

THE SHOCK OF THE NOW

Retail space and the road to nowhere

by

GAVIN CAMPBELL BFA Hons, MFA

**Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

**School of Visual and Performing Arts
University of Tasmania**

October 2011

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

The material contained in this paper is original, except where due acknowledgement is given, and has not been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

Signed: GAVIN CAMPBELL

STATEMENT OF AUTHORITY TO ACCESS

This thesis may be made available for loan and limited copying in accordance with
the *Copyright Act 1968*.

Signed: GAVIN CAMPBELL

ABSTRACT

The project is focused on my interpretation of my workaday experience, my attempt to navigate the many layers of the retail space of the supermarket, and the enigmatic landscape of the suburban environment. My premise is that retail and suburban environments can have a dehumanizing effect on the individual. Elements such as alienation and dislocation move beyond their supermarket and suburban associations to permeate my observations. My work is reflective of this process. The paint appears bleached, having a sterile quality reflecting the effect of the supermarket and suburbs on my emotional state. The fluorescent lights of the supermarket and the white concrete of the suburbs reach out and become part of my imagination, sapping colour and forcing me to rethink the relationship between the built environment and my self.

During my time as a worker in the retail environment of the supermarket, I began to experience a questioning process that led me to this investigation. Mentally I had to occupy an expressive space in parallel with my workaday experience. This dual existence of working and observation and interpretation of my workplace, helped me to make sense of the issues around alienation and desolation I experienced in the supermarket. The project allowed me to occupy a point of observation. I realised I had an opportunity to maximise my investigation by developing my ideas in an academic context, and voice my experience and outcomes through painting and writing.

Through my art I attempt to make sense of environments that I perceive as being in opposition to my sense of humanity. These spaces challenge my ideals around the relationship between human beings and their environment and I therefore see them as an ideal subject to develop my ideas around sense of place.

I believe contemporary urban spaces can affect a sense of dislocation from society. The products of many modernist artist and writers such as Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, John Steinbeck's *Hour of Pearl* in *Cannery Row* and George Orwell's utopia under Big Brother in *1984*, Albert Camus' *The Rebel* and John Paul Sartre's *Nausea* have been inspired by this experience of dislocation. I find parallels to these ideas in the abstract expressionism of Mark Rothko, and the eerie, melancholic environments of Paul Nash and Andrew Wyeth. The social commentary of Richard Hamilton and Andy Warhol anticipate the absurdist turn to postmodernism, which is further filtered through the social positioning of critics such as John Ralston Saul, Christopher Lasch and Paul Virilio and mediated through Jacky Bowring's writing on melancholy. I refer also to the social irony of artist Jeff Koons, selected enigmatic landscapes by Bill Henson and the washed out paintings of Luc Tuymans, Fiona McMonagle and Jon Cattapan. My own work is positioned in this reductionist style to comment on the alienation I have experienced through contemporary consumerism and my transition from passive worker to active observer.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my thanks to my supervisors, Emeritus Professor Vincent McGrath, Dr Deborah Malor and Ms Penny Mason for their inspiring support. Their informed guidance and accessibility was invaluable and greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank the School of Visual and Performing Arts for providing a rich and simulating environment in which to carry out the project.

I would like to thank my parents for their ongoing financial and emotional support, without which this project would not have been possible.

This project is dedicated to Rebecca for her unconditional love and support, and for her intelligent and inspired contribution.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of figures	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: SURVIVAL IN THE DESERT	6
CHAPTER TWO: FORCED CONFESSIONS	44
CHAPTER THREE: GOD SPEED (SIGNIFICANCE)	63
CONCLUSION	99
REFERENCES	104
BIBLIOGRAPHY	107
APPENDIX 1: EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION	110

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1 Edward Hopper, *New York Office*, 1962, 101.6 x 139.7 cm, Collection of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama, The Blout Collection, (Source: Schmied 1995, pp. 102–103).
- Figure 2 Andrew Wyeth, *The Mill*, oil on canvas, 1959, 36.5 x 57.8 cm, private collection, (Source: Corn 1973, p. 15).
- Figure 3 Andrew Wyeth, *Weather Side*, tempera 1965, 121.9 x 70.5 cm, Mr. and Mrs. Alexander M. Laughlin, (Source: Corn 1975, p. 159).
- Figure 4 Andrew Wyeth, *Wind from the Sea*, 1947, tempera 48.3 x 71 cm, private collection, (Source: Corn 1975, p. 125).
- Figure 5 James Whistler, *Nocturne in Blue and Green: Chelsea*, 1870, oil on panel, 48.2 x 39.8 cm, Tate Gallery, London, (Source: Spalding 1979, p. 52).
- Figure 6 James Whistler, *Nocturne in Blue and Gold*, c 1875, oil on wood, 66.6 x 50.2 cm, Tate Gallery, (Source: Spalding 1979, p. 53).
- Figure 7 Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893, oil on cardboard, 91.4 x 73.7 cm, Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, (Source: Hughes 1991 [1980], p. 282).
- Figure 8 Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, oil on canvas, 84.1 x 152.4 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection, (Source: Schmied 1995, pp. 56–57).
- Figure 9 Edward Hopper, *Morning Sun*, 1952, oil on canvas, 71.4 x 101.9 cm, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio, Museum Purchase: Howell Fund, (Source: Schmied 1997, p. 79).
- Figure 10 Edward Hopper, *Rooms By the Sea*, 1951, oil on canvas, 73.7 x 101.6 cm, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, 1903, (Source: Schmied 1995, p. 17).
- Figure 11 Edward Hopper, *Approaching a City*, 1946, oil on canvas, 68.6 x 91.4 cm, The Phillips Collection, Washington DC, (Source: Schmied 1995, p. 101).
- Figure 12 Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1957, oil on canvas, 201.9 x 177.2 cm, private collection, Zurich, (Source: Waldman 1978, p. 168).
- Figure 13 Mark Rothko, *Light Earth and Blue*, 1954, oil on canvas, 193 x 170.2 cm, private collection, (Source: Waldman 1978, p. 174).

- Figure 14 Mark Rothko, *Green, Red on Orange*, 1950, oil on canvas, 236.2 x 149.9 cm, courtesy The Pace Gallery (Copyright issues), (Source: Waldman 1978, p.151).
- Figure 15 Mark Rothko, *Brown and Grey*, 1969, acrylic on paper, 157.5 x 122 cm, lent anonymously, (Source: Waldman 1978, p. 261).
- Figure 16 Paul Nash, *Nocturnal Landscape*, 1938, oil, 76.2 x 101.6 cm, Manchester City Art Gallery, (Source: Eates 1973).
- Figure 17 Paul Nash, *We Are Making a New World*, 1918, oil on canvas, 71.1 x 91.4 cm, (Source: Eates 1973).
- Figure 18 Paul Nash, *Environment of Two Objects*, 1937, 52.1 x 77.5 cm, Leichestor Gallery 1938, Tate Gallery 1948, (Source: Eates 1973).
- Figure 19 Paul Nash, *Empty Room*, 1937, watercolour, 37.5 x 55.9 cm, (Source: Eates 1973).
- Figure 20 Callum Morton, *Belvedere*, 1995, mixed media, dimensions variable, (Source: *Art and Australia*, vol. 42, p. 582).
- Figure 21 Jeffrey Smart, *Holiday*, 1970, oil on canvas, viewed 9 Jun 2011, (Source: Australian Fine Art Editions 2011, <http://www.australianfinearteditions.com/pages/enlargement_artists_works.php?current=32&workID=53&artistID=3>).
- Figure 22 Callum Morton, *Farnshaven: Illinois*, 2001, digital print, 59 x 84 cm, (Source: *Art and Australia*, vol. 42, p. 583).
- Figure 23 Food aisles, Fred Meyer, Portland, 2000, photographer unknown, viewed 10 June 2006, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fredmeyer_edit_1.jpg>.
- Figure 24 Bill Henson, *Untitled #2*, 2000–2003, type C photograph, 127 x 180 cm, edition of 5, (Source: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, viewed 12 May 2011, <http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artist/18/Bill_Henson/98>).
- Figure 25 Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, 2006, oil and pencil on canvas, 50 x 60.5 cm.
- Figure 26 Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988, 106.7 x 179.1 x 82.5 cm, ceramic, (Source: Caldwell 1993, p.96).
- Figure 27 Jeff Koons, *Rabbit*, 1986, stainless steel, dimensions variable, (Source: Caldwell 1993, p. 86).

- Figure 28 Jeff Koons, *New Hoover Convertible*, 1980, vacuum cleaner, plexiglass, fluorescent lights, 142.2 x 57.2 x 57.2 cm (Source: Caldwell 1993, p. 49).
- Figure 29 Richard Hamilton, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?*, 1956, collage, 26 x 24.8 cm, Kunsthalle, Tübingen, (Source: Hughes 1991, [1980], p. 343).
- Figure 30 Richard Hamilton, *\$he*, 1958-61, oil, cellulose and collage on panel, 122 x 81 cm, Tate Gallery, (Source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=5829&tabview=image>).
- Figure 31 Richard Hamilton, *Hommage à Chrysler Corp.*, 1957, oil, metal foil, and collage on panel, 122 x 81 cm., private collection, (Source: Hamilton 1992, p.74).
- Figure 32 Gavin Campbell, *Domestic Interior 1*, 2010, oil and pencil on canvas, 30.5 x 40.5 cm.
- Figure 33 Gavin Campbell, *Domestic Interior 2*, 2010, oil and pencil on canvas, 30.5 x 40.5 cm.
- Figure 34 Luc Tuymans, *Within*, 2001, oil on canvas 223 x 243 cm, (Source: Saatchi Gallery, viewed 17 May 2011, http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artist/luc_tuymans.htm).
- Figure 35 Gavin Campbell, *Coke*, 2008, oil and pencil on canvas, 50 x 60.5 cm.
- Figure 36 Gavin Campbell, *Long Life Milk*, 2008, oil and pencil on canvas, 30.5 x 40.5 cm.
- Figure 37 Luc Tuymans, *Dusk*, 2004, oil on canvas, 166 x 260 cm, (Source: Art News, viewed 17 May 2011, <http://.artnews.org/luctuymans/?i=8>).
- Figure 38 Gavin Campbell, *Another Day*, 2010, oil and pencil on canvas, 50.0 x 60.5 cm.
- Figure 39 Luc Tuymans, *Nuclear Power Plant*, oil on canvas, (Source: Friends of Art, viewed 17 may 2011, <http://www.friendsofart.net/en/art/luc-tuymans/nuclear-plant>).
- Figure 40 Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, 2006, oil and pencil on canvas, 50 x 60.5 cm.
- Figure 41 Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, 2008, oil and pencil on canvas, 30.5 x 40.5 cm.

- Figure 42 Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, 2009, oil and pencil on canvas, 41 x 51 cm.
- Figure 43 Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, 2010, oil and pencil on canvas, 50.5 x 60.5 cm.
- Figure 44 Gavin Campbell, *Cornercopia*, (detail) 2009, oil and pencil on canvas, 35.5 x 45.5 cm.
- Figure 45 Fiona McMonagle, *Up on the Roof*, 2010, watercolour and gouache on paper, 100 x 72 cm, (Source: Crawford 2010, p. 171).
- Figure 46 Fiona McMonagle, *I'm His Because He Deserves the Finest*, 2009, watercolour and gouache on paper, 114 x 95 cm, (Source: Crawford 2010, p. 173).
- Figure 47 Jon Cattapan, *The Group Discusses*, 2002, oil on linen, (Source: *The Age*, July 2006, viewed 19 May 2011, <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/arts-reviews/the-drowned-world/2006/07/31/1154198048005.html>>).
- Figure 48 Gavin Campbell, *Gone Shopping*, 2008, oil and pencil on canvas, 50.x 60.5 cm.
- Figure 49 Andy Warhol, *200 Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, oil on canvas, 182.9 x 254 cm, private collection, (Source: Hughes 1991 [1980], p. 349).
- Figure 50 Bill Henson, *Untitled #74*, 2000–2003, type C photograph, 127 x 180 cm, edition of 5, (Source: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, viewed 12 May 2011, <http://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/artist/18/Bill_Henson/98>).
- Figure 51 Kenyon Cox, *Tradition*, 1916, oil on canvas, 106 x 165.5 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Modern Art, (Source: Hughes 1997, p. 222).

INTRODUCTION

I walked from my car to the library to get an enrolment form for my PhD. On the way I passed the empty rectangle of grass where my studio used to be. I kept walking and came across another empty area where my undergraduate studios had been and yet another vacant space where the University's art school administration building once stood. Being confronted with the strangeness of these vacant spaces I immediately thought that what might seem utterly important and indispensable can also be... nothing. I imagined myself painting in the Master's studio a few feet off the ground, walking up the steps to the entrance, now just grass and air. Looking at these spaces as I write, I feel like a voyeur, exposing the very essence of each building that no longer exists, just by looking at where it used to be. I can see through it now. It is utterly transparent. This evokes in me a strange mix of grief and freedom, like losing a fair-weather friend; you miss them but you are free. This idea of empty space where something important once existed can evoke a kind of nostalgia; a feeling of melancholy that seems to contrast with the bold certainty and permanency of the other spaces I am investigating, the retail, supermarket environment and the suburban environment.

I know that one day the supermarket building, surrounded by the suburbs, will cease to exist (and I might like to be around when this day comes) but having worked in this space for four years after leaving the richness of the learning environment of the university, it is as if it changes little and will exist forever. This to me is an illusion of permanence generated through the physicality of the building and the perception of time I experienced 'on the inside'. Often while working, the word 'continuum' would

occupy my thoughts. It was a feeling of foreverness; that I could exist here forever within this building that seemed so self-confidently established. This permanency comes about because of humankind's perceived need for a particular environment. Many people rely on it as a source of food, employment and shelter, not to mention the sense of security felt in taking your product home to the suburbs and knowing you can go back for more any time. All these survival-based issues give the supermarket a beacon-like quality and no one wants to see the light go out. I see this as a similar thing to death. Human beings live their lives striving forward a little further every day as if death is a myth. We travel faster and faster towards the grave and are in danger of missing the journey. In the same way as the ignoring of death, our minds latch on to the 'seeing is believing' philosophy and it seems impossible to imagine that this place so visually loaded and full of people and life could ever die. For me this feeling was magnified because often at work my mind wandered beyond the everyday to actually seeking out this end-day. The grind forced my mind to look for the end of it all. My environment was urging me to 'speed things up', while the fluorescent lights continued to light up the faces and faceless products, and so I continued with the word 'continuum' still in my mind.

My project explores the ideas of permanence and transition through painting. I am interested in the importance human beings attach to the permanent – that if something appears important to us, and we are told often enough that it is, then our perception can shift and our desires can change. I believe human beings are becoming confused and stressed about what they perceive as important to have in their lives. This leads many of us to be kind of scanners, not knowing what to rest on, the result of which is a depressed apathy, an existential despair, Sartre's (1938) 'terrible freedom'.

Eight years ago I wrote: 'I see buildings as people, strong with pride and reluctant to move'. Now, with the relocation of the art school from Newnham to Inveresk, the very building in which those words were written has died. As the wind blows the leaves across the grassy void I think of the contrast between this space and the space of the supermarket. This is a free space where there is no pressure, no demands and no people. Here there is room to feel. My workplace, in which I am now only part-time, is an opposite universe where control is the key. The suburbs, which continue to spread across Australia, lie as a kind of in-between zone, between life and death, where consumers mostly spend their time sleeping. Along with this suburban sprawl creeps the fog of melancholy, the atmosphere which envelops and signifies the in-between of the suburban.

The supermarket environment with its concrete and steel is constantly asserting its foreverness. I can almost imagine it saying to the world, 'I could never cease to exist, look how strong I am, look how many people I give shelter to. I give them somewhere to go to fill their lives with meaning – I protect them'. It is tempting to believe the concrete giant and one almost does if one spends enough time in its shadow as I have. Because one really knows that it won't exist forever, a kind of scaffold or façade is created to hide its real impermanence. The retail and suburban environments complete with their forever-young complexion occupy my imagination as physical metaphors for humankind's fear of death and almost universal obsession for all that is young and novel. The content of advertisements for major brands like Coke, KFC and the latest mobile phone are good examples of this. Sexy young people frolicking on the beach refreshing and refueling themselves after a hard half-hour of text communication are the type of TV scenario for consumers. Human beings are

constantly reminded how important it is to stay young and to eat and drink and own the coolest product:

Coca-Cola have found the Holy Grail of marketing. It has managed to embed in our culture such a powerful set of associations and meanings for its product that it can activate parts of the brain its competition cannot reach. We have not so much been brainwashed into drinking Coca-Cola: We have had our brains rewired to want it (Hamilton & Denniss 2005: 42).

I open Chapter One of this paper with product obsession in mind as I critically examine the milieu of the supermarket in which I once worked. I go on to explore my psychological reaction to this environment, and the kind of art that this reaction leads me to identify with, and create myself. Chapter One is an explanation of my attempt to better understand my work environment and includes research of artists and writers who reflect the ideas around my reaction.

In Chapter Two I examine pre-eminent social commentators such as Walter Benjamin and Christopher Lasch and their critique of what human beings generally accept as 'progress', while briefly touching on the history of the supermarket and the suburbs. I investigate Barbara B Stern's analysis of different methods of advertising, highlighting their manipulative qualities, while speculating on the growth of drama programs on television. I also investigate Sartre's and Camus' ideas on 'the absurd', and suggest that contemporary society is often an absurdism; a utopia of the artificial.

My medium of oil, acrylic and pencil on canvas, my use of a washed out or bleached pallet and my place in the bigger picture (where I see myself positioned in my field), is the focus of Chapter Three. I investigate recent and contemporary artists and social commentators that are established in the field I identify with, such as Jeff Koons and

Luc Tuymans, Jon Cattapan, Paul Virilio and Jacky Bowring. I include examples of, and explain my own work, in this contemporary context.

I see in the work of these artists and commentators the ability to better understand the complexities of contemporary society through creativity. I find parallels with their work, and the coping mechanisms and survival strategies I discovered while dealing with adversity within the retail.

CHAPTER ONE: SURVIVAL IN THE DESERT

Retail Culture

Every aspect of retail space is controlled, from the physical environment to the people within its walls. This control fever permeates the air so that if one spends enough time there one breathes in the controlled tension and it becomes part of one. This environment is a microcosm of society. The boss is the government and the workers are the civilians. Where one sits within this hierarchy is everything. This contrived environment is an in-doors space where the adrenalin generated through risk and creativity has no place. Here the human touch and tenderness are rare and the pressure to perform provides a breeding ground for Machiavellian-style politics. When I am at work it often seems our one little supermarket has the political vicissitudes of ten Canberras.

Probably the most intense feelings I experienced while working at Coles were due to hearing what co-workers said about me, the content of which usually revolved around my inability to properly do my job. The impact of hearing these types of comments, whether they really were the utterances of co-workers or not, is surprisingly strong, and motivates one to try and change the situation. I variously considered confronting the supposed source of the comments (the response to which is almost always one of denial) or telling the boss (which usually makes things worse), or spreading rumors about the person in question. This latter method was also obviously counter-productive and only succeeded in giving me a leading role in the grand performance of the supermarket soapy; just another aisle, just another product, just another working-class back-stabber. This sort of experience had a great impact on me. I

suffered a lot for a below-average wage. I had a few coping mechanisms. The main one was keeping in mind what I was going to do when I got home. This helped me get through.

Other coping mechanisms included the placing of objects here and there where no one would really notice, but I knew they were there. This gave me a feeling of power over the institution rather than the other way around. I placed a toy dog high up in the roof beams once; he watched over the storeroom for a year or more until one day he was gone. A bit later I found a rather sinister looking plastic batman mask. I placed it high up on a nail in the storeroom and it looked right at home; an evil looking mask to watch over a grey-brick, lifeless storeroom.

I first experienced the supermarket in a working capacity in 1989 when I worked at Jimmy's Supermarket in Launceston, which is now Coles. We had pricing guns back then. I fixed the gun to 1989 and using a ladder left the frozen piece of time on the zigzag roof support. I went shopping there in 1994 and it was still there! Now that Coles have taken over of course it is gone but this gave me a great deal of satisfaction, both the placing of and the endurance of the marker, and I wonder what the renovators made of it if it was noticed. This behavior is an attempt to gain some power back and also *to leave a mark*.

Perhaps this is what painting is, the desire to leave a mark. I paint for more than to create an image. I am attempting to make sense of my place in the world and I can't do that with just working '9 to 5'; I need to do something more. With this in mind, my work is a deliberate attempt to challenge my circumstances and at the same time

challenge painting itself. For these reasons my work is not 'pretty'. It takes on a reduced quality. I have stripped away most of what one might expect to see in an attempt to give the viewer more space to think, so it is not all done for them. I want to go in the other direction to the visual overload of the supermarket. Some of my work still has an echo of the repetition one finds in retail spaces, but it is so reduced its subtlety is an unmistakable reaction to commerce and mass-production. Sometimes taking away nearly all colour my paintings take on a desert-like quality, giving room for contemplation.

