



BREON O'CASEY
THE WORLD BEYOND



Triangles
1987, Acrylic on board
Unique
105 x 80 cm

FOREWORD

*The world beyond
staying just the same,
only more so.¹*

At the beautiful Cornish farmhouse near Penzance where Breon O'Casey lived for nearly four decades, a huddle of outbuildings and a secluded plot of garden have been transformed into four separate studios to house each of the disciplines O'Casey enjoyed namely painting, sculpture, tapestry and jewellery. Preferring not to be distracted by the outside world the soft light in each studio comes from rooflights or obscured windows creating spaces where O'Casey could focus on distilling the complexity of the world outside to simple, yet no less powerful, shape and form.

Whilst researching this exhibition I was struck by how the last verse of the poem *Nine Triangles* by Christopher Reid seemed to capture O'Casey's entire *oeuvre* so powerfully and succinctly. Almost like a pseudo scientist O'Casey's building blocks of life and 'the world beyond' were represented by patterns - sometimes considered, sometimes instinctive - of a simple lexicon of shapes: the triangle, square, circle and diabolio. His sculpture too reduced complex shape and volume to a bold yet instantly recognisable form which he imbued with an increased sense of power and timelessness as a result of its refinement.

As with much ancient or primitivist art on first appearances reduction of form to pattern and shape can seem an easy simplification but in reality it is a complex and challenging process. This exhibition explores Breon's remarkable creativity and incredible ability to communicate a universal language, energised with vibrant colour and potent form across all media.

The earliest work in the exhibition *Untitled (Shower)*, c.1980 was created just after O'Casey and his young family had left St Ives and the increasingly claustrophobic environment or 'school' that he is often associated with. Constructed in a familiar O'Casey triptych of three blocks of colour, the central segment of board is pierced with nails. To the segments either side of the nails bright red lines seem to signal their displaced shadows or linear representations. In many ways its three-dimensionality is out of keeping but these constructions and collages alongside the jewellery he was making seem to indicate O'Casey was already making three-dimensionally, almost without thinking about it, ahead of concentrating on sculpture much later in life.

It was a film about the naïve painting of Alfred Wallis that had led O'Casey to St Ives in the late fifties. Having grown up surrounded by art in a creative household where his father the famous playwright Sean O'Casey had dreamt of becoming a painter, it seems only natural that O'Casey would be drawn to St Ives from Torquay where he 'had felt like a rhinoceros walking along the streets'.² Here a Post War sense of camaraderie flourished in an enclave that supported 'Modern Art', a term most of the nation was still grappling with. Abstract painting was difficult to make a living from, so O'Casey assisted Denis Mitchell and later Barbara Hepworth in their studios, worked at the telephone exchange at weekends and scratched a living by selling the jewellery he made.

It is perhaps this sound, practical education that Breon had in making sculpture for Hepworth and Mitchell that enabled him to turn so easily to it in his seventies when the Irish sculptor Conor Fallon introduced him to wax. Conversely it could possibly have also been a prohibiting factor as both artists were perfectionist taskmasters which must have seemed at odds with the loose and free method of his painting. Breon said of his time as an assistant to Mitchell:

*And so I learned, and so he taught through practice, the passion of getting it just right, step by patient step, at whatever the cost. I learned to accept the tedium of work; the practical way to Heaven, using hammers and saws, ropes and pulleys, chisel and files, among the dust, filings and shavings of the cold, dark, damp workshops, that now I love so much.*³

It was clearly a good grounding and when O'Casey discovered he could work directly with wax instead of plaster or clay he created instantly readable forms full of character which he communicated by the simplest accentuation. *Deer*, 2003, an animal more often represented in the traditional canon of art as a vigorous stag is distilled here to his delicate antlers, snub nose and spindly legs. In *The Sea, The Sea!*, 2008, one of Breon's larger female forms one can almost hear the intake of sea air and the excitement of seeing an expanse of ocean. Whereas *The Bather II*, 2006, a voluptuous, fertility goddess of a woman is braced to take on the freezing cold water.

