

SITTING FOR THE POST-MORTEM PORTRAIT

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Engaging the work of Joni Brenner, David Bunn reflects on loss; the relationships between the portrait, the funerary mask and the face of the cadaver; and the liquid nature of Objects.

The dead have left us – irreparably; yet we must of course also leave them, for our own health’s sake. Not to do so, entails a fate worse than death: that condition of ghostly provisionality, of melancholic stuttering, in which the self cannot disconnect from its lost object. “Thus,” said Freud, in his most famous gloss of this condition in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), “the shadow of the object [falls] upon the ego”.

To resist the continued appeal of the recently dead, in other words, the mourner has to perform an act of replacement, and hence also of representation, transferring libidinal attention to a new object. Yet the very act of representing a lost object (a self that is now gone, lost to the senses, but which continues to assert itself in the experience of loss) is profoundly complex. In art that has tried to come to grips with traumatic loss and the presence of the corpse, that same difficulty has generated a variety of sub-genres: elegy, dirge, memorial, *kaddish*, and the like.

How do we look into the face of the dead? What will save us?

How do we look into the face of the dead? What will save us? Johannesburg artist Joni Brenner has had a philosophical interest in the problem of death, representation, and portraiture spanning several decades. At the core of this interest is the figure of the funerary portrait, where the truth implied in the last dying moments of personhood is confronted in a representation. One of Brenner’s most significant painterly statements is a meditation on the “Mask of Agamemnon.” This is the name that Heinrich Schliemann gave to the crumpled golden death mask he found adorning a royal skull in a burial site in what he took to be historical Troy. For Brenner, the visible crushing is not just the evidence of the weight of the earth on the metal visage over time. It is itself exemplary of that force which seizes and shakes all attempts at naturalistic portraiture.

I have been interested in Joni Brenner’s work for more than a decade. Returning to it now, and viewing it in parallel with her two essays mourning the death of Wilson Mootane, I am forced to confront the ways in which my own experience of the corpse has fuelled my changing understanding of such art.

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One of the first cadavers I encountered was that of Steve Biko. Not unexpectedly, this was an event that changed my life. I had met Biko briefly while a student at Rhodes in Grahamstown, and after the shock of his death, I and a number of workers and activist friends travelled by bus to King William’s Town for the funeral. This cannot be a tale told in any detail



Mask of Agamemnon by Joni Brenner, 2001.

Photo: Courtesy Joni Brenner ©

now; nevertheless, in that stadium, with thousands of people in the colours of the banned Black Consciousness organisations, ringed with police forces, with Biko’s infant son held aloft from time to time, the body of the dead activist displayed in an open coffin played a profound role.

Thinking back on it, Biko’s corpse appeared for many of us, I think, to shimmer between two states: that of the evidentiary trace, and of the icon. In an era of apartheid without real archives, or justice, or the law, the sheer fact of the autopsied body seemed to speak out unanswerable accusations to the State and the world. Circulating past the open coffin with thousands of other mourners, I stared briefly at Biko’s stitched and crumpled face, with the familiar little birdlike mouth and the gap-toothed smile now rigid.

All about us, and from that moment on, the processes of iconographic conversion were at work: images of Biko breaking his chains were already manifest on T-shirts and posters held aloft.

In his essay 'Drawing a Veil', Colin Richards has written very movingly on the impact of the image of Biko's autopsied body, a body he studied while working as a medical illustrator. It is an image that has echoed famously through the work of Paul Stopforth, Ezrom Legae, Sam Nhlengethwa, and Richards himself.

My own experience on that day prepared me, in some ways, for the many horrifying encounters I was to have over the next decade of apartheid violence, confronting the tortured and broken bodies littering that era. Yet even though Biko's was a profoundly political body, a body always-already mediated by iconographic processes, something else lingers for me in the memory of my staring into his coffin. I can only describe this something else as the experience of the face of the corpse *as such*.

In retrospect, I cannot tell whether the emotional shock of my encounter (as distinct from its political impact) with Biko's cadaverous face is something that actually took place then, in 1977, or whether it is later traumatic events that have reached back in time to remake the earlier experience, in that mysterious process of deferred psychic revision Freud calls *nachträglichkeit*.

