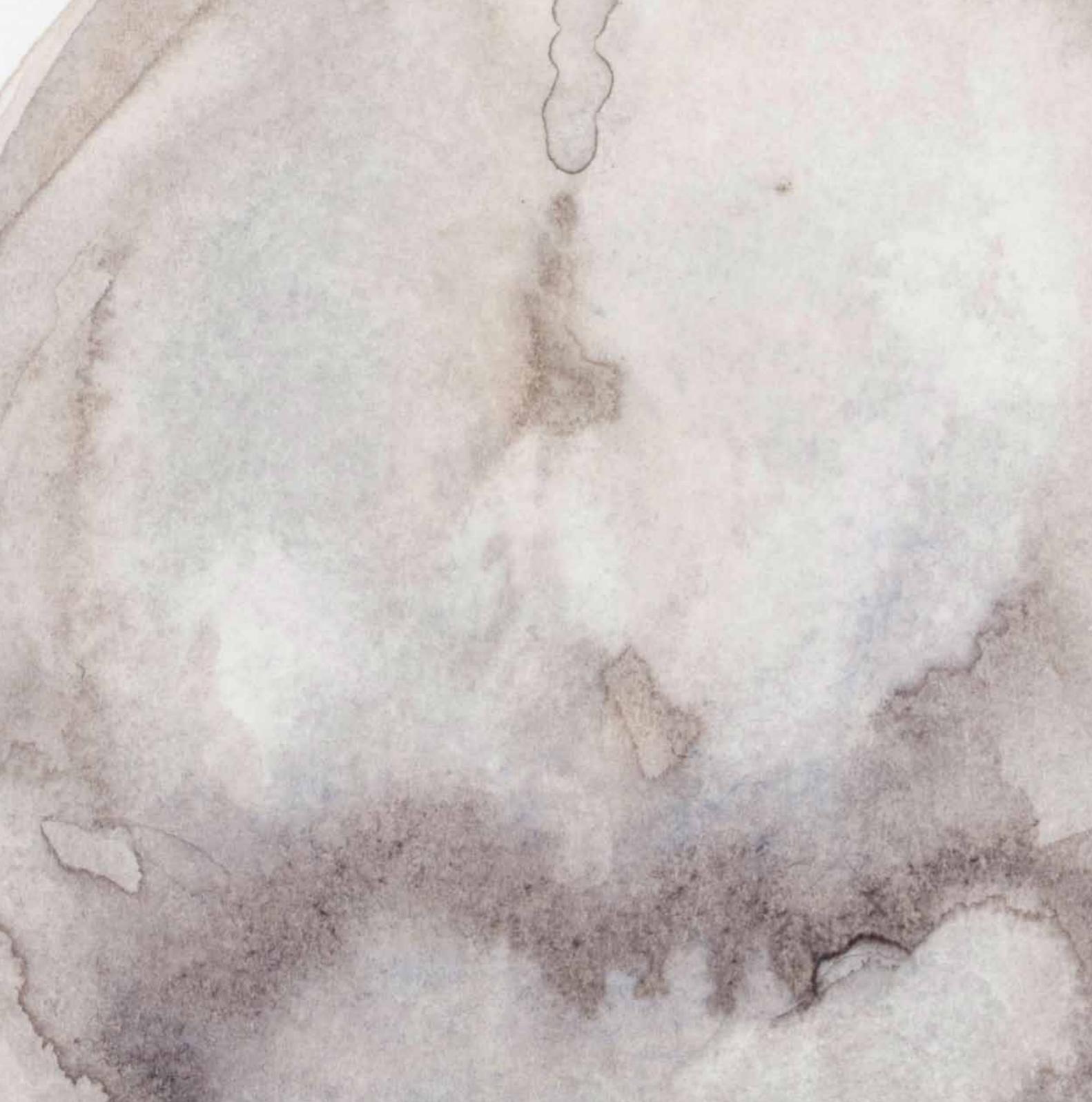
Watercolour on paper 10 x 15 cm, 21 x 15 cm, 15 x 15 cm 2010



78
2010

From *Navel series*

Watercolour on paper 27 x 41 cm 2010



Occiput

Watercolour on paper 18.5 x 25 2009



Nacre

Watercolour on paper 18.5 x 26 cm 2008





Language – Taung series

Watercolour on paper 13.5 x 21 cm 2009



Joni Brenner

Born 1969, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Joni 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. Joni'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.

Joni is a Principal Tutor in the Division of Visual Art at the Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand. She teaches mainly in History of Art and was the recipient of the Vice-Chancellor's Teaching Award in 2008.

Solo exhibitions

- 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 exhibition

- 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.

Public collections

University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, 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

Origins Centre at Wits University

Alliance Française, Johannesburg.

PG Glass, Johannesburg.

South African Association of Art

Sandton Civic Gallery



Wilson Mootane

Died Johannesburg 19 January 2010