



Gisèle BONIN

# Fragment

While my drawing work may seem, to a cursory glance, to revisit the classical genre of anatomy as an iconographic study, it nevertheless seeks to delve deeper: into the very materiality (of paper, pigment, and line) – to dig deep and strive for an essential sculptural depth that distances it from mere observation, as it seeks, almost desperately, to embody intimacy, or rather, intimacies. Torn apart. Cracked. And above all, profoundly: incomplete.

The monochrome imposes an initial silence. The tools used are equally unassuming, remaining simple, traditional, and modest (red chalk, graphite, and charcoal), perhaps to give life, beyond themselves, to the fragment of the body and to all the timeless stories and emotions, often buried and hidden, that it carries (for me) in its very paradox: an existence whose presence rests on the absence of the rest, of what is not there.

Beyond the mere “piece of...”, the aim is to construct on paper what lies hidden behind these fragments of tense, constrained, bent, or folded bodies. To draw the secrets and their weight, all that is neither representable nor speakable: to offer a way of seeing and feeling “beyond.” To draw, to nourish and awaken it: memory. Our chaos and our ghosts: to awaken them, provoke them, and hope to confront them. Who knows...



"I listen to the dead with my eyes"  
(Francisco Gómez de Quevedo y Villegas - XVIe)

"The palms of your hands dance with the clouds"  
(excerpt from a poem written and read by an insurgent in the film  
"Sudan - Remember" - Hind Meddeb - 2024)

## ExileAsylumExile

Since 2014, I have been part of a refugee aid association (REDA: Réseau d'Entraide des Demandeurs d'Asile d'Angers - Angers Asylum Seekers Mutual Aid Network). Having never before "situated" my work, favoring the anonymity of models and sources until now, in an effort to universalize the subject, I am placing it for the first time within its original context: that of exile, asylum, departure, and arrival somewhere where nothing and no one awaits or hears you, even though the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted in 1951, commits all countries to welcoming people in danger within their borders. No one, except for a few women and men mobilized with profound humanity, whose work and immense volunteer generosity I commend today. This project is a tribute, as much as it seeks to convey, without explicitly recounting, terrible stories, yet stories marked by a courage that is difficult for Western perception to grasp.

This exhibition project comprises several ongoing series, as well as a few independent, one-off works. The first series, entitled Ici-Bas (Down Here), began in 2022. The meticulous and conflicting layering of graphite and charcoal on Velin paper plunges the subjects into a strange darkness, in which presences seem to float. The second series, Big Reda, has been ongoing since 2023. Very large-format sanguine drawings convey the searing enormity of concrete realities linked to exile—inhuman and complex, often secret: our European consciousness has perhaps gradually become accustomed to truths that are progressively slipping toward abstraction, likely due to a derealizing daily media coverage. The D'Ailleurs (Elsewhere) series emerged during a residency in Brussels. Other works are currently in development, including a sound and video installation, prints and/or installations on glass, and cement sculptures.

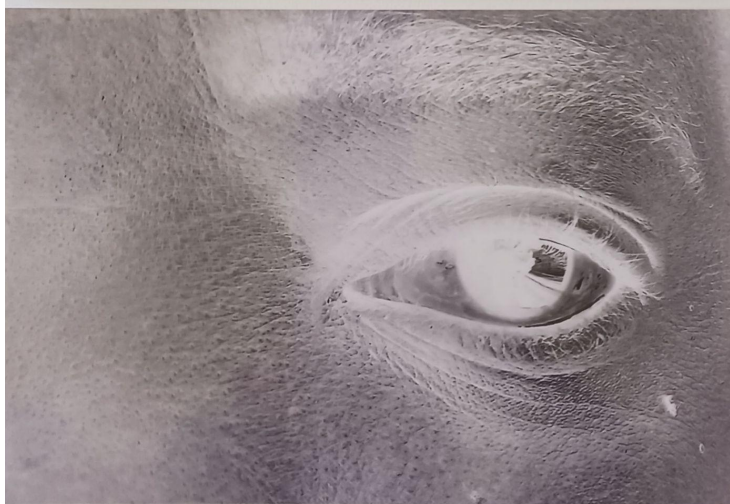
## *From Elsewhere*



Hosted at La Cambre Abbey (Brussels) by the SAFFCA (South African Foundation for Arts), I undertook to multiply interpretations of a single photograph (a gaze, captured without any specific intention during a break with members of REDA), which remained in my mind. The formats, techniques, and interpretations vary, in an attempt at exhaustion that will form a body of work blurring the boundaries between drawing, photography, engraving, video, sculpture, painting, and all other possible methods of representation or reproduction, from the minuscule to the gigantic. This accumulation will give rise to an installation that is not yet conceived from a scenographic point of view, but which will be the subject of research during my new residency this summer in Brussels.



