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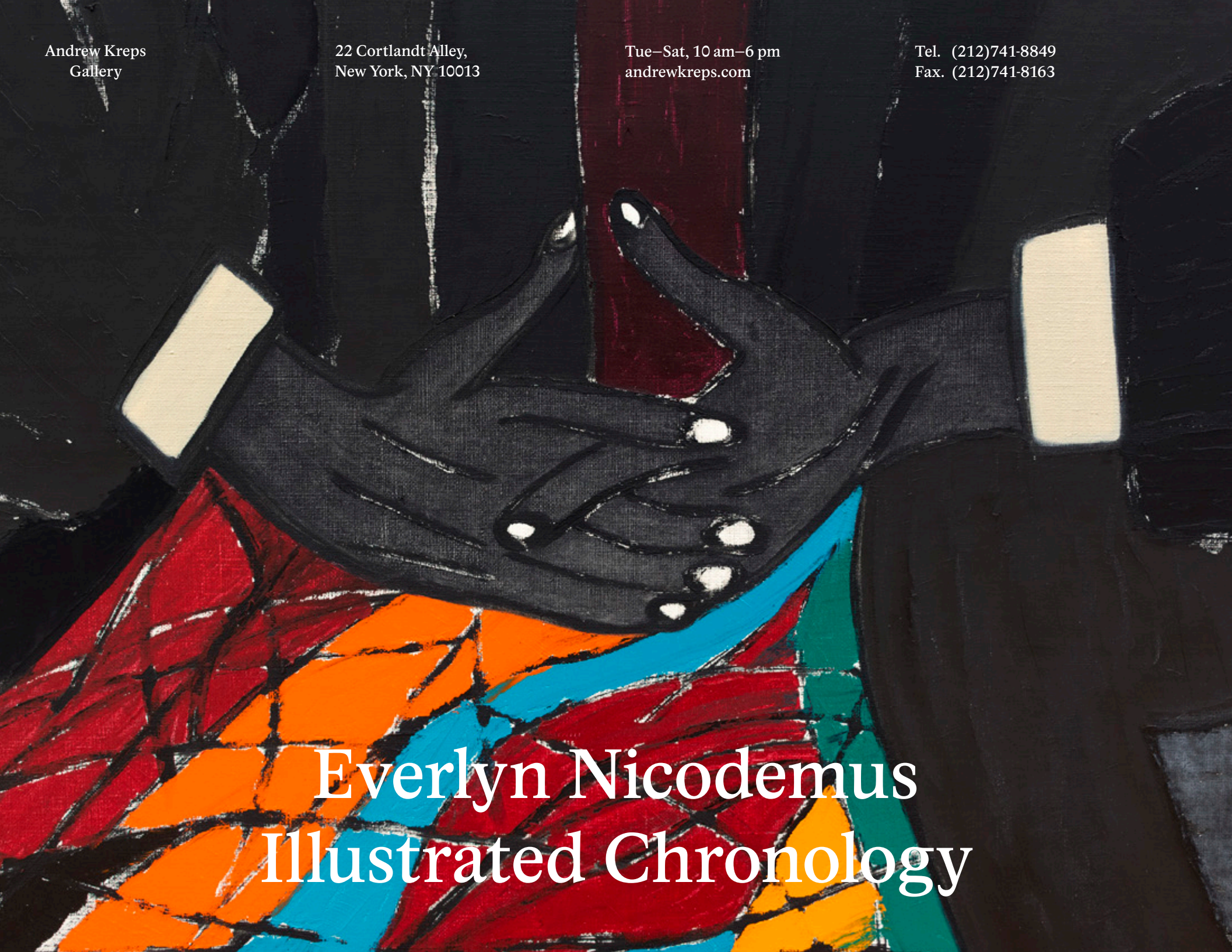

Everlyn Nicodemus
Illustrated Chronology

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
(b. 1954, Kilimanjaro, Tanzania)

Everlyn Nicodemus is one of the strongest feminist voices to emerge from Eastern Africa in the past 30 years. Born in Kilimanjaro, Nicodemus relocated to Europe in the 1970s, where she would move across Sweden, France, Belgium and finally Scotland, where she currently lives and works. Her years of emigration were marked by harassment, persecution and isolation and eventually culminated in a traumatic breakdown - which she describes as a near-death experience - and the beginning of her suffering of PTSD. Drawing on personal experience Nicodemus' work explores the universal issues of racism, cultural trauma, human suffering and the marginalization of women throughout history.

Amidst the adversities, Nicodemus turns to art-making as a way of healing. She creates out of necessity, her unique body of work is a spontaneous outpouring of emotions into multiple forms: paintings, collaged books, photographs, poems and assemblages where textiles, straw and other natural materials overlap with metal wire and found objects. A recurring element in her figurative paintings is the female body, instrumental in reclaiming freedom and the lost stories of women from minority communities.

Everlyn Nicodemus was the 2022 recipient of the Freelands Prize. In 2024, the National Gallery of Scotland will present the first comprehensive retrospective of Nicodemus' work, charting the four decades of her career. Her work is held in the permanent collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London. In addition to her practice as a visual artist, Nicodemus is widely regarded as a preeminent scholar of African art, and received a PhD from Middlesex University London on African Modern Art and Black Cultural Trauma.

Nicodemus lives and works in Edinburgh. Her work has been included in various solo and group exhibitions, including Hacking Habitat: Art of Control, Utrecht, Holland (2016); 18th Biennale of Sydney, Australia (2012), curated by art historian Catherine de Zegher; Bystander on Probation, The Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal, UK (2007); Crossing the Void, Cultural Center Strombeek, Brussels, Belgium (2004); Displacements, University of Alicante, Spain (1997); Vessels of Silence, Kanaal Art Foundation, Kortrijk, Belgium (1992); and the solo exhibition Everlyn Nicodemus, National Museum, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. (1980).

EARLY WORK

Nicodemus moved to Sweden in the early 1970s, where she had her first experience of racism and encountered the notion of the "other." This prompted her to study cultural anthropology at Stockholm University and this early training laid the groundwork for an extraordinary artistic practice that combines a breathtaking formal sensibility together with an obsessive exploration of post-colonial theory, Feminism and Black radical thought.

On a return trip to Tanzania in the late 1970s, Nicodemus met a community of aid workers who came together as a group to draw and paint. These meetings triggered a transformative response in Nicodemus, kickstarting her artistic practice and leading to a solo exhibition at the National Museum, Dar es Salaam in 1980. Nicodemus continued to cultivate her artistic practice in Sweden and in 1983 received an invitation from the Skive Art Museum, Denmark to exhibit her work. This invitation developed into her series Woman in the World, a three-year exhibition project held in three locations: Skive, Denmark (1984); Dar el Salaam, Tanzania (1985); and Calcutta, India (1986). Nicodemus travelled to each city to interview local women and asked the same question of the women she met: 'what is it to you to be a woman?'. Meeting in community centres (Skive) and slums and local outlying villages (Dar es Salaam and Calcutta), the women entered into intimate conversations with the artist as she invited spontaneous reflections and testimonies. Sharing traumas and experiences, from domestic violence to arranged marriage, to forced labour and dowry practice, these open, intercultural dialogues were translated into a series of 65 paintings and poems unique to each city and community of women.

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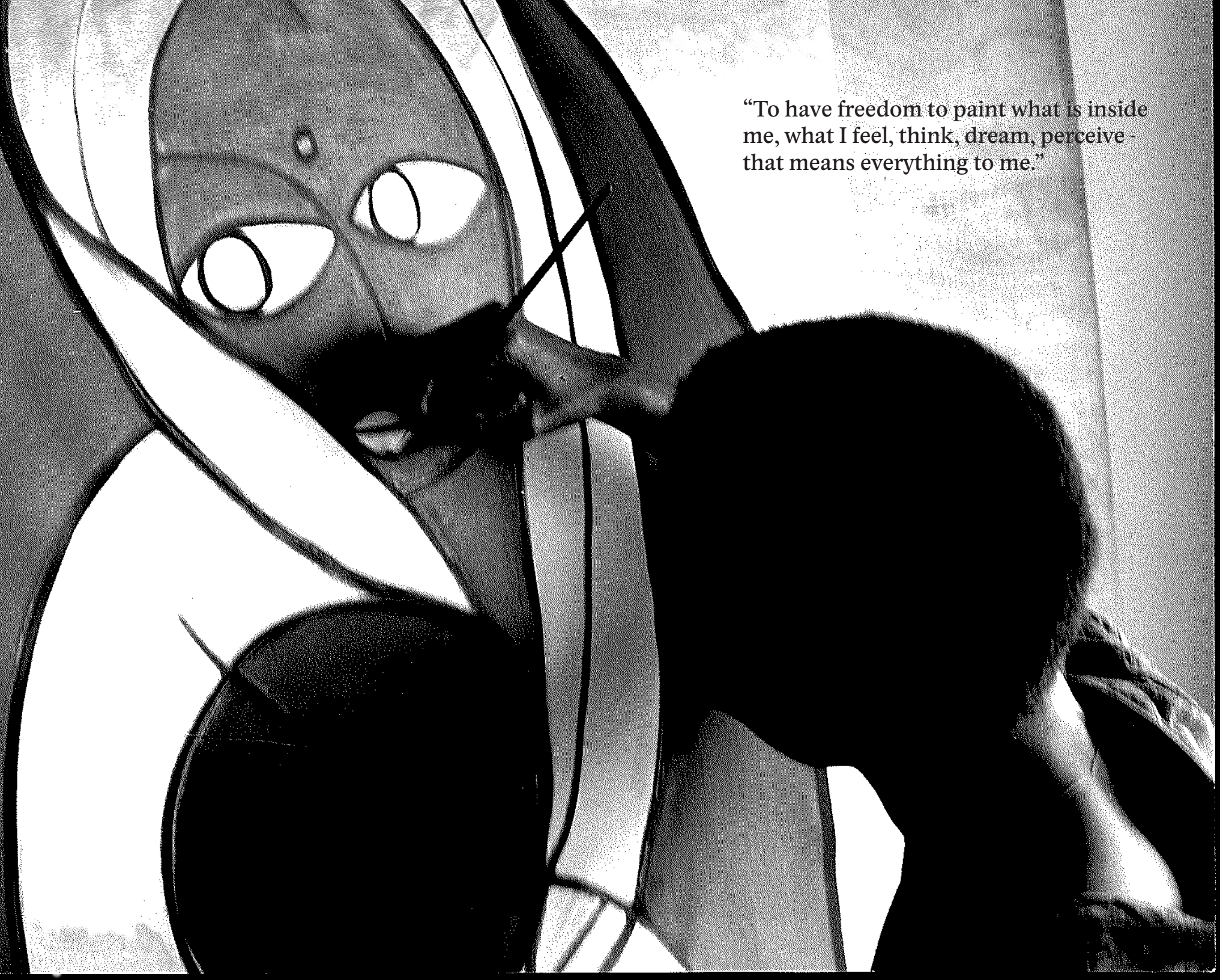
EVERLYN NICODEMUS
SISTER-SHIP, 1980

Oil on bark cloth
Approx 66 7/8 x 41 3/8 inches
(170 x 105 cm)

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Porträtt av politiker [Portrait of a politician], 1980

Acrylic on board
24 x 22 1/2 inches
(61 x 57 cm)


Everlyn 80



“To have freedom to paint what is inside me, what I feel, think, dream, perceive - that means everything to me.”

