

# Odd Birds & Other Selves

Jon Buck

2005

'Animals are useful for thinking with'

Primo Levi

## Jon Buck

The late Joe Light, a self-taught African-American artist from Memphis, Tennessee repeatedly drew and painted an image of a human head on top of which stood a white bird. The style was bold and simple, the image of nothing seen but symbolic of an epiphany. This is Light's reiteration of the realisation whilst serving a prison sentence that the disembodied voice he was hearing was that of God. The image is, as he told me, 'a symbol of God getting into my head.' Seeing a largish work in plaster in Jon Buck's studio recently I was reminded of this. Quite unknowing of Light or his work he had produced a similarly iconic image, in this case in crisp, spare sculptural form. Here were the heads of a woman and a man (or were they the two manifest aspects of the same individual?) and into the top of each were rooted, trunk-like, the feet of some primal child, her steady gaze inclined toward the cosmos and unwavering. On top of the child's head was a bird, brought into being by the simplest of volumetric suggestions and indicative linear elements, being no more than a couple of cigar-shapes and cylinders. This commanding hieratic piece combined a feeling of physical weightiness and intangible spirit. Around its base, tellingly, I thought, in a studio tidied for my visit, were a little cast of the Venus of Willendorf and an assortment of smooth, beach pebbles with sculpturally suggestive forms. Yet, if these objects reinforced connections with the form-making of ancient humanity and a nature viewed as animate and creative, they also threw into stark relief the fundamental modernity of Buck's work. If its content refers to eternal or archetypal things, its conception belongs to the now.

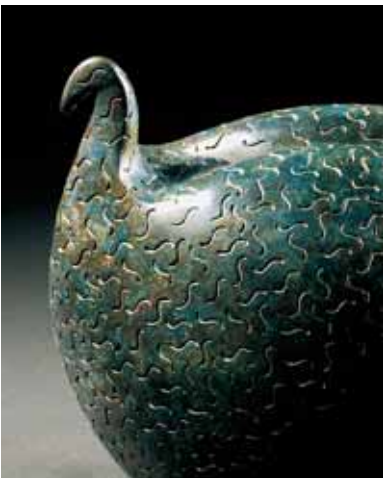
In his latest works Buck has continued the move away from the 'super-realism' of his early career that culminated in pieces of astonishing serenity and magical presence at the turn of the millennium in the *Intimate Connections* series. The keynote of the latter work was a reduction of formal complexity, such that the thing in the world to which each piece referred could be named, but from which detail and all visually distracting excrescence had been expunged. Once again a human head on which a bird perches, significantly titled *Go-Between* provided a kind of transition and guide into sculptures that embody states of being, or physical-emotional conditions rather than being merely descriptive. For example, fecundity in *Natura*, unselfconscious aggressivity in *Hawk*, or the eternal tension between shared identity and otherness that occurs in the moment of recognition in *Back to Back*. Faced with this work at times I am reminded of certain African and Oceanic sculptures, of Etruscan figures, and – perhaps more unexpectedly – of the Neolithic temples of Malta and the small number of surviving artefacts unearthed in archaeological excavations there.



top **Go-Between** centre **Natura** bottom **Hawk**

Occasionally the reference is clear, as in *Drumbeast*, which is related to zoomorphic carved log drums from Africa and New Guinea, for example. However, this is not a case of some kind of stylistic primitivism on Buck's part, but rather an acknowledgement of shared sculptural interests as well as a feeling for spirit in the created form. Significantly, where the African and Oceanic pieces are functional – whatever else they might 'mean' they are made for the purpose of creating sound – Buck's is not. In fact, it is the opposite. It is intrinsically silent; the bronze unyielding in contrast to the organic hollowed wood of the drums. As a communicating vessel, it can only be understood through visual and tactile contemplation. It 'sounds', if I can use the word in this way, through these other senses, connecting the viewer psychologically to some great bass timbre through mass, volume and form.

Another feature of the *Intimate Connections* series is the inspired attention that was paid to the surfaces of the works. As a sculptor Buck has always been concerned with colour, from the polychromatic, stylized naturalism of his early output, to the subtle, sophisticated patinations of work from the 1990s achieved through working closely with Rungwe Kingdon during the casting process at Pangolin Editions. In *Intimate Connections*, though, an intriguing development occurred. In the first place, there is evidence of a further deepening of the understanding between the sculptor and his collaborators resulting in new patinas that take the possibilities of finishes for bronze into exciting new realms where references to the delicate fragility of ceramic and baked mud, or the promised but evasive translucence of polished granite enter into a kind of sculptural dialogue with the underlying qualities of mass and indestructibility of bronze. To this was added, in many pieces, the innovation of inscribing an all-over surface pattern consisting of discreet form elements repeated, usually irregularly, and often with pigment added (as in *Motherbird* and *Back to Back*).



In some works the pattern element consisted of a simple, witty stylization of the piece itself – ‘dog’ petroglyphs in *He-dog*, ‘goddess’ ones in *Primal Woman* – or distilled to the very essence of the basic form – as in *Bird of Paradox* and *Waterbird*. In other works simple incised marks also indicated feathers or fur in a highly abstract way. The result of employing repeated glyphs in this way is to free pattern from its descriptive function in the conventional sense, adding to the sense of animation of surface planes and of the push and pull between surface and mass.

Buck continues to explore the relationship between visibility and physicality in his latest series of works, collectively titled *Odd Birds and Other Selves*. Again most of the finished bronzes bear the marks of lines and simple shapes formed by shallow, regular incisions into the smooth surfaces of the plaster originals. *Fancy cat* and *Early Bird*, for example, share the dotting of *Goddess* and *Back to Back*. However, the eternal, almost grave character of the chthonic creatures of *Intimate Connections* has been overtaken by a lightness that suggests a kind of liberation.

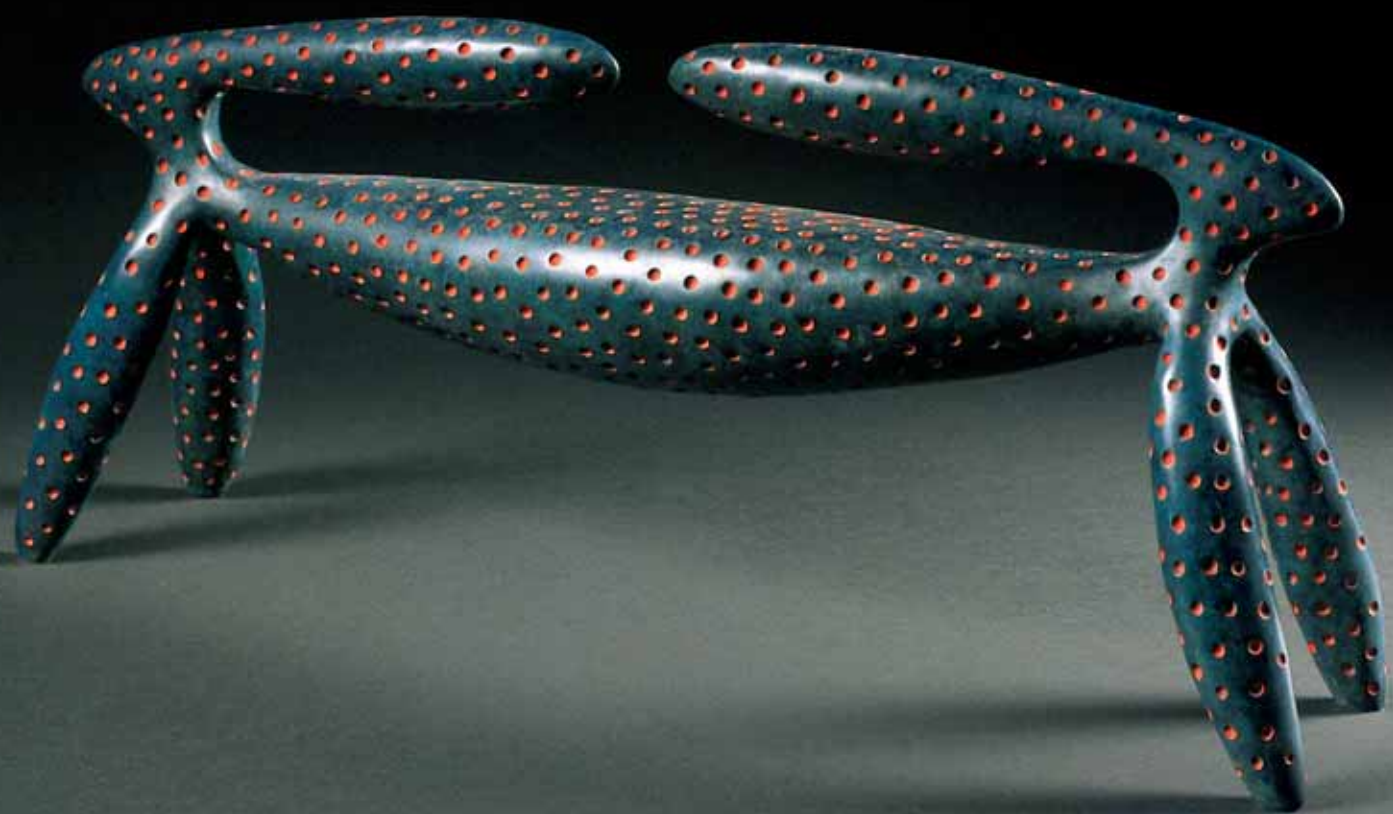
top **Motherbird** centre **Hounddog** detail bottom **Waterbird** detail