From Elsewhere Series #5 - Redcharcoal on Velin paper - 48x64 cm - 2025  
From Elsewhere Series #2 - Charcoal and graphite on paper - 23x30 cm - 2025

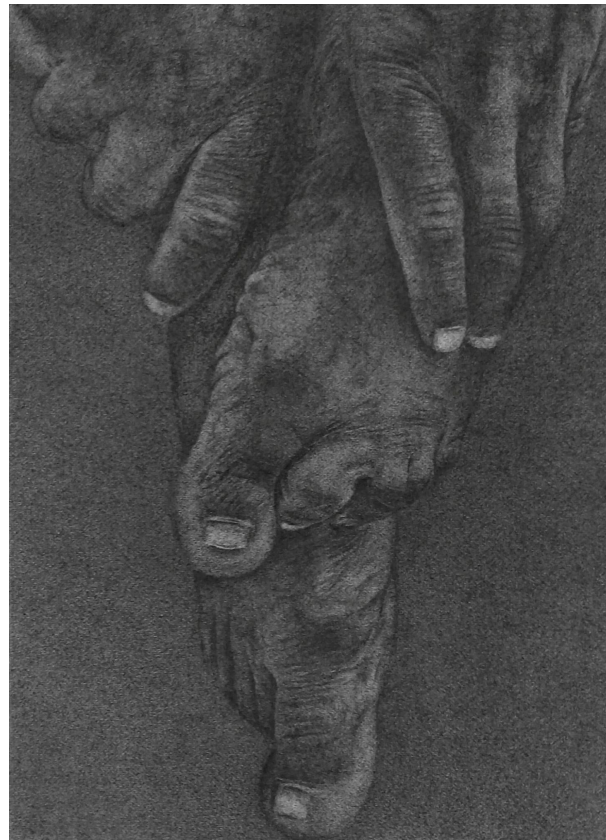
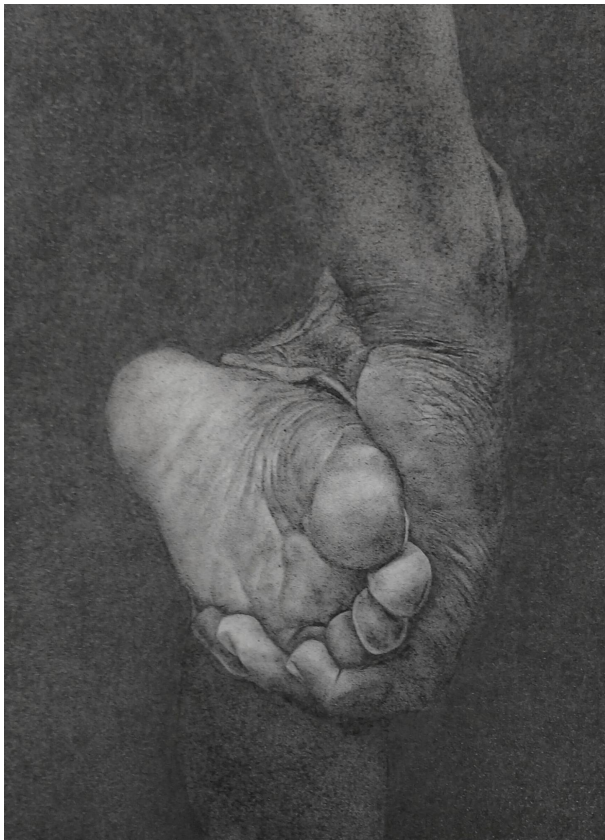


From Elsewhere Series #10 -  
Diptych Photographic Print  
2 x 20 x 30 cm - 2026

*Down here*

It is a work of “twilight,” yet a relentless search for a light concealed by distance, flight, misery, and rejection. These small-format works, where graphite and charcoal (difficult to reconcile) clash, seek to embody, in the thickness of the vellum paper and through the meticulous grain of the drawing, the intimacy devoid of identity of asylum seekers, primarily from Africa. The subjects' withdrawal, their vulnerability and fragility, offer a genuine resistance to the world—a presence and a strength emanating from the depths of their being: unfathomable, immense. Solid and absolute.





