

# Jenny Doležel

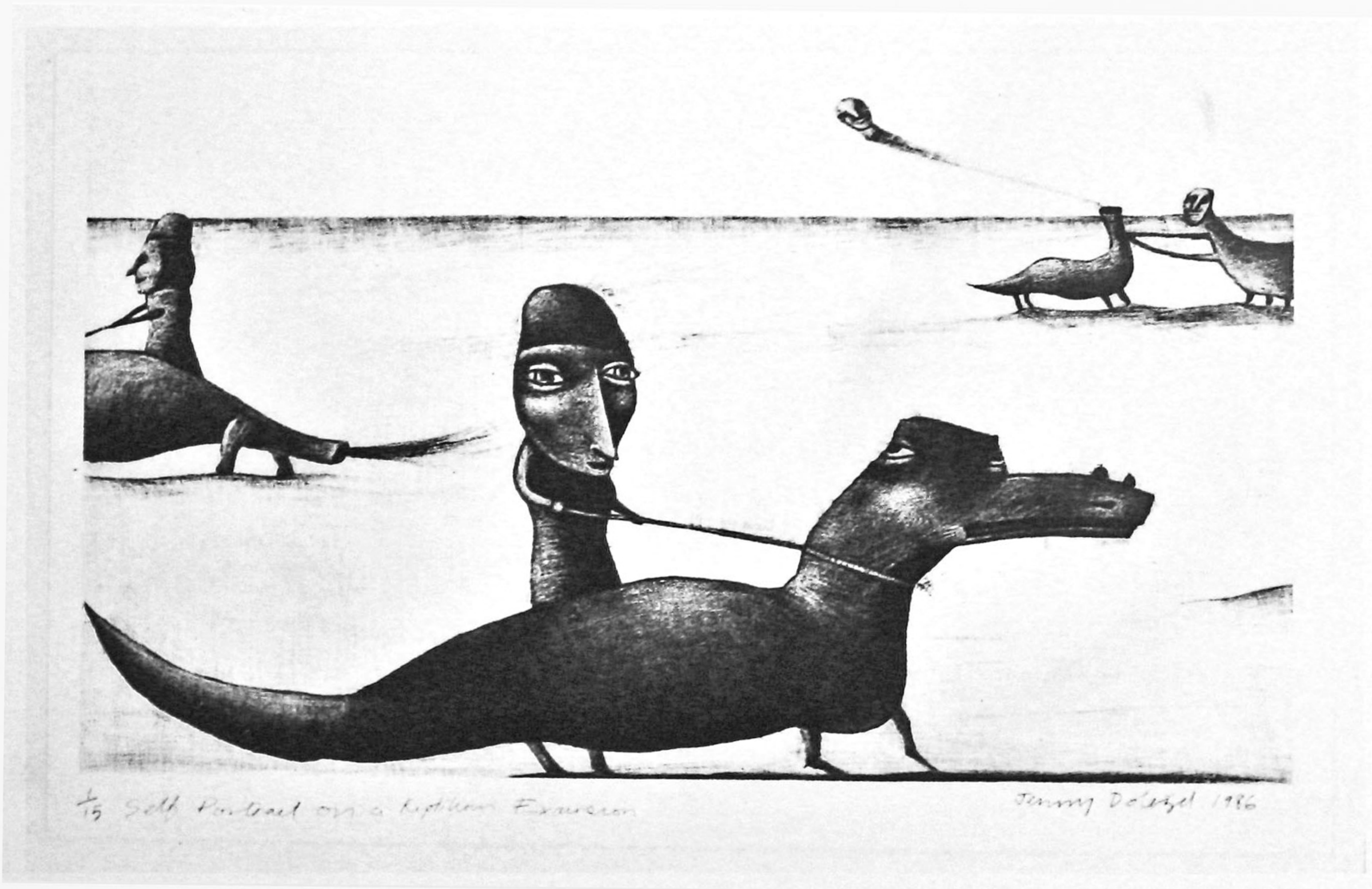
Seriousness and whimsy make for intriguing bedfellows in the work of Jenny Doležel. Though the odd little humanoids and dragon-like creatures (some of which appear to have lost their heads) in *Self Portrait on a Reptilian Excursion* 1986 seem to be the product of pure fancy, Doležel describes the work with a fair amount of gravity:

*I wanted to find a visual equivalent of the inner landscape I was dealing with at the time. I was questioning notions of sense of self and of belonging. The end result reads to me like something emotionally really familiar, while to the viewer it may look incongruous to my physical world. I like*

*to play with dualities of illusion and reality, pulling them in on a personal level.<sup>33</sup>*

So in the Doležel universe there's an earnest face behind the carnival – a weight to all the levity. Witness her reasons for pursuing self-portraiture:

*I'm interested in drawing material from myself, interested in the body as a conductor between what we show on the outside and what we feel within. I always feel that when you make things you're trying to make*



*Self Portrait on a Reptilian  
Excursion* 1986  
Etching with mezzotint  
(edition of 15):  
178 x 305 mm  
Photo: Michael Roth

something external; external examples of internal things – you're trying to make the internal physical. The body is, after all, the most readily available territory for expression of this theatre of illusion and reality.<sup>34</sup>