By this, I mean that in his most recent work Buck seems to have found a way of conveying archetypal content in forms that are aerial rather than earthly. Playfulness that has always been an aspect of his work is now brought to the fore, so that it functions as part of the viewer's primary response. Smiling seems to me an important part of the encounter with *High Flyer*, *Cactus Cat*, or *Dogondog*, for example, and we are invited to share in the exuberance of *Lying Lady* and *Shadow Hare*.

This is partly a result of a movement towards dynamic, pop shapes and the use of saturated surface colour. In some pieces the use of line also contributes greatly to this aerial quality; where previously glyphs had freed pattern from description, in works like *Eachway Heads*, *Dogondog*, and *Wishbone Bird* incised marks and lines act as sign, such that they refer to representation but do not tumble over into descriptive particularity. In this way another kind of push and pull is activated, now between graphic sign and sculptural volume.

I am interested in the visual dialogues that are set in play, between simple overall formal nobility and near-caricature, between pop line and high modernist volumetrics, between figuration and abstraction, between opaque pigment and metal. *Pink Lady*, for example, possesses that wonderful density of matter characteristic of bronze, and the quality is exploited in the smooth, fluid curvilinear forms that insinuate a figure that is perhaps human, perhaps bird, or more likely some incipient hybrid creature. Yet, this coolness is overlaid by spare but strident shallowly incised lines that punch out information in bald, graphic form – eyes, nose, hair, hand, breasts – like graffiti applied by someone who, having intuited a female figure in some found stone or an abstract sculpture, felt the need to crudely share her or his revelation.





Furthermore, Buck has chosen to paint the piece in an all-over rose pink, with the drawing in a near complementary blue, so that its bronzeness is hidden under the skin, so to speak. What is impressive about *Pink Lady* is the way in which Buck's provocations set up problems which cannot be 'solved', but which in the pondering make the viewer consider the relationships and contrasts in a way that is fluid yet satisfying.

The surfaces of the works in *Odd Birds and Other Selves* are exciting and groundbreaking, with Buck and Kingdon working closely together to push back the boundaries of what is possible in bronze finishes. Aside from *Pink Lady*, which has a paint 'skin', most of the other works in the series use translucent pigment, sometimes laid directly onto the raw bronze surface, as in *Eachway Heads*, or added onto a patina, as in *Hatterhead*. The use of saturated, translucent pigment achieves an incredibly fresh and contemporary feel, appropriate to the forms, whilst making the most of the particular qualities of the bronze. Glyphs are then picked out in opaque pigment, as in *Double Take*, or gold leaf, as in *Flitterbird*, which creates a compelling dialogue between line and surface volume. As they appear now, *Odd Birds and Other Selves* have a feeling of freshness and newness that overrides any sense of the aura of anachronism that is often projected into works in bronze by contemporary artworld viewers and critics. The use of saturated synthetic red pigment, with blue graphic elements in *Double Take* and *Wishbone Bird*, for example, situates them in the early twenty-first century as emphatically as their form, whilst a mixture of deep, midnight blue with pink glyphs helps make *Midnite Movie Heads* both mystical and mundane.

What is interesting is the fact that in using pigment a particular aging process is inferred. Wearing of the surface 'skin' will be inevitable, which will have the effect not only of modulating the assertive all-over quality of the pieces in their current state, but will also reveal their underlying nature as bronze. Perhaps one day, like the polychrome bronze statues of Ancient Greece, they will be unearthed, surviving only as the abiding base material of their construction and reinvented as monochromes.

There is a general tendency toward frontality in the new work, so that the feeling of petroglyphs somehow liberated from their stony base is strong. Seeing the works stacked in the artist's studio there is a sense that they might somehow begin to add up to a symbolic language. This is part of what I have called the playfulness of the work. It is the playfulness of creative exploration, of holding back the influence of received knowledge and risking trust in the unconscious or the unknown. It is what artists like Paul Klee and Joan Miro referred to as attempting to regain the fresh, unfettered conceptions of childhood. Playing with possibilities is what allows striking innovations to emerge out of the process of working, as for example in the realisation that the solution to making a bronze bird stand upright could be found in treating the slender legs as a simple graphic form on a cylinder. Birds, after all, in life are incredibly light in comparison with their volumes and bronze is incredibly dense, so that legs that serve the living bird are hopelessly inadequate in the material of its representation. It is remarkable, therefore, that there is an overwhelming sense of lightness and delicacy in *Wishbone Bird*, which is in fact a very solid object. Lightness is achieved metaphorically, not through finicky modelling but by the simple sweep of the upward 'u' of body, head and tail and straight, graphic pitchfork rendition of leg and foot whose extremities stop short of the base.





BUCK  
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Also interesting in this context, I think, are *Cactus Cat* and *Spikydog*, in which Buck has incorporated steel pins. Aside from the fact that this presents a new challenge in the casting process, the use of protruding pins extends into three dimensions the disruption of surface through use of repeated simple forms begun in the *Intimate Connections* series.

If many of the new works are somehow flat or frontal, they are simultaneously solid presences, physical and volumetric. Like the drawings of children they appear to have a privileged viewing aspect that is usually related to the way in which we conventionally conceptualise a thing or a part of that thing. Thus birds and animals tend to be in profile, but faces frontal. Buck notably plays with this in *Midnite Movie Heads*. The two faces are here in profile, including noses and mouths. Only the single visible eye of each face is frontal. However, although the faces do not actually touch they are tantalisingly close, creating the possibility of seeing them as a single, frontal face, with frontal eyes, nose and mouth under which a rectangular void surely performs the function of movie 'screen'.

Buck comes closest to an almost linear abstraction in the four-legged pieces, two of which are cast in copper. These are pared down to only that which is necessary to create the sense of something animated and alive – and Buck achieves this brilliantly. Interestingly these are perhaps the most African in feel, with echoes of stools and headrests in *Four-legged Form I* and *II* and of structural beams around doorways in the large, bronze *Longdog*. In the latter, as with much of this work, the initial effect, from a distance, is that it is all visual – reminiscent to some extent of work by Keith Haring. The closer one approaches, though, the more the visual/tactile dynamic shifts to the tactile end of the system.





If the 'graphic' encounter with *Longdog* is rewarding, the sculptural one is doubly so. Close up the piece is both volumetric and spatial, the great span of its straight, tree-trunk back containing beneath it a large void which opens up the form and invites exploration across the sculptures long axis as well as of its constituent parts.

**Long Dog**

Plaster for bronze  
Edition of 5  
143cm high

The feeling for natural form is strong in Buck's work, which is a consequence not only of his dominant interest in the connections between the human and the natural worlds, but also because he is a maker. The choice and feel of his materials and the genesis of form through physical manipulation have always been crucial to the creation of his art and similarly, the need to imbue his pieces with content beyond the merely formalist or coldly conceptual. Thus, it must have been interesting to attend art school in England in the second half of the 1970s, when minimalist and conceptualist aesthetics in sculpture were the order of the day. Given the continued neo-conceptualist dominance of artworld politics today, it is hardly surprising that he often feels something of an outsider. Being on the outside or, as I prefer to see it, occupying a kind of connecting fringe structure at the edge of boundaries allows for tremendous creative possibilities. Unhampered by the professional imperative to toe a particular art-political line, Buck has been able to explore new possibilities in his work according to creative demands, and to follow the idiosyncratic line of intriguing tributaries when they have gained his attention. As a result he can count a broad and fascinating spread of artistic interests, from European High Modernism through prehistoric and Cycladic art to tribal sculpture and Art Brut.

