

Jaap Bongers in Conversation
with Sheila Pickett

Sheila Pickett: *Ten years ago when we talked about your trip to visit the Pygmies in Central Africa, you described that visit as the most significant experience of your life. How important is that experience to you today?*

Jaap Bongers: It remains the pivotal experience of my life. Before that trip, I was footloose and carefree worker living a Bohemian lifestyle. After the terrifying weeks in a canoe-like boat, on the most remote parts of the Lomami River, when I was losing my sight in both eyes due to a viral infection, my expectations about life changed. No longer could I take anything for granted or waste time. It changed my beliefs about the certainty of a future. I realized how fragile and how precious life is. I likened my experience to an initiation rite. I became aware of the vagaries of one's life.

SP: *What do you feel was the most important factor influencing your early work?*

JB: Archeology was an important part of my childhood because of my father's interest and our excursions to the local archeological sites. My father belonged to a respected archeological society and the town where I grew up, Dutch Limburg, was rich in artifacts from ancient Roman ruins. Shelter, communication, death, and the spirit are aspects of the archeological context that contribute much to the thematic content of my work.

SP: *You also mentioned that in your earlier work you developed imaginary cultures. Would you discuss the work that you developed for Remnants of a Burial?*

JB: *Remnants of a Burial* was done in the late '70's and was certainly influenced by my archeological experience. Conceptually the work suggests gravesites of an imaginary culture. The construction materials were very close to nature. The pieces were made from sticks, burlap and wax and then cast in bronze. The forms are reminiscent of what you might expect of the remains of funeral pyres. I photographed them in sand, which gave an almost monumentally beautiful effect. Because of the proportions there is a strong figurative element in the work that suggests desiccated remains of humans on stretchers under primitive shelters for the dead. Some pieces were buried under mounds on top of which were forms suggesting an antenna or guardian. Communication is an ongoing theme in my work.

SP: *Aspects of this work remind me of some of the contemporary Vietnamese artists who have worked with stretchers.*

JB: Well, when I came to this country in 1985, I found that these sculptures strongly resembled a depiction of Native American burial rites about which I had known nothing. My work was supposed to be based on an imaginary culture. It still surprises me. However, as I mentioned, shelter, communication and death are concerns of every culture. I have always believed that nothing that happens to the individual truly disappears from memory, although it may evolve into new forms.

SP: *Was there other early work that also dealt with imaginary cultures?*

JB: In 1981 I had an exhibition at Charlottenborg in Copenhagen that also included a performance. The performance was titled “Rebirth of the Ancient Drummer” and dealt with a person from my imaginary culture. The installation was also the set for my performance. It included the following: a full sized sarcophagus carved out of wood and secured with tar, a smaller similarly shaped wooden volume partially bifurcated and hollowed out that functioned as a slit drum, a human-sized shelter and a similar smaller shelter honoring the bird. The form of the habitat and the temple honoring the bird were the same – the shape of a segment cut through the drum. They were constructed from iron, burlap and tar. The drummer’s dwelling was log size, eighty inches high. The temple honoring the birds was half that size and was constructed with an opening at the top. On the circumference of the opening, strings were hung weighted at the bottom by small clay spheres that each held a feather and just skimmed the ground. As you walked by the temple the air would ruffle the circle of bird feathers. Metaphorically, the set includes all the parts of human life; the house representing life, the drum enabling communication, the sarcophagus symbolizing death and the bird temple signifying the spiritual. Inherent in this totality is a slower paced existence. Consider the significance of communicating with a drum and the rhythm of a heartbeat.

SP: *Can you comment on the forms and material you used at this time –and also on the tonal qualities?*

JB: The forms I used in this exhibition are the most elementary forms of architecture. The Pygmies still make houses like this and presumably have been doing so for 30,000 years. I like ancient materials that are close to nature and colors of decay. The smell of the materials, old vegetation and the inky black color of tar add to the overall dramatic atmosphere. They are important to the totality of this exhibition and the viewer’s experience.

