

DEBORAH BELL

Sculpture and Painting | 2000–2023



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Spirit Studios | Suffolk

8 June – 3 August 2024

Spirit Studios, Benhall, Saxmundham, Suffolk, IP17 1JJ

In association with John Martin Gallery



'I see these figures as resurrections – resurrections of histories and ideas that we have forgotten.'

Everard Read London and John Martin Gallery present *Deborah Bell at Spirit Studios* in Suffolk, an exhibition of works by one of South Africa's most respected artists. Encompassing sculpture and paintings made over the past 25 years, this is the largest survey of the artist's work in Europe and includes monumental bronzes, several on exhibition for the first time in the UK.

Bell has always been interested in the idea of art as a power object. 'I am drawn to the art of cultures that have used it for this purpose', she says. 'I am also aware that such work reveals itself through the act of making. I don't believe that it is something that can be planned in advance. It requires the artist, to get out of the way – to serve as a conduit for its emergence. In this way it can be linked to magic or the sacred. It comes through from the implicate realm into this material existence, and as such can alter our world, if ever so slightly.'

At the heart of the exhibition at Spirit Studios – and placed in the surrounding fields bordered by ancient oak trees – is Deborah Bell's monumental bronze rendering of *Artemis and her Dogs* (2009–2011). 'Artemis is the warrior woman, says Bell. 'The huntress – bow in hand, forever striding forward. Her arrows arc into the future. She has great purpose, and I can see that as an archetype she has helped me travel far.'

The exhibition includes the Artist's Cast of several sculptures which have not been shown in the UK. Bell was making her *Unearthed* sculptures as the twentieth century was coming to a close. The artist recalls, 'At the end of the millennium I became very conscious of history and dates. I started thinking about the legacy of the last two thousand years, (our Christian heritage), and our education regarding past civilizations and history. At the same time, I found myself drawn to images of our distant past ... It is the silent images of different cultures and times that haunt me – that speak to me of an alternative history and a spiritual language that we have forgotten. I see these figures as resurrections – resurrections of histories and ideas that we have forgotten.'

Bell's *Unearthed* figures evolved in a way that surprised the artist. 'In a strange way, these sculpted figures made

themselves,' she says. 'It was as if I was channelling them or that I knew things I was not aware of knowing. Each figure would suggest what it carried on its headpiece, and what symbolic images would evolve. They seemed to be born from the earth, from the clay that made them.'

One critique of Bell's *Unearthed* figures observed that they 'seem to pertain to a multiplicity of universes ... [Firstly] the universe of Benin art ... [but they also] evoke Egyptian art, or even more, Babylonian art, so that the idea of these figures belonging to different registers and universes is something quite striking.'*

Responding to these observations, Bell notes that 'many people have linked [the sculptures] to Egyptian figures, to Sumerian art, to the Chinese warriors, to Ethiopian or West African figures. They are all of these and more. For me it is as if they have been unearthed, they speak of things that have been buried for millennia, and that it is now time for us to recognize how much we have forgotten, and to re-vision who we are, and our history.'

Bell's *Sentinel* sculpture and paintings draw their inspiration from the columnar figures and statuary which the artist had researched intensively and they emerged as guardians, as observers. Her more recent *Sentinel* works were completed several months before the global pandemic in 2020. Reflecting on this, the artist describes having a strong sense that these *Sentinels* were meant to hold the centre in a chaotic world, occupying a place of stillness and reflection. 'Unlike Yeats, I believe in a centre that can hold. I relate more to Rilke and his poem 'I live my life in widening circles,' Bell says:

I live my life in widening circles
That reach out across the world.
I may not ever complete the last one,
But I give myself to it.
I circle around God, that primordial tower.
I have been circling for thousands of years,
and still I don't know: am I falcon
a storm, or a great song?

– Rainer Maria Rilke, *Book of Hours*,
translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy

The journey as metaphor for movement between mortality and immortality; earthly and spiritual realms is a recurring theme in Bell's work. Human figures have embodied the seeker on a journey, often accompanied by hounds – as with *Artemis* and *Interval* – or by lions, wolves, horses and totemic modes of transport such as boats and chariots – as with some of her *Unearthed figures*.