It may seem an obvious statement but Breon O'Casey was also an inspirational colourist as well as a master craftsman. Whether it was the subtle play of metals or hand-carved stones of his jewellery, the threads of his tapestry, the earthy patinas of his sculpture, the solid colour of his linocuts or the extensive palette of his paintings, applying and relating colour came naturally to O'Casey. *Rainforest*, 2010-11 inspired by watching the BBC *Life* series narrated by David Attenborough, contrasts monochromatic panels flanking a warm fleshy pink which surrounds two precious discoveries. In contrast *Anna Livia I*, 2011, whose title was inspired by James Joyce's personification of Dublin's River Liffey in *Finnegan's Wake*, shows a tonal, undulating landscape with a flash of lime green and lemon yellow. Talking about his painting process O'Casey said: *It is difficult to use words to describe painting. As one paints, one thinks, not in words, but in the language of colour or form, one's tools are light and dark, red and green, straight lines or curves.*⁴

Deer
2003, Bronze
AC II from Edition of 5
90 x 100 x 25 cm





Indeed colour was a physical requirement for O'Casey. During his two years of national service, O'Casey did not put pen to paper or brush to canvas and remembers a particular walk through Taunton on leave from the barracks through the town's park: *The sudden explosion of colour from the municipal flower beds was overwhelming... I realised how starved of colour I had been and how my home had made it almost as important to me as food and drink.* ⁵

Breon O'Casey's work is rich with beautiful, timeless craftsmanship, optimism, discipline, experience and glorious colour. A life then worth re-examination and celebration. Christopher Reid's poem offers us up a lens with which to look again at Breon's work and indeed the world around us. Look at the things you think you know then look again with Breon's eyes, reduce them and know them better. In this age of over-complication and visual saturation that is a rare and inspiring skill.

POLLY BIELECKA

Painting is like fishing - however expert the fisherman, he cannot be guaranteed to bring home a fish. To paint is to wait and watch, to try and listen to the picture, to chance a stroke, to hope for the best.

BREON O'CASEY

(LEFT)
Rainforest
2010, Acrylic
on canvas
Unique
95 x 125 cm

(RIGHT)
Breon O'Casey in
his painting studio
c.2002



FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Extract from *Nine Triangles*, A poem by Christopher Reid, 1997
- ² *Breon O'Casey*, by Brian Fallon & Breon O'Casey, Solar Press, 1999, p.48
- ³ Ibid. p.48
- ⁴ Breon O'Casey's notebooks
- ⁵ *A Celtic Artist, Breon O'Casey* by Jack O'Sullivan, Lund Humphries, 2003, p.40

When I was at the Anglo French Art School, the school organised a visit to the Dordogne. Two things: one a visit to the then recently discovered Lascaux caves, which was like a thump on the head with a mallet, the other to visit the home and workshop of Lurçat. Here were true tapestries in using the limitations of the materials to further the work. Unlike Raphael, or Sutherland, or Henry Moore, whose tapestries were paintings in wool, Lurçat had gone back to the medieval tapestries and the results were true tapestries. One saw, too, the bantams in the yard outside his house, one saw the world outside as a tapestry. I think an artist can store away ideas for years until the time is right. I remember standing in front of a tapestry that had just come back and knowing that one day I too would weave.

BREON O'CASEY



(LEFT)
Selection of small
sculptures.
See p. 72 for details.

(RIGHT)
Nine Triangles Poem
1997, Etching
Edition of 50
140 x 72 cm



NINE TRIANGLES

Eyelight thrown
on a dark question
to darken it further.

Time to take in
the view, the entire
daily tablespace.

Earthenmost shades—
and yet the effect
is of airy redemption.

That pledge of mud
the soul needs
to make its abstract journey.

Shapes huddle
in improvised families
out of the storm of seeing.

Wedges, half-moons,
rough squares: a simple
bag of tricks.

But everything
is accounted for
by these economies.

The epicurean
saint attends
to his plot of paint.

The world beyond
staying just the same,
only more so.

Christopher Reid

CATALOGUE

Breon O'Casey is a man for all seasons. He thinks and feels with his hands and moves with apparent ease from two-dimensional to three-dimensional activities, from one medium to another, without losing the artistic integrity of his intent.