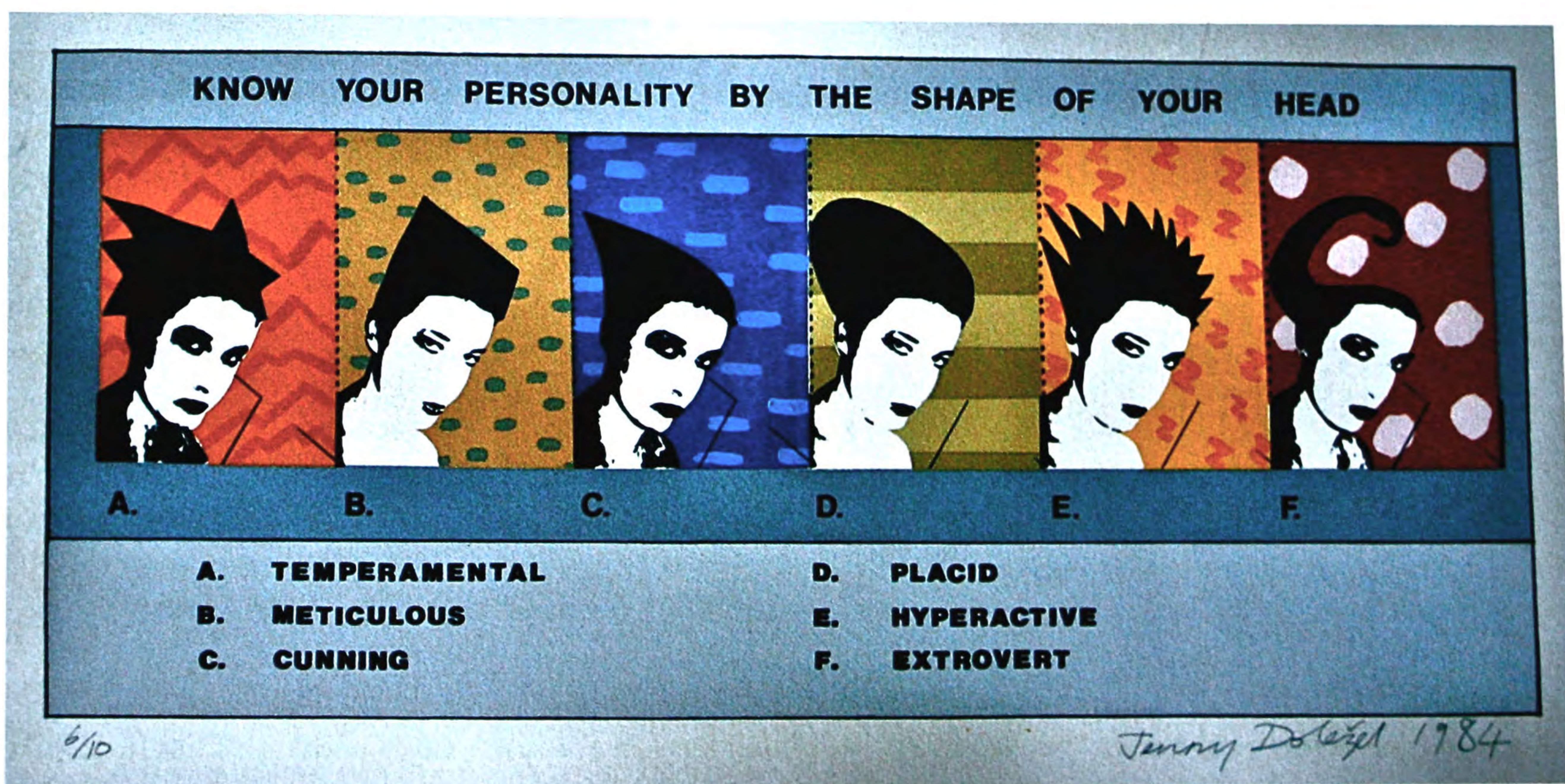
Doležel's style – one that prizes the surreal and quirky over the real and regular – is a fitting visual idiom for exploring the unbridled world of our secret, internal landscapes. She's always been deeply attracted to the oddities of Surrealism, to the cavorting crowded madness of Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450–1516) and Pieter Bruegel (c.1525–69), and to the fringes of the art world rather than the centre. Says Doležel, 'I'm also impressed by the work of psychotic, schizophrenic and mentally unbalanced people as well as children. Their work is a very direct representation of their mental reality, through their unselfconscious mark making. It's not a deliberate making of art and that's what really appeals to me.'

The gap between our internal and external realities is also the guiding force behind *Know Your Personality by the Shape of Your Head* 1984. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, our overactive brains are guilty of making snap judgements (based solely on physical appearance)

about those strangers we pass in the street. Doležel emphasises this 'social coding' by attributing vastly different characteristics – everything from placidness to hyperactivity – to a series of identical faces (hers). The only difference is the hair. Doležel explains:

*I was really interested in challenging the way we read external appearances and how we marry these up with emotional states and personalities. In toying with such a visual game I decided to manipulate images of myself – initially simply because it was more convenient to use myself – but in representing myself I realised it brought into play questions about how we perceive artists to look and behave - as well as questions about whether one's art looks like/reflects the artist, and vice versa.*

For Doležel, self-portraiture is a compelling vehicle for exploring the intersection between the individual and society, between herself and the world from which she draws inspiration. But which part of her is evident in her reptilian excursion, and where she sits between A–F on her personality chart, is likely to remain a carefully guarded secret.



*Know your personality by the shape of your head* 1984  
Screenprint (edition of 10):  
195 x 437 mm  
Photo: Courtesy of the artist