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plumb -

painting, somatics, and generosity.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters degree (Fine Arts) at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

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Abstract

This exegesis explores the role of a “transverse” body in artistic practice, concentrating specifically on painting as a common space or index that links the awareness of the artist and the awareness of the viewer. The central premise of a bodily “transverse” quality draws from the philosophy of phenomenology—in particular the writings of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas—but also takes its cue from Dance practice and the writings and legacy of Antonin Artaud. The ways in which we participate in social space through our bodies can be seen in an articulate legacy of “visceral” art that surfaces throughout the history of figuration. This visceral nature that art invokes or signifies has been observed in art that tackles (among other things) traumatic experience and the ontology of the other. What can be seen as a kinaesthetic mode of painting (and art in general) is invariably couched within cultural contextual frameworks of the time.

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NB: All works are oil on canvas and all images are taken by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

In part, what follows in these pages is an exploration in lineage. In relation to my work this study seeks to uncover the qualities of an existing kinaesthetic figurative tradition. The concept of lineage here agrees with T.S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). Eliot holds that a person’s work exists alongside, and in the *same instance*, as those that have come before it; works are seen in light of each other, no matter when they were made. In this way the works of living and dead artists are as much alive and well as my own, and in many cases are referred to here in the present tense.

Acknowledging the influence of the precepts of phenomenology, this study examines ideas drawn from the philosopher Merleau-Ponty, and others, particularly in terms of how the body interacts with the world. The first chapter—on seeing (“I’m in the milk and the milk’s in me!”)—discusses the continuum that exists between the self and the world—an encounter at what Merleau-Ponty terms as the *a priori* “horizon” of being. It should be said that phenomenology seeks to preserve an ambiguous unity of the body as it is lived in the world in or at this horizon; to present it as a porous vessel, alive to both subjective and objective concerns; in Merleau-Ponty’s words, a “polymorphous Being” [sic] (Merleau-Ponty, 1993b, p. 134). In this vein, I am interested in various incarnations of somatic interaction that are addressed, articulated or arrested through art and artworks, most specifically in painting. One criticism of phenomenology is that it prioritises the solitary vision of the artist over the thematic embrace of the institution (Shapiro, 2003, p. 217ff). These pages may be open to similar criticism. The artists presented here, including myself, are given space and privacy for their ideas to stand alone. The peculiar paradox being that an institutional tool—this study—tenuously links and binds them.

Chapter two (“you will see my present body / burst into fragments . . .”) seeks to further an understanding of Artaud’s elusive notion of the body without organs. It explores ways in which the threshold of the body is negotiated, primarily in terms of dance practice, with examples drawn from Hijikata Tatsumi, Emilyn Claid and others. The chapter suggests figurative painting as incorporating a similar kinetic, “transverse” body as that found in

dance, signified by the kinaesthetic bond between artist and viewer. A note here: the term “kinaesthesia” is used as the sense of how one feels the timbre and movement of one’s own body and the relationship of this sensation with another. Some definitions are more insular, and confuse the term with proprioception, the awareness of one’s own body, one’s own posture and movement, in and of itself.

Chapter three (“I can’t. I don’t know. Only my hand knows.”) introduces some personal inclinations and reflections about my practice. In particular, art-making—in my case painting—becomes a curious form of generosity: towards another, towards myself, and towards life in general. It is an articulation of hospitality that encompasses and welcomes the state of things as they are, however clumsy, untoward or seemingly untenable.

Chapter four (“A blind man is feeling his way in the night . . .”) examines notions of the self and the body as they manifest in the works of Alberto Giacometti and Antony Gormley. The works of these two artists are seen to address and articulate a bodily gestalt. This presence of the body is enmeshed within an array of cultural qualities and these surface in unique ways in their artwork. These artists are presented to suggest a tradition of somatic interaction in figurative work in direct relation to my own practice. This chapter also examines further manifestations of a “transverse”, or gestalt kinaesthetic body in historical painting and discusses how its meaning is continually open to change.

Chapter five (Yellow Shift) discusses the technical development of my practice within the bounds of the masters course—how experimentation articulates an intuitive, emotional journey towards the rendition of the face in paint.

The territory of trauma is briefly investigated in chapter six (“How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb”): the momentum with which trauma both inhibits and prompts experience is examined, as well the ways in which trauma can indicate a common bond or continuum between artist and viewer, what Jill Bennett (2005) calls a manifestation of “conscience” and/or “sense memory”. This direction of enquiry stems from my own experience of trauma—in particular, from the way in which it has surfaced autonomously and worked its way through my practice.

The seventh chapter (“Indeed, how do we sing? . . .”) addresses the locale of the face, how it embodies and prefigures a passage of moral responsibility, drawing on ideas from Emmanuel Levinas. The face as a painter’s motif is examined, as is the possibility of a mutual exchange through the “language” of painting.

The coda returns to aspects of my own work. All the themes and ideas explored in previous chapters form the shifting bedrock of my own practice: how qualities of the artist are transferred and embedded into the personality of the artwork, inaugurated by the kinaesthetic impulse of painting; the peculiar weight and timbre of the figure and its repercussion on both viewer and artist; the “live” encounter between the artist and sitter (seen specifically in the work of Giacometti); the artwork as an empowering force in an artist’s life, articulating a channel for the body to “speak”. I find that in developing and linking these themes through other artists and their work, a lineage against which I can measure my own work begins to take shape. Primarily I see my own work as acting from a complex impulse or “urge”, kinaesthetic or otherwise, in the perception/recognition of another (an elusive “<proximity of bodies>”—Horrocks, 1998/2010, p. 86). I am interested in the ways in which this bodily relationship alludes to, mirrors or allows an ambiguous passage of moral responsibility or generosity toward another (as discussed by Levinas, Vasseleu, Levin and Elkins, among others). The place of the body within practice is manifold; those I see as most pertinent to my work are hopefully addressed within these pages. These qualities may well contribute to a “density” often attributed to the painted image—how paintings act in opposition to a “flattening” of meaning found in contemporary visual culture (see, for instance, Pallasmaa, 2008, p. 30; Marks, 2002, p. 116). This study, on the whole, raises more questions than answers. Fittingly, this state of provocation sits well in accordance with the nature of my practice. A sense of “opening-up” or what Merleau-Ponty calls “dehiscence” (cited in Vasseleu, 1998, p. 30) permeates the entire practice. The tug of perception pulls, at times against, at times along with, the persistent tissue of the body.

But you can't anticipate it, predict or fit it into a program. This "all" can't be schematized or mastered. It's the total movement of our body. No surface holds: no figures, lines, and points; no ground subsists. But there is no abyss. For us, depth does not mean a chasm. Where the earth has no solid crust, there can be no precipice. Our depth is the density of our body, in touch "all" over. There is no above/below, back/front, right side/wrong side, top/bottom in isolation, separate, out of touch. Our "all" intermingles. Without breaks or gaps.

(LUCE IRIGARAY & CAROLYN BURKE, 1980, p. 75)

*Dass die Körper sprechen, auch das wissen wir seit langem**

** That bodies speak has been known for a long time.*

(HEMMA SCHMUTZ & TANJA WIDMANN, 2004, title)

I'm in the milk and the milk's in me!

(MICKEY, from *In the Night Kitchen*, Sendak, 1971, p. 31)

That which occupies our vision and how our bodies inhabit the visual field is a subject of intensive scrutiny. Merleau-Ponty suggests a field of interpenetration at the site where the self meets and views the world: “I perceive the world, but the world also perceives me” (cited in Lyle Massey, 2007, p. 75). Whatever one’s personal experience of the world, we invariably navigate regions of syncretic space, places where boundaries blur. Self gives way to other; other to self. We are raised and constantly immersed in cultural ways of seeing ourselves and our world. Contemporary art often plays with these conventions, coaxing us to see things in new ways. Traditional painting may appear rather anachronistic amidst the traffic of progressive art, but its relative stability (or even out-datedness) may allow a steady look at viewing practice, helping to uncover just what sort of operations are at play.

History gives us many different painted pictorial modes or “scopic regimes” (Jay, 1988) that have guided our vision: European Medieval religious painting; Cartesian perspective; the Oriental scroll; the Modernist grid. All have reinforced particular values of the world and the people who occupy it. One viewing practice that closely echoes the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty is the Hindu act of darśana. Darśana is an exchange through the eyes of a viewer and those of an image or statue, usually a shrine. The viewer opens themselves to the presence of the divine in order to grow. Not limited to deities and their shrines, darśana is also an attitude in the apprehension of nature, as well as in the presence of a teacher. It is an attitude of respect and self-effacement, an acknowledgement of the responsibility of shared space, of the self rendered morally porous (see Eck, 1998).

One’s moral responsibility towards another has been called the other’s “trace” within the self (Levin, 1998). Examining Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas, David Michael Levin attributes to the face-to-face encounter with another a pre-personal, “global, syncretic, bodily felt” contract that informs and directs one’s behaviour, embedding one in the social, moral order (p. 348). It is an elusive, pre-reflexive quality that fluctuates between the body of the



Figure 1. "Study no. 7" wax and oil pigment on canvas, 450 x 390 mm.

self and the body of the other. This fluctuation or immersion brings meaning to the gestures one makes:

The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernable in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his.

