

the  
collector's  
room

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Angus Taylor: New Work* held in the Collector's Room at Fried Contemporary  
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Interview conducted by  
Johan Thom

# New Work

Angus Taylor  
20 July - 27 August 2015

Signed by the Artist \_\_\_\_\_

Edition of \_\_\_\_ / 20



Installation view, photo by Rina Stutzer



*Composite Portrait, researched*, Rammed earth & Belfast granite, Approx. 45 x 45 x 105 cm, Edition 1 of 12, 2015  
Photo by Rina Stutzer



*Composite Portrait, researched (back view)*, Edition 1 of 12  
Photo by Rina Stutzer



IN CONVERSATION WITH  
ANGUS TAYLOR  
BY JOHAN THOM

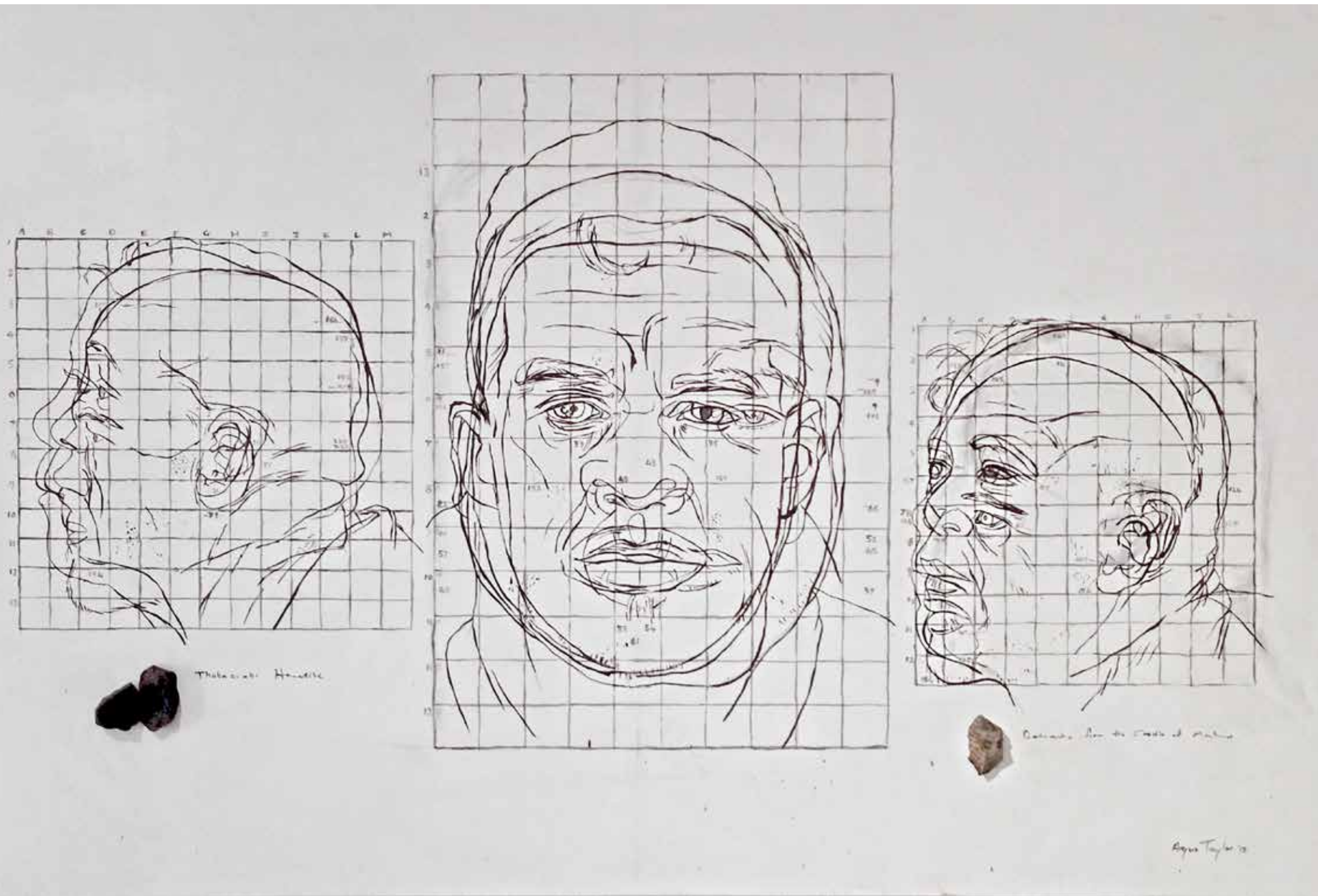
**Johan Thom (JT):** I think Angus Taylor can correctly be termed a consummate sculptor and craftsman. He is known for his large scale sculptures, characterised by his alternative choice of materials. These vary from bronze to natural materials such as rammed earth, grass and stone. When looking at Taylor's development of materials over the last ten years or so, and specifically working with rammed earth, he is "poetically speaking" moving closer to the earth and perhaps the planet itself.

