



**JON BUCK
TURNING INSIDE OUT**



(LEFT)
In Man's Nature
Bronze
Edition of 5
240 cm high

*Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner - what is it?
if not the intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.*

(ABOVE)
Rainer Maria Rilke
(1875-1926)
Ahead of All Parting:
The Selected Poetry and Prose

TURNING INSIDE OUT

Jon Buck in conversation with Polly Bielecka,
September 2012

Your solo shows always have a carefully considered title; can you tell us about this one and how it relates to this new body of work?

Titles can be an important way of giving an over-arching context in which the viewer can consider the work. My sculptural concerns have changed remarkably little over the last thirty odd years, although inevitably the sculptural language itself has evolved much more radically. Some people have found this discrepancy confusing and with this in mind, Gallery Pangolin last year published a book in combination with an exhibition entitled *Making a Point: The Point of Making* which examined just this relationship between my practice and its content.

Over the last ten to twelve years my work has been punctuated by a series of solo shows which can be seen as discrete bodies of production within this general evolution. I am sure this in itself is not unique; musicians, writers and poets all work in this way, producing self-contained collections that are invariably connected but not the same.

For me the first of these collected groups of sculptures came together in an exhibition entitled *Intimate Connections*. This title made reference to my two abiding obsessions: our relationship to the natural world and our connection to the roots of our artistic language. The body of work that followed this I called *Odd Birds and Other Selves*. Under this title I continued to develop those previous ideas but particularly focused on our age-old predilection to use images of other creatures to describe our own characteristics and how we have frequently enlisted animals as alter egos to vicariously express our essential selves.

The pieces in my last solo exhibition at Pangolin London, *Behind the Lines*, continued these pre-occupations but even more than previously, signalled the primacy I put on the making process itself. Inscribing lines into the forms of my sculptures has become such an intrinsic part of my making practice that I wanted to draw attention to it. This process has evolved further with line now, not simply replacing the form of a hand, an eye or whatever, but through a language of more abstract symbols suggesting more ephemeral concepts like emotions, feelings and thoughts that might lie beneath the surface of the form.

In my mind it is this revealing of the 'inner' that this current exhibition, *Turning Inside Out*, explores. Everything in existence contains unseen elements within it, biologically and metaphorically, from atoms and cells to ideas, feelings and beliefs.

Mind Menagerie
Bronze
Edition of 10
78 cm high



Much of sculpture-making deals with 'the look', with the form and the outer skin. The drawn image on the surface of my work is somehow able to infer and refer to that which is contained within; a form of X-ray image, revealing not simply the vital organs but patterns of process, biological and cultural. For example, the work *Repository* is a sculptural object in the form of a vessel but its exterior glyphs are intended to suggest an interior with a potential for transformation and inspiration and not simply a storage container.

The introduction of bold colour beyond the scope of patina has been an important development in your recent work. How did this come about and how did it develop?

Actually colour isn't really a new aspect of my work. I have always regarded colour as one of the sensory delights of the human experience. I began using colour whilst still a student and I certainly wasn't alone in doing so. It was probably part of a contemporary shift at the time, away from the Modernists' concern with 'truth to materials' and perhaps more generally a cultural liberation of design that new materials such as plastics allowed. At the beginning of my career all my work was quite highly coloured and cast in polyester resin.

The need to make my sculptures more durable, especially if they were to exist in an outside environment, meant that I changed to using bronze as my preferred medium. Bronze in itself is a beautiful material, especially after the passage of time, but even so, immediately after casting it does need to be coloured to draw the worked surface together into a cohesive and comprehensive whole. Traditionally, chemical patination gave the colour black and various degrees of brown and green. Because of this restriction I sacrificed the use of bold colour in my work and concentrated mainly on refining the form and shape of my images. Initially I regretted this reduction in the available palette, not just for its own sake but because I regarded bronze as such a traditional material. Devoid of colour, my essentially figurative work lacked the contemporary feel I sought. At this early point I was of a mindset that to simply to paint the bronze seemed such an act of sacrilege that it was not an available option. Nonetheless, through working with the founders at Pangolin Editions, colour has gradually again, become an integral part of my sculpture. First we experimented with new and highly inventive chemical patinas, then with raw pigments and finally with paint itself or sometimes a combination of all three. Regarding the bronze simply as an appropriate casting medium and not being precious about it has released me from the inhibitions of its traditional constraints and finally allowed colour in all its sensuousness to flood back into my work.

Bright colour isn't something we attribute to our traditional perceptions of sculpture. How do you think or rather hope that colour affects the way that we see these works?

Historically, colour has in fact been a major element in sculpture. In our western tradition of art history much of it has come to us with the colour eroded away, so we are used to seeing stone as stone, bronze as bronze, as it were. However we know that in a pristine condition these works would often have been highly polychrome in nature. I also think that far too often, with brief exceptions, we have tended to look to our own high art tradition and should more often be open to other cultures where colour has always been an important symbolic element.

So, how and why is colour important to my work? Well, for humans colour is simply a major part of our lives and we delight in it. Beyond that, colour is part of the signalling system that is employed in a large part of the natural world and I have talked elsewhere about how the work of scientists Tinbergen and more recently Ramachandran have shown how similar phenomena are relevant in making art. It must be true that colour has major significance for us as a species, not least because the majority of mammals have only two receptors within their eyes and therefore perceive the world as black and white. Humans on the other hand, along with most other primates, have a third receptor and luckily can discern the full colour spectrum. Incidentally, some birds and fish have a fourth receptor, which allows their vision to go all the way into the ultraviolet. So, the old adage 'like a red rag to a bull' is shown to be nonsense, whereas the red breast of a robin is not mere decoration but is recognised by others of its kind as a major signal of its status and condition. It would seem that although most of us have not evolved to have flamboyant plumage, we have evolved to use colour culturally.

In making art, colour has often been employed to describe the world in naturalistic representations but has also been used to liberate objects from their perceived reality. Semir Zeki, Professor of Neurobiology at UCL and Head of Neuroaesthetics at the Wellcome Institute, researched the work of the Fauve painters and suggests that they were intuitively exploiting quite different neural pathways in the brain than would normally be used in observing objects in their 'correct colours'. I am sure this symbolic use of colour is something that tribal artists of the world have also long understood and exploited. I think it is in this way that I use colour in my own work, in an attempt to evoke an emotional response and in addition to separate the image from a direct comparison with reality. This in consequence asks the viewer to consider the object for its symbolic possibilities. Beyond that it's hard to deny that colour contributes highly to the sensual value of my work.

Observation of the natural world, scientific research, anthropology and poetry all seem to inform and inspire you. Has there been a particular area of study or literature that has made an impact on you recently?

