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The 'Liminal Self': Evoking a critical dialogue around self-representation in contemporary arts practice

Sue Bessell

University of Wollongong

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*The 'Liminal Self':
Evoking a critical dialogue around
self-representation in contemporary arts practice*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the degree

MASTER OF CREATIVE ARTS (RESEARCH)

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

Sue Bessell (BCA Hons)

Faculty of Creative Arts

2014

CERTIFICATION

I, Sue Bessell, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Creative Arts – Research, in the Department of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Sue Bessell
28th October 2014

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Abstract

This exegesis explores concepts and techniques for extending the photographic self-portraiture into self-representation in relation to the concept of liminality. The research question – How can critical dialogues around self-representation be evoked through contemporary arts practice? – is explored through the concept of the liminal self. I argue that the creation of this liminal self opens up a space of contestation that disrupts assumed paradigms of self-portraiture, the photographic image, and image-reproductive technology.

The exegesis identifies the importance of the interconnections between the photograph and objects, the photograph and digital media, and the photograph and hand-made interventions upon the photographic surface. It examines theoretical discussions and debates on the role of memory, objects and collage including the writings of Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and Joan Gibbons, that guide the exploration of self-representation, identity, and gender. This in turn provides a context for my art practice. Analyses of works of other artists such as, Claude Cahun, Arnulf Rainer, and Julie Rrap, informed examination of my artworks. The exegesis argues that evolution of critical dialogues around self-representation cannot be confined to the external – in other words, physical aspects and appearances – but must extend to the internal, the emotional, and the subjective.

I argue that liminality opens up a space of uncertainty and contention that allows interpretation to go deeply beyond the surface of the work, beyond a mirror likeness and beyond the gaze. The intervention of the intuitive hand upon the surface of the photograph is key to creating multi-layered self-representations – the liminal self. Liminality is a space where a critical dialogue around gender, memory, and representation itself can be evoked.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

This exegesis explores techniques for extending photographic self-portrait into self-representation in relation to the concept of liminality. It asks the question: how can a critical dialogue around self-representation be evoked? Issues such as identity, memory, and gender are central to my exploration of self-representation. Creating a liminal self opens up these questions to further dimensions of exploration.

My early self-portraits in 2004 were sculptural assemblages that examined my personal history and aspects of my identity and memory. My family settled in Wollongong in 1837 (fig.1). Five generations have lived and worked here. It is compelling to imagine what they were like, what they did and thought, and what were their values and beliefs. Little is left of their existence other than gravestones and remnants of items such as personal affects, photographs, and birth, death, and electoral registers.



Fig. 1. Photographer unknown, *Charles Mowbrey Bessell (1841-1914)*, black-and-white photograph, in possession of the author, Wollongong, NSW. 12cm x 7cm.

These materials give rise to thoughts of the transience of life, the fragile and tenuous existence we have, and the evidence (if any) we leave behind. There exists a gulf between the official documents and personal histories, recollections

and memories, and our actual everyday existences. I have used objects, collage, and inscriptions on the photographic surface as a way to create connections and stories in this history. The idea of intervening upon the surface of the photograph is the starting point in the creation of liminality.

This exegesis examines the historical and theoretical contexts of such interventions by defining self-representation in relation to the notion of liminality. Artists who use self-representation in their practice as an investigative tool inform my argument. The works of Claude Cahun, Julie Rrap, Sally Smart, and Arnulf Rainer explore methodologies in art-making that critically engage with identity, memory, gender, and representation. These methodologies question representations of self, and have at their centre a way of disrupting the conventional relationship with the photograph, technological reproduction of the image, and the idea of the self-portrait. Their approaches, as well as my own, are examined to discover how the use of digital media and complex textural layering can create a liminal self that evokes a critical dialogue around self-representation.

To examine the liminal self, the exegesis is organised into five chapters. This introductory chapter provides an overview of the project, contextualising the research question, and outlining my approach. Chapter 2 focuses on the development and evolution of my art-making processes and methods with reference to the works of Claude Cahun, Arnulf Rainer, and Sally Smart, and writings of Ludmilla Jordonova. Chapter 3 presents an overview of the historical and theoretical framework that contextualises and informs my practice. It includes references to the theoretical writings of Maria Sturkin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Ina Loewenberg, Joan Gibbons, and Walter Benjamin, and the work of artist Julie Rrap. The chapter outlines a definition of self-representation and liminality, and examines Walter Benjamin's writings on his ideas of craft, the hand-made, and authentic experience in relation to the idea of liminality. Chapter 4 gives a detailed discussion of my current Master of Creative Arts – Research body of work that responds to the research question. It examines how the theoretical and historical context detailed in the previous chapter informs this development. I conclude by discussing the research questions posed and speculating on possible avenues of further development.

Chapter 2 – Methodology of Making

This chapter focuses on the development of working methods in my artworks from 2004. It examines three main thematic interconnections: the photograph and objects, the photograph and digital media, and the photograph and hand-made interventions.

My early sculptural assemblages created between 2004 and 2008 use old 30cm x 50cm wooden boxes as framing devices. These boxes house objects, such as photographic prints, pieces of cloth, jewelry, or beads, that function as memento mori.

These objects and their placement embody deeply personal memories that connect with my family's past. At the same time, the ordinariness of the objects impart a universal quality that encourages viewers to formulate their own associations. The assemblage and placement of objects is similar to Joseph Cornell's collections of materials and objects created in 'an automatic or semi-automatic state' with the aim to capture fleeting moments, dream-like impressions, indescribable feelings with spontaneity and poetic intensity' (Cornell 1946-8).

