

The Sculpture of **GEORGE
KENNETHSON**

1910 – 1994



RICHARD
CORK



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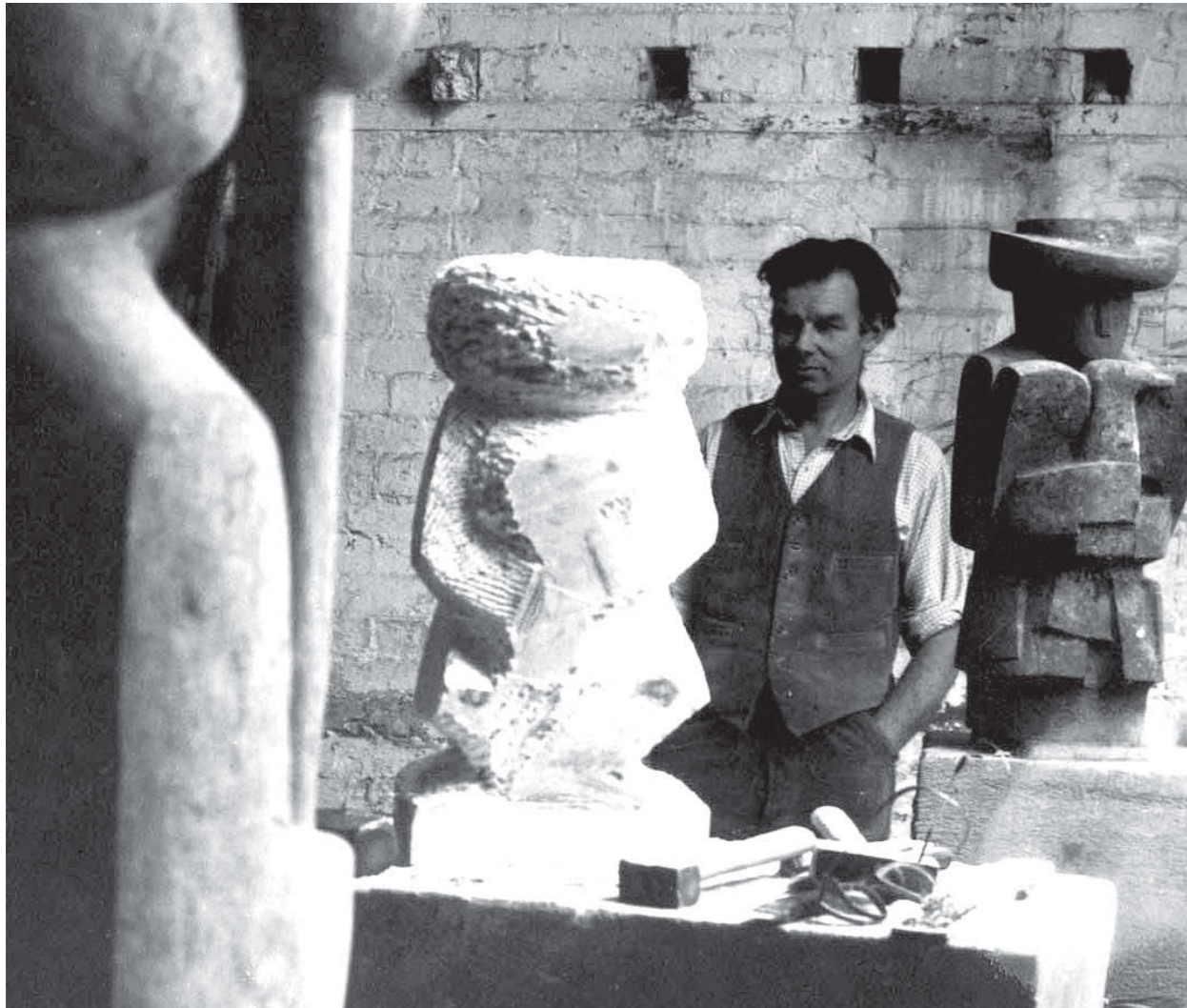
Essay by Richard Cork

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George Kennethson: *A Rich Multiplicity of Experiences*

Richard Cork



George Kennethson in his studio, 1952

During his long summer walks on the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset, George Kennethson communed with earth and air alike. He felt at one with the immensity of the land and the sky. They nourished his work as a sculptor, and so did the machines mining stone beneath the hills. He spent a lot of his time at Purbeck scrutinising the motion of the sea as well. Fascinated by the incessant confrontation between waves and rocks on the coastline, he also studied birds as they enjoyed their freedom in flight. Watching them soar, curve and dive confirmed Kennethson's passionate belief that 'the essential aim' of his art 'is to communicate life.' He had arrived at the conclusion that 'life is movement, so the work in whatever medium must express that above all. In the case of sculpture it must be achieved by the rigour of the relationships of masses and by the rhythmic transitions from plane to plane.'

Unlike most sculptors, Kennethson wanted this remarkably comprehensive vision of landscape to play a key role in his mature work. He began visiting the Isle of Purbeck in the late 1930s, soon after marrying Eileen

Guthrie. They had met almost a decade earlier, as students at the Royal Academy Schools in London where the training was fiercely traditional and focused on life-class drawing along with careful study of Old Master paintings. But Kennethson grew excited by modernism, and during the 1930s he worked as a painter influenced primarily by Cezanne's emphasis on elemental forms. He also began experimenting with sculpture and soon became wholeheartedly committed to carving in stone. 'The tactile quality is essential', he wrote later, emphasizing that 'you must either feel the surface, the angularities and subtleties, or imagine you are feeling them, as in any moment of empathy. But in fact the tactile sensation is essential.'

By the time the Second World War erupted, Kennethson knew that in his native country Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore were radically transforming the whole notion of carved sculpture. Yet he also admired the work of the three sculptors – Jacob Epstein, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Eric Gill – who had revolutionised carving in Britain before



Lost from St Johns Wood
Art School, Sonstims, 1938-40

the First World War. Kennethson warmed to the urgency with which Epstein cut into blocks of stone and created naked figures whose bold forms and sexual explicitness shocked so many viewers at the time. Epstein's challenging insistence on developing a close, personal relationship with the stone, and respecting its innate character, meant a great deal to Kennethson as he committed himself to carving. But he felt equally in tune with Gaudier-Brzeska, the young Frenchman who built such a precocious reputation in London before dying, at the age of only 23, on a battlefield in France. Ezra Pound had described Gaudier as 'a well-made young wolf or some soft-moving, bright-eyed wild thing.' His tragic loss in June 1915, killed by a machine-gun bullet in the forehead, may well have helped Kennethson decide to become a conscientious objector during the Second World War.

He belonged to the generation whose fathers had suffered the gruelling carnage of the First World War. Soon afterwards, when Kennethson was only ten years old, his mother died very suddenly. Kennethson wanted the artist to be a man of peace in society, and violent themes are rarely detectable in the sculpture produced during his long, prolific career. He saw himself essentially as a traveller, forever moving 'towards some sort of harmony', and rejected the alternative idea of making 'endless journeys backward into poisonous reinventions of murderous and hate-ridden dreams of the past.'

He was always willing to study and learn from ancient sculpture. Like Brancusi and Picasso, whose work he also respected, Kennethson looked hungrily at older art produced far beyond the classical canon. Unlike his traditional teachers at the Royal Academy Schools, he searched for inspiration among the 'primitive' carvings to be found at the British Museum. Gaudier-Brzeska had paid tribute to 'the barbaric peoples of the earth (for whom we have sympathy and admiration)'. And Kennethson shared this profound respect for the anonymous practitioners who had pioneered the vision he respected. Time and again, his carvings seem to evoke the spirit of extreme distillation which characterized sculpture in the primordial era.

However much he admired the monumental severity achieved by large-scale 'primitive' carvings, Kennethson had no wish to make colossal works himself. Early on, he did try to make some large-scale sculpture. But on the whole, his pieces are modest in size and some – like much of Gaudier-Brzeska's sculpture – are small. Hence his



STANDING
FIGURE mid 1930s
hornton
24.5 x 10 x 10 inches



RECLINING FIGURE 1955
alabaster 12 x 20 x 5 inches

commitment to direct carving, which he described as 'the technique of evolving and developing a work from a given piece of material without the use of a maquette or model in some other material such as clay or wax.' Kennethson relished the hard work necessitated by carving straight into the resistance of the stone. He distanced himself from the whole notion of a team in a workshop, where the artist made a model and then presided over the execution of the final work by others. 'The use of a maquette or scale model is obligatory of course in the case of large-scale monumental or architectural sculpture which is generally dependant on the work of assistants. I am only interested in a form of sculpture which results entirely from the work of one individual from the beginning to the final minutest subtlety of form or

texture, parallel to the work of the painters I most admire, or to musical composition or to poetry or writing.'

An omnivorous reader, Kennethson also kept a record player in his studio, enabling him to listen to compositions ranging from Beethoven's late quartets and Sibelius to Stravinsky and Britten. Both he and Eileen, who shared his enthusiasm for music and played a grand piano, moved to Oundle in 1954, after he secured a job as Art Master at the local public school. He taught there for many years, but made sure in his contract that Wednesday was a free day. 'I'm a sculptor first', he always insisted, even though his initial studio in this ancient Northamptonshire market town was nothing more than a former chicken shed.



Carving, 1937, location unknown



GIRL WITH CELLO 1960
alabaster 17.5 x 12 x 11.5 inches

left (detail)

In 1959, however, Kennethson's life as an artist underwent a dramatic metamorphosis. He managed to acquire a colossal Old Anchor Brewery on the outskirts of Oundle, ample enough to become a house for his burgeoning family, a 'chipping shed' where he worked, a painting studio for Eileen, and an immense Malting building where Kennethson could at last instal his carvings in spacious surroundings which enhanced their merits. Protected here by a wooden raftered ceiling, the stones rested on tall,

substantial baulks fashioned from the dismantled Malting floor timbers.