Breon O'Casey's sensitive observations of life, art and nature inform his rich personal, visual language and beautifully balanced prose. His respect for his immediate environment and for tradition have enabled him to move forward with a confident, quiet ease, creating a refreshingly honest approach to art. He is an artist who is prepared to wait for the right shape, for the right brushstroke or the perfectly chosen word to express his meaning.

PETER MURRAY



Acrobat
1998, Bronze
Edition of 3
112 x 67 x 31 cm

...easily his most ambitious creation is a standing female nude which he calls *The Acrobat*. Based largely on a much-reproduced Romano-Celtic figure, this is an impressively statuesque work, fully realised in the round, which seems to have been made at least partly in conscious emulation of the classic European tradition. It may well mark a turning point in his sculptural output, in approach as well as in scale.

BRIAN FALLON





(LEFT)
Reclining Nude
 2010, Acrylic on Canvas
 Unique
 95 x 125 cm

(RIGHT)
Green Head
 1995, Acrylic on paper
 Unique
 55 x 60 cm





The Sea, The Sea!
2008, Bronze
AC I from Edition of 5
107 x 74 x 36 cm

Although I live in the country, I'm not a landscape painter. I find the landscape too difficult to control and arrange into any sort of meaningful pattern: not the wood, not the tree, but the leaf; not the distant view, but the hedge; not the mountain, but the stone. I have no windows in my studio, only skylights.

BREON O'CASEY



Anna Livia I
2011, Acrylic on canvas
Unique
69.5 x 130.5 cm



(LEFT)
Seated Nude
 2007, Acrylic on paper
 Unique
 62 x 43 cm

(RIGHT)
Bather II
 2006, Bronze
 Edition of 5
 81 x 45 x 27 cm





It's odd, but although my paintings are almost always abstract, my sculptures are almost always of some animal, bird or person. I don't know why this is; but maybe painting is a language - a language writ on hardboard, paper or canvas. The language of colour and form - as John Wells says: "whereas sculpture is objects". And an object, unless it be a stone, must be of something.

BREON O'CASEY

Long Necked Bird
2009, Bronze
AC I from Edition of 5
109 x 65 x 27 cm



(ABOVE)
Nose
 1991, Acrylic
 on board
 Unique
 34 x 49 cm



(RIGHT)
Profile
 1989-01, Acrylic
 on board
 Unique
 64 x 50 cm



Jungle Bird
2004, Bronze
Edition of 5
49 x 47 x 18 cm





(LEFT)
The Three Graces
 2006, Acrylic on board
 Unique
 62 x 108 cm

(RIGHT)
Blue Bird
 2002, Bronze
 AP from Edition of 5
 76 x 95 x 23 cm



An understanding of the expressive power of simplified shape runs throughout Breon's work. In his sculpture, particularly the birds, the essential forms have a stillness, with a quiet, almost mystical air.

Unsurprisingly, it is primitive art which most informs his own sculpture. Stylised, pared down, loaded with symbolic and spiritual meaning, this art spans continents and centuries, yet retains these unifying features. It expresses in the most simple terms a powerful presence beyond its size, capturing expansive ideas in a spare physical form.

SARAH COULSON

Moth & Zig Zag
2010, Acrylic on board
Unique
56 x 72 cm





(LEFT)
Woodland Pool
 2010, Acrylic on canvas
 Unique
 99 x 129 cm

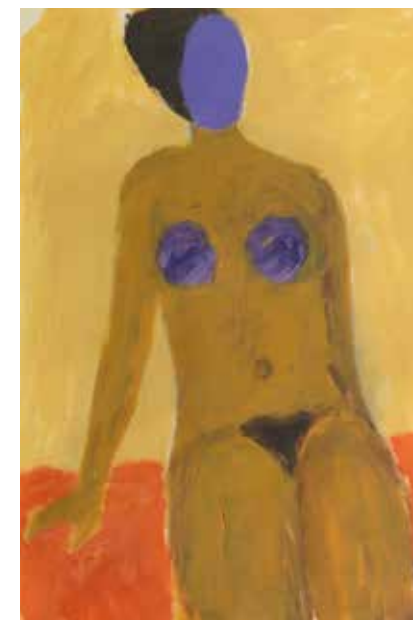
(RIGHT)
Level Bird
 2004, Bronze
 AC I from Edition of 5
 61 x 70 x 19 cm