(Merleau-Ponty cited in Levin, 1998, p. 358; originally from *Phenomenology of Perception*)

I suggest that paintings—and in particular figurative depictions—directly mediate or arrest the momentum of this trace, this passage of responsibility between the self and another, in very particular ways through the features of each work. In this way they constitute a moral fingerprint that sheds light on the ways in which we interrelate, and our bodies’ or selves’ participation in this interaction.

The paintings of Francis Bacon are iconic embodiments of the ambiguities of the mediated person-to-person encounter. Ernst van Alphen, in *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (1993), examines a complexity of response in the presence of Bacon’s works. In sum this experience constitutes the loss of an independent ego as suggested in the book’s title. Van Alphen’s delineation of a porous personal boundary in the face of Bacon’s work infers Merleau-Ponty’s position on the nature of the perceptive body and the nature of identity. More particularly perhaps, Deleuze (2003) posits an attribute of Bacon’s work, the diagram (p. 70-77), as a region that induces synesthesia, an overlapping or intertwining of sensory data. This negotiation or loss of sensory boundaries reveals an intrinsic vitality in the painting’s role to mediate a simultaneous existence with another, encompassing a contiguous overlapping or “exfoliation” of personal, social relations (Bennett, 2005, p. 75).

An encounter with Bacon’s work easily compares with other strong kinaesthetic, intersubjective experiences. Dancer and writer Emilyn Claid describes the synthesis of watching dance performance: viewing Nigel Charnoch she describes herself as

not just watching, passive and objective. I feel rebellious, sharp, on edge. I am running with him. His presence meets mine. It’s as if a wire on fire connects us, where subjects and objects are incinerated. His body and my body are pulled into a diffused alive-ness.

(Claid, 2006, p. 178)

This connection Claid describes could well refer to one with Bacon himself, through the index of the painting (Noland, 2009), as well as one with the figures in the paintings themselves (Deleuze, 2003, p. 71). The question is how this connection arises: what are the syncretic aspects or threads particular to (Bacon’s) painting that facilitate or resonate within such a “diffused alive-ness”? A starting point is Deleuze’s “diagram”, to be sure, but do these syncretic threads articulate a deeper, ethical relationship between the viewer and the artist? According to Carrie Noland (2009) the painted mark carries a somatic impulse in its scale, speed or rhythm. We feel the physical energy inherent in each gesture and respond in kind, invoking the act of painting in our own bodies (p. 3). The degree to which one is

physically “moved” in this way depends upon the inclinations and viewing habits of the viewer in question, what I am sure James Elkins would agree to as the level of “generosity” given towards the painting and the painter (see Elkins, 1999b, p. 96-116). This form of kinaesthesia acts on a level—what Merleau-Ponty would call a *stratum*—that is, I suggest, inexorably bound to further syncretic qualities articulated by the work, echoing and reinforcing a complex commonality or continuity between the viewer and the artist.

Diedre Sklar (2007) cites any kinaesthetic language as being culturally determined. The body’s gesticulation follows specific pathways of impulse and response. We all recognise the crouched shrug of hip-hop, the elongated neck of ballet, the open hand of the politician. The kinaesthetic impulse within painting invokes (among other things) the legacy of the American Abstract Expressionists. The “New York School” of painters in the 1940’s and early 1950’s arguably pursued a rarefied autonomy of the self as “expressed” through the kinaesthetic, “horizontal” mark (Krauss, 1999/2005). The articulation of this “self” has undergone extensive criticism (see, for instance, Landau (Ed.), 2009). An embracing generalisation would be to see this autonomy as redemptive, as “a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution” (Rothko, 1947-48/2005, p. 141). What I am primarily interested in these pages, it should be clear, is how (or indeed, whether) the painted mark and the painted figure itself articulate and/or arrest aspects of what it is to be human in ways that transcend what could be called solipsistic autonomy. Is there a contemporary constitution of the kinaesthetic mark, or a kinaesthetic discipline of painting? Is there a contemporary position that draws upon a tradition of the kinaesthetic, mimetic figure?—and if so, does it articulate moral responsibility? This line of questioning follows on from Levinas’s view of the moral implication of another’s presence, a quality he sees as residing deep within us—persistent and inescapable:

The face of the neighbour signifies for me an unexceptional responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract.

(Levinas, cited in Levin, 1998, p. 348)

The contemporary paintings of Jenny Saville address personal identity, and, by implication, personal responsibility, in specific ways through the “body” of the painting and the bodily act of painting itself (cf. Sylvester, 2005, p. 125). Saville is, very consciously, a “visceral” painter whose work capitalises on an ambiguous threshold of one’s body in the experience of making and viewing a painting. Her work couples kinaesthetic sensation with raw, almost

accusatory imagery of “fallen” or wounded bodies in an unrelenting treatise on the ambiguities of what it means to be human.

Looking again at Bacon’s work we find a similar set of unruly bodies: the painter’s, the viewer’s, the figure’s within the painting, as well as the “body” of the painting itself. These bodies can be seen to articulate a gestalt that finds its way through the continuum of artistic and viewing practice. These various “bodies” are like a child’s paper-chain of the human form. Each individual indentation or “shape” of the body is an echo of the template of the first—the same, yet separate. Paintings articulate the relationships between these bodies; each kind of painting arrests and illuminates a different manifestation or modulation of values. What are the contemporary roles of these (our various) bodies, found and addressed through painting? What have been their roles in the past? Whatever the answer(s), the painting stands at a crossroads: between the viewer, the artist, and their worlds.



Figure 2. "Study no. 8" oil on canvas, 450 x 390 mm.

*you will see my present body
burst into fragments
and remake itself
under ten thousand notorious aspects
a new body
where you will never forget me.*

(ANTONIN ARTAUD, cited in Barber, 1999, p. 72)

Artaud's quest for identity is made even more unforgettable with Deleuze's exposition of the body without organs in *The Logic of Sensation* (2003). Inscribed as elusive, "hysteric" (p. 32), it alludes to Emilyn Claid's "wire on fire [which] connects us" (Claid 2006, p. 178). It is a break with the social order, an undertow that challenges logical cognition. The crux of Artaud's dilemma outlines the limits of representation, and how far they rest from his creative intention:

Suppose that each of my pondered instants is on certain days shaken by these deep tornadoes which are not betrayed by anything external. And tell me whether any work of literature is compatible with such states. What brain could resist them? [. . .] All I ask is to feel my brain.

(Artaud, 1965, p. 22)

Playwright, poet and artist, Artaud's work continues to elude us even today. His work is seen as inassimilable by some, as existing, perhaps romantically, "outside of time" by others (Shoham 2002). It speaks of an inconsolable yearning towards reconciliation, a neurotic, hysteric impulse towards wholeness. His drawings while incarcerated at the Rodez Asylum are desperate, afflicted. Drawing, he was described as "blindly dig[ging] out the eyes of the image", working "in the sobbing, bleeding music of the soul to reassemble a new body" (Jean Dequeker & Artaud, cited in Barber, 1999, p. 58; p. 75). This new body for which he strived promises autonomy he lacked, especially during his time at Rodez where he underwent some of the century's first brutal electroshock treatments. Artaud's body without organs trips over itself to acquire a new resplendent self. In his stuttering attempt towards freedom, however, Artaud invokes a creative freedom, one that lives on in his verse and his drawings.

For Artaud, the body is the seat of the self, the agent of identity. His drawings express the urgent transmission and attempted communion of this body to the page and to the viewer. His particular vehemence can be seen as a necessary ingredient in the process. For him, cruelty or “horror” was a means of breaking conceptual identification with the boundary of the body and the page or stage: “doing this I claim the right to break with the usual use of language, to sunder the frame once and for all” (Artaud, cited in Jacobs, 1978, p. 53). Artaud delineates a passage or migration of the body through the artwork, an impulse articulating what Deleuze calls an “*indeterminate organ*” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 34, original emphasis): “[t]hus the body does not have organs, but thresholds or levels” (p. 32). In this way Artaud outlines the inherent capabilities and limitations of any media to transmit complex levels of sensation. The problem with the body without organs is its legibility—it easily lost in description or invocation. Does this organ manifest in other ways, in other places that can inform us of its nature? Does the “transverse” nature of this body help an understanding of how bodies interact through the screen of the painting, the ways in which we recognise each other (and ourselves) through the mimetic, kinaesthetic figure? An exploration of the body in terms of dance practice may help shed some light on qualities and thresholds of the body, of how the body operates *in relation*—to others, to itself, and to space in general.

Hijikata Tatsumi, co-founder of the Japanese dance form of Butoh, negotiated a boundary of his body from an early age:

like a thief I studied the gestures and manners of the neighbourhood aunties, my mom and dad, and of course all my other family members. Then I put them all inside my body. Take the neighbor’s dog, for instance. Fragmented within my body, its movements and actions became floating rafts. But sometimes these rafts get together and say something, there inside my body.

