

In late 2017 Doncaster Council commissioned Laurence Edwards to create a sculpture to celebrate its mining history. Little did he know he was about to embark on a transformative journey.

This publication celebrates and marks the first phase of the project. The finished sculpture is due to be unveiled in May 2020.

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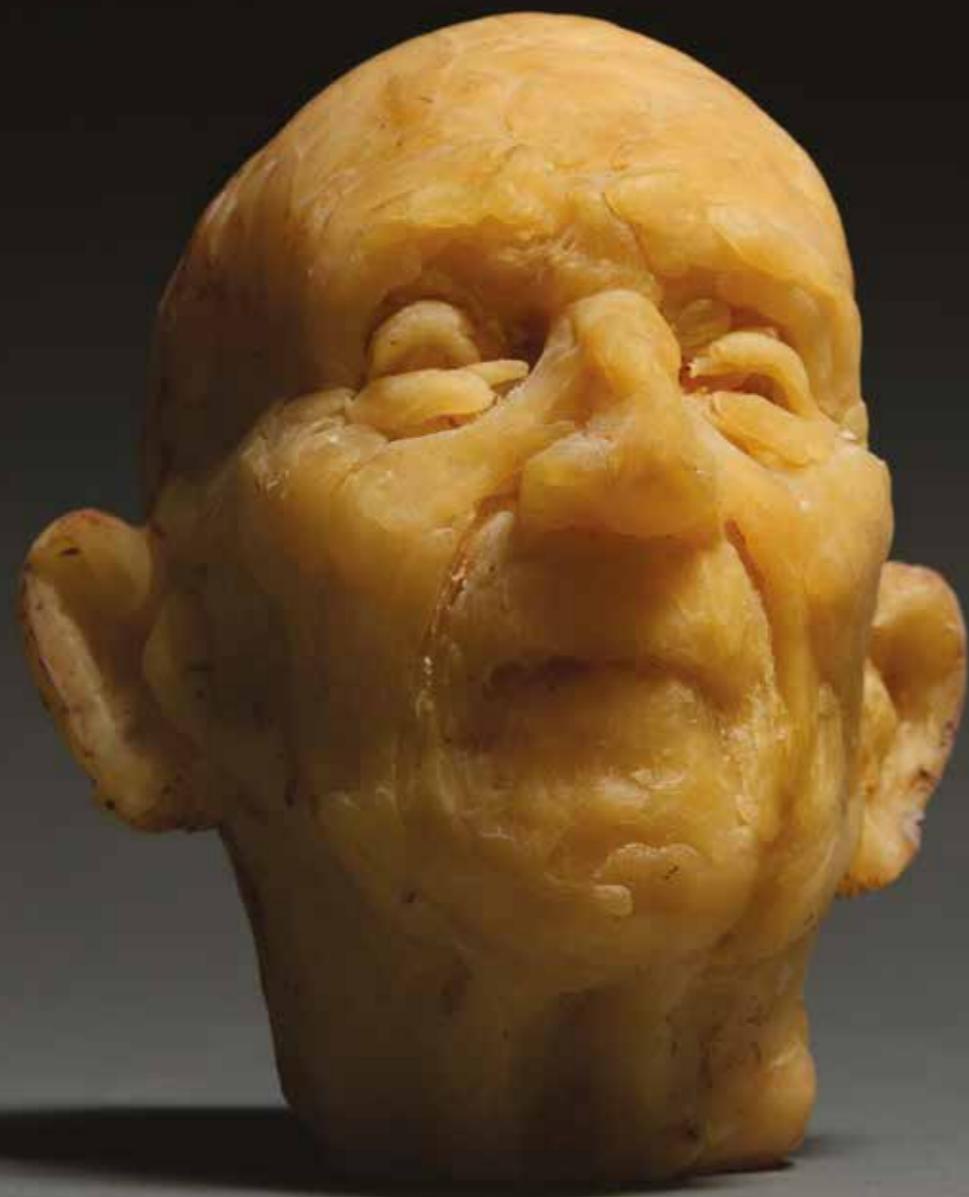
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THE DONCASTER HEADS

LAURENCE EDWARDS

MESSUMS LONDON

THE DONCASTER HEADS  
Laurence Edwards



Pete O'Conner, *Pit Bottom Coupling, Ripper*  
Brodsworth Colliery  
(Wax original)

MESSUMS LONDON

## PORTRAITS OF A MINING COMMUNITY

Public commission preview  
15 January - 15 February

Messums London, 28 Cork Street, London W1S 3NG



## Robert Macfarlane - A New Stone-Book

I grew up in coal-mining country. Collieries were the highest structures around: the headstocks with their spinning wheels, the non-stop chunters of the winding engines. Power station cooling-towers made their own weather. Nodding donkeys pumped drifts dry. Slagheaps leaked black streams, tracked with tyre-marks. I had a strong sense as a child of knowing only one storey of the landscape, walking the surface above an invisible underworld of tunnels and shafts that ran for thousands of miles.

My father, a respiratory physician, treated miners with industrial diseases, and one of my childhood friends was a former miner called Peter Smith. Peter had worked below ground for thirty years and he was the happiest person I knew. He was a miraculous whistler: he could do two-tone whistling, bird-songs, hymns. He taught me how to play golf and how to gamble. When I asked him why he whistled so much, he said it was because now he got to spend his days above ground. He became a champion bowls player later in his life, walking lovingly alongside his gleaming wooden bowls as they curled towards the jack, urging them on or slowing them down with gentle murmurs, until their last lean into stillness.

Peter had an extraordinary face; I can see it very clearly now in my mind's eye - above all the great wide mouth that seamed it sideways, smilingly, almost all of the time. And from that wide mouth came, sometimes, stories about the darkness in which he had worked for three decades; the men - and women - who'd been alongside him in the tunnels and lifts, the danger and the accidents, but also the sense of community and the pride he took in his work. Though Peter was ecstatic no longer to be mining, I never heard a single word of complaint or self-pity from him.

I remembered Peter instantly, across the space of a quarter-century or more, when Laurence Edwards arrived at my room in Cambridge one day early in 2019. 'I've brought a bagful of heads with me', he announced. Of course you have, Laurence. Each head was wrapped in cloth. Laurence unwrapped and then passed them to me one by one. They were made of yellow wax, but I cradled them as if they were delicate china, for taking the head of a stranger in my hands felt like a great responsibility. As I handled them - amazed once again at Laurence's sheer, absurd talent as a sculptor - he described to me their origins in a commission to commemorate and celebrate the miners and mining history of Doncaster.



For several months Laurence toured the pubs, clubs and community halls of the Doncaster region, speaking to miners and mining families in the city and its villages. Then he began a remarkable process, positioned somewhere between oral history and performance art. He would meet up to three mine-workers a day, and with each person would sit for two hours, modelling their heads in buttery yellow wax, while talking with them and drawing out their stories. Each of these conversations was recorded, and each 'sitting' resulted in the model of a head which went on to be cast in bronze by means of the lost wax method.

Initially Laurence thought that sculpting while talking would be impossible, resulting in a disabling cognitive dissonance. But to his surprise, he found that - in his words - 'as I listened, I realised that my hands continued to work, like fingers at a typewriter going about their business almost independently of me'. Somehow, the stories he was being told about life and death underground - often harrowing, sometimes funny or surreal - became part of the means by which the heads of the speakers emerged and evolved in Laurence's hands. One miner told him how they would race pit ponies underground in the darkness. A pit nurse spoke of how she had once had to leave a mine with her own hands bandaged tightly to the skull of an injured miner, to prevent potentially fatal bleeding.

Over the weeks of modelling work, the headcount mounted, and so did the tales and conversations. Sculpting and story-telling melted into one another. The intimacy of having the likeness of one's head moulded by a stranger seems to have encouraged an openness in the miners. Laurence's first genius is as a sculptor, but he is also an attentive talker and listener; one instinctively trusts him and feels willing to share. This listening and sharing happened again and again in Doncaster; by the end of his time there, Laurence had sculpted and spoken with around forty people.

The final phase of the project was to devise a means of framing and re-telling both the heads and their voices. Laurence decided to set the cast bronze heads in niches cut into vast blocks of stone, echoing the geological spaces in which the miners had laboured for so long. Placed in those niches, the heads look somehow both protected and constrained. They seem to be speaking for and of the Earth; deep-time voices, carrying stories from the underworld. There is something mythic, something saintly, and something also very respectfully ordinary about this final housing of the heads; these 'faces in the rock', as Laurence calls them.

Modern geologists refer to the stratigraphic archive of the Earth as 'the rock record'; nineteenth-century geologists spoke of it as 'The Great Stone-Book'. In this unique project, Laurence Edwards has created a new kind of stone book: an extraordinary double-archive - told in bronze and told in story - of a generation and a community that is now close to disappearing.

Robert Macfarlane is the author of *Underland*, *The Old Ways*, *Landmarks*, *The Lost Words* and most recently *Ness*.

# DIGGING DEEP

## Exploring process with Mark Hooper

Laurence Edwards is renowned for the visceral nature of his sculptures, which artfully combine figurative portraiture with landscape, presenting us with characters that are inextricably linked to the earth.

For *A Rich Seam*, he has adapted his approach in order to fully explore subjects that are embedded both in the local community and its geography. On the surface, in sculpting the heads of 40 Doncaster miners in miniature, he has produced some of his most literal portrait work. Each of the heads, created in wax from an initial two-hour long live 'consultation', is an accurate likeness of the individual sitter: a feat in itself given the time constraints of the project.

Despite being a member of the Royal Society of Portrait Sculptors, he admits it's been a long while since he's had the opportunity to demonstrate the very traditional skill of live modelling. 'I've never had that chance to push it and find a contemporary setting for it: to find a place for it to have a voice,' he says. 'It's been a wonderful way of finding that sculpture can be a tool for social engagement. It's become a vehicle for learning and communicating with people – and one that I never thought would have ever existed'.

Edwards undertook an extensive consultation process, he found himself touring the mining clubs of Doncaster with his laptop and projector. 'Often unannounced,' he interjects. 'Usually in a pub with a load of blokes watching Doncaster vs Rotherham on the TV, and the barman going, "I don't know what you're talking about, I've never heard of you, what do you mean? What are you doing here?" I'd end up putting the projector on a billiard table and projecting onto the dartboard, standing under a TV screen and saying, "My name's Laurence, I'm a sculptor from Suffolk and I've come to make a sculpture about you..."'

