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INBETWEEN

Drawing Breath

An Embodied Practice

A Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Maria O'Toole

2014



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Rooms of the Soul, Remembered in the Body.

Introduction

In this inquiry I explore the role of phenomenology and embodiment within a drawing practice.

In phenomenology of Perception (1945), French Philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty argued that people perceive and conceptualize everything bodily. He stipulated that our very consciousness is embodied.

My closest companion on my journey is the philosopher Gaston Bachelard (Bachelard, 1969). Bachelard insists on the transfer of the poet's affectivity to the surrounding space and objects: a process, which endows all matter with a poetic essence and expands the experience of intimate space into a poetic space.

My practice is a perceptual experience of space and time, which focuses closely on the senses and sensuality.

When applying Bachelard's philosophy in the studio issues around embodiment arose. It became obvious that this project was bigger than the studio could contain, it needed to take a walk. In large-scale performative drawings I am exploring the inbetween space that I experience when taking a walk, when the rhythm of my body and imagining consciousness slips into another space where daydreams open up and expands my experience of a vast inner landscape. The resulting works are a form of lyrical abstraction.

In chapter one I discuss the work of those who are my companions on this journey. I discuss Gaston Bachelard's background and the effect his childhood experiences were to have on his academic choices. His philosophy regarding experience and intimate space is of particular interest. I have been exploring the 'rooms of the soul, remembered in the body' within my own drawing practice. I activate these spaces by walking and drawing, sometimes at the same time. I don't look at the surface or choose what to draw; instead I let my bodily responses guide the work. This way of working is phenomenological. I discuss the links between contemporary Brazilian Sculptor Ernesto Neto and Bachelard. They both describe space in such interesting ways and share an affinity for the experience of high places. Both connect the audience with space in their own way. Julie Mehretu has had a large influence on my MFA study. I discuss the influence her childhood and migrant experience has had on her work. I am interested in the layered drawing technique she has developed which she uses to create a narrative of her experiences. I am attracted to the idea of creating a palimpsest. I was introduced to Mehretu through Catherine de Zegher's book 'Julie Mehretu'. De Zegher, a curator, writer and historian has been influential in my choice of medium because she is an important figure within art today and a strong advocate of contemporary drawing. I discuss the thinking behind her most recent curatorial position at 'More Light' the Moscow biennale 2013. An interesting influence on Mehretu's practice has been the situationists of the 1960's, mainly Guy Debord. Debord is salient to my own practice. He was associated with the letterists who were attempting to fuse music and poetry with an interest in transforming the urban landscape. In 1953 they mapped out what they called the 'psychogeography' of Paris by walking through the city in a free associated manner. As the name suggests 'psychogeography' is psychology and geography combined. I also discuss William Anastasi's practice; his walking drawings and more recent subway drawings are traces of his walk and subway ride. His bodily responses to walking and the vibration of the train are recorded. Anastasi's process is a phenomenological one; he does not prejudge the experience preferring to let the experience reveal itself. Phenomenology is a connection my companions share. I will

end this chapter by discussing Maurice Merleau Ponty the main thinker in the area of phenomenology.

In chapter two I discuss how a drawing practice can operate, as a processual exploration of the poetics of interior space. I have chosen key areas that facilitate the poetics of sensory expansion identified through my research. I discuss these in dictionary style sub chapters, beginning with immensity. I begin with a John Pule poem that I received in 2012. I discuss how my research into Bachelard's philosophy has opened up an understanding of the poet's vast inner landscape. I also discuss Bell Hooks reflection on Emily Dickinson. In solitude she was able to access an expanded poetic of domestic space. In a chapter titled Intimacy I discuss Catherine de Zegher, she stresses that in contemporary society we live with too much information. De Zegher believes that in our busy lives we forget the everyday that can also be beautiful in our lives, she reminds us not to forget how important out intimate space is. In a chapter titled Embodiment I discuss the work of Eva Hesse. I am interested in her process with one development leading to another in free association, as her unconscious thoughts and memories came into play. I discuss Joanna Greenhill's suggestion that the memory of the body sits behind our physical experience of the work of Eva Hesse. Eva Hesse is an important reference for my own work as previous to my MFA body of work I had been working figuratively as an Illustrator. I wanted to make the switch from the figurative to the abstract; at the same time I wanted the body to still be visible in the work. In a chapter titled Psychogeography I discuss Conflux, an art conference in New York where participants turn New York into a playground of urban adventures. Organizers claim it's a chance to see what we would usually ignore. Chance and randomness is what excites them about psychogeography. Taking a walk has provided me the vehicle to slip into the inbetween. A place where my own unconscious thoughts and memories facilitate a new experience of the spaces I inhabit daily.

In chapter three I reflect on my own process and developments. I discuss the highlights and the low moments. In concluding this document I identify the important moments and discovery that has facilitated a new way of working and enriched my practice.

Throughout this document there are two streams of type. There is a main body of type explaining my research and work and there is a second stream that is a personal diary notation outlining my encounters of space and general thoughts during this Masters exploration.

'Drawing is about the immediacy of the moment. It is the avenue into perception; it's a language and a way of seeing and thinking.'