(Tatsumi, 2000, p. 76 [sic])

A celebrated somatic practitioner, Tatsumi’s work addresses many thresholds of the body. He stated that there are various aspects, what he calls “mythic things” that reside in the body (cited in Fraleigh, 2004, p. 28). These interior sensations or presences could be akin to archetypes, “sleeping intact” beneath or within one’s consciousness (p. 28). He often stated that his dead sister lived inside him, a constant presence, he says, who “plucks the darkness from my body and eats more than is needed” (Tatsumi, 2000, p. 77). The counter-intuitive, often dream-like movement found in Butoh cultivates and excavates these buried and borrowed “selves” or states. For Tatsumi the body is diaphanous and manifold, interpenetrated and replete with other bodies, other presences.

Emilyn Claid describes a negotiable boundary of the body in terms of Bataille's erotic theories of the threshold of the ego: “[a]ccording to Bataille, eroticism offers an experience for a body to meet with another and in so doing answers the fundamental need for continuity” (Claid, 2006, p. 43). What makes the negotiation of this personal boundary erotic and not abusive is the mutual trust and respect of both parties, as the role of the passive partner is exchanged. Claid parallels this power play of erotic submission and domination with the training of dance performers, how dancers submit their bodies to “oppressive” or “shaping” structures of dance forms. In this way she questions the autonomy these forms bestow on their practitioners. For Claid, years of submission to classical dance training had to be challenged for her to redress her profession on her own terms. In *Yes? No! Maybe . . . Seductive Ambiguity in Dance* (2006) she traces a journey towards her own autonomy through the tumultuous years of feminist strategy in the 1970's and 80's. This negotiation—the quest for a more personal, authentic vision—is a story familiar to many dancers and mirrors Artaud's perennial goal of personal freedom.

In *Sacred Monsters* (2008), Akram Khan speaks on behalf of fellow dancer Sylvie Guillem, mapping the territory from the cultural to the personal:

. . . so from there you had two choices. The choice was: do quietly and obediently as you're told . . . but for her this was never an option; secondly you . . . why, you go in search of your own answers.

(Khan, in Khan & Guillem, 2008, 5:27-5:42)

Guillem was classically trained in ballet, Khan in kathak. Both broke with their respective traditions in the transition to more personal styles. *Sacred Monsters* is a meeting and conversation between their idiosyncratic bodies. The title refers to the near-divine status of famous French stage personalities of the nineteenth century (“Monstres Sacrés”—booklet, p. 4). Here, this deliberate “height” or alienation of social stigma gives way to the individual autonomous qualities of the dancer's body. Energy freely passes back and forth between the dancers throughout the performance: “one would create the wave, and it would have a repercussion on the other; and that was our conversation” (Khan, interview, 10:06-10.10). *Sacred Monsters* explores the frisson between what Claid calls the “vertical” strictures of culture and a more “horizontal”, often existential, personal reality: “[b]odies fall back, flail and fling. Bodies are sexual and hungry. They drop downwards. Bodies hurt.” (Claid, 2006, p. 40). Claid's

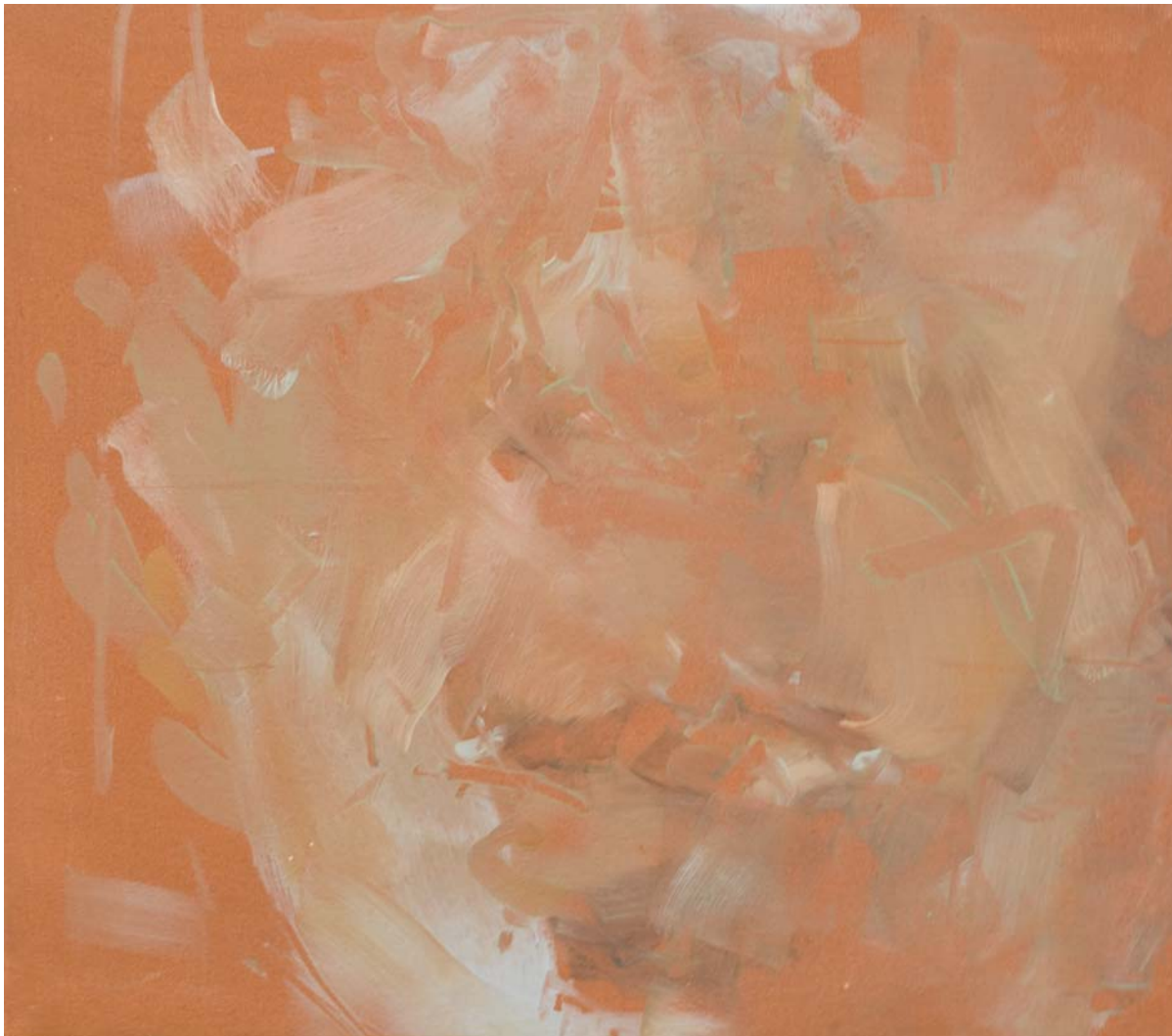


Figure 3. "Study no. 12" oil on canvas, 390 x 450 mm.

“horizontal” body, with its highly personal and/or subversive qualities directly correlates with the “horizontal” body or mode of activity outlined by Rosalind Krauss in “The Crisis of the Easel Picture” (1999/2005). The “horizontal” for both invokes the qualities of gravity: Claid’s “horizontal” body directly opposes the gravity-defying illusion of ballet; while Krauss finds the “horizontal” as a more haptic, “transverse” occupation of the (traditionally vertical) picture plane. Carrie Noland (2009) points out the simultaneity of these two agencies in embodiment; how the meanings of gestures are paradoxically at once cultural (inscribed, exterior, “vertical”) and personal (generative, interior, “horizontal”). Personal agency is seen to be “contingently forged on the level of the individual” (Noland, 2009, p. 62; cf. Butler, 1997).

The dancer's body consolidates the fugitive, transitory movement of the body through the discipline of training and performance. It is causal rather than objective, an indeterminate body without organs seemingly lacking the hysteria of Artaud's; one that combines mental and physical energy to become something inherently *other* (cf. Sontag, 1987/1993)¹. This *otherness* occupies a porous boundary of the body. Belgian-born dancer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui describes his experience of his body's own threshold:

There is something quite transparent about me—things go through me—like when I am somewhere I really get the sensation that it seeps in absolutely, a little bit like a ghost character. I go places and I feel like, “My God, I am totally drenched.” But this is how I choose to be, because it helps me relate to my surroundings and I care about being one with it.

(Cherkaoui cited in Horsely, 2010, p. 37)

A further passage that aptly addresses the open, “transverse” nature of the dancer's body comes from this description of American dance pioneer Trisha Brown:

She shed the stylized use of her muscles and the tensile alertness through the spine and skin. Focusing instead on subtleties of elegant, relaxed alignment of her spine and limbs, she moved with ease and a special clarity that stemmed from innovative inner imagery [. . .] New sensations, perceptions, and energy developed within her body and between body, space, time, and geometry. These changes became a technical breakthrough for dance in America.

(Marianne Goldberg, in Brown, 2002, pp. 30-31)

The body, addressed through dance practice, perpetually enacts or embodies an open quality of apprehension. It brushes up against, realigns and penetrates boundaries in unexpected ways. Its clear properties are porosity and plasticity, as well as a potential or realised resistance to fixed meaning.