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Mellan Flaggor (Between Flags),
1980.

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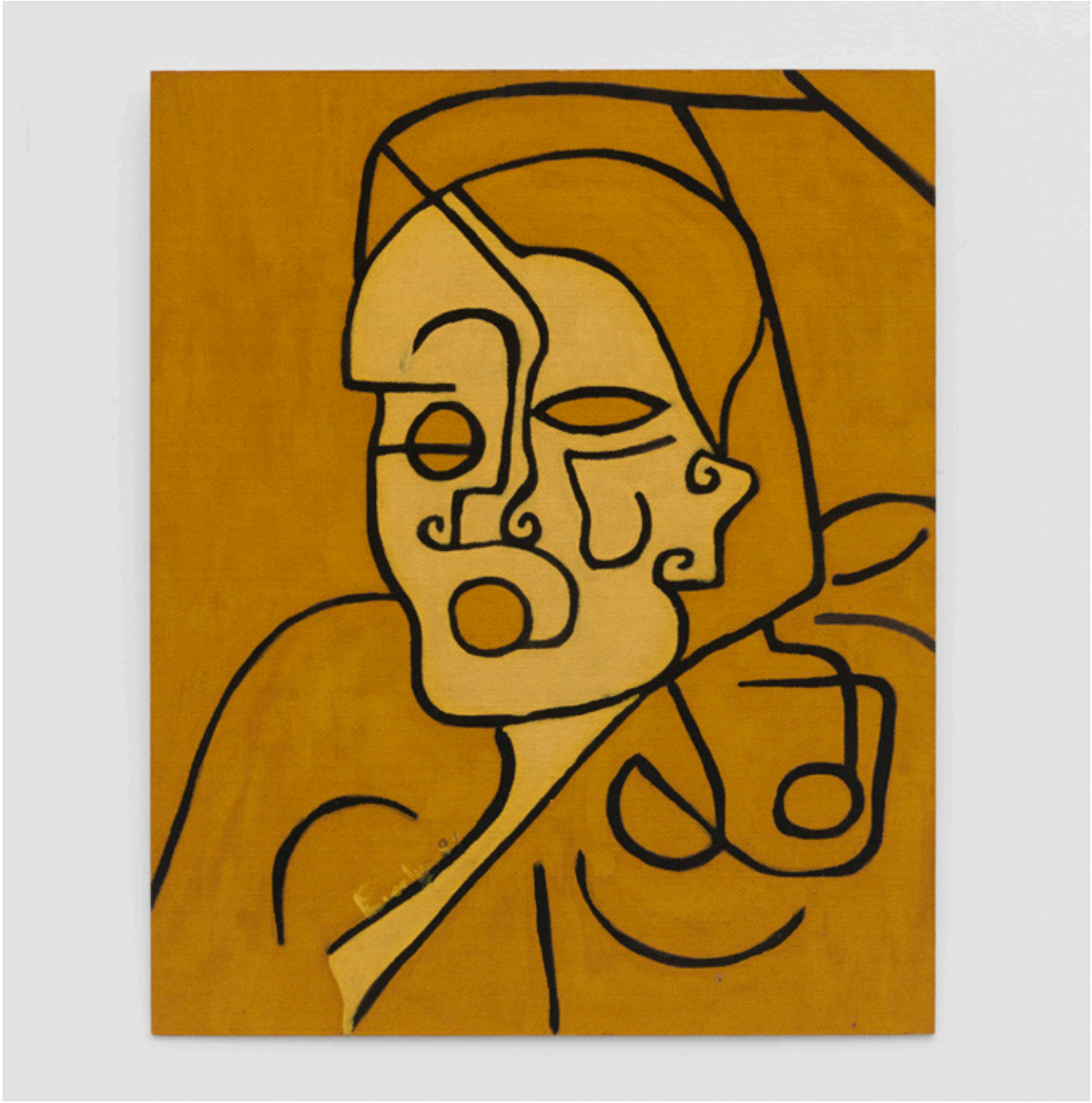

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Jagsåghenne [I Saw Her], 1981

Acrylic on board
24 1/50 x 19 1/2 inches
(61 x 50 cm)

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Karneval [Carnival], 1981

Acrylic on canvas
43 1/3 x 22 inches
(110 x 56 cm)

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Självporträtt, Åkersberga (Mother, lover, friend, daughter), 1982

Collection of the National
Portrait Gallery, London

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Fórunderlig Skatt [Marvellous Tax], 1983

Acrylic on canvas
24 1/50 x 19 1/2 inches
(61 x 50 cm)


TID A TOM
MADAM
BARN

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Man och Kvinna [Man and Woman], 1983

Oil on canvas
76 3/8 x 11 3/4 inches
(194 x 30 cm)

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
1 Paradiset [1 Paradise], 1984

Acrylic on canvas
54 x 37 1/2 inches
(137 x 95 cm)

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
The Head, 1986

Acrylic on canvas
39 5/8 x 29 inches
(100.8 x 73.7 cm)

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Femme Totale Still [Total Woman Still], 1987

Acrylic on canvas
57 1/2 x 45 inches
(146 x 114 cm)

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Femme Totale Still [Total Woman Still], 1987

Installation view in private apartment in Borgerhout, Antwerpen, Belgium.

Everlyn Nicodemus in a private apartment in Borgerhout, Antwerpen, Belgium.

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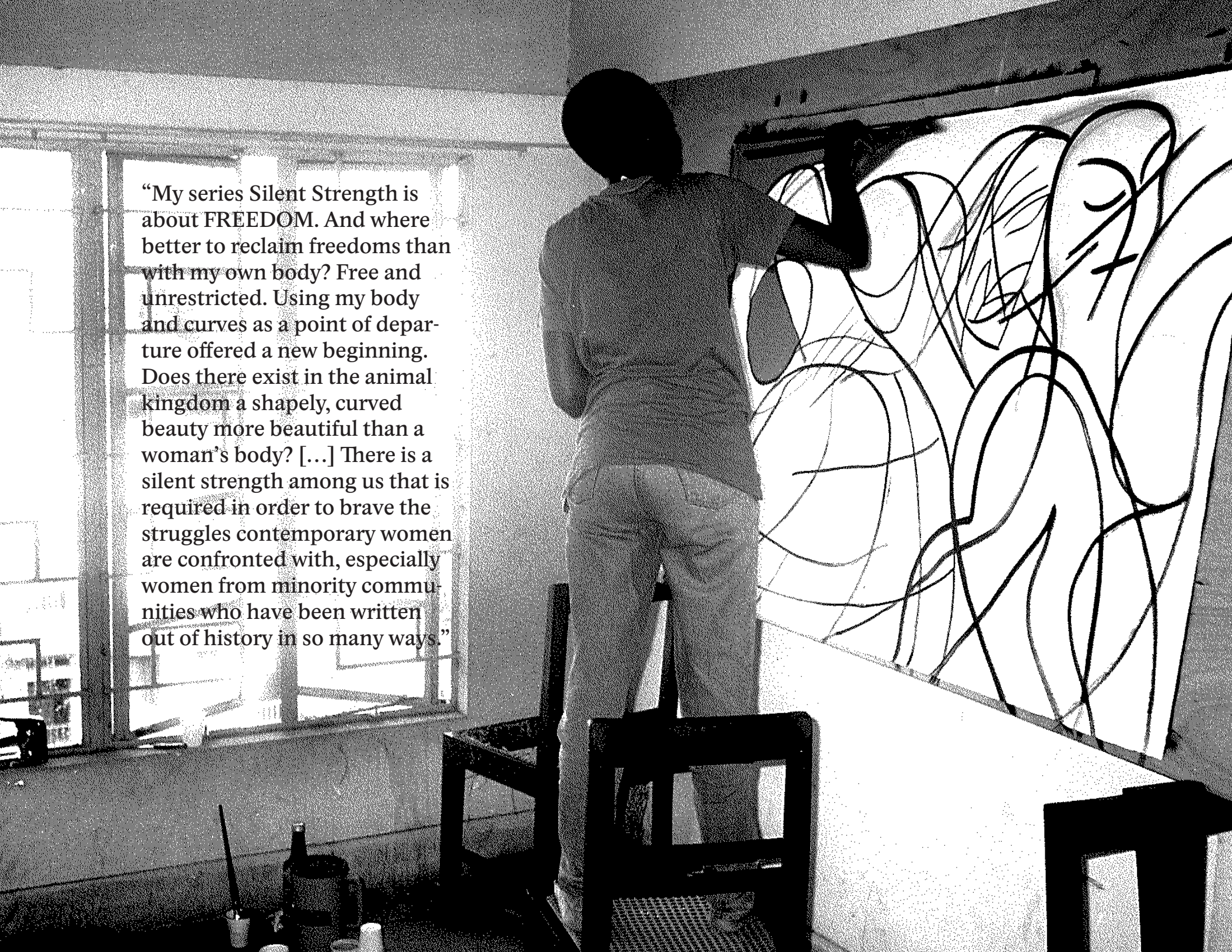
EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Echo - Sonia Sanchez reading her poems, 1988

Acrylic on canvas
39 3/8 x 31 7/8 inches
(100 x 81 cm)


Once I lived on pillows
Christ the true



“My series Silent Strength is about FREEDOM. And where better to reclaim freedoms than with my own body? Free and unrestricted. Using my body and curves as a point of departure offered a new beginning. Does there exist in the animal kingdom a shapely, curved beauty more beautiful than a woman’s body? […] There is a silent strength among us that is required in order to brave the struggles contemporary women are confronted with, especially women from minority communities who have been written out of history in so many ways.”

