

ZADOK BEN-DAVID



BLACKFIELD



Acknowledgements

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Front cover *Blackfield* installation (detail)

Frontice piece *Blackfield* installation (detail)

Back cover *Blackfield* glass box (detail)

ZADOK BEN-DAVID

BLACKFIELD

5000 piece installation

Glass Boxes

corten steel sculptures & aluminium cut-outs

Opening Wednesday 12 March 6:30 - 9:00 pm

Exhibition dates 7 March - 12 April 2008

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Gallery Hours Tuesday - Saturday 11:00 - 5:00 pm **ACGA**

This exhibition open Sundays 11 - 5 pm

There is something almost daring in art that celebrates life, the miraculous power of humans and nature to recover from hardships and trauma, to turn an apocalyptic landscape into a flourishing garden. Zadok Ben David's *BLACKFIELD* is not naïve, it's not a new age message about positive thinking. It is about expanding our view, creating new narratives and a space for contemplation, allocating a place for hope and belief.

The piece consists of 5000 acid-etched, stainless-steel miniatures of flora. The initial view these images, detached of their natural environment is painfully artificial, in the way the meadows of Rogier van der Weyden, (1399/1400 – June 18, 1464) are so perfect they are hopelessly beautiful. They bring to mind the botanical illustrations from Victorian botanical manuals and older sources, especially Moslem or Monastic medical treatises. These were drawn or painted under the pretext of scientific exploration, indicating understanding and are no less commanding of nature. Nonetheless, much of the Flora depicted were fantastic, a mixture of examination and myth. In manuscripts denoting Greek and Roman mythology, again both Moslem and Monastic, botanical images rich with symbolic meaning addressed the way nature and the supernatural became hybrid entities.

The miniature flowers in Ben David's work are far from Realism, each in its own right and all as an unfeasible ensemble where plants, based on flora from different climate stand together in a harmony of displaced entities. They form a field of dream and reflection, a place the viewer may not grasp but cannot escape.

Each miniature is black on one side and brightly hand colored on the other; the colors an aesthetic decision with no obligation to a realist "Truth". Doubting truth, testing reality has been a reoccurring theme in Ben- David's work for the last two decades. Scientific knowledge and a unique observation of human nature and the natural world, converged in magic artistic moments, equally enchanting and troubling, such as in *Come and get me* from 2000 or *Trouble in the Square* 2006. The magic in *BLACKFIELD* is particularly captivating, as it offers an opportunity to savor a moment of revelation and then repeat it, a chance we don't have out of the realm of art.

Upon entering the exhibition space the viewer sees a field of exquisite floral silhouettes planted in a bed of white sand. Is this the black beauty after an apocalypse, after doomsday? An intolerable convergence of night and day? Are these parched entities a memory of a glorious past like Pompeian frescoes? A contemporary "Vanitas" evoking thought of an environmental disaster no less than a divine reprimand? As the viewer walks around this elegiac, melancholic installation a mysterious and luminous moment occurs when one perceives that the silhouettes are colorful jewels, celebrating life. As *BLACKFIELD* unfolds it bridges two distinct states of minds and it describes and evokes the possibility of redemption. The dramatization of the relationship between black and color is so intense that the viewer may well doubt his perception going back to the point where he saw black. Although it discloses all enigmas, *BLACKFIELD* is the kind of work that stays with the viewer long after one leaves the gallery.

BLACKFIELD speaks of choice. Our ability to choose a way to view objects and situations, the change of angle leads to dramatically different experience. The spatial order is constructed so that we, the viewers, become Gulliver; Jonathan Swift's hero of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) or Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll). We encounter a sudden change of our physical presence in the world and with it a rapid change in our conception of reality, of a moment where particularities are blurred to abstraction based on an interdependent notion of the self.

BLACKFIELD provides the opportunity for us to retrieve the sense of wonder, adventure and discovery that is becoming a rare commodity in our constantly monitored, reviewed and toured world in which mystery is again and again unveiled only to reveal manipulation. In *BLACKFIELD* we have the superb option of going back and forth between the dark side (of the moon?) to a colorful, lush garden of Eden planted in sand, the ultimate symbol of the ephemeral in most cultures and a materiel rarely in use in contemporary Art. It is the material for Buddhist Mandala, (circle in Sanskrit) a sacred diagram created in sand that provides a visual framework for establishing feelings of peace and wholeness. As *BLACKFIELD* in its largest version yet, is now viewed in Australia it is interesting to note a certain affinity to sand drawing in Vanuatu which serve to transmit a wealth of traditional knowledge about local history, rituals, cosmologies, and natural phenomena. The ambiguity, the encompassing of so many emotional, historical and intellectual facets is what makes *BLACKFIELD* a constant challenge, consolation and, I will risk saying, joy.



