

A black and white photograph of a bouquet of roses, with a classical painting of a reclining figure in the bottom right corner. The roses are the central focus, with several large, fully bloomed flowers and a few buds. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the petals and leaves against a dark background. In the bottom right corner, there is a small, classical-style painting of a reclining figure, possibly a woman, in a draped garment, resting on a surface. The overall composition is artistic and evocative.

PAUL EMSLEY Retrospective

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PAUL EMSLEY

US Woordfees/Wordfest Artist 2012

Retrospective Exhibition

Curator Amanda Botha

Sasol Art Gallery, 52 Ryneveld Street, Stellenbosch

02 March – 21 April 2012



The artist working on *Sir V.S. Naipaul* (2009) in his studio.

BEAUTY AND TRUTH:

AN AESTHETIC APPRECIATION OF PAUL EMSLEY'S ART

by Amanda Botha

To move the image into the realm of the imagination could be a way to define the works of art of Paul Emsley. An equally valid way would be to describe the work as poetical, evocative and spiritual, or to define it merely in terms of its style and technique as being within the tradition of realism. My approach would be that Emsley's work is a personal exploration of the aesthetic appreciation of beauty as a reconciliation of the sensual and rational aspects of human nature.

I would subscribe to how Oscar Wilde once described beauty (albeit not the foundation of much of his literary career): "Aestheticism is a search after the signs of the beautiful through which men seek the correlation of the arts. It is, to speak more exactly, the search after the secret of life."¹ He added: "By beautifying the outward aspects of life, one would beautify the inner ones."²

Beauty is the freest that the pure intellect can be from the dictates of will. Here, we contemplate perfection, as Arthur Schopenhauer argued, without any worldly agenda, and thus any intrusion of utility or politics that would ruin the point of the beauty.³ And consequently beauty and truth have been argued to be nearly synonymous as reflected in the profound poetical statement: "Beauty is truth. truth beauty" (Ode on a Grecian Urn by John Keats). The fact that judgments of beauty and judgments of truth are both influenced by processing fluency, which is the ease with which information can be processed, has been presented as an explanation for why beauty is sometimes equated with truth.⁴

I find support for my views in Emsley's "Artist Statement", in which he declared: "I try to transform the appearance of the object from ordinary to extraordinary. That transformation moves the image into the realm of the imagination. The emphasis of light and shadow impresses upon the mind the sadness and poignancy of our short time here as well as the unanswerable questions of where we come from and why we are here, the greatest mystery of our lives."⁵

This notion informs his approach to his art. "I believe that each of us has a singular voice, whether we sing, shout, whisper or speak, it is always with our own voice. We can never escape it.

So too in art, finding one's own voice is the most important thing for an artist. I am essentially a spiritual person; I have learnt that I live in an abstract world and whatever I draw or paint seems to echo this. So now that I know what I want to say it is much easier to talk quietly than to shout."

An overview of Emsley's career indicates that it can be divided into five different "periods". The periods are defined by a timeline which the artist himself indicated as: first period 1976–1980; second period 1980–1985; third period 1985–1990; fourth period: 1990–1994 and fifth period 1995–2012.

Looking at the difference in work which marks these time periods, one can define the themes that would emerge as the work that later finally occupies his mind. The experimentation periods were to "find" his "true" voice, which was, in any event, always present. My assumption that Emsley's art challenged existing notions of beauty in order to broaden the scope of art and aesthetics is supported by Eli Siegel, American philosopher and poet, who defined his theory that Aesthetic Realism supports the philosophy that reality itself is aesthetic and that "the work, art, and self explain each other: each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites."⁶ Emsley made this poignant statement, which complements Siegel's view: "In my drawings I try to emphasise the singularity and silence of the form. More than one emphasis breaks the 'silence' of the image and it loses its spiritual quality. By a careful balancing of tones, I emphasise the way in which light and shade fall across the subject. By creating a settled half-light I try to transform the existence of the object from the ordinary to something profound."

He is a superb draughtsman, confessing to a longstanding love for drawing. "The dryness of the paper and the chalk demand precision and exactness. It quickly exposes one's shortcomings, allowing no room for tricks or cleverness. I try to emphasise the singularity and silence of the form."⁷

He also declares that his experience of the universe "with any degree of certainty is matter" and describes it as "the visible end of space". To him it appears in "different form and densities". He connects it directly to his themes: "Whether it is a cloud, a rhinoceros or a flower, light and shade pass over each of them in the same way." By emphasising the movement of light and shadow over objects, he offers a sense of mystery to his images.

He challenges the distinctions between light and darkness and the way in which forms are revealed. "If we realise that these dramas are being played out upon every object in the universe all the time as light and shade move across them, then 'reality' becomes very exciting." Emsley's focus is on transforming the appearance of the object (reality) from the ordinary to the extraordinary. That transformation moves the image into the

realm of the imagination. But it also takes us into the realm of mysticism. The artist faces "the sadness and poignancy of our short time here" and confronts himself with the "unanswerable questions of where we come from and why we are here, the greatest mystery of our lives". To him there is no difference between animate and inanimate objects. "A cloud, a stone or a bull are all matter, the only differences are in density and tempo."

Whatever the subject matter, whether the impressive form of a rhinoceros, elephant, bull or similar animal, the more delicate nature of a flower, or the distinctive qualities of the human face or body, it is the surface textures and characteristics that most interest Emsley, especially when these are influenced by the play of light and shade.

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Emsley is well known for his paintings of animals, the genre in which he specialised for the past 15 years. His first animal subject, while he was still living in South Africa, was a chalk drawing he made in 1995 of a bull on his brother-in-law's farm. Since then, always using a limited palette and exploring the drama of light and texture, he has painted many different animals, often on a large scale.

He sees the animals as "walking landscapes". He tries to emphasise veins, bones, folds and muscles "because they remind me of the complexity, vulnerability and shortness of life". He is drawn to interesting shapes within the overall form. When drawing or painting an animal he is "often struck by a particular part, such as a tuft of hair, an eye or an area of skin". He registers an insight of similarity when he states that there is "a kind of horror at its (the animal's) strange beauty" and that he is often "startled by its resemblance to parts of our own bodies, only in a different configuration".

In Emsley's animal paintings, and for that matter in his portraits, he leaves the background as a fairly nebulous space instead of deprecating a particular environment.

A non-explicit background, while directing the focus to the person or animal, would protect "a sense of stillness and timelessness", which in turn enhances the feeling of mystery. He phrases it as follows: "I draw and paint animals because I am interested in their forms, textures and surfaces. In them I find an echo of ourselves."



Rhinoceros, 2002, winning entry in the Singer & Friedlander/Sunday Times Watercolour Competition

...

Animals, he confesses he still finds fascinating to look at, "it is so strange and mysterious that such things exist". He is aware of an interrelatedness of human beings and animals. "Our fate is linked to that of animals; what we do to them may determine our own future. The unanswerable questions about our existence may come closest to being disclosed within our relationship with them."

