

# ***render me naked***

***the painted self and the  
spectator***

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Submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Art.

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## **Abstract**

The research project investigates the representation of an empirical model of female bodily experience as a formal pictorial project. The aim is to present the spectator with a personal, specific and intimate embodied subjectivity that evokes an awareness of corporeal experience. Further, the project investigates possible avenues for setting up reciprocal feelings of embodiment within the viewer. It explores this through forms of pictorialism including scale, point of view, pictorial space and the rendering of tactile surfaces.

The project aims to present the spectator with a representational image of a female body that defies objectification and instead evokes the physical and emotional presence of a person beginning to impinge upon the actual space occupied by the viewer.

The project is concerned with formal pictorial construction and parameters were set to enable specific methodologies to be isolated and refined. The focus was on the body, the pose, the space and the rendered surfaces.

The subject is autobiographical, exposed and singular. The paint is a record of my body in the marks that it made and the work is a point of intersection between my body and the body of the viewer.

The pictorial space in the images was deemed to be very shallow, and ambiguous as to its orientation. Thus the spectator is led to resolve the ambiguities as to their spatial orientation within the image, and locate himself or herself physically in relation to the subject.

The outcome of the research project is a group of paintings that present a new approach to the positioning of the spectator in relation to a figurative painting and more specifically in relation to the representation of female embodiment. The paintings in the submission constitute the outcomes of the research and form the original discourse of the project. The exegesis chronicles the practical and conceptual inquiries, placed in context through discussions of historical and contemporary practice.

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## **Chapter one: central argument**

### **The Project Outline**

1. A consideration of the embodied subject represented in painting provides the content.
2. The general problem, posed in painting, is to find visual form for the representation of embodied experience and female subjectivity.
3. Through studio based investigations and theoretical reading, a series of methodologies were identified and developed in order to find alternative approaches within the representation of the female body.
4. The outcome is a group of paintings submitted for examination, which contain the substantive original discourse of the project.

### **Introduction**

This research project investigates the representation of an empirical model of female bodily experience as a formal pictorial project. It seeks to find representation for embodiment and subjectivity, and to find visual form for the plural and shifting nature of personal identity. The project considers the role of the spectator as active participant and the changing nature of subjectivity within 'feminist' (or 'post-feminist') art practice. It examines pictorial strategies within representational figurative painting, both historical and contemporary, that emphasise corporeality and generate a

bodily relationship between the subject and the spectator. The research draws upon theories of visual perception and proposes a model of pictorial representation within painting that negotiates alternative approaches for the picturing of female embodiment in painting.



## **Central argument**

This research project brings together concerns about the body as self, subject and stimulus. Two initially divergent areas of consideration have motivated the research. The first is the incongruity between my own experiences of embodiment and with both contemporary representations of female subjectivity, and with the experience of being the subject of my own gaze whilst simultaneously the subject of someone else's. The ambivalent experiences of my embodiment found commonality in some feminist dialogues. However, while many were insightful on issues of female subjectivity, most, other than developing critiques or parody, faltered at the point of proposing alternative forms of representation that conveyed embodiment pictorially.

The second motivation is my fascination for representational paintings of people. I specify people, rather than simply the body, as I have always been drawn to images that convey the presence of an individual and to that intimacy which paint can evoke. The sensuality of paint and its ability to emulate the waxy, pliant surfaces of the body while, at the same time, asserting its own stubborn physicality, is a continuing source of fascination.

In this project these two areas have come together to pose problems of painting the autobiographical body. The project presents the representation of subjectivity as fundamentally linked to the body of the spectator with the perception of embodied experience generated through the spectator's own corporeal recollections. These recollections are evoked through particular formal approaches to image construction

that emphasise tactile bodily sensations. These alternative approaches to the representation of embodiment and subjectivity, have been developed through a consideration of visual theories of perception and the embodied gaze of both the spectator and the subject.

While the aim is to subvert the objectifying gaze traditionally associated with images of the naked female body through formal pictorial strategies, the project acknowledges the risk of misinterpretation that is always at stake in such imagery and it observes that the subjective gaze of the viewer is also embodied and particular.

The project utilizes my body as the subject and draws upon my personal experiences as inspiration. I do not, however, define the resulting work as self-portraiture in the traditional sense, as the primary aim is not to generate an accurate representation of my appearance nor provide revelatory insight into my individual psyche. Instead, I prefer the terms 'self-image'<sup>1</sup> and the 'autobiographical body', as these emphasise subjective experience. It is important that the subject is presented to the viewer as a specific individual, possessed of her own thoughts and feelings and that her subjectivity is also reflective of the plural and shifting nature of personal identity.

Embodiment describes a position that is a consciously visceral, sensual experience of the world and is internalised within the body. It is the point of intersection between cognition and sensation and a site of identity and subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this research I have interpreted the term 'self-image' to mean both the intellectual opinion of self in one's own mind and the more literal reading of the visual form of self in representation.

While issues of embodiment and subjectivity apply equally to both sexes, it is female embodied experience that is the primary focus of this research.

## **The background to the project**

A consideration of the subjective female body in representation and re-conceptualisations of the subject within philosophy, psychology and art theory, form the background to the research, and will be discussed in detail in chapter two of this exegesis. The key issues that emerged from this contextual research, and that proved to be fundamental to the development of the studio based research, are summarised here in dot point.

- The self-portrait (or self-image) is a point of negotiation between lived experiences and the constructions of female identity in art and society.
- Strategies that have emerged in the representation of female subjectivity by women artists include ambiguity, empathy, gesture, emphasis upon corporeal or sensory experience and self-reflection.
- The aim, in subverting stereotypes of the female subject, has been to find universal points of mediation between lived experiences.
- Subjectivity has recently been conceptualised as decentered, multi-layered, complex, shifting and ambiguous; describing the subject as constantly in flux and an entity negotiating its own path within a shifting context.

- Our relationship with our own bodies is ambiguous and images of the body are a means of articulating these ambivalent experiences.
- Artists have employed ambiguity as a representational approach both formally and conceptually, in the representation of subjectivity.
- The ambiguity, in representational images of the body, is located within both the subject and the spectator.

## **The problem**

The difficulties associated with the representation of the female subject have primarily been the objectification and commodification of images of the female body within art and popular culture. These images have defined stereotypes and specified fixed subject positions and identities. In contrast, the experience of embodied subjectivity is ambiguous, plural, sensory, visceral and is internalised within the body.

The problem posed by this project is to find visual form for the representation of embodied experience and to create, in painting, empirical models of subjecthood within the representation of the female body.

## **The proposal**

The project proposes to subvert the objectifying gaze traditionally associated with images of the naked female body. By establishing the physical body of the spectator as the location of visual perception, it becomes possible to consider the formal arrangement of the subject, within the picture, in direct relation to the viewer's body standing before the painting.

The studio-based research has identified and developed a number of approaches to particular aspects of the construction of representational paintings. The research proposes that, through the employment of these strategies, it is possible to create representational images of the naked female body that defy objectification and evoke recollections of the spectator's own sensual embodied experience, thus

overcoming the distance between the viewer and the viewed. Theoretical consideration of the visual perception of images has provided the groundwork for the formal approaches to image construction.

The project proposes ambiguity as both a conceptual and formal strategy. Ambiguity is an intrinsic aspect of embodiment and subjectivity, preventing stable definitions and fixed identities. As a formal strategy in pictorial representation, it can destabilize narrative interpretations and also the logic of pictorial space. (Here I refer to the expectation that pictorial space is defined as separate from real space and contained within the frame of the picture.)

Embodiment is suggested in both the painting process and in the experience of perceiving representational images, and painting is proposed as an appropriate medium for the communication of embodied sensations, as the research considers the painting of the self-image as a metaphor for embodiment and as a point of intersection between one living body and another. The image/object dichotomy of painting provides evidence of the painting process, and, by extension, the body of the painter. In describing the appearance of the body and, also, in physically evoking the waxy porous surfaces of flesh, the physical, tactile qualities of paint offer possibilities for emulating the sensual surfaces of skin in the body of the paint.

## **The argument**

### **The autobiographical body and the gaze**

The gaze is the presumed purpose of visual representation and is also intrinsic to conceptions of personal subjectivity. Darian Leader observes that turning away one's gaze is a way of expressing one's own subjectivity and, yet, this does not make us invisible to the gaze of others. In his terms our look is linked dynamically to someone else's look. Social structures exist to mediate the look and allow us to maintain apparent privacy within public situations. However, despite social mores, we are always looking and being looked at. Leader surmises that what we see is mixed up with what someone else sees and that the way that we are looked at by others is inbuilt into our own self-image.<sup>2</sup> The irony of this is that we can only imagine the way that someone else is looking at us.

So what goes on when an individual looks at another individual depicted within an image? Instead of positing two terms – the viewer and the viewed – Leader identifies at least three: the viewer, the viewed and a third party who is viewing the viewer. The first two are positions in actual and pictorial space and the third is suggested by the existence of the represented subject, thus making the viewer conscious of the construction of their viewing experience.

Leader's proposal of this third position is illuminating, in terms of this research project, as it emphasises the role of the depicted body as representing both its own subjectivity

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<sup>2</sup> Leader, Darian, *Stealing the Mona Lisa - What art stops us from seeing*, Faber and Faber, London, 2002, pp13-16.

and the subjectivity of the third position that is viewing the spectator. (In this case it can be assumed that the painter occupies this third position.) Within this research the subject is the body of the painter and therefore the second and third viewing positions are compounded. This has the potential to suggest that, although the subject's gaze is turned inward, the third position of the painter (who is also the subject) is observing the spectators in their act of looking.

### **The spectator's perception**

A primary aim of this research is to evoke sensations of embodiment within the viewer that recall tactile and sensory experiences. Therefore a consideration of the spectator, as the observer and interpreter of visual images, and as the embodiment of the gaze, is fundamental to this research. Visual perception is itself a subjective, individual and embodied position and therefore, the research does not propose a didactic response from the audience, rather, the project suggests that the spectator's perception is reflective of their own sensual and embodied experiences. However, a consideration of various theories about visual perception, proposed by Jacques Aumont and Ernst Gombrich, has facilitated the creation of conceptual and formal approaches that propose the evocation of the spectator's embodied experience through pictorial construction and illusionary representation.

In viewing representational images, we utilize the same understanding of space, the size of objects, orientation, light, the qualities of surfaces and so on, that we use to locate ourselves in the material world around us. These



perceptions are never entirely visual and, as Jacques Aumont points out in his book *The Image*:

The idea of space is fundamentally linked to the body and its movement: vertically, especially, is a specific immediate given our experience via the perception of gravity... The concept of space is as much derived from tactile and kinetic data as from the visible.<sup>3</sup>

It is by our movement through space and our 'continuous sampling' of successive view points, that we understand space and the way objects and spaces appear from a static point of view. This continuous sampling allows us to recognise the constancy of certain qualities in the objects around us and, through repetition, we come to associate these qualities, such as size, shape, orientation, location, and surface, with particular objects. Aumont terms this phenomenon 'perceptual constancy'.<sup>4</sup> Through recognition we utilize this knowledge to locate ourselves and interpret our surroundings and in visual images, we utilize perceptual constancy to interpret the pictorial space and identify the qualities of objects represented.