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More than a decade after Biko's funeral, the sudden death of my mother and father changed my understanding of mortality; it also had a retroactive effect on my early experience of the stare of the corpse. My mother died first, and in a state of keening despair, I went to view her body in the mortuary in Braamfontein, off Jorrisen Street in Johannesburg. Of course nothing could have prepared me for what I was

about to see, nor can I report with accuracy – even now – on what happened. I went in to the mortuary viewing room expecting to be shored up by experience of political deaths in the late 1970s and 1980s. This was not one of those. I had expected to see my mother on a cool slab, clad in white. Instead, what lay before me, it seemed, was a kind of dry arthropod husk, like last season's cicada casings.

When the familial corpse appears to us directly, unmediated, unrepresented, the horror of the Real stares back. Shocking encounters such as these have the potential to work backwards, re-rendering all past experiences of death. So the face I see before me now, in memory, may not be the face of Steve Biko in the manner I remembered it months after the event. It has changed, perhaps, because of the psychic content that attaches to all such instances in the wake of the death of my mother.

The problem, therefore, in working with representations of the dead, is that one wishes to honor the departed, while remaining outside of their clammy embrace.

Representing the dead, in memorials, elegies, or painting, requires not only some sign of their presence, some post-mortem "facture" if you like, but also a fundamental separation. However, the newly dead are seldom happy with this solution, and there is a great, death-driven struggle that takes place in the lives of those who survive. This is the terrain of the Freudian death-drive, in which the corpse seems to call out against representational displacement and tries to hold the mourner in a kind of unchanging embrace associated with melancholic trauma.

In the case of my mother, I had imagined enough time had passed now for the power of the familial corpse to have waned. In writing this short medita-

tion, however, I have suddenly become conscious of how even my own academic research began to circle centripetally around deathly representations in the penumbral decade after her passing.

The problem of the corpse and representation continues to be a subject of my practical research it seems; it still drives me from place to place in my research on land claims based on gravesites in South Africa's national parks.

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Imagine a Lowveld morning in the Kruger National Park. We are walking through glittering, chest-high grasses. We are looking for a grave. Guided only by the memory of the old man who had once lived here, before the forced removals of the apartheid era, we are sweeping the grass that is now heavy with the combined weight of autumn seed and dew.

What I see suddenly before me now is not obviously a grave. Yet it is a very common feature in the fieldwork I have been doing: an almond-shaped mound of rocks with a half hidden dome at one end instead of a visible headstone. Many decades ago, it seems, some family member placed an upturned clay pot at the head of the grave, and took care to punch a hole in it, thus rendering it useless. It is a formula I have seen repeated many times in the burial sites we have found: rusted duck-egg-blue enamel tea kettles, old *potjies*, tin mugs, earthenware beer pots, all with deliberate punctures.

This symbolic transformation of the domestic object, from use to uselessness, removes it from the domain of commodity exchange, while retaining traces of the owner's aura. As a representational act, therefore, this kind of grave practice is part of the process



Grave marked with deliberately damaged pot,
Kruger National Park.
Photo: Courtesy David Bunn ©

of separation we call mourning, which maintains an intimate link to the *habitus* of the deceased yet simultaneously manages the memorial object so that it remains a signifier and does not reenter the world of use. There can be no reappropriation of the object by a jealous neighbour or witch bent on evil.

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The occasion of Joni Brenner’s new work, and her essays on the death of her friend and studio model Wilson Mootane, have taken me on a looping conversation about the face of the cadaver in my own experience. Links between death, representation, and desire have been at the heart of the work of this Johannesburg artist. Hers has been a long philosophical meditation on the meaning of the generic portrait, and frequently in her studies the portrait and funerary mask approach each other.

For seventeen years, Brenner worked with the

same studio model, Wilson Mootane, reducing portrait likenesses of his face, his profile, the back of his head to quantum whorls of impasto brushstrokes.

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Likeness, in these works, is captured through gestural associations: impossibly deep, sculptured oil paint, plasticine, clay, and a variety of malleable media that change and fray over time. But because consciousness and reciprocal recognition in the form of the face were her main themes, until very recently Brenner never really painted the body directly. Instead, it was implied indirectly, often in the framing and support of the work itself. Early paintings like the pure white *Stele* (2001) or the fiery *Posts* (2001) locate the zone of the face on a six-foot-high plinth or obelisk of colour, roughly equivalent to the body.