It is meaningful, perhaps, to consider the work 'The Last Lioness' as part of this philosophy. Emsley spotted her a few years ago. She was full of marks and scars and was on her own. She was too old to hunt and she died soon afterwards. He "imagined her as the end of her species and perhaps all species."

Although Emsley does not regard himself as a portrait specialist, he painted a number of distinguished portraits in the past decade. His striking large-scale oil study of fellow artist Michael Simpson won him the prestigious first prize in the BP Portrait Award. For the portrait 'Michael Simpson' the light source comes from directly above, which emphasises the surface qualities of the face. This concern for the texture and the physical, outward qualities of the appearance is more important to the artist than attempting to reveal the inner personality of the sitter.

The artist's aim, especially when it is a commissioned portrait, is for a likeness. "For me this means a likeness based on observation and subsequently the carefully constructed form of the head. I aim for a presentable image, though not one that is tinted with flattery. I interpret from the standpoint of visual form: if, as a consequence, this reflects the character of the person, that is almost an accident, I would say."

Emsley chose Michael Simpson, a well-known artist, because he finds him a very interesting man to look at. "The shape and form of his head is typically European, and what I found especially interesting about him was that his face seems to tell a story. It seems to carry something about the history of Europe and also the aesthetics of Europe: he is a very aesthetic person."

When Emsley's portrait of Simpson was exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2007; the work was described as "intense and eloquent, a poem in paint that reveals to us the sense of adventures of his life."⁸ It is judged as "a real physical presence summed up in one image following many hours of observation. But it is much more than a likeness. It is a life. It

unlocks a door to the inner life of Michael Simpson, his emotional and intellectual complexities caught in an instant of time."

The Michael Simpson portrait, as with all his other portraits, carries an authority which bears close examination. He pays attention to the minutiae and it is his eye for detail that gives a portrait that authority.

When looking for a potential subject, Emsley admits to seeing in each face "an object that carries the complex history of that person and also of their innumerable ancestors reaching back in time. Sometimes one encounters a face on which all of that is written more clearly than most." He is also fascinated by "the strangeness of the human form. We are stranger than we can imagine, and some faces reflect that."⁹

In October 2009 Emsley was given a rare opportunity to have a ten-minute slot to take a series of photographs of Mr. Nelson Mandela. On meeting Mandela he felt that he had a "definite atmosphere of benevolent authority". With these photographs, Emsley started work on the portrait. Despite the realism of the final image, the portrait is not a "copy" of a photograph. Emsley says: "The portrait looks photographic, but there is a difference between the portrait and the photographs. This is partly because of the tiny judgments made between hand and eye. I moved his eye, I moved his ear. If you took a tracing of the photograph and the portrait they would be different. I made aesthetic judgments. It was intuitive. It's the way I get the object to disappear into darkness. There is a subtlety that only the hand can achieve."¹⁰

Emsley was commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery in London to make an oil portrait of the writer V.S. Naipaul, winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize for Literature. Naipaul is depicted seated on a portable stool in front of the Wiltshire landscape of his home, "and appears to emerge – as it were – from the shadowy mystery of his garden backdrop. Emsley makes great play of light and dark and the sense of the spiritual that emerges from their interaction."¹¹

Emsley acknowledges that the human face is not a "neutral" subject; it is a loaded image and the face carries a history not just of that person. "Each face is a tunnel to our ancestors."¹²

Emsley used to work entirely from reference sketches and studies. However, in recent years, partly due to the time required and the practicalities of this kind of approach, he has generally used photographs. He will take quite a number of photographs but will usually work mainly from one or two. He views them

as an aid, a starting point. He uses the photographs as a time-saving device.

Taking a photograph that gives him the essence of the idea he has in mind for a painting, Emsley makes a small version on his computer and then either squares it up or projects it into the canvas surface. For this he uses an epidiascope. His intention is not to make a strict copy of the photograph but to use it as a guide to establish the general shape of the head, the position of the eyes and so on.

He usually starts with the eyes, taking whatever reference information he needs from the appropriate section of the photograph, which he now enlarges on the computer. From the eyes he moves to another part of the face, essentially finishing each area as he goes. Then, having considered all the necessary detail and surface texture, he reassesses the light and dark qualities.

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The beauty of his flower studies is self-evident. He is drawn by the shapes and textures and forms proposed by a vase of flowers. His principal materials are chalk and conté. He grinds the chalk to a fine powder which he applies with the finger tip and caresses into the paper.

By applying the chalk dust in this way he is able to achieve very subtle tonal transitions and to refine the texture of his surfaces with a practised touch. He is, in effect, painting with chalk powder. He also uses highly sharpened carbon pencils when he needs to be more diagrammatic in his mark-making. He prefers to use his fingers or to work with a stump or blender, with which he moves the chalk dust around and massages it into the grain of the paper, and thus into the grain of the image.

The beauty of Emsley's work begins with an appreciation of his craft. His work shows an acute perception and understanding of the beauty of the objects he portrays. The familiar and ordinary of Emsley's world – the classical themes of portraits, still life, landscape and figure realised through the close examination of his immediate surroundings – comprise his subjects. With painstaking detail and profound adherence to observation, he creates a faithful representation of his humble motifs. His strict dependence upon the truth of his subjects has become the hallmark of his work. While truthful to his subject, Emsley always challenged himself artistically.



Michael Simpson, 2007, oil on canvas,
112 x 137.5 cm (Collection: Ömer M. Koç)

To be a great artist, as Emsley is, requires emotional depth, an openness to look beyond self to the subject, and passion. A great painting then is one that enriches and broadens one's perspective. The value of art is at one with the value of empathy.

Amanda Botha is a writer and art journalist. The retrospective exhibition of the work of Paul Emsley is the tenth exhibition that she has curated for the Stellenbosch University annual Wordfees/Wordfest.

- 1 Richard Eilman, 1988, *Oscar Wilde*. London, Alfred A. Knopf INC., p159.
- 2 Ibid, p164.
- 3 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesthetics>, 2012/01/28.
- 4 Reber, R, Schwarz, N, Winkelman, P. "Processing fluency and aesthetic pleasure: Is beauty in the perceiver's processing experience?" *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. 8(4):364-382.
- 5 E-mail correspondence, *Artist Statement*, 30 January 2012.
- 6 Siegel, Eli: "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites", *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, 1955 (2)
- 7 Paul Emsley: Artist Statement.
- 8 *The Times*, London, 13 June 2007.
- 9 Interview: *Artist's and Illustrators*. Notes by Paul Emsley. January 2012.
- 10 Van Wyk, Lisa: "The portrait of an artist". *Mail & Guardian*, 26 March 2010.
- 11 Lambirth, Andrew: "The light of meaning". Catalogue: *Paul Emsley*. The light of meaning. The Redfern Gallery, London, 2010.
- 12 Van Wyk, Lisa: "The portrait of an artist". *Mail & Guardian*, 26 March 2010.