(LEFT)
Reclining Nude
 2007, Acrylic on paper
 Unique
 44 x 63 cm

(RIGHT)
Painted Drawing
 2009, Acrylic on paper
 Unique
 63 x 44 cm





(LEFT)
Waterfall III
 1992, Acrylic on board
 Unique
 49 x 39 cm

(RIGHT)
Turquoise Bird
 2002, Bronze
 Edition of 3
 26 x 23 x 10 cm

He painted in words. Father compared Yeats to a silvery moon passing serenely across the Irish sky, while Shakespeare was the midday sun. If Yeats is the moon and Shakespeare is the sun perhaps the colour in father's plays, especially his later greater ones, would allow him the rainbow.

BREON O'CASEY



Small Bird on Tall Base
2009, Bronze
AC from Edition of 9
31 x 14 x 17 cm





(LEFT)
Yellow Centre
 2008, Acrylic
 on board
 Unique
 64 x 82 cm

(RIGHT)
Medium Boat
 2010, Bronze
 Edition of 9
 37 x 34 x 19



Tree
2010, Acrylic on canvas
Unique
95 x 125 cm





(LEFT)
Figure
 2001, Bronze
 Edition of 5
 41 x 51 x 11 cm

I think of our garden and the organising there of nature into some sort of pattern. I think of building a stone wall with roughly shaped granite blocks, and again coaxing the stones into some form of pattern.

BREON O'CASEY.



(RIGHT)
Figure in Landscape
 2010, Acrylic
 on canvas
 Unique
 80 x 105 cm



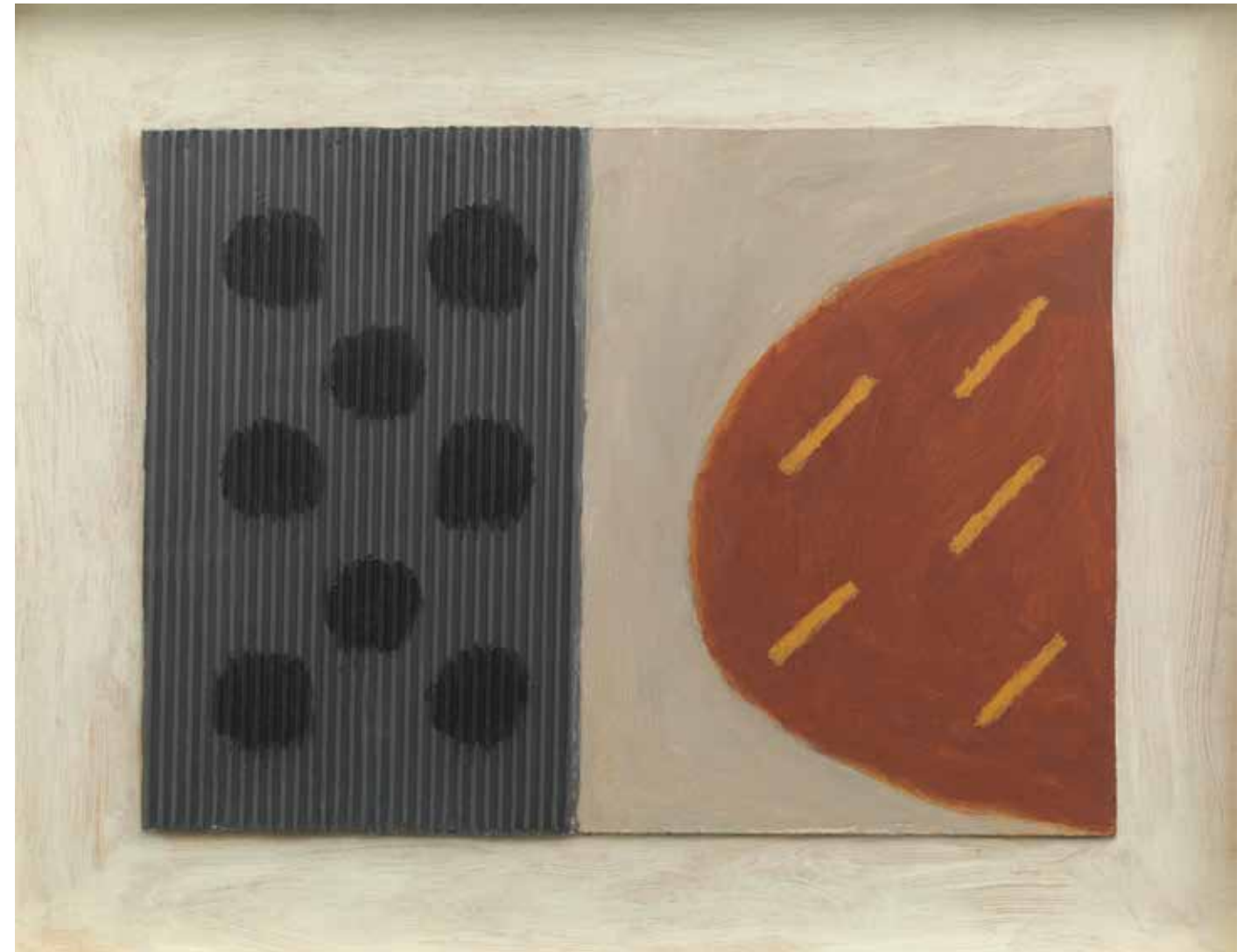
(LEFT)
Profile
 1989-2009, Acrylic
 on paper
 Unique
 59 x 77 cm