SP: *Tell me more about the performance you gave.*

JB: Well, the performance was spontaneous. On the night of the opening I covered myself with white clay and lay down in the sarcophagus. I didn’t move. People thought that they were looking at a wooden sculpture in the coffin. My notion was to tell the story of the ancient drummer by bringing him back to life. The audience was shocked when I rose up from the coffin. Then using a ritual knife that had been part of the exhibition, I inscribed a circle around the drum. The knife had a flat Cycladic shape that represented male and female. The circle was meant to separate me from the present as a man from another time. I moved to the drum playing it for some time, symbolically telling the audience about my imaginary culture. Then I went into the habitat where I remained standing in the opening with my arms crossed.

It was after that performance that I took my first trip to Africa. During that trip in an out-of-the-way location, I walked into a ritual performance that was almost identical. The dancer had been rubbed with a white powder and wore a white skirt (mine had been black). He danced while the children drummed for hours. Talk about *deja vu!* I felt that I had tapped into

the “collective unconscious”. This was true stuff. I was uncovering the fundamental elements of what it means to be human!

SP: *Often in your work you take one form and use different cross sections of it to reveal a new form. An example of this was the casket, drum, habitat and bird temple. Besides creating a visual unity I think it evokes a deeper interest after the initial impression.*

JB: Yes, repetition of form is an important aspect of my work. Repetition also unites the visual languages and often adds a rhythmic aspect.

SP: *Birds also have a high profile in your work at this time.*

JB: Birds have always been important to me. As a kid my room was filled with cages of owls, falcons and homing pigeons. I would send a homing pigeon back to my mother when I reached a destination. She would know that I got there safely. The cast bronze birds in this exhibition can’t fly so the function of a messenger becomes a spiritual one. Birds are often identified with the spirit.

SP: *You had been to Africa in 1981 on a study tour grant from the Dutch Government. What took you back to Africa in 1984?*

JB: I wanted to see the Pygmies in their environment. When I had met them briefly before, they seemed like the personification of the ancient drummer. A friend of mine came with me on this trip. We went deep into the jungle in Zaire, Central Africa, and stayed with the Pygmies. They were amazed and delighted when after each of them was introduced to us, I recalled every name. I was a magician! Actually I had merely written the phonics for each name in the format that they were each introduced.

We stayed with the Pygmies for a period of time and then set out with two guides and a dug-out canoe for the Lomami River. My friend was ill with dysentery almost from the beginning of the boat trip. I seemed fine at first but after a few days I noticed blurry vision in one eye. We had no purified water for washing or drinking and so were susceptible to any problems the river carried. After a few more days the problem developed in the other eye also. I was terrified. We were, as it turned out, weeks away from any medical help. My vision kept getting worse and worse. Anxiety was a constant companion. I couldn’t sleep. My heart was pounding constantly. When I finally did see a physician he treated the anxiety first and then diagnosed the eye problem as a viral infection for which he had medication. Without the medication I could have been permanently blind. It is in this context that my beliefs changed. This was my initiation. I now knew that neither time nor health was guaranteed.

SP: *How did this experience change your work?*

JB: The work I did right after the second trip to Africa in 1984 was titled “Memory and Honoring” and was very personal. I was so grateful for my recovery that I wanted to give homage to all aspects of that initiation. Some works in marble honor the water: the substance itself, the river, its source and its reflective properties. Some pieces depict ruins of ancient

civilizations with broken columns and leaves scurrying over deserted temple floors. Before this trip I spent three years studying marble techniques in Italy, which also influenced my work. Recently, in a private commission, titled *Amphitheatre*, I combined many of the critical elements of this period. I am pleased at how that work successfully integrated so much of this earlier period.