## *Big Reda*

The Big REDA series, featuring very large-format sanguine drawings, focuses on a profoundly mysterious paradox. By transcending the chromatic characteristics of skin tones, iron oxide, with its organic redness and dusty volatility, and its grain, builds the subject and its volume, sculpting it, constructing it in space: towards a monumental fragility.





Big Reda Series - Studio View









## Scrolls

"The artist Gisèle Bonin 'writes' and appropriates bodies as a writer appropriates words. Closely observing their anatomical truth, the artist leaves nothing out: she allows the flesh, with its folds and imperfections, to express itself on a heavily textured vellum paper, which resists the passage of graphite or sanguine just as her 'academic studies' resist revealing their true nature. Zoomed in to an extreme degree, as if cut from the immaculate surface of the paper, what exactly do these bulging muscles, these thighs folded in on themselves, these wrinkled, twisted feet and hands, these scraped fingers tell us about their model?"

By dissecting the intimacy of a body so closely, Gisèle Bonin extracts a lexical field reduced to its simplest expression, and allows us to see the very essence of drawing in its most accomplished form: shadows and light, the grain of the paper/the grain of the skin, figuration/'defiguration,' matter." and non-matter, silence and contemplation of the hours spent, pencil in hand, on the thick medium. Far from being content with pure technical virtuosity, Gisèle Bonin herself says: "Beyond the 'piece of...,' it is about building on paper what lies hidden behind these fragments of tense, constrained, bent or refolded bodies. Drawing the secrets and their weight, all that is neither representable nor speakable: proposing to see and feel 'beyond.' Drawing, to nourish and awaken it: memory. Our chaos and our ghosts: awakening them, provoking them, and hoping to confront them."

Thus, the gesture is not merely introspective—by dissecting her own body and those of her models, the artist reflects the viewer's own vulnerabilities back to themselves—but it is also highly political: these fragments of humanity, as if sculpted by the interplay of light and shadow and magnified by the pigments, always monochrome, tell us nothing other than the inexorable fragility of our physical form, its flaws, its pains, and its countless stories. Skin becomes subject and language, like monumental scrolls from women and men who want to tell us, in their own way, about joys, underlying desires, suffering, aging, and even isolation or exile. Gisèle tells me about her volunteer work, for over 10 years, with the Asylum Seeker Support Network in Angers. Just a few years ago (2022), she "dared" to ask refugees or asylum seekers to pose for her, which they accepted with "Trust, generosity, and modesty," she says. But, in order "to avoid any form of portraiture, indication, or narrative. To allow the gaze absolute freedom, complete silence was necessary." A silent, mental projection, therefore, sublimated by the void—this void that evokes not absence or death, but rather life itself, fighting against all odds behind the beauty of the drawing, protected by the anonymity of these "fragments of Men" that will forever remain preserved from vulgar exhibitionism. Vanitas? Still lifes? No, beautiful, vibrant, and resilient still life."

Anne-Cécile Tréglos

(Exhibition curator and art critic)



Series 610 #1 - Redcharcoal on paper - 120x150 cm 2018  
(Private collection)



Series 610 #5 - Recharcoal on paper  
110x125 cm - 2019  
(Private collection)



## *The drawing laid bare*

"Curiously, when faced with Gisèle Bonin's drawings, with all these fragments of bodies—busts, hands, backs, navels, etc.—and these formless heaps draped in their envelopes, I can't help but see photographs. To see them as if they were photographs. Not digital prints, nor even silver gelatin prints, but rather old-fashioned proofs, like bromide or gum bichromate. 'I don't like smooth papers,' the artist notes in her Personal Writings. 'I prefer them thick, grainy: they have to catch the pencil, offer resistance, leave their mark.' Grainy—that says it all. Indeed, everything for her is a question of grain, and that's the point of connection. From the grain of paper to that of skin, the difference is infinitesimal, meaning slips away, and the pencil exults. When Gisèle Bonin takes hold of a sheet of paper, she doesn't draw a form; she reveals A presence emerges, and the image appears. Looking at one of her drawings, I like to imagine myself in a photographer's darkroom, the red light dim, and that, leaning over the developing tank, I await that surprising moment when the image appears, and then how, plunged into another bath, it immediately fixes. Gisèle Bonin also says: "The virginity of certain sheets of paper repulses me." Drawing and old photographs have this in common: they are stains, even smudges, and, as such, leave traces. Between material and support, the osmosis is total. The grain of one embraces the grain of the other to inform this presence. Everything takes place in silence, apart from the world, in a time that no measure can assess. An uncounted time that confers upon the artist's works something of an ineffable dimension. "To draw," she says, "is to free oneself from a certain form of Time: an activity of Withdrawal, constraint, release. Towards tranquility and towards madness: setting the spatial limits and the graphic calendar of one's own desert. Silence. » Yes, drawing is being outside of time, in a place of intimacy and retreat, in a substantial friction with thought.