Gombrich argues that the role of the spectator is projective, combining recognition and recall in order to interpret. He has coined the term the 'etcetera law' to describe the idea that the spectator utilizes prior knowledge to make up for information that is lacking in the image. Thus the spectator projects onto the image what is not represented.<sup>5</sup> In

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<sup>3</sup> Aumont, Jacques, *The Image*, British Film Institute, London, 1997, p20. (First published as *L'Image*, Editions Nathan, Paris, 1990.)

<sup>4</sup> Aumont, 1997, pp21-22.

<sup>5</sup> Gombrich, Ernst H, *Art and Illusion: A study of the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Princeton University Press, 1961. (Quoted by Aumont, 1997, pp56-57.)

extending Gombrich's discussion, it could be argued that if images, or aspects of images, are made deliberately ambiguous, then we can ensure that the spectator is likely to attempt to create the missing information. This can be a case of inventing the narrative surrounding an image such as the famous smile of the Mona Lisa, or trying to locate an object when the surrounding space in the representation is ambiguous. With regard to the latter, the spectator creates this projected information by recalling perceptual constants and observing visual clues such as light and shadow, indicators of gravity or, (most significantly within this research) by the depicted object or subject's relationship to the body of the spectator in terms of scale and point of view. Therefore, by further extension, this research argues that the viewer can be drawn to use their bodily position in order to locate a subject within a representational image, provided the pictorial space is ambiguous.

### **The body is everywhere in paint**

Leader points out that an artwork shows us not simply a created object, but an object that consists in the act of creation.<sup>6</sup> For example a painting, casting the artist's movements and gestures in its surface, conveys a sense of the time spent in making the image. By extension this suggests the absent and imagined body of the painter. In painting this evidence of creation is intimate and visceral, unlike, for example, the factual distance of a photograph, the body of the spectator physically corresponds to the body of the painter. By this I mean that the spectator can stand in

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<sup>6</sup> Leader, 2002, p64.

the same location, in relation to the canvas, that the painter stood in when rendering the image.

Helen McDonald clarifies this 'act of creation' (in artworks) as the vehicle for a cognitive and physical relationship between the painter's body and the viewer's body. She defines art in the following terms:

As representation, art stands between artist and spectator, subject and object, form and matter, concept and thing... If viewed in psychological terms, it is a point of mediation between the self and "other". In bodily and social terms, it is a prosthetic, an extension of the body and a point of intersection between one living body and another.<sup>7</sup>

McDonald's view emphasises the reciprocity of the artist/spectator relationship - via the artwork – a relationship grounded within both physical bodies.

The experience of painting can also be a metaphor for embodiment: both encompassing a private and wordless dialogue between subjective thought and visceral sensation (an experience of sensual and internalised boundlessness). Both the act of painting and the experience of embodiment materialize through someone else's gaze: painting, when it leaves the closed studio and is exposed to public view, and embodiment when internalised experience becomes self-conscious. This moment of materialization within embodied experience is a point of transcendence between one state and another.

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<sup>7</sup>McDonald, Helen, *Erotic Ambiguities: The female nude in art*, Routledge, 2001, p4.

An illusion, according to Aumont, is a mistaken perception, a confusion between an image and something other than an image. From a very different perspective, James Elkins describes illusion within painting as a point of transcendence, 'when the paint ceases to be paint and turns into coloured light...In that moment the paint distils into light: it moves without my noticing from its base, oily self into an ethereal abstraction.'<sup>8</sup>

The aim of illusionary representational painting is to transcend its material substance and transform into 'coloured light', to become, as Elkins put it: 'a transparent thing that shimmers in our awareness as we look through it to see what the painter has depicted'.<sup>9</sup> The writer also proposes, however, that perfect painting is imperfect transcendence, when a painting is neither only its substance nor entirely its illusion, but instead pushes the equivocation as far as it can go between earthly substance and 'hovering apparition'. He states that what makes painting compelling is 'not the choice, but the narrowness of the gap'.<sup>10</sup>

This 'gap' between object and illusion, occurs within the perception of the spectator, and the idea of it is particularly significant to the aims of this research. The viewer's perception of this gap is bound to the physicality of the body and perceptual constancy allows the spectator to comprehend the tactile qualities of a surface by its appearance. This understanding of texture is particularly important in illusionary paintings, which possess two texture gradients: that of the surfaces represented in the picture and

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<sup>8</sup> Elkins, James, *What Painting Is*, p125

<sup>9</sup> Elkins, 2000, p45.

<sup>10</sup> Elkins, 2000, pp187-188.

the surface of the canvas itself.<sup>11</sup> Elkin's 'gap' can be directly related to the space between the perception of these two textures. So can we perceive both at the same time, or must we abandon one vision for the sake of the other? Elkins suggests that the former might be possible in a 'twofoldness' of attention that takes in both equally in an entrancing wavering between two possibilities.

These theories: of the spectator's visual perception; of art as an embodied point of intersection; and of painting as embodiment, (outlined above), have isolated a range of significant aspects of pictorial construction. These ideas emphasise the spectator's active position as viewer, and suggest ways in which visual images can implicate the spectator's body.

By a consideration of formal approaches employed by historical and contemporary artists, in the representation of subjectivity, specific pictorial strategies for overcoming the distance between the viewer and the viewed have been identified.<sup>12</sup> These include the creation of shallow pictorial spaces that serve to position the subject as close as possible to the spectator; emphasis upon sensations of touch, through the rendering of tactile surfaces; the emphasis placed upon the subject's hands to suggest the non-visual experiences of embodiment; and the arrangement of the subject's body or hands so as to emulate the orientation of the spectator's body, standing before the painting. Technical approaches have included the employment of paint to both pictorially

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Aumont in *The Image*, British Film Institute, London, 1997, discusses these ideas concerning the perception of space and the texture gradients of images, pp20-23.

<sup>12</sup> These artists and their works are discussed at length in chapter two.

represent surfaces of the body while also emulating the tactile substance of flesh in the surface of the painting.

The images formed throughout the project employ formal approaches to image construction in order to defy the objectifying gaze and evoke sensations of embodied experiences within the spectator. The paintings attempt to convey my embodiment as both subject and painter and through this investigation of the personal, the project aims to find more universal points of mediation between lived experiences.

## **The significance of the project**

This research brings together disparate conceptual and formal concerns in order to propose new approaches for the pictorial representation of female subjectivity and embodiment.

These primary concerns are:

- The subversion of the distancing gaze through emphasis upon touch and embodied perspectives.
- The ambiguous condition of subjectivity as shifting and perpetually evolving, and the use of ambiguity as a contemporary strategy within visual art. (Particularly in the work of women artists concerned with subjectivity).
- The ambivalent relationship we have with our bodies, our identity and self-image.
- Illusionary representational painting as a metaphor for embodiment, a representation of embodied experience and a vehicle for the implication of the spectator's physical body and corporeality.
- The substance of paint as simultaneously representing and simulating the substances of the body and the tactile sensations of embodiment.

The project's objective has been to find representation for sensations of embodiment and subjectivity within painting that acknowledges and navigates historical references and structures but diverges from these to evoke the perception of an embodied interaction between the subject and the spectator; thereby negotiating new forms for the representation of female subjectivity.

## **Major developments within the practical research**

The core objective of the research was to find representation for female embodied experience and subjectivity through the employment of formal pictorial strategies in painting. The aim was to subvert the distancing objective view by implicating the spectator's body and sensory experience within the image.

The project developed through three major stages.

### **Stage one**

Thinking of the canvas as a means to intimately contain the subject, led to the development of extremely shallow pictorial space and the movement of the image to the surface, brought the subject closer to the spectator. This increased the tactility of the images, as the surface of the body was perceived to be in the same place as the surface of the painting, and suggested the possibility of the paint simultaneously representing the subject while emulating the tactile surfaces of the body in the painted marks, therefore evoking tactile sensations. Closing the subject's eyes created ambiguities as to the state of consciousness and, by internalising the gaze, emphasised sensations of touch.

### **Stage two**

By positioning the subject vertically and parallel to the picture plane within an ambiguous pictorial space, the subject's body emulates the spectator's body standing before the canvas. The scale of the subject and image was enlarged in order to generate the impression of the subject's physical presence



within real space, and the ground was intended to pictorially push the subject forward so that it is perceived to sit at the surface of the representational space. Techniques of paint application were developed in order to create a visceral surface in the brush marks that is suggestive of the waxy porous surface of skin. Consideration of the spectator's position before the painting led to the idea that the subject's body and/or hands could be arranged to emulate the orientation of the viewer's body facing into the canvas, thus generating feelings of empathy and immersion.

### **Stage three**

The figure/ground relationship was identified as a means to suggest tactile sensations, by drawing attention to the exchange of touch between the body and the ground. The location of the spectator within the image was further destabilized by making the ground more fluid and ambiguous as to its supporting structure. This was motivated by the idea that the viewer might be led to resolve the ambiguity of the subject's location by its relationship to their own body. The shifting state of subjectivity is inferred by the multiple views of the subject depicted across the group paintings that constitute the project.

## Conclusion

In negotiating new representations of female subjectivity within painting it is important to acknowledge the problems of the historical constructions of the female body in painting.<sup>13</sup> However, rather than considering painting as purely historic and problematic, this project proposes that the characteristics of realist painting might be utilized to reconsider the representation of female experience.

In order to make the pictorial space ambiguous and to focus attention upon the embodiment of the subject, parameters were set to limit the representation to the formal arrangement of the naked body within the space of the canvas. In this way it was hoped that approaches for the picturing of embodied experiences could be identified, tested and refined.

This exegesis brings together ideas about the representation of the autobiographical female body in contemporary painting practice. It does not propose that illusionary painting is a solution to debates and dialogues within feminist practice nor does it suggest that it presents a new language of representation. On the contrary it argues that the conventional language of painting, in combination with contemporary ideas regarding the representation of female subjecthood and embodiment, present new areas of investigation. These import into the language of painting,

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<sup>13</sup> An important issue, which has been raised by various writers including Griselda Pollock, Allison Rowley and Katy Deepwell, is the relationship between the representation of the female body and painting. Painting, perhaps, epitomises the patriarchal structures of art and has often been rejected by feminist practitioners in favour of more performative or text based strategies. Of those who have employed painting, most have utilized it to critique patriarchal structures through appropriation, satire and de-construction.

contemporary feminist conceptualisations of the female and recent approaches to the representation of subjectivity. This approach also invites re-interpretations of historical painting; and specifically, strategies that implicate the body of the artist and the spectator. This is not to suggest that these aspects of painting have gone unobserved but perhaps that they have been overshadowed by the emphasis placed upon vision, by the appearance of artworks in reproduction (reducing the painted object to its purely visual characteristics) and perhaps even by feminism itself which has often focused its theories of patriarchal structures upon the visual aspects of painted representation.

The project is not concerned with maintaining a politicised feminist position, instead feminist dialogues regarding the representation of the female body and subjectivity provide a framework for an investigation into the picturing of my own experiences of embodiment and conception of my subjectivity. Through this investigation of the personal, the project aims to find a more universal point of mediation between lived experiences.

In considering the embodied gaze of the spectator, the research does not presume a definitive interpretation or response from the viewer, rather it proposes that the perception of the image - profoundly linked to the physical body - is located within the spectator, and is reflective of their own personal and sensual experiences of embodiment.

## **Chapter two - context**

### **Introduction**

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part charts a background to the project in terms of the representation and re-conceptualizations of the subject within philosophy, psychology and art theory. The second considers those artists that have been most influential in the development of this research project. The third part discusses a number of other artists who, to varying degrees, have been significant formally and technically.