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Silent Strength II, 1989

Oil on canvas
59 1/8 x 78 3/4 inches
(150 x 200 cm)


Silent
Strength

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Silent Strength 14 (Carolina),
1989

Oil on canvas
39 3/8 x 31 7/8 inches
(100 x 81 cm)

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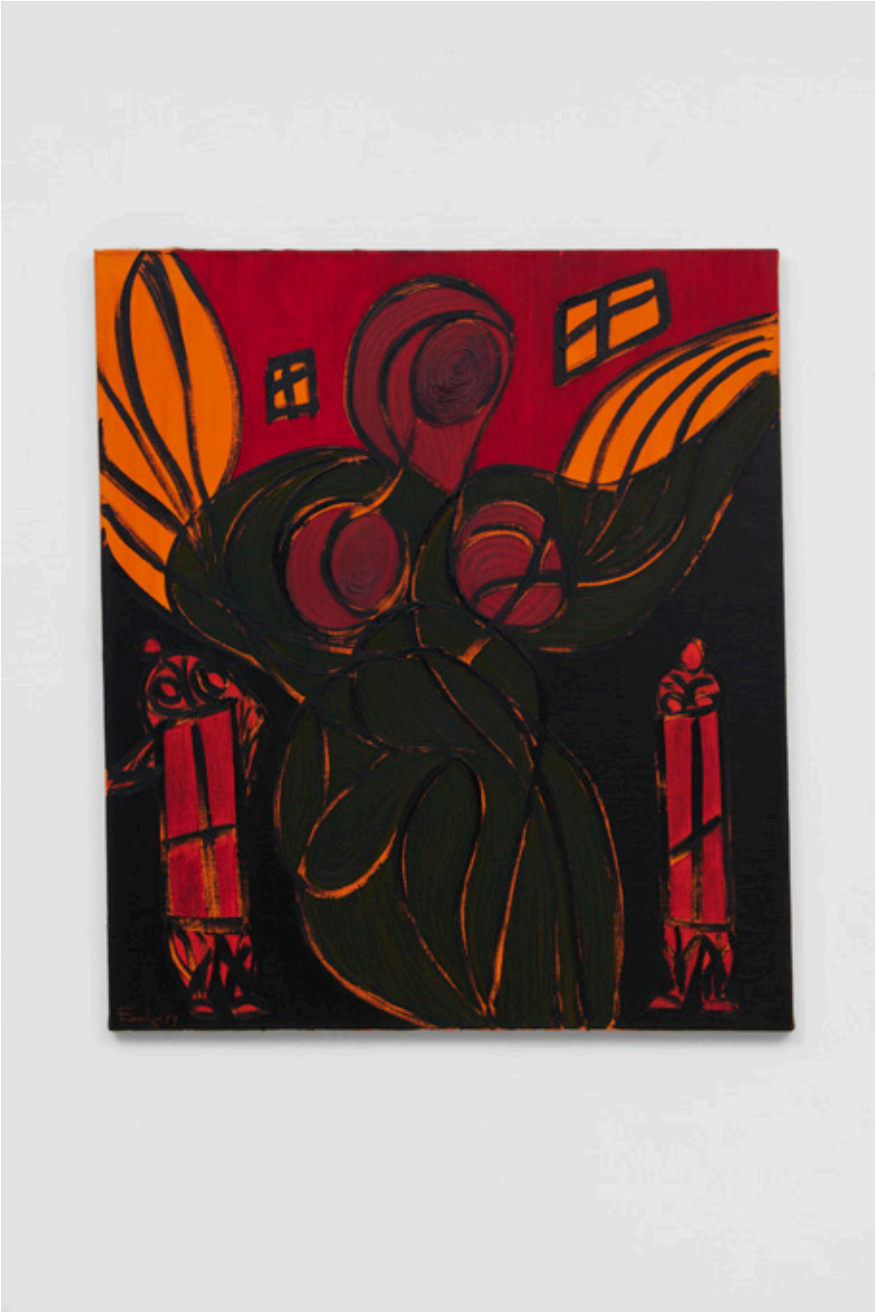

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Silent Strength 23

Oil on canvas
31 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches
(80 x 70 cm)

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Silent Strength no 24, 1989

Oil on canvas
31 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches
(80 x 70 cm)

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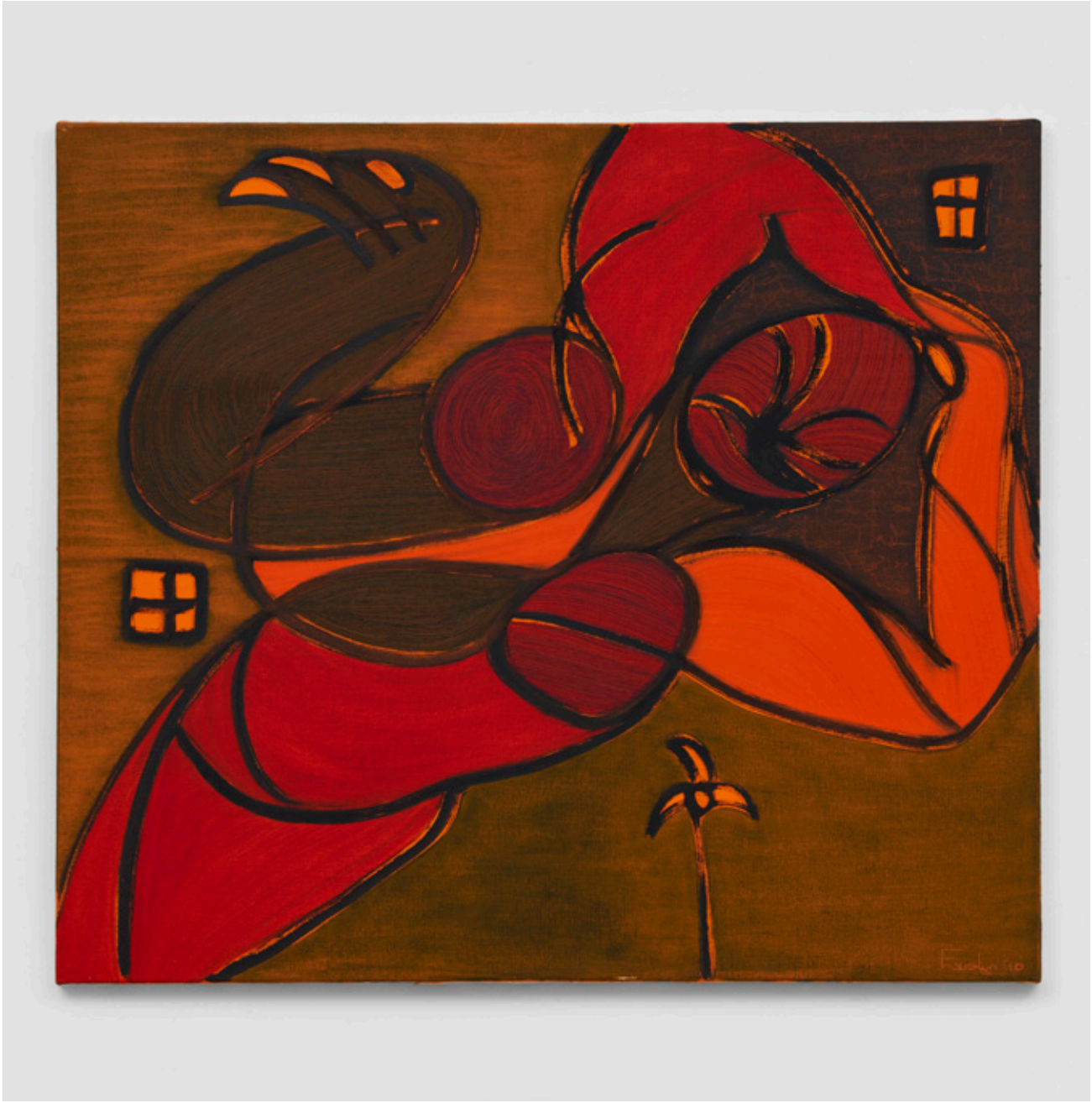

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Silent Strength no 33, 1990

Oil on canvas
27 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches
(70 x 80 cm)

1990s

Nicodemus was diagnosed with PTSD in the early 1990s, leading her to explore her own body in The Wedding (1991-92), a series of 84 large-scale self-portraits representing a ballad about the experience of meeting and fighting death and returning to life after her breakdown. For Nicodemus, returning to life meant reoccupation of her body, which had been obliterated by the past trauma. To make this pictorial representation tangible, Nicodemus worked increasingly larger in scale as the series progressed, resulting in monumental, multi-panel works.

Nicodemus would begin to explore the relationship between art and trauma in a broader sense, creating sculptural, and assemblage based works. These investigations would later result in what is considered to be one of her most important works: Reference Scroll on Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing (2004), a 50 foot long, hand-sewn scroll documenting some of the most atrocious genocides and ethnic cleansings known throughout history.