SP: *The work in Initiation and Linkage that was shown at the San Jose ICA in 1994 has a different tone and texture than the work in “Memory and Honoring”. This new exhibition included rusted iron vessels of different size and shape and function. Some of the vessels were non-functional. Some pieces had rust-framed photographs blurred by wax with shelves holding related sculptures. There were works introducing aspects of the Pygmy culture and there was a pervasive environmental concern.*

JB: The work that followed the *Memory and Honoring* series was possible as I became further removed from the immediate experience. It integrates my personal trials with the larger problem of the environment. The work includes comparisons between the gentle Pygmy culture that has survived with its surroundings intact for 30,000 years and the warrior Roman culture that is extinct. In particular, the river and water as a critical source of life for man and nature take on new significance. The utilitarian and symbolic uses of water are uncovered through multiple layers of meaning in each piece. Water may be used for transportation, for cleansing and for nourishment. The vessel may provide storage or be a conduit for water. It enables water to pass through or be poured from it. Passage, a symbolic death, is a critical symbol in initiation rites as is cleansing with poured water, a symbolic rebirth. Wax becomes a critical material because when put on a photograph it mimics my vision as I was going blind. Wax can also change the appearance of water from clear to muddy. Rust reminds us of passing time. My second journey to Africa had become my personal initiation and passage to adulthood. Concern for man’s environment followed from that context. I have also become increasingly aware of Western culture’s lack of any deep meaningful initiation to adulthood.

SP: *One piece, Passage and Pouring #2, dealt with the vessel concepts of water as a conduit and water contained. Above each of the vessels situated on the floor is a rust-framed waxed background that looks like water. Over that, is a black tarpaper reflection of the vessel on the floor. The ripples of the water and the softly undulating vessels and shadows are another example of form repetition and reflection.*

JB: The format for that work consisted of rusted steel-framed black tarpaper cutouts, a repetition in two dimensions of the shape of the cast iron vessels on the floor in front of them. Roughly painted on these cutouts is the name of the vessel function, i.e., PASSAGE or POURING. The vessel-form for “passage” is a softly rippled cast iron conduit open at both ends. The repeated shape on the tarpaper looks like a dark shadow. Similarly, the “pouring” vessel is a rippled, horn-shaped vessel of cast iron that is open at one end. Both vessels function as tools. The vessel that is open at both ends forces the water to follow its shape thus symbolically representing initiation. The pouring vessel, open at one end, symbolizes the start of new life.

SP: *What is the significance of the solid vessels in this exhibition that could neither hold water nor provide passage?*

JB: These solid vessels are universal vessel forms and also represent the different life forms. They function as a reminder that rivers, being the veins of the earth, need nurture even as they nurture. The source can dry up. They also suggest passage of time, hence the solidified or fossilized appearance.

SP: *In this same exhibition there was a very large rusted vessel called “The Source”. It stood alone. What is the story of this powerful object? Is it part of African mythology?*

JB: “The Source”, a cast iron piece which weighs almost 1000 pounds, is so visually commanding that it demands space. Other objects appear out of place when they are close to it. It is an “illogical object”, mythically considered the source of strange phenomena. Water would appear in it and stream out of it and then become a giant river. This is the most positive and meaningful example of an honoring piece. The vessel is the mythological source of all rivers.

SP: *Aside from the work that is engaged with water and all the potential metaphors surrounding it, you have a number of works that honor the Pygmies, their customs and their minimal environmental impact.*

JB: The Pygmies have been on this land over 30,000 years. They live close to nature, taking only what they need. One piece, *Linkage – Pygmy Settlement in Roman Territory #2*, honors the Pygmy’s way of life. It started with a black outlined floor plan of ancient Roman villas on a white ground. Over the plan I added a brown wax. The black outline of the villas shows through the wax. Then by scraping away the brown wax and revealing the white paper below, I created seven circular forms representing the Pygmy round huts. Now both the black angular footprint of a Roman territory and the freer pattern of a Pygmy settlement are revealed. The Pygmy’s survival is emphasized by the brightness of the white hut outlines contrasted with the dark wax underlay and the black line of the Roman footprint.