## Part one

### The condition of the embodied subject in representation

Over the past decade there has been a renewed interest in the representation of the body as subject in visual art, manifest in exhibitions and publications both in Australia and overseas. These have generally fallen into the following areas:

- the use of self-portraiture by women artists<sup>1</sup>
- the strategies used by women artists to navigate the representation of the female body or female subjectivity, particularly in regard to politicized feminist practice<sup>2</sup> and
- the pictorial representation of the nude or naked body.<sup>3</sup>

Thanks to the work of scholars and curators during the past decade self-portraiture by women artists' has recently been refigured as a genre in its own right. Through exhibitions, and a small but significant body of research, the self-portraits of women artists, since the Renaissance, have been brought together to illustrate the ways that women have represented themselves.<sup>4</sup> Historically, self-portraits operated within

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to the writings by Marsha Meskimmon; *The Art of Reflection, Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century*, Columbia University Press, 1996, and to Francis Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: women's self-portraits*, Thames and Hudson, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> McDonald, Helen, *Erotic Ambiguities: The female nude in art*, Routledge, 2001; *Art and Feminism*, edited by Helena Rickitt and Peggy Phelan, Phaidon Press Limited, 2001; The *Bad Girls* exhibition at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1994; and Catherine Lumby's Book *Bad Girls, The Media, Sex and Feminism in the 90s*, Allen and Urwin Pty Ltd, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> The Exhibition *BODY*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997; and the writings of Helen McDonald, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Borzello, 1998; Meskimmon, 1996; The exhibition *Face to Face*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, 1994; the exhibition *Exploring the Unknown Self*:

pictorial and social conventions of art practice and the contributions of female practitioners were marginalized or regarded as anomalies or curiosities. From a contemporary perspective it is possible to observe the diversity and originality of approaches employed by these artists in order to undermine conventional pictorial constructions of the female body and to generate new subjective positions within representation.<sup>5</sup> The self-portrait, therefore, has been refigured as a point of negotiation between lived experiences and the constructions of female identity within art and society.

During the twentieth century many women artists have used their own image to subvert the genre of autobiography and question the convention of subjectivity as fully formed, stable and truthful.<sup>6</sup> Features of this work have been the lack of fixed subject positions, subversion of traditional narrative structures, and explorations into the provisional nature of identity.<sup>7</sup> The marginalization, within visual arts, of the depiction of female experience and subjectivity, has, since the 1960s, led to the development of more overt strategies that identify and subvert historical and social constructions of the female body. Identity and subjectivity have been ongoing concerns for women art practitioners and significant conceptual and visual practices have appeared. Most recent approaches to self-representation have included the use of ambiguity, empathy and the corporeal or sensory experience

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*Self Portraits of Contemporary Women*, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Here I refer to artists such as Lavinia Fontana, Sofonisba Anguissola, Artemesia Gentileschi, Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Judith Leyster, Anna Dorothea Therbusch, Anna Bliska, Gwen John, Charlotte Berend-Corinth, Claude Cahun, and Frida Kahlo who are among many.

<sup>6</sup> Meskimmon, 1996, pp64-73

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

of the body. Another important strategy in defying objectification has been the use of the particular or personal body, often the autobiographical body.

In recent decades feminist practitioners explored subjectivity through performance, time-based media, photography, text, multimedia and installation. Through parody and appropriation, painting, and its historical and patriarchal associations, has often been the subject of critique in these practices but has seldom been employed as a genuine strategy in the representation of embodied subjectivity, and even more rarely within figurative representation. The exceptions to this have been artists such as Joan Semmel [Figure 1], Jenny Saville, Alison Watt and Marlene Dumas.



[Figure 1]

While there have been few women painters picturing the body, there has been a sustained interest in the realist representation of the naked body. One of the most

significant manifestations of this concern was observed in the exhibition *Body* held in Sydney in 1997. The curator Anthony Bond noted that his selection of works for the exhibition highlighted critical ideas about realism, empathy, gesture and self-reflection. In the catalogue essay Bond wrote:

By replacing the objectifying and distancing conventions of academic painting with an emphasis on sensory and emotional engagement, the works selected for BODY lessen the gap between art and life. Making art which addresses the boundary between representation and lived experience is an important aspect of realism.<sup>8</sup>

Another significant aspect of the exhibition was the juxtaposition of contemporary and past works, an organization that suggested re-interpretations of many of the images. Of particular note was the re-figuration of Courbet's realism as immersive and presenting an emphatic relationship between the viewer and the viewed. These discussions, illuminated through the exhibition, are suggestive of new possibilities in contemporary figurative representation.<sup>9</sup>

### Subjectivity

Art theorists including Helen McDonald<sup>10</sup>, Marsha Meskimmon<sup>11</sup> and Rosi Braidotti<sup>12</sup> have discussed feminist reconceptualisations of the female subject. They have charted the emergence of new representations that are

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<sup>8</sup> Bond, 1997, p12

<sup>9</sup> These reinterpretations of Courbet's painting will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

<sup>10</sup> McDonald, 2001, p4

<sup>11</sup> Meskimmon, 1996, p201

<sup>12</sup> Braidotti, Rosi, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp174-5. (Quoted by Meskimmon, 1996, pp200-201.)



inclusive of difference and that present a conceptual ideal in place of a representational ideal. McDonald defines this ideal as an erotically appealing female body, based upon a principle of inclusiveness.<sup>13</sup> In this instance inclusiveness means that this ideal does not speak about, or for, one particular group of women - as defined by race, class, sexuality or disability - but rather seeks to find more universal points of experience.

The elusive nature of subjectivity and the shifting state of identity has been at the forefront of much feminist practice during the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Philosopher Rosi Braidotti has coined the term 'nomadic subjectivity' to describe the shifting nature of identity. She states:

...we need to think differently about our historical condition; we need to re-invent ourselves. This transformative project begins with relinquishing the historically-established, habits of thought which, until now, have provided the 'standard' view of human subjectivity...in favor of a decentered and multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity, situated in a shifting context.<sup>15</sup>

Braidotti argues that figurations of mobile, complex and shifting subjectivity have overturned the idea of subjectivity as fixed and innate. She describes it as partial, embodied - and thereby accountable for itself - and capable of operating

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<sup>13</sup> McDonald, 2001, p4.

<sup>14</sup> Significant also is the emergence of the 'post-human body', the 'post-colonial body', cyber-feminism, hyper-reality and queer theory. Although this project does not address these issues directly, they provide a wider context to the discussion of embodied subjectivity.

<sup>15</sup> Braidotti, Rosi, *Difference, Diversity and Nomadic Subjectivity*, <http://women.ped.kum.nl/cbt/rosilecture.html> (developed from an earlier lecture under the title: *Figurations of Nomadism*; in *Cultures in Contention: Differences, Affiliations, Limitations*; edited by John Foster and Wayne Fro-man from the International Association of Philosophy and Literature, 1998.)

within collectively negotiated structures. In other words, the subject is constantly in flux and is an entity negotiating its own path within a shifting context.

The multiplicity and diversity of subjectivity across populations, and within individuals, underpins representational strategies that employ ambiguity. The shifting nature of subjectivity is not only a matter of external conditions, but is also reflective of the ambivalent relationship individuals have with their own bodies.

### **The ambiguous subjectivity of the autobiographical body**

Our bodies are always with us, though we have always had trouble saying exactly how. We are in various conceptions or metaphors, in our body, or having a body, or at one with our body, or alienated from it. The body is both ourselves and other, and as such the object of emotions from love to disgust. To psychoanalysis, it is the object of primary narcissism. Most of the time, the body maintains an unstable position between such extremes, at once the object of pleasure, the uncontrolled agent of pain and the revolt against reason – and the vehicle of mortality. As such it is always the subject of curiosity, an ever-renewed project of knowing.<sup>16</sup>

The psychologist Liam Hudson proposes that we make images of the body as a means of articulating our desires and fears about it<sup>17</sup> and that the nude can be viewed as a vehicle, or venue, for the exploration of ambivalence.<sup>18</sup> He

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<sup>16</sup> Brooks, Peter; *Body Work – Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*; Harvard University Press, London, 1993, p1.

<sup>17</sup> Hudson, Liam; *Bodies of Knowledge: The Psychological Significance of the Nude in Art*, George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Limited, London, 1982, p1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p7.

argues that the difficulties the body presents to us in coming to terms with our own subjectivity highlights the ambiguities in our conceptualization of the body. These difficulties manifest in dichotomies such as internal/external, mind/body and public/private. Hudson argues that pictures are 'a means of articulating to ourselves emotions that are of carnal significance, but on which we can otherwise impose none but the slipperiest of grips.'<sup>19</sup> Hudson's position is similar to Braidotti's in the sense of foregrounding ambiguity and ambivalence in subjectivity as a perpetual state.

Their writing on the subject also finds parallels in the writing of Helen McDonald. McDonald argues that in re-conceptualizing the female body and subjectivity, many women artists of the past decade, have used ambiguity as an approach. She states that this has allowed for the development of a conceptual ideal for the female subject that is inclusive of difference. She discusses the use of ambiguity to blur distinctions of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and gender and to resist stereotypes. A significant aspect of her discussion is the conscious process these artists employ in constructing this ambiguity for the spectator. The ambiguities of embodiment, associated with the representation of the body, exist within the subject but also, McDonald argues, within the spectator.

In conclusion, the ideas discussed here provide a background to the research and suggest a range of approaches to the concept of the subject in representation. In particular, they focus upon the use of the autobiographical body and self-portraiture as an approach to considering the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p148.

subversion of the objectifying gaze and as a point of negotiation between lived experience and the constructions of female identity in art and society. The re-conceptualization of subjectivity, as ambiguous and shifting, is also reflected in discussions of embodiment and self-image. Feminist art theorists have chartered the emergence of ambiguity as a conceptual and formal approach to the representation of female embodied subjectivity within art practice. By defining ambiguity, in this way, new possibilities in picturing the subjective female body become apparent.

## Part two

### Introduction

The section considers works by Rembrandt van Rijn, Gustave Courbet, Jenny Saville and Marlene Dumas, which have resulted in significant realizations and have, at times, influenced the course of my research. My intention is to create a context for my work based upon the ways that these artists have generated embodied subjectivity within figurative paintings and, further, that this subjectivity implicates the spectator beholding the image. In this section I shall also discuss Michael Fried's reinterpretation of Courbet's realism, specifically his arguments concerning the implication of the artist's and spectator's bodies and the corporeality of painting.<sup>20</sup> Fried highlights a number of representational strategies that are common to the works of other artists who are concerned with the depiction of embodied experience through figurative painting. The aim, however, is not to transfer his model for reading Courbet's work, rather, I propose that he provides a structure through which the intentions of these artists can be considered.

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<sup>20</sup> Fried, Michael, *Courbet's Realism*, University of Chicago Press, 1990.

## Rembrandt van Rijn

In many respects, this project has its origins in my experience of viewing Rembrandt's painting of *Bathsheba* (1654) [Figure 2] in the Louvre, during a visit to Paris in 1999. I returned to her often and, long since, her presence has remained with me and led me to consider why I felt such an intimate connection with her. At the time I was unaware of the artist's<sup>21</sup> or the painting's<sup>22</sup> history and it was, therefore, through the pictorial construction and the painterly qualities that Rembrandt conveyed his startling intimacy. Standing before her I felt something I had never experienced before; I felt that somehow I was implicated in her fate, not as a character but as another person. The awareness that this canvas had sat before her in real space and time and that I was standing in the place of the painter, were inseparable from the image itself and seemed, for a moment, to extinguish the centuries between us.