Many awkward silences later (and several return visits, in which he brought them up to date by showing the sketches he had developed in the meantime, gauging their responses and reactions), Edwards finally hit upon his idea. It was, he admits, partly spurred by his son, who was reading a book on Rodin and noticed the parallels between his father's project and the great sculptor's *Burghers of Calais*, which saw Rodin spending time modeling the citizens of Calais searching for a common physiognomy.

'He said, "Why don't you do that for the people of Doncaster?" And I thought, "That's a bloody good idea!" So I went back to the council and said, "I think I should talk to these miners, but more intimately, and do portraits of them." Before I knew it there was a press conference...! Suddenly it was in the papers and I was committed.'



Setting up in Doncaster College with film students recording him as he sat opposite his subjects. Edwards found his hands 'took over' as he became engrossed in the stories he was told.

Edwards describes the initial sittings – in which he was not only timed but filmed producing his likenesses, whilst simultaneously interviewing his subjects about their lives – as a leap of faith. 'It's a jump into the unknown. it's so quick, there's no time for correction, it's about getting the information down as fast as possible and hoping it works. With no safety net: it's a fast and scary ride. I'm submitting to a process that I have to trust will come good. An hour in and the guy behind the camera will say, "An hour's up" and you think, "I'm nowhere near! There's nothing here..." you get more and more focused until the last ten minutes when the interview often goes quiet and you find yourself digging deep to get the information in – something that will make



this face resemble the subject – stripping it down to the bare minimum getting the essentials – "What is this head about?" You realise what a luxury you have in other ways of making. This is a submission to a period of time and a mission that is unlike anything I've experienced.'

Despite the formality of public art of this kind (where it is literally 'set in stone' for posterity), Edwards inevitably delves deeper to fully explore the nuances in his work. 'This project was really about their story, and the head is a vehicle towards that, rather than a thing in itself,' he explains. 'It's quite a seismic shift for me to think about these people's stories first and foremost rather than me making sculpture.'



'It was like my hands were at a typewriter, going around the block as I was listening to these stories,' he says. 'I became so engaged that the heads just evolved in my hands. It was almost a subconscious act, an incredible moment of realisation for me. The films and the stories that evolved were so powerful that it became a package.'

The intimacy of the process meant the atmosphere quickly became a warm and respectful one. 'You're given rare permission to study someone's face for two hours - you become intimate very quickly, you feel trusted. They watch how your hands are working and see that you're not a sap. You're a guy with a skill - and skill it seems is appreciated, it breaks down barriers. The subjects loved the idea of being

celebrated, that their likenesses might last a long time in bronze and also having time to tell their story.'

The sense of allowing his hands to take over and be guided by the situation is typical of Edwards' methodology. A huge fan of the Italian sculptor Medardo Rosso (1858-1928), who spoke of letting the sculpture take control and evolve on its own terms, Edwards makes a feature out of what would normally be called 'casting errors' - the unforeseen strands, marks and detritus that are usually removed in the final process. 'Rosso is one of my heroes, with this idea that the work leads the way, a dialogue with material. That's definitely my modus operandi.'



Historically, a project such as this – a public sculpture celebrating and commemorating people who have contributed significantly to the community – would conform to certain norms – that romanticised, heroic statue on a pedestal, an idealised version of reality. But this project offers a very different paradigm: the everyday as the heroic, depicting and celebrating the real people of Doncaster with real stories and real faces... 'Almost by accident, it's tapped into this thread of public art now,' agrees Edwards. 'It's no longer the generals on horseback in Trafalgar Square, it's more about social histories. Chiming with the very contemporary way that public art is evolving, it's timely.'

The final work will feature each of the 40 portraits, cast in bronze and set within small niches in giant blocks of large York stone as though they were a seam of coal. Each head will be connected to the film made during the portrait



session, which can be digitally accessed by scanning a code with your phone. Thus, the viewer can witness first-hand the story of the head they are looking at, turning the piece into a living digital archive.

A six-foot bronze miner will stand amidst the stones, eyes closed, listening. 'Miners talked about how at the end of a shift they listened to the geology settling when the machinery had quietened down, of how unsettling it was,' says Edwards. This awareness of being part of the geology itself struck a chord with Edwards. But the sense of these men being one with the landscape was also tempered by a very different sense of earthiness in their character. These are, let's not forget, both Yorkshire men and miners - people whose trust is hard won, meaning it is all the more valued.



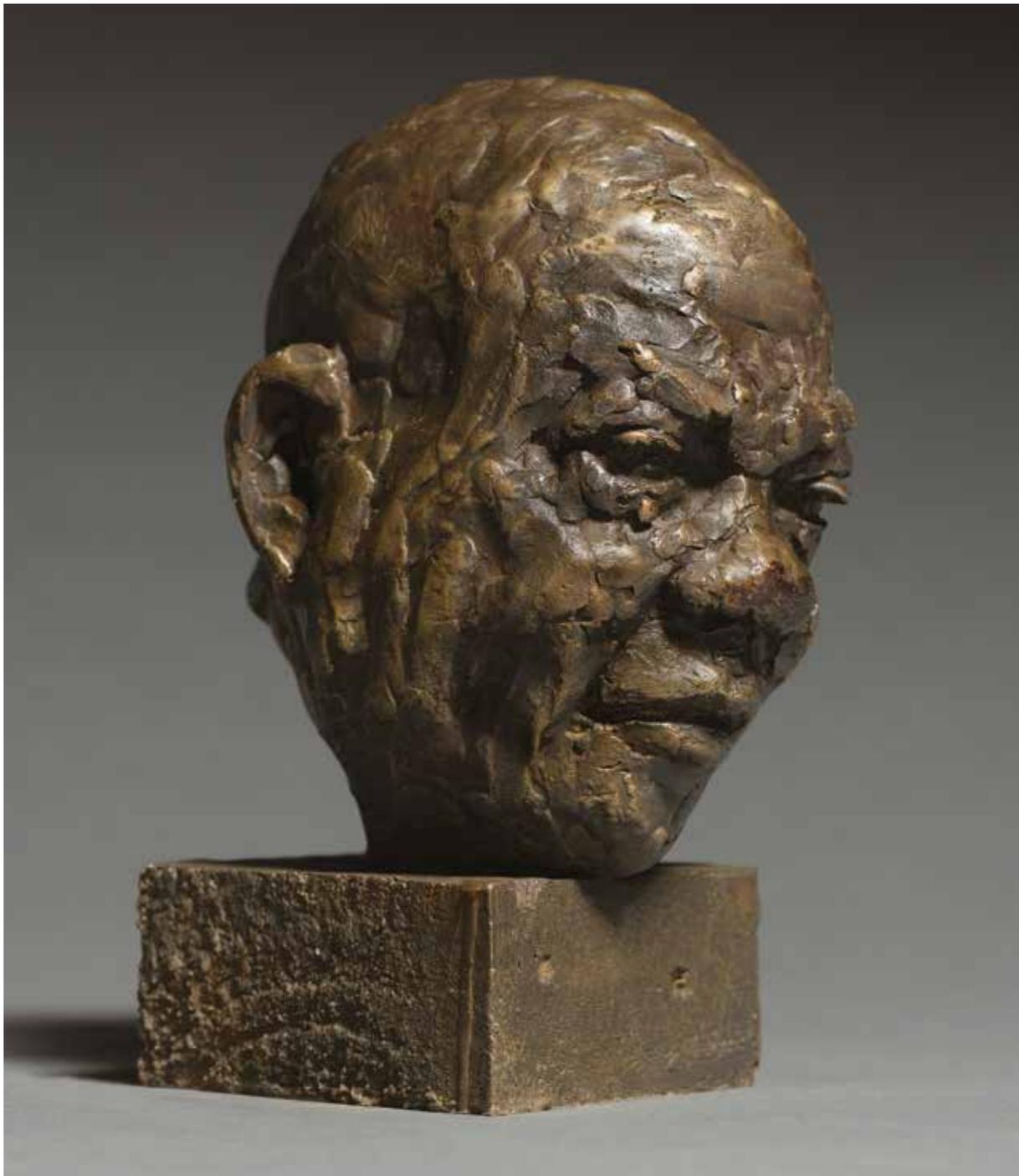
While followers of Edwards' work might see this project as something of a departure, with its emphasis on 'straight' portraiture, dig a little deeper and the seams at the core of his work begin to expose themselves. One should perhaps see this work as a natural progression in his fascination with how the human and natural worlds intertwine. 'Very much so, that connection is there. The miners' stories are stories of the underworld. The world beneath our feet, literally, the images they portray and the life they describe is a dark, chambered, hard, gruelling, dangerous, dirty world. I think the heads often reflect that. The more I do the better I get, finding asymmetries in the faces so they almost become pieces of nature in themselves. I love the idea of setting them back in rock – I've been very particular about the type of rock I'm using, which is a York stone from the area, indeed it is the bedrock that the coal is set within, a link back to an underground world.'

By displaying the final work in a central, public position in Doncaster, the miners are also presented as the heart of the community – indeed the reason why many of these communities exist... 'Exactly, these towns are built around mines, bringing the underworld above ground, the bowels of the earth to the surface and then using it. They're like ant nests, people going down and bringing stuff out. These communities are built around digging.'