SP: *I would like you to discuss the layering and complexity within Order Correction. There is so much there that you can’t know just by looking, for example, the careful way in which you determined the grid. Since a number of pieces that you have done since rely on the grid, this will give us a context for the newer works also.*

JB: You’re right. *Order Correction* deals with a recurring theme in my work. In this piece, part of the dotted tribal cloth worn by a Mbole African man is photographed and the photo hazed with a light coat of wax. The piece of cloth has nine dark circles of different sizes arranged in an irregular grid. I calculated the average centers for each of the nine circles and then I scraped away nine equal sized circles of wax around the calculated center. This was done in order to correct the irregular placement with an exact Western approach. The glass over the image contains a sandblasted rectangle divided into a grid of four equal rectangles. Each of the nine corners of the four rectangles is centered exactly over the circles beneath it. The question that is being posed here is whether the correction is better, aesthetically and

compositionally, than the original, seemingly random, tribal design. When you look at this piece you see the dark circles on the cloth, the scraped wax correction circles and the sandblasted grid. I like the fact that because of the transparency of the glass and the wax, the original and the corrected version are both still available.

SP: *Of the work that you did at this time is there any particular piece that you think of as most encompassing of the period?*

JB: *Anatomy of a River System* is composed of sixteen rusty individually framed photos of the water of sixteen tributaries of the Congo. Each of the water photos has been worked in a different way with honey-toned wax. The glass covering each panel is sandblasted with the name of the river represented. I like the way the sandblasted names cast their shadows on the water and the individuality of the water surfaces from each of the rivers. Reflections are an important aspect of my work. The piece is much like African music and design – a rhythmic repetition of similar images. However, each one is slightly different from the next. The format allows each river an individual presentation but still presents the totality of the system. Metaphorically the tributaries are presented as the veins of the land and the land becomes the living body. The format suggests that we can physically examine the health of each river separately.

SP: *Another piece that has the same grid format as Anatomy of a River System uses out-of-focus photographs of the jungle with symbols (or signs) etched on the glass over the image. These signs have gravitated to so much of the work you are doing currently. What do they mean to you?*

JB: This work continues with the idea of chaos vs. order and is another sixteen-panel work of honey-colored waxed photos of jungle vegetation. The photos are slightly out-of-focus and the wax further reinforces the haziness. Sandblasted on the glass over each panel is an unfamiliar sign. For example, if you turn the letter “E” ninety degrees you get one sign, turn it again and you have a new symbol and so on for sixteen different signs. These signs (potentially meaningful) are reflected on the water in the photos. The orderliness of the straight lines and ninety-degree angles suggests meaning, while the jungle with its dynamic diagonals and irregular forms suggests randomness. The signs are meant to suggest the very beginning of a language, i.e., the potential of conveying thought. On the other hand the jungle vegetation follows the laws of nature and has a complexity well beyond the potential language signifiers. The idea of appearance and reality is becoming a new focus in my work. Looking and finding the communication inherent in the presentation of images is fascinating.

SP: *What was your inspiration for the beautiful and mysterious Quarry Puddle?*

JB: During a stay in Italy, I was prepared to make a series of photos in the marble quarries. What interested me was the many grid patterns left behind on the quarry walls as a result of the blocks that were cut out of the mountain. There happened to be a huge puddle of water on the floor. The water was milky from the marble dust and barely transparent. You could just make out foggy-looking pebbles and rocks under the surface. What really struck me were the intricate reflections of sky, marble walls and equipment.

SP: *You have said that Quarry Puddle was a critical piece for the development of the “Black and Image” series. Why is that so?*

JB: This is the piece that started this series. It is almost like this: there is nothing and there is almost nothing. The photo of the quarry by itself would just be a hazy photo of grayish water. So much was going on and the reflections were so foggy that the whole picture becomes abstract. From a distance it actually looks like a monochromatic gray. I placed an absolutely black photo next to the puddle photo. Adding the black photo creates a tension, which enables the details of the quarry puddle to become more dominant. The absence created by the black photo reinforces what is there in the gray quarry puddle. The black image gives us a feeling of blocked vision or “not seeing” that contrasts with our “seeing” the puddle’s depth. The little pebbles become visible and then reflections from the surroundings of the puddle appear. Seeing the reflection vastly increases the space in the work and adds to our interest. It reminds me of Manet’s painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*. First you see the bartender and about five feet of the bar. Next, however, we notice the mirror reflections of the rest of the room filled with people and the depth we perceive is significantly increased.