Seated figure with Table Mountain, 1979, pencil crayon, dimensions unknown (Private collection)

VITAL ILLUSTRATIONS

by Melvyn Minnaar

'Illustration': Origin 1325–75; Middle English, from Latin *illustrātiōn*, stem of *illustrātiō* ('the act of making vivid, illustrating')

'Illustrate': Origin 1520–30; from Latin *illustrātus*, past participle of *illustrāre* ('to illuminate, make clear, give glory to')

Artists are not craftsmen, although craft could be their strength. Artists do not make chairs or polish diamonds, although those things could be art. The distinction is obvious and yet difficult to pin down – especially in our contemporary world of feverish, rampant capitalism and the fall-out of waning postmodernism.

Ever since we started talking about art and that slippery construct called 'the art world', tension between the power of creativity and that of commerce or politics has been in serious play. It's a nebulous area where the paradigm is anchored by the inspired, clever, individual, talented artist and the person of means or high influence who can buy, commission or use.

Of course, the object, happening or result of that negotiation is what matters. That is art.

Paul Emsley started out his professional life as an 'illustrator'. To some minds, that occupation is probably considered a 'craft', in the sense that, as a skilled draftsman, he would have been commissioned to come up with specific images – to be used for some (commercial) purpose.

There is no need to argue here the history and merits of brilliant illustration, except to say there are images, conceived within this process, that have become iconic in popular and public culture.

Anyone who has worked with a truly talented illustrator will testify to the excitement of the perfect image. The purpose of illustration, simply put, is to drive home a point. Derived from 'light', the meaning of the word is clear.

Vital, modern means of communication, such as computer graphics, have redefined, even reinvented, illustration. The term often used is 'visualisation', and professionals in the field say the concept is one that 'stresses subject more than form'. This is a good description to apply when considering Emsley's quest for charging his images with so much more than surface value.

Emsley's professional origins, when we consider an overview of his work, are also a key to understanding the various – and sometimes somewhat puzzling – phases of

a substantial career over more than four decades. Yet, in the final instance, all that he has produced can be traced to the simple formula of 'illustration': a fine draftsman, with a particular skill, style and viewpoint, recording, as precisely as possible, images that will resonate beyond the surface. Making pictures that drive home the point is his purpose.

"I have always," he says, "loved perceptual or observationally correct drawing, and I suppose I wanted to swim against the stream of what I felt was an orthodoxy."

By that, the artist implies a high demand of himself: a finely-tuned sense of what he sees (whether the 'real' thing, or imagined, or – and this is important – in a particular light) and the hard task of putting that down on paper or canvas.

As with all illustrators, the means matter a great deal. The medium is a significant and fundamental aspect of how the image finds expression. One of the threads running through Emsley's oeuvre is a strong awareness of what the medium is and how he can use it.

The fact that his drawings and paintings of the past decade have dazzled so many viewers with their visual virtuosity is only a superficial acknowledgement of his engagement with the various media he has worked in.

The most public highlight of this career, of course, is winning the 2007 BP Portrait Competition at the National Portrait Gallery in London with a superb, enigmatic picture of fellow artist, Michael Simpson. (Portraiture is an aspect of his art-making that sets its own tests, and drawing or painting other artists and the famous clearly increases the challenge.)

Something close to obsession seems to drive artists such as Emsley to employ the simplest, possibly also the most difficult, medium in a painstaking process of visual creation.

Working, for example, with black chalk, as in the astounding flower pictures of recent years, is one of the most intense and challenging of drawing processes. He says he believes in 'restraint', and is enthused by the meticulousness and difficulty of manipulating a tactile material such as chalk on paper.

"The dryness of the paper and the chalk demand precision and exactness. It quickly exposes one's weaknesses and mistakes, leaving no room for cleverness or tricks."

This urgent, focussed awareness of the medium – as it leads also to what the picture will become – can also explain the shifts of his image-making over the years.

Probably the most vexing imagery to explain and consolidate within the span of his career is the paintings of the early 1980s, when he explored a kind of intuitive expressionism: canvases loaded with fierce, in-your-face painting and imagery that made no bones about their emotive lure. The artist himself has expressed ambivalence about work from that period in his career, even though he earned high praise.

One of those paintings, 'The Fatalist II' in acrylic on canvas, dating from 1981, in the Iziko SA National Gallery permanent collection, is on show at the Old Town House in Cape Town, and its power and impact are inescapable.

Although that painting may superficially seem to be a step out of line in the context of Emsley's current work, the dramatics are consistent, not to mention the tactile awareness of the media. Indeed, what we see and experience in this painting 'stresses subject more than form' – visualisation charged by the imagination. Illustration of which the meaning cannot be fixed exactly, also because of the shifting psychological references.

Paul Emsley stepped out of the commercial graphics world into the limelight of art with two small drawings he made for the first Cape Town Biennial. These immediately struck viewers as expressively individual – and notable even amidst the surge of vigorous art-making that inspired that group show at the SA National Gallery in 1979.

Typical of Emsley – and curiously close to his current work methods – these pictures were executed with pencil and crayon in the smallest of markings. The effort in the media was apparent, but more so the resultant, charged tableaux he had created. In each a dark, gloomy male figure sits as if caught in a strange, emotional limbo. If the sombre mood and poses perhaps evoked Francis Bacon, the quiet drama is pure Emsley.

One can trace in these early drawings the flashes of the technique that will later give his portraits of people (and also of animals) such powerful presence.

There is the faded, fading or anonymous background against which the foregrounded figure claims all attention. The title of one, 'A Certain Figure', says it all.

In one of the 1979 drawings, 'Seated Figure with Table Mountain' in pencil crayon, the mountain is barely discernable at the back as a charming, cartoonish presence. Even this faint type of coded decor comes back to set scenes in later work. Look at something like the recent 'Uncertain Land'.

Emsley's portrait of the writer V.S. Naipaul, commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery and completed in 2009, echoes not only the theatrical, centre-stage pose and recessive backdrop of those first drawings; even the body language looks similar: drooping, elongated hands, emphasis on the folds of the coats and the inward, uncompromised facial expression. (He similarly endowed Michael Simpson with this austere visage.)

The customised pose of the sitter is also reflected in the Goya-esque portrait of 'David Seated' of 1989. The architecture of Emsley's visual formulations runs through from the earliest time.

After his first exposure to the Cape's art scene, Emsley's career was set. A dynamic, eye-catching first solo show at the University of Stellenbosch art gallery in 1981 placed him among the to-be-noted, and in the follow-up Cape Town Triennials, he produced riveting paintings, charged with energy and visual exploration. At Stellenbosch University he taught drawing, riding a wave of art enthusiasm and invention that would eventually lead to the kind of introspective questions that serious artists periodically ask themselves about their work.

By the end of the 1980s Emsley's art was evolving quite significantly. The magnificence of the bold and colourful expressionistic canvases had run its course, and he was turning to the less-is-more medium of monochromatic or pared-down colour drawing.

In 1987 he made one of his stand-out pieces, a grand tableau of 'The Visit'. Done in chalk for the Standard Bank Drawing Competition, it received a merit award, and was acquired for the Sanlam collection. This is Paul Emsley at his most dramatic, with the narrative spinning out in numerous strands, mesmerising the viewer with recognisable references that slip in and out of play – illustrations of magic realism.

