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Articulating desire

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Articulating desire

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

Doctor of Creative Arts

from

University of Wollongong

by

Leonie Watson, B. Sc. (Hons), BCA, MCA (Research)

Faculty of Creative Arts

2012

CERTIFICATION

I, Leonie Watson, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Creative Arts, in the Faculty 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.

Leonie Watson

Articulating *desire*

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Abstract

This exegesis provides a context for the body of work in the exhibition *desire*. It examines the notion of desire and the emotional/psychological narratives that initiate the paintings in the exhibition. The Baroque and Surrealism are discussed as historical reference points to which the work owes certain of its material and symbolic characteristics as well as aspects of its psychological content. It also undertakes a historical and theoretical consideration of drapery and drapery-derived forms that contribute to an understanding of the figures residing in the space of the paintings.

The text positions the paintings in *desire* in relation to selected historical and contemporary works: paintings from the Baroque period, Surrealist paintings, and the paintings of the contemporary artists Alison Watt (Scotland, 1966-), Jude Rae (Australia, 1956-) and Amanda Robins (Australia, 1961-), finding in their use of materials, methods and imagery a range of similar concerns.

At the core of this thesis is the discussion of the making of the works. In the studio process personal psychological content and individual experience is given shape, is staged and lit then finally rendered in the form of painting. This is the meeting point of historical and contemporary, material and theoretical, public and private.

The thesis begins with a consideration of aspects of the Baroque important to my work, followed by an examination of selected Baroque paintings, paying attention to their optical qualities, symbolic content and psychological implications. The text continues with a closer look at the paintings in *desire* in relation to selected Baroque and Surrealist works. Further resonances with Surrealist works are identified in the development of the figures in the paintings from objects made in the studio. The painted figures are then examined in relation to historical and contemporary works that use folds and draperies, in a broader discussion of the meanings of drapery in painting.

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Introduction



Figure 0.1: Leonie Watson *I don't want to talk about it* 2010, oil on linen, 101.5x76 cm. Private collection.

Some might argue ... that desire is invisible and unrepresentable, a dimension of the Real that remains inaccessible to depiction. We might be able to talk about, or at least talk *around*, desire with the technical languages of psychoanalysis or biology, but we can never see, much less show, desire in itself. Art refuses to accept this prohibition, and insists on depicting desire ...”

W J T Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*

This exegesis examines a group of paintings under the collective title of *desire*. Three major themes will be explored in relation to these works: the notion of desire and the emotional/psychological narratives that initiate the work, the Baroque and Surrealism as historical reference points to which the work owes certain of its material and symbolic characteristics as well as aspects of its psychological content, and the significance of drapery and drapery-derived forms to an understanding of the figures that reside in the space of the paintings.

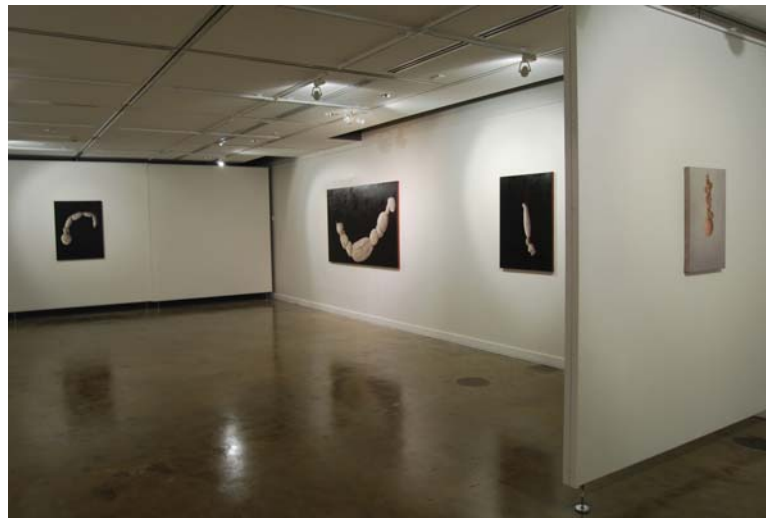


Figure 0.2: *desire*, FCA Gallery, University of Wollongong, 2012, installation view.

To enter the space of these paintings is to be caught off-guard: the space is unfamiliar. It seems endless and yet close, stage-like and yet personal. There are objects in the space that are at once familiar and strange. They are ambiguous, both inanimate and vital, vulnerable and guarded. These ‘figures’ are physical presences in the physical space of the paintings, and yet clearly of the imagination and therefore in a subjective space. They appear to be animated and even endowed with intentionality: a kind of consciousness. They seem to be halted mid-action, as if taking part in some hidden narrative, but if there is a narrative here, it is elusive.

The figures are immobilised or constrained. Those that rest on a surface seem unable to move, whereas those held with wires seem at once supported and suppressed, as if shaped by their bindings. Though trapped, they are also helpless. If freed from their

constraints, they would be immobilised like the others. If these inanimate bodies experience desire then fulfilment of this desire is impossible as each one is constrained or lacks any capacity to alter its condition.

For Jacques Lacan, desire is the gap between what we experience and what we are able to say. It is thus “a fundamental lack, a hole in being” (Grosz 1990, p64). Desire, for Lacan, is “an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued” (1973, p154). It is structured like a language, but never actually spoken; it is “barred or repressed from articulation” (Grosz 1990, p65). In this psychoanalytic definition, desire is tied “to lack, negation and the subject ... and so desire is understood as the external relation between two terms: the desiring subject and the desired object” (Colebrook 2002, p98). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari contest this conception of desire as “lack”, instead seeing desire as “positive and productive” (Ross 2005, p63), a social force, able to form connections between bodies (p63). However, their view would seem too optimistic to apply to the works in *desire*.

desire has a particular affinity with the Baroque, on which it draws for expressive effects as well as technical processes. The paintings’ optical qualities of transparency and opacity, their dramatic juxtaposition of darkness and light, aspects of their particular formal compositions and their drapery and drapery forms can all be found in Baroque paintings. The influence is clear in terms of style, materiality and optical characteristics, but there are also certain thematic resonances. Like Baroque paintings, my paintings deal in drama, pathos and the tension of oppositions: inside and outside, material and immaterial; accordingly, considerable attention will be paid to their historical antecedents.

In Chapter One I will outline some of the better-known theoretical analyses of the Baroque period, found in Heinrich Wölfflin’s *Renaissance and Baroque* 1964 (originally published in 1888), Alois Riegl’s *The Origins of Baroque Art in Rome* 2010 (first published in 1908), Erwin Panofsky’s 1934 essay “What is Baroque?” (republished in 1995), Ernst Gombrich’s *The Story of Art* (1960), Rzepinska and Malcharek’s essay on tenebrism in Baroque painting (1986) and *The Fold: Leibniz and*

the Baroque (1993) by Gilles Deleuze. These different approaches will give an overview of Baroque art.

In Chapter Two, I will make a close examination of a selection of Baroque paintings. My visual sources for this part of the study are the paintings I have examined first-hand because they are held in Australian galleries or have been available for close scrutiny when shown in Australian exhibitions of internationally-sourced works. The work by Jusepe de Ribera (Spain, 1591-1652), *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* 1620-24, the Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (Netherlands, 1606-1669) painting *Two Old Men Disputing* 1628 and the still life painting by Jan Davidsz. de Heem (Netherlands, 1606-1683-84), *Still Life with Fruit* 1640-1650 are in the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Victoria. *St John the Baptist in the Wilderness* c.1604 by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Italy, 1571-1610) as well as *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-13), by Artemisia Gentileschi (Italy, 1593-1652) were shown in the exhibition *Darkness and Light: Caravaggio and his World* in 2003-2004 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Victoria. Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes* c.1599 was included in the exhibition *Rubens and the Italian Renaissance* shown at the Australian National Gallery in 1992; my interpretation of that work is based on my recollections aided by reproductions.

In Chapter Three I will analyse the formal structure of the paintings, and its effects. Aspects such as overall composition, the figure-ground relationship, the way figures are positioned in relation to each other, and their mode of address to the viewer will be considered in relation to Baroque paintings. However, there are aspects of the work that this can't account for. With their part-objects, their inside-outness, their anxiety and melancholy, and their suggestions of unresolved yearnings, the paintings have a clear debt to Surrealism.

An account of the process of making the paintings in *desire* gives an insight into their Surrealist connections, as well as suggesting other connections to the Baroque. In Chapter Four, I will outline this process: the way I select materials and construct objects for painting has links to Surrealism; the manner of staging and lighting of the constructed objects is suggestive of methods used in still life painting and also

reminiscent of Caravaggio's approach to figure painting (Varriano 2006, p56). The final step, the painting process itself, uses materials and methods that are based on contemporary understandings of those used in the Baroque period, but which, in its "realism", is also linked to the style of painting employed by several Surrealist artists.

My painting methods are based on those taught to me by the Australian artist and teacher of historical oil painting principles, Charlie Sheard (b.1960), supplemented by my own research into historical and contemporary sources for traditional materials and methods. These range from the extant writings of Leon Battista Alberti (Italy, 1404-1472) from the fifteenth-century, and the sixteenth-century Giorgio Vasari (Italy, 1511-1574), through to recent texts such as Brown and Garrido's *Velasquez: The Technique of Genius* (1998). The range of sources and, where possible, a brief summary of their usefulness in terms of information for the contemporary practice of traditional oil painting techniques is found in the appendix to this text, "Sources for traditional oil painting materials and methods".

The figures in *desire* are all derived from constructed fabric maquettes. They are twisted and knotted, folded or wrapped, staged and rendered in paint to create dramatic scenarios. In all of the works, drapery and drapery-derived forms become personae that nevertheless retain qualities of drapery that have resonances crucial to the meanings my works produce. In Chapter Five, I will look more closely at this aspect of imagery in the works, contextualising it in terms of historical and contemporary examples.

The forms of drapery and their folds refer to coverings for the body but also the body itself, its surfaces and membranes. They conceal, but also suggest that which is hidden. Drapery thus suggests both wrapping and wrapped, the outside flowing seamlessly to the inside so that distinctions blur. This ambivalence is employed in my work as a metaphor for the self: both unitary and fragmented; the self as neither fully subjective nor fully public.

My sources for an interpretative approach to drapery in painting will be Anne Hollander's *Fabric of Vision: Dress and Drapery in Painting* (2002) as well as Deleuze's influential text *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1993). However, my

primary source is Gen Doy's *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture* (2002), which examines the changing meanings of drapery from the "drapery rhetoric" of sixteenth-century painting through to the intimate connotations of Tracey Emin's *My Bed* 1998. The main aim of Doy's text is to understand the meanings of drapery in visual culture, including its changed function from "a signifier of civilisation" to recent evidence - in press photography, at least - of its appearance as "a signifier of barbarism" (2002, pp16-7).

Contemporary paintings using drapery differ markedly from historical examples in that drapery forms and folds have come to inhabit the space of the painting at the expense of the human figure. I will examine the work of three contemporary exponents. Amanda Robins' work straddles still life and drapery painting, Jude Rae's drapery paintings "seem to engulf the viewer" (Doy 2002, p182) and Alison Watt makes large-scale paintings of knots and folds that "edge ... towards the abstract yet [have] a strange, almost sexy quality which [suggests] a human presence, or at least absence" (Ingleby Gallery).

My sources for this section are Amanda Robins' *Slow Art: Painting and Drawing as Meditative Process* (2009) and examples of her work included in the exhibition *Touch Too* at the University of Technology, Sydney in 2011. I have not seen Alison Watt's work in the flesh; the publication *Phantom*, produced in conjunction with her exhibition at the National Gallery, London in 2008 has been my main visual source and includes a useful essay by Colin Wiggins. It has been supplemented by a video of her being interviewed while working in her studio at the National Gallery of London. Images of Jude Rae's drapery paintings have been sourced from the website *Art + Object* and from Michael Dunn's *Contemporary Painting in New Zealand* (1996).

I will examine the similarities and differences between the works of these artists and my work in terms of materiality and illusion, the specific forms the drapery takes, and content. This chapter will conclude the thesis with a consideration of drapery and drapery forms in my work. It is in this aspect of the work - the forms and folds of drapery - that the material, formal and conceptual aspects of my paintings intertwine.

Since the 1980s there has been a considerable amount of research and speculation around the notion of a contemporary neo-Baroque (see, for example, Calabrese 1992, Calloway 1994, Ndalianis 2004, Purgar 2006 and Wacker 2007). The body of work in *desire* has developed independently of any such theoretical concerns, so they will not form part of the research scope of this thesis. Specific connections between my paintings and works from the Baroque period will be considered in relation to the body of work in *desire*; whether the notion of a Neo-Baroque brings another level of understanding to the work would be the subject for a subsequent study.

Symbolic, Psychological, Material

In their extreme dark-light contrasts, their pronounced chiaroscuro and their positioning of realistically-rendered forms in a dark, undefined space, the paintings in *desire* have clear affinities with paintings of the Baroque period. These affinities, I believe, are more than stylistic likenesses: they suggest similarities in content as well. To explore this contention I will look at several interpretations of Baroque art and the connections they make between optical characteristics, pictorial structures and symbolic meanings.

In Baroque paintings I see human figures in situations and exhibiting emotions that seem to be caught on the cusp of differing states. The figures are torn between the physical and the spiritual, between faith and despair, or between duty and horror. The paintings picture a “self” as if between two states of being, balanced between an “inside” and an “outside”. This psychological state is reflected in the optical dynamics of the painted surface – the transparent darkness of the ground, the opaque materiality of the lighted figures, and the complex interrelationship of these.

