



MORPH
A Solo Exhibition by Lena Hugo
20 MAR - 1 MAY 2022



MORPH: NEW WORKS BY LENA HUGO AT
GALLERY@GLEN CARLOU
By Peter Machen

Lena Hugo's latest exhibition 'Morph' offers a fragmented portrait of a fractured period of time, both in the artist's life and that of the planet. But it is also a time of transformation, as fragments of the personal and political past rearrange themselves into new constellations of power.

'Morph' comprises a collection of figurative pastel and charcoal drawings, relief prints and mixed-media artworks that are unified by their diversity and the delicate empathy that is key to Hugo's work. All the works were made in the course of the pandemic period, during which new frameworks began to emerge, both in terms of representation and broader reality, including, for example, the heightened presence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the rise of the movement for trans rights, and an increased recognition of both animal sentience and the impact of biodiversity loss.

But while the works reflect the political and cultural shifts and schisms of the pandemic and the period that immediately preceded it, the show is essentially an interior journey for Hugo – although the point of separation between the self and the world is one that is itself in a state of shift. It is, says Hugo, the first time that she has made a show about herself (previous exhibitions explored, for example, the environmental impact of our urge to leave a legacy, the pseudoscience of physiognomy, and our relationship to work).

In her artist statement, Hugo quotes Ovid's *Metamorphosis*: "I intend to speak of forms changed into new entities." In the poem, Daphne, the mythological nymph of Arcadia, becomes a universal symbol of imperial power through victory – but not her own. She is transformed into a laurel tree in order to escape Apollo's advances, but loses her sense of self and her autonomy. She is henceforth paraded as a symbol of Apollo's victory and her name is not mentioned in the poem again.

"It all began with an incident in 2019, where my face was rearranged and I was almost killed by a burglar at my house/studio," says Hugo. "Lots of people saw it as a gender-motivated

crime. But I disagree. I was just in the guy's way and, a month later, a young male was killed, in his own home, just a few blocks from my house." Hugo subsequently began to notice many other incidents of violence against men. She decided to begin with a series of vulnerable men, because, as she says, "these kinds of violent acts can happen to them too" and, at the same time, encourage women, "who can and should protect themselves".

The exhibition includes these vulnerable male nudes, as well as other nudes, portraits of women, a series of plant and animal drawings, and abstract de-constructed works. The portrait drawings are for the most part depictions of Daphne, a weak and tragic figure whose transformation gave her transgressor an even stronger hold over her. Yet, at the same time, the body of work celebrates the strength of women.

'Morph' investigates the ambiguous and changeable nature of power. It considers our perceptions of power over and in relation to the other, whether it be another person, an animal, or the environment itself. The show also explores the temporality of power and how it can shift or invert, depending on random and unstable circumstances.

Listening to Lena talk about her personal experience and the transformation it has engendered, both in her life and her work, it's clear that the process is still ongoing. Like the changing nature of power and representation, transformation is something that is never complete but always part of a broader process that takes place in a wider and uncertain world.





ABOUT LENA HUGO

Lena Hugo has been working as a full-time artist since graduating from the University of Pretoria in 1996.

Her hyper realistic drawings of people are predominantly executed in pastel, although she does include alternative mediums such as oils, fibre arts and relief printing from time to time.

While her thematic content has focussed largely on portraits of rural workers in the past, her interests also extend to the universal human condition and transient, fragile nature. Currently she is exploring the ambiguous and changeable nature of power.

She has exhibited widely in South Africa as well as abroad. Her works are held in noteworthy corporate collections like Standard Chartered Bank - London, University of Johannesburg, CCMA, UNISA, William Humphreys Gallery, Pretoria Art Museum, The National Museum of China as well as private collectors worldwide.

She has been a finalist in the BP Portrait Awards - London, and in most major art competitions in South Africa. She won the Bettie Cilliers-Barnard award for painting.

MORPH

Drawing from mythology & history, an outline of the content depicted in the artworks - the artist's statement.