Blackfield glass box 2007

Zadok Ben-David - Introduction

To embrace the world of Zadok Ben-David is to find oneself in a state of wonder. It is a world full of surprises where things are never quite what they seem – an illusory world of 'magical reality'. For Ben-David, reality is a concept in a state of flux, always open to reassessment by new experience. To create art with a lasting impact the artist needs to place a 'hook' into the mind of the viewer; to create a space that has access to the unconscious mind. The surrealists used unlikely or impossible juxtapositions such as flaming tubas, melting watches. Ben-David approaches us with different means by partially using the time honoured methods of the magician: part trick, part display but always calculated to awaken our senses into seeing things from a different perspective and allowing us to mine aspects of ourselves in the process. His art is like the apparently sealed room, apart from a crack of light at the far end, leading to a window that then looks onto a corridor; which, if followed, leads to a door and finally a balcony with a view over a valley. What was limited, small and dark has now opened up into endless possibility provided we have the energy to explore and follow the signs.

The work is not without gravitas – indeed there is an existential and absurd element in the lone figures reminiscent of Giacometti – but the world of Ben- David is an energetic one that best welcomes those with curiosity and enthusiasm.

Ben-David also intuitively grasps that laughter and humour are key elements in the human mind that we reach for as we reach for air in difficult circumstances. He also understands these emotions sit near the surface in the human psyche and skillfully taps the resources that we all possess to allow increased access to his work. People often look to art to address the big questions in life but they also seek solace in the here and now in order to survive the inevitable ordeals that life has in store for us all. They need to be entertained as well as confronted and humour is a direct and effective way to capture people's attention. Communication this way may have a more profound and lasting effect on how people look at the work and indeed at themselves than, for example, any overt or strident political message. Ben-David is akin to South Africa's William Kentridge in this respect in that they both come from atmospheres of political turmoil and yet largely avoid direct political reference in favour of an overall view that addresses the human condition in a positive, if sometimes slightly absurd way. There is a slapstick element to some of the films of Kentridge. Similarly, Ben-David uses illusionism to put his figures into 'impossible' situations and positions that require us to look again and again in order to fully grasp what we are seeing, thereby creating more space for the thoughts and feelings that create new perspectives for us.

The monumental *Blackfield* installation, the centerpiece of this exhibition is made up of nearly five thousand individual flowers and plant sculptures no more than a few inches in height. The individual sculptures that make up *Blackfield* are black on the front and hand painted in colour on the reverse so as we circle it the work, gradually and miraculously, comes ablaze with colour. The eye is continually surprised and may not rest for any length of time in a single place. Even a blink, never mind physically moving and changing one's perspective, confronts us with an entirely new viewpoint, both similar and utterly different to what one has encountered a few seconds before. The images are on a scale akin to Mughal miniatures and individually appear impossibly fragile. When confronted by such a massive installation it is hard not to rub one's eyes in wonder. How is something so substantial, so big, made from elements that are so small – even ephemeral. A myriad of sensations detonated at the very first glance continues to build until one may be quite literally overwhelmed by the experience. Only after some initial investigations does the mind kick in and begin to make intellectual sense of the experience. The sense of wonder never leaves and continues to resonate long after leaving the space. The field does not sit in the space but invades and occupies it.

In *Blackfield* there is a play with scale - on exterior versus interior space, with the artist reminding us that there is as much inward space as there is outward – both are infinite - and we are bound only by our own imaginations and ability to perceive, a theme he also plays out in his tree man sculptures or *innerscapes*. Once one has absorbed the fine detail of a single piece it is up to the imagination to construct a response. It is a little like viewing an archaeological dig, where we start on the surface with a few promising signs and then peel back layers, but instead of artifacts our investigations reveal unexpected meaning and emotional response. The site of our 'excavations' is in fact our own bodies and minds. We are digging inside ourselves.



Blackfield (detail) 2006

Similar to *Evolution and Theory* (see photo in catalogue page 19) the 1999 installation which began at Annandale and toured museums around the world, there is something banner-like and iconic about the *Blackfield*. It is not so much constructed but rather comes into being according to the space and the intuition of the artist. It 'finds' itself in its final form for the particular installation, which is itself only a passing phase or one manifestation. The work you only see at Annandale is temporary, even momentary – the residue of the installation performance – and will be repeated at other venues in different forms.

The Perspex Glass Boxes are random groupings of the flowers – segments of the overall installation (perspex boxes with 30-45 pieces) encompassing the larger installation in a smaller format. One cannot move around them so the colour is seen by a clever use of a mirror that makes the piece appear doubly as large and full of illusionist colour. Like *Blackfield*, the eye is at first hesitant and the mind requires some suspension of disbelief. The *Blackfield* installation and the related *Blackfield Boxes* may be made up of flower sculptures but the role of man is still present as the flowers have an anthropomorphic feel to them. A crucial aspect of Ben-David's art demonstrated in the glass boxes is that the ideas and impact of the large-scale works are fully present in the smaller works or even in tiny single sculptures. The work does not suffer compromise by reduction in scale. The artist has so cleverly framed his oeuvre that it is impossible to come up with a hierarchy of 'important and major' versus 'minor' works. Each sculpture brilliantly contributes to the whole, sparked and nurtured by his overall vision.