When I refer to the Baroque I am using a term that has had its geographical and chronological boundaries debated since the late nineteenth century but, broadly speaking, describes the dominant style of the visual arts from 1600-1750, which developed in Italy but had influence across western Europe from Germany to the Netherlands, Spain and France, and into England (Janson 1991, pp549-607). One of the earliest writers on the subject was Heinrich Wölfflin (Switzerland, 1864-1945). His text *Renaissance and Baroque* of 1888 was predominantly a study of architecture and ornament, but extended to Baroque sculpture and painting; his characterisation of Baroque style was that it was “painterly” (1964, p29), by which he meant that which is animated, gives an illusion of movement, of light and shade – “not only individual

figures but the entire composition are made up of areas of light and dark” (p31). Rather than line, “the painterly style thinks only in masses, and its elements are light and shade” (p31), giving the characteristic chiaroscuro and “an illusion of physical relief...the different objects seem to project or recede in space” (p31). Secondly, the painterly style aims for “dissolution of the regular”, seen as apparently accidental groupings and asymmetry, giving “a peculiar tension” (p33). A third element, according to Wolfflin, is elusiveness, “the lack of definition”, objects are not “fully and clearly represented, but partially hidden” (p33), a characteristic that stimulates the imagination of the viewer.

For Wolfflin the Renaissance was characterised as

the art of calm and beauty. The beauty it offers us has a liberating influence, and we apprehend it as a general sense of well-being and a uniform enhancement of vitality. Its creations are perfect: they reveal nothing forced or inhibited, uneasy or agitated (p38)

whereas the Baroque

aims at a different effect. It wants to carry us away in the force of its impact, immediate and overwhelming. It gives us not a generally enhanced vitality, but excitement, ecstasy, intoxication. Its impact on us is intended to be only momentary, while that of the Renaissance is slower and quieter, but more enduring, making us want to linger forever in its presence. This momentary impact of Baroque is powerful, but soon leaves us with a certain sense of desolation. It does not convey a state of present happiness, but a feeling of anticipation, of something yet to come, of dissatisfaction and restlessness rather than fulfillment. We have no sense of release, but rather of having been drawn into the tension of an emotional condition (p38).

This description of Baroque style is charged with emotion, but Wolfflin also identifies an emphasis on the body. When he discusses the reasons for the change in style from Renaissance to Baroque, he states that “[I]t is self-evident that a style can only be born when there is a strong receptivity for a certain kind of corporeal presence” (p78). He bases this on the notion that “we judge every object by analogy with our own body”, more specifically, we “interpret the whole outside world according to the expressive system with which we have become familiar from our own bodies” (p77).



Figure 1.1: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio *Deposition from the Cross* 1600-1604, oil on canvas, 300x203 cm. Pinacoteca Vaticana.

Wolfflin makes a persuasive argument for the connection between style and the human body, including that of the viewer of a work of art: “we go so far as to experience, to a highly sensitive degree, the spiritual condition and contentment or discontent expressed by any configuration, however different from ourselves” (p77). He is thus

drawing attention to the position of the viewer in relation to an artwork and the potential for the work to affect the viewer emotionally. This sense of awareness of the viewer is made quite clear in Caravaggio's *Deposition* c.1600-1604 (Figure 1.1): the figures are arranged so that each face is visible to the viewer even though their bodies overlap, and the ledge on which the figures stand seems to jut out of the painting into the space of the viewer.

Wolfflin was a philosopher and psychologist and “was naturally more inclined to raise aesthetics-related questions” than to make detailed investigations of artworks (Payne 2010, p10). As a result, his characterisation of the Baroque was accessible to a broader public (p10). The attributes of the Baroque he described were refined twenty years later by the Austrian scholar Alois Riegl (1858-1905) in *The Origins of Baroque Art in Rome* (1908). Whereas Wolfflin had characterised the Baroque as a new feeling for form arising from changes in attitudes to the body, Riegl aimed to find the “glue” that held the Baroque style together but also paid close attention to individual works (Payne 2010, p22), including analyses of architecture, sculpture and painting. For him, Baroque paintings foregrounded optical perception; this implied an emphasis on the corporeal and a “more or less subjective” approach (Riegl 2010, p249).

Erwin Panofsky (Germany, 1892-1968), in his 1934 essay “What is Baroque?”, took an approach not unlike that of Wolfflin, in that he was concerned with style change. However, he regarded Wolfflin's analysis as simplistic: it “does not mention a single work of art executed between, roughly speaking, the death of Raphael in 1520 and the full-fledged seventeenth century” and thus “we do receive the impression of a straight diametrical contrast between Baroque and Renaissance” (1995, p20).

For Panofsky, what we think of as the Baroque was really the culmination of what had gone before – the Mannerism of Tintoretto and El Greco. In this light, the Baroque could be seen as “a reaction against exaggeration and overcomplication ... a new tendency towards clarity, natural simplicity and even equilibrium” (1995, p23). While Mannerism tended towards “convulsive entanglements”, Baroque works were pictorially more expansive, more balanced in space, while still a highly emotional

mixture of reality and imagination that “we would never encounter in a High Renaissance composition” (p25).



Figure 1.2: Annibale Carracci, *Pietà with Saint Francis and Saint Mary Magdalene* c.1602-1607, oil on canvas, 277x186 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Panofsky credited two forces with bringing about the change from Mannerism to Baroque: the attempts by Annibale Carracci (Italy, 1560-1609) to restore Renaissance traditions, and the naturalist tendencies of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Italy, 1571-1610). Caravaggio “shattered the artificial world of mannerism to build a new one out of its very elements: solid, three-dimensional bodies and light (chiaroscuro, first purely plastic, later spatial)” (Panofsky 1995, p38). Carracci, on the other hand, deliberately used the “plastic values of classical antiquity and classic High Renaissance” (p38) and attempted to fuse these with Mannerist qualities of colourism and sfumato. Panofsky noted that the early works were “cool and academic” but in later works such as the painting he refers to as *Lamentation* (but which is also known

as *Pietà with Saint Francis and Saint Mary Magdalene*) 1602-1607 (Figure 1.2), Carracci developed a looser and more emotional style (p38).

For Panofsky, the move from Mannerist to Baroque was a merging of the conflicts “between plastic and spatial tendencies, ideal beauty and reality, neopagan humanism and Christian spirituality” (1995, p38) into a “subjective feeling of freedom and even pleasure”, a “subjective intensification” which he considered a fundamental attitude of Baroque art (p51). However, this new sense of freedom was “still haunted (and enlivened) by the intense consciousness of the underlying dualism” (pp38-45), manifesting in the “play of light and shadow (and) the deep though definitely irrational space” (p38).



Figure 1.3: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* c.1601-1602, oil on canvas, 107x146 cm. Gemaldegalerie, Berlin.

These definitions defined the Baroque in terms of attitudes and feelings, but Ernst Gombrich (Austria, 1909-2001) rejected the idea that works of art may be regarded as expressions of the “spirit of the age” (Summers 2002, p139). Like Panofsky, he perceived the Baroque in terms of its relation to Mannerism, but he saw an hermetic evolution. In his *The Story of Art* (1960), he described the Baroque “rescue” of painting from the “deadlock of Mannerism” (p290), noting that Annibale Carracci and Caravaggio both seemed “tired of Mannerism” (p290), though their methods appeared

to be opposed (p290). His analysis of their differing approaches was not unlike Panofsky's; Carracci admired classical beauty, but brought to it a Baroque use of light and emotional appeal (p291). Caravaggio, on the other hand, was not "afraid of ugliness" if it was in the pursuit of truth (p291); he had no respect for ideal beauty, instead wanting his figures to look "real and tangible" and to see the holy events "as if they had been happening in his neighbour's house (p292). This unflinching approach to questions of faith is perhaps most pointed in Caravaggio's painting *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* c.1601-1602 (Figure 1.3).

The foregoing historical sources, when taken together, give a view of Baroque painting based on plastic and spatial qualities, the relationships between figures, and the connections between these aspects and the perceived content of the works. Late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century writers, on the other hand, have tended to focus on the qualities of darkness and light, the way these are manifested in material and optical terms, and the significance of these aspects of Baroque paintings in relation to their content.

Gilles Deleuze (France, 1925-1995) wrote in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1993) that the Baroque was "inseparable from a new regime of light and colour" (p31). He attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Germany, 1749-1832) a description of a distinctively Baroque method of painting introduced by Tintoretto and cultivated by Caravaggio: a dark, red-brown background on which were placed "the thickest shadows"; the figures were rendered by painting directly, "shading toward the shadows" (p31). These were the salient qualities of Baroque painting according to other writers as well: a dark ground with the darkest areas delineated, followed by establishment of the lightest areas in lead white (Weil 2007, p106). The unifying tone of brown, which, according to Riegl (2010, p218), was applied to the *surface* of the painting by earlier Venetian artists, was, in Baroque painting, applied first, "from the inside", which Riegl referred to as "a trait of interiority" (p218).

For Rzepinska and Malcharek, the "discovery of darkness" (1986, p92) was the essential innovation in painting around 1600 (p92). Christian theology of the 12th,

13th and 14th centuries had assigned a negative meaning to darkness – it was associated with “evil, negation, non-being, and sin” (p97) – but this had slowly changed through the Renaissance. Towards the end of the sixteenth century darkness in painting took on a positive value artistically and psychologically, and reinforced the intense light that was distinctive in paintings of the period (p92). The dynamic optical situation thus created brought new meanings to traditional biblical subjects, whereby they took on the drama and pathos of the human condition.

The sense in the mid-sixteenth century that “everything art could possibly do had been achieved” (Gombrich 1960, p265) meant that artists felt freer to explore: for the Mannerists, this manifested in “obsessive perfection or startling invention” (p268) but for Baroque artists it meant exploring specific material/optical effects of light and shade to make figures “stand out with uncompromising honesty” (p292). The painting of the Baroque therefore relied less on the Renaissance science of perspective to produce an illusion of space and more on the material/optical qualities of the oil medium, notably transparency and opacity and their potential for producing the dramatic alternation of solid lights and deep darks characteristic of the chiaroscuro of this period (Panofsky 1995, p38). These qualities enabled the creation of an illusion of deep dark space and solid forms, often partially hidden, caught in the light that passed over them, which produced not only spatial movement, but optical dynamism as well – the perception of movement into and out of the illusory space of the painting.

The characteristics of Baroque painting just described were clearly manifested in works of the so-called “naturalists” of whom Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was the most influential, inspiring the terms “Caravaggisti” (Riegl 2010, p210) and “Caravaggeschi” (Waterhouse 1962, p33) to refer to his followers. The style consisted of paintings on a dark ground, the figures sharply defined and with “tactile” boundaries (Riegl 2010, p249). The way the figures were modelled from the dark ground earned these painters the name of “Tenebrosi” (p249).

Contrasts of darkness and light are powerful in their compositional potential, but they also have representational, symbolic and emotional values. In Baroque works, the

transparency of dark passages and the opacity of light areas create contrasts in opticality and tactility, between darkness and light, that resonate with notions of the conflict between “the void” and human material existence. In Panofsky’s view, the tension between “neo-pagan humanism and Christian spiritualism” characteristic of Mannerism, “while still subsisting” began to “merge into a new sphere of highly subjective sensations” (1995, p38) during the Baroque. In Annabale Carracci’s *Pietà with Saint Francis and Saint Mary Magdalene* 1602-1607 (or *Lamentation*) (Figure 1.2), Panofsky notes that “the mourning figures seem already to revel in their own sorrow, a new decisive factor in the Baroque psychology” (p38). (A dark brown pigment mixture of similar constitution to that used by Baroque painters was referred to in a fourteenth-century manuscript as “sadde brown” (Eastlake 1960, vi, p119), but the emotional content of Baroque works was more complex than that appellation would suggest).

These characterisations of the art of the Baroque resonate with my own intentions: Wolfflin’s description of “a feeling of anticipation, of something yet to come” (p38), Riegl’s view of Baroque paintings as foregrounding optical perception, implying an emphasis on the corporeal and a “more or less” subjective approach (2010, p249) and Panofsky’s sense of a “subjective feeling of freedom and even pleasure” that was nevertheless “still haunted (and enlivened) by the intense consciousness of the underlying dualism” (p38-45).

With the exception of Wolfflin, these writers referred to particular optical situations in Baroque painting – at times, even the material means by which they were achieved - and related these to content. They recognised a close relationship between materials, methods and content that, in the context of my work (employing similar materials and methods), must be taken into account. As these are aspects of the paintings only fully available to the viewer experiencing the works firsthand, close scrutiny of selected examples of Baroque painting will be undertaken in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Close encounters



Figure 2.1: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Judith and Holofernes* c.1599, oil on canvas, 145x195cm. Galleria Nazionale d'Arts Antica, Rome.

My first introduction to Baroque painting came in 1992 when I saw Caravaggio's *Judith and Holofernes* c.1599 (Figure 2.1) at the National Gallery of Victoria. I had never seen work like it before. The painting was compelling: crisp, present and yet completely detached from me. It felt at once absolutely real and overtly theatrical – as if real people were enacting a drama right in front of me. I had a glimpse into another world, and I saw something that I have only in retrospect come to fully appreciate. Caravaggio's work reveals painting for what it is – fabrication - and yet retains its emotional power and its mystery. We are given insight into the way the medium works, but this does not take away from the power of its affect.

Judith and Holofernes represents an enactment of a moment. There is a story alluded to that would have been well known to Baroque audiences, but we are given only a sliver of it, like a film still to a contemporary viewer. There is a solid, material presence to the figures in the tableau and yet they are situated in an indeterminate space. There is richness in the tonal subtleties and glowing colours set off like jewels on a velvety background: an appeal that belies the horror of the actions of the figures. The composition turns the figures partly to the viewer while creating a circular movement between the figures that is internal to the painting. The light that falls on the figures is – to use a term from film theory – non-diegetic: it comes from some undefined source outside of the space of the painting, but not from the space in front of the painting occupied by the viewer. These qualities of the work produce a sense of both presence and distance from the viewer; it is both intimate and enigmatic.

