



Rictus Sardonicus, 1999, 2000/2001

Judith Mason

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I have often used the open mouth to suggest screaming or uttering, as if the teeth are the ‘pales’ of the persona, and ‘beyond the pale’ suggests transgression of some kind.

Judith Mason, 2011

One of the most striking images in the latest suite of drawings by Judith Mason is of an elongated jack-saw or cross-cut saw, with worn human teeth in the place of its own teeth in what appears to be an extended lower jaw bone with a curling bit of lower lip. Suspended in mid-air above this saw is a small fret- or jigsaw, with a twisted blade. The drawing is one in a series of open-mouthed sketches, many with snarling bared teeth in what looks like a set, sardonic smile, or grimace. “The *Rictus Sardonicus* drawings” says Mason, “are a response to a delightful file of rictus tooth x-rays sent to me by a collector friend, Dr Shaun Beecroft, who is a trauma surgeon in the UK. These anonymous images suggested distinct personalities, and not just skeletal heads, as some of them presented themselves as mischievous or monstrous, and the fracturing and occasional prosthetic hardware added an extra frisson to the subject matter. When I drew from them, using the plates and a light table, I began to see that some sets of teeth conveyed power or malice, and when I juxtaposed sets of teeth against or opposite each other, particular narratives suggested themselves.”

The key to unlocking the story of the saw drawing, which is more than just a clever visual pun, resides in its title: *Mouthpiece “Unwise Saw and Modern Instance” – apologies to W. Shakespeare*. In total, thirty-eight teeth are lined up on the base of the saw to form a serrated edge, redolent of the battlements of a castle, or of a fortified wall. Thirty-eight is also the commonly accepted number of plays recognized to have been written by Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s ‘teeth’ or plays grimace to the world: but they are not primigenial weapons of attack. Rather, they seem to protect the fragile inner spirit of the plays.

One such a play is *Coriolanus*. It tells the story of ancient Rome after a severe famine in which the common people (the Plebeians) demand the right to set their own price for the city’s grain supply. The ruling aristocracy (the Patricians) reluctantly grants them 5 representatives (or tribunes) – a decision that provokes the ire of the proud Patrician soldier, Caius Marcius, who has nothing but contempt for the lower classes. “The tongues of the common mouth: I do despise them / for they do prank them in authority against

all noble sufferance.” After single-handedly quelling an uprising in a neighbouring city, Corioli, held by the Volsces, Caius becomes Coriolanus and the Senate wants to reward him by offering to make him consul. In order to gain this office, however, Coriolanus must go out and plead for the votes of the people, a task he reluctantly accepts to do. At first the people are willing to cast their votes for him, but later they recant after the prodding of two clever, or evil, tribunes, Sicinius Velutus and Junius Brutus, who think of Coriolanus as too popular and too powerful. This drives the proud Coriolanus into a fury and he speaks out intemperately against the very idea of popular representation: “Are these your herd? / Must these have voices, that can yield them now / And straight disclaim their tongues? What are / your offices? / You bring their mouths, why rule you not their / Teeth?”

These could well be the words one hears when looking at another one of Mason’s *Rictus Sardonicus* drawings, coming out of a barking mouth, with a double set of teeth, entitled *Mouthpiece “Commandant”*. “The teeth in the *Commandant* are his fighting force, giving effect to his words,” says Mason. Or they could be the words from the mouth in another drawing, *Mouthpiece. “Manipulator”*, with entangled figures dangling like puppets on a string from the bared teeth in the gaping mouth of what was once the face of a human being. But look at the eyes of the Commandant: weary and vulnerable, they belie his utterances. Eyes, incidentally, do appear between the teeth of an open mouth in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, acting as point of convergence of the external and internal worlds, and symbolizing the protection of the inner spirit. Mason is concerned about the state of her own eyes: “My drawing style has changed a bit. Partly because I have taken such a lot of time, several months, on each drawing, using pencils which range from 3B to 6H in each work, and probably because I am in dire need of cataract operations and have had to discipline myself to get all the marks as ‘right’ as I can.”

