

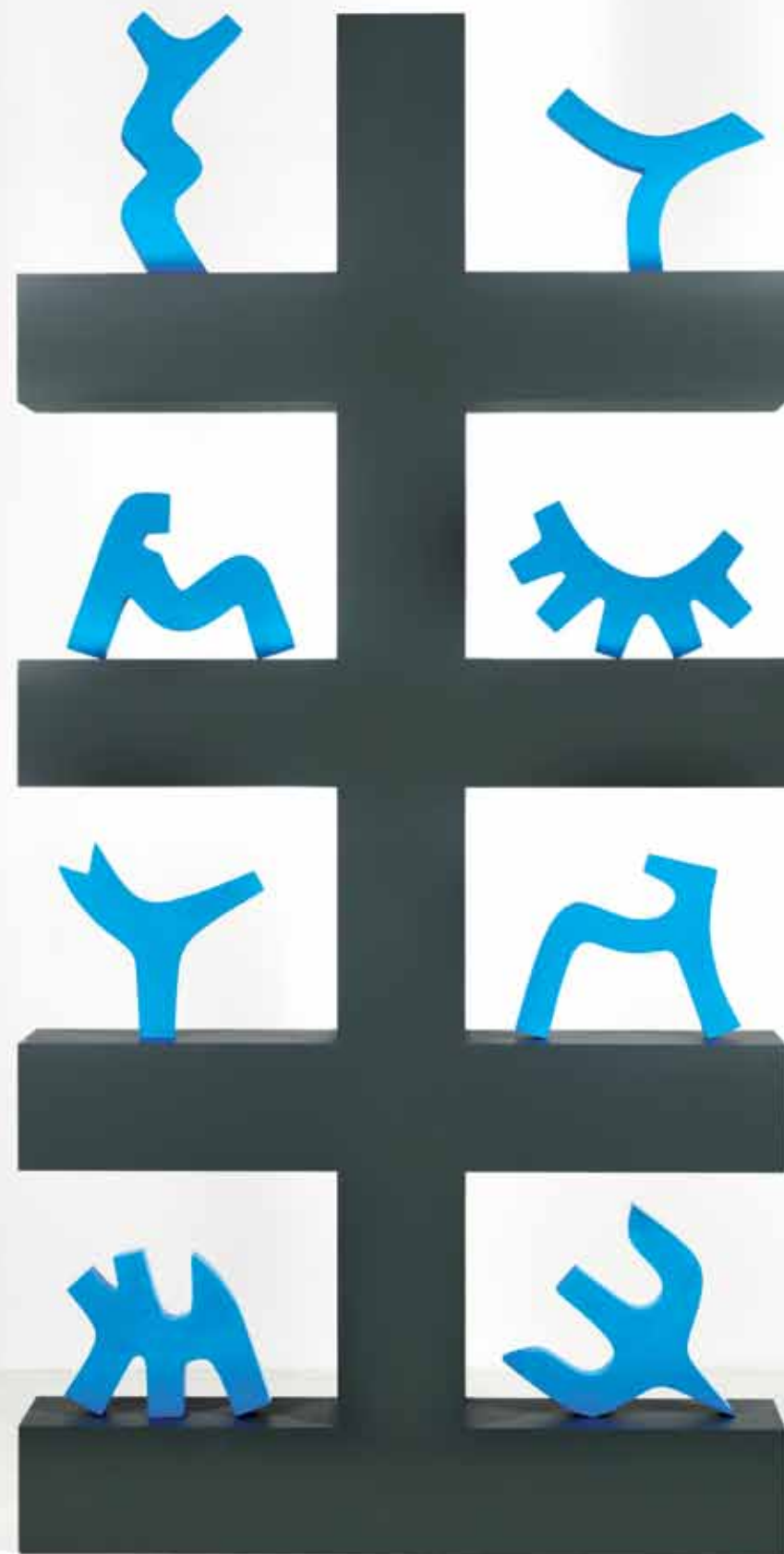




Jon Buck

Without Words

2014



Body language

Does sculpture speak? And if it does – in the absence of words – then how?

