

BOWMAN SCULPTURE



JOANNA ALLEN

Subconscious Playground

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Subconscious Playground

Subconscious Playground is an exploration of human psychology, offering an alternative reality that strips away the illusion of normalcy to reveal a more complex, sometimes dark, yet playful perspective on our subconscious. Allen's work moves seamlessly between figuration and abstraction, culminating in fully abstract pieces, reflecting the shifting boundaries between our conscious and unconscious minds. Through her sculptural practice, she examines the tension between intellectual aptitude and primal instinct, as well as the way personal and inherited experiences shape individual identity.

Joanna Allen's signature sculptural language incorporates recurring motifs such as distorted forms, floating ovoid or egg-like heads, and dissecting planes. While her abstract works move beyond literal representation, they retain a figurative presence, reminding us that we are ultimately confronting the complexities of the human psyche. The play between fluid, buoyant forms and harsher, jagged elements underscores the duality within the self. The materials she employs - patinated bronze, bold ink lines, and layered strokes of paint - enhance the dreamlike and surrealist quality of her practice, evoking both ancient and futuristic aesthetics.

A key element of Allen's process is her use of mindful meditation to access the subconscious. Through blindfolded, one-stroke drawing sessions, she develops what she calls psychomorph-shapes that often take on personal or archetypal significance. Whether these forms function as a Rorschach-like reflection of the mind or emerge from deeper psychological imprints remains an open question. Her engagement with the subconscious places her work in conversation with the legacy of Surrealism, a movement historically dedicated to uncovering the hidden depths of human thought.

Mica Bowman

Joanna Allen

Joanna Allen is an English sculptor working primarily in bronze, marble, clay, and plaster. Her artistic training combines academic and atelier approaches, having studied under several renowned figurative sculptors.

Allen began consistently drawing and working with clay in 2008, instinctively engaging with life models and cultivating a deep, intuitive connection between self and material - an element that has remained central to her practice.

Midway through her training, she pursued formal study at the Barcelona Academy of Art and later the Florence Academy of Art, where she deepened her understanding of classical techniques through intensive life drawing and sculpture. It was during this period that she began to incorporate formal principles such as contour design, proportion, gesture, and rhythm into her work.

“That period of complete immersion transformed my relationship with art into something profoundly deep and permanent,” says Allen.

As her practice evolved, Allen developed a distinctive style that merges figurative and abstract elements, often exploring themes of psychology, behaviour, and the interplay between conscious and unconscious states.

Her experimentation with colour and light adds a rich, multidimensional quality to her sculptures. Highly polished bronzes reflect their surroundings, allowing light and shadow to animate the forms. Gradient and translucent patinas reveal the innate character of the bronze beneath. This material sensitivity continues in her drawings and paintings - marked by scratchy, shaky ink lines on paper, and thick, expressive gestures of oil on raw canvas.

“When I weave subconscious exploration into material expression—whether through drawing, painting, or sculpture - it unearths something essential about the complexity of human experience beyond the rational mind.”

Allen’s work is held in private and public collections across the UK, Europe, and the USA. Her sculptures have been recognised by the Portrait Sculptors Society, the Royal Society of British Artists, and the European Museum of Modern Art, where her 2020 bronze bust Chronic became part of the museum’s permanent collection.



Introduction

Dr. Jon Wood

Art historian and curator, specialising in modern and contemporary sculpture

Whilst I was drawing and copying in the Louvre I was especially attracted by sculpture, and Greek sculpture in particular, because I realised that sculpture, more so than painting, was the art of the invisible.¹ (Phillip King)

Visiting Joanna Allen's studio recently and looking at her work, the sculptor Phillip King's words came to mind. Allen's sculpture is all about invisibility, its most striking qualities residing in the ways it brings together her considerable technical skills as a modeller with a poetic evocation of thoughts that lie beyond the visual. Her sculpture aims to express what cannot be seen, articulating the inner life of things because of, as much as in spite of, its intrinsic materiality. This exhibition highlights this, showcasing many of her new works and pointing to the ways in which her explorations have taken her from naturalistic renditions of the human body to more simplified, abstract forms in recent years.