(RIGHT)
Johanna
 2005, Bronze
 Edition of 5
 52 x 22 x 18 cm





(LEFT)
Untitled (Shower)
 c.1980, Acrylic and nails
 on board
 Unique
 34 x 46 cm



(RIGHT)
Black Dots, Yellow Lines
 2011, Acrylic on Board
 Unique
 59 x 73cm



The origins of art
are the plumage
of a bird.

BREON O'CASEY

(LEFT)
Blue Bird
2010, Oil pencil
on paper
Unique
45 x 49 cm

(RIGHT)
Plump Bird
2010, Bronze
Edition of 9
40 x 25 x 24 cm



There are, if you like, two sorts of sculpture. There is classical sculpture, the sculpture that evolved from the early Greeks, through to the Romans, culminating in the Renaissance with the likes of Michelangelo. There is also what Sotheby's calls Ethnic sculpture. This is usually small in scale, symmetrical, often patterned, sometimes allied to useful craft objects, always stylised, with short legs and large sex organs, identified not by the artist but by the place of origin: folk art. It is this sculpture that I feel I can learn most from, and which colours my own work.

BREON O'CASEY

Cup Bird
1997, Bronze
AC from Edition of 3
33 x 15 x 27 cm





(LEFT)
Hollow Bird
 2002, Bronze
 Edition of 3
 29 x 18 x 17.5 cm

(RIGHT)
Farewell
 2008, Acrylic on canvas
 Unique
 80 x 105 cm

Recently he has made a number of tersely simplified birds, with thick legs sometimes joined to bronze stands and sometimes with plain wooden ones. The backs of a number of these birds are hollow, making them resemble some kind of ritual ewer or sacrificial vessel, rather in the style of Chou bronzes - though the artist himself denies such a connection, and says that the hollows were originally introduced simply to give an impression of folded wings.

BRIAN FALLON



JEWELLERY & PRINTS

I had made several attempts at sculpture in the past, after all I had spent many years working for sculptors, but to no avail. I couldn't seem to think in 3D, but I came to it eventually through the back door. I had made a number of animal brooches, and these evolved into little silver animals in their own right. Conor Fallon, the Irish sculptor, introduced me to wax as a material, which I found more sympathetic than clay or plaster, and I began to make small wax figures and getting them cast in bronze.