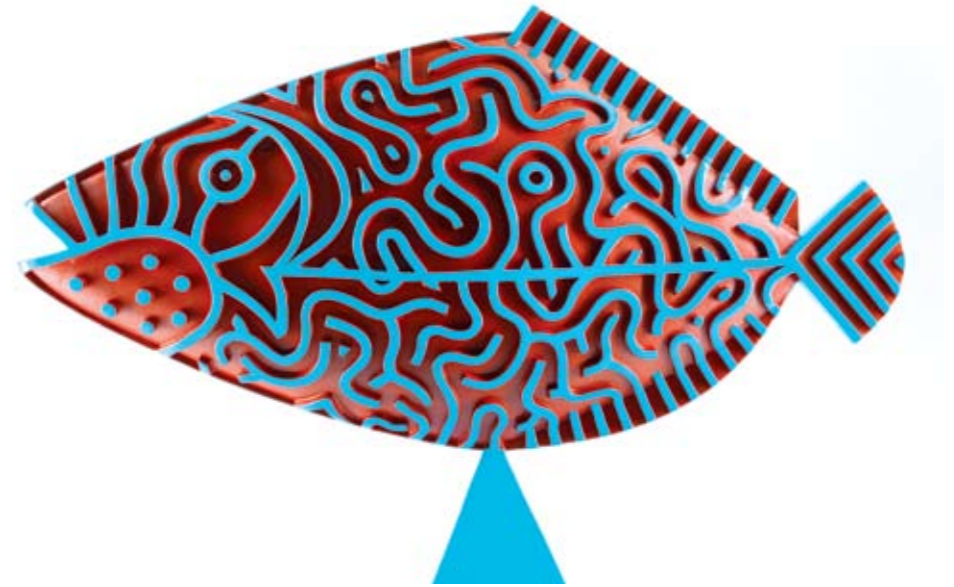
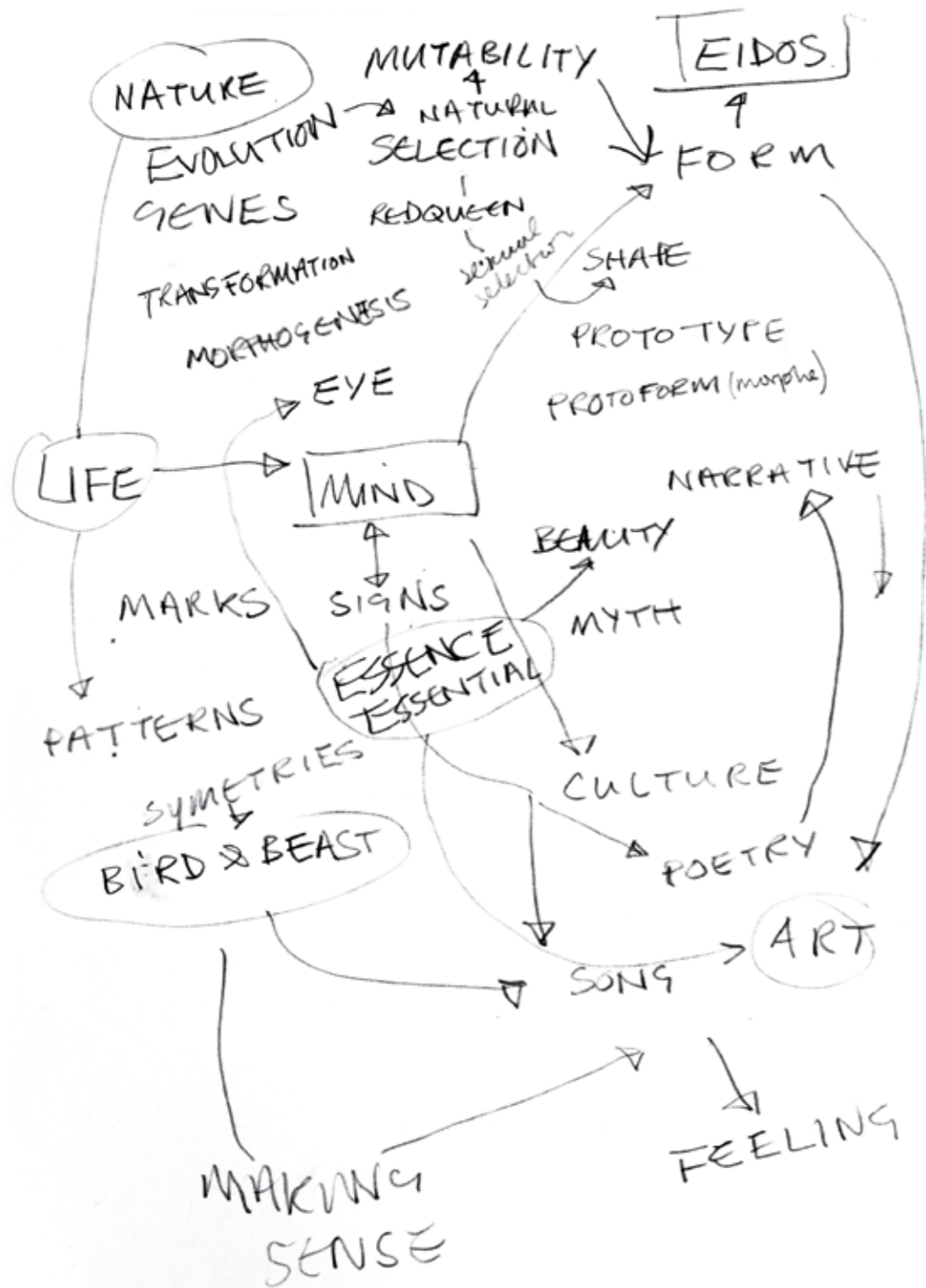
You're right, even as a child the natural world has always been a delight and a fascination, and art and the process of making followed closely behind. It's taken many years for me to learn exactly how I might effectively combine these two passions in a meaningful way. For a long time I've been preoccupied with the process of how we perceive the world around us. I think it is important to understand that seeing is not simply a mechanical process and our construct of the world is made by the information from the eye being processed by the brain through experience, knowledge and emotion. So images made too close to resembling reality will suffer from the scrutiny of a direct comparison with life itself. It is the general rather than the specific that is more likely to form an accord with our perception system and will then resonate successfully in our minds. Perhaps this is what we call beauty?

Over the years of making I've come to recognise that there are aesthetic parallels in evolutionary biology and our own human cultural development of image-making. My own current sculptural concerns, for example, have been informed by looking at patterns. In nature patterns occur everywhere of course, but in the markings of animals, birds and fish it would seem that there is a process describing the underlying biological formation. This process is often referred to as morphogenesis or sometimes Turin patterns, after Alan Turin of Enigma Code fame, who discovered the mathematical principle for what is essentially 'order out of chaos'. Basically, in biology this process is developed by special pigment cells in the skin being switched on and off to produce dots and lines which can then form circles and will sometimes close again to form dots. So many animals, birds, fish and insects carry similar patterns of dots, stripes, and 'eye' formations specifically because of these underlying processes. In the same way, many cultures around the world have developed independent visual languages that have similar visual vocabularies made up of the same organic geometries of dots, lines and circles. Judging from anthropological and archaeological evidence these motifs probably started as decorations on the human body before at some point being transferred to other surfaces. These abstract patterns, like their biological counterparts, must have gradually developed into coherent patterns and over time have developed into visual languages representing or symbolising elements of their cultural life.