For this exhibition, titled *New Work*, Taylor presents a series of composite portraits with merged likenesses drawn from the people in his daily life. In certain terms that means that he's looked at everybody that surrounds him, he's taken their faces and his own and he's merged them all into a single portrait. Taken the idea of a self-portrait I think it's quite ingenious. When we think of ourselves, we can only think of ourselves as individuals. Yet, when we think clearly about the role that other people play in our lives, we quickly realise that they are present within our representation of ourselves. Perhaps not present in the immediate physical sense, but they are definitely present in terms of who we are, how we live, and how we relate to the world. I dare say this interest with others and the important role that they play in his life is an ongoing concern for Angus. With his last exhibition at the Everard Read Gallery in 2014, he ended up making portraits of women that have had a major impact on his life. These included figures like Diane Victor, his mother, and one of his old lecturers (Professor Margaret Slabbert).

The sculptures exhibited here are mixed media rammed earth portraits, and they are part of a series of 12. What that means is that there are 12 in that series. They are all unique.



Installation view, photo by Rina Stutzer



Yet, they are all the same but slightly different, which I think is more or less the way we experience ourselves as individuals anyway. So let's ask him about his artistic choices, and the things in his work on a day to day level, because these works are drawn from firstly an experience of the day to day and then referring back to something that we (AT&JT) discussed about 4 years ago, the idea of grounded-ness, or what grounds us. So I wonder if we could begin with a comment from your side, how you started with this series of works – the choice of materials in a very broad sense – before we move on to specifics.

**Angus Taylor (AT):** This body of work is not separate from the rest of the work I've made. It's actually part of the same trajectory. This is simply the next chapter of a certain book or focus. A couple of years ago I was in New York, visiting the city and speaking to people there. I started to realise that I had a different understanding of being which they didn't quite get. The one person I spoke to in a hostel I stayed at in Harlem, grew up on welfare. And so did his father and so did his grandfather. So three generations down they had a social support system that brought them up. Now, as a South African, we don't have such support systems. If you go around the wrong corner either a Tshotsi or a lion will get you. There is nothing to save you, so it's a different environment. To describe it best, I think it can be likened to our sun, which is very bright and our land's shadows, which are very dark. And within that contrast exists our being.

*Measure composite Portrait: Study of self*  
 Painting in dolomite, hematite & anthracite pigment with linseed oil  
 119 x 180 cm  
 2015  
 Photo by Rina Stutzer



So I thought, if I came back and started making work again, what would be the point of trying to compete with that international market or with the conversation which was taking place in a first world developed nation? I'm in this place. I see things that they don't see and I have materials they don't have. Because they live in the city, their only soil is Central Park and, well, that's just a 'parkie'. I, on the other hand, have a landscape around me that is just incredible. So I started focussing on that. What did I have, which they did not?

