

PRISON SENTENCES

Willem Boshoff

Date of first issue: 2003

Materials: Zimbabwe Black granite, Belfast Black granite, White marble

Each panel 150 x 100 x 3cm (Some variables of 130 x 100cm were also made)

Estimated weight 120kg per panel for granite panels of 150 x 100 x 3cm

The set earmarked for the Den Haag show is dated as 2010. It is number 4/5 and its size is 134 x 100 x 3cm. The material is Belfast Black granite

Methods of display

- At Constitutional Court: Long steel bars fixed to the building, holes drilled in the back of the granite panels, bolts cemented into these holes, then bolted through the steel bars.
- At Gordon Schachat Residence: A large stand concreted into the ground. The stand has steel channels at top and bottom. The granite panels were slid into the channels.
- Standard method: Custom made brackets are fastened to a wall so that top and bottom of work fit snugly into them. The bottom bracket is lined with black double-sided tape and the granite panel rests on the tape and bracket. The top bracket has a thin, loose bar of steel as wide as the panel's thickness and this loose bar has a lip that overlaps the top of the panel slightly. This bar is screwed down on the work with sunken grub screws and Allen keys. The bottom bracket carries the weight of the panel and the top bracket with its loose bar and lip keeps the work from falling forward.
- At NIROX sculpture park. The eight panels were randomly stood up against trees in a chosen section of forest. Shown in Den Haag, Netherlands, as part of the exhibition entitled *AFTER THE RAINBOW NATION*.

Naming

- The eight panels as a set is named *PRISON SENTENCES*
- To set them apart from the *PRISON SENTENCES*, single panels are named *PRISON HACKS*.

Edition Status

PRISON SENTENCES

- Comprises of a composite work containing all eight granite panels
- These eight panels are in a fixed edition of 5 (altogether 40 panels)
- 1/5 Constitutional Court, Johannesburg (Zimbabwe Black granite)
- 2/5 Gordon Schachat, Johannesburg (Zimbabwe Black granite)
- 3/5 Ferguson family, Boston (Zimbabwe Black granite)
- 4/5 NIROX sculpture park on consignment (Belfast Black granite)
- 5/5 Not yet made

PRISON HACKS

- Comprises individual, loose granite panels of the Rivonial trial prisoners existing outside the edition called *PRISON SENTENCES*
- Each panel represents a particular political prisoner
- Only five panels with two artist proofs per prisoner are scheduled (potentially 50 panels). These panels are numbered 6/10 to 10/10 to set them apart from the same panels that exist in the work *PRISON SENTENCES*.
- So far only individual panels of Nelson Mandela's prison sentence were made

- *Nelson Mandela Prison Hacks* 6/10 Johannesburg Art Gallery, Zimbabwe Black granite
- *Nelson Mandela Prison Hacks* 7/10 Private Collection, Belfast Black granite
- *Nelson Mandela Prison Hacks* 8/10 Mark Read, Belfast Black granite
- *Nelson Mandela Prison Hacks* 9/10 Tollman family Boston, White marble
- *Nelson Mandela Prison Hacks* 10/10 Jason Druin, White marble
- *Nelson Mandela Prison Hacks* Artist's Proof 1 Mark Read, Belfast Black granite



PRISON SENTENCES in a courtyard at the Constitutional Court of South Africa. Size: 150 X 100 cm



PRISON SENTENCES in the Tollman Residence, Boston. Size: 130 X 100 cm



PRISON SENTENCES in the Schachat garden. Size: 150 X 100 cm



PRISON SENTENCES in the NIROX sculpture park. Size: 150 X 100 cm

Interview with the artist

Transcript by W Siebrits, June 2007

When I first thought of this project my initial idea was to make a series of etchings to record the number of days spent in jail by the eight political prisoners who were sentenced to life imprisonment at the close of the Rivonia trial in June 1964. Most were released only in 1989-1990. I appointed a number of assistants to calculate the exact number of days each of them spent behind bars, taking leap years into account. In the case of Dennis Goldberg, we actually went to visit him to ascertain precisely the number of days he was imprisoned, as he was released early. It emerged from the research we did that seven years of prison is considered by the inmates to be a very long time, which feels never-ending, almost like an eternity. The prisoners speak of it as a *neves*, which the Oxford Dictionary defines as an extended period of prison sentence. (When written backwards, *neves* spells the word 'seven'.) Realising that the measurement of time was a very important idea, I felt I would be throwing it away by simply translating that concept into a series of prints, so I decided to make these works in granite.

With my assistants I started to experiment on the computer to find the most meaningful way to represent these prison sentences. Initially I could afford to make only three panels: those for Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada. I liked the title PRISON HACKS, because a hack is a term for a person hired to do dull routine work, but also means a line that you draw through something. Each prisoner counts the days of his or her sentence already served by scoring a vertical hack through each day. After six days a diagonal is scored across the verticals to close a week of days. This is done on a wall, in a private place, perhaps in a cell or toilet. The sentences completed by the Rivonia prisoners were:

Nelson Mandela 11 Jun 1964 -- 11 Feb 1990 (9 377 days)
Ahmed Kathrada 11 Jun 1964 -- 15 Oct 1989 (9 269 days)
Walter Sisulu 11 Jun 1964 -- 15 Oct 1989 (9 269 days)
Raymond Mhlaba 11 Jun 1964 -- 15 Oct 1989 (9 269 days)
Elias Motsoaledi 11 Jun 1964 -- 15 Oct 1989 (9 269 days)
Andrew Mlangeni 11 Jun 1964 -- 15 Oct 1989 (9 269 days)
Govan Mbeki 11 Jun 1964 -- 5 Nov 1987 (8 548 days)
Dennis Goldberg 11 Jun 1964 - June 1985 (± 8 030 days)

Having received life sentences, these prisoners were going to be incarcerated forever. A man like Mandela did not sit in jail for one period of *neves*, but for four. It is crazy to doom one person to spend the remainder of a lifetime behind bars purely because of what he thought. This work is strongly related to BANGBOEK (1978-1981), a work in which I was also toying with the idea of prison. (It had to do with my own refusal to continue to do military service.) So I wanted to create a link between the two works, which were made 24 years apart.

Once I had received a commission to make all seven panels, I altered the title of the work to PRISON SENTENCES. The word 'sentence' refers to the term a prisoner serves, but it also denotes a grammatical whole with a full stop, an ending. Naming the work PRISON SENTENCES alluded to the second meaning, the idea that one would expect a sentence to end. I wanted to evoke a sense of abstraction, a meditative

quality arising from the whole process of counting days and passing time, to the point at which you lose yourself completely. I chose the black granite as it is the material of a graveyard. It is also the material used to build memorials. Each panel is reflective, so you see yourself in it: in a sense it becomes a mirror of the self.

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