The eyes of the Commandant ‘hear’ the voices of the people. They ‘see’ the power of these voices. Look, for instance, at another one of Mason’s singular drawings: *Mouthpiece - The Laughter of Others*. Repeated sets of

grimacing teeth form a type of vortex, swallowing the viewer entirely, yet at the same time suggesting the opening out of the petals of a delicate flower. This is perhaps the central paradox in Judith Mason’s drawings: the mouth, the teeth, the tongue, the voice all combine into very powerful speech, the product of *mana*, or psychic energy. Yet, the mouth, these teeth can equally powerfully devour, destroy and consume. Creativity ameliorated and tempered, softened and hardened, by destruction, in other words. These opposing concepts reside in such other drawings as *Mothmask Drawing* and *Mouthpiece. “Scarecrow”*.

How unsettling, then, when looking at yet another drawing in which the mouth, the teeth are absent, *Mouthpiece. “Saying No”*: a sensitive self-portrait with the mouth erased, or never drawn, for that matter. “The mouthless self-portrait” she says, “is a comment on my inclination to say yes and regret the consequences.” However, it signifies much more: it references her moral obligation for visual, aesthetic articulation, rather than a reluctant verbal undertaking. “Being and artist” Mason says, “has allowed me to develop an aesthetic sense. Kierkegaard distinguishes between the aesthetic and the moral sense, regarding the former as licentious, less worthy than the latter. He got it wrong. The aesthetic sense is profoundly moral. I am an agnostic with no metaphysical expectations. My behavior is not guided by a fear of punishment or the hope of eternity or the notion that I am made in any transcendent image. My actions are moderated by this aesthetic sense. It provides the ethical framework without which I would be a barbarian. This is why I believe the arts are important to artists and art lovers alike. I do not kill things, because I find life beautiful. I don’t litter because I find it ugly. I try not to waste, because I find it disgusting. My sense of other people’s autonomy is based on my own aesthetic experience.”

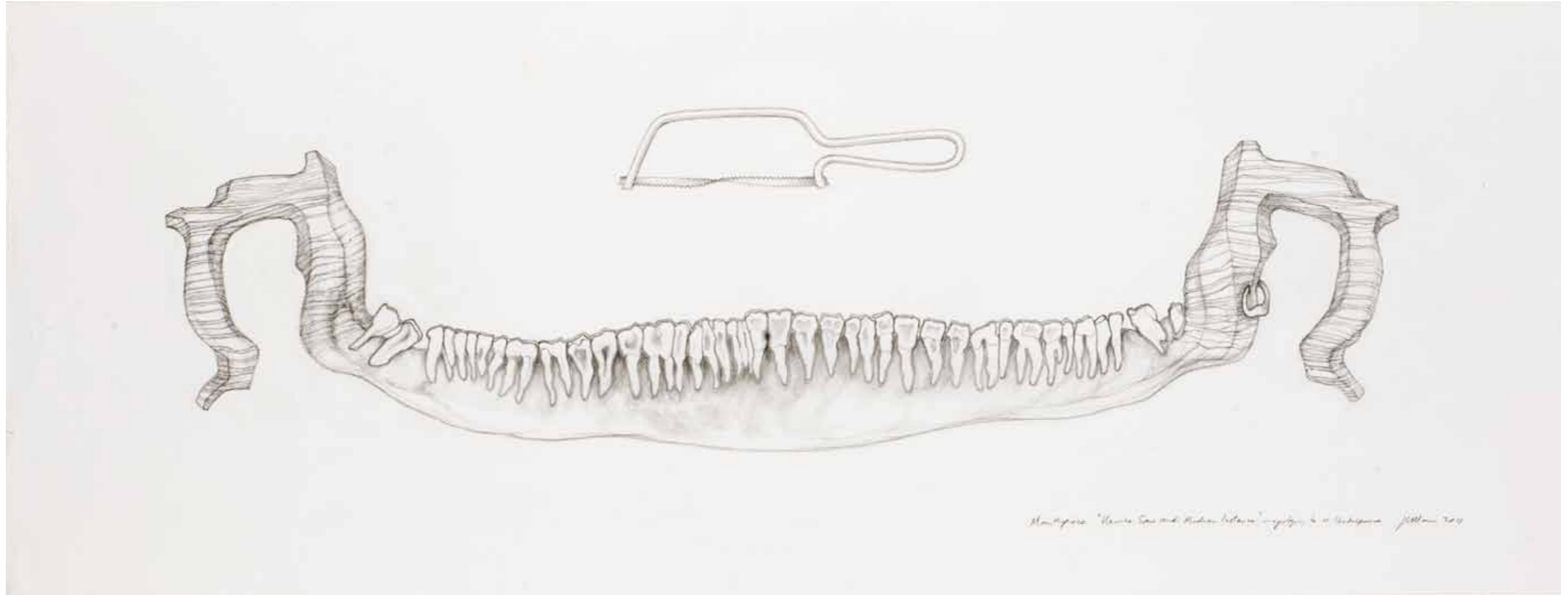
The *Rictus Sardonicus* suite of drawings holds up two ironic images of the role of the artist in contemporary society. *MOUTHPIECE – ARTIST AKA SACRED SHROUD SELLER*, and *Mouthpiece “Prophet”*. In terms of the former drawing Mason comments wryly, “I enjoy employing humour in art work, along the lines of a ‘comic novel’ rather than a swiftly