Human beings occupy the supermarket and take the product home to the 'burbs'. An aerial view of suburban Melbourne or Sydney reminds me of the supermarket shelf, everything conforming to a rigid plan, the houses lined up one after the other again and again over and over. This fascinating suburban space where the majority of people in society choose to live their ordered lives, offers many shapes and angles for the artist to enjoy and has obvious parallels with the retail environment in terms of mass production, order and repetition. I could almost imagine a set of traffic lights at the end of each supermarket aisle. Human beings see the product as important. One only has to notice one's home environment. Just as one might say hello to someone in the supermarket aisle, one sends a cheerful wave over the back fence. I would argue that all this order is a screen to hide the chaos underlying the lives of the majority of contemporary urban and suburban inhabitants. One only has to look at Canberra, a city of impeccable planning and order, but it also has parliamentary question time, more chaotic than an episode of *Days of our Lives*.

I make art so I can feel less of just another grey brick in the storeroom wall. When I left my 1989 mark in Jimmy's Supermarket I made sure no one that I knew of ever knew about what I was up to and that was the key: it was something that I had exclusive knowledge of and control over. I thought another way to take some power back might be to write *beneventum ad mechanicum* (welcome to the machine) in the men's toilets, but I felt that would be a step down into vandalism. Then I thought I could write it really small in the corner, and wondered, 'is hard-to-notice graffiti more OK than the in-your-face stuff?' I dropped the idea, thinking it was getting too complicated.

Painting the Paradox

The early work of my research was a departure from my comfort zone of angles and colours. The supermarket aesthetic was so different to my usual subject matter of vacant or derelict spaces. I found it a great challenge to strip down the vibrating and demanding walls of colour so that I could see it clearly enough to paint it. Yet I had to evolve. I couldn't stay in my derelict wasteland. I wanted to push the boundaries and portray a place that was a challenge for me to occupy. The 'wasteland' or 'resting place' that I used to rely on, which is more closely linked to how I see the suburban environment, is still vital to my research, but now a counterpoint to the body of the investigation. To understand it more clearly I had to make painting more like what I already knew. I had to simplify what I saw without losing the impression of overload and repetition. I found that by taking a lot away I still could convey successfully the ideas of 'too much choice' and 'overload of the senses' that I was interested in. The results were an interesting mix of colour and grey scale, void and bustle. Through the

reduction process I have polarised the retail into void versus overload, within which my view of suburbia has become an in-between space that links these polarities.

Through painting I have explored my experience of the supermarket. This retail space has many visual, political and emotional layers. These layers could be thought of as the bricks of the building. Within this strata exist even finer layers, which hold everything together: the mortar, the in-between area that connects. The visual layers consist of the absolute plethora of coded imagery one finds in the supermarket based on the product, and the structure and signage which support the product, the shelving and the building itself. The political and emotional layers are more subtle and hidden within and reflected by the immediacy of the visual. They are governed by the structure of the building and the interactions between people within the building.

I investigate the interaction of these layers, the mortar that holds it all together like roots in the soil. To me this is the real superstructure of the space and it consists of a mixing of the layers so that paradoxes begin to emerge. The visuality of the supermarket is incredibly busy and dense, yet emotionally it is barren. Order is the key. The ordering of product and brand into a layered format designed to catch the eye demands the shopper's attention. The strategic placement of product location coupled with the linear dictation of spatial passage encourage the customer to spend more time roaming about the supermarket and therefore to spend more money. The flooding of visual information leaves no room for time or emotion. The customer is inundated and therefore has no time to base their buying decision on real emotions.

Deception and Desolation

French social commentator Paul Virilio has built a reputation of having something of a sixth sense when commenting on the realm of social misdirection. In his book *Art As Far As The Eye Can See*, Virilio (2007: 4) writes, 'Indeed, through their (often programmed) repetition, a population's disturbing panic attacks are associated with a depression often masked by the routines of everyday life'. He cites French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty writing in 1953 that; 'To obey with our eyes shut is the onset of panic...in this world where denial and morose passions take the place of certainties, people seek above all not to see' (in Virilio 2007: 4). The routines of everyday life masking depression and the desire not to see are both very much twentieth-century phenomena, the twenty-first century version of which is even faster and more immediate, based on instantaneity and visual and audio saturation. In *Affluenza* (2005) Clive Hamilton and Richard Dennis cite research that highlights the perils of too much time at work:

A researcher at Queensland University of Technology found that the wives of workers who are often away from home for extended periods often experience higher levels of anxiety, stress and depression than the general population, (J Dagge 2002, cited in Hamilton & Denniss 2005: 91).

Closing my eyes to the ubiquitous product and its ordered routine and long work hours was not enough. I had to find another way to make sense of this 'new artificial'.

Six years of working within this environment has given me the opportunity to feel true desolation. This is also a paradox in that the feeling of desolation itself has great depth, yet it is the terrifying depth of a wasteland, and this land of waste is mirrored in the products that fill ones eye's, as they will soon be land-fill. There is such a sense of eternity in this environment. The product is placed on the shelf by the worker to be

taken off the shelf by the customer (processed). The worker must then put another product back on the shelf, and the cycle continues. Having been a part of this cycle it really does seem as though it will continue forever. I view it this way because of the rigidity of the supermarket structure coupled with the assertiveness of the product. Both are very much pushing on one's consciousness (and I would argue, the subconscious) so convincingly that it is hard to believe it could ever be any other way. It is a space that lends itself to a form of dictatorship in that it knows what is best for the consumer.

The feeling of desolation I experienced is also reinforced in the banality of the work itself. The lack of creativity and the long hours in an environment that is visually taxing and potentially politically murderous eventually took its toll. When something is repeated enough times it can lose its power, as if society celebrated Christmas every day so the product, in great numbers, generates disinterest. A customer may walk down the toilet paper aisle and ask, 'Do I really have time to sort through ten different brands?' They may know the brand they want beforehand but then a new brand catches their eye and then next to that the one on special. The customer leaves after much deliberation, feeling a little stressed and not quite sure if the right choice was made. It is this stress and tension that I am concerned with. This shopping experience is just another example of our hyped-up fast-paced lives. Once the shopping is done the 'consumer' jumps in the car and speeds home to suburbia to quickly devour a freezer meal. My work flies in the face of this choice and speed-generated stress, and exists as a mental resting-place.

Interestingly it was at the time of my deliberations on the retail that my fascination with built and outdoor environments, that embody a used-up quality, reasserted itself. For example, the until recently derelict Launceston General Hospital holds for me an especially strong magnetism. The essence of this type of environment is that it is seen to have no value. This is the very reason I wanted to know more about it. I needed to escape the predictability of the supermarket for a land where interesting things happened, though I wasn't sure what. I saw the old hospital as a great ocean liner that could transport me away with the charm of its broken windows and blinds, its corridors full of yesterday's importance. Because it was no longer operating it gave space for the imagination. The supermarket is the antithesis of this idea. It is so inundated with the relevance of the now there is room for nothing else, especially not a creative energy. Many people would probably see a dilapidated old hospital as a desolate place and a supermarket as lively and worthwhile. But perhaps the opposite is also true. Can we see worth in an environment even though it may not have a tangible monetary value?

The Hour of Pearl

The opening line in T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, has inverted the conventional idea of spring and the coming of summer. For the people who inhabit the wasteland, winter is a rest from the pain of existence. When everything comes alive in summer time so too do the fundamental frustrations of life – sex and death. Helen Williams in her book *TS Eliot: The Waste Land* (1973) describes how this inversion...

...may cheat us into expecting a journey with beginning, middle and end. But our conditioned expectations of the seasons are soon upset. April is cruel, winter is kind because spring stirs the dull roots of growth, memory and desire, inspiring painfully ... the surge of sap which excites (Williams 1973: p.18).

For me this poem is about the things that human beings need to survive and how their very dependence on these things reminds them of their vulnerability. Water in the poem is one key example of this. It is desirable only in recognition of a terrible need. Eliot's focus on the anguish of existence suggests to me that he was an artist who had experienced great emotional pain and frustration. I gather from his work that he had known enough pain to make winter more attractive than summer – he needed somewhere else to exist.

This concept of divergence from existing paradigms is more than just an escape: it is a survival strategy, and it is a theme central to my own work. My view has been polarised because I have felt the despair of long working hours, and many hours not working but dreading it just the same. American writer John Steinbeck (1902 – 1968) wrote many novels in which his characters at once feel a sense of place, such is the richness of the environment he constructs around them, and yet are on a constant search for meaning. Steinbeck grew up in California not far from the Pacific Ocean. In his novel *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck wrote of the community of Monterey, a Californian coastal town built on the canning of sardines. His book is about the fringe dwellers of the city and their struggle to live a meaningful existence. His characters include a group of unemployed young men about the town. With these apparent misfits in mind Steinbeck philosophised:

What can it profit a man to gain the whole world and to come to his property with a gastric ulcer, a blown prostate and bifocals? Mack and the boys avoid the trap, walk around the poison, step over the noose while a generation of trapped, poisoned, trussed-up men scream at them and call them no-goods, come to bad ends, blots on the town, thieves, rascals, bums (Steinbeck 1949:13–14).

Later in the book one of Steinbeck's characters, higher up in the social strata and a father figure to the lost boys, watches them from his laboratory window and comments:

Look at them, they are your true philosophers...Mack and the boys know everything that has ever happened in the world and possibly everything that will happen. I think they survive better in this world than other people. In a time when people tear themselves to pieces with ambition and nervousness they are relaxed. All of our so-called successful men are sick men, with bad stomachs and bad souls, but Mack and the boys are healthy and curiously clean (Steinbeck 1949: 106).

Steinbeck sees past the workaday; his unemployed youths are a metaphor for freedom. This looking beyond the grind is further evident in his description of Cannery Row when it is not operating:

Early morning is a time of magic in Cannery Row. In the grey time after the light has come and before the sun has risen, the row seems to hang suspended out of time in a silvery light...the street is silent of progress and business. It is a time of great peace, a deserted time, a little era of rest (Steinbeck 1949: 147).

Steinbeck describes the activities of some of the characters during this time, as if this quiet period has given them room to be human:

The cannery watchmen look out and blink at the morning light. The bouncer at the Bear Flag steps out on the porch in his shirt-sleeves and stretches and yawns and scratches his stomach...it is the hour of pearl – the interval between day and night when time stops to examine itself (Steinbeck 1949: 148).

This idea of time examining itself can only be realised when people's relationship with their environment slows enough for them to catch their breath. As Steinbeck

says, the Row seems to hang suspended out of time. When this occurs, when we get a chance to look at the world without pressure or fear, our feeling for time and therefore life, can be put back into perspective. American painter Edward Hopper (1882–1967) was a master at capturing this reflective type of time. Of *New York Office* (Fig. 1), author of *Edward Hopper: Portraits of America* Wieland Schmied writes:

Hopper loved to show what is known in theater parlance as the ‘retarded moment.’ The animation of urban life is suspended for a brief moment, haste and unrest come to a standstill revealing the absurdity of the rat race (Schmied 1995: 102).

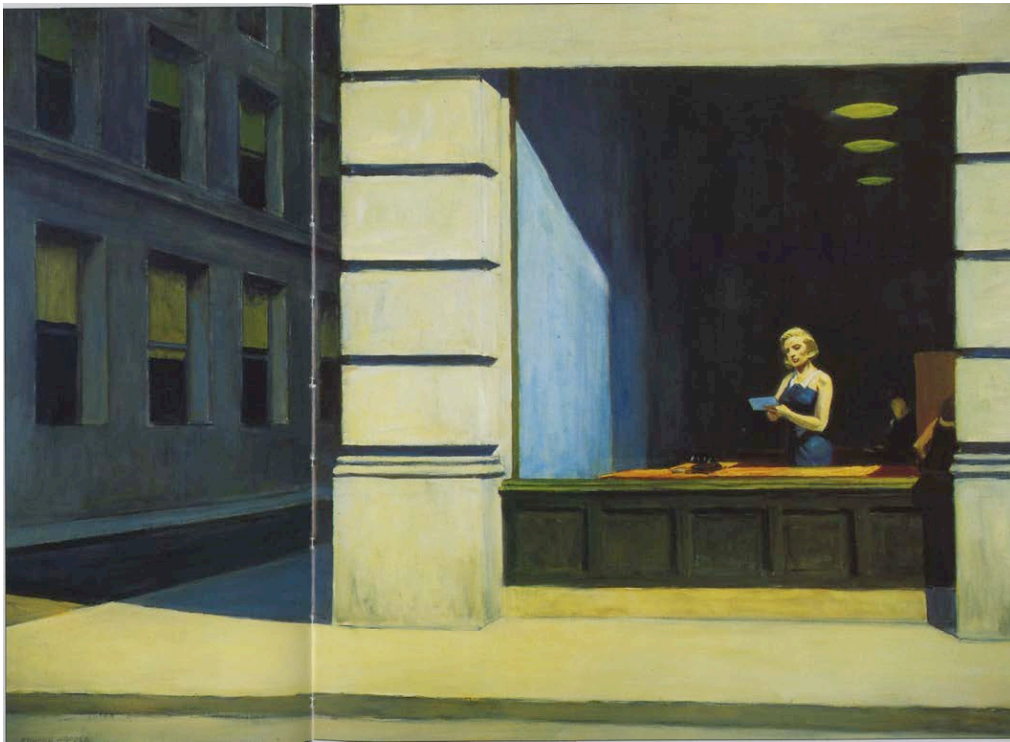


Figure 1: Edward Hopper, *New York Office*, 1962.

American painter Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009) also had the ability to capture this special kind of time in his work. His paintings have a contemplative, quiet quality in their often spacious and softly coloured subject matter. Wyeth imbued emotion into

both landscape and rustic interior. I am drawn to his work for its subtle, insightful reservedness. He had a keen feeling for the quiet moments and an ability to find something special in the usually unnoticed and every day. In *The Mill* (Fig. 2), Wyeth has the power to evoke so much emotion. To me this is one of his best works in that it holds such a strong sense of ‘reality’. The viewer is not given any mod cons in which to withdraw in comfort. The raw coldness of the buildings, bare trees and the flock of birds that care nothing for the observer set up a hard-edged world where only the strong survive. But the reward if one can see far enough, is a harsh, austere beauty that gives the viewer time and space.



Figure 2: Andrew Wyeth, *The Mill*, 1959.

In *Weathered Side* (Fig. 3), Wyeth achieves a surreal quality; as if we are suddenly aware of a part of the universe we once overlooked. Wyeth creates a space that acts as a portal to the ‘other side’. One can almost see the work as a negative photograph as if looking at a parallel universe. The painting reminds me of the spaces I occupied as a child. I would enjoy exploring on my own with no real direction. One could argue this

is why Wyeth was drawn to these spaces: they are everyday but at the same time have a mystical quality. I felt the impact of this surreal otherworldliness around the age of seven, but only now as I have explored my existence through art have I become more aware of what it actually is. Though this quality is at times seemingly indefinable, I have found it can be expressed through painting. It exists as a place of rest as in Steinbeck's 'hour of pearl', where the mind can relax and imagine, unburdened by the pressures of urban and suburban environments. The strong sense of white light in many of Wyeth's works evokes a sharp clarity which contrasts with their strongly emotional nature. Wyeth puts forward a beautiful, thoughtful world, with a cold sharp edge.



Figure 3: Andrew Wyeth, *Weathered Side*, 1965.

For me Wyeth's *Wind From the Sea* (1947) (Fig. 4), along with works such as *Her Room* (1963), and *Off at Sea* (1972), share a feeling of absence. Not long ago one was talking to a friend, enjoying their company. One hasn't moved but they have moved on. One is left with the structure that once surrounded the person, only the window and the breeze for company. Here, the shelters that reflect ourselves have become the focus. The viewer might be encouraged to contemplate someone they hold dear.

Wyeth leaves room for my imagination.



Figure 4: Andrew Wyeth, *Wind from the Sea*, 1947.

I am free to fill in the space Wyeth has created. The Western contemporary lifestyle is losing this kind of dream-space where our minds can rest, free to wander. I see my practice (Fig. 32), as occupying a similar place to Wyeth's (Fig. 4), one that is based on a philosophy of inclusion.

James Whistler (1834–1930) was another American painter with the ability to evoke thought through what isn't there. Frances Spalding, author of *Whistler*, describes his style as having a:

...startlingly original method of composition, refining his means to the barest essentials. He was one of the first to canvas the idea that the abstract ingredients of a picture – the lines and shapes, colours and tones – could in themselves be the subject (Spalding 1979: front sleeve).

Whistler painted a series of enigmatic misty nighttime scenes of the River Thames which became famously known as the 'Nocturnes' (Figs 5 and 6).

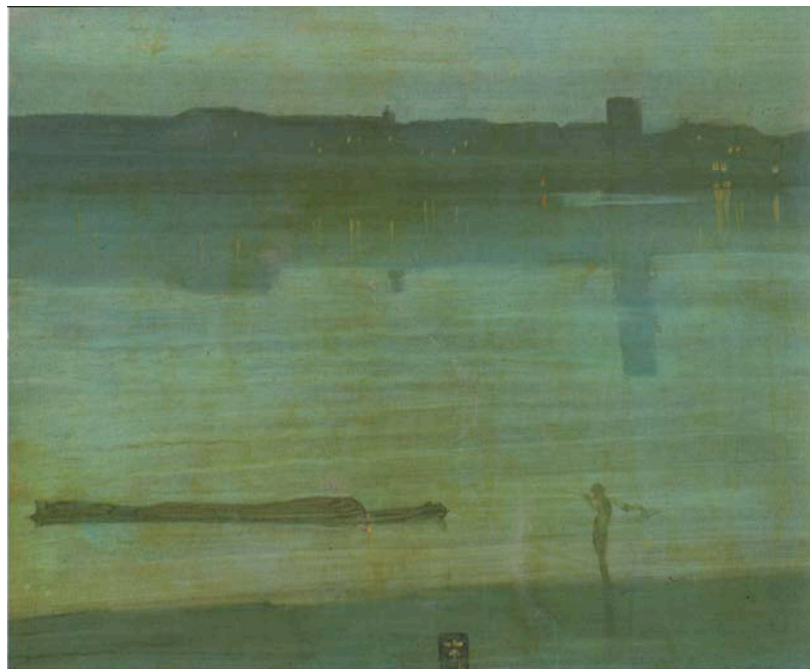


Figure 5: James Whistler, *Nocturne in Blue and Green*, 1871.

The Nocturnes have a slowness that is outside the pace of city life. When I look at these pictures I feel like time is no longer important. What has been done and what needs to be done, these things don't matter in Whistler's world. Whistler's environments remind me of the empty patched of grass where the university's art

school once stood. All the critical interactions and goings on, now just wind and grass, or mist over water.

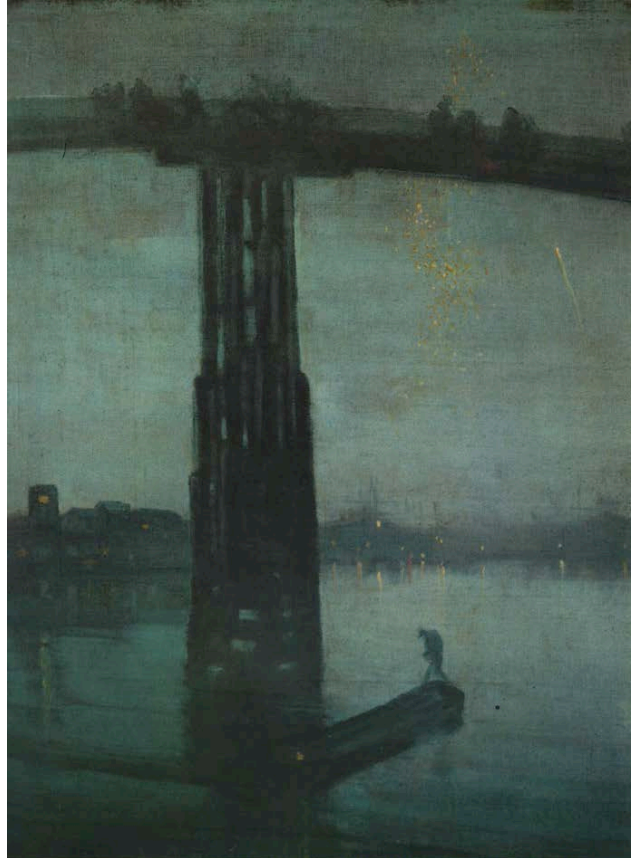


Figure 6: James Whistler,
Nocturne in Blue and Gold, c.1875.

Whistler's Nocturnes are dream-like, and their strength lies in their strong composition and lack of 'close up' detail, encouraging a feeling of quiet observation. The 'Nocturnes' are not as literal in detail as Wyeth's impressions, though like Wyeth, Whistler still managed to convey mood and emotion in the 'space' of his paintings. Both artists have the ability to find a brooding stillness in their subject. Whistler places the viewer at a distance from the rest of the world, behind a pearly veil of mist; outside of society. Perhaps he was trying to escape mainstream society through his art; another artist drawn to nature as a tonic for modern life.