In biological evolution this exploitation of pattern seems to have been evolved for survival and ultimately the development of new species. As one might suspect, camouflage is one aspect of this but quite often quite the reverse is true. In many species either the male or the female, but most often the male, will carry markings

Red Queen Rules
Bronze
Edition of 10
70 cm high





of colour and pattern so outrageous that it deliberately seems to make them vulnerable to attack. Darwin's initial theory of evolution, *Natural Selection*, purports that change occurs by selection of the individual best able to survive its environment. These conspicuous markings seemed to fly directly in the face of that process and forced Darwin to put forward a second theory, that of *Sexual Selection*. Basically, this is a much more bizarre and exciting theory which contends that the female, by choosing to mate with the male with the most exaggerated version of the species 'blueprint', will gradually over time force a change in size, colour, form and pattern to such an extent that an entirely new species will eventually come about. Females it would seem, in many species have an advanced appreciation of aesthetics and furthermore it seems that these closely resemble the same aesthetics that we also enjoy and find pleasurable. The theory of Sexual Selection has been popularised by authors such as Matt Ridley in his *Red Queen* hypothesis, named after Lewis Carroll's famous character that has to keep running to stay still, and Geoffrey Miller in *The Mating Mind* as the basis of even our own art. In this exhibition my sculptures play around with and conflate these two hypotheses. My sculptures *Red Queen Rules*, *Symphysis* and *Part of the Puzzle* reflect the processes of biological patterns and works like *In Man's Nature*, *Mind Menagerie* and *Repository*, the human propensity to make symbols with a similar aesthetic. However, although this work may be nurtured by the world of science, I still

(ABOVE)
Part of the Puzzle
Bronze
Edition of 10
60 cm high

(LEFT)
Mind-map from
sketchbook, 2012

believe our connection to the rest of nature is essentially an intuitive one and best expressed in a lyrical way and perhaps never better expressed than in Rilke's poem *Ah, not to be cut off*.

In conversation you have often reflected upon the human condition and its relationship to art and in particular to the possibility of there being a timeless recognition of our shared evolutionary history that ties us physically and mentally to an object. Does this still occupy your thoughts?

Yes, very much so, after all in human history what changes? Culture and technology can change rapidly and spectacularly but the human form and basic human condition I believe less so. 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. Biologically of course, the human body has remained unchanged in the evolution of our history as modern humans and because of this must be a prime candidate as a visual signal itself. Beyond that, one must ask if there are other images that possibly inhabit our psyche that might transcend time and place. In other words, although the animate and the inanimate world that surround us constantly change, are there visual constants that remain, resonate and continue to exist inside our minds? 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.

The works in this exhibition certainly seem more refined and your personal lexicon of symbols more defined – would you agree?

Well yes, I think in some respects this is linked to your previous question. In defining what it is that connects my intellectual concerns and my passion for making, I have been able to condense and refine the images I have wanted to pursue. I have come to believe that this act of simplification allows more room for interpretation but at the same time engenders a stronger intuitive response, as I have suggested, some form of perceptual resonance.

It is surely probable that humans over time must have shared many emotions with each other, fear, anger, envy and so on. More positively perhaps, there is the need for us to celebrate our sense of beauty, pleasure and the joy of simply being alive. Part of this pleasure is gained through our experience of the natural world in which we exist and the use of natural metaphors to express our emotions has been prevalent from the earliest of times.

The image of the bird as a symbol for our imaginative and creative sensibilities exists in many, many cultures, whereas four-legged creatures tend to make reference

to our more biological urges. The beast and bird are symbols that represent the non-visual abstractions within us: our feelings, our emotions, our thoughts and our expectations and while not exactly being binary opposites, they do seem to complement each other. In my mind at least, such symbols can be drawn upon in an attempt to express a sense of self. It is these timeless metaphors that I think have the propensity to be echoes of an ancient lexicon but at the same time have for me formed some kind of personal visual vocabulary. Signs and symbols are perhaps our very oldest ways of communication and comprehending the world, expressed so wonderfully I think, in a Tomas Tranströmer's poem; *Language Without Words*.

In this age of visual saturation do you think that personal totems still have a role?

Yes I do. If we think of a totem as a visual metaphor or a creative muse, then I think we can see it being enlisted in a great many works of art. Totems are metaphors that come from great mythic traditions and are constantly being renewed, refreshed and revived through the ages. In the modern era Picasso in particular recognised the power of the tribal totems. As a Spaniard it is not surprising that the bull had particular potency for him but he also dug further back into our mythic imagination to re-invoke the man-beast that was the Minotaur. Picasso is hardly alone, many artists have invested their own animal totems with contemporary significance, Ted Hughes through his poetry and Hitchcock in film both called on the totem of the crow as a menacing force of nature, a character that is more than likely a direct descendant of the raven in Norse and Celtic legend. The sculptor Barry Flanagan and poet Seamus Heaney are both inspired by the playful 'trickster' quality of the hare that has a wide and long history in folk legend and both Spielberg and Hirst play with our innate fear of a lurking menace in the form of the shark, to name but a few examples. For me, what a totem is not, is some form of personalising brand or style to act as badge of recognition. I think, a totem through the medium of making, is a way of discovering meaningful metaphors that connect an individual to like-minded others; making art is an act of communication after all.

Over the last four or five years I have been involved with work for the Ruwenzori Sculpture Foundation, researching and making totems that represent the different clans existing in the tribes of Uganda. Although these clans are extant and members are proud of their clan membership, because of recent historical events a tradition of visual art no longer exists. Trying to help re-invest these clans with their visual totems has made me understand that totems, like the signals inherent in nature, are made from the most significant of abstractions but as in 'Red Queen' rules of nature they are forever transforming themselves to be relevant to their audience.

Recently, in his book *The Old Ways*, Robert Macfarlane describes the sculptor Steve Dilworth as saying 'I have spent my life making ritual objects for a tribe that doesn't exist'. This strikes a chord with me; it makes me think that I have been making totems, not for a non-existing tribe but for a tribe that exists in my head. If the search for a visual language is directly linked to the way we process information then maybe it exists in others as well and hopefully some of that tribe will make their way to this exhibition.