realized cartoon. Such is my intention in my portrayal of the artist as creator and seller of mandylions. The history of religious relics inspires in me, not so much devotion, as great admiration for generations of entrepreneurs throughout the ages who created objects of veneration for the gullible/ innocent. Some of them, like the shroud of Turin, possess great gravitas.” In the drawing, *MOUTHPIECE – ARTIST AKA SACRED SHROUD SELLER*, two realistically drawn hands beneath a skull-like face, with the ubiquitous grimacing teeth, hold up what appears to be another skull-like image on a cloth that seems to emerge, or being pulled up from below. Is the artist an embittered seller of fabricated aesthetics, Mason seems to be asking. Or is the artist a false prophet, she also seems to want to know.

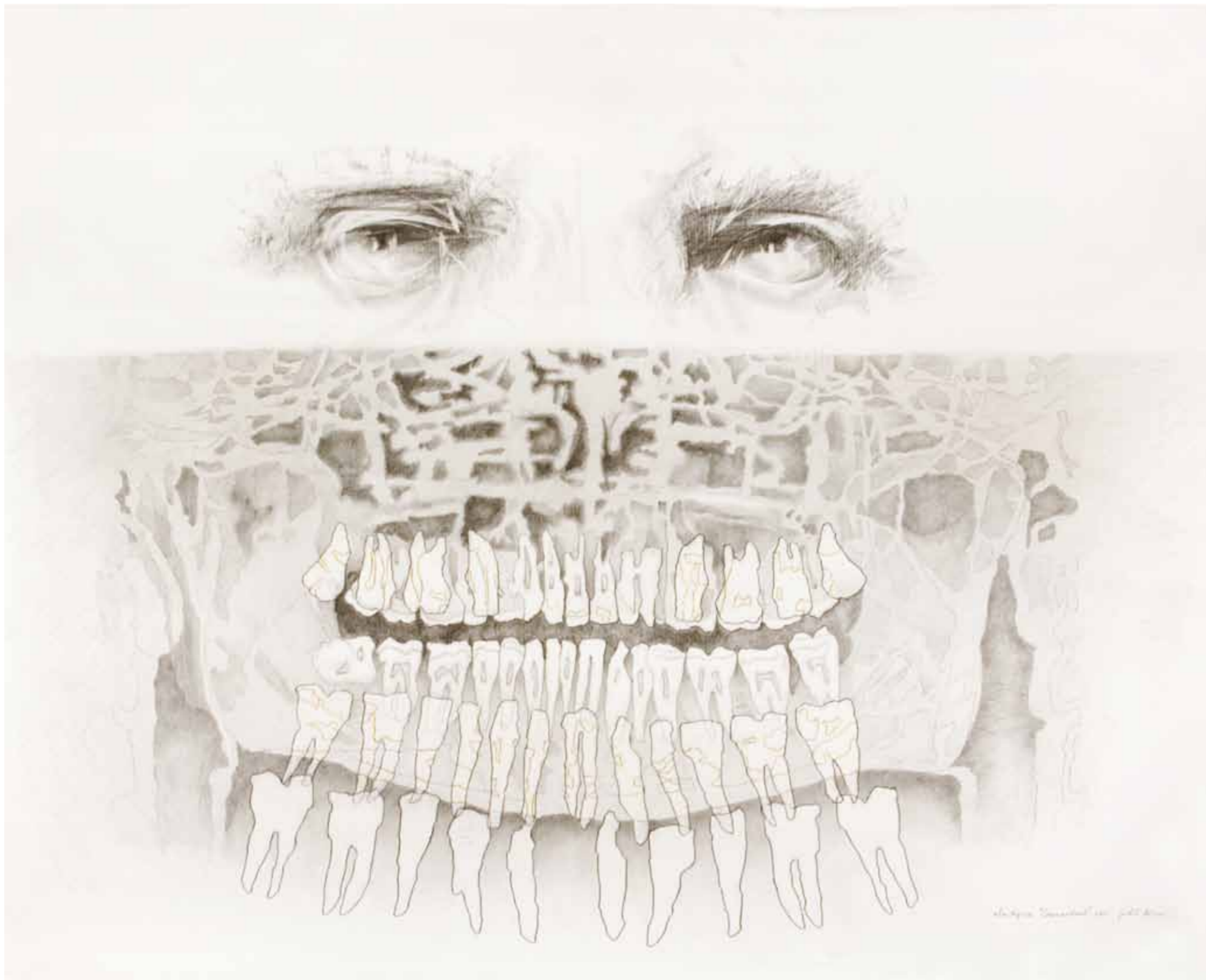
“Unlike the other drawings, *Mouthpiece “Prophet”* is toothless, his mouth is a foul and gaping orifice, inhabited by flies, to suggest the damnation he promises.” The mouth of *Mouthpiece “Prophet”* is a rotting trap, containing its own destruction and the destruction of others. It is akin to what in slang terms is called a ‘bugchaser’, a person who seeks sexual partners who are HIV positive for the purpose of having unprotected sex and becoming HIV positive himself.

Contemplating a final drawing *Mouthpiece. “Kiss”*, depicting a ghost-like image of a head devoid of material substance except for the fleshy, bruised lips, one is moved to ask, along with Hamlet, “What a falling off was there”, to invoke another Shakespearian narrative. Hamlet might regret the demise of greatness and of noble thought, but we have greatness and noble thought in unadulterated form in this suite of drawings by Judith Mason.