This notion of the body corresponds with Merleau-Ponty's view of an indeterminate perceptual organ, the *chiasm*, a term that transforms the objective body to living flesh. “Chiasm is the name Merleau-Ponty gives to the motion of perpetual dehiscence, in which perception is understood as being in momentum” (Vasseleu, 1998, p. 30). Through this momentum the corporeal, sensible, perceiving body is seen as indefinable, as existing before or outside of conceptual identification or language. It is a fold of meaning where the interior perpetually meets or ruptures its exterior. The movement, stillness and timbre of the body in dance—what could be called its momentum or causality—palpably embodies Merleau-

¹ “Dance enacts being both completely in the body and transcending the body. It is, or seems to be, finally, a higher order of attention, where physical and mental attention are the same.” (from *The Blow of the Sublime*, excerpt from *Art and Design: Parallel Structures*. Vol 8 No 11/12 1993: VCH publishers, p. 41.)

Ponty's view on how the body is immersed, and to an extent "lost", in the ongoing act of apprehension; how it continually (re)makes sense of itself and/in the world. Les Todres (2007) explains the role of the body in understanding as interwoven with language but existing apart from it: "[u]nderstanding *is* this intersection of bodily adventure and languaged home" (pp. 24-25, original emphasis). Vasseleu (1998) sees Merleau-Ponty's chiasm as expressing "a common world of humanity as 'one flesh' possessing an indefinite coherency in the weaving of relations between bodies" (p. 31; more on this in chapter five). We find, permeating ourselves and others—and, reiterating Noland—an inescapable cultural/personal, though not abstract entity; a palpable "transverse" flesh replete with opening meaning and inflection.

Does a similar "transverse" body find voice in painting? According to James Elkins, any painter worthy of the name immerses themselves and is to a degree "lost" in the continual process of painting, what he terms as a "kind of psychosis" (Elkins, 1999b, pp. 147-167). The gestalt of their active, causal body becomes "folded into" an ongoing material "becoming" of paint. ("Indeed we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint"—Merleau-Ponty, 1939b, p. 123, original emphasis.) The painter works with this curious organism of him/herself and paint. Its various parts, the pigments, the solvents, the tension of the hand on the brush, constitute its body. With practice, it grows and develops new articulations guided by the mirror or register of the picture plane. This extension of the body/self into process *cannot help* but articulate a myriad of sensations and meaning(s) about what it is to be human, complete with an active, "transverse" flesh. Such a view leans towards a "Modernist" validation of process. Bonnefoy (2001) aptly sums up this viewpoint of the Modern: their "[w]orks of art, particularly paintings, were produced so the signifying elements were allowed to agree amongst themselves, to decide amongst themselves, rather than be subordinated to the imitation of outside objects or to the artist's conscious design" (p. 6). Our body and its implication in process, rather than being an anachronism, however, is something we cannot escape. Whatever technological or cultural developments may arise, there will always be: *this* body; *your* body; *my* body.

The history of painting is nothing if not extensive. Vestiges and clear articulations of the transverse body have constantly found voice, have had no choice but to do so ("every picture is a picture of the body"—Elkins, 1999a, p. 283). Some of these instances are taken up in the following chapters. The way we encounter images is, of course, always steered by our

motivations and predilections. Laura Marks (2002) sees viewing practice as negotiating both the haptic and the conceptual; combining both internal and external pressures. For herself, she prefers the haptic, the blurred impetus of transverse flesh:

I search the image for a trace of the originary, physical event. The image is connective tissue; it's that fold in the universal strudel. I want it to reveal to me a continuity I had not foreseen [. . .] No need to interpret, only to unfold . . .

(p. xi)

Gregory O'Brien (2010) also invites a bodily intimacy in reading. He discerns a pathway that leads *into* the paintings of Euan Macleod: “[i]f we linger long enough here, going deeper than the surface, then Macleod’s paintings might be just that: a place where we meet ourselves” (p. 180). O’Brien here sketches the “continuity” that Marks speaks of, that of a contiguous transverse flesh. Self becomes other; other becomes self. Paintings of the figure here mark the territory of the bodily, the haptic or the transverse. Sculptor Antony Gormley states that this body is a perennial subject, something that no matter how hard we may try we cannot escape:

. . . while the body remains the constant it is not what it represents that is to be discovered, but other issues that begin to be important: like how it feels as a gestalt or how it fits into a context.

(Gormley cited in Blazwick, 2001, p. 144)

This gestalt, activated or articulated through the transverse body—crossing boundaries, intersecting meanings—does not halt at the kinaesthetic. It is forever tinged with further implication, as the following chapters investigate.



Figure 4. "Sarah no. 1" oil on canvas, 1170 x 1460 mm (first layer).

I can't. I don't know. Only my hand knows.

(ANNA FLECKENSTEIN, aged 5, in Fleckenstein, 2004, p. 612)

The depiction of the human form in art reflects, articulates, and embodies the gestalt within ourselves. Expressive, kinetic renderings of the human form can be seen to stir the ambiguous edges of this gestalt—the ways in which it is (and we are) a “polymorphous Being” [sic] (Merleau-Ponty, 1993b, p. 134), continually open to change and possessed of a peculiar momentum of disparate agencies. In my own experience of viewing and making art what comes to the fore is the generosity involved in artworks. The vitality of art can enrich our lives, make us eager for more, and help heal whatever form of heartache we are partial to. Speaking for myself, painting occupies and addresses a near-sacred space of regarding another, a position Levinas posits as a recognition of another’s *infinity* (see Vasseleu, 1998, p. 89). I am easily touched it would seem, the face of another reflects no, *is*, an epiphany, and painting can be a meditation of this moment of apprehension. Through this identification of another, an embrace of their “alterity”, a space beckons—my own sense of place, of being. The face, as a pictorial device, iterates Levinas’s imperative of the recognition of the other and, through this, the recognition of oneself: “[t]he face as the extreme precariousness of the other. Peace as awakesness to the precariousness of the other. [. . .] The proximity of the neighbour – the peace of proximity – is the responsibility of the ego for an other” (Levinas, 1996, p. 167). Painting acknowledges, facilitates and parallels this sobering interconnectivity of life. This “recognition” stands apart from narcissistic attachment; it is a *rediscovery* of ourselves: “[t]o rediscover oneself in another is to recognize him or her as another embodiment of the same flesh” (Silverman, 2009, p. 43).

The chapters of this paper outline a physical mystery; no one definitively knows how or why we recognise each other in all the ways we do: we just do. On my initial return to study I investigated artist after artist, searching for the seemingly malignant cause of my entanglement with art. The figure that strode forth from the endless books and monographs was Antonin Artaud. I still have a flow chart placing him at the centre of a sprawl of artists and movements, a small Charlie Chaplin figure with a top hat and cane [fig. 5, p. 16]. I do