In Bell's recent paintings, the spirit animals that have transported her, and the horses in particular, have grown in scale and become more like resting places in themselves, symbols for the world or for home. As in her painting *Be Earth Now*, the riders have, in turn, become less protagonists and figures with agency, and more like figures present at a greater event, experiencing something greater than themselves – and being content to dwell there. Bell has arrived at a place

beyond judgement, a place of realisation that each of us is a spark from the divine fire, an individual expression of a far greater mystery.

Bell's work is represented in public and private collections around the world including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Smithsonian Institute and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, the Gloria Steinem Foundation, the Hara Museum, Tokyo and the IZIKO South African National Gallery, Cape Town. She has collaborated on artistic projects with contemporaries including William Kentridge and the late Robert Hodgins.

* Achille Mbembe, *Deborah Bell*, David Krut Publishing, 2004. Mbembe is a Cameroonian historian and political theorist and a research professor in history and politics at the Institute for Social and Economy Research, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.





Unearthed I

2000–2001

Edition of 4, Artist's Cast
bronze

194 x 52 x 84 cm

76³/₈ x 20³/₈ x 33 in



Unearthed II

2000–2001

Edition of 4, Artist's Cast
bronze

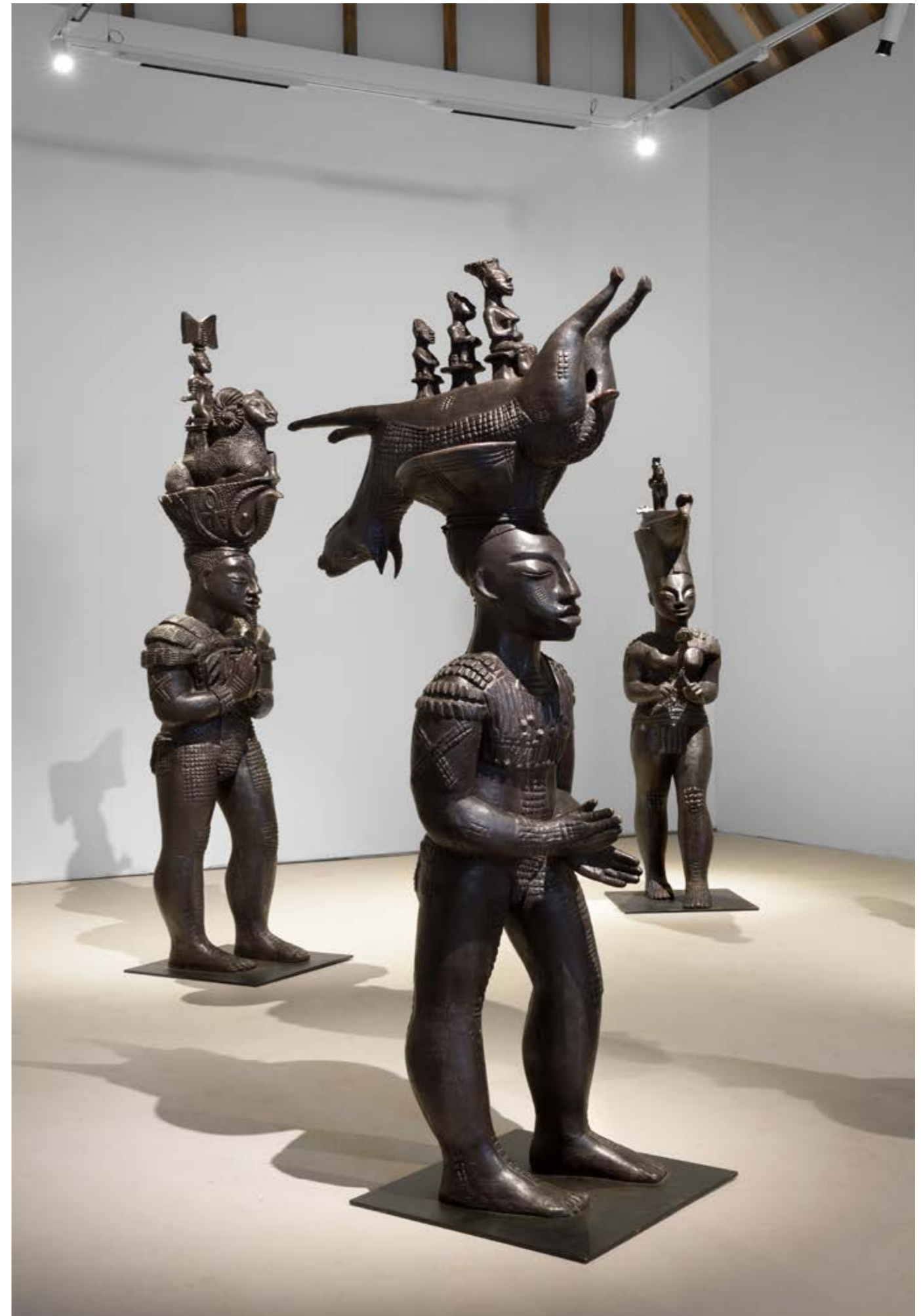
205 x 44 x 47 cm

80⁵/₈ x 17¹/₄ x 18¹/₂ in





Unearthed V
 2000–2001
 Edition of 4, Artist's Cast
 bronze
 239 x 62 x 64 cm
 94 x 24³/₈ x 25¹/₈ in





Unearthed VI
 2000–2001
 Edition of 4, Artist's Cast
 bronze
 205 x 49 x 57 cm
 80 ⁵/₈ x 19 ¹/₄ x 22 ³/₈ in