"I intend to speak of forms changed into new entities"
- Ovid, Metamorphosis, line 1 & 2

In Ovid's epic poem Metamorphosis - Daphne, the mythological nymph of Arcadia, becomes a universal symbol of imperial power through victory. But not her own. Her transformation into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's advances, causes her to lose her sense of self and her autonomy. She is henceforth paraded as a symbol of Apollo's victory and the name 'Daphne' is never mentioned in the poem again.

The exhibition investigates the ambiguous and changeable nature of power. It considers our perception of power over or in relation to another person /creature /vegetation / land area at a given time and how this can be overturned, depending on random and unstable circumstances. It also questions traditional interpretations of gender conventions in terms of power monopolization: the powerful male as opposed to the weak female.

Transformation or metamorphoses is explored especially as it is viewed through mythology and used to express metaphors

for power thus lost or gained. Transformation has been an essential theme in folklore and religious material. In mythology, power could instantly be enhanced or destroyed when a person was transformed into a mixed or pure animal form (theriomorphic transformation) or vegetable form (phytomorphic transformation).

Change often involved a transition period in which boundaries were broken and chaos ruled, only to be overcome as order was restored. The theriomorphic form could also be associated with a manifestation of chaos - something which does not fit into the natural order of things like a taboo, for example monsters in demonic traditions. But the opposite in some cases was also supposed to be true: for example, transformations in creation myths or transformations of self for the purpose of transcendence.

In contemporary times and with the rise of environmentalism there exists a more sympathetic view towards transmutation as depicted in popular culture. There is often a cult like 'worship' of fictional superheroes in possession of animal-like powers or empathy expressed toward hybrids when the viewer is allowed audience to their private inner turmoil.

Yet, little more than a century ago for women especially - if not reconciled to the role of mother and housewife - were surprisingly often viewed as a "predatory beast" in the form of the "femme fatale". Some of the titles of literary works by Charles Baudelaire during the time, in which females were the main characters, give us clear examples: "*The metamorphoses of the*

vampire", "*The dancing serpent*" and "*The flowers of evil*", to name a few. Gender expectations are still rigid today, not allowing tolerance for strength in women or weakness in males.

Morph consists of a collection of figurative pastel and charcoal drawings, relief printing and mixed media artworks depicting vulnerable male nudes and portraits of strong women. The exhibition also includes a series of plant and animal drawings and abstract 'de-constructed' artworks.

While quite a few portrait drawings are depictions of Daphne, I want to emphasize the strength that women possess, rather than their perceived weaknesses. The Iris is appropriated as a symbol for women's strength and was a popular design feature during the Art Nouveau period - the same period in which ideas of women as femme fatale abounded. A sensual and dangerous looking plant, like Georgia O'Keeffe's closely cropped paintings of flowers, which were accepted by the art public of her day to be depictions of female genitalia - a view which she strongly rejected throughout her whole life.

The Iris is also named after the mythological goddess Iris, a messenger goddess who used her rainbow and golden wings for communication between different mythological gods or between humans - especially women - and the heavenly spheres. Similarly, pigeons, doves, birds, or any winged creature, were viewed as vehicles for messages or spiritual communication. As such there are several drawings of birds included in this exhibition. Eve is also depicted with a

skeleton of a serpent - or devil in animal form - in her hair, she was the personification of the first femme fatale according to many.

Another central figure in the exhibition is a large portrait of a woman holding an AK-47 rifle and surrounded by floral motifs and palm fronds. This imagery is often used in contemporary African art and becoming a typical symbol of the strong nurturer who can defend herself, her family, and her natural environment. This drawing titled Gaia: represents the universal situation in which many African and middle Eastern women find themselves today. The image was adapted from a media photograph of an Afghan girl who shot and killed six Taliban members who killed her parents, thereby saving herself and her younger brother from kidnapping. This is a real-life example of a woman taking power into her own hands and refusing to surrender. Subsequently, I have chosen to donate proceeds from the sale of this specific artwork to the Ukraine Embassy in South Africa. They recently opened a designated account for donations aimed at humanitarian aid for Ukraine.