It is hard to ignore the psychological problems many people experience being a part of the fast-paced, tension-filled rat race. I would argue most of the anxiety and depression that currently plagues contemporary society can be avoided if we spend more time in the 'hour of pearl' and become friends with Mack and the boys from *Cannery Row* for a while, and in doing so avoiding any resemblance to Edvard Munch's famous painting, *The Scream* (Fig. 7). This image is very powerful for me in that it exposes the state of mind I experienced during times of extreme anxiety or depression. The fluid chaos of Munch's environment curves and distorts until the figure is warped and melded. As Munch's figure is the prisoner of the hellish landscape of his/her mind, so the environment of the supermarket permeated my consciousness. The walls of the supermarket would shift and develop cracks, as I was unable to comfortably handle the pressure of an eight hour shift, or the idea of having to prop up and support the antithesis of my belief systems.

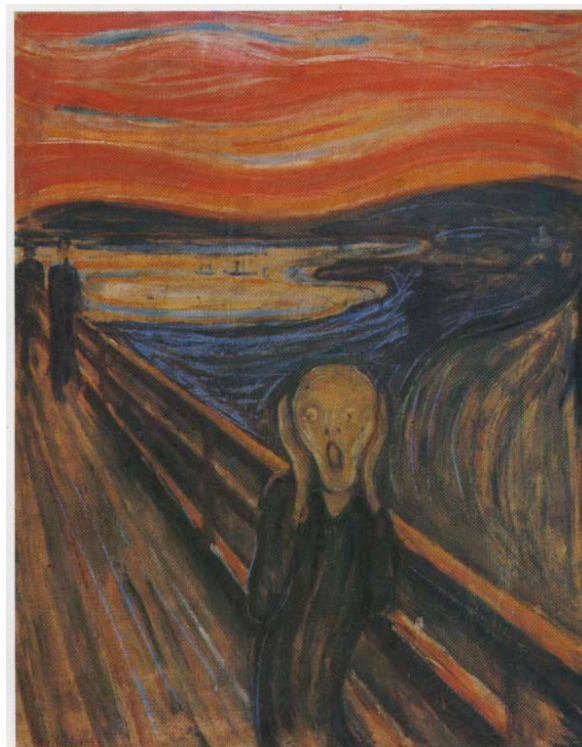


Figure 7: Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893.

As mentioned earlier, Edward Hopper was also an artist who was drawn towards the idea of Steinbeck's 'pearl hour'. Although Hopper is thought of as a realist painter, his ability to imbue space with a dreamy timeless quality through a sensitive rendering of light and shadow speaks more about the human condition than space itself. His works sometimes include a solitary figure in a room or on a street, but this figure would always be dominated by the built environment it occupied. Of perhaps one of his more famous works, *Nighthawks* (Fig. 8), Hopper is quoted as saying:

It was suggested by a restaurant in Greenwich Avenue where the two streets meet. I simplified the scene a great deal and made the restaurant bigger. Unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city (Hopper, cited in Schmied, 1995: 56).

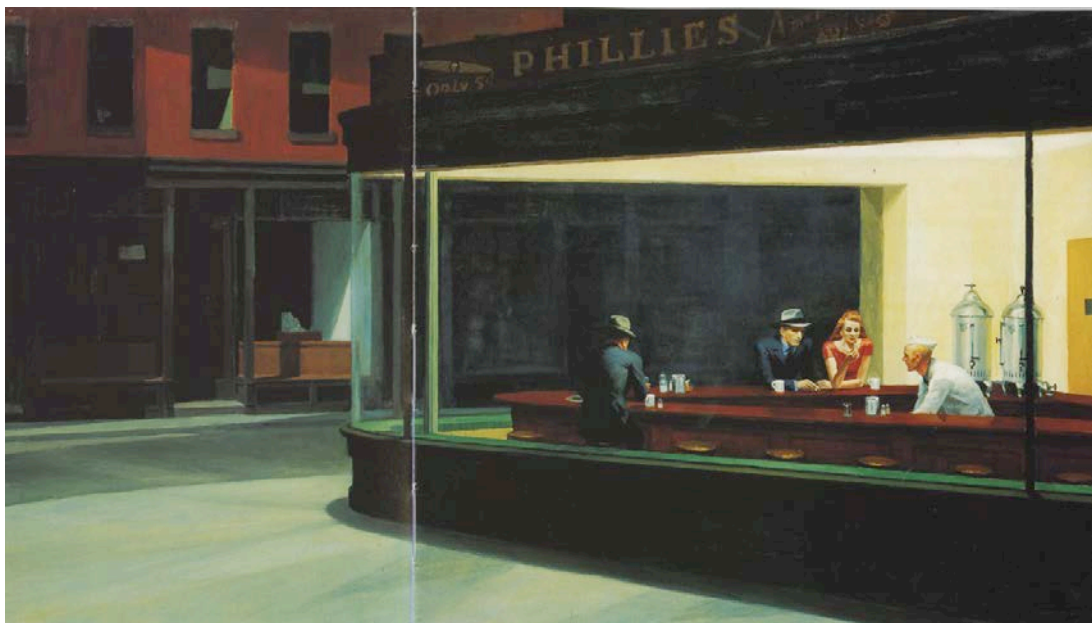


Figure 8: Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942.

For Hopper to say 'unconsciously, probably' implies that he did not set out to 'paint loneliness'. Hopper views the undercurrent of loneliness as just that, an underlying mood that is inextricably tied into the fabric of the subject, rather than using it as a

device that is all too easy to read and obvious. Thus like Whistler and Wyett, Hopper's subtlety and power of suggestion are the strengths of his work. The seated figures, facing each other are united in their circle, as if letting go would mean giving in to the ever-present sense of alienation. I imagine myself at the counter. I am part of something, but still I am alone. Hopper used to great effect the interiors of American houses and hotel rooms to convey his feeling for what it meant to be human, evident in *Morning Sun* (Fig. 9). As Schmied (1995: 11) describes:

The houses he depicts are American houses...and the people who inhabit them are certainly American – restlessly on the move and tired of being restless, lonely and quietly despairing at their loneliness. There is a timeless quality in the America Hopper depicts.

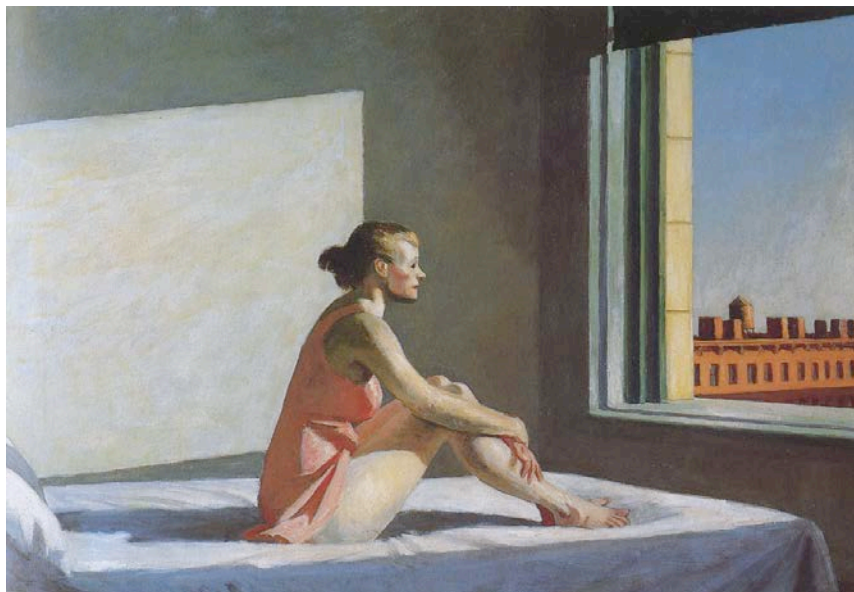


Figure 9: Edward Hopper, *Morning Sun*, 1952.

Schmied goes on to frame Hopper's evolution as a painter as moving 'towards an increasing economy of means, a waiver of extraneous detail, an emphasis on simplicity of composition, and a growing emptiness. This development culminated in paintings such as *Rooms by the Sea*' (Schmied 1995: 15) (Fig. 10).

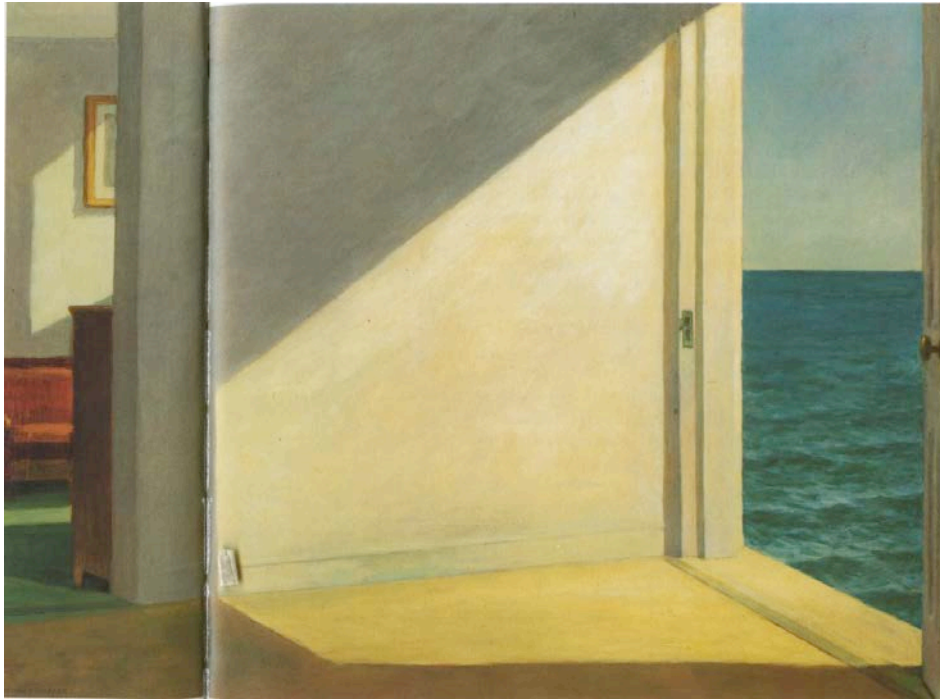


Figure 10: Edward Hopper, *Rooms by the Sea*, 1951.

When asked what his paintings were about, Hopper was known to answer that they are about himself. This is most evident in *Rooms by the Sea*. Here is a very personal space. I am reminded of musician Phil Collins and his song 'Thru' These Walls'; from the album *Hello I Must Be Going!* (1982), an introspective gem about a room becoming at once prison and protector, and what funny business the occupants next door are getting up to, so emphasising the tragedy of how near he is to them, yet how isolated he remains. Aside from the possible morbid aspects of isolation, *Rooms by the Sea* is also a contemplation of light, space and warmth and says to me that there can be great happiness experienced in this world, ensuring one stays in and notices the light. The door opening on to the sea emphasises the feeling of space and gives the work a surreal quality, which is perhaps easier to pin down than the spaces of Andrew Wyeth, but still just as enigmatic. The over-riding device in the picture is the contrast of light and shadow on the wall. I would think most people have at some stage

advanced to the line where light meets shadow and marvel as they watch it creep across the wall or floor; thus this work is fleeting and ephemeral, for one knows in a few hours it will be dark, yet it is also eternal – the sun will rise again and again. This binary of the fleeting and the forever mirrors the contradiction of the push and pull of humankind's need for intimacy and space or even isolation. Hopper put all this in one room. Once again here is an example of what is not there leaving room to be filled by our imagination.

Approaching a City (Fig. 11) is for me one of Hopper's most contemporary (with our time) pieces. Although painted in 1946 it has a savvy 'street cred' feel to it. It is not naïve to the harshness of the modern/contemporary city life. The tunnel represents an impending darkness for all who choose to live there. The starkness of the building facades and the windows stare outward and long for a better life, yet remain tragically immovable, exemplifying the modern/contemporary metropolis. Even though the sky is blue in this picture one still might feel it is somehow grey.



Figure 11: Edward Hopper, *Approaching a City*, 1946.

I am interested in stripping away the hard-sell that covers up what human beings really are. Research suggests many people in urban and suburban environments are losing touch with their dreams and creativity, and are drowning in choices. In my work I investigate what lies beneath/beyond the tension and try and uncover something closer to ourselves. It is this tension that I am interested in; or rather I am keen on a reduction of this tension. Research suggests that stress gets in the way and distorts an individual's experience and can lead to a sense of defeatism. It is as if there are too many things claiming to be permanent and important to our lives to the point that many human beings have lost faith in a society that tries to separate us from our money, by whatever means necessary. The bombardment of advertising takes the consumer away from their ability to focus on anything but the stress itself. The eye jumps from one product to the other, paralysing the mind with indecision. The fast pace of modern life leads to a defocusing kind of stress, one that distances the individual from their sense of self and is therefore a move away from nature. I argue human beings have become so busy listening to the plethora of information from technology, and zipping from the suburbs to work and back, that they have lost touch with their bodies and therefore their nature. I also believe that the idea of the body as a natural vessel that can exist on its own is being replaced by conceptualising the body as an appendage to, and dependent on, technology.

This idea of a moving away from nature is not just confined to the inside of the retail environment. John Ralston Saul, in his book *The Unconscious Civilization* (1997: 34), examines the idea that corporatism and globalisation are the antithesis of humanism. He believes we are passively accepting globalisation and any real individualism in our society is punished, and that under corporatism the human is reduced to a measurable

value like a machine or a piece of property, 'dumped into marginality' (Saul 1997: 35). Saul writes, 'the larger question that intrigues me is whether or not we can escape this utopian nightmare. Remember, utopia is a word coined by Thomas More in 1516 from the Greek words *no* [=] *place*...to live nowhere...to live in a void' (Saul 1997: 35).

Saul contends that human beings live in a world ruled by an ideology and only gods, kings and groups are recognised to have value. Here the individual believes he/she must be self-interested to survive, rather than being disinterested and living for the greater good (Saul 1997: 35). It is interesting that the *no+place* that I am used to is the nowhere space of a deserted building; but this is just the surface image. In line with Saul's utopia of corporatist ideology, the supermarket could be conceptualised as a mini stock market: corporatist by nature; a place where people are recognised as being within a group and not as having individual value. This is the real nowhere-place where true desolation is realised, the very heart of nowhere, soulless and devoid of humanism. This is where the paradoxes begin to emerge. In the maelstrom of the visual, political and emotional layers that make up the supermarket I find an unparalleled sense of desolation. In the seemingly used-up wasted space of the abandoned building I find humanity. I focus on this sense of humanity when I am painting and use it in contrast with the artificial that bleeds beyond the supermarket and the suburbs. My work becomes a partial evacuation of culture, a washed out space leaving room for nature and the imagination.

Here I am reminded of Eliot's inversion of our normal view of the seasons. To continue functioning and to keep from letting the psychological killers of work,

boredom, monotony, repetition and desolation take over I had to invert space. I was forced to leap from the winter of the workaday and the safety of the predictable into the utopia of the romantic, and hope that while being all at sea on my ocean liner I might find it not really a nowhere place.

I see a kind of utopia in the work of one of the pre-eminent post-World War 2 American painters, Mark Rothko (1903–1970). The large size of the work, rather than being imposing, would allow the viewer to almost walk into the space he has created; creating a space that the viewer could access. But what is this space? What it is not is just as important. Rothko has allowed the viewer room for contemplation (Fig 12).



Figure 12: Mark Rothko, *Untitled* .1957.

Rothko's paintings with their hazy edges are like old family photos, minus the family, and that is the key: he has left the room for the viewer to build their own experience. In contrast, a modern space like the supermarket spells it all out. One does not need to contemplate or dream how the space may be filled in terms of person or object. What occupies this space is dictated to us and our minds are passive observers, as if we were watching television. Rothko's paintings almost always suggest landscape, but with the title *Light, Earth and Blue* (Fig. 13), he has decided to make certain that the link be made, probably because of the sheer harmony between image and title.



Figure 13: Mark Rothko, *Light, Earth and Blue*, 1954.

In *Green, Red on Orange* (Fig. 14), Rothko has painted what I see as a kind of video-still of the ocean. The photographic or video-like nature of Rothko's work, especially this painting, gives it a sense of nostalgia, as if it were a snapshot of a family outing.



Figure 14: Mark Rothko, *Green, Red on Orange*, 1950.

Somewhere in this nostalgia is a sadness which lies in the background of all of Rothko's work. This darker state of existence is reflected in the sombre tones of *Brown and Grey* (1969) (Fig. 15).



Figure 15: Mark Rothko, *Brown and Grey*, 1969.

These paintings really are snapshots from another world and remind me of the photographs taken by the Viking spacecraft on the surface of Mars. The ‘skies’ in the work of this darker period have a brooding quality similar to Francis Bacon’s (1909–1992) heavy, stage-like background as in his painting *Study after Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), and suggest a far distant sun setting on a lifeless, lonely landscape. The view could be from the same planet as English painter Paul Nash’s *Nocturnal Landscape* (Fig. 16), but Rothko’s is a more somber twilight where it seems it is time to contemplate death.



Figure 16: Paul Nash, *Nocturnal Landscape*, 1938.

The desolate war scenes in the work of Nash (1889–1946) are destroyed environments. I see in them the effect that the supermarket environment sometimes had on my psychological condition – somewhat devastating. It is at this point that each type of environment, alive and dead, current and forgotten, begins to mirror the other. The retail world is so saturated with visual information it becomes shallow and meaningless, while a world which has been rendered useless, or used up as in Nash's war paintings, (Fig. 17), is for me a metaphor for the 'truth' behind the sheen of the product. This is the kind of concept I am dealing with in my own work. The idea that in the tightly packed supermarket more is really less, and in a painting that leaves room to add in the cerebral, less is actually more.



Figure 17: Paul Nash, *We Are Making a New World*, 1918.

Nash's war-torn world turns into a no [+] place, a utopia. The Earth has been rendered barren and lifeless, a no-man's land, yet it is in this wasteland that there is room for contemplation and a chance to dream of the future and a better world.

Nash's later semi-surreal work seemingly captures the very process of thought itself. Not only does he leave plenty of room for thought, the strangeness and unusual juxtaposition of the 'objects' he has included evoke a cerebral atmosphere. *Nocturnal Landscape*, (Fig 16) and *Environment of Two Objects*, (Fig. 18) are two examples of Nash's strange and eerie environments.

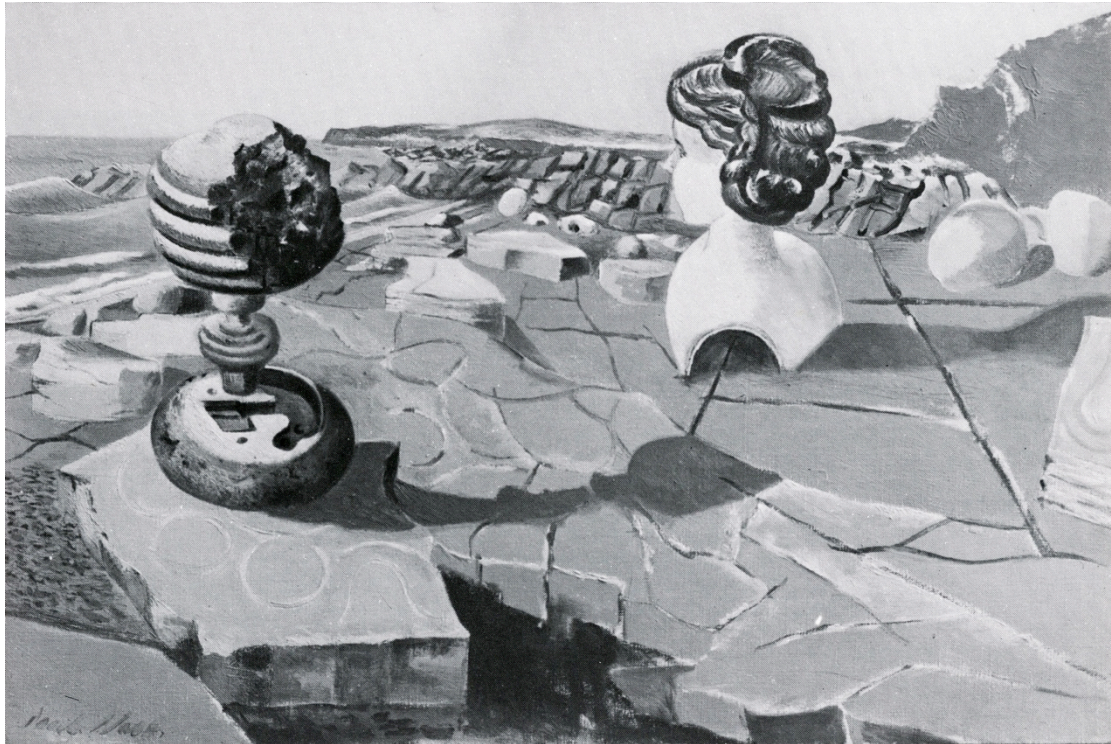


Figure 18: Paul Nash, *Environment of Two Objects*, 1937.

Nash's unique kind of surrealism shows that the less recognisable the object and the less familiar its arrangement the more room the viewer has for imagination to work freely. The neurotically busy aesthetic of the supermarket environment exists at the other end of the spectrum. The imagination is not required in this mire of predictability. Nash's nocturnal landscape is the shore my ocean liner is headed for; peaceful, unpredictable and altogether self-confident in its other-worldliness.

Nash's 1937 watercolor *Empty Room* (Fig. 19) is an expression of humankind's need to escape the psychological spaces they build for themselves and to exercise their imagination. I see it as a room that on one side opens out into a coastal landscape, rather than a landscape that has a bit of a room attached to it. The room is dominant and the coastline is almost like a painting on the wall.