Jon Buck's recent sculptures are self-evidently concerned with signs, faces and bodies. Faces and bodies so abbreviated as to become signs. Glyphs or signs that have separated themselves from any notion of the voice that speaks or hand that writes, to the point where they morph into objects. On two very large pieces titled *Eidetic Tree*, object-signs sit on the horizontal axes of a grid-shaped armature like roosting birds, exotic refugees from some cryptic alphabet who are making use of the sculpture to take a break from meaning. They continue to gesture, however, through uplift, extension, equipoise. The way the body speaks, in fact.

In some sculptures, such as *On the Lines of Lascaux* or *Like a Dog with Two Tails*, the animated glyphs seem about to turn back into bodies. In yet others, including *Lineated Woman I* and *II*, the reverse process is underway: these schematic bodies are on the verge of subdividing into their component signs. Buck's sculptures always have, he says, 'this tension between figuration, which is often too specific, and abstraction, which is not specific enough'. He is 'trying to bring the two together'. Hence, I think, the work's glyphic, linear aspect. A sign, after all, 'brings together' abstraction and experience.

left
 Eidetic Tree I
 Bronze and mdf
 Edition of 10
 240cm high

In *Mind Menagerie* a profile head is embossed with canine, equine and avian glyphs. The idea that shapes applied to the outside of a sculpture represent invisible entities inside it is a curiously graphic conceit for a work in three-dimensions, echoed in other pieces such as *Part of the Puzzle* and *Repository*. Much of Buck's work of the last decade has involved just such a process of 'playing around with how three-dimensional things can be taken from two-dimensional things'. It's a process reinforced by his long-standing interest in African sculpture, in which carved shapes have the impact of markings and vice versa. At the same time, the distinctive 'flattened' volumes shared by works such as *Nightbird*, *Matrilinear* and *Poetry of Line* – in fact by most of the work in the present show – are symptomatic of Buck's particular sense of the way in which sculpture speaks.



left
Mind Menagerie
(detail)
Bronze
Edition of 10
78cm high



right
On The Lines
of Lascaux
Bronze
Edition of 10
48cm high

Repository
Bronze
Edition of 10
70cm high



At art school in the late 1970s there was, he recalls, an emphasis on sculptures as objects that you could 'circumnavigate', that had something to offer from whichever angle you approached them. Historically, however, as Buck points out, sculpture is often 'very frontal, because it occupies a niche', or, in the final analysis, because 'We are frontal. We confront each other, mostly.' Encounters with Buck's sculptures don't take the form of an in-the-round perusal but of face-to-face confrontation: 'Even when I put the face on the side, you confront it face-on.' There are, then, right and wrong angles of approach. Come at *Poetry of Line* or *In Man's Nature* side-on and you can't possibly get the point. Or any point: it's like trying to read the page-ends of a closed book or interpret the face on a Kota reliquary figure sideways on.



left
In Man's Nature
Bronze
Edition of 5
240cm high

right
They All Look Alike To Me
Painted Resin
Unique
92cm high



This wasn't always the case. Buck's earliest sculptures found their place in a gamesy, topical figural idiom that flourished in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. It was closely associated with Nicholas Treadwell's Chiltern Street gallery, where, while still a postgraduate student at Manchester, Buck first exhibited, alongside sculptors such as John Buckley, Saskia de Boer and Rod Dudley. The gallery, in Treadwell's account, was the birthplace of a movement he christened Superhumanism, 'the first people's art movement'. Superhumanist art was, by definition, confrontational; its signature style was a plumped-up, eroticised naturalism that dragged Pop kitsch out of its comfort-zone cool, with the aim of triggering extreme responses:

a Superhumanist work will move you to feel – to laugh, to cry, to shudder, to be overwhelmed with compassion. They [sic] do not include any aesthetic gesture to distract from the vivid nature of the image. A Superhumanist work will take a down to earth subject, and use original technical means to exaggerate it, achieving an over-the-top impact of its humanist theme.