The appearance of intensely lit figures in a dark, indeterminate space relies to a degree on the optical characteristics of particular oil painting materials and techniques. I made a decision to learn about these techniques and this informed a subsequent research project toward the degree of MCA (Research), published as *Collecting the Self: Paintings and the Ambiguous Body* (Watson 2008). The techniques are fundamental to the process of making the paintings that accompany this text, and also inform my investigations of Baroque paintings undertaken for the current project. My analyses of Baroque paintings in the following pages will be based on material and optical qualities which can only be fully appreciated in the presence of the works, but this looking is informed by my working knowledge of contemporary painting practices as well as a degree of understanding about traditional materials and methods. Thus my interpretations will be partly phenomenological and partly analytical. I will consider materials and techniques in relation to thematic aspects of the works.

I make a distinction between works that I have seen “in the flesh” and those I have examined in reproduction; certain optical qualities of oil painting are difficult to reproduce photographically; the materiality and the scale of works in relation to the viewer are essentially irreproducible. The facture of the painting, its physical presence,

is necessary to its full appreciation, which involves the way in which subject matter is handled, and the way this is embedded in painting and apprehended as material object.

Jusepe de Ribera

***Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* 1620-24**



Figure 2.2: Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* 1620-24, oil on canvas, 206.2x154.5 cm. National Gallery of Victoria.

The advantages of seeing a painting in the flesh was reconfirmed for me on my viewing of the first of the works I will examine in this chapter, the painting by Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* 1620-24 (Figure 2.2), held in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. I had previously examined reproductions of the work (a digital image via the gallery website as well as in print) and I had been moved by

the dramatic composition of figures circling around a central dark space, the details of facial expressions, the subtleties of flesh tones and the beauty of the draperies. It was a distinctly different experience seeing these qualities at close range.

Only in the presence of the painting can you experience the way it commands the space in which it hangs, but instead of imposing its presence, it draws the viewer in. The deep space created by passages of transparent glazes invites the viewer to move closer, and he or she is then captured by the intense detail of the light areas of flesh and drapery. We can recognize the figures, clouds, clothing fabrics, the gridiron and fire and we can also approach and examine the details. We are able to move up close to examine brush marks and thus the way the illusion is created, while still being able to hold the entire picture in our mind's eye.

In the presence of the object both central (acute) and peripheral (generalized) vision (Livingstone 2002, pp68-73) come into play. The viewer is able to suspend disbelief and be taken by the illusion *at the same time* as being privy to details of material and technique that reveal how this illusion is achieved. In the material presence of the work one can both *know* and *feel*.

Panofsky has noted that the increase in “emotional values” in the Baroque led to the unearthing of subject matter that “conformed to the new trend of imagination and feeling” (1995, p68), an observation salient to the painting examined here, from the story of a saint who was beaten and tortured before being put on a gridiron for his active resistance to the directives of the Emperor Valerian in 258AD. St. Lawrence is pictured surrounded by his persecutors, after having been brutally beaten. He is gazing and gesturing upwards, as if “contemplating reunion with his maker” (p68).

The figures are composed around a dark void – the “central absence” described by Lambert (2009, p11). We are drawn from the space of the gallery to the opulence of the heavy, gilded frame, to the figures and then into the void at the centre of the painting. Just visible in the central space is the gridiron on which St. Lawrence will be burned; the flames and smoke from the fire underneath it disappear into darkness. The

saint's tormentors are four men emerging from this darkness. An intense light shines down on the upward-looking saint, who crouches on the right-hand side of the composition, containing it.

De Ribera was praised for "rendering the surfaces of things with a lifelike specificity" (*Darkness and Light*, p170) and he achieved this within the context of characteristically Baroque contrasts of light and dark, while imbuing his paintings with "unmistakable spiritual qualities" (p170). In this work, the physical reality of the figures – "the warts and facial imperfections of the torturers and ... the bruising and dirty fingernails of their victim" (*National Gallery of Victoria*) is in contrast to the sense of spirituality conveyed by the "heavenly" beam of light shining on the saint from above.

The figures materialize from the dark background; lit as if on a stage, they enact the drama. The actions we see, it is suggested, are only part of the story; the rest is hidden from us. It is as if we are privy to a glimpse of a dark world that is beyond vision except for the narrowly illuminating shaft of light that stills the action, creating a dramatic tableau. This strong light also enables the rendering of details that intensify the realism of the scene and bring the specificity of portraiture to the characters depicted.

The figures are opaquely painted, with the thickest applications where the light hits them. The figure of St. Lawrence is almost completely rendered in opaque paint but this is where one of the differences from Caravaggio's work can be seen. While much of the saint's body is rendered solidly in opaque colour to indicate the intense light shining on it and to heighten the viewer's perception of the materiality of the flesh, surface details are seen across the entirety of the brightly-lit skin surface, rendered as areas of light pigment scumbled thinly over the dark ground to produce cool mid-tones. These shadowy details reveal hollows between muscles or bones that indicate a gaunt physique imbued with pathos in a way that Caravaggio's are not.

The fragility of skin barely covering muscles and bones might suggest the ascetic life of a saint, but also evokes a vulnerability that has the potential to affect the viewer physically and emotionally. The coolness of these mid-tones may be due to the increased transparency of opaque pigment mixtures over time, a phenomenon that will be discussed in more detail in relation to Artemisia Gentileschi's painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, but it is difficult to determine to what degree this has occurred in the case of de Ribera's *Martyrdom of St Lawrence*. In its current state, the cool grey cast to the mid-tones of the skin give it an almost deathly pallor that has the potential to heighten empathetic responses.

The background to this scene is partly created by thin layers of opaque colour to indicate shreds of light in the night sky and to give subtle form to the smoke emanating from the fire; these have been glazed along with the remaining areas of dark ground. The result is that the whole is relatively dark compared to the figures and some areas are so heavily glazed as to obtain the "deep but irrational" space of Caravaggio (Panofsky 1995, p38). De Ribera manages to bring both "pictorial naturalness and ... intensity of communicative expression" (*Darkness and Light* p172) to the work.

The story of St. Lawrence is one of faith in the face of torture, or of the spiritual overcoming the physical. These oppositions are figured in visual terms: in the relationship of darkness to light, in the appearance of weight and weightlessness and in the body language of the figures. In the presence of the work however, the viewer is able to feel these oppositions in material and optical terms as well, aspects that are lost in reproduction. The relationship of the viewer's body to the scale of the work, the physical object of the painting in relation to the illusion of space it creates, and the painting's surface, with tactile qualities in opaque areas and apparent immateriality in glazed passages are aspects of the painting that contribute to a more physically immediate understanding of the work.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

***St John the Baptist in the Wilderness* c.1604**

Caravaggio's *St John the Baptist in the Wilderness* (c.1604) (see Figure 2.3) is based on the story of the saint preaching in the wilderness of Judaea – one of Caravaggio's favourite subjects (*Darkness and Light*, p94). Traditionally portrayed as aged, haggard and unshaven (p49), the saint is here represented as a handsome young man, so realistically as to be almost a portrait. The figure is life-sized, like the majority of Caravaggio's figures (Varriano 2006, p38). He is seated and resting on a swathe of vibrantly red fabric. The painting exhibits dramatic chiaroscuro; raking light illuminates the figure of St. John asymmetrically, one side of the body catching the light while the other is in darkness, its perimeter barely defined by a subtle, warm, reflected light. The intense light on the figure which has no apparent source is consistent with Friedlaender's "magic light" from "the celestial spheres" (1955, p10). Friedlaender has pointed out that in Caravaggio's paintings "the effect of light may be so enhanced or exaggerated that objects struck by it seem to transcend natural experience, to be endowed with miraculous content" (p10).

The light on the figure is balanced by the darkness that surrounds it. The face of Caravaggio's St. John is only partially lit; his downcast eyes are hidden in half-circles of shadow – looking down, away from the intense glare of the light. The figure, though brightly-illuminated, has dark shadows that slice into it, and invade its opaque solidity. The darkness of the eye sockets suggests a darkness inside and make us aware of an internal drama. In Friedlaender's words, Caravaggio shows "a surprisingly sensitive understanding which goes beneath the surface" (1955, p9); he fills his characters with "a sensitive and stirring inner life (p9). We are made to perceive, and are drawn into, the subjective space of the figure.

The dark space within which the figure of St. John is positioned is only nominally an exterior setting; there are no indicators of distance. It is an "irrational space" as described by Panofsky (1995, p38) that serves to push the figure forward. Instead of a

clearly-defined landscape, the background suggests a stage-setting, and the young man we see, an actor. This tableau-like quality is characteristic of Caravaggio's oeuvre and heightens the sense of theatre.



Figure 2.3: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness* c.1604, oil on canvas, 173.4x132.1cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Missouri.

The red cloth framing the figure of St. John is sensuously draped and glowing red. The presence of the cloth in this painting is reminiscent of that in several other paintings by Caravaggio. In his rendition of *Judith and Holofernes* c.1599, a red drape hangs over Holofernes at the moment of his beheading; in Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* 1601-1605/6 (Figure 5.2) a swag of blood-red drapery is suspended above the death scene. To suggest the association of red drapery with death in Caravaggio's oeuvre might be too specific – it appears in numerous works in different guises; I suggest, however, that it might be construed as a reminder of fleshly existence, of the body's

vulnerability and ultimate mortality. This suggests the way in which the drapery might be understood in the context of the painting of St John – that is, as a portent of his fate. In contrast to the rich and sensuous rendering of the red drape are its frayed edges, seen as fine threads of red opaque paint over the glazed dark internal spaces of folds in the fabric. Such attention to detail heightens the “naturalism” of the scene, but also brings an enhanced tactile quality. The viewer is made aware of their own sense of touch and thus their own skin. These fine details bring an edge (literally) of materiality to the otherwise classically-rendered red cloth, and a degree of intimacy that is a foil to the high drama of the scene.

St John the Baptist in the Wilderness is characterized by solid form, tactile flesh and fabric, glowing colour and an encompassing darkness of indeterminate depth. The painting appears to be on the ground of warm, brownish red that was customary for Caravaggio and, in the late sixteenth century, would have been composed of “inexpensive pigments – red earth, yellow ocher, umber and a small amount of lead white to assist in drying” (Weil 2007, p106). This pigment mixture provides an even, flexible base of warm and unsaturated colour that when glazed with a dark transparent layer creates an illusion of deep space.

It is difficult to determine through observation alone the precise method by which these qualities would have been achieved, however, based on my research into matters of materials and techniques (see Appendix) and on experiences gleaned from my own practice, I will outline methods that were used by Caravaggio and Baroque artists who were influenced by him and were likely to have been employed in the making of this painting.

After delineating the very darkest areas, according to Weil, the composition would have been rendered as a tonal underpainting using fast-drying lead white (2007, p108). Over this layer, opaque pigments gave material and optical solidity to the flesh and the fabric. They were applied quite robustly in some areas, to bring figures forward out of the darkness, but they were also used subtly, in diaphanous layers (Eastlake 1960, vii, p275) to produce subtle tonal changes. These tonal changes give the appearance that

the surfaces (of skin or fabric) turn away from the light into the darkness, giving the forms three-dimensionality, enhancing their overall solidity and their presence for the viewer.

The particular quality of the tonal make-up of this painting is due to the pigments used and the way they are layered. One of the advantages of a dark ground is that when very thin layers of lighter pigments are passed over it, cool tones are produced. The cool passages thus achieved are “far more delicate” (Eastlake 1960, vii, p275) than those achieved by the addition of blue tints - as used by the Flemish painters (p275) - and allow a subtlety in flesh tones that renders representations of flesh more optically dynamic. Eastlake describes the phenomenon thus:

The aim of the colourist is first to produce a pleasing balance and a constant and even minute interchange between cold and warm hues. His next object is that the nature of these warm and cold colours shall be of the last degree of refinement and delicacy. The system of glazing – passing a relatively dark colour in a diaphanous state over a lighter colour – is a mode of insuring delicacy in the warm tones. And to attain an equivalent delicacy in the cool tints the expedient presents itself of passing a relatively light colour, or even white, in a diaphanous state over a darker hue. This method of producing the cool tones constitutes the essential difference between the Venetian and the Flemish practice. (p275).

Though the practice of painting on a dark ground originated in Venice, it was cultivated and perfected elsewhere by the painters of the Baroque (Goethe cited in Deleuze 1993, p31).

The glowing colour of the red drapery around the figure in Caravaggio’s *St John the Baptist in the Wilderness* would have been produced by the application of layers of transparent paint over lighter opaques: customarily, after the lead white underpainting and additions of coloured opaque layers, glazes of transparent colour were applied.

Lead white has a glowing, slightly warm tone that reflects light back through subsequent layers of transparent colour. Whereas transparent colours produce deep, dark shadows where they are applied over a dark ground, they produce glowing colours that appear to float above the painted surface when they are layered over passages of light opaque pigments. Opaque areas left unglazed allow for other material/optical possibilities. These various techniques allow for the creation of dark passages that recede into space, brightly-lit areas of unglazed opaques and, in other parts, glowing colours that seem to emanate from the painting.

The palpable presence of the figure of St. John is created by the use of opaque layers of paint, applied solidly in the lightest areas. Transparent colours, as already pointed out, appear to recede into the space of the painting or conversely, to glow as if emanating from the painting - depending on the nature of the layers underneath – and thus, in a sense, dematerialising the painted surface. Light opaque pigments, on the other hand, tend to draw attention to the surface of the painting by virtue of their reflectivity. Instead of absorbing or re-emitting light as a transparent layer does, an opaque layer reflects light off its surface, to a degree determined by its specific pigment/binder makeup (Taft and Mayer 2000, pp72-3): broadly speaking, the lighter the pigment, the more light is reflected (Mayer 1991, p162). The reflection of light from opaque areas draws attention to the painted surface but also gives opaquely-rendered objects and figures the appearance of materiality. Opaquely-rendered objects and figures thus come forward in relation to transparent areas (Eastlake 1960, vii, p261-2). In Caravaggio's painting this tendency of opaque pigments is combined with extreme contrasts of dark and light to make the figure of St. John appear to sit in front of the space of the painting, coextensive with the space of the viewer.