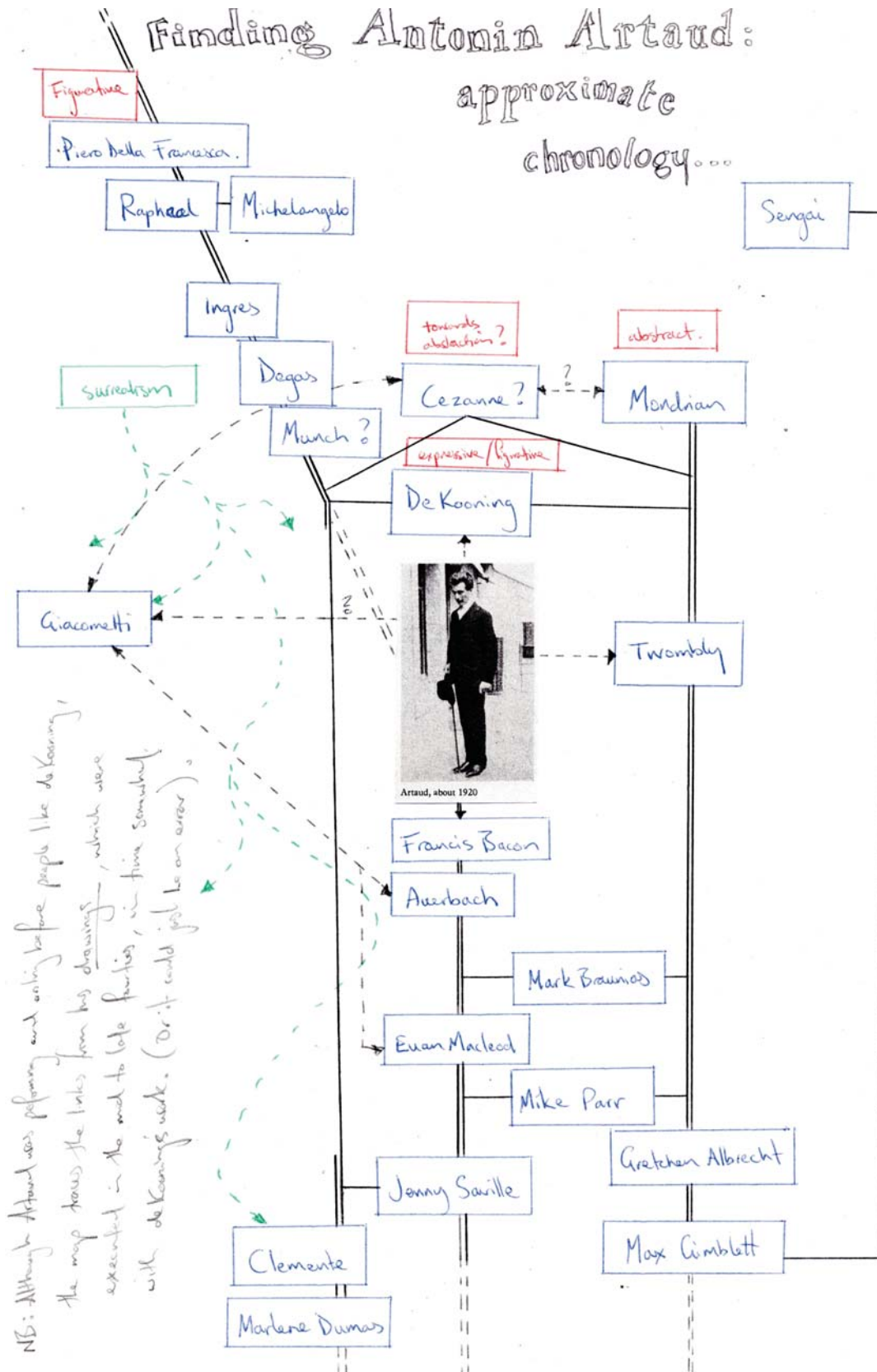


Figure 5. "Finding Antonin Artaud" ball point and pencil on paper, 297 x 207 mm (from the author's workbook, 2009, np).

not pretend to understand him but he stands for the enigma of expression. Apart from the tragic pathos of his legacy, his simple—and I use that word hesitantly—frustration with the medium of art speaks of an uncompromising sincerity, a form of *infinity*, if you will, that always lies tantalisingly out of reach. He articulates what Freud terms the “unplumbable navel” of a dream (cited in Fuery, 2004, p. 46), that point that passes beyond understanding—the very kernel of “madness” or expression. (“. . . words strain / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still”—Eliot, 1963, p. 194; *Burnt Norton* v 1.13-17.) As for me, I am easily pleased; painting suffices. The complexity and “resistance” of the medium forever lends its act a fugitive, plaintive, at times febrile aspect. True presence always resists representation, there is no escape, it seems, from “the impossibility of fixing an image of any living being” (Ravenal, 2010, p. 6). But painting is an ongoing call for what James Elkins refers to as the “transcendence” of the medium, a search for that moment when an image that somehow constitutes meaning pierces through the murk of days and paint, the “mouldy *materia prima*” (Elkins, 1999b, pp. 68-95, original emphasis):

When paint is compelling, it is uncanny; it hovers on the brink of impossibility, as if nothing that close to incorporeality could exist. Like the hypnotic red powder of the [Philosopher’s] Stone, paint can reach a pitch of unnaturalness where it seems it might lose every connection with the tubes and palettes where it began. That is the state that counts, and not the choice between fictive space and canvas, or between illusion and paint. It’s not the choice, but the narrowness of the gap: the incredible tension generated by something so infinitesimally near to perfection.

(p. 188)

No one said it would be easy. But the insensible quality of painting is what makes sense. That immersion where you lose track of your arms and legs and all that matters is this beguiling, ongoing *process*. Painting fuses these bewildered extremities within the image and its making. And good painting allows the painter to reach beyond these “limbs and outward flourishes” to the beating heart of the image itself. This “transcendence” can touch heart, mind and body. The protracted investment of the painter in the activity of painting can initiate a relationship with the viewer, one that asks for comparable frankness. Ironic paintings abound, surely, however fashionable they may be, but they miss a main touchstone of communication. (“<Stories, too, are basically concerned with spatial relationships. The proximity of bodies>”—Horrocks, 1998/2010, p. 86.)



Figure 6. "Odessa no. 1" oil on canvas, 1170 x 1460 mm (first layer).

*A blind man is feeling his way in the night
 The days pass, and I delude myself that I am trapping,
 holding back, what's fleeting.
 I run and run, staying in the same place, without stopping . . .*

(ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, cited in Sylvester, 1995, p. 169)

I

Giacometti's art borders on the obsessive. He worked repetitively, constantly building up and paring down his figures—never satisfied with the result, instead constantly immersed in the living process of making. The first part of this chapter addresses Giacometti's subject and how it arises between the seer and the seen, how qualities of the one inform or affect the qualities of the other. This section also looks at notions of the body in the sculpture of Antony Gormley. The second section briefly looks at how kinaesthesia and the ambiguous role(s) of a transverse body have informed painting in the past.

While Giacometti's early work was openly Surrealist (he later termed this period as “mere masturbation”—cited in Baumann, 2008, p. 92), the later, more consolidated work pursued a most private vision. During this time he either worked from life or from memory on lone or grouped figures. Erect, walking or stationary, these attenuated forms give testament to more discrete concerns than those of Surrealism: a kinaesthetic, “syncretic” sense of another in space; a bodily groping or “drawing” along the range of Giacometti's sight.

Yves Bonnefoy (2001) writes that what Giacometti confronted in his work was no less than the irreducible presence of another:

Albeit hazily, what he discerned in the perceived object was a kind of event, and this event, this enigma, was the fact that this head was there, facing him, when it might so easily not have been—the fact that it existed, instead of not existing.

(p. 9)

This presence, this “core” (Sylvester, 1995, p. 47)—perhaps in correlation to Francis Bacon’s “*mise en abyme*” of the head (van Alphen, 1998, p. 32)—essentially proves resistant to representation (cf. Ravenal 2010, p. 6). In this fashion we recognise the legacy of Artaud; it is a resistance that plagued Giacometti all his life (Capon, 2006, p. 11). Giacometti was forever searching for the visible trace of presence seen through proximity. The face or head, as a pictorial device or emblem, parallels Levinas’s imperative of the moral or ethical recognition of the other and, through this apprehension, the recognition of oneself (Levinas, 1996, p. 167). This position calls to mind Thich Nhat Hanh’s proposition “to *inter-be*” (“it’s not possible to be alone, to be by yourself. You need other people in order to be”—cited in Donaldson, 2006, p. 226; cf. Belford Ulanov, 2005²). I am hesitant to offer or investigate a definitive existential position to Giacometti’s work simply out of respect for the nature of (his) subjectivity. Just as true presence resists pictorial representation, it should also prove resistant to the demarcation of language (cf. Levin, 1998, p. 348). The closest we can get to unearthing its nature in language—that is, to the ontology between oneself and another—could well be through Levinas’s proposition of the *infinity* of another (see, for instance, Vasseleu, 1998, p. 89). The works of Giacometti, with their reticence, embodying a peculiar “isolation”—acting as they do as the “residue of a vision” (Sylvester, 1995, pp. 33-47)— can be seen as an attempt to substitute a kinaesthetic or “hazy” syncretic value in place of an unrepresentational moral imperative, “to exhume the invisibility of presence from what is visible” (Bonney, 2001, p. 17). This frisson between the infrastructure of sight and the *value* of another within its framework leads Giacometti back, again and again, to his diminutive or stretching anamorphic figures; their fugitive, “fleeting” presence flickering with implications of exteriority, of alterity—of, perhaps, a kind of *truth*.

The ambiguity of the other at the centre of Giacometti’s work is, I think, best left so—best granted privacy. His work though, it is clear, functions as a touchstone for his curious interrogation of vision. It is a plumb-line, a sextant in a very personal navigation:

This balance is important. [. . .] The fundamental idea is that the artist stands in a sensually challenged relationship with the world when he observes it. [. . .] Both artists [and here Tøjner speaks of Giacometti and Cézanne] are permanently at odds with the world. They chafe at it in an unresolved balance that demands articulation. Only then can they equalize the almost

² “. . . there is no self in isolation; our self at its core is social; our sense of who we are grows out of the space we share with others” (H. S. Sullivan cited in Belford Ulanov, 2005, p. 292; originally from *Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* 1953).

osmotic pressure that both ensure the exchange between artist and world and, finally, forces out a kind of empowering balance in and with the work, if it succeeds.

(Tøjner, 2008, p. 34)

This “osmotic pressure” calls to mind Sidi Larbi’s “drenched” experience of the world and suggests transverse, bodily activity, not only as a physical momentum, potentiality or resonance between bodies, but as something that articulates more abstract, perhaps ethical values. The continued resistance Giacometti encountered in respect to pictorial or sculptural resolution underlines what is absent from his pictures, what they cannot represent—that is, the specific nature of another, how we experience their meaning in proximity to our own lives:

For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give.