A change occurred in my working process in 2006 with *The Lock* (fig.2) and *Wonder Woman*. Like previous works, these were assemblages, but unlike their predecessors, the assemblages were photographed, and the photographs, not the works themselves, were exhibited as digital prints. This new working method expanded the range of objects used, particularly ephemeral objects such as flowers, delicate fabrics, treasured photographs, and objects from my personal collection of family mementos, and provided different ways to explore the construction of narratives.



Fig. 2. Bessell, S. 2006, *The Lock*, digital photographic print, in possession of the author, Wollongong, NSW. 50cm x 90cm.

In 2007, I created a series of four digital prints about my family. The works used assembled images and objects in a box that creates a portrayal or a portrait of my parents. For example, *Mum* (2007) (fig.3) focused on my mother, who passed away in 1975. Photographs, jewelry, watches, beads, maps, perfume bottles, flowers, and feathers, some of which had belonged to her, were positioned in the box to evoke memories. The coming together of images and objects converged to create stories and meaning.



Fig. 3. Bessell, S. 2007, *Mum*, digital photographic print, in possession of the author, Wollongong, NSW. 50cm x 90cm.

The methodology of juxtaposing objects and the construction of narratives has remained an imperative process in my work. In Ludmilla Jordonova's essay, *Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums* (New Museology, Vergo, P), she outlines how objects are laden with meaning, and how they support the radicalisation and subversion of meaning. Jordonova contends that objects are more than their physical manifestation, and are invested with social histories and

memories that generate narratives. The reading of such a story depends on the viewer's own memory, history, and experience (Jordonova 1989, p.22-24).

The iconic value and universal meanings of objects can become primary sites for the construction of ideology, as well as sites of contestation and disruption, when used in artworks. Political and ideological concerns converge with objects, history, and memory and with ideas of how meaning is created. The use of objects and photographs in my work engages with these critical dialogues where memory and representation can be constructed and deconstructed, questioned and explored.

The addition of digital media, by layering images and the construction of meaning are manifested physically in *Road Trip* (2006). Old archival slides are overlaid, projected, and photographed, building layers upon layers of images. The process was extended in 2010 with *Street, Gagged, and Rotting* (fig.4), where images of landscapes and environments were projected onto my face and body. The layering of images bypasses a physical resemblance of the body to become more than the physiognomy of the face.



Fig. 4. Bessell, S. 2010, *Rotting*, digital photographic print, in possession of the author, Wollongong, NSW. 122cm x 92cm.

In contrast, the photographic series entitled *Death of a Bureaucrat* (2010) (fig.5 & 6), explored notions of death and transience, beauty, and self-identity. Twelve 30cm x 21cm black-and-white digital prints of my face were arranged in a grid in crucifix form. The images were taken in quick succession using slow shutter speed to capture blurred movements. No further digital manipulation was used; the camera was simply a tool to document the performance of the body in motion.

The performative photographs capture emotional moments of anguish. This speaks to my own experience of 20 years in public service, and more broadly to the experience of regimented and uncreative labour. The blurred images of my moving face are glimpses into the slow death of being, a metaphorical spiritual death of the inner self. The capturing of motion makes visible the emotional consequences of this inaction.



Fig. 5. Bessell, S. 2010, *Death of a Bureaucrat*, detail, digital photographic print, in possession of the author, Wollongong, NSW. 20cm x 30cm.



Fig. 6. Bessell, S. 2010, *Death of a Bureaucrat*, digital photographic print, in possession of the author, Wollongong, NSW. 190cm x 90cm.

The process of taking performative photographs is an attempt to bypass vanity and egoism. It questions the conventional notion of narcissism – the curated image, or an idealised image of the self – by capturing unguarded moments. It deliberately goes against the construction of the ‘selfie’ so prevalent in social media today. Instead, it focuses our attention on the widening space between the image and the real. I contend that this evokes a reality that engages our memory, making the experience more than just the point of capture. The act of photographing myself is revealing and challenges the sense of who I am, resulting a work that is unsettling on both a personal level and a broader level for the audience.

Claude Cahun’s *What do you want from me?* (1928) (fig.7), resonates with my approach. Cahun explores gender and self-representation in her photographs. Her use of double exposures multiplies the self, and her creation of different personifications using costuming projects further imaginings of her selves. Her androgynous images shocked the social conventions of the time and questioned the established ideologies surrounding gender and identity. As Gen Doy states in *The Sensual Politics of Photography* (2007), Cahun saw the camera as a ‘instrument of evidence as well as fabrication’ (2007, p.206).