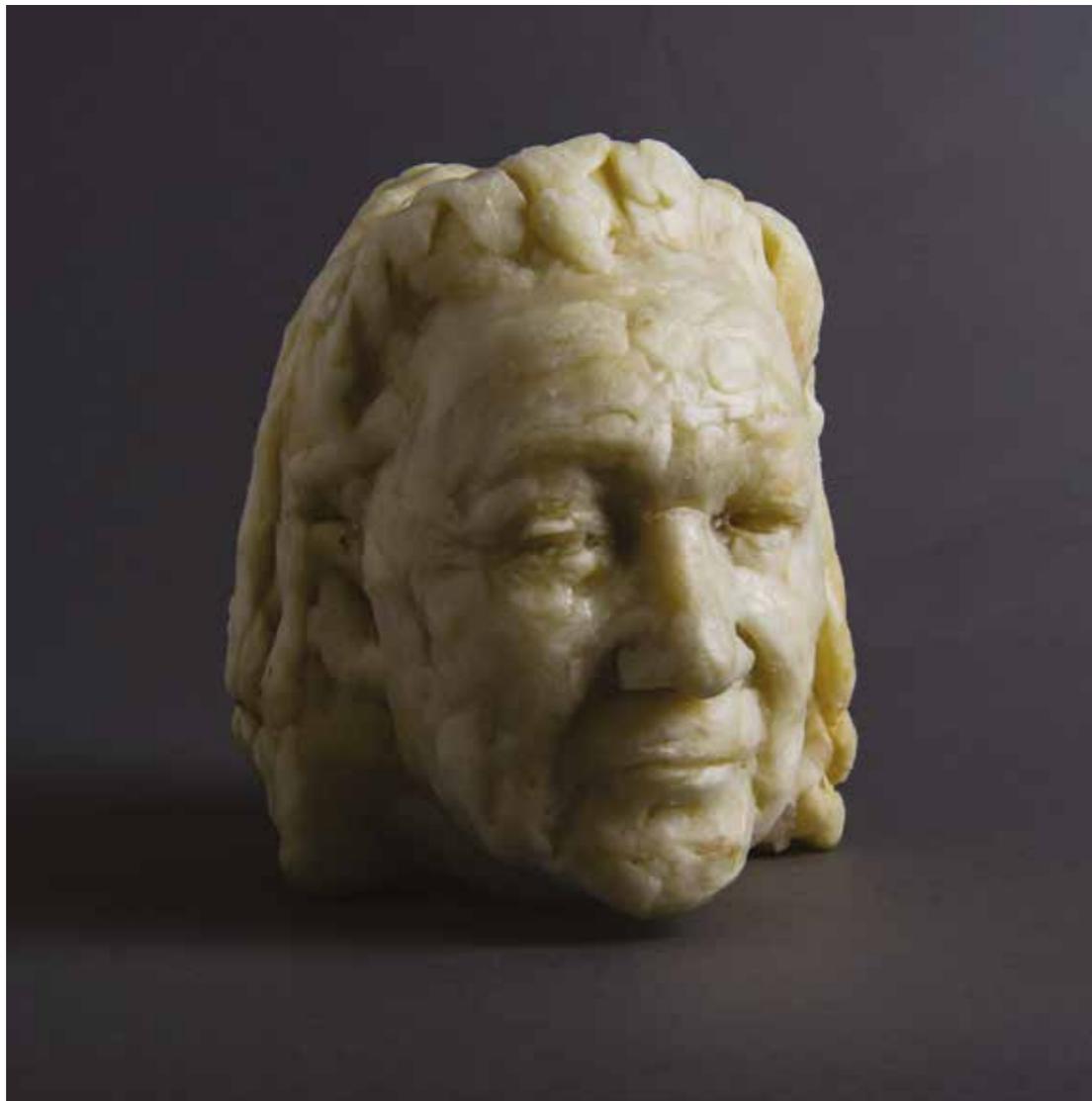
And, after his initial trepidation, the community seems to have welcomed Edwards with an unexpected warmth. 'I was stunned at the positivity,' he says. 'There were times when I thought it would be impossible to get an idea that would satisfy all parts of this proud community. But the miners were very supportive, and the feedback from visitors has been, in some cases, emotional. I think we are tapping into something, creating a new community around the rock...'







1  
 William Rose, *Winder*  
 Markham Main



2  
Angela Inglis, *Miner's Daughter*  
Rossington Colliery





3  
**Joan Hart**  
*Pit Nurse*  
 Brodsworth Colliery

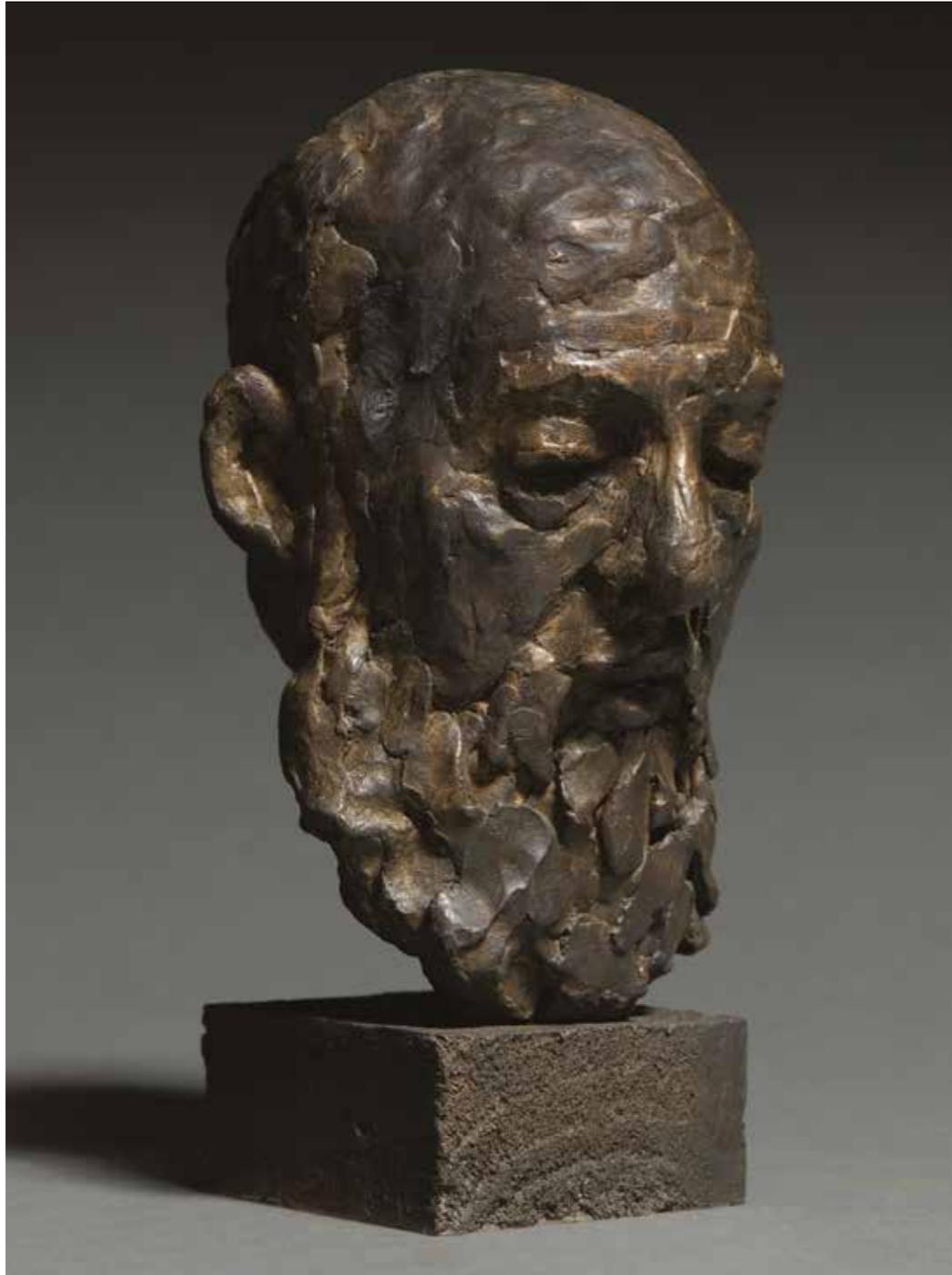
4  
**Dianne Hogg**  
*Treasurer, Askern Women's Support Group*