All artists are drawn to those things in which they sense an affinity, whether based in the visual or conceptual response. What is important is to be true to this impulse, rather than to turn away from it through fear of 'influence' or, worse, through over-concern with artworld fashions. It is through actual practice that one is a contemporary, rather than as a result of one's artistic interests; the fact of being of one's times and





**Shadow Hare**  
Bronze  
Edition of 12  
14cm high

working out of that specific historico-cultural context in an unforced, unselfconscious way. The best art has this quality at the moment of its inception, and also transcends that particularity, though this cannot be achieved by design – only time tells whether this transcendent quality is present or not.

But an art that starts anachronistic will stay that way, just as an art that refers only to the time and conditions of its production will sooner or later become so. Pastiche can stem from anachronistic interest, but it can also induce anachronism quickly. In retaining a degree of independence for his sculpture and exploring other creative possibilities out of a universalising impulse rather than through nostalgia I believe that Jon Buck has consistently produced work that is fresh and which speaks directly to contemporary viewers. I believe also that it embodies content that is not bound by temporal and cultural limits. The secret, I think, is for artists to extend, explore and develop without looking over their shoulder too much.

Colin Rhodes

September 2005

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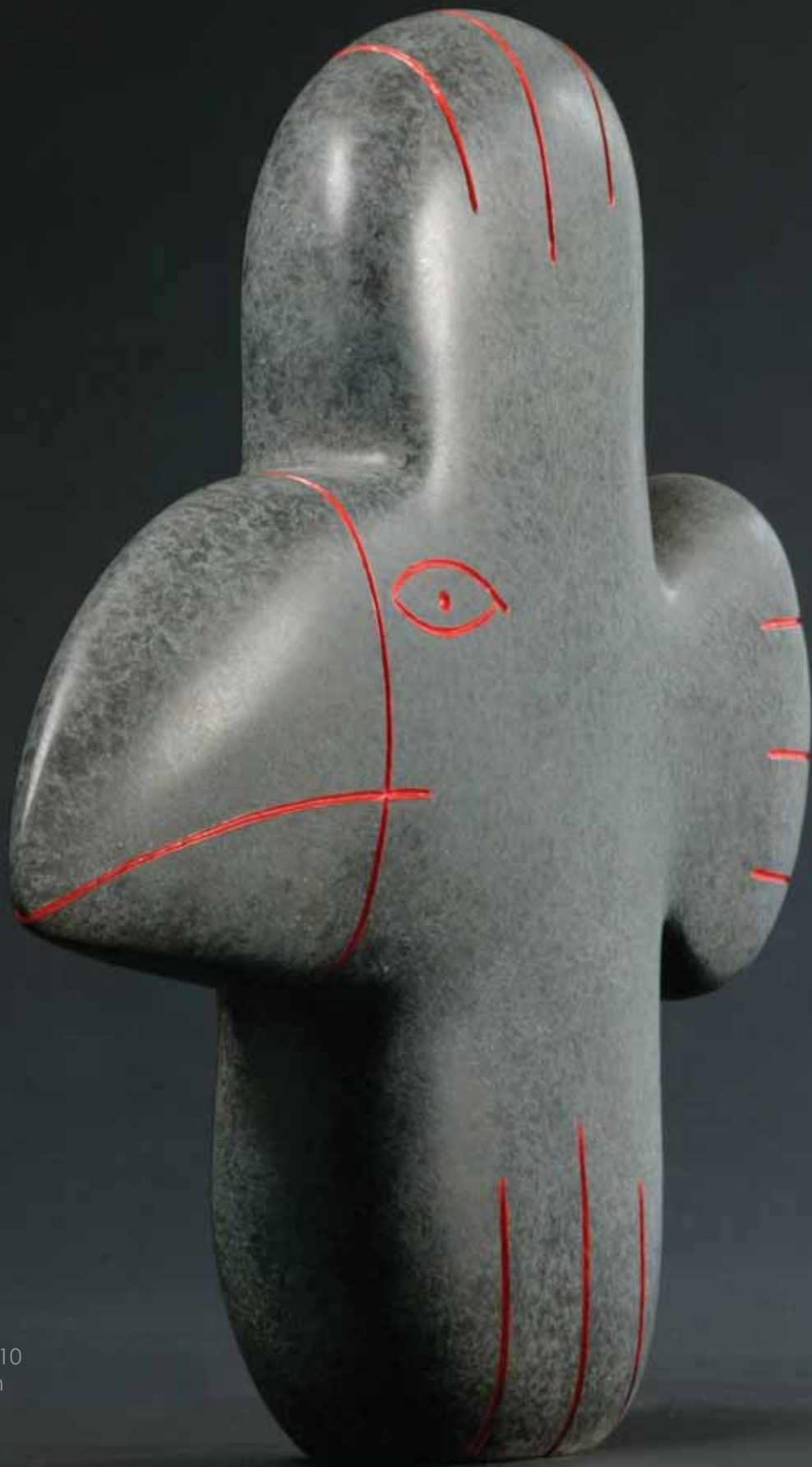
Colin Rhodes is a writer and artist. He is Professor of Art History and Theory at Loughborough University and Director of the School of Art & Design. His books include *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1994) and *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives* (2000), both published by Thames & Hudson.



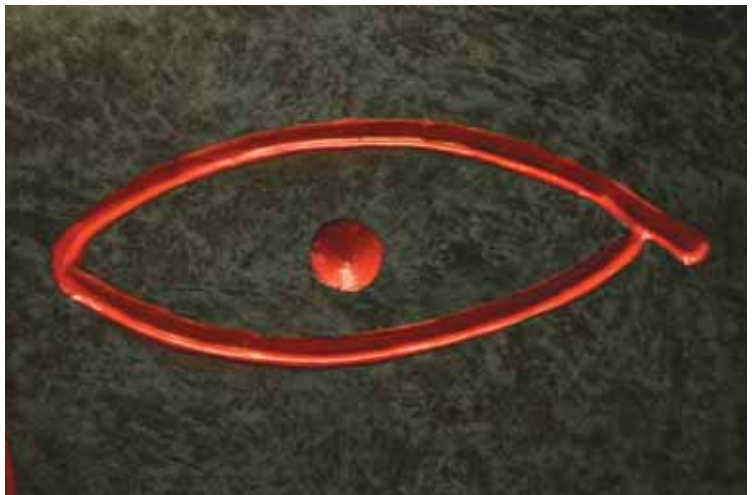
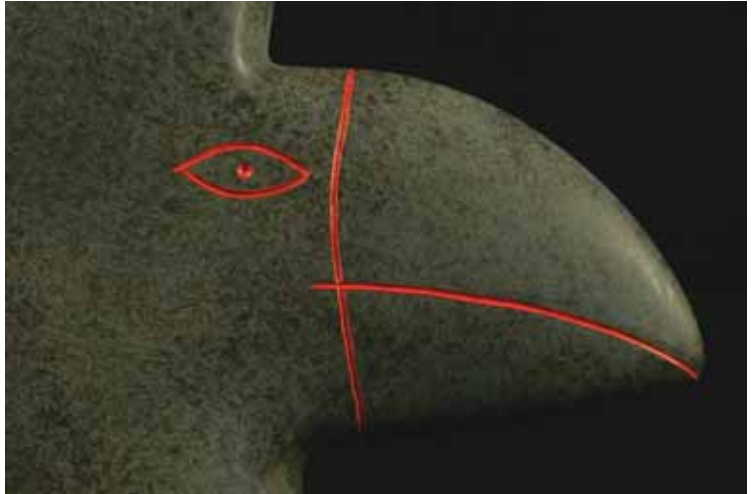
**Fancy Cat**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
39cm high