Many of the carvings, hewn from Hopton Wood stone, alabaster, Clipsham stone, Purbeck marble, Brown Hornton stone, Cumbrian limestone or Ketton stone, remained in the Malting. But they looked impressive there, displayed alongside cubes of stone still waiting to be carved. Their untouched rectangular integrity stimulated him whenever he looked at them, won-

Carving c.1940s, location unknown



dering how they might be transformed. Kennethson once defined his fundamental ambition as 'removing from a given block of material of a certain size & proportion sufficient of it to produce a fully three-dimensional harmony of rhythms without destroying too much of the material or wasting it. This seems to me the basis for experiments in the medium of Direct stone carving, considering it as a fairly small-scale form of Artistic communication. It is essentially a medium of extraction not of addition.'

When visiting the Malting, I noticed a giant hogweed leaning against a white-painted brick wall. Kennethson regularly brought examples of plant-life into the studio and admired their structure. Although he enjoyed going to London and visiting art exhibitions while staying with Eileen's sister in Chelsea, metropolitan life would never have suited him on a permanent basis. He had, after all, grown up in the New Forest, joined a rowing club and in later life gained perpetual inspiration from his proximity to the countryside, planting trees in the paddock and swimming in the nearby river. Like Gaudier-Brzeska, he filled sketchbooks with swift, economical drawings of everything which caught his vigilant eye.

Turning the pages of a sketchpad he took with him while walking through the Isle of Purbeck, I can still watch Kennethson moving with rapid assurance from figures on rocks to plants, seaweed and seascapes. His deftly summarising draughtsmanship enables him to define the simplified forms of a seated woman and then direct his avid attention to the sculptural magnifi-



Carving c.1950s. Private collection

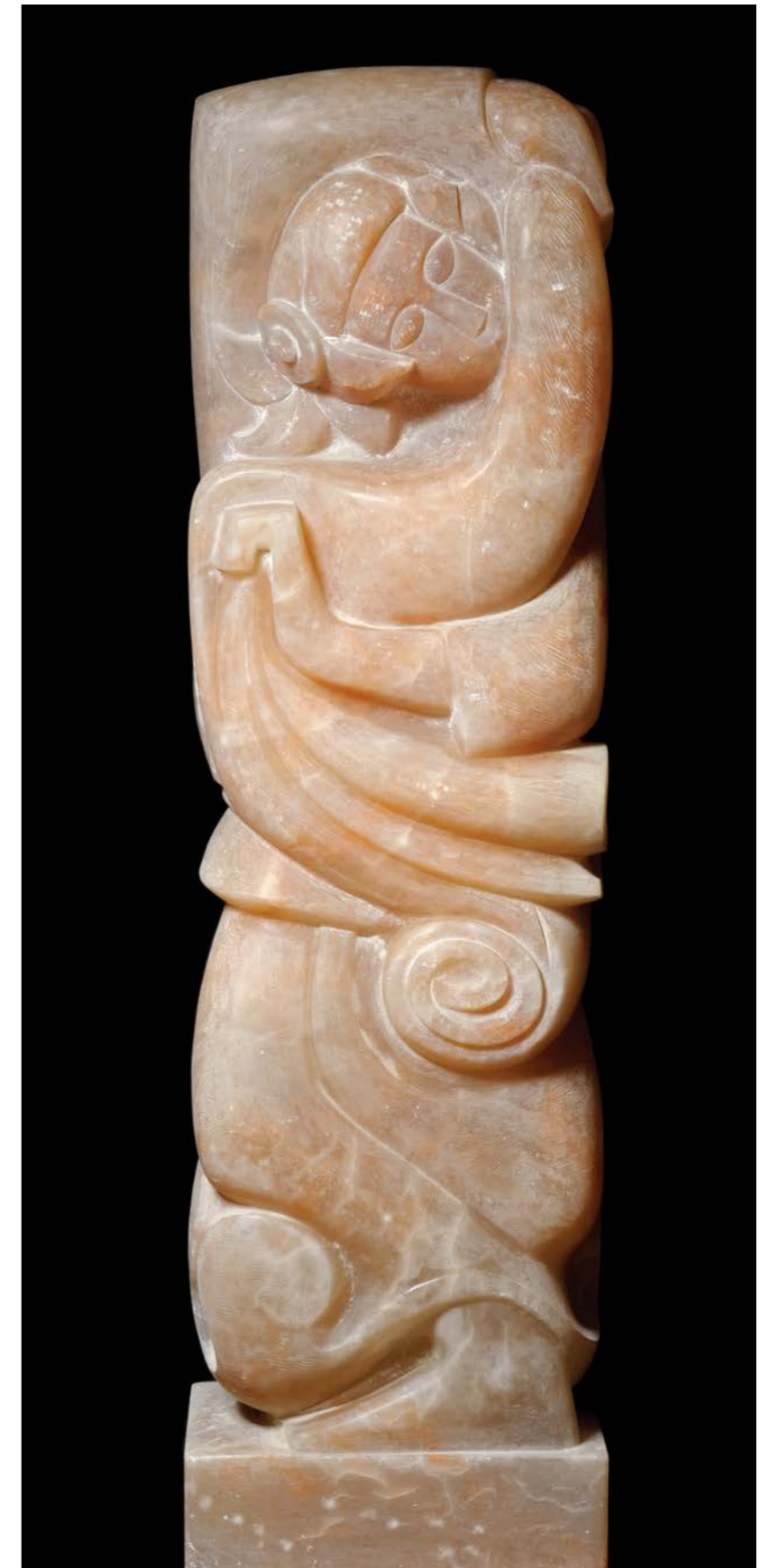
cence of the ruined Corfe Castle. Soon afterwards, he becomes equally involved with the dynamism of waves lashing the Dorset coast in dizzy circular motion. Then the weather breaks, impelling him to draw a thunderous sky rearing beyond a cliff-fence. These drawings are all executed with great certainty, clarity and confidence. They undoubtedly nourished his imagination, and he also filled hundreds of little notebooks with minimal preparatory studies for the sculpture he was about to produce.

Occasionally, his awareness of the appalling conflicts elsewhere in the world drove him to make carvings where combatants brandish



right
SALOME c.1950s
alabaster 50 x 14 x 10 inches

left (detail)





Recumbent Knight, carving, 1942

swords, or are caught in the act of stabbing each other. One of his subjects, a male figure with a staff, was inspired by tragic scenes of refugees walking endlessly away from the Ethiopian civil war. And Kennethson was very impressed by the stoical courage of a kindly local watchmaker in Oundle who recounted, with riveting attention to detail, how he had walked out of gruesome captivity in deepest war-time Russia. Even so, such themes are rare. Most of the time he focused on affirmative carvings which celebrate his fascination with the world he observed so keenly.

Architecture stimulated him a great deal. He venerated Chartres, and once embarked on

a tour of English cathedral cities. But he was equally captivated by modernist architects as innovative as Le Corbusier, and Kennethson played an instrumental role in making Oundle School decide to commission an architectural extension from Powell and Moya, who had made their reputation at the 1951 Festival of Britain by designing the adventurous Skylon. He even carved *The Serpent of Knowledge* on the wall of Oundle School Science Block, working there on site in the late 1950s.

On the whole, though, Kennethson much preferred carving on a smaller scale in his studio. Here, relying on a methodical yet



Carving, late 1930s



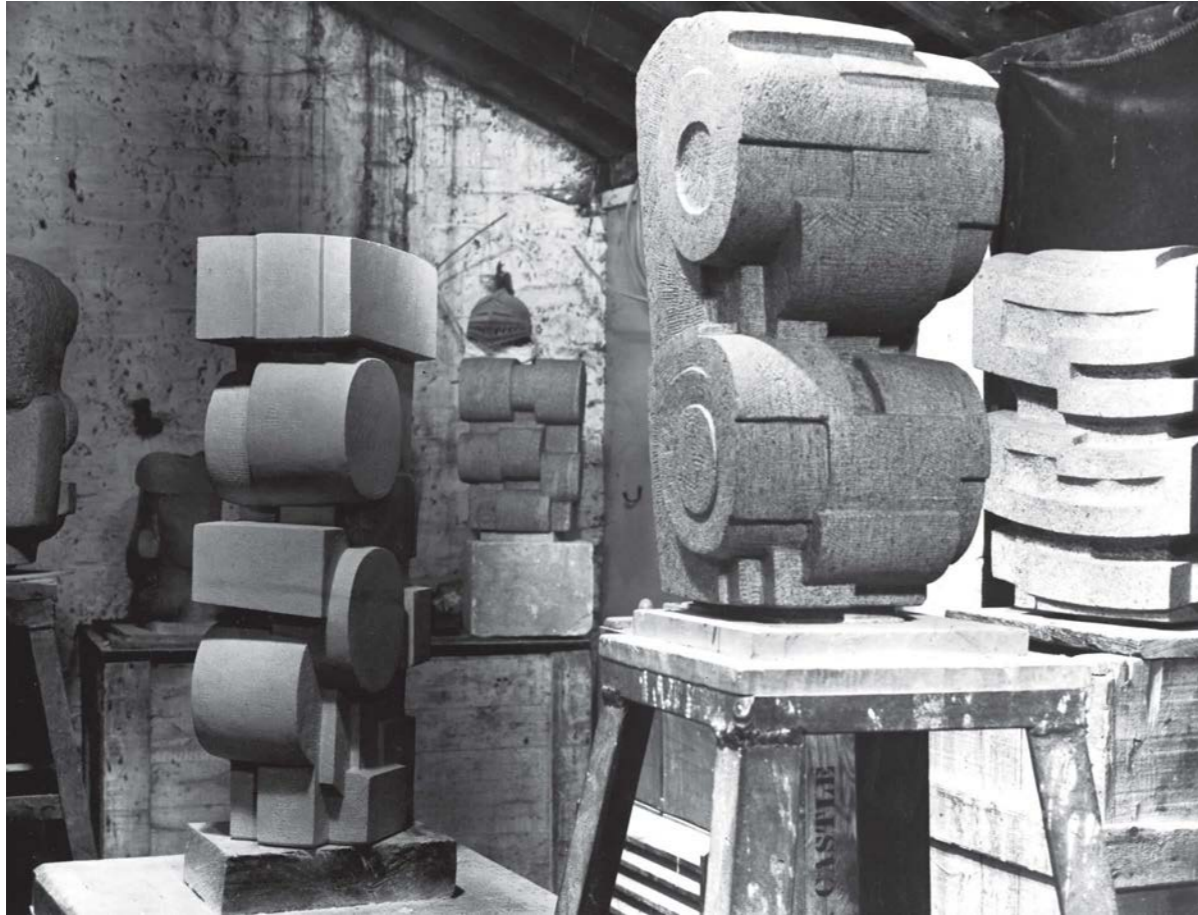
above

WAVE c.1960s
clipsham 10 x 12 x 8.5 inches

right

MOTHER AND CHILD 1945
hoptonwood 23 x 13 x 9 inches





The Maltings, 1960s

to suggestions of waves, bathers, musical instruments, Bauhaus buildings, leaves, birds, fish, rocks, flowers and recumbent figures on tombstones. Hinting at an immense array of subjects drawn from the observed world, he even included mechanistic forms derived from his encounters with the quarries where Purbeck stone was mined. It became one of his favourite materials, and during summer visits to the Isle of Purbeck he often felt compelled to make drawings of the machines at work within the mines. In this respect, his sculpture has an intriguing and unexpected link with Epstein's revolutionary Rock Drill, which began in 1913 with the startling decision to purchase a real machine used extensively in the mining world.