(Butler, 2010, p. 14, original emphasis)

The sculptural work of Antony Gormley finds the figure outside the confines of painting. His castings of himself and others allow us to relate to the figure in perhaps more direct ways. A practitioner of vipassana meditation, Gormley is deeply interested in his own personal occupation of space. He has been known to scrap castings of himself that fall short of a live, kinaesthetic or syncretic charge, what he calls their “internal potency” (cited in Levinson, 2001, p. 76). His castings give us a direct relationship to this “place” of the figure—it is natural for us to occupy these bodies, to put ourselves in their place, their scale, their world. As with Giacometti, the kinaesthetic impulse implicates more abstract values of embodiment. His work gives testament to how a figure fills space as well as how space fills a figure—the ways in which one informs the other. The process of casting neatly bypasses the artist’s personal gestural mark—the process of building, of writing—and replaces it with the gesture of simple volume, the residual, active memory of the presence of the self; or is it the other?

Many of his works have protrusions that mark the immediate space around the figure, most famously perhaps the *Angel of the North* (1995-1998), but also the *Quantum Cloud* series (1999-2000). Gormley here articulates an ambiguous threshold of the body, how its qualities or presence extend into space:

. . . that is what the *Angel* is for me. I mean, yes . . . it’s got these figurative overtones, but in fact, what it is . . . it’s a pylon with a wall driven through it—which is the wings—and the wall

registers, in a way, this, like, energy field; and the ribs, the interval between the ribs is . . . in a way an idea about this energy going sideways.

(Antony Gormley in “Angel of the North” [short film], 2:43-3:10, in Gormley, 2009)

There is a striking similarity in many of his works to Yogic concepts or “maps” of the body. Unsurprising, considering his time spent in India. According to classical Yogic texts the self consists of three “bodies” and five “sheaths” or *koshas*. The three bodies are the gross (physical) body, the subtle body and the causal body. The gross body contains one sheath, the *annamaya kosha*; the subtle body has three sheaths, the *pranamaya*, *manomaya*, and *vijnanamaya koshas*; and the causal body has but one sheath, the *anandamaya kosha*. These various levels mark different qualities of energy. The extent to which each level is inhabited by our consciousness depends upon its particular “vibration” (Moses, 2008/2010, p. 5). Yogic texts also prefigure the qualities of “interpenetration” found in both Giacometti’s and Gormley’s work as the consistent space of *atman*, a level of consciousness that pervades all space(s), found both inside and outside of each person (p. 4).

Gormley’s awareness of the various qualities or “frequencies” of the human body and one’s conscious habitation of these levels is reflected in sculptural works such as *Domain Field* (2003), a work he describes as references of “subtle bodies” and the “collective community” body that these bodies constitute (Gormley, 2009, 36:40-37:58). Stephen Levinson (2001) comments that his castings carry within them a causal, developmental quality, a pregnancy of the innate possibilities of the growth or “swelling” of the human form (p. 93-94). Gormley himself underscores this causal aspect of his work, saying that he is “interested in the body as a place of becoming” (cited in Blazwick, 2001, p. 146). His work has been seen as “exploring, on one level, *what it is* to inhabit this thing that is my body, your body; *your* body” (Tim Marlow cited in Gormley, 2009, 14:04-14:11, original emphasis). Gormley continually uncovers and plays with how materiality and site can express and communicate complex levels of human involvement.



Figure 7. "Shiloh no. 3" oil on canvas, 1170 x 1460 mm (second layer).

II

Historically, the features of painting that articulate or embody the gestalt or texture of the “transverse” body discussed in chapter two become perhaps more visible after the advent of photography in the late nineteenth century. The subsequent rise of Impressionism and other visual schools and genres signalled a departure from “photographic” treatments of the pictorial space and an embrace of different relationships between the self as a “body” and the picture plane (Crary, 1990). This arose mainly in the pursuit of autonomy from the photograph which could suddenly do the rendering task of painting without apparent effort.

There were, however, long before this, mimetic painting techniques that underscored the ambiguous role of the body in viewing practice. The pictorial distortion of anamorphosis was one clear cue for the shifting participation of the perceptual body. The oblique angle required of anamorphosis accepts and invites the viewer's body as active, in direct competition with the pictorial space of the painting (cf. Crary, 2001, p. 4). Viewed from the "correct" angle, the long, compressed or distended figures return once more to human-like proportions. On a sculptural note, Michelangelo's *David* (1501-1504) uses this technique.

Traces of a "transverse" impulse in figurative depictions go back as far as one cares to look. Prehistoric cave handprints are clear kinetic articulations, fusing bodily scale and tension (the spread hand) with pictorial figuration. Antony Gormley calls these images "wonderful silhouettes of individual cro-magnon [. . .] hands that in some way wave and touch us from the deep past" (Gormley, 2009, 2:24-2:53). His observation of "touch" through the medium of coloured clay or dust is apposite. As far as calculated, kinaesthetic, "visceral" figurative painting is concerned, an apogee can be found in the religious iconography of the suffering or dead Christ. These icons consolidated a formula of redemptive pathos through (or in spite of) suffering and were propagated to heighten the sincerity of the Church's congregation (Spivey, 2001, p. 48). These figures were often portrayed in contrapposto, another "transverse" technique, which capitalises on the body's active response to "frozen" depictions of the figure in movement. Once again, the kinaesthetic response kindles or leads a passage of more complex, abstract (moral) values. This formula has reappeared throughout art's history and for various ends (see, for instance, Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819)—Athanasoglou-Kallmyer, 2010, p. 122). What is particularly telling is that the gestalt of the Christ-like trope of personal transformation articulated through the transverse gesture and figure resurfaces, not only with Géricault, but within the contemporary practice of Jenny Saville, though her own values of transformation take a feminist standpoint: "I am trying to convert something that is not commonly held as beautiful through a process of sublimation" (Saville, cited in EDN, 2008, np). ("If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, [. . .] we will fail each other. Again. . . . Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads, disappear, make us disappear"—Irigaray & Burke, 1980, p. 69.)³ Apart from the timbre and polemic of her imagery, Saville's work articulates a concentrated commitment on the part of the painter's body towards figuration and the process

³ This text is inscribed (backwards) in Saville's work *Propped* (1992).

of painting. Paintings such as those by Lucien Freud, Marlene Dumas, or even Eric Fischl lean towards this extremity but invariably fall short of Saville's investiture. This extremity is a clear yoke of the transverse flesh within painting. The expressive body pushes towards clear speech. Saville invites this bodily condensation—this “sublimation”—both in the viewer and in herself.

The cultural contextualisation of the “transverse” impulse/response is particularly evident when we look at the American Abstract Expressionists who, arguably, took the “pure” kinaesthetic gesture to its limit. Michael Leja (1993) locates the place of the subjective body of the “New York School” as enmeshed in what he calls the “Modern Man discourse” of its day. “New York School art”, Leja writes, “was involved in a broad cultural project—reconfiguring the individual (white heterosexual male) subject for a society whose dominant models of subjectivity were losing credibility” (p. 39). The reified abstraction of the transverse subject/body incorporated by the artists of the Abstract Expressionist “movement”—what Krauss determines as a “horizontal” body in the works of Jackson Pollock (Krauss 1999/2005)—allowed its meaning to undergo radical and almost constant metamorphosis. The conceptual hinge of the works of the “New York School” has about as many different manifestations as there are critics (Leja, 1993, p. 42).

Today the painted transverse gesture (and figure) finds a home periodically, in works such as those by Jenny Saville, Antony Gormley, Euan Macleod, and perhaps, Lucien Freud, but as a mode it remains largely abandoned. Perhaps “out-dated” or perhaps just too subjective or impertinent, it waits on the verge of perception for yet another incarnation.



Figure 8. "Sarah no 1." oil on canvas (second layer—detail)

Yellow Shift

The time span of these pages encompasses a valuable period of development in my work. I began this course seeking a stable and invigorating environment to unlock a painting practice—and that's exactly what I found. The last twelve years or so the work has concentrated on drawing [figs. 9-10, p. 28]. Its relative simplicity allowed me to become more and more aware of various qualities of the creative process: its starts and stops; the opacity of "vision"; the clumsiness (the difficult honesty) of rendering; the deep well from where mark-making springs; and that palpable, ambiguous link between the body and the eye. The challenge has always been to extend this level of consciousness into paint. During

the last two years I slowly pulled apart the “engine” of painting in an effort to find its limitations and strengths—to become as aware as possible of its slippery idiom in practice. The painting’s ground has undergone a shift from a deep reddy brown [fig. 3, p. 10] to a rawer feel, treated with rabbit-skin glue [fig. 4, p. 14]. I have briefly experimented with an acrylic wash underneath this glue to suggest more depth in the painting though I abandoned this for sake of clarity. I have dissolved wax with powdered pigments [fig. 1, p. 2], briefly tried poppy oil for its clarity and qualities of “cutting”—an action of removing or manipulating paint with spatulas [fig. 2, p. 6]—and finally settled on a translucent glaze that holds the crispness of painterly activity (wax can be sloppy), “cuts” well, and stands *in between* the ground and the volume of the figure, activating a “positive ground”, similar to the drawing. The use of rabbit skin glue was later abandoned. I settled on a transparent gesso having always felt it a little strange and unnecessary to use part of a dead animal to prepare a painting.