SP: *So now it seems as if “nothing” is much more than nothing. Speaking of looking, more and more of your current work seems to involve black photos. Where is this leading you?*

JB: I have always liked the depth achieved with out-of-focus photographs because the actual photographed image becomes unrecognizable and abstract. What is left is very suggestive and feels like you are looking into a deep colorful mist. The emphasis here is on “deep”. I am also interested in the questions that come up concerning what you are seeing. Out-of-focus photographs that I took through a window reveal an ambiguity between the distant and the up-close elements in the image. The closest element, the shrubbery, could appear as deep space. On the other hand the sunlight behind the shrubbery could appear as the closest element, like white blossoms. I found that similar types of effects were possible by making alterations to black photos through sandblasted lines, squares or rectangles. By juxtaposing an altered black photo and an out-of-focus shrubbery photo I could direct the focus of the viewer. These possibilities inspired two diptychs. The right part of each of these diptychs is an out-of-focus photo taken through a window. The left part of each is a framed black photo, but the glass over each is treated in a different way. Each is framed in rusted steel and covered with glass. In the first diptych, the black photo has a painted $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch wide border. The same black painted border is also painted on the out-of-focus image next to the black photo. Additionally a linear square is etched over the black photo next to the painted border. The etched border appears to float above the photo and gives additional depth to the black photo below, which now appears as an opening into deep space. The darks in the out-of-focus photo also appear as deep space. There is a tension between the black altered photo and the out-of-focus image which makes the lights appear closer than the dark. The second diptych has no black borders. In this diptych the glass over the black photo is etched in the center with a small square. The eye reads this translucent gray square as a limit – the end of the opening. The darks in the out-of-focus photo image taken through the window now appear close and the lights appear distant.

SP: *Another grid piece that uses these same out-of-focus images taken through a window is framed in steel. A Mylar sheet with evenly spaced square openings is attached to the photo with stainless steel furniture tacks placed evenly to complete the grid pattern. The translucent Mylar coupled with the steel frame and stainless steel nail heads gives the piece a minimal feel.*

JP: The concept for this work comes from the *Black and Image* series. The out-of focus photo is a blurry picture of nature with light spots giving the illusion of endless depth. The Mylar grid determines which parts of the photo can be viewed clearly and which parts are further blurred or obscured by the Mylar and tacks. The grid openings encourage the viewer to examine each part, square by square. This is similar to the grid format of *Anatomy of a Tributary River System*.

SP: *You have talked about a puddle sculpture that consists of two pieces. One is black granite carved in a puddle shape and smoothly polished. The other is cast glass in a similar shape. How does this piece fit with the Black and Image series?*

JB: This piece finds its roots in the “Memory and Honoring” series. I designed a frozen puddle that was supposed to go with a solid vase lying on its side. The vase was to be made of polished black granite. It was not until a few years ago when I was in Italy that I remembered this design. I still liked the idea because it was related to my water theme, so I decided to make the piece. After I finished the polished black granite puddle, I realized a clear glass puddle was required to complete the “Black and Image” concept. The seeing versus the not seeing, the blocked vision versus the transparent image, it is all there.

SP: *This work reveals so many aspects of looking: looking at, looking into, looking through, finding reflections, etc. The work also raises questions about what we mean when we talk about seeing and not seeing. When you look into the polished black granite you can't see to the other side the way you can with glass, so you could say that the granite blocks vision. However, it does not block reflections and it doesn't really block vision either. It enables the eye to see new possibilities.*

You also have a number of pieces that use black granite and blue stone. How do those pieces relate to seeing?