Whatever their nature—black, red, or subtly tinted—Gisèle Bonin's drawings are, quite simply, "frightening." They wrench us from our state of peace, forcing us into a confrontation from which we do not emerge unscathed. Their power lies not in their framing, but in their memorable impact, their imposition upon us as a part of ourselves, reflecting a profound sense of inner life. Though they are the fruit of the artist's labor—her work—these drawings do not belong to her. They belong to the viewer, to the precise moment of their discovery, irresistibly compelled to explore them, delve into them, turn them over and over. The viewer's gaze then attempts all manner of breaches and penetrations, seeking to slip into the folds, the interstices, and the gaps that constitute them, as if to possess them more fully. The risk, in fact, is that they will escape her notice, so readily do they present themselves in this kind of strangeness which Baudelaire described as the very paragon of beauty.

Are Gisèle Bonin's drawings, moreover, figures of bodies, of drapery? Nothing is less certain. They are merely the pretext, the artist designating them with no names that would reduce them to any kind of contingency. Instead, she identifies them by series with generic—sometimes mysterious—titles such as "RV," "CD," "Reds," "Dilutions," "Pieces," "Fragments," "Middles," and "Remains." From Francis Ponge, the artist readily borrows the idea of offering "each person the opening of inner trapdoors, a journey into the very essence of things, an invasion of qualities, a revolution or subversion comparable to that wrought by the plow or the shovel, when, suddenly and for the first time, millions of fragments, specks, roots, worms, and tiny creatures, previously buried, are brought to light." Indeed, drawing proceeds from a probing. A probing that is paradoxically sublime (sub-lime, literally meaning "that which is placed very high")—into the depths of being. Every draftsman is an explorer; their work does not consist of illustrating but of extracting, revealing, uncovering, even laying bare. Thus, their work is determined by the order of a raw material—a *matiera prima*—which situates it at a point of origin. A territory unidentified by any particular individual, yet bound to the universality of existence. Gisèle Bonin's drawings present themselves either across the full expanse of the sheet of paper on which they appear, or conversely, in an almost nuclear concentration. Both reveal a shared relationship to the world, a metaphorical approach to the cosmos of which the body is merely a substitute figure. The universe is simultaneously everything and detail, expanse and punctuation, diffusion and concretion. A sense of vertigo and opacity is at work in the artist's creation, inviting the viewer to experience emptiness and fullness. This is commonly associated with the idea of a fall and a resistance. Gisèle Bonin's drawings, which encourage touch, are first and foremost mental experiences nourished by a materiality intimately connected to thought. In its very core."

Philippe Piguet  
(Exhibition curator and art critic)



NB Series #3  
Graphite on Vellum paper  
56x76 cm - 2019







Territories of memory and sensation, the envelope and volume of the living (bodily or symbolic: skin, bone, muscle, or "objects") can appear as vast expanses or mysterious depths, full of intimacy in all its forms (anatomical, emotional, mental, historical...). My drawing explores an in-between space that both envelops and develops the fragment, masks as much as it reveals: a false boundary between inside and outside, a place of fusion as much as of division between interior and exterior, or a protection of one against the other. Stigmata. Fragments. Along these traces, marks of life (of emptiness?) and signs of death (scars, wrinkles, folds and creases of skin or fabric), along the contours and textures, following the path of skeletons and frameworks like so many rugged terrains: drawing.