Artemisia Gentileschi

***Judith Slaying Holofernes* 1612-13**

Gentileschi's painting (Figure 2.4) refers to the story of a beautiful Jewish widow Judith who, in order to save her city from attack by the invading Assyrian army, went

to their camp and seduced the commander, Holofernes. He invited her to spend the night in his tent and, then, when he was asleep, she decapitated him with his own sword and returned to her people with his head in a sack. Gentileschi took the most dramatic moment of the story, probably inspired by Caravaggio's example in his painting of the same subject c.1599: the moment of the beheading (*Darkness and Light*, p126).



Figure 2.4: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* 1612-13, oil on canvas, 159x126cm. Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.

Judith Slaying Holofernes exhibits the dominant qualities of the Baroque already discussed: the emphasis on contrasts between light and dark and a composition based on tonal masses rather than on linear perspective. However, the extremes of chiaroscuro are not as pronounced as in Caravaggio's *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness*; the dark recesses are not as deep and the light, while still strongly directional, is less intense. Mid-tones are more evident in the flesh and in the fabrics of the clothing and bed linen. The colours in the women's clothing are more literal,

whereas the colours in Caravaggio's version heighten drama and shape the space. The lightest parts of the figures in Gentileschi's painting are not as brightly-lit as in Caravaggio's figures, and the edges are more softly delineated. The overall light-dark contrast is not as pronounced and, as a result, the lighting is perceived as more natural; it *reveals* the scene rather than freezing it in the "arrested representation" of Caravaggio's painting (Friedlaender 1955, p50).

Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn

***Two Old Men Disputing* 1628**

Rembrandt certainly had indirect contact with Caravaggio: although he never went to Italy, he knew the work of painters from Utrecht who had gone to Italy and "become Caravaggists" (*Darkness and Light*, p60). In Gombrich's opinion, he "absorbed the message of Caravaggio" (1960, p318), in that he valued "truth and sincerity above harmony and beauty" (p318).



Figure 2.5: Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Two Old Men Disputing* 1628, oil on wood panel, 72.4x59.7 cm. National Gallery of Victoria.

The “cellar light” of Caravaggio is a strong presence in Rembrandt’s *Two Old Men Disputing* 1628 (Figure 2.5), a painting from early in his career. In this work, the two figures are revealed by a light shining into the dark space in which they converse. The sense of an underground space is psychologically powerful – we feel as if this is a private conversation between these men. The fact that they are aged implies wisdom – a measured argument, not a passionate one.

A strong, narrow beam of light that, in Leibniz’s words “slides as if through a slit in the middle of shadows” (qtd in Deleuze 1993, p32) comes from what would be a high, small window. It cuts between the figures, creating a light-filled space within the painting. Instead of the central dark void seen in the Ribera painting, there is a central brightness. It is still a space, but clearly-defined and rational. The light area creates a central form surrounded by the darkness of the rest of the composition.

The figure closest to the front of the painted space is rendered in warm, glazed colours of mid to dark tone, with subtle tonal contrasts. The figure towards the middle of the painted space is, by contrast, in cool colours, with strong contrasts and dense opaques where the light strikes his garment. The light on this figure and the drapery to the side creates a light area in the painting that is situated within a dark space. The viewer’s attention is drawn to this light space – and thus to the relationship between the figures that is defined by the space between them.

The most intense light falls upon the book over which the men converse and on the figure of the man in the middle of the painting; we can see his face clearly and the earnest expression he wears. He is lit in such a way that his torso is sharply divided into a light side and a dark side. The man with his back to us seems almost completely in the dark; in fact, he is rendered in mid-tones and glazed in warm colours and these qualities bring him towards the front of the composition. His posture appears passive and the colouring and tonal subtlety of his clothing makes him a less forceful element in the composition; so, even though he is at the front of the painted space, he forms part of the dark framing of the brightly-lit figure.

In this work, the relationship between light and dark is quite different to that in the paintings of Ribera, Caravaggio and Gentileschi already discussed. Rather than light figures framing dark spaces or, in the case of Caravaggio's *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, the dark being both around and within the brightly-lit figure, in Rembrandt's *Two Old Men Disputing*, darkness surrounds light. The light is held between the men, enclosed within the space of painting.

Jan Davidsz. De Heem

***Still Life with Fruit* 1640-1650**



Figure 2.6: Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Still Life with Fruit* 1640-50, oil on canvas, 67.3x79.8 cm. National Gallery of Victoria.

De Heem is credited with inventing the type of still life known as a *pronkstilleven* (Gott 2003, p67). The example here, *Still Life with Fruit* 1640-1650 (Figure 2.6), is a sensual display of ripe fruits and serving vessels arranged in staged disorder. Light rakes across the space, lighting the centre of the tableau. The fruit is centre stage, surrounded by the glass, metal and ceramic objects. The bright white fabric draped over the edge of the platter to the right of the fruit competes for attention.

The tableau is set in a dark space, but the array itself is shallow and seems to push forward into the space of the viewer. This intimate address is reinforced by the high degree of detail with which the objects are rendered. Their appearances indicate different haptic qualities; the fruits are soft and potentially decaying, the fabrics are resilient but unstructured. The serving platters, glasses and metal cup are cool and hard. These different textures and surfaces are meticulously rendered to engage the viewer's sense of touch as well as their sight.

The arrangement is like a stage setting for a drama that is played out across the front of the stage. A narrative is told of erotically-suggestive disorder: oysters lie open, a pomegranate splits to reveal its shiny red globules, grapes hang in space and fabric drapes over the front of the stone ledge. The centrally-placed pomegranate is torn open, its glistening red seeds hanging on to a scrap of skin or falling to the platter.



Figure 2.7: Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Still Life with Fruit* 1640-50 (detail), oil on canvas, 67.3x79.8 cm. National Gallery of Victoria.

The sense of sumptuous excess in this work is created by both subject matter and the way this is rendered. Darks and lights, solid opaques and transparent glazes, glowing colours and greyed mid-tones, are brought together in an extravagant disorder bordering on chaos. This accumulation is held together by a stable triangular composition that is in marked contrast to the circular composition of the Baroque paintings so far examined. From this stable position, the tableau leans forward, as if it might fall out of the painting into the space of the viewer. At the same time, the viewer

is drawn in to its recesses, entangled in its drama. At the centre of this stability, however, is the bursting pomegranate, which seems to open up the actual surface of the painting (Figure 2.7), as if we are seeing inside the illusion, to a different, less-ordered space.

The paintings I have examined are, for me, a source of technical information as well as lessons in composition, but they also prompt questions about the relationship between optical and material qualities, representation, and meaning. There are meanings that have been shown - by Deleuze (1993), for example - to be implied in the processes by which the works were made. The Baroque trait of “interiority”, materialised in painting by working from a dark ground towards light, is an example that might be considered as active in my own work.

I am suggesting that my attention to Baroque painting goes beyond an interest in employing its methods for theatrical effect to making use of its potential for harbouring psychological content, an aspect noted by several historical accounts of the art of the period as well as in my own analyses of particular works. However, there is another specific function that Baroque “style” performs in my work. The historically-ratified style confers authority on what are essentially humble forms; it dignifies what is otherwise abject subject matter. In my paintings, the sense of history invoked by classical references frames chaotic, personal and essentially private content in a way that allows it to enter the public domain; the viewer is lulled into a false sense of security.

Figures in Space

Anyone entering the exhibition *desire* will be struck by its resonances with the dramatic paintings of the Baroque period, both in terms of technical and formal qualities, as well as in the ways figures are disposed in the space of the paintings. The viewer might also recall the inversions, ambiguities and provocations of Surrealism; the figures are neither clearly object nor body and they merge animate and inanimate forms. It will be evident, also, that these paintings have affinities with the genre of still life, the domain in which mundane subject matter is rendered in the materials of high art. These are obvious precedents and my paintings will be discussed in relation to all of these: to Baroque theatrical presentation, to Surrealism's enigmatic forms and to still life's intimate address.

Placement

In *slow leap* 2012 (Figure 3.1), a white figure curves across the top of a dark space. The figure is creased and folded, and in the form of a tightly-wrapped object held together by loops of what appears to be wire. The figure has a large, egg-shaped end, like a head, also held firmly by two crossed wires. This head emerges from a tightly-knotted 'neck', the knotting of the fabric at this point echoing the constrictions imposed by the wires. The head hangs down on the left-hand side of the painting and on the other end of the figure a short length of the fabric hangs loose like a tail, in a draped form that has an unexpectedly pointed end – almost a sting. Between these extremities, the torso is divided into sections by the wire constrictions. These girdles are evenly placed, the sections regular, but the evenness of the form is pulled out of balance by the apparent weight of the head.

The figure is suspended in the painted space by fine lines suggesting wires that connect to the loops that encircle the figure. The weight of the head seems to strain against the wires and drag the whole figure downwards against their upward and backward pull. The impression given is of a figure looping in space that has been caught, its curving leap halted and held by constraints.



Figure 3.1: Leonie Watson, *slow leap* 2012, oil on linen, 101.5x76 cm. Collection of the artist.

The figure is very light in tone, in marked contrast to the dark space in which it is poised. The dark negative space in *slow leap* reinforces and emphasises the form by closing around the figure. The darkness, like the lines of wire, grips the figure and arrests its movement. The wires that hold the figure's shape and position are understated, but reinforce and are reinforced by the negative space. These constraints both shape and confine it. The wires make literal the "arrested representation", that Friedlaender (1955, p50) attributes to Baroque painting.

As in all of the paintings, the form in *slow leap* is ambiguous. It appears as inanimate fabric and wire, but its shape and its position in space suggest movement that gives it

animate qualities. It has the shape of, perhaps, a blind worm that never sees the light of day or a tadpole, but its sting-like tail suggests other possibilities. This is at odds with the appearance of vulnerability that comes from its seemingly naked and soft-bodied quality. The form seems partial, like a truncated body part or an internal organ removed and displayed. In contrast, the title *slow leap* brings with it a sense of agency, of intention, prompting the idea of a human figure – a ballet dancer or a trapeze artist, perhaps.

Detailed rendering of the surface topography of the object brings it perceptually close to the viewer. The viewer becomes a scientist, examining morphological detail as if to get closer to the meaning of this strange creature. Instead of revelation, however, all that is revealed is the constructed nature of the object. The wires connecting the figure to the edge of the painted space give the sense of being privy to details of the image's construction, as if the viewer is complicit in a theatrical sleight-of-hand, but they also function to connect the figure to the edge of the painted space, drawing attention to it. We are reminded of the painting as a physical object.

The curved shape of the figure, positioned toward the top of the painting, frames the darkness at the same time as it is framed by it. It creates a central void like that seen in Ribera's *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* (Figure 2.2). While the figure suggests nearness to the viewer, as if almost touching upon the viewer's space, the darkness gives a glimpse of deep space; while the figure seems close and tangible, the darkness is undefined, unknowable. The nearness of the figure conceals the fact that it too, is ultimately unknowable. Its nearness seems to reveal it, but its indecipherable form and its wrapped, constrained qualities tell otherwise.

Similarly, the objects in Juan Sanchez Cotan's *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* c.1600 provide an arched entrance to a dark space (see Figure 3.2). In Cotan's painting a frame is created by the walls of the niche in which the fruit and vegetables are positioned. The objects curve in relation to this frame, but also curve forward into the space of the viewer.



Figure 3.2: Juan Sanchez Cotan, *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* c.1600, oil on canvas, 69.2x85.1 cm. San Diego Museum of Art.

The quince and cabbage hang by strings into the niche, the melon slice edges out of the defined space and the cucumber hangs right over the edge of the ledge as if protruding from the painted space into the space of the viewer. The central dark space recedes in relation to the framing of the niche and away from the space of the viewer. In *slow leap*, by contrast, the framing device of the niche is absent, but the strings/wires on which the figure hangs suffice to define the plane of the painted surface from which the form advances and the dark space recedes. In both of these paintings it is as if the darkness is as much the subject of the painting as the figures, which are like gatekeepers hovering on the cusp between the viewer and the darkness beyond.

When Cotan's painting came to light in 1945, it seemed

unrelated to anything except perhaps to the art of Caravaggio, whose works Sanchez Cotan could not have known and which, in any case, do not really antedate his own ... however, we have come to see that a rich context of ideas and precedents had been accruing and that

these spectacular images were a logical outgrowth of it (Jordan and Cherry 1995, p27).

Cotan's work thus appears to have a close relation to other works of the Baroque in terms of its visual language and the ideas that gave rise to it. The choice of subject matter and their positioning within the framed space "would probably have been recognised by contemporaries as a *canterero*, or primitive larder" (p29); the strings refer to the practice of hanging food to slow spoilage (p29). These aspects seem to define it as a still life, and yet the dark, indefinite space behind differs from the interior space generally associated with still life, and instead suggests a relation to the figure paintings of the Baroque.

Norman Bryson calls still life "the great anti-Albertian genre" (1990, pp71-2) because it opposes the idea of the canvas as a window on the world. Although it masters perspective, the vanishing point - "the jewel" (p72) of perspective - is missing. According to Bryson, the "principal spatial value" of still life is nearness (p72). It proposes a shallower space, a closer space: that of the body. In Cotan's *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, the niche and the fruit are rendered in the shallow perspective of the still life, giving a sense of nearness, but the intimacy of the domestic interior that is suggested gives way to a deep, undefined dark space behind. The suggestion is of a dark void *within* a private, interior space. The arrangement, like the viewer, balances between two different orders of space.