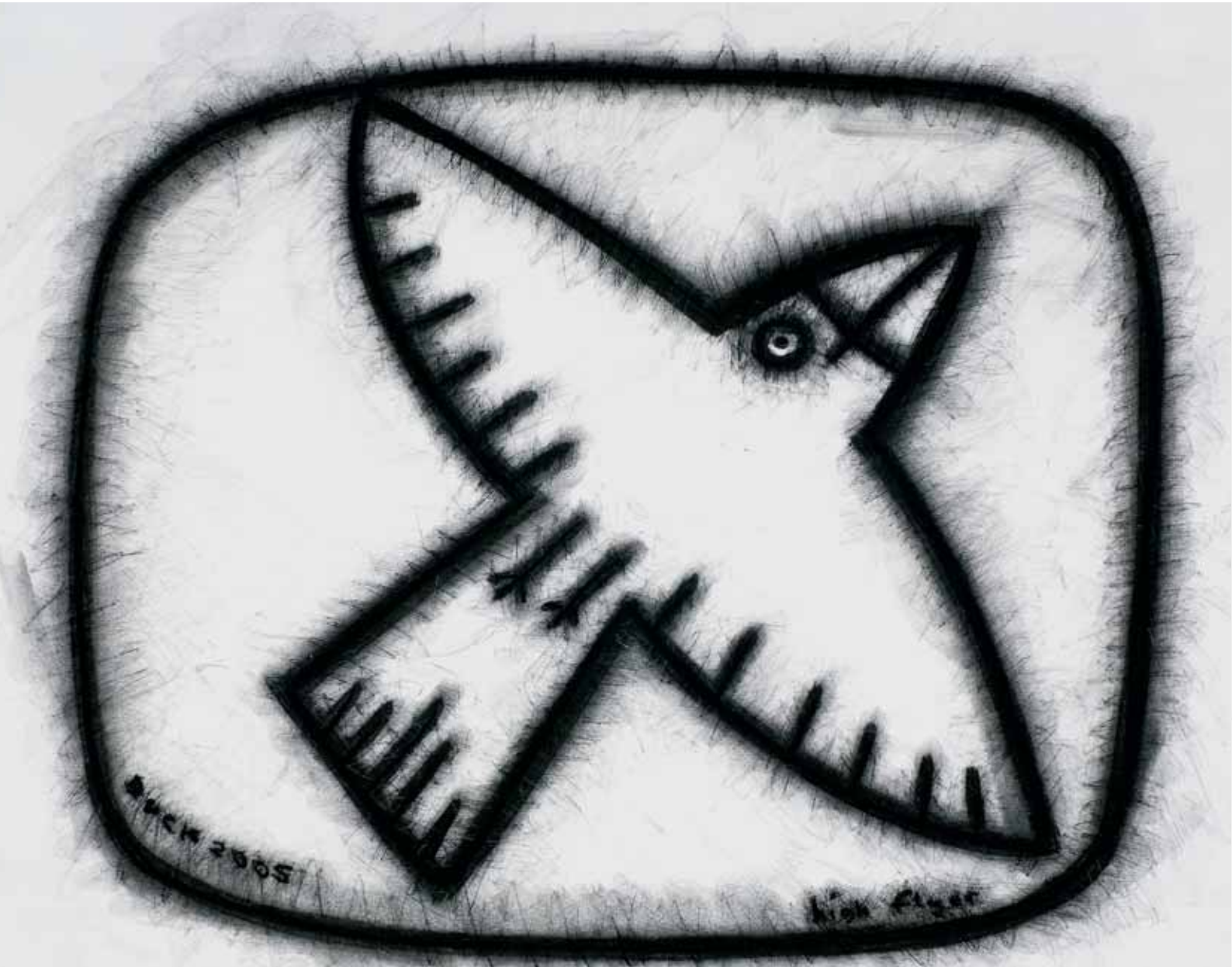




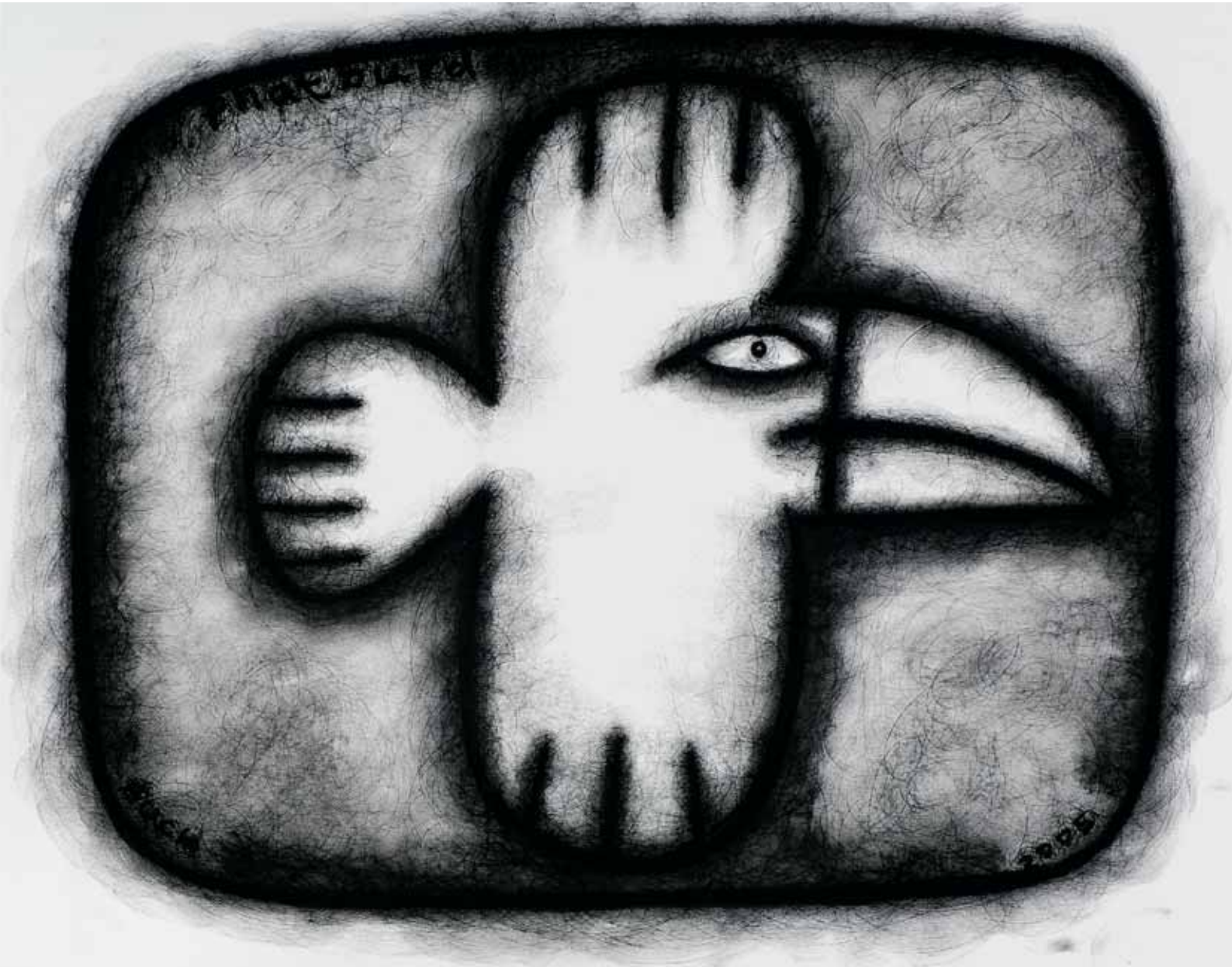


**Phatburd**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
40cm high

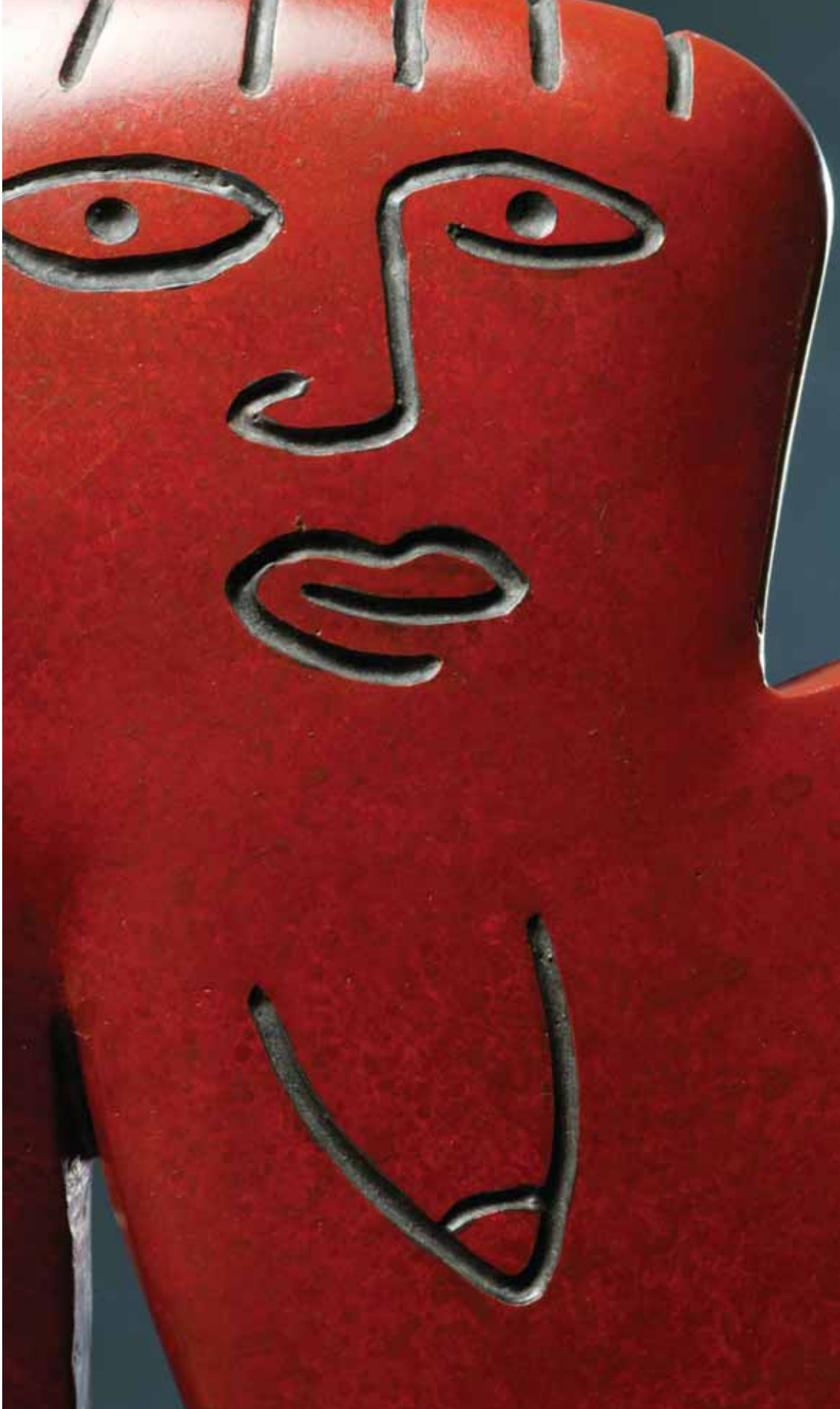














**Lying Lady**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
30cm high



**Knowing Bird**  
Bronze with gold leaf  
Edition of 10  
47cm high





**Four-legged Form I**

Copper

Edition of 10

14cm high

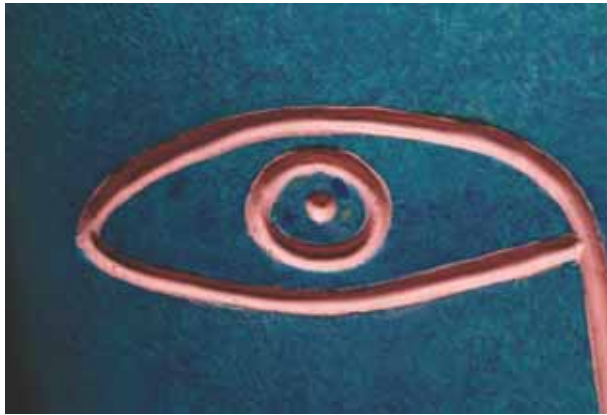


**Four-legged Form II**  
Copper  
Edition of 10  
17cm high





