

Body Language

GALLERY PANGOLIN
2005

Anthony Abrahams
Kenneth Armitage
David Backhouse
Laurence Broderick
Christie Brown
Don Brown
Ralph Brown
Jon Buck
Reg Butler
Lynn Chadwick

Michael Cooper
Terence Coventry
Sue Freeborough
Damien Hirst
Jonathan Kenworthy
Claude Koenig
Anita Mandl
Leonard McComb
Kenneth Robertson
William Tucker

Body Language

The presence in this exhibition of so many recent works by younger artists alongside pieces by more established names reveals the extent to which the human body continues to provide an inexhaustible source of inspiration to the creative imagination. It also causes us to think critically about the term 'contemporary art'. Instead of describing contemporary work — that is, work being made today — it is more often used to denote a certain *kind* of work being made today. But who decides what work is suitable for inclusion under the 'contemporary' rubric? Moreover, what critical criteria apply?

If, by 'contemporary art', we mean works by artists living today, which succeed in commenting in a significant way on what it means to be human at this particular moment in history, then most of the works in this exhibition qualify.

However, for all the artists in this exhibition, the human body is an infinitely malleable object of study. It is both master and muse; it offers a refuge, as well as a means of orientation; it is a reflective surface, and a tabula rasa; it is a place of mystery and myth. Above all, it is eloquent and expressive.

Language originates in the body, and as the works assembled here demonstrate, the human body also speaks a language of its own. Through a wordless grammar of gesture, posture, facial expression and movement, the body can articulate the subtlest thoughts, the deepest emotions and the most complex ideas.

So accustomed are we to a constant process of interpreting bodily symbols in our daily lives — and indeed of using our own bodies to express our fears and desires — that we forget how eloquent and versatile the language of the body can be. Sculpture, through its propensity to mimic the three-dimensional, volumetric nature of the human form, redirects our attention to those aspects of the human body that are often taken for granted — most notably how it functions as a mode of representation and an instrument of symbolic expression.

One rarely thinks of sculpture as having a skin, but since antiquity the exterior surface of the sculpted body has offered limitless scope for invention. It is here, on the outside of the body, that meaning is inscribed. Indeed, once the body is opened, as, for example, in anatomical dissection, the previously hidden interior becomes the visible exterior.

If the surface of the sculpted body is a boundless zone of exploration for the artist, it is also a matter of concern for the foundry that makes the work. The care and attention lavished on these sculptures by Pangolin's talented technicians and craftsmen reveals the importance of materials in allowing the body to speak. Change the material, texture, or patina, and the sculptural language — the meaning — changes accordingly.

Sculpture can reveal hitherto unacknowledged realities about the body and can teach us about ourselves and about the human condition. Furthermore, as technology continues to

present new opportunities for increasingly radical manipulation and modification of our own bodies, so the human body is itself beginning to approximate to a kind of sculpture — the human body as artefact. This only serves to deepen our empathy with the sculpted body, to identify it as our doppelgänger.

A number of underlying themes and preoccupations emerge from this thought-provoking exhibition. One senses a concern with archaic, primal forms, or what is often referred to as the 'primitive'. We notice a keen awareness of the importance of materials and the significance of scale, and how the introduction of unorthodox elements can affect an object's meaning. Equally important is the underlying idea of art as an organic, ever-developing language. Artists love to quote the work of previous generations by borrowing familiar historical motifs, adapting them and lending them fresh significance for a modern world. This reminds us that the history of art is a dynamic process, continually feeding off the past and fructifying the future. Art is also a language that crosses cultures, invariably gaining, rather than losing something in translation.

One of the most compelling objects in the exhibition is Sue Freeborough's bronze *Memory Vows*, a standing female figure bristling with nails like a tribal fetish. Perhaps partly inspired by the famous Palaeolithic limestone carving known as the Willendorf Venus, Freeborough reinvents that totemic female form as a piece of contemporary ethnographica. The clenched fists and rapt facial expression suggest a mystical

marshalling of bodily energy, an energy exuding from every pore and follicle.