Some of Brenner’s most fabulous works are meditations on funerary emblems like the crushed golden mask I referred to earlier. But without question the greatest influence on her argument is the famous cache of Fayoum funerary portraits from the Roman period in Egypt. These provided her with a rich field of experimentation. We now know from Brenner that her *Fayoum* (2002) is a double portrait (unrecognizably so) of Wilson Mootane in wax. When I first wrote about this work some years back, I thought of it as a commentary on identity, curation, and museology: the deathly, waxy pallor doubled the museum against the morgue. Now, I must say, returning to the Brenner’s paintings made in the shadow of Wilson Mootane’s death, I think they have more to do with the liquid nature of Objects.

When Freud or Melanie Klein or Winnecott

speak about internal “Objects”, they have in mind a domain of intersubjective experience in which the phenomenal experience of other people is dramatized in the internal, signifying systems of the self. Our earliest childhood fantasies about others are often about incorporation: consuming and internalizing the Other in a fantasy of introjection. For one branch of psychoanalysis, lovers are thought to exemplify this principle of regression and incorporation in the early moments of their relationship: they desire to be one indistinguishable, eroticised agglomeration. The most sublime meditation on this principle may be found in Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, where the Byronic Heathcliff cannot give up the dead Catherine. Instead, when he dies, he will leave instructions for the sexton to remove the sides of his dead lover’s coffin and interpolate his corpse between that of hers and her husband’s. The two lovers will rot and liquefy into one thing.

To see the self as a state, as well as an internal object, is a perspective that Joni Brenner has been evolving for some time. She has evolved it, moreover, in a strangely driven dialogue with her only model, Wilson Mootane. Part of what has been at stake all along, moreover, is Wilson’s blackness and her whiteness. Somatic contrasts have been part of the complicating argument all the time, and there is a kind of eroticism in the Pygmalion-like engagement of artist and model in their 17-year relationship. (Interestingly, there are parallels here with the work of other Johannesburg artists, in the 1990s “history paintings” of Penny Siopis, for example, which also depends on the artist’s long relationship with Dora, her sitter.)

Finally, though, as Brenner admits in her essays in this volume, the face of death has also always



Fayoum by Joni Brenner, 2002

Photo: Photo: Courtesy Joni Brenner ©

been a partner in the relationship. The only other human object that has been an artistic subject for her in the past two decades is a skull that she has painted repeatedly.

The ancient Fayoum death portraits speak volumes about the relationship between death and representation. They consist of a naturalistic but conventionalized encaustic wax portrait on limewood laid as a final ground over the shriveled, mummified corpse. Representation guards us against the appeal of the death instinct, and nudges us out of the cycle of melancholic repetition, away from the horror vacui of the corpse.

But there may be another way of seeing it. In his book *The Gaze of Orpheus* Maurice Blanchot compares the moments of Orphic obscurity in lyric poet-

ry to “the strangeness of a cadaver”. Once it is uncannily represented, in other words, the skull beneath the skin may be a rich source of poetic complexity. This connection with the strangeness and liquidity of the dead, and our representational mourning, has driven much of the argument in Brenner’s recent oeuvre. Before now, she has insisted that her work is not ‘portraiture’ per se, but a dialogue with that genre. It is interesting to me that at the very moment of the death of her principal model, her position has changed. She allows that the beautifully obscure, Orphic works she has produced in studio dialogues with this man *are in fact* portraits of him, because, in the wake of his passing, and as though time may flow backwards, they have a presence and fullness that was not there before.

It is as though the logic of the portrait has only now been allowed to complete itself in Brenner’s work, to be uttered, as it were, as an act of identity rather than philosophical abstraction. This sense of completion plays itself out in the two works of mourning for Wilson: *Written*, and *The World Was Silent*. In both, the addition of support elements to existing portraits (a black panel in the former, making up a left to right logic, and an adamantine plinth in the latter, forming a vertical body) brings the argument to a close.

It is as though a sheet had been lifted on the corpse for a while, and is now allowed gently to drop. To stare into the hollow face of the cadaver, it seems, may cause us to remake our worldly philosophies; with enough time, and rendition, however, that stare may become more bearable.