

Forward Broadcast: Conversation with Sue Baker Kenton

Rebecca Partridge, in conversation with artist Sue Baker Kenton

Rebecca Partridge: We are at Leicester Print Workshop in the run up to Forward Broadcast, an exhibition of prints which you have largely made here in the workshop. Could you describe the work and the installation?

Sue Baker Kenton: The installation comprises of two walls that face each other: on one side is an array of monochrome etchings of sitters under the age of 30. All the etchings are all mounted on boards with some of the portraits 'leaving' the wall onto free-standing panels. The wall opposite appears blank, but, as the light shifts, constellations of tiny portrait heads of an older generation are revealed, printed in transparent greys directly onto the wall. These sitters are gazing directly at us, unlike the subjects in the etchings who are gazing at their phones. None of the work is under glass, which emphasises the materiality of the surface. It's really important to me with this exhibition that it's a sensory, immersive experience and that the audience engages in a physical way. Integral to the installation is a sound piece which suggests auditory interference: sounds of everyday life and snippets of conversation which come and go, the content building then dropping out just as you begin to make sense of its patterns. On the large gallery window there are multiple drawings of heads which have been silkscreen printed onto the glass itself, and which cast shifting shadows across the space during the day.

RP: The title, Forward Broadcast makes me think about communication and the tools we use to do so, but does it also have another meaning?

SBK: The term forward broadcasting comes from cognitive science. It refers to the neurological processing of information, in particular the transition from unconscious to conscious perception in the amygdala[i]. It's about how we process sensory information as it finds its way into our consciousness, and perhaps also indirectly refers to our memories and feelings.

RP: So the title points to the emotional, interpersonal nature of your work. We've previously talked about that you're attempting to explore the sitters' humanity, as well as make a connection with their lived experience. Does this connect to the sensory experience you are talking about?

SBK: Yes, I'm thinking about both aspects. When working with these portraits I'm not interested in a drawn photographic representation but with the act of drawing itself. My emotional connection with the subject happens through this process of



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Exhibition install (2021) etchings on board. Photo: Paul Lapsley

Figure 2. Artwork for window images (2012) Photo-screen acetates Photo: Artist

making – my experience with both the surface of the plate and the subject is temporal. Etching is sequential and labour intensive.

RP: We also discussed “the gaze” and you spoke about how being the subject of the gaze the sitter becomes objectified... Wanting to connect with someone’s real experience and their humanity, to their personhood rather than as an object, is counter to the objectification of the traditional “gaze” in some ways, isn’t it?

SBK: I am working on large steel etching plates as a deliberate choice. As a surface it is malleable and responsive, but steel plate has a greater material resistance than traditional copper etching plate. These plates bear the traces of time spent pushing things around, so there is an analogue history and at this scale (62 x 50cm) and there is a physicality of working on them. My relationship with the metal creates and revives memories of touch and time, there is an intimacy in this prolonged contact. This connection with the subject or sitter is how I clarify my thinking when I’m making work.

RP: We are constantly presented with airbrushed and flattering images of people on social media, and it strikes me that your portraits of the younger people resist this. There seems to be a way that you use gesture and mark making which counteracts that superficiality, almost as if you’re pulling out the character through the process.

SBK: I am drawn to imperfection, individuality and the observed ‘particular’. I make reference to familiar historical forms of the portrait, but use these associations in a contemporary context. I’m thinking about the exterior we present as we negotiate the world, and how this both reveals and hides our interior lives. The accumulation of drawn marks, some tentative, some urgent, others assured, which are possible within the etching process, document my responses to a shifting understanding of the subject.

RP: There’s a fragility in the images of the older generation, in an obvious way – you can see through the mark making that they’re very much aged, but it sounds like you’re describing a fragility in the images of the young people as well, albeit in a less direct way. Do you think that capturing people absorbed in something else, like their phone, brings out a vulnerability?

SBK: Yes because they’re off guard. They have been caught when they’re not consciously presenting themselves to the world, not mediating their image on social media platforms to be ‘gazed’ at. These subjects are introspective. The viewpoint that I present in the etchings is deliberately voyeuristic in order to direct the audience, rather than objectify the sitter, although I realise that there may be some confliction here. I am pursuing the idea that the passivity of the sitters in theory[iii] encourages the audience to engage, to stare and to linger.