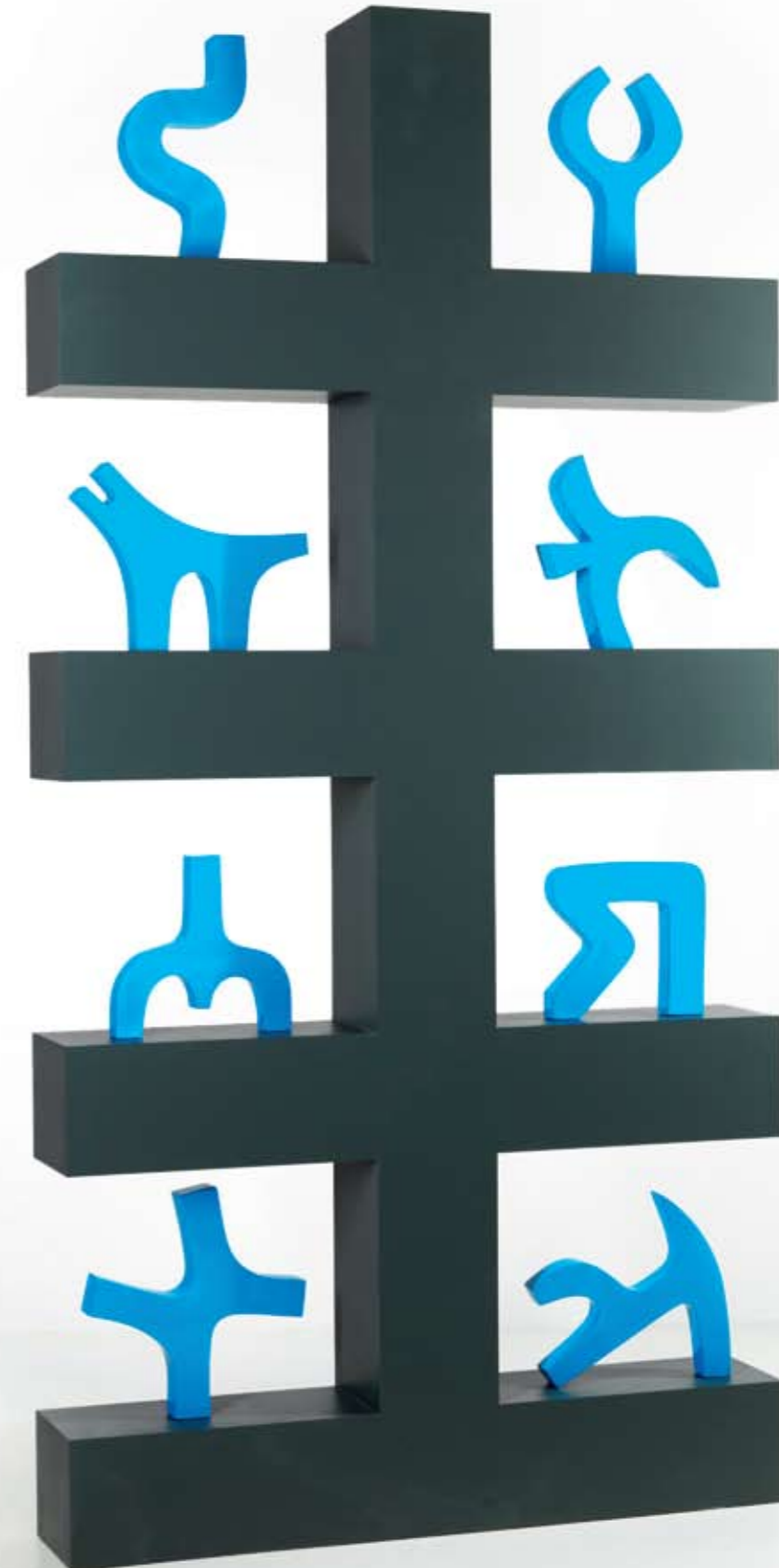
Your Eidetic Tree is a sculpture within a sculpture. Can you tell us about it?

On the face of it this seems a simple work but it has had a long and convoluted gestation period. I first started patterning the surface of my work in order to enhance the form and this took the shape of inscribed geometric marks: dots, lines and curves etc. Gradually these inscribed glyphs took on recognisable representations so that a sculpture of a figure might have an abstracted image of itself embossed into the surface or similarly, a dog would have simplified dog-glyphs. In my mind at least, these patterns became indicative of how DNA carries replicas of ourselves within each of our cells. From here, rather than patterning the whole surface I began using drawn lines in the place of three-dimensional form, so that overall the sculptures became altogether simpler and more abstract. More recently, I have inverted the whole process so that the lines themselves have become three-dimensional, collectively forming patterns, some of which have evolved once again to be recognisable images, images as I have said, which represent inner qualities rather than surface appearance.

In each of the 'Eidetic Trees' one can imagine some elements of these surface patterns to have slipped free of their surfaces and to have become enlarged into fully formed three-dimensional objects. They possess the same linear quality as the raised patterns and their simplicity of form and colour allow them to be seen as 'essences' not merely representations. Rather as a morpheme is the smallest meaningful unit in a language, each *Eidos* cannot be further reduced but at the same time such simplicity allows for a degree of ambiguity. I see these two works as a lexicon of visual units collected together, rather as one might find a collection of artefacts from an unknown culture in a museum of anthropology, their exact meaning waiting for interpretation.

The word 'eidos' has a long derivation in philosophy starting with the Ancient Greeks. Plato used it to mean immaterial 'forms' or 'ideas', idea being the feminine form of 'eidos'. His student Aristotle, as much a biologist as a philosopher, used the word 'idea' rather differently, taking it to mean a group of like individuals that share common attributes. In Latin, this meaning later became translated into the word 'species', with the word 'idea' being limited to describing a subjective non-tangible view of the world. In the twentieth-century, the philosopher Husserl used the word

Eidetic Tree II
Bronze
Edition of 10
Overall height: 240 cm





'eidos' and its adjective 'eidetic' to mean the 'essence' of a thing and this is how it is intended in the title of this sculpture or group of sculptures.

When you began working on this show I notice you scribbled in your notebook that you wanted to see this show as a novel, with each piece having an individual personality but there also being a collective coherence. Did this come to fruition and what would you like viewers to come away with?