BREON O'CASEY

Necklace
Lapis & 18ct gold
Unique
24.5 x 1.5 cm





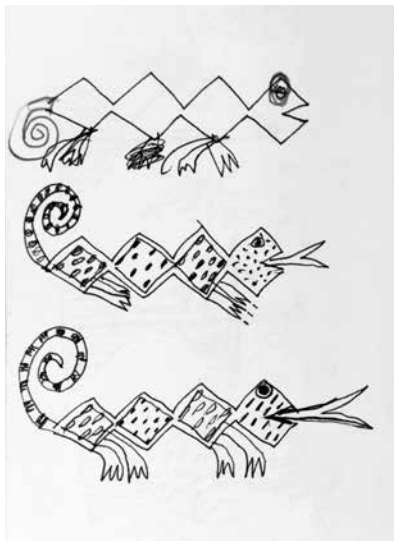
(TOP LEFT)
Earrings
Aventurine & Silver
Unique
4.5 x 3.5 x 0.5 cm

(TOP RIGHT)
Earrings
Garnet & 18ct Gold
Unique
3.5 x 1.6 x 0.5 cm

(MIDDLE)
Earrings
Lapis & 18ct Gold
Unique
3.3 x 3.3 x 0.5 cm

(BOTTOM LEFT)
Earrings
Carnelian & 18ct Gold
Unique
4 x 3 x 0.5 cm

(BOTTOM RIGHT)
Earrings
Amethyst, Carnelian & 18ct Gold
Unique
4.7 x 1.7 x 0.5 cm



(LEFT)
Jewellery study taken from a
sketch book of Breon O'Casey

(TOP RIGHT)
Snake Brooch
Silver and 18ct Gold
Unique
9.8 x 1.5 x 0.2 cm

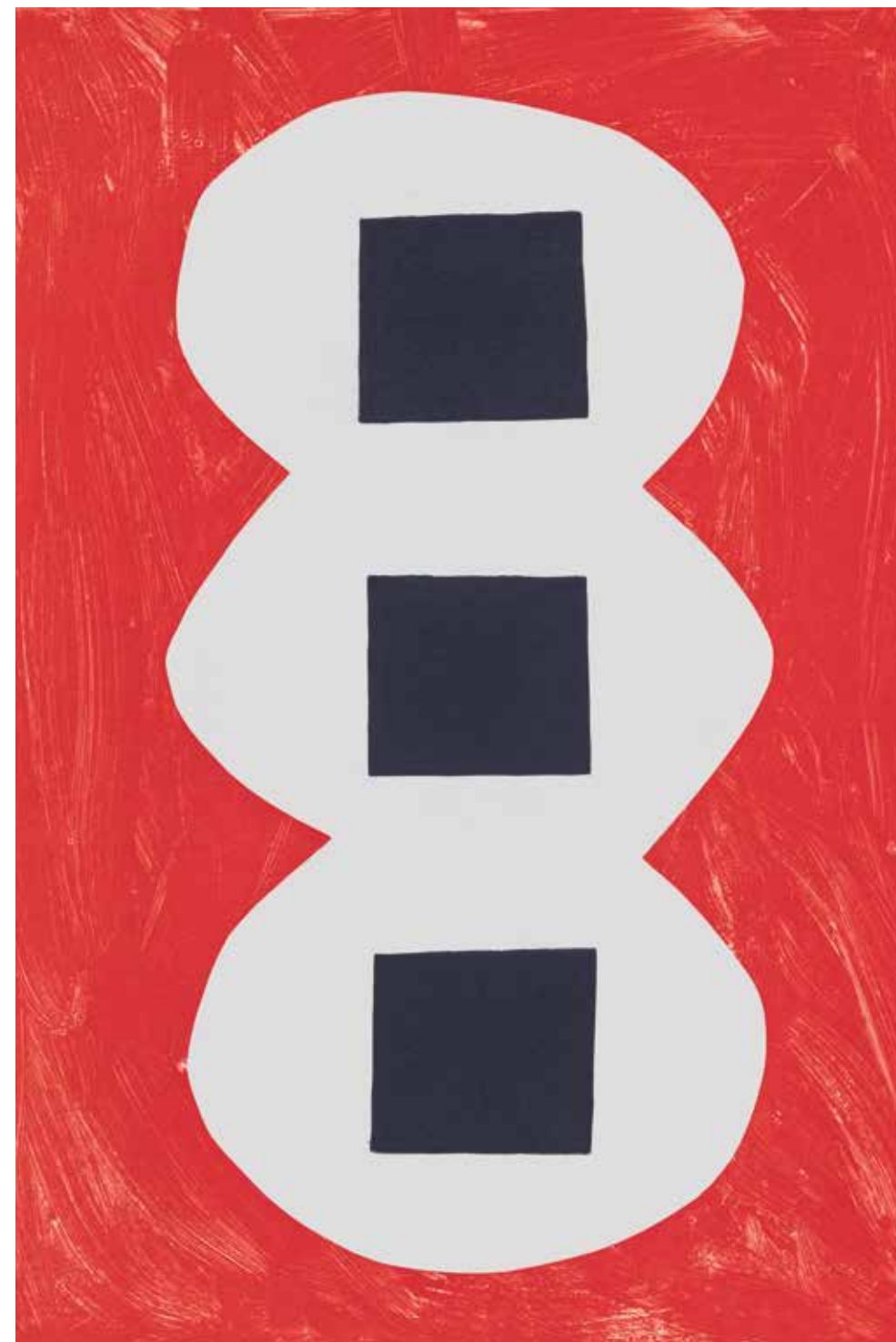
(BOTTOM RIGHT)
Female Figure Brooch
Sterling Silver
Unique
7 x 4.7 x 2 cm