Across her work, Allen is always looking beyond appearances, searching for compelling combinations of form and idea that are loaded with personal, private meaning, true to herself while open to viewers. Hope, fear, love, togetherness, life, death... It is not surprising that the human head, an object onto which viewers have always been readily able to project their thoughts, occupies an important place. On display here, we find several prime examples, such as *Shadow*, *The Hour*, *Infinite Shell*, *Diminishing Capacity*, *Confliction*, *Resistance*, *Maladjusted Ordinary*, *Lunar Sea* and *Consumption Pattern*, as well as the more abstract heads, *Dream State* and *Clinging on to Normalcy*. Allen's titles are striking, often evocative of anxiety and physical or psychological tensions. This is continued into the support structures she uses to display her sculptures, as we find them carefully poised on pins and points, in all manner of balancing acts and suspensions that help create floating arrangements and precarious situations for the works – works which are themselves often fragmentary or partial, carrying vulnerabilities of their own. Sometimes, as we see in *Confliction*, *Wherever We Go*, *There We Are* and *Consumption Pattern*, the sculptures serve as plinths for other sculptures, creating other dualities, pairings and double acts.

Shadow offers good insight into her sculptural imagination. At first, we might read its shadowy, introspective look as resulting from a kind of hat or fringed hairstyle partially covering the eyes. On closer inspection, we realise that this is not a hat or hair, but an adult's cranium sitting like a protective helmet on top of a smaller child's head. It is a compelling image of skin and bone, as poignant as it is macabre. Allen herself sees it as 'a kind of metaphorical protection for the mind' that relates to feelings of retreat and remoteness we all experience, and which she herself recalls feeling as a child when she withdrew into herself in the company of others.²

We might also read the work as an image of cross-generational dialogue and *Shadow* brings together the present and contemporary concerns with history and earlier periods of figurative sculpture in subtle and unusual ways. We might think of issues today around children's mental health, as well as recalling the downcast eyes of Alfred Gilbert's sculptures and especially works such as *A Dream of Joy During the Sleep of Sorrow* (1908-13), also known as the *Wilson Chimneypiece*.³ Allen's work often seems to engage in such time travels, pulling different kinds of art and life associations together into a 21st century present in

surprising ways. We find intimations of late nineteenth-century symbolist sculpture, as well as nods to the works of Jacob Epstein, Alberto Giacometti, Jean Arp and many other modern sculptors, some associated with the surrealist movement. Allen spends a lot of time ruminating on her works and their associations - on where they have come from and where they are going - trying as much as possible to let things emerge from within and allowing these inner thoughts and feelings to feed into the gradual shaping of form. Her sculptures, as a result, take time to complete, often developing over months and years.

Many of the works themselves suggest ruminations - sleep, dreams, introspections and closed-eyed considerations of things. Heads and figures are often eyeless, leading inner lives. In *Horizon*, the eyes have been sliced by a single square plane (which itself fixes the head dynamically on a tilt), and in *Maladjusted Ordinary* and *Lunar Sea*, the human head has been sliced in two beneath the eyes. Severed heads are thus severed once again, leading staggered existences, their gazes directed far beyond the immediate spatial orbit of the material object.

This conjuring up of imaginary worlds, intimating the invisible, has recently been taken further still, as we find Allen conducting drawings and paintings blindfolded. This enables her to tap into her unconscious and into forms and ideas unseen. These she executes as drawings and paintings in their own right, as well as using them as sketches for possible sculptures. Such endeavours enable her to inject spontaneity into her work, introducing spur of the moment immediacies which counterbalance the slower and carefully well-measured processes of her academic training as a modeller. This balance of chance and order, the unconscious and reality – and the special states that coexist between them – is deeply important to Allen. This is reflected in the title of the exhibition Subconscious Playground - a title that casts her studio as a space for such endeavours, while nodding to automatism, the surrealists and the broader ways in which the unconscious informs art making and, of course, the reception of art by viewers.