Figure 19: Paul Nash, *Empty Room*, 1937.

I see it this way because I am at once protected and to an extent imprisoned by the built environment. To make money and survive this world of mostly horizontal and vertical straight lines is of great importance to me, whether I want it to be or not. This is a departure from nature and therefore, I argue, a departure from human beings' understanding of themselves. 'Who is more contemptible than he who scorns knowledge of himself?' asked John of Salisbury in 1159, (in Saul: 1997). Saul speculates that we have hijacked the term individualism to mean selfishness. From what I see around me, on television, in the supermarket or department store or in the street I would have to agree with Saul. If the relentless barrage of advertising is anything to go by, one could argue consumers are constantly reminded that the pursuit of personal wealth is everything, and if one isn't in the race, one is nothing. As this is the age of the individual, my reaction is to find interest in art that has qualities of

selflessness, and that somewhere within it is a desire for a deeper understanding of self; art that does not patronise but as in Rothko's paintings (one could almost call them 'doorways' or 'thresholds') leaves room for the viewer to think about and experience the work.

Melbourne-based artist Callum Morton appears to encourage contemplation without being pretentious. Critic Juliana Engberg (2005) describes Morton's work as, 'thwarting further information and visual penetration'. Like Rothko, Morton engages the viewer so much so that he/she becomes part of the work. One looks at *Belvedere* (Fig. 20), and wonders, who lives there? Because Morton does not freely give information the viewer is undoubtedly thwarted on a visual level, but this creates an opportunity for further contemplation.



Figure 20: Callum Morton, *Belvedere*, 1995.

Engberg characterises Morton's work as 'a blend of high art and kitsch and that he makes us see that the 'cubic art of modernism has found a new use as a container for consumerist culture: bagless, external, all – and no-place' (Engberg 2005). Morton achieves a real sense of anonymity in *Belvedere* in the perfectly spaced, clinically white living spaces, and reminds me of expatriate Australian painter Jeffery Smart's (b. 1921) high-rises often found in the distant backgrounds of his work (Fig 21). Smart conveys a similar sense of urban dislocation to Morton; that the built environment has stacked city dwellers up like pallets of grocery products, layer upon layer existing in a grid under an ominous dark cloud.



Figure 21: Jeffrey Smart, *Holiday*, 1970.

Smart's character on the balcony is among many, yet contemplates the view alone.

Morton has conveyed the feeling of no-place in his digital print *Farnshaven, Illinois* (Fig. 22). Engberg describes this image as a meeting of Mies van der Rohe's 'International Style' of architecture (the Farnsworth House) and the consumer. It's as if the minimalism of modernism and the shallowness of advertising team up to create a space so devoid of anything human no one wants to go there.



Figure 22: Callum Morton, *Farnshaven: Illinois*, 2001.

Farnshaven, Illinois speaks the annihilation of all things human and the dominance of the commercial. Yet unlike Morton's image, retail spaces are a buzz of human activity. Coles, for example, sees 4.5 million customers every week Australia wide. If they are such bad inhuman spaces, why are they so popular? It is important to recognise that the customer spends far less time in the supermarket than someone like myself who works in a supermarket. The customer is affected and manipulated by this environment in different ways to someone for whom the supermarket is a place of

employment. Unlike the customer, the worker must mentally adjust to the culture of the environment and the long periods of time spent as part of this culture. People can physically exist in a space but that doesn't mean they are there mentally. My experience of the supermarket is exactly this: when I was there for long periods I would have to exist mentally somewhere else in order to survive. If the pain was bad enough my visualization of the future would need to be strong, so like in Morton's service station I was there but not really there. Here I am talking about work-related psychology rather than the mindset of the shopper, the consumer at the 'point of sale'. The shopper in the supermarket experiences the shock of the now; the immediacy and visual bombardment of a ridiculous amount of product choice. The following photograph taken in a Fred Meyer supermarket (Fig. 23) demonstrates that consumers have more choice than they need.



Figure 23: Food aisles, Fred Meyer, Portland, 2006, photographer unknown.

This experience is closely linked to the workaday grind; when the consumer enters the supermarket after a hard day's work they are simply moving from one coded space to another, only to arrive home after shopping to encounter Harvey Norman advertisements on television. People are constantly reminded to spend money in the environment that is a metaphor for their desperately linear ordered lives. How can one exist in this consumer culture and stay sane? I observe the answer to be that consumers, at work or at home, don't actually stay within that space all the time. They can travel somewhere in their mind that is closer to nature in an attempt to reconnect with themselves. There is evidence of this attempt to escape being a global phenomenon in the increasing popularity of different forms of escapism, the most extreme of which is based on religion and takes its anti-consumerism philosophy to disturbing lengths, such as terrorism's anti-western doctrine, while others are hijacked by consumerism to an astonishing degree; fundamentalist Christianity in the US, for example. Other forms of escapism such as watching television, playing video games, drinking alcohol and eating at McDonalds paradoxically drive consumerism. The more we try escape, the more we feed the capitalist machine and therefore the more we need to escape. In *Affluenza* Hamilton and Denniss describe this vicious cycle:

A society that feels anxious, depressed, dissatisfied and inadequate provides fertile ground for the sellers of things that promise to make us happy. And the beauty of it is that when we feel like that we are more likely to spend money anyway (Hamilton & Denniss 2005: 119–120).

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has studied in great detail humankind's need to 'be somewhere else'. In his 1998 book *Escapism*, written after a research trip to Disneyland, he writes:

What comes after theme park? Shopping mall? It has been attacked as an escapist Eden for mindless consumers. Suburb? Academics have not yet

hesitated to dismiss it as a dull, middle-class playground. They prefer the city. But the city is escapist par excellence ...(Tuan 1998: xii).

As in Saul's *Unconscious Civilization* (1997) Tuan highlights how we humans have created cultures in an attempt to escape nature and therefore be secure, but that very act is a distancing of human beings from themselves, leading to human beings becoming more insecure, and civilisation more unconscious. There are many different forms of escapism and it is well known that escapism in excess, through alcohol, drugs or movies, has negative effects. Yet there are positive ways to escape, through travel or a good book. My need to escape was mainly driven by a vague knowledge that it is better somewhere else; an undefined feeling that things as they were, that is my existence in retail culture, was to be escaped from. Having no real idea of where to escape to and how to stop the everyday grind, I continued to swim directionless for a long time, but my eyes were always fixed on the stars.

My research is an attempt to distance myself from culture enough to get a clear view of it, for when I am too far within its walls it swallows me up and I again need to escape. I see my research as a form of positive escapism, paradoxically looking at culture to get closer to nature. Culture to me is the constructed artificial environment. It is society's attempt to shield itself from nature (or itself) and therefore to control it, with shelters and machines, so it can feel secure in its distancing. It could be argued the nature that human beings should not lose touch with is lying-in-waiting in their collective imagination, but it is clouded by fear. This fear is a fear of getting lost, in that if an individual lets their guard down and moves away from the apparent security of order, existing as culture, they will be labeled as a misfit or freak by the rest of society. This fear of being ostracised is natural, for almost everyone needs to feel part

of the collective, but it can drive us to push down and deny our individualism. I am interested in acknowledging our humanism and introducing it into the workplace rather than pretending that the workplace cannot be a humanistic environment. My current workplace for instance, a casino in Launceston, has strong anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies which seem to go some way to protecting the idea of individuality. The adverse effects I experienced prior to this, in supermarket culture, would not have been so traumatic if anti-discrimination policies had had a stronger presence. The shock I felt from the stress of the nowness and urgency of the retail would have had a supportive culture to land on. Instead I was left to free-fall into downward spiral, product after product flicking by me. I searched the shallow façade of the retail, but it was just that, a façade. It had no depth, nothing to hold on to. It was a visual barrier separating me from my potential self.

Instead of falling forever I found a way to step sideways through art. This empowered me to become a proactive observer of my situation.

If consumer culture has so many negative effects on our health why has it become the force to drive contemporary society? In an attempt to answer this question I will explore prominent social commentators on consumer culture, such as Christopher Lasch and Barbara B Stern, briefly touching on the evolution of the supermarket environment, and the Tasmanian origins of Coles supermarkets.

CHAPTER TWO: FORCED CONFESSIONS

‘He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother’,

(George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949: 256).

Pain in the Guise of Progress

Before the advent of the supermarket way of shopping people bought their goods ‘over the counter’ with the shop assistant finding and sometimes measuring the amount of product required. The first-ever Coles store opened in 1910 in Wilmot, Tasmania, and used this method. The founder of the modern Coles, George James Coles, worked under his father in this store between 1910 and 1913 and travelled to America during this time to study best practice. In America the concept of the customer choosing their own pre-packaged groceries was just starting to take off around the time of G.J. Coles’ visit. To obtain an overview of the broader origins of the supermarket I searched the ‘Groceteria.com’ (2011) website, an appropriate site to establish an industry self-image, and discovered that the supermarket revolution of the way people shopped was developed by Clarence Saunders at his Piggly Wiggly stores. His first store opened in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1916; while in Australia G.J. Coles founded the Coles Variety Store in the Melbourne suburb of Collingwood in 1914. The first true supermarket in the United States was opened by ex-Kroger employee Michael J. Cullen in 1930 in a former garage in Jamaica Queens, New York. Existing grocery chains like Kroger and Safeway at first resisted Cullen’s idea but eventually were forced to become part of the revolution and build their own supermarkets as the North American economy sank further into the Great Depression.

In 1997 as part of my honours thesis I investigated the development and iconography of suburbia and looked at American sociologist David Popenoe's book, *The Suburban Environment* (1977), which focused on the study of the 1951 suburban development of Levittown, Pennsylvania. Popenoe found that unlike European models the car was the dictator of suburban form, and social services such as daycare centres, libraries, retail establishments and schools were severely lacking. To summarise Popenoe's findings I wrote the following:

Levittown consisted of scattered retail outlets (stores), and one very large retail outlet which was quoted in Popenoe's book as 'a huge fortress surrounded by a sea of cars'. The home and the school were the principal foci and any recreation and leisure time was spent in the home watching television or in the back yard (the front yard was usually occupied by a broken-down automobile). There was also bowling, baseball and bars – all male dominated activities (Campbell, 1997: 5).

The website I visited to investigate the history of the supermarket stated that Kroger took the idea one step further and pioneered the first supermarket surrounded on all four sides by a parking lot. This I believe is the 'huge fortress' Popenoe cited. Many would see this apparent step forward, I would argue, as the great leap backwards. Essentially the form of suburbia has changed little since its American beginnings. I grew up in, the suburb of Legana which is north of Launceston. Legana began as a hundred or so houses surrounded by native bush. In the last ten years that bush has been replaced by the low-in-biodiversity suburban backyard of lawn and pretty flowers, the bitumen of the suburban street and of course the supermarket surrounded by cars. Recently I was walking in the tiny amount of so-called bush land left amongst the houses as a kind of park or reserve, with its seven or eight forlorn-looking eucalypts, tired of existing as a symbol of real bush. I felt a grief for the

natural habitat that once existed and a sadness for the structure that has taken its place.

This 'culture taking over nature' idea is not new, it is so much a part of who we are that it is just accepted. It is this acceptance or embracing of phenomena such as the suburban swallowing of nature that breeds much of the psychological suffering evident in modern society. Robert Hughes links this condition to arts practice in *The Shock of the New* stating that:

The sense of natural order, always in some way correcting the pretensions of the Self, gave mode and measure to pre-modern art. If this sense has now become dimmed, it is partly because for most people Nature has been replaced by a culture of congestion: of cities and mass media. We are crammed like battery hens with stimuli, and what seems significant is not the quality or meaning of the messages, but their excess. Overload has changed our art. Especially in the last thirty years, capitalism plus electronics have given us a new habitat, our forest of media (Hughes 1991: 324).

If human beings work in artificial retail environments in crammed cities, devoid of humanism and then go home to suburbia which has its own special kind of desolate quality, then where is nature? Humans have pushed nature beyond the periphery and she has fallen over the edge. All that remains is her hazy reflection in the form of a few lonely gum trees bounded and defined by culture. For me the retail environment and the suburbs mirror each other. Whether one is walking down an aisle or a street, searching for a product or a house number to house a product, the rules of spatial dictation, order and repetition are essentially the same.

Morals and Manipulation

Coles supermarkets, as with the other larger chain stores, take up a lot of land. It's not

just the store, it's the surrounding suburbs that go with it. The car's need for roads determines to a great extent how the suburbs are designed, and the emergence of an environmental form dictated by the car goes hand in hand with a public dictated to by the retail and media giants. I worked in an environment where I was flooded not only by a visual schematic, I also experienced an audio saturation, and became interested in how different forms of advertising function. The physicality of the way people shop today in supermarkets, such as Coles or Woolworths, hypermarkets such as Wal-Mart and retail stores such as Harvey Norman and Myer, harks back to the time before the corner store to the European medieval open market: the streets lined with stalls are now the aisles of the supermarket. This is a physical, spatial link to the past. An equally important psychological link concerning advertising directed at the mass market is the use of metaphor and allegory. In *Affluenza* Clive Hamilton and Richard Dennis cite Joel S. Dubow (former communications manager for Coca-Cola) in E. Clark's *The Want Makers* (1988):

If you think what Pavlov did, he actually took a neutral object, by associating it with a meaningful object, made it a symbol of something else; he imbued it with imagery, he gave it added value, and isn't that what we try to do in modern advertising? (Hamilton & Dennis 2005: 41).

In her article 'Medieval Allegory: Roots of advertising strategy for the mass market' (1998), Barbara B. Stern analyses this use of persuasive allegory in great detail. She investigates the hypothesis that modern advertising methods have their roots in the literature of the Middle Ages. It begins:

...by examining the historical literary convention of allegory, dominant in the Middle Ages and the 'stories and visions' in contemporary advertising. Advertising and poetry are similar in literary structure, for both are metaphorical arts... in a contemporary context metaphor is considered the

very heart of the communicative form used in modern advertising... allegory developed in the early middle ages as an art form with a persuasive purpose: didactic instruction to convey moral lessons to the masses... the metaphorical base employs explicitly stated comparisons in which the reader is told outright that A is B (Stern 1988).

Here I am reminded of the packets of pasta and other generic brands Coles have recently introduced into their supermarkets. Each Coles product has on it the image of a happy consumer sampling and endorsing the contents within. The idea is that this marketing device gives the customer a stronger emotional link with the product and is therefore more likely to buy it. The allegory is that 'A', the Coles brand, can through advertising be thought of as 'B', happiness and satisfaction, and the other brands can't be as good because there is no happy consumer to be seen. The underlying power of allegory and metaphor in modern advertising is that if you buy this product you are a good person and good things will happen to you. I recall a car advertisement where the guy is hugging his car and the car hugs him back by gently closing its doors on him (much to the surprise of his partner who walks in on the scene). He finds love and affection in his new purchase: A the car is B the companion. 'Ram it home with volume and repetition' is also a technique employed by contemporary advertisers. The Harvey Norman advertisements are the prime example of this. As in the high-school playground, 'bigger' and 'louder' gets the most attention and is therefore the most popular, and to finish the logical sequence, the most 'right'. This means that buying from the biggest and loudest is an act of supporting the most correct and not challenging the dominant paradigm.

French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's (1929–2007) ideas on this hyperreality, where A becomes B, are explained by Gary Aylesworth's commentary on Baudrillard's

Simulacra and Simulation (1994:6): ‘Baudrillard presents hyperreality as the terminal stage of simulation, where a sign or image has no relation to reality whatsoever, “but is its own pure simulacrum” ’ (Aylesworth 2010) and continues, referring to

Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993):

The real, he says, has become an operational effect of symbolic process... “From now on” says Baudrillard, “signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real” (Baudrillard, 1993,7) so production now means signs producing other signs. The system of symbolic exchange is therefore no longer real but “hyperreal.” Where the real is “*that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction,*” the hyperreal, says Baudrillard, is “*that which is always already reproduced*” (Baudrillard 1993, 73). The hyperreal is as system of simulation simulating itself. (Aylesworth 2010).

Baudrillard’s observations reinforce the notion that the real is being usurped by the hyperreal; that consumers are told through symbols in advertising that A is really B.

Guilt and fear are common emotions targeted by advertisers. The ‘material’ is the new ‘God’, and the fear of God has been replaced by the fear of not keeping up with the Jones’s. Stern writes, ‘In the medieval mind all allegory originated from an impeccable source – God and his vicars’ (Stern 1988). Today the fear of looking like a loser (one of Steinbeck’s ‘blots on the town’) by not owning what the ‘good’ people own, underlies all forms of advertising. The 2007–8 Supercheap Auto advertisements on television are a good example of this. The guy in his garage with all the right tools purchased from Supercheap Auto is constantly visited by his neighbor asking to borrow one tool or another. The average Aussie bloke sees this and is afraid of looking more like the pesky neighbour than the man with the right gear, so he makes sure he shops at Supercheap Auto. Guilt is also a strong emotional persuader. A Kraft television advertisement in the 1990s suggested that if one didn’t buy *their* brand of

cheese, you would be depriving your children. The ‘mother’ says, ‘Skimp on them? No way!’. Many insurance and telecommunication companies, banks and other profit-based institutions end their advertisements with, ‘Shouldn’t you be with so and so?’ and, ‘Isn’t it time you crossed over to so and so?’. One of the more subtle and enduring slogans is the two words from Mitsubishi Motors: ‘Please Consider.’ There is a quiet confidence in this soft approach that leaves the consumer wondering what Mitsubishi has to offer, and one might feel a faint sense of guilt if one ignored the offer after being asked so nicely!

A cruder method of advertising involves a childish anthropomorphism: animals take on human qualities to establish empathy. They are easy to remember, especially in the use of ‘man’s best friend’, as in the Home Hardware advertisements on television and radio. Two dogs discuss the products being advertised – one is dominant, the other passive and constantly being reprimanded by the other for making mistakes while they are working. The dog in charge uses the tools correctly and like the handyman and his pesky neighbor from Supercheap Auto, the viewer wants to identify with the one in charge. The personification of animals in advertising works on the same principal as used in children’s programs such as *The Muppets* (1954–55) and *Humphrey B Bear* (1965) and the *Looney Tunes* (1930) cartoon characters involved in a never-ending battle, as in the *Road Runner* and the Coyote, *Tom and Jerry*, or *Sylvester the Cat* and *Bugs Bunny* or *Tweety Bird*. These characters are easy to remember and can behave in a way that wouldn’t work as real people; they are animals personified which gives them an anonymity, making them identifiable to everyone: they stand for all consumers and are therefore perfect advertising tools.

This method of advertising persists because, like the programs that surround them, they are conveyed in a way that is quickly and easily understood. The rise of drama from the USA such as the CBS, *CSI* series (2000), and from home such as the Nine Network's *McLeod's Daughters* (2001–09), *Sea Patrol* (2007), and the Seven Network's *All Saints* (1998–2009) reflect the state of mind of the public. The high drama of other people's problems takes the viewer/voyeur away from their own, if only temporarily. These programs, like the advertisements and current affairs 'infotainment', go straight for the jugular, presenting a disturbing mix of romance, accident scenes and murder. They offer something that is missing in the life of the viewer, but when the program is over it's back to the workaday real life, making real life an absurdity because the real is increasingly becoming confused with the imagined. These advertisements and programs encourage the viewer to remain passive consumers. One wonders how many people think subconsciously along the lines of, 'Tonight I can watch relationships develop and break up, accidents and murder, between which I will see Harvey Norman ads, all viewed on my widescreen TV that I bought from Harvey Norman'.

The Absurd

In Henry Guerlac's 1949 review of Siegfried Gideon's book *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (1948) he shows that Gideon was one of the first to question the impact of mechanisation on human being. While Guerlac is critical of Gideon's broad approach to investigating the history and effects of mechanisation, saying it 'involves a tendency to interpret history in subjective terms by means of free association and magical confrontations' (Guerlac 1949: 190), a move from the idealisation of the machine as the saviour of humankind to a serious

questioning of the merits of mechanisation was beginning. Guerlac (1949: 188) notes Gideon's reference to, 'the encounter of the machine with the organic'. Guerlac notes Gideon: '...is able to express...the sensible European's revulsion at American mechanized bread, his first example of a cultural "devaluation" resulting from mechanisation'. The word 'devaluation' jumped out at me. It is not just a reminder of the fact that quality is lost when mass production occurs, but also of the way human beings have put so much faith in the machine.

Human beings build objects that do their work, only 'better', but these objects do not feel. This can only lead to a devaluation of self, in that they revere something that is not conscious and yet mirrors themselves. Humankind has loved the machine (the modern) for over a century and now it loves a new machine (first the post-modern and now the contemporary), this time not as clunky and much faster. Nothing has changed. We still worship the artificial.