5  
**Jean Crane**  
*Secretary, Askern Women's Support Group*

3

4

5



7  
**Connor Hughes**, *Miner's Grandson*  
 Hatfield Colliery



8  
**Jean Crane**

6  
**John Healy**, *Engineer*  
 Carcroft Workshops



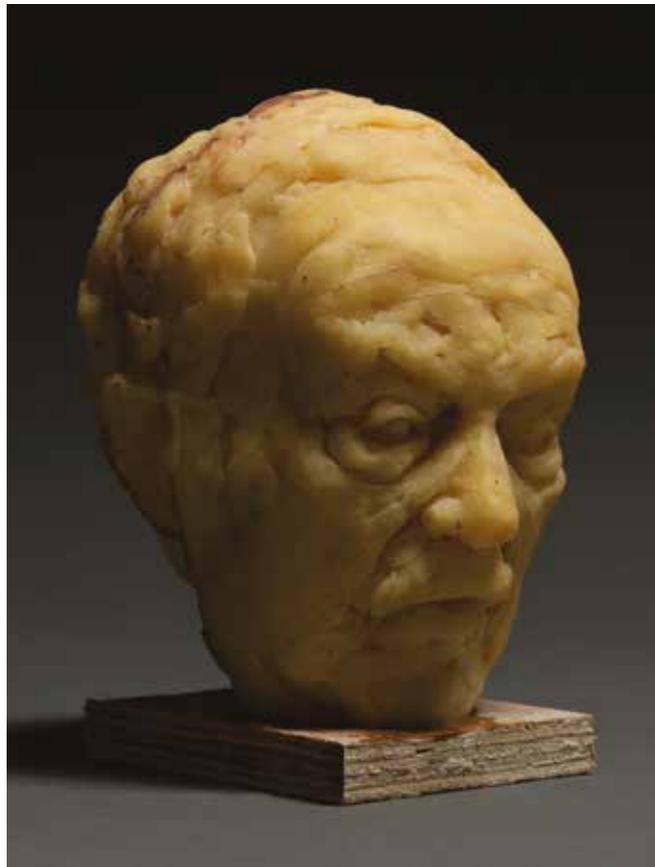


9  
David Allport

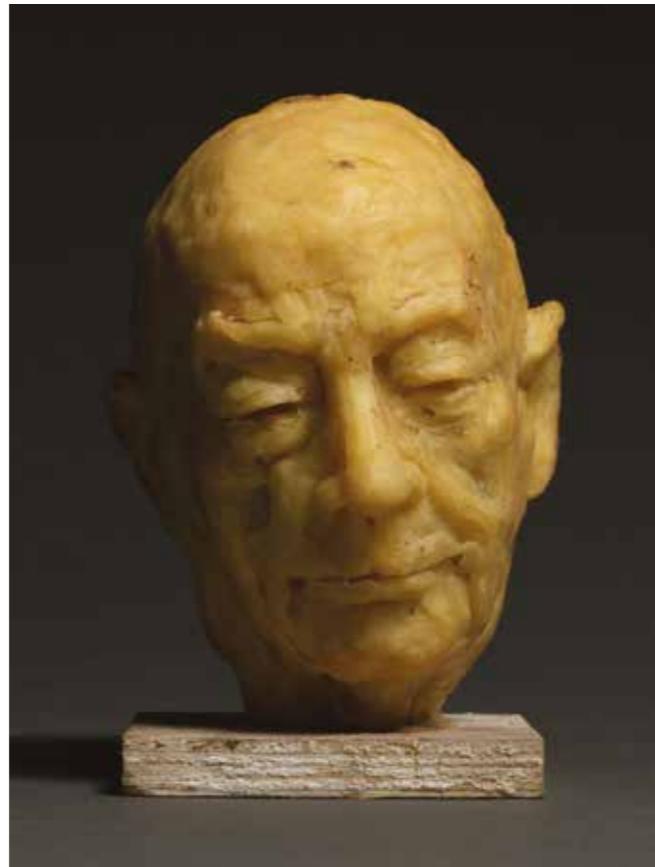


10  
Colin Deakin, *Coal Sampler*  
Bentley Colliery

8  
Bill Borthwick, *Face Worker, Powder Magazine*  
Brodsworth Colliery

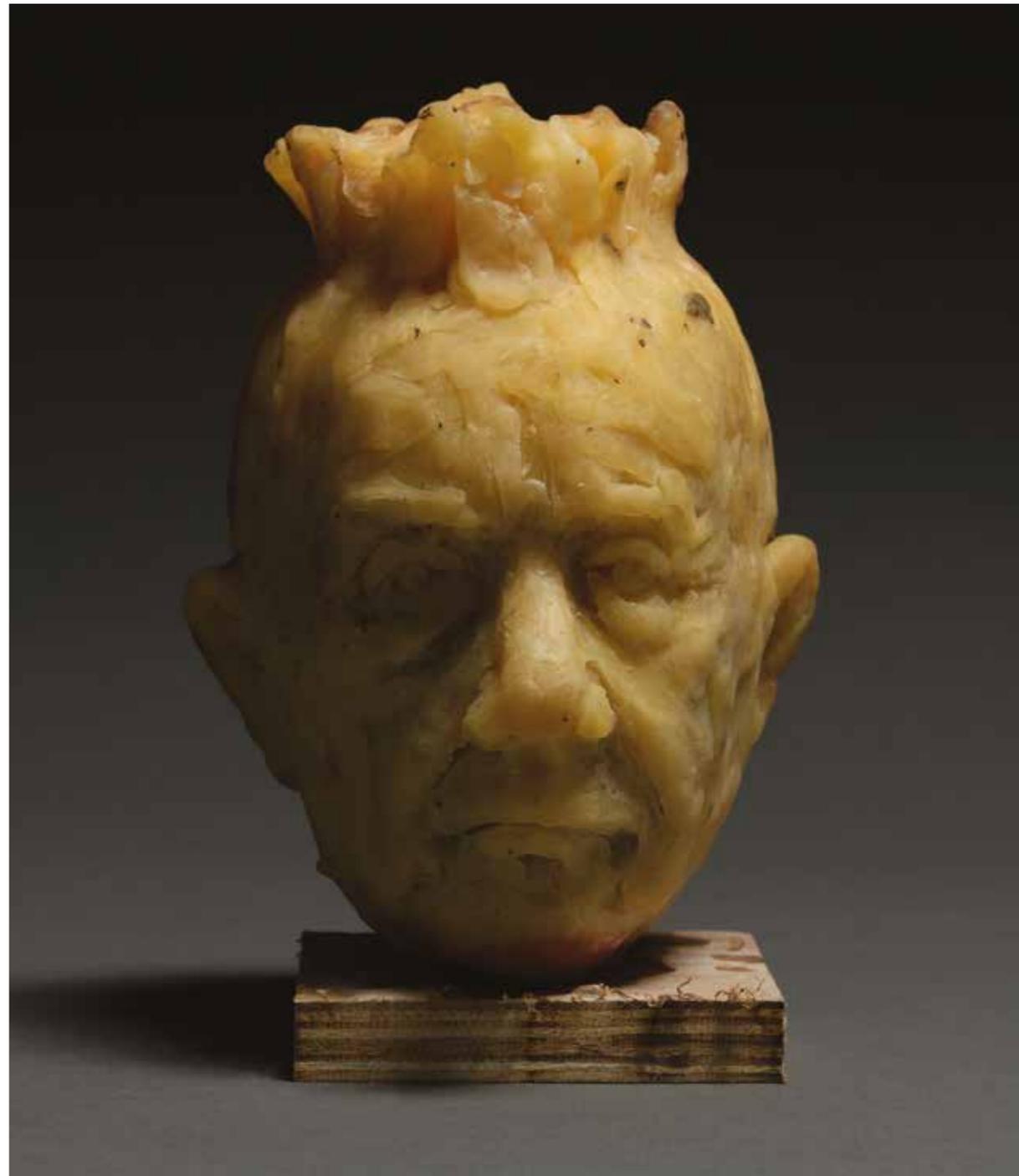


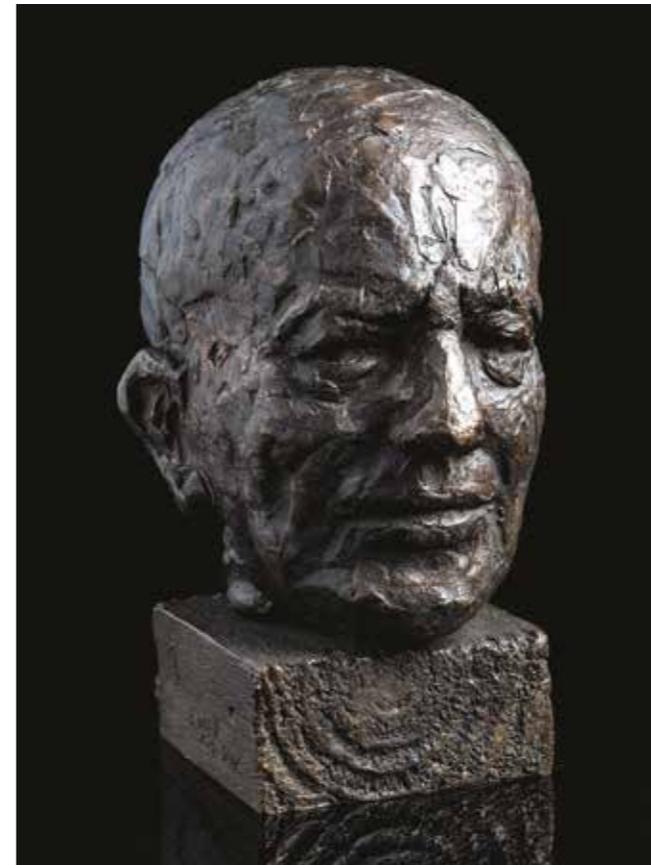
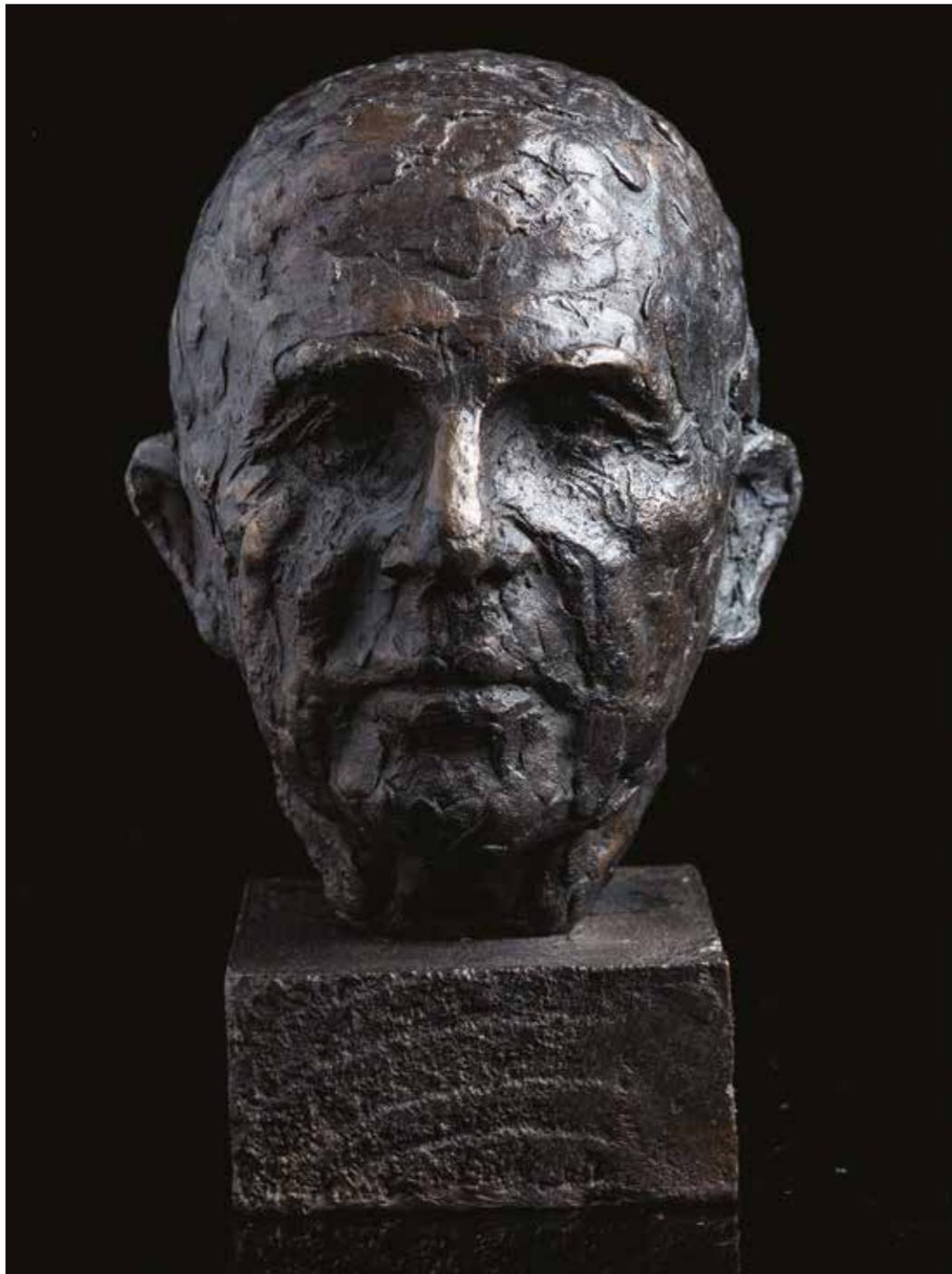
11  
**Frank 'Colin' Mather**  
 (Wax original)



