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Pictures of the Body: Painting as Praxis

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

PhD
Fine Arts

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Paul Melser

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Statement of Original Authorship

The work submitted for this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet the requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except as where due reference is made.

Signature _____

Date _____

Abstract

This thesis uses the painting / photography nexus to investigate painting's viability as a decisive means of activating reflexivity and interpretation. The artwork tests painting's agency by presenting simplified abstracted paintings which critique selected news media images documenting conflict between the citizenry and institutional authorities. The paintings thwart the resort to the normalised (non)-understanding engendered by the ubiquity and information excess of the news photograph. They invite the viewer instead to fill out and resolve the incomplete figuration through 'experiencing' the narratives pictured. In this way the audience can interpret and expand on the minimal information contained within the paintings by extrapolating from their own experience. This reduces the need to employ the restrictive, hidden and historically entrenched discourses that are commonly used to read both photography and painting.

The narrative content and simplified figuration of the artwork assists in creating a relationship with the viewer that enables an exchange of experience comparable to that achieved through dialogue. The simple presentation and understatement of the paintings aims to forge a link with the viewer that implies a joint struggle to understand. This commonality is augmented by the paintings' muted, unassertive authorial 'performance' and through the invitation to engage in the (joint) work of interpretation. The images have been chosen on the basis of their capacity to promote empathy and imaginative experience. To emphasise the 'joint witness' of the artist and viewer the paintings are of a size, and installed in a manner that maximises their correspondence with the body of the viewer.

Acknowledgements

The decision to undertake post graduate study, especially a PhD, is likely often made in ignorance and innocence. It certainly was in my case. Throughout this period of research I have tried to continually remind myself that this work was being undertaken for the pleasure in learning and understanding it afforded me. It was, however, impossible to avoid the occasional lapse into panic provoked by an all-pervading dread that a very serious mistake had been made and that I was responsible for making it. At those times my partner Frances and sons Daniel and Joseph were able to deliver a therapeutic admonishment. Nevertheless, a PhD will always be a very lonely undertaking. I am very much indebted to all three supervisors but most particularly to my main supervisor Associate Professor David Cross, who continuously gave me encouragement. He has carefully read this, and previous drafts, many times and made extensive suggestions about direction and focus that have improved my understanding, and thus the document itself, immeasurably. The task of moving me and my writing towards the clarity and precision required in an academic work called for the patience, and forbearance, of a 'natural-born' supervisor. I am very grateful and appreciative of David's support.

I have probably taxed my other supervisors, Sally Morgan and Simon Morris, only a little less. Their support and affirmation of the paintings was unflagging but by no means unconditional. Their interrogation, scrutiny and critique of the work tested it to the point where I could feel confident that it was robust. I also owe thanks for maintaining this confidence in the painting project to another painter, Associate Professor Andy Thomson, with whom I have spent many afternoons in recent years, looking and talking about the work and art in general.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the patience and incomprehension of my cricket teammates who have been forced to view the paintings after games or practice. They have provided a useful, though sometimes unwitting, testing ground of the ability of the paintings' visual code to postpone, or preclude, narrative resolution.

Finally I acknowledge the enormous debt I owe to the philosopher Jacques Rancière whose discussions of aesthetics, democracy, pedagogy and the politics of power were crucial to my understanding of the role of artworks.

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Preface



Fig.1. Detail from **Pictures of the Body** (from a news photo depicting tear gas use in Thailand)

“But Kafka’s about your life!” Avery said. “Not to take anything away from your admiration of Rilke, but I’ll tell you right now, Kafka’s a lot more about your life than Rilke is. Kafka was like us. All of these writers, they were human beings trying to make sense of their lives. But Kafka above all! Kafka was afraid of death, he had problems with sex, he had problems with women, he had problems with his job, he had problems with his parents. And he was writing fiction to try to figure these things out. That’s what this book is about. That’s what all of these books are about. Actual living human beings trying to make sense of death and the modern world and the mess of their lives.”

*Avery then called our attention to the book’s title in German, *Der Prozess*, which means both “the case” and “the process.” Citing a text from our secondary reading list he began to mumble about three different “universes of interpretation” in which the text of *The Trial* could be read: one universe in which K. is an innocent man falsely accused, another universe in which K.’s guilt is undecidable...I was only half listening. The windows were darkening, and it was a point of pride for me never to read secondary literature. But when Avery arrived at the third universe of interpretation, in which K. is guilty, he stopped and looked at us expectantly, as if waiting for us to get some joke; and I felt my blood pressure spike. I was offended by the mere mention of the possibility that K. was guilty. It made me feel frustrated, cheated, injured. I was outraged that a critic was allowed even to suggest a thing like that.*

(Jonathan Franzen, **The Discomfort Zone**¹)



Fig. 2. Detail from **Pictures of the Body** (taken from a news photo of crowds under attack by police in Iran)