A part of the exhibition is also devoted to the fragile male. Male as fragile, not because of any feminist propensities on my part, but rather because of an acknowledgement, in empathy, of his weaknesses. To view the cosmos lashing out its capricious onslaughts against male and female alike and in the same measure, is to acknowledge the human condition in its totality. Male nudes are here often depicted sharing the picture plane with twisted pieces of draperies or cloth resembling a bed sheet, often knotted. This may represent an evil presence in the form

of a nightmare or an intruder or something that will tie and bond. In mythology, men were equally harassed by enemies or over-zealous lovers and often faced the penalty of being abducted, raped, or transformed into an animal- or plant form.

A series of de-constructed artworks represent an in-between state of chaos and consequential transformation. For this purpose, selected artworks were taken apart or destroyed and re-assembled to stand as a metaphor for birth, new life, complete change, and a new order.

In the wonderful and mysterious world of nature, animals can hide from predators or predators can lure their prey, by pretending to be what they are not, by "transforming" themselves into something attractive, disgusting, invisible or even something resembling a different species. When an animal can utilise this ability successfully, it may mean the difference between life and death. Lena is hopeful that through this exhibition of works we may do introspection and attempt -if we dare- to adapt or transform our spirit, to the point of staring our subconscious in the eye. The exhibition is an expression of hope for humanity, to survive and to be resilient and creative, in the face of peril and external change.



Lena Hugo
DE-CONSTRUCTED IRISES I
lino print and enamel paint
on wooden board
23cm x 38cm
R8 500



Lena Hugo
DE-CONSTRUCTED IRISES II
lino print and enamel paint
on wooden board
23cm x 38cm
R8 500



Lena Hugo
DE-CONSTRUCTED IRISES III
lino print and enamel paint
on wooden board
23cm x 38cm
R8 500



Lena Hugo
DE-CONSTRUCTED SKELETON
Oil on wooden board
50cm x 86cm
R28 000



Lena Hugo
DE-CONSTRUCTED LEAVES
Pastel, tea, and acrylic paint
on wooden board
87cm x 49cm
R18 000



Lena Hugo
FEMME FATALE I
Pastel on wooden board
75cm x 60cm
R32 000



Lena Hugo
SILENCE

Pastel and oil on wooden board
80cm x 60cm
R31 000



Lena Hugo
FEMME FATALE II
Pastel on wooden board
80cm x 60cm
R32 000



Lena Hugo
THE UNWELCOME VISITOR I
Pastel on paper
50cm x 70cm
R25 000



Lena Hugo
FEMME FATALE III
Pastel on wooden board
50cm x 137cm
R63 000



Lena Hugo
FEAR ANGRY
Pastel and black board paint
on wooden board
60cm x 80cm
R21 000