RP: The young people you depict are all under 30, and the older generation are in their 80s and 90s. Could the title Forward Broadcast

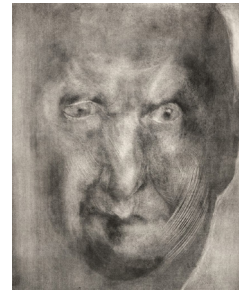


Figure 3



Figure 4

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also relate to a message that the older generation might want to tell the younger generation, or refer to a conversation between generations?

SKB: One of the aims of this body of work was to start a multi-generational conversation about how we are 'seen' in the world and the disjunct in experience across the generations. I'm interested in the idea of self-presentation and how that affects identity or how identity affects that: in relation to the changing role of the photographic image.

RP: Well this brings us to the question of what is of the moment and what's timeless. On one hand we've got a conversation about the digital and the analogue, and a conversation about two different generations. In terms of our relationship to the image there has probably never been a starker difference between the oldest and youngest generations today, the latter never having experienced life before the internet – so it's very poignant to have these two particular generations. We could speculate about the affect the proliferation of images has had on our attention spans. On the other hand, self-representation is part of our humanity – and you're suggesting that the importance of constructing our identity is timeless.

SBK: Yes, we could trace this through the various forms of historical portraiture. Commissioned portraits were about the status of the sitter, whereas artists' self-portraits were both a training ground and a way to market their skills. Both are means by which the subject places themselves in society. Within portraiture, the move into naturalism marked a shift, with images becoming not so much about the sitter, but about the artists' ideas about the sitter. The works here are drawn in a classical way and at first glance they appear familiar and accessible within the realm of contemporary representation, but I'm predominantly concerned with that interface where my ideas meet the sitters ideas about themselves in the world.

RP: The way that this show is installed is quite sculptural and immersive, accompanied by your sound piece.

SBK: Yes. Traditional portraiture is subverted here by scale and by how the works are installed. The images are closely cropped, they are not glazed or presented in the way that you would traditionally hang portraits, they overlap, float in the space and repeat. The installation is three dimensional and sculptural. The smaller faces are hardly visible on the walls, which means that the audience have to search for these images, they are invited to negotiate the space to engage with the work, constantly shifting their physical relationship to it in order to find it.

The sound piece, which was developed in collaboration with my daughter, is built around the associations the sounds of everyday life trigger in us. But again the audience is required to engage attentively and it takes personal effort to process this familiar but fugitive auditory information.[iii]



Figure 5

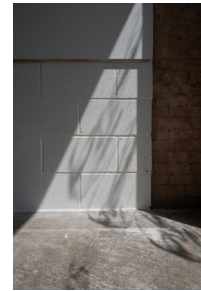


Figure 6

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RP: There's two different senses of perception that we are talking about in relation to your work; there is self-perception as an idea of who we are and then there is physical perception and sensations. There is a feeling of fragmentation and disruption in the way you have installed the exhibition and also in your sound piece – does this relate to the decline in cognition that may be experienced in old age?

SBK: The fragmentation is somewhat referring to compromised sensory perception and the fragility of self-perception. The sound piece is one of the clues. It describes a fragmented auditory experience of the world as senses fail, it is disorientating. I'm mooting that for the younger generation there is an alternative but equivalent impoverishment of sensory interaction, when using digital communication. Social 'tells', such as the length of gaze or gestures, that add meaning to communication, are obfuscated and compromised.[iv]

RP: So it's physical and psychological, it's a kind of holistic loss.

SBK: Our identities are partly formed by our memory of the past. These collective memories are compromised when witnesses to past events are lost and when cognitive or perceptual faculties weaken and fail. In this work, the loss of visibility is directly related to the desire for engagement. This physical and psychological loss is echoed in the young people whose interpersonal relationships and sensory perception are both mediated through the filter of a screen. I am asking what does that do to the way we process and interact? How does that ultimately change the way in which we present ourselves to the world?

RP: When we talk about loss and vulnerability, it could seem melancholy yet this is not the feeling you get in the space. The title also has a sense of optimism, forward broadcasting, there is a direction to it.