My philosophy in making is that one should make work that speaks of what one sees and experiences, and this should be done through materials that one starts to understand and develop – to such a level that the craft becomes an art. If I did what everybody else did, then what motivated me to continue doing it? I was looking for a material that spoke of being an African, in a South African vernacular, almost in its materiality. I love material, I find it more of a collaborative element than something that I dominate, so I started working with the material, and in turn it became a feedback loop. I usually work with it for a long time before I start to understand how to build something bottom up. So it's not a top-down domination. For example, if a European or Italian tackles a block of white marble, nothing is left of the stone, but its surface. Everything else is removed, and there is nothing natural about it left. In South Africa we have this beautiful natural stone lying around in 'koppies' in Belfast, about two hours from here, which is one of the most

sought after granites in the world, but it is wasted.

This stone is lying there and nobody is using it. We're importing white marble like the Europeans and carving in that material or working in bronze. But we have all these resources around us, waiting to be discovered. I started just scratching the surface and I found that geologically we are sitting on the oldest mini continent on the world: the Kaapvaal Craton. We are sitting on the Bushveld Complex – the largest igneous complex in the world – which is basically a big bubble of volcanic stone. It came up from the bottom of the earth to the top of the surface and it appears from here all the way to Brits, going out to Lydenburg. It's like a big boiling pot. All the heavy stuff (the platinum, gold and chrome) goes to the bottom, while all the lighter stuff (like the granite) moves to the top. Belfast granite is two billion years old. To explain, that's 2000 million years of age. It's a thousand times older than us as humanoids. If you just go an hour and a half further to Barberton, you have stone that's three and a half billion years old, formed just a year after the earth was born. You can't see the stone exposed anywhere else but in Barberton, and there are eight different types. I knew I had to work with this material, but never thought I'd discover the depth, richness and diversity that we have around us. Surprisingly no-one else has actually worked with it.

As artists, none of us went to study art to become rich, and you're a bit silly if you do that. I always loved art



*Composite Portrait, researched (side view)*  
Edition 1 of 12  
Photo by Rina Stutzer



*Composite Portrait, researched*  
Rammed earth & Belfast granite  
Approx. 45 x 45 x 120 cm  
Edition 2 of 12  
2015  
Photo by Rina Stutzer

and I loved the gift given to me by the artists that preceded me, such as Marino Marini on an international level - a great favourite of mine. We had a thick book on him when I was a kid. Locally we had Van Wouw and I also saw some of Tienie Pritchard's work, and I just started loving sculpture. As an artist you want to contribute to that economy, which is the gift-economy, it's not the market. But the market has become this over dominating enormous machine that drives most things in life. So when we speak about an artist, many a times, the collectors want to know what he sells for before they know what the value of the artist is. Which is actually so wrong, because the market does not necessarily correlate with the value of the work on any levels other than the market.

So in sculpture I wanted to start working in the gift-economy, but it is very difficult to do so because sculpture is so laborious and bronze is so expensive (so people steal it). Which poses the question: what material should you gift in? Especially when you work outside on a large scale and it should last. So I started with stone, but it was just too expensive to use. Then I tried wood, which didn't last, and then I tried grass which also didn't last. Then I found rammed earth. If you don't have stone, you collect the soil around you, compact it and through that you make a structure. There is no value to it. There is no market for something like rammed earth, but we do research and development and we fund it through the market economy, to ultimately fund the gift-economy. So we use the one to do the other. We don't have institutions

that support artists. We live in a world where we have to support ourselves, and then one project will pay for the other. So if you don't experiment with it, if I don't make art with it, if I put that on a sidewalk there is no second-hand value to it and nobody will steal it, which is great. Bronze is R85 a kilogram, so a life-size sculpture is R8500 spec-value, which is why it gets stolen. The material was one thing to gift, and then I suppose at a certain age, with my show in 2014, I focused on how mind became matter.