Lena Hugo
MARRIAGE PROPOSAL
Pastel on wooden board
122cm x 144cm
R 73 000



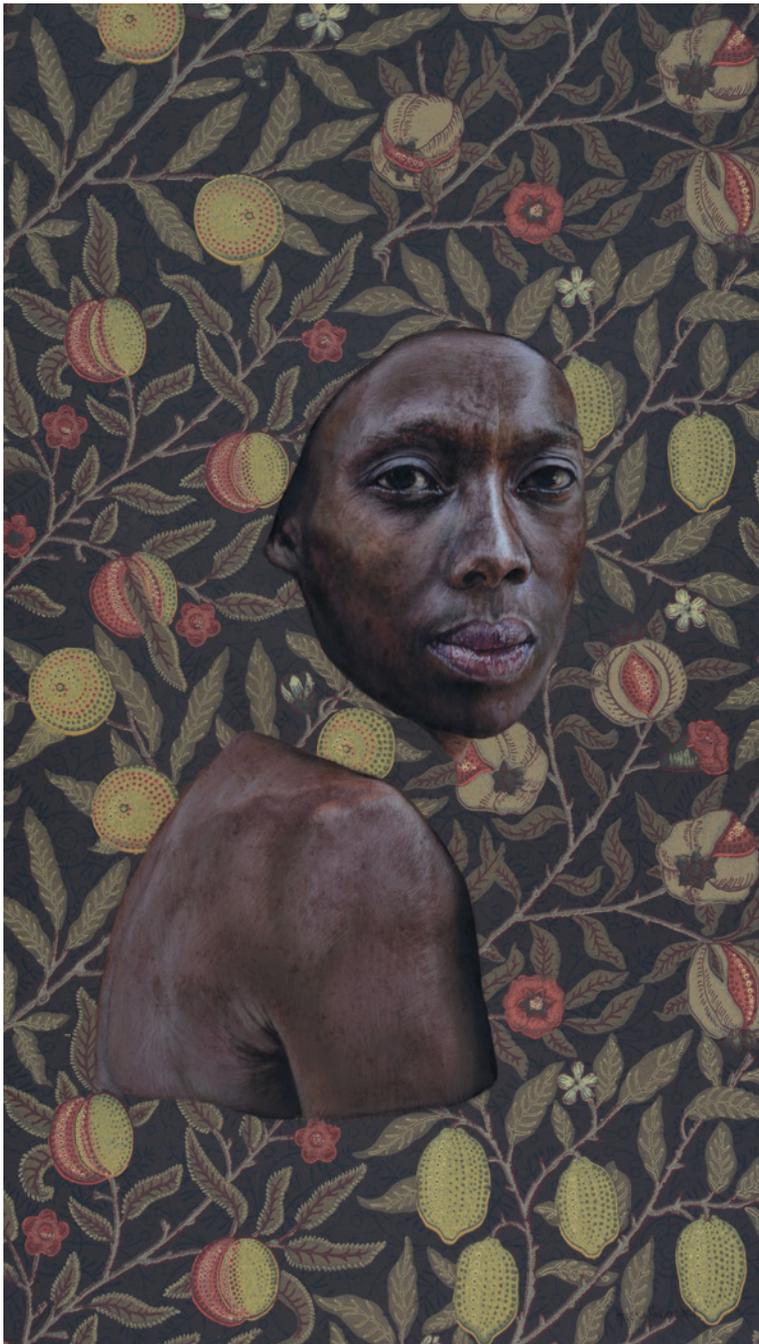
Lena Hugo
FALLING DOVE I
Pastel on wooden board
45cm x 50cm
R17 000



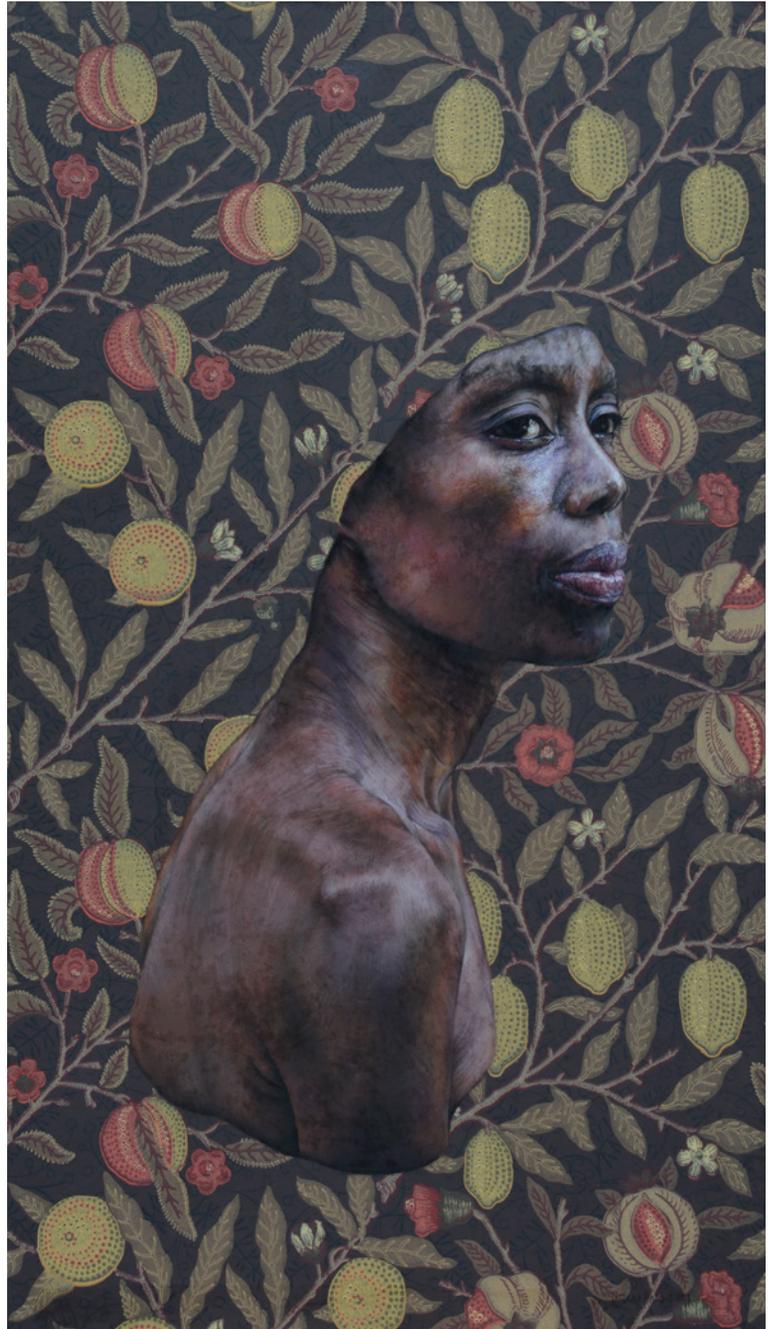
Lena Hugo
FALLING DOVE II
Pastel on wooden board
45cm x 50cm
R17 000



