



Karel Nel

Silent Thresholds

*11 Impasse Ronsin* (detail)

Gallery opening hours

Tuesday – Friday: 10am–6pm

Saturday: 11am–4pm

and by appointment

Art First

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Karel Nel

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PAGES 2–3: *11 Impasse Ronsin* detail

LEFT: *At the Threshold* detail

## Silent Thresholds

*Elizabeth Burroughs*

In *Silent Thresholds*, Nel returns to the quiet process of looking inwards, the philosophical act of contemplation, of finding, tracking and engaging again with the perceptual process of making meaning, mapping and shaping form in the confines of the studio. As Nel has observed to the astronomers he has worked with on the Cosmos Project, 'My studio is the equivalent of your observatories.' After a long period of looking outwards into the universe, it is as if he has turned the telescope of consciousness around so that the instrument which previously brought near the vastness of a myriad of distant galaxies, now concentrates and reduces the intimacy – and immediacy – of his studio space to a distilled clarity, as if through the other end of the telescope.

From Nel's very first exhibition, the nature of perception has been central to his work: the threshold – between the inner and the outer; the seen and the unseen; deep space and inner space; the sacred and the profane – is intrinsic to his artistic exploration. These thresholds are frequently both physical and conceptual. They focus thought on the conundrum of how the act of crossing the limen results in a change of reality or the alteration of one mindset to another. Nel likens that instantaneous change of intensity, of consciousness, to the difference between sleep and sudden wakefulness or to walking through the carved portal of a



*Eidetic Space detail*

Romanesque church into the numinous interior space. The change of state is instantaneous, intense, complete.

From the time that he was a young boy, Nel was immensely drawn to the work of Constantin Brancusi. He recalls the sense of wonder and recognition when, in an early monograph, he first saw black and white photographs of Brancusi's studio. It was therefore inevitable that he would visit Brancusi's studio, which had already been moved from 11 Impasse Ronsin to its new placement in front of the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

This body of work, conceived over decades, bears witness to his numerous return visits to Brancusi's studio, which was left intact as an installation to the French nation at the time of his death in 1957. Brancusi's studio, a series of interlinked spaces, was both his home and workspace as well as an ideal setting for viewing his works. The physical presence and stark beauty of the objects creates an archaic yet futuristic ambiance which both amplifies the space itself and the objects. Their precise placement in relation to each other creates a complex spatial construct, which evokes a sacred, almost temple-like quality. From the time Nel first visited the studio, he made sketches and notes in preparation for these drawings. The exhibition is thus an extended dialogue between Brancusi's studio and the consciousness which informs it, and Nel's own workspace and thinking.

Nel's studio, a large, vaulted space thousands of miles away, constantly alters according to the placement of a series of sculptural sacred objects collected on his travels through many cultures. These objects – such as the ceremonial bowls, including the long, slender platter from Lake Sentani,



ABOVE: *A Moment Apart*

LEFT: *Radiance: the House Within* detail

the Chinese hardwood chairs, the Zanzibari doors and the African slit drums – form a psychological topography of the world, created by the intersection of perception, insight and belief, and, together, give a glimpse of the complexity of the terrain created by the variety of consciousness itself. The caring positioning of these objects in relation to one another in his studio space is evidence of Nel's own preoccupation in our species' quest to shape thought into form – the same preoccupation evidenced in Brancusi's sculpture.

Nel speaks of the desire to transmute function into perfection of form as a shared impulse: an aspiration evident whether one looks at a ceremonial paddle from the island of Niue, a poi pounder from the Caroline Islands, a Swazi bowl or a Zulu snuff container. The same determination shapes an iPhone or an Apple computer because Steve Jobs understood the power inherent in fusing function and aesthetics, creating objects that are both useful and desirable.