Another oblique reference to the Willendorf Woman can be seen in Claude Koenig's talismanic Venus figures in sterling silver. Her *Venus* and *Conch Venus* both use scale to creative advantage. By counterposing images of bodily plenitude with the tactile quality of small-scale objets d'art, these sensuous sculptures stimulate desire while prompting us to question contemporary cultural attitudes towards the female body.

Jon Buck's *Pink Lady* is another celebration of feminine attributes and, like Koenig's work, focuses on soft, curving shapes to hint at some primitive essence. By taking a series of traditional, albeit often contested, signifiers of femininity — the colour pink, rounded, breast-like forms — and distilling them into a stylised, symbolic object, Buck's *Pink Lady* makes a pithy comment on gender stereotypes. The facial features inscribed into the body may be an ironic, respectful homage to Picasso.

The concept of the primitive can be traced across time as well as across culture and geography. Christie Brown seems to draw on all these trajectories and more to produce a figure that eludes easy classification. One of the few objects in the exhibition that combines animal with human properties, *Entre Chien et Loup: Jackal* is a figure from some threshold world of fairytale, myth or magic. The Ancient Egyptians worshipped gods that combined human and animal characteristics. They also made partially articulated figure sculptures in which the

limbs were jointed to facilitate changes of posture. Brown's figure, with its visible partitions and transitions, extends this archaic tradition into a contemporary object with an uncanny, unsettling presence.

A more fragile, but equally powerful sensuality emanates from Don Brown's bronze figure *Yoko XIII*, 2005. Brown's wife Yoko often models for him and on this occasion she allows the artist to give a contemporary twist to a pose familiar from classical figure sculpture. 'Contrapposto' is a position in which the weight is shifted into one leg, counterbalancing the hips and shoulders. Here it accentuates Yoko's sinuous, epicene outline. The slightly hesitant stance is made even more precarious by the high-heeled shoes, which intensify the figure's erotic charge.

Damien Hirst, perhaps best known for his radical interventions into the bodies of dead animals, has turned his attention to subverting one of the most iconic images in European sculpture — Edgar Degas's *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. Hirst is clearly aware of the torrent of criticism that greeted Degas's ballerina when it was first exhibited in 1881. The only sculpture exhibited by Degas in his lifetime, the original Little Dancer was made of wax and dressed in real clothes, prompting some contemporary critics to argue that it belonged not in an art gallery but in a museum of zoology, anthropology or physiology. In *Corruption Exposed*, Hirst has picked up on these undercurrents of meaning and amplified them to produce an ironic updating of the kind of anatomical model encountered in nineteenth century academies — Degas meets Vesalius.

Corruption Exposed continues Hirst's interest in the profane beauty of the body's interior by turning the benign Little Dancer into a metaphor for corruption in its most abstract sense. Even the flap of skin curling down over the thigh doubles as the top of a thigh-length boot, adding a frisson of sexual mischief.

William Tucker, as radical and visionary a figure for his own generation as Hirst has been for his, also takes one of Degas's dancers as his starting point. In recent years, Tucker has developed a highly personal sculptural language, pushing the body to the limits of representation. *Dancer after Degas* rejoices in the primal process of sculpture, just as a ballerina uses her body to rejoice in the faculty of movement. The result is a lively, knobbly surface, revealing the evidence of instinctive modelling. It can be read as a recognisable human form, but it also works as an abstract visual poem.

Tucker's *Dancer* is not the only object in the exhibition to partake of the tradition of the fragmented human form. Rodin revealed how the fragment could be as expressive as the intact human body. Anita Mandl, Anthony Abrahams and Michael Cooper all follow this example, showing in different ways how absence can augment presence by prompting the imagination to supply what is lacking, thereby restoring part to whole.

Leonard McComb's *A Young Man Standing* of 1983, present here as a lustrous new cast, has become one of the most familiar images in twentieth-century British sculpture. 'The Golden Man', as he is sometimes known, is as timeless and self-

contained a representation of the male body as any archaic Greek kouros. For the ancient Greeks, the human body was an expression of the divine, a manifestation on earth of the transcendent power of the gods. McComb's figure seems poised on the threshold of movement as though about to stride towards us. Yet his tensed physique has a radiance that removes him from the realm of mundane humanity.

