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Spectra on the edge of embodiment

An exegesis presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington,
New Zealand.

Isla Griffin-Wilson 2017

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I would like to express my deep gratitude to Rich Wilson for his unwavering support, humor and vibrant love which has sustained me throughout this project. Thank you to my supervisors, Julieanna Preston and Heather Galbraith for their invaluable insight, knowledge and encouragement.

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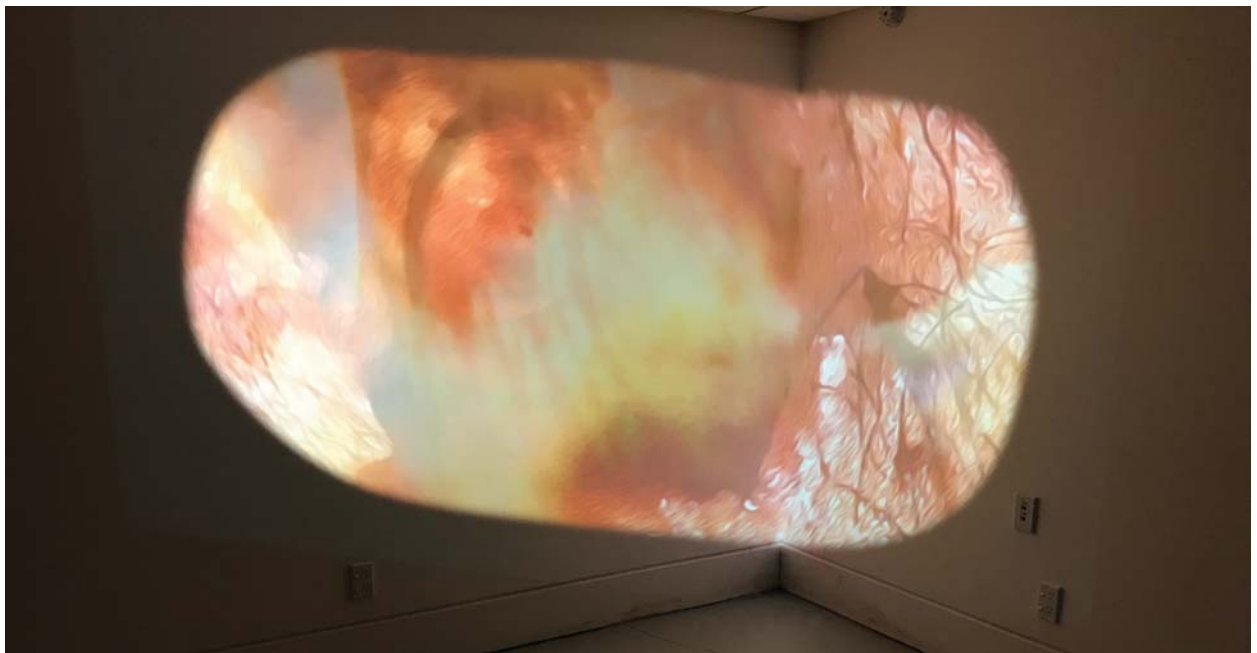
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1. Abstract

This creative-practice research references a body undergoing transformation in the search of the essence of self based on perceptions of a skin rendered permeable by years of my own emersion in eastern esoteric practices.

In this exegesis, I allude to a transformative process that shifted my art practice from figurative clay sculpture and painting to the projection of digital light forms. The projections belie an interface of the flesh body encased in the skin and everything else that is considered as 'outside'. At this interface is an ontological model of self that has a subjective malleability, one that blends with the external world of visible objects and invisible forces, felt but not seen. Composed of photographs of surfaces I have encountered, the projections transcend the world of material edges and boundaries into a borderspace where the "active power of things" alluded to by political and ecological theorist, Jane Bennett in her work *Vibrant Matter* holds sway (Bennett, 2010).

The phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty's notions of the borderless self centred in his description of "flesh ontology" offers a framework within which I engage an audience in propagating their connections to personal corporality and surrounding spaces (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). This artwork makes visible how the world touches us and we touch the world, igniting the haptic experience of perceiving life as one single continuous existential experience.



Isla Griffin, details from *Spectra on the edge of embodiment* (2017). Two Channel video projection with audio. College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

2. Enmeshment

An Introduction

My practice at the start of this project was firmly situated within the tactility and material engagement of clay and paint, the smells and corporeal inclusivity of material juxtapositioning. Making for me had been an active, grubby, sweaty alchemy located amongst slippery wet porcelains and the wood ash firestorms of an anagama dragon kiln in tropical Queensland. Yet the core fabric of my figurative sculptures rested less in the objects themselves but more explicitly in the space around the object as analogous to the inclusive identity of the thing. My up-bringing in a mixed community on the edge of the hippy communes and artist colonies of Cornwall, England imbued me with a sensibility and curiosity for the mysterious energetic invisible components of existence that have continued to be a driving force underlying the enquires and development of work for this project. My object-centric practice became one of exploration into the potentiality of light in an effort to extend a thing beyond its edge and into the space that surrounded it. The process has been one of taking the language of material corporeality and transitioning it into one of software, layering, masking and rendering. My practice for this project proposes that a sense of matter can be instilled into a video sequence of projected light embodying what Merleau-Ponty calls "flesh of the world" (2004). Merleau-Ponty's notions of the borderless self is centred in his description of "flesh ontology". He describes a dimension outside of self as the "flesh of the world" in which we are all immersed, and through which all inter-human connections channel the co-construction of embodiment.

Writing on the phenomenology of perception, Merleau-Ponty maintains that we are literally losing touch with the flesh of the world, becoming more disembodied than any previous period in history (Shildrick, 2013, 15). His discourse prompted me to undertake a fresh examination of the permeability of the epidermal boundary not just with regard to the influence of the "flesh of world" but to the "active power of things" alluded to by Jane Bennett in her work on vibrant matter. She describes how "the quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations" (Bennett, 2010, vi). In undertaking her philosophical project to overturn notions of matter as passive stuff, raw, brute or inert she speaks of "turning the figures of "life" and "matter" around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange" (2010, vii). Bennett's description of a method to coagulate matter and life infused the start of the project with the possibility that two seemingly separate materialities could be agitated together until they fused.

A microcosm of the invisible "flesh of the world" matrix, known as an 'aura' or human energy field is described in eastern esoteric teachings and alternative healing modalities as a perceptive coloured emanation enveloping all animate physical forms (Brennan, 1988).

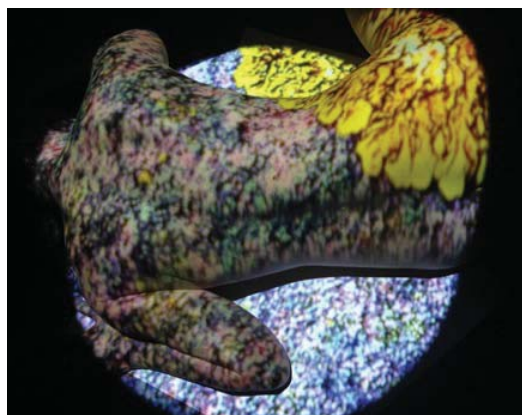
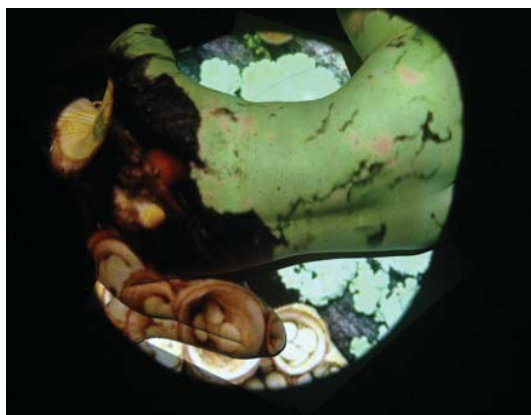
It is a popular description of human energetic anatomies found in 'New Age' culture, one that adds a distinctive and pervasive atmosphere to ideas of extending the edge of self beyond the skin.



Isla Griffin, two detail images from *Interfacing on blood and love* (2016). Porcelain, projection video. The Engine Room, College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

I first explored this concept of extending the form beyond its boundary in a work titled *Interfacing on blood and love* as part of a group exhibition in May 2016 at The Engine Room, College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University. A head was constructed of coiled porcelain paper clay, the face sculpted to figurative realism whilst the base gouged into bone forms and coral-esque texturing. Projected down onto the head, that had been placed on the floor in the corner of the gallery, was a video sequence of found images both in relation to human interior anatomy and Google earth surfaces. Honeycombed trabecula bone, the optic nerve blood supply and microscopic cell structures intermingle with meandering riverbeds, dry salt pans and sedimented estuaries. They are edited into a sequence blending one image into the next, changing the face and floor into imagined topographies, slowly transforming opaque material surfaces into a charged illuminated extended presence. At the opening I remember noticing the audience pause, stand and crouch in a concentric circle, mostly one meter from the edge where the light melted into shadow. Pallasmaa, the Finnish professor of architecture, writes of the body's connection with light: "There is a constant deep breathing of shadow and light; shadow inhales an illumination exhales light" (Pallasmaa, 2012, 51). The sculpture had projected its own personal space into the room as if it had started to breathe.

The clay seemed to absorb the light into its material fabric activating a gravity that pulled the audience to the edge of its extended field. I was leaning on a wall observing the watchers and considering the effect of a work to draw in the attentiveness of the viewer, to hold them for longer than a momentary pause in close proximity to the work allowing notions of porosity to enter their own skin. The projection seemed to offer an impression of human corporeality that mimics the way a body, subconsciously, touches, probes and absorbs the space in which it occupies with its entire sensorium; the digital images allowed the inside to come out and the outside to penetrate the skin. It engaged an audience to participate in “a greater attentiveness to the active power of things” alluded to by Jane Bennett (2010).