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
The Wedding 38, 1991

Oil on canvas
39 3/8 x 43 1/4 inches
(100 x 110 cm)

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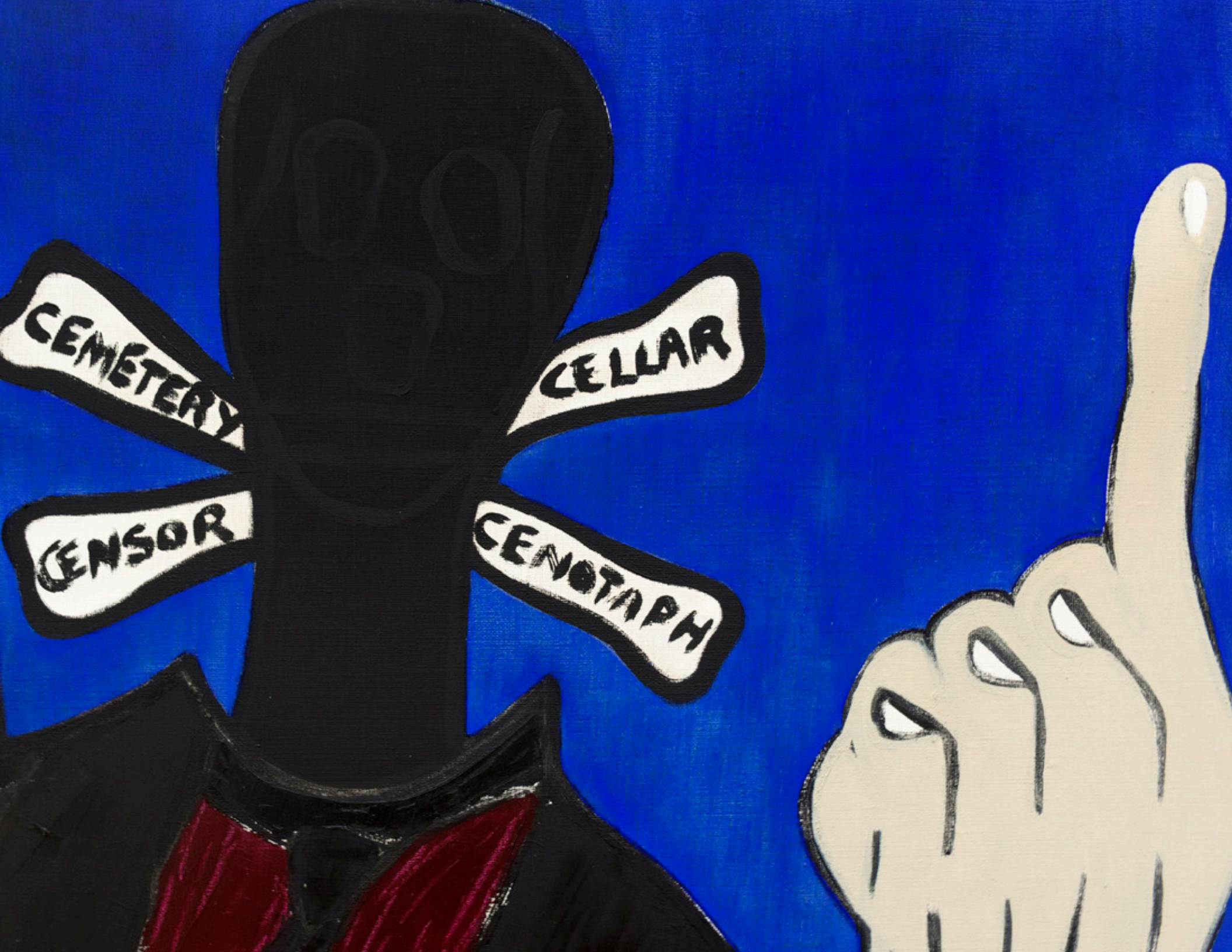
EVERLYN NICODEMUS
The Wedding 62, 1992

Oil on canvas
78 3/4 x 59 inches
(200 x 150 cm)


CEMETERY
CELLAR
CENSOR
CENOTAPH

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Untitled, 1991

Pencil and pastel on paper
20 7/8 x 16 1/8 inches
(53 x 41 cm)

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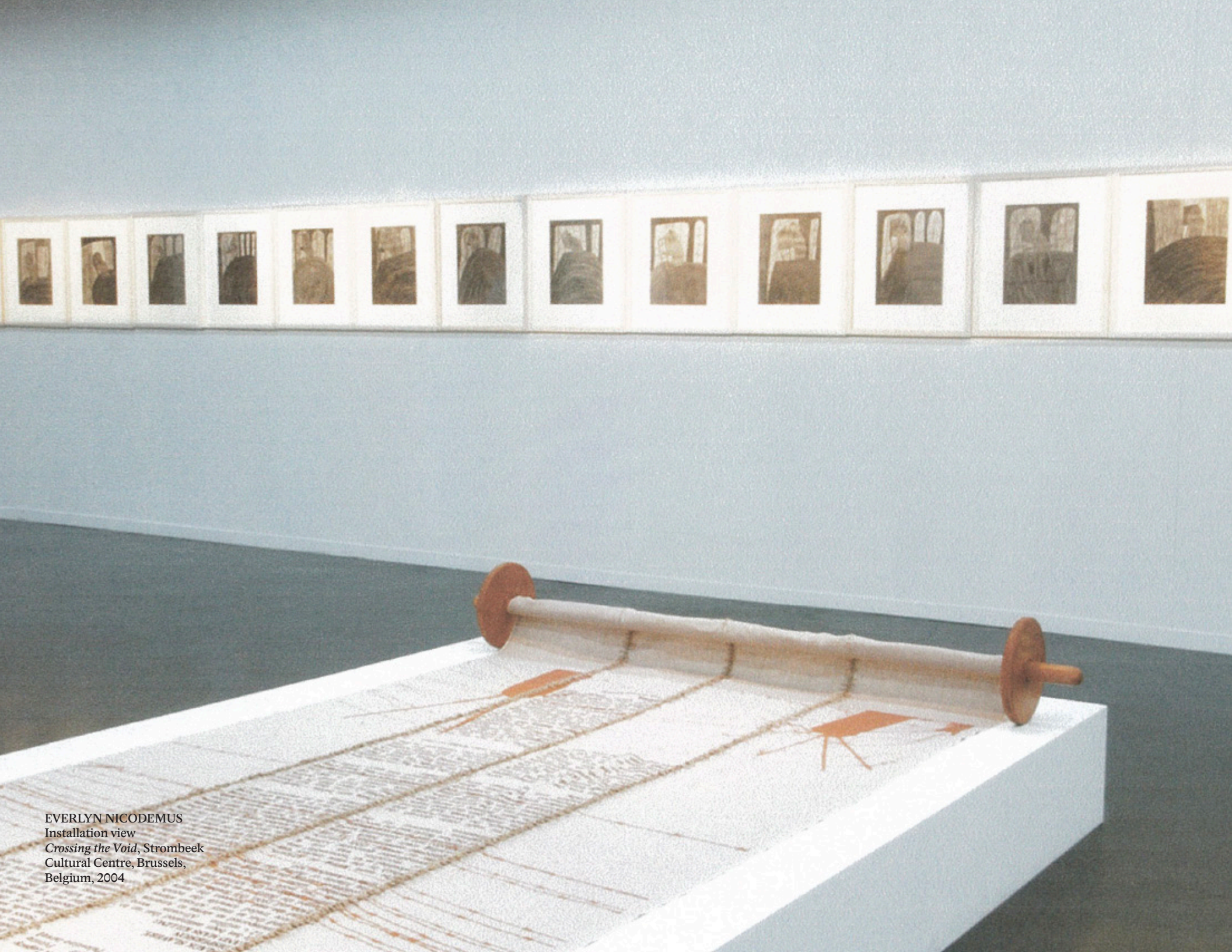
EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Untitled, 1991

Pencil and pastel on paper
20 7/8 x 16 1/8 inches
(53 x 41 cm)

ACADEMIC WORK

Between 1994 and 2000 Nicodemus served on the advisory board of Third Text, the leading international journal dedicated to the critical analysis of contemporary art in the global field. In 2011, Nicodemus was awarded her PhD from Middlesex University following the submission of her thesis “African Modern Art and Black Cultural Trauma.” She subsequently co-edited the influential book Modern Art in Africa, Asia and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernism, which was published in 2012.



EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Installation view
Crossing the Void, Strombeek Cultural Centre, Brussels, Belgium, 2004

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Installation view
Crossing the Void, Strombeek Cultural Centre, Brussels, Belgium, 2004

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Installation view
Trauma and Art – The Hidden Scars, 198 Gallery, London
June 19–July 28, 2006

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Detail view
Trauma and Art – The Hidden Scars, 198 Gallery, London
June 19–July 28, 2006