All this was relatively straight forward. The work consisted of finding a vibrant level of activity that constituted a layer of paint. Not too overworked, but not too spare either. The compositions of the work stemmed from a feeling of frankness and “proximity” found in the photographs of W. Eugene Smith (1969), Nan Goldin (2003), Larry Fink (2001), among others, exemplified perhaps in the “extreme close up” approach to the frame in David Lynch’s *Inland Empire* (2006). I also was attracted by the “dissolution” and close cropping found in the portraits of Sally Mann (Ravenal, 2010). This “proximity” was attempted through working from life, from the live studio encounter with the subject. After experimenting with the time-frame of each period or session of work I discovered a curious “plateau” after about an hour or two of work. The painting, marks and myself would literally “open up” with a feeling of freedom and flow—surpassing even the drawings with its sense of depth. After I decided to try and leave each painting at this level I struck a wall. The depth of the painting in front of me still didn’t articulate this sense of freedom. Looking again and yet again at the work I uncovered a curious fault: a lack of yellow. I looked again at Saville and saw, at last, her pervasive use of yellow, the way it linked other areas—the reds, the blues and greens. Turning to de Kooning I registered his own passionate use of yellow. Monet, Manet, Degas, Lautrec, Kanevsky, Freud, Mcleod and Borremans, even Bacon: everywhere I looked there was an expansive or linking use of yellow—figures vibrated with the stuff. And at last, looking at Rembrandt, I finally saw the subtle golds and



Figure 9. "Draught" exhibition view, Bowen Galleries, Wellington NZ, June 2011
(Image Stephen A'Court).



Figure 10. "Louise" charcoal on paper, 1170 x 1460 mm (2011)
(Image Stephen A'Court).

ochres that modulated and held the space from colour to colour. How could I have been so blind? Could such a basic chromatic shift open the depth of the painting? I was eager to find out. I had always mixed my own colours—up to about forty to fifty or so, both in glaze and thinned [fig. 11, this page]—in preparation for each painting and had begun a process of “in-palette” mixing to modulate areas within certain chromatic fields, to hold the painting together for the ever-precarious passage of the eye. My journey towards yellow was a subtle one—I mixed a range of light greens, heavy with mars yellow, and the work began to open, ever-so-slowly [fig. 13, p. 34]. At this time I also started thinning the glazes to give as much voice to the ground as possible [fig. 12, p. 30]. The technical considerations primarily clarified the dynamic range of the painting process—to expand its register as much as possible.



Figure 11. Studio Floor, Massey University (January 2012).



Figure 12. "Reflection no. 8" oil on canvas, 1170 x 1460 mm (first layer).

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.

(STANLEY KUBRICK, *Dr. Strangelove*, 1964, title)

The first time I talked while doing the *Accumulation* I said, “My father died in between the making of this move and this move”. Which knocked me out. I was amazed that my body had stored this memory in the movement pattern I became silent and composed myself. I was devastated that I had said that.

(Trisha Brown, cited in Rainer, 2001, p. 52)

Experience becomes trapped and/or expressed in our bodies every day. Our simple posture can betray our mood. Emotional habits become physically etched in the ways we go about our lives. Trauma, more insidious than everyday experience, can reside unrealised in the muscle tissue. It slumbers, troll-like, beneath the bridge of consciousness, colouring and distorting experience. That the body traps and “incubates” memory has been observed in dance practice (see, for instance, Nelson, 2006, 4:10-5:08). The above passage from Trisha Brown illustrates the often disturbing momentum of such memory, (un)locked in the somatic tissue. Dance therapy, sometimes used for rehabilitation in cases of post-traumatic stress disorder, can help sufferers come to terms with the nature of trauma by (re)aligning knotted sensation and memory with the “lived” present. Novel narratives of movement are sought to capture, address and restructure what was previously inassimilable. In this way a person learns to move *with* and *past* what he or she was previously moved *by*.

Marta Zarzycha’s essay “The Force of Recalling: Pain in the Visual Arts” (2009) presents pain and trauma on the one hand as objective and communal, akin to a collective unconscious, and on the other hand as highly personalised, where each person’s experience of pain is unique. She links the construction of one’s identity in relation to pain through the construction or documentation of memory through art-making, a process that Freud calls “*Nachträglichkeit*” (see Silverman, 2009, p. 42). This (re)construction of identity, through pictures and sculpture—as in the work of Frida Kahlo or Alina Szapocznikow—becomes a way of chronicling the self, making sense of one’s past and present:

Stories are an important element of the therapeutic journey. Since the core problem in PTSD consists of a failure to integrate upsetting experiences into an autobiographical memory, the goal of treatment is to find a way in which people can acknowledge the reality of what has happened, without having to re-experience the trauma all over again. For this to occur, merely uncovering memories is not enough: they need to be modified and transformed: placed in their proper context and reconstructed into neutral or meaningful narratives. Thus, in therapy, memory paradoxically becomes an act of creation, rather than the static recording of events which is characteristic of trauma-based memories.

(Jeanette MacDonald, 1992/2006, p. 55)

The coherence of an artwork or series of artworks, then, requires and facilitates an amount of coherence on the part of the practitioner (see Foster, 2004, pp. 257-301; Jung, 1997, pp. 162-163; cf. Weiss, 1992, p. 98; Zarzycha, 2009, p. 148). Artworks are seen as modes of storytelling—modalities of remembrance or memory—and take on many of the qualities of spoken narratives. Even works that purposely align themselves against narrative, like the paintings of Francis Bacon, can be seen to articulate another kind of narrative. For van Alphen, Bacon's sense of narrative springs from the destabilisation of the modernist's/positivist's identification of the self with the gaze: “[f]or Bacon, perception is a philosophical problem, and the narrative effect of his paintings tells the story of this problem” (van Alphen, 1993, p. 51). Narratives invite our identification and immersion in their structure and can manipulate this (bodily) involvement through their progression and cadence:

Storytelling synthesizes somatic experience. It organizes the elements of experience into a body form that gives us a personal shape, a direction, and even a felt sense of meaning. That's why I insist on looking for the body in a story, rather than looking for symbols and their meanings. In this way we experience the cortical man talking to the subcortical.

(Keleman, 1999, p. 75)

The impact of trauma dislocates and falls outside the coherent sense of self, distorting the gestalt pattern of the body. Its reintegration forms a new kind of somatic knowledge in the sufferer (Zarzycha, 2009, pp. 144-145). Zarzycha states that this sense of reconciliation reveals a contagious circuit operating within artistic practice with the artwork at its crux: “. . . the affect goes further in its power to immerse the artist, the art object and the viewer in a circuit of sensations that ruptures the individual modes of remembrance and self-reflexivity” (p. 148). The experience of trauma and pain outlines a visceral and emotional bond between the viewer and the artist through the artwork—one that perhaps does not necessarily need to

articulate the extreme degrees of trauma. Jill Bennett (2005) sees this bond as articulating a “sense effect” or bodily “sense memory” that operates through the artwork and viewing practice. The (traumatic) artwork contains “a trigger for, or embodiment of, conscience” (p. 77). How the body receives and decodes this sense effect—this manifestation of conscience—is by the way it operates in space, a particular system of bodily “exfoliations” (p. 75). Here again, the body vibrates on a frequency close to the phenomenological moral “trace” (see chapter one), or Merleau-Ponty’s *chiasm* (see chapter two). Physical and pictorial space are replete with social implication; they are rendered porous and are superimposed with the structures of emotion and what could be called a common feeling, empathy or generosity towards one another.

This rehabilitative application of artistic practice embodies an important recognition of ourselves in and through (visual, pictorial) stories. This underscores a relatively abandoned holistic aspect of art. Artists, through their work, become (sometimes unwitting) storytellers. Art that addresses or articulates the “scarred” or “open psyche” of the individual illuminates artistic practice as ethical in a most straight forward and “sensible” way (Keleman, 1999, p. 7). The role trauma plays in and through artworks outlines their participation in a circuit of complex empathy. Far from simplistic, the application of art towards personal, intuitive, functional freedom sees the human subject in a most complex manner, enmeshed in qualities of personal fluency and growth. What is at stake through the practice of these narratives is personal validity. This congruent subjectivity finds itself inextricably linked to a moral order:

The validity of such understanding can never correspond to the way things are (one cannot get into the same river twice). The validity of such understanding is rather in the way it ‘carries forward’ meanings into new productive relationships in the future. Validity in this sense cannot thus be separated from a consideration of use and ethics.

(Todres, 2007, p. 24)



Figure 13. "Richard no. 3" oil on canvas, 1170 x 1460 mm (first layer).

Indeed, how do we sing? For whom? And against what?

(ALLEN S. WEISS, 1992, p. 102)

The face, if we are to put words to its meaning, will be that for which no words really work; the face seems to be a kind of sound, the sound of language evacuating its sense, the sonorous substratum of vocalization that precedes and limits the delivery of any semantic sense.