Waves against the Cliffs I, ink on paper



WAVE c.1950s
clipsham
20.5 x 9.5 x 10 inches



Quarry's Edge, ink on paper

Unlike Rock Drill, though, Kennethson's machine-age forms were always interwoven with his other preoccupations. He was fascinated by the relationship between modern mining machinery and the ancient landscape. However much he may have understood the Vorticists' involvement with industrial innovation, and included references to cogs, pumps and diggers in his own carvings, Kennethson aimed at embracing an extraordinary wealth of diverse associations. Looking at his work,

and moving round it time and again, we can savour his unique ability to incorporate so much from remembered encounters with both art and life. Roaming across the hills, valleys and coasts on his beloved Isle of Purbeck, he succeeded in absorbing a rich multiplicity of experiences which all found a place within his own deeply meditated and satisfying sculpture.

Richard Cork, 2014

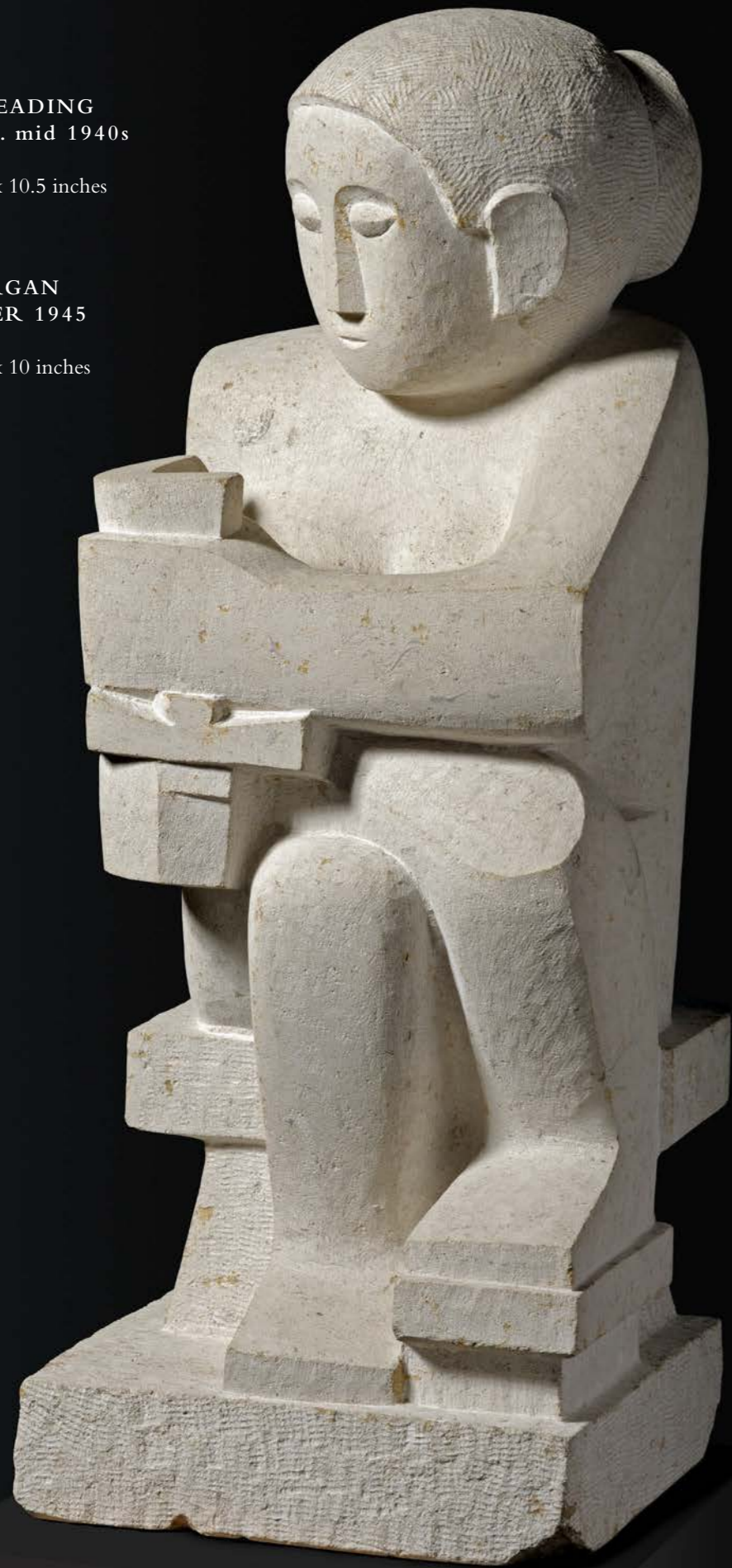
right

GIRL WITH A PLUMED HAT c.1950s
clipsham 23 x 8 x 12 inches



left

**GIRL READING
BOOK** c. mid 1940s
purbeck
26 x 10.5 x 10.5 inches



right

**THE ORGAN
GRINDER** 1945
hornton
24.5 x 10 x 10 inches



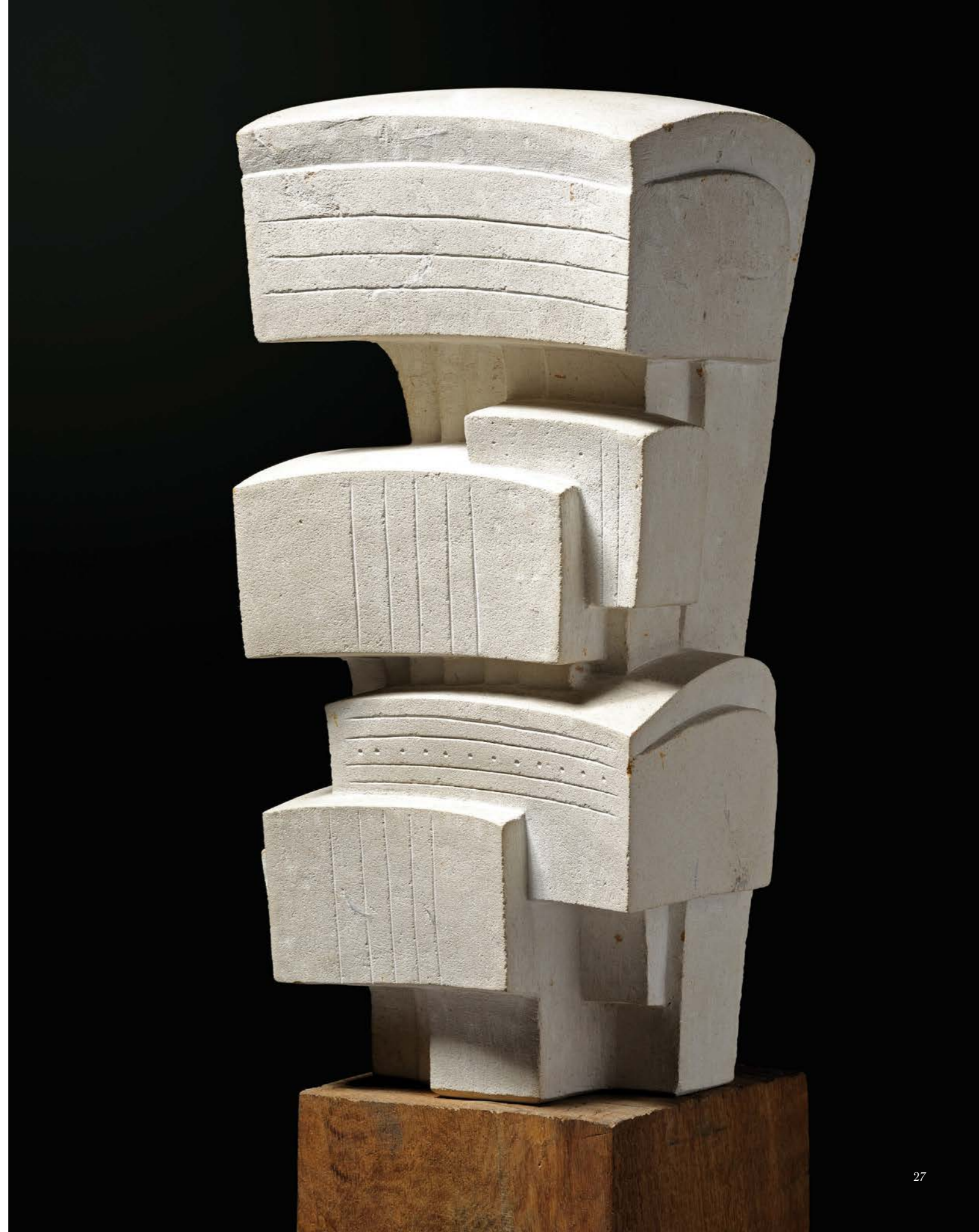


above

SEA COAST 1955
clipsham 14 x 12 x 6 inches

right

WAVE AND ROCK FORMATION c.1950s
clipsham 19.5 x 9 x 7.5 inches





GIRL WITH FLOWER 1965
alabaster 18 x 13 x 8.5 inches

right (detail)