Isla Griffin, *Interfacing on blood and love* (2016). Body performance and video projection. The Engine Room, College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

Perceptivity to material encounters could be seen as a kind of collaboration, one which heightens existential experiences, one that integrates us more with the space and objects around us. Investigations into our neurological system suggests that our processes of perception and cognition advance, not from “a sum of a visual, tactile and audible givens” but as “I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once” (Pallasmaa, 2012, 23). In thinking about how a sense of plasticity and malleability of a surface could be manipulated further into a digital image which might engage the proprioceptive and haptic nervous system, I wanted to investigate further the transparency, sense of weightlessness, flotation, subtle movements of graded light. Not as a penetrating beam, but more an amorphous auric mass of coalescing imagery, cut free from its corporeal core, a giant sponge like force field absorbing the shadows of the space and emitting the radiance of an alive independent entity with transparent membranous skin and nature embedded within its blood.



James Turrell, *Virtuality Squared, Ganzfeld (2004)*. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. © James Turrell. Photograph © Florian Holzherr.

At a critique of the *Interfacing on blood and love* I was pointed towards James Turrell, an American artist working with light. His immersive installation works emphasize the thingness of light and space manipulating it as a sculptor would mold clay. At this stage of the project I was strongly influenced by his use of light fields to heighten sensory awareness and coax the viewer into a state of self-reflexivity. In what Turrell has called a "sensing space", he uses a volume of colored light collapsing into what appears to be a floating, luminous plane with no surface or depth (Law, 2015). The illusion is said to be destabilizing yet mesmerizing; it is a tangible example of the artist's endeavor to produce sensations that are essentially prelingual, to create a transformative experience of wordless thought. He maintains "we are a surface culture and I am interested in how we judge things based on imperfections and discontinuity of perception" (Yu, 2017).

In the light of *Interfacing on blood and love* and Turrell's observation of our status as a "surface culture", I wanted to remove the object from the light field and look more closely at how manipulating the software platform would allow me to converge the digital photographs into a standalone permeable, translucent digitally animated form. It was important that the forms visually behave more as a magnified fragment of human borderspace emphasizing a porosity to light and openness to transformation. Donna Haraway, political theorist, addresses the transformative power of techno-science referring to the point of diffraction when a beam of white light pops into a full spectrum as it passes through a prism to emphasize her observation. The point of diffraction offers the single beam a multiple of different trajectories along which to shine and Haraway expresses how this relates to the interference patterns techno-science imposes on how meanings of our existence are made and lived (Schneider, 2005). I related to how she uses this metaphor to reflect on the patterns of shifting trajectories my body and life had taken with the interference of digi-technical programs on my practice. Messy active bodily encounters with clay, paint and detritus looped rhythmically into periods of seated, static, clean, screen-focused making.



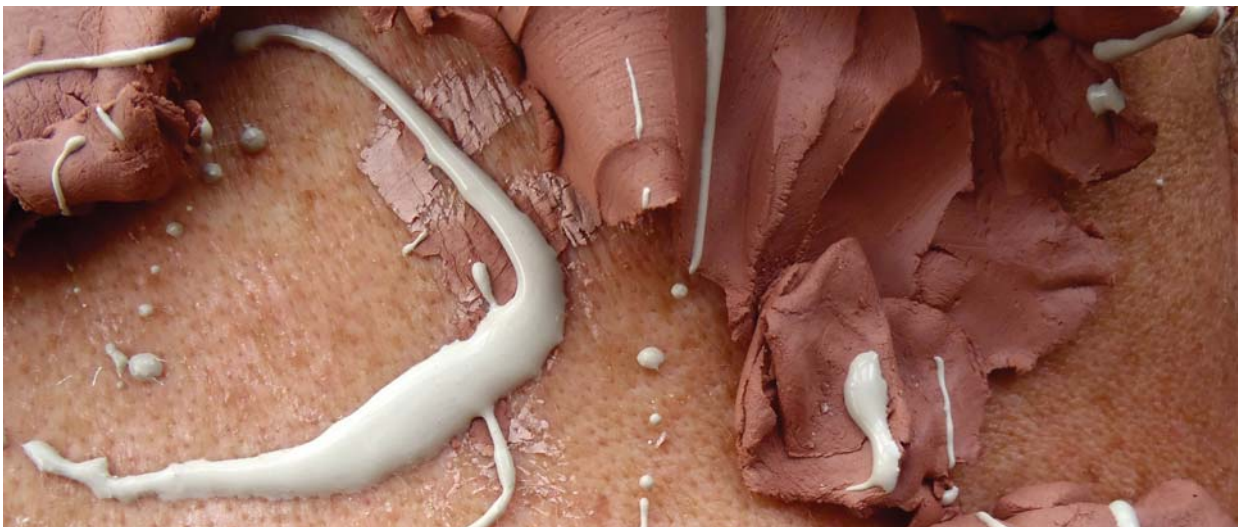
Isla Griffin, *Sponge* (2017). Digital prints. College of Creative Arts (CoCA),
Massey University, Wellington.

3. Locating the watcher

Perceptions at the interface

I spent many years as a musculoskeletal physiotherapist embedded in anatomy, theories of physical and biomechanical health encountering thousands of people not just on a superficial level but one that involved the intimacy of therapeutic touch. Within these experiences of close corporeal proximities and the tactility of flesh, I became acutely aware of the fragility of the self and its close association to human embodiment. The term 'self' has become a highly problematic notion to define and one which is synonymous with a duality between thinking about "the self as in the skin and the self as the skin" (Benthien, 2002, 24). Claudia Benthien, the German academic, argues that human beings feel increasingly less sheltered in the skin but more concealed, less protected and more imprisoned so that the skin is experienced as something that while individualizing the person it primarily creates separation (Benthien, 2002). Hence it is only the autonomy of the self that leads to the discovery of the tragedy of isolation and disconnectedness from the world, the body surface not porous and open but closed and impermeable.

Skin speaks in a way that can inform a trained observer as to the health state of the interior flesh over which it lays down its envelope. I recently witnessed the women's changing rooms at the public pool after an aqua-aerobic class awash with flesh and skin. Dimpled, scarred, sagging, all shades of pink through brown, accents of pale blue and green where the translucency of old skin allows the sight of interior vascular tissue to percolate through. I watch the shape of the groove under which lies a wonky spine and notice a patch of protective hair that grows over a site of thinning bone, scars of life's stories branded into their skin. I have experienced the physical touch of 41,600 skins. Hand on body, skin on skin say ten bodies a day, five days a week, sixteen years, 832 weeks, 4160 days, 41,600 people. In a room, me and them. Blending through the senses. My fingers have eyes that can see under the surface penetrating down to bone. I still catch myself looking for a skin sign that will illuminate an entry place for the first contact of therapeutic touch. I have the same approach to a freshly opened bag of clay, plastic peeled back to reveal the flesh of an uncarved block - one which is ready for manipulation into something new as yet revealed. Sinking in my fingers up to where they join the palm, I probe my mind and memories through the layers of sensory experiences into the liminal space where the block might want to speak of what it wants to become.



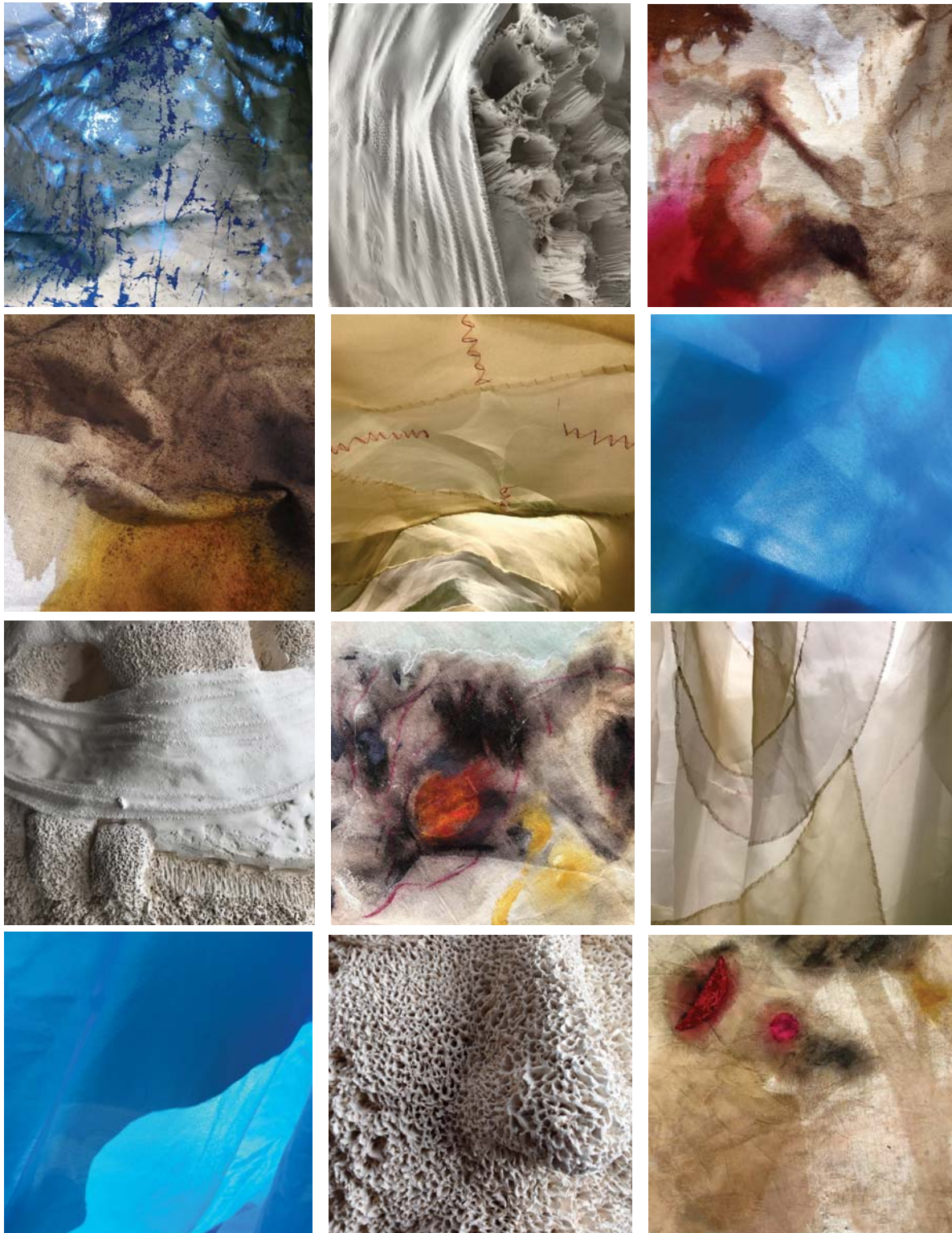
Isla Griffin, *SEN.or.ri.UM* (2017). Digital prints. College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