In the present drawing, Nel images how the slipstreams of thought pass through space into matter, honing the material into form, shape or image – the trunk of a tree into the sheerest of paddles. Conversely, in *Eidetic space*, the merest of broken lines rising from a rustic Brancusi stool suggest the vertical presence of its tree-origin back into the space. Both these representations contrast with the crisp linear projections that move through space, laser-like. The play between the intellectual and the poetic, between the scientific construct and the artistic apprehension of the nature of our understanding of reality is a consistent search in Nel's work. The interactive and reciprocal nature of the process of perception and its translation by the hand into form or image demands a simultaneous en-



*The Shape of Darkness* detail

gagement with abstract properties and with the demands of the material: Brancusi's struggle to find the image of the bird in *Maiăstra* or the engineers' attempt to find an aerodynamically suitable shape for Concorde or the Stealth fighter require an engagement with matter, speed and space, the demands of each of these influencing one another towards a single, elegant solution.

In his lecture, *The Shape of Space*, to the Cosmos astronomical team in Kyoto earlier this year, Nel grappled with our conception of the nature and shape of the universe, and how we have conceptualised the probability of its shape through history according to our perceptual tools on the one hand, as much as by our personalised mental projections. These projections often reflect as much about the structure of human consciousness as they do about the universe, and talk to the interface between the inchoateness and vastness of space and the great mutability of thought or consciousness itself as they struggle to codify perception. In *The Shape of Darkness*, the central image is simultaneously both void and object.

Nel often argues that Brancusi's studio and Duchamp's *Étant donné*s as milestones in 20th century art are the first installations or tableaux which would develop into the innovative art forms that would dominate art-making in the late 20th and early 21st century. These iconic installations foreground the importance of space itself as a medium in its own right.

In the Duchamp, the large, rugged Spanish door is closed, inaccessible. It is presented as an object to be approached by the viewer. Yet the work requires of one to peep through two small holes for the work to reveal itself. He thereby constrains the viewer by means of this visual thresh-



LEFT: *11 Impasse Ronsin* detail

TOP: *Parinirvana*

BOTTOM: *Étant donnés*



old, so that one must become a voyeur in order to view the provocative female presence in the landscape. In Brancusi's studio, on the other hand, the roughly-hewn portal marks the threshold, the entrance to and transition from his large, public studio to his small workshop with its staircase to his sleeping platform. At the foot of this staircase, Brancusi spent his last days on a bed. He was found dead with a globe of the world suspended above him, the object of his last contemplation. *Parinirvana* is thus a homage to the expansive nature of his thought and his lifelong focus on pure form. In this drawing (and in *Eidetic Space*), the light streams through the portal, creating a radiant capsule-like, lingam form. The lingam, a sacred Hindu shape, signifies the transcendent coalescence of the male and female principle, the masculine phallus and the feminine egg.

In *Threshold*, the viewer engages with the geometric and physical power of the roughly hewn wood, while in the two drawings already mentioned, the threshold is dematerialised into a radiant field, being simultaneously matter and light.

The view of the door in *11 Impasse Ronsin*, begins to integrate the space of the two artists' studios. The slipstream of thought enters the doorway from Nel's studio into the shelved antechamber of Brancusi's small workshop. The creative valence of thought is evoked by the provocative trace of Brancusi's controversial phallic portrait of *Princess X*. In Nel's understanding, this drawing forms a conscious counterpoint to his 2011 drawing, *Étant donnés: the birth of Jeff Koons*, its pointed, vulva-like form the antithesis of the straining voluptuousness of *Princess X*.

*A Moment Apart* unifies the two studio spaces, alluding to the possibilities of instantaneity, of thresholds crossed beyond the apparent



constraints of time and space. It speaks to the power of legacy of memories – one's own ancestral memories and those of another – which can so bond as to eliminate the concept of time and separateness. Brancusi's workshop with its saws and calipers resonates with Nel's own family past as stone masons and carpenters, and yet, at the same time alludes to the automaton-like bachelors in the lower registers of Duchamp's *Large Glass*.

The two long drawings on exhibition allude specifically to Nel's own studio, and both contain the archetypal image of a house. As with Brancusi, Nel's studio is also his home, and an ideal place to experience the seamless relationship between his own work and the objects which he has collected and which surround him.

