



KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT

CARPENTERSWORKSHOP GALLERY

What makes African art special, is that when you look at an African work of art, it looks back at you.

— Kendell Geers

Flesh of the Spirit – Kendell Geers

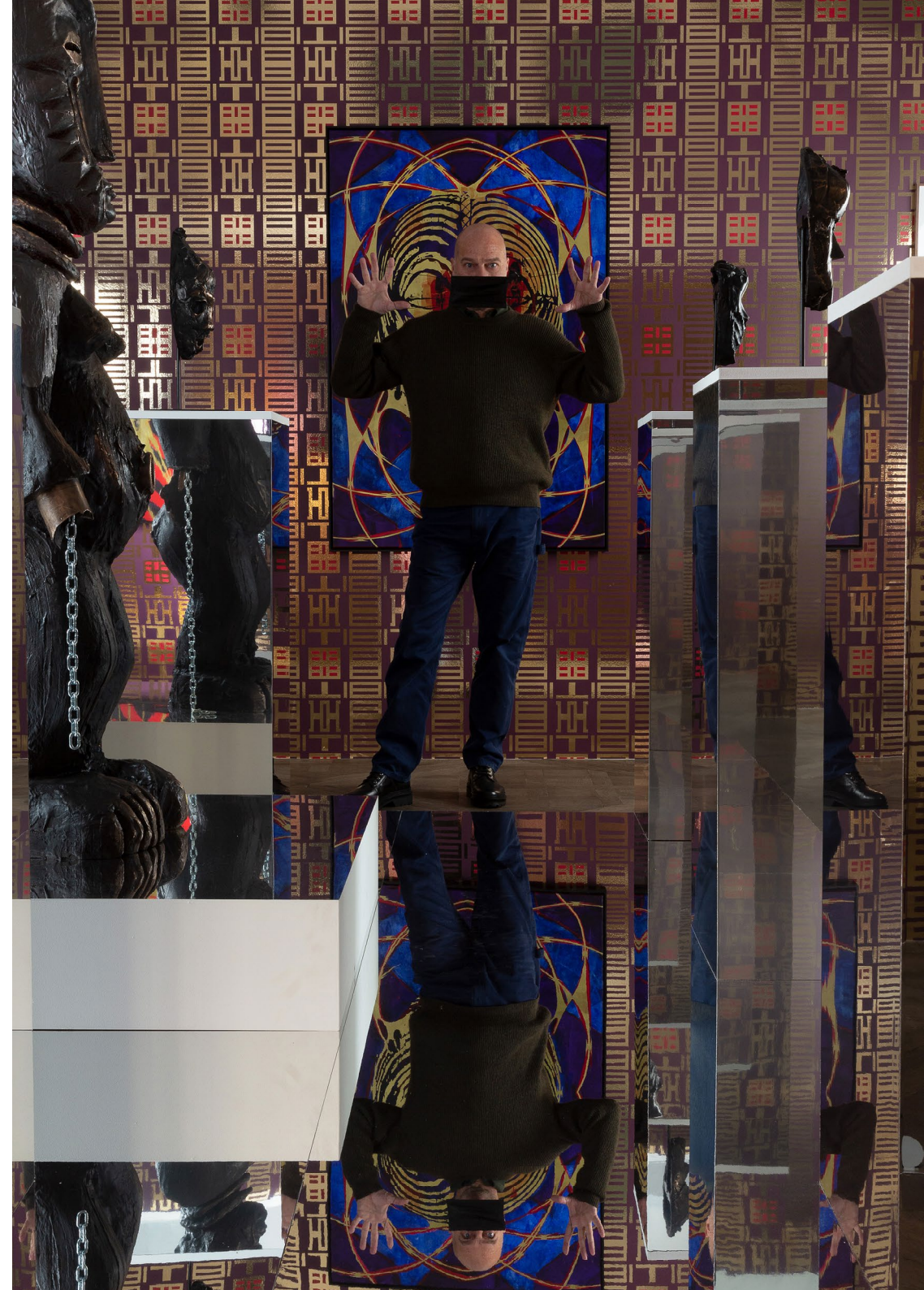
*Flash of the spirit*¹ – *Flesh of the spirit*. From the Flash to the Flesh, something is dismantled in Kendell Geers. The spirit no longer describes a common inspiration; it calls towards phenomena that are difficult to explain, like a poltergeist - a spirit that strikes. Once the spirit becomes flesh, the false merges with the true, the unity of reference breaks down. A space opens up to explore, to play with strangeness, false recognition and false perceptions - disorders of identity. What is «African art»? Does it consist of tangible plastic similarities? Or even, to put it like Leopold Senghor, the first president of Senegal, does it express the unity of a spirituality, of a philosophy?