SBK: I don't see it as sad. The human condition is a fact of life. Each society or generation has its own particular challenges. Is this self-curation by the younger generation now another ritual for self-validation, which becomes a social performance once images are uploaded onto a digital platform? The work shown here and the ideas informing it are not intended to make grand statements, instead, they are more of an update, a broadcast, an observation of the life around me.

RP: This exhibition forms part of a year-long Arts Council funded research project, can you say something about how you think it will develop?

SBK: I am interested in seeing what the display of the exhibition reveals in terms of audience feedback as well as giving me a chance to step back and see the work in one immersive space. I'm intrigued by how this might inform future drawing enquiry and support my research into cognitive behaviour. Printmaking is pivotal in how I extend my enquiry, as it offers me the opportunity to create images both as physical analogue objects and as multiples

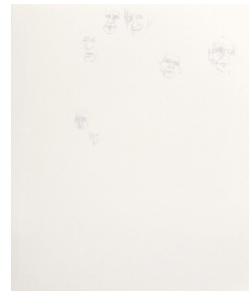


Figure 7

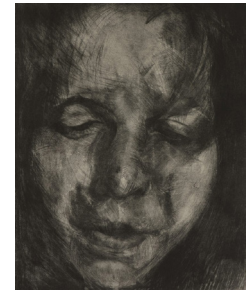


Figure 8

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Figure 7. Wall install (2021) Silkscreen Photo: Artist
Figure 8. Miriana (2021) Etching, 620 x 500mm. Photo: Patrick Mock

I'm captured by James Elkin's statement: *'Each act of vision mingles seeing with not seeing, so that vision can become less a way of gathering information than avoiding it'* [v]

Where all this will lead is an exciting but unknown prospect.

FOOTNOTES

[i] Kandel. Eric. R. (2012) *The Age of Insight* 1st ed. New York: Random House p.390-391

[ii] Kandel. Eric. R. (2012) *The Age of Insight* 1st ed. New York: Random House p.384-385

[iii] <https://www.suebakerkenton.com/projects/forward-broadcast> web link to soundscape

[iv] Argyle, M. (1967) *The psychology of Intrapersonal Behaviour*, 5th ed. London; Penguin Books. p.24- 44

[v] Elkins, J. (1996) *The Object Stares Back*, .Harvest ed. USA; Simon & Schuster/Harvest. p.201

AUTHOR

Rebecca Partridge is an artist, writer and curator based in London. Since graduating from the Royal Academy Schools in 2007 she has been exhibiting internationally. Over the past ten years she has curated a series of exhibitions taking place in Germany, Norway and the U.K, most recently 'Scaling The Sublime' at Nottingham University which she co-curated in 2018, followed by 'In Pursuit of Elusive Horizons' at Parafin Gallery, London. She is a Lecturer in Fine Art at West Dean College of Art and Conservation.

<https://rebeccapartridge.com>

ARTIST

Sue Baker Kenton is a British artist who lives and works in Buckinghamshire, London and Leicester. Alongside her ongoing studio practice Sue works on collaborative projects, commissions and undertakes international residencies. She was appointed etching fellow at the RA Schools, Royal Academy of Arts, (2016 – 2019), and has been a specialist tutor UAL Foundation in Art & Design at City Lit since 2014. She exhibits nationally and internationally and her work is held in public and private collections including the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. For more information about the exhibition and her gallery residency please visit <https://www.suebakerkenton.com/projects/forward-broadcast>

For updates and news @sue_bkstudio



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

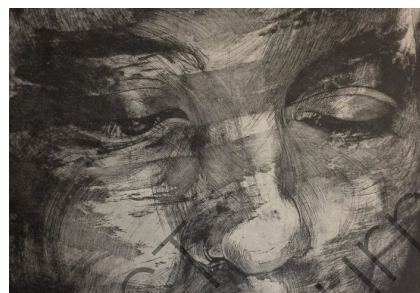


Figure 12

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IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1. Exhibition install (2021) etchings on board. Photo: Paul Lapsley

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Figure 2. Artwork for window images (2012) Photo-screen acetates Photo: Artist