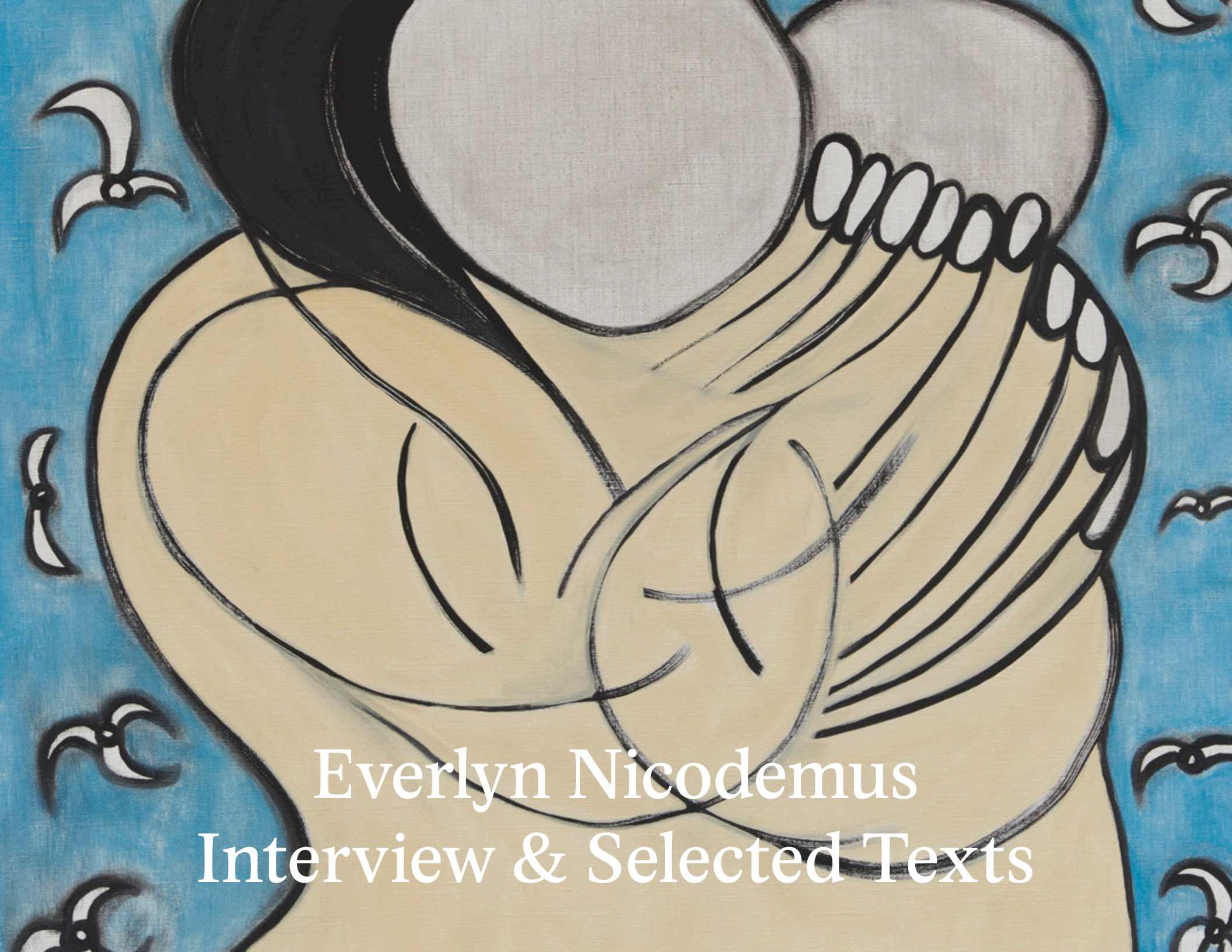
EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Installation view
Richard Saltoun Gallery,
London
April 12—May 28, 2022

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Installation view
Richard Saltoun Gallery, London
April 12—May 28, 2022

EVERLYN NICODEMUS
Installation view
Richard Saltoun Gallery, London
April 12—May 28, 2022

Everlyn Nicodemus in France,
Filmstill.

Everlyn Nicodemus in France,
Filmstill.



Everlyn Nicodemus
Interview & Selected Texts

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‘They told me I was a savage’ – the unstoppable painter Everlyn Nicodemus

INTERVIEW

by Lanre Bakare, April 2022

She grew up in the shadow of Kilimanjaro and never knew racism until moving to Europe. As the ‘clandestine artist’ finally gets her due, she looks back on a rich life lived in defiance of convention.

At night, when her daughter was tucked in and her husband had nodded off, Everlyn Nicodemus would make her way to her studio, turn the lights on and begin to paint in the silence. Like a scene from Bong Joon-ho’s Parasite, she would craft nocturnal art in her house in Åkersberga, a suburb of Stockholm, while the world outside slept. By day she was a mother, Swahili teacher and student; by night a clandestine artist.

Forty years on, we’re meeting in the basement of the Richard Saltoun gallery in London’s Mayfair. As Nicodemus makes her way down the stairs, someone asks how she’s doing. “I’m not dead yet,” she deadpans, before sitting down and suddenly springing to life. The truth is she’s not on the wane at all: she’s a live wire, with stories for days and an opinion on everything.

The walls are covered with her paintings: large scale, vivid works that marry religious symbolism and figurative elements and have seen her described as “one of the strongest feminist voices to emerge from Eastern Africa in the past 30 years”. The whole of the upstairs is dedicated to her work too.

Nicodemus is not only alive but thriving, having a career renaissance as she approaches 70.

She was born in 1954 in Marangu, the Tanzanian town that is the starting point for most people who scale Mount Kilimanjaro. From an early age, Nicodemus would set off on her own philosophical expeditions which would often put her at odds with authority figures. At church, she questioned the priests about inconsistencies in their teachings – she once threatened to leave the Lutheran church and go to the Catholic one down the road to see if she could get answers.

She was so outspoken that her father used to worry about her getting into fights. “He used to tell everybody that he would like to have a big pocket so he could take me everywhere to protect me,” she says. “Because I had no brakes in my mouth. I tell people exactly what I feel.”

Nicodemus puts her pugilistic approach to life down to her grandmother, Makuna, who raised the artist and her siblings in a home with no male authority figure (her parents lived elsewhere in the town). Boys and girls would be treated equally at Makuna’s house. A rota was produced for water collection and everyone was expected to pull their weight. That might seem like a simple

The Guardian

‘When I came to Sweden, it was the first time I looked at my skin and said, “Ah, I’m black”’ ... Everlyn Nicodemus. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

‘Mother, lover, friend, daughter’ ... Jälvporträtt, Akersberga, the 1982 self-portrait acquired by the National Portrait Gallery. Photograph: National Portrait Gallery, London/courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery

Revelling in mischief ... Nicodemus at Richard Saltoun. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

egalitarian system but it was radically different to the patriarchal Chagga tradition most children grew up in – and it instilled in Nicodemus a sense of right and wrong, and of what equality looked like. “My grandmother didn’t call herself a feminist,” she says. “For her, it was existential.”

When she went to live with her parents, she would object to being told she had to serve others. “I didn’t fit in. Because here, suddenly, my mother is telling me, ‘Cook breakfast for your brothers.’” To this, she would reply: “Well, I did it yesterday. Tomorrow they’re going to cook breakfast for me.”

Such acts of defiance have become a recurring theme in Nicodemus’s life. As a teenager, she got into teacher training school but then met her first love and eloped with the man who would become her husband: a Swedish economist from a well-to-do family who was working in Tanzania. They got married and after his two-year contract ran out the pair returned to Sweden where they had a daughter, Carolina.

Her relationship with Sweden has soured over the years. She spent 14 years there, mastering the language and bringing up her daughter before she left for France, then Belgium, eventually settling in Scotland in 2008. Before the interview starts, she passes me a note that has a brief, bullet-pointed list with entries including: “I refuse to be a prisoner of racism, sexism and the past … The Swedish chapter of my life is closed.”

Nicodemus arrived in Sweden in 1973, encountering racism for the first time in her life. “That notion was not in my head,” she said. “Even when I married the white man, I didn’t think about the fact he was a different colour. It just didn’t make sense to me. I was equal, just like when I was growing up. There was never this notion of me being inferior. Then suddenly, they’re telling me that I was black, a savage and uncivilised.”

In a bid to understand what was confronting her, Nicodemus decided to study social anthropology. But at university, she was shocked by the euro-centric, reductive attitudes Europeans had towards their subjects, especially Africans. “I didn’t know about ‘othering’. When I came to Sweden, it was the first time I looked at my skin and said, ‘Ah, I’m black.’”

Nicodemus was proud of Marangu: her family were educated; her town had a gallery and a teacher training centre; her father was an artisan, a carpenter who repaired Lutheran churches. The obsession with so-called primitive Africa was anathema to her, so she decided to turn the tables. “I told my professors that I think the people who need to be studied are you anthropologists. I’m going to study you, which means you are going to be my specimen.” What did they say? “They couldn’t believe it.”

Whenever Nicodemus tells one of these stories, it’s accompanied by a laugh that starts as a low, almost inaudible hum and builds into a high-pitched giggle that often leaves her bent double. She’s serious about the prejudice she faced but clearly revels in the mischief she caused, seeing the funny side of the hopeless double standards of those around her.

She decided to move back to Tanzania so Carolina could get to know her family and the Chagga culture. In 1980, Nicodemus first took up painting, after taking part in weekend drawing lessons. After two lessons, she made an announcement: “I said, ‘You know what? Within six months I’m going to exhibit in the Dar es Salaam National Museum.’ Her friends said she was mad but Nicodemus was serious. She began painting and once she had 60 works she approached the director of the Tanzanian museum. “I said, ‘I have come here with my works of art and poems, and I want to

be exhibited in this museum. The works are right here, I'm here and I'm not moving until you look at my art.' He laughed and said, 'Can we have a cup of tea, first?'"

The director liked her work and gave her an exhibition just as she had predicted. The paintings, and the poetry she created that sat alongside it, came naturally. There wasn't the racial baggage of anthropology. "I discovered that, when I was doing art, I felt myself," she says. "This was my identity."

After getting divorced from her first husband, she met and married the Swedish art historian, TV producer and critic Kristian Romare, who supported her financially so she could focus on her art and poetry full-time. Nicodemus combined her anthropological skills with her artistic practice, using her new freedom to interview women and ask them about their lives: sex workers, cleaners and doctors – no one was excluded or considered unworthy.

The result was Women in the World, which would see Nicodemus travel to Denmark, Tanzania and West Bengal to do interviews and produce paintings inspired by her conversations. "I collected more than 50 hours of tape about what it is to be a woman," she says. "I started by telling them everything about me, from my childhood to work problems I faced, the racism and sexism. Because of my frankness, they opened up. They talked about incest, rape, abortions, happiness." More work about trauma followed, such as Silent Strength, a collection of featureless women often in pairs that "addresses the triumph of the human spirit over suffering"; and 2004's Reference Scroll on Genocide, Massacres and Ethnic Cleansing, a 16-metre-long scroll documenting genocides and ethnic cleansings.

After Romare's death in 2015, Nicodemus retrained as a care nurse and started work in a home for the elderly in Edinburgh. Some patients had dementia and could be violent. It wasn't unusual for her to come home with bruises on her arms and wrists after a 12-hour shift. She was struggling to cope and the bills began to add up. Then the gallerist Richard Saltoun approached her, and featured Nicodemus in the 1-52 African Art Fair in 2021 where she was one of the fair's revelations – despite having had her first solo exhibition in 1980.