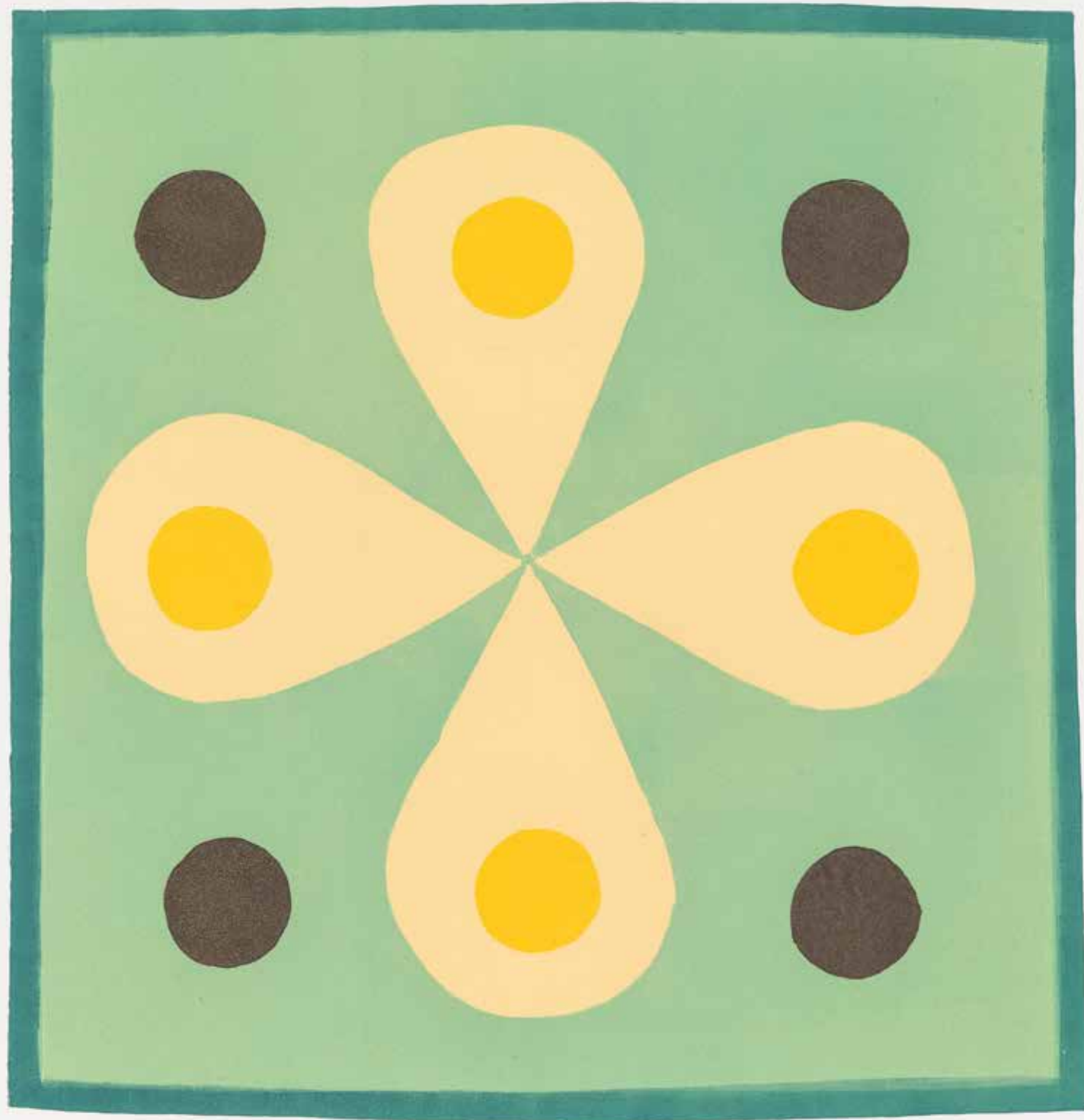
(ABOVE)
Trio
 1997, Etching
 Edition of 25
 31 x 49 cm