On a support-mirror, an immense bronze sculpture: a woman without hands, whose forms echo the fabulous idea of an ancient African statuary that remains undefined. She is surrounded by eight bronze masks, placed on a support that reflects them one after the other. On the walls, a colored wallpaper, red - *believe* / *lie*. A text as a reflection. The device is posed without detour: lie, believe - the lie become the transparent measure of our beliefs.

The question of African art that runs through Geers' curatorial work, particularly the one he conducted with Sindika Dokolo for the exhibition *Incarnations* (BOZAR, 2019), is redeployed here in his work as an artist. The plastic model is Afrocentric - it takes Africa as its center, but what matters is not to recompose the unity of an identity. It is a question of disturbing the game of continuities and affiliations, of remodeling families, of creating new links of kinship. Not to appropriate forms. But to summon the spirit of the forms, to manufacture figures resisting the possibility even to be fixed in a category, to be brought back to the univocity of a story. It is necessary to open another history of the art - the one where the works travel and are invited to cure us.

— Nadia Yala Kisukidi

¹Title of the book by Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the spirit*, New York, Random house, 1984.







KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 8667

2019

POLISHED AND PATINATED BRONZE

H158 L54 W55 CM / H62.2 L21.3 W21.7 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

Kendell Geers' *Flesh of the Spirit* reevaluates the Western fetishisation of African art. The sculptures in the exhibition are reworked Nkisi standing figures, hand-shaped by Geers to include elements of sculptural self-portraiture. Nkisi means *spirit*, and the mirrors in the bodies of Nkisi figures are intended contain its spirit within. In place of the mirror Geers inserts the end of a bottle of wine he drunk into this human-sized sculpture, forging a spiritual link between his own flesh and that of the bronze figure.





KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 6892

2021

BRONZE

H13 L31 W9 CM / H5.1 L12.2 W3.5 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

This series of sculptures and masks is called *Flesh of the Spirit* because the objects exist half in the physical dimension and half in the spiritual - their physical nature is not activated without an understanding of a further spiritual presence. The title itself is a play on *Flash of the Spirit*, a book by the American art historian Robert Farris Thompson, that traces the evolution of traditions that were carried from Africa to America in the 15th and 16th centuries by enslaved African peoples.

KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 6851

2021

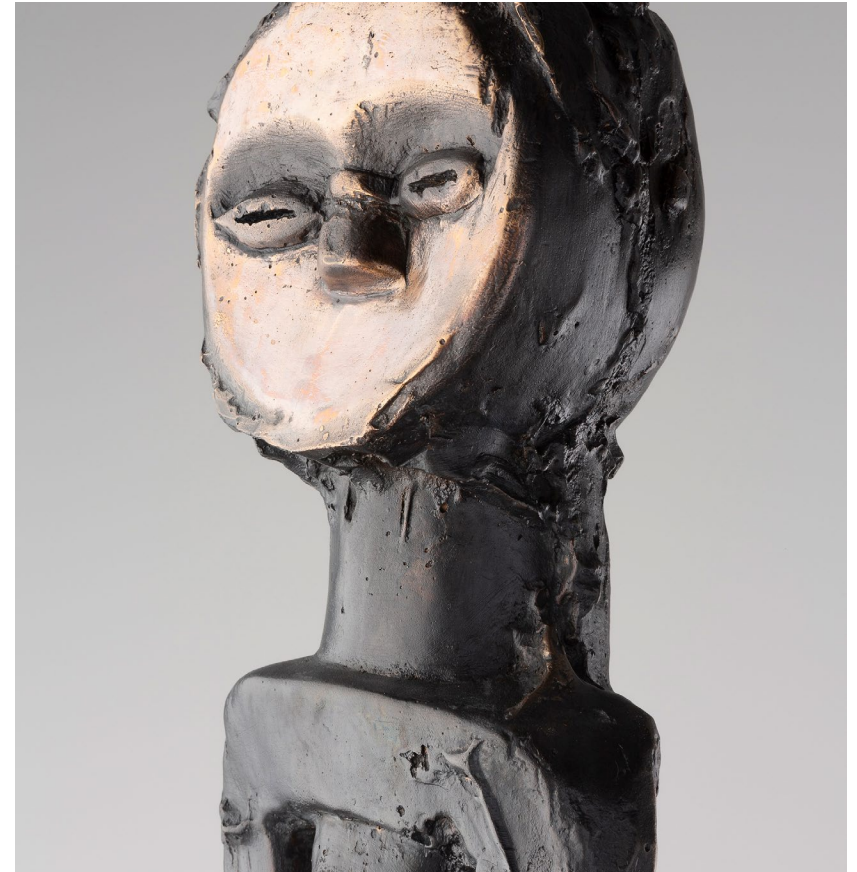
BRONZE

H15 L28 W9 CM / H5.9 L11 W3.5 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

A person's gaze is influenced by the habits of their learning. Mirrors and masks dictate and distort this gaze. Traditional African masks have been used for the wearer to become healers, gods, or clowns. Geers uses masks as a modern interrogation of identity, freedom, protection and display. The artist 3D scans African masks and works directly into them with his hands, shifting their identities away from clearly defined roles and using them as territories of conflicting expression.





KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 3228

2019

POLISHED, PATINATED BRONZE

H65 L15 W15 CM / H25.6 L5.9 W5.9 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

Before cast in bronze, the figures and masks in *Flesh of the Spirit* are originally shaped in plaster of Paris, which the artist appreciates for its innate fluidity. The material will take on any form it is given, and Geers moulds it with his own body, considering himself an organic part of nature. His hand and finger prints are clearly shown in the textured finish.

KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 6881

2021

BRONZE

H22 L31 W14 CM / H8.7 L12.2 W5.5 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

The contortions that Geers wreaks over the faces of his masks, respond to a historic narrative that inspired a major canon of Western art. Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which depicts women with faces inspired by the African masks Picasso had seen exhibited at the Musée d'Ethnographie in Paris, is credited as a pivotal work in art history. Geers questions why Picasso, and others who followed closely after him, are now seen as the custodians of an abstract visual language that was never theirs to keep. This mask's distorted mouth symbolises the silencing of the cultures whose visual tradition was appropriated from them.





KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 3567

2019

POLISHED, PATINATED BRONZE

H78.5 L19.3 W19.3 CM / H30.9 L7.9 W7.9 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

Kendell Geers requires that people look at his work with intelligence, and see beyond aesthetic stereotypes. He undermines those who would assume this is an authentic 'African' sculpture due to its superficial aesthetic reference points. Its bronze hands and feet were actually taken from one of Geers' children's dolls, the cheap European toy hidden in plain sight if people are careful enough to see it.



KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 2820

2019

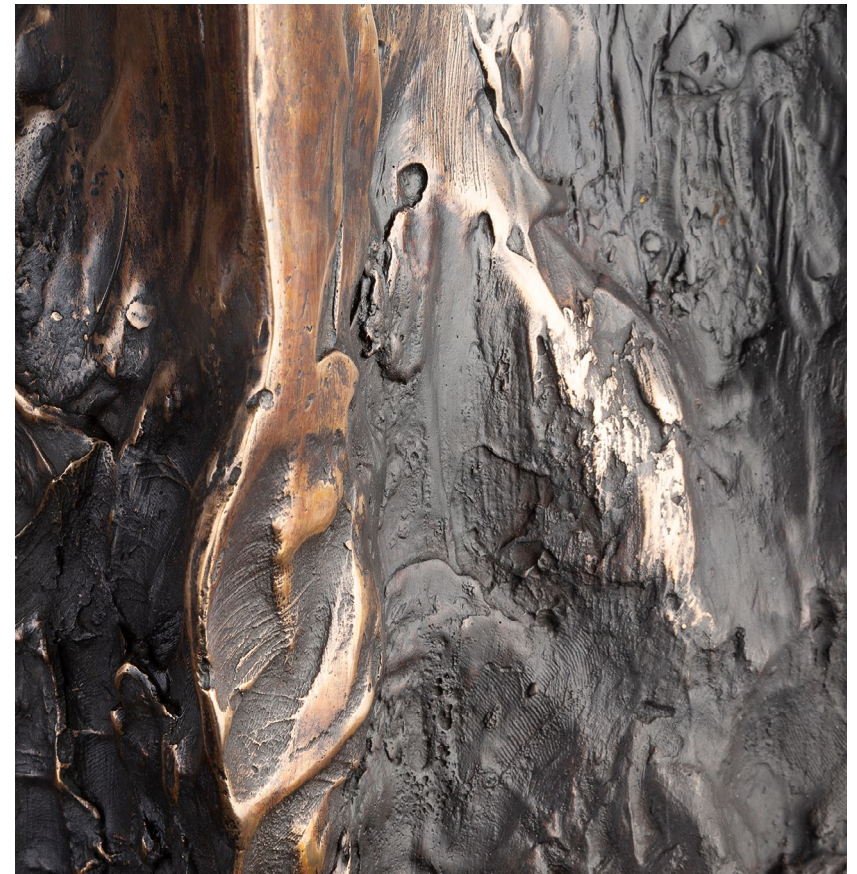
POLISHED, PATINATED BRONZE

H30.5 L17.6 W9.3 CM / H12 L6.9 W3.7 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

The mouth becomes a key battleground in Kendell Geers' visual dissection of speech and power. He questions who has the right to speech, while acknowledging the right to speak is not the same as the ability. In his masks the mouth is often clawed or pushed away, denying the persona of the mask the power of speech. African Art as we know it today has been forged on the struggle to speak and to be heard.





KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 8231

2021

POLISHED, PATINATED BRONZE

H110 L73 W47 CM / H43.3 L28.7 W18.5 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

This is a large mask, over a meter tall. The piece started out much smaller, with Geers worked into it with his fingers, destroying the mouth. He then took a 3D model of his work, and enlarged it before working into it again. His gestural marks are recognisable in both scales, with the deep grooves formed by his original marks now richly detailed by life size fingerprints and scratches by the artist's nails.

KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 292

2016

BRONZE

H25 L14 W9 CM / H9.8 L5.5 W3.5 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

The inverted print of a hand clamped tightly over the mouth of this mask is a potent image. The hand is the artist's himself, and the distortion denies any imagined speech. To be robbed of speech and the right to expression is to be robbed of humanity, and Geers acknowledges the actions of his Dutch ancestors. Their most damaging colonial import to the African continent was their language, which warped into Afrikaans and which smothered the varieties and dialects of thousands of local cultures.





KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 6879

2021

BRONZE

H19 L28 W8 CM / H7.5 L11 W3.1 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

As has been discovered during the past two years of the Covid pandemic, a mask covering your face can feel suffocating. Is the mask there to suffocate or liberate? Geers understands that erecting walls, fences, barriers and masks between yourself and a perceived threat is a protective impulse. Yet the same walls that protect you, also imprison you.

KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 2154

2021

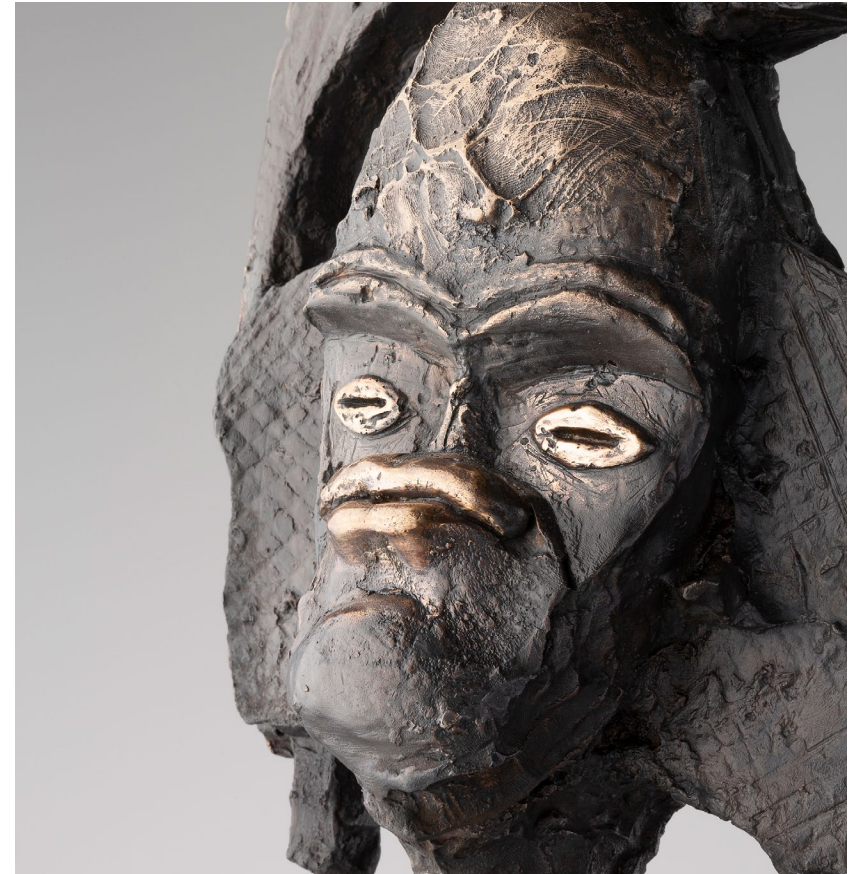
POLISHED, PATINATED BRONZE

H40 L19 W9.5 CM / H15.7 L7.5 W3.7 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

The word *fetish* was invented by Portuguese sailors, who encountered African visual and sculptural tradition for the first time sailing down the West coast in the 15th century. It derives from the Portuguese *feito*, or *made*. These never-before-seen objects were items of value but not as the Portuguese knew it, and as such were linguistically categorised as things that had been made, but which were not art.





KENDELL GEERS | FLESH OF THE SPIRIT 4163

2019

POLISHED, PATINATED BRONZE

H52.5 L27 W20 CM / H20.7 L10.6 W7.9 IN

EDITION OF 3 + 2 AP

Kendell Geers' tactile approach is seen in the textured finish of this sculpture. Shaping the figure with the palms of his hands, the artist's skin becomes imprinted onto the skin of the figure. The polished lips are the artist's lips, moulded by pushing them into plaster of Paris. The only part of this sculpture not physically shaped by Geers are the eyes, which are made of broken bottle tops.



KENDELL GEERS | BARREL STOOL

2014

POLISHED BRONZE

H43.5 L26 CM / H17.1 L10.2 IN

EDITION OF 8 + 4 AP

Early ideas for the *Barrel Stool* came from the riots in Paris in May 1968. Geers was taken by the idea of emergency furniture, scraps and leftovers that needed to be reverse engineered to be functional. This barrel in particular was an oil barrel taken from Geers' favourite restaurant, channelling his eating habits and consumption back into his work to result in an abstract self-portrait.





KENDELL GEERS | LEVIATHAN STOOL

2014

BRONZE, WOOD

H95 L83 W50 CM / H37.4 L32.7 W19.7 IN

EDITION OF 8 + 4 AP

Leviathan Stool channels the same spirit of reverse engineering as *Barrel Stool*. The original *Leviathan Stool* was created in a moment of need in Geers' workshop; a broken chair hurriedly placed on a stack of old motorcycle tires gave form to this seat which was later cast in bronze, giving the originally ephemeral piece a sense of longevity.

KENDELL GEERS | MUTUS LIBER (FETISH) 5202

2021

INDIAN INK, NAILS, GESSO ON LOST OBJECT

H57 L25 W20 CM / H22.4 L9.8 W7.9 IN

UNIQUE

Of Kendell Geers' twin *Mutus Liber* sculptures, one is based on a Baga dancing sculpture, and one on Nkisi sculpture. This fetish sculpture contains the mirrors and nails that Nkisi sculpture is known for. Beneath dirt, gesso and ink, mirrors are placed in the rounded stomach and behind both eyes.

The title *Mutus Liber, The Mute Book*, is taken from an alchemical book, often thought of as the first graphic novel. Knowledge had to be written down visually rather than verbally to avoid the authors being accused of heresy. Geers translates its graphic nature to the modern day by pouring gesso and Indian ink over the forms, referencing the black and white of newspaper print, tones which in many African cultures represent the spiritual and physical planes respectively.