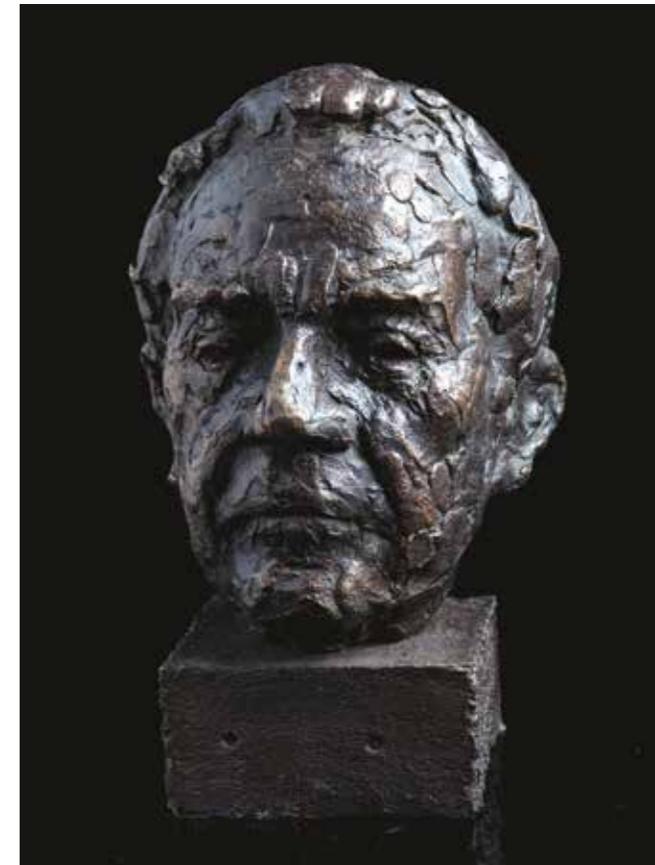
12  
**Donald Borthwick**  
 Yorkshire Main Colliery  
 (Wax original)

13  
**Stephen Langton, *Main Gate Ripper***  
 Yorkshire Main  
 (Wax original)