(Judith Butler, 2010, p. 7)

The portrayal of the face as an “event”, an “enigma” (Bonney, 2001, p. 9), has served as a painter’s grail for centuries. Its role as a *mise en abyme* or psychological touchstone reveals a depth of character in the sitter and, correspondingly, a depth in the viewer and artist.

Historically such “depth” can be found in the works of Rembrandt and Velázquez, among others, but it was not until the twentieth century that ambiguities of character were explored explicitly through exaggerated, “expressive” kinetic painting, such as in the works of Van Gogh, Munch, Soutine, Kokoschka, Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach, Giacometti, Lucien Freud, and Jenny Saville. It could be said that these works seek to uncover an interiority—of another, of the self, or of process—through a rupture or disturbance of the illusory “skin” of the painted subject, as well as the painting itself.⁴

Judith Butler (2010) stresses a “precariousness” or openness that a face must be given or *allowed to possess* in order for it to be itself, to be honest or direct—to be, simply, complexly, human. This vulnerability comes about, for Butler, from a disassociation from any overt polemic “framing” of the image. Butler specifically addresses this subjectivity in photographic representations of the other but her call for an unalloyed responsibility for another by way of the image easily pertains to the realm of painting. What is it to see another clearly? Is it at all possible through the materiality of paint, through the apprehension and

⁴ Deleuze specifically posits the “diagram” as a region of such “disturbance”; it facilitates what he calls a kind of “dissolution”: “[p]ainting gives us eyes all over: in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs (the painting breathes . . .)” (Deleuze 2003, p. 37).

capabilities of the painter? Does the voice or “signature” of the painter overwhelm the subject? Do all paintings, then, become self-portraits? In short, how transparent are the painter and the painting in their recognition of another?

Portraits are known by the name of the artist as much as by the name of the sitter. Such and such a painting is a “Velásquez” as much as it is of “Pope Innocent X”. This image, in turn, “belongs” to a context of classical Spanish Painting, as well as being a progenitor for Francis Bacon’s series of homage paintings of the same name. The identity of the sitter, then, becomes enmeshed into a broader cultural context of recognition. The mode of address (ie, painting) and the oeuvre of the artist seem to “contain” the image or identity of the subject. According to Diane Perpich (2010) this constitutes a Levinasian “failure” of representation to adhere to the ontology or ethical integrity of another’s identity (pp. 31-33). The painting is a view *from* as much as it is a view *towards*, or, even, an invocation *of*. In the politics of identity portraiture seems of little value as it can never escape being an address of the artist towards a sitter.

Standing in front of a work we often wonder *who* this person *is* or *was like*, embedded—to an extent “lost”—and gazing out from pictorial space, perhaps enclosed with the physical accoutrements of identity: the glasses, the open book, the peculiar clothing. We are relegated to summate the posture and the gaze of those portrayed for cues of psychological depth (fierce? Demure? Composed? Recriminating?). The risk of over- or under-reading is palpable. From that disarming moment when Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) locked gazes with us from within the “picture-object” (see Foucault, 2009), there has been an often furious dialectic of the pictorial gaze and those gazed upon within the frame.

The transparency of the portrait, its “faithfulness” to the sitter’s presence can be evaluated with respect to how the work itself is recognised, by its own internal logic—in a sense its own “face”. Francis Bacon’s portraits, for instance, purport to address the nervous system of the viewer, transmitting qualities of the sitter with more “immediacy” (Sylvester, 1975, p. 82, p. 104, p. 105). Soutine’s portraits approach—and perhaps prompt—Bacon’s gestural treatment of pictorial space, and are imbued with “visceral” perception. His predilection for sitters he did not know allowed, perhaps, his pictorial distortions without risk of offence or, more importantly, self-consciousness on his part (Tuchman, et al., 1993, p. 509)—something Bacon could only achieve through the “distance” of the photograph (Sylvester, 2002, p. 32).

Giacometti's portraits seem to render the tension that lies *between* sitter and artist, a quality so taut it is like the silence that falls before a sound (cf. Sylvester, 1995, pp. 165-175).

At best the activity of the portrait is based on a mutual understanding between the sitter and the artist. In my experience, rather than the sitter being vulnerable to the vicissitudes of painting, its process becomes open and culpable to this person before me. The face becomes the authority, its presence *there*, folded into and piercing space, like the prow of a ship, forever intangible but somehow articulated, articulating. The painting becomes a reflection of the sitter's gift of integrity—of simple presence. Somehow . . . the painting holds space. An armature begins to form, then nuance. The face becomes translated into the rhythm of gesture, the particularities of colour. In a sense, a document is forged, not of the moment of the one seeing the other, but of the fold of process towards this meeting. Precariousness is all.



Figure 14. "Richard no. 4" oil on canvas, 1170 x 1460 mm (first layer).

Coda:

*This cast-off skin is our land and home, which our body has forcibly ripped away.
This cast-off skin is totally different from that other skin that our body has lost.
They are divided in two. One skin is that of the body approved by society. The
other skin is that which has lost its identity. So, they need to be sewn together . . .*

(TATSUMI HIJIKATA, Lizzie Slater [trans.] in Hoffman & Holborn, 1987, p. 121)

*In our culture of pictures, the gaze itself flattens into a picture and loses its
plasticity. Instead of experiencing our being in the world, we behold it from
outside as spectators of images projected on the surface of the retina.*

(JOHANI PALLASMAA, 2008, p. 30)

*So noble, so receptive yet creative, is our faculty of seeing, that it goes out,
like a courteous host to a welcome guest, to meet and dignify whatever
comes to it.*

(JOHN DRURY, 1999/2002, p. 71)

The preceding chapters show the body opening on a variety of levels syncretically, ways in which it is woven into both social, mutual space, and into and through artworks in particular. Paintings can be seen as a hinge that connects people in ways that supersede theoretical analysis; that is, we all share “unsaid” qualities through paintings that relate to how we live every day, in our shared encounters with others and in our quiet, most unguarded moments as individuals. They embody a practice that unearths bodily truths and inclinations that can

shed light on the complexities of our lives. Each painter has the opportunity to make sense of the ambiguities of how they experience life through their own particular immersion in the “language” of painting, through its own internal, intuitive logic, and to communicate this whole encounter to others. The “blurred”, uncertain boundaries of painting can tell us as much about ourselves as those aspects that we recognise more explicitly; the qualities that express and articulate cultural values are just as relevant as these values themselves. To be sure, culture is always evolving and changing, but paintings show that part of us still chooses to leave traces on the walls of caves, whatever changing constitution these traces may be.

Paintings can be seen to address a modern pathology of vision, the “fast-food” diet of consumer imagery. Forever articulating desire, modern advertising impels a sense of *lack*; an abstracted, disembodied space with little allowance for immediate, “holistic” being (Marks, 2002, p. 116). Hijikata speaks of sewing lost and found skins together and this, I believe, is what painting (along with all good art) is capable of. It is a validity of bodily understanding or reconciliation reached by the artist through their work that invokes a response in kind, if we are willing to listen closely enough.

Jan Verwoert, speaking at the One Day Sculpture Symposium (Wellington, NZ March 26-28, 2009), concluded his paper with the image and parable of Saint Jerome, at ease in his library within arm’s reach of a lion. Verwoert invited an attitude of generosity when encountering the variety of One Day sculptures, a generosity that takes precedent in Saint Jerome’s encounter. This wild, predatory animal was welcomed by Jerome into his library and his daily routine. For me the lion in the story easily takes on the role of one’s body in art and life. Welcoming this animal, acknowledging its part in perception and finding a space for it to speak in practice, with whatever “burden and bewilderment” it may carry (Kazuo Ohno cited in Fraleigh, 1999, p. 85), becomes an invaluable task for any painter or artist. Its role is ambiguous—often ambivalent—but underscores a visceral tone of honesty in the way we see ourselves and others. I always know when I have returned to the heart of practice, to the familiar lilt and precociousness of the body:

When I felt the roll of the deck again it was a source of comfort to me. I knew the feel of the waves underneath those boards like I knew the feel of my own bed or the pattern of my breathing. There was an animal mind in the ocean and I felt calmer against it, reassured by its buffets against our boat, gentle and heavy as a cow’s, the character of muscles shifting in the watery back we rested upon and slipped within.

(Clayton, 2011, p. 157)

My feelings toward the arts and toward painting in particular come from a very personal and intimate place, and may not fit the staple of today's amorous art viewer. A gap of literal meaning may well present itself to viewers of my work, some looking for the conceptual hinge, for this or that pictorial cue that indicates features of identity or impending culture. I am happy to give this viewer little, if anything to go on. The place of the body in my work, that of my own perceptual body and that of my peering subject, articulates an ongoing validity, a "visceral" quality of apprehension, a study of the simple fact of presence. I hope the work will always continue to surprise and, quite frequently, elude me, its consistency and "simplicity" the result of days of hours looking for a cadence of those "right" mistakes—that particular fusion of marks and gesture that coalesce into a fragile, "precarious" experience of a face or person. This position perhaps marks a weather-worn hermetic stereotype of the artist, but one with some rather esteemed company, as I hope this paper shows.



Figure 15. Studio Floor II, Massey University (January 2012).

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