The idea – the eidetic image – of the house focalises the deep sense of belonging to a specific place, yet Nel speaks of his 'home' as carried with him when he travels. It is as if this state of being, the house within, can be found and recognised in other places too – as in the plaited huts from Oceania, which he has previously drawn. So, while home has a physical location, it is simultaneously a state of being in the world, a capacity for connectedness. Such a capacity demands a constant reappraisal of one's place at home and in the society one lives in; further, it requires a consciousness about the country of one's origin, one's own connectedness to global issues, and ultimately to the questioning of our position within the universe itself. The telescope must again be turned around.

ABOVE: *The Bachelors*

LEFT: *Radiance: House Within* detail





*The Imagined House*

2013 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 94 x 240 cm



*Wakening*

2012 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 181 x 181 cm





*Eidetic Space*

2012 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 181 x 181 cm





*Parinirvana*

2012 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 181 x 181 cm



*At the Threshold*

2013 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 181 x 181 cm



*The Shape of Darkness*

2013 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 181 x 181 cm





*The Bachelors*

2013 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 181 x 181 cm

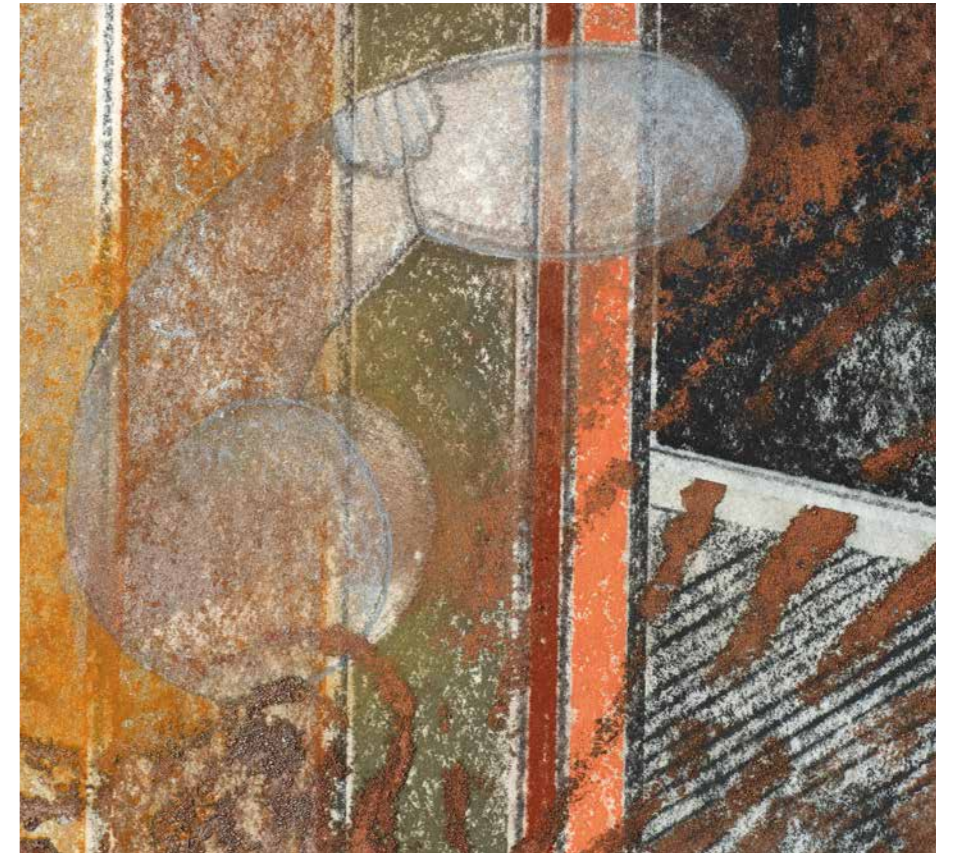
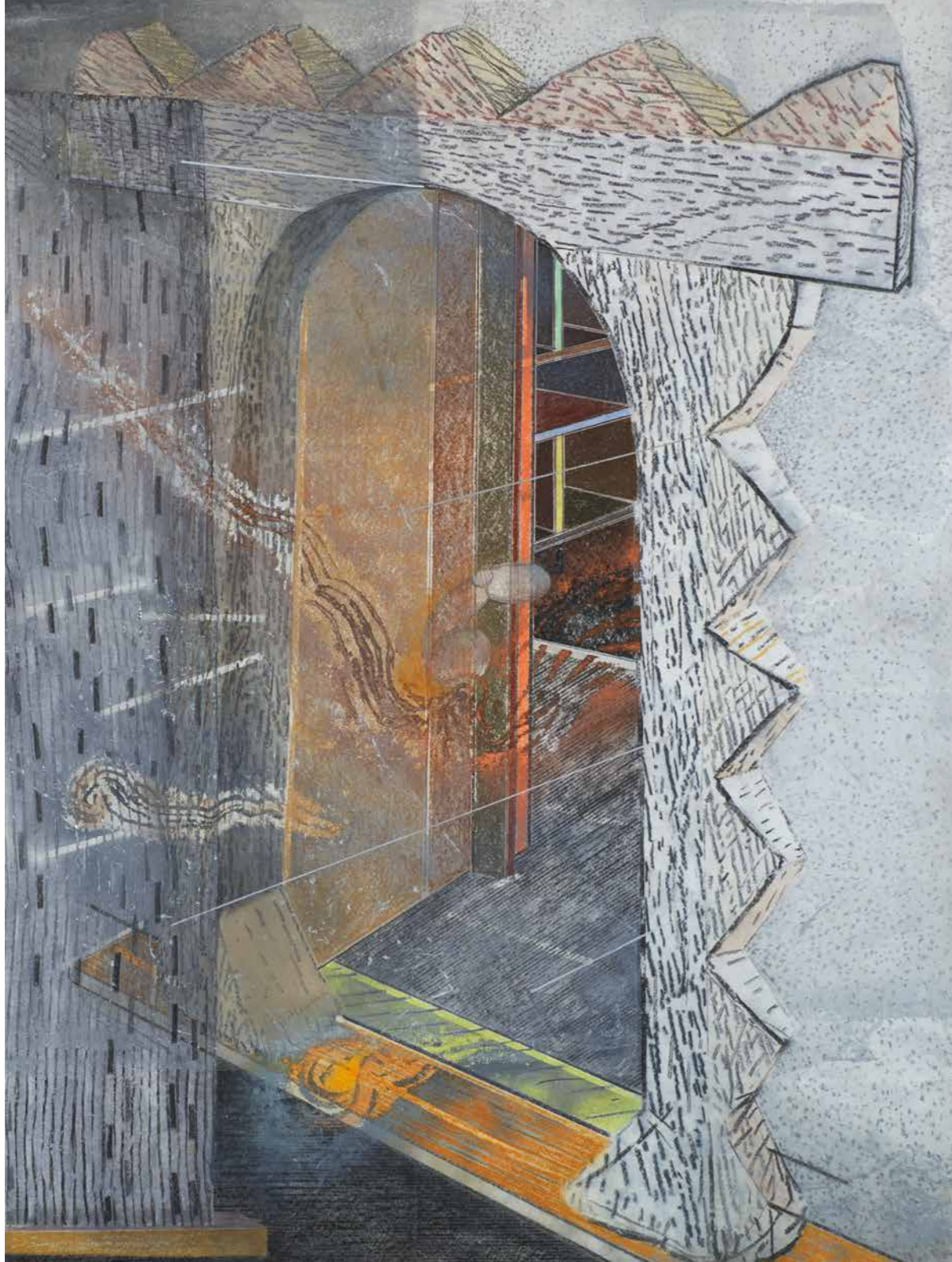


*A Moment Apart*

2013 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 181 x 181 cm







*11 Impasse Ronsin*

2013 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 241 x 178 cm



*Radiance: the House Within*

2013 Pastel, metallic dust and dry pigment on bonded fibre fabric 94 x 241 cm



## Karel Nel

Born 1955, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Nel studied Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, St Martin's School of Art, London and the University of California, Berkeley (Fulbright Placement 1988–89), he now lives and works in Johannesburg and is Associate Professor at the School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand.