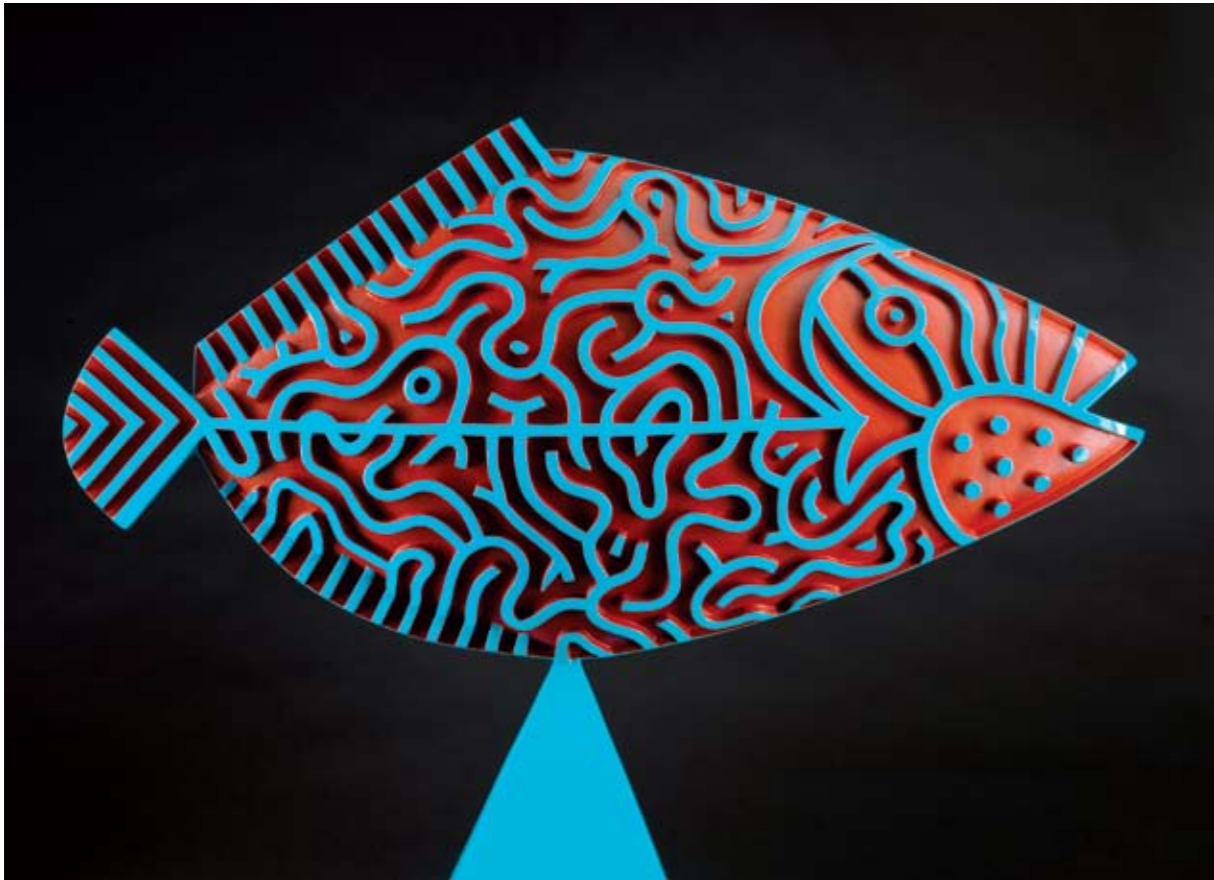
When I suggested it be like a novel I don't think I ever intended to create anything with a linear narrative, a story with a beginning and an end. However, I do like the idea that a solo exhibition gives the opportunity to see each sculpture rather like a chapter in a book or perhaps more like a song track, as one element of a complete album, or a poem as part of a published collection. I think this means each piece can be seen as having a discrete entity and as such they can be taken out to exist on their own merits but at the same time, the exhibition brings them together to produce more than the sum of all the parts. Did this happen? Well, we'll have to wait and see how people react.

In the end, I'd like people seeing this work to find it an enjoyable and thought-provoking experience. It would be good if they empathised with some of the ideas that we have discussed here but most of all, I think I would like people to come away with what Darwin in discussing the aesthetics of Sexual Selection describes as "the functional target is delight. Delight!"

Symphysis
Bronze
Edition of 10
32.5 cm high

CATALOGUE





Part of the Puzzle
Bronze
Edition of 10
60 cm high





Transmutation
Bronze
Edition of 10
44.5 cm high



Repository
Bronze
Edition of 10
70 cm high

Flashback
Bronze
Edition of 10
47 cm high





Night Bird
Bronze
Edition of 10
46.5 cm high

Inner Man
Bronze
Edition of 10
65 cm high





*Sick of those who come with words, words but no language,
I make my way to the snow-covered island.*

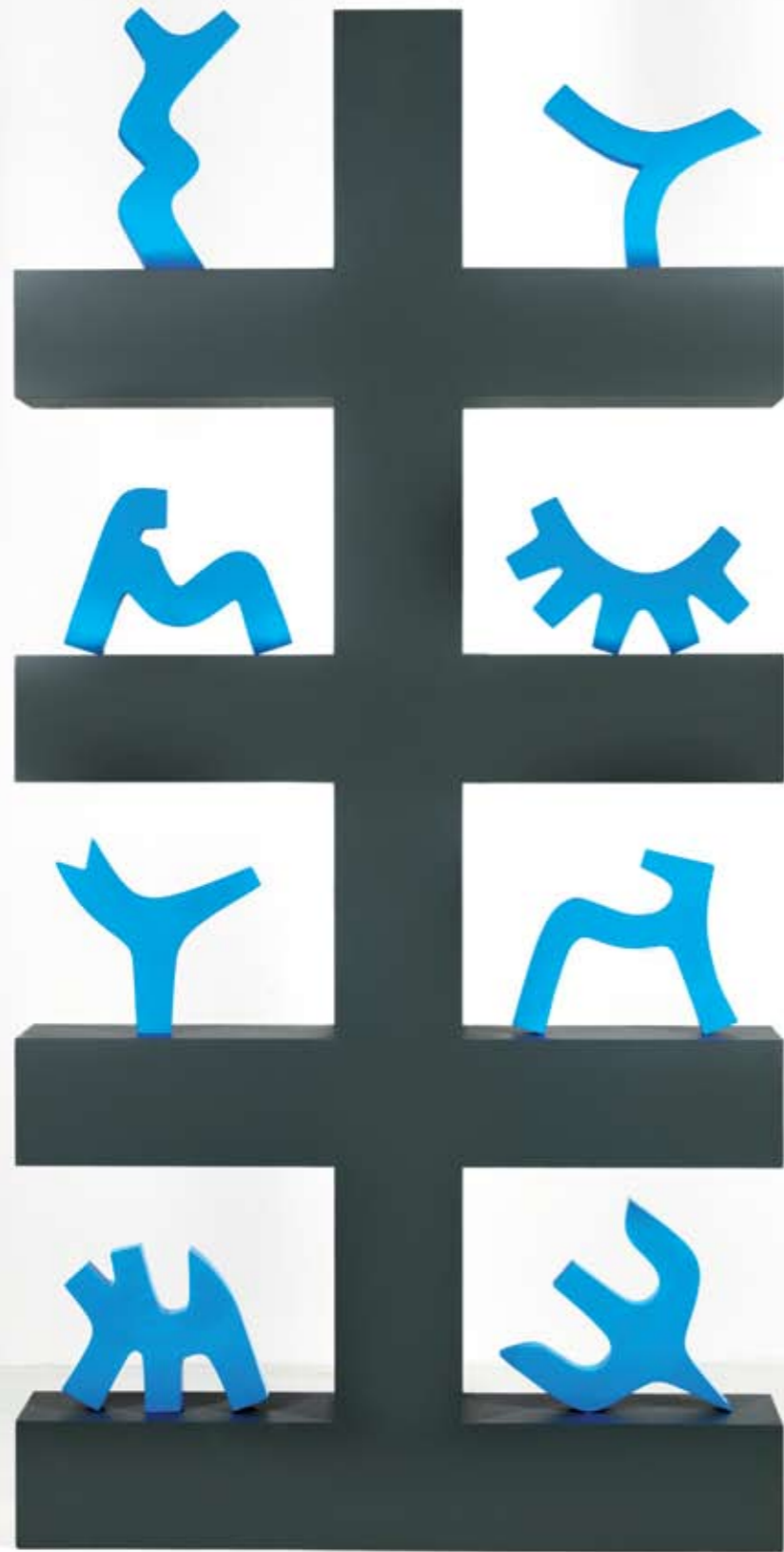
*Wilderness has no words. The unwritten pages
Stretch out in all directions.*