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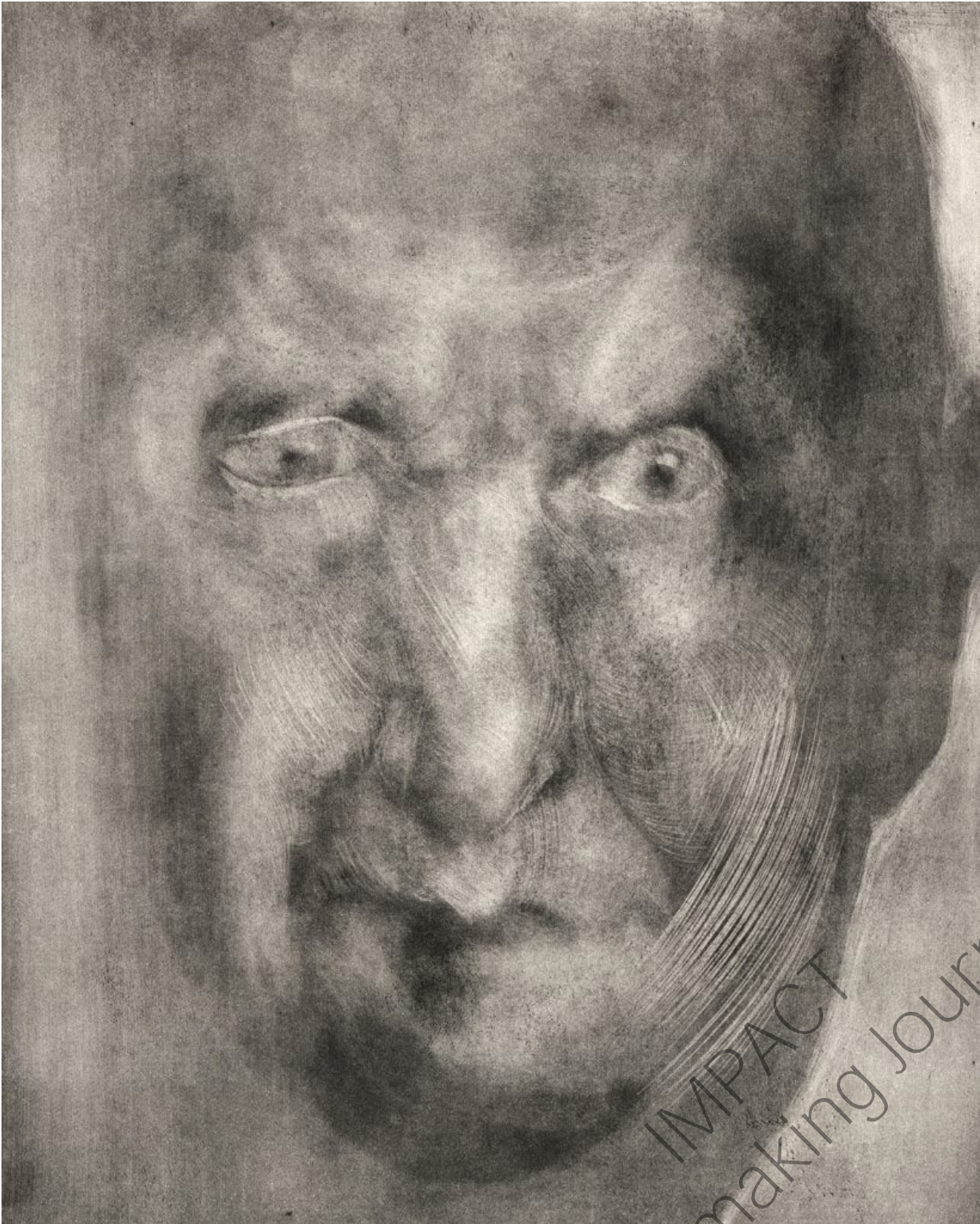


Figure 3. Portrait (2012) Spit Bite Etching, 620 x 500mm Photo: Artist



Figure 4. Wall single detail (2021) Silkscreen, head 70 x 35mm. Photo: Paul Lapsley

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Figure 5. Artwork for walls (2021) Photocopies of Monotypes. Photo: Keith Allot