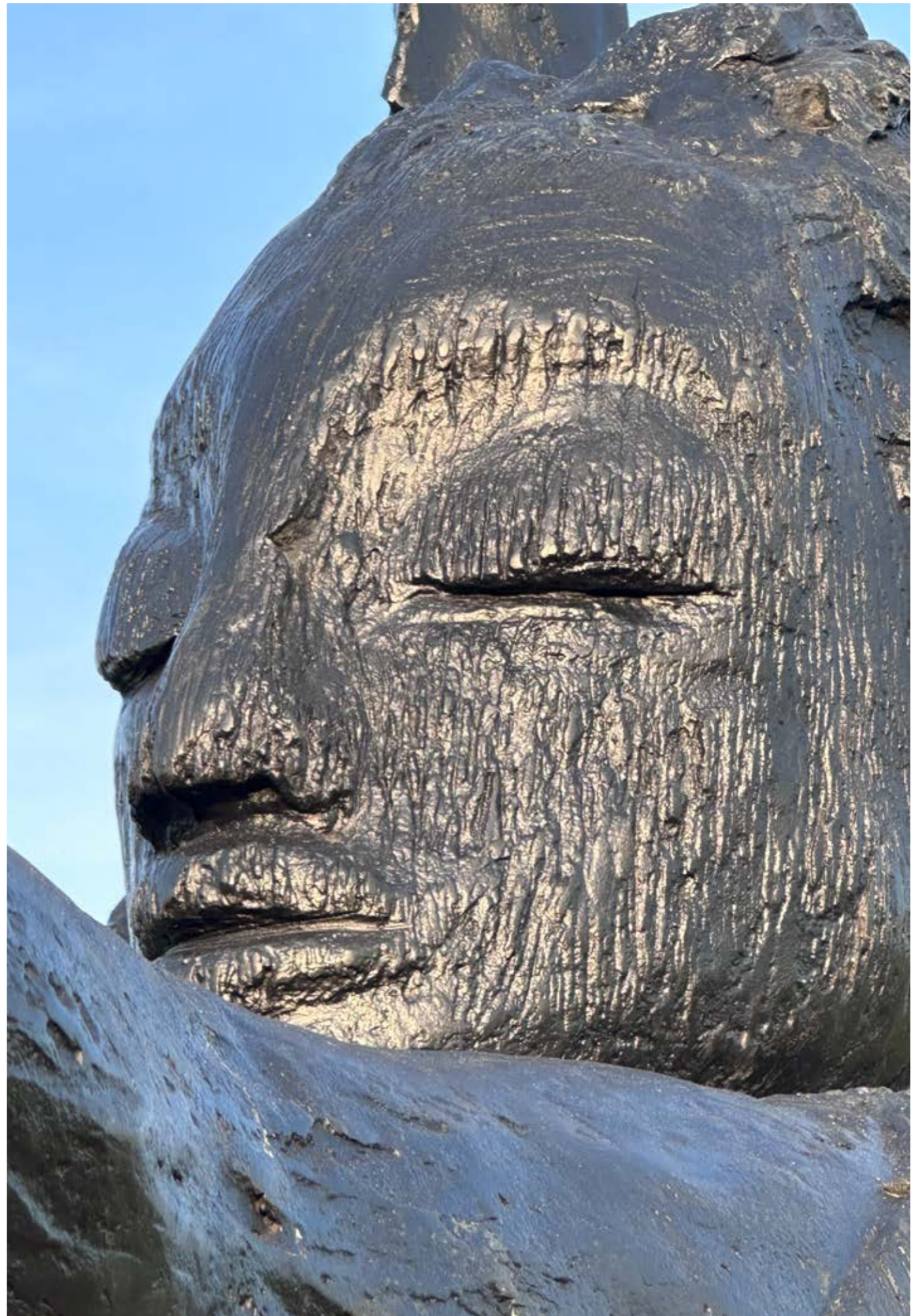


Unearthed VII
 2000–2001
 Edition of 4, Artist's Cast
 bronze
 213 x 49 x 102 cm
 83 ³/₄ x 19 ¹/₄ x 40 ¹/₈ in



Artemis with Dog I-III
2009–2011
Edition 5 of 6 (last in the edition)
bronze
380 x 280 x 120 cm
149 1/2 x 110 1/8 x 47 1/8 in







Be Earth Now
 2018
 mixed media on paper
 210 x 140 cm
 82⁵/₈ x 55 in





Interval

2008

Edition 5 of 6

bronze

208 x 45 x 42 cm

81 ⁷/₈ x 17 ⁵/₈ x 16 ¹/₂ in

Figure: 208 x 45 x 42 cm

Dog: 71.5 x 40 x 171 cm





Sentinel IV
2020
mixed media on paper
160 x 60 cm
63 x 23 1/2 in



Sentinel V
2020
mixed media on paper
160 x 60 cm
63 x 23 1/2 in



Sentinel VI
2020
mixed media on paper
160 x 60 cm
63 x 23 1/2 in



Sentinel VIII
2020
mixed media on paper
160 x 60 cm
63 x 23 1/2 in





Sentinel V
 2004
 Edition 1 of 5
 bronze
 236 x 40 x 40 cm
 92⁷/₈ x 15⁵/₈ x 15⁵/₈ in