A number of works in this vein cast its spell over his admirers at this time. It seemed a logical move from those images on canvas and impasto so highly charged that even the artist may have lost control. He had to simplify and return to the tools of illustration – chalk, for example.

And so the next stage started. Animals – primordial in their armour and feral outfits, looming creatures of brute authority, claiming space for their symbolism or simply earthly attendance – became Emsley's subject. He made enormous drawings, using the very basic media: the tools of initial and possibly all final illustration. The new work, powerfully-precise workings with chalk, executed

in deft, dramatic chiaroscuro, suggesting photo-realism, but, on closer viewing revealed as way beyond the picture-perfect 'truth', found him a host of new followers. His international reputation grew and Redfern Gallery in London's Cork Street signed him up.

In 1996 Emsley moved to the U.K., since when he has polished his career, with his South African association remaining intact, as will be clear from even his most recent art.

In 'Uncertain Land', we face again an eloquent and persuasive illustration. The narrative suggested holds something of the mystery embedded in 'The Visit', and yet it is also more contemporary, modern in touch, locking in the viewer as good illustration does.

Numerous observers have noted Paul Emsley's skilled use of light to hold the central subject in a state of authoritative suspense. Even those early Cape Town Biennial pictures have this. In this context specifically, we return to the notion of illustration and its literal meaning: to bring to light.

Melvyn Minnaar is an art critic and journalist.

PORTRAIT OF PAUL EMSLEY

by Clare Menck



Triptych:

The Visit: Arrival, The Life and the Time, Departure,
1987, chalk drawing, 30 x 92.5 cm, 65.5 x 92.5 cm,
30 x 92.5 cm (Private collection)

In looking back at my years as an undergraduate from 1987 to 1990 and later as postgraduate art student at the University Stellenbosch, I realise that it was a particular privilege to have studied there during the formative years of former lecturer Paul Emsley's transition from expressionism to realism. I believe that the turning point happened before my time, partly fuelled by his growing dissatisfaction with the emphasis on gestural expressionism in favour of observational drawing, with a keen eye for detail.

I recently undertook a month's residency at the Old Town House on Greenmarket Square, Cape Town, where, curator Hayden Proud, had the insight to juxtapose an early, highly expressive and gestural painting by Paul, featuring a female figure in a bathing suit in what seems like a pool with a splash of water, entitled *The Fatalist II* 1984 from the Iziko Collection, with the Dutch masterpieces of the Michaelis Collection for an exhibition entitled *Baroque meets Modern: a re-hanging of the Michaelis Collection*. This shrewd juxtaposition seemed, with hindsight, ironic to me that Paul after his initial expressionist phase, and his disillusionment with it, would continue to aspire to emulate the polished style of the Old Masters he so admired (such as Bellini and Velasquez), rather than expressionistically countering their realist vision, as was the more accepted artistic stance of painters in the eighties.

When I knew Paul as a lecturer, he had already begun a personal journey of self-rediscovery, specifically in his close study of Velasquez, whose exceptional visual skills he aimed to reinvent for himself. He "quoted" him directly, which culminated in his ultimate post-modern statement of the time, the triptych in pitt chalk on paper entitled *The Visit: Arrival, the Life and Time, Departure*, that won him a merit prize in 1987 in the Standard Bank National Drawing Competition. The work embraces a far more observational approach to representation than the earlier work, but at the same time the content, as well as the drama of the verticality of the three-panelled composition and the theatricality of the clouds as backdrop to this mysterious "departure", still has loose ties to his earlier expressionist period – the violent combination of church steeple, explosion, aircraft, train, large wild animal, crucifix and bride into some idiosyncratic rite of passage, visitation or departure with clerical and other figures, including a Velasquez court midget looking straight out.

I watched from afar, not engaging in the direct student-lecturer conversation that might have made me a "follower" (as some students evidently did) and by way of rare

and privileged visits to his studio. Paul gradually moved from this “painterly” approach to drawing and painting, where marks and smudges could be seen, and which included quite a bit of work done from life, to a style that required drawing and painting tools and aids, such as a *Mahlstock* and stumps or blenders, to smudge, disguise and integrate marks in order to all but negate the artist's hand.

This attention to detail and tonal transition on a large scale also required the use of photographic sources, taken with the strong play of chiaroscuro for optimal dramatic effect, interpreted methodically and painstakingly into dark and imposing tonal drawings that occasionally also translated into similar paintings of sepia monochromatics, generally either portraits of people or large single portraits of livestock, wild animals in profile and still-lives of flowers in glass vases.

I also recall the mesmerising works from an early solo exhibition that resonated very deeply with me, featuring close-ups of body panoramas such as fingers pressing into skin next to a nipple, and so on.

The eventual outcome of this slow process of stylistic evolution was that he felt culturally isolated in South Africa at the time, and, seeking international recognition he emigrated in 1996 to the UK. His work is represented by the Redfern Gallery in London and Paul has steadily gained recognition for his quiet realism and tonal drawings. International exposure also grew when key pieces won him various prestigious awards in competitions abroad.

I remember Paul as being an imposing, reserved, authoritative figure of some intrigue, as he had the intensely private and compelling persona of someone searching for artistic answers, moving against the stream. In a private world of realism, he defended vehemently by example rather than theories. He had the self-same, exquisitely thick, silver hair and beard then that I captured in my recent portrait of him, *Paul (Emsley)* 2007 following his then visit to Cape Town. What struck me again, many years down the line, is best described by the Afrikaans saying: *'n mens kon Paul nog altyd deur 'n ring trek*, meaning that he was as meticulously mindful to the detail in his appearance as he was to the detail of his life's work, namely this particular take on realism with which his name has become synonymous.

This portrait of Paul Emsley by Clare Menck is presently touring the major art centres of South Africa as part of “Clare Menck: Hidden Life – Twenty Years of Painting (1990-2010)”, which is also documented in a catalogue of the same title towards which Amanda Botha contributed the essay ‘n Deurskouende blik op menslike ervaring (published by Sanlam and edited by curator Stefan Hundt.)