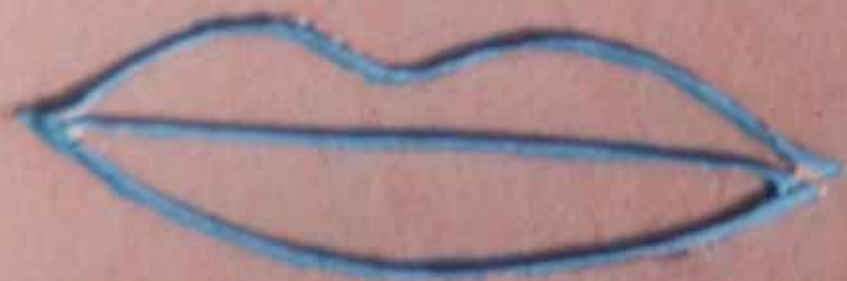
**Hatterhead**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
57cm high

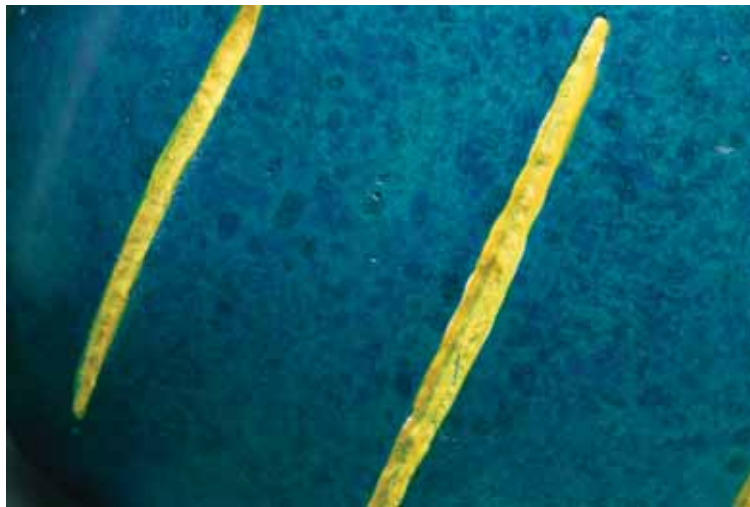






**Pink Lady**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
50cm high







**Star Dog**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
39cm high



**Game Fox**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
67cm high







**Imago**  
Tin  
Edition of 10  
17cm high



top  
bottom

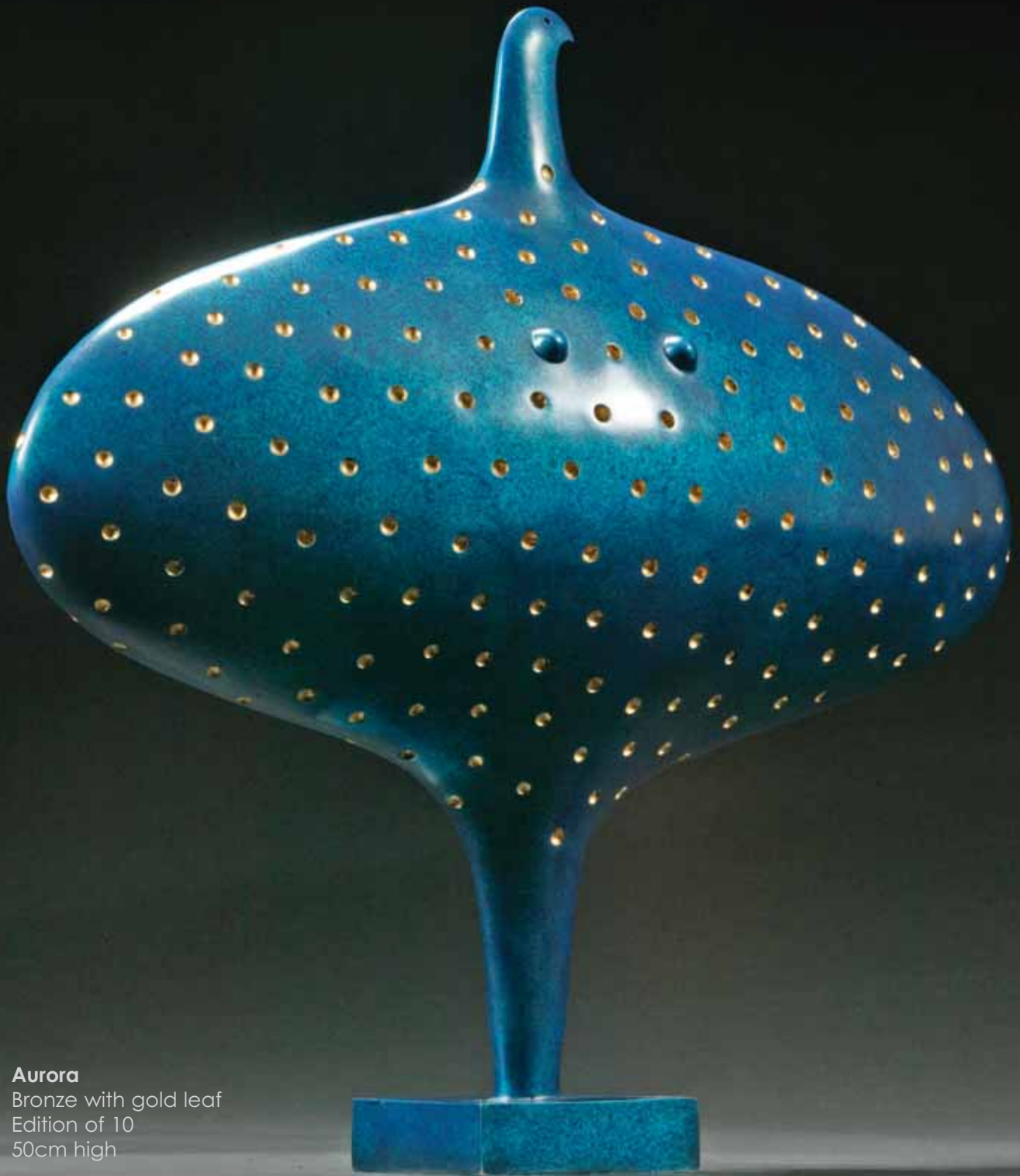
**Imago** Red iron  
**Imago** Cast iron