(RIGHT)
Three Black Squares
 2001, Aquatint
 and linocut
 Edition of 20
 84 x 61 cm



Necklace
Carnelian & Silver
Unique
25 x 2.5 cm





(LEFT)
Yellow Flower
 2001, Linocut
 Edition of 20
 60 x 68 cm

(RIGHT)
Profile
 Silver & 18ct Gold
 Unique
 3.5 x 5 x 0.2 cm



I am an abstract painter, closer, in my work, to the older definition of a still life painter than a landscape painter. A painter, that is, who works best in the confines of his studio, and though sees the world through a collection of pots and pans, apples and oranges (or circles, triangles and squares) rather than the fields, trees and skies. To look outside at the vast vista of unending landscape flowing in all directions, is for me too difficult to try and get down on paper. I shut the door and work in my windowless studios.

BREON O'CASEY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Images from p.8, left to right:

Head, c.1993, Bronze, 12 x 6 x 5 cm, Unique

Seated Figure, 1990, Brass, 19 x 11 x 3.5 cm, Unique

Woman Figure, 1997, Bronze, 12.5 x 7.5 x 5.5 cm, Unique

Abstract Figure, c.1995, Bronze, 13 x 11.5 x 7 cm, Unique

Seated Figure, 1990, Copper, 10.5 x 5 x 10 cm, Unique

Quotes:

P. 7 - *Breon O'Casey* by Brian Fallon & Breon O'Casey, Scholar Press, 1999, p.54

P.8 - Breon O'Casey's notebooks

P. 10 - *Breon O'Casey: An Anthology of his Writings* by Sarah Coulson & Sophie Bowness, YSP, 2005, p.3

P. 13 - *Breon O'Casey* by Brian Fallon & Breon O'Casey, Scholar Press, 1999, p.35

P. 18 - *Breon O'Casey* by Brian Fallon & Breon O'Casey, Scholar Press, 1999, p.54

P. 23 - Breon O'Casey's notebooks

P. 30 - *Breon O'Casey: An Anthology of his Writings* by Sarah Coulson & Sophie Bowness, YSP, 2005, p.5

P. 37 - *A Celtic Artist, Breon O'Casey* by Jack O'Sullivan, Lund Humphries, 2003, p.9

P. 50 - Breon O'Casey's notebooks

P. 55 - *Breon O'Casey* by Brian Fallon & Breon O'Casey, Scholar Press, 1999, p.35

P. 44 - *A Celtic Artist, Breon O'Casey* by Jack O'Sullivan, Lund Humphries, 2003, p.8

P. 52 - *Breon O'Casey* by Brian Fallon & Breon O'Casey, Scholar Press, 1999, p.84

P. 56 - *Breon O'Casey* by Brian Fallon & Breon O'Casey, Scholar Press, 1999, p.51

P. 71 - Breon O'Casey's notebooks

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