In 2003 Ben-David began experimenting with large-scale corten steel sculptures, a marked shift from the aluminum cutouts or the casting in bronze of the earlier work in metal. Corten steel is particularly suited to large format outdoor pieces as it is a medium meant to rust making for a changing patina that may be arrested as desired. The first major commission was the *Tree of Life* at the Holocaust Museum in Israel. One figure acts as the trunk and the branches made up of hundreds of interlocking and connected figures, which, at first glance appear to be leaves. When subsequently commissioned for similar works the artist has always given close consideration to the surrounding natural environment – taking photos and making drawings so the final work reflects its surroundings. A work done responding to the twisted gums of an Australian outback setting would be very different to the English tree outline of *Autumn Reflection* (see photos in cat pages 20-21) at Chatsworth House, UK, in the hugely successful Sotheby's exhibition in 2007 that also included Lyn Chadwick, Damien Hirst, Marc Quinn, Anish Kapoor and Jaume Plensa. The corten steel works are sometimes versions of previous small works done in stainless steel editions or medium size aluminum cutouts. The format and materials changes the scale and the emotional response.

It has now been twenty years since I first met Zadok Ben-David standing outside the Israeli pavilion at the Venice Biennale where he was the featured artist that year. Indeed the first exhibition at Annandale galleries when we opened the new space in 1991 was a solo show of his work and subsequent shows have been landmarks for developing the program at Annandale Galleries. This exhibition is a celebration of sorts, which marks our time collaborating together. Over the years, the evolution and progress of his work has never ceased to surprise and inspire me. While certain themes like magic, illusionism, the role of the figure in art and the balancing of western art aesthetics in London with the more mystical and spiritual overtones of the Middle East are always present, the use of materials, the shifting subject matter and the presentation of his work have always provided me with a sense of regeneration. He never stagnates or allows himself to fall into the trap of becoming formulaic. Rather, he always generates new and varied emotions in his followers and has the rare capacity in an artist to make each new body of work fresh, contemporary and relevant to the here and now.

I would like to thank Smadar Sheffi, the critic for the newspaper Al-Haaretz in Israel for contributing an essay to this catalogue and for her shared enthusiasm for Zadok's work. Also, Siti Osman, the studio manager for Zadok Ben-David for her patience and help with the logistics of the exhibition. Finally, I would like to thank Zadok Ben-David for his fifth visit and keen interest in Australia, his ongoing support of Annandale Galleries and his personal friendship over the years.