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Figure 6. Cast Shadows from window (2021) Silkscreen. Photo: Paul Lapsley

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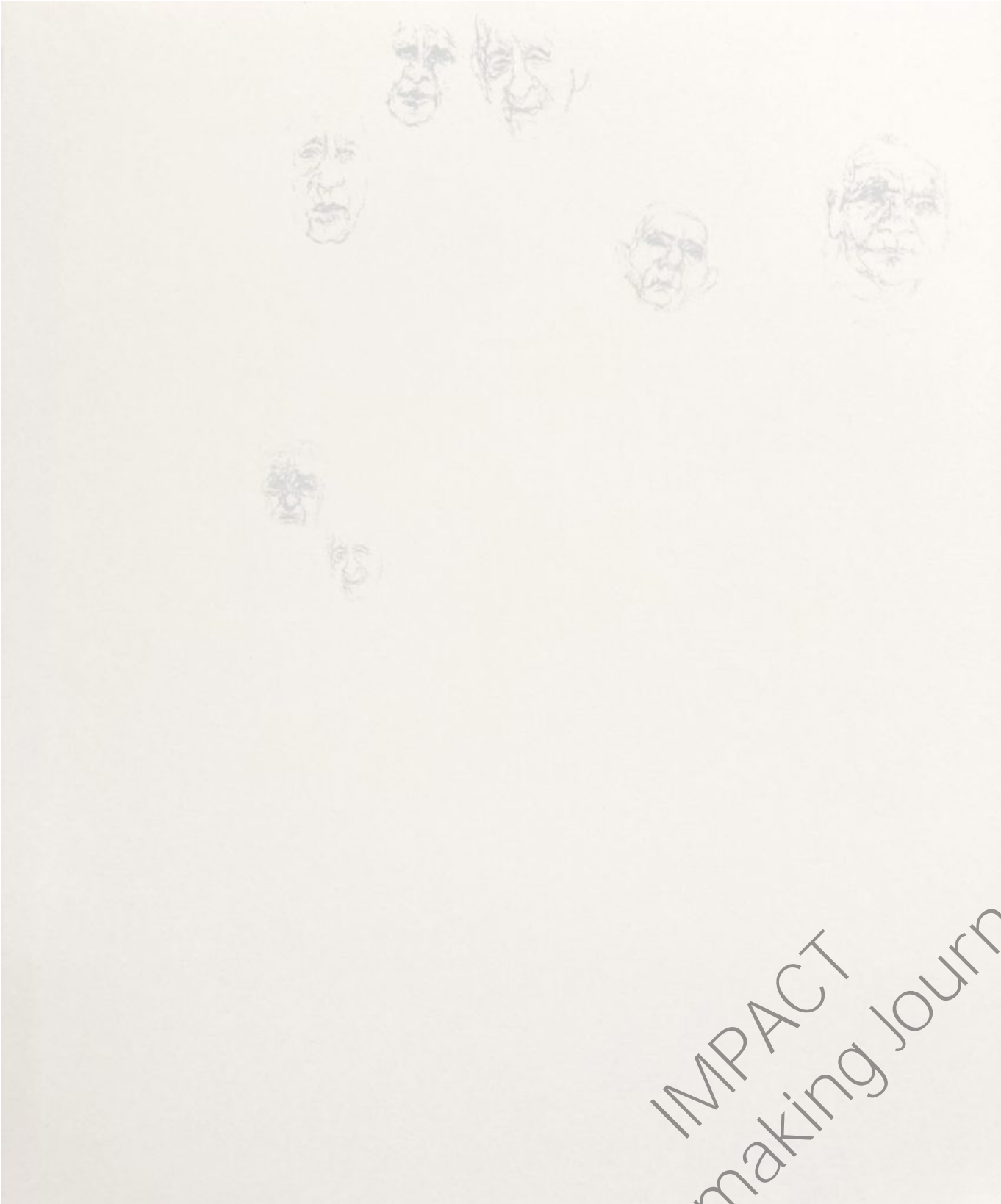