**Wishbone Bird**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
58cm high



**Aurora**  
Bronze with gold leaf  
Edition of 10  
50cm high





**Neophorm**

Bronze on stainless steel base

Edition of 10

13cm high inc base











**Hot Tin Cat**  
Sterling silver  
Edition of 12  
17cm high



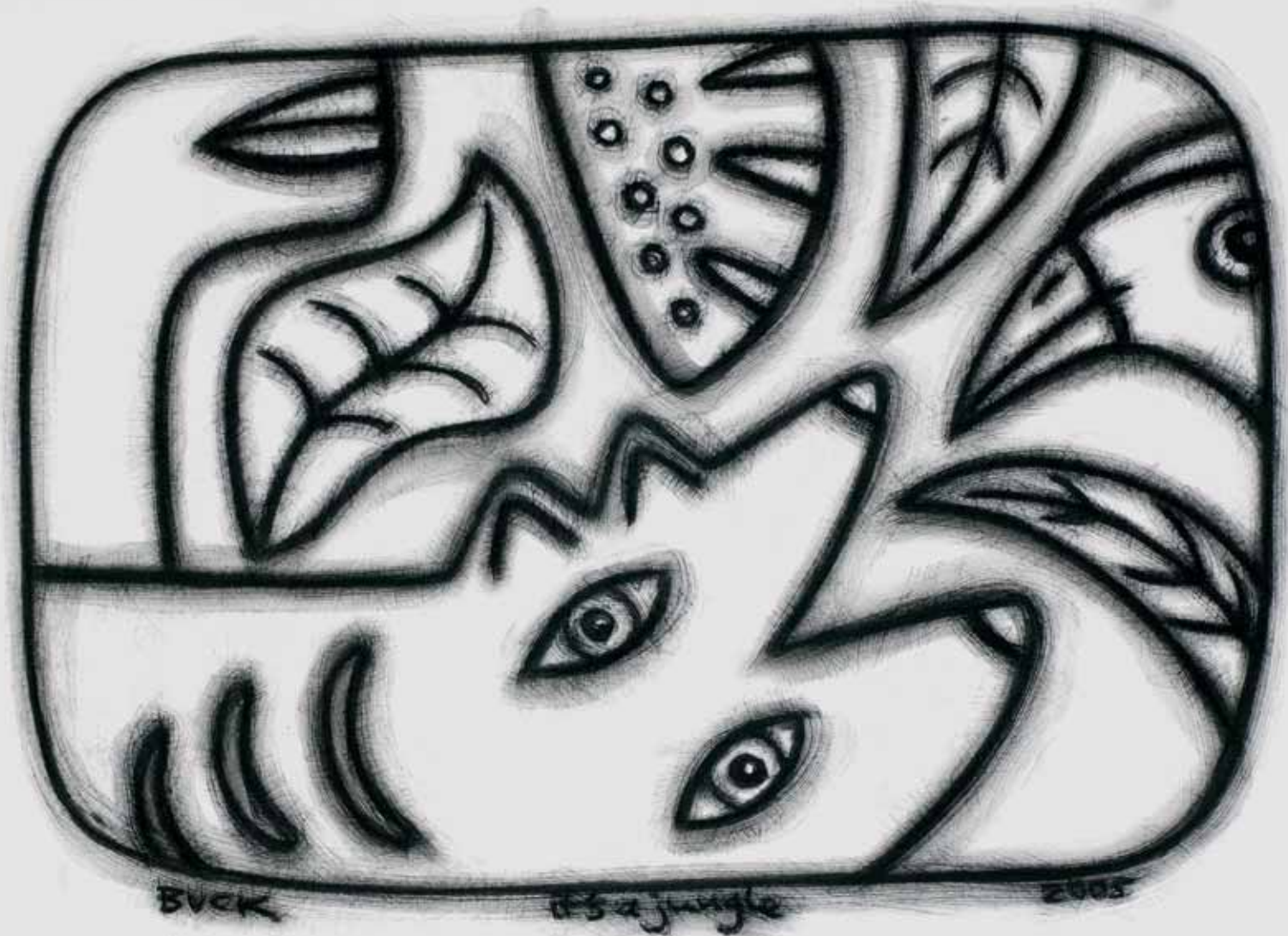
**Dogondog**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
40cm high