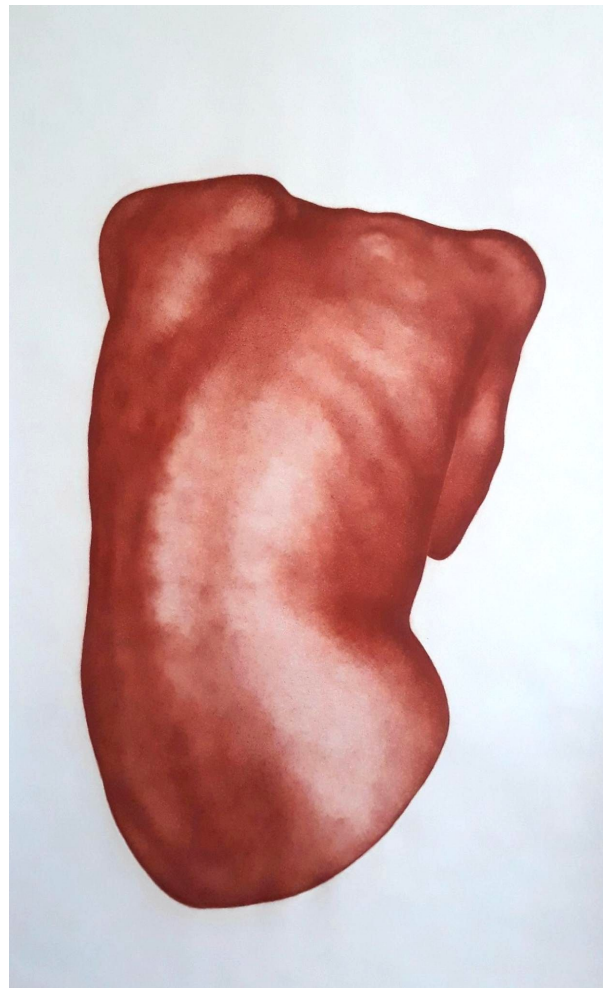
My inability to depict the body head-on and in its entirety—insofar as it also involves expressing it through voices, the pathways of absence and emptiness—is compounded by the almost constant temptation of reframing, of disrupting scale, of fragmentation. Often, the line disappears into the "matter," the "grain," toward a form of dissolution, a synchronic dispersion of eye and mind, of nerves and emotions, in an indeterminate and interminable, undefined and infinite time. As is the subject itself.

The drawing would become a space that envelops while simultaneously leading astray. My work perhaps expresses a diffuse temporality, a vanity that constantly stretches and contracts. He would like to create a state of immersion detached from any precise identity, any unit of measurement, devoid of chronology, operating (sometimes to the point of vertigo in execution) a ceaseless back-and-forth between reality and a distancing from it in the form of extraction, in order to present the lack and the inexorable, to offer the gaze a shift of a visual, referential, and sensory order. To overturn an indefinable absence through the invisible, infinite multiplication of signs of presence...



Series Is #14 - #15 (details) - Graphite on Velin paper - 38x56 cm - 2021 (#15: private collection)





DR Series #1 - #2 - Redcharcoal on paper - 120x180 cm - 2022



DR Series - Workshop view and detail

## *Loins*

"Gisèle Bonin works with protective coverings: the epidermis, fabrics, veils. She explores these exposed surfaces, working with their grain, roughness, shadows, and light. Fragmented and isolated, the monochrome skins are conceived as intimate topographies or landscapes where silence and sensitivity harmonize. For her new exhibition at the Jules Desbois Museum in Parçay-les-Pins, the artist has chosen to juxtapose her work with that of the sculptor. A collaborator of Auguste Rodin and Camille Claudel, Jules Desbois (1851-1935) developed a reflection on the body, its movements, tensions, and expressions. A bridge is created between two temporalities and two approaches to the body. Gisèle Bonin studies the works in the museum's collection to create a dialogue with Jules Desbois, focusing particularly on the interplay of materials, hollows, shadows, and light that contribute to the power of the sculptor's work." Through drawing, the artist translates its essence. She observes how the volumes receive and project light. Inspired by a terracotta sculpture entitled War, Head of a Helmeted Soldier (between 1919 and 1920), Gisèle Bonin depicts contemporary military helmets using graphite and charcoal. This technical combination allows her to play with the effects and movements of light, since graphite reflects light, while charcoal absorbs it. Extending this study, she turns her attention to a key work in Desbois's oeuvre, Winter (1908). The work presents a naked, bearded old man standing with his head bowed towards the ground, his eyes closed. He holds an animal skin in his hands to warm his vulnerable body. Gisèle Bonin chooses to work from the man's back, an element of the sculpture that she fragments to highlight the textures of the modeling. "I treat the hollows in "I'm interested in the salient parts." She reverses their luminous values, shadows becoming light and vice versa. The artist also attaches great importance to the museum itself. She appropriates the metal bar in the room of monumental sculptures, suspending four long strips of fabric on which four drawings are reproduced. These drawings depict the two arms, the nape of the neck, and the shoulders of Jules Desbois's Sisyphus, a monumental sculpture created between 1910 and 1925. Two practices echo each other. A final work underscores another dimension of the sculptor's oeuvre: his rich contribution to the Decorative Arts. Gisèle Bonin draws the fragments of a flayed crow. The work, created as a nod to a more discreet period in the sculptor's work, also highlights the dark and dramatic nature of his practice. Through this act of extraction, Gisèle Bonin constructs a visceral dialogue with the works of Jules Desbois, whose details are captured and transcended. The drawings generate a sensitive and vibrant juxtaposition with a work whose secrets remain to be (re)discovered."