Sentinel Fragment II
2020
Edition 1 of 12
bronze
24 x 11 x 18 cm
9³/₈ x 4¹/₄ x 7 in



Head Fragment III
2020
Edition 5 of 12
bronze
14¹/₂ x 5 x 7 in
37 x 13 x 18 cm



Sentinel Fragment IV
2020
Edition 1 of 12
bronze
25 x 12 x 21 cm
9³/₄ x 4⁵/₈ x 8¹/₄ in



Head Fragment VI
2020
Edition 5 of 12
bronze
27 x 10 x 16,5 cm
10⁵/₈ x 3⁷/₈ x 6³/₈ in



Sentinel Fragment VII
2020
Edition 1 of 12
bronze
37 x 13 x 23 cm
14 1/2 x 5 x 9 in



Sentinel Fragment VIII
2020
Edition 1 of 12
bronze
34 x 18 x 22 cm
13 3/8 x 7 x 8 5/8 in





Sanctuary
2023
mixed media on paper
53 x 107 cm
20³/₄ x 42¹/₈ in



That One Voice
2018
Edition 4 of 9
bronze
42 x 90 x 30 cm
16¹/₂ x 35³/₈ x 11³/₄ in



SANCTUARY



Invocation: The Ancient Ones I
2015
Edition 1 of 9
bronze on marble base
and stainless steel plinth
143 x 45 x 45 cm
56 1/4 x 17 5/8 x 17 5/8 in