Lena Hugo
FALLING DOVE III
Pastel on wooden board
45cm x 50cm
R17 000



Lena Hugo
IN A MAN'S GARDEN I
Pastel and wallpaper
on wooden board
90cm x 52cm
R45 000



Lena Hugo
IN A MAN'S GARDEN II
Pastel and wallpaper
on wooden board
90cm x 25cm
R45 000



Lena Hugo
DAPHNE IV
Pastel, lino print and acrylic
paint on wooden board
122cm x 88cm
R76 000



Lena Hugo
SCARED TREE
Pastel and lino print on wooden board
100cm x 80cm
R30 000



Lena Hugo
DAPHNE II
Pastel, lino print and acrylic paint on wooden board
100cm x 88cm
R72 000



Lena Hugo
DAPHNE III
Pastel, lino print and acrylic paint on wooden board
100cm x 88cm
R72 000



Left
Lena Hugo
EVE
Pastel, lino print and acrylic
paint on wooden board
112cm x 42cm
R59 800

Right
Lena Hugo
DAPHNE I
Pastel, lino print and acrylic
paint on wooden board
112cm x 42cm
R59 800





As a central figure in the exhibition, this work is a symbol of the strong nurturer who can defend herself, her family, and her natural environment. It represents the universal situation in which many African and middle Eastern women find themselves today.

The image was adapted from a media photograph of an Afghan girl who shot and killed six Taliban members who killed her parents, thereby saving herself and her younger brother from kidnapping. This is a real-life example of a woman taking power into her own hands and refusing to surrender.

Subsequently, Lena Hugo has chosen to donate proceeds from the sale of this specific artwork to the Ukraine Embassy in South Africa, who recently opened a designated account for donations aimed at humanitarian aid for Ukraine.