An idea comes to your mind and you don't know where it originates from, and you want to make it. We are at a stage in our country's history where we are struggling with identities and our clashing cultures. We have so many problems in our country, yet we are moving forward as one nation. If I could appear the way I think, I would look more like one of these portraits, perhaps 200 years from now. I think the evolution of our minds moves faster than our physical evolution. Perhaps it's a couple of generations ahead of time, but maybe in time we will look like a hybrid between our various cultures that have merged. I thought that if I made a self-portrait, and I made it the way I thought I looked, I should take all the people around me that I work with daily; converse with daily. I took each individual's general measurement from ear to nose and ear to chin and from that, modelled a portrait. And that is basically what this show is. It's quite simple, it's just the next chapter of a certain search.





*Composite Portrait, researched I*  
Belfast granite, stainless steel and solidified with concrete  
Approx. 45 x 45 x 110 cm  
Edition 1 of 12  
2015  
Photo by Rina Stutzer

**JT:** I wonder if we could just quickly look at some of the works and think about the working processes involved in creating the massive portraits. We are looking at two different portraits, the one is made from stone and the other from rammed earth. At the risk of sounding almost too technical, would you quickly explain to people what you mean when you say 'rammed earth' and then explain how you made the stone one.

**AT:** Normally when we as sculptors make something in figurative clay, we carve down. So we work from the larger to the smaller or we bring something together. We model and the different fellspa and micro that you see in the stone reflects different on your eye, and that is something you can't copy. There is something special about the surface, the patina as it lies in the veld, that I cannot copy, which is far better than what I can do. I also started getting tired of my own hand, as artists do. Initially as a young artist you just want to model something that looks like something and if you get that right you think you're great and then you get tired of it. Then we go abstract or we start making video art or something else. But it's much more interesting to work with a material or process where you don't know what the outcome will be. You have a fair idea, you have the mould and you start ramming it with soil and stone and grass, but once you open it, each time there is a slight variation. It makes a different portrait. And with the stone also, once you remove the steel frame, it's the first time you see it and I'm amazed because I didn't know what it would look like.

The process for 'ramming,' in short: you sculpt the same way you would have if you made a bronze. You then make a very difficult and expensive mould, which you should be able to take apart in many pieces. You can't have it too soft, otherwise the material will lose its shape. Then, with violence (usually with pickaxes and wooden rods) you take a material that you just dampen (you don't wet and pour like concrete), and then you compact it. It's a slow process. To make one head would take three guys a day to do, and then it lies in the mould for a day or two to set. Then we open it. Now, rammed earth was established in ancient times with either animal blood or egg white or lime as binding agent. But we use a cement fondu from France, which works similar to it. And then we take the mould and we ramm it.

I am sure you are more familiar with a bronze cast, because that's the process of elevating something to a status of value. If you model something in clay, you have different options of casting it, so you make a negative; you make something around the positive. If you take my fist and you make something around it, that's a negative, if I cast something into that it's a positive again. Bronze casting is a process of eight of these processes. For these portraits I used a mix of processes including moulding and casting. Instead of making a mould and casting it in the studio, sometimes I'll make a mould, take it to the site and cast it there, often because it's either too fragile or too large and heavy to move from the studio to the specific site. An example of that is in front of a Waterkloof shopping centre. It's a huge head built from stone.

The process involved me and my team building it on site using a mould. We soon discovered that kids would climb on it causing a lot of wear and tear to the stone. I realized that the stone had to be protected in some way. The stone portrait on exhibition here in the Collector's Room was made using a welded steel frame. I had to mark where the eyes, eyelids, cheekbone and muscles would be and took it apart. Then from the inside, we started building it up and solidifying the concrete, so each stone is bolted into place and two stainless steel pins is put in. It is then welded onto a central structure. It takes about two months to create one of these portraits. Each one must be carved and then fitted.

**JT:** I wonder if you can just explain to us a little bit. For those of us who don't quite understand, because you've been making a lot of these types of work in different sites, I've seen them quite a few places including TUKS and Nirox and they are outside, they kind of return back to their source. On the one hand, I wonder if you want to say something about the technical aspect of leaving the work there: what will happen to the work, and what you hope for it? Because clearly it's not the same as just putting a bronze, sculpture there and keeping it polished for the week. Also, you've been doing a lot of work in nature, so to speak, and I wonder if that isn't something that is close to your heart?