Karel Nel is a practicing artist and has, over many years, been interested in the interface between art and science. This ongoing investigation has led to his inclusion in the COSMOS project as artist-in-residence. Nel is also a respected collector of African, Asian and Oceanic art with a particular interest in currencies. He has expertise in southern African art and advises and consults with museums in South Africa, New York, London and Paris. He has also been part of curatorial teams for major international exhibitions on early Zulu, Tsonga and Shangaan art, and has contributed to numerous publications on this material.

### Solo exhibitions

- 2013 *Silent Thresholds* – Art First, London
- 2011 *There But Not There* – Art First, London
- 2009 *Penelope and the Cosmos* (with Willem Boshoff), CIRCA, Johannesburg
- 2008 *The Brilliance of Darkness*, Art First, London
- 2007 *Last light: fugitive images from deep space*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
- 2005 *In the Presence of Leaves*, Art First, London
- 2004 *Unfathomable Depths*, Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles
- 2003 *Status of Dust*, Art First, London
- 2002 *Status of Dust*, Art First, New York
- 2000 *Volcanic Texts*, Art First, London
- 1999 *Solo Journeys*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
- 1998 *Images of Paradise and Death*, Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles
- 1996 *View on the Inner House*, Art First, London
- 1995 *Isles and the Inner House*, Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles
- 1994 *Inner Province*, Art First, London
- 1990 *Recent Work*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
- 1986 *Quiet Lives*, Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of Witwatersrand
- 1983 *Recent Drawings* and Guest Artist, Johannesburg Art Gallery
- 1980 *Drawings*, Olivetti Gallery, Johannesburg

### Selected group exhibitions

- 2012 *African Cosmos – Stellar Arts*, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington
- 2011 *Life of Bone – Art Meets Science*, Origins Centre, Johannesburg
  - 20 Years – Art First, London
  - Water: The delicate thread of life* – Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg
- 2009 *The Discerning Eye*, Mall Galleries, London



- 2008 *Angaza Afrika. African Art Now*, October Gallery, London — Dialogue, Art First, London
- 2004 *Ten Years of Democracy*, South African National Gallery, Cape Town
- 2003/4 *Place*, Galerie Asbaek, Copenhagen and Kastrupgardsamlingen, Kastrup, Denmark, Touring to Pretoria Art Museum and Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein, South Africa
- 2001 *Art First at 10*, Art First, London
- 2000 The Schachat Art Collection, SASOL Art Museum, Stellenbosch, South Africa
- 1999 *Claiming Art/Reclaiming Space: Post Apartheid Art from South Africa*, Smithsonian, Washington DC  
*Emergence*, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown and touring exhibition
- 1998 *Divided City Installation*, In *Nearer than Bronze* Exhibition, Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg, S.A
- 1996 *Three Years On*, Art First, London  
*Insights*, Wright Gallery, New York  
*Vita Art Today*, Johannesburg Art Gallery
- 1995 *Temenos Installation*, Johannesburg Art Gallery for the Johannesburg Biennale  
*Common and Uncommon Ground*, South African Art to Atlanta, City Gallery East, Atlanta, USA
- 1994 *Artists Under the Southern Cross*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam  
Giholte-Board-Breda Fonden, Copenhagen, with Doris Bloom and Marlene Dumas
- 1993 Resident Artist, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown  
*Affinities*, Contemporary South African Art, Venice Biennale (and Rome)
- 1992 Institute of Contemporary Art, Johannesburg  
*Art Meets Science*, Grahamstown Festival of the Arts
- 1991 University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, USA  
*Three South African Artists: A Contemplative View*, Midlands Contemporary Art, Birmingham
- 1988 Cape Town Triennial, SA National Gallery, Cape Town and national tour  
Fort Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California (prizewinner)
- 1987 *Vita Art Now*, Johannesburg Art Gallery  
National Drawing Competition Exhibition, Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown  
Valparaiso Biennale, Chile  
*Tapestries*, Linda Goodman Gallery, and tour to South Africa National Gallery
- 1986 The Volkskas Atelier Award (and 1987, 1988)  
*Selections From a Century*, Johannesburg Art Gallery
- 1985 *Tributaries A View of Contemporary South African Art*, BMW Exhibition, touring Germany and Europe  
Cape Town Triennial  
*Paperworks Group Show* (prizewinner)
- 1983 Tatham Gallery, Pietermaritzburg Association of Arts, Natal
- 1982 Cape Town Triennial (gold medallist), SA National Gallery, Cape Town and national tour
- 1980 *Durban Arts '80*, sculpture exhibition  
*Young Artists*, Olivetti Gallery  
*Sculpture '80*, University of Pretoria
- 1977 University of Witwatersrand