A Coles employee was interviewed for a 2006 article published in *Talking Shop*, a newsletter created by the Tasmanian branch of the Shop Distributors and Allied Employees Association. The article notes that 'he has been working there for the last four years and about twelve months ago became an SDA delegate. Although he maintains *his life is not exciting* [my italics] his schedule is certainly a busy one.' The striking thing for me was the sense of blind acceptance of an unexciting workaday existence expressed by the employee. Organisations such as the SDA are of great importance in the retail world as they look after the employee. I wonder how many union members were concerned that at least one retail employee was 'unexcited' by his life. As with the advertising method where we are convinced that A is B, the

workers' expectations become transformed. While A is becoming B on the television the viewer's life becomes the advertisement or the soapie because their real life of work and more work is not a real life, or one could argue an 'unconscious' life, as in the afore mentioned *Unconscious Civilization* (Saul 1997).

The popularity of the so-called 'reality-television' show 'Big Brother' typifies a society that is unconscious and finds fulfillment in losing their own lives to watching the lives of other people. When I first saw this very surreal program I noticed I was sitting on the couch watching a television show in which people sat on the couch watching a television. 'Something's not right here,' I thought.

French theorist Paul Virilio, author of *Art as Far as the Eye Can See* (2007), states a concern for human beings losing touch with their compassion and sensitivity. This underlies his ideas on the increase of a desensitised media-fed mass culture, and how this leads to a reduction of quality in arts practice: 'Once empathy goes, the reality show replaces dance and theatre' (Virilio 2007: 16). I would like to reaffirm to the reader the essence of my investigation – *the search for meaning*. If human beings have dropped their gaze to the level of Big Brother on television, does this suggest the concept of meaning in their lives is in crisis? Have they, like Virilio says in the context of the condition of contemporary art, lost their empathy towards other human beings? If society really cared for the welfare of those on television would it be comfortable with observing them in such a voyeuristic way? The sinister aspect of this so-called reality television is that the viewer is not encouraged in any way to stop viewing and build a life for themselves. All they get is advertisements of products they don't really need, after a cheery 'don't go away we'll be right back after these

messages'. One worries for a society whose main diet is so-called reality television, then brainwashing advertisements, then more reality television, the more advertisements, then a well-lathered soapie. This is what happens when one ignores what it means to be human and becomes product focused. I discovered the following statement by social commentator American Christopher Lasch (1932–1994) in his essay 'What's Wrong With the Right?' (Lasch 1987, in England 2011): 'A child's appetite for new toys appeal to the desire for ownership and appropriation: the appeal of toys comes to lie not in their use but in their status as possessions' and: 'We can carry this analysis one step further by pointing out that the model of ownership, in a society organised around mass consumption, is addiction' (Lasch 1987, in England 2011). The materiality of contemporary culture indicates human beings rarely grow beyond this status in ownership phenomenon.

On the website Corrupt, Conservation and Conservatism.com, Brett Stevens reviews Lasch's 1979 book *The Culture of Narcissism*, and cites the following regarding his idea of the modern narcissist:

Having surrendered most of his technical skills to the corporation, he can no longer provide for his material needs. As the family loses not only its productive but also its reproductive functions as well, men and women no longer manage to raise their children without the help of certified experts. The atrophy of older traditions of self-help has eroded everyday competence, in one area after another, and has made the individual dependent on the state, the corporation and other bureaucracies (Lasch 1979 cited in Stevens 2008).

According to Lasch the modern man and woman no longer has any power. He/she has handed it over to the corporation. The same corporation that tells them what products they need via the media advertising. If we look at the importance human beings place

on possessing products, evidence of which lies in the ubiquity of advertising of these products, it would appear Lasch's narcissus thrives in the material nature of the contemporary.

Lasch puts forward the idea that modern capitalism held a 'therapeutic sensibility...which undermined older notions of self-help and individual initiative' (Lasch 1985: 18). Lasch continues:

this sensibility having boundless admiration for fame and celebrity (nurtured initially by the motion picture industry and furthered principally by television) and the rise of the information age caused...by 1970, even pleas for individualism to be desperate and essentially ineffectual cries which expressed a deeper lack of meaningful individuality (Lasch 1985: 18).

In his book *The Minimal Self* Lasch writes of the two states of Narcissus: Firstly egoism and selfishness (an attempt to remake the world in one's own image); and secondly, merging with the environment (the feminine desire for union with the world). Lasch states that narcissism is neither of these ideas. His view is that the first state (egoism and selfishness) has led to an illusion of self-sufficiency, and the second (a desire for union with the world) is a radical attempt to exist in a state of 'oneness' with nature. He states that we need a new culture that is based on a recognition of these contradictions within the nature/culture binary. (Lasch 1985: 18).

It is as if Lasch thinks it impossible to be either totally self-sufficient or totally at one with nature, and remain sane. The more we strive for self-sufficiency with our machines of mass production, media and information technology, the more we encourage Lasch's therapeutic culture. But according to Lasch (1985), if we do a U-

turn and look to nature that won't work either. I agree with Lasch that self-sufficiency or a oneness with nature are illusory states. For human beings to learn how to break the illusion and exist closer to reality and find more meaning in their lives, they might begin with moving away from that which has helped power it for so long – *the machine*. Photographer Bill Henson captures this hovering between self-sufficiency in culture and a reliance on nature in *Untitled #2* (Fig. 24). Lasch's ideas on society's confusion within the nature/culture binary, is framed succinctly by Henson's brooding landscape.



Figure 24: Bill Henson, *Untitled #2*, 2000–2003.

Henson at once identifies the tension between nature and culture, and somehow looks beyond it. I imagine the work of artists such as Henson and Andrew Wyeth, and writers such as John Steinbeck, to be glimpsing the 'new culture' that Lasch refers to (Lasch 1985). Lasch states the 'new culture' idea is based on a recognition of the contradictions inherent in the nature/culture binary (Lasch 1985). I feel these artists have the ability to recognise the contradictions Lasch identifies and are therefore arguably the creators of a new way of thinking about culture. While I don't claim to

be part of creating a new culture, I do consider my work falling within this field of exploring alternative ways of looking at, or beyond contemporary culture and questioning the mainstream.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), founder of French existentialism and author of pivotal works such as *Nausea* (1938), believed that human beings make their decisions based on where they find meaning rather than what is rational. Sartre found that objects around him and everyday encounters held a sickening quality because they were a constant reminder that life was essentially meaningless. In *Nausea* the main character Roquentin sees his life as just a collection of ‘existences’, one after the other. In the novel while out walking on the boulevard Roquentin realises he can see the future. He watches a figure walking in the distance and predicts where that figure will be in a few moments’ time. Because of this he describes time as having a deflowered newness, that events are new but tarnished, holding no surprises. Sartre writes of Roquentin thinking, as he walks, of the empty warehouses with their machines standing motionless in the darkness (perhaps a metaphor for Roquentin’s life, and how I imagine the supermarket when it is empty of people).

The nihilism of Roquentin’s thoughts, as imaginative as they are, point to someone under the influence of depression. Was Sartre a depressive? Perhaps nihilism is an intellectualised form of depression. To me, the thoughts and ideas that Roquentin experiences are familiar. The patterns of thought that Sartre describes for Roquentin always have a common origin, they are musings on meaning; they are the thoughts one has when one is searching for substance. Sartre believed human beings constantly try to rationalise existence, which distracts them from experiencing existence in any pure

form. He saw our effort to rationalise in an essentially irrational world as a form of 'bad faith', that is, having faith in a nonsense. Sartre found that just being alive in the world could often seem futile and absurd. Sartre's contemporary Albert Camus (1923–1960) did not consider himself an existentialist, as he was less of a nihilist than Sartre, yet his idea of 'the absurd' was similar to Sartre's. It was based on the inherent contradictions of existence, such as the idea of being happy and having a meaningful life when we know we are going to die. Like Sartre, he considered human beings to have an inherent desire for order and structure. He thought that when our consciousness collides with the lack of order in the world a third state is born: 'absurdity' (Camus 1951: 13).

Research suggests many aspects of contemporary society are becoming increasingly absurd. Death on our roads is horrific and the grief felt by those left behind unimaginable, but people still drive around in cars. Humans try to order their lives into straight highways that link their existence with the existence of other people like the electronic workings of a circuit board – an attempt to rationalise space with the mind. The chaos rides past in the other lane going in the opposite direction, every car that goes by a minor miracle. Most of the time the carnage doesn't eventuate. It materialises in all its horror on the six o'clock news and is too horrible for people's rational minds to cope with, but the real absurdity hits them when they get onto the road the next morning. We begin to drive with our fingers crossed.

This absurdity of the violent freeway doesn't end when we get out of our cars. For me the order of the supermarket environment, though not so immediately life threatening, is an attempt by human beings to organise their chaos. As Camus (1951:13) stated,

human beings try to make sense of a world they cannot control (an absurdity). Within this business culture human beings have also lost control of the power of self-definition. If one takes into account the contemporary description of a member of the public as ‘consumer’ and ‘customer’, it seems that human beings now define themselves in terms of business quantities rather than human qualities. This is a fundamental shift that manifests itself in the structure of the supermarket.

Walter Benjamin, author of *Das Passagen-Werk* [*The Arcades Project*] (1927–1940), documented the beginnings of this shift, which he considered part of the evolution into the modern age, as the ‘commodification of things’. Benjamin was interested in the beginnings of consumerism and focused on nineteenth-century bourgeois society's retail experience within the shopping arcades of nineteenth-century Paris. More a collection of ideas and insights on human nature than a rigorous sociological analysis, Benjamin’s substantial work has the feel of a Jack Kerouac novel in that it hovers and observes the machinations within the arcades, from a very human angle. Benjamin began his project in 1927. He viewed the arcades as forerunners to department stores, noting the artificiality of this environment of ‘new’ industrial iron and glass. He seemed acutely aware of the perils of industrialisation and commodification and pays special attention to how the product has become mass-produced and displayed, (further discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to artist Jeff Koons).

This was where human beings began to ‘consume’ in the new ‘department-store’ and ‘shopping-mall’ environments of the arcades. In the ‘Foreword’ to *Das Passagen Werk* the translators write of Benjamin: ‘At issue was the commodification of things. He was interested in the unsettling effects of incipient high capitalism on the most

intimate areas of life and work – especially reflected in the work of art...’ (Eiland, H & McLaughlin, K 1982). One of Benjamin’s key ideas on the effects of the arcade is what he calls the ‘dialectical image’. Benjamin’s idea is that the product/commodity is perceived by the collector as an immediacy; an impact on the consciousness of the observer of ‘nowness’, what he termed as ‘the now of recognizability’ (Tiedemann 1982: xii) and what I would call ‘the shock of the now’. Translators Eiland and McLaughlin (in Tiedemann 1982) explains his idea as: ‘Historical time broken up as distractions and momentary come-ons, myriad displays of ephemera, thresholds for the passage of what Gerard de Nerval (in *Aurelia*) calls ‘the ghosts of material things’. It appears Benjamin was driving at a sense of lost time, in that the mass production of the object has a limited history, that the arcades almost need to be grand and impressive to disguise the façade of the product, as if to say ‘don’t worry that these things for sale have no memory, that they are ghosts of the past presented as must-haves, because they are presented so well, under iron and glass, they must be worth having’. This is undoubtedly the precursor to the supermarket, department store and ubiquitous mall. Benjamin could see the implications back in 1927. Benjamin’s ideas on lost time/memory within well-presented objects remind me of *my* personal experience of present-day retail environments. The product I fly past to answer the call of a customer stays in my consciousness as a ‘glossy nowness’ and is persistent in its seduction.

Human beings build environments that reflect their move away from the human, and then they work in them. The effect of this work environment for me is dislocation. Dislocation – to not be able to locate is the same as no [+] place, so for me when I am working in the supermarket I exist (behind the guise of a contemporary utopia),

nowhere. I see the supermarket environment as one of French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1926–1984) heterotopias found in: 'Of Other Spaces' (1967). Foucault makes the analogy of looking in the mirror and observing a heterotopia. The heterotopia is at once real because we see it, and not real because it has no dimensions. It is just a reflection. This leads me to think of television and its blurring of the real and the unreal, and the associations between TV, advertising and the utopia (or heterotopia in the context of Foucault's analysis of spaces, real and unreal) (Foucault 1967), of the supermarket. I have looked at my own reflection and wondered where the reality lies, when the mirror depicts me so convincingly. My mind accepts my reflection as me, yet it is not me. This is how the supermarket functions. It appears real, but as in Baudrillard's (1994) hyperreality, it is only a façade, a reflection— a kind of absurdism.

The absurd for Sartre and Camus was that of human beings trying to make order from a world of chaos. My experience of the absurd falls under this umbrella in that I am continually trying to make sense of the world of the artificial. I travel to work in a vehicle that poisons my very life force with its emissions. When I arrive I am surrounded by an order made of plastic, concrete and steel. I wear a uniform that fits me in with all the other workers and I mirror the product on the shelf. It makes me feel like the space itself – nothing. I reflect the product. The product reflects me, like holding two mirrors up to each other, the light bounces from one to the other eternally; a closed system of continual self-affirmation. This is a massive absurdity because it undermines individuality. Human beings define their identity by looking at themselves in relation to other people, but what if the other person looks the same as the observer, and the same as the environment? This repetition of the individual and

product leads to a state of meaninglessness, a similar phenomenon to Sartre's nihilism. Perhaps this is what we were designed to do, as do the worker-ants or worker-bees that build their communities. The only problem in the case of human beings is that they are conscious of their existence, so unlike the ants and bees they ask questions. This very act of asking questions can be seen as a form of rebellion. Camus (1951: 28) said that rebellion is only possible where a theoretical equality conceals great factual inequalities. This for me is the condition of my work environment. The idea of 'teamwork' is superficially adhered to but is in constant conflict with the inescapable hierarchical structure. This conflict evokes another form of absurdism, one that I became acutely aware of during a conversation with a manager. I realised I was completely powerless. I existed as a kind of tool for management. This, in contrast with the idea of 'team', filled me with a sense of nihilism, and I needed to rebel in some way. Taking time away from Coles to study is my rebellion against the absurdism of human beings becoming part of the fabric of the artificial. Camus wrote that rebellion arises from the spectre of the irrational (the absurd) coupled with an unjust and incomprehensible condition (Camus 1951: 28). Once again, this explains the exact nature of my work environment. Camus sums up my situation when he writes:

In every rebellion is to be found a metaphysical demand for unity. Rebellion from this point of view is a fabricator of universes. This also defines art. All rebel thought...is expressed in rhetoric or in a closed universe. In these sealed worlds man can reign and have knowledge at last. This is also the tendency of all the arts. The artist reconstructs the world to his plan (Camus 1951: 29).

I had to rebel against the absurdity of the workaday in order to make sense of it. I could not accept it as it was. I had to fabricate my own version of things and stick to it as closely as possible to guard against slipping into the void.

CHAPTER THREE: GOD SPEED (SIGNIFICANCE)

Paul Virilio is concerned that contemporary visual and soundscape art has become dehumanised. He states that this dehumanisation of artistic expression has come about because of the desensitising nature of contemporary society and that we no longer make art that is sensitive to what it means to be human. Introducing Virilio's book, *Art and Fear* (2003) John Armitage writes:

In contrast to Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus, Virilio claims he is anxious to study the varieties of life and the contemporary art of the crisis of meaning that nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists have shaped and the genocide that homicidal rulers have in reality committed (Armitage 2003: 4).

Virilio himself writes of 'the emergence of public opinion and the appearance of a virtual or multimedia democracy that is not just obliterating democracy but also the sense of the human body' (Virilio 2003: 5). Virilio seems worried, in my opinion justifiably, that the nihilism Sartre was so familiar with is becoming all-encompassing. The art that we use to check our health as a society is itself losing its credibility. Artistic forms of expression have melded so closely with popular forms of information gathering, namely television and the internet, that they have become meaningless. The violence on the human body seen in these mediums, Virilio says, leads to the artist 'presenting' a dehumanised form of expression rather than 'representing' in a sensitive and what he calls 'pitiful' way (Virilio 2003). This idea of dehumanisation is a central theme in my work. I wanted to strip away all the gloss I found in retail space to see what was really behind the façade. My work therefore appears dehumanised on the surface, but is actually a pursuit of the truth, whereas the retail environment appears to tell the truth in a persuasive manner, but if the surface is removed one is left with a void. I am therefore dealing with two opposing binaries –

the empty/façade versus the reactive image that at first appears lifeless, but is really busy opposing the retail like a mirror. The following work (Fig. 25) is one example of this reaction. It was painted not long after I began the project, so the act of leaving full-time work to study and begin my search for meaning is reflected as an appropriation of my workplace. The image represents an attempt to see beyond the artificial. The product is still there, but now I can see its parallel universe in the realm of how it exists when it doesn't try to sell itself. It has over the course of my research acquired a shop-worn look that I once saw everyday in the workplace: imperfections built up over time, retained on a white canvas, or the floor of a supermarket.



Figure 25: Gavin Campbell *Untitled*, 2006.

If Virilio were to view some of my work he might wonder ‘where is the humanity?’. But I think he would make a clear distinction between what he sees, and other forms (namely technologised) of contemporary art. In its evolution, my painting has become more reductionist; yet beyond first impressions, it represents an attempt to rediscover humanity in art, in that it is looking at ‘real self’. It is reacting to the very noise and

violence that Virilio despises. It is trying to find the silence that Virilio believes has given way to what he calls 'sonorisation' (Virilio 2003), the deafening noise from an over-bearing soundscape installation, background music in the retail environment or from advertisements and sitcoms on television. In my work I am reacting to the fashionable, loud, 'in your face' way of communicating. Unlike most contemporary advertisements and television shows, my work is soft and not too easy to read. In his introduction to *Art and Fear*, James Armitage describes Virilio's awareness of the same audio-saturation I felt while working in the supermarket. Armitage:

But, for Virilio, present day sound art obliterates the character of visual art while concurrently advancing the communication practices of the global advertising industry, which has assaulted the art world to such a degree that it is the central dogma of the multimedia academy. People today have to endure the pressure of the 'ambient murmuring' of incessant muzak at the art gallery, at work or at the shopping mall (Armitage 2003: 15).

Virilio helps me understand the link between the demise of art and the suffering of human beings, in that often people have to 'endure' their environments. Virilio:

Art Breakdown, contemporary with the damage done by technoscientific progress. If 'modern art' has been synonymous with the INDUSTRIAL revolution, postmodern art is in effect contemporary with the INFORMATION revolution – that is, with the replacement of analogue languages by digital (Virilio 2003: 95).

It seems to me Virilio is saying that scientific progress, especially in the fields of gene and information technology, is running at pace, away from humanism. As people make art and communicate from their computers, and watch television, they are leaving their body behind. While studying at my desk one time, talking with a learned

colleague, I jokingly said to her, 'Perhaps I should just email you; none of this face to face stuff'.

As human beings move into the digital age they are experiencing an identity crisis, in that they no longer recognise their bodies. The recent fame of pop sensation Lady Gaga is perhaps one of the most poignant examples of what people see as important in terms of self-image. In *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, Camille Paglia wrote: 'Lady Gaga is the first megastar of the digital age. But she is a fraud...and her success only shows how culturally impoverished we have become' (Paglia 2010: 13), and continues:

Fans of Gaga have grown up with mobile phones and iPods as sticky extensions of their bodies. It is an era of miniaturization, computer-generated special effects and image manipulation by Photoshop, with everything steeped in unreal, highly saturated colour disconnected from nature. The fine arts have been replaced by video games from which the cartoonish Lady Gaga seems to have popped (Paglia 2010: 14).

and:

In 1933, the critic I.A. Richards writing about *The Waste Land*, spoke of T.S. Eliot's 'persistent concern with sex, the problem of our generation, as religion was the problem of the last' (Paglia 2010: 14).

Paglia speculates that we have reached the end of the sexual revolution begun in Eliot's time, and asks the question, 'How could a figure, so calculated and artificial, so clinical and strangely antiseptic, so stripped of genuine eroticism, have become the icon of her generation?' (Paglia 2010: 14). Paglia, I believe, is correct in having these concerns. Increasingly technologised lives lead to less time in reality and more time in virtual-reality. Lady Gaga's popularity warns me that society increasingly looks to the denatured and the artificial.

Mass production via the machine, and now the mass production of sophisticated computer technology, dominates the lives of all individuals. The ubiquity and worship of the product are key themes in the work of artists such as Andy Warhol (1928–1987), Jeff Koons (b.1955) and Richard Hamilton (b. 1922); three Pop artists whose work I have considered below. Like Virilio, Jeff Koons is a strident critic of contemporary society, yet he incorporates a little more humour than Virilio. Koons comments on the absurdities and contradictions of society through his sculptures and installations. In the book *Jeff Koons*, published on the occasion of the exhibition, held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 1992–1993, John Caldwell compared Koons to Andy Warhol. Caldwell talks about Warhol's *200 Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962). He describes his experience during a lecture at the MOMA in New York, during which a slide of Warhol's cans appeared on the screen, noting how the Warhol image sparked a derisive hiss from the audience, while the previous Roy Lichtenstein image had provoked laughter. He pondered the difference in reactions:

[Warhol's] multiplied rows of Campbell's soup cans were in fact no irony at all but instead a close approximation of what every American sees on every visit to the supermarket...an industrial product sold as such, in endless over-lit supermarket aisles whose rows of cans look almost exactly like Warhol's painting (Caldwell 1992: 9).