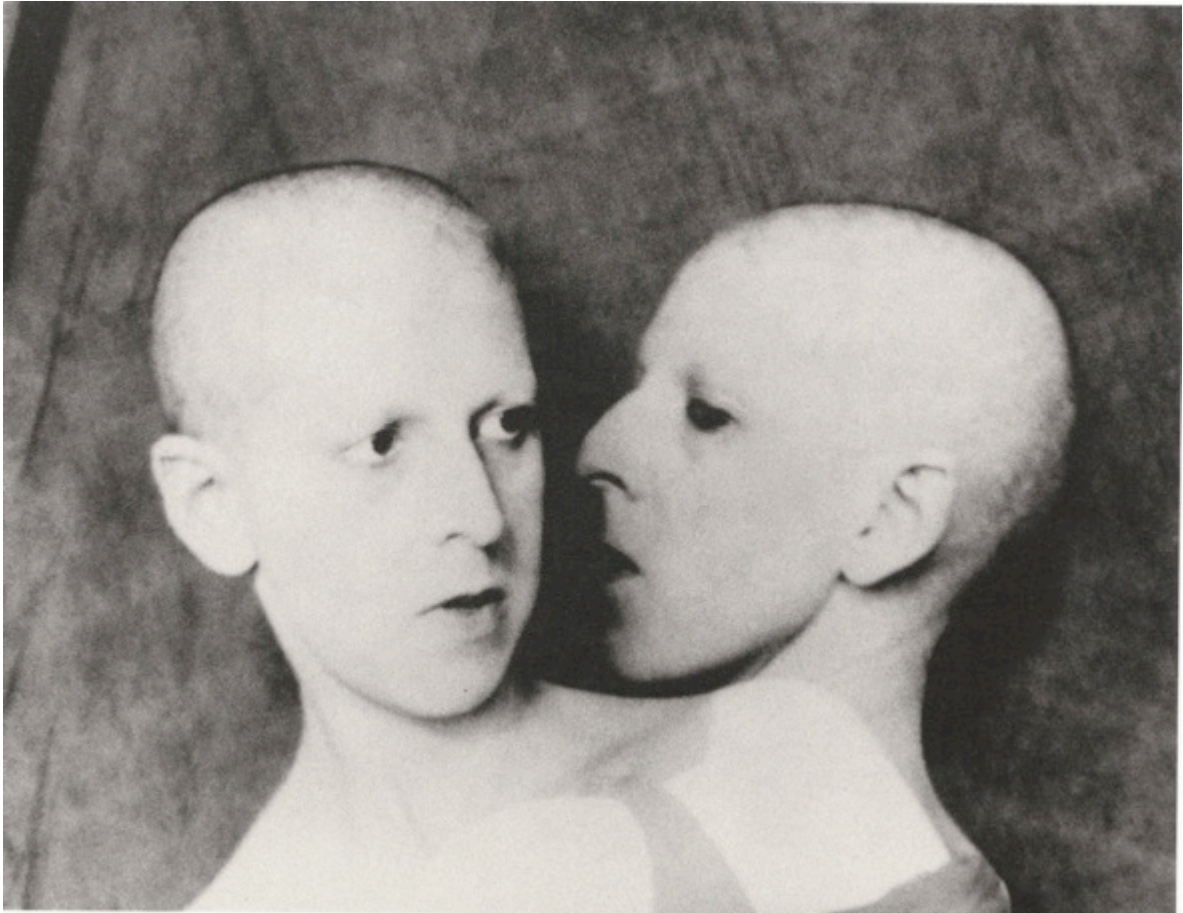


Fig. 7. Cahun, C. and Moore, M. 1928, *What do you want from me?* black-and-white photograph, private collection. 23cm x 18cm.

Cahun's approach and manipulation of the image of the self relates to my use of performance, where the face and body are stripped of any sexual identity with the intention to go beyond physical appearance and assumptions, to deconstruct and recontextualise our notions of gender and identity.

In 2011, I produced a series of 24 digital photographs arranged in a grid entitled *My Secret Life* (2011) (fig.8). The works are also performative in nature. A quick succession of shots spontaneously captured the act of painting my face. This work makes reference to masks, and comments on the position of the female body in society that is constructed through ideas of beauty, make-up, and ritual.



Fig. 8. Bessell, S. 2010, *Blue Sue*, detail from *My Secret Life*, digital photographic print, in possession of the author, Wollongong, NSW. 24cm x 35cm.

More significantly, the work explores the relationship between painting and photography, and the intervention of the gestural hand is an idea similar to the artworks of Austrian artist Arnulf Rainer. Rainer's work combines images of the self with the process of marking or painting upon surface of the photograph (fig.9). John Russell (1989) in a review in the New York Times called *Arnulf Rainer: Backward to Respectability*, explains, 'Rainer's methodology involves the use of intuitive gestural marks and physical interaction to create an artwork' (Russell 1989). Rainer was influenced by the idea of the 'ideology of psychic automatism' (Rainer 1974) and experimented with over-painting of photographs and spontaneously painting and drawing over his own image.



Fig. 9. Rainer, A. 1975, *Fesselstern*, photogravure, etching, and drypoint, 40cm x 30.6cm

By going beyond the photographic recording of the face, he is able to transform the usual definition of self-portraiture to arrive at the notion of self-representation. This highlights the critical dialogue surrounding interventions onto the surface of the photograph and the importance of gesture as an act of intuitive spontaneity. The photographic surface has become a site for transformative activities. In Rainer's work as well as my own, combining different media that are usually bound

by conventions, such as painting, drawing, and collage techniques, to interrupt and transform the photographic surface changes the work into a site of disruption.

The approach of disruption is further developed in my artwork *Blah Blah Blah* (2012) (fig.10), where mirror likeness is subverted and transformed into self-representation. A photograph of my painted face is repainted and drawn on with pen and ink. The process of inscribing, marking, drawing, over-painting, and collage becomes a nexus of signifiers for the liminal self. The depth of textures and layering creates an incomplete and unstable image where tension resides.