*I come across this line of deer-slots in the snow: a language,
Language without words.*

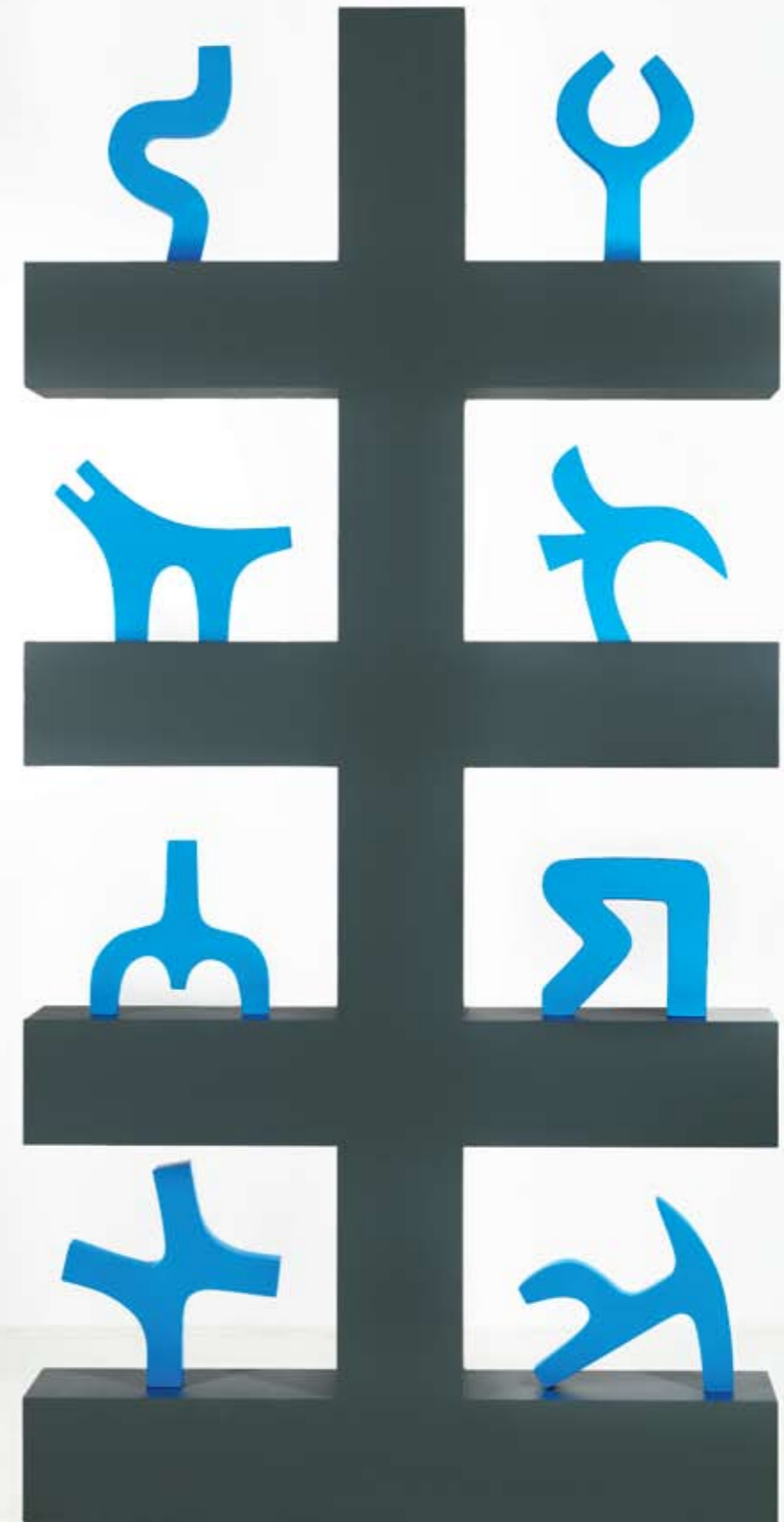
TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER
March 1979