Caldwell makes the link to Koons's work: the ordered and the everyday placed inside a museum or gallery. Like Warhol, one of Koons's devices is to bring the everyday into the art world. The kitchness of many of Koons's sculptures, such as *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (Fig. 26) and *Rabbit* (Fig. 27), are musings on decoration and ego and parody popular culture in that they purify and objectify the popular imagination to the point of the ridiculous. Here Koons is highlighting that we *are* ridiculous in the things that we as consumers worship, that we worship the superficial.



Figure 26: Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988.



Figure 27: Jeff Koons, *Rabbit*, 1986.

I am interested in Koons's earlier vacuum cleaner pieces from the early 1980s (Fig. 28). These works are altar-like, commanding worship from their distancing glass enclosures, (a little like how the 'Pope-mobile' operates) and parody popular cultures' obsession with time saving and 'the new'.



Figure 28: Jeff Koons, *New Hoover Convertible*, 1980.

New Hoover Convertible (Fig. 28) mirrors the shop front display window, standing erect and untouchable like a mannequin sporting the latest fashion. It's as if consumers are saying 'look how we adore our machines, even if they are only vacuum cleaners'.

English painter and popular culture commentator Richard Hamilton was one of the first to contemplate this theme. Hamilton is widely viewed as one of the founders of Pop Art. His 1956 collage *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (Fig. 29), includes the all-important mod cons: TV, vacuum cleaner, packaged meat and romance between man and woman and, like Koons' vacuum cleaners, questioned our desire for the appliance and its ability to be life-improving.



Figure 29: Richard Hamilton, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?*, 1956.

Here Hamilton shows us the modern interior: the new product in the home. It is a portentous image and has a strange sadness, as if warning the viewer of what happens when the consumer's obsession for the new takes over. The homemakers have become self-obsessed, too busy posing to talk to or even notice each other. Their love is a shallow 2D image on the wall, a poignant example of modern commodified feelings. In *She* (Fig. 30) Hamilton has taken our iconic vacuum cleaner, and blended

it with a toaster, so that ‘\$he’ is becoming the appliance. Her eye grimaces as she morphs, but she still remembers to reach for something from the fridge. The toaster/vacuum cleaner reflects product ubiquity and confusion and sits in either her blood or that of a leaky package of meat. The title is a clever wordplay by Hamilton, suggesting the ‘housewife’; and perhaps all human beings are now viewed in terms of product and monetary value. In *\$he* 9 (Fig.30) and *Hommage á Chrysler Corp.* (Fig 31),



Figure 30: Richard Hamilton, *\$he*, 1958-61.

Hamilton honed in on the underbelly of a burgeoning popular culture. He reduced the domestic scene, and our love affair with the car, down to a few key reference points.

In both *She* and *Hommage á Chrysler Corp.*, culture is exposed indoors, and on the street; evident in Hamilton's reference to the appliance and the automobile. Hamilton cuts culture in cross-section: something needs to be taken away in order to see what is going on. *She* represents what can happen when we move too far away from nature and become commodified. Man (and Woman) has become machine and is now, with worlds in cyberspace and virtual reality, enabling people to create their own utopia. 'Man' is fast becoming obsolete. The replacement is a temporal world of buying and selling products and real estate and creating a new virtual identity.



Figure 31: Richard Hamilton,
Hommage á Chrysler Corp., 1957.

Hamilton uses the clever device of suggested form. Rather than painting the entire scene, Hamilton lets our minds construct much of the image, allowing the viewer to

become part of the work. As in Hamilton's *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (Fig. 29) and *She* (Fig. 30), to bring the product home is to personalise it. In this environment of familiarity individuals are in their comfort zone. I am interested in the difference of feeling when I occupy different zones geographically, and therefore mentally. I often feel when I am in the safety of my house I am a different person to my persona in the workplace. I currently rent a house in a suburb of Launceston. Figures 32 & 33 are views from inside this house.

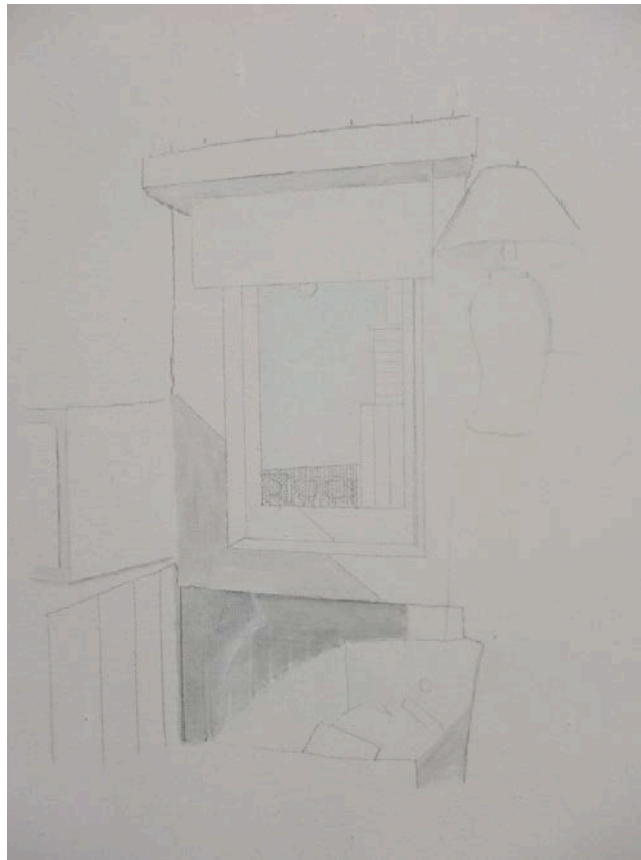


Figure 32: Gavin Campbell, *Domestic Interior One*, 2010.

Andrew Wyeth's *Wind from the Sea* (Fig 4) holds a washed out nostalgic mood which I begin to occupy in Figure 32.



Figure 33: Gavin Campbell, *Domestic Interior Two*, 2010.

The bleached interiors of Figures 32 and 33 are simplifications of space, not unlike Belgian painter Luc Tuymans' (b. 1958) reduced and faded pallet. Tuymans conveys an almost used up quality, as if he is not satisfied with painting as a means of communicating an idea and reacting to this by using a suggestive style. On the Saatchi Gallery website, Tuymans' work is catalogued, and described:

If media images inadequately depict the horrors of reality, then Luc Tuymans's paintings are even more disturbingly detached. Often taking his imagery from published photos (of war, violence, subjugation), the paintings are the antithesis of this historic iconography; dull tones, vague, nondescript scenes, stripped of emotional propaganda (Saatchi Gallery 2011).



Figure 34: Luc Tuymans, *Within*, 2001.

Tuymans's *Within* (Fig. 34) is a cold internal environment that suggest some kind of restraining area. It is 223 x 243 cm in size and is described as: 'a close up detail of a birdcage, this painting more than conveys feelings of hopelessness and isolation: through its sheer size and potency, it literally traps the viewer, swallowing him into a prison of collective consciousness' (Saatchi Gallery 2011). Though my work doesn't try to capture the viewer with size, (they are on average 40 x 50 cm) Tuymans' austere interiors inspire me to contextualise my own familiar suburban interior (Figs 32 & 33). While in *Coke* (Fig. 35), and *Long Life Milk* (Fig. 36) I attempt to convey

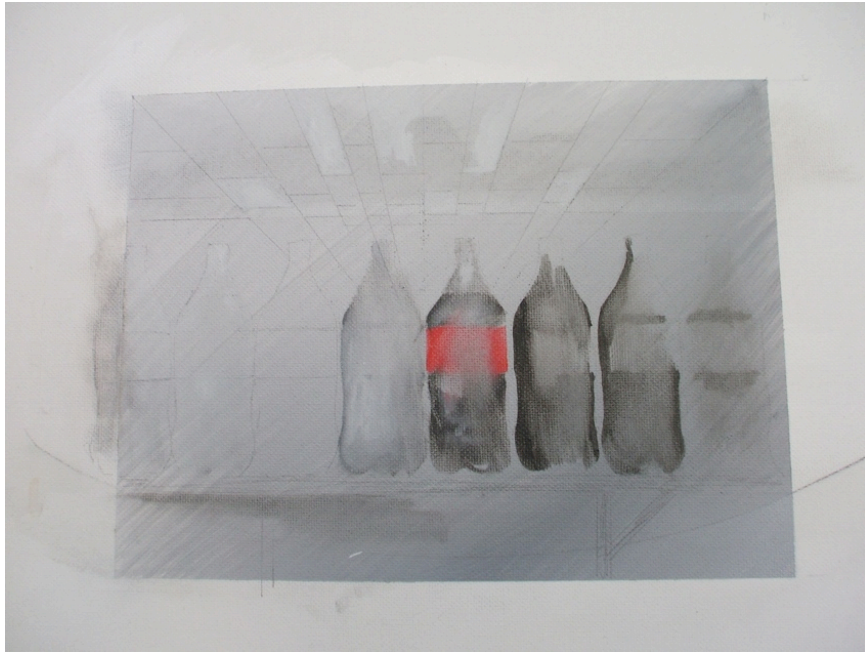


Figure 35: Gavin Campbell, *Coke*, 2008.

the collective consciousness of the retail world and the sense of isolation and hopelessness I sometimes experienced from within. Here I rely on a muted palette of appropriated products under the fluorescent twilight of the retail interior.

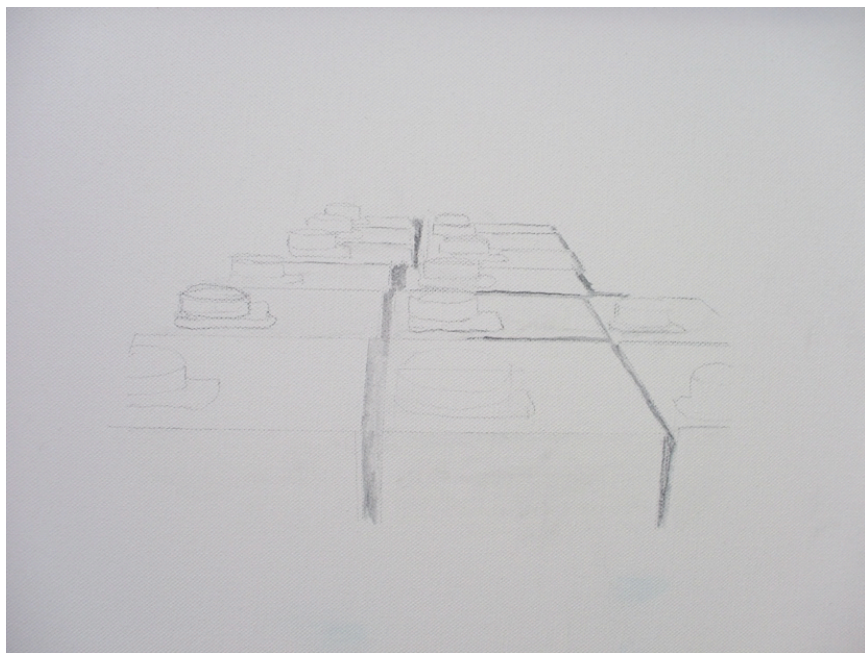


Figure 36: Gavin Campbell, *Long Life Milk*, 2008.

Tuymans' paintings of urban and industrial scenes (Figs 37 & 39) are distant reflections of the built environment. I compare Luc Tuymans' paintings to my own views from a distance (Figs 38 & 40), and find similarities in subject, composition and paint application. Tuymans finds the mood of urban brooding that I try to achieve. His work is keeping a safe distance for observation, as if there is a kind of portentous danger in the subject.



Figure 37: Luc Tuymans, *Dusk*, 2004.

Stephan Beyst's article 'The secret charms of Luc Tuymans', describes Tuymans' work:

Luc Tuymans' most cherished procedure can be described in two ways. In terms of photography, it is a close up, a zooming in on a detail of the whole image. No zooming in on the kernel of proceedings, however: these are rather zoomed out of the image. We can also describe such 'zooming away' in terms of the conventional academic genres. Luc Tuymans is then turning away from 'history painting' – the explicit depiction of the human drama, condensed into one single meaningful scene. He withdraws in the 'lesser genres' of the

hierarchy: landscape, interior, still life – where the painter zooms away from human drama to concentrate on the place where it happens (interior, landscape) or on the objects which he uses or produces (still Life) (Beyst 2007).

His hazy *Dusk* (Fig. 37) suggests the sun is setting on civilisation, a similar kind of fog that I have included in *Another Day* (Fig. 38) that hides the way forward.



Figure 38: Gavin Campbell, *Another Day*, 2010.

In *Another Day* I focus on mood. The Launceston fog slowly creeps through, enveloping and obscuring the built environment. Nature softly caresses structure as if teasing a culture that is still only in its infancy, when compared to the highly evolved fractal qualities hidden within the natural environment.

In a pale blue heat the relentless sun beats down in *Nuclear Power Plant* (Fig.39),



Figure 39: Luc Tuymans, *Nuclear Power Plant*, 2006.

suggesting it may inhabit a similar region to that I have captured in *Untitled* (Fig. 40), in its bleaching of colour and austere subject matter.



Figure 40: Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, 2006.

I am fascinated by the strange way the built environment appears to reflect its inhabitants. By this I am not referring to the particular style of architecture, although this does have some bearing. I focus on the state of the building, how it reacts visually to the time of day or weather conditions, how the cars are arranged around it, whether there is any rubbish in the garden, if the curtains are open or closed, the elements that are directly related to human habitation. To gain a different perspective I have to decrease my distance from the subject and observe more closely. Figure 41 is based on a mini 'projects' arrangement of living (or existing): a particularly enigmatic cascading flat complex that suggested to me occupants who trod a fine balance between a sensible, level-headed, just getting-by type of existence and an emptiness that was strong enough to glow from its windows. I have no knowledge of the inhabitants, but I use and enjoy the musing process to inform my work.



Figure 41: Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, 2008.

I see suburbia as a ring around the urban retail environment, with its own special aesthetic. It is strongly linked to the urban because it is still a denatured environment. The closest we get to any semblance of natural bush is a patch of grass and perhaps a few native trees, and an amusingly titled 'nature strip'.

The following work (Fig. 42) is a reaction to the built-up and the overload I believe is central to the commodification process. Here I employ a stripping-away method in an attempt to distance myself and find a place that is more conducive to contemplation; to reduce in order to see; to lose as much of the superficial as possible.

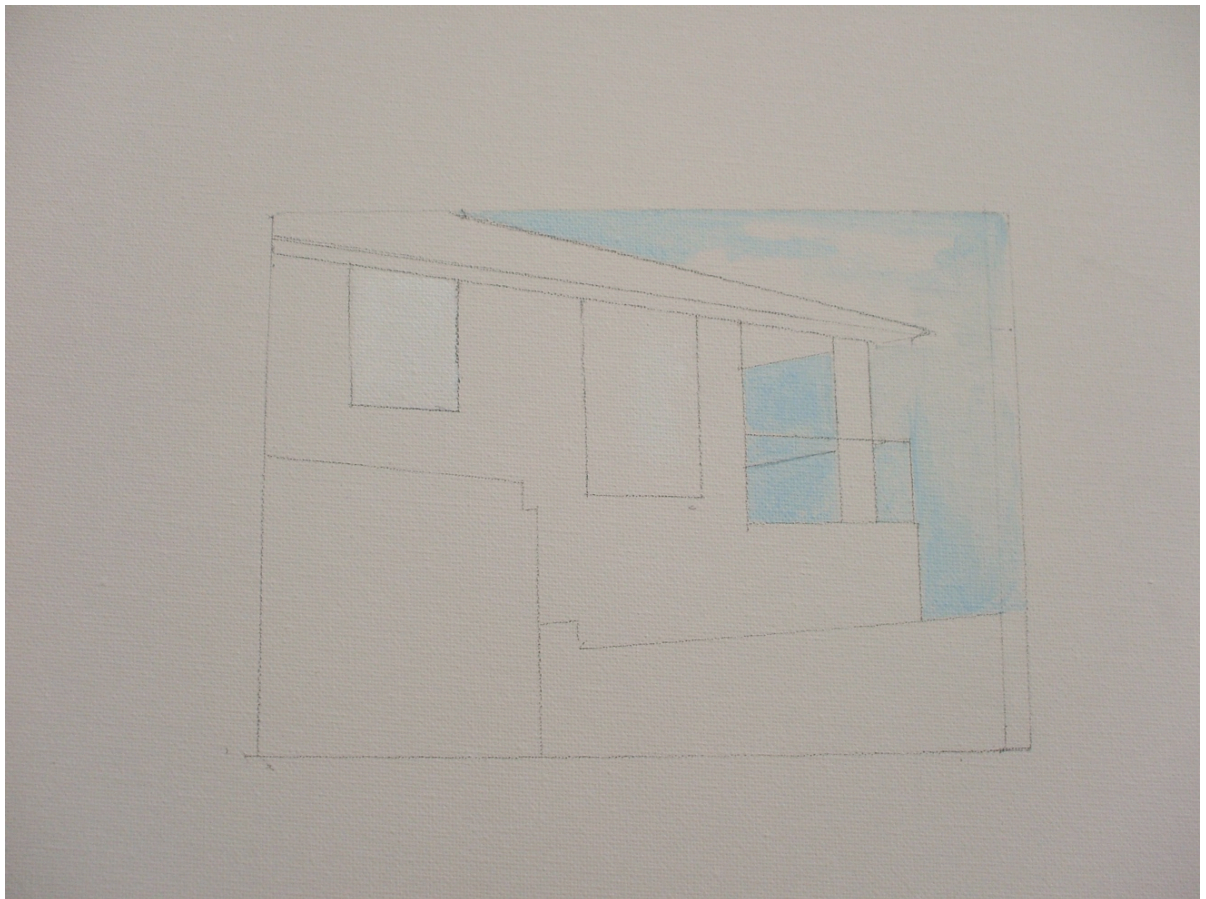


Figure 42: Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, 2009.

To contrast this with the next painting, a later work that is somewhat more built up, my idea was to not lose the sense of emptiness and melancholy, but to include with it a feeling for nature and the eternal (Fig. 43).



Figure 43: Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, 2010.

Wyeth had a special feel for places that were stripped away and exposed, as in *Weathered Side* (Fig. 3). I employ a similar abrasive process to the image in Figure 43, enabling me to see beyond the structure via the receding wall, to a nature that has for so long been obscured: invoking, as I believe Wyeth did, the sense there is something more than the here-and-now built environment.

This development of a sense of melancholy within the suburban environment is intertwined with the denaturing of the Australian landscape, from natural bush to

paddocks to tarmac and concrete, and can lead to an individualistic, compartmentalised existence for its inhabitants. *Cornercopia* (Fig. 44) mirrors this divisionism within white concrete boundaries.

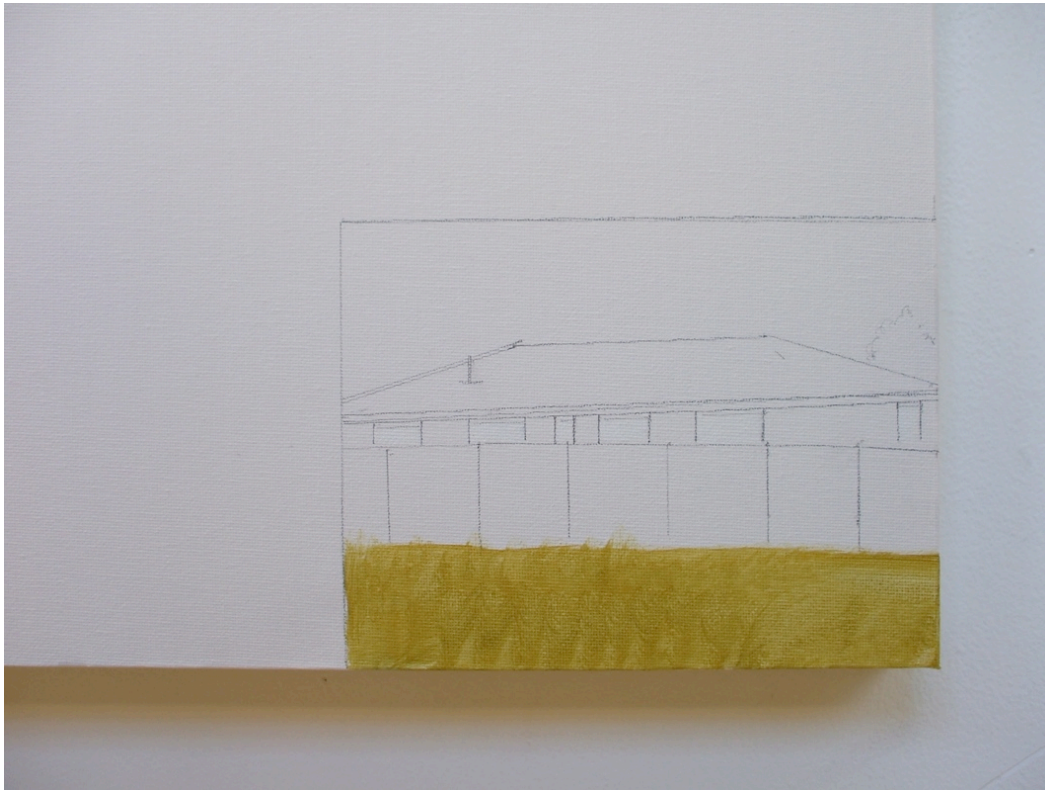


Figure 44: Gavin Campbell, *Cornercopia*, (detail) 2009.