KENDELL GEERS | MUTUS LIBER

INK AND ACRYLIC ON FOUND OBJECT

H66 L27 W39 CM / H26 L10.6 W15.3 IN

UNIQUE

The figures of Baga dancing sculptures would sit on top of the head and over the shoulders, to balance in spite of the dancer's movements. Its unique shape and utility speak to a distinct visual tradition used for storytelling that became superseded by colonialism, modernity and the European written tradition.

KENDELL GEERS | FOUR LETTER BRAND WEST

2009/2014

PLEXIGLASS MIRROR, CHARRED WOOD

H110.5 L77 CM / H43.5 L30.3 IN

UNIQUE

Four Letter Brand West uses mirrors and words shaped in burnt wood to reflect questions of belief back at the viewer. Geers has realised that the English language is predicated on the potency of four letter words, which have become the building blocks of our language (love, hate, need, want, mama, papa, etc). The four letters are reflected around a central focal point, folded together until the letters lose their original meaning and become an abstract image - the word made flesh.





KENDELL GEERS | FOUR LETTER BRAND SALE

2009/2014

PLEXIGLASS MIRROR, CHARRED WOOD

H110.5 L77 CM / H43.5 L30.3 IN

UNIQUE

The black letters of Kendell Geers mirrored *Four Letter Brands* are made from charred wood, as if burnt into the image itself. In a homage to concrete poetry, Geers builds a layered imagery from words themselves, concerned as much with the shape of each letter as the linguistic meaning it holds. The word sale has a double meaning, as it translates to *dirty* in French, which together with the branding imagery combines to reflect the prejudices of those involved with the slave trade.

KENDELL GEERS | WONDERLAND

2014

PLEXIGLASS MIRROR, CHARRED WOOD

H60 L69.5 CM / H23.6 L27.4 IN

EDITION OF 5 + 2 AP

The mirror adds function to the words imprinted on it. Kendell Geers considers 'Here Lies Truth' a fitting epitaph for the death of language. Language is currently being tortured to death, constantly tortured in search of factuality and truth. The mirror's visual function is to hold the viewer to account by including their image in the work, complicit in this slow decline of truth and trust.





KENDELL GEERS | MASKING TRADITION DXVI

2017

ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

H152.5 L82.5 CM / H60 L32.5 IN

UNIQUE

The name *Masking Tradition* is a pun, containing the level of duality that Kendell Geers enjoys. The image interrogates the role of African masks in Western painting tradition, tracing a line back through history to when Picasso, Matisse, and Georges Braque among others were entranced by African art and took its iconography for their own art. The title also references the way Geers actually made the work with stencils and masking tape, the artist using masking techniques to talk about masking.

KENDELL GEERS | MASKING TRADITION DXII

2017

ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

H152.5 L102.5 CM / H60 L40.3 IN

UNIQUE

Kendell Geers' paintings look ostensibly 'African' to a Western viewer, but on closer inspection the details become fractured and broken, tending towards abstractions. Geers counteracts the assumptions that from a distance the abstractions take on an 'African' quality, fighting the reduction of spirit into an aesthetic.





KENDELL GEERS | MASKING TRADITION DXI

2017

ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

H182.5 L122.5 CM / H71.8 L48.2 IN

UNIQUE

Lattices and fractals of razor wire feature in the background of Kendell Geers' *Masking Tradition* paintings. Razor wire is a South African invention, a vicious means of separating humans from each other. However, Geers returns to his motif that the higher you build your defences the more deeply you imprison yourself.

KENDELL GEERS | WRETCHED OF THE EARTH 3010

2016

IRON DUST ON PAPER

H110 L74 W3 CM / H43.3 L29.1 W1.2 IN

UNIQUE

Wretched of the Earth 3010 and *3001* follow in the footsteps of a uniquely alchemical tradition. To make the iron dust that the picture is made of Geers took the nails from a Nkisi sculpture and left them to disintegrate in a bucket of rain water. The iron finds a new life in the image, transformed from three to two dimensions yet retaining its potency.





KENDELL GEERS | WRETCHED OF THE EARTH 3001

2016

IRON DUST ON PAPER

H110 L74 W3 CM / H43.3 L29.1 W1.2 IN

UNIQUE

Iron is known for its role in warfare, and as such is known as the metal of Ares, the god of war in alchemical tradition. It is not coincidence therefore that the red and brown of rust is like that of blood, the product of metal, body and warfare all combined.

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