Invocation: The Ancient Ones II
2015
Edition 1 of 9
bronze on marble base
and stainless steel plinth
152 x 45 x 45 cm
59 3/4 x 17 5/8 x 17 5/8 in



DEBORAH BELL

b. 1957, South Africa

Deborah Bell is one of South Africa's most celebrated contemporary artists. She works in a range of media on canvas and paper, produces dry point etchings and large-scale bronzes. Her earlier more political work has given way to a broader, deeper investigation into the border between mortality and immortality, matter and spirit, presence and absence, the quotidian and the mythic, the grounded and transcendent. In recent years she has developed an immediately recognisable visual language, her images simple, stark, symbolic – grounded, silent, still, poised.

In her iconography Bell draws from a range of cultures (including African, Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, early Christian and European) and a range of philosophies (especially the Buddhist preoccupation with stillness and the shedding of attachment and the ego) and psychologies (more Jung than Freud). But her work digs deeper, arriving finally out of an internal and personal place that Bell occupies in the world as an artist, a woman and an explorer. A central task is to make the unknown present – apprehended in a series of powerful images that are both of her and beyond her.

Bell's earlier figures, characterised by entrapment (in the country, in the body), gave way to figures embodying the seeker – often accompanied by boats, horses, chariots. Images of lions, dogs, horses and angels. These are often intermediary figures between the physical world and a higher more

spiritual realm. They are also aspects of herself – the powerful daemons that reside in all of us, which are often accompanied by solitary female figures, some full of assertive confidence, others more vulnerable and less sure of their agency.

Bell is interested in the half-formed image – the unwritten, as yet unformed spaces we move towards in our quest for self-knowledge. More recent work has also become more concerned with surrender – to the higher self, the mystery of the universe, the simplicity of the present. All her art, she has observed, points towards the Zen mark: the single gesture of absolute presence. Her quest is ongoing – and has left in its wake a series of hugely powerful, totemic images from what Yeats called *Spiritus Mundi*.

Bell has collaborated on various historically important projects with contemporaries such as William Kentridge and Robert Hodgins. She received her BAFA (Hons) and MFA degrees from the University of Witwatersrand and has been an artist working abroad and a lecturer at various South African tertiary institutions.

Deborah Bell's work is represented in public and private collections around the world including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Smithsonian Institute and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, the Hara Museum, Tokyo and the IZIKO South African National Gallery, Cape Town.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2024** *Mother Land*, Everard Read Johannesburg, South Africa
2020 *Sentinels (2020)*, Everard Read, London, UK
2019 *Enthroned*, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
2018 *Invocations to the Plate*, David Krut Projects, Johannesburg, South Africa
2017 *Uncovering Ancient Memory – 15 years of etching*, David Krut Projects, Cape Town, South Africa
Recent Paintings and Sculpture, Everard Read, Franschhoek, South Africa
2016 *Dreams of Immortality: Blood and Gold*, Everard Read, London, UK
2015 *Renunciation*, David Krut, Johannesburg, South Africa
Dreams of Immortality, Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa
2013 *What Would Wisdom Say to Your Dark Heart?* Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
2012 *A Far Country*, John Martin Gallery, London and the Glyndebourne Opera Festival, UK
2011 *Presence*, Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa
2010 *Alchemy*, David Krut, Johannesburg, South Africa
2009 *Flux*, Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
Collaborations, David Krut, Johannesburg, South Africa
2007 *Objects of Power: memory of metal, memory of wood*, Goodman, Johannesburg, South Africa
2005-6 *Crossings and Monuments*, Oliewenhuis Museum, Bloemfontein, South Africa
2005 *Crossings and Monuments*, Aardklop Festival Potchefstroom University Library Gallery, South Africa
2004 *Sentinels*, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
2002 *Unearthed*, Joao Ferreira Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
2001 *Unearthed*, Goodman, Johannesburg, South Africa
2000 *The Journey Home*, Art First, London, UK
1998 *Displacements*, Goodman, Johannesburg, South Africa
1995 *Muses and Lamentations*, Goodman, Johannesburg, South Africa
1989 *Deborah Bell*, Potchefstroom Museum, South Africa
1982 *Deborah Bell*, Market Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