HILL FORM 1960
clipsham 10 x 14.5 x 9 inches

left (verso)



above

SILVER STREAM late 1970s
alabaster 8 x 15 x 10 inches

right

GIRL'S HEAD c.1964
white alabaster 16 x 8.5 x 9.5 inches

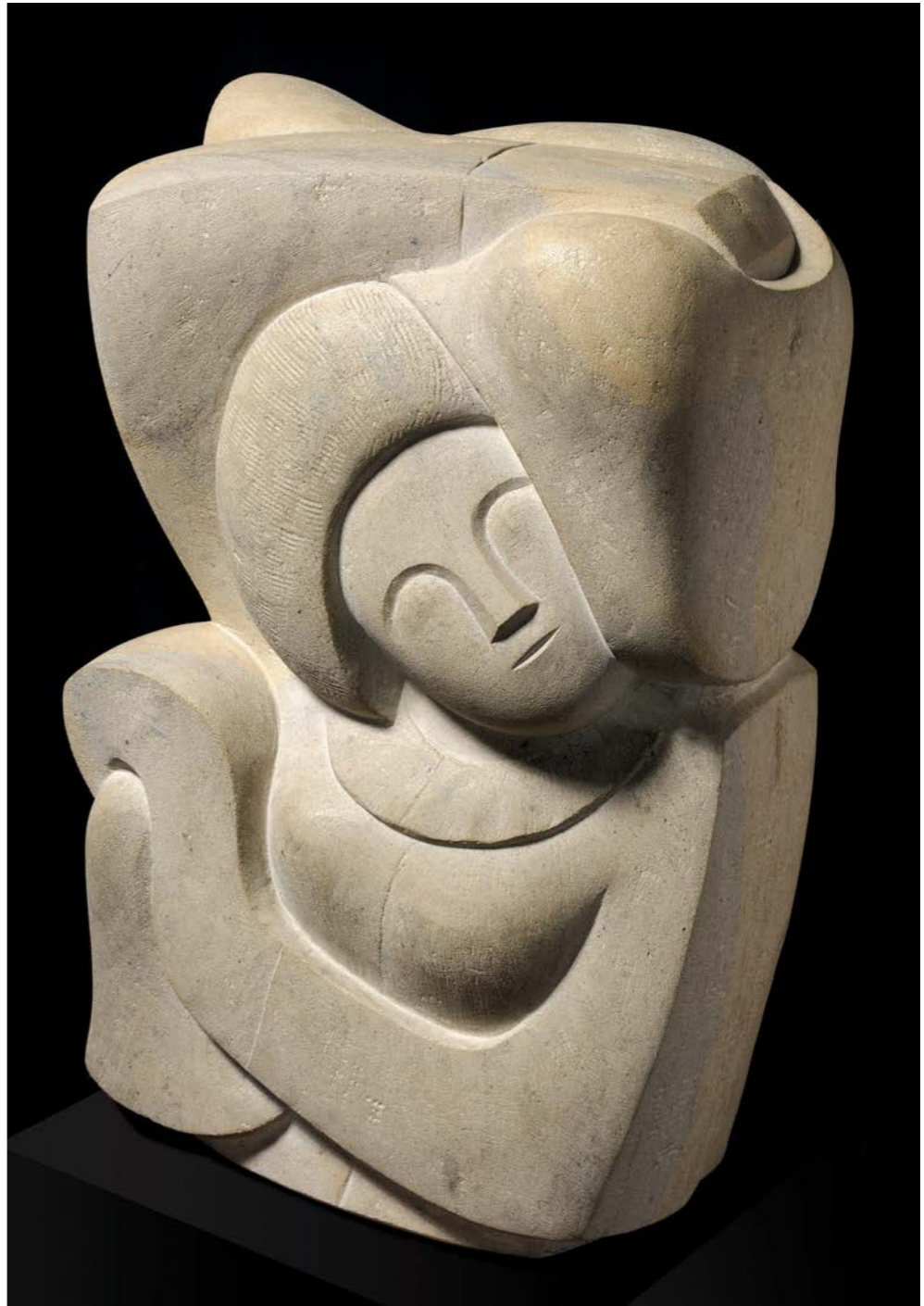




Study of Rock Forms, ink on paper



ROCK FORMS 1965
purbeck 12 x 15 x 10 inches



GIRL WITH SCARF c.1960s
clipsham 23 x 15 x 19.5 inches

left (detail)

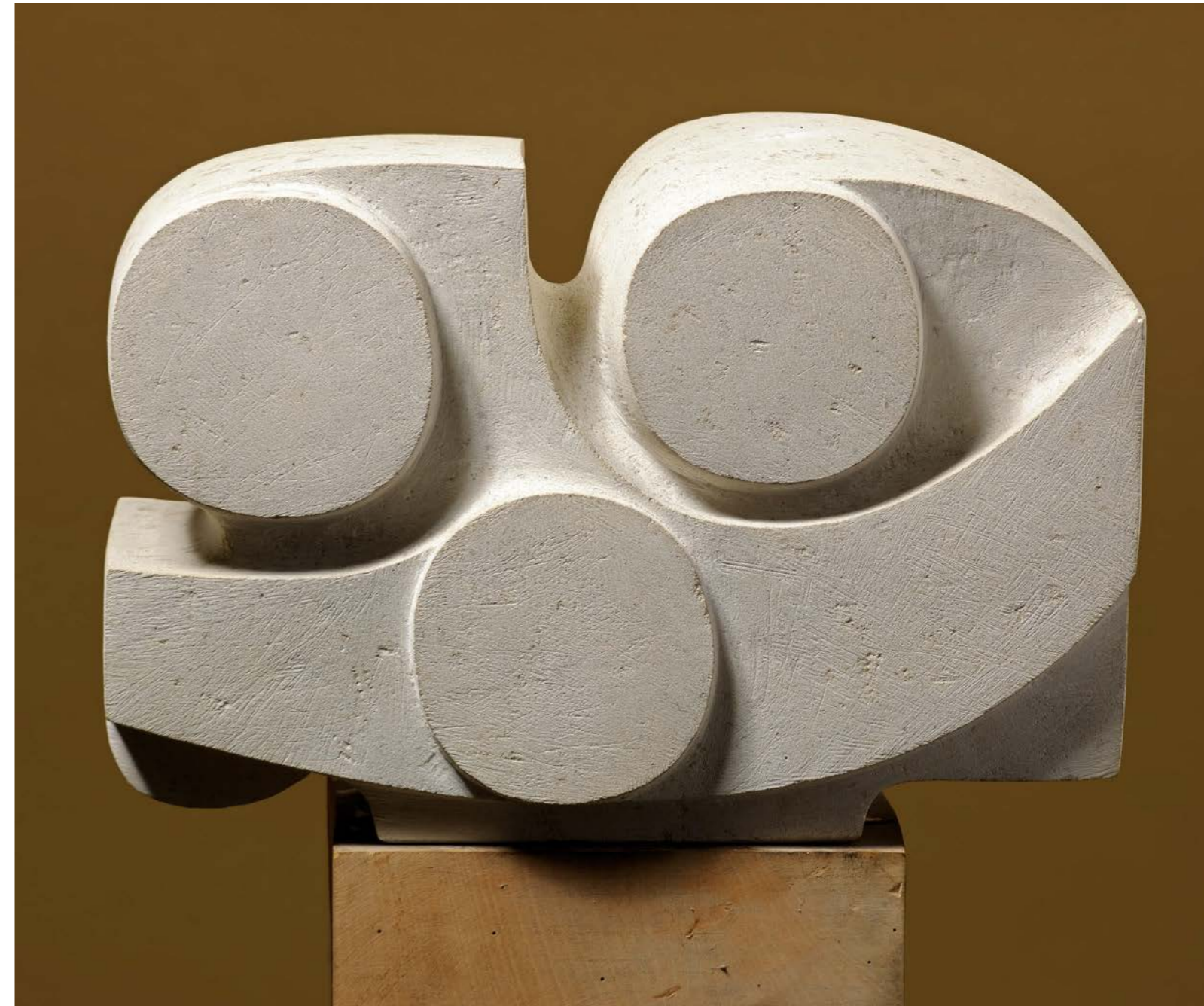


MOTHER AND CHILD c.1950s
alabaster 26.5 x 12.5 x 11 inches

left (detail)