"I'm not getting younger," she says. "So it was just the right time that they discovered me, because I think I couldn't cope any more." The interest meant she didn't have to worry about paying her bills, leaving her to paint whenever she wanted and no longer needing to work at the care home.

It was one of the original paintings created in 1982 in Sweden that would bring Nicodemus her biggest success to date.

It was one of the original paintings created in 1982 in Sweden that would bring Nicodemus her biggest success to date. In March 2022, her work Självporträtt, Åkersberga would become the first painted self-portrait by a black female artist to be acquired by the National Portrait Gallery. "I couldn't believe it," she recalls. That moment was the culmination of a journey that started in the foothills of Kilimanjaro. Remarkably, the work was created only two years after she took up painting. A reflection on the various roles she was expected to play – mother, lover, friend, daughter – it's a rare inward look at an artist who mostly tries to understand others. As well as the solo show at Richard Saltoun and the National Portrait Gallery acquisition, she has also just been offered a scholarship at Princeton.

So does she think all the defiance has finally paid off? "I guess I never learned my place," she laughs.

The Guardian

BEHIND EVERY PICTURE IS A POEM
by GAVIN DELAHUNTY

Artist, writer, and poet Everlyn Nicodemus was born in the foothills of Kilimanjaro in Marangu, Tanzania in 1954. Although Nicodemus has exhibited widely for over forty years, her work has not yet had the critical attention it deserves. Initially studying social anthropology at Stockholm University, Nicodemus became disillusioned with the Eurocentric bias of the discipline and sought "a counter-discourse diametrically opposed to that of anthropology," finding it in painting and poetry.1 This critical engagement with anthropology laid the groundwork for an extraordinary artistic practice that combines a breathtaking formal sensibility with an obsessive exploration of postcolonial theory, Feminism and Black radical thought. Nicodemus has much in common with the artists Frank Bowling, Rasheed Araeen and Lorraine O'Grady, whose formal talents are matched by their incisive critical thinking and writing skills. Fundamental to Nicodemus' art is an unceasing intellectual and emotional exchange, intent on illuminating certain aspects of human suffering while exploring avenues of compassionate understanding. Nicodemus' distinctive approach to art making, which throughout her career has grappled with different social and cultural settings across the globe, relates to and anticipates the socially engaged practices that have emerged since the 1990s.

Mellan Flaggor [Between Flags], 1980 (p.5) is a remarkable early painting on board that explores the complex psychological and emotional processes that accompany migration and relocation. Between 1973 and 1987 Nicodemus lived between Sweden and Tanzania. Towards the end of the 1970s she began painting in what she has described as: "a desperate need to communicate."2 A rare self-portrait depicts the artist surrounded by a set of colors drawn from the Tanzanian and Swedish flags. The central motif, the artist's head, is divided along a red axis so that it faces both left and right, in a manner that suggests some internal conflict. The Janus-faced figure seems unsure of her allegiances to each nation and uncertain of how to make sense of her peripatetic way of life. Mellan Flaggor graphically articulates the psychological experience of migration, evoking feelings of anxiety, discontinuity, and disorientation. For Nicodemus, this meant exchanging a life in rural Tanzania among her parents, siblings and relatives, for a new life in Stockholm away from friends and family. Nicodemus' process of acclimatization in Scandinavia involved navigating a new, urban environment; learning a new language; and dealing for the first time with racism, as a Black woman in a predominantly white society. Functioning in this new alien world, the artist felt divided. On the one hand, she was separated from the familiarity of her culture of origin, while on the other, she was drawn toward the promise of adventure and opportunity offered by her host country. During this confusing and painful time, Nicodemus battled to

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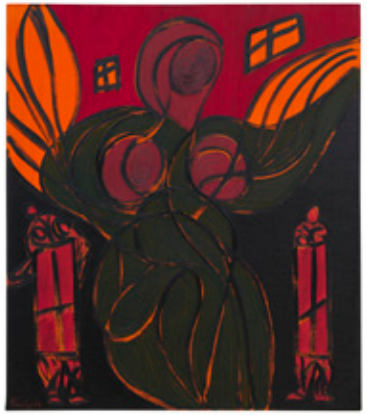
Everlyn Nicodemus, *Mellan Flaggor [Between Flags]*, 1980.

Everlyn Nicodemus, *Fnitter [Giggle]*, 1984.



Everlyn Nicodemus, *Silent Strength 43*, 1990.

understand what was appropriate in terms of which values, customs, and practices to preserve from Tanzania and which to adopt in Sweden.

Man och Kvinna [Man and Woman], 1983 (p.19) depicts a couple sharing an intimate embrace, their bodies intertwined in such a way that is hard to tell them apart. The expression on the woman's face—her eyes blissfully closed—reveals that giddy, energetic, and euphoric feeling experienced in a lover's arms, receiving their kiss. It was painted shortly after the artist's first meeting with art critic and historian Erik Kristian Romare (1926–2015). Following the separation from her first husband Nicodemus had been introduced to Romare at her solo exhibition which was held at Sveriges Television (SVT) Sweden's national publicly funded broadcaster, where Romare worked as a producer. Instantly becoming soulmates, Nicodemus and Romare's bond developed rapidly and would go on to become the defining relationships of the artist's life, of which she has said: "we enriched one another in profound ways that no words can describe."3 This intensity is signaled by the size of the canvas, measuring some 76 inches tall, as well as the artist's eye-catching use of crimson red and sapphire blue. In color theory, red and blue are considered complimentary since they are found on opposite ends of the color spectrum. In many respects Nicodemus and Romare were opposites and their relationship crossed social divides: African/European, male/female, Black/white, young/old. Nicodemus has recounted the prejudice they faced as an interracial couple in Sweden during the 1980s. Another extraordinary thing about this painting is how the figures are not fleshy or detailed but are instead fragmented and ethereal. In Man och Kvinna, certain anatomical parts such as back, arms, torso and legs are illustrated by a single contour while others—such as the oversized right hand of Romare—are more fully articulated symbols of the protection, affection, and tenderness he provided. The couple are not represented in any realistic way, instead Nicodemus favors an abstract style that sets her subjects free and in doing so communicates something of the boundless and intoxicating sensation of falling in love.

Between 1984 and 1986 Nicodemus made three important projects in Skive, Denmark; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; and Calcutta, India, which together came to be known as "Women in the World." Each project involved setting up a discussion group that brought together the artist and local women. An important dimension of these sessions was face-to-face interaction and the reciprocal experience of sharing stories. In each case, these storytelling contexts physically and metaphorically removed the participants from the immediate and historical context of everyday life. Fnitter [Giggle], 1984 (p.22) is a powerful painting created after one of these collaborative sessions. In Skive, Nicodemus engaged with Danish women of various ages and professions. Their discussions were stimulated by questions posed by Nicodemus such as: "What is it to be a woman? For me? For you?"4 The artist intuited that these women were more likely to confide in her as a relative stranger in this small municipality and that her status as a blank canvas could provoke a new kind of communion between women. Fnitter is a highly gestural painting. Hands are placed on cheeks, rest on foreheads, or cover mouths in displays of shock, surprise, laughter, or incredulous disbelief. Eyes dart, catching each other's attention to identify the source of amusement and entertainment. Fingers dance around the canvas like half notes on sheet music paper with the energy of a musical performance. The fingers also call to mind the oval head and long tail of sperm. The painting is accompanied by a poem entitled The Giggles:

Giggles
Tittering.
The heaven
Is shaking.

Laughter.
And the clouds
Bare their
Teeth
Behind
The spreading
Fingers.
—Women!5

During these sessions, stories of violence against women and girls physical, sexual, and psychological abuse in the family or within the community were heard again and again. What is remarkable is that, in the face of this horrifying adversity, many of the women Nicodemus encountered used laughter as a coping mechanism. Finding time to laugh, embrace little joys, and find levity to make each other feel better physically, emotionally, and even to relieve their pain. Writer Jean Fisher has described the processes involved in the "Woman in the World" project as directing us "toward a dual theme in the artist's work, namely, the quest for human unity, one which would alleviate the burden of individual isolation that is the tragedy of modern existence."6 While speech leaves no mark in space, in painting, Nicodemus found a device to give lasting materiality to these revelations.

Nicodemus' "Silent Strength" series of 1989–90 addresses the triumph of the human spirit over suffering. The paintings' distinct palette of black, amber, rust and vermillion suggest a nighttime scene and the orange glow of sodium powered streetlights. They feature women, often in pairs, who are not ordinary in any sense of the word. Their bodies are drawn with a curvilinear economy bereft of the regularities and proportions to which we are accustomed. They have no mouths, no eyes, no ears but we can ascertain they are human by the finger-nails on their simply drawn hands and feet or by the basic circles that indicate their breasts. The fact that they do not have substantive skeleton or muscle mass enables them to merge with their backgrounds, moving back and forth between legibility and illegibility, seen and unseen.

Windows are another consistent feature of these works by Nicodemus and are represented as framed crosses. They disorientate rather than locate, as they typically would in an architectural setting. In Silent Strength 23, 1989 (p.34) the scale and placement of the windows suggest that its faceless figure is in some vast cavernous building, while in others such as Silent Strength 43, 1990 (p.35) they allude to more private spaces, such as a bedroom. The "Silent are another consistent feature of these works by Nicodemus and are represented as framed crosses. They disorientate rather than locate, as they typically would in an architectural setting. In Silent Strength 23, 1989 (p.34) the scale and placement of the windows suggest that its faceless figure is in some vast cavernous building, while in others such as Silent Strength 43, 1990 (p.35) they allude to more private spaces, such as a bedroom. The "Silent Strength" series is an expression of the anxieties of lived experience in often perilous and austere conditions. What is remarkable is that—however isolated in its environment—each of Nicodemus' subjects maintains a certain strength, humility, and forbearance.