- Bill Gregory Sydney February 2008



The Unnatural 2005
corten steel 247 x 160 x 77 cm



Under Fire 2005
corten steel 214 x 94 x 54 cm



You Again 2006
corten steel 255 x 62 x 15 cm



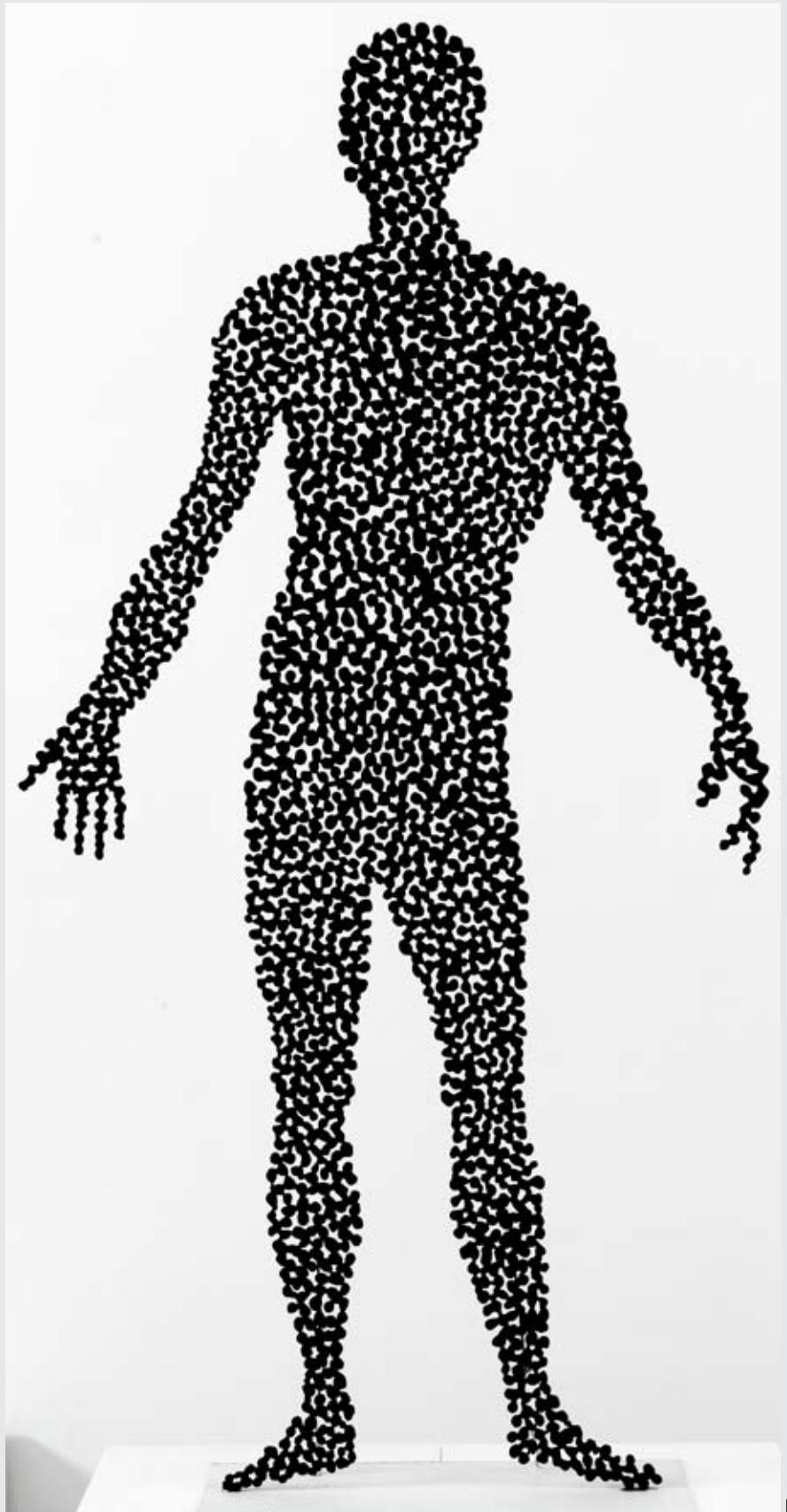
Three of a Kind 2006
corten steel 168 x 77 x 10 cm



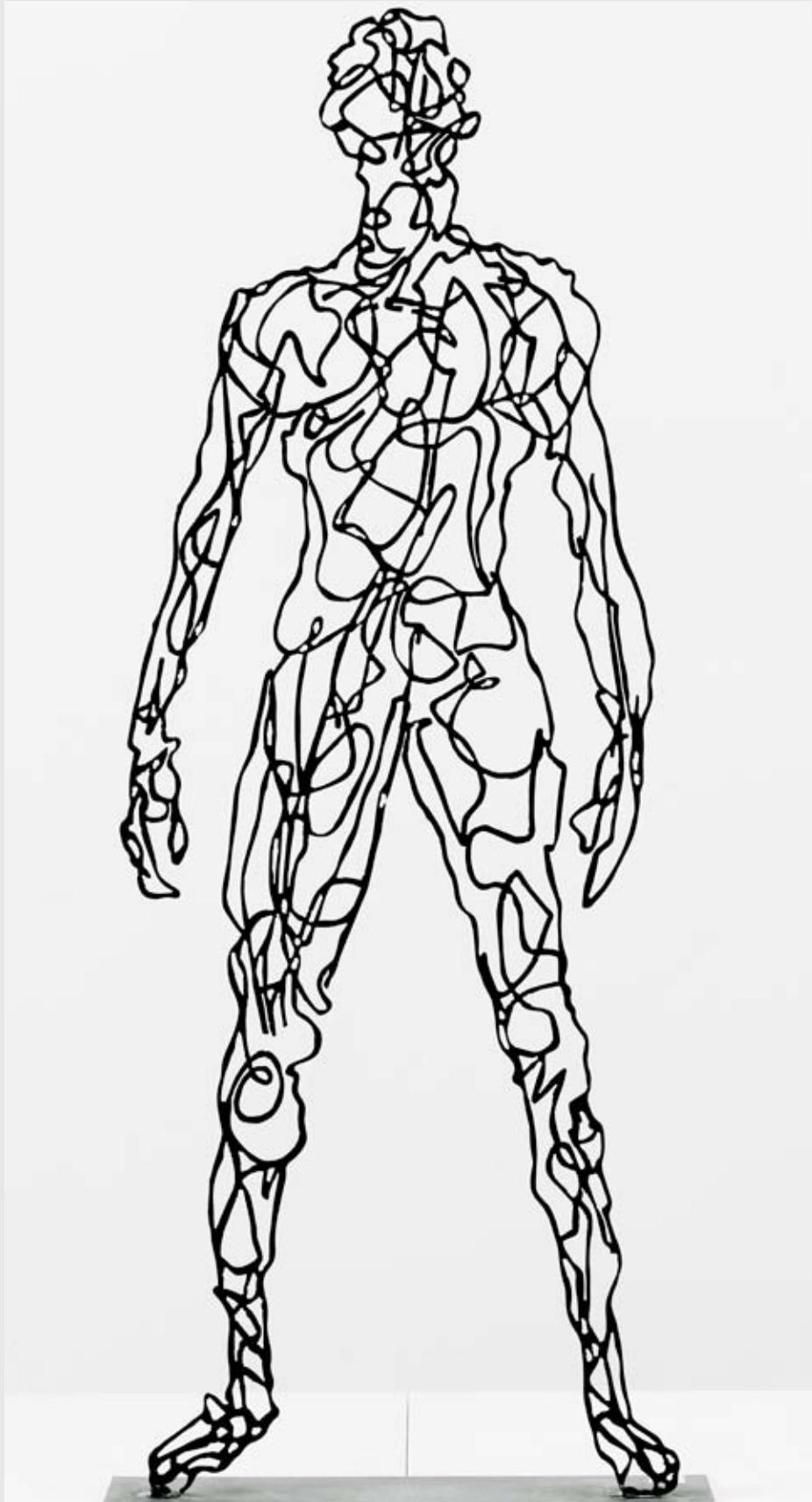
Untitled 2004
unique acrylic on aluminium
98.5 x 40 cm



