

PRISON SENTENCES

Willem Boshoff

Date of first issue: 2003

Materials: Zimbabwe Black granite, Belfast Black granite (gabbro)

Estimated weight 120kg per panel

Methods of display

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

Naming

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

Edition Status

PRISON SENTENCES

- Comprises of a composite work containing all eight granite panels
- These eight panels are in a fixed edition of 5 (altogether 40 panels)
- 1/5 (2004) Constitutional Court, Johannesburg (Zimbabwe Black granite)
- 2/5 (2004) Gordon Schachat, Johannesburg (Zimbabwe Black granite)
- 3/5 Ferguson family, Boston (Zimbabwe Black granite)
- 4/5 NIROX sculpture park on consignment (Belfast Black granite)
- 5/5 Not yet made

PRISON HACKS

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

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



PRISON SENTENCES 1/5 (2004), Courtyard at the Constitutional Court of South Africa.



PRISON SENTENCES 3/5 (2007), Ferguson Residence, Boston.



PRISON SENTENCES 2/5 (2004), in the Schachat garden, Johannesburg.



PRISON SENTENCES 4/5 (2010), in the NIROX sculpture park.

PRISON SENTENCES

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The idea for *PRISON SENTENCES* was conceived in 2002. At first, in 2003, only three panels were exhibited at Michael Stevenson Fine Art, Cape Town.

The first two full sets, 1/5 and 2/5, were installed in 2004

Set 3/5 was installed in 2007

Set 4/5 (2010) is made of Belfast Black Granite (gabbro) at the Boschpoort Granite factory near Belfast, Mpumalanga, South Africa.

Set 4/5 was first exhibited at the NIROX sculpture park in 2010

In 2012 set 4/5 was exhibited with a selection of South African artworks in Den Haag as part of an exhibition entitled *AFTER THE RAINBOW NATION*. This exhibition of outdoor sculptures took place under the auspices of NIROX sculpture park, Museum Beelden am Zee and Stichtung Den Haag Sculptuur.

In 2013 and 2014 set 4/5 was exhibited in the garden of NIROX sculpture park.

In 2015 set 4/5 was assigned to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum Of African Art.

Belfast black granite

In my stone sculptures I use mostly Belfast black granite, an igneous material formed by magma or lava (molten volcanic rock) cooling and becoming solid. This means that, at some point in time immemorial, granite/gabbro was a liquid. By polishing the natural rock I take it back, in a symbolic way, to its former molten, constituency. The ultimate character of my stone sculptures should look as if it has something to do with the rock's history, with its own 'memory' of its liquid essence being moulded and settling in a place. The soil, the bedrock and the earth contains a record (some would even say memory) of past events. The land artist Andy Goldsworthy says: "A stone is ingrained with geological and historical memories."

In natural stone trade, Belfast Black is simply called a *granite*, but in geological terms Belfast Black is a *gabbro*. Since the name *gabbro* is relatively unknown to the man in the street, all exporters, traders and manufacturers of stone products conveniently refer to the material as 'Belfast Black Granite' or 'Absolute Black Granite.' *Gabbro* is a dark, coarse-grained plutonic rock of crystalline texture, consisting mainly of pyroxene, plagioclase feldspar, and often olivine. Belfast Black Granite is a most impervious stone, highly prized with its market value exceeding that of most granite materials. The town of Belfast is often advertised for its well-known black 'granite,' the only known and purest deposit in the world of its kind.

Interview with the artist

Transcript by W Siebrits, June 2007

When I first thought of this project my initial idea was to make a series of etchings to record the number of days spent in jail by the eight political prisoners who were sentenced to life imprisonment at the close of the Rivonia trial in June 1964. Most were released only in 1989-1990. I appointed a number of assistants to calculate the exact number of days each of them spent behind bars, taking leap years into account.

In the case of Dennis Goldberg, we actually went to visit him to ascertain precisely the number of days he was imprisoned, as he was released early. It emerged from the research we did that seven years of prison is considered by the inmates to be a very long time, which feels never-ending, almost like an eternity. The prisoners speak of it as a *neves*, which the Oxford Dictionary defines as an extended period of prison sentence. (When written backwards, *neves* spells the word 'seven'.) Realising that the measurement of time was a very important idea, I felt I would be throwing it away by simply translating that concept into a series of prints, so I decided to make these works in granite.

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

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

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

Once I had received a commission to make all seven panels, I altered the title of the work to PRISON SENTENCES. The word 'sentence' refers to the term a prisoner serves, but it also denotes a grammatical whole with a full stop, an ending. Naming the work PRISON SENTENCES alluded to the second meaning, the idea that one would expect a sentence to end. I wanted to evoke a sense of abstraction, a meditative quality arising from the whole process of counting days and passing time, to the point at which you lose yourself completely. I chose the black granite as it is the material of a graveyard. It is also the material used to build memorials. Each panel is reflective, so you see yourself in it: in a sense it becomes a mirror of the self.

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The Rivonia Trial

The Observer, Sunday February 11, 2001
Sunder Katwala

The Rivonia Trial, named after the suburb of Johannesburg where sixteen leaders of the African National Congress had been arrested in July 1963, began on 26 November 1963.

Mandela and his fellow defendants were charged with 221 acts of sabotage designed to "ferment violent revolution".

The ANC had been operating underground since being outlawed in April 1960, one month after the Sharpeville Massacre of 67 protestors by police. The police had collected hundreds of documents from the ANC hideout at Rivonia about Operation Mayibuye (Operation Comeback).

Under the new General Law Amendment (Sabotage) Act of 1962 and the Suppression of Communism Act, the defendants faced the threat of the death penalty.

Mandela had a growing international reputation and the ANC sought to use the trial to win worldwide support and attention, hence Mandela's speech from the dock on April 20th which was delivered from his handwritten script.

For example, the speech was extracted in The Observer on Sunday April 26th, under the headline "Why I am prepared to die".

Mandela was described as "the black pimpnel of South Africa, on trial in Pretoria with eight others on charges of attempting a revolution by violence".

The newspaper told its readers that "the alleged offences are punishable by death. Last week he appeared in the witness-box for four-and-a-half hours to explain his stand. He admitted that he had organised sabotage. He explained why he had turned to violence, and what kind of South Africa he was prepared to die for" to introduce "the historic speech which could be his last".

On June 11 1964, at the conclusion of the trial, Mandela and the seven other defendants - Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki (father of current South African President Thabo Mbeki), Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi, Ahmed Kathrada and Denis Goldberg - were convicted. Mandela was found guilty on four charges of sabotage. All eight were imprisoned to life imprisonment.

The United Nations Security Council condemned the trial and began moves towards international sanctions against the apartheid regime. But it was 27 years before Mandela was released from prison on February 11th 1990, becoming President of South Africa following the first democratic multi-racial elections in 1994.

See also Wikipedia entry:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rivonia_Trial