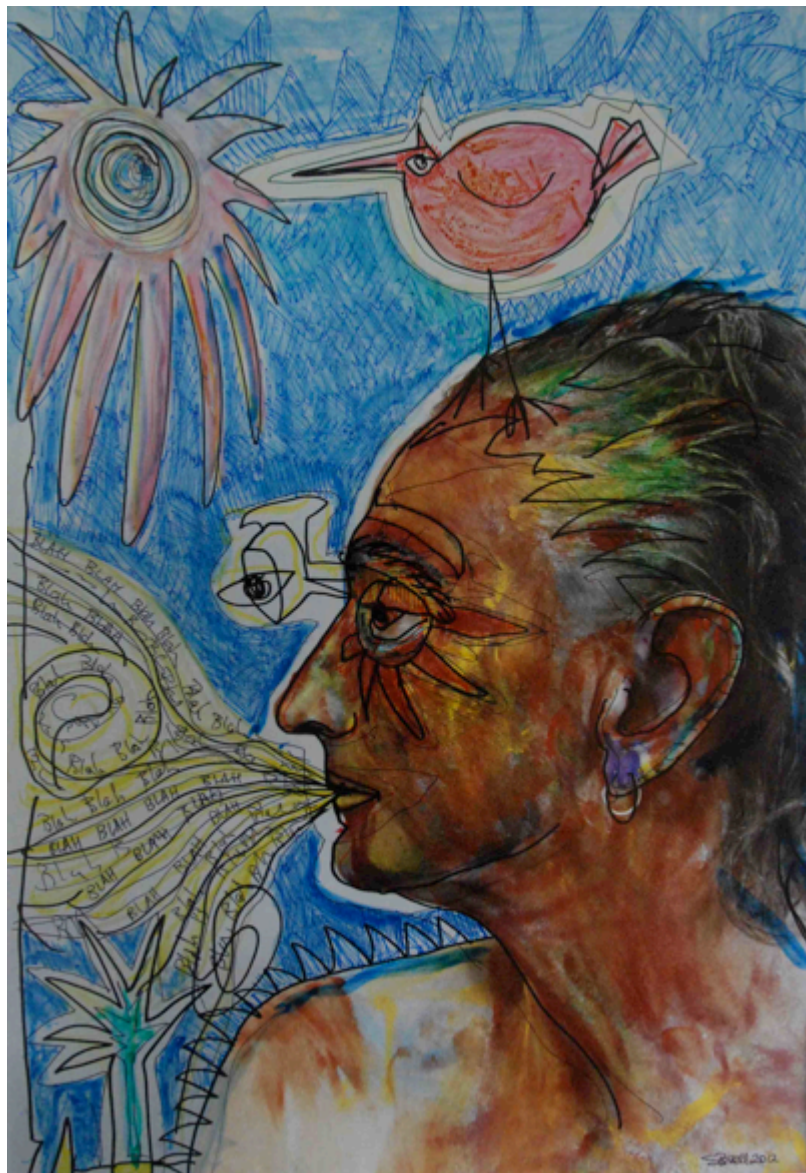


Fig. 10. Bessell, S. 2012, *Blah, Blah, Blah*, overpainted digital photographic print, 40cm x 60cm.

This tension is borne out of the idea of control enabled by media technologies on the one hand and the idea of the imperfect as embodied in reality which is activated by the intuitive, hand-made marks on the other. The works are an example of a convergence of disruption, and directly subverting the veracity and objectification of the photograph. The photograph as an object and the photograph portraying an objectified image are interrupted by the creation of a liminal self. The image becomes a site of authenticity and a place of contestation and transformation.



The idea of the liminal self explores the space between. In my artwork it is a site that evokes uncertainties in the construction and deconstruction of identity, memory and gender. Complex layers of collage and assemblage techniques as well as the process of photographing and rephotographing have become fundamental to how I create new and confronting experiences.

Historically, collage has its origins with the Cubists, Dadaists, and Surrealists and is associated with subversion. The use of collage as a political act can be seen in the work of Hannah Höch. A member of Berlin's Dada movement in the 1920s, Höch used collage and montage to question

Fig. 11. Höch, H. 1936, *Made for a Party*, collection of IFA Stuttgart. 36cm x 19.8cm.

conventional concepts of feminism, gender, and beauty (fig.11). Höch produced works that disrupted the accepted parameters of social, political, and ideological positions of the time.

My work, like Höch's artworks, demonstrates that cutting and reassembling in collage can be a political act. My artwork *Thinking of You* (2013) (fig.12) is a still from an animation that shows the process of deconstructing a self-portrait and constructing a self-representation. Objects float in and out of the frame, multiple layers of collaged parts of my face are cut, rearranged, and painted. Drawn images and marks transform the face to add depth where stories can be created.



Fig. 12. Bessell, S. 2013, *Thinking of You*, still from animation, digital photographic print, private collection. 43cm x 65cm.

The combination of collage with the use of the camera and objects creates an unsettling tension. Objects, as Jordonova stated, are more than their physical manifestation: they are vehicles for the convergence of histories, imagination, and meaning. Collage creates the conditions where questioning of prevalent values and meaning can take place.

Thinking of You illustrates the conceptual framework that underpins my practice. It illustrates the importance of developing the interconnections between the photograph and objects, the photograph and digital media, and the photograph and hand-made interventions. Multiple referents culminate to create images with a textural depth of interpretation that go beyond the surface of a two-dimensional medium. The process recreates relationships between the different elements, the viewer, and the artwork, and disrupts the integrity of the surface of the photograph to create new experiences.