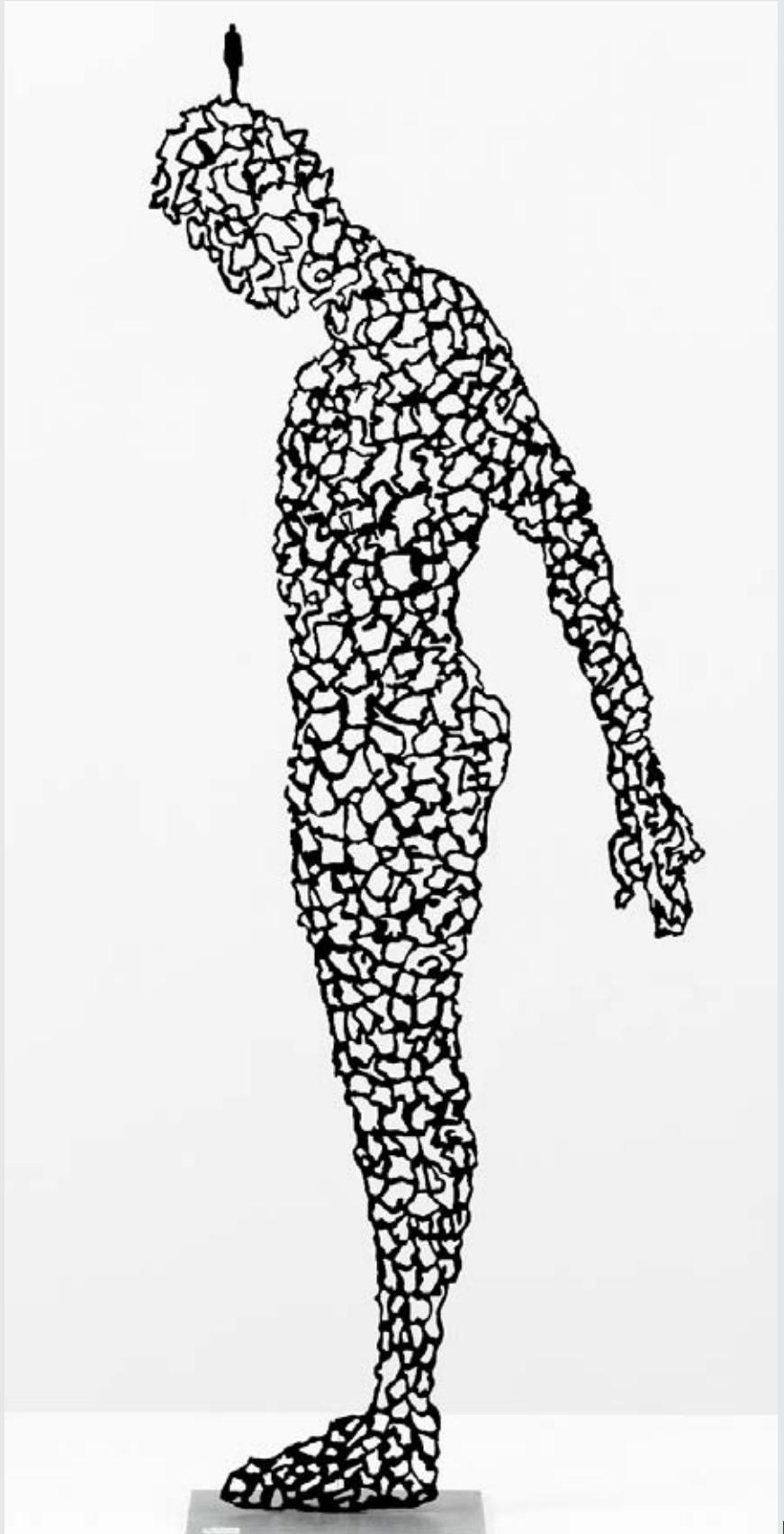
Untitled 2004
unique acrylic on aluminium
76.5 x 84 cm



Untitled 2004
unique acrylic on aluminium
224 x 114 cm



Untitled 2004
unique acrylic on aluminium
101 x 35 cm



Untitled 2004
unique acrylic on aluminium
102 x 38 cm



Autumn to Spring installation 2006 - 2007



Innerscapes installation 2006





Autumn Reflection (detail)





Zadok Ben-David Studio 2006 West Hamstead London

Quotes by the artist

'Like a magician, I enjoy surprising people, making them wonder...'