Many of the works which result from Allen's meditative making are distillations: streamlined, pared down and essentialised objects. We find a heightened attention to their outer skins and to the careful creation of smooth and often polished surfaces. After the haunting, hand-modelled double-imagery of *Shadow*, the highly polished dualities of a work like *Clinging onto Normalcy* take the mysteries further still, offering up a head that is skull, mask and curvilinear abstract form as one. For those interested in developments in modern sculpture in the first decades of the last century, echoes of Raymond Duchamp-Villon's Portrait of Professor Gosset (c.1917-18) might be legible here, as well as the double-imagery of Constantin Brancusi's polished bronze Princesse X (1915-16).

Allen's sculpture always invites viewers to take things personally, but the capturing of their imaginations is actively intensified through these polished sculptures. One in particular, called *If Only It Were Me In The Mirror*, a polished bronze oval disc suspended within a metal frame, demonstrates how far she wishes to open up the call and address of her work to viewers. Allen is a sculptor, to quote T.S. Eliot on the playwright John Webster, who 'sees the skull beneath the skin,' and it is in the forms and surfaces of her imaginative sculptures that she invites us into the inner experiences of this vision.⁴

Jon Wood

1. Quoted in Michael Harrison, 'Mind over Matter,' Three Little Books about Sculpture: 3 Mind Over Matter, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1984, p. 5.

2. Joanna Allen in conversation with Mica Bowman, February 2025.

3. Richard Dormont, Alfred Gilbert, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985, pp. 266-74.

4. T.S. Eliot, 'Whispers of Immortality,' T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962, London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1974, p.55.