#### Commissions

- 2004 Oval Carpet, South Africa House, London
- 2002 Field of Value, Nedbank headquarters, Sandton
- 1999 ABSA, Johannesburg, Place of Nurture (Entrance Mural)
- 1997 B/M/D Headquarters, Cape Town, Signs of Fire (drawings)

- 1996 The Way of Stone, Reunion, Indian Ocean
- 1995 Four Core Tapestries for the Mining Group Gencor, Johannesburg
- 1992 Grahamstown Festival of the Arts: Three Lithographs
- 1988 Anglo Vaal: Mural  
African Oxygen: Tapestry for new hospital complex
- 1986 Johannesburg Art Gallery: Intact — graphic
- 1984 Anglo American: Trance Atlantic — mural/drawing  
Sandt Du Plessis Theatre, Bloemfontein: Inner Dance — mural/drawing

#### Collections

- Anglo American Corporation, Johannesburg
- Barloworld Corporate Collection, Johannesburg
- BHP Billiton Art Collection, Johannesburg
- Bloemfontein University
- Durban Art Gallery
- General Electric Company, USA
- Johannesburg Art Gallery
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- MTN Collection, Johannesburg
- National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC
- Pretoria Museum
- Rembrandt Foundation, Stellenbosch Sanlam, Cape Town
- South African Broadcasting Corporation, Johannesburg
- South African National Gallery, Cape Town
- Standard Bank Collection, Johannesburg
- Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg
- Trust Bank, Johannesburg
- University of South Africa, Pretoria
- William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley
- Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg

#### Awards and residencies

- 2004 Artist in residence — the COSMOS Project (ongoing)
- 2003 Gammeldok Copenhagen artists residency
- 1991 The Old Mutual Vita Award (overall winner)  
The Simpson Fellowship, University of California, Berkeley
- 1989 Art Gallery Founders Prize of the University of California, Berkeley
- 1987 Fulbright Placement (University of California, Berkeley)  
University Council Fellowship (University of the Witwatersrand)
- 1982 Olivetti Travel Grant
- 1981 Alrnaks Prize
- 1979 Montague White travel grant
- 1978 Montague White bursary  
Afrox Prize (open category)
- 1977 Afrox Metal Art Sculpture annual competition (student award)



With thanks to:

Elizabeth Burroughs and Joni Brenner, for insight and help on every level that made this exhibition possible.

Clare Cooper, my gallerist, for the journey long travelled, the encouragement and pleasure in making exhibitions for her specific space in London.

Benjamin Rhodes and Matt Inledon, for their invaluable assistance.

Rory Doepel, for the lifelong gift of his perspicacious analysis of both Duchamp and Brancusi, in my formative years as a student of history of art at University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

Noma Copley and Florie Barnett, whose home in New York was for many years a haven, and a direct link in my life to Duchamp, Brancusi and Man Ray.

Astronomers Nick Schoville and Henry McCracken with whom I have shared the pleasure of being in Brancusi's studio in Paris, and who, with the COSMOS team have attempted to guide me through the complexities of the universe through the circumscribed 2-square-degree field.

Georges Pfreundler and David Andrew from the Wits School of Arts, whose support and encouragement enabled me to quietly focus on dealing with the challenges of my health and on the creative process.

Drs. Lewis, Shanker, Van Niekerk, and Gellman, who have treated me with care and medical precision.

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