The poet Mary Oliver talks of the three primary selves that she inhabits and that inhabit her as they do all of us. The child I was, who is always with me; the social self, fettered to a thousand notions of obligation; a third self, a sort of other-worldly awareness (Lacy, 2016). The third self is a type of awareness that has the ability to stand apart from the multiple social selves that reside behind the skin, effectively to become a watcher of the body's intimate sign language. The watcher gazes inward, observing the multiple personas with their psycho-social-geographic masks and how they interface with the world. The watcher resides within a body that is perceived as a porous, permeable vessel that moves through time and space, constantly homogenizing the environment, both visible and invisible in which it occurs, with its internal world. In the watching, a personal, lyrical sense of codes, constellations and dendritic trajectories emerge that can be seen coalescing with those that permeate through the skin from the external world.

I had a brief brush with a Buddhist meditation practice that coaxed an unruly third self awareness within the body cavity and forced it to stay there for ten days, silently, with no distractions, watching all that arose in the mind as thoughts and in the body, as sensations. Just waiting and watching. Patiently, quietly observing. It helped me identify and drag out the rigid exoskeletons of a few self limiting beliefs revealing a softer underbelly self, ripe for probing deeper into the existence of things. Later, in a different tradition, one of the Taoists, I was told to dissolve my skin beyond my body boundary in the space around me and then expand my consciousness out to the void. Nobody could really ever explain where that was but it evoked a direction in my art towards engaging with the more ephemeral forms of materiality that I am using in this project.

A key component of physiotherapy training is the exploration of anatomical structures hidden under the skin of a cadaver. Engaging with the shadow of gristle and formaldehyde, I have prodded the topography and tactility of a human interior. It has given my watcher an innate sense of perceiving live interiors behind an envelopment and it stimulates experimentation with coagulating substances to see how they behave together, scuffing away the surfaces until they break, blend and bleed. In my art practice, and this project, I am really looking to get a sense of how materials and objects can hold a vibrant life-force, Bennett's 'active power of things' without blood and breath.

I take pieces of cloth two metres by two metres, the size of a human skin, and start to engage with their fibres and how they may mimic porosity. I have begun a meaningful relationship with the materiality and behaviour of the cloth as if it were skin.



Isla Griffin, interfacing fabric, pigment, slip, clay and light, photography (2017). College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

A cotton drop sheet, its function would normally be to form a shield protecting the floor from spillages. An old tent, frayed and peeling inner layers separating from a waterproof lamina that I have cut up to omit the seams and unharness the lightness of fragmenting nylon. I want to metamorphosize these membranes into something instructional. I treat them like my skin and take them out with me into the sunshine of an afternoon spring day. I test their receptivity to coffee grounds, clay slip and pigments, sewing sections together and testing the pliability of areas after sclerotic plaques of clay have hardened and cracked. I record the stages of metamorphosis as the effect of each intervention unfolds keeping an inner gaze into my border-space as I work. Catching a glimpse of suggestions of a giant pore or an open mouth that simultaneously seem to collide with bloody anatomies and abject emissions that might exist outside the body wall.

It has been a debridement of sorts, a deep cleaning, buffing of the surface to expose a fresher layer of derma, then scraping away to get under the surface of the body as an object into the deepest recesses. The oozing and unctuous substances referencing some sort of corporeal emission from an open wound, mucus or sputum, normally classified as 'abject' a collective term to address any bodily matter of fluid that has breached the integument and spilled out into the world. Abject materials almost always elicit a withdrawal, feelings of disgust and rejection. The term 'abject' came up in one of my critiques as a response to a collection of debrided and perforated ceramic heads referencing barnacle skin lesions and punctured surfaces. The 'abject', described by Julia Kristeva, is an existential state where "boundaries begin to break down, where we are confronted with an archaic space before linguistic binaries emerge on the fragile border where identities do not exist or only barely so, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject (Lechte and Margaroni, 2004). Kristeva describes a possible borderspace where form does not exist yet, just amorphousness, colour and hints of organic structures in the embryonic stage of conception. To me it suggests a primordial soup of potentiality not decay, an opportunity to include images of the debris of living, detritus and ejected matter that may suggest an opposite to the process of putrefaction, more of what an evolving form might look like as it amasses and becomes something. Our desire to present ourselves as coherent containers of our chosen identity is thwarted through common shared experiences of the emissions from mucoid organic tunnels piercing the encasement. All hole and orifice. Whilst the abject substances gets whisked away we cannot hide the visual and olfactory memories of daily unctuous encounters.

A decaying piece of tissue embedded in a splatter pattern of vomit left on a Sunday morning on a pavement outside a student halls of residence, a freshly deposited bird poo steaming on a rotten leaf glistening in the morning sun, the ulcerated surface of a skin fistulae from a medical surgery book.



Isla Griffin, *Emission avem* (2017). Digital Print. College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

Found substances of abjection, brokenness and imperfection transformed to images that have been diffracted far beyond their original appearance through the filters of a digital platform. Harvesting a photographic digital record mimics how the body ensnares the external world into its neural web. Manipulation of the images into a video sequence feels like a cross between autopsy and skin grafting, the language of software, referencing a body undergoing transformation in search of the essence of self.

4. Folding over embodied imaginations and visible evictions

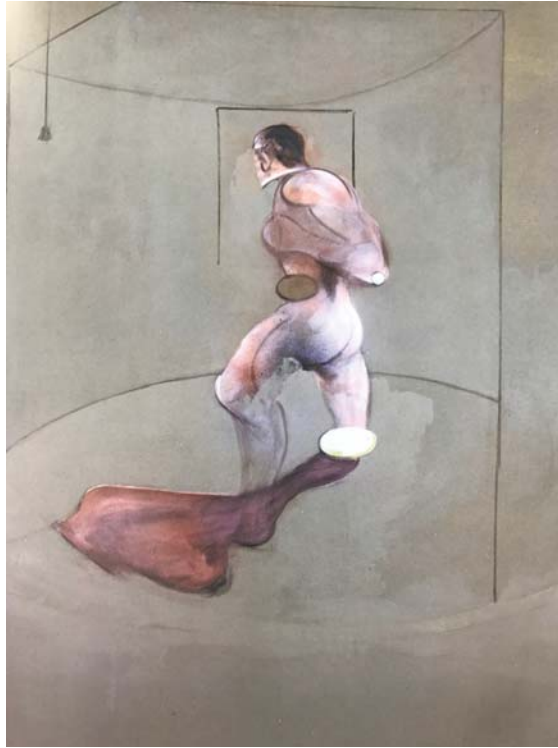
The skin of things

The original inspiration for this project, *Spectra on the edge of embodiment*, came from the few figurative painters, such as Bacon, De Kooning and Auerbach who defleshed and debrided paint as a mechanism to obliterate the human edge. The idea that envelopments not only cover but reveal what is behind them has been explored using the fleshy renderings of oil paint for centuries. Painters often amplify blemishes, scars or wrinkles or make skin translucent to reveal veins and subcutaneous flesh all ways of alluding to life as it blooms or decays from within (Scala, 2009). Given contemporary cultures growing fetishization of perfect, blemishless, immaculate skin and its fixation on the perfectly contoured body, psychosomatic anxieties of body consciousness, the vulnerability, fragility, and porosity of the psyche-self can find a way though the dermal layers and out onto our surface disrupting the envelope in skin diseases and eruptions that can sometimes make the body's surface look like a battlefield.