Around this time Buck produced pieces such as *My Pretty Chicken* and *Cherry Ripe* (both 1983), life-size heads in painted polyester resin surmounted by birds. Superficially his work fitted the Chiltern Street agenda, but Buck soon became uncomfortable with Treadwell's unrelenting insistence on extravagance and outrage, and what he saw as the 'mix-up between sensuous and sensual'. Sensuous, in Buck's developing sculptural vocabulary of the 1980s, took him a long way from provocative sensuality. The more contemplative tenor of his work would never result in 'over-the-top impact', exemplified by Buckley's *Headington Shark* (1986), a 7-m long fibreglass white shark plunged head-first into the roof of a terraced house in Oxford.

The animals, and particularly birds, that feature in Buck's work throughout his career are vehicles for quite a different kind of formal humour, from *They All Look Alike to Me* (1983; a set of three penguins in painted resin) to *Bird in the Bush* in the present show (the bush in which the bird is hidden actually reveals its shape). For a few years before he went to art school, Buck worked as a bird keeper at Bristol Zoo, and it's not hard to trace the (acknowledged) influence of this experience on his work. The use of strong colours and patterns, the suggestion that signals are being given by colour, shape and posture, although – even when the title provides a clue – the signals remain multivalent.



left
Bird in the Bush
(detail)
Bronze
Edition of 10
44cm high

right
Family
Bronze
Edition of 8
51cm high



It was during the 1990s that Buck's work focused more than at any other time on the human figure. In pieces such as *Family* (1991) and *Cast Apart* (1994), he retained the smooth, filled-out aesthetic of the Treadwell years, while determined to separate out the humanist element from the Superhumanist mix. From this point onwards, humanism became an explicit part of his sculptural rhetoric, articulated both in the work itself and in his statements about it:

For art to have the possibility to cross the boundaries of time and place one must ask if there is the possibility of essential human universals ... Human relationships to environments obviously vary over time and place but it seems to me that there is some timeless recognition of our shared evolutionary history that ties us physically and mentally together.



left
Goodwood
Goddess Maquette
Bronze
Edition of 10
19.5cm high

right
Headland
Bronze
Edition of 10
74cm high

Where better to find this 'timeless recognition' of shared history than in 'mythic narratives'? Narratives 'whose function perhaps was to explain and celebrate our existence in the world'. And it is a condition of figure sculpture in general that, whatever a sculptor does with the human form, it takes its place for the viewer in an inferred narrative of some sort, whether mythic or historic or simply in a vague sense of personal backstory. By the time Buck's monumental *Embracing the Sea* was installed on Deal Pier in 1998, he had come to feel that 'narrative was over-dominant to form'. Looking for ways of 'getting myself free from being enslaved to naturalism', he began to use 'animal forms to express human feelings'. Animal or animal-like pieces, such as *Motherbird* (1999) or *Goodwood Goddess* (2000), retained the physical sense of repletion without the narrative figuration. Cast in bronze and sometimes highly coloured, with applied patinas and rubbed-in pigment, they formed the core of his 2000 exhibition *Intimate Connections*.



Headland (2009) is one of a group of bronze sculptures Buck produced between about 2005 and 2010. Some of the shapes suggest jugs or vessels, others the smooth contours of Aztec ritual jade. All are inscribed, or indented, with the briefest glyphs for male and female faces: eyes as a shuttle with a target in the middle, nose a single hooked line, mouth a bisected V, hairline, beardline – the basics. *Headland*, as quite often with Buck's titles, offers an entry-point to interpretation. The outline contour of the profile female head has a protrusion springing from the forehead that turns into a bird's head, while suggesting the shape of an island on a map with single sharp promontory. *Headland* also means the unbroken turf at either end of a ploughed field where the plough turns, the sense in which it occurs in the work of the Irish farmer-poet Patrick Kavanagh. To the touch, the indented hair-lines of *Headland* feel like furrows in a miniature field or Celtic cup-marks engraved in stone. The sculpture's punning title, and its playful graphic aspect, feel easygoing, but the more time you spend with it, the more persuasive the undertow of 'shared evolutionary history' becomes.



In-Sights and
In-Forms III
Charcoal and
coloured pencil
Unique

In 2014 Buck is, he insists, 'still interested in narrative', but the narrative medium has changed. In pieces such as *Repository* and *Mind Menagerie*, 'Some of the narratives have been put on as patterns in the surfaces'. The glyphs and signs, then, tell stories. But what stories are they? The pieces have the impassive volumetric calm of vessels. But what are they meant to contain? Meaning, perhaps – although their freight of meaning appears to be carried on the outside rather than within. This is the kind of conundrum that draws you back to the work, waiting – it may be – for an answer.