Nicodemus has described her practice as "mixing two media, paintings as visual objects and sometimes as objects painted upon, and poems as invitations to fellow humans to share the intimate dialogue of reading."7 Her emphasis on dialogue applies as much to her paintings as it does her poems and the discussion groups she organized in Denmark, India, and Tanzania. Casting aside the "imperial glasses of an anthropologist," Nicodemus utilized dialogue as a means of combatting the objectification and distancing inherent in the ethnographic gaze.8 In painting and poetry, she established a counter-discourse based on proximity, vulnerability

and mutual recognition that continues to welcome new audiences into the fold.

Gavin Delahunty is a Dallas-based curator. He is editor of a forthcoming monograph on Everlyn Nicodemus that will include contributions by art historians and curators Eddie Chambers and Catherine de Zegher.

Footnotes:
1 Everlyn Nicodemus, “The Centre of Otherness,” in Jean Fisher ed., Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts, (London: Iniva, 1994) p.92.
2 Everlyn Nicodemus in conversation with the author, London, October 2021.
3 Ibid.
4 Kristian Romare, “Woman in the World,” National Museum Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, June 1985, n.p.
5 Everlyn Nicodemus “The Giggles” reproduced in Anne Wilson-Schaef, “An African Woman Gives Us Woman in the World” in Woman of Power: magazine of feminism, spirituality, and politics issue seven, summer, 1987, pp.13–15, continued p.71.
6 Jean Fisher, “Everlyn Nicodemus: Between Silence and Laughter” in Third Text 40, Autumn 1997, p. 41.
7 Nicodemus, “The Centre of Otherness,” p.92.
8 Nicodemus, “The Centre of Otherness,” p.93.

THE BLACK COLOUR IS JOY AND PAIN.
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN EVERLYN NICODEMUS AND CATHERINE DE ZEGHER.

E.N.: To have freedom to paint what is inside me, what I feel, think, dream, perceive - that means everything to me. I don't believe that one perceives reality in exactly the same way as an other. Or am I wrong? For me, art is an individual revolution. And that's how I want to be treated. I don't want to be stamped "African". I don't know what that is. Yes, I was born in Africa. People who inhabit Africa, south of Sahara, do have black skin - if that is what is meant by "being different". We are human beings. The colour of our skin is due to pigments and to the sun. Without the pigments and the sun, even these paintings wouldn't be anything. The reflections of light upon pigments are what enables us to see the colours and the beauty of everything.

CdZ: Still, you use a lot of black in your paintings.

E.N.: Yes. This black came from life experience. It is strange to talk about it, because at the same time the best colour I know, the colour I love, is black. It is easy for me to associate black with my strongest feelings, the most painful and also the most joyful.

CdZ: When you moved to Sweden, you studied Social Anthropology. Why did you make that choice?

E.N.: I was in an identity crisis. Coming to Europe was my first experience of what racism can be. I had grown up in a country where the majority of us are black and where we don't think about it. But why, suddenly, were people telling me that I was different? That, for instance, I have no history? Why do they call us "you savages"? I was forced to look at my skin and to think about colour.

CdZ: That was when you decided to study anthropology?

E.N.: It caused a lot of pain in me. I started to seek who I was. I wanted to know more about myself and about others.

CdZ: Was that also how you got the idea of making an anthropological study of the anthropologists in Sweden?

E.N.: I was selected by my fellow students as their representative. In the meetings with the scientists and the teachers,. I didn't believe my ears. I told them: I would like to study you,

because the anthropologists should be the first objects to be studied. It was like throwing a grenade in their midst.

CdZ: I know about a few artists who, like you, moved from anthropology into art. Why and how did you take that step?

E. N.: I was planning for my field work and reading a lot. I got terrible problems with my conscience. Anthropology demanded that I look at human beings in a way which was foreign to me. I had to dissociate myself from the humans I was to study, to deal with them as objects. But I grew up in a society where there are no such traditions of objectifying humans, on the contrary ...

CdZ: Obviously you were dealing with a colonial construction, wherein objectifying - in fact a kind of negating - the Other confirms one's positional difference as much as it establishes a relation of control and power.

E.N.: I wanted to commit suicide. By chance, I met some women in the community of aid workers and "development experts" - at that time I was studying and also working back in Tanzania as a teacher for Scandinavian aid workers - who used to meet and do some drawing, copying popular pictures of lions and such stuff. I joined them twice, then I had enough. But it triggered something in me, so strong. I told them, you know, within six months I am going to have an exhibition in the National Museum of Tanzania. It was pure madness. But I made it! At the Museum, I introduced myself as a social anthropologist. It was the last time I used that title to get status. When I look back, I can see that what I really did by putting up the exhibition was exactly the opposite of the objectifying approach. I exhibited myself as a subject, showing every part of myself, my problems, my hopes, my conflicts, my whole life. All over the museum, I pinned up paintings on cardboard, on barkcloth, on baskets, and poems in Swahili, English, Swedish, Chagga, Danish, ... It was a psychological survival.

CdZ: So, you tried to confront the discourse of anthropology, which produces meanings in society through the categorization and subordiantion of the Other, by reversing your experience in terms of position, and by clarifying its appeal to an imaginary order of nature. Resolutely you decided to expose yourself in the public space as object of the mastering gaze, as sign, as fiction. Although positioned as the object, as woman, as black, you nevertheless remain the subject of the look - mostly considered as a masculine position - because you occupy the position of an artist, because you rely on your anthropoligical experiences, and because the decision of your act of exposure was fully yours. Those shared positionalities within and against the social relations of race and femininity give your art its strength and erase differentiating power relations. Now, it becomes clear to me that your first attempt to study the anthropology of anthropologists was inducing your art of the self, of the artist.

E. N.: What anthropology asked from me - what the entire academic world and all the schools are asking from us women - is that we change our language and our way of thinking in order to be able to compete with the men, on their terms. But I had my own way. I was not a conscious feminist. I just didn't want to change in that way. So that was my revolt against an-

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Everlyn Nicodemus, *Silent strength nº 39*, 1990.

Everlyn Nicodemus, *Silent strenght nº 56*, 1990.

thropology.

CdZ: Can I assume that on the one hand your more public activity in the domain of anthropology turned into a more internal inquiry in the realm of art, and that, on the other hand, your private life got exposed in the public space? The significance of these positions needs to be carefully assessed, because this separation of spheres also structures the very meaning of the terms “masculine” and “feminine”. Without being overtly political, it seems that your art practice was always concerned with the spaces of representation of women?

E.N.: Yes, and I still have myself as my main object and I am a woman. My life experience is the life experience of a woman. If I one day meet an angel who paints, then I will admit that there could exist such a creature as a genderless artist - but not until then.

CdZ: You also told me that you have been researching and working with women in different countries and then making art works out of it.

E.N.: Yes, I called the project “Woman in the world”, I made it 1984-86 in Europe, Africa and India. Again, it was a revolt against anthropology, a field work against all rules. I had observed that women have been marginalized throughout the history, so I wanted to do the opposite. I was invited to a museum in Jutland, Denmark. And I wrote back: I have an idea, I would like to come to the Danish natives of your region. It shocked them, but of course there are natives in everyone’s native region. I want to talk with my sisters, my fellow women, I wrote. Out of it there will arise poems and paintings which I want to paint on the spot. The boss of the museum hesitated. But his wife supported me: “For once, you should listen to us! Don’t you think that we white women have problems? Everlyn is not going to interview us, she is going to tell us about herself. And we are going to tell her about us. That’s different.” And at last he agreed.

CdZ: How did you proceed?

E.N.: It took a lot of time and several trips to Denmark. At last, I had fifty hours of recorded tape. About everything in our woman lives, even about the most difficult things as rape and incest.

CdZ: Did you find similarities in their stories?

E.N.: Oh no, very different. But yes, more or less. We had the pains in common.

CdZ: Do you think it is really possible to turn such a sociologically based material into art and poetry?

E.N.: I hadn’t even thought about it. For weeks, I was paralysed by the absurdity of the task I had set myself. After listening again to the tapes, I discovered something. At the spots where we came to the deepest, to the unspeakable, where our eyes said: “I understand what you mean”, or where we cried together, at those spots which were the most painful and the most joyful, there was no language: it was silence. Suddenly a poem was running inside me. You will find it in my catalogue

from Denmark, is was called “The women’s silence”.

CdZ: It is true, women have always been silenced! Still, how can women speak and represent within a patriarchal culture which also defines the feminine as mute?

E.N.: Precisely! And out of that insight, I was then able to develop a pictorial language. The first paintings were painted in white on white, upon old womanmade linen, the ones you wanted to include in my exhibition. And things just came. I painted like mad, more or less twenty-four hours a day. In a few weeks I had painted the exhibition.

CdZ: What did it mean for yourself and for your art?

E.N.: I had found something, and that is what has kept me together as a human. With the help of other women, I had found my identity. From there, I found a way out of the suffering of racism. I am still traumatized by it, but not in the same way. My trauma now is more that of an artist. I don’t think my project was provocative, it was rather a very personal transcultural adventure. But still it provoked. I came to understand that the act of art is subversive, in every society. I didn’t know. I shouldn’t have made so many naive mistakes, believing in freedom of speech and so on. And I shouldn’t have had to experience all those pain full consequences ...

CdZ: I always wondered why you chose painting as your medium? Could the reason be that the practice of painting is itself stressed as “a site for the inscription of sexual difference”, or that the practice of painting still is displaced into the realm of self-expression, self-absorption, subjectivity?

E.N.: I was beaten up a lot as a child, because I was always saying NO. I didn’t learn to say yes. I haven’t learned that yet.

CdZ: But, whatever is said about painting today - as you know, other means are thought to be more contemporary - for you it is the best way of self-expression?