Julie Creen

(Curator and art critic)



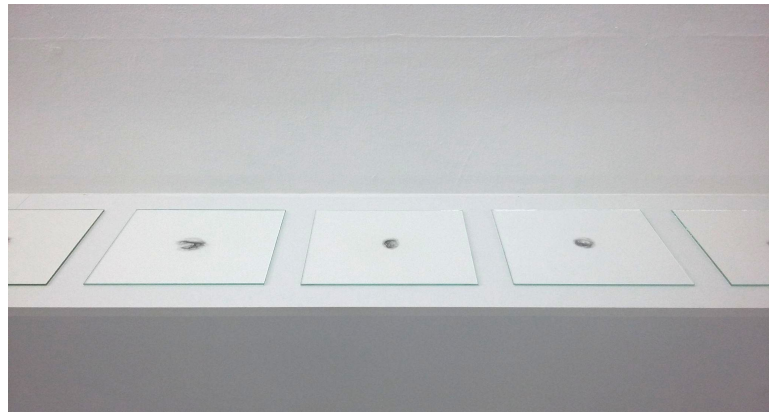
R Series and P Series - Exhibition view  
Installation under glass - 2016



4 drawings from the Collection P series (12 drawings: graphite on paper - 50x65 cm - 2013)

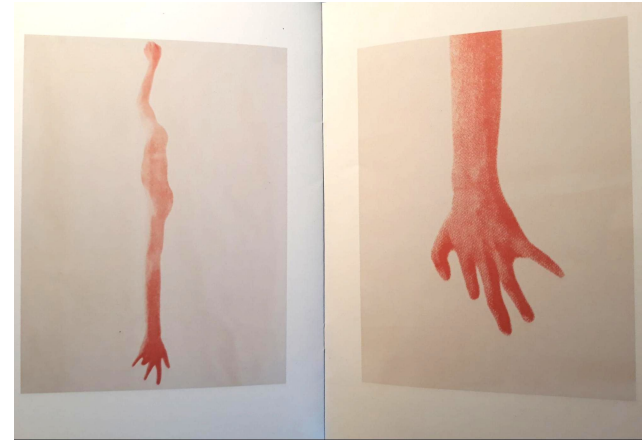








Untitled - 300x300 cm - 6 silkscreened panels - Unique piece - Exhibition view, 2Angles, Flers 6 - 2016

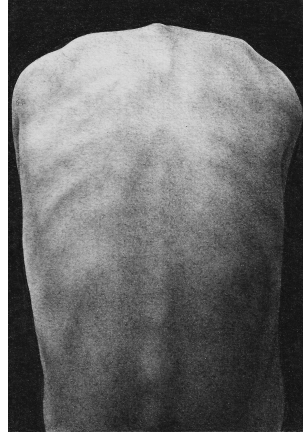
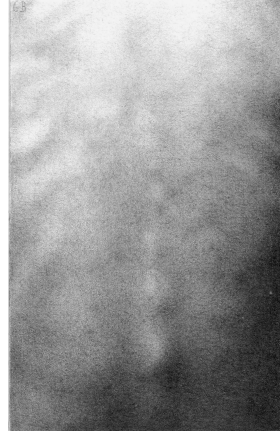
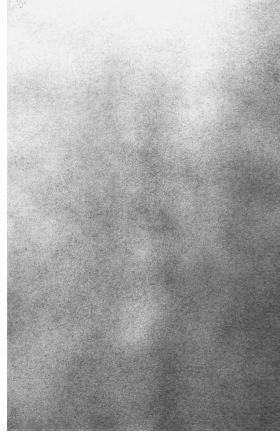
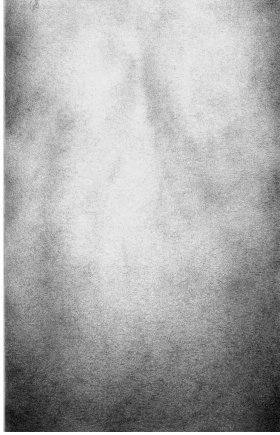
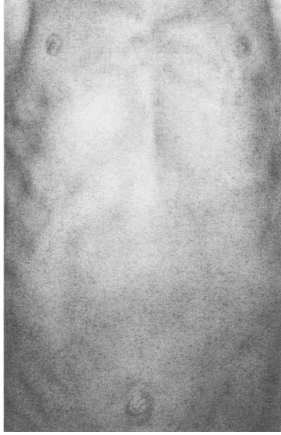
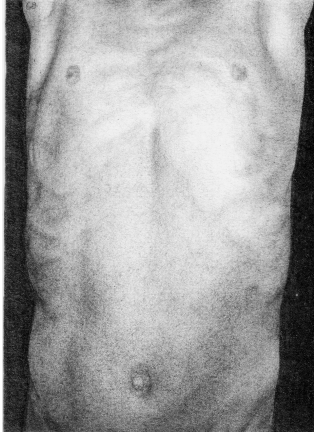