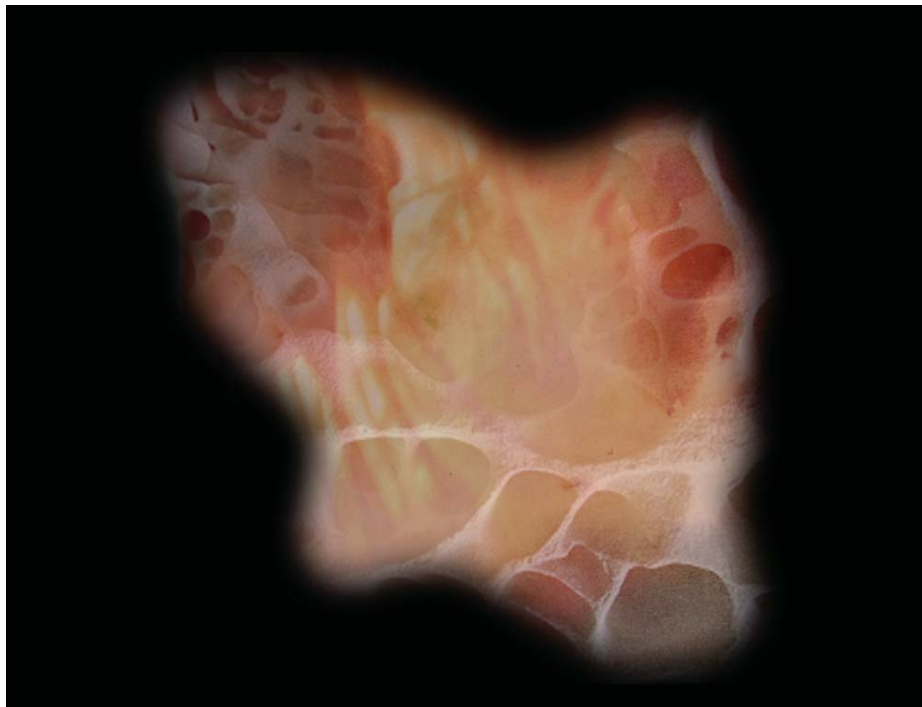
In depicting the human body on canvas, Francis Bacon, the British painter, explored the idea of distorting the form beyond the skin lesion. He said "you must distort to transform" (Bond, 2012, 67). He wanted to distort the thing far beyond its appearance but in the distortion to bring it back to a closer recording of some extruded life-force. His was a violent distortion of embodiment. The flayed fleshy bodies barely contained within a transparent membrane, he used the viscosity of oil paint to extrude a gelatinous ectoplasm out over the floor of his paintings as a hybrid entity of shadow and blood. I was so taken with these globular shapes that I traced the different forms from a catalogue of a retrospective show I went to at the gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, using the shadow blobs in formulating the amorphous shapes I experimented with at the start of making projections.

I applied the idea of distortion to the photographs of found abject surfaces and blended materials. I could filter them, cut, paste and interweave elements until the images were distorted far beyond their original appearances gathered within a membrane that resembled the leaking ectoplasms of a Bacon painting.

I was taken with the definition of an ectoplasm as the viscous substance that supposedly exudes from the body of a medium during a spiritualistic trance and forms the material for the manifestation of spirits. It reminded me of the exudation of fluid into an open wound as it starts to form a scar, the threads and filaments of collagen emerging from the gloop interweaving our identity into the fibers of our skin which over time becomes less stable and more membranous.



Francis Bacon, *Study for the human body after Muybridge* (1988). Oil on canvas. 198 X 147.5cm, (Bond 2012) pg 216.



Isla Griffin, *Lesion* (2017). A detail from video projection. College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

I had set out to gather a more cohesive understanding of how the world infiltrates our bodies and how we inform the world not only through a making process but in gathering surfaces of objects I gravitate towards during my daily lived experience. Pallasmaa writes of walking in his surroundings. "I confront the city with my body" he says, and "no body is separate from its domicile in space and there is no space unrelated to the unconscious image of the perceiving self" (Pallasmaa, 2012, 43). He references his body as just another object among objects, interpenetrating and mutually defining each other in an osmotic interchange happening on a subliminal level.

My own meandering walks are different now. I am practicing Bennett's "a greater attentiveness to the active power of things", looking closer, observing, perceiving, using the third self to probe the non-human things which populate previously unobserved spaces. I always look down where-ever I am. I have to negotiate the surface of the ground that for me is not left to the automatic proprioceptive receptors in my feet but to the eyes. It's an old trauma to a left ankle that means occasionally I limp and uneven ground can be a minefield. So I get preoccupied with the pathways, mapping my way to the yield of soft grass or sand rather than concrete. Surfaces invade my peripheral vision drawing me closer, changing my direction, causing me to pause, to crouch, encircle, wait for the sunlight to contrast texture and colour, to capture or not through a pocket camera that has become a constant companion. The behaviour of just walking has become one of gathering shifting forms that penetrate my senses and anchor my embodiment in the world. Luminous orange lichen consuming a fence post, tree bark, eroded rock faces, close up crystalline glazes and the defrosting calf heart for a dog's dinner jump into my sensorium and are all harvested to add the vibrancy of non-human objects to the anthropomorphic matter and textures of *Spectra on the edge of embodiment*.

The next generation of artists obsessed with skinning the paint includes Jenny Saville, who has made paint work *as* flesh not like it, the canvas becoming a tactile, textural, viscous cutaneous surface. She points out that "[w]hen you see the inside of the body, the half-inch thickness of flesh there's a realization that it is a tangible substance, so paint mixed a flesh colour suddenly became a kind of human paste" (Gray et al. 2005). A paste constituted from Baker miller pink, Pantone 618, R;255, G;145 B;175, flesh tint, raw umber, burnt sienna, yellow ochre. The effect of Saville's work is to break up and tear apart our self image yet in eroding the picture we have crafted of ourselves it is an art that serves an interest in exposing permeability and fragility of the skin in defining a human identity.

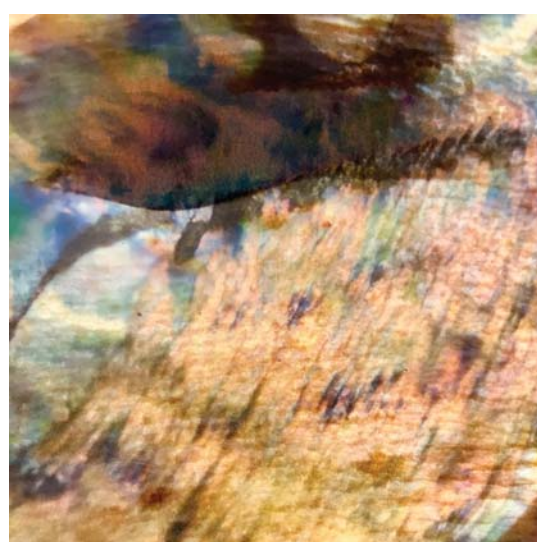
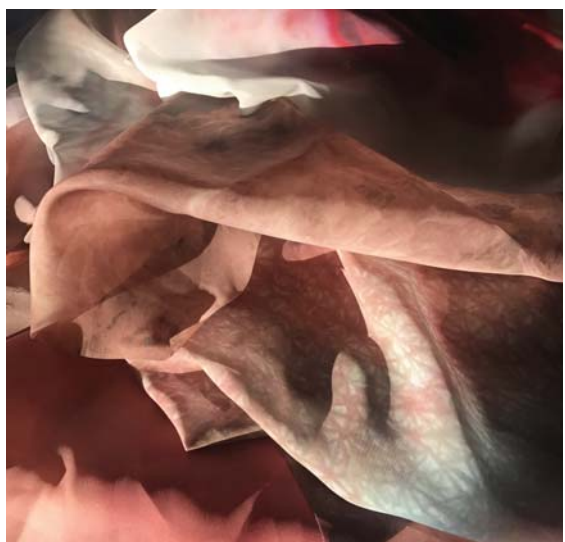
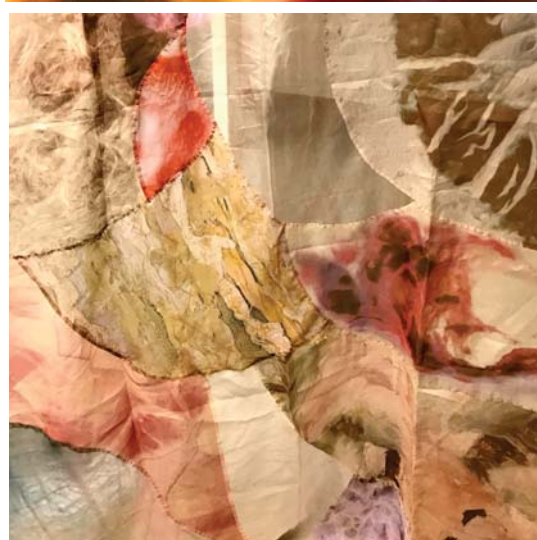
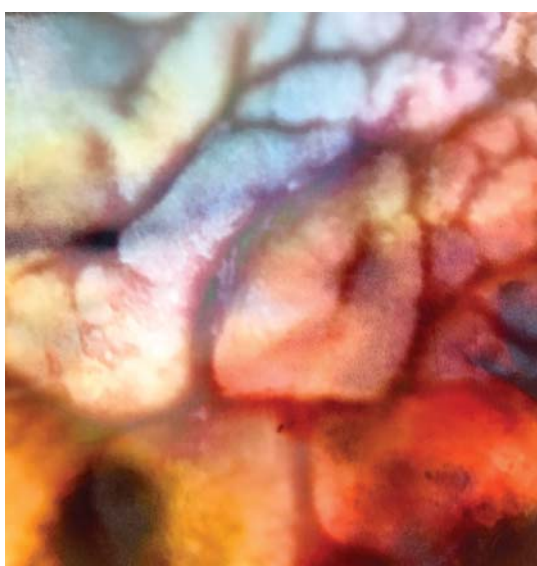
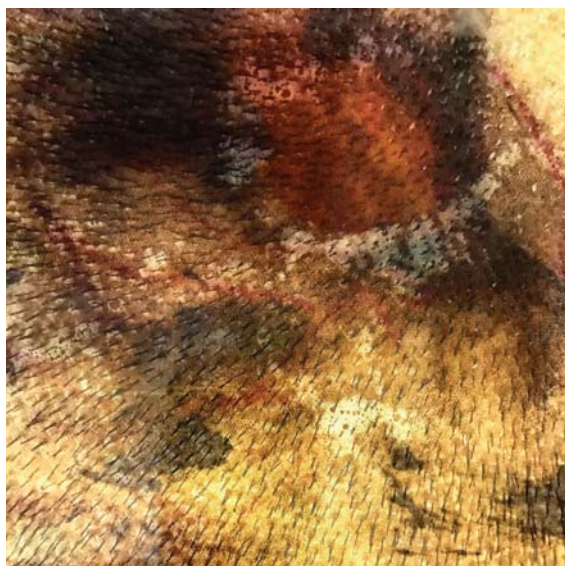


Isla Griffin, *Found surfaces and detritus* (2017). Digital photography. College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

The struggle is to see more clearly, and the dismantling of defense mechanisms is a necessary stage in the shift of perception. I want my projections to ooze with the same feeling of viscous texture as if they were constructed of human paste mixed with abject matter, to offer a portal into the physicality of how a porous membrane behaves.