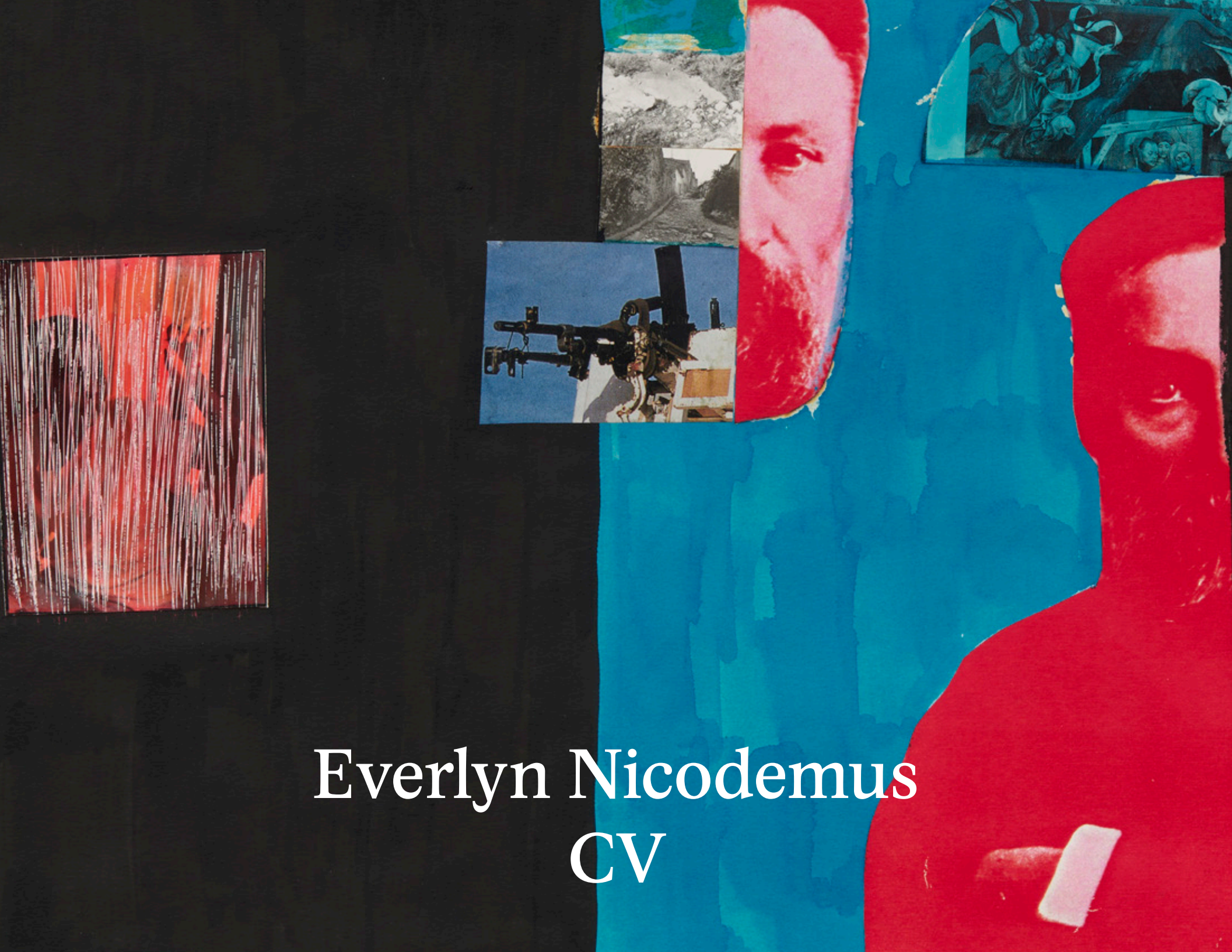
E.N.: Yes, I like to talk through painting.

CdZ: Or I would rather change the word, due to what you have told me. For you, it is the best way of self-exposure.

E.N.: I prefer self-exposure. Once, I was accused by an art-pro with whom I quarrelled of being an old fashion expressionist. But I don’t know what that means. Either expressionism is everything or it is nothing I feel connected with. Do we not express ourselves through art just as we express our ideas and emotions using words? Without all that, there would just remain muteness and autism. And talking about the “self” of the artist, isn’t that exactly where the act of art starts agreeing with our modern and universal concept of art! Even if many mainstream artists might talk about getting beyond subjectivity - still, it is their “selves” who decide so. What we commonly associate with “expressionism” - German, American -, for me hides an egocentric and imposing attitude. Somebody saying: look here at my fantastic feelings! To expose my-self through paintings has always meant to me to make something of myself visible to the Other, so that she/he can respond. Communication. And at the same time, you are exposing something to

yourself. An exploration of an enigma. Yes, I think that's rather what it is about for me, to expose and to explore myself.

Antwerp, July 1992.



Everlyn Nicodemus
CV

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EVERLYN NICODEMUS

Born 1954, Marangu, Kilimanjaro, Tanzania
Lives and works in Edinburgh, Scotland

EDUCATION

2007–2012	PhD by Published Work, Middlesex University, London.
1994–2000	Member of the Advisory Board of Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture, London.
1988	Guest student at the Academy of Fine Arts, Universität der Künste, Berlin, Germany.
1978–1982	Social Anthropology and Occupational Safety and Health Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden.

SELECT SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2022	Everlyn Nicodemus, Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, UK
2007	Bystander on Probation, The Brewery Arts Centre, Kendal, UK.
2006	Trauma and Art – The Hidden Scars, 198 Gallery, London.
2004	Crossing the Void, Strombeek Cultural Centre, Brussels, Belgium.
2000	Everlyn Nicodemus, Galerie Even-Aarde, Ghent, Belgium (cat).
1997	Displacements, Sala de Exposiciones, University of Alicante, Spain (cat.)
1996	Everlyn Nicodemus, Carte Blanche Gallery, Hasselt, Belgium.
1992	Vessels of Silence, Benedengalerij Cultureel Centrum Kortrijk, Belgium (cat).
1986	Woman in the World III, Sisirmanch, Calcutta, India (cat). Woman in the World, 2nd International Feminist Book Fair, Aker Brygge, Oslo, Norway (cat).
1985	Woman in the World II, National Museum, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (cat).
1984	Woman in the World I, Skive Museum, Skive, Denmark (cat).
1983	Everlyn Nicodemus, Kulturhuset, Stockholm, Sweden.

Everlyn Nicodemus, Africa Centre, Stockholm, Sweden.
Everlyn Nicodemus, Swedish Broadcasting Centre, Stockholm, Sweden.
1980 Everlyn Nicodemus, National Museum, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

SELECT GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2016 Hacking Habitat: Art of Control, Niet Normaal Foundation, Utrecht, Netherlands.
2012 All our Relations: 18th Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, Sydney, Australia.
2005 Métissages [Crossbreeding], Museum voor Industriële Archeologie en Textil (M.I.A.T.), Ghent, Belgium.
2003 De Draad van Ariadne: textiliennes in beeld [The Thread of Ariadne: Textiles in Art], Expo Site Delbar, Ronse, Belgium.
2000 Brussels, City at the Crossroads of Culture, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium.
Continental Shift: A Voyage between Cultures – An Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, Netherlands with the Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany, the \Staadsgalerij, Heerlen, Netherlands and the Musée d'Art moderne et d'Art contemporain, Liège, Belgium.
1999 Trafique [Traffic], S.M.A.K. off-site, Ghent, Belgium.
1998 The Fascinating Faces of Flanders: 58/98 Two hours wide or two hours long, Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon, Portugal and Hessenhuis, Antwerp, Belgium.
1997 Trapped Reality – Young Flemish Art, Centre d'art Santa Mònica, Barcelona, Spain.
1993 Présence Africaine [African Presence], Villa du Parc, Annemasse, France, WORKS WITHDRAWN.
Osaka Triennale '93, The International Triennial Competition of Painting, Osaka, Japan.
1990 Osaka Triennale '90, The International Triennial Competition of Painting, Osaka, Japan.
1989 TAJIRI Students Multi Media Mail Art Exhibition, Hochschule der Künste, Berlin, Germany.

AWARDS

Freelands Award 2022.
Flemish Community Stipend.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Flemish Community Collection, Brussels, Belgium.
National Bank of Belgium, Brussels, Belgium.

CONFERENCES, SYMPOSIUMS, AND LECTURES

2019	1–54 Forum, Somerset House, London.
2014	'From Wilhelmstraße to Shark Island', paper given at We are Tomorrow – Visions and Memories at the Berlin Conference in 1884, Literature Series: Literary Topographies of Colonialism, Ballhaus Naunynstraße, Berlin, Germany.
	'African History and Memory after Colonialism', keynote paper presented at BIGSAS – Festival of African and African-Diasporic Literatures: Literatures of/ and Memory 1884, 1904, 1914, Bayreuth University, Germany.
2012	Africa in Scotland – Scotland in Africa, symposium at University of Edinburgh, Scotland.
	'From Local to Global Perspectives – an Art History Afria Badly Needs', Peter Areh lecture, Ofu Obi Africa Centre, Enugu, Nigeria.
2009	'Creating the Global Image Archive', workshop at Goldsmiths College, University of London.
2008	What has Anthropology to do with Modern African Art?, seminar at Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK.
2007	'An Art History Africa Badly Needs', paper presented at Interrogating African

Modernity, symposium on modern African art history, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA.

2006 Dispossession and the Poetic Imagination – Trauma and Art – The Social Realities, symposium at Iniva, London.

2004 The Limits of Representation: On Trama and Visual Art, symposium at Cultuurcentrum Strombeek, Grimbergen, Belgium.

2003 'The Multiple Ethics of Contemporary Art Practice', panel at ARCO Madrid, Spain.

2002 On the Status, Role and Working Condition of the Artist in Africa, pan-African conference organized by the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

2001 Symposium Africa 2001: Representing African Art and Cultures, Japan Foundation, Osaka, Japan (published in 2005).

1998 Independent Practices, conference at Birmingham University, UK. 1996 Africa and Art Criticism, AICA symposium at Courtauld Institute, London. Multiculturalismo y la Situacion de Mestizaje Cultural [Multiculturalism and the Situation of Cultural Miscegenation], lectures at Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid and the Universities of Alicante and Murcia, Spain.

1995 'Shift!', paper presented at The ACASA Tenth Triennial Symposium on African Art, New York University, USA (published in 2008).

1994 'Dr Livingstone, I presume?', paper given at Curatorial Strategies for the Future, seminar at Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada (published in 1996).

1993 'The Centre of Otherness', paper presented at A New Internationalism, Iniva inaugural conference, Tate Gallery, London (published in 1994).