JB: This is work from the “Night and Day” series. I found what I thought was the perfect blue stone slab to represent the daytime sky and another beautiful piece of black granite with copper specks for the night sky. Placed next to each other on a rusty steel shelf (which is how I had planned to use them) they were a disappointment. Something was missing. So I tried introducing two (2 x 2 inches) mounted photos centered in front of and slightly distanced from each slab. The little photo of a day sky floats in front of the granite night sky and the night sky photo floats in front of the day sky of the blue stone. Now the black granite becomes a night sky and the blue stone becomes a day sky. In the night sky you see the endless space and the stars while in the day sky our view of the stars is actually blocked by the earth's atmosphere.

SP: *It seems that while we associate seeing with the daytime and not seeing with nighttime, your work is suggesting that we see more at night. At night we look into the depth of the universe – into time itself. During the day the atmosphere obscures that view.*

Another fascinating piece is Visual Language. As I recall, it consists of a steel frame with no image on a wall behind a 20-inch cube of white marble inscribed with language signifiers signifiers. You have said that the proportions, size and location of the cube and the frame suggest a sculpture that in fact does not exist. How do you explain this? Is it an aesthetic visual expectation that the viewer has? What's actually going on here?

JB: The piece is about communication with aesthetic visual language. The white marble cube (pedestal) has sixteen language signifiers incised, filled with wax and arranged in grid format. They represent early attempts to communicate through a symbolic construct. The pedestal is empty. The sculpture, which would have visually communicated something, is absent. On the wall behind the marble pedestal is a steel frame. This frame is also empty except for two lines that indicate a measurement. The measurement shows the proportionally correct size of the sculpture for the empty pedestal. Now everything is ready to be filled in, i.e. the paper and the pen are ready for the poem to be written. This work investigates elements of visual language. It is possible to exchange ideas and concepts without the use of written language.

SP: *You see yourself fundamentally as a sculptor. Some people would see your framed works as two-dimensional. Is it the way you work with your materials, i.e., rusty steel frames, honey colored wax over photos (sometimes incised), etched glass and grid patterns that makes them sculptures?*

JB: These materials and ways of working with them, besides being beautiful, enable subtle emphasis in the work and yield what I call “thin sculptures”. For example, the rusty steel frames are not decorative. Their use adds a tactile aspect to the work which otherwise might be too pristine. They are an integral part of the piece. Wax on photos may have variable thickness – emphasized further when it is incised with names or signifiers. Etched glass casts shadows on an underlying photo image evoking a sense of depth. It may also focus the eye in a prescribed way, as does a grid, which may also involve an additional layering of material.

SP: *Your newer work investigates aesthetic perceptions of depth and detail by manipulating the visual field. Alterations include: juxtaposing nothing with something, blocking part of an image with a black or gray square, etching on the glass over the image, using a grid form to selectively obscure part of an image, etc. Your additions to and subtractions from the image appear to refocus the eye, while articulating the process at the same time.*

JB I have found that a lot of my newer work is still based on the African canoe trip where I nearly lost my sight. For example, *Quarry Puddle* is about seeing nothing (the black photo) and seeing very little (the almost monochromatic gray puddle photo). However, after close examination the eye picks up the reflection evoking deep space. By painting black and gray squares on different parts of an image I show different ways of seeing. This adjustment reverses the parts where you can see depth and where you cannot. Recently in a five foot

horizontally oriented piece, *Cinque-Terre Reversal*, I use an out-of-focus image on the top section of the work over which I paint five black squares. Now the out-of-focus image appears to have great depth. The lower half of the piece is black. Over the black I have painted five gray squares. The gray squares in the bottom part block the potential infinity of the black and indicate an ending or closure. In *Night and Day* by juxtaposing a photograph with stone I show how our eyes can perceive something one way when it is really something different. All this work is investigating the way we see. Certainly this is an important question for the visual arts. While on this path my work has become increasingly minimal and aesthetic.