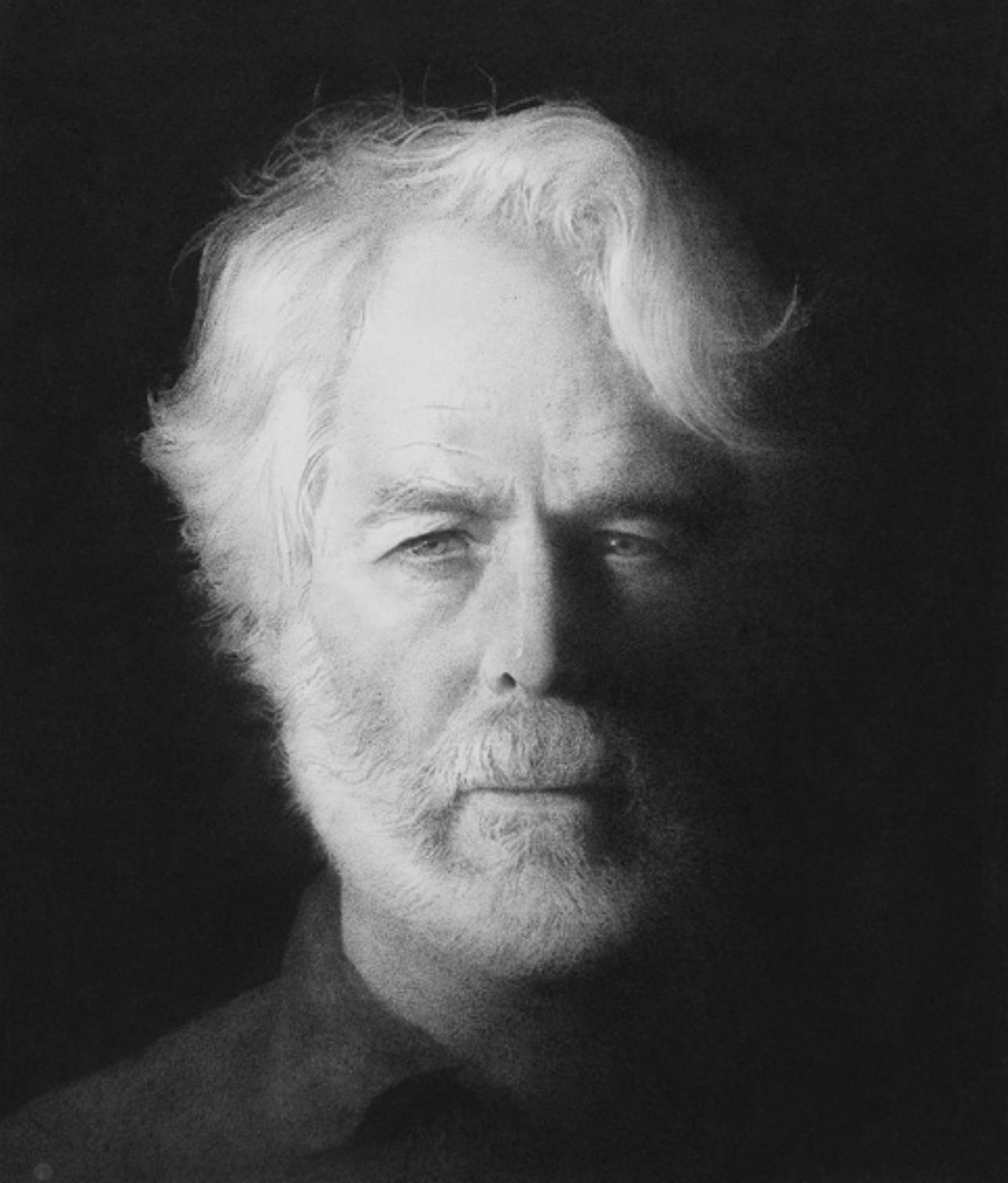
The Fatalist II, 1981, acrylic on canvas
(Iziko SA National Gallery permanent collection)



Clare Menck, *Paul*, 2007, oil on panel, 20 x 20 cm
(Private collection)

Opposite:
Head study, 1988, chalk drawing, 38 x 38 cm
(Private collection)





MY FATHER, THE ARTIST

by Alex Emsley

As an artist, the first and foremost thing that I learned from my father was the necessity to cultivate perseverance. From a young age, I was taught that the art world can be a harsh and unforgiving environment, and if one is to make headway in this industry, persistence and tenacity are as important as talent. Each year, hundreds of hopeful young artists emerge from their respective art schools and enter the industry with great expectation and hope. Only one in a hundred will still be making art a decade later. Only those with iron-willed determination and rigid self-discipline will endure the stinging criticism, debilitating poverty and apparent hopelessness facing emerging artists on their way to success.

It is in this respect that my father has always set an example to younger, emerging artists. From his sojourn as a drawing lecturer, to his current position in the international scene, he has always displayed a resolute single-mindedness and spartan work ethic that contradicts the nonchalant indifference associated with the stereotypical artist.

I believe that the underlying reason for my father's success is his absolute and undivided devotion to art. It has been said that 'art is a demanding mistress'. But for my father, art is life itself, and it is this commitment that enables him to submit to the grueling work schedule that has become his daily routine. On rare intervals of repose, when he is supposedly 'on holiday' – it is virtually impossible for him not to reach for a pencil or paintbrush. If a day does pass in which circumstances prevent him from working, then his mood is adversely affected by this abstinence. Art in general, but more particularly drawing, is the drug that gets him out of bed in the morning.

My father has remained true to himself and, throughout his career, has paid little attention to the fads and trends that pervade the art world. He has always believed that one produces the best work when you stick to that which enthalls you. During the 1980s, when he dabbled in abstract expressionism, he found himself to be part of a set, but soon grew disillusioned with the limitations of this style and embarked on a journey of self-discovery that led him to realism. It is in this genre that he has always felt most comfortable, and he has been an exponent of this school ever since.

At a time when realism enjoys less attention in the climate of contemporary art, it is interesting that my father's work intrigues observers from contrasting sides of the spectrum. It seems that a mark made by a human hand, a life-like image composed of countless pencil or brush strokes, still has the power to captivate all walks of life.

*Self-portrait, 2007, black chalk and pencil drawing,
51 x 60 cm (Collection: Dr & Mrs Robin Emsley)*



The artist drawing *Nelson Mandela* (2010) in his studio.

PAUL EMSLEY ON HIS CAREER

My career began with eight years in design and illustration, which left me frustrated and filled with pent up energy. Once freed from this, I embarked upon a few years of frenetic and heady experimentation. I explored expressionism, mark-making, abstraction, gesture, colour, chance, temperature, political and social investigation. I drew upon many sources which were fresh to me, such as African Art, Picasso, Matisse, Battiss and many more. I found a language which seemed to be my own and which was well-received in contemporary art circles.

And yet I lacked complete faith in the work I was doing. It seemed too far from the centre of who I was. I think I suspected that this was perhaps not my true voice. With time I have come to know myself more clearly. I am both conventional and creative. I am fastidious by nature and yet sometimes reckless.

I prefer order to disorder, yet I dislike fixed ideas and orthodoxies of any kind. I have a deep regard for technical skills and though I respect academic theory, it is not particularly helpful in the studio. I have little faith in passing trends and I place greater value on things that have been sifted by time.

I began to draw closely from nature. I made small, careful drawings of trees, stones, shells, spiders, clouds and so on. I found that through a careful study of tone it was possible to draw most things convincingly. I discovered that light, shadow and reflected light underpin and describe every form. I consider that this has been an underlying principle of Western art for hundreds of years and has only recently been abandoned. Given the nature of the human eye it helps to make the universe intelligible to us. I found little serious response to what I was doing. Over and over again I was encouraged to 'loosen up'. It was amongst a more conservative audience that I found an echo that surprised me. At the same time I became increasingly aware that I was unable to reconcile being both a practising artist and an academic. So for a time I made some work which today I am not particularly proud of. On the other hand it enabled me to attain sufficient financial freedom to leave teaching.