This convergence allows for critical dialogues around gender, memory, and representation to be explored. The traces of the objective world are overwhelmed to create a space of uncertainty. The physiognomy of the self-portrait is disrupted; the space between the image and reality is widened; the textural and hand-made layering processes open up a dimension for the liminal self to emerge. This is the site of tension, contestation, and creativity.

Chapter 3 – Theoretical Context

This chapter presents an overview of the historical and theoretical framework of self-representation in art. The photographic self-portrait is explored with respect to self-representation and its relationship to liminality. The exploration is guided by Walter Benjamin, Marika Sturkin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Ina Loewenberg, Joan Gibbons and artist Julie Rrap. Analyses of their works support the argument that self-representation is more than a self-portrait or mirror likeness: it evokes the liminal self, a disrupted space of uncertainty.

The early photographic portrait in the Victorian era was considered more than a mirror likeness, it was believed by some to expose the soul and have magical powers. Elizabeth Edwards *Magic and Superstition* (2005) suggests:

Significantly, the word for photography/photographer in many cultures translates as 'shadow catcher', 'soul taker', or 'face stealer'. The magical, mysterious, and quasi-supernatural qualities of photographs reflect their perceived power in society.

Additionally, the photographic portrait and self-portrait have been imbued with the idea of immortality. In *The Image as Memorial: Personal Photographs in Cultural Memory*, Marita Sturken contends that 'the photograph has been associated with memory and loss - the desire to fix an identity in the image, to have the image live after the individual's death' (1999, pp.178-195). Photographs capture an image frozen in time and act as a reminder of our mortality. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag states that 'all photographs are "memento mori"' (1978, p.15). Photographs become vehicles for commemoration, recollection, and imagination, objects that immortalise a present that exists in the past. Yet we believe the photograph portrays truthfulness, a veracity that documents reality.

In *Camera Lucida* (pp.13-14), Roland Barthes states that the photographic portrait is a complex convergence of oppositional ideas from the position of the subject in the moment of being photographed:

In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.... I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming object; I then experience a micro version of death; I am truly becoming a specter (1980, p.13).

In being photographed, self-curating, self-consciousness, and anticipation create an unreal version of the self. Barthes argues that the photographic portrait is a sign of the death of a subject. Its ability to capture a human subject is unreal, or more precisely an index of the real – that is, that which has been. He describes the relationship between what is photographed and the image produced as indexicality. Sontag agrees with Barthes that this perception of the photograph creates an objectified, dislocated image, and transforms people into ‘objects that can be symbolically possessed’ (1978, p.14).

The complex contradictory positioning of the photographic portrait is indicative and emblematic of our rich historical and cultural narratives. Barthes states that ‘the photograph is always visible, it is not it that we see’ (1978, p.6). As viewers of a photograph, we look, see, and interpret our assumptions of cultural, social, and political meanings. As Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart in *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* state, ‘photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience’ (2004, p.1). Thus the photograph has a particular positioning when used in portraits and self-portraits.

Portraits and self-portraits reflect and connect our interior and exterior worlds. They have the potential to be sites of creativity, disruption, and liminality. In *Reflections on Self-Portraiture in Photography*, Ina Loewenberg explores definitions between a portrait and a self-portrait. She writes, ‘A portrait is an artist’s interpretative rendering of the subject while a self-portrait is an artist’s presentation of self’ (1999, p.399). Joan Gibbons claims that the self-portrait can ‘assume a variety of forms and involves a range of practices [encompassing] the memoir, the confession, the apology, the diary and the journal’ (2009, p.9). Gibbons argues that self-portraits can transform and disrupt our perceptions of identity. She argues that when used by women, images of self are an effective and powerful way to

disrupt the ideological construction of women in a patriarchal society. Loewenberg likewise claims:

There is a special incentive for women artists to practice self-portraiture. Women have been so frequently used as subjects (for which we can read objects) in the arts, including photography. Women artists who make self-portraits see it as a way to keep control of their representation. This does not typically result in more beautiful or flattering depictions of the artist-subject (1999, p.399).

Loewenberg argues that the self-portrait is a way of reclaiming the female body as subject. She contends that by controlling representation, artists, as authors, can create different narratives that question a subject's place in the world. I approach my photographic images of self within this context. I argue that the photograph as objectified other is subverted through the intervention on the photograph's surface by inscribing on the surface of the photograph, and by creating a complex layering of images and objects in photographing and re-photographing. The process interrupts and deconstructs the photograph and its cultural assumptions and creates possibilities to explore exterior and interior realities.

Contemporary artists who work with self-representation frequently disrupt how the face or body can be viewed and understood. When artists use their own physical appearance as a vehicle to examine wider issues, the image can become the site where prevailing ideological paradigms are questioned. Artists such as Marina Abramovic, Hannah Wilke, Sally Smart, Jo Spence, Cindy Sherman, Ana Mendiata, and Julie Rrap use self-representation as a medium to examine a range of socio-psychological and political contexts.

In Rrap's *Conception* (1984) (fig.13), she depicts her body using collaged photographs and paints over the surface. She uses cut-up images of her body and face to disrupt the authority of the photograph. She deconstructs and recontextualises the photograph by using the photographic surface to create a disjunction between the 'objective' eye of the camera and the 'subjective' interpretation of the artist/viewer (Lynn 2007, p.6). Rrap has said, 'I've always

been interested in the slippage between whether you regard a photograph as real or not' (Maloon 1998, p.120).