When, some time later, I did learn of the stories that intersect in *Bathsheba*, I was enthralled by how skillfully Rembrandt depicted his shamed mistress as his reluctant queen, by the parallel details such as David's letter and Hendrickje's summons from the Chamber of Matrimonial Affairs, and the

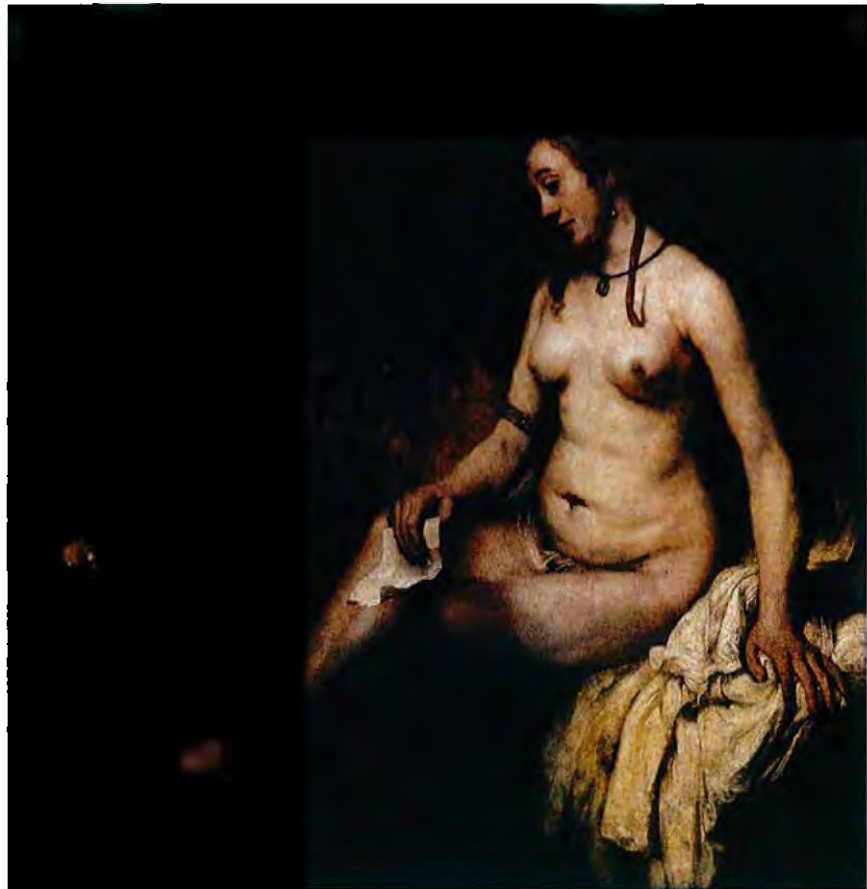
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<sup>21</sup> *Bathsheba* is a portrait of Rembrandt's maid, lover and companion Hendrickje who poses as the subject of King David's wanton affections. Rembrandt was unable to marry her due to a clause in his deceased wife Saskia's will that would have resulted in his financial ruin. At the time the image was painted, Hendrickje was pregnant with Rembrandt's illegitimate daughter and, soon after, she was banished from her local church and labeled a whore. She lived with Rembrandt throughout the latter years of his life until she died in of plague in 1663.

<sup>22</sup> The story of Bathsheba is from the book of David, and describes how King David beds the married Bathsheba after observing her post-menstrual bath. When she falls pregnant with his heir, he disposes of her husband and she becomes his Queen. God however punishes their lust and adultery by causing their child to die. Rembrandt has depicted her at the point when she first receives David's invitation to attend him.

fact that the letter held by the illiterate Hendrickje, appears blank.

The naked body of Bathsheba is poised as though lost in her thoughts, and this state of reverie is emphasized by her unfocused gaze that travels across the image, and her darkened eyes diminish the emphasis upon sight and draw attention to her other senses. Her adornments of jewelry, her dressed hair and the opulent brocade fabric behind her suggest she is a woman of some importance, as does the presence of the servant at her feet. The beautiful rendering of her body describes its dimpled, pliant surface as well as its heat and solidity. She supports her weight with her left hand



[Figure 2]

and her right grasps a sheet of paper. These actions are important to the narrative of the painting<sup>23</sup> but also to the way in which we relate to the subject, as they suggest the effort required to maintain her pose and, therefore, her bodily experience. I believe that this interpretation is supported by the way in which Rembrandt has rendered the hands which are enlarged, active and capable, and which become, as I shall argue later in this chapter, the visual metaphor for the non-visual experience of her embodiment.

*Bathsheba's* body is parallel to the picture plane and sits within a relatively shallow pictorial space. The angle from which she was painted locates the viewer as slightly above her hips but level with her breasts and we look up at her tilted chin. These subtle distortions imitate close proximity, as does her enlarged left hand, which projects forward while simultaneously appearing to gather the picture surface back towards her in the folds of the cloth. In addition to her nakedness, this positioning of her body within the space of the canvas, and her almost life-like scale, bring her closer to us in a bodily sense. By this I mean that the intimacy of her painted flesh and the manipulation of her body within the space of the image combine with the pose and gesture to generate her embodied subjectivity.

Rembrandt implicates the beholder in the voyeurism of David<sup>24</sup>, but we are also implicated by our bodily relationship to the subject, her close proximity and her subjectivity as an

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<sup>23</sup> The letter depicted is from King David and is weighted with tragic implications, as Rembrandt emphasizes by its central placement in the image and its detailed rendering, casting a shadow across her knee. According to the story, upon this letter rests not only the fate of David and Bathsheba but the whole House of Judah.

<sup>24</sup> The biblical story begins with David observing Bathsheba bathing, from the rooftop of his palace.



individual, possessed of her own thoughts and embodied experience. The tactility of the image in terms of the surfaces described, the emphasis upon the hands and the evocative textures, of the paint itself, evoke our own corporeality. In considering the rendering of Bathsheba's body, I cannot help but draw upon the significance of Rembrandt's model as someone with whom he was intimately familiar; and recall that we are seeing her through his eyes.

Considering *Bathsheba*, I began to think seriously about the possibility of constructing an image so as to generate a relationship between the subject and the beholder. I recalled a painting by David Hockney I had also viewed in Paris, entitled *Play Within a Play* (1963) [Figure 3], in which the



[Figure 3]

artist depicts himself on a stage with his hands and face pressed against the surface of the painting as if it were a wall of glass. Attached to the canvas is a piece of Plexiglas sandwiching him like a specimen in a slide. This image was significant to the development of this project as for the first time I was acutely aware of the subject's relation to the surface of the image and the space that divides the subject from the spectator. This work came to mind when I first viewed Jenny Saville's photographs of her body pressed



[Figure 4]



[Figure 5]

against glass, where the surface seems to act not as a barrier but as though the flesh has been vivisectioned allowing us more intimate access to the body, (as even the boundary of skin is transgressed) [Figure 4 and 5]. Saville achieves this without the self-conscious theatricality of Hockney's image, which operates more as a critique of the apparent impossibility of overcoming the distance between the viewer and the viewed, rather than a consideration of how this distance might be traversed.

## Jenny Saville

The enormous paintings of Jenny Saville, do, in a number of ways, attempt to traverse the divide between subject and spectator. Her work raises some important issues in terms of this research, including the significance of the connection between embodiment and painting, and the possibilities provided by her approach to corporeal subjectivity as a transient and shifting state.

Saville's painting has long held a fascination for me and, although I find her photographs are equally painterly and impressive, it is her paintings that I find most relevant to my research project because of the connection they make between the experience of occupying a body and the experience of creating that body in paint. She herself has stated that her photographic experiences have reinstalled her belief in painting and, since the *Closed Contact*<sup>25</sup> series, she has shifted the bodily emphasis to the surface of the canvas to create a more visceral impact.<sup>26</sup> Another crucial distinction between the photographs and the paintings is the spectator's experience of occupying the place of the artist in front of the work, as if witnessing the process of making the painting.

Saville presents us with women whose skin is no longer able to contain them; the elasticity has failed physically and socially. She aims for intimacy through scale and there is the sense that the subjects' puckered, uneasy skin stretches on

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<sup>25</sup> *Closed Contact*, photographic collaboration between Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford, exhibited at Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, January 12 – February 9 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Saville, Jenny, from interview with Philip Hunter Drohojowska, 'Back to Paint – Thanks to Photos', *Art and Architecture Magazine*, 13 January 2002.



indefinitely, disappearing between thighs, tucked under armpits, projecting out into our space and beyond the limits of the canvas. Her women, conglomerates of her own and other bodies, exist at the very surface of the image. The rendered skin and the skin of the painting's surface are one and the same. Further, Saville's paint both describes flesh and physically behaves as flesh, stretching and pulling over the paint beneath, at once covering and revealing the construction of the body and the painting.



[Figure 6]

The erogenous and most vulnerable parts of the body such as the lips, nose, eyes, breasts, armpits, groin and hands, become areas of focus, emphasized by clammy magentas and the delicate interchange of brush marks. The evocation of physical experience through touch is vitally important in the construction and she has stated that this was the primary motivation for *Fulcrum* (1999) [Figure 6], to emphasize the touch of one body against another. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty describes the concept of corporeal reflexivity: that one cannot touch an object without being touched by it, so the act of touching evokes an awareness of oneself.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, discussed by Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts in 'Courbet's Corporeal Realism: The Phenomenological Body and the

The depicted women seem absorbed in the experience of embodiment, their faces revealing internal contemplation, reverie or semi-consciousness. There is also an acute awareness, discomfort and anxiety associated with the experience, both for the subject and the spectator. However, these paintings are also impassive. Saville does not aim to reveal the characteristics of her subjects but instead to emphasize the artist's and the sitter's absorption in their own embodiment.

Saville's paintings make a strong connection between the experience of occupying flesh and the immersive process of creating that flesh in paint. Both experiences are evident to the viewer who, within the duality of surface and image, is led to shift between looking at the object quality of the paint and at the embodied subjectivity of the figure.

Luce Irigaray wrote that female desire is the very inability to separate herself from herself,<sup>28</sup> and (I propose) it is the inextricability of immersive experience, female subjectivity and embodiment that is central to Saville's practice. The artist states that: 'I want any contradictions I have – feelings about my body, looking at other flesh – I want that in the work. I want them to be full of contradictions'; and the underlying factor in her work is 'an attempt to find out what it means to be female'.<sup>29</sup>

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Anti-Theatrical Tradition', from *Body* (catalogue), Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997. (Referenced from Maurice Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1992, p90-97.)

<sup>28</sup> Irigaray, Luce, *The Sex Which is not One*, 1985, New York, p206, referenced by Alison Rowley in 'On viewing three painting by Jenny Saville: rethinking a feminist practice of painting', *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: feminist readings*, edited by Griselda Pollock, Routledge, 1996, p96.

<sup>29</sup> Saville, Jenny, interview with Philip Hunter Drohojowska.