Isla Griffin, *Immanent unfolding* (2017). Digital Print. College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.



Isla Griffin, Composite images (2017). Tracing paper, digital prints, organza fabric.
College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

5. Before I was bounded, now I've begun to leak...

Distorting flesh and fracturing objects

The title of this section is taken from British artist Helen Chadwick's writings called *Enfleshings* (Chadwick, 1989). In her work *Of Mutability* (1989), she has suspended her own image in a sea of organic forms and decay that suggests she has reached through the surface of her body into her own cellular structure. It is a juxtaposition of microscopic and macroscopic images, as if in being with them, the viewer can access the state of "in between" (Chadwick, 1989). The sense of an interiority that conglomerates with the natural and fabricated exterior world is alluded to in Jane Bennett's book *Vibrant Matter* in which she proposes that on a molecular level our flesh comprises 80% other organisms 20% human cells. She describes how our bodies, rather than a monadic singular entity, act as an assemblage of organic and inorganic micro "actants" (Bennett, 2010). Bennett borrowed the word "actant" from Bruno Latour, who in *The Politics of Nature* describes the idea of actants as "any entity or thing that modifies other actors through a series of actions" (Bryant, 2011). In this context, assemblages are seen as ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials, of all sorts; which are able to generate an effect as distinct from the vital force of each materiality considered alone (Bennett, 2010).

I have used the above description of 'actants' and 'assemblages' to directly inform the process of collating the hundreds of images I had amassed into a digital coagulation of different materialities until they resembled an assemblage capable of alluding to a pulsing, independent entity. I myself became an actant, modifying other actors, the images, through a series of actions to create the ad hoc groupings of diverse elements of a projected assemblage. The modified digital images of surfaces stacked as partial transparencies, overlapping and dissolving into one another on a software time line became a moving bricolage that could maintain the malleability and flux of aliveness.

The British sculptors Henry Moore and Anthony Gormley, early influences on my art practice, had embedded in the materials of their work an alive, vital presence that seemed to generate a magnetic agency beyond the corporal forms of the work into the space in which they were situated. Their methods of working and thinking offered me insight into the effect an assemblage of material actants has on the potency of a space. Whilst I had chosen to use a digital medium to evoke corporeal vitality, I wanted the work to maintain the same sense of potency contained in a material assemblage and not lose any of the active power of things in translating the surfaces into digital form. Henry Moore spoke of consciously wanting to make space and form inseparable: "If space is a willed, a wished-for element in the sculpture, then some distortion of the form - to ally itself to the space - is necessary" (Allemand-Cosneau, 2009, 119). For him, considerations in construction and shape of solid forms became one of placing space within the figure. "At one point holes in my sculptures were made for their own sakes. I made the hole have a shape in its own right, the solid body was encroached upon, eaten into, and sometimes the form was only the shell holding the hole" (2009, 86).

Artist Anthony Gormley's early approach to inner world semiotics was to make casts of his own body frozen in time. Making for him involved layering of multiple surfaces, cling film, hessian scrim over which plaster was laid covering the entirety of his own body. In conversation with Ernst Gombrich, art historian, he reflects "I get out of the mould, I reassemble it and then I reappraise the thing I have been, or the place that I have been and see how much potency it has. The potency depends on the internal pressure being registered" (Gormley, 1996). I am interested in the ideas propagated by Moore and Gormley in considering a body with a hollow interior, a space that expands outward charging a body's membrane like a balloon before bursting. Gormley's sculptures are a return to the body not as an object but as place. His body shells recreate an internal pressure in the work that has a relationship with the atmosphere which we sense with our bodies through the skin of the work.

Regardless of the 'internal pressure' the interior remains 'inside' which is not the case in Kiki Smith's *Tale* 1992, a sculpture of wax, pigment, papier mache, depicting a life size female figure crawling, naked abjectly along the floor, trailing an indeterminate stream of blood and excrement for many meters behind her. She along with Louise Bourgeois and others, were corralled under the term 'abject' artists in the 1980's. They composed sculptures of materials that were somehow construed as low or inferior; fabric, latex, rubber, hair and wax (Tate). In referring directly to bodily functions and the traces of the body, their works closely relate to social taboos and traumas, personal obsessions and phobias which torpedo our concepts of a stable body-self. It was a kind of art that explored corporeality in its psychological-depth and social dimensions.

In developing my project it has been interesting to compare my influences within the context of addressing a body containing abject substances as opposed to a body as a hygienically clean contemplative interior space anything disturbing or repelling put aside. In this light, Gormley's iron/metal cast body multiples take on a static almost sterile, plugged, homogenised interpretation as opposed to Smith's animated oozing form speaking of the haunting ways staining effects of body fluids imprint reality into the sensory memory. *Tale* asks "what is it to be 'inside' ". Where is the edge of the inside? The stain is an imprint, a trace that I have used frequently to record the passing of a material into nothingness.

Birgit Dieker, a German textile artist, in her body of work entitled *Derma* (2012), uses the act of dismembering sculptural materials to more reflect impermanence and interiority. Dieker constructs her forms with layers of found garments compacted to figuration in which she then consciously place surgically inspired incisions, exposing the interior lamina of construction fabric. Each material membranous layer a representation of our mental afflictions and psychic chasms (Dieker, 2012).



Birgit Dieker, *Rosie* (2007). From *Derma* catalogue, 2012, pg 83.



Birgit Dieker, *Detail from Olga* (2006/2007). From *Derma* catalogue, 2012, pg 28.

Dieker works with fabric as I have worked with clay, piercing and debriding the surface of ceramic heads I made early in the project. She talks of the search for the self that is concealed under strata of experience and stories, one which she reveals in a 'peeling away' until the inside comes out as the outside penetrates in, the interventions result in symbolical exposure of emotional wounds (Dieker, 2012).

Diekers multilayering of cloth built up to a representational form evoked ideas of stacking images of surfaces to create hybrid composites that might create more of a sense of interiority. In a like manner I printed out photos of various surfaces onto tracing paper on my home inkjet photocopier and pinned them overlapping on a north-facing window as well as placing them over a light box to test how the back lighting affected the coalescing spectral quality of a newly constructed membrane. The subjective malleability extended from one surface to another, blending into a hybrid dermal layer. The images of surface fragments I have gathered when superimposed on each other seem to be comparable with anatomical mutations creating more depth and transparency than the images afforded on their own. I also experimented with printing the hybridised images back onto swathes of light translucent flesh toned organza, suggesting a single layer of epidermis excised from the foundational and more fleshy dermis, stitched together as a second skin.

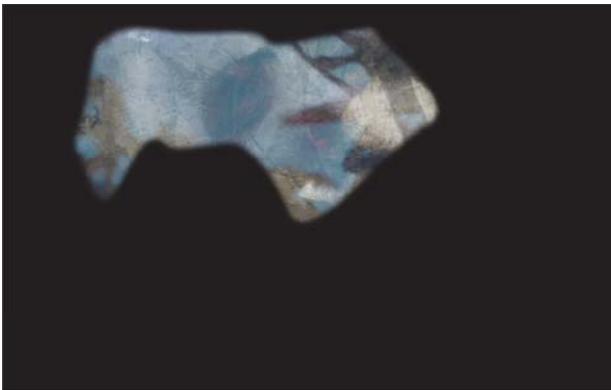
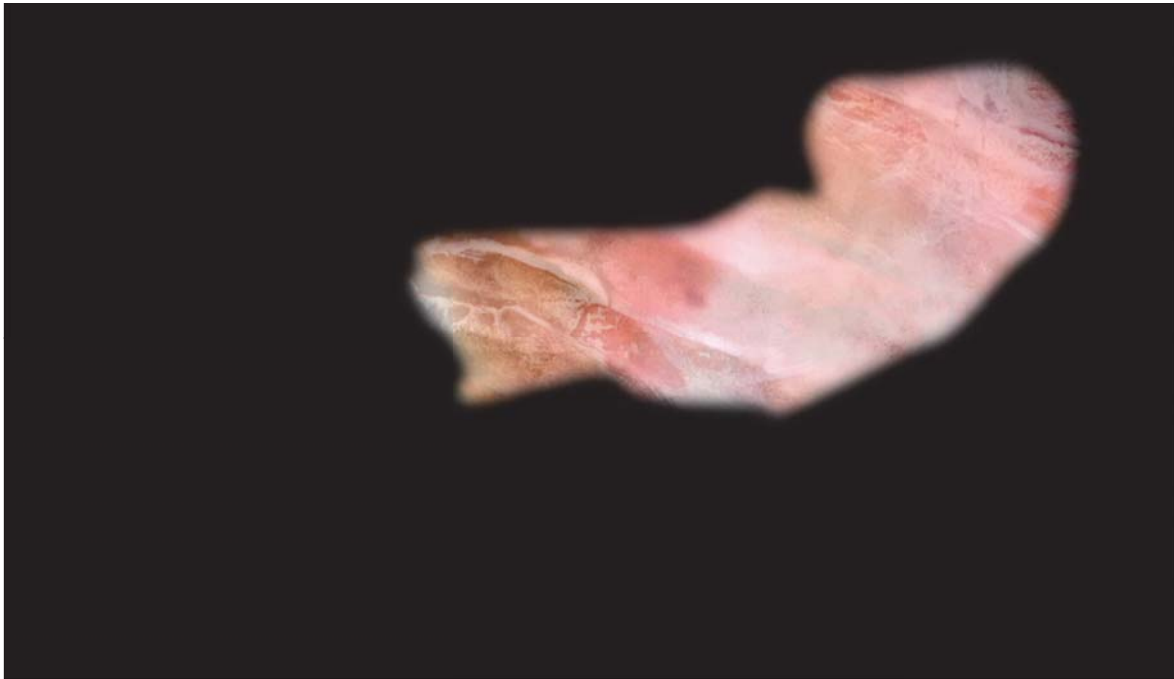
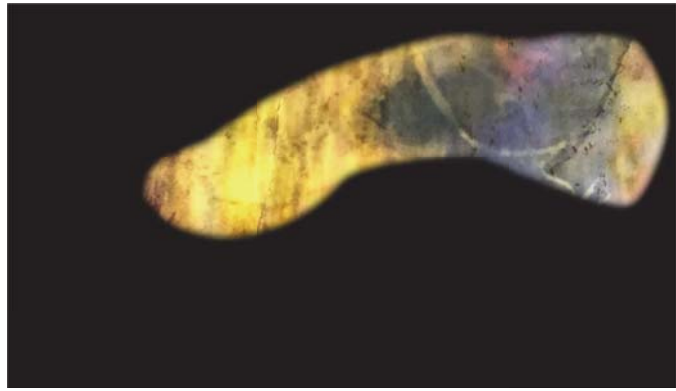
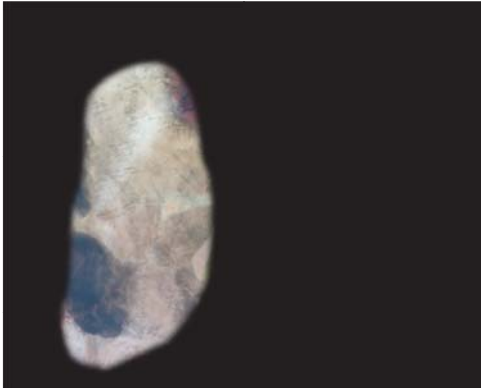
6. There is a crack in everything that's how the light gets in

