

On **Stand A 13** at the 2015 Cape Town Art Fair, ART FIRST presents **Joni Brenner** and **Karel Nel**, two notable South African artists based in Johannesburg at the Wits School of Arts. Their influential teaching, curating and exhibiting have had a far-reaching impact locally and internationally. ART FIRST London is their principal gallery and further information, online catalogues and exhibition history can be found on the website: www.artfirst.co.uk

JONI BRENNER



Rufous, 2012, oil on marble, 30x30cm

Brenner has worked within and against the genre of portraiture since the early 1990s, making portraits in a range of media including oil on canvas, on wax slabs and on hard stone surfaces, and others made using clay and plasticine, sometimes cast in bronze and plaster.

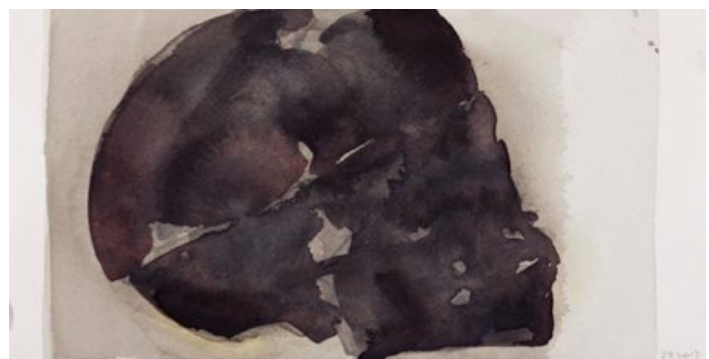
Most of her portraits were of one man – Wilson Mootane, whose death in 2010 resulted in a personal and creative crisis for her. Partly as a result of this loss, she extended her engagement with portraiture to include studies of a friend, Fred, and then further to include portraits of Russell, and most recently her husband Scott.

The five oils on display here are all of Fred who agreed to arrive at the studio twice a week for a period lasting almost one year. Like Wilson, Fred arrived with consistent regularity, and so the portraits proceeded with a rhythm or pattern of repeated looking that Brenner understood to be the crux of her practice: looking, and looking again, learning from this repeat-action process. The five portraits presented on the stand give some indication of the range of her work, and of the intensity of her investigation.

The living presences she portrays take on an existential immediacy; they challenge and invigorate that long established tradition of portraiture focused on exact, recognizable likenesses. Both painterly and sculptural, the work resists the flatness of two-dimensional surfaces, hoping to give greater embodiment to her subjects.

Portraits exist on the threshold between life and death, marking a presence, and in time coming to stand for an absence – an idea that, for Brenner, shifted out of the abstract in the wake of Wilson's death, and in turn gave rise to an increased focus on the skull work she had begun in 2004. Six more recent of these watercolour skull studies are seen here alongside the robust oils and point to her exploration of remembrance, presence and absence as an intrinsic part of portraiture.

One of the six watercolours on display is from Brenner's investigations of the juvenile *Taung* skull, which pushed her understanding of lineage and belonging back some 2.5 million years.



Skull Series, 2013, watercolour on paper, 22.5x37.5cm

Paintings in watercolour, and a range of other media were shown at the *Life of bone* exhibition in 2011, which she co-curated with Karel Nel, for the Origins Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand.

In 2014 assisted by Angus Taylor at DSW, Brenner scaled up and cast in bronze three of the four new small clay skulls she had made. Titled 'Intimations of continuity' these compelling large-scale skulls were exhibited at the Nirox Sculpture Park in May, and have opened up an exciting new set of possibilities for Brenner's work in the future. The small clay originals were also cast in bronze and will be shown at a forthcoming exhibition with Art First.

Born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe Brenner is Principal Tutor in Art History at Wits School of Arts. For further details please view her profile on the gallery website: www.artfirst.co.uk.

KAREL NEL



Path of the Cyclone
2014
Pastel & pigment
on fibre fabric
135x185cm

Hovering at the point where art, science and biology intersect, Nel's approach to the natural world is meditative but also investigative. His long standing body of work entitled *Elegies to the Forests*, harbours a deep sense of lament as he grapples with the waning of the world's great forests and the growing threat of their extinction. Yet his drawings inspire us to marvel at Nature's gifts and to consider the compelling formal complexities of leaves themselves, alongside the tragic beauty they may come to represent.