[Figure 7]



[Figure 8]

As subjects, Saville's women are decentred, multi-layered, dynamic, and changing, they have lived a life in and through their flesh, and the experiences that have formed them are both individual and collective. The construction of her subjects from multiple bodies, using both photographic collages and staged images of bodies piled together, also contributes to their shifting and multiple identities. Saville, who spends many months 'layer(ing) the paint like a network, paint on top of paint', notes that it is as if the painting also has lived a life of its own.<sup>30</sup>

Saville's pictorial strategies, and the ways in which her paintings act upon the spectator, find significant parallels in Michael Fried's consideration of Courbet's realism. In particular, the implication of the spectator's body, the corporeality of painting and the subversion of the distancing gaze.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid

### **Gustave Courbet and Michael Fried**

Michael Fried wrote that Courbet's self-portrait paintings establish a relationship between the subject and the spectator or, as he terms it, the sitter and the beholder. In this relationship the artist departs from the state of 'mutual facing' and instead begins to imply that the two bodies, of sitter and beholder, are made congruent.<sup>31</sup> In other words, Fried argues that the physical presence of the subject and the spectator correspond, and that Courbet achieves this through his careful and particular manipulation of the subject within the space of the canvas and his employment of often-ambiguous states of sleep or reverie. In addition, the artist's rendering of hands forms a metaphor for the non-visual experience of embodiment.

Fried's phenomenological reading is centered upon the idea that the immersive experience of embodiment, of beholding and of painting cannot, for Courbet, be delineated. This is particularly apparent when considering his collection of self-portraits from the 1840s in which he is simultaneously the beholder and the subject of consideration. The experience of embodiment for the artist exists on both sides of the painting's surface, which is permeated through the act of painting.

Fried locates Courbet's aim, of overcoming the distance between the spectator and the subject, in the emphasis placed upon the proximity of the figure represented to the surface of the canvas. And this is further emphasized by the shallow pictorial space and the placement of the body in such a way that the part of the body that is not depicted is

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<sup>31</sup> Fried, 1990, p68.



to be imagined lying 'this' side of the canvas; in other words, it calls into question the ability of the frame to contain the representation. Fried claims that Courbet's work demonstrates a desire to dissolve the distinction between subject and object, and that the prolongation of the experience of painting stresses the process of making, rather than the product.

At this point I would like to draw attention to my earlier observation concerning Saville's employment of paint to both describe and behave as flesh, at once covering and revealing the construction of the body and the painting, and suggest that this demonstrates that same desire. This close proximity of the subject to the surface is central to Saville's methodology and also a significant feature of Rembrandt's portraits and his narrative paintings where he implicates the spectator as the witness to the event portrayed. A prime example are his two paintings of *Lucreatia* (1664 and 1666) [Figures 9 and 10], in which his subject fills the space and seems to reach out, as if appealing to us, her body level to the picture plane and positioned in direct relationship to the spectator's body.



[Figure 9]



[Figure 10]



Courbet's recurring images of himself in a state of reclining semi-consciousness draw attention to the subject's absorption in his bodily existence and, interestingly, Fried also notes that lying down is abandoning 'the upright posture that establishes us in perceptual opposition to the object world'. The removal or subversion of the gaze and the close proximity of the subject's body to the surface of the painting furthers the aim of overcoming the distance between the subject and the spectator.



[Figure 11]

In Courbet's *The Wounded Man* (1844-54) [Figure11], the subject's left hand operates in a similar way to Bathsheba's. It is composed as if the figure is gathering the surface of the canvas toward his body, thus the gesture is directed both outward and inward. The action of the hand also evokes the sensation of effort and of touch, further emphasizing a sense of embodiment. The hands in Saville's paintings often fold away from the viewer into the body as if corresponding with the hands of the painter/holder. When they do appear they are solidly rendered and virile.

Fried observes that Courbet made a significant number of paintings in which the subject is depicted from behind (*Lovers in the Country* (1844) for example) [Figure 13] or is twisted, often improbably, to reveal his back or shoulder, (such as *Man with the Pipe* (1849)) [Figure 12]. Through these observations Fried concludes that Courbet was



[Figure 12]



[Figure 13]

replicating his own bodily orientation to the canvas – that of facing into the picture – as a means of merging with the subject and thus merging the position of seeing and being seen. In a similar way, he notes that the position of looking up the foreshortened body of the subject in paintings such as *The Wounded Man* corresponds to the foreshortened view of the subject regarding their own body. This latter approach appears repeatedly in the paintings of Jenny Saville.

## Marlene Dumas

In her representation of the human body, Marlene Dumas renders what is public and generic in a way that is intimate and specific.<sup>32</sup> The simplicity of her figurative paintings seems to defy the intimacy they possess; at one moment graphically describing a body and then dissolving into abstract marks. Dumas' subjects reveal little character or personality and focus instead upon the embodiedness of their being. She has often been quoted as saying she uses second-hand images and first-hand emotions and her subjects seem to exist only in their relationship with the beholder.<sup>33</sup>

Dumas' desire for intimacy is the desire to overcome the distance between the spectator and the subject. She states:

It's as if I can make people think they are so close to me that they believe I've addressed the painting directly to them. I give them a false sense of intimacy. I think the work invites you to have a conversation with it.<sup>34</sup>

Dumas removes any information that locates her bodies within a pictorial space and she passes over individual details in favor of the pose or gesture. However, it is this very emphasis upon the action of the body, the internal effort, which maintains its state of subjectivity.

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<sup>32</sup> Observed by Mariuccia Caradio in *Marlene Dumas*, Phaidon, 1999, p88.

<sup>33</sup> Storsve, Jonas, (Translated from French by Gila Walker), *Marlene Dumas – Nom de Personne / Name no Names*, 2001, Galerie d'art Graphique, Centre Pompidou,

<sup>34</sup> Marlene Dumas, from interview with Barbara Bloom, *Marlene Dumas*, Phaidon, 1999, p12.

Dumas utilizes a number of pictorial strategies in constructing her images in order to create a bodily relationship between the viewer and the person depicted. Her subjects are placed parallel to the picture plane, located at the very surface of the painting and often filling the image. Much of her source material is drawn from pornography and advertising within which the emphasis is upon creating a



[Figure 14]

narrative inclusive of the viewer. Dumas adopts the poses and postures of her sources but removes their photographic seamlessness. In other words, she acknowledges their fiction within the painting's resistance to transcribing the photograph. However, it is through this act of painting her imagery that Dumas makes the transformation from the public and generic into the specific and intimate.

The marks in Dumas' works are always apparent, as lines, strokes and scumbled color in her oil paintings, or as watery



dabs and flowing scrawls in her watercolors. She does not aim to create illusions and her works often shifts between painting and drawing with a brush. However, the child-like honesty of her marks belies their sophistication and makes their moments of transcendence more mesmerizing.



[Figure 15]

For example, the face of the figure in her watercolor, entitled *X-Plicit* (1999) [Figure15], glimmers on the edge of photographic clarity before dissolving back into watery stains. Another example is *Mandy* (1998) [Figure 14], in which the paint both describes the body and the shifting pigments of skin and also suggests the seepages of the body; thus connecting the embodied experiences of painting and looking, with the embodiment of the subject.



[Figure 16]

In the work *The Painter* (1994) [Figure 16] the artist depicts a young child, centrally placed, standing facing out of the painting with an intense penetrating expression. Each hand is covered in paint, both literally and figuratively, and is poised as if after an event. The outlines of the body describe the soft babyish curves and toward the feet the delineation, as it meets the edge of the canvas, dissolves the boundary between her and us. The obvious activity of the hands, as further suggested by the title, strongly suggest the embodied experience of the child, and, further, connect the image with the act of its representation. Thus, although the image itself is intimate, it is our awareness of the painting of the image -

the hands of the child, the maker and our own – through which Dumas addresses us so directly.

Once, in North America, someone was interested in these smaller paintings of a naked young girl and asked, "What is the age of the child?" I said, "It's not a child, it's a painting."  
(Marlene Dumas)<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, these artists have employed formal pictorial approaches in the representation of embodiment and subjectivity. Each generates embodiment through both the illusionary representation of the subject and also through the evidence of the painting process, and, by extension, the artist. This creates a 'two-foldness'<sup>36</sup> of attention between the subject represented and the objectness of the painting – between surface and image. These artists have concentrated upon the proximity of the figure represented to the surface of the image in order to overcome the distance between the subject and the spectator. Another important aspect is the consideration of the subjects' hands in evoking sensations of embodiment and also as simulations of the painters' and the viewer's hands.

Technically the painting practices of these artists differ, however, each has considered paint as a means of evoking sensations of embodiment within the spectator, most particularly mimicking the tactile qualities evident in the surface of the body.

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<sup>35</sup> Dumas, Marlene, from interview with Barbara Bloom, p21.

<sup>36</sup> Elkins, 2000, p188.

### **Part three**

In this third part of the context I shall discuss aspects of the work of John Currin, Lucian Freud and Odd Nerdrum, who have been significant to the research to varying degrees, formally and technically. These artists have revealed approaches to representational figurative painting that are illusionary and yet, simultaneously, draw attention to the painting process and the fabrication of the image. Rather than evoking the embodied experience of the spectator, however, their pictorial approach is focused upon conveying ideas through the arrangement and rendering of the subject within a pictorial space. In terms of technical issues of paint application and composition, the works of these artists have proved to be significant points of reference within the studio practice and provided a broader contemporary context within which to consider this project.



## Lucian Freud



[Figure 17]



[Figure 18]

Freud's paintings have provided three significant formal and technical insights. The artist uses shallow pictorial space in order to create formal arrangements of the subject within the frame and to focus attention upon the form and volume of the body. Freud employs the subjects' hands in a similar way to Courbet, by arranging the hands to suggest that the gesture of touch is directed both outward and inward, both touching and being touched. He enlarges the scale of the hands, drawing attention to their virile capabilities, and seems to be suggesting the psychological state of his resolute sitters in the tension and awkwardness of the hand positions. The third aspect is his use of paint, which he employs liberally, plastering the features of the body onto the canvas and pushing the pigment around to describe the stretch and weight of the flesh. The tactile surfaces he creates suggest the porous waxy texture of skin and reflect the slabs of muscle and fat present beneath. The brush marks indicate the direction and force of each stroke and make the painting process apparent to the spectator.

## John Currin



[Figure 19]



[Figure 20]

John Currin's satirical positioning of the body has been of interest to this research project mainly in terms of his formal pictorial arrangements and his painterly techniques. Currin places his subjects centrally and vertically in the foreground of his pictorial spaces. There are some similarities with Dumas' images, in that both artists draw upon advertising and images from popular culture as reference material, and their subject's convey the same direct sexual seduction associated with marketing. The erotica in Currin's paintings, however, is playful, warm and humorous, whereas Dumas conveys a much darker and confrontational sexuality.

In works, such as *Heartless* (1997) [Figure 19] and *Buffet* (1999) [Figure 20], the artist contrasts painting techniques, such as delicate tonal rendering, with loose painterly marks. This disrupts the illusion and reminds the viewer of the surface of the image, and, by extension, the artist. In this way Currin makes the process of representation and the

construction of the images apparent, compelling us to make conclusions about the meaning of his paintings.<sup>37</sup>

### Odd Nerdrum

There are three aspects of Nerdrum's paintings that are of particular concern within the research. The first is his use of ambiguous narrative, the second is the formal placement of his subject's within the frame and the third is the application of paint in the rendering the human body.