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





Eidetic Tree I
Bronze
Edition of 10
240 cm high



Eidetic Tree II
Bronze
Edition of 10
240 cm high

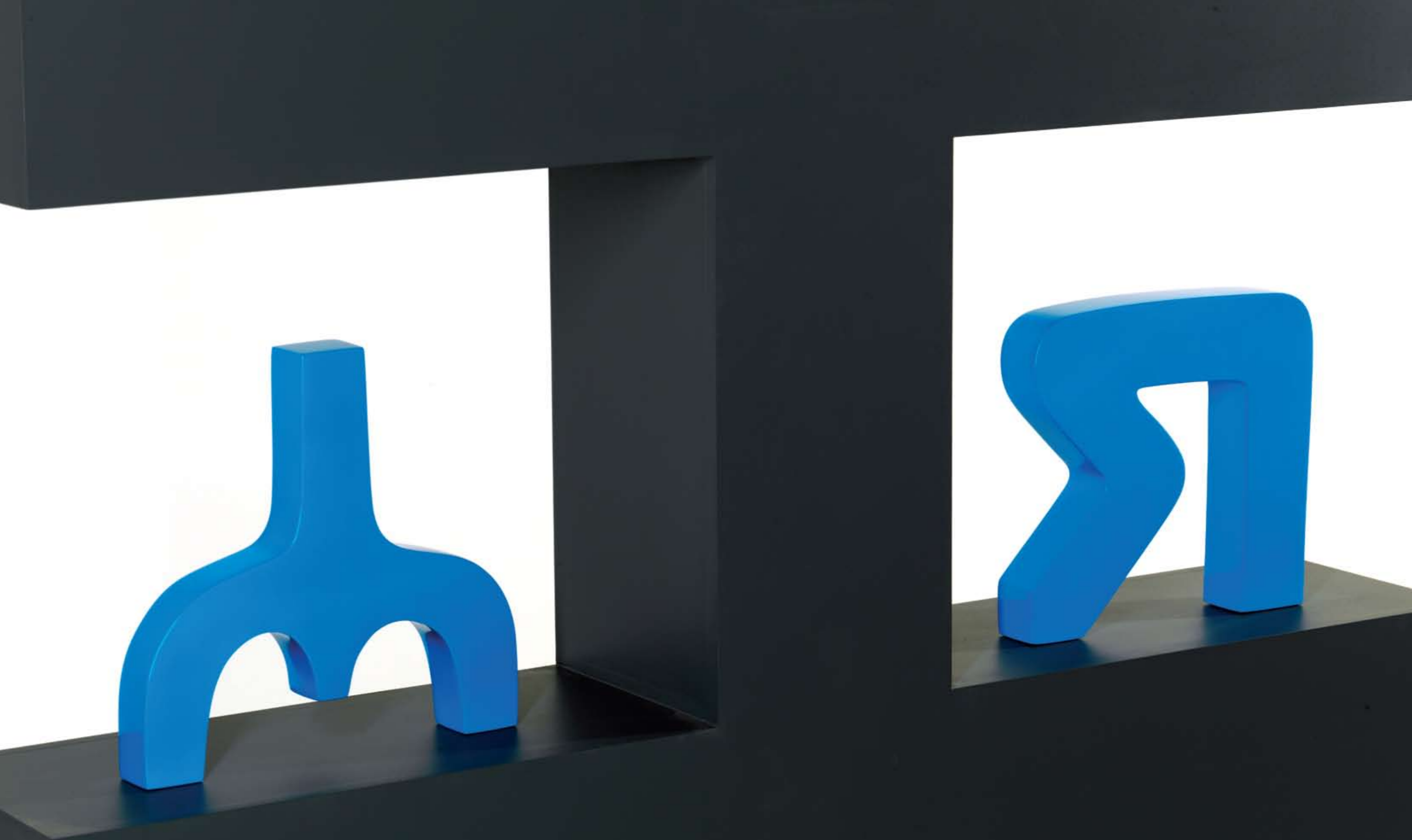


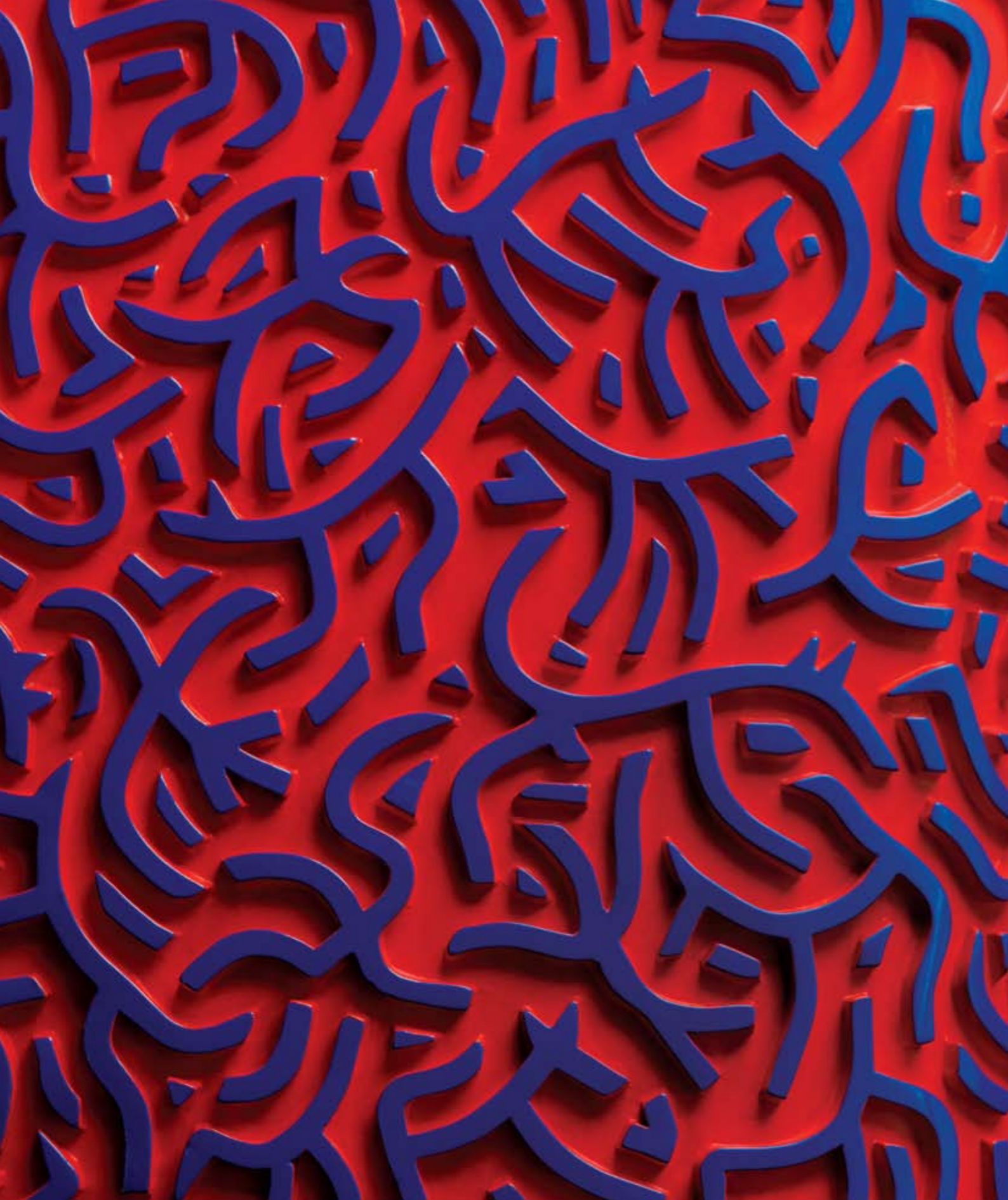
(RIGHT)
Eidos XV
Bronze
Edition of 10
42 cm high