Waves Against the Shore, ink on paper



LAND AND SEA c.1950s
white clipsham 12 x 18 x 8 inches



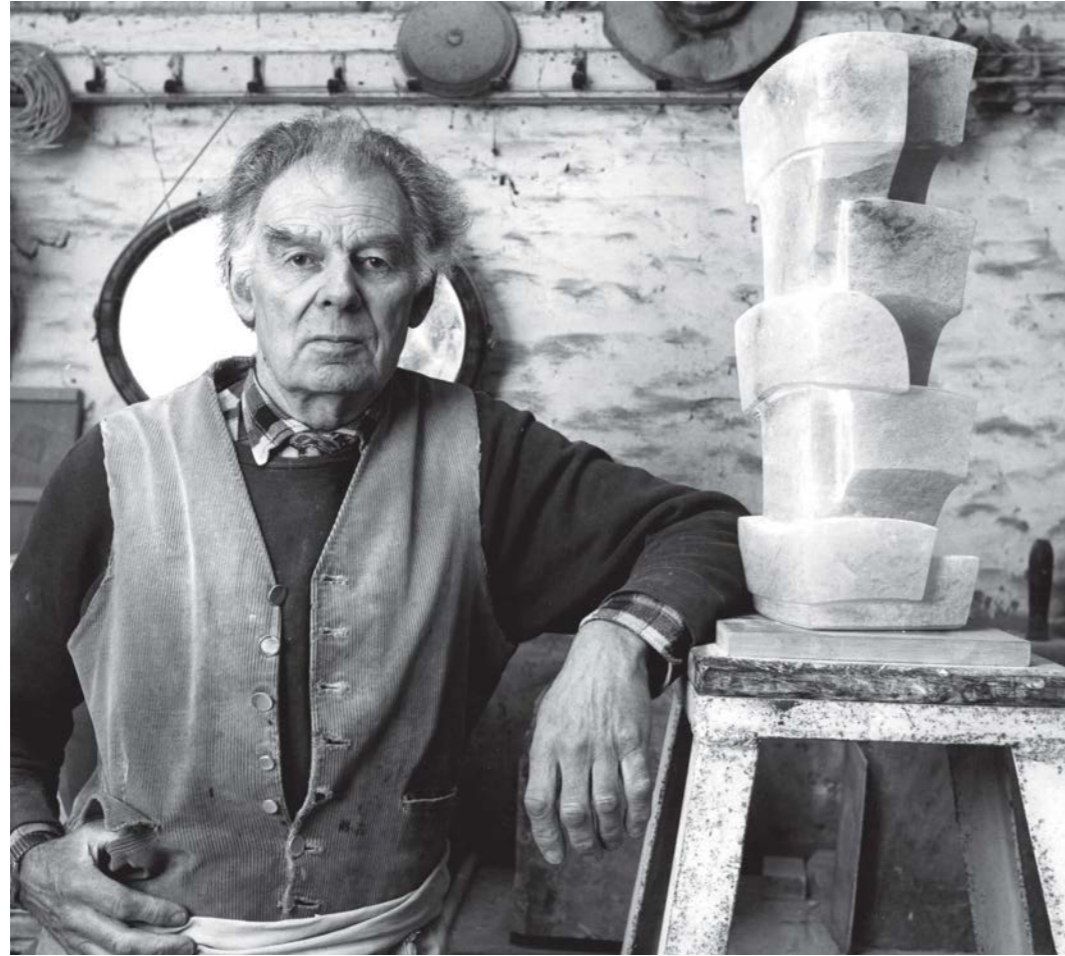
Coast and Hills, ink on paper

right

THE WAVE late 1950s
clipsham 7 x 19 x 13 inches





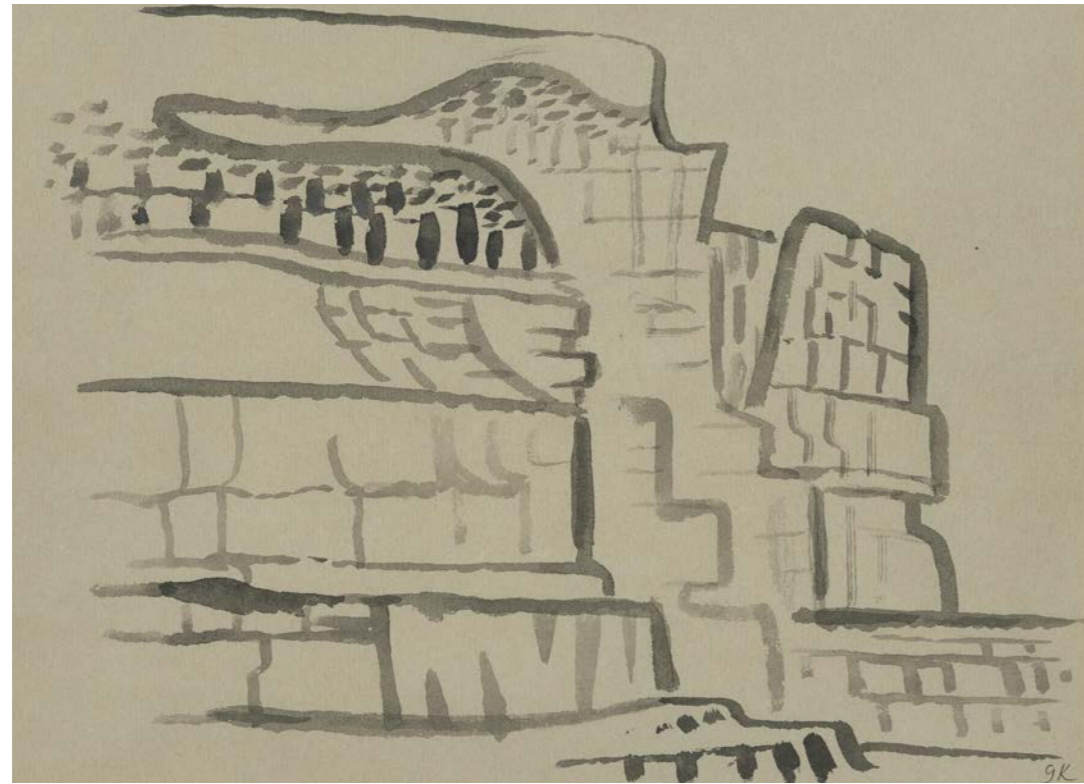


George Kennethson in his studio, 1983, photo: Gerald Corbett

right

ROCK AND WAVE SHAPE c. late 1970s
alabaster 21 x 7.5 x 7 inches



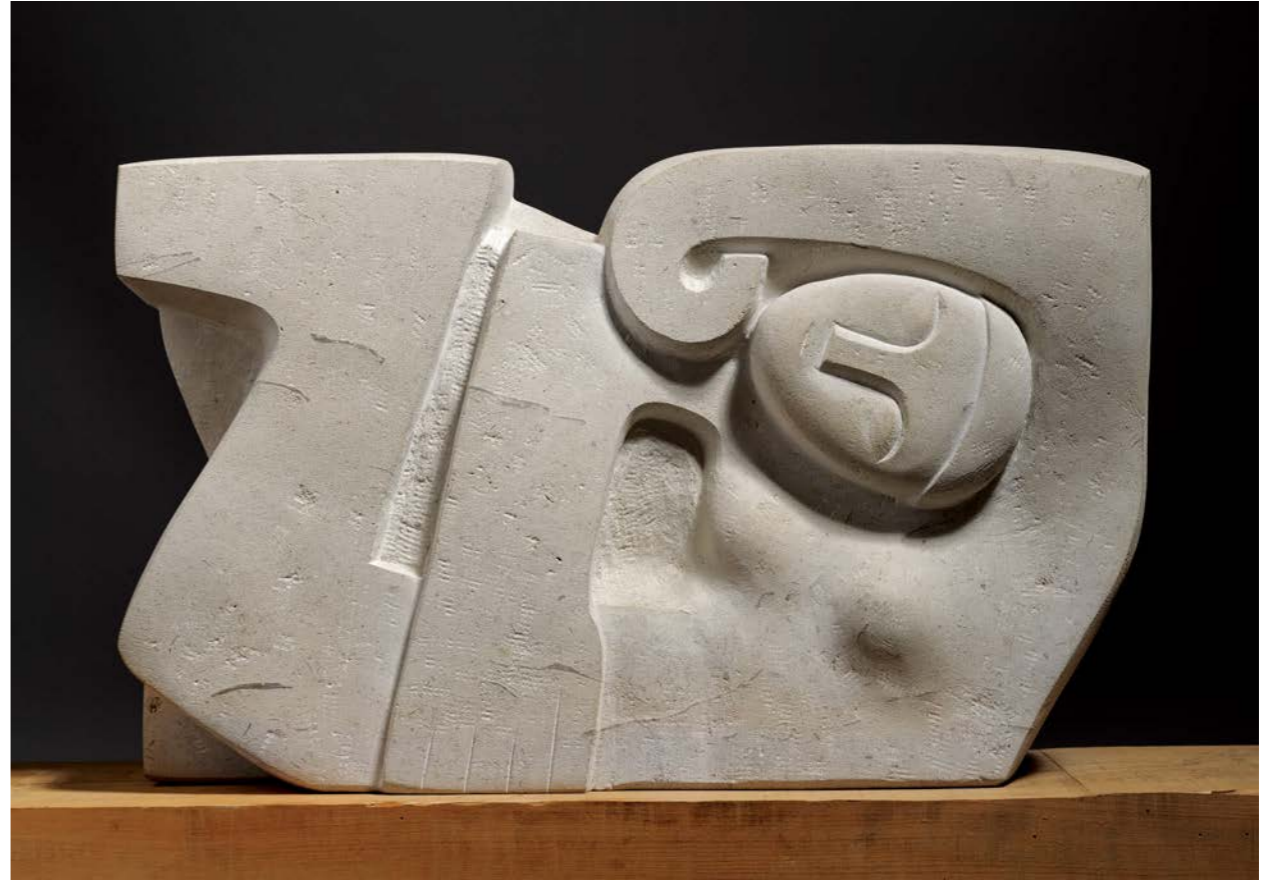


Quarry Cliffs, ink on paper