"Leaves have always struck me as remarkable structures in their own right. They have the innate ability to produce nutrition from sunlight, and their forms clearly reflect the radiant nature of their contained yet diffuse energy fields. For me they are a model of the sacred, purposeful and non-wasteful life pattern which continues quietly, without partaking in the violent food chain of consumption. Leaves are nonetheless flamboyant and transitory, with a transcendent inevitability to their own particular life-cycle."

Path of the Cyclone evokes exactly this mix of lush beauty and vulnerability. The drawing stems from one of Nel's visits to a remote and relatively uninhabited island in the Seychelles. Home to the giant Coco de Mer Palm, Nel was asked to

harvest one of the great leaves which he cut and suspended within the shelter where he stayed. The contextualization of the leaf within a man made structure helps the viewer to understand the actual scale of the leaf with its own naturally engineered structure. From that commission, a series of drawings followed, showing an array of magnificent leaf forms as they grow around the walkways and lodges.

Nel is also a major collector of African and Oceanic traditional artefacts. Increasingly his collection is the subject of his work, influencing the drawings in subtle ways.

Parinirvana appears at first to be a luminous arrangement of abstract forms. That it is an architectural setting for an interior on two levels gradually emerges. It is a metaphysical space, charged with thought and mysterious energies, and it describes one of art history's sacred spaces, for this is Brancusi's Paris studio. The cushioned shapes below belong to the makeshift bed where Brancusi spent his last night alive, contemplating a globe of the world, suspended above him.

The 'silent thresholds' to which the scene alludes comes from a recent body of work under that title where every drawing pays tribute to this touchstone sculptor whose formative influence continues to penetrate Nel's thinking. Other drawings in the series fuse the studio space of Brancusi with Nel's own studio, housing as it does, objects from his collection seen alongside the working drawings.

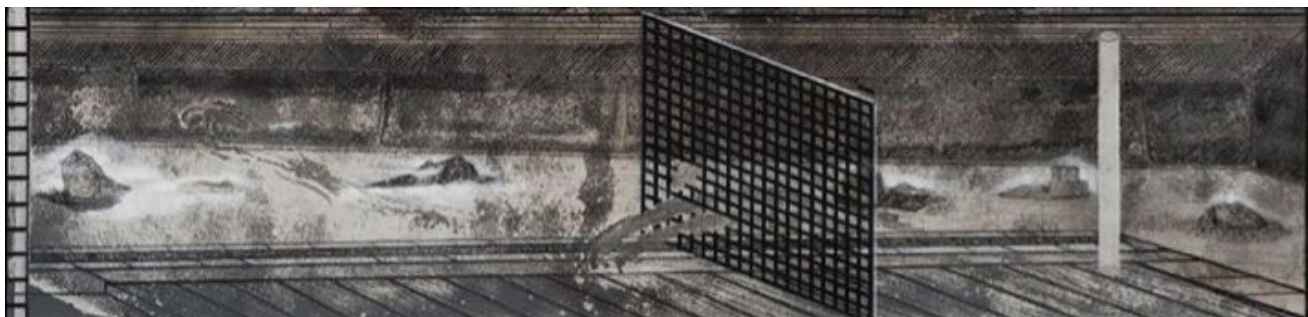


Parinirvana, 2013, pastel & pigment on fibre fabric, 181x181cm

Nel's travels as resident artist to the Cosmos Project have taken him to places in far-flung parts of the world. Visits to Japan inspired drawings of one of the great Zen temples in Kyoto; Ryoan-ji's rock garden has been raked for over 500 years, inciting a meditative state across generations. The horizontal drawing echoes the shape of the garden, seen from the seating platform. The black upright grid structure divides the composition, hinting at axial symmetries associated with the garden, alerting us to rhythms of thought and to the balance of opposites.

These drawings point to just a few of the many areas of visual thinking that has comprised Nel's output over three decades, each body of work forging a further set of integrated connections and counterpoints that have emerged alongside and in conversation with his commitments to teaching, curating, collecting and travel.

Nel is Associate Professor in Fine Art at the Wits School of Arts. A forthcoming book on his life and work is under way for 2016. In Cape Town two major works can be seen at the Iziko National Gallery and at the Rupert Museum in Stellenbosch. His work is also represented in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, and in significant corporate and private collections world wide.



Ryōan-ji at Dark Moon, Kyoto, 2011, pastel and pigment on fibre fabric, 66x236cm

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