

An abstract painting with thick, expressive brushstrokes in various colors including red, orange, pink, blue, yellow, and dark brown. The colors are layered and blended, creating a textured, painterly effect.

HEDWIG BARRY

HERE IS WHERE WE MEET

NIROX Sculpture Park
22 jan. - 13 mar. 2022

Presented by FORMS
Gallery and NIROX



Hedwig Barry's debut solo exhibition, *Here Is Where We Meet*, is a collection of sculptures and paintings completed during a seven-week residency at the NIROX Sculpture Park over the southern summer of 2021 – 2022.

The exhibition centres around new *Crumple* sculptures, large-scale three-dimensional works made from massive sheets of crumpled metal welded together and then painted to create complex and enigmatic forms.

The *Crumple* series dramatises the presence of force, scale and fragility, drawing attention to the simultaneous structural resilience and vulnerability of the work's primary material, aluminium sheets.

Barry's sculptures explore the relationship between destruction and preservation, force and form.

The works were initially inspired by crumpled up paper, and then invisible "crumple zones" in cars – areas in the bodies of cars which are designed to buckle in the instance of an accident, absorbing the force of impact and protecting the bodies inside the vehicle.

Alongside the *Crumple* sculptures Barry presents paintings on canvas which continue her exploration of automotive paints and painting techniques used on the crumples' surfaces.

These paintings derive from memories of experiences in nature, using colour and form to evoke different environments that are ecologically unique and increasingly vulnerable. Working on previously used canvases, Barry defamiliarises the classical relationship between figure and ground, removing the hierarchy that makes a "figure" more important than the "ground" which we traditionally understand as a background or an invisible support.

The exhibition borrows its title from a novel by John Berger (*Here is Where We Meet*, 2005), and echoes several of the themes and sentiments that emerge in the book: playfulness, remembering, traveling, mourning and desire. And like Berger's prose, Barry's work searches for a language to mediate feeling, metaphor and visuality.

As a physical exhibition, *Here is Where We Meet* traverses different spaces and locations at the NIROX Sculpture Park, creating a diverse experience of form and feeling, marks and memory and the fleeting encounters and events that give shape to life. The exhibition's digital renderings – this catalogue and a related viewing room [on Artsy.net](#) – translate powerful three-dimensional forms and rich surfaces into images that can be viewed and enjoyed from anywhere in the world.

– Anthea Buys

Anthea Buys is the director and owner of FORMS Gallery. FORMS is a gallery without a space located in South Africa and on the internet. At the heart of its curatorial programme are ongoing collaborations with artists who make work that is critically, aesthetically and politically important. Also central to the FORMS ecosystem are connections with like-minded spaces, people and organisations.

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NIROX Sculpture Park is an initiative of the NIROX Foundation, an independent non-profit trust, located in the Cradle of Humankind, established and run for the benefit of the arts – in all forms. The NIROX Sculpture Park hosts an international residency and exhibition programme and contributes to the sustainability and progress of artistic production in South Africa.

An abstract painting with a textured surface. The background is a mix of dark green and teal. A large, vertical, yellowish-green brushstroke runs down the center. To the left, there's a dark, almost black, vertical shape. In the bottom right, there are several bright red, circular brushstrokes. A small white circle is visible on the left side. The overall style is expressive and painterly.

INSTALLATION VIEWS



Installation view showing the works *Makuleke*, *Angel of History*, *Marievale*, *Arch* and *Tswalu* (L-R).



Installation view showing the works *Johannesburg*, *Angel of History*, *Arch* and *Marievale* (L-R).



Installation view showing the works *Arch*, *Tswalu* and *Angel of History* (L-R).



Installation view showing the works *Johannesburg* and *Angel of History* (L-R).



Installation view showing the works *Arch*, *Angel of History* and *Johannesburg* (L-R).



In-situ view of the work *Mother*.



In-situ view of the work *Mother*.



In-situ view of the work *Seat*.



In-situ view of the work *Sharkboy*.

An abstract painting with a textured, painterly style. The background consists of broad, horizontal brushstrokes in shades of brown, tan, and grey. A prominent, bright red horizontal stroke cuts across the middle of the composition. Above the red stroke, there are patches of yellow and a small, irregular blue shape. Below the red stroke, there are more muted tones of grey and brown, with some darker, more textured areas. The word "TEXT" is centered in the middle of the image, overlaid on the brushstrokes.