Fields of space and light

In working on an Adobe digital platform, one in which there are infinite ways in which to juxtapose the images that I have harvested, I first have to select which ones to use and how to mix and match them. The program allows me to stack, merge, dissolve, or warp and with no preconceived method of match making the images, it becomes a process of allowing experimental chance encounters of one image with another to create either a harmony of colour and form or a discordant mix. The lines of blending seem to gyrate on each other and I have to reassemble the timeline to coax out a better fit. While reflecting and sifting the images into a sequence that in its fragmentation emits coherence, it occurred to me that fundamental to a sensation of corporeality was the handling of the edge of the projection, where the light mass becomes the dark void of the surrounding space. The process was a 'deframing' of the video sequence by applying a mask to create the impression of an amorphous floating shape whose content spoke adequately of skin and flesh without needing to specify a human outline. Choices were centred on deciding the pace of movements and shape changes of the form.

I started to consider light as a malleable materiality, much like clay, not so much when viewing the emerging work on a computer screen but when the projector is switched on and the ectoplasm comes to life gently swaying across the corner of the room as if it is seaweed clinging to a rock caught in a tidal flow. Although I know that the projection consists of a sequence of separate images harvested from different surfaces at incongruent times and places, the ectoplasm emits a pulse as a single phantom-like entity hovering, ready to burst out from the corner of the room and out across the wall.

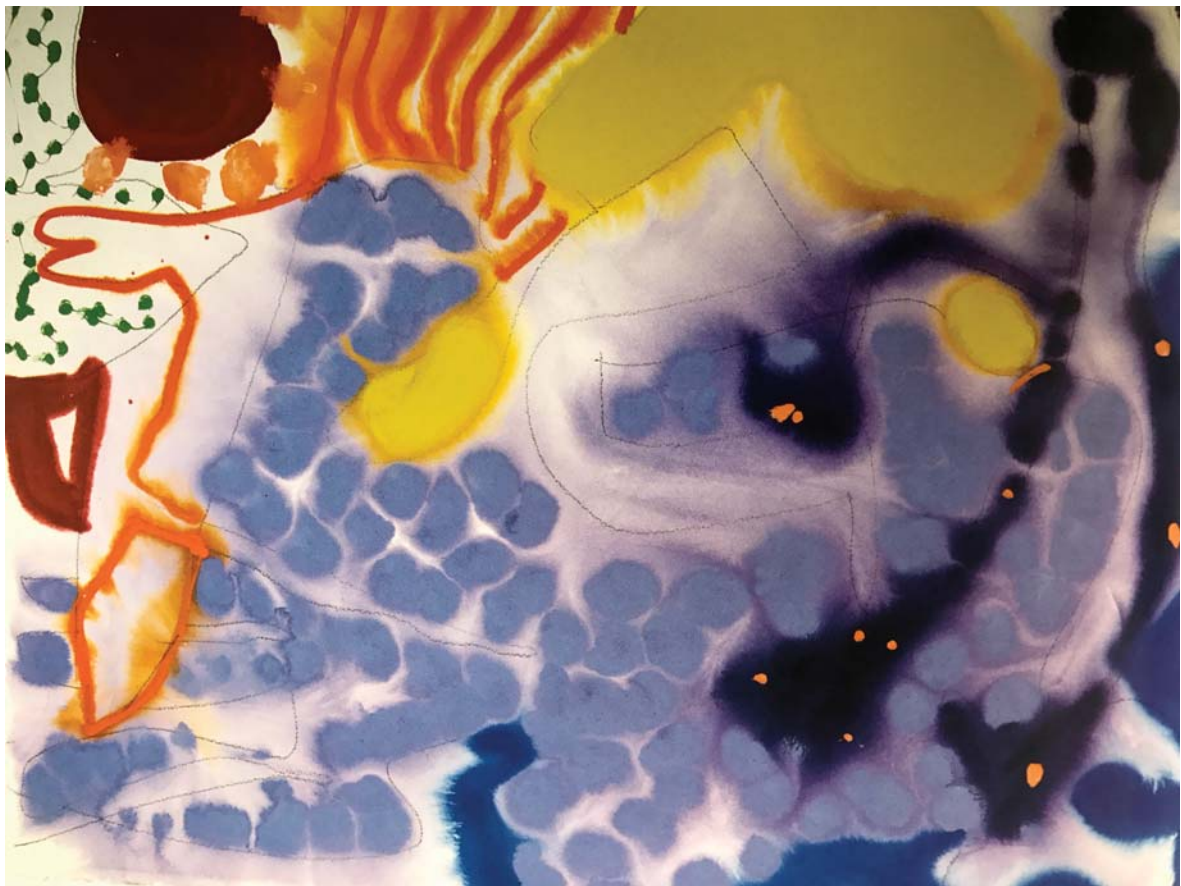
Maintaining the 'pulse' of the thing, a sense of life-force, within the pace and fluidity of transitions became a fundamental exploration into creating simultaneously a synthesis and separation of the entity and its space. This imagery of borderspace as a place of coalescence whilst effusing it's presence out into the room needed to remain loosely encapsulated within a membrane much the same way a human occupies a space with its entire sensorium. The room itself is a containment, a built membrane that artist Helen Chadwick refers to as an 'enfleshing' (Chadwick, 1989). James Turrell attempts to collapse a room's sense of boundary by saturating it with volumes of diffused light whilst my projections feel as if they could float off into the corridor, up the stair well, down to the basement or simply hover in the corners where the walls meet each other or the ceiling, as a spirit like apparition illuminating neglected interior spaces.



Isla Griffin, details from *Lesion* (2017). Video projection. College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

This complex engagement with the use of photography, image editing and digitally manipulating the minutiae of my images felt more reminiscent of painting than the contingency of photography. I found myself looking for the painterliness of the content in the way the abstract expressionists debrided and obliterated the edges of figuration and brought to the fore sensibilities of the subtle force of the sublime.

The paintings of Patrick Heron, who from 1945 lived in the artist colony of St. Ives, Cornwall, UK (where I grew up), engraved a sense of the colourful luminosity of space into my bones very early on in my life. The sight of washed blues and purples, flashes of pink, sharply saturated yellow patches and orange parallels of his paintings provided a chromatic immersion and spatial coherence that I wanted to imbibe into the video projection (Gooding, 1994).



Patrick Heron, *Sydney; November 17* (1989). Gouache on hand-made paper 57.5 x 75cm from Patrick Heron by Mel Gooding, 1994.

The painting *Sydney; November 17*, named by Heron after the place and time of its conception in 1989, has specifically infected me with the chroma of the invisible. Heron describes his work as crystallisations of the realities immanent in the physical world's hidden linear rhythms and lucent harmonies (Gooding 2005). The digital art, constructed on screen and then printed into large format prints by Petra Cortright in a show called *running neo-geo games under mame* at City Gallery Wellington in 2017 seem to graduate further Heron's crystallisations. In my mind, Cortright's prints further diffuse and fragment Heron's chromatic gestures into 'actant' like microcosms of each painterly impression. The flattened plane of Heron's paintings are rendered three dimensional in Cortright's work and speak more to a molecular interiority more in keeping with what a human borderspace might look like on a magnified level. Her command of the shifting nature of blending the traces of light, shadow, transparencies, glare, reflections, chroma saturation highlighted the importance of manipulating the content of my digital images to use light in the spirit of a plastic and malleable medium. Her work was a reminder of how the light of space is distorted and diffracted through the epidermis and into the borderspace.



Petra Cortright, *Novelty Quotes WEN russin Stephen Baxter adopted* (2016). Digital painting on Sunset Hot Press Rag paper.