right

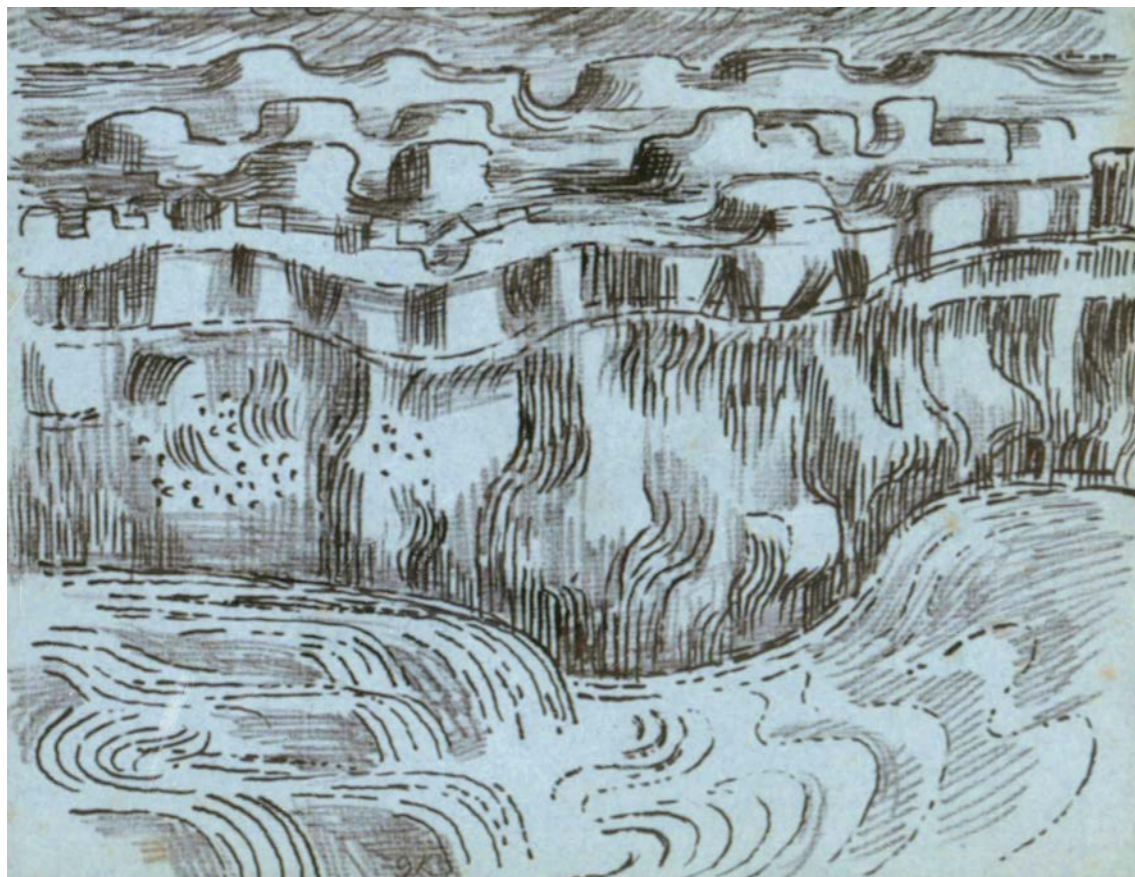
WAVE AND CLIFF FORMATION c. late 1950s
clipsham 16 x 11 x 10 inches





GIRL FLOATING c.1960s
clipsham 15 x 24 x 8 inches

left (detail)

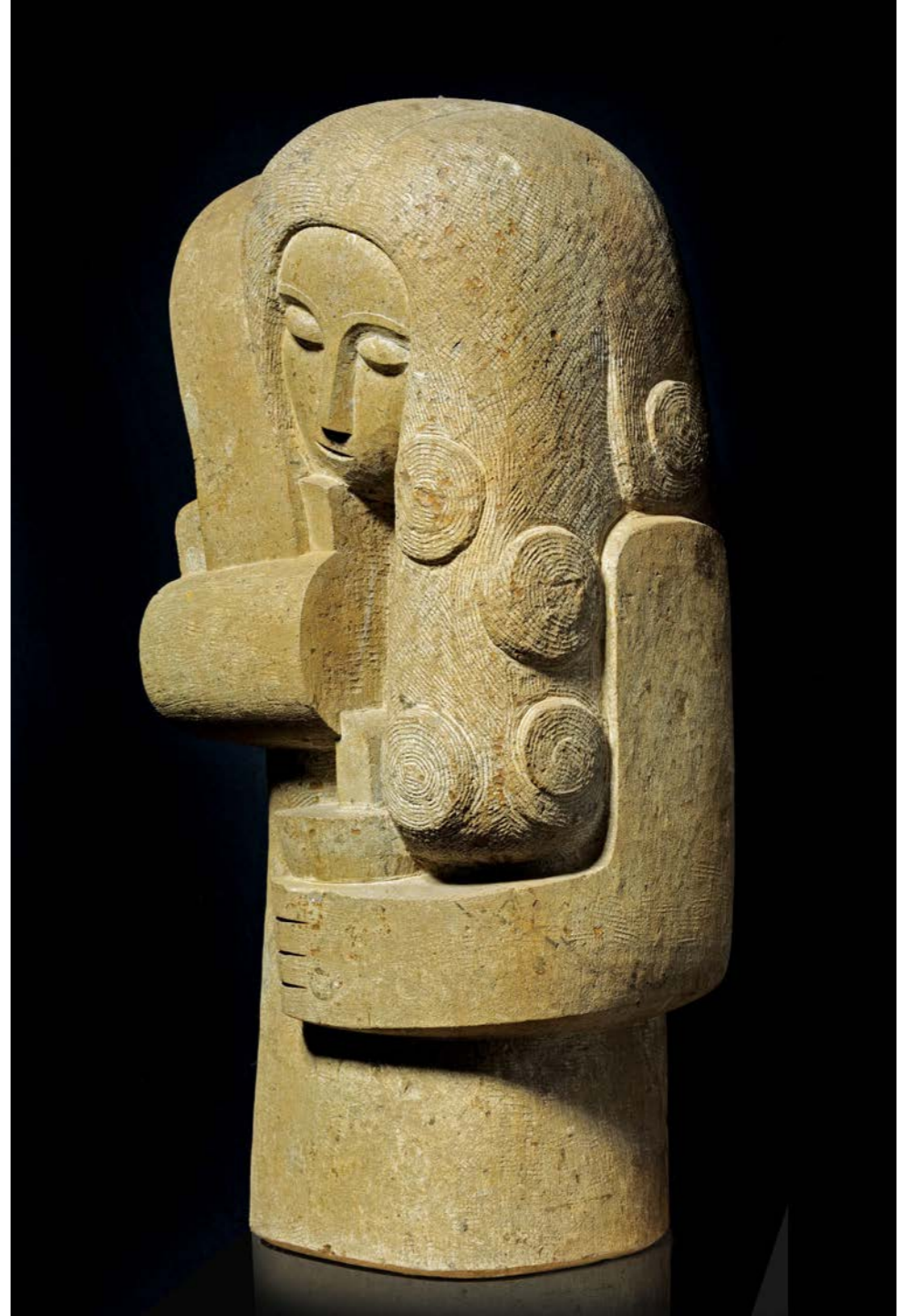


Coastal Landscape, ink on paper

right

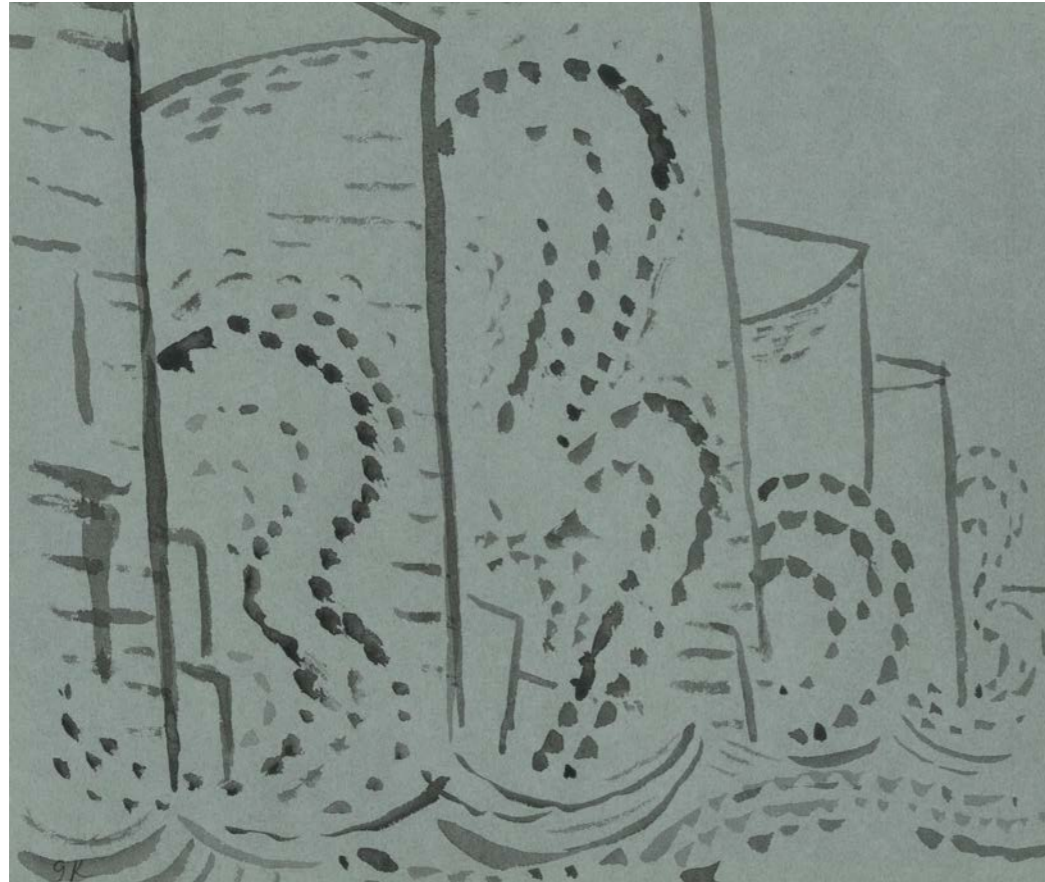
WAVE FORMATION 1955
white clipsham 19.5 x 13.5 x 8 inches





WOMAN POURING JUG c. early 1960s
brown hornton 27.5 x 12 x 10 inches

left (detail)