TWO–THREE PERSON GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2019** *Co-Responses*, Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg in collaboration with Ricky Burnett
1997 *Collaborations 1986–1997* (11 years of collaborative projects between artists Kentridge, Hodgins and Bell)

- at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, in association with the FNB Vita Awards, South Africa
UB101, a portfolio of etchings created in conjunction with Kentridge and Hodgins. Exhibited at the Grahamstown Festival and at the Gertrude Posel Gallery. Exhibition curated by Fiona Rankin-Smith
1994 *Memo*, installation with video at the Grahamstown festival in collaboration with William Kentridge and Robert Hodgins, South Africa
Lamentations, Art First, Cork Street, London, UK
1993 *Easing the Passing (of the hours)*, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
Portraits in the round, ceramic exhibition in collaboration with William Kentridge and Retief van Wyk, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
1992 *Easing the Passing (of the hours)*, computer Animation, laser prints and drawings in collaboration with William Kentridge and Robert Hodgins, Waterfront, Cape Town, South Africa
1991 *Little Morals*, a portfolio of etchings created in conjunction with Hodgins and Kentridge, exhibited at the Cassirer Gallery, Johannesburg, Gallery International, Cape Town and Taking Liberties, Durban, South Africa
1988 Exhibited with Jenny Stadler and Nagel at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
1987-8 *Hogarth in Johannesburg*, a portfolio of etchings created in conjunction with Hodgins and Kentridge. This exhibition travelled to all the major centres in South Africa
1985 *MAFA* exhibition, Rembrandt Gallery, Milner Park, Johannesburg, South Africa
1983-4 Exhibited with Hodgins and Sassoon, Carriage House Gallery, South Africa

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2020** *Bronze, Steel, Stone and Bone*, Everard Read London
2019 Masterpiece London Art Fair, with Everard Read
Southern Aspect, Everard Read London
Summer, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
2018 *Bronze, Steel and Stone III*, Everard Read London
Investec Cape Town Art Fair, with Everard Read
2017 *Bronze, Steel and Stone II*, Everard Read London
2016 *Bronze, Steel and Stone I*, Everard Read London
Opening Exhibition, Everard Read London
2016-7 *TACIT*, a group exhibition acknowledging 20

- years of conjunction and reciprocity at Dionysus Sculpture Works studio and foundry, NWU Gallery, Potchefstroom and William Humphreys, Kimberley, and Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria, South Africa
2015 *Bronze, Steel & Stone*, Everard Read, Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa
1:54 Fair, with Everard Read, London, UK
2013 *Summer of Sculpture*, Everard Read, Cape Town, South Africa
Centenary Exhibition, CIRCA & Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa
2012 *Rainbow Nation: Group exhibition of South African Sculptors*, Museum Beelden Aan Zee, Den Haag, the Netherlands
2011 *HORSE*, curated by Ricky Burnett, Everard Read, Johannesburg, South Africa
2010 *TWENTY, 20 Years of South African Sculpture*, Nirox Foundation, South Africa
2009 *Contemporary Sculpture in the Landscape*, Nirox Foundation, South Africa
2007 *Lift Off II*, Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
David Krut Print Workshop, UNISA Art Gallery, Pretoria, South Africa
2005 Art Basel, with Goodman Gallery, Miami, USA
Works on Paper, Collaborative prints from David Krut Print Workshop, Franchise Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
David Krut Collaborations: 25 Years of Prints and Multiples, National Arts Festival, Grahamstown, South Africa
2004 *Earthworks/Claybodies*, Sasol Museum Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa
2003 *Earthworks/Claybodies*, Pretoria Art Museum, Standard Bank Centre Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
2000 *Icons for the Millenium*, Atlanta, USA
1999 *The Paper Show*, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
Emergence, Group Show, National Arts festival, Grahamstown, South Africa
Artery, AVA, in conjunction with the Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
Artists in residence, Standard Bank National Arts Festival, Grahamstown, South Africa
1998 *Earth Hues – Contemporary African Art*, World Space, Washington DC, USA
100 Artists Protest detention without trial, in aid of DPSC, Market Theatre, Johannesburg, South Africa
Artists for Human Rights Exhibition, Durban Exhibition