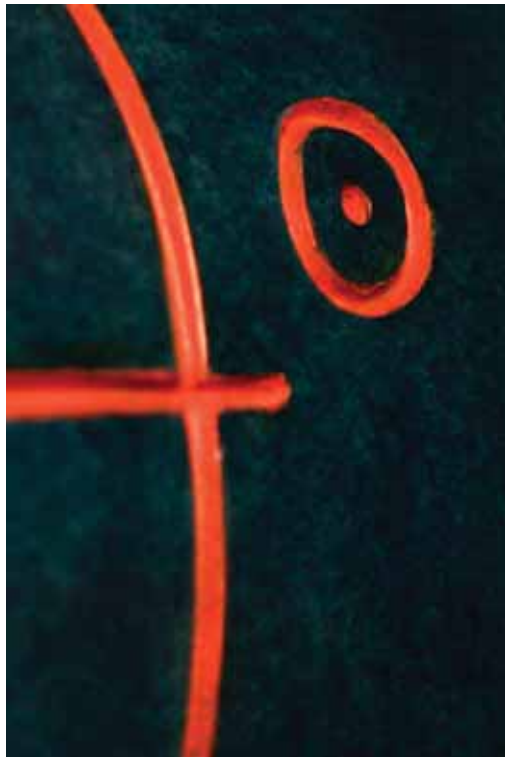


**Houndog**  
Bronze  
Edition of 12  
16.5cm high











**High Flyer**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
73cm high





**Spikydog**  
Bronze with steel nails  
Edition of 10  
30cm high











**Taleteller**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
20cm high





**Double Take**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
34cm high







**Midnite Movie Heads**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
75cm high





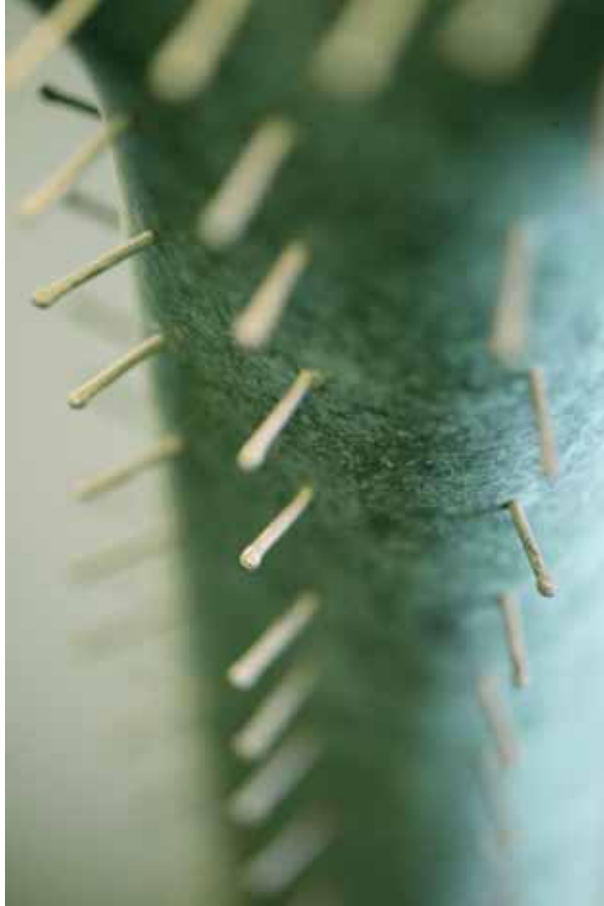




**Heptile**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
12.5cm high

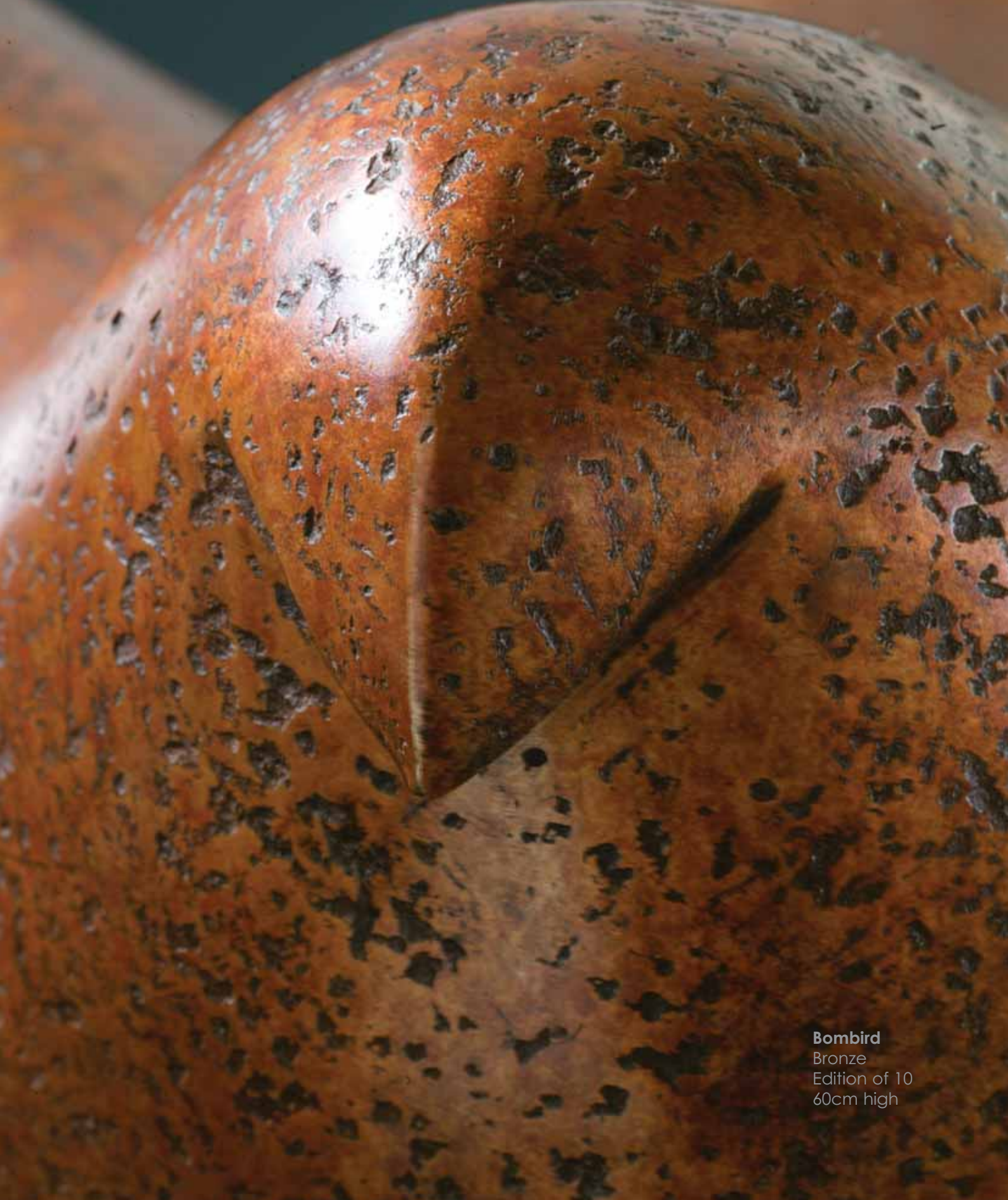


**Cactus Cat**  
Bronze with  
steel pins  
Edition of 10  
56cm high









**Bombird**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
60cm high



**Rawdog**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
22cm high