15  
**Dennis Nowell**  
 Markham Main Colliery

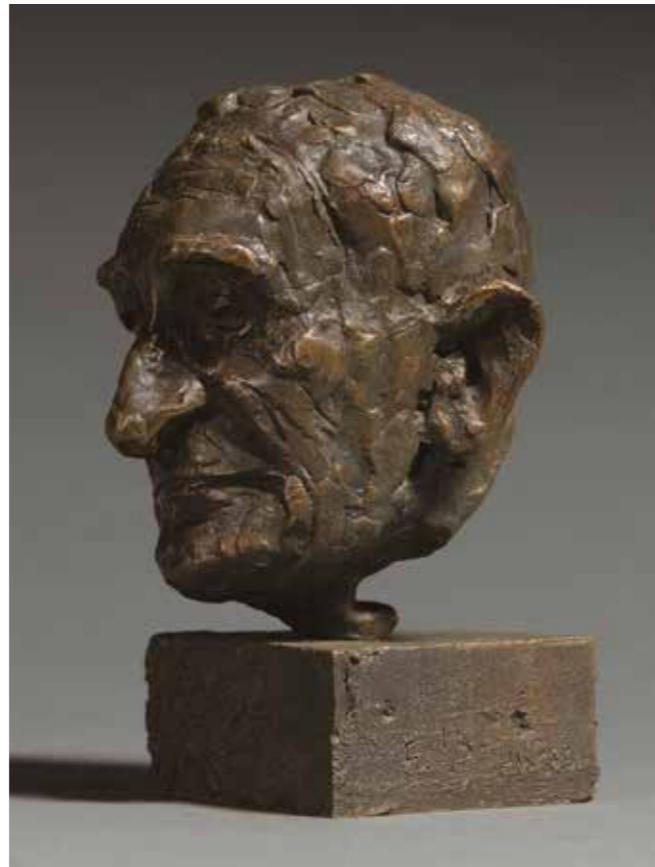


16  
**Keith Marshall, *Miner***  
 Brodsworth Colliery

14  
**Tom Foy, *Miner***  
 Brodsworth Colliery

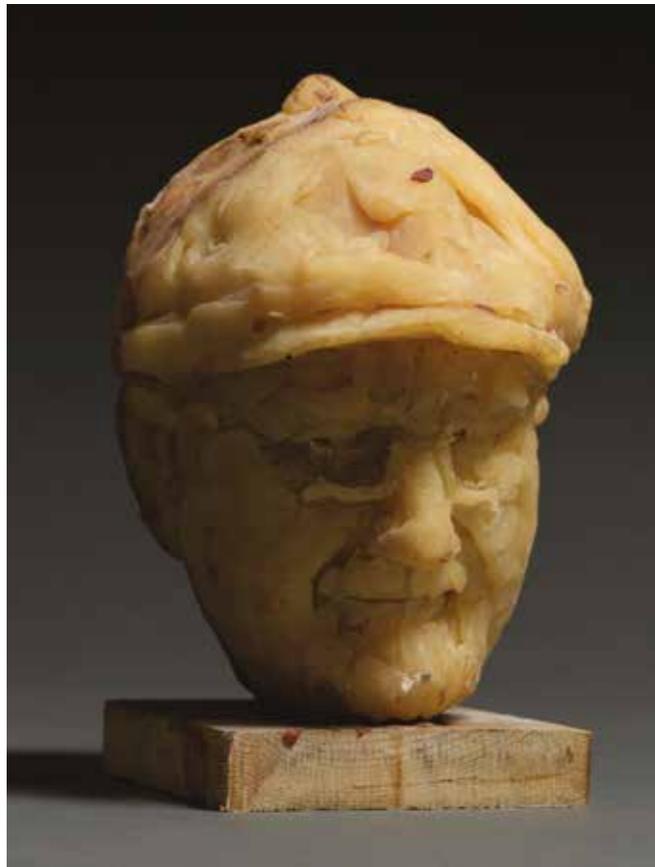


17  
**Gerald Gooch**, *Face Worker*  
 Yorkshire Main Colliery

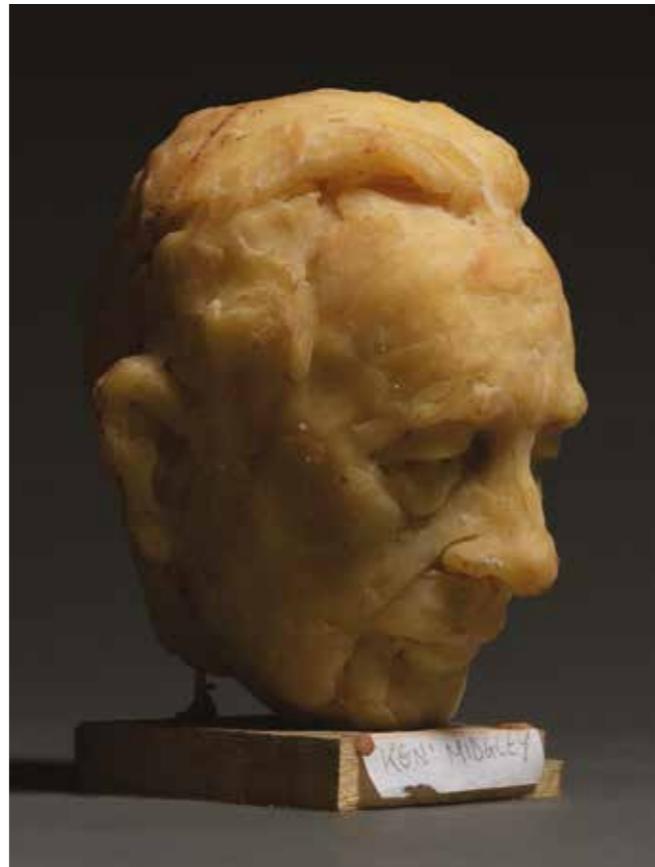


18  
**Ray Barton**, *Face Worker*  
 Hatfield Main Colliery

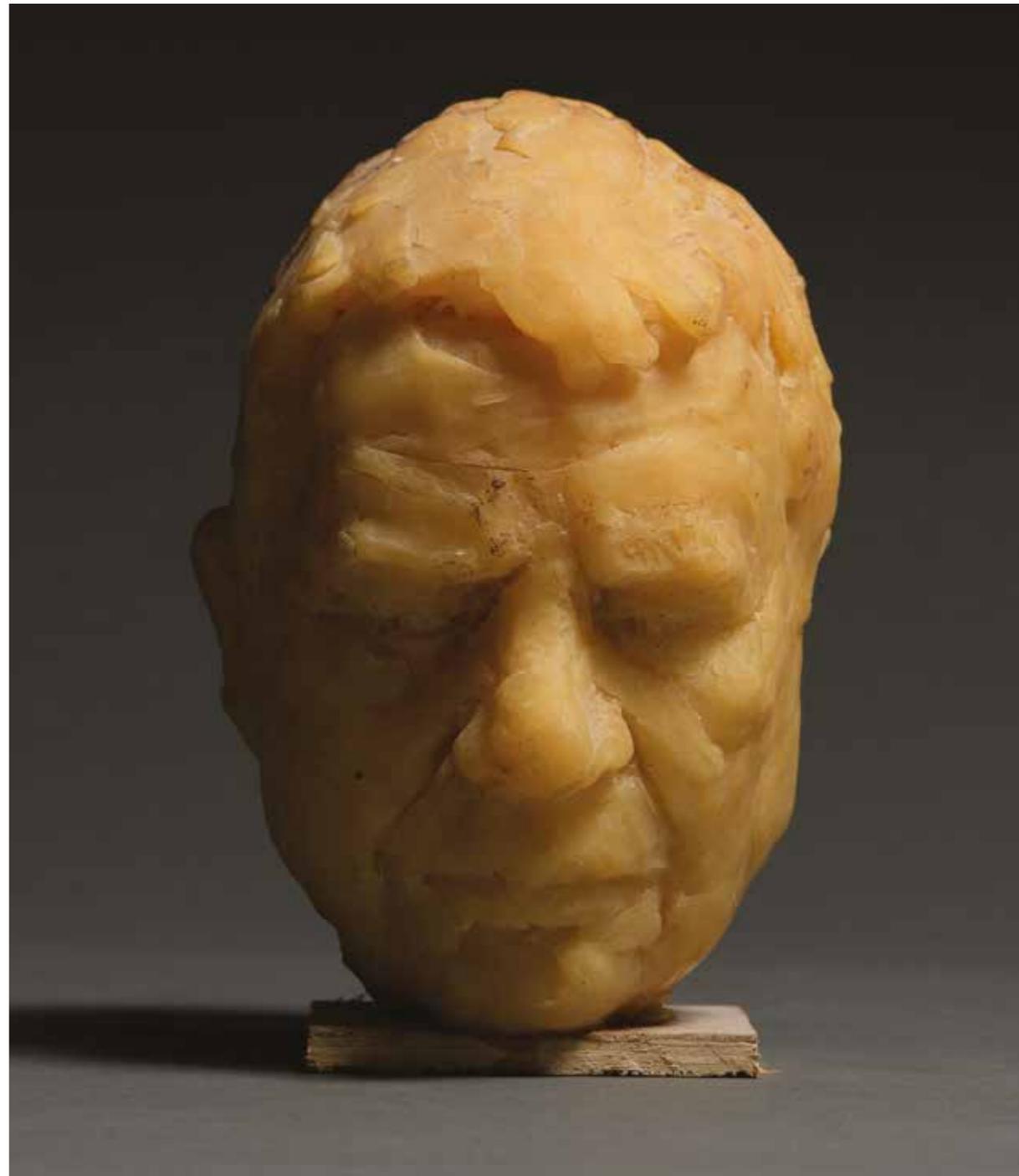




19  
**Mick Lanaghan, *Ripper***  
 Hatfield Colliery  
 (Wax original)



20  
**Ken Midgeley**  
 Yorkshire Main Colliery  
 (Wax original)



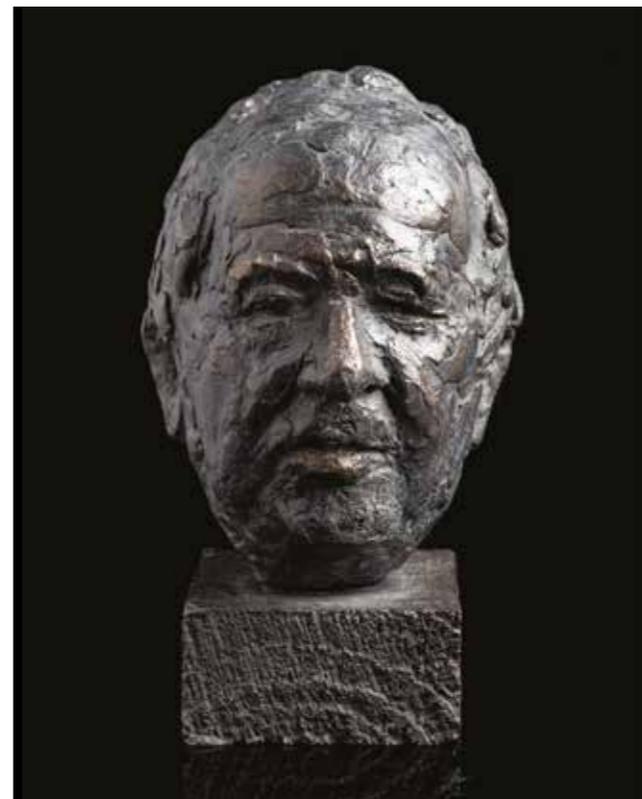
21  
**Stephen Longley, *Miners Rescue***  
 (Wax original)



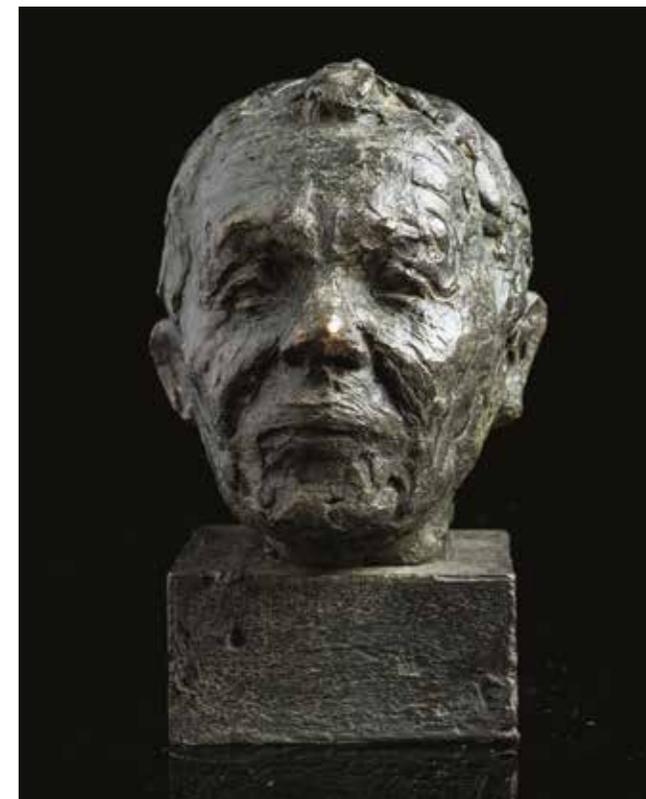
22  
**Anthony Busell, *Miner***  
 Bentley Colliery