I also began making chalk drawings from life. My technique evolved without forethought. I became fascinated by the grainy texture that resulted from smudging. It felt right, almost like electricity. It perfectly suited the fine tonal gradations which I saw in the way in which light and shade moved over the forms I was drawing. Over time I have refined it, using my fingers, a 'stump' or 'blender' which is an old academic drawing tool which I inherited from my father together with various chalks and pencils.

The choice of paper is important and can affect the look of the drawing. I currently use Somerset Tub-sized Hot-Pressed Satin 410 gsm paper. I stretch it to provide stability.

When I was teaching drawing at Stellenbosch University I concluded that when drawing from observation there were roughly two visual types, perceptual and idiosyncratic. Both are valid visual intelligences. Most people fall clearly into one group or the other. Some are situated between the two but with a definite emphasis either way. Some people observe correctly when drawing and others are awkward. If pursued with determination and perseverance, both can make beautiful and interesting work. I am largely a perceptual type. I can also be idiosyncratic but I am not sure I can sustain this over decades. It is important for an artist to find your own voice and it can be helpful if you can identify to which group you belong.

Sometimes, as I get further along with my technique, I have the sense that it might be something entirely my own. The persistent development of technical skill brings one to a place inaccessible by any other route. I was recently looking at a wonderful drawing by Niki Daly, an old friend and colleague from art school days. He is by nature more 'loose' than me. His work has always been wonderful but he now draws with a divine fluency which has taken a lifetime to arrive at.

Although I love colour and find it exciting I have chosen to work mainly in black and white or monochrome. I find the world more interesting at dawn or dusk when the structure of all forms seems more clearly defined and colour is at its lowest. Drawing is at its most stringent in monochrome and this seems appropriate.

My subject matter is simple: the way in which light and shadow falls across forms. It can be a cloud, a rhinoceros or a vase of flowers. For me the mystery is in the sheer existence of the forms. I am not interested in their place in culture. I have difficulty with the notion that art must be challenging. Obviously it is so for many people, and I sometimes feel that perhaps I am missing something. I am challenged and shocked by what I see in the news but never by art. My most powerful experiences in art have been transporting rather than transgressive. Something has been added to my imagination that was not there before. I have noticed that many of the works that have done this have been technically sublime and with a coherent vision of form.

For the past few years I have been drawing animals, human faces, landscapes and flowers. All of these are fascinating forms to explore but at present I am concentrating almost exclusively on flowers. They are such complex and difficult forms that they offer the greatest prospect of further development. They have obvious art historical references. The other side of my nature seems reluctant to remain silent. Consequently I am beginning to make compositional drawings again which take up the unfinished business of the earlier work. 'Uncertain Land' in this exhibition is one of them. Light and shade again fall across figures taken from one context and composed anew to take on different meanings. Arbitrary gestures find a new function. The overall subject is displacement in our age of migration.



Study for Bulldog, 2010, chalk and pencil drawing, 16 x 12.7 cm (Private collection)



Janey, 1967, pencil on sketchbook page, 12 cm x 15.8 (Private collection)

Opposite:

Woman's Face, date unknown, conté on paper, 26 x 15.4 cm (Collection: Stellenbosch University)