An interpretation of Cotan's fruit as part-objects or fragments of a body is suggested by considering it in relation to Alberto Giacometti's *La Boule Suspendue (Suspended Ball)* 1930-31 (Figure 3.3). After Surrealism, it is difficult not to see in Cotan's fruits the connotations of body parts with, perhaps, some sexual content. The sexual connotations of Giacometti's objects infiltrate readings of Cotan's cut melon and the wedge of the fruit beside it. The smooth curve of the arrangement of Cotan's objects reinforces the idea of a fragmented body. The line they describe links them and makes them parts of a whole figure, the "head" held up by strings and the lower body resting on the ledge.

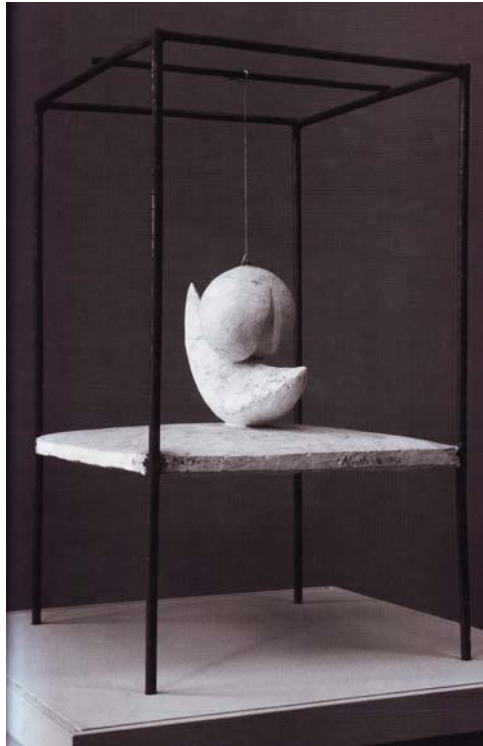


Figure 3.3: Alberto Giacometti, *La Boule Suspendue* (*Suspended Ball*) 1930-31, plaster and metal, 61x37x35.5 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel.

The suggestion of disassembled body parts in Cotan's painting might be understood in the context of the religious orthodoxy of seventeenth-century Spain, where representation of the nude was not allowed (Cherry 1996, p84), as a result of which painting from nature was a pleasure to which painters brought "considerable originality, inventiveness and representational skills" (p84). In this context, the work could be seen as a coded language for something else, something hidden. Its carefully-staged arrangement of precisely-rendered objects in a faux domestic setting is in keeping with such a reading.

Peter Cherry, in *The Hungry Eye: the Still Lives of Juan Sanchez Cotan* (1996) sees a connection between Spanish Baroque painting and Surrealism in that the

high degree of pictorial manipulation and artifice in this supposedly naturalistic genre is combined with an intense visual concentration reminiscent of Surrealism (sic), in which an almost rapt, obsessive

scrutiny of ordinary things seems to alienate them from their familiar, everyday context (pp75-77).

Certain of the formal elements in Cotan's painting such as the arrangement of rounded body-like forms, some suspended by string, the presence of architectural details and a composition in which darkness plays a central role, can be seen in Hans Bellmer's *La Poupée* 1935/49 (Figure 3.4). Bellmer was "a German associate of the Surrealists" (Foster 1993, p101) who made doll-like objects of wood, metal, plaster pieces and ball joints, then manipulated and photographed them. His dolls functioned like still life objects, posed in unsettling tableaux vivants (Lichtenstein 2001, p7) as material for photographic images. The serial nature of Bellmer's photographs, with the doll functioning as a model in various poses evokes "psychologically complex narratives" (Lichtenstein 2001, p7). In individual images, there are powerful evocations of melancholy, death and desire. I will look closely at *La Poupée* 1935/49 because of its parallels, in composition and form, with *slow leap*.

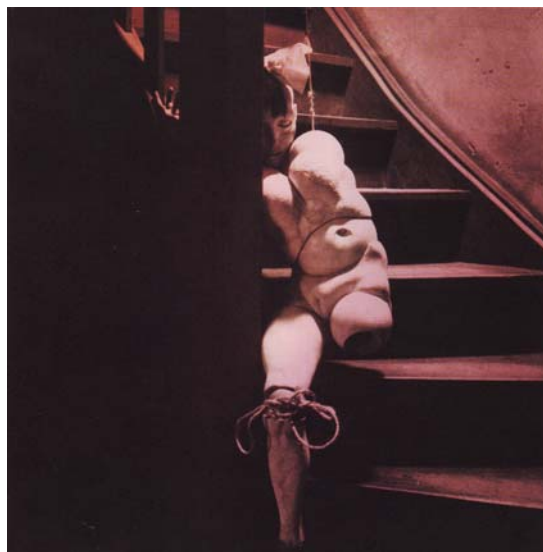


Figure 3.4: Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée* 1935/49, hand-coloured antique gelatin silver print, 14.5x14.5 cm. Private collection.

In this image, the doll is posed on a curving set of stairs. It is positioned centrally in the photographic image, with the stair treads and part of a wall visible to the right, and

an undefined dark space to the left. The upright of the stairway functions as an axis around which the image is constructed.

The doll is made of recognisable body parts, but the body is incomplete and anatomically awry, creating what Rosalind Krauss calls “construction *as* dismemberment” (qtd in Foster, 1993, p103). The doll has one arm, evidenced only by a hand appearing through the railings of the stairway banister. A pair of buttocks serve as breasts. The head, only half-visible, is lowered almost onto the chest, in a position that implies submission, or sleep, or perhaps death. The doll wears a piece of fabric in a parody of female headwear. This sign of youthful femininity is echoed in the pink toning of the black and white photograph and also in the coy positioning of the doll.

The body of the doll is segmented and incomplete, rendered passive by its lack of limbs. Its strangeness and recombinant parts give it potential to become something else. Hal Foster notes that in Bellmer’s dolls, there is a “physical shattering ... of the female image” (1993, p102). The doll is made of parts but, significantly, the parts seem as if they might be moved around to form different arrangements; Bellmer himself stated that “The body is like a sentence that invites us to rearrange it” (qtd. in Foster 1993, p103). Like an armature, the treads of the stairs cut into and across the body at regular intervals, reinforcing its segmentation. At the same time, the regularity of the stair treads suggests the bars of a cage that seem to imprison the figure but also bring order to the otherwise disjointed form.

The doll is held upright by what appears to be rope, wrapped around the torso and extending upwards out of the frame. Another tangle of rope emerges from inside the knee, like internal contents escaping. The figure seems top-heavy, inverting gravity by its anatomical reversals. The body of the doll forms a curve that follows the spiral of the staircase and the twisting that is implied gives a sense of movement both upward and downward, as well as backward and then forward into the space of the viewer.

The architecture within which the doll is positioned is both ordinary and, at the same time, strangely unsettling. Lichtenstein points out that “the contrast between

naturalistic body parts organized unnaturally in realistic everyday environments emphasizes their artificiality” (2001, pp7-13). The object may be a broken doll – that is, refuse – or a female body of sorts; it may be sliding down, or being hauled up the stairs.

The figure of the doll seems to curve around the central axis as if attempting to hide behind the stair bannister. In this position, the figure partially disappears into darkness. The body of the doll and the stairs curve toward the darkness; the doll leans or is pulled into it. The doll and the stairs seem to encircle the dark space which is made central to the image, the point towards which everything moves.

Hal Foster considers Bellmer’s dolls to be “uncanny confusions of animate and inanimate figures ... ambivalent conjunctions ... compulsive repetitions ... difficult intricacies ... of desire, defusion and death” (1993, p101), but acknowledges the violence the *poupées* visit upon the image of the female body (p109). Rosalind Krauss reads them more categorically: “They are not real bodies and they are not even whole bodies”, rather, they are meant to “create meaning itself as blurred” (qtd. in Suleiman 1998, p136). For Susan Suleiman, both of these views are essential to an understanding of Bellmer’s doll images, which produce, rather than a blurring, an instability of meaning (p137).

Suleiman compares the effect of the dolls to the writing of a contemporary of the Surrealists, the French filmmaker and novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet: “the reader slips from a position of aroused voyeur (or possibly, outraged feminist) to aesthetically distanced viewer and back again, in rapid alternations” (Suleiman, 1998, p137). Lichtenstein finds similarities with another writer influential on the Surrealists, Georges Bataille. For Lichtenstein, the “unsettling mixture of human, animal, and automatic qualities” (2001, p44) found in Bellmer’s photographs is consistent with Bataille’s concept of the labyrinth:

a disorienting, dizzying space in which it becomes difficult to distinguish between inside and outside, distance and closeness, self

and loss of self – in other words, a place where opposites merge
(p44)

In *slow leap*, *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* and *La Poupée*, figures move between inanimate and animate, restraint and movement, between intimate and distant, real and illusory. These ambiguities may be the source of their disquieting and yet seductive appeal to the viewer. They intrigue with their detail be it through painting technique or photographic realism, and they draw us in, but only in order to point the way to a darkness that is as present as the figures that frame it. This darkness is never clearly defined. Norman Bryson believes that the empty *cantareros* (ladders) in Cotan's still lifes may be metaphor for the dark void inside the human body (1990, p88), in other words, the darkness is not out there, but inside us.

Part-objects

The segmentation of the figure in *slow leap* is developed in *dirty laundry* (Figure 3.5), to the point where the individual sections are pulled apart and lined up. A line of objects is strung from edge to edge across the space of the painting, held by bulldog and fold-back clips on wire or string. There is a deep red drape or curtain behind the line of objects, but it is only clearly visible at the sides. The classical drape creates a muted frame for the string of objects, rather than a solid backdrop; it disappears into virtual blackness in the centre of the painting, so that the objects are at once framed and free of the frame.

The objects are pushed forward by the loose indication of a backdrop, but then the backdrop falls away to leave them hanging in a void. The clips and wire that hold the objects in place are only barely indicated and almost disappear into the dark background. The hanging of the objects separately along the wire like biological specimens suggests close observation and focused attention, complemented by the careful manner of rendering. This is an unemotional, almost scientific rendering of the objects. The viewer is invited to bring to these strange objects the same analytical eye.



Figure 3.5: Leonie Watson, *dirty laundry* 2010, oil on linen, 76x101.5 cm. Collection of the artist.

The objects represented are fabric forms, knotted, hanging, bulging, creating shapes that resemble body parts: parts of external features or internal organs. However, they are not the “broken, amputated” body fragments of Theodore Gericault, painting in the aftermath of the French Revolution, as described by Linda Nochlin (1994, p16). They are, instead, “part objects”, suggestive of body parts (even sexual organs, albeit of indefinite sex) - somehow individual, at the same time as they demand completion.

The objects appear to have originally been white, but are now greyed - dirty or aged; the absence of saturated colour enhances the tonal form and emphasises sculptural solidity and weight. They each have their own insistent presence. They are arranged in proximity to each other and yet held apart, made distinct from each other; individuals, but related in some way.

The title *dirty laundry* suggests a domestic imperative or - metaphorically - private stories brought into the public arena. There is, in the title, an association of domesticity and sexuality that seems unwholesome. The inanimate objects of the laundry suggest the body that smells and soils clothes – the abject body. These banal

objects are transformed into strangely independent sexual body parts that suggest a taxonomy of hidden desires.

The fragmented body produces a series of “part objects”, identified by Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss as organs of “shifting identity” (1997, p156) that make up “a mechanism to resist meaning, to attack the illustrative or thematic” (p156). In *dirty laundry*, that mechanism is put into play by the series of objects that are vaguely sexual, yet remain obscure. The positioning of these brightly-lit objects in a stage-like setting draws attention to their representative function. As a viewer, we sense meaning, but are unable to access it.

The body fragments in *dirty laundry* suggest the possibility of their fitting together, but they remain apart. The dissatisfaction that arises from the prevention of such a possibility is marked in an emblematic work of Surrealism: Alberto Giacometti’s *La Boule Suspendu (Suspended Ball)* 1930-31, previously discussed and shown in Figure 3.3. In this work a metal frame holds, suspended, a white plaster object shaped like a ball, but with a cleft cut into its underside. The ball is suspended over a convex, horizontal plaster surface that supports a “recumbent wedge” (Bois and Krauss 1997, p152) that the crescent shape almost touches, as “almost to be caressing” (p152). The curvature of the surface on which the crescent sits seems to push it upwards to meet the ball.

Giacometti’s objects suggest sexuality. The French writer Maurice Nadeau commented “Everyone who saw this object functioning ... experienced a strong but indefinable sexual emotion related to unconscious desires. This emotion was in no sense one of satisfaction, but one of disturbance, like that imparted by the irritating awareness of failure” (qtd in Krauss, 1993, p166). The sex of the individual parts is ambiguous – what Bois and Krauss describe as a “perfect sexual ambivalence ... in which the labial form of the wedge is stridently phallic and the active, presumably masculine element of the work, in its roundness, is yieldingly vaginal ... one element sent mutating into the next” (p155). They see the “constantly shifting identity of organs, or “part objects” ... [as] a mechanism to resist meaning” (p156).

In *Suspended Ball*, the juxtaposition of materials: hard/soft, light/dark, rough/smooth, rounded/linear, produces a further disturbance; the classical order suggested by the white plaster forms is juxtaposed with the industrial materials of metal tubing and wire; the body is entrapped, *becomes* a machine. In *dirty laundry*, as in *Suspended Ball*, the “part objects” are held in a system of restraints, of clips and wire and drapery, as well as contained within the space of painting. They are suspended close to each other, but not touching. What is produced is a perpetual enactment of frustrated desire.

Passivity



Figure 3.6: Leonie Watson, *I don't want to talk about it* 2010, oil on linen, 101.5x76cm. Private collection.