23  
**Rachel Horne**  
 Cadeby and Denaby Collieries



24  
**David Sharp, *Miner***



25  
**Steve Durose, *Miner***  
 Brodsworth Colliery



Louis Casely, Mouldmaking

Eva Terzoni, Metal finishing



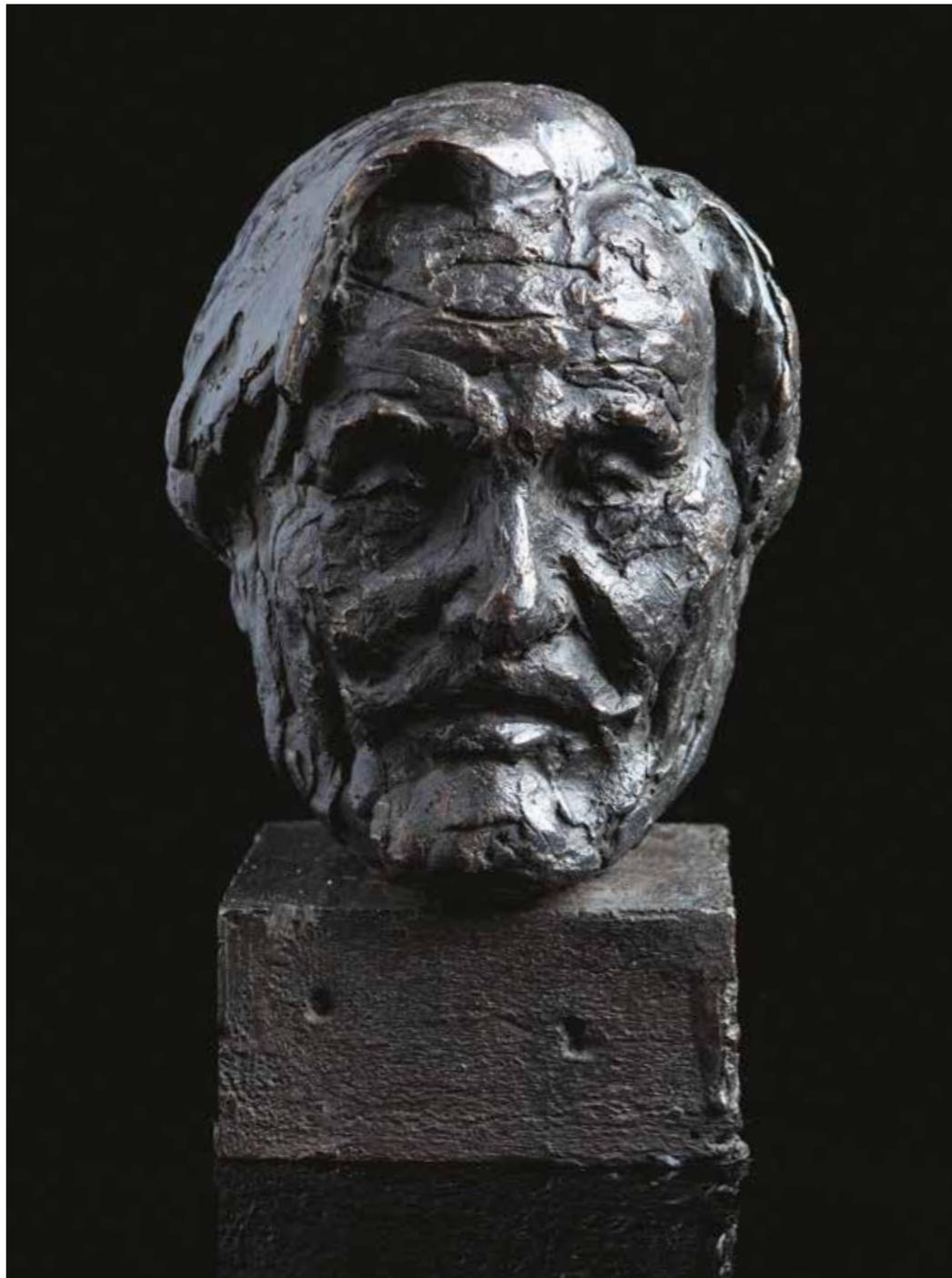


27  
**Clifford Smith**, *Wagon Builder, Face Worker*  
 Cadeby Main Colliery

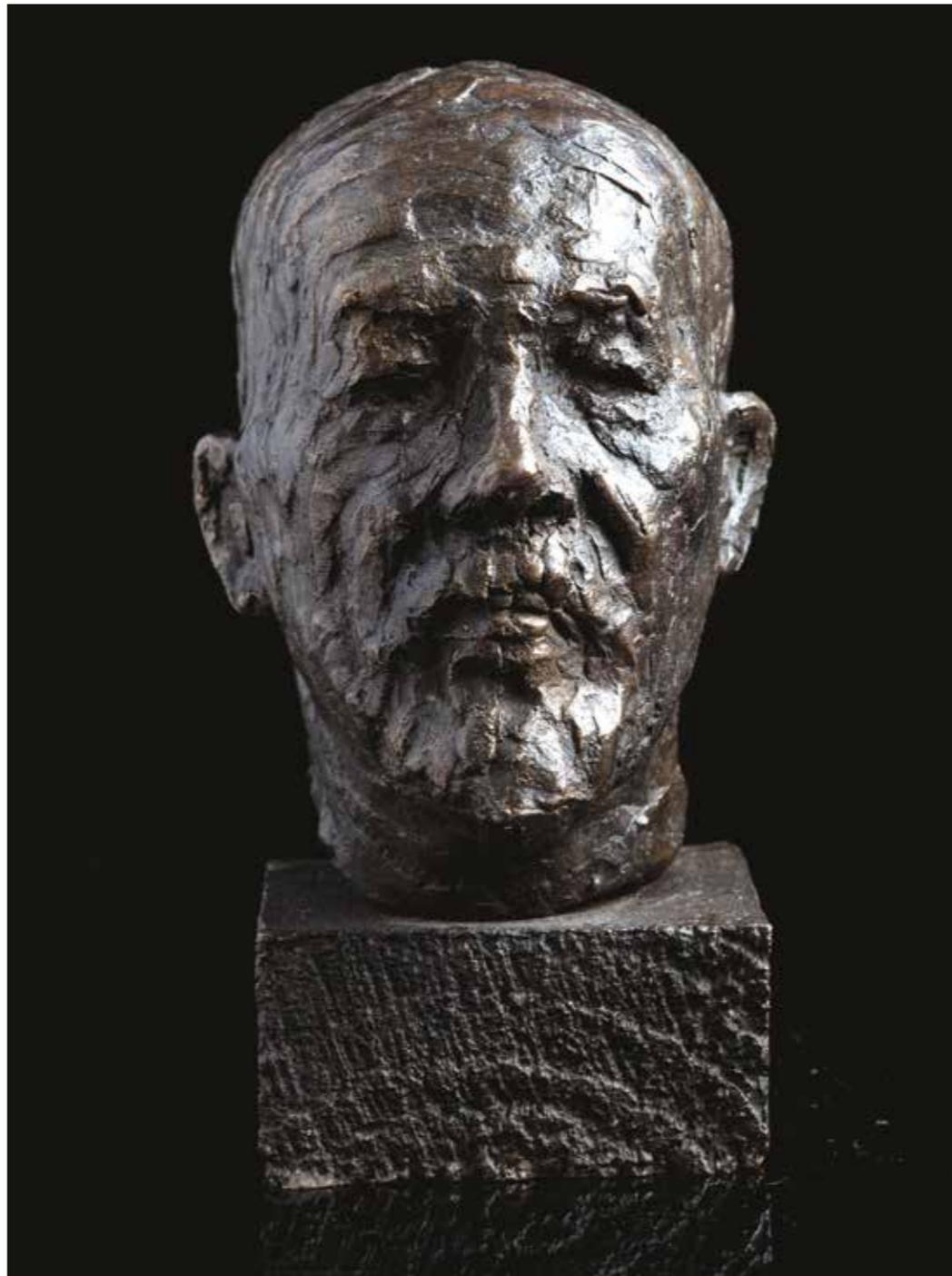


28  
**Alan Booth**, *Pony Handler*  
 Bentley Colliery

26  
**John Gwatkin**, *Pony Driver, Overman*  
 Denaby Colliery



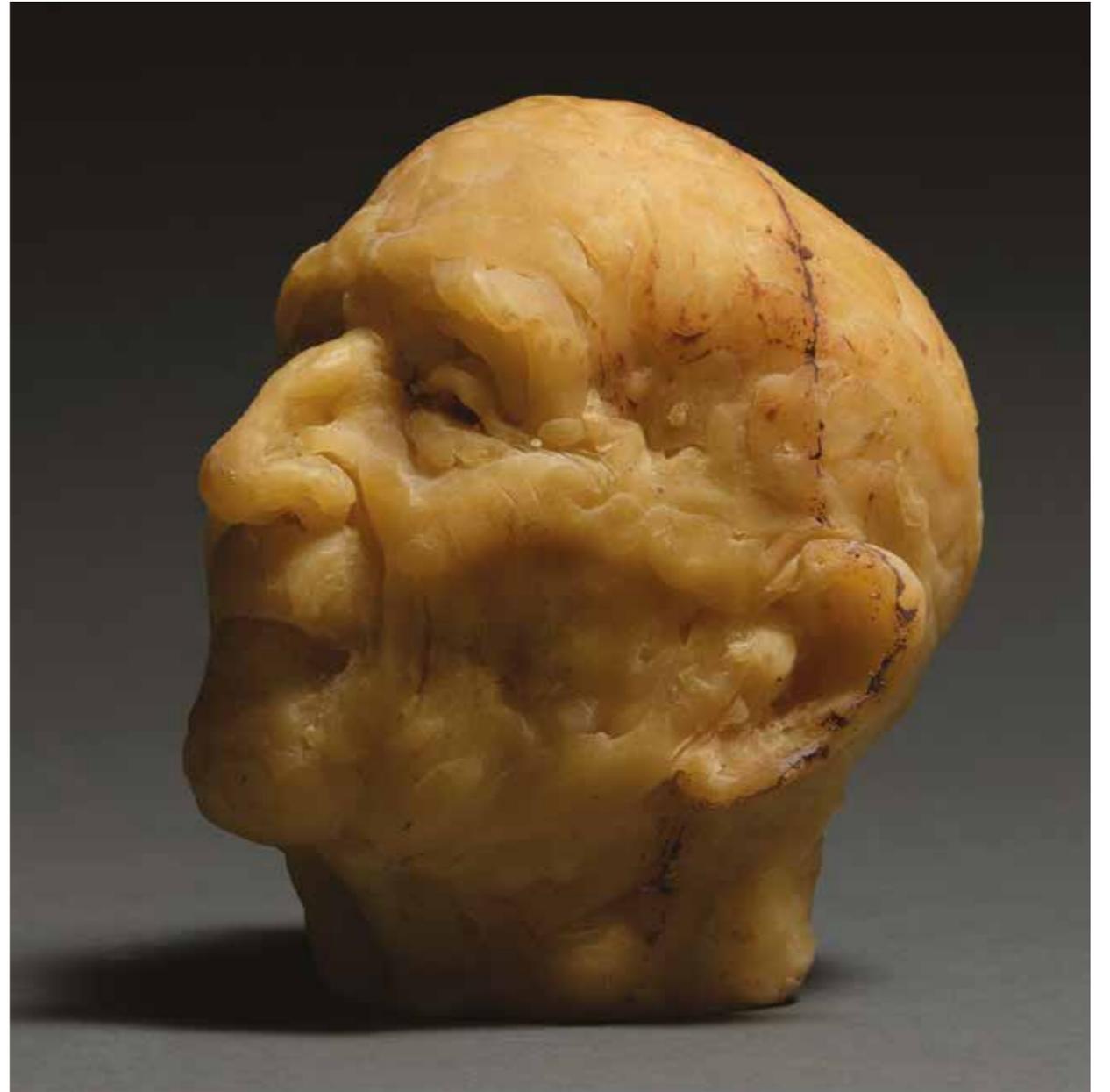
29  
**Keith Allsopp**  
*Pony Handler, Pit Face*  
 Barnburgh Colliery



30  
**Keith Tompkinson**  
*Face Worker*  
 Rossington Main Colliery



Pete O'Conner, *Pit Bottom Coupling, Ripper*  
Brodsworth Colliery  
(Wax original)