Figure 7. Wall install (2021) Silkscreen Photo: Artist

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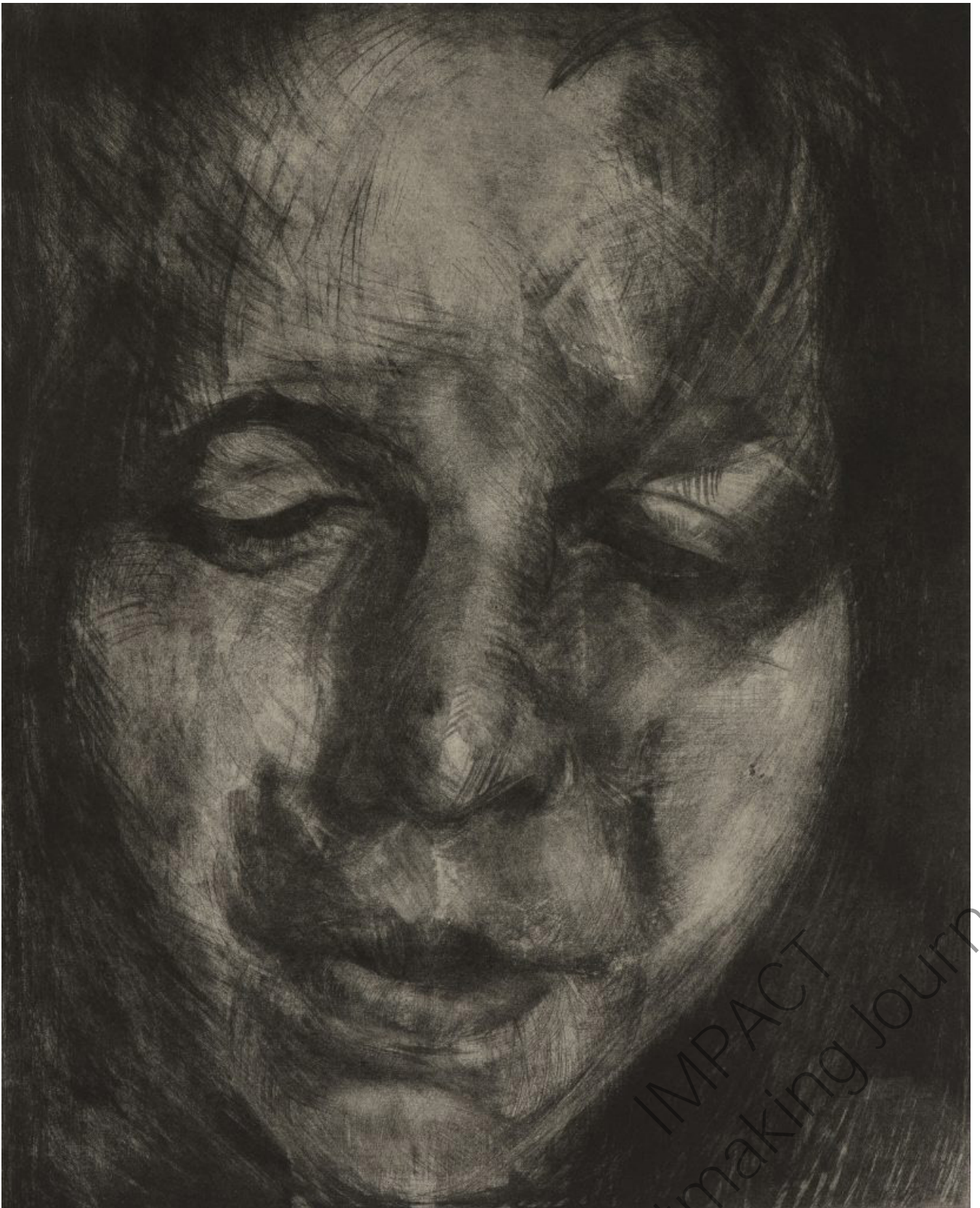


Figure 8. Miriana (2021) Etching, 620 x 500mm. Photo: Patrick Mock

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Figure 9. Exhibition install (2021) etchings on board. Photo: Artist



Figure 10. Exhibition install – cast shadows (2021) Photo: Artist

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Figure 11. Install overview- detail (2021) Photo: Paul Lapsley



Figure 12. Camilla detail (2021) Etching, 620 x 500mm Photo: Artist

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