Richard Serra, 2012

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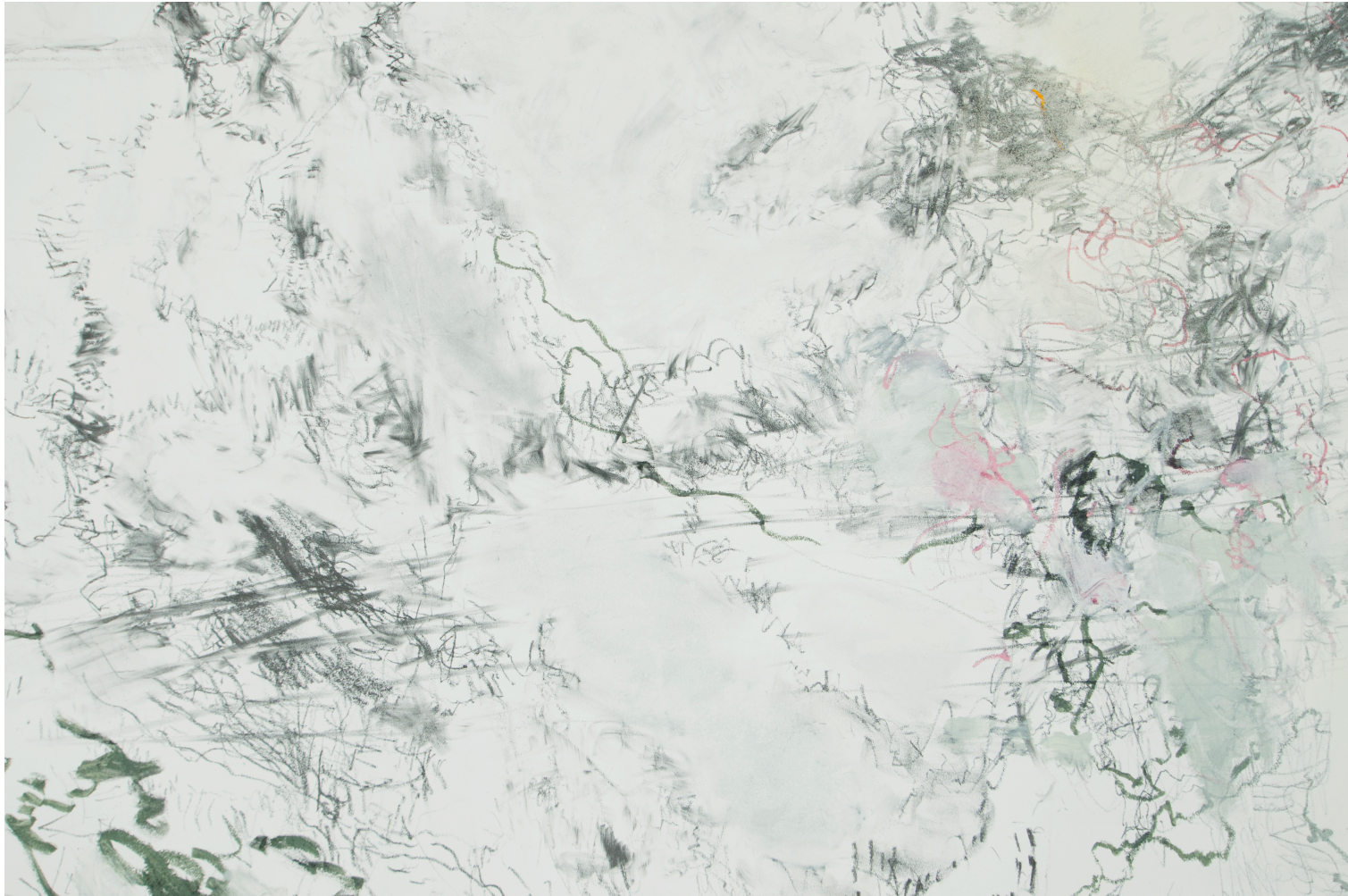
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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisors Professor Sally Morgan and Distinguished Professor Anne Noble for giving me permission to play. Getting lost in the doing has been essential to the development of my practice throughout 2013.

For their generosity and feedback I would like to acknowledge and thank the following: Simon Morris, John Pule, Shannon Te Ao, Karin van roosemalen, Emma Febvre-Richards, Jonathan Kay, David Cross and Maddie Leach.

Lastly, but not least to my MFA co-horts; Connah Podmore, David Brown, Nigel Royal and my amazing family, Glen, Hayden and Anna ...what more can I say, you are the best.



Maria O'Toole, Puke Ahu (close up), 2013, Acrylic, Charcoal, Graphite and Oil on Fabriano

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Chapters

1. **Companions** + Connections

The Pathway

2. **Immensity** The Poetics Of Sensory Expansion

Immensity, Intimacy, Consciousness, Phenomenology, Embodiment, Affectivity, Psychogeography

3. **Mark Making** Navigating An Inner Landscape

Marking My Interior Space

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IN BETWEEN, Drawing Breath. Maria O'Toole, The Engine Room, Massey University, Wellington Campus, February 7 – 15, 2014



Maria O'Toole, Ocean 1. (Close up), 2013, Acrylic and Graphite on Fabriano