The sense of melancholy within urban and suburban environments has evolved to become part of the fabric of society. Jacky Bowring in her book *A Field Guide to Melancholy* (2008) argues that contemporary society confuses melancholy with depressive states and therefore a condition which human beings should overcome and ‘fix’. Bowring believes that melancholy should be considered a necessary and useful state of mind, rather than a kind of emotional malfunction. I have experienced both these states extensively and I agree with Bowring’s assertion. When I experience melancholy it feels ‘normal’, on the same level as, say, love, fear and happiness, but

when I have lived in depression it feels like there is something really wrong with my brain chemistry – very ‘abnormal’; as extreme as mania or rage, but in another direction. To recognise this is of extreme importance so that human beings don’t make the mistake of destroying something which is naturally part of their thought lives.

Bowring cites many great artists and thinkers through history who have experienced melancholy and depression:

Aristotle’s ‘Problem XXX, I’ which re-awakened interest in the connections, re-stating the melancholic’s outstanding qualities as good memory and astuteness... Aristotle’s conundrum sheds light on the internal conflictions of an attraction to that which is sorrowful, and a co-dependence on positive and negative within melancholy. The recognition of an artistic temperament associated with is the legacy of the Problem, and, throughout history, there are examples of artists and writers whose best work was produced when they were afflicted with melancholy (Bowring 2008: 35).

Bowring goes on to identify artists such as Michelangelo, Vincent Van Gogh, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko as depressive or melancholic, and notes Walter Benjamin as being a ‘self-declared melancholic’ (Bowring 2008: 39).

For me depression and melancholy have forced me to ask questions. Why would I ask any questions of my life if I was blissing out all the time? I wouldn’t have to, I would just go with it. When I was depressed I was constantly thinking thoughts such as ‘What’s it all about?’ and ‘What is the point of all this?’. If I were very depressed I would not have the motivation to try and answer these questions, yet if I were melancholic the creative spark would be there. Real depression is painful, but

melancholia is a kind of sweet sorrow that I find is best reflected in in-between environments like suburbia. In a section of her book entitled 'The architecture and landscape of sadness' Bowring writes:

As part of the contemporary obsession with eliminating sadness, architecture and the designed landscape aspire to a state of untroubled paradise. The advertising for new housing developments, condominiums, and parks is dominated by images of sunlit scenes, trees, water, moments of Arcadia.

Bowring continues:

Searching for an architecture of melancholy is fraught with pitfalls. The heartless picturesque always lurks nearby, deriving aesthetic pleasure from the suffering of others. In the context of the designed environment – i.e. architecture and landscape architecture – could this mean that poorly designed places could be sources of melancholy? (Bowring 2008: 188).

I have never actively searched for melancholic places. Places always took me by surprise: in fact for me the heartland of melancholy, the suburbs, were initially depressing (more akin to my impression of the supermarket environment). It wasn't until I had spent sufficient time in the suburbs that I learned of their subtle layers and charms. I found a rich landscape of feeling in the last place I had expected to. I was used to finding melancholy in derelict environments such as the Inveresk railyards of Launceston before they were redeveloped, or the old Launceston Hospital, which I managed to visually record before it was rejuvenated. Much like successful communities, melancholy is not something to be simply manufactured.

It is also interesting for me to recognise a melancholic nostalgia for the supermarket environment: a feeling that is possible only with a certain amount of distance, another example of the way melancholy operates, requiring lots of ingredients to function and lots of time spent mixing those ingredients. As Bowring has mentioned, to try and

find the exact recipe is futile. This is because melancholy only properly exists when it is just *experienced* rather than being picked apart and over analysed.

In the section ‘Melancholy and beauty: ‘Spirited sadness’, Bowring asks the question, ‘Why should the appearance of sadness hold aesthetic appeal?’, and continues:

Morally, ethically, logically, it might be expected that sadness would not be associated with beauty. Yet it is this very contradiction that contributes to melancholy’s elevation above its early companions in the humoral tradition – the choleric, the sanguine and the phlegmatic. Beyond fears of madness, and alongside ideas of genius, the aesthetic appeal of melancholy is central to its paradoxical attraction (Bowring 2008: 41).

I certainly don’t consider myself in the genius league, but Bowring’s research does help me to contextualise my work. I am drawn to an aesthetic that captures the dual melancholy of moving on from the past and being caught in the present: the nostalgia of the post-industrial, and the melancholic limbo of supermarket and suburban suspension. Without trying to understand it scientifically, I pay a kind of homage to a simultaneously exhilarating and sorrowful state of being, which in my opinion lends itself to painting in its many layers and subtle impressions.

The supermarket is so full of surface gloss it becomes empty of emotion. While the suburbs operate in the same ordered fashion as the supermarket, it is their sense of initial emptiness, that they are a void between the city and the bush, which leaves room for nostalgic reflection. I see simultaneously a vista of emptiness, and a richness and depth of feeling, working together at the heart of ‘suburban utopia’. I see the suburbs are a nowhere environment, yet it is this ‘nowhereness’ that lodges it in my imagination.

Suburbia mimics a desert landscape and is always overshadowed by a general lack of confidence and misdirection as it is never quite urban and not properly bush. One could argue this middle ground of picket fence sitting permeates into its inhabitants. If one lives a long time in the suburbs one might become middle of the road; not urban hip and unable to navigate the outback. My experience of suburban life certainly involves a lack of extremes. Hovering between city and country the suburbs have surreptitiously created their own mystique, and for me have proved to be the dark horse in the 'place race'. The unassuming limbo of the suburbs belies the rich story of people and place that exists under the surface. This is a never-ending story that tells of the eternal struggle for human beings to find sense of place and belonging.

Contemporary Australian artist Fiona McMonagle explores this incomplete narrative from her soft and muted, yet vibrant, watercolor palette. Her work (Figs 45 & 46) is featured in the article 'Loud and Proud', in a 2010 issue of *Art Collector*.



Figure 45: Fiona McMonagle, *Up on the Roof*, 2010.

Columnist Ashley Crawford contextualizes the work within a ‘suburban limbo’ and writes:

...she never left her memories of growing up in suburbia. The resulting pictures are rendered with a strange sense of nostalgia and melancholia, an aspect in part attributable to her use of watercolor as a medium (Crawford 2010).

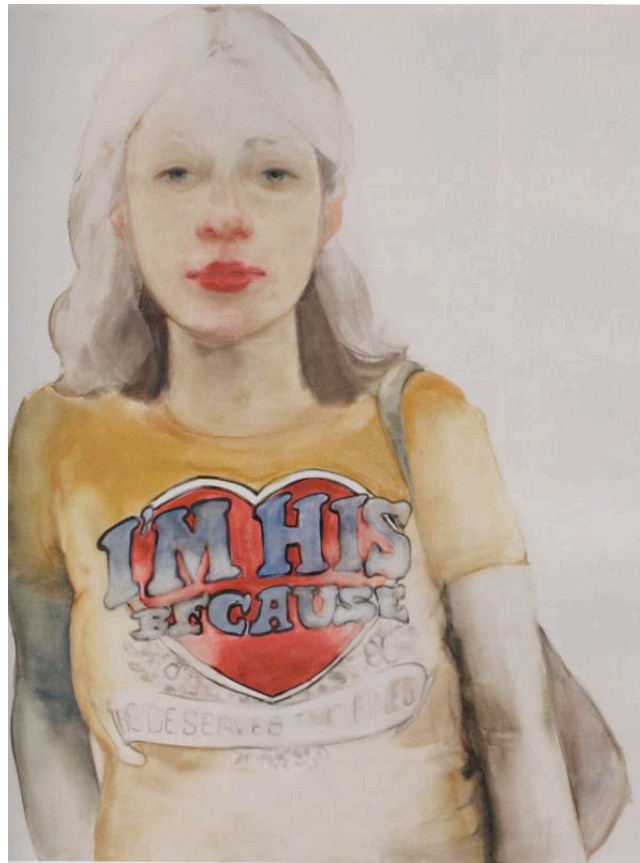


Figure 46: Fiona McMonagle,
I'm His Because He Deserves the Finest, 2009.

McMonagle's ethereal style enhances the subject's melancholia, as if they are full of life but confined to a ghostly suburban existence. When comparing my own work (Figs 42, 43 & 44) to McMonagle's, (Figs. 45 & 46), I see similarities in leanness of paint application and an overall sense that McMonagle's figures might feel at home if they were to occupy my impression of suburbia.

Similarly, I want peel back the gloss and explore the space behind the retail that is more contemplative and less busy. I attempt to create a window into the mind that reflects the thoughtful, and is able to look at the human condition without the stress of hectic contemporary life. My images try to capture Steinbeck's 'hour of pearl' and Hopper's 'retarded moment', the state of existence that brushes away clutter and floats in nature. I find this space when I look beyond the contrived façade of retail and suburban environments. As in the work of McMonagle, I attempt to find the real atmosphere of an environment that holds qualities of melancholy and timelessness. This is the basis of my research, to look for something more than the immediate image by using a reduced palette. In my work I speak of dream-like spaces that represent a trance-like state of mind, highlighting the need for human beings to hold onto and value their daydreaming qualities.

As I was completing this project, Australian artist Jon Cattapan presented an arts forum on 19 May 2011 at the University of Tasmania, entitled *Being There but not Being There*. Cattapan displayed slides of his paintings, saying they were based on his observations that society is becoming less and less sure of itself, and that running through society is an increasing sense of instability (Cattapan 2011). In a 2008 article on Cattapan, author and artist Ian North writes:

The negative is a truism: that there are too many people in the world, and too many of us are producing too many things. This is the situation the mature Jon Cattapan has been addressing for many years now, recognising that many of us live virtually in a trans-national mega-city (North 2008).

During his presentation Cattapan mentioned that many of his paintings could be of anywhere and nowhere, giving the viewer nothing to locate, intensifying the

relationship between viewer and image. Cattapan captures the phenomenon that many people now live in mega-cities in *The Group Discusses* (Fig. 47).



Figure 47: Jon Cattapan, *The Group Discusses* 2002.

Once a population of a given area passes a certain critical mass, anonymity takes over, and one loses one's bearings. At this point human beings become anonymous shoppers or retail workers. The instability Cattapan mentions is represented by the ghostly figures, as if they are unsure of which way to turn. They are there but not there, while their faded identities have been filled with the lights and grid of the urban. Cattapan's work often has an intense vibrancy of colour, yet it still maintains a washed-out, blurry feel that I identify with. When I do use colour it is as a supporting counterpoint to an emptied canvas, and thus works in a different way to Cattapan's overall colour field.

It is ironic the more people in a given area, after a certain point, the greater the chance of alienation for those people. Similarly there is irony in a gridded and controlled landscape, that is designed to direct human passage, yet only leads to more and more consumers losing their way. Paul Virilio might say that contemporary art is following this directionless path. But what of the artists who deal with the subject of alienation either directly or indirectly? Perhaps the art that Virilio considers shallow and 'presented' (Virilio 2003) is honest in that it accurately reflects its shallow and fleeting subject, and therefore an effective way to communicate this idea. One cannot say all contemporary art is shallow and presented. Artists like McMonagle, Tuymans and Cattapan are testament to that. Their attempt to portray the contemporary human condition with such insight and sensitivity suggests an art that is altogether the opposite of shallow, in its getting below the surface of Western culture.

The retail environment for me is a very anonymous space. During my workaday I would see many people, but I felt connected to none of them. This inability to identify with anyone was a palpable form of alienation. I felt that if I painted something that was at once every shopper and no shopper, I might get closer to understanding this environment that challenged my sense of connection to society. This sense of anonymity led me to investigate the suggested figures surrounded by the no [+] place of the built environment in Jon Cattapan's *The Group Discusses* (Fig. 47). The result is a generic couple treading the utopian catwalk (Fig. 48).



Figure 48: Gavin Campbell, *Gone Shopping*, 2008.

Pop Art, reacting to the god of industry, commerce and repetition, had to find a way to mimic the sense of dehumanisation brought on by mass production. Warhol's *200 Campbell's Soup Cans* (Fig. 49), is one of the quintessential manifestations of this: one sees no human figure, or if one does it is of human as product: another brick in the wall. Here the canned product supplants the human figure. Warhol's cramming of the cans within the canvas push against the borders, reflecting the pressure of a saturated retail space. Each can has a different name badge, but they all wear the same uniform.

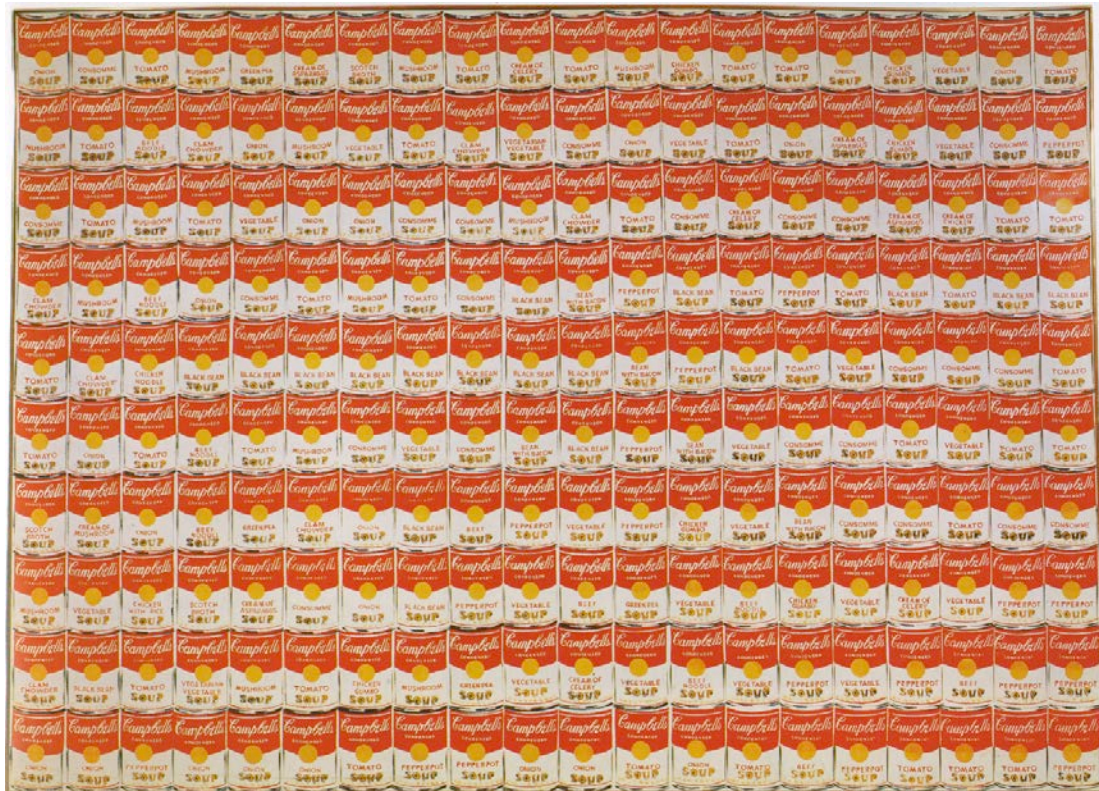


Figure 49: Andy Warhol, *200 Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962.

Warhol could not achieve this ironic mirroring of society by being insincere and cutting corners. He wanted every can to portray what mass culture demanded, and the repetition that this entailed. Within this lies an interesting counter to advertising itself. Here art at once mimics the advertisement and mocks it. The high art of Warhol demands the advertising industry and the society that drives it, to take a good look at itself, and is a warning for the direction in which culture is headed.

So contemporary art might be considered post-Pop distillation. There seems to be an emotional factor attributed to the overall sense of immediacy in much contemporary art. The photography of contemporary artist Bill Henson (Figs 24 and 50) speaks of human beings' emotional disconnection with the natural environment, a schism that only persists while culture is present.



Figure 50: Bill Henson *Untitled #74*, 2000–2003.

I am drawn to images that try as honestly as possible to portray the human condition; art that is not afraid to admit that we may sometimes feel lost in suburbia, or that we are beings with emotions that need to be recognised. If humankind is ever to grow away from its product/material obsession we need to be reminded (and unafraid) of work like Henson's. Only with honest acceptance of our bodies within the built environment can we be psychologically at peace. This is what lies behind the integrity of artists such as Cattapan and Henson and though not solely a contemporary phenomenon, this courageous approach to looking at ourselves is one of the tenets of contemporary art.

In relation to my work I found it was important for me to be able to address its contemporaneity and its modernist roots. While reading Robert Hughes' *American Visions* (1997), I got a good idea of why this over-arching paradigm of modernism was for so long the guiding light for art and culture. Post-colonial American art was

about grand themes like conquering nature, relations with the American Indians and general empire building. Hughes describes the work of prominent American painter Kenyon Cox (1856–1919) (Fig. 47), in the following context:

The art of painting was about sublimation; unruly nature must be tamed and reformed as a kind of idealized ornament, whose chief part was the human figure, naked or clothed. Transcendence through generality and typifying led to the Ideal (Hughes 1997: 221).

Contemporary society, having tamed nature, has left it to starve in its cage. Previously nature was to be conquered. Now it is just irrelevant. This manly overpowering of nature was part and parcel of the grand narrative of the modern. Culture no longer required nature, or the bigger picture. It has become individualistic in that it strives for personal wealth at the expense of community values and the natural environment.

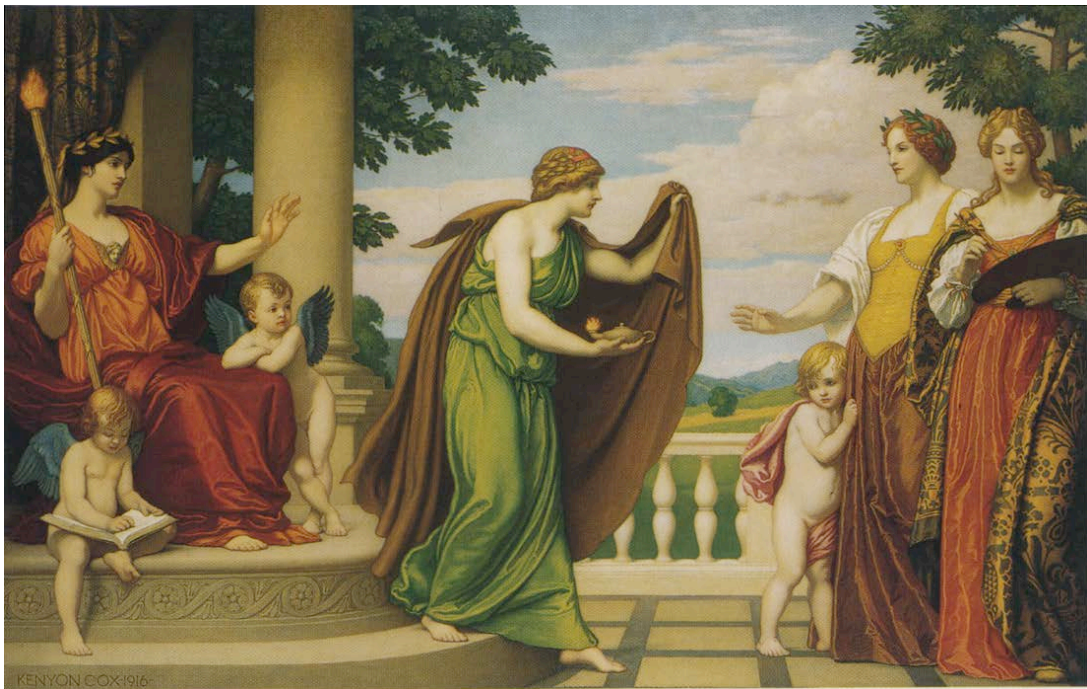


Figure 51: Kenyon Cox *Tradition*, 1916.

Hughes quotes Cox's artistic ideals:

The disinterested search for perfection; it is the love of clearness and reasonableness and self-control; it is, above all, the love of permanence and continuity. It asks of the work of art, not that it shall be novel or effective, but that it shall be fine and noble. It seeks not merely to express individuality or emotion...but it desires that each new presentation of truth shall show us the old truth and old beauty, seen only from a different angle (Cox, cited in Hughes 1997: 221).

Cox reflects the thinking of early modernism. Some key words: fine and noble, clearness and reasonableness and the phrase 'love of permanence and continuity'.

These ideas are no longer cornerstones of art. It's as if human beings have done their empire-building and conquering, and the grand narrative is no longer required. Why would anyone need a map when any attempt to navigate is futile anyway? Losing one's way, without a specific context, has replaced the modern tenet of belonging. On the front sleeve of Virilio's *Art As Far As The Eye Can See*, it is stated that: 'Art used to be an engagement between artist and materials, but in our new media world art has changed; its very materials have changed and have become technologized' (in Virilio 2007).

This is what my painting is reacting to; the distancing of human beings from nature because of technology and consumerism. In this distancing I have found a 'dis-ease' that manifests itself as psychological disturbance. My work runs against a dependence on technology and reflects the therapeutic nature making art has for me. My images speak of the catharsis I have experienced in letting go of the material and the superficial to leave room for a better understanding of self. I am not against using technology to make art, but I find that technology is at least partly responsible for the

‘art breakdown’ that Virilio refers to (Virilio 2003: 95). A distancing from contemporary culture and technology, and a reconnection with nature is required to avoid any ‘art breakdown’.