**AT:** In short it once again comes back to the market and the gift economy, the fight against the commodification of everything we do and the largest value that you can sell for. I make large



*Composite Portrait, researched*  
Edition 2 of 12  
Photo by Rina Stutzer



*Composite Portrait, researched I*  
Photo by Rina Stutzer

sculptures, which is a problem to some collectors (we built one in Belgium out of 25 tons of stone, and the guy said "now what if we want to sell it" and I was so happy to say, "You can't sell it"). It's not a commodity anymore, we built it and it's going to stay there. If you want to move it, you're going to destroy it. So that is part of it: to make something and once it's made, it's out of the market, and it ceases to be a commodity. Because the process is laborious, but not as intense as bronze or stone, we can actually gift it. So you go can to a town or university and make one, like we did at Stellenbosch University and the University of Johannesburg. If people look after it, it will remain for hundreds of years, but it has the same vulnerability or fragility as humankind. You can take it from its being in one day. If you take a hammer or a rock and you hit it, you can remove its nose, or an ear. Or a couple of wrong characters in Stellenbosch can break the legs off (and that has happened before). But in a way it's also expected that the ignoramus are people who don't understand culture, and would therefore do something like that to the medium. We could say 'naughty, you shouldn't do that,' and maybe they'll learn something from it. It's a process of engaging with the public that wouldn't necessarily go to a museum or a gallery.

This is something that one usually cannot do with sculpture. But we have the capacity to take the mould, as we did recently in Namibia. We made sculpture weighing up to 25 or 30 tons and went through with two vehicles and four people. We used the materials from the environment to make the sculptures

in nature, 15 km on a dirt road with a 4x4 jeep until we got there. This was something we couldn't have done with a crane, a big truck and all the rest.

When we arrived at the site, it was a wonderful surprise because it was so far from everything. Made from the material in its surroundings, and how the sculptures were figured would make one wonder how it got there. The process entailed altering the normal sculpture process.

When we studied an odd 20 years ago, the people before us (and there are some people that taught me here this evening: Guy and Andreas) we still learnt the basics. You learn to master a language, either painting or drawing or sculpture or video for that matter, and you learn to execute it yourself. That is the same as learning a language and you can't write a poem in a language you don't know. So a lot of art that could be made some decades ago can't be made anymore by the young ones who do not learn to master the language. Sculpture, for example, can take 10, 15, 20 years before you'll be able to speak the language, and the longer you go, the better you are. So in any craft, there is something of a direct flow from the concept to the end product, where nothing gets lost in translation if the artist executes the work. If you outsource it, a lot goes missing. Not to say that there is anything wrong with that, as I've done the same for dumb things and sometimes it worked. But that one aspect, that one genre (almost as if it needs a genre of its own now) is practiced less and less because it





*Composite Portrait, researched (side view)*  
Edition 1 of 12  
Photo by Rina Stutzer

takes so long. And there is always the risk that if you did it, and you made an 'object', it could be frowned upon. It's a political game, so we must just please get over that idea and understand there is something beautiful and poetic about the communication from the artist to the viewer. This can't happen if you outsource, and the artist should know that. There is something really good in mastering the language, and we must keep on practicing.

**JT:** I would like to make just one comment before we take some questions from the audience. I think that you have always been greatly committed to the idea of materials and definitely there was a stage where material thinking was our 'fashion'. But I think that has changed quite a lot and people are thinking of the capacity of artists to work through materials. In no small amount do I think that it accounts for the kind of success of your work and broad appeal of it, exactly because it is that kind of base material language that is necessary to connect with your audience. Considering the kind of work that you are doing or have been doing for the past 10 years, I don't think that the market really existed before you actually started doing it. So I think there is something vital about the idea of communicating through materials and that sense of people having thinking. And it's very much present here. I would like to ask the audience to actually look at the differences between the works, look at the way the grass is left in the face. I find those surfaces quite essential. Especially the contrast between them, it's quite nice if you walk into the gallery and it's not so full. You first see this one head here and

it calls you closer because clearly it's soft. There is something about the soil, you'll want to get closer to it. And as you come in, suddenly you see the harder stone figure. There is definitely a game there, a sensitivity that only comes by actually understanding the medium, which I think is more or less your point. I don't know if you want to respond to that?