Motion of Breaking Waves, ink on paper



ROCK AND WAVE c. late 1950s
hornton 15.5 x 8 x 14 inches

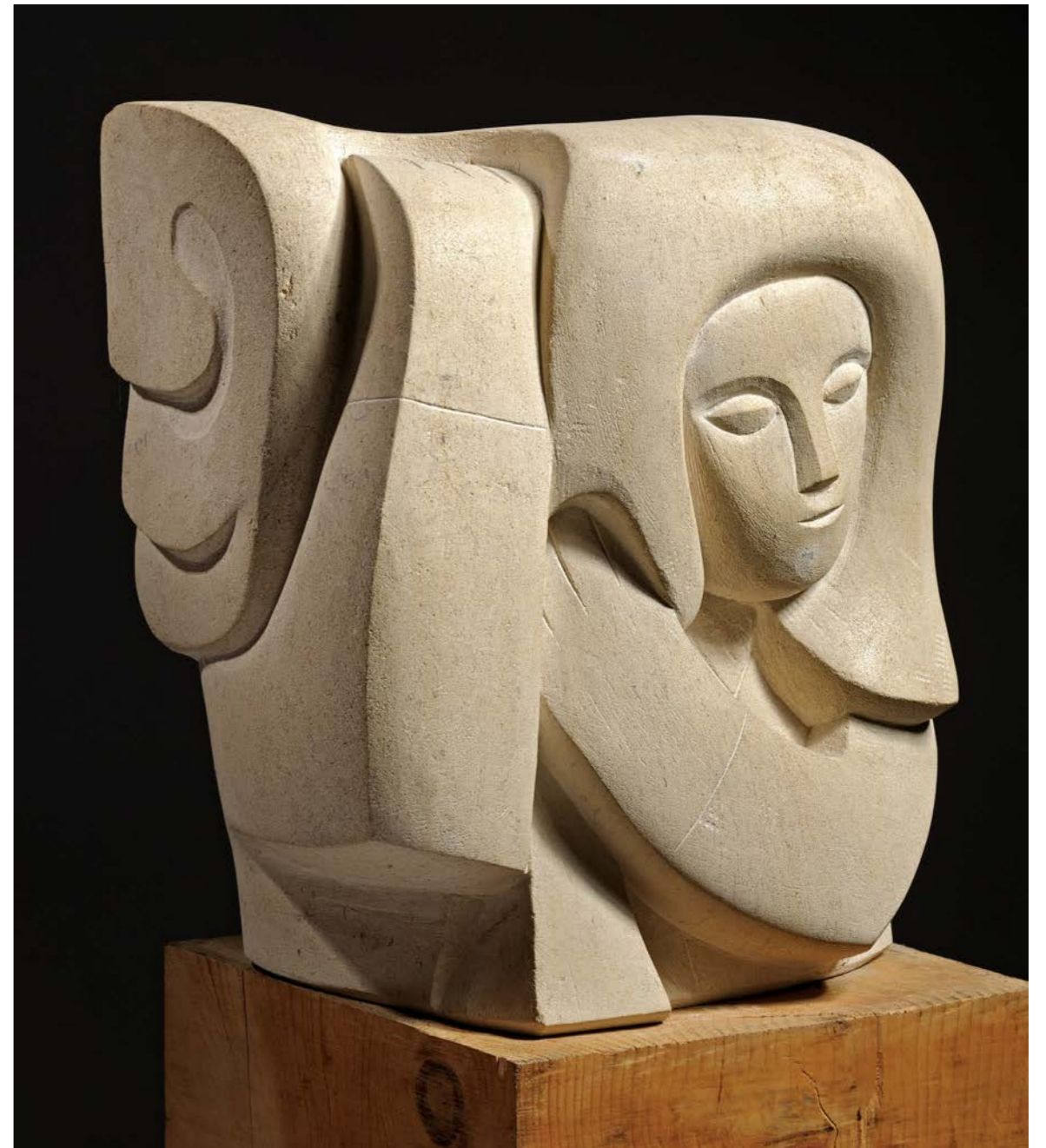


Bird in Flight, linocut

right

BIRD ALIGHTING 1970
clipsham 22 x 8 x 9 inches





WOMAN PINNING HER HAIR c.1960
clipsham 17 x 14 x 9.5 inches

left (detail)



WAVES AND ROCKS: SEA PIECE c. late 1950s
purbeck 24.5 x 30 x 5 inches

left (detail)



DANCING GIRL c.1950s
clipsham 19.5 x 19.5 x 9 inches



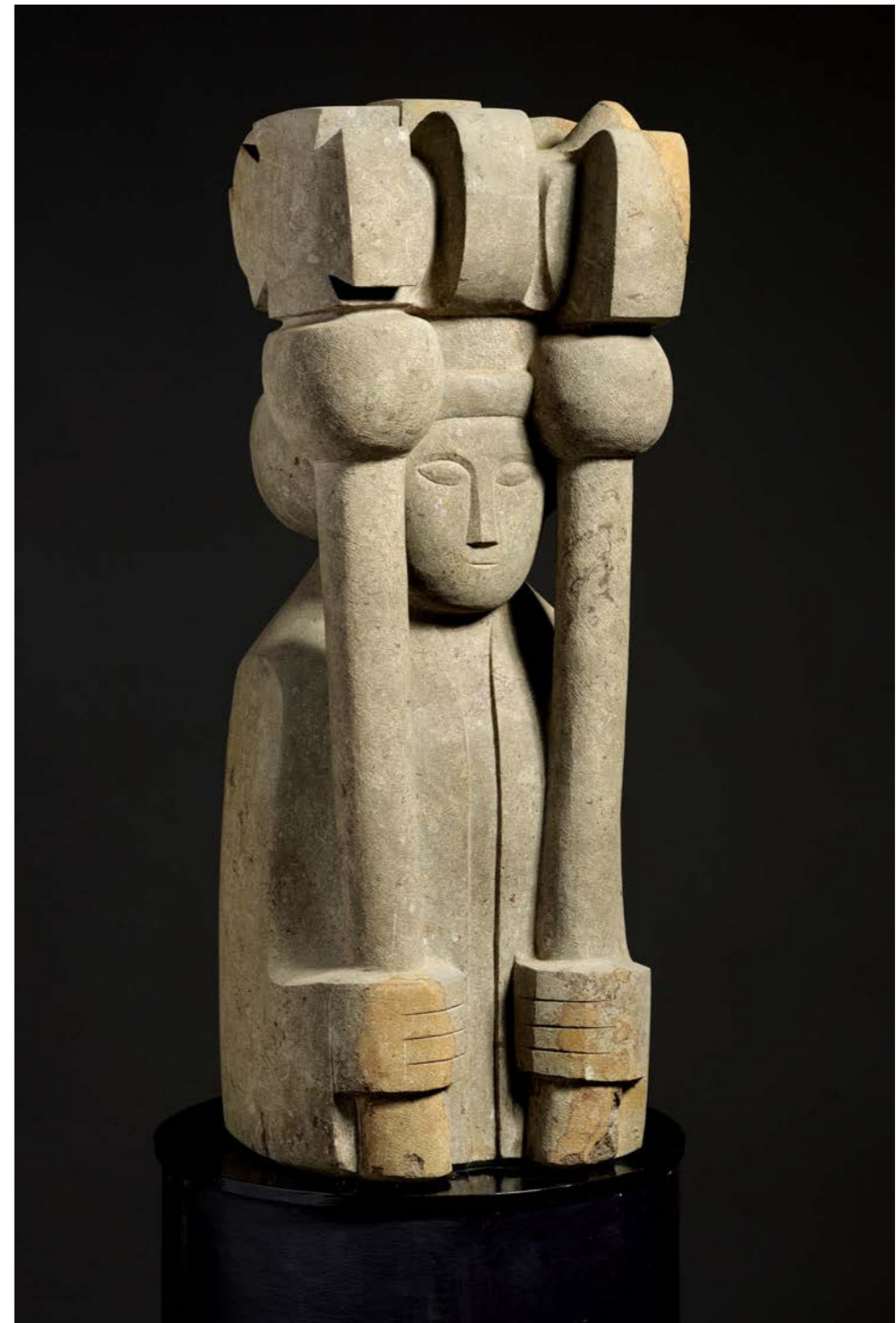


Waves Lashing the Rocks, ink on paper

right

ROCK: SEA PIECE c.1950s
clipsham 16.5 x 13 x 12 inches





CORONATION 1953
hornton 25 x 9.5 x 9 inches

left (detail)



Quarrying the Land, ink on paper

right

ABSTRACT LAND FORM 1960
purbeck marble 11 x 10.5 x 9.5 inches





DANCING FIGURE 1958
clipsham 36 x 11 x 9 inches

left (verso)