Fig. 13. Julie Rrap, 1984, *Conception*, from the series *Persona and Shadow*, Cibachrome print, courtesy of the artist, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne. 194cm x 105cm.

Rrap's process of deconstructing the photographic surface through collage and paint resonates with my own approach. Like Rrap, I play with the notion of constructing and deconstructing the photographic image, going beyond the surface to reveal the artifice of photography. The original photograph is

recontextualised to reveal an archaeology of meaning. The approach has created a rich area of investigation and provides opportunities to explore representation, identity, and memory by pushing the assumptions regarding the photographic image to challenging extremes. The disruption and tension created upon the surface of the photograph by hand is a significant process in creating liminality in my works.

In Walter Benjamin's (1936) essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he states how the direct use of the hand, what he calls craft, creates an authentic experience of the world. Esther Leslie notes that Benjamin discusses the 'paradigms of authentic experience' (2012, p.1) as being a nexus between memory and making. She summarises Benjamin's approach in the phrase 'to touch the world is to know the world' (2012, p.2). Benjamin uses the term *erfahrung* to describe a lived experience that is communicated through wisdom derived from past memories. *Erfahrung*, Benjamin states, is a 'emancipation from isolated experiences' (1940, p.318). He contends that authentic experience is based on a collective wisdom that belongs to memory. Memory, objects, and the process of making by hand come together to create authentic experiences. It is not the momentary captured 'selfie' or a short-term instantly gratified experience, but a connected and engaged experience.

Benjamin's idea of authentic experience relates directly to my process of art making. The hand creates a directness and tactility that connects and engages physically with the world. Leslie writes that the hand is the 'the accord of soul, eye and hand' (2012, p.2). Creating artworks that use inscriptions upon the surface of the photograph, collage techniques, and the inclusion of meaningful objects that carry histories and stories creates a paradoxical experience and a tension that is unsettling.

The use of collage techniques constructs and extends the work to reveal experiences that engage the viewer, and evokes the liminal self, a disrupted space of uncertainty. Sally Smart uses collage techniques to produce artworks that reconstruct reality. She creates large-scale wall works and installations that include diverse media and materials such as photographs, drawings, felt, canvas,

silk screens, and fabrics (fig.14). Her intuitive process of collage resonates with Benjamin's notion of authenticity.

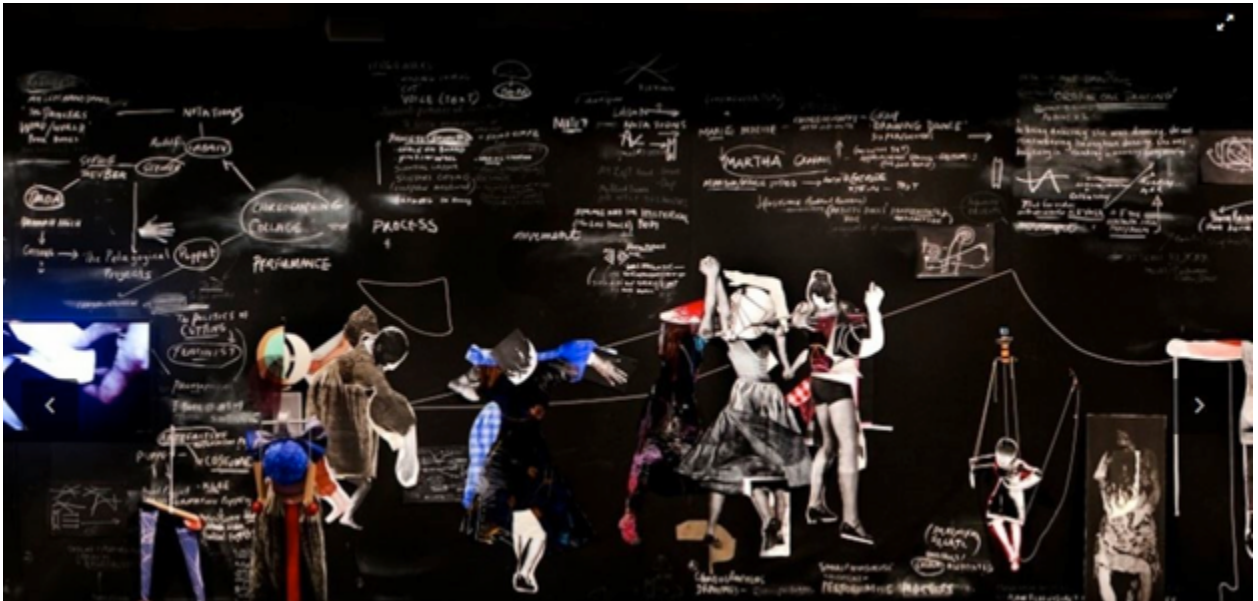


Fig. 14. Smart, S. 2013-14, *The Choreography of Cutting*, installation, mixed media, courtesy of the artist and Breenspace, Sydney and Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide; photo: Anthony Whelan. Dimensions variable.

Smart uses personal stories, memories, and recollections to activate conscious and subconscious associations by bringing objects, images, and photographs together. The cutting of photographs and the intuitive assemblage of material create works that are poetic and surreal. The collage technique brings together disparate elements that generate an uncertainty or ambiguity where a liminal space opens up and where new narratives reside.