Lena Hugo
GAIA
Pastel, acrylic paint
and wallpaper on
wooden board
160cm 122cm
R87 000



Lena Hugo
BLACK GOLD
Oil on wooden board
47cm x 35cm
R25 000



from left to right

Lena Hugo
THE LADY AND THE REMEDY
Lino print on handmade algae paper
ED 10/26 varied edition
35cm x 25cm
R4 500

Lena Hugo
THE LADY AND THE REMEDY
Lino print on white paper
ED 15/26 varied edition
35cm x 25cm
R4 500

Lena Hugo
THE LADY AND THE REMEDY
Lino print on handmade banana paper
ED 6/26 varied edition
35cm x 25cm
R4 500



from left to right

Lena Hugo
POSE AS A WINDSWEPT TREE I
Woodless charcoal on paper
42cm x 30cm
R6 000

Lena Hugo
POSE AS A WINDSWEPT TREE II
Woodless charcoal on paper
42cm x 30cm
R6 000

Lena Hugo
POSE AS A WINDSWEPT TREE III
Woodless charcoal on paper
42cm x 30cm
R6 000



clockwise from left to right

Lena Hugo - POSE AS A WINDSWEPT TREE IV
Woodless charcoal on paper, 42cm x 30cm
R6 000

Lena Hugo - POSE AS A WINDSWEPT TREE V
Woodless charcoal on paper, 42cm x 30cm
R6 000

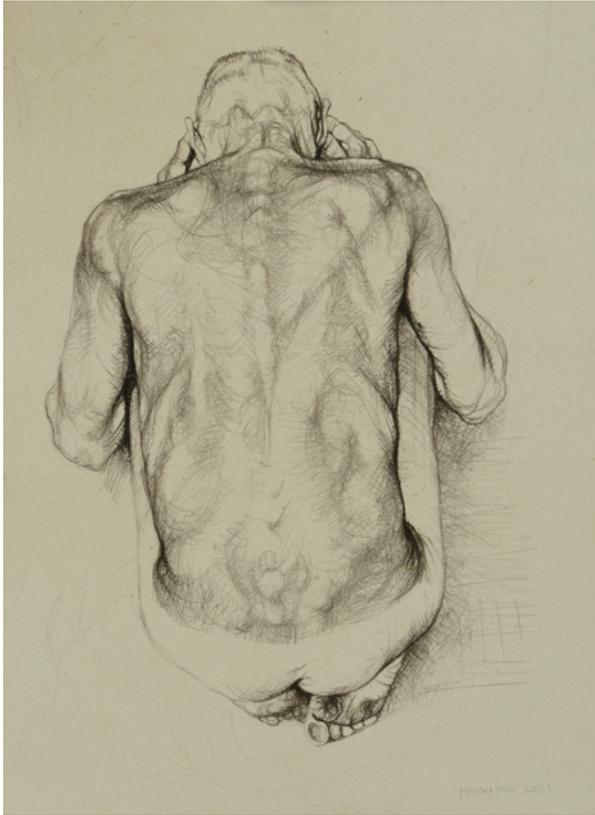
Lena Hugo - POSE AS A WINDSWEPT TREE VI
Woodless charcoal on paper, 42cm x 30cm
R6 000

Lena Hugo - POSE AS A WINDSWEPT TREE VII
Woodless charcoal on paper, 42cm x 30cm
R6 000





Lena Hugo
THE UNWELCOME VISITOR II
Pastel on acid free sanded paper
23cm x 30.5cm
R8 500