There is a component of our mental, emotional and physical bodies that according to ancient and New Age teachings are composed of light (Brennan, 1988). The light body or aura, according to former NASA physicist and energy healer Barbara Brennan, is largely invisible to the majority of people but nevertheless it provides a matrix that suspends and supports the physical body. It provides an invisible structure in the greater field into which a new life grows and manifests. Rupert Sheldrake, the evolutionary biologist, describes how the field of space, which he named Morphic field, organizes systems to all levels of complexity, giving a system its structure and patterns of activity. The invisible matrix within the Morphic field is a type of memory of structure that organises the growth and movement of microcosmic atoms, molecules and cells and macrocosmic societies, ecosystems and galaxies. The invisible structures are like exoskeleton patterns into which matter can begin to clump together and become visible (Sheldrake, 2009). I imagine the morphic field of the projection existing in the room's corner just as the seeds of the idea were beginning to germinate in my mind or following me around attached to my body throughout the making process like an invisible balloon, the form already poised in situ before the projector is even turned on.

It occurred to me that within Sheldrake's morphic fields is the spectrum of invisibility and visibility the midpoint of which is the permeable boundary where the light body becomes flesh from the outside in. Multifold spectra occupy my work where one thing becomes another, material becomes digital, red becomes blue, sound becomes space, clay becomes light and the body's cavities and flesh transition through skin to auric fields. Becoming fades into decaying. The place on the spectrum where opposing materialities exist simultaneously becomes the flesh of light formed in software, rounded, amorphous, feathered dissolving edges with slow creeping movements akin to the rising and falling of the chest cavity during sleep.



Isla Griffin, *MO.hair* (2017). Digital print. College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

7. I closed my eyes and spoke to you in a thousand silent ways

Permeable selves and dendritic preoccupations

If the intent for this project is for people to encounter the permeability of their skin by immersing in the space of *Spectra on the edge of embodiment*, then the ectoplasmic projections must maintain the tactility, viscosity and texture of the live material world not just be a picture of it. “We can feel the organic pressures, the swellings and the counter-forces to gravity so that shape is not merely a static thing but a stage in a causal process, where the shape predicts the expansion of meaning of the thing seen” (Sheldrake 2009).

Merleau-Ponty points to a dimension embedded in interhuman connections that channels the co-construction of embodiment. Similar to Sheldrake’s Morphic fields, Merleau-Ponty’s the “flesh of the world” in which we are all immersed, and through which we are constituted, throws into doubt the very sense of selves as distinct entities and speaks to “a folding over of flesh that creates the possibility of difference within a unified but undifferentiated medium” (Shildrick, 2013, 15). The human body is a composite of many different it-bodies: bacteria, virus, metallic atoms. Sometimes the connecting link between humans and things is a shared ‘inorganicism’. In this case, the link is the techno-science of a digital platform taking the abject, the flesh and detritus, the clean and the dirty and enmeshing them. Rosi Braidotti, contemporary theorist, has suggested that technology is at the heart of a process of blurring the fundamental categorical divide between self and other; a heteroglossia of the species, a hybridization of what we used to call the embodied subject (Braidotti, 2013). This questions the malleability of the subject at the edge of its embodiment. I sense how the images on the computer screen are taken more deeply into the dendritic pathways of my nervous system as I discover what feels like new physical territory complete with topography, spaces, gravity and sensations. My haptic system seems sucked into the virtual work that begins to define a new and liminal boundary of my selves disrupting the normal mechanisms for which the body is built to feedback, position and place. I sit for hours, static, barely breathing, captivated, probing into the edges of void behind the screen much the same way as my ectoplasms quest out into the room.

The basis for artist Tony Oursler’s work is his observation of how the mind is conditioned and controlled by mass telecommunications. I understand how whilst I am manipulating images, I am being mesmerised, held fixated by the screen. His installations contain globular forms, which he names ‘thought forms’ on which videos of orifices, eyes and facial features are projected. His mutations are enigmas of biomorphic fleshiness that have an amoebic quality writhing within the confines of the material but not venturing beyond the edge. Oursler stimulates us to explore the conscious awareness of self-perpetuating thought behaviours through engaging with his giant molecules of fragmented human features (Oursler, Mercurio, and Paparoni, 2011).



Tony Oursler, *Dust* (2006). *The Broad, Los Angeles*.

In a conscious awareness stimulated by reading about Tony Oursler's perceptions on existence, I find interesting the notion that skin is seen, more often than not, as an edge behind which the self can privately reside, the epidermal layer acting as an outline of fixed separate corporeality moving through places of flux. If the idea of skin as an edge to self is replaced with one that considers a self which occupies a permeable zone, the idea of inter-subjectivity injects itself between subject and environment. The subjective embodied self in this case is not discrete and original but rather, one of many malleable subjectivities that flow into each other and create meaning outside of themselves. An invisible osmotic seam, at least an arm's length from the body hovering between an expanded self and the flesh of the world.

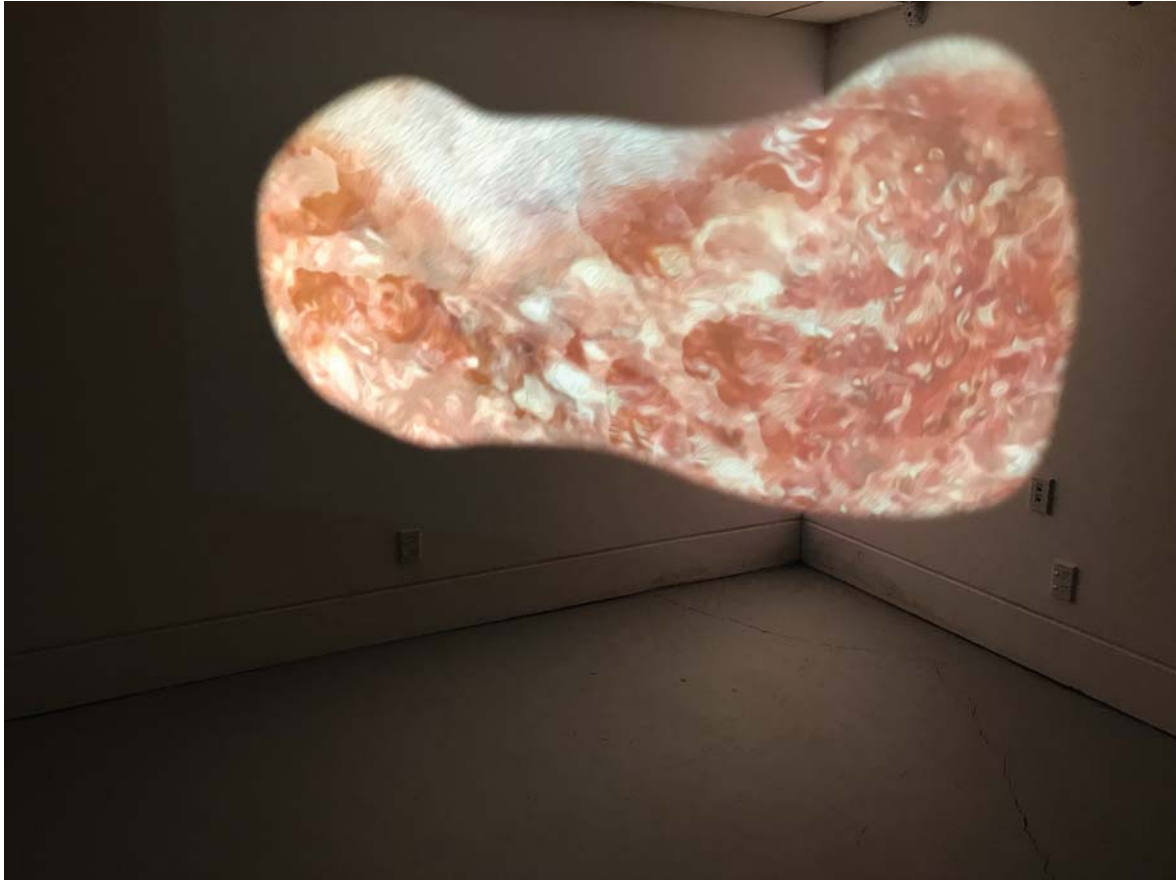
I have come across the idea of mirror neurones whose purpose is to help us recognize the totality of our own human selves by facilitating a seeing of ourselves in other people around us, objects and the invisible forces of the Morphic field (Hustvedt, 2016). This is not in the sense of me, over here, standing in front of you over there, but in the sense of all that is contained within your embodiment circulating through my porous body and vice versa. Standing in the same space, whether we see each other or not, we are blended and constantly leaking information and emotion into each other. It is involuntary as much as it can be intentional. It reminds me of the subliminal information I have gathered through my senses that infiltrate the work before which you stand.

In her essay “The essence of peopling”, writer Sara Perry uses the word ‘peopling’ to give an account of the innermost connections humans have in the self-conscious social context, describing the way images of our embodiment are held in other people’s memory (Perry, 2015). Our own self-images are malleable depending on the context in which self we are called upon to reveal or be at any given time. This is the same idea as poet Mary Oliver’s social self, the one that she describes as “fettered to a 1000 notions of obligation” (Lacy, 2016). Perry claims that each person learns to be aware of herself – is constrained *toward* self-consciousness – by other people being aware of her. She learns to manage her image in the minds of others, and finds herself reflected, as in a mirror, through the interface of language and nonverbal communication. The self in this instance is not unitary and separate from others; each person’s self is spread out among many people, simulated in all their brains and each person has a different ‘self’ for each one of the people she knows, and a different self for every social context (Perry, 2015). And none of these are the ‘true self’ – rather, the true self, the watcher, exists in all these, and in the transitions between them.



Pipilotti Rist, *Worry Will Vanish Horizon*, from the *Worry Work Family* (2014). Audio video installation; corner projection on two walls, carpet, white duvets, sound. Music by Anders Guggisberg. Installation view, London, UK, 2014. © Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Luhring Augustine. Photo: Alex Delfanne.