The body language of sculpture has been there since ice age Europeans whittled figures from the bones and tusks of slaughtered prey. Many of these figures represent, with the accuracy and subtlety of clinical diagnostics, the changes that take place in a woman's body during puberty, pregnancy (first and subsequent) and later in life. Today we have words, like menarche and second trimester; 40,000 years ago these tiny sculptures provided their own complete language of inner sensation and outward transformation. I'm scanning the gallery of postcards on Jon Buck's studio walls for a picture of one of these palaeolithic figurines. There are blued-out photos of art works that feel very familiar, although I can only identify the modern ones with any confidence. Brancusi's *Maiastra*, Miro's *Lunar Bird*, a steamrollered Dubuffet woman. A headless pregnant figure with bullet breasts could be African, a standing horse Chinese. Hard to be sure. But there she is, the Willendorf 'Venus' – a replica model not a postcard, a sculpture among sculptures. Why would I expect to find her here? Not for the same reasons that she enthralled Picasso and the primitivising crew of the 1900s – the licence she gave them to jettison the academic precepts they'd all grown up with. It has more to do with sculpture's function as a vessel of meaning, and with the sense in which a replete form defuses, or satisfies, the urge to question.

Certainly there's no sculpture more replete than the Willendorf 'Venus', though the exact nature of the meaning that engorges out her clove-orange head and Camembert haunches is anyone's guess. Erotic fantasy? Sisterly solidarity? The dream of a golden world where it wasn't freezing cold most of the time and you didn't have to live swathed in animal skins? The interesting thing about a sculpture's meaning, in contrast to a string of words, is its capacity to be fully present whether or not it is understood.

The first time I saw the Willendorf 'Venus' reproduced in a book, I imagined it much larger than it is. Because *Eidetic Tree* seems so obviously to do with inscribed words or signs, I imagined it considerably smaller than its 2.4 metre height. If Buck's shapes were really signs or words, of course, their meaning would have nothing to do with physical size. As it is, they make you feel that they can only be decoded – understood – by grasping, by feeling the curves and junctures, and tracing the sequence blindfold. Buck describes the 'long and convoluted' gestation of *Eidetic Tree* as a progression from surface pattern (the dots on *Motherbird*, for example) to quasi-figural glyphs (a sculpture of a dog 'would have simplified dog-glyphs' on its surface) to the transformation of the glyphs themselves into three-dimensional forms. Each of the *Eidetic Tree* sculptures represents 'a lexicon of visual units collected together ... their exact meaning waiting for interpretation.' The *exact-meaning-waiting* state of mind is about right for approaching these sculptures, I'd say. And the longer the wait, the clearer they speak.