In contrast to the implied movement in *slow leap* and *dirty laundry*, the painting *I don't want to talk about it* 2010 (Figure 3.6) introduces the idea of passivity. In this painting, a white form sits on a horizontal surface, with a dark space behind. The form

is an amorphous blob, with little identifying visual information. It has a lower section a little larger than the upper part, this differentiation suggesting a body and a head. The “head” falls forward, giving the figure a hunched appearance. The surface of the form is softly folded and creased; underneath and against these folds are indications of some internal contents.

The white form is to the right of the space; towards the left and positioned higher than the resting form is a much smaller, darkly-coloured object that hangs from a clip on a wire, against the darkness that occupies the top two-thirds of the painting. This smaller object is in the form of a knot of fabric, with a deeply folded outer surface and little sense of internal contents. At its lower end, it has an opening, but this reveals little or nothing.

The shape and posture of the larger figure gives the impression of introspection – the figure seems to be self-contained and self-absorbed as if looking within. At the same time it appears to recoil ever so slightly, whether from the dark figure hanging above it or from the bright light shining on it, is not clear. The opening at the bottom of the dark figure is angled toward the white figure, but there is little indication of any significance in this orientation. The dark figure might almost be a bait to attract the attention of the larger figure, but the latter does not react.

The contrasting visual qualities of the figures, in terms of tone, size, weight and shape, and their positioning in relation to each other, creates a narrative promise which does not materialize. Instead, there is a distinct lack of narrative, a withholding that creates a disturbing emptiness. We are reminded of Wölfflin’s description of the effect of Baroque art:

[the] momentary impact of Baroque is powerful, but soon leaves us with a certain sense of desolation. It does not convey a state of present happiness, but a feeling of anticipation, of something yet to come, of dissatisfaction and restlessness rather than fulfillment. We

have no sense of release, but rather of having been drawn into the tension of an emotional condition (1964, p38).

The isolation of the figures is enhanced by the nature of the lighting. The source of light is neither really inside nor outside the scene. It is inside in that it comes obliquely onto the figures, rather than frontally from the position of the viewer, but it is outside the scene as its source is not visible within the space of the painting. This lighting is characteristic of Baroque paintings, especially those of Caravaggio. The strongly directional “cellar light” spotlights the figures as if to reveal them in their inaction. They seem to shy away from the light into a secret space.



Figure 3.7: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Narcissus* 1598-99, oil on canvas, 110x92 cm. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.

In Baroque painting, this light that comes from elsewhere has been interpreted as a “celestial” light (Friedlaender 1955, p10), but in secular terms might be thought of as coming from a place unknown, from which the figures are excluded and that is equally inaccessible to the viewer. It thus undermines the viewer’s position as beholder of the scene: a destabilising effect. In *The Neo-Baroque Subject*, Kresimir Purgar refers to “gaze destabilization” as “the very essence of the visual arts of the Baroque” (2006,

p28), citing Caravaggio's *Narcissus* 1598-99 (Figure 3.7) as a prime example. In this work, the source of light enters obliquely from outside the painted space. Reinforcing this, Narcissus looks into a space that is not of the painting and not of the viewer, but somewhere between, or outside of each.

Narcissus presents a form similar that of a painting I have already examined: *slow leap* (Figure 3.1). The figure of Narcissus curves across the top half of the painting, delicately supported by the surface of the watery space in which his reflection is dimly perceived. The figure and its reflection frame the dark space at the centre of the painting. The passivity of the figure arises from the composition, which circles around the undefined dark space, punctuated only by a knee that becomes a pivot around which the figure curves. The composition is contained, but with a dark hole at its centre – a composition that speaks of Narcissus' self-absorbed character, unaware, unresponsive to any outside influence.

Similarly, a sense of passivity and introspection pervades Giorgio de Chirico's *Malinconia Autunnale (Melancholy Autumn)* of 1915 (Figure 3.8). We see an almost-empty piazza, in which there is a solitary statue of Ariadne, the mythical Cretan princess who was one of de Chirico's favourite subjects (Gere 2009, p100). On the right, behind the figure of Ariadne, are the three arches of a darkened arcade; on the left is a single arch, through which we can see two distant figures. In the far distance, behind a wall, a steam train passes on its way to somewhere else. The piazza is bathed in the yellow light of the afternoon sun, but the sky is green and the archways of the building are in darkness.

The figure of Ariadne waits in perpetual anticipation of Theseus' return. She reclines, a figure in stone, both inanimate and animate, a sort of living sculpture. The soft draping of her garment contrasts with the stone in which it is rendered and with the rectangular plinth on which she rests. Likewise, the whiteness of her figure contrasts with the dark behind her and the saturated colours of the rest of the painting.

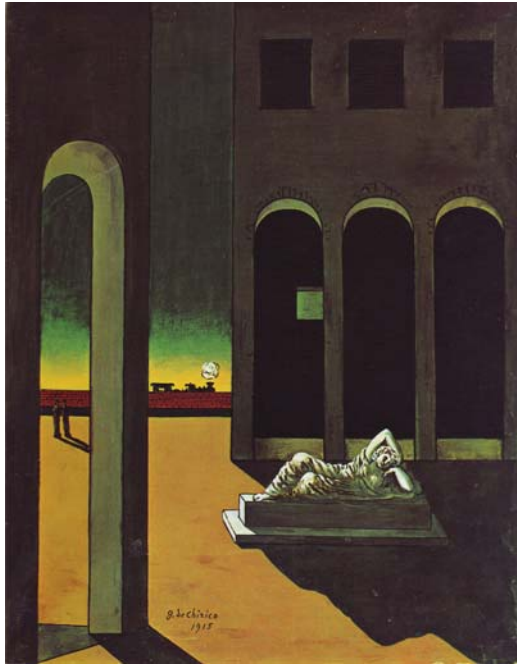


Figure 3.8: Giorgio de Chirico, *Malinconia Autunnale (Melancholy Autumn)* 1915, oil on canvas, 51x64 cm. Isabella Far Collection, Rome.

The light entering the space is reminiscent of the “cellar light” of Caravaggio, with the otherworldly quality of coming from outside of the picture space. This gives the scene a sense of desolation that is echoed in the image of the passing train and the exaggeratedly tiny, distant figures. The figure of Ariadne is pictured in “a state of depressed inactivity, a paralysis that resonates with the viewer’s own feelings of uneasiness and disquiet” (Gere 2009, p100). Her position halfway between the dark and the light suggests an existence on the cusp – between animate and inanimate, between hope and despair, between dream and reality.

In *I don’t want to talk about it*, the white figure, like de Chirico’s Ariadne, waits patiently. It faces the light coming from outside of the space as if that is where its desire lies. The dark object hangs in space as if in the figure’s imagination, the object of its longing.

Exposure

We sense that the figures in the *desire* paintings have been hidden but abruptly brought to light; they seem vulnerable, as if their protection has been removed. Their surfaces resemble fabric but might also be skin. This gives them an intimate quality suggestive of the body, but not necessarily of the human figure. They are familiar, yet unidentifiable, as if they have been inside rather than disclosed.



Figure 3.9: Leonie Watson, *the truth about Christmas* 2010, oil on linen, 61x40.5 cm. Private collection.

The painting *the truth about Christmas* 2010 (Figure 3.9) stands out from the other paintings in *desire* by virtue of the relatively light space in which the form hangs. The dark, indefinite void found in the other works is absent. Instead of an ostensibly external space, this seems internal. As in the other paintings, there are no clear indications of spatial depth; there are no indications of context, no cast shadow from the object and therefore no way to determine whether this space is shallow or deep.

The bright light that shines on the figure makes this vulnerable-looking object seem exposed, as if we are seeing the normally-hidden insides of something. The form consists of velvety orbs of different sizes, a number of small ones at the top, anchored by the weight of the largest, at the lower end. The spheres hang as a bunch around a central cord. This central anchor point seems unstructured, forming soft ridges, or folds, between the spheres. In this painting, the folds are on the inside of the figure rather than the outside. It might be that we are seeing the figure inverted, the inside turned out so that its contents are revealed.

The composite form might suggest symbols of fertility: breasts, bellies, eggs, testicles, possibly eyeballs, or some unidentified internal organ. Despite its stripped-bare appearance, however, there is still the sense of something else inside. There is an air of intimacy and yet also the suggestion of something obscene just barely contained.

In this painting the form seems clearly defined at first, but the title, *the truth about Christmas*, implies the existence of an *untruth*, something hidden, denied or misrepresented. The idea of Christmas - happiness, family, generosity – is here given a dark connotation, but instead of the darkness being literally visible as in other works, here it is suggested in the title, provoking unwanted associations.

Like *the truth about Christmas*, Louise Bourgeois' *Fragile Goddess* 2002 (Figure 3.10) suggests fragility coupled with resilience. It is evocative of the soft toys of childhood, tactile and yielding, but at the same time it is solid, weighty. The object is made from hand-stitched fabric, a fragile material. Bourgeois grew up in a family of tapestry restorers and this work resonates with the history of fabrics and of repairing, making whole again.

Frances Morris, in *Stitches in Time*, wrote of Bourgeois' fabric works:

Technically these are complex figures, their bodies made not of a random patchwork of scraps but revealing, in the cut and design of their surface sections, a kind of structural, external skin which is,

ironically, more evocative of the human body beneath the skin – the pattern of muscle and tendon ... Naked yet clothed, suggesting skin yet revealing aspects of the flayed body, they are at the same time profoundly disturbing and yet speak of warmth and nurture (2003, pp25-6).



Figure 3.10: Louise Bourgeois, *Fragile Goddess* 2002, fabric, 31.8x 12.7x15.2 cm. Private collection.

Fragile Goddess has the appearance of a body turned inside out – we can see the joins between different fragments – the construction of the body not normally worn on the outside. Like Bourgeois' *Goddess, the truth about Christmas* speaks of vulnerability and exposure but also engenders horror. Evocatively pink, round and bauble-like, it equally suggestive of tumorous growths or skinned body parts. It turns desire inside out to become, simultaneously, repulsion.

Weight and Weightlessness

The weight of the figures in the *desire* paintings is suggested by the tension of the hanging wires or the sag of the figures and by their folds and constrictions that suggest bulk against which downward forces act. Their animate appearance combined with the

sense of material substance provokes an empathic response in the viewer as if to a human figure. In *swag* (Figure 3.11), the perception of weight combines with the human scale of the figure and the shroud-like appearance of the drapery to suggest the inert mass of a dead body.

However, the perception of weight is counteracted by a sense of the lightness of the figures, brought about by their hanging into the space from some unidentified anchor point outside the picture, so that they appear to float. This is reinforced by the observation that the wires holding the figures are fine, thread-like, and seem inadequate to hold their apparent bulk. It is not the contrast between weight and weightlessness that characterises the paintings in *desire*; rather, it is the way these seemingly opposite qualities exist simultaneously.



Figure 3.11: Leonie Watson, *swag* 2012, oil on linen, 122x214 cm. Collection of the artist.

The painting *swag* is the largest in the exhibition *desire*, at over two metres long. The figure in *swag* is the size of an adult human body, and curves in the way of a reclining nude, or, in contrast to this, the slumped body of Christ taken down from the cross (see Figure 3.12). It has the appearance of bunched fabric, held tightly together at intervals by strictures: threads tightened around the circumference of the object. In between these constrictions, the form swells or loosens. In an apparent continuation of the

threads around the form, a fine line emerges from each end of the figure and extends to an upper edge, suspending the form in the space of the painting.

The figure is white and hangs in front of a dark space. The contrast between these two elements makes a stark composition in which the shape of the figure and its position in the dark space is foregrounded. The figure seems at once heavy and light, full and empty. The folded surface suggests wrapping, as if there is something hidden, or protected, inside, and yet there is no evidence of contents. Even the constrictions of the form, against which internal contents might be expected to push, give no clues; it is as if there is nothing inside, just more drapery, more surface.

The curve of the figure and its positioning on the canvas combine to produce a back-and-forth movement that suggests weightlessness. However, the graceful curve is interrupted by the division of the “body” into sections. The beauty of the drapery is offered and then taken away. There is an awareness of sumptuous bodily folds, the eye is drawn to them and traces their movements, but the segmentation of the figure truncates the lines of folds and prevents the smooth flow of vision along the form. The segments vary in length and in the intensity of their folds. There is no regularity to the interruptions, and this is additionally unsettling.

The binding of the figure in *swag* frustrates any desire we might have for the sensuous drapery found in classical painting. The flow of the fabric is restricted, and it is as a result of this constraint that the perception of weight occurs. The binding of the figure produces concentrated folding, giving a more pronounced topography, further enhanced in this painting by focused directional lighting that catches the ridges of fabric and leaves the valleys in the dark. Such folded surfaces are perceptually deep and invite the eye to linger and explore; they seem to become more materially substantial, more subject to the force of gravity.

The wires from which the figure hangs are very fine in relation to the size of the figure they support, as if the figure is weightless; in contrast, its shape suggests weight. The

wires draw the eyes upward, against gravity, but the figure brings them back down to the lowest edge of the painting.

The figure in *swag* sags in the way of Christ's body in the *Pietà* 1433 by Michelangelo Buonarroti (Figure 3.12). In this marble sculpture, the body of the dead Christ, recently taken down from the cross, is held by Mary; it is an image replete with pathos. The graceful line of the young man's body slumps heavily, but Mary's solidly-draped garments provide a firm base on which he rests. She holds him as if he is weightless even as we perceive his dead weight. Each of the figures seems at once both heavy and light. The sense of weight and weightlessness is somehow made more powerful by the mass of the material from which the sculpture is rendered, as if some magical transformation has taken place.



Figure 3.12: Michelangelo Lodovico di Buonarroti, *Pietà* 1499, marble, 174x195 cm. St. Peter's Basilica.

In contrast, the perception of weight and weightlessness in Jusepe de Ribera's painting *St Bartholomew* 1634 (Figure 3.13) arises from the transformation of the insubstantiality of paint into the physicality of the saint's body positioned just prior to his torture by flaying. His arms make a strong diagonal across the space of the painting. One hand is tied up high to a post, the wrist is twisted to indicate the pull of his body against the bindings while the elbow of his other arm points down to the

opposite corner; the forearm and hand are raised in the familiar gesture of supplication. The saint's head also lifts as he looks upward towards the source of light.