- Centre, South Africa
4 UNISA Lecturers, Bloemfontein, Pretoria Art Museum, South Africa
1997 *Images and Form: Prints, drawings and sculpture from Southern Africa and Nigeria*, Brunei Gallery, University of London and Edinburgh College of Art, UK
The Gencor Collection, Sandton Art Gallery, and The Grahamstown Festival, South Africa
Kempton Park Metropolitan Substructure Fine Arts Award Show, Kempton Park, South Africa
New Art from South Africa, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, UK
Les Arts de la Résistance (Fin de Siècle a Johannesburg), Galerie convergence, Galerie Jean-Christian, Fradin, Galerie Michel Luneau, Galerie les Petit Murs, Nantes, France
Not Quite a Christmas Exhibition, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
CRAM, AVA, in conjunction with the Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
1996 *Gay Rights: Rites, Re-writes*, travelling exhibition, South Africa
Group Salon, Rose Korber representing artists at the Bay Hotel, Cape Town, South Africa
Common and Uncommon Ground: South African Art to Atlanta, City Gallery East, Atlanta, USA
Vita Awards, Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa
Tomorrow is Now, First Canadian Place and Knights Galleries International, Toronto, Canada
Barber Signs, the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
Recent Drawings, Gallery on Tyrone, Johannesburg, South Africa
Ceramics Biennial, Sandton Art Gallery, South Africa
1995 *The Bag Factory: The First Five Years*, the Civic Theatre Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
The Art of Tea, Kim Sacks Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
Group Salon, Rose Korber representing artists at the Bay Hotel, Cape Town, South Africa
1994 *Group Show*, Newtown, Johannesburg, South Africa
Anything Boxed, Group Show, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
South African works on Paper, North Western University of Illinois, Chicago, USA
1993 Gallery on Tyrone, Johannesburg, South Africa
Vita Awards, Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa
Momentum Life Exhibition, Pretoria, South Africa

Internations of Millenium, Newtown Gallery,
Johannesburg, South Africa

1992 *ICA*, 50 Johannesburg Artists, Johannesburg, South Africa

Paris: The Catalyst, Alliance Francaise, Durban, South Africa

Looking at Art: Looking at Watercolours, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

Vita Awards, Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa

Works made in August, Newtown Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

1991 *Cape Town Triennial*, South Africa

Painted People: Painted Spaces, Newtown Galleries, Johannesburg, South Africa

Hand Coloured Graphics, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

Tiny Tapestry Show, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

1990 *Women choose Women*, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Art from South Africa, MOMA, Oxford, UK

Standard Bank Drawing Competition, Johannesburg, South Africa

1989 Volkskas Atelier Award Exhibition, Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa

African Encounters, Dome Gallery, New York and Washington, USA

The Little Big Show, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

1988 CASA (Culture for Another South Africa), conference in Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Volkskas Atelier Award exhibition, South African Association of the Arts, Pretoria, South Africa

1986 Volkskas Atelier Award Exhibition, South African Association of Arts, Pretoria, South Africa

1985 Cape Town Triennial, New Visions, Market Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

11 Figurative Artists, Market Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

COLLECTIONS

BHP Billiton South Africa Ltd.

Bristol Myers Squibb Corp. USA

The Leeu Collection, Franschhoek

Delaire Graff Estate, Stellenbosch

Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town

Hara Museum, Tokyo

Johannesburg Art Gallery

Johannesburg City Council

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth)

Legal Resources Centre, Johannesburg

Museum of Modern Art, New York

MTN Art Institute, Johannesburg

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C

Oliewenhuis Museum, Bloemfontein

Pretoria Art Museum

Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C

Standard Bank Investment Corporation, Johannesburg

Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg

University of South Africa Art Gallery

University of Pietermaritzburg

University of the Free State

University of the Witwatersrand

Spirit Studios, Benhall, Saxmundham, Suffolk, IP17 1JJ
Open June and July, Thursday to Saturday 10am – 5pm, or by appointment

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

Douglas Atfield, Michael Hall, Stella Olivier and Liz Whitter