Figuratively *speaking*

Ceramics sculptor Glenys Barton chats with Piers Ford about her work and some of her famous and challenging subjects

YOU'RE NEVER ALONE in Glenys Barton's studio. Everywhere you turn, there are heads and faces. Some are familiar. Two Daniel Craigs gaze distractedly into the distance. Michael Stipe stares impassively at something just beyond your field of vision. Walking along the shelves you come eye-to-eye with Jean Muir and Glenda Jackson. In a crate on the floor, a selection of anguished Thom Yorkes scream silently to be released from their bubble-wrap.

It's a compelling reminder that Glenys, acclaimed among the most important British figurative sculptors of our time, made her name primarily as a portraitist. The work – human forms as well as heads – almost thrums with a quiet, intense energy. Many of the faces have their eyes shut, but the lids pulsate with the dreams and thoughts that race behind them.

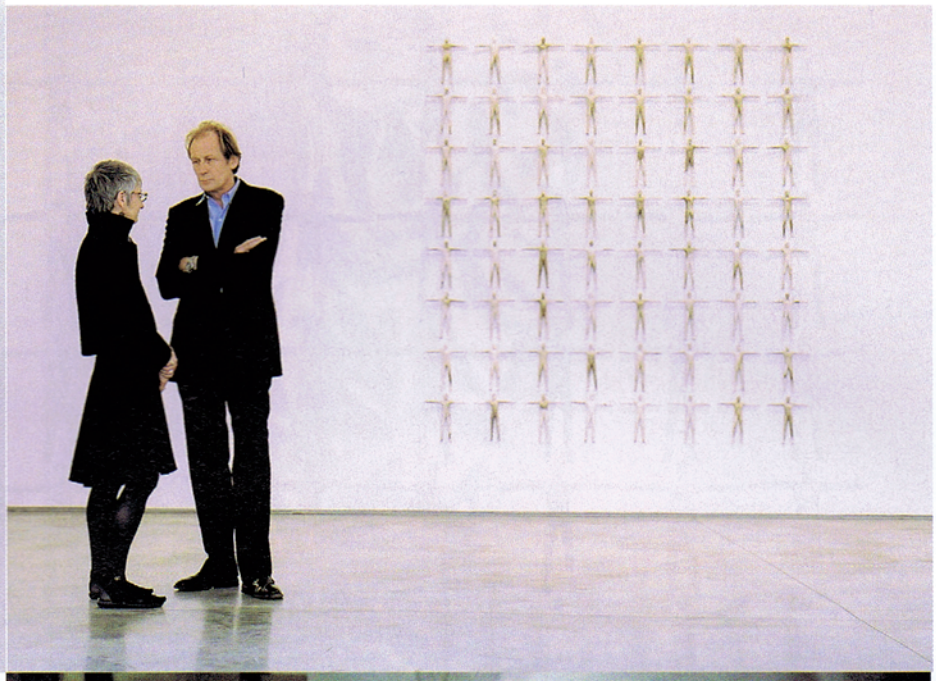
It ought to be unsettling when Glenys leaves the room for a few minutes, in search of coffee. Instead, a comforting silence descends. Her pieces have a timeless quality, enhanced by her tireless quest for different textures and glazes – particularly those blues and turquoises redolent of Ancient Egyptian faience and antique bronze, and the sawdust-fired Japanese raku technique that scorches the clay. They don't intimidate. On a murky morning, the choppy water out on the River Crouch looks far more threatening.

Glenys and her husband, the eminent commercial ceramic designer Martin Hunt, have lived here, near Burnham, with their son Felix for more than 20 years. Martin is also an experienced yachtsman – they are now on their fifth boat – and sailing remains an important element in their lives.

"I always say that my husband keeps me in a shed in Essex," she jokes. And to begin with, it was almost true. When they first moved here, Glenys' studio was in the garage. Today, it's a large, airy, purpose-built room with inspirational views across the garden and marshes to the river beyond.

Part of the sense of busy-ness comes from the variety of shapes and forms in the studio, and the apparently haphazard way they are placed on shelves and plinths. It is, says Glenys, a mixture of work. Some of her favourite pieces – sculptures she feels unable to part with – stand alongside half-finished studies and projects that have fractured during the firing process.