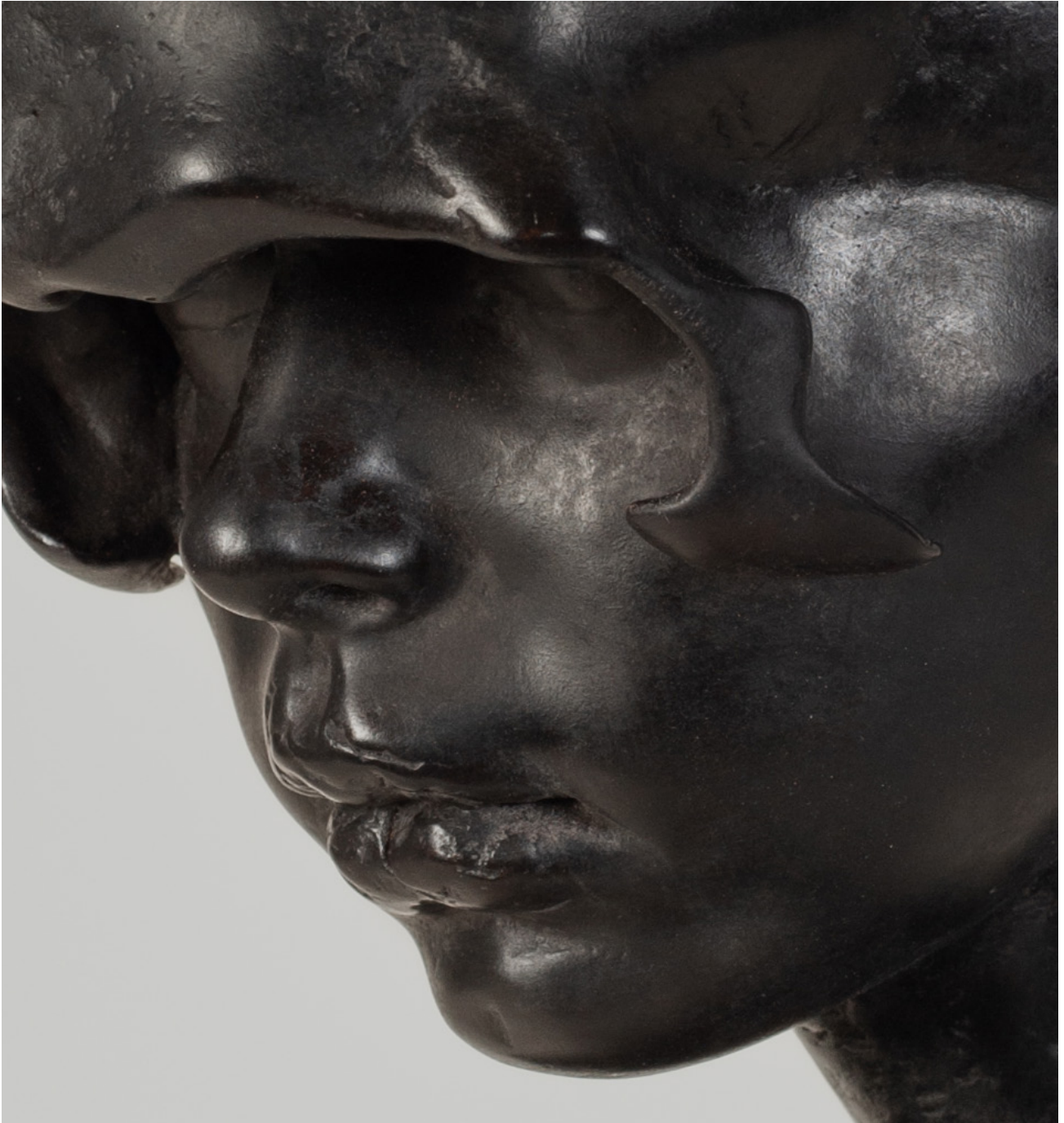




Shadow in clay

Shadow

Signed Allen
Numbered 2/9
Bronze with charcoal patina
Height: 17" (43.5 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA







Horizon

Signed Allen
Numbered 3/9
Polished bronze and bronze with charcoal patina
Height: 8.3" (21 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA



Maladjusted Ordinary

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/9
Bronze with charcoal patina
Height: 8.6" (22 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA







Wherever We Go, There We Are

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/9
Bronze with charcoal patina on a steel base
Height: 61" (155 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA





Wherever We Go, There We Are in clay



Lunar Sea at the foundry

Lunar Sea

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/9
Bronze with dark and light brown patina
Height: 7" (18 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA







Consumption Pattern

Signed Joanna Allen

Numbered 1/9

Polished bronze and bronze with dark and rich brown patina on a steel base

Height: 22.4" (57 cm)

Edition of 9 + 2 EA



If Only It Were Me in The Mirror

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/9
Polished bronze on a steel base
Height: 20" (51 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA







The Hour in clay



The Hour at the foundry

The Hour

Signed Allen
Numbered 2/9
Bronze with charcoal patina
Height: 17.7" (45 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA







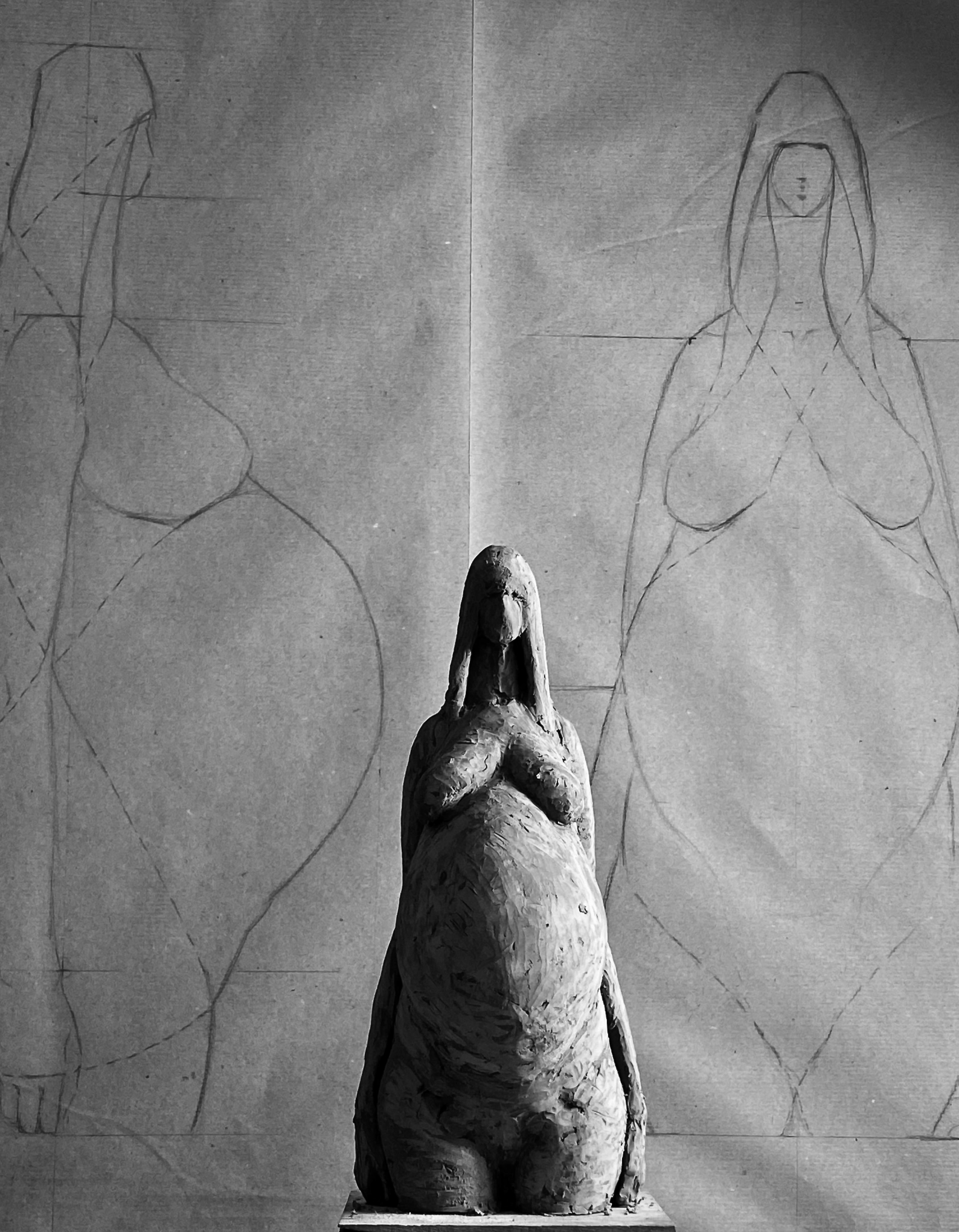
Monument

Signed Allen
Numbered 1/9
Bronze with rich mid and dark brown patina
Height: 21.7" (55 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA





Monument in plaster





Complexing

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/9
Bronze with rich red brown patina
Height: 18" (46 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA



Clinging on to Normalcy

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/9
Polished bronze
Height: 8.6" (22 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA







Clinging on to Normalcy in plaster



Developmental drawing for *Clinging on to Normalcy*

Infinite Shell

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 2/9
Bronze with charcoal patina
Height: 14.9" (38 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA







Resistance

Signed Allen
Numbered 1/9
Bronze with rich brown patina
Height: 19.2" (49 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA



Diminishing Capacity

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/9
Bronze with rich brown patina on a steel base
Height: 18.9" (48 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA





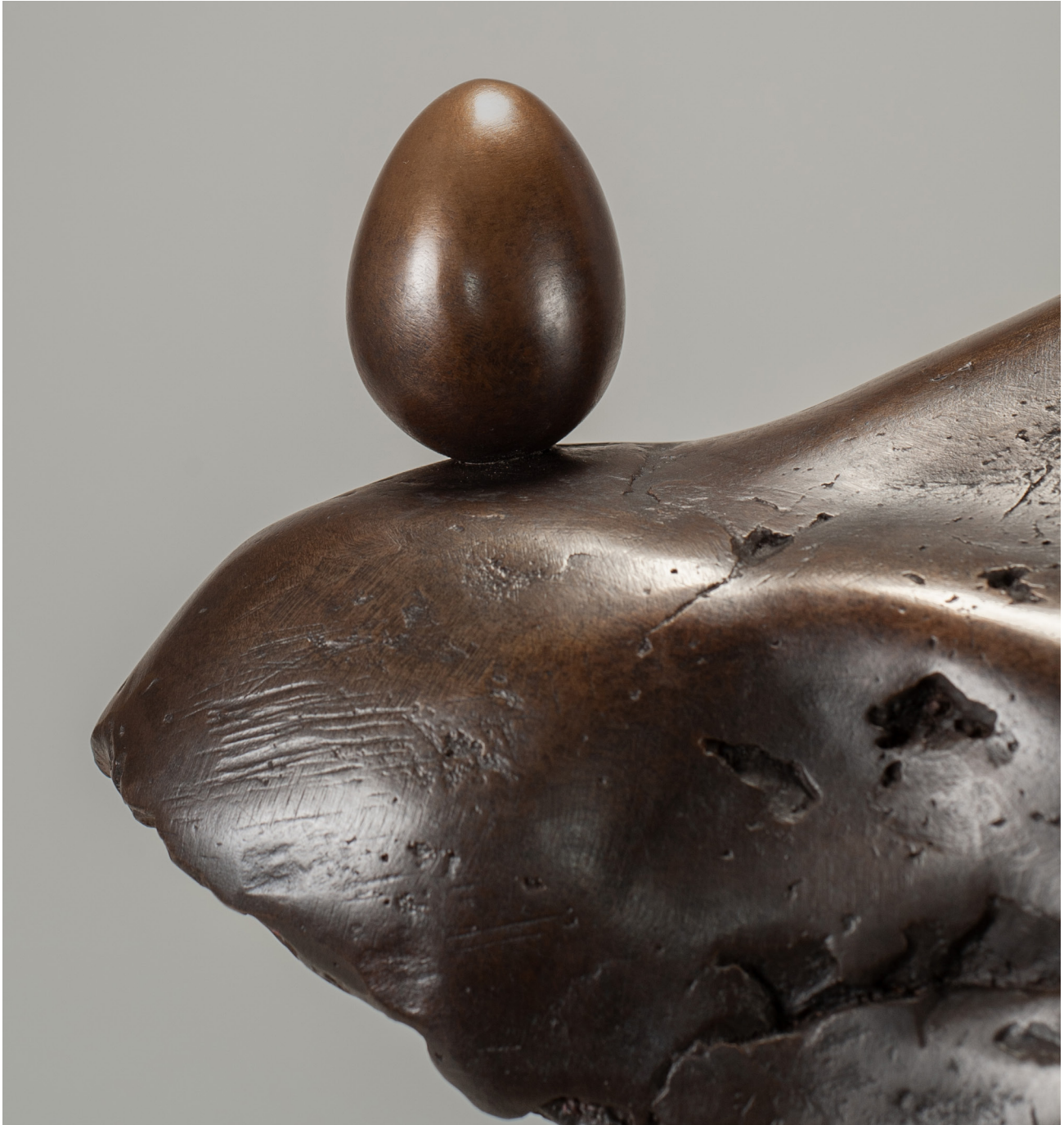


Diminishing Capacity in plaster



Conflict

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/9
Bronze with rich brown patina on a steel base
Height: 29.5" (75 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA







Dream State

Signed Joanna Allen

Numbered 1/9

Bronze with light and dark brown patina on a blackened steel base

Height: 13" (35 cm)

Edition of 9 + 2 EA



I Know Your Edges Are There

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/5
Statuario white marble
Height: 27.5" (70 cm)
Edition of 5







The Fear Echos

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/5
Statuario white marble
Height: 15.7" (40 cm)
Edition of 5