David Backhouse's *Walking Man*, by contrast, seems very much of this world. Vulnerable and uncertain, he appears naked rather than nude. A man drawn cautiously forward by some unseen imperative, he is an emblem of human frailty.

A similar aura surrounds Terence Coventry's *Crouching Figure*. Although compacted into a series of abstract planar surfaces, which foreclose engagement with the viewer, the pose nevertheless elicits empathy. Coventry's figure reveals how the simplest, most instinctive postures are often the most emotionally expressive.

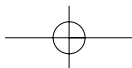
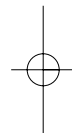
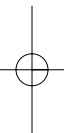
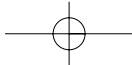
This exhibition offers persuasive evidence that while the body has a language of its own, in sculptural terms it generates a kind of dialect. The formal limits of 'body language' might describe a discrete and bounded entity comprising torso, head and limbs. However, the varieties of dialect through which that language might be expressed are seemingly endless.

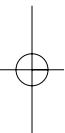
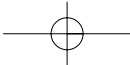
Tom Flynn
February 2005

Searching 2
Anthony Abrahams
Bronze
Edition of 9
48cm high

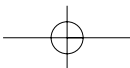
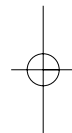


Man with Raised Arms
Kenneth Armitage
Sterling Silver
Edition of 6
29cm high





Walking Man
David Backhouse
Bronze
Edition of 7
54cm high

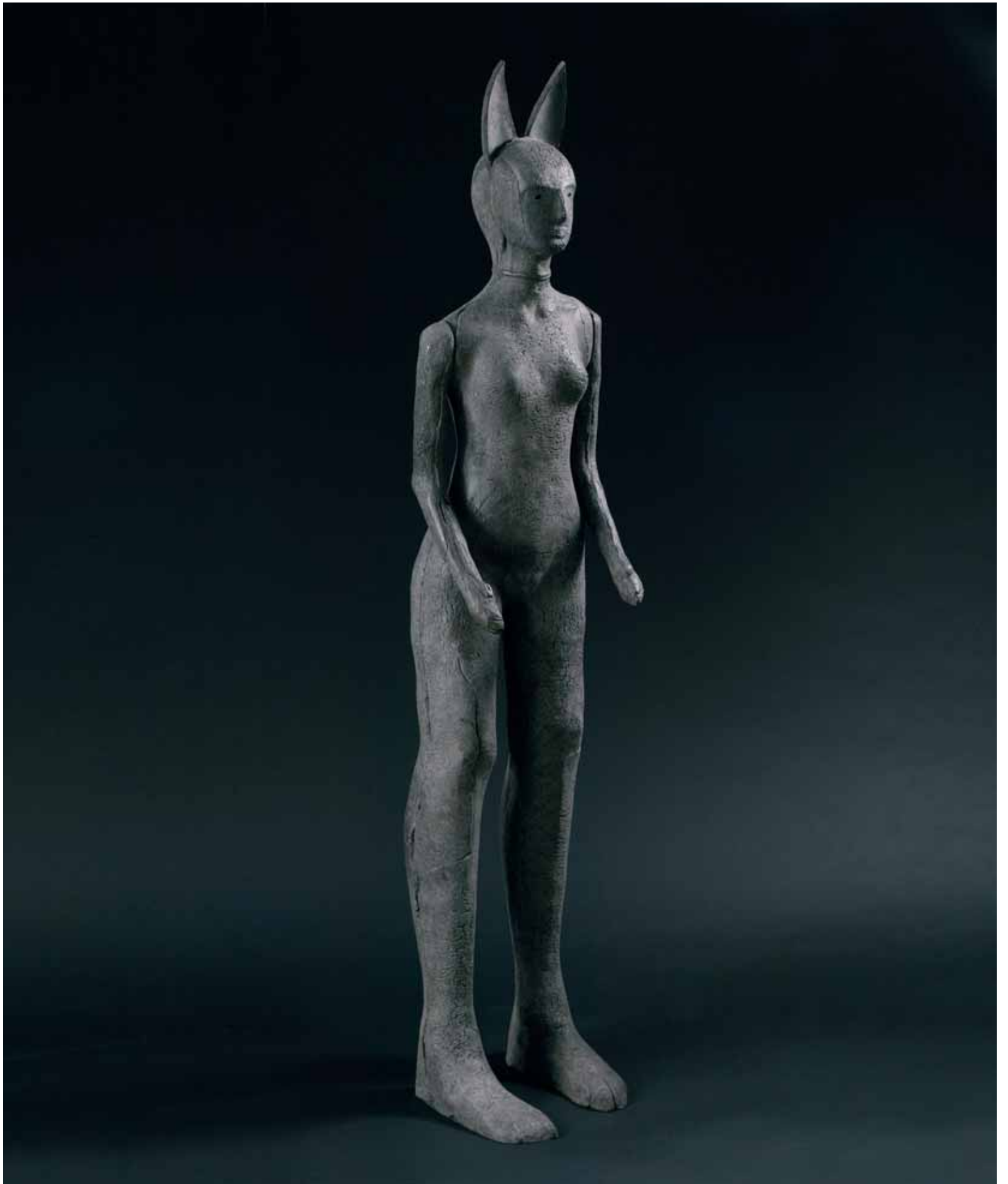




Dancer III
Laurence Broderick
Bronze
Edition of 7
70cm high



Entre Chien et Loup: Jackal
Christie Brown
Bronze
Edition of 5
142cm high

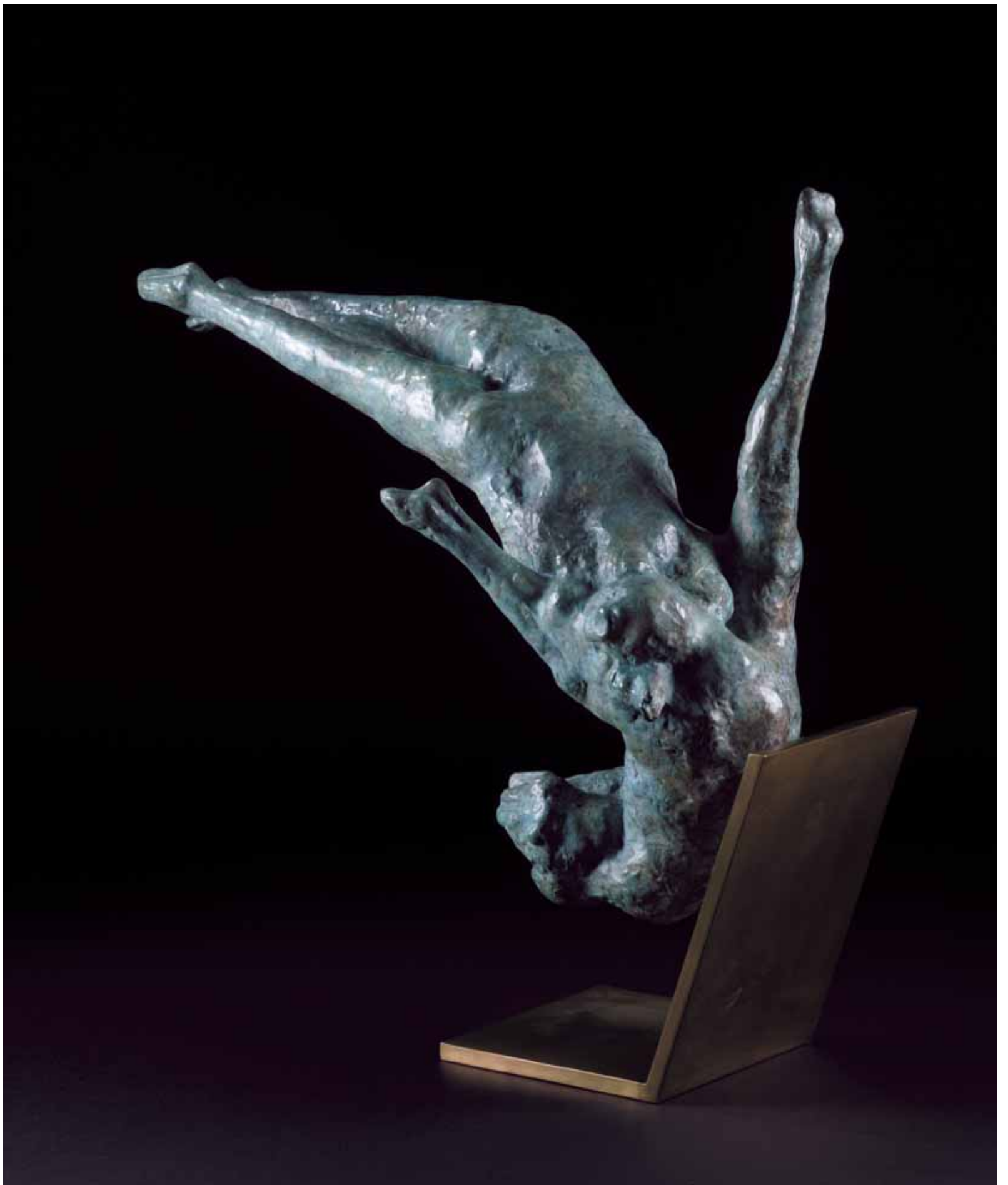


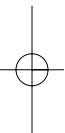
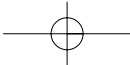
Yoko XIII, 2005
Don Brown
Bronze
Edition of 6
114cm high

© the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ London

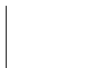
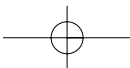


Swimming Movement
Ralph Brown
Bronze
Edition of 7
52cm high





Pink Lady
Jon Buck
Bronze
Edition of 10
52cm high



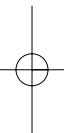
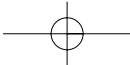


Japanese Girl II
Reg Butler
Painted Bronze and Hair on velvet covered foam base
Unique
5cm high

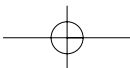
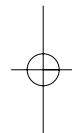


Winged Figures
Lynn Chadwick
Bronze
Edition of 6
57cm high





Torso with Head
Michael Cooper
Bronze
Edition of 9
109cm high



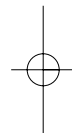
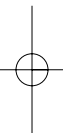
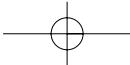


Crouching Figure
Terence Coventry
Bronze
Edition of 10
24cm high

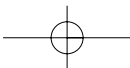


Memory Vows
Sue Freeborough
Bronze, Mild Steel and Stainless Steel
Unique
75cm high