In *Antinomies of Art and Culture* Terry Smith describes the modern as something new that has moved on from the old, and continues:

Nowadays, the idea of returning to ‘the eternal and the immutable’, or of forging new forms of both, appears anachronistic, quaint and feeble, or worse, infantile. More broadly, the qualities of modernity have been forced into new conjunctions. Aspects of these changes were first recognized under the label ‘postmodernity’, and their artistic, fashion and intellectual manifestations soon attracted the appellation ‘Postmodernism’ (Smith et al. 2008: 5).

and identifies the contemporary by:

its immediacy, its presentness, its instantaneity, its prioritizing of the moment over the time, the instant over the epoch, of direct experience over multiplicitous complexity over a singular simplicity of distanced reflection (Smith et al. 2008: 8).

Distanced reflection: an attitude that goes missing when art is, as Virilio (2003) puts it, ‘presented’ rather than ‘represented’. My investigation is a form of psychological distancing, as when I am painting; I have to step back every so often to ‘see’ the work properly. In the daily grind the bigger picture becomes obscured. My research, recorded as paint and text, is a rebellion against paradigms of oppression and control. Research suggests humankind’s evolution into hierarchical capitalism comes from a subliminal, Darwinian instinct, a well-buried portion of human psyche that tells us if our species is to survive we must order ourselves in some way; so I am attempting to

‘bring to attention’ a concern that human beings might be letting this instinct get out of control.

I am aware of a potential contradiction: how can my work be considered contemporary when I lean towards a more modernist *Modus operandi*? Virilio (2003: 95) has warned us of an art that falls apart if it becomes too shallow and instant. My work pays a kind of homage to what modernism tried in part to do, that is to understand, depict and reflect the world in a holistic way. My work is a contemporary look at popular culture while glimpsing in the rear vision mirror now and then.

I don’t want to lose my memory. I find art suffers terribly if it can’t recall what happened yesterday or if it is too close to its subject to focus properly, but I do want to reflect the now. I aim to critique the contemporary lifestyle with art that is itself contemporary, yet I distance myself enough so the two cannot be confused, thus avoiding an art that gets swallowed up in its subject.

CONCLUSION

You can't stop progress... they say. Sure but what progress? After the case argued for supersonic and shortly hypersonic speed... comes the case argued for the maximum carrying capacity for a superjumbo jet capable of carrying over eight hundred passengers. Here again what progress are we talking about if not progress in purely quantitative excess? (Virilio 2007: 41).

Research indicates the faster humankind goes the faster it wants to go, and the more it has the more it wants. Troublingly, this is no longer an exclusively Western phenomenon, the current growth of China heralding a new era of global materialism.

Shouldn't society learn how to be content with its current speed and level of excess?

A slowing down and taking stock is necessary. Too much pluralism can lead to confusion and apathy. Advertising has convinced consumers that they believe they *need* a product when they really only *want* it, and this need doesn't stop when the product is obtained. Like an addiction, a new product is required to fill a hunger for consumption.

When I was working at Coles I was struck by how little anyone cared for notions of modernism or the contemporary. Most just wanted to get on with the job as fast as possible and then go home. Time was always against them. Many individuals seemed to have no time for things artistic or philosophical. To me this was the shining example of the contemporaneity of popular culture: that an overarching ideal has been lost, and replaced with a hasty individualism. My work is not in keeping with the fast pace of modern life. It is a blip in the motherboard. I am not trying to quash contemporaneity and return to modernism. My whole point of difference is based on a

desire to move a little slower, which ultimately comes from a fear of speeding to the grave and a desire to create art that is thoughtful, and ‘represents’ my thoughts and passions. One can be contemporary in arts practice without relying on shallow ‘presentation’. What is the point of a faster pace if you drive past all that is good? In *Art As Far As the Eye Can See*, Virilio describes the ‘presented’ art form:

This drift away from substantial art has been part and parcel of the boom in film and radio, and in particular, television, the medium that has ended up flattening all forms of representation, thanks to its abrupt use of presentation, whereby real time definitely outclasses the real space of major artworks, whether of literature or the visual arts (Virilio 2007: 2–3).

Maybe this is one reason why I find advertisements on television and the Internet so annoying, that their information medium threatens my vehicle for expression. My work is not popular but it is about popular culture. It is contemporary but it doesn’t want to forget the past. It is not speed-of-light expression, but an attempt to diverge from hyper-reality. Human beings don’t need to know everything all the time even though they are growing to believe that they do. This I see as the essence of my practice: to react and apply the brakes before total brainwashing has occurred.

Art should act as a barometer for the mental health of popular culture. If art senses something is wrong it must exercise its reason for existing and express itself. This I see as part of my role but less because I am an idealist and more because the overload of visual information and lack of supporting reference points within the supermarket retail work environment, set in motion for me a denaturing process that had to be arrested. Like contemporaneity itself I no longer felt connected to an over-arching paradigm. I was truly living the contemporary lifestyle with no moorings, within an

environment of true pluralism in the form of the product on the supermarket shelf. A kind of paralisation ensued. I was, like Sartre foretold, experiencing a terrible freedom of choice. My only defense was to mentally shift my position to a point of observation.

My work is therefore a reaction to the immediacy of contemporary life. The phrase ‘the instant over the epoch’ (Smith 2008) defines the move away from the modern and post-modern. This is a shift towards the now, of instant product recognition and instant gratification. The supermarket environment is a good place to observe the fast moving contemporary popular culture, especially as I spent so many long hours there. To be part of the social system in such an extreme form as a supermarket worker forced my mind out of the box. I consider myself privileged to have the opportunity to document my experiences in the form of paintings and text. The entire process has been a massive cathartic learning curve and a rich and life-changing endeavour born through retail adversity. Although not conscious of it at the time, difficult periods while working were planting ideas and reactions in my mind. The fear and depression I felt, which in turn triggered primary school and high school memories of ostracisation, (and vice versa) when conflicts arose with coworkers, became fuel for art making. The general feeling that life was passing me by was strong, and I had to find an inroad into what I knew was out there. The mind cannot tolerate not being used to its full potential and finds all sorts of way to protest. A visual and audio overload can be just as banal and damaging as sensory deprivation.

Now that I have investigated my situation I have identified the retail to be, I believe, a ‘no [+] place’, a utopia of quick fix and retail therapy. If my mind cannot find

substance it gets bored and looks desperately for something to get its teeth into. The creative research process has shown me I can't just suddenly become fulfilled and content. I used to wake up in the morning and wonder why I was so dissatisfied with my life. University has allowed me to explore the questions around this pathos. The road to psychological peace is long and hard, and for me takes a lot of working out. To analyse my condition is natural for me, and within that analysis comes growth and a greater awareness of the importance of embracing what it means to be human. I believe for human beings to lose sight of this and to cast their eyes down and worship the material is to ignore their true selves, making them vulnerable to a 'more is never enough' mentality. This blindness is evident in the amount of choice available to consumers. I experienced a kind of alarm bell going off in my head when I noticed a shift in my own thinking. I was justifying my abhorrence to a life wasted in the walls of a supermarket with language like 'I am lucky to have a job' and 'It's not so bad; I am depressed and bored with this work but I must continue'. To me this is the same kind of blindness inherent in consumerism, a blindness of placing money and material things even above my sense of identity. When my mind reached a saturation point I could not pretend any longer.

While my experience as a worker is different to the experience of the consumer I think it is still comparable. I view my retail experience as a concentrated and extended version of the consumer's. Long hours in the supermarket have given me a preview of the future, into the dangers of being too dependent on the material, and of what it feels like to be shocked by the now.

Yet this time amid the retail has also forced me to carve an unexpected path. In accepting the ambivalence of my situation: that I am a consumer who once worked in a supermarket, reacting to consumerism and retail space through art, I have learned to adapt to the harshness of this competitive setting. I have transformed my view from an instantaneous, negative reaction to a more proactive, lateral initiative, and in the same way my perception of suburbia has evolved: I now see alongside the adverse affects of the retail a vast subject to inform my research.

REFERENCES

- Armitage, J 2003, 'Art and Fear: an introduction', in Paul Virilio, *Art and Fear*, Continuum, London, pp. 1–24.
- Art News 2011, *Luc Tuymans: Dusk*, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://artnews.org/luctuymans/?i=8>>.
- Australian Fine Art Editions 2011, *Jeffrey Smart, Holiday*, viewed 9 Jun 2011, (Source: <http://www.australianfinearteditions.com/pages/enlargement_artists_works.php?current=32&workID=53&artistID=3>).
- Aylesworth, G 2010, 'Postmodernism', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E N Zalta, ed., viewed 2 September 2011, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>>.
- Beyst, S 2007, *The Secret Charms of Luc Tuymans*, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://d-sites.net/english/tuymans.htm>>.
- Bowring, J 2008, *A Field Guide to Melancholy*, Oldcastle Books, Harpenden, Herts.
- Caldwell, J 1993, *Jeff Koons*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
- Campbell, G 1997, 'The iconography of the suburbs', BFA honours thesis, University of Tasmania.
- Camus, A 1971, *The Rebel*, Penguin Modern Classics, London & New York rev. edn., first published 1951 *L'Homme revolte*, trans. A Bower, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- Cattapan, J 2011, *Being There but not Being There*, Arts Forum, School of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Tasmania.
- Corn, WM 1973, *The Art of Andrew Wyeth*, The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco & Little Brown & Co. New York.
- Crawford, A 2010, 'Loud and proud', *Art Collector*, no. 53, pp.170–174.
- Eates, M 1973, *Paul Nash 1889–1946*, John Murray Publications, London.
- Engberg, J 2005, 'Callum Morton', *Art and Australia*, vol. 42, pp. 582–583.
- England, S 2011, 'What's Wrong With the Right?', by C Lasch in *Tikkun Magazine*, 1987 p.23–29, viewed 2 September 2011, <http://thor.clark.edu/sengland/previous%20features/a_dialogue_with_christopher_la_sc.htm>.

- Foucault, M 1967, 'Of Other Spaces', viewed 2 September 2011, <<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>>.
- Friends of Art 2011, *Luc Tuymans: Nuclear Power Plant*, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://www.friendsofart.net/en/art/luc-tuymans/nuclear-plant>>.
- Geurlac, H 1949, review of *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* by Siegfried Gideon, *American Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 2, viewed 18 July 2007.
- Groceteria.com: *Exploring Supermarket History*, viewed September 2011. <<http://www.groceteria.com/about/a-quick-history-of-the-supermarket/>>.
- Hamilton, C & Denniss, R 2005, *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Hamilton, R 1992, *Richard Hamilton*, Tate Gallery, London.
- Hughes, R 1997, *American Visions*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York.
- Hughes, R 1991(1980), *The Shock of the New*, Thames & Hudson, London.
- Lasch, C 1984, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, WW Norton & Co., London & New York.
- North, I 2008, review of *Jon Cattapan: Possible Histories*, by Chris McAuliffe Miegunyah Press, 2008 in *Artlink Magazine* 2008, viewed 19 May 2011, <<http://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3148/jon-cattapan-possible-histories/>>.
- Orwell, G 1954 (1949), *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- Paglia, C 2010, 'The World's Gone Gaga', *Weekend Australian Magazine*, 25–26 September, pp. 12–19.
- Popenoe, D 1977, *The Suburban Environment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Saatchi Gallery 2011 'Luc Tuymans', viewed 17 May 2011, <http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artist/luc_tuymans.htm>.
- Sartre, J P 1965 (1938), *Nausea*, trans. R Baldick, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- Saul, JR 1997, *The Unconscious Civilization*, Penguin Books Australia, Ringwood.
- Schmied, W 1995, *Edward Hopper, Portraits of America*, trans. JW Gabriel, Prestal-Verlag, Munich & New York.
- Smith, T, Enwezor, O & Condee, N 2008, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Duke University Press, Durham & London.
- Spalding, F 1979, *Whistler*, Phaidon Press, Oxford.

Steinbeck, J 1949, *Cannery Row*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.

Stern, BB 1998, 'The roots of advertising strategy for the mass market', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 52, no.3, viewed 7 June 2008,
<<http://www.marketingpower.com/ResourcesLibrary/JournalofMarketing/Pages/1988/52/3/6354327.aspx>>.

Stevens, B 2008, review of *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) by Christopher Lasch, *Corrupt, Conservation and Conservatism* 2011, viewed 9 June 2011,
<http://www.corrupt.org/articles/culture/brett_stevens/the_culture_of_narcissism_by_christopher_lasch>.

Tiedemann, R 1982 ed. (1999), *Walter Benjamin: The Arcades Project*, trans. H Eiland & K McLaughlin, Suhrkamp Verlag & Harvard University Press, USA, viewed 9 June 2009,
<<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?recid=26689&content=bios>>.

Tuan, Y 1998, *Escapism*, The John Hopkins University Press, Maryland.

Virilio, P 2003, *Art and Fear*, trans. J Rose, Continuum, London & New York.

Virilio, P 2007, *Art as Far as the Eye Can See*, trans. J Rose, Berg Publishers, Oxford.

Waldman, D 1978, *Mark Rothko: A Retrospective*, Harry N Abrams Inc. & the Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

Williams, H 1973, *TS Eliot: The Waste Land*, Edward Arnold, London.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Armitage, J 2003, 'Art and Fear: an introduction', in Paul Virilio, *Art and Fear*, Continuum, London.
- Art News 2011, *Luc Tuymans: Dusk*, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://artnews.org/luctuymans/?i=8>>.
- Australian Fine Art Editions 2011, *Jeffrey Smart, Holiday*, viewed 9 Jun 2011, (Source: <http://www.australianfinearteditions.com/pages/enlargement_artists_works.php?current=32&workID=53&artistID=3>).
- Aylesworth, G 2010, 'Postmodernism', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E N Zalta, ed., viewed 2 September 2011, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>>.
- Beyst, S 2007, *The Secret Charms of Luc Tuymans*, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://d-sites.net/english/tuymans.htm>>.
- Bowring, J 2008, *A Field Guide to Melancholy*, Oldcastle Books, Harpenden.
- Caldwell, J 1993, *Jeff Koons*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
- Campbell, G 1997, The iconography of the suburbs, BFA honours thesis, University of Tasmania.
- Camus, A 1971, *The Rebel*, Penguin Modern Classics, London & New York rev. edn., first published 1951 *L'Homme revolte*, trans. A Bower, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- Cattapan, J 2011, *Being There but not Being There*, Arts Forum, School of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Tasmania.
- Corn, WM 1973, *The Art of Andrew Wyeth*, The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco & Little Brown & Co. New York.
- Crawford, A 2010, 'Loud and proud', *Art Collector*, no. 53, pp.170–174.
- Eates, M 1973, *Paul Nash 1889–1946*, John Murray Publishers, London.
- Engberg, J 2005, 'Callum Morton', *Art and Australia*, vol. 42, pp. 582–583.
- England, S 2011, 'What's Wrong With the Right?', by C Lasch in *Tikkun Magazine*, 1987 p.23–29, viewed 2 September 2011, <http://thor.clark.edu/sengland/previous%20features/a_dialogue_with_christopher_la_sc.htm>.

- Foucault, M 1967, 'Of Other Spaces', viewed 2 September 2011, <<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>>.
- Friends of Art 2011, *Luc Tuymans: Nuclear Power Plant*, viewed 17 May 2011, <<http://www.friendsofart.net/en/art/luc-tuymans/nuclear-plant>>.
- Geurlac, H 1949, review of *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* by Siegfried Gideon, *American Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 2, viewed 18 July 2007.
- Groceteria.com: *Exploring Supermarket History*, viewed September 2011. <<http://www.groceteria.com/about/a-quick-history-of-the-supermarket/>>.
- Hamilton, C & Denniss, R 2005, *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Hamilton, R 1992, *Richard Hamilton*, Tate Gallery, London.
- Hughes, R 1997, *American Visions*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York.
- Hughes, R 1991(1980), *The Shock of the New*, Thames & Hudson, London.
- Hughes, R 1970 (1966), *The Art of Australia*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- Kerouac, J 1965, *Desolation Angels*, The Berkley Publishing Group, New York.
- Lasch, C 1984, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, WW Norton & Co., London & New York.
- Malamud, B 1965, *A New Life*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York.
- North, I 2008, review of *Jon Cattapan: Possible Histories*, by Chris McAuliffe Miegunyah Press, 2008 in Artlink Magazine 2008, viewed 19 May 2011, <<http://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3148/jon-cattapan-possible-histories/>>.
- Orwell, G 1954 (1949) *Nineteen Eighty Four*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- Orwell, G 1946, *Animal Farm*, Penguin Putnam Inc., New York.
- Paglia, C 2010, 'The World's Gone Gaga', *Weekend Australian Magazine*, 25–26 September, pp. 12–19.
- Popeno, D 1977, *The Suburban Environment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Saatchi Gallery 2011, 'Luc Tuymans', viewed 17 May 2011, <http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artist/luc_tuymans.htm>.
- Sartre, J P 1965 (1938), *Nausea*, trans. R Baldick, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- Saul, JR 1997, *The Unconscious Civilization*, Penguin Books, Ringwood.

Schmied, W 1995, *Edward Hopper: Portraits of America*, trans. JW Gabriel, Prestel-Verlag, Munich & New York.

Smith, T, Enwezor, O & Condee, N 2008, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Duke University Press, Durham & London.

Spalding, F 1979, *Whistler*, Phaidon Press, Oxford.

Steinbeck, J 1949, *Cannery Row*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.

Stern, BB 1998, 'The roots of advertising strategy for the mass market', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 52, no.3, viewed 7 June 2008,
<<http://www.marketingpower.com/ResourcesLibrary/JournalofMarketing/Pages/1988/52/3/6354327.aspx>>.

Stevens, B 2008, review of *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) by Christopher Lasch, *Corrupt, Conservation and Conservatism* 2011, viewed 9 June 2011,
<http://www.corrupt.org/articles/culture/brett_stevens/the_culture_of_narcissism_by_christopher_lasch>.

The Great Masters, 2003, Quantum Publications, London.

Tiedemann, R 1982 ed. (1999), *Walter Benjamin: The Arcades Project*, trans. H Eiland & K McLaughlin, Suhrkamp Verlag & Harvard University Press, USA, viewed 9 June 2009,
<<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?recid=26689&content=bios>>.

Tuan, Y 1998, *Escapism*, The John Hopkins University Press, Maryland.

Virilio, P 2003, *Art and Fear*, trans. J Rose, Continuum, London & New York.

Virilio, P 2007, *Art as Far as the Eye Can See*, trans. J Rose, Editions Galilee & Berg Publishers, Oxford.

Virilio, P 2005, *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*, trans. M Degener, Continuum, London & New York.

Waldman, D 1978, *Mark Rothko: A Retrospective*, Harry N Abrams Inc. & the Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

Williams, H 1973, *TS Eliot: The Waste Land*, Edward Arnold, London.

APPENDIX 1:

Exhibition documentation

Gavin Campbell, PhD: Gallery Plan, 2011.

1. *Another Day*, 2010.

2. *Untitled*, 2011.

3. *Untitled*, 2006.

4. *Untitled*, 2006.

5. *Untitled*, 2007.

6. *Untitled*, 2009

7. *Untitled*, 2010

8. *Untitled*, 2008

9. *Gone Shopping*, 2008.

10. *Untitled*, 2009.

11. *At Work*, 2010.

12. *Untitled*, 2006.

13. *Cornercopia*, 2009.

14. *Coke*, 2008

15. *Long Life Milk*, 2008.

16. *Domestic Interior 2*, 2010.

17. *Domestic Interior 1*, 2010.

18. *Untitled*, 2011.

19. *Untitled*, 2011.

8. 9. 10 11 12. 13.

7.

14.

6.

15.

5.

16.

4.

17.

3.

2.

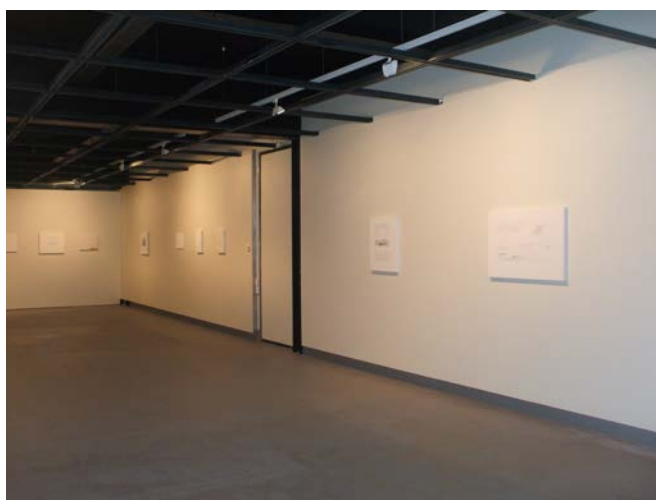
18

1.

19

Journal
&
support
work.

View of exhibition, Gallery A School of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Tasmania, June 2011.



Works in the exhibition which were not included in the exegesis.



Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, oil and pencil on canvas, 2006.



Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, oil and pencil on canvas, 2011.



Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, oil and pencil on canvas, 2011.



Gavin Campbell, *Untitled*, oil, acrylic and pencil on canvas, 2011.