"You keep things that didn't work because there might still be an idea to develop in the future," she explains. "You never know. I don't really like to analyse the way I work. It's a bit like going down the stairs: if you think about how you're doing it, you're bound to trip and fall." Her current work in



Right: Bill Nighy and the striking sculpture commissioned for the film *Enduring Love*
Left: A bespectacled Daniel Craig
Above: Dancing figures
Above right: Glenys and Bill Nighy at an exhibition of her work

progress is wrapped in a black bin liner to keep the clay moist, in the centre of the room. She peels away the plastic to reveal a lyrical study of two dancers wrapped in each others' arms but – again with that trademark inscrutability which asks more of the onlooker – their faces turned away, occupied in their own thoughts. It is directly inspired by a recent commission to produce a piece of public art for the new Hextable Dance studios on the other side of the Thames estuary in Kent.

"I've always been interested in dance," explains Glenys. "I was Laban-trained and I taught it in a comprehensive school for a while, before I became an artist. When I was awarded the commission for Hextable, I discovered that two dancers-in-residence, Theo Clinkard and Antonia Grove, were working on special pieces of choreography for the launch of the building. I thought it would be wonderful to base the piece on their work, as it developed. So I sat in quietly on their sessions with the choreographer, Rafael Bonachela, taking photos and video footage. Then I'd come back here and make drawings, finding specific points to fix on and freeze."

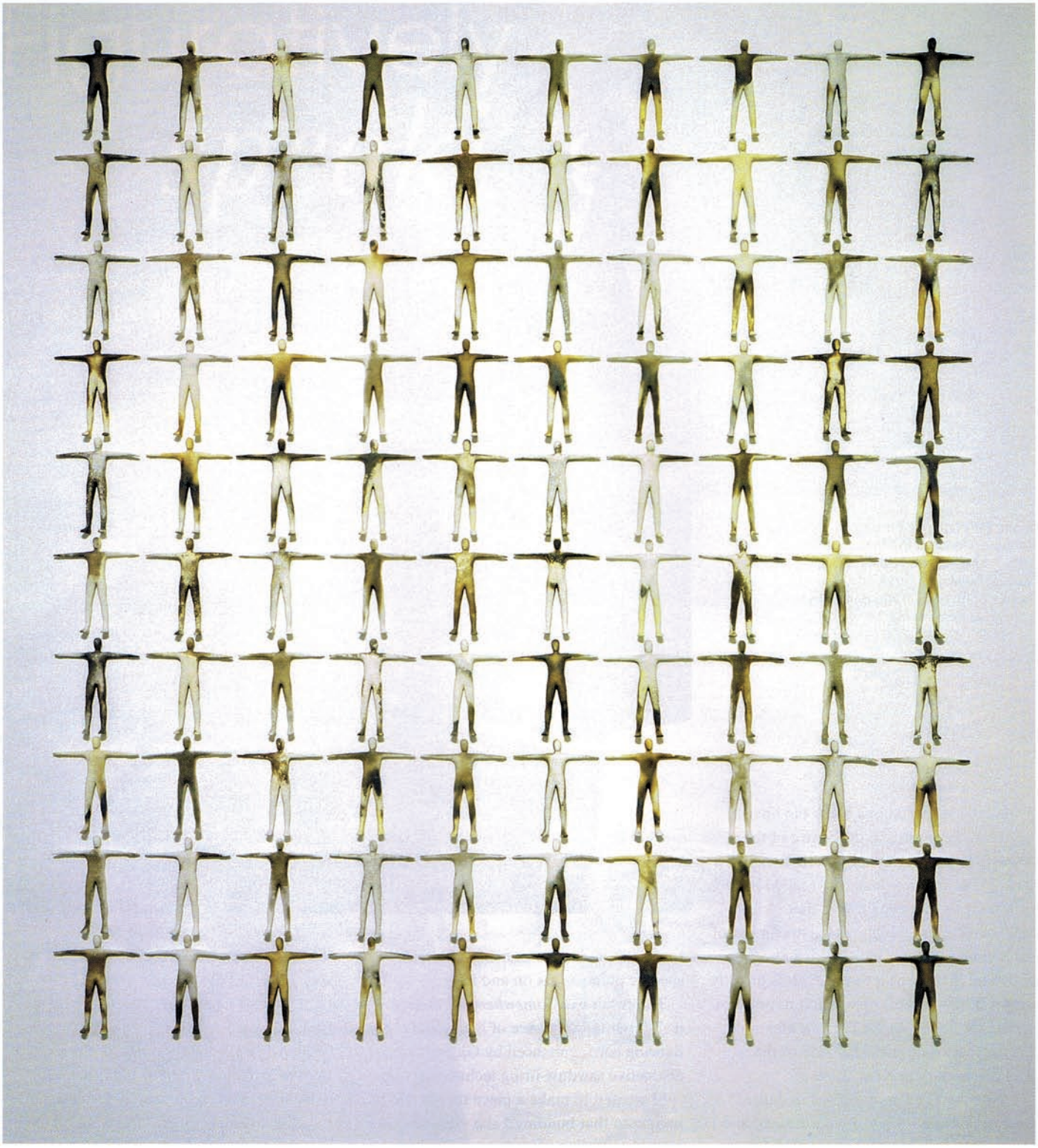
The result was *Somewhere we Meet*, a wall-mounted sequence of high relief dancing pairs, enhanced by Glenys' distinctive sawdust-firing technique.