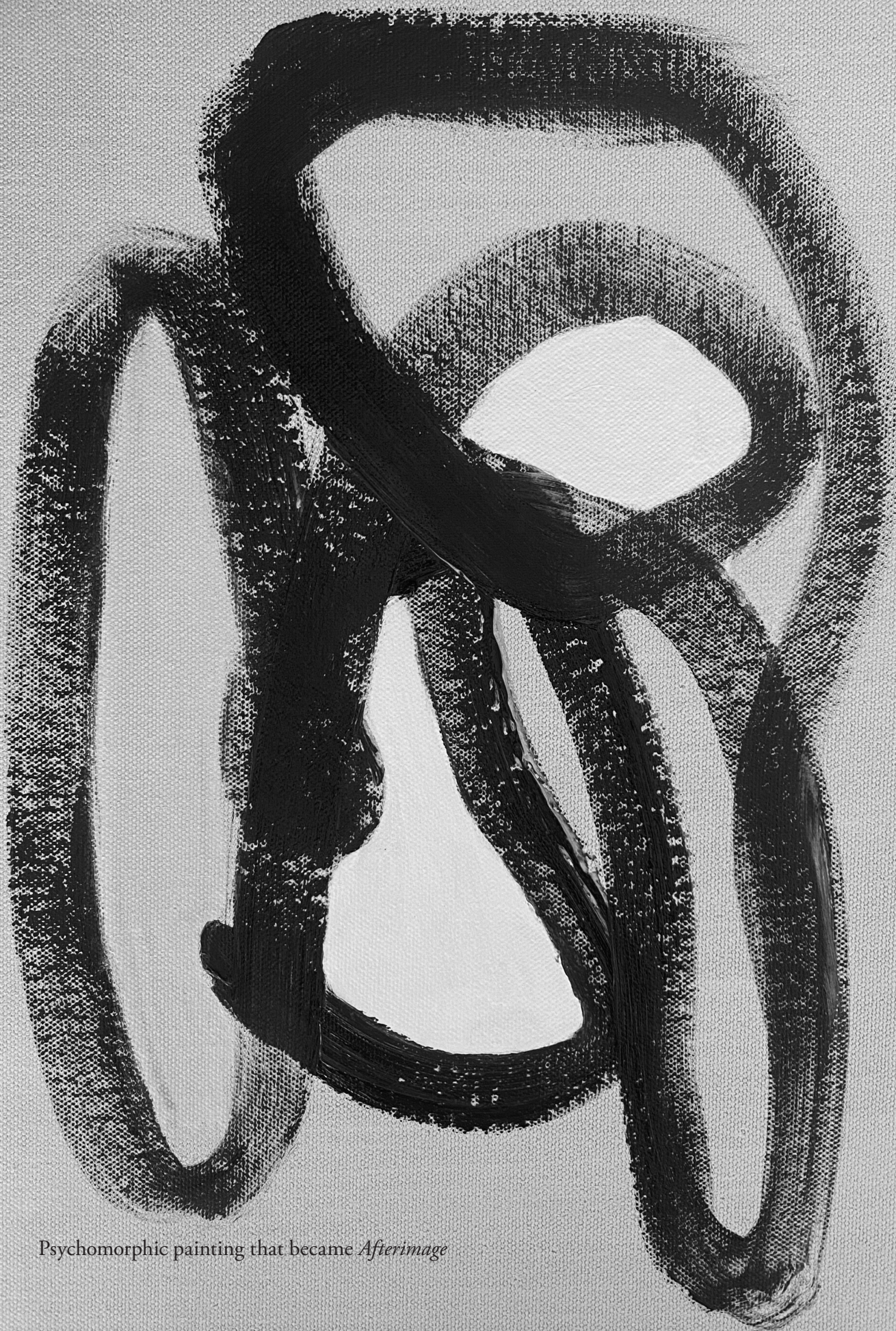


Afterimage

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/9
Polished bronze
Height: 8.3" (21 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA







Psychomorphic painting that became *Afterimage*



Developmental drawing for *Inherent*

Inherent

Signed Joanna Allen

Numbered 1/9

Bronze with golden and dark brown patina on a steel base

Height: 21.3" (54 cm)

Edition of 9 + 2 EA







Words That Bend Me

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/5
Portuguese Pink Marble
Height: 29" (74 cm)
Edition of 5



I.D.

Signed Joanna Allen
Numbered 1/9
Bronze with rich light, mid and dark brown patina
Height 11.8" (30 cm)
Edition of 9 + 2 EA







Psychomorphic painting that inspired the marble sculptures



Words That Bend Me in plaster

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