[Figure 21]

Nerdrum has created a post-apocalyptic world in his images, peopled by subjects concerned with primeval issues of survival and social rituals, and dotted with contemporary objects such as guns or doorhandles. The ambiguous and frequently disturbing scenes are metaphorical representations of humanity in which the subjects are immersed in particular concerns such as trade, conflict or

<sup>37</sup> Boris, Staci, 'The Lovers, the Invalids, and the Socialites', *John Currin*, (exhibition catalogue), Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 2003, p52.



death. Nerdrum's works reference epic, historical paintings, such as those produced by Delacroix, Gericault and David, and yet they are devoid of fabled or moral narratives associated with such imagery. The result is that the scenes are ambiguous and uncomfortable, confounding the spectator and their attempts to interpret.

The artist's formal arrangement of his subjects appear calculated, as if the images portray directed enactments rather than captured scenes. In a similar way to Freud, Nerdrum uses bodies as compositional devices. However, Nerdrum emphasizes the subjectivity of his figures by their physical activity, gesture or animated facial expression.



[Figure 22]

The painted surfaces of Nerdrum's canvases reveal the evidence of process in the dense layering of marks and glazes, which vary from wet daubs to scratchy scumbled

The three artists have in varying degrees, sought to represent subjectivity in figurative painting, through formal pictorial construction.

Common approaches have included the subject's orientation within the pictorial space; the formal arrangement of the subject in order to generate dynamic pictorial relationships; a consideration of the spectator's bodily orientation and location in relation to the image; the use of painterly marks as evidence of creation and in order to evoke tactile sensations; and, at times, to differentiate the subject from its environment. Ambiguity has also been employed, to varying degrees, as a formal and conceptual approach.

## **Chapter three - studio practice**

### **Introduction**

The intention of this chapter is to delineate the major formal and conceptual decisions made during the research. I shall begin by outlining the methodologies that were consistent throughout the project and follow this with the development of the studio-based research. This is discussed as three stages, each marking a significant shift in formal and conceptual approaches, and is considered in terms of the objectives, the conceptual, formal and technical strategies employed and a written description of specific works. Each stage discussed concludes with an evaluation of progress.

The primary aim of the research project is to investigate the representation of an empirical model of female bodily experience as a formal pictorial project. In order to create a universal point of mediation between lived experiences, it seeks to find representation for embodiment and subjectivity. This is investigated through consideration of the physical position of the spectator standing before the paintings and the identification and development of formal pictorial and painterly strategies for evoking the spectator's corporeality and embodiment. It is therefore important to emphasise that fundamental aspects of the work can only be experienced in the physical presence of the canvases, where this bodily relationship between subject and viewer is constructed through scale, surface and relative positioning.

## **Methodologies consistent throughout the project**

### **Painting**

All the art works produced during the research are oil paintings on linen, on a stretcher or strainer. The painting process begins with an oil-based ground upon which the composition is sketched in paint. The image is created by building up multiple layers of semi-opaque paint, combined with various mediums. The number of layers varies across the surface and is most dense in detailed areas of the body, such as the hands and face, and in areas of the figure or ground closest to the surface of the pictorial space. These sections often contain up to twenty separate layers of paint. The aim of this process is to build the physicality of the body and also to generate a waxy, skin-like translucency and tactility within the paint that provides a visual and tactile description of flesh.

The painted surface is intended to provide evidence of the painting process and generate a perceptual shift, within the viewer, between the surface of the painting and the illusion of pictorial space. Therefore gestural brush-marks are emphasised rather than smoothed or blended.

### **The Generation of Source Imagery**

The primary source for all paintings are high quality photographs taken with a medium format 6 x 7cm camera. I decided on the pose and surroundings and employed an assistant to take the photographs. The source image is constructed from multiple photographs taken at close



proximity to the subject, which are then collaged together. Using a tripod to fix the position, the camera was tilted and panned, with between three and six separate shots to capture the pose. The purpose of this process is to simulate the distortions experienced when viewing a body from a near distance. This exaggerates the scale of the closest features and foreshortens the body parts that recede away from the viewing position. The intention is to subvert the distancing monocular view and, instead, replace it with multiple views melded together to imitate experiences of close proximity.

The difficulties posed by this process mainly centre around the problems of constructing an image whilst also being the subject of the photograph. This resulted in a great deal of trial and error before the desired images were achieved.

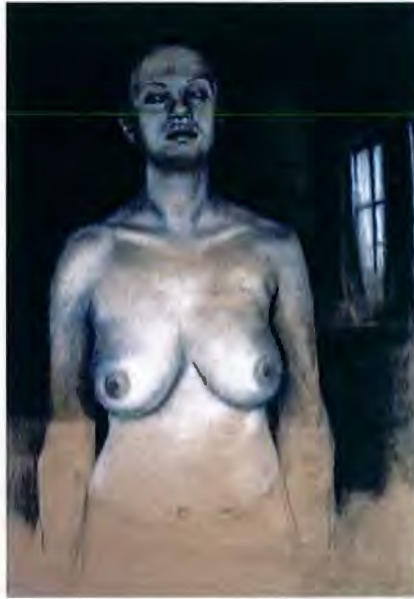
Digital photography was proposed as a cost and time effective solution, which might also provide a more seamless collage of images through the employment of digital imaging software. Following experimentation, the qualities of the digital prints proved to be unsuitable for my requirements<sup>1</sup>; however, the ease of the digital camera provided a new freedom in exploring pose and gesture. Subsequently, the digital camera was used to test ideas, with the analogue camera providing the final working photograph. The advantage is the high quality of the photographic material, which allows enlargements of fine details and registers subtle shifts in tones and colours.

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<sup>1</sup> I would qualify that this is due in part to my novice expertise in digital imaging technology, and also to the difference in texture gradient between the 6 x 7cm negative and the pixelation of the digital image and inkjet dot within the print.



In terms of the logistics of image construction, natural daylight was used to illuminate the subject, and the body was normally positioned near a window in such a way that the light source in the image originates from above the head of the subject. Mirrors were utilized to bounce light into shadows and remove strong contrasts on the body.



[Figure 23]



[Figure 24]

### **Transferring image to canvas**

An irregular grid was created to scale the source image first into a full-scale drawing and later onto the canvas.<sup>2</sup> The benefit of this grid system is that it positions the features of the body in relation to one another, emphasising dynamic formal relationships and the overall pictorial structure. Large drawings were made in charcoal on paper to trial source

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<sup>2</sup> The process of gridding the source image involves attaching clear acetate over the photographic collage and dividing the composition into quarters, and across diagonals. Lines are then ruled connecting significant points or features in the image, for example a line connecting the ear, shoulder and hand. This is continued until all significant locations are charted within the image and all lines intersect two edges of the frame. This irregular grid is then scaled up to the required size by measuring the positions around the frame at which the lines intersect and multiplying each by  $x$ . ( $x$  = the height of the canvas divided by the height of the source image.)

imagery, resolving issues of scale, composition and image selection, [Figure 23 and 24].

### **Additional source material**

During the painting process the separate photographs (as segments of the collage), provided the primary reference material. However, a significant aim was to create images that evoked a physical presence and therefore I felt it was important to avoid a photographic look **within the pictures**<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, skin tones were mixed from observations of my own body in the studio and anatomical and spatial aspects of the pose observed in a mirror. An additional branch of the research, undertaken during stage one, involved making plaster casts of my head, hand, ear and torso, using dental alginate<sup>4</sup>. These were regularly employed as reference throughout the research and were particularly valuable in considering how the painted marks might describe the curving volume of the body. These tools assisted in visualizing the volume of the body and overcoming the flattening of the photographic image.

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<sup>3</sup> By 'photographic look' I mean specifically aspects of photographs such as the flattening of forms, the hardening of edges, and often the graphic simplification of tonal values. Transferring these qualities into the painting, I feel, immediately conveys a reference to the photograph and, although photographs provide a valuable resource, this is not my intention.

<sup>4</sup> Dental alginate is an organic product made from seaweed that is used to make highly detailed impressions of gums and teeth. I found that I could achieve very high quality casts of facial details that included the surface texture, and the rubbery nature of the material when set allowed for casting of complex forms such as ears. Reliefs were then cast in porcelain plaster.

## **Stage one**

### **Objectives**

The primary objective, during this first stage of the research, was to investigate, through formal pictorial approaches; ways of making pictures that subvert the distancing and objectifying gaze traditionally associated with painted representations of the female nude.

The focus was upon identifying aspects of pictorial representation that might highlight the physical relationship between the represented body and the body of the spectator. These included consideration of the spectator's position within the picture and their physical viewing position in relation to the canvas; the scale of the subject in relation to the viewer's body and their anticipated distance from the canvas; the arrangement of the subject within the pictorial space (in terms of pose, gesture and gaze); and the potential to suggest embodiment through the actions, gaze and/or the facial expression of the subject. The intention was to employ these strategies in order to undermine the remote viewing position of the spectator and instead place the subject at what is perceived to be a close proximity to the viewer's body.

### **Formal and technical approaches**

Formally my intention was to generate pictures of the body situated within intimate spaces by the assertion of the material qualities of the body and adjacent surfaces, thus recalling the tactile experiences of the viewer. Initial experimentation revolved around ways of generating intimate places that could contain the body of the subject. I

experimented with its physical arrangement using props such as chairs or lounges and through cropping the body. In order to create an intimacy that would be inclusive of the viewer, I arranged to subject as close as possible to the surface of the pictorial space. A further intention of this close positioning was to increase the sensations of exposure and privacy associated with nakedness.

Another area of experimentation involved the introversion of the subject's gaze by closing the eyes. Although the returned gaze has often been used as a strategy to assert subjectivity, I felt that the internalisation of the gaze could generate greater sensations of empathy and embodiment within the viewer, whilst also suggesting the private and inaccessible internal life of the subject.

Technically, the problem was to render the body so that it possesses a physical presence within the image and consequently within real space.

### **Specific works**

Three works were undertaken during this first stage of the research.

*Tirer* [Plate 1] depicts a semi-naked female body from above the hips. The subject is frontal and parallel to the picture plane. She is approximately life size and is centrally placed within the image. Behind her striped fabric drapes against the body, suggestive of a shroud. Her posture, and the gravity acting upon the breasts and fabric, suggests she is standing supporting her own weight. Her eyes are closed, chin raised and mouth slightly open. The arms hang against the sides of the body and disappear below the bottom edge



of the picture. The vulnerable tender areas of the chest, neck, stomach, open lips and inner elbows are exposed. The intention was to mirror the position of the spectator's body in height, scale and orientation, thus making this exposure feel personal - like looking in a mirror or seeing someone you know, naked for the first time. Together these features make it difficult to objectify the subject. Further, by internalising the gaze the spectator might be compelled to consider what the subject is thinking, doing or feeling.



[Figure 25]

*Untitled self-portrait* [Figure 25] is an image of a naked body contained within the shallow space of a chaise lounge. The body is curled up to fit within the space and she gazes directly at the spectator. The scale is significantly larger than life-size and the subject appears active in her effort to maintain her position. The intention was to evoke a sense of intimacy, through the shallow space and the tactile surfaces of the upholstery and to suggest embodiment in the physical action of the pose.



[Figure 26]

*Untitled self-portrait (beanbag)* [Figure 26] depicts the subject reclining on an orange beanbag. The viewing position is from slightly above, as if the viewer is standing over the subject. The body is arranged parallel to the picture plane and cropped across the upper thighs. The eyes are closed and the hands rest on the abdomen. The intention was to emphasise the weight of the body pressing down onto a support that, in turn visually pushes the body to the front of the pictorial space. The prop was selected to provide a contrast to the surface and colour of the body and as a departure from the historical references suggested within the previous painting. This was the first and only work in which digital photography was utilized to provide the primary source images. The painting remains unresolved.