Pippilotti Rist, a Swiss installation artist, draws on the idea that repeated sets of visualisations and certain postures have a calming effect on participants when delivered in an immersive environment designed to lull a sense of receptivity at the interface of environment and self. For her London exhibition, *Worry Will Vanish*, audiences were encouraged to take off their shoes and lie down on bean-bags. Rist’s video’s cover two entire walls of the gallery posing a journey inside the human body consisting of human skin and interior anatomy imagery interwoven with close-up fragments from nature.



Isla Griffin, detail from *Spectra from the edge of embodiment* (2017). Video projection. College of Creative Arts (CoCA), Massey University, Wellington.

The images are superimposed, identifiable forms with intact surfaces and I was struck, on discovering this artists work almost at the point of completion of my project, how I had taken similar concepts but ended up with very different work. I had set out to obliterate any recognition of objects, surfaces or forms, blur the boundaries between the self and the world by blending the images to a point of abstract expression, encasing them in a fluid membrane and pulling the coagulation off the wall to speak to a flexibility in the notions of embodiment. I had no desire to elicit a certain emotion from the audience or propagate a pre-conceived effect on the nervous system; I just wanted to offer an alternative trajectory in the discovering of self. Rist's collaboration with musician Anders Guggisberg inspired me to give my entities an "undersound" one that would operate like the sound of a body generating its own atmosphere. I had experienced a sound bath performed by sound therapists Debbie Karl and Rob Moore where my body was subjected to the overlapping volumetric tonal sounds of various instruments traditionally used as a therapy for balancing the body's energetic system. They had seen the projection work *Lesion* (2017), and agreed to collaborate by providing a sound bath recording in response to the visual experience of the work. Given free reign to edit and adapt the sound recording to fit other works and the spaces in which they were projected, I was taken with how percussed crystal bowls, finely crafted metal tubes and drums could seemingly extend the effect of a visual field beyond its edge into a rooms space. It also had the effect of homogenising the 'sonic effluence' of a buildings workings that leaked into the room through the walls and vents (Hendy, 2013). I had disregarded the effect this subliminally penetrative white noise may have on allowing an audience to stay in the space and fully engage with the visual work. The vibrational potency of the sounds within the audio component of the work, tonal, stacked and irregular seem to add a facility to the coloured light reflections radiating off the projected entities. In effect the soundscape gravitationally anchors the body into the work becomes a layer of sonic texturing beckoning an audience to an environment into which they may more readily be willing to submit.

8. Crossing the Great water

'Crossing the great water' is a metaphor used in the I Ching, known as the book of changes, one of the oldest of ancient Chinese wisdom texts, for the difficult passage a person has to make to shed the ego and find the true self. It can also mean bringing something to completion, a difficult undertaking, or the resolution of a problem or illness (Anthony and Moog, 2002). Ted Hughes titled a posthumously published collection of Sylvia Plath's poems *Crossing the water* (1975) in which was published "Mirror" a poem about reflectivity and the absorption effects of surfaces in respect to truth and aging. It introduces the idea of an object existing far from the place of a static dormant surface:

I am Silver and exact, I have no preconceptions.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful,

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long

I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish. (Plath, 1975, 52).

It is the spectrum, the blending scale from visibility to invisibility, form to formlessness, presence to absence that underpins the inspiration for my work. Where the interior becomes the exterior, where the flesh bag that is me becomes the space within which I stand. In the capturing of material surfaces into a digital record I can convert the static nature of envelopment into moving projected light, work that when directed onto a building's internal surfaces offers a dialogue between subliminal corporeal sensibilities and hardened fixed boundaries.

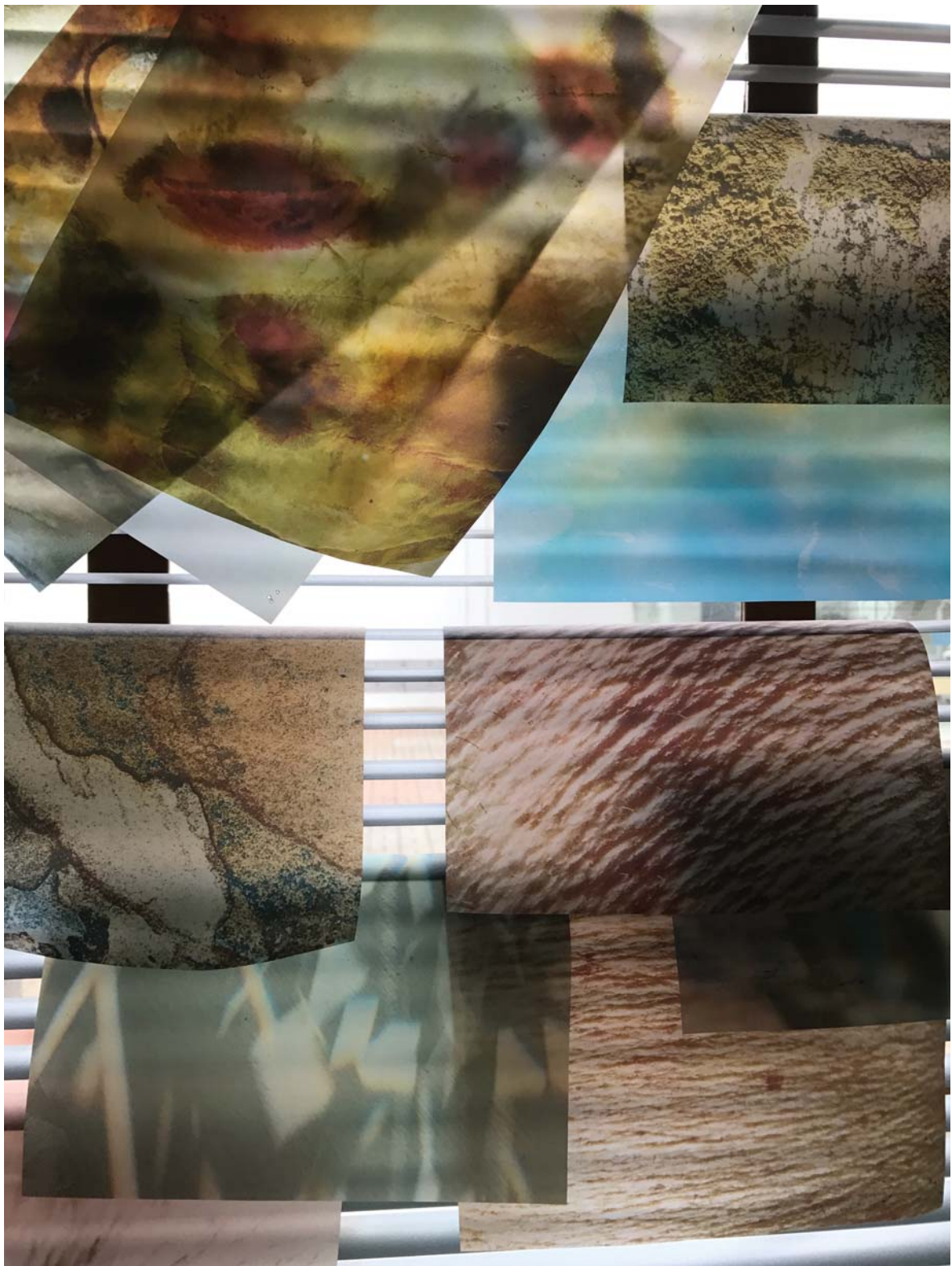
As I extend my practice beyond materials such as clay, paint and textiles to digital light, I feel I can offer the quality of ephemerality that is needed for the work to transcend its materiality. I found helpful hints while examining the point between fullness and emptiness alluded to in the forward of New Zealand artist Fiona Pardington's *The pressure of sunlight falling*, where she questions: "Is the fundamental point of existence situated in the manifest world. Objects are on the essential level a viscosity of self. Is it possible to know anything outside the contingency of life? The transference between seen and unseen is a concept in the agency of archiving cultural memory" (Pardington, 2011, 11). In answer to her question, I would say it depends on how attentive we are to the interface between us and the world.

This body of work has also been an exploration of how I might engage in a process of transformation of the self embedded in my own borderspace, one of recognising the potentiality of how my own neural web responds and ensnares the surfaces and light reflections that rise up to meet me as I follow the rhythms of life, breathing, walking, pausing, thinking and feeling and, in turn, how my presence leaves something of itself, a trace of energy, a mood in the external world as it passes through. What was once a visually impenetrable static surface, under the light of projection, becomes a malleable membrane illuminating and transforming the surfaces with which it collides. Patches of wall seem to float and breathe. The process of creating a language of material corporeality and envelopment has become one of software, layering, masking and rendering as it references a body undergoing transformation in search of the essence of self.

The explorations I have undertaken act as a reminder of the permeability of our bodies to the surrounding environment of spaces, forces and things, human and non-human. Contradictory though it may sound, the key words of malleability and permeability have helped me establish a boundary to my enquiry that at times was in danger of expanding out to the edge of the universe and deep into the cellular structures at the heart of my embodiment.

Through the reflective practices of writing, making and attentiveness, vital materialist and phenomenological discourses have shown me how significant exposure to the mysterious and profane in my up-bringing and encounters with eastern health practices have moulded a deep curiosity for ways in which the boundaries that separate us could be breached.

A more conscientious attentiveness in daily activities has served to make more evident the patterns of existence at the borderspace and the commonalities we all have in more subtle and temporary modes of being. It is indeed the intersection of my own sensibilities and haptic memories that harmonize within the processes of making the work, regardless of the aim to find the commonalities to being human. The simplicity of introspection becomes a complexity of content, blending the deepening threads of materiality in a digital platform. The project started out as a journey into the edge of my own uncertainty and brought my creative process into a collaboration with the 'power of things', sound artists and the new territory of a live digital nervous system. The resulting vibrant intervention into interior corner spaces is offered as a key insight into the agency of light as a tactile and ephemeral materiality to move us and remind us of the ease with which we can blur the imagined partitions of the world by consciously placing our watcher self within the permeable coalescing borderspace.



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