Sisyphus, 4 panels - silkscreen on fabric, installation at the Jules-Desbois Museum - 2014

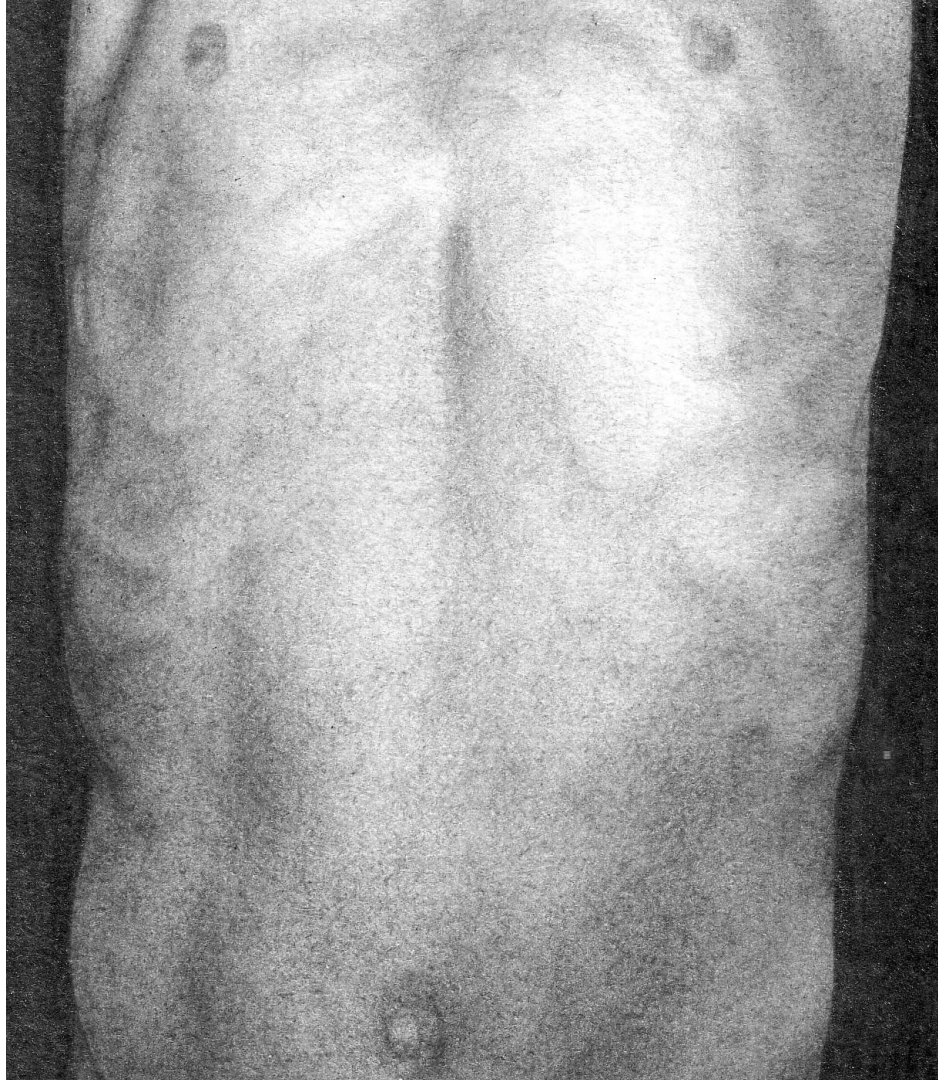


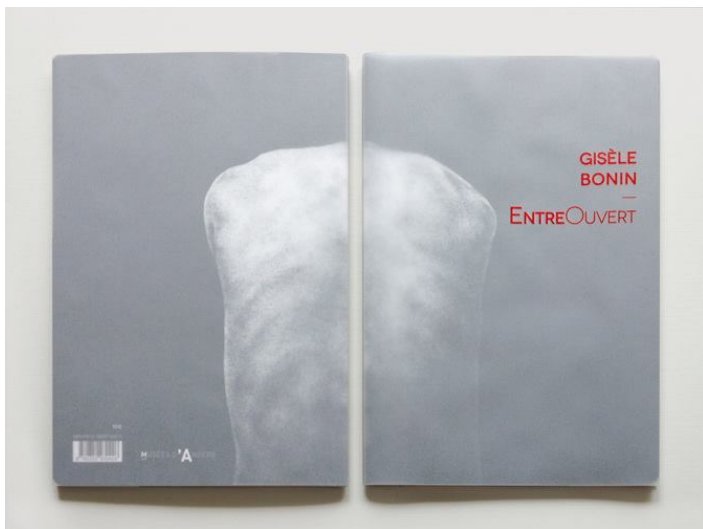


Drawing from Series R,  
colored pencil on paper -  
30x40 cm - 2008  
(Personal collection)



Series of 6 drawings for Le Dit du Mineur, with Michel Butor (Editions l'Instant perpétuel, 2012) - Graphite on Velin paper - 6 x 10x15 cm (Images 1, 4 and 5: private collections - Images 2 and 3: Michel Butor collection)





"Gisèle Bonin's drawings express mixed feelings: strangeness, unease, violence, and fragility. They exude an impression of slowness, of time stretched, of extreme concentration, a sensation of physical and mental apnea. Through their close, almost imperceptible treatment, they convey presence or absence, solitude or emptiness, extreme delicacy and the sharpest observation. While she has chosen the human body as the almost exclusive subject of her work, the artist, in each of her drawings, "...focuses on a bodily fragment containing as little information as possible, but not abstract either, in an attempt to find the most metonymic image possible..."(1) She leads the viewer's eye toward a loss of bearings, toward imbalance. "...the time it takes to get lost: first to lose oneself in one's own time, then perhaps to lose oneself in a subject..."(2) In her works, with their tight framing and shift in scale, the fragments of bodies leave their humanity, while objects (chairs, blankets, etc.) come alive with a semblance of life, suggesting a presence or its memory.

But Gisèle Bonin herself has a deep familiarity with writing, which she practices with the same precision in her analysis as the point of her pencils in her drawings. Her texts speak of her work—with strength and lucidity—and of that of other artists—with accuracy and sensitivity. It is to some of these encounters between literature and visual arts that she invites us in the book accompanying her exhibition