

LIFE, DEATH AND PORTRAITURE

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Visual artist Joni Brenner's oeuvre is dominated by portraits of one man. Here she offers some initial thoughts how his death changes the significance of her works.

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 this 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



Written

2009, oil on sandstone, sprayed supawood, Perspex, 31 x 61 x 3.5cm

Photo: Courtesy Joni Brenner ©

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 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



The world was silent when we died
2009, (detail), oil on granite, sprayed supawood plinth,
160 x 30 x 3cm.

Photo: Courtesy Joni Brenner ©

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.

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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 very recently, in August and September 2009, did I move my attention to his torso.

Just after Wilson's funeral I began reading James Lord's biography of Giacometti, in which he writes that, "For twenty years [Giacometti] had been obsessed with life's frailty. Now it presided over his work. In a very real sense, it became his work. 'I always have the impression or feeling', [says Giacometti], 'of the frailty of living beings, as if at any moment it took a fantastic energy for them to remain standing, always threatened by collapse. And it is in their frailty that my sculptures are likenesses'.

In November a selector for the Johannesburg Art Fair came to my studio and chose three portraits completed earlier in 2009. After Wilson's death in January the portraits suddenly took on an entirely different, and renewed, significance. To be honest, I felt reluctant to let them go. And although they are images that I think have a robust life-force, images that have in some way absorbed or subsumed Wilson's 'fantastic energy', I decided to complete two of the works by framing them in ways that connect to the event of his death. *Written*, I framed with an equal sized blank black panel attached to the painting at the right. It seemed to me to signal an end to the life that is so present in the left panel. The painting is also quite calligraphic, the central group of scripted marks approximately forming an ideogram, which is why I titled the work 'Written', a word that also alludes to the biblical notion of being written into the book of life.

The second image I titled: *The world was silent when we died*, a phrase borrowed from Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a book

set during the Biafran war in Nigeria. The phrase evokes for me, on the one hand, the tremendous human loss and pain that goes unacknowledged and, on the other hand, the significant way in which the world is altered or affected by these same losses. I mounted this portrait on a thin black board that evokes the body at the same time as it alludes to a memorial post.

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.

[A version of this piece will appear in the journal *Visual Communication*.](#)



The world was silent when we died
2009, oil on granite, sprayed supawood plinth,
160 x 30 x 3cm.
Photo: Courtesy Joni Brenner ©