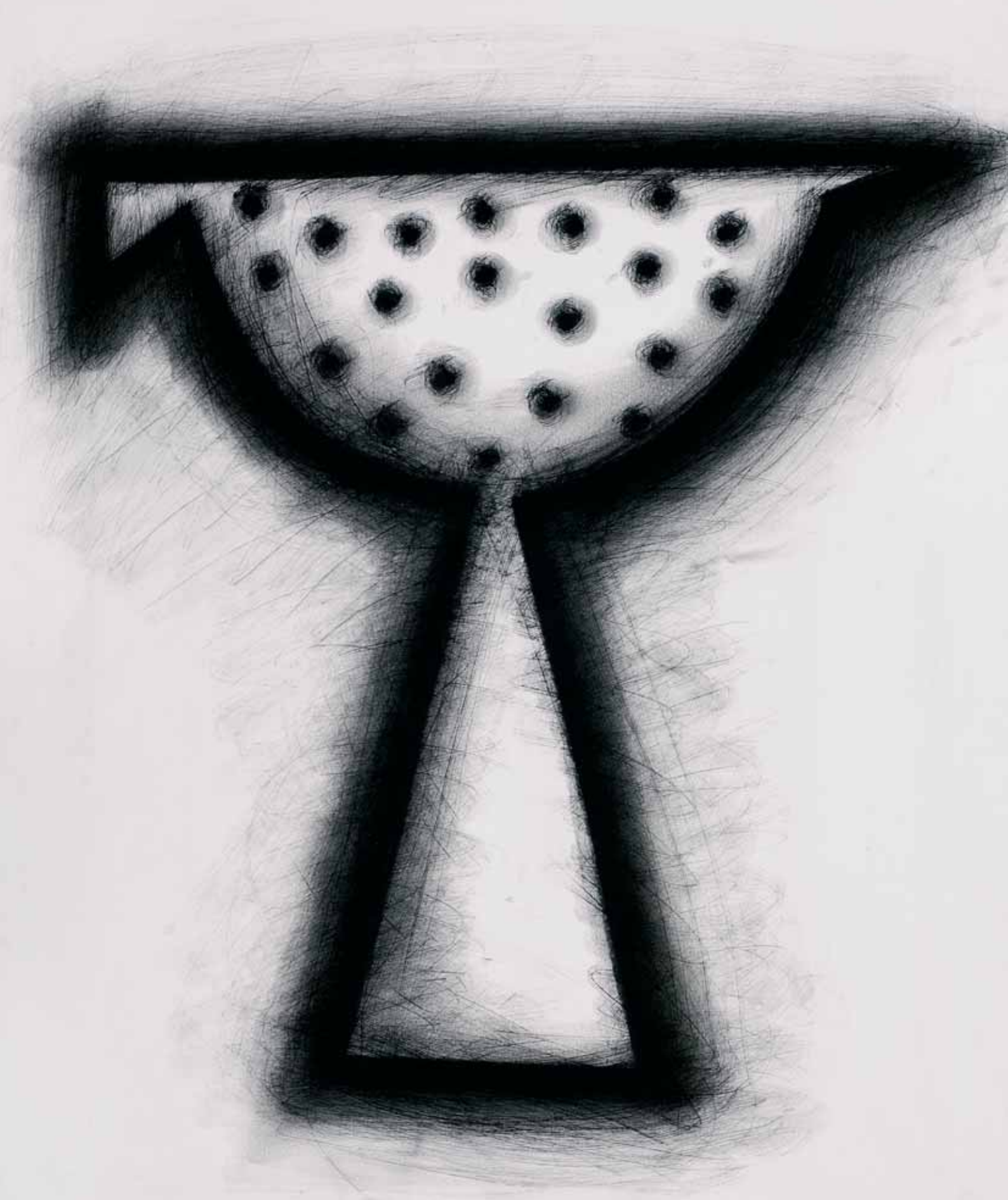








**Flitterbird**  
Bronze with gold leaf  
Edition of 10  
40cm high

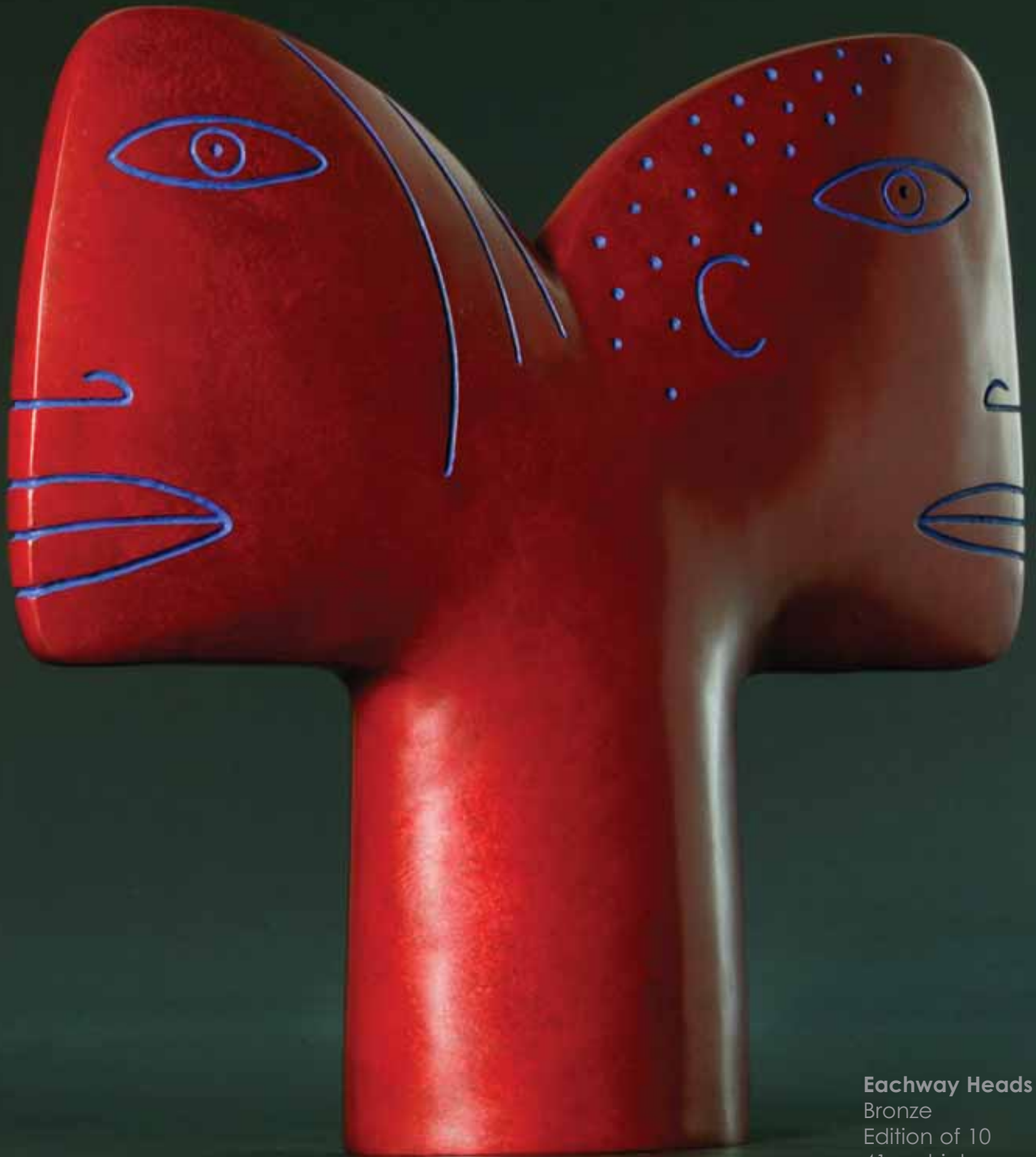






**Early Bird**  
Sterling silver  
Edition of 12  
13cm high





**Eachway Heads**  
Bronze  
Edition of 10  
41cm high



## Afterword

Bursting with energy, Jon Buck's 'Odd Birds and Other Selves' is an inspired and dynamic exhibition representing five years of studio work.

Emerging directly from 'Intimate Connections 2000', this joyful and exuberant collection takes us into a world of potent symbolism through the exploration of primal images, which evoke a powerful resonance in our shared consciousness.

Honed forms, shimmering surfaces and vivid colour all contribute to an exhilarating and magical show which we know will stimulate the imagination and excite the senses.

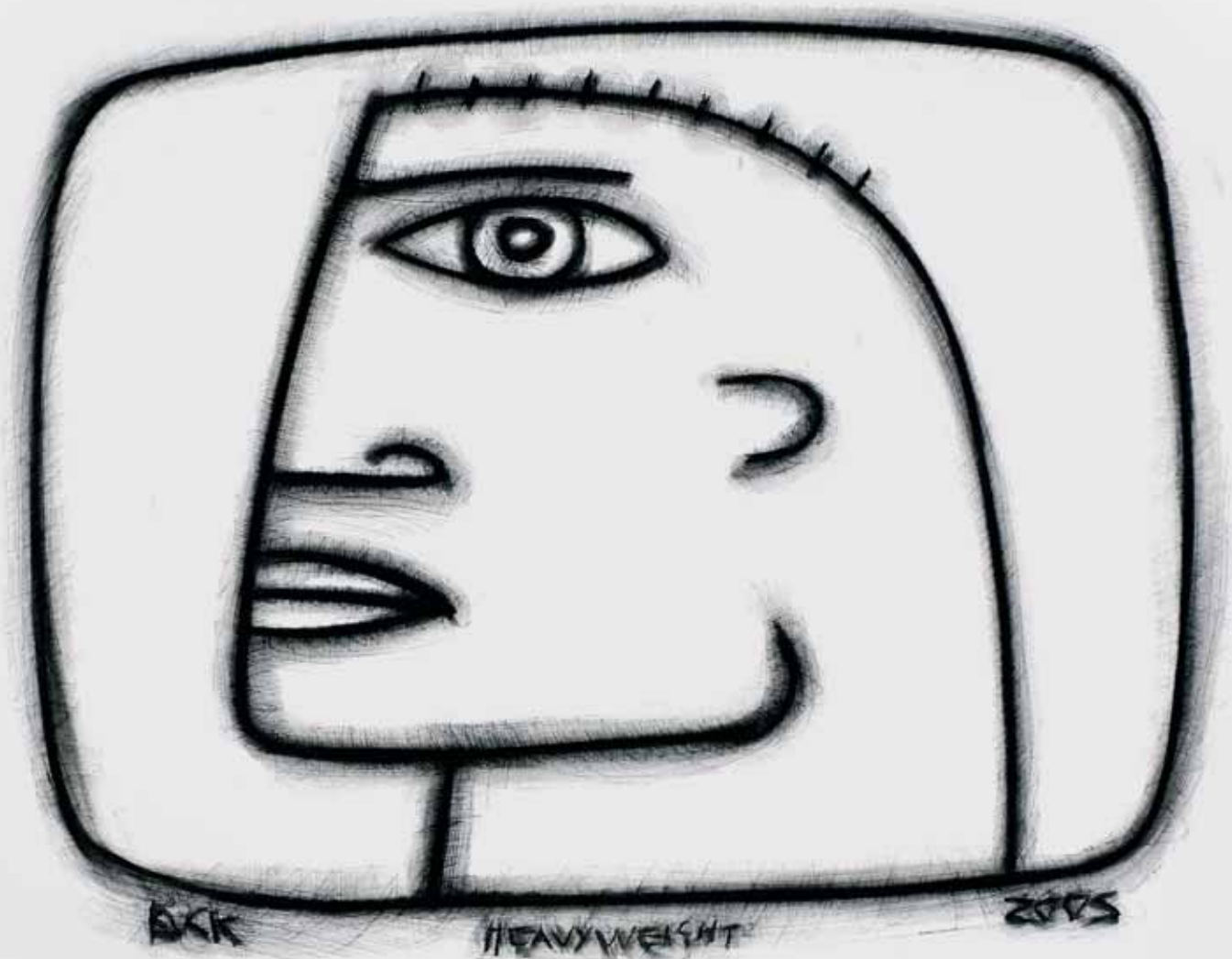
Jane Buck  
Claude Koenig

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