'I see myself first and foremost as an artist. Where I work or where I live is of less importance.'

...my family have been craftsmen since biblical times and jewellery skills have passed from father to son for many centuries'...
'maybe it is in my blood, I don't know.'

'I think that one of the problems of the western world is its emphasis on logic. Most of the philosophies of the west are based on logic, while the philosophies of the East are much more mystical. I try to combine both.'

'My experiences are experiences of both (UK & Middle East) cultures, even though they are much more deeply rooted in the Middle East. What I picked up from Britain is probably the language rather than the use of materials or the subject matter.'

'I don't think art can educate anyone. Art can open things up to people but it can never solve problems.'

– above quotes taken from interview with Waldemar Januszczak, Collins Gallery catalogue *Zadok Ben-David sculpture 1987-90*

'When we become very involved in the vision of creative chaos, the studio is a lab and a study; a space of creativity itself and for any future thoughts. I want to be the sorcerer and the master of those dreams.'

Quotes by writers

'Zadok Ben-David's *Blackfield* is, quite simply, the best single work that the Israeli-born, UK based sculptor has produced during his twenty-five year career.' - Gabriel Coxhead

'Zadok Ben-David manages to transport a language rich in illusions and meaning. We see in the sculptures a spirit towards the common language and a faith in humanity: Illusion and Magical Realism.' –Victor De Circasia

'Ben-David takes and manipulates the image to achieve a surprise. The power of communication is not only visual, but an infinite string of unconscious elements, which informs our identity and tests our ideas and emotions.' –Victor De Circasia

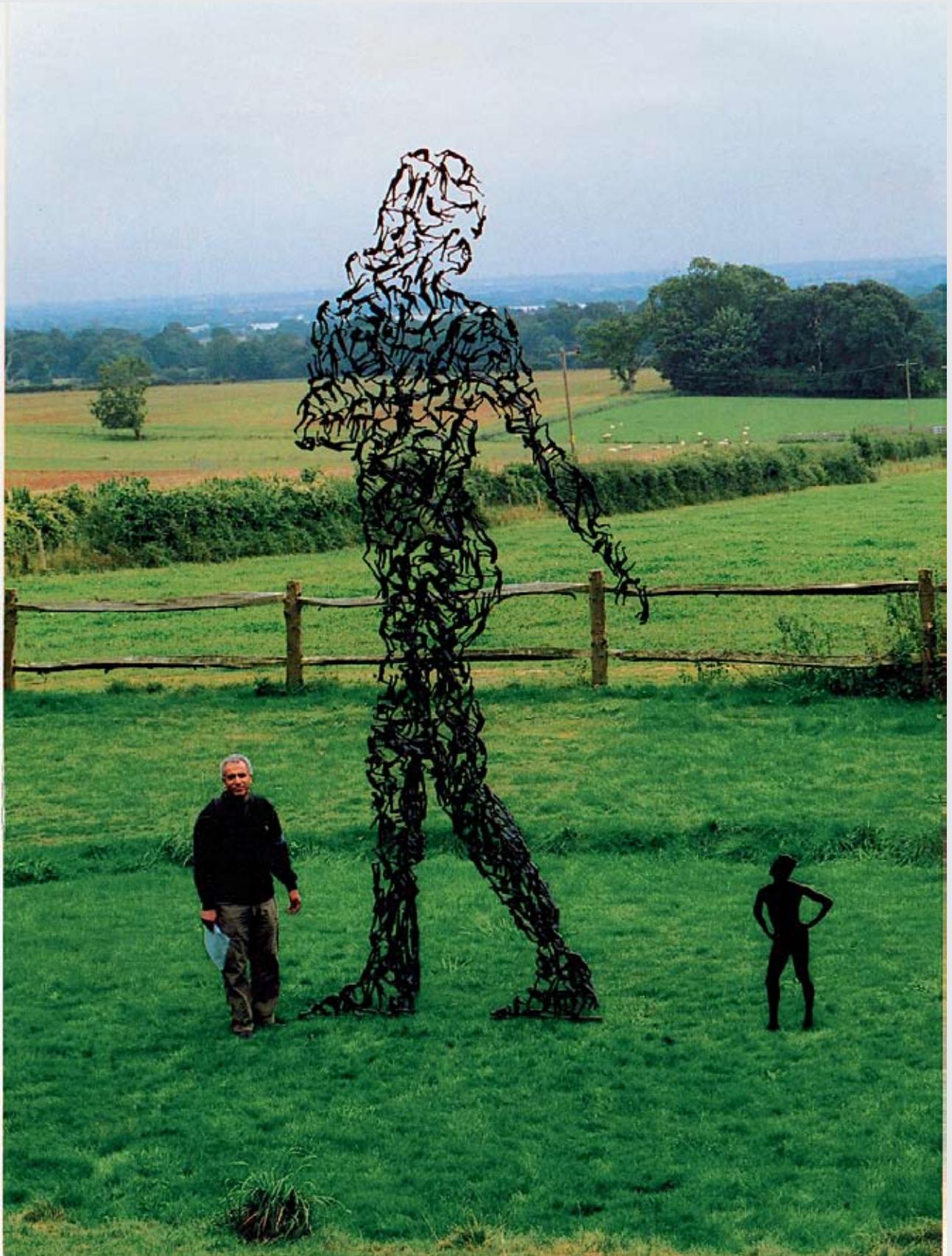
'The upheavals of modern society: war, tyranny and political ideologies are absent from the work. Nevertheless, his art embodies a humanity, which he pursues with a compelling optimism.' –Victor De Circasia