Figure, reclining 1988

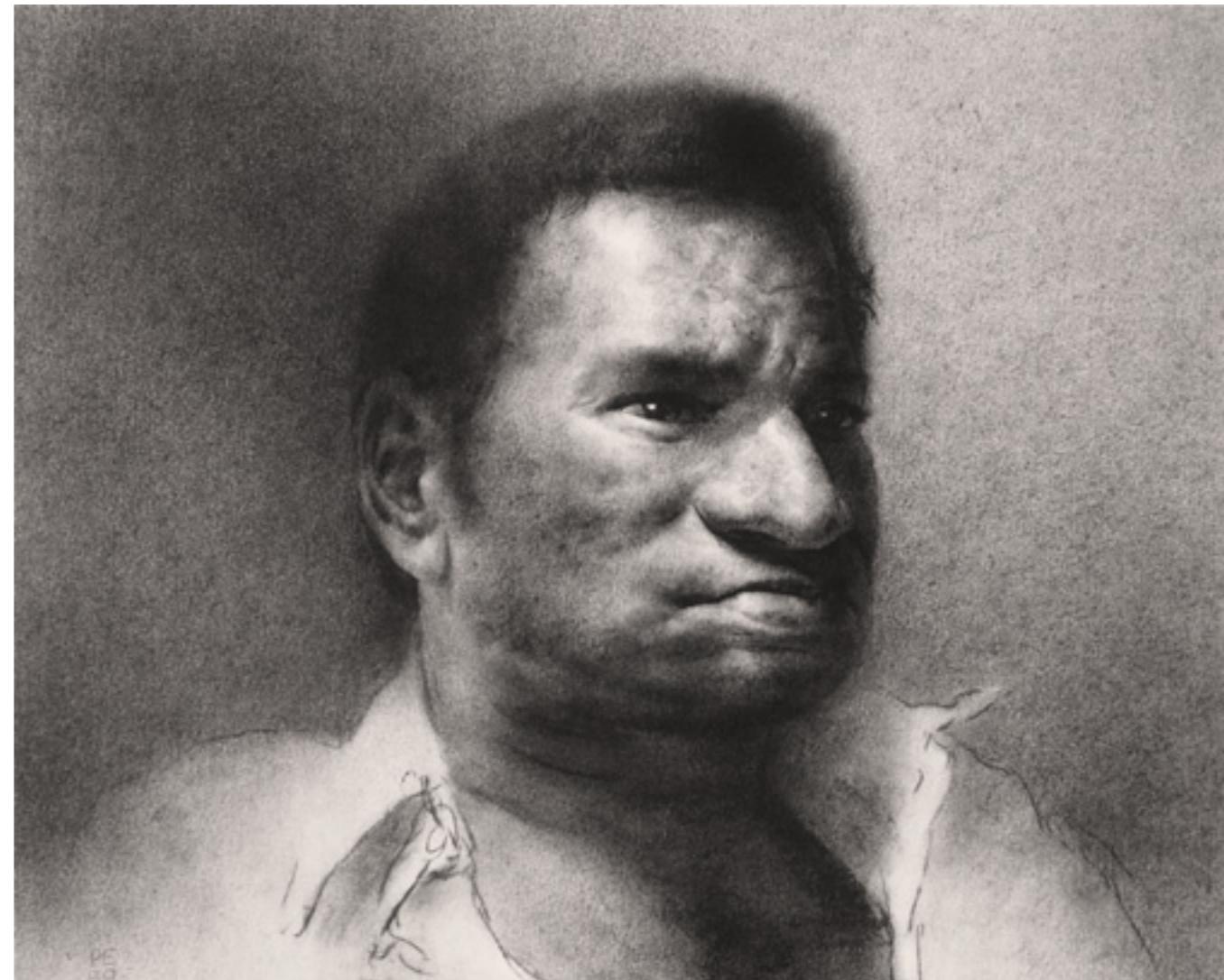
Chalk drawing
32 x 22.5 cm



David 1989

Chalk drawing
48,7 x 42,5 cm

Private collection



Wild Boar 1988

Chalk Drawing
47 x 66.5 cm

Artist's collection



Franschhoek 1987

Chalk Drawing
Dimensions unknown

Private collection



Portrait of a woman 1986

Chalk drawing
17.5 x 16 cm



Figure 1 1999

Black chalk and pencil drawing
57 x 77 cm

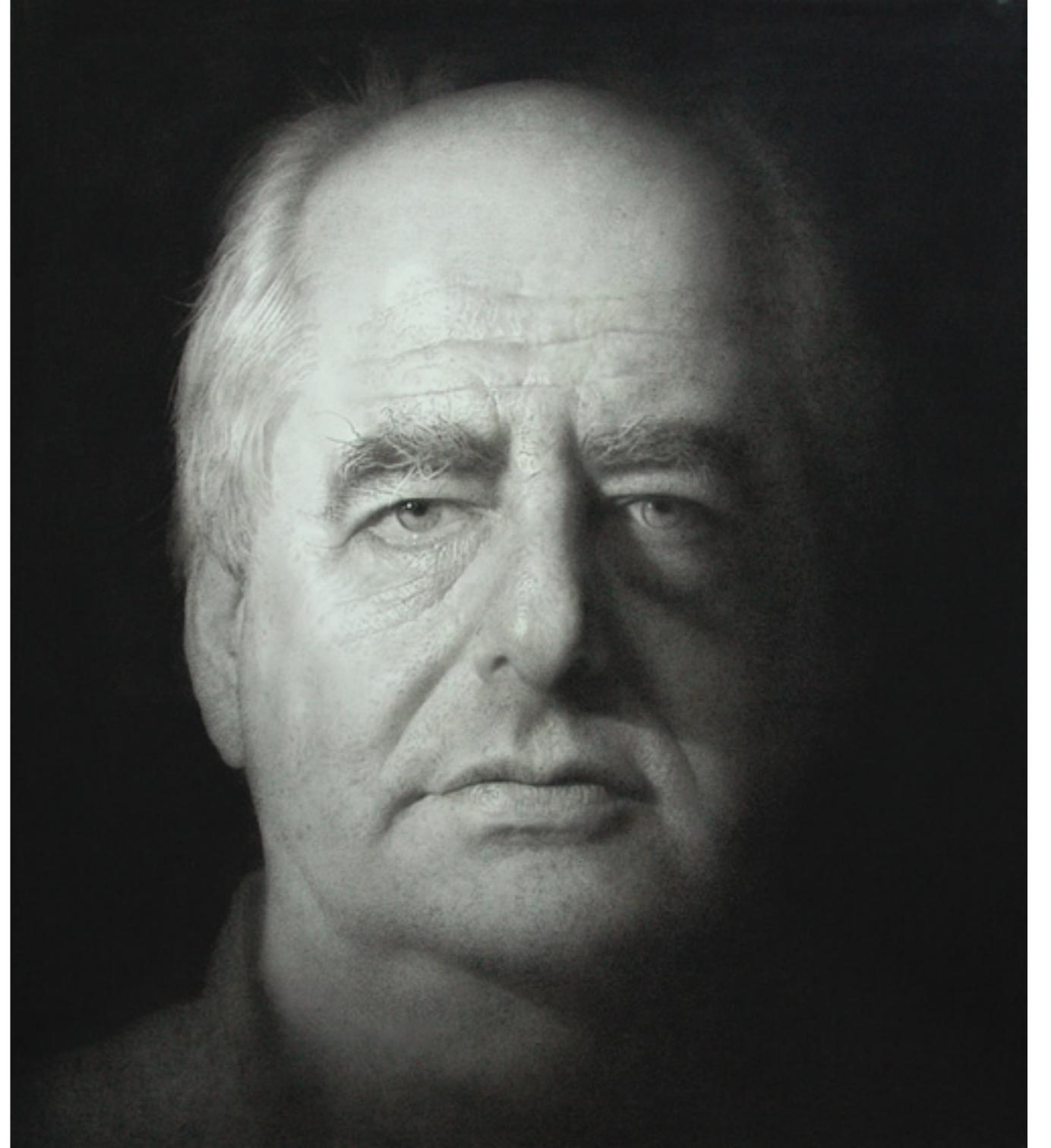
Collection: The Royal West of England Academy, Bristol



William Kentridge 2008

Black chalk and pencil drawing
91.5 x 105.5 cm

Collection: Bright Foundation



Katherine 2004

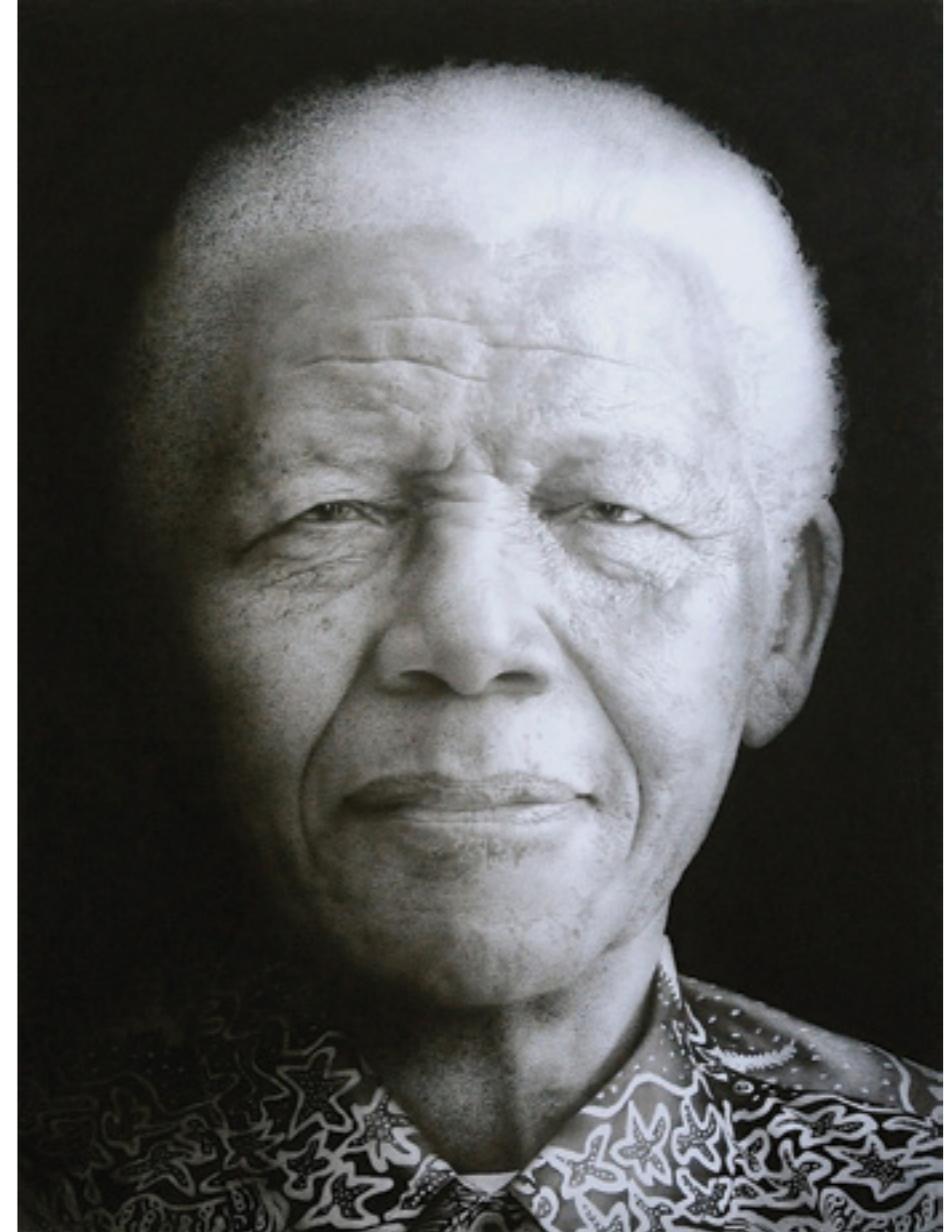
Black chalk and pencil drawing
100 x 100 cm