Similarly, in my work a remnant of the face, an object, or an inscription provides a platform to explore the space between these elements – that is, the liminal space. What we see is the exterior physical truth, presented using photographs. An interior truth, the image of which cannot be easily captured, is activated by an interruption of the hand on the surface of the photograph. A tension is created between the elements. The process creates a site where ideas of representation, identity, and memory are contested and the image of the self can move beyond the photographic image, the photographic replication of an appearance, to self-representation. Self-representation resides within a liminal space.

Gibbons defines liminal space as a space that has the capability to transform. In liminal spaces we find ourselves on the edge, caught between knowing and not knowing, a space that creates ambiguity and ambivalence. Furthermore she describes liminal space as heavily laden with memory and emotional experiences (2007, p.31), a space that creates 'otherworldliness' (2007, p.40); this otherworldliness is what makes liminality perceptible. Liminal space can be understood as a metaphorical realm where ideas, concepts, and ideologies are in constant states of contestation and negotiation. Artworks that reside in a liminal space, a space of contestation and ambiguity, can produce authentic experience of the world.

Gibbon's concept of liminal space is evident in my own self-representations through the process of the intervention of the intuitive hand upon the surface of the photograph. Using the techniques of collage to combine photographs, objects, and media enables fragments of reality to be reassembled that disrupt conventions. The artwork is transformed into a site of contestation, a place where the liminal self resides.

Chapter 4 – My Practice

For my Master of Creative Arts – Research project I created five works that explore the critical dialogue surrounding self-representation and how it evokes liminality in practice. The body of work was exhibited at the TAEM Gallery at the University of Wollongong from 29 August to 18 September 2014. *A Curious Moment of the Dying Imagination I, II, III, IV* (2014) (fig.15) are four large photographic collage works.



Fig. 15. Bessell, S. 2013, *A Curious Moment of the Dying Imagination I*, digital photographic prints and mixed media, 132cm x 198cm.

Each is composed of nine black-and-white digital prints, presented in a large grid format of three rows by three columns measuring 1320cm x 1980cm. Each image, which measures 440cm x 660cm, was created individually using a process of overlaying multiple layers of media, then photographing and digitally printing the work multiple times. The foundation images of the work are created by taking a series of sequential photographs using a remote control. The process captures unguarded moments. Images of parts of my body, head, hands, feet, and torso are selected and printed.

Objects are chosen from my personal collection of family mementos. Objects such as doilies, frames, my mother's jewelry, my father's watch and spectacles, wooden ducks, a vase, and feathers are combined with ephemeral objects such as flowers from my garden. These are arranged on the prints, photographed, and reprinted. The surface of the print is then inscribed with pens, ink, paint, and cut and collaged. The compositions are re-photographed and reprinted. No digital image manipulation program is used in their creation.

The work explores images of the self that consider the internal and external realities of the self. In *A Curious Moment of the Dying Imagination II* (2014), the central top panel of the grid shows my face, with eyes closed and head bowed down in contemplation (fig.16).

An x-ray of my skull is placed above as though watching over my shoulder, an ever-present reminder of mortality and the transience of life. A cut out eye placed in the bottom right corner looks out to directly engage and challenge the viewer. The eye seems to be looking out from behind the artwork, from another, deeper place. The images are surrounded by marks made by felt-tipped and ballpoint pens, which give the work a tactile and direct presence.

The convergence of photographic image, objects, and inscriptions within the collage generates a dialogue between internal and external narratives, between memories and personal history. The self-representation creates unexpected and unanticipated experiences that unfold as viewers decode the dense layers within each image. The multiple layers compressed by the process of rephotographing



Fig. 16. Bessell, S. 2014, (Detail) *A Curious Moment of the Dying Imagination II*. Digital photographic prints and Mixed Media. 132cm x 198cm.

dislocate the vocabulary of the photographic image. This dislocation in turn creates a space where the real and the perceived are in flux, with image and representation constantly shifting and being questioned. A liminal space is born out of the displacement.

A Peculiar Challenge to the Authority of the Rational (2014) (fig.17) is the fifth work in the exhibition. It consists of three large black-and-white digital prints installed side by side (with full measurements of 3360cm x 2350cm). A collaged image of my face is centrally located, with white cut out jagged lines emanating outwards. Objects surround the face: small baby dolls, toys, a hair clip, an old brooch, and a beaded flower. X-rays of my skull and bones are included, with the addition of felt-tipped and ballpoint pen drawings on the surface of the print. Like the companion

work, the skull functions as the vanitas that sits in the centre of the work above the head. It is a sentry or a guardian that is an ever-present reminder of what is to come. The other collaged x-rays of bones are like winding rivers that provide a glimpse into a vast secret interior. Fragments or impressions move between what is known and unknown, the concrete and the spiritual. It creates an insight into imaginary internal and external realities.



Fig. 17. Bessell, S. 2014, *A Peculiar Challenge to the Authority of the Rational I*, digital photographic print and mixed media. 336cm x 235cm.

The imagery in these works has a range of implications that trigger conscious and subconscious associations. The works deliberately play with meanings embodied within physical objects. Through their juxtaposition with other photographic images, their meanings resonate, gesturing to questions of identity, memory, transience, decay, and loss. Through the use of collage and the act of inscribing on the photographic surface, the works intentionally fracture the illusion of reality, and instead induce a dream-like quality that expands the depth of the photographic image. The techniques present a way to connect with authentic

experience through a spontaneous and direct response to the photographic image, an act of intervention upon the surface of the work.