(LEFT)
Eidos VII
Bronze
Edition of 10
30 cm high

Eidos IV
Bronze
Edition of 10
24 cm high





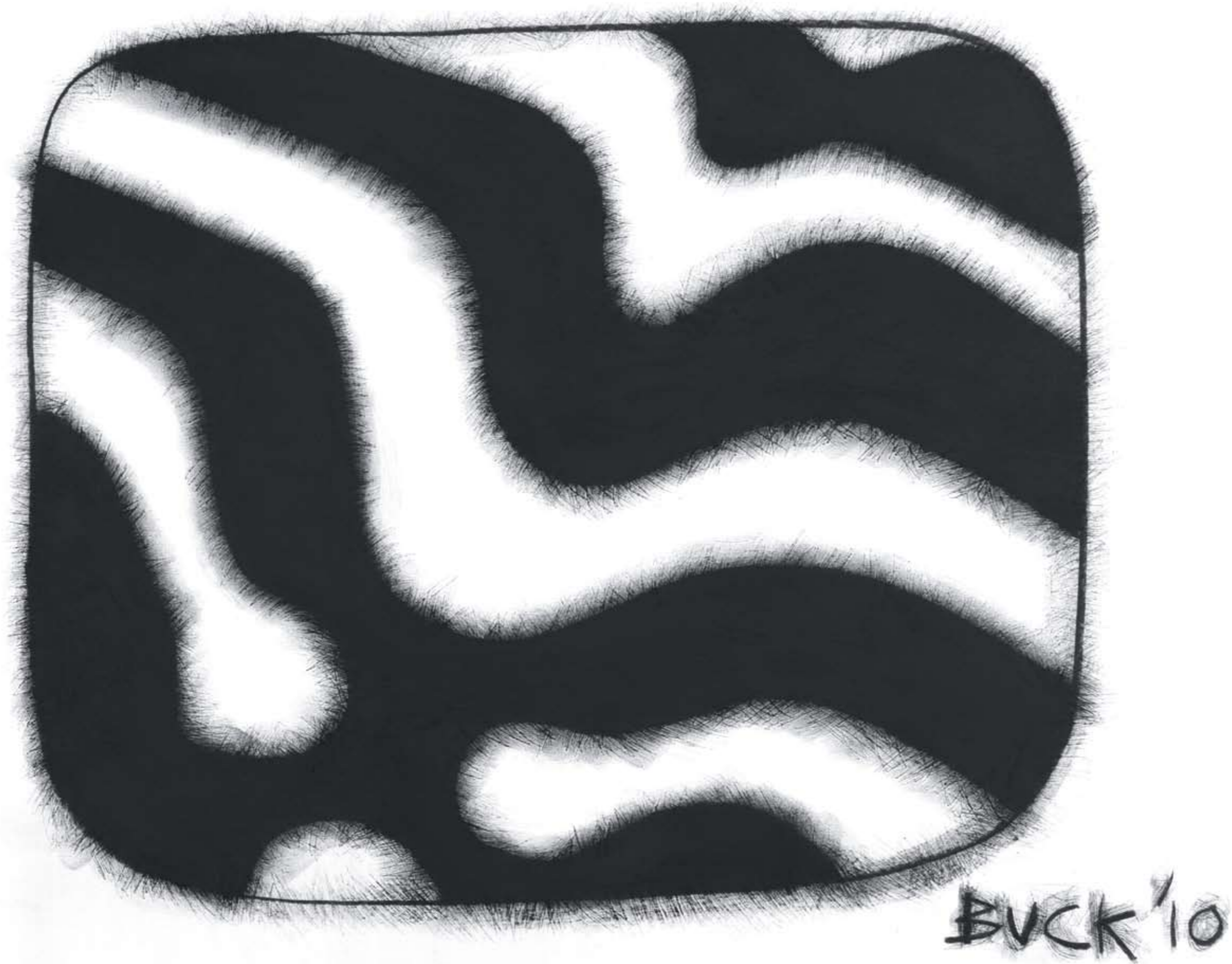


Mind Menagerie
Bronze
Edition of 10
78 cm high



Red Queen Rules
Bronze
Edition of 10
70 cm high





*Patterns of Process:
The Order of Chaos
Charcoal on paper
Unique*



You and Me
Bronze
Edition of 5
215 cm high

Headland
Bronze
Edition of 10
74 cm high





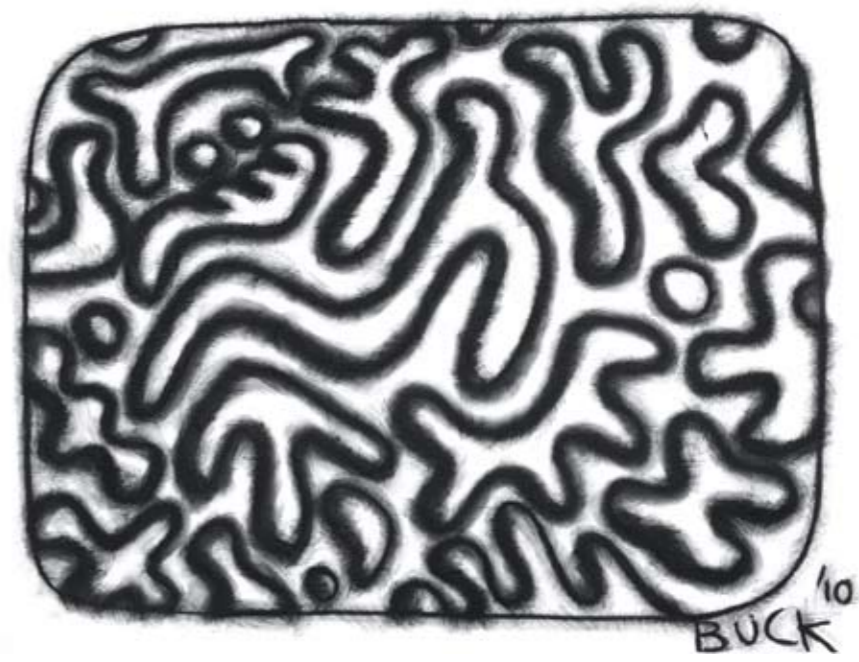
Marked Man
Bronze
Edition of 25
9.3 cm high

Ship To Shore
Bronze
Unique
300 cm high





(LEFT)
Point of Balance
Bronze
Edition of 10
16.5 cm high



(ABOVE)
*Patterns of Process:
Common Descent*
Charcoal on paper
Unique



Fruiting Body
Bronze
Edition of 10
44.5 cm high



FURTHER READING

Titles particularly pertinent to the subjects discussed in the interview with Jon Buck:

Aujoulat, Norbert, *The Splendour of Lascaux: Rediscovering the Greatest Treasure of Prehistoric Art*, (Thames and Hudson, 2005)
Abram, David, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, (Vintage Books, 1997)
Abram, David, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, (Vintage Books, 2010)
Ball, Philip, *Shapes: Nature's Patterns: A Tapestry in Three Parts*, (Oxford University Press, 2009)
Bateson, Gregory, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, (Flamingo, 1985)
Berger, John, *About Looking*, (Pantheon Books, 1980)
Boyd, Brian, *On The Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition and Fiction*, (Harvard University Press, 2009)
Buck, Jon, *Making a Point: The Point of Making*, (Gallery Pangolin, 2011)
Campbell, Joseph, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, (Penguin, 1981)
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Clottes, Jean, *Cave Art*, (Phaidon, 2008)
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Dissanayake, Ellen, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, (University of Washington Press, 1992)
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Gimbutas, Marija, *The Language of the Goddess*, (Thames & Hudson, 1989)
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Howard, Morphy, *Aboriginal Art: Art & Ideas*, (Phaidon Press, 1998)
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Lewis-Williams, David, *Inside the Neolithic Mind: Consciousness, Cosmos and the Realm of the Gods* (Thames and Hudson, 2005)
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Le Quellec, Jean-Loïc, *Rock Art in Africa: Mythology and Legend*, (Flamarion, 2004)
Macfarlane, Robert, *The Old Ways*, (Hamish Hamilton, 2012)
Miller, Geoffrey, *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*, (Vintage, 2001)

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Wilson, Edward. O., *Consilience, The Unity of Knowledge*, (Abacus, 2001)
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Zeki, Semir, *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain* (Oxford University Press, 1999)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Turning Inside Out

7 November - 22 December 2012

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