## Evaluation

Works discussed above were undertaken in the first year of the project. These paintings achieved some of the objectives of the research and assisted in identifying significant formal and conceptual strategies that suggested further areas for investigation. The success of individual works varied and I felt that the first painting achieved more of the project's formal and conceptual aims than the subsequent works.

The most significant conceptual developments during this stage of the research evolved through the difficulty of using props to generate intimate places of containment.<sup>5</sup> Consequently there was a conceptual shift away from picturing places of containment, to a consideration of the frame of the image as a means of containing the subject. Overall there was a development extending from picturing sensations of embodiment, to considering how these sensations might be generated within the spectator.

A solution that arose through the research was the use of ambiguity as a conceptual and formal strategy. This emerged, initially, as a consequence of *Tirer*, however, it was my dissatisfaction with the subsequent works that highlighted the potential of this approach. The simplified ground, its tactile relationship to the subject, and the closed eyes created the ambiguity in this work. It was often commented by peers that it was difficult to determine how the body was orientated – standing up or lying down. Although I felt that the indications of gravity in the painting made this obvious,

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<sup>5</sup> These problems included the loaded historical references of props such as the chaise lounge in *Untitled self-portrait* that, in retrospect, I felt added to the objectification of the subject. Other difficulties included the space surrounding the prop, or the cropping of the body required to eliminate the surrounding space.



the idea of creating more ambiguous arrangements of the body opened up new possibilities. This realization coincided with my reading of Helen McDonald's book *Erotic Ambiguities* in which she foregrounds ambiguity as a strategy employed by artists for self-representation.

Pictorially, shifting the composition so that the subject sat within the foreground of the pictorial space and reducing the depth of the pictorial space significantly changed the nature of the paintings. Not only did these approaches generate a greater sense of the materiality of surfaces, the surface of the forms were perceived to be in approximately the same place as the surface of the paint itself. The tactility of the skin and adjacent materials, surrounding the body, could be evoked both through illusion and through the body of the paint. This suggested new ways of manipulating the paint in order to create the waxy visceral qualities of skin.

This work suggested the possibilities of creating pictorial space that might be perceived to exist on the fringes of actual space. By this I mean that the shallow pictorial space in the image, rather than operating as a window into an adjacent space, appears instead to be within the room occupied by the spectator. The light source was identified as a significant factor in determining whether this occurred within the viewer's perception. This approach was identified as a consequence of my dissatisfaction with the second painting, *Untitled self-portrait*, in which the body is illuminated by strong sunlight that casts shadows across the image, clearing separating the pictorial space from real space.



These works led me to conclude that the scale of subject, both in relation to the spectator's body and the size of the canvas, was a significant factor in terms of the research aims. The subject in *Tirer* and the untitled beanbag image, although life size, appear smaller within a gallery environment and do not generate the physical presence I desired. In contrast, the scale of the body in *Untitled self-portrait* was too large to be perceived as a person in actual space and seemed almost monstrous within the confined space of the composition.

Although the third work proved to be problematic and remains unresolved, there were two formal aspects identified through this work that proved to be significant to the development of the research. The first is that the relationship between the beanbag and the body is interactive, in the sense that one affects the other, with the shapes created in the material mimicked by some of the shapes and creases of the body. This evoked a more visceral relationship between the figure and the ground. The second was the self-referential positioning of the hands resting on the body. I observed that this offered possibilities in evoking the feeling of touching the body and of being touched, thereby increasing the overall tactility of the picture.

## **Stage two**

### **Objectives**

The objective at this stage of the research was to consider the way female subjectivity might be conveyed to the spectator through images of the body that were more ambiguous. My intention was to evoke an emphatic relationship between the spectator and the person depicted in the painting. Through ambiguities in spatial orientation and pose, and simplification of the figure/ground relationship, the aim was to relate the subject more closely to the physical body of the viewer. A secondary aim was to increase the tactile dimensions of the imagery through the rendering of surfaces, thereby emphasising the tactile experiences of the subject while also generating corporeal sensations within the spectator.

### **Formal and technical considerations**

Formal and technical considerations focused upon the arrangement of the body within the pictorial space in order to create ambiguities as to its location, while also positioning the subject vertically within the composition as if parallelling the body of the spectator. The plan was that this vertical orientation, in combination with the placement of the figure as if pressing against the ground, would generate ambivalence as to the location of the body, while simultaneously leading the spectator to relate the subject to their own body through its parallel position.

A further intention was to suggest an ambiguous state of consciousness between sleep and reverie, and associate

these with the physical tensions within the body<sup>6</sup> to subtly subvert a stable reading of the body as passive. A further consideration was the positioning of the hands so as to emphasise the sensations of touch.

### **Specific works**

*Mute* [Plate 2] depicts the back of a naked female body. The figure is centrally placed and parallel to the picture plane. Her body is pressed against a drape of striped fabric, the proximity of which is indicated by the left hand, (raised near the face and resting palm down on the material), and the head, (that is turned toward the hand as if to compensate for an apparent lack of space). The eyes are closed and the right arm hangs down beside the body. It is difficult to determine if she is standing or lying down. The ground in the painting is parallel to the picture plane and visually pushes the subject forward. The fabric is draped so as to suggest it is hanging down and yet it also seems to be attached to a solid supporting surface behind. The body is cropped above the knee.

The primary aim of this painting was to lead the spectator to question whether they are standing in front of, or over, the subject, thus physically implicating the viewer's body. A second aim was to replicate the spectator's orientation through the representation of the subject's back, to create a more emphatic response within the viewer. This depiction of the back of the body was also important in generating intimacy and was intended to make the spectator feel as though they were privy to a moment of seclusion.

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<sup>6</sup> By physical tensions within the body, I mean evident muscular exertion required to either support the weight or posture of the body, or to maintain positions such as the placement of arms and hands.

*Sweetmeat* [Plate 3] depicts the subject from the side with partial view of the front. The subject is positioned centrally, parallel to the picture plane and appears to be leaning against a surface (a ground of striped material) that is receding away toward the left of the picture, as indicated by the diminishing size of the vertical stripes. Her left arm rests against the fabric, whilst the other is invisible but for the hand resting on the abdomen. The eyes are closed, the mouth is slightly open and appears relaxed. The body is cropped at the upper thighs and stretches diagonally towards the left, seeming to lift away from the ground. While there are ripples in the fabric, it seems to be resting against a flat surface beneath. The gravity acting upon the breasts is pushing them towards the shoulders destabilizing the vertical orientation of the body.

The primary objective of this work was to further the ambiguous location created in the previous image, and to position the viewer in a more intimate perspective. In addition to rotate the plane of the ground within the space so that the ambiguity is not simply a duality between vertical and horizontal but rather a slippage that is also ambiguous in terms of spatial depth.

The positioning of the hands was intended to evoke the sensuality of touch; specifically, the right hand placed to emphasise the sensation of the body being touched and the left hand to situate the body in relation to the fabric by resting palm down against the ground.

## Evaluation

This stage of the project explored and resolved many of the issues that arose during stage one. The two paintings that were generated during this period achieved some of the significant aims of the research and resulted in several major conceptual shifts. These led to conclusions regarding formal approaches.

I observed that the subjectivity of the pictured body could be stressed by destabilizing the location of the subject within the pictorial space and the spectator's perceptual location in relation to the picture. This resulted in a pictorial ambiguity that subverted the distancing view by leading the spectator to find perceptual stability within the image through the parallel positions of their own body with the subject's body.

This idea was developed in tandem with the idea that an emphatic and reciprocal exchange can be suggested by simulating the position, scale and orientation of the spectator's body in the painted body of the subject – specifically the position of standing facing into the canvas.

The most significant conceptual development concerning this simulation of the spectator's body involved the arrangement of the hands to mimic the orientation of the spectator's hands. That is the rendered hands metaphorically act as the spectator's hands, as if they were reaching into the shallow space of the picture. This became evident in *Sweetmeat* where the right hand, resting on the abdomen, is visually dislocated from the subject. By this I mean that it could





[Figure 27]

potentially be read as someone else's hand, reaching around behind the subject, and paralleling the orientation of the spectator's right hand [Figure 27]. This concept was substantiated when, coincidentally, through my research I encountered the text by Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism*<sup>7</sup>, which provides a reconsideration of Courbet's painting in terms of his pictorial construction.

Darian Leader's account of the psychology of the returned gaze between mother and child was significant at this stage of the research. Leader observes that turning away one's gaze is a way to show one's own subjectivity, that right from the beginning of our lives we are the subject of someone's gaze, and that our look is dynamically linked to someone

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<sup>7</sup> Fried, Michael, *Courbet's Realism*, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

else's look.<sup>8</sup> Consequently my ideas concerning the internalisation of the gaze developed to include the proposition that, by closing the subject's eyes, the spectator is made more conscious of their own look and led to consider their position as spectator. This refigured the approach, of closing the subject's eyes, as a dynamic assertion of the gaze, rather than a reticent denial, thus emphasising the subject's self possession and their internalised experience of embodiment.

In terms of the depiction of the subject's embodiment, one concern that arose from the painting *Sweetmeat* was the sexual nature of the image. The response to this image, from peers, often focused upon this aspect of the subject's pose to the point of suggesting sexual activity. Although my intention is to present a subject inclusive of their own sexuality, I was concerned that this might lead to the image being interpreted as erotica and therefore in opposition to the aims of the project.

In terms of formal outcomes, the scale of the bodies in these works and the enlargement of the canvases were more successful than in the works produced during stage one as, when viewed within a gallery space, the bodies appeared to be life size, and generated the desired physical presence. The figure/ground relationship was more resolved in terms of my aims and, I felt, succeeded in drawing attention to the material qualities of the subject. The increasingly painterly and visceral approach to the rendering of the paint generated sensual surfaces and invited the spectator to move closer to the subject. This also created a greater slippage between

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<sup>8</sup> Leader, 2002, pp12-13.

the surface of the painting and the image; between looking at the paint and looking through it to see the representation.

Although I was satisfied with these aspects of the paintings, I felt that the relationship between the figure and ground remained a problem in that the two were formally separated by the outline of the body and, although they touch, did not interact formally or physically in terms of movement; that the figure had no affect upon the ground and visa versa. I felt that there was potential to generate a more intimate relationship that might be suggestive of the warmth and intimacy between the body and the supporting surface. I also began to consider how the flatness of the ground might be painted as if to sink and mould around the subject.

A second identified potential concerned the paint surface. Although I was excited by the surfaces generated in these paintings, I was disappointed that the painted marks and the thickness of the paint were indiscernible from a greater distance. The harsh outline of the subject against the ground imparted a more graphic reading of the image at opposition to the emphatic response I hoped to generate within the spectator.



## **Stage three**

### **Objectives**

The final two works undertaken within this project aimed to consolidate the strategies identified and developed within earlier phases. Particular objectives were: to investigate alternative figure/ground relationships, in order to further destabilize the orientation of the body; to emphasize the embodied experience of the subject (by pressing the body into the ground); and to concentrate upon how the body and ground intersect both physically (within the pictorial space) and formally (in terms of the paint). I hoped the refinement of these would realize the aim of generating empathic sensations of embodiment within the spectator. Another concern was to identify ways in which to better convey the impression of internalisation and the sensuality of embodiment, whilst not making the images overtly erotic.

### **Formal and technical considerations**

The plan was to enlarge the paintings and the scale of the subject and also increase the scale and fluidity of the painted marks in order to create a more immersive viewing experience.