Figure 3.13: Jusepe de Ribera, *St. Bartholomew* 1634, oil on canvas, 104x113 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The tonal structure of the painting effectively creates two different spaces. The arm by which St. Bartholomew is tethered is pulled back into the space of the painting which is also the plane in which his torturers are positioned. The free arm of the saint, his shoulder and his face tilt forward of the rest, into bright light. It seems that different rules apply in these two spaces. The figures in the space further from the viewer, including the right arm of the saint, are bound by the laws of gravity - they have weight. The brightly-lit parts of the saint's body are not subject to these physical laws and they seem to float upwards towards the light. The man sharpening his knife, in preparation for the flaying of the saint, remains on the physical plane, while the saint looks up and is illuminated, seems to be raised up, even as he pulls painfully against the rope that ties him, connects him to the earthly realm.

The positioning of the saint's body in relation to his torturers, in relation to the light source and in relation to the space of the painting bears striking similarities to Ribera's painting of *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* examined earlier in this text and shown in

Figure 2.2. In both of these works, there is a sense of the weight of material existence that is literally *behind* the apparent weightlessness of the spirit.

In my work, it is not the relationship between the body and the spirit that is at stake, at least not in the way these would have been understood during the Baroque. In *St. Bartholomew*, the earthly body is measured against spiritual devotion, where these are apparently opposing forces. In my work the simultaneity of weight and weightlessness implies the intertwined nature of the material and immaterial, of the body and the self, reality and illusion.

Body language



Figure 3.14: Leonie Watson, *the space between* 2012, oil on linen, 101.5x76 cm. Collection of the artist.

However ambiguous the figures in the *desire* paintings might be: animate/inanimate, part/whole, inside/outside, they nevertheless exhibit distinct attributes by virtue of their body language. Turning, leaping, slumping, hanging, bulging, they make shape

and posture into a language of desire and frustration, of vulnerability and inevitability, of restraint and excess.

The narrow white figure in *the space between* 2012 (Figure 3.14) is held by wires from above and below so that it seems to balance between opposing forces. The figure is constrained and yet seems to float. It is not submissive but neither is it demonstrative. It maintains its composure. The top of the figure is rounded, intimating the shape of a tiny head. The central “torso” is relatively long and thin, with folds running lengthwise that indicate lines of force arising from the upper and lower restraints. Near the bottom end, a tightly folded and bound section gives way to a loose fabric “tail”; this is the only part of the figure where the fabric of the body is allowed to drape.



Figure 3.15: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio *The Annunciation* 1608-1609, oil on canvas, 285x205 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nancy.

The attitude of this figure is reminiscent of the archetypal posture in countless versions of the Annunciation. An example is given in Figure 3.15: Caravaggio’s *The Annunciation* 1608-1609. In this painting, the Virgin tilts her head in humility, seeming to accept the fate the angel foretells. However, there is at the same time hesitation; her head bows with a movement that pulls it back towards her body in a sign of modesty, or ambivalence.

The figure in *the space between* similarly suggests ambivalence, revealed in the humble tilt of the head that gently pulls against the upward pull of the thread that connects to the top of the painted space. An opposite force is applied by a thread wrapped around the lower part of the figure that pulls downward, but this is countered by the relatively unconstrained “tail”. The “torso” itself retains a softness that seems to counteract the impression of binding and stretching that the threads or wires suggest.

The figure of the Virgin and the figure in *the space between* both respond to a light coming from outside the picture. In *The Annunciation* this is assumed to be a divine light symbolizing God; in *the space between*, the light is ambiguous. In each painting, however, the body language of the figure conveys, subtly, the ambivalence of a self held in a kind of suspension between states of being.

Performing Personae

In *the buddy system part III* 2009 the spotlighting of the figures, their tableau-like arrangement, and their intimate address to the viewer combine with the enigmatic space to create a stage-like situation (Figure 3.16). The figures become personae, carefully positioned in relation to each other and to the viewer.



Figure 3.16: Leonie Watson, *the buddy system part III* 2009, oil on linen, 46x51 cm. Collection of the artist.

The space in which the painted forms of *desire* are situated is not the space of landscape - though it is suggestive of a surface and a space beyond - nor is it the intimate space of the portrait. In this work, there is an illusion of depth, of space behind the figures, but this is not deep perspectival space: there is little indication of its extent. The object/figures sit on a stage-like surface like that of a still life, but this is not the defined space of still life painting, where a wall or some such backdrop suggests the intimacy of a domestic setting. Instead the space in which these objects exist is depthless, undefined, dark and yet not convincingly spacious. It is more like an immeasurable void with no discernible reference points.

In its deliberate staging, the work refers not only to still life, but equally to the tableaux of Caravaggio and the appearance of figures on a stage characteristic of Baroque painting. In Caravaggio's *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness* c1604 (Figure 2.3), the dark space within which the figure of St. John is positioned is only nominally an exterior setting as there are no indicators of depth; it functions as a stage-setting that serves to push the figure forward, into the focused light. Varriano claims that the "visceral impact" of Caravaggio's paintings derives from the "spatial proximity" of his figures:

since spatial relationships are naturally implicated in psychological interactions, the closeness of the artist to the model, and thus the viewer to the portrayal, creates a certain expectation of intimacy (2006, p62).

The painting *keeping it together* 2010 in Figure 3.17, confronts the viewer directly. A centrally-placed object is made up of many different colours. The fragments are individual pieces of cloth, like a bundle of rags. Pieces fit together to make a domed form loosely held together by further pieces of cloth tied around the whole. The lumpen form sits on a horizontal surface, again reminiscent of a still life. The edge of this stage-like surface is shown near the bottom of the painting, perceptually close to the viewer. The viewer is positioned at the edge of this stage, level with the figure. It

brings the viewer close to the figure, as if to reveal it, but the figure remains ambiguous.

Unlike most of the paintings in *desire*, *keeping it together* is multi-coloured, but the colours come from a limited palette and therefore create a harmonious whole. Striped pieces within the accumulation stand out and yet function to hold together the other pieces, by virtue of their allied colours. This motley collection of bits - blind, mute and passive - hopefully maintains a shape sufficient to the convincing performance of a persona on stage. Its fragmented, patchwork, and yet composed appearance is its message.



Figure 3.17: Leonie Watson, *keeping it together* 2010, oil on canvas, 101.5x76 cm.

With its fragmentary and multi-coloured forms accumulated in a triangular composition on a stone ledge, *keeping it together* has commonalities with a traditional still life like that of de Heem (Figure 2.6). The paintings that make up *the buddy system* 2009 (two of which are shown in Figures 3.16 and 3.18) also conform to the characteristics of traditional still life in that they sit, quite still, on a surface and are available for quiet contemplation. On the other hand - like the figure in *keeping it*

together - they are not the familiar objects of the still life. The paintings in *the buddy system* are populated by strange folded, knotted almost-creatures – personae – that seem, by their proximity and positioning, to be in some kind of dramatic relationship. They seem to be aware of being observed, and have composed themselves for the viewer. The encounter between these personae has been caught by the light that sweeps across them, as if an isolated moment of a hidden narrative has been revealed.



Figure 3.18: Leonie Watson, *the buddy system part II* 2009, oil on linen, 46x51 cm. Private collection.

In *the buddy system part II* (Figure 3.18), we seem to be observing two different psychological states in juxtaposition. The figure closest to the viewer is warmer in hue and more expressive in form than the figure further back. The front figure seems to extrude contents even as it curls inwards, whereas the figure in the background is anxiously poised, observing the antics of the figure in front. The figures are knotted and self-contained as if withholding something but they also have an appearance of vulnerability, as if their soft internal bits are revealed. They are, in one sense, incommunicative, but their positioning in relation to each other, their differences in colour and their contrasting postures clearly articulate relationships between them.

Like the strange soft creatures of *the buddy system*, the figures in Yves Tanguy's *Tes Bougies Bouge (Your Tapers Taper)* 1929 (Figure 3.19) are amorphous blobs that might have been squeezed out of a toothpaste tube. They rest or float, and “might be

hot or cold, wet or dry, rising from surface to air or floating under water” (Caws, 2004, p88). Like the forms in *the buddy system*, they are positioned in an ambiguous space that is not clearly interior nor exterior and there is the suggestion of a performance, especially in the case of the two centrally-positioned figures. Their positions in relation to each other and the fact that they seem more solid than those around them suggests their mutual involvement in a narrative, though no clues are given as to its nature. We are drawn to the unspoken drama between these two inscrutable characters. Mute and featureless, they are essentially unknowable to us.



Figure 3.19: Yves Tanguy, *Tes Bougies Bouge* (*Your Tapers Taper*) 1929, oil on canvas, 73x92 cm. Private collection.

The figures in *Tes Bougies Bouge* reveal even less than the figures in *the buddy system*. As personae they are intriguing, yet enigmatic; they are will-o'-the-wisp, fleeting entities, that might evaporate. In comparison, the figures in *the buddy system*, and indeed, in most of the works in *desire*, seem to temporarily appear in the space of the painting as if caught unawares, revealed by the light shafting into the dark space into which they might disappear just as quickly. They are, however, tangible, substantial and vulnerable. Their wrapped and knotted forms seem to both conceal and reveal; they picture the difficulty of communicating at the same time as projecting the vulnerable states of melancholy, loss, uncertainty, disgust, and desire.

Apparent in all of the paintings in *desire* is the deliberate construction, staging and lighting involved in the making of the works. The paintings declare themselves as fictions and this makes explicit the way in which the figures in the paintings perform for the viewer. What they stage is a scenario of contradictions, the physical forms suggesting a parallel psychological drama of control and volition, buoyancy and weight, darkness and light.

Chapter Four

Strange objects in the studio

French painter Pierre Roy preferred to “take his strange objects into a corner and worry at them in private”

Dawn Ades, *Surrealism: Revolution by Night*



Figure 4.1: Studio photograph of staged maquette for *slow leap*.

The making of the works in *desire* is a considered and controlled process. The figures in the paintings appear to derive from the imagination, but this is far from the case. For each painting a model is specially constructed then carefully staged in the studio and positioned in a particular relation to a light source. The models are arranged as a kind of still life tableau from which the paintings are painstakingly rendered in a process involving coloured grounds, tonal underpainting and subsequent opaque and transparent layers. But while the process of making these works is like that of still life, the paintings that result have as much in common with the mythological and religious dramas of the Baroque.

Making Models

The models for the paintings are constructed of fabric that is knotted, tied, loosely draped or bound with wire. Each object is made from materials used in everyday life (sheets, discarded clothing, safety pins, rubber bands) and from the studio or the shed (string, wire, clips). Some of these objects are shown in Figure 4.2. One of the maquettes for this exhibition is a little different in that it has a child's marbles held tightly inside the fabric of a discarded piece of clothing (Figure 4.3).

The selection of fabrics and other materials is carefully considered. Items of clothing retain resonances of the body, socks have an added abject quality, bed sheets have connotations of intimacy, sexuality, but also illness, or death, and since Tracey Emin's *Bed* 1998, which consisted of her soiled bed surrounded by debris, "the bloody aftermath of a nervous breakdown" (*Saatchi Gallery*), sheets have taken on an abject quality of their own.

For me, white bed sheets retain memories of the laundry in my childhood home and my mother's mangle – a hand-cranked wringer consisting of a tub and on top of this, two rubber rollers pressed together, designed to remove excess water from laundry before it was hung on the line to dry. Just-washed sheets would be pushed between the rollers on one side and forced out the other squashed flat like a body emptied of its contents.

Wire could be thought of as the opposite in physical qualities to bed sheets – cold, hard, metallic, linear. For me, wire is associated with the shed, with fixing as opposed to comforting; with my father as opposed to my mother. These two kinds of materials come from the feminine and masculine realms of my childhood. In the objects I construct, these materials and their resonances are juxtaposed to create a blurring of genders, or entangle to make a disturbing image of control.



Figure 4.2: Studio photograph of various constructed objects.

The construction of objects involves time spent handling materials, physically engaging with them in a way that brings a sense of touch to the objects and thence to the figures in the paintings. The making of the object is a “simultaneously playful and serious business”, to borrow a phrase from the psychologist Carol Strohecker (2007, p25). Strohecker, in her “Knot Lab” at MIT, encouraged children to tie knots as they talked to her about their experiences. She observed the children tying knots and saw the process as spanning “the deliberate and the spontaneous, the rational and affective, the conscious and unconscious” (2007, p25). For Strohecker, knots are “objects that enable us to explore the inner states of those who tie them” (p26).

Fabrics are bunched, twisted, knotted and tied to make shapes that are restrained or tightly constricted (Figure 4.1). They are manipulated into shapes, rather than their shapes being determined by the fall of fabric that characterises traditional drapery. Folds in the forms indicate weight, lines of pressure or the buckling of excess material. The force of gravity is made apparent by the direction of creases; constraints are indicated by intensity of folding. The complex surface of creases, folds and invaginations is reassuring to the touch and suggestive to the eye.

My aim in making these objects for my paintings is the creation of a form that is able to hold a particular but unnamed feeling. The construction of the object is quite intentional and the process is consciously undertaken, but the final form is

unpredictable; what is being undertaken is a careful unearthing or a process of making visible buried truths.



Figure 4.3: Studio photograph of partial maquette for *the truth about Christmas*.

The handling of fabrics resonates with sense memories - the memory of touch and being touched, of security and warmth, the comfort and the intimacy of skin against skin. But sheets also remind me of hospitals and the stains on sheets that are the markers of significant moments in a life – an injury or illness, a birth or a death. In contrast, the cold hardness of wire, the pinch of a clip or a taut string against the softness of worn fabric suggests containment or control.