Hatfield Main, the last Doncaster pit head standing

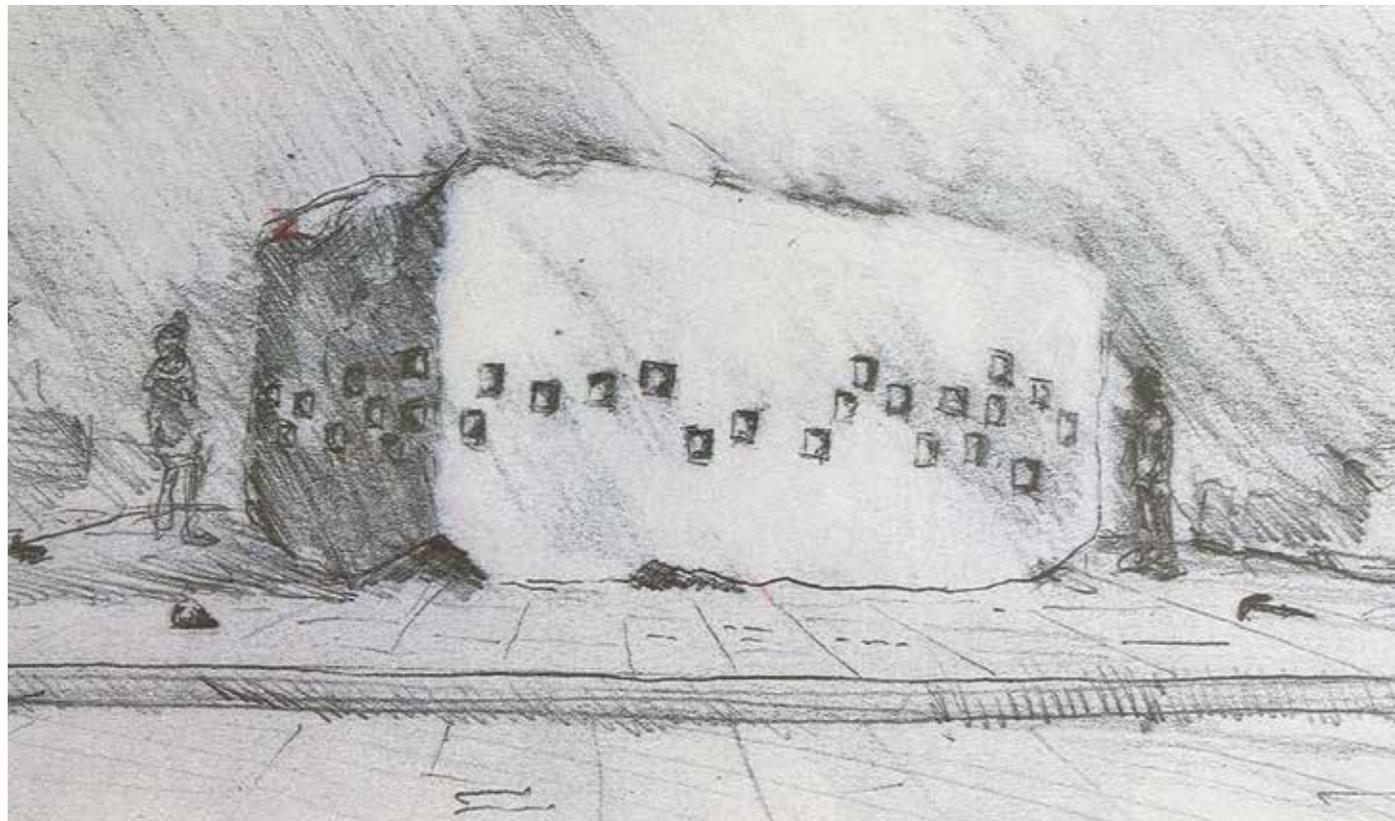
# CONCEPTS





Man in hole -  
 I dreamt a sculptor in recession or  
 losing commission and was looking  
 at Robert Rauschenberg lying in and  
 on holes - The thought struck a good  
 idea - Shuman she had it - they had  
 a clamp - holes of piss off that  
 the dream had under art was getting  
 loads of ideas - the realism they  
 were in, she other ideas - she didn't  
 exist and in fact they were minor  
 whoopee -  
 (idea) - <sup>Sardonic</sup> Man, between two giant  
 pieces of stone - crawling on his  
 belly - (pot holding venting) force  
 and weight of the crushing stone  
 very powerful and symbolic of  
 the demise of mining and its crushing  
 of lives - but also the reality of  
 the job - working under ground  
 etc -





Heads set in niches in York Stone block



Final study - *Listening Miner* stands between two stone blocks





THE LISTENING MINER









## LAURENCE EDWARDS CHRONOLOGY (HIGHLIGHTS)

1967

Born Suffolk

1983 – 1985

Studies Foundation Art at Lowestoft College, Suffolk

1985 – 1988

Studies Sculpture at Canterbury College of Art, Kent; tutors include Anthony Caro, John Gibbons and David Thompson

1988 – 1990

Studies under Master Founder Tissa Ranasinghe at the Royal College of Art London

Awarded a Henry Moore Bursary, the Angeloni Prize for Bronze Casting and an Intach Travelling Scholarship to study traditional methods of Indian bronze casting

1990

Establishes first foundry and studio at Clock House, Bruisyard, Suffolk

1991

Exhibits Nature Morte series in the coastal marshland near Aldeburgh

1992

Works on Totemic series

Moves from Bruisyard to set up studio at Yew Tree Farm, Laxfield, Suffolk. Builds bronze foundry and establishes Yew Tree Farm Studios artistic community

1993

Shows the Nature Morte series at The Crypt Gallery, London

Starts work on Squatting Figure series

1994

Solo exhibition 'Laurence Edwards: Interior Motives' at Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich, includes the Squatting Figure series and Walking Man, his first life-size bronze

1995

Starts work on the Predicament series

'Laurence Edwards: Recent Sculpture' solo exhibition at the Delfina Studios Gallery, London

1996

Solo exhibition at the Hannah Peschar Gallery, Surrey, featuring the Predicament series Moves to Yoxford

1997

Produces the Snap and Keeping it Together series Included in the 'Disembodied: Exploring the Human Form' exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, Norwich

Exhibits in 'Young British Sculptors' at the Beaux Arts Gallery, Bath

1998

Appointed Artist-in-Residence for the Bury St Edmunds Festival, working on Projection series

'Projections: New Sculptures by Laurence Edwards' exhibition at St Edmundsbury Cathedral

2000

Works with artist Les Bicknell on Meridian, a Millennium public art commission project in Louth, Lincolnshire

Stations of the Cross series exhibited at the Church of The Blessed Virgin, Woolpit, Suffolk

2001

Shows Surrender to the Gaze series at Sculpture on the Green at Norwich Castle, a Breaking the Mould Tate Partnership exhibition

2002

Shows Standing up to Scrutiny series in 'The Naked Truth', a Tate Partnership exhibition at the Fermoy Gallery, Kings Lynn.

Solo exhibition at the Lynn Strover Gallery, Cambridge

Exhibits in 'About Face: Get Your Head Around Sculpture' at The Croydon Clocktower alongside works by Rodin, Henry Moore, Elisabeth Frink, Antony Gormley and Tracey Emin

2003

Moves studio to Butley Mills, near Orford, and builds a larger foundry and creates a complex of studios

Against the Tide commissioned by Ipswich for the River Gipping. Works on Organic Figure series

2004

Creek Heads series Messums Gallery, London

2005

Messums commissions three life-size figures: Kite, Hover and In the Balance, and starts to represent the artist

2006

Wins the Royal Society of Portrait Sculpture Award for Grin and Bare

2007

Three figures from the Surrender to the Gaze series are permanently sited on private land overlooking the Alde river at Iken, by the Suffolk coast

2008

Major solo exhibition, Creek Men, at Snape Maltings during the Aldeburgh Festival, includes siting of three 8ft bronze figures among the reed beds

2009

First publication, 'Creek Men, a journey'. With introduction by Christopher LeBrun PRA Published by Clock house Arts Association, accompanied by Solo Exhibition Aldeburgh Gallery

Elected Associate member Royal Society of British Sculptors

2010

Solo Show Messums Cork St London. Naked show at Royal Society British Sculptors, London

2011

Purchased New Studio an ex fire station, Saxmundham (in addition to Butley) Set up modelling - drawing - studios

2012

'East Coast Show'. 8 East Anglian artists. Messums Cork St London

Art at the Edge, Olympic. Touring show to Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Victoria Art Gallery, Bath; Oxo Tower, Southbank London

'Beast of Burden'. 14ft wide sculpture installed on the alter at Blythburgh Church, Suffolk

'Society of British Portrait Sculptors' Cork St London

'Exchange'. Group show with Maggi Hambling, Lynne Strover Gallery, Cambridge

Elected 'Fellow of the Royal Society of British Sculptors'

2013

Gallery show at Sala Pares, Barcelona

Gallery show at McClelland Sculpture Park and Gallery, Melbourne, Australia

Two man show with Dominic Welch at Mossgreen, Melbourne, Australia

Solo show at Messums London

Dedication of new Alter piece at Blythburgh Church Suffolk

2014

'East Anglian Artists' at Messums, London

'Figuring' - Group show at Royal society of Sculptors, Kensington

Installed 'Carrier' at Lake Zurich Switzerland

2015

Solo show at Mossgreen, Melbourne, Australia and at Rushcutters bay, Sydney, Australia

Prize-winner, Society of British Sculptors, London

Maquarie sculpture winner, 'Sculpture by the Sea', Bondi, Sydney, Australia

Featured in the New York Times, Guardian

2016

Solo show, Messums London

Sculpture Commission installation at the opening of the 'Bei Wu Sculpture Park', Weissensee, Berlin

Opened new Studio and large scale Foundry, in Suffolk

'Deformation- Transformation', group show with Sean Henry and Brian Taylor at Messums Wiltshire

'Genus' solo show of maquettes and studies, Messums Wiltshire

'Encounter', group show with Maggi Hambling, at Lynne Strover Gallery, Cambridge

2017

Commissioned to create 'Summit' 4 life size figures ascending staircase Cannon Green, London

2018

Received commission to create 8ft figure 'Man of Stones' to be installed in the Sainsbury Centre Sculpture Park, Norwich. Funded by 'The Louise & Paul Cooke Endowment'

'Heads', Messums Wiltshire

'Maquettes', a solo show at Messums London

'Evolution- Exploration' St Mary's Place, Paddington Sydney

Travelled to North Eastern Siberia to visit and stay with the Eveny Reindeer Herders, with Cambridge University Anthropologist, Professor Piers Vitebsky

Commission to create 'Mining monument' Doncaster

2019

Installed six 6ft figures in 18th Century Wyatt entrance hall of Heveningham Hall, Suffolk

'Gathering of Uncertainties', Messums London and Wiltshire

Film of the 'Making of the Man of Stones' by Bill Jackson

Film 'The Making of the Colossus' by Phil Cairney

2020

The Doncaster Heads Portraits of a Mining Community Messums London

### Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank a number of people with whom this project has gathered momentum.

Danny Heaton senior lecturer in photography at Doncaster College, who turned up to a meeting almost by accident, and became a friend, who enthused, got involved and carried swathes of the project, not least the organising of the studio the film unit and facilities with the wonderful students and staff at Doncaster College.

Jo McQuade and Nick Stopforth and later Janice Adams for managing on behalf of the council. Councillor Nigel Ball and Andy Maddox for their faith and support. To the Mayor Ros Jones, whose dream it was to have a sculpture celebrating the mining history of Doncaster, and whose generosity and trust has allowed ideas to develop at their own pace, a rare thing in the field of Public Art.

My staff at the foundry in Halesworth: Craig, Freddy, Ed, Louis, Eva, Nhung, Rowan, Cat, Felix, Sim, Julian and Bill, all skilfully managed and in the cases of the trainees taught by Tom Crompton whose continuous innovation and skills are evidenced in the ever increasing quality of craftsmanship attained in this 'Artist's' foundry.

Bill Jackson, for 24/7 availability and enthusiasm with film and camera, Doug Atfield for his attention to the details I can never see.

Robert Macfarlane for his big heart and inability to say no.

Johnny and the Messums' staff for their support and willingness to take risks. To Mark Hooper for the interpretation of garbled phone conversations and Les for giving me the nod!

The mining community of Doncaster and its environs, whose loyalty and sense of community is still impressively strong and whose warmth, friendship and goodwill, I am hoping will be rewarded in May, when the sculpture is finally unveiled.

And finally Johanne for being there at the end of those difficult days.