left

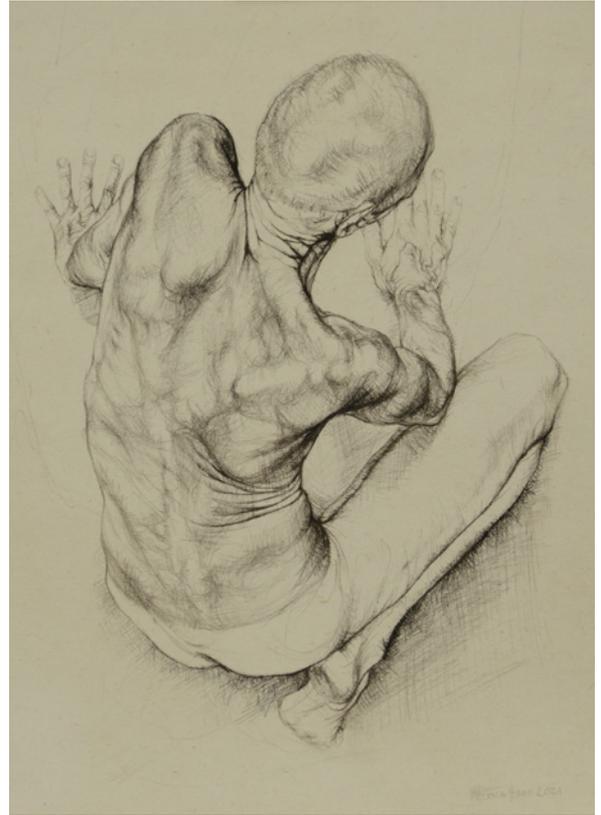
Lena Hugo

POSE AS A ROCK I

Woodless charcoal on
sugarcane bagasse paper

21cm x 15cm

R2 600



right

Lena Hugo

POSE AS A ROCK II

Woodless charcoal on
sugarcane bagasse paper

21cm x 15cm

R2 600



Lena Hugo
STUFFED FOR POSTERITY
Pastel on wooden board
112cm x 100cm
R66 000



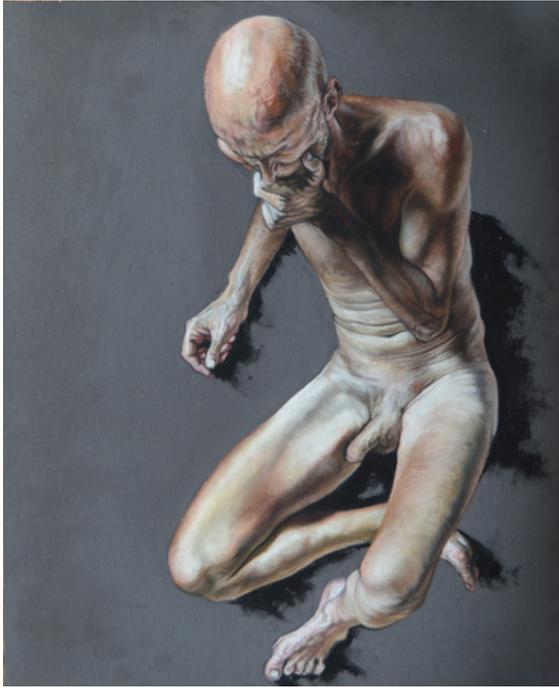
clockwise from left to right

Lena Hugo
POSE AS A BIRD I
Woodless charcoal on sugarcane
bagasse paper, 30cm x 30cm
R5 000

Lena Hugo
POSE AS A BIRD II
Woodless charcoal on sugarcane
bagasse paper, 30cm x 30cm
R5 000

Lena Hugo
POSE AS A BIRD III
Woodless charcoal on sugarcane
bagasse paper, 30cm x 30cm
R5 000





Lena Hugo
CONTEMPLATING MALE FIGURE
Pastel on sanded paper
28cm x 23cm
R8 500



Lena Hugo
THE UNWELCOME VISITOR III
Pastel on acid free sanded paper
23cm x 30.5cm
R8 500



Lena Hugo
THE FIGHT
Pastel on acid free sanded paper
30.5cm x 23cm
R8 500

Viewing & Buying Art on this Exhibition

Buying

All **sales** and **enquiries** may be directed to our gallery manager Christa Swart at **gallery@glencarlou.co.za**

Payments may be made via electronic fund transfer. All prices as listed in catalogue are in ZAR including VAT.

All artworks purchased are to remain on exhibition until the end date of 1 May 2022.

Reservations are only valid for 48 hours pending receipt of proof of payment.

Viewing

As per the current guidelines on the gathering of crowds in public spaces, visitors are welcome to attend the exhibition during gallery hours.

All COVID-19 health and safety protocols are implemented at our venue.

All artworks on exhibition are illustrated and catalogued in this document.

Shipping

All **sold items** may be collected or shipped as from 2 May 2022.

Kindly email your **shipping requirements** to Christa Swart at **gallery@glencarlou.co.za** We will arrange competitive quotations for your perusal and approval.

Buyers preferring to make use of their own shipping arrangements should advise accordingly.

Packing, courier and shipping fees are for the buyer's account.

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