"I wanted to make a piece that would be unique to that building," she says. "But it's proved a starting point for a new sequence of work and I'm now looking at ways of using the material I gathered while I was with them.

"Right now, I'm supposed to be working for my next exhibition at Flowers [the London gallery that has represented Glenys ever since she became a professional artist] and so a period of peaceful time is required. But in my head, my thoughts are turning around dancers and angels. Sometimes, Theo's hands start to look like wings. So that's sent me off looking at angels. My son, Felix, has just bought me the Tate's book of angels and I'm collecting images from all over."

Glenys is a daughter of the potteries, born in Stoke-on-Trent in 1944. After her early stint as a teacher, she won a place at the Royal College of Art and went on to spend some time with Wedgwood as an artist-in-residence during the mid-1970s. Her reputation for work that combined humanity with an ageless stillness and depth grew steadily and galleries around the world began to acquire pieces for their collections. But it was really in the 1990s, following her landmark portraits of the iconic fashion designer Jean Muir, that Glenys became more widely known.

"It's luck, how you take off," she says. "I started with figures in the early 1970s, then



The wall-mounted ceramic *Almost Touching*

moved into heads. When I found I could do portraiture, I got sidetracked from that more archetypal or universal style. My study of Jean Muir was used in an exhibition catalogue and an advertising poster on the tube. Then the National Portrait Gallery offered me a one-woman show, and so it goes on."

The National Portrait Gallery commissioned Glenys to make a portrait of the actor and MP Glenda Jackson, famously diffident about her own appearance and cultural status and, like Muir, an intimidating proposition for the artist. Both subjects proved a fertile source of material: Muir with her taut, brittle poise and Jackson with her later persona as public servant always competing against the legacy of her acclaimed acting roles.

The lawyer, Helena Kennedy, also became a subject in 1996 and Glenys recently learned that the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland has purchased one of her portraits, coinciding with a survey that named Kennedy as the most popular Scottish woman of our time.

REM's lead singer, Michael Stipe ('such a

'I'm still lusting after something that's been buried for thousands of years. That's the look I'm after'

beautiful head') and Radiohead's Thom Yorke, the trigger for an emotional, troubled grouping called *Screaming Out*, subsequently inspired Glenys. Then, in 2004, her work – and her sculptor's world – came to the attention of film director Roger Mitchell, who was working on an adaptation of Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*.

Mitchell needed sculptures of two of the film's lead actors, Daniel Craig and Bill Nighy. After meeting Glenys, he not only hired her to complete the work, but also asked for her entire studio, in order to make the sculptor's environment in the film as authentic as possible. An unnerved Glenys watched in amazement as her locus operandi was transported up to London for the shoot. Only one small piece was damaged during the whole operation.

"You've made him look like a Greek god!" said Nighy when he saw her portrait of Craig. And he's right. It's those intense blue/green glazes again. In fact, the portraits of both men are haunting, easily transcending the context of the film with their beauty.

"Both blokes are such nice people," says Glenys. "Daniel is a very modest man. And for Bill, we set up a temporary studio in Camden Town and it was just fun from start to finish. What you see is what you get! Afterwards, I felt I should have bought a ticket for the experience."

When the portraits went on show shortly after the film opened, Nighy signed the visitors' book, "Love and rock". Now, like the rest of us, Glenys is fascinated to see how Craig fares as the new James Bond and has recast the portrait a couple of times in anticipation.

Communication is everything for this most perspicacious of artists. If her work triggers something in the viewer, that's what matters. There's no need to analyse how or what. For Glenys herself, the quest remains to achieve an effect that will outlive any transient context.

"What really moves me is when I see a tiny, pre-Hispanic figure or an Egyptian shabti, made by an artist thousands of years ago," she says. "I feel moved even thinking about it. If anybody ever felt I had made something that was completely timeless in that way, it would be the biggest compliment to me. I'm still lusting after something that's been buried for 1,000s of years. That's the look I'm after."

Within, a limited edition bronze featuring Glenys' trademark relief figures on the planes of a sheared head