Nelson Mandela 2010

Black chalk and pencil drawing
88,5 x 117 cm

Collection: The Nelson Mandela Foundation, South Africa



Night Sky 2011

Black chalk and pencil drawing
87 x 128.5 cm

Private collection



Europa 2011

Black chalk and pencil drawing
89 x 66.5 cm

Private collection

Next page: detail





Sisterhood 2011

Black chalk and pencil drawing
109 x 92 cm

Private collection



King Proteas 2 2010

Black chalk drawing
91 x 113 cm

Private collection



Warthog 2006

Black chalk and pencil drawing
141 x 72 cm

Private collection



Cola 2006

Black chalk and pencil drawing
84.5 x 62.5 cm

Collection: Mr & Mrs Dave Lewis



The Last Lioness 2006

Black chalk drawing
97.5 x 52 cm

Artist's collection



Uncertain Land 2012

Black chalk and pencil drawing
185 x 120 cm

Artist's collection

Next page: detail





Melancholia 2012

Black chalk and pencil drawing
110 x 150 cm

Artist's collection

Next page: detail







Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Amanda Botha, Elana Brundyn and Ann Gonsalves for initiating and organising this exhibition.

Amanda has managed the complex task of selecting and showing examples of my work from many different periods with great patience and pragmatism.

Elana has promoted my work over a number of years with enormous energy and professionalism. She has become essential to the continued showing my work in South Africa.

My thanks to Frank Kilbourn for agreeing to open the exhibition and to the Bright Foundation for their generous support.

My appreciation to Amanda Botha, Melvyn Minnaar, Alex Emsley and Clare Menck for their contributions to the catalogue.

Thank you to Die Woordfees, the University of Stellenbosch and to the Sasol Museum for holding this exhibition in their beautiful galleries.

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Many thanks to the staff of Brundyn + Gonsalves for all their help and assistance.

Stellenbosch has played a very large part in my life. It feels appropriate to have the first retrospective exhibition of my work here. Although we now live in England we do not forget you.

My gratitude to my wife Susanne, all our wonderful children, my mother and all our family and friends for many years of support.

Paul Emsley

7 February 2012

Paul Emsley

Born 1947

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2012 Retrospective, Sasol Art Museum, Stellenbosch
- 2011 Redfern Gallery, London
- 2004 Balatro Gallery, Palm Beach
- 1999 Redfern Gallery, London
- 1996 Mary Ryan Gallery, New York
- 1995 Redfern Gallery, London
- 1994 Redfern Gallery, London
- 1993 Sasol Art Museum, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch
- 1982 S.A. Association of Arts, Cape Town
- 1981 US Gallery, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2009 Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition, London
- 2008 Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition, London
- 2008 BP Portrait Award, Victoria Art Gallery, Bath
- 2008 Muse 08, iArt Gallery (now Brundyn + Gonsalves), Cape Town
- 2007 BP Portrait Awards, National Portrait Gallery, London
- 2007 Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition, London
- 2005 *The Bestiary*, Jill George Gallery, London
- 2004 *Naked*, The Royal West of England Academy, Bristol
- 2003 *Tooth and Claw*, The Royal West of England Academy, Bristol
- 2001 *1st Painting Open*, The Royal West of England Academy, Bristol
- 2001 Discerning Eye exhibition, London
- 2001 Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition, London
- 2000 Discerning Eye exhibition, London
- 2000 Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition, London
- 1999 Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition, London
- 1995 *Panoramas of Passage: Changing landscape of South Africa*, Washington
- 1994 Gerhard Werzer Gallery, Houston
- 1994 Dickens and Rigg Contemporary Art, Hong Kong
- 1994 Levy galerie, Hamburg
- 1994 Bury St. Edmunds Gallery (now Smiths Row), Suffolk
- 1987 Standard Bank National drawing competition, Grahamstown
- 1987 Drawing exhibition, University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein
- 1985 Cape Town Triennial, Cape Town
- 1982 Cape Town Triennial, Cape Town
- 1979 Cape Town Biennial, Cape Town
- 1978 Exhibition of South African Art touring USA and Sao Paulo

Art Fairs

- FNB Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg (2009–2011)
- Art London, London (2002–2009)
- Art Palm Beach, Miami (2001–2008)
- 20/21 British Art Fair, London (2003–2006)
- Geneva Art Fair, Geneva (2001)
- Masterpiece Art Fair, London

Awards

- 2008 UWE Drawing Prize, RWA Autumn Exhibition
- 2007 BP Portrait Award, First Prize
- 2005 Silver Award for Works on Paper, British Interior Design Association, Art London
- 2004 UWE Drawing Prize, RWA Autumn Exhibition
- 2004 3rd Prize, Singer & Friedlander Sunday Times Watercolour Competition
- 2003 1st Prize; Singer & Friedlander Sunday Times Watercolour Competition
- 2002 3rd Prize; Singer & Friedlander Sunday Times Watercolour Competition
- 2001 Commended, RWA 1st Painting Open
- 2001 Bovis-Architects Journal Special Award, Royal Academy
- 1987 Merit Award, Standard Bank National Drawing Competition

Collections

- National Portrait Gallery, London
- British Museum
- South African National Gallery
- Johannesburg Art Gallery
- University of the Witwatersrand
- University of Stellenbosch
- University of the Orange Free State
- William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley
- Sasol Collection
- Sanlam Collection
- Northwestern University, Chicago

Opposite:

Solace, 2011, black chalk and pencil drawing, 65 x 54.5 cm
(Private collection)



Sasol Art Gallery

Director: Dr. Lydia de Waal

Curator: Ulrich Wolff

Technical assistance: Ulrich Wolff & Kurt September.

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Project Manager: Jana Hattingh

Word Art Project Manager: Melt Myburgh

WOW Project Manager: Fiona van Kerwel

WOW Organiser: Shireen Crotz



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Cover image: *Europa*, 2011, black chalk and pencil drawing, 89 x 66.5 cm (Private collection)