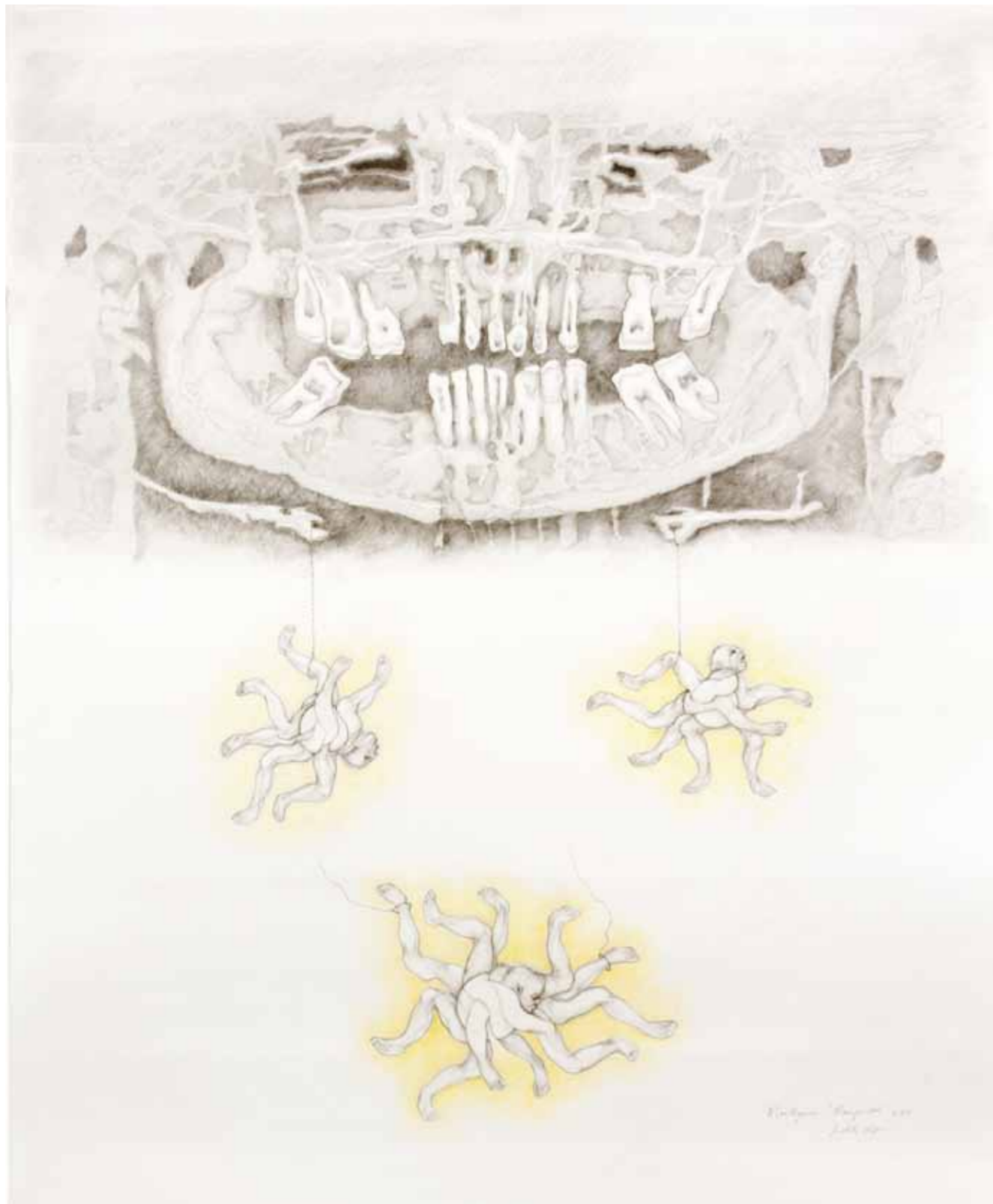
Wilhelm van Rensburg



Mouthpiece "Unwise Saw and Modern Instance"—apologies to W. Shakespeare 2011 Pencil on paper 410X1090mm



Mouthpiece "Commandant" 2011 Pencil and coloured pencil on paper 1175X1497mm



Mouthpiece. "Manipulator" 2011 Pencil and coloured pencil on paper 1246X1022mm



MOUTHPIECE – ARTIST AKA SACRED SHROUD SELLER 2011 Pencil, coloured pencil and gold leaf on paper 1220X1036mm



Left *Mothmask Drawing* 2011 Pencil and coloured pencil on paper 696X498mm
 Right *Mouthpiece: "Scarecrow"* 2011 Pencil, coloured pencil and cotton string 760X565mm

Mouthpiece - The Laughter of Others 2011 Pencil and coloured pencil on paper 1015X1065mm



Mouthpiece. "Kiss" 2011 Pencil and coloured pencil on paper 685X520mm



Mouthpiece. "Saying No" 2011 Pencil and coloured pencil on paper 780X745mm



Mouthpiece "Prophet" 2011 Pencil and coloured pencil 1082X1036mm



Top *Draggins the Night* 2011 Pencil on paper 620X615mm

Bottom *Cast skin* 2011 Pencil on paper 500X703mm



Paolo & Francesca 2011 Pencil and coloured pencil on paper 1190X992mm



Housekeeper 2011 Pencil and coloured pencil on paper 560X760mm



Fleas on Time's Dog 2010 – 11 Pencil and coloured pencil on paper 1475X1045mm

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Icarus 2011 Pencil, coloured pencil and burning with soldering iron 1220X930mm



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