TEXT

Hedwig Barry: *Here Is Where We Meet*

Chloë Reid

An imaginative leap is required in order to connect the aesthetic experience of contemporary artworks with what is simultaneously happening in the world. This is a rewording (with liberties taken) of something John Berger wrote in 1955 when what was happening in the world was the testing of the Hydrogen bomb. Fifty years later, Berger wrote *Here Is Where We Meet*, a book that could be fiction, autobiography, reflection or essay and from which Hedwig Barry borrows the title of her exhibition in 2022. Barry's work responds to the deep uncertainty of our current times in a way that resonates with the lyrical and reflective transposing of time, space and memory that

shapes Berger's writing in *Here Is Where We Meet*. Rather than demanding an imaginative leap, her paintings and sculptures encourage the substitution of the desire to know with feeling and intuition.

In Barry's sculptures, extreme, indiscriminately applied force meets the careful application of lurid colour and soft marks. Her crumples sit lightly on their sharp edges and make the green of Nirox's lawns look sprayed-on. They are the vivid aftermath of a material process that begins when an orange peel grab or grapple, also known as a hydraulic press, descends and transfigures flat aluminium sheets. This giant brute of a hand is a crude artistic tool, whose unwieldy facility is central to Barry's practice. Though some manipulation is possible, she has limited control over the forms that are wrought from this process. Their surface is the base for a material exploration involving colour and marking, and a play of light and shadow that will continue to transform the work long after

the paint has dried.

Relinquishing control in such an extremely deliberate way is a provocative move. For all the complications and contradictions of the term in a contemporary context, Barry considers herself a feminist. What this represents for her is a resistance to dominant systems of oppression and control engendered by social hierarchy and, in particular, the subtle ways in which these systems are used to demean people. She runs against the prioritization of rational modes of thought and decision-making and is guided by emotion, empathy and intuition in her work and life. By creating the conditions for chance to be so forcefully enacted, and for the memory of that force to be captured in the resulting form, the artist proposes a dramatic alternative to logic. The work is conceived from a crash. Far more than an act of resistance, Barry's crumples are a gesture towards the human capacity for recovery and growth in spite of sometimes overwhelming odds.

"Crumple zones" are designed to protect the life of a person in a vehicle by absorbing the impact in case of an accident. Barry extends this defensive measure in her sculptures as a reflection on fragility and the ways in which we transform ourselves in the face of trauma and difficulty in our lives. The crumples give shape to the intangible experience of grief and renewal. The space of unknowing that distinguishes their fabrication is generative for the artist, and an essential component of her working process in any medium, including in her painted work.

In 2019, Barry's figurative painting practice began to dissolve into a way of working compelled by mark making. Without a representational anchor, the relationship between form and ground is loosened. Colour, texture and movement describe ephemeral states in Barry's affective compositions.

In the painting *Tswalu* heat radiates from the surface of the canvas through a base of sprayed and layered red, pink, orange, green and grey. Flat orange, pink and red strokes simmer and give way to swirling yellow that rises into dark and murky cloud forms. *Tswalu*, a reserve in the Kalahari, is very hot and, according to the artist, getting hotter. The painting *Johannesburg* is familiar with its frenzy of brown, black, green and pink – storms and traffic perhaps, with intermittent charm in bright blue skies.

Barry's paintings are unsettling. They don't let you settle. Their compositions decompose. You can lose yourself in a soft receding oceanic consistency only to be thrown out by a vivid projectile. These marks and textures are extended in some of her sculptures. Once again, the effect is unsettling. Shadows that move in the folds of the work and shift throughout the day are redirected and confused by ecstatic automotive paint. Soft stippling and twirling

brush strokes that are added to the surface of the crumples bring another dimension to the very active engagement that the works demand.

This affective meeting of the viewer and the work is one of several that this exhibition tenders. The 'here' of *Here Is Where We Meet*, is where we reconcile with the forces that propel and interrupt each of our lives, where we are confronted by what we've lost in the traces left behind, where we meet and resist our own mortality and where we find one another in this resistance.

Chloë Reid is an artist and writer based in Johannesburg who is interested in the relationship between reading, writing and artistic practice.