**AT:** I think you summarised the term of embodied thinking, which is the right term. Because that is what it is. As embodied thinking goes, you can't decontextualize yourself or the material around you. You must take everything into the context that you are and where you live. Hopefully that shines through the thinking and then all that "mind" becomes matter. So I think that is the right term, embodied thinking.

**JT:** I would like to quickly ask if there are some questions from the audience, he is not running away directly after this so if you would like to have a more casual conversation with him, well he's rather nice so... But if there are any questions?

**Audience:** I would be interested on your opinion on 3D digital printing as a form of medium, of sculpting in terms of what you just said.

**AT:** I used it myself last year. It was the exhibition where I did the portraits of the seven women that influenced my life. We could never, with sculpture, really use a photograph as reference. It was always a laborious process of taking the model, having him seated, taking a calliper, measuring, and the longer you spent with the model, the better the end

product. I think there have been some beautiful things made with 3D printing thus far. Somebody took mathematical fractals and the Fibonacci numbers and applied them to shapes, and then applied movement to it. It's the most beautiful objects, reminding you of a cauliflower or broccoli. So it's beautiful for that function.

However, I utilized this technology by scanning the model and making a low-resolution 3D print which I then modelled further. We invested in the technology a couple of years ago, but we couldn't use it until we fully understood it. It allowed me to work in detail, on a scale which would normally be very difficult to do.

What I did with this project was: scanned the model, and then printed it. It works, but at the same time it doesn't work because a lot of details get lost in the transference. So what comes out is almost like a bad photo copy of a beautiful photograph. It needs to be handled. Now, I don't want to sound mystical, but if you put energy into something, the audience can read it. Lucien Freud put it beautifully saying "if you take a photograph of somebody, you capture the instant and the energy in the instant. If you paint it, with a sitter for a year and a half, when you look at the surface, you see the year and a half's energy." And I believe this, If I take a surface (even if it's a print and I fiddle with it and I struggle with it), and I give it life and I work on it, you have to exaggerate some elements so it becomes a sculpture. A painter would do the same to a photograph they've taken. If you think about it, painters have had

photography for the odd 100 years or so, but we as sculptors did not have such a resource at our disposal. So we could never go into the landscape, take a photograph and paint it in your studio, but now we can with 3D. It still needs artist hands and energy in it before it becomes something. Perhaps that energy could also happen via digital media, if you sat at your computer and you spent the time and energy into it, it could also be. But I believe that it is human interaction that makes it and gives it life.



*Composite Portrait, researched (detail)*  
Edition 1 of 12  
Photo by Rina Stutzer



Angus Taylor in studio. Photo by Elani Willemse

#### ABOUT THE ARTIST

A skilled sculptor and craftsman, Angus Taylor (b. 1970) is known for his large-scale sculptures characterized by his alternative choice of materials, which vary from bronze casts to natural materials such as rammed earth, grass and stone.

For this exhibition titled "New Work" Taylor presents a series of composite portraits, with merged likenesses drawn from the people in his daily life. These sculptures may be interpreted as representations of self, while they also pay tribute to the very community that defines and shapes one's identity. In this sense, the work is both introspective and reflective, an exploration of what it means to be an individual that seeks to belong and thrive within a specific community.

Taylor is one of South Africa's most successful contemporary sculptors. His work is represented in private and corporate collections around the globe including Rand Merchant Bank; Saronsberg Wine Estate; Ellerman House; Museum Beelden aan Zee (The Hague); Sasol, the University of Pretoria, The University of the Free State and the University of Cape Town, to name but a few. A great deal of his sculptures feature in public spaces both nationally and internationally.



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