Michael Bird
June 2014



Recalling the Dog
Work in progress
37cm high

Lineated Woman II
Bronze
Edition of 10
47cm high





Night Bird
Bronze
Edition of 10
46.5cm high

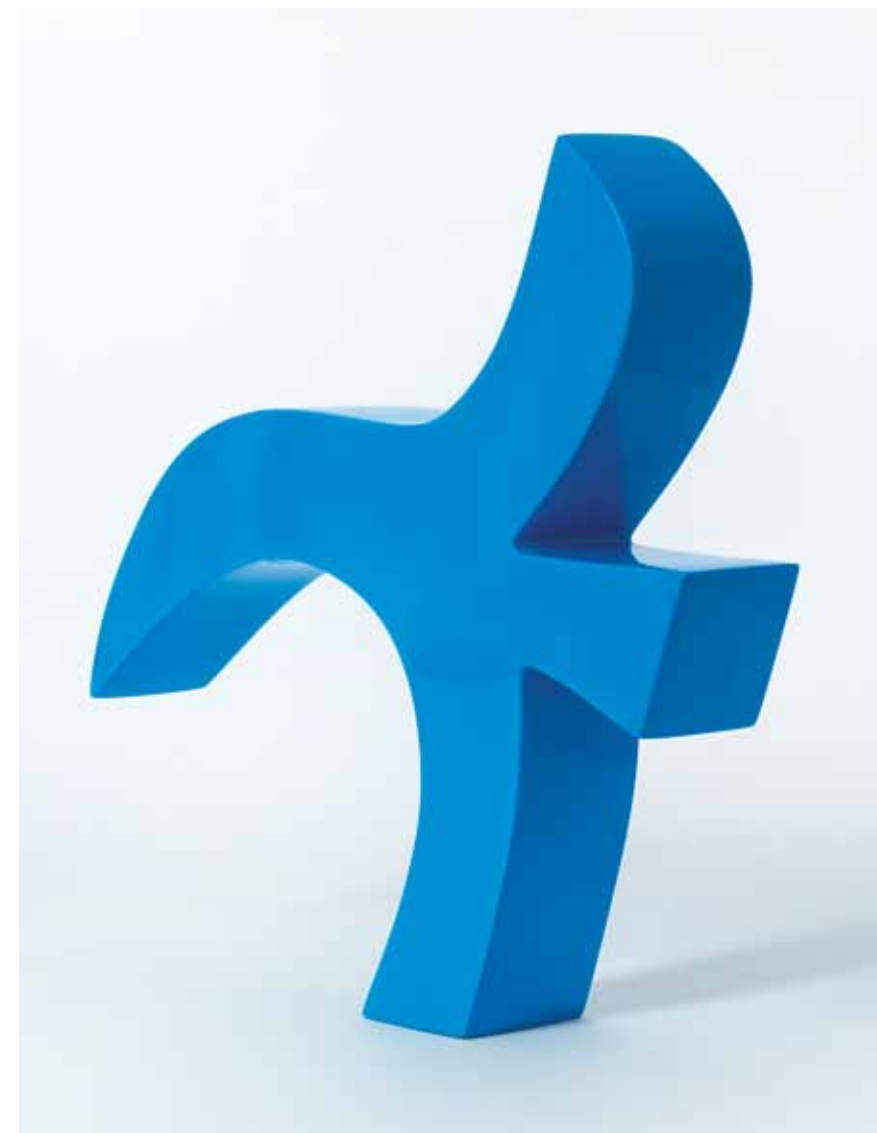




Fruiting Body
Bronze
Edition of 10
44.5cm high



Eidos XIV
Bronze
Edition of 10
28cm high



Eidos XII
Bronze
Edition of 10
32cm high

Eidetic Tree II
Bronze and mdf
Edition of 10
240cm high





Matrilinear
Bronze
Edition of 10
59cm high



Bird in the Bush
Bronze
Edition of 10
44cm high



2013 BUCK 8/10

And All the Birds
Jon Buck
Woodblock Print
Edition of 10

Mind Menagerie
Bronze
Edition of 10
78cm high





Into the Light
Bronze
Edition of 10
56cm high

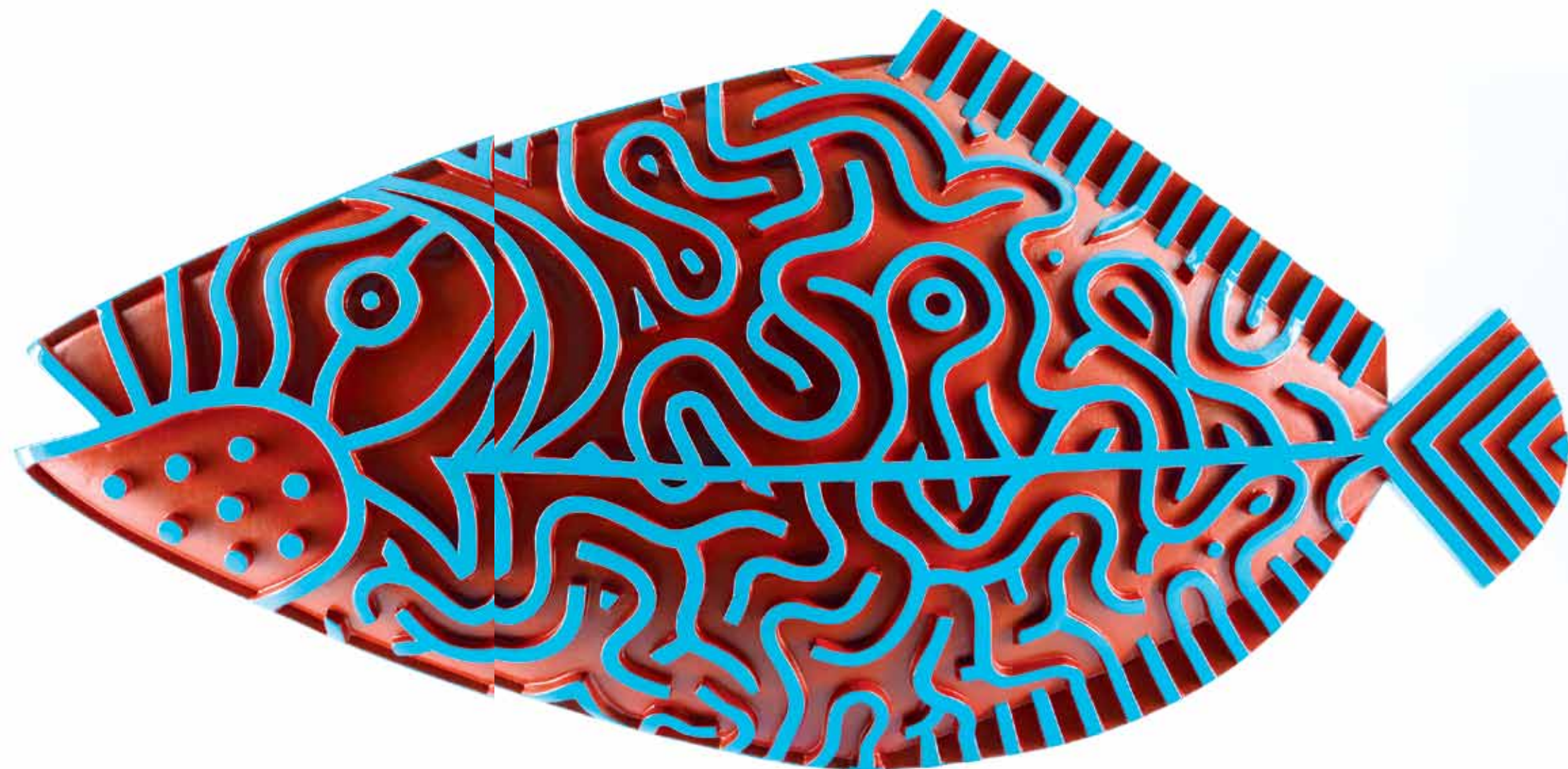


Cutting the Sky
Bronze
Edition of 10
33cm high





Lineated Woman I
Bronze
Edition of 10
47cm high



Part of the Puzzle
Bronze
Edition of 10
60cm high

Like a Dog with
Two Tails
Bronze
Edition of 10
31cm high





On Reflection
Bronze
Edition of 10
45cm high

Dancing to Time
Bronze
Edition of 10
54cm high



Red Queen Rules
Bronze
Edition of 10
70cm high



In the Balance
Bronze
Edition of 10
59cm high





Pyroglyph (i)
Jon Buck
Brand Print on Paper
Edition of 6

Afterword

Three years have passed since 'Making a Point: the Point of Making' traced the development of Jon Buck's art over three decades.

In that time, his work has continued to evolve as he explores further those themes and ideas about which he is so passionate: the natural world, mythic narratives, metaphors, signals and symbols, evolution and scientific discovery.

These latest sculptures are powerful, often playful and humorous, but above all joyful. 'Songs without words' as Jon describes them, or visual equivalents to poems, they express the resilience of the human spirit, evoking recognition and intense emotion.

It takes a whole team to bring together such an exhibition and catalogue. Michael Bird has given us a very insightful personal perspective on Jon's work for which we are extremely grateful. We would like to thank Steve Russell for his superb photography and unstinting support and, as always, the Pangolin Editions craftsmen for the quality of their craft, so apparent in the finished sculptures.

Most of all we must thank Jon Buck for providing the ingredients for 'Without Words' and we very much hope you will share our delight in this, his fourth solo show at Gallery Pangolin.

Jane Buck
Claude Koenig

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