at the Angers Museum. The collaboration with two writers, Marie Chartres for *\*Cette bête que tu as sur la peau\** (3) and Michel Butor for *\*Le Dit du mineur\** (4), is at the origin of the *EntreOuvert* project (5). *EntreOuvert*, the artist explains, "because it is a work that questions a tension, an in-between that unfolds in a kind of incompleteness, aiming to represent, to embody Absence and The Absent. It is therefore necessary to remember a presence and those who are Present. But also, "How can drawing read a text, beyond illustration, and vice versa? How do literary creation—verbal expression—and plastic creation—here, pictorial expression—engage in dialogue? How can they respond to each other? What doors open the passage from one to the other?" To find out, Gisèle Bonin invited writers to compose a fictional work or poem based on (and not "about") pre-existing drawings or paintings. Jean-Noël Blanc, Christian Garcin, Denis Lachaud, Isabelle Minière, Eric Pessan, Jacques Serena, and Carole Zalberg responded to this call.

The drawings or paintings thus serve as a reading of the unpublished texts, or rather, the texts as viewed by the artist. And then there are the texts composed from the drawings, the authors' written perspectives. All express moments of transition from one state to another: imbalance, rupture, absurdity, excess, exasperation, tipping point, and even derision.

"Doors open, echoes and resonances are heard. (6)"

Christine Besson

Chief Curator of the Angers Museum of Fine Arts

(1) Gisèle Bonin, *The Surface of Time*, working notes, 2008 (2) Gisèle Bonin, *Drawing: The Inevitable Categorical, the Indispensable Sufficient...*, 2007-2008

(3) 2011, Éditions du chemin de fer (5) 2012, Éditions de l'Instant Perpétuel

(5) This project took various forms during exhibitions in 2012 and 2013 in Paris (34 bis rue Sorbier), in Hennebont (Pierre Tal-Coat Art Library), in La Roche-sur-Yon (Maison Greffier)...

(6) Gisèle Bonin, op cit.