'Ben-David's boldest move was to bring dream-creativity into his art and make it contemporary, lively and symbolic.'
– Meir Agassi

'In Zadok Ben-David everything comes, as it were, from nature.' 'As it were, because he doesn't imitate nature, he invents it.'
- Meir Agassi

'In the work of Ben-David there is a great deal of improvisation and arrangement, as he adapts to the most diverse situations. He develops the work on a small scale in the studio, but he modifies the final assemblage to achieve a monumental scale.'
–Victor De Circasia

'In the last thirty years, Ben-David has established himself as an original sculptor with his own language and style and has launched the clipping or the silhouette sculpture into a new platform. These sculptures/installations of Ben-David are exceptionally important works of art.' –Victor De Circasia



Conversation Piece 1996 bronze 300 x 100 x 30cm Goodwood Sculpture Park UK

5 Solo exhibitions

- 1988 **Venice Biennale** – represented Israel
1997 **Evolution and Theory** Herzliya Museum Israel, Annandale Galleries Sydney (also 1998 Ambrosino Gallery Miami, San Francisco Art Institute, Museum Beelden aan Zee Schveningen Holland, 2003 The Forum Villa Nva de Cerveira Portugal
2000-3 **Magical Reality** Place arte Contemporanea, Cavagnola, Turin, Italy, Galleria Civica d'arte Moderna e Contemporanea Saint Vincent Aosta Italy, Esplanade Culture Centre Singapore
2006 Survey exhibition Guangdong Art Museum, Guangzhou China
2007 **Blackfield** Hales Gallery London, Oroom Art Foundation Seoul Korea

5 Group exhibitions

- 1986 **From Two Worlds** Whitechapel Art Gallery London and touring
1990 **Jewish Art of the 20th century** Barbican gallery London
2000 **BRONZE - Contemporary British Sculpture** Holland Park London
2002 **Thinking Big, Concept for twenty-first century British Sculpture**, Peggy Guggenheim Collection Venice
2007 **Beyond Limits** Sotheby's at Chatsworth House UK

5 Collections

Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv
Berardo Collection – Museum of Modern Art, Lisbon
Israel Museum, Jerusalem
Guandong Museum of Art, Guangzhou China
Botanical Gardens, Singapore

5 Works

- 1992 **Restless Dream** Limehouse Link, Docklands London, painted aluminium 900 cm diameter
1996 Conversation Piece Goodwood Sculpture Park England, bronze 300 x 100 x 30 cm
1999 **Evolution and Theory** hand cut painted aluminium, 250-work installation, and dimensions variable according to installation venue
2000 **Day and Night** Rad Bynet building Tel Aviv Israel, water jet cut stainless steel, 300 x 150 x 30 cm, 300 x 150 x 10 cm
2007 **Blackfield** - 5000 acid etched hand painted stainless steel miniatures, dimensions variable