Corruption Exposed
Damien Hirst
Bronze
Edition of 35
62.5cm high





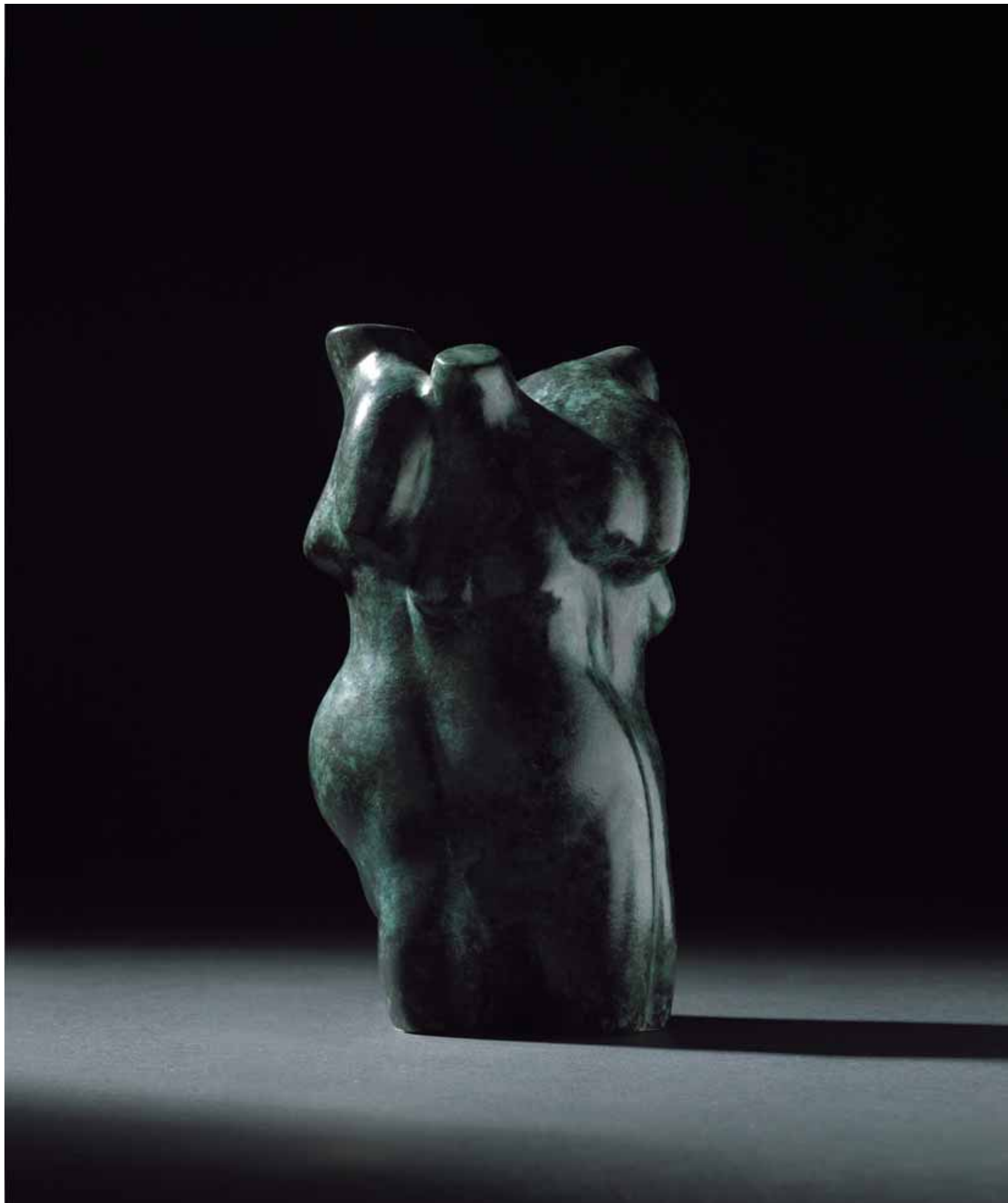
Dinka Man
Jonathan Kenworthy
Bronze
Edition of 9
58.5cm high
Photo courtesy artist



Conch Venus
Claude Koenig
Sterling Silver
Edition of 10
4cm high



Three Ages of Woman
Anita Mandl
Bronze
Edition of 6
22.5cm high



A Young Man Standing
Leonard McComb
Bronze
Edition of 8
177cm high

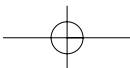
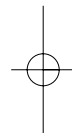
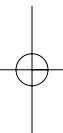
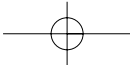


Lamentation
Kenneth Robertson
Bronze
Edition of 12
22cm high



Dancer after Degas
William Tucker
Sterling Silver
Edition of 10
13.5cm high





Acknowledgements

Our warmest thanks are due to all the artists involved; they have provided the vital ingredients for this exciting show. We also greatly appreciate the generosity of Rosemary Butler and Lypiatt Studio in lending works by Reg Butler and Lynn Chadwick which add greatly to the historical context.

Special thanks must go to Tom Flynn for his intelligent and discerning introduction and to Steve Russell for his perceptive photography; his dedication and enthusiasm during the preparation of this catalogue reached saintly proportions!

This exhibition brought new challenges to our constantly supportive team in the workshops to which they rose with consummate skill. As always we are deeply grateful.

Jane Buck
Claude Koenig

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