Bird in Rock Forms, ink on paper

right

WAVE FORMATION c.1950s
clipsham 14.5 x 10 x 8 inches





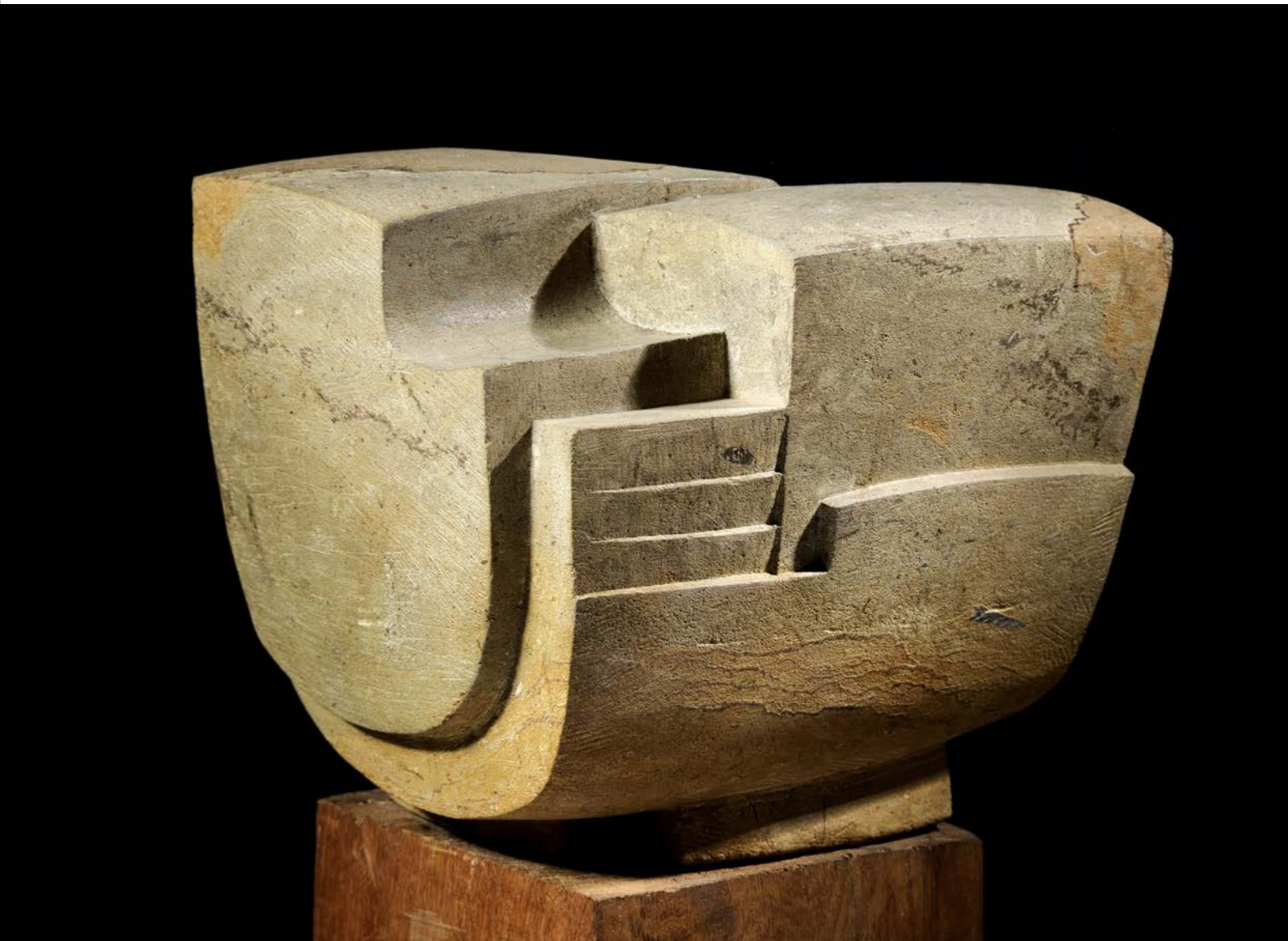
Ridge and Furrowed Hills, ink on paper



George Kennethson on the Isle of Purbeck,
photo: Matthew Mackenzie



HILL FORMS c.1950s
clipsham 10 x 12 x 10 inches



HILL FORMS

above (verso)

left (detail)



left

**STANDING FEMALE
FIGURE** c.1930s
brown hornton
32 x 10 x 8 inches



FEMALE FORM c.1940s
brown hornton 15.5. x 10.5 x 8.5 inches



George Kennethson, 1983, photo: Gerald Corbett

right

GIRL WITH PLUMED HAT c.1950s
clipsham 19 x 13 x 11 inches



George Kennethson

1910 Born Richmond-Upon-Thames, Surrey
 1927-28 Attended St. John's Wood School of Art, London; studied under Pat Millard
 1929-32 Student at the Paintings Schools, Royal Academy of Art, London
 1935-38 Studios in St. John's Wood, London and near Winchester, Hampshire; working as a painter but beginning to experiment with sculpture
 1938 Married Eileen Guthrie; couple moved to Uffington, Oxfordshire. Had five children
 1946 Exhibition of a few works in Bristol, organised by Godfrey Pilkington (no records survive)
 1947 Sculpture in the Home, Arts Council touring exhibition
 1954 Moved to Oundle, Northamptonshire; began teaching at the local public school
 1968 One-man show at Fermoy Art Gallery, King's Lynn, Norfolk
 1969 One-man show at Somerville College, Cambridge arranged by Anthony Holden
 1972 *George Kennethson: Sculpture & Drawings 1952-72*, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge
 1974 *A Retrospective Exhibition (1949-72): Sculptures & drawings by George Kennethson*, University of Birmingham
 1975 One-man show *George Kennethson: Sculpture* at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge
 1986 *Translations from Life and Nature: Stone Carvings 1950-85*, Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery

1988 One-man show at The New Art Centre, London
 1993 *George Kennethson: Retrospective* at The New Art Centre, Roche Court, Wiltshire
Experiments and Translations: Sculpture by George Kennethson at Pallant House, Chichester, West Sussex
 1994 Died in Oundle, Northamptonshire
 2000 *George Kennethson 1910-1994*, Wilson Stephens Fine Art, London
George Kennethson: Retrospective, Yarrow Gallery, Oundle, Northamptonshire
 2004 *George Kennethson – A Modernist Rediscovered*, Wilson Stephens Fine Art in association with Archeus Fine Art, London
 2012-13 *Carving in Britain from 1910 to Now*, The Fine Art Society, London

Public Collections

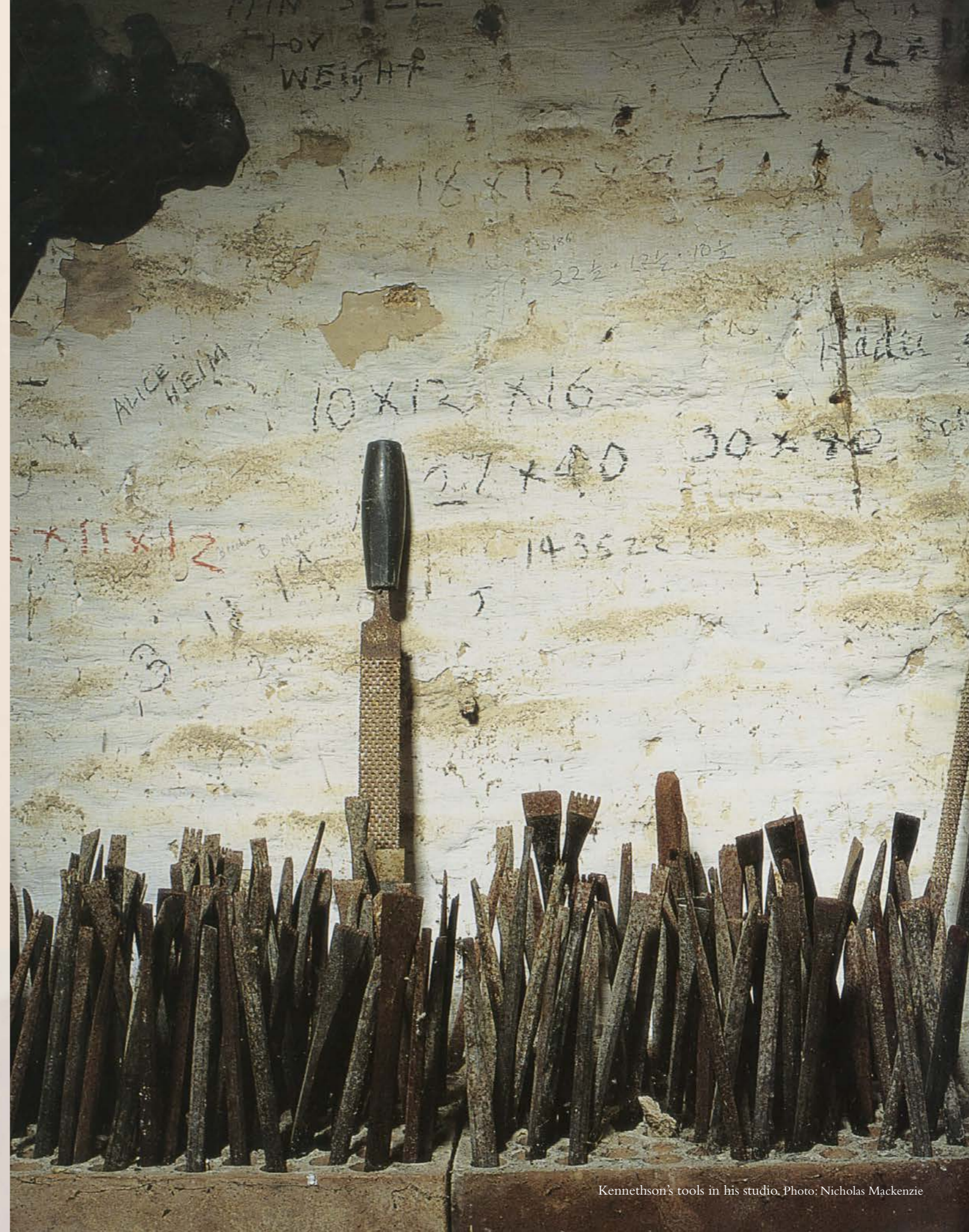
The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh and Kettle's Yard, Cambridge



Jim Ede at Kennethson's house. Photo: Nicholas Mackenzie



Construction-Birds c.1970 Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. Photo: Nicholas Mackenzie



Kennethson's tools in his studio. Photo: Nicholas Mackenzie

This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of Eileen Mackenzie (1913–2006) and Martin Mackenzie (1953–2006)

Acknowledgements

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Established 1923

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MAN WITH SHEAF 1945

Richard Cork: A brief biography

Richard Cork is an award-winning art critic, historian, broadcaster and curator. After reading Art History at Cambridge, where he gained a Doctorate, Cork became Art Critic of *The Evening Standard* and then Chief Art Critic of *The Times*. He was Editor of *Studio International*, and broadcasts regularly on BBC radio and TV. Cork became Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge University in 1989–90, and Henry Moore Senior Fellow at the Courtauld Institute, 1992–5. He has acted as a judge for the Turner Prize and curated major exhibitions at Tate, the Hayward Gallery, the Barbican Art Gallery, the Royal Academy and other European venues. Cork's many books include a ground-breaking study of Vorticism, awarded the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1977; *Art Beyond the Gallery*, winner of the Banister Fletcher Award for the best art book in 1986; a major monograph on David Bomberg, 1987; *A Bitter Truth: Avant-Garde Art and the Great War*, winner of the Art Fund Award in 1995; *Jacob Epstein*, 1999; four acclaimed volumes of his critical writings on modern art, published by Yale in 2003; *Michael Craig-Martin*, 2006; and *Wild Thing: Epstein, Gaudier-Brzeska, Gill*, 2009. He was appointed an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Academy in 2011. His recent book, *The Healing Presence of Art*, is a pioneering history of western art in hospitals from the Renaissance to the 20th century. It was published by Yale in 2012. His next book, *Face To Face: Interviews with Artists*, will appear in 2015 (Tate Publishing).