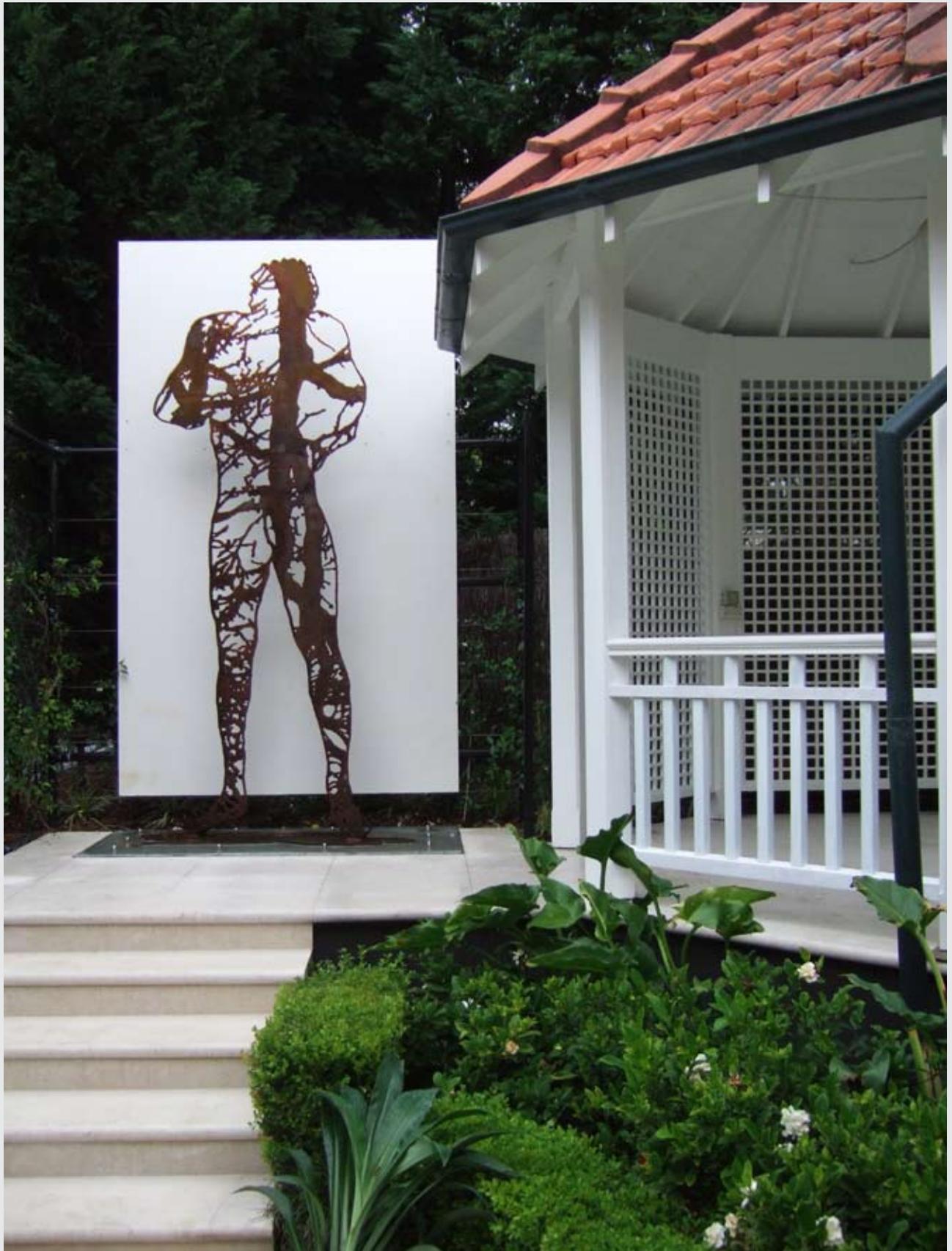
5 Publications

- 1990 **Zadok Ben-David – sculpture 1987-90** Collins Gallery Glasgow touring exhibition
1997 **Zadok Ben-David – Evolution and I** Herzliya Museum of Art Israel
1999 **Evolution and Theory** LaSalle-Sia College of the Arts Singapore
2003 **Magic Realita** (Magic Reality), curated by Victor De Circasia, hardcover 142 pages
2007 **Zadok Ben-David** coinciding with survey exhibition at Guangdong Museum of Art Guangzhou China hardcover 160 pages

Zadok Ben-David was born in Bayhan, Yemen in 1949 and immigrated to Israel in the same year. He graduated in advanced sculpture from St. Martins school of art in London and taught at the same institution from 1977-82. He is the recipient of numerous awards in the UK and Israel. Ben-David divides his time between his massive London studio and Tel Aviv. **Recent Awards** include Grande Premio at the XIV Bliennial Internacional de Arte de Vila Nova de Cerveira Portugal 2007 and the Tel Aviv Museum prize for sculpture 2005. He also has been commissioned to make a sculpture for the Beijing Olympics. In addition to the above, notable solo exhibitions at Annandale Galleries 1991, 1997 (**Evolution and Theory**), 2004 (**Magical Reality, Innerscapes**) and Luba Bilu Gallery Melbourne in 1989. This is his fifth visit to Australia since 1989.



Up and About 2005 corten steel 287 x 110 x 130 cm installation Private Collection Sydney



Down By The River 2005 Corten Steel 200 x 170 x 60 cm installation Private Collection Sydney



Samuel Namundja Zadok Ben-David John Mawurndjul at artist's studio West Hampstead London September 2007



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