The use of objects engages with memory, while intuitively drawing upon the surface of the photograph, interrupts, intervenes, and repurposes the image. The frozen moment of the photograph expands to become a transformative and evocative space that embodies and questions self, memory, and identity. The works use the hand to challenge the authority of the rational, disrupting the idea of the materiality of the precious photographic object by propelling it into another life.

Inherent in digital media technologies is the capacity for precision and control. In my works, this control is reconceptualised by the hand and by intuitive actions. Throughout my creative process, I am conscious of my relationship with different types of technologies. I employ a number of technological tools in a spontaneous improvisational approach. I do not engage with computer applications to compose artworks. I simply use the camera to copy and reproduce materials. I am not restricted to the constraints imposed by the digital medium (such as its pixel grid). The use of technology, therefore, becomes a tool to discover, explore, and create new experiences.

Devolving technology through an improvised and intuitive approach assists me in creating unique and disruptive artworks that open up a liminal space. The way I use technology, self as subject, objects, and inscriptions becomes a personal, social, and political commentary. Within this context the artworks override the pervasiveness of technology in contemporary culture and present the fallibility of life. The process creates an uncertainty that is more about the immediate, the felt, and the emotional. The representation of the self, captured momentarily as appearance, is expanded to become an alchemy of perception and possibilities. It highlights the ability of the liminal self to reflect on broader cultural critical dialogues, and the work can be seen as a metaphor for the tension that exists in contemporary culture.

A Curious Moment of the Dying Imagination I, II, III, IV (2014) and *A Peculiar Challenge to the Authority of the Rational* (2014) engage the viewer on a visceral

level. The artworks are a convergence of a number of theoretical approaches and techniques that disrupt the paradigms of technology use, the photograph as truth, and the self-portrait. The works provide a platform to explore the space between what we see as the exterior truth or reality in the photograph and the interior truth that is embodied in identity and memory. Combining digital and hand processes opens a site for creative intervention that is fundamental to the emergence of the liminal self.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

I began approaching the research question by examining the evolution of my art-making methodology in relation to artists such as Cahun, Rainer, Höch, Rrap, and Smart. These artists engage with a critical dialogue around self-representation, gender, memory, and identity by questioning and interrupting the assumptions associated with the photograph, technological reproduction, and the self-portrait. The methodologies are significant in asserting the importance of textural layering of media and objects upon the surface of the photograph. I have argued that this convergence of media and techniques produces a heightened sense of uncertainty and subverts our perceptions of the everyday. Objects are used as memento mori and containers of memory and meaning. They function as vestigial archeological evidence of our existence. These remnants can be constructed and deconstructed to produce stories of my internal and external worlds. This exploration has contextualised my practice and identified the process of using digital media, collage, and complex textural layering to create a liminal self.

This analysis has been supported by the historical contextualisation and the theoretical writings surrounding the self-portrait, self-representation, and liminality. The work of theorists such as Sturkin, Jordonova, Barthes, Sontag, Loewenberg, Gibbons, Benjamin, Leslie, and Hofmann has been used to support the argument that self-representation is more than a self-portrait or mirror likeness, and can be a space of uncertainty and contention – a liminal space. Benjamin and Leslie's writings on craft in regard to the hand-made, memory, and collage resonate with the idea of liminality, and are critical to this exegesis.

Analysis of my current MCA-R body of work reflects an exploration of self within this context. I have argued that my central themes of identity, memory, and gender have the ability to create a site where dialogues concerning political and ideological issues can take place. They have provided an ongoing platform to explore what we experience as truths. I argue that the creation of a liminal self resides in a space between the photographic image as recorded reality and memory-based authentic lived experience. It is more than just the point of capture, but rather a crisis in perception that can evoke a realness that engages and

infiltrates memory.

Research for this exegesis has given me invaluable material and a critical foundation for my future art practice. It emphasises the need to continue to take control of my representation as a carrier of meaning and memory as I continue to explore gender, identity, and memory as subversive acts. By doing so, I exercise the power to construct and deconstruct meaning around ideological paradigms of femininity. The intervention of the intuitive hand upon the surface of the photograph will continue to be a key to creating dynamic narratives, and, I contend, create new, authentic, and challenging self-representations – the liminal self.

Time and size constraints of this exegesis have prevented me from presenting fuller discussions on gender, technology use, and the relationship between still and moving images. These are rich areas for future research. In addition to developing large-scale (colour and black-and-white) digital prints employing the techniques developed in this project, I intend to fully extend my work into the medium of moving images, in completing an animation of my face in a state of transformation that I began with this project. Additionally my aim is to explore installations pieces that combine screen works and projections with large photographic pieces.

Exploring the liminal self has identified the importance of the interconnections between the photograph and objects, the photograph and digital media, and the photograph and hand-made interventions. These investigations and techniques extend the photographic self-portrait to create self-representations that reside within a liminal space. This exegesis has explored the question: how can a critical dialogue be evoked around self-representation? The central point of investigation, I have argued, is that the notion of the liminal self is a space of contestation that disrupts assumed paradigms of technology, the photographic image, and the self-portrait. The use of multiple referents creates images that have a depth of interpretation that goes beyond the surface of the work, and is the key to creating multi-layered self-representations – the liminal self.

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