Formal considerations included the meeting of body and ground and how the two might interact (in terms of shapes, textures and the boundaries of forms), in order to evoke a tactile experience, and generate recollections of touch within the spectator. My intention was to find ways of rendering the image that allowed for a greater diversity in the size of the marks, particularly within the ground. My thoughts were that if the illusion within the picture was perceived to dissolve into

paint in certain places, it might increase the ambiguities of the pictorial space.

Another aspect of the figure/ground relationship concerned the employment of colour and light. In order to represent the immersion of the subject into the ground, my plan was to create slightly more contrast in the lighting that would emphasise the volume of the body and the undulations within the ground. A further objective was to link the figure with the ground by suggesting the warmth generated between the body and the ground through subtly reflecting the warm skin colours onto the adjacent surfaces.

### **Specific works**

*Untitled 1 (render me)* [Plate 4] depicts the body of the subject viewed from the side. The pose suggests that she is lying down and that the viewer is observing her from above. However, the positioning is ambiguous as the gravity acting upon the breast (seen in profile) subtly suggests she could also be in a more vertical position. She rests upon a billowing drape of striped pale material that pulls and twists around her, at times echoing the dynamic shapes in the body. Her hands are positioned beside the face and the eyes are closed.

*Untitled 2 (render me)* [Plate 5] depicts the back of a naked female body that is leaning against a mass of fur. The left shoulder is stretched back and the arm hangs behind and parallel to the body, with the fingers gently curled towards the thigh. The head, resting in the fur, is turned to the left to reveal an oblique profile of the face. The right arm is concealed except for the fingers that appear in the shadow

under the chin. The fur is more like shagpile carpet than pelt and seems to recede into the pictorial space on the left. The body is cropped at the thigh and seems to be standing but for the awkward weight of the legs which push against the fur on the right. The entire effect is of instability.

The intention behind this image was to position the body so that it visually seems to project out of the canvas and to place the arm in front of the body, as if it might be floating within actual space. The hand, suspended in space, aims to create the impression that it is possible for the spectator to reach beneath the fingers and take hold of the hand. The fur, surrounding the figure, was used to evoke tactility and warmth against the body and also to create an unstable ground, as its structural support is obscured by the fibrous surface.

### **Evaluation**

The two final paintings consolidated key aspects of the research. The most significant conceptual and formal developments involved the figure/ground relationship. Specifically, conceptualisation of the ground as a more fluid space not only created greater visual ambiguities, it also opened up, in the representation and in the rendering of the paint, greater potential for the simulation of sensual experiences that far exceeded that of previous pictures. I felt the decision to impress the subject into the ground proved to be a significant development. In conjunction with other formal and conceptual approaches the interaction between the subject and the ground increased the sense of corporeality and the sensuality of the images. The warm tones reflected from the body onto the folds of the material in

*Untitled 1 (render me)* and the fibres of the fur against the body in *Untitled 2 (render me)* focused attention on the intersection of tactile surfaces and skin, and increased the sense of embodied corporeality. Further the ambiguous pictorial space promotes an open and exploratory surface for the viewer to investigate, a process bound to the sensuality of touch. In conclusion, I believe that the combination of these pictorial and painterly strategies come together to present an image of subjectivity and embodiment that evokes, on many levels, the body and corporeal experiences of the spectator.



Plate 1



Plate 2





Plate 3



Plate 4





Plate 5

## **Chapter four: conclusion**

The project has developed pictorial approaches through which to represent female embodied subjectivity within painting. It has identified and developed strategies that subvert the objectifying gaze, commonly associated with images of the naked female body.

The outcomes of the research are demonstrated in the paintings presented for the thesis exhibition, which comprises works produced during each of the three stages of studio-based investigation.

The problem posed by the project was to find visual form for the representation of embodied experiences and to create empirical models of subjecthood within the representation of the female body in painting. The outcomes of this investigation were threefold: conceptual, formal and technical.

- The picturing of alternative representations of female embodied subjectivity establishes the conceptual objective. The research determines that the inherent ambiguities of embodied subjective experience are keys to finding pictorial representations for female subjectivity that defy gender and stereotypical classifications, (which have conventionally led to the objectification of the female body in pictorial representation). Ambiguity is suggestive of the plural, shifting and often incongruous experiences of embodiment. The pictures acknowledge the viewers' bodily position Through the establishment of

the spectator's gaze as embodied and subjective and the employment of theories of visual perception. The distance between the subject and spectator is overcome through the arrangement of the subject's body within the pictorial space. The emphasis is placed upon the tactile and sensory experiences of embodiment and of painting, and the objectifying gaze is subverted through the depiction of touch and embodied perspectives.

- The formal objectives - to develop approaches for the picturing of the female naked body – are confirmed by the use of shallow and ambiguous pictorial space, which locates the subject at the surface of the representation; and the inversion of the subject's gaze, which advocates the embodiment of the subject. The conception of pictorial space as a fluid and malleable extension of real space, creates greater spatial ambiguities and ensures that the orientation of the subject is stabilized only through its parallel relationship with the spectators' body.
- Development in technical methodologies emphasise both the visceral textures of the body (in the representation and in the surface of the paint itself), and the process of painting, (which emphasises, by extension, the body of the painter). By positioning the subject's body in what is perceived to be the same place as the surface of the picture, the gap between surface and image is traversed. Therefore, the substance of the paint simultaneously acts as the physical traces of the painter's body and the sensual, waxy surfaces of flesh, thus evoking the spectator's embodied experiences.

The project brings together ideas about the representation of the autobiographical female body in contemporary painting practice. It does not argue that illusionary painting is a solution to the debates and dialogues within feminist practice nor does it suggest that it presents a new language of representation. On the contrary it proposes that the conventional language of painting, in combination with contemporary ideas regarding the representation of female subjecthood and embodiment, present new and fertile areas of investigation within formal pictorial construction.

The picturing of the embodied subject within painting provides a point of mediation between: personal experiences and social/historical constructions of women; psychological perceptions of self and the corporeal body; and between the embodied spectator and the body of the painter. In this way the project presents new pictorial forms for the representation of female subjectivity.

The outcomes of the research project, rather than providing conclusive resolutions to the problem posed, have opened up new avenues for exploration within my practice. The potential for paint to concurrently pictorially represent and simulate sensual tactile experiences, suggests the development of further approaches for the representation of embodiment, beyond the parameters of this research project.



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1. *Tirer*, 2001, oil on linen  
101 x 95.5 cm
2. *Mute*, 2002, oil on linen  
150 x 130 cm
3. *Sweetmeat*, 2002-3, oil on linen  
150 x 125 cm
4. *Untitled 1 (render me)*, 2003, oil on linen  
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183 x 152.5 cm

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Measurements in centimetres and height x width.

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- 2 **Rembrandt van Rijn**, *Bathsheba*, 1654, oil on canvas, 142 x 142
- 3 **Hockney, David**, *Play Within a Play*, 1963, oil on canvas on plexiglass, 183 x 198
- 4 **Saville, Jenny, and Glen Lunchford**, *Closed Contact #15*, C-prints and plexiglas, 182.9 x 182.9
- 5 **Saville, Jenny, and Glen Lunchford**, *Closed Contact #3*, C-prints and plexiglas, 182.9 x 182.9
- 6 **Saville, Jenny**, *Fulcrum*, 1999, oil on canvas, 289 x 487
- 7 **Saville, Jenny**, *Rubens' Flap*, 1999, oil on canvas, 305 x 244
- 8 **Saville, Jenny**, *Hem*, 1999, oil on canvas, 305 x 213
- 9 **Rembrandt van Rijn**, *Lucretia*, 1664, oil on canvas, 120 x 101
- 10 **Rembrandt van Rijn**, *Lucretia*, 1666, oil on canvas, 105.1 x 92.3
- 11 **Courbet, Gustave**, *The Wounded Man*, 1844-54, oil on canvas, 81 x 97
- 12 **Courbet, Gustave**, *Man with the Pipe*, 1849, oil on canvas, 45.5 x 37
- 13 **Courbet, Gustave**, *Lovers in the Country*, 1944, oil on canvas, 61 x 51
- 14 **Dumas, Marlene**, *Mandy*, 1998, ink wash & watercolour on paper, 125 x 70
- 15 **Dumas, Marlene**, *X-Plicit*, 1999, ink wash and acrylic on paper, 125 x 70
- 16 **Dumas, Marlene**, *The Painter*, 1994, oil on canvas, 200 x 100

- 17 **Freud, Lucian**, *Girl in striped nightdress*, oil on canvas, 30.5 x 25.6
- 18 **Freud, Lucian**, *Standing by the rags*, 1988-9, oil on canvas, 168.9 x 138.4
- 19 **Currin, John**, *Heartless*, 1997, oil on canvas, 111.8 x 91.4
- 20 **Currin, John**, *Buffet*, 1999, oil on canvas, 55.9 x 45.7
- 21 **Nerdrum, Odd**, *Woman with a Door Handle*, 1990, oil on canvas, 115 x 135
- 22 **Nerdrum, Odd**, *Sleeping Twins (detail)*, 1987, oil on canvas, 206 x 228

**All following works by the artist**

- 23 *Untitled drawing (for Tirer)*, 2001, charcoal on paper, 120 x 95
- 24 *Untitled drawing (for Sweetmeat)*, 2002, charcoal on paper, 150 x 125
- 25 *Untitled self-portrait*, 2001, oil on linen, 70 x 139
- 26 *Untitled self-portrait (beanbag)*, 2002, oil on linen, 101 x 95.5



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Celeste Helene Chandler

Curriculum vitae

Born Hobart, 1977

Education University of Tasmania  
Batchelor of Fine Arts (Hons), 2001  
Batchelor of Fine Arts, 1998

Selected Exhibitions

2003 'Painting the home', *Inflight Gallery*, Hobart  
'Scratch the surface', *Canberra Contemporary Art Space*,  
Canberra  
2002 'Synergy', *CSIRO*, Hobart  
2001 'Half Way There', *Plimsoll Gallery*, Hobart  
'Portia Geach Memorial Award', *S.H.Erwin Gallery*,  
Sydney  
2000 'Confessions of a Supersensualist', *Entrepot Gallery*,  
Hobart  
'Game Over', *Plimsoll Gallery*, Hobart  
'Artists Living in North Hobart', *Bett Gallery*, Hobart  
1999 'Work by 1999 residents', *Cité International des Art*, Paris  
1998 'Christmas Exhibition', *Despard Gallery*, Hobart  
*3000,000kms*, *Entrepot Gallery*, Hobart  
'Put me up', *Whirling Rainbow Café*, Hobart  
'Passion Fruits', *Maldini's Restaurant*, Hobart

Referred Texts

2003 'Bette Davis eyes: Scratch the surface at the Canberra  
Contemporary Art Space', Chris Chapman, *Art Monthly*,  
August, number 162, pp 30-32.  
  
'The Changing Face of Portraiture', Sasha Grishin,  
*The Canberra Times*, May 21, p24.  
  
2001 'She who must be displayed', Jennifer Sexton, *The  
Weekend Australian*, June 30 – July 1, Arts  
pp18-20.

Grants and Awards

2003 The Marten Bequest Travelling Scholarship in Painting  
2001 Australian Post Graduate Award  
1999 McCulloch Studio Residency,  
Cité International des Art, Paris  
1998 Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Scholarship  
Quebec, Canada