The object is something like a container for memories and feelings, but it is also a maquette. It is a way of visualising and testing ideas for painting. In the construction process I think about figures and composition based on the developing form of the model, what it conveys to me and how that might be staged for painting.

These forms are emotionally-charged and yet ambiguous, inflected with bodily references and yet psychologically-laden. Their making suggests the notion of transitional object, described by D. W. Winnicott in *Playing and Reality* (1971) as the way objects are used by an infant to mediate between their internal and their external worlds (p47). Winnicott believes that “in all stages of life we continue to search for objects we can experience as both within and outside of the self” (Turkle 2007, p314).

The objects and the related paintings might be seen in this light, as a way of visualizing a relationship between inside and outside, private and public, self and other.

These objects are made in private and are not intended to be shown in public. As raw material, they are too abject, too vulnerable, too intimate in meaning to be displayed. I have already suggested that they are a materialisation of interior life, of that which is normally hidden from the gaze. The making of the object brings these vulnerabilities into the outside world in a tentative way. The process of painting produces another level of displacement, of protection. The raw feeling is not exposed, but transmuted through a carefully-controlled process of making, staging and encoding in the object of the painting.

Staging

The figures in my paintings hang or sit on unidentifiable surfaces in darkly obscure spaces, the result of staging the maquettes against a dark background made from black cloth and placing them on a horizontal surface or hanging them from wire. The practicalities of staging have a bearing on the shapes of the painted figures. Because the objects are made of soft, manipulable materials, their final shapes are dependent on the means of suspending or otherwise positioning them. Wires bind some forms, or hold them in position. Some hang from wire that resembles a laundry line, their weight indicated by tension lines in the fabric; others are strung between two or more wires (Figure 4.4). The placement of an object determines which side of the object will be visible from the painting position, and therefore what shape it will take in the painting. The staging is therefore as influential in the materialisation of the form as the initial choice of fabrics and their manipulation into shapes.

Where there is more than one form, their placement in relationship to each other inflects their meanings. In the three paintings of *the buddy system*, the figures take on distinct personalities, not just by virtue of their shapes and positioning in the space of

the painting, but also in their relation to each other. In these particular works, there is a sense of an internal narrative between the figures, within the space of the painting.



Figure 4.4: Studio photograph of staged maquette for *the space between*.

Some of the objects have wires wrapped around or attached to them. Paradoxically, the wires that hold the objects also shape them; their constraints both create the objects' "personalities" and seem to limit their movement. Folds and creases are held in place by binding wires, determining the surface topography and form of the objects; at the same time the objects are held by those wires which determine their position and posture.

Wires are often apparent in the finished painting. However, the painted lines representing these wires are very fine, barely visible (see Figure 3.1). This makes the objects seem heavy by comparison and brings a tension to the painting by virtue of the fact that the object looks as if it might snap its tethers and fall. In *slow leap*, for example, the apparent weight of the object as indicated by the intensely folded form,

and its large, dangling “head” is only barely countered by the wires holding it together and supporting it. This combines with the positioning of the figure toward the top of the painting, above a dark void, to create tension between buoyancy and weight.

In *I don't want to talk about it*, *dirty laundry*, *slow leap*, *swag*, *the space between* and *the truth about Christmas*, the wires attached to the figures position them in relation to the edge of the painting support, thus alluding to the painting as an object in physical space. In these works, the relationship between the seemingly weighty materiality of the figure and the fiction of painting is deliberately articulated.

The lighting of the figures is, as in Baroque paintings, dramatic. In all of the works the light is from a single source, originating from the side. In most cases natural lighting is used, but in the large work titled *swag* it was necessary to use a diffused spotlight due to the limitations of the working space. The light catches the near side of an object leaving the opposite side in relative darkness and, where there is a surface, casting a long shadow. The light exaggerates the shape of the object, it catches on folds and passes over indentations. The topographic details of the form are intensified, ridges catch the light and are made more prominent, creases and indentations appear to deepen.

The focused lighting creates the impression of figures on a stage. In *dirty laundry*, there is a backdrop of deep red curtaining reminiscent of the theatre. In others, the undifferentiated black of the backdrop that visually isolates the form or forms reinforces the impression of a figure in a spotlight. The sparseness of their staging is countered by a painting process that is complex, time-consuming, methodical and specific. The careful attention to detail and the resulting clarity of form create the impression that, however strange and unfamiliar these objects may seem, and however indefinite the space in which they exist, they are convincingly real presences.

Painting

The paintings in *desire* are painstakingly-rendered. They are many-layered, with later layers applied only after those underneath are dry. This method gives the greatest control and enables the rendering of subtle tonal variations and a high degree of detail (see Figure 4.7). The paintings are made according to what are considered traditional techniques: coloured grounds, tonal underpainting and alternation of opaque and transparent pigment layers. In general terms, there is a sequence of steps that I have followed in the making of these works. The painting process begins with the laying down of a coloured ground over primed linen canvas. In some of these works it is a cool, mid-toned ground but, in the majority of the works in *desire*, a warm dark ground has been used. This is a contemporary interpretation of one commonly used in the Baroque period (Goethe ctd in Deleuze 1993, p 147, n.11).

When the painting is being executed on a mid-toned ground, as shown in Figure 4.5, the imprimatura is made up of iron oxide red (known as Venetian red), phthalocyanin blue and lead white, blended to make a grey-violet. Over this initial layer, a double tonal underpainting is executed in burnt umber followed, when dry, by lead white; the dark areas are defined in burnt umber, the light areas in lead white, and the middle tones are defined by combinations of these as well as areas of the mid-toned ground that are left untouched. Together these produce an underpainting that is modulated in terms of colour temperature as well as being tonally complex.

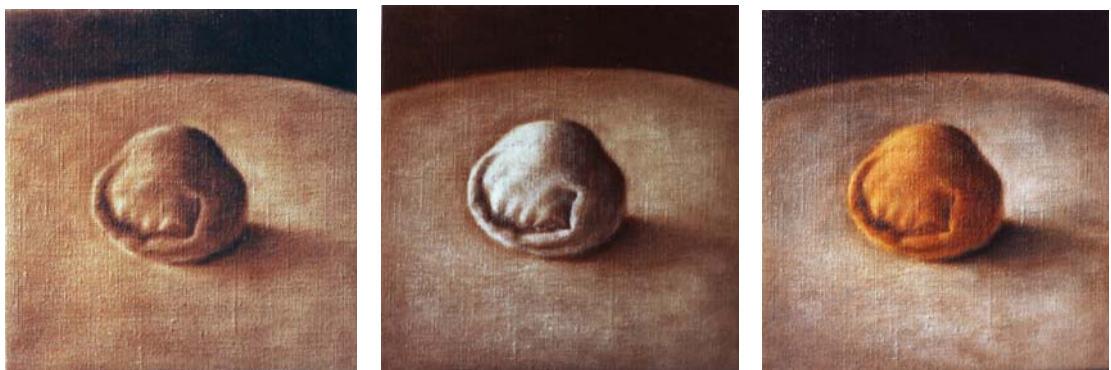


Figure 4.5: A sequence for painting on a mid-toned ground: ground with tonal underpainting in burnt umber; second stage of tonal underpainting in lead white; beginning of coloured layers. Painting shown is Leonie Watson, *Little One* 2004, oil on linen, 10x10 cm.

When the ground is dark, the underpainting is in lead white only, applied solidly in the light areas, scumbled in the mid-tones and then very thinly-applied in the dark parts of the figure (Figure 4.6). The areas designating the “backdrop” are, in the most part, left with only the ground colour. After the one or two-layered underpainting is dry, opaque colour is applied in a thin, modulated layer that on top of the underpainting will result in three different tonal colours; in some cases, this layer is applied in three separately-mixed tones. In either case, the result is a subtle alternation between warm and cool colours; the lighter areas are slightly warmer, the mid-tones relatively cool and then the darker tones are again warm. Some of the paintings in *desire - the buddy system* (Figures 3.16, 3.18 and 5.15), *keeping it together* (Figure 3.17) and *the truth about Christmas* (Figure 3.9) - use distinct colours; but in the majority of the works, the opaque layers are virtually monochromatic: essentially warm or cool whites and greys in a tonal composition. After the opaquely-painted layers, layers of transparent colour are selectively applied, more in the darkest areas such as the background but also in the darker tones of the figure. When necessary, a further layer of opaques is added in the lightest areas.



Figure 4.6: Studio photograph of the maquette for *swag* and the painting in progress, showing the first stage of a white underpainting on a dark ground.

The process of alternating opaque and transparent colours tends to push back and then draw forward the perceived picture plane, as opaque and transparent pigments have distinctly different optical behaviours (Figure 4.7). Attention to these varying optical qualities allows the creation of an optically dynamic painting in which figures seem to occupy real space. This is reinforced by the detailed rendering of surface features, attention to tonal structure and the isolation of figures on a dark ground, giving them the appearance of substance and three-dimensionality.

The attention paid in the painting process to the details of the objects I make is not intended to slavishly transcribe the object. It is done to bring a sense of authenticity to the painted figure, in the same way as an actor might incorporate observed details of everyday behaviour into their performance in order to bring a fictional character to life. The exact shape of the object is not as important as the feeling it conveys. Attention to detail in the painting process thus functions to bring a sense of the real to the figure, so that the marked ambiguity of the form is counterbalanced by the sense that it is a real thing. The “realism” of my work is a strategy to grab and hold the viewer’s attention on an image that is essentially ambiguous and offers few clues as to its context or meaning.



Figure 4.7: A sequence of steps for painting on a dark ground: red oxide and burnt umber ground with a tonal underpainting (lead white); application of a modulated layer of opaque colour (naphthol red and vermilioned cadmium red); selective glazing (various colours including alizarin crimson, ultramarine blue, transparent oxide red and vine black) and adjustment of the light tones with opaque colours. The painting shown is Leonie Watson, *siren* 2008, oil on linen, 40x26cm.

Painting in a “realist” style was a strategy employed by the Surrealists but otherwise rare within Modernism, which “rejected realism explicitly” (Meuris 2004, p73). According to Ades in *Revolution by Night*, Salvador Dali painted with “passionate precision” (1993, p56), in order that

the world of the imagination and of concrete irrationality may be as objectively evident, of the same consistency, of the same durability, of the same persuasive ... and communicable thickness as that of the exterior world of phenomenal reality (Dali qtd in Ades p56).

René Magritte, likewise, chose to paint in a realist style. According to Meuris, this is because only by “the most faithful reproductions of objects, things – including people – and all that we see around us in everyday life, one can force the beholders of these images to question their own condition” (2004, p73). Magritte’s aim was “to use the known to reveal the unknown” (p76).

The constructed nature of the works in *desire*, together with the clarity of their rendering, is in apparent contradiction to their unidentifiable forms. At the level of process, the objects I make are akin to Surrealist objects. They take domestic, familiar materials and make them strange or “uncanny”, a quality described by Sigmund Freud. Freud used the German word *heimlich* meaning homelike, domesticated or comfortable, but also concealed or secret, and its opposite, *unheimlich*, meaning strange, uncomfortable or frightening, but also meaning that which “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Freud 1919, p224). He noted that “*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*” (p225). The “uncanny” is thus the familiar become strange. Though they originate in fabrics that are evocative of the home and nurturing, the objects I construct suggest other meanings. Through painting, they undergo another transformation to become figures of both desire and repulsion, animate and inanimate, inside and outside.

Draperies, folds and shrouds

In painting, drapery may mould the body's outlines, follow its curves, define its mass, in every way give form to the body. But it may have the reverse effect. Piles of wanton cloth, a generous train of satin or even the tablecloth of a still-life may be painted as if these undulating folds have no internal structure – and without internal structure, they register only a state of collapse. It is as if cloth were so compelling precisely because of the way it has conventionally lurched between these poles.

Bryony Fer "The Pleasure of Cloth"

Drapery, like the nude, is a pictorial artifice. It has meanings beyond the representation of a physical garment, sheet or curtain. Cloth, itself, is manufactured, but drapery has undergone "transformation by yet a further layer of human work and thus appears in an artwork, carefully arranged or invented to look more than just cloth" (Doy 2002, p10). Drapery takes the form of a "condensed" tonal arrangement that attracts the eye with a surfeit of visual information, drawing it in to its folds but refusing entry. It folds the painted space - seems, in fact, to fold the surface of the painting as if the canvas itself has buckled - thus disrupting the perceptual boundary between illusory and real space, between object and representation.

Drapery and textiles have a close association with the body by virtue of the history of their use in relation to cleaning, screening, dressing, protecting and comforting. Drapery may conceal but equally serves to reveal. In certain configurations, draperies come to stand in for the body by visual analogy: the skin's surface is evoked by creases, folds, bulges and invaginations that "echo its crevices [and] draw attention to its erotic points" (Fer 1998, p11). A fold in a piece of cloth may even come to "look like something never seen before, an interior landscape with intimate recesses, perhaps

even folds of tissue inside the body, or some other unexpected and uncharted territory” (p13).

The analogous relationship between drapery and the body is reflected in the language used to describe them. Drawing teachers use the term “anatomy” to refer to the structure of drapery, likening it to a body (Doy 2002, p26) and the words used to describe drapery and the skin have been used interchangeably: when discussing drapery in his *Lectures on Fine Arts*, Hegel referred to the folds and wrinkles of skin (ctd in Doy 2002, p238, n.35). In turn, skin has been likened to cloth: in the 1562 sculpture by Marco d’Agrate (1509-1574) at Milan Cathedral, St. Bartholomew wears his flayed skin draped around his shoulders and torso (see Figure 5.1), as if it were a garment.



Figure 5.1: Marco d’Agrate, *St. Bartholomew Flayed* 1562, marble, dimensions unknown. Duomo di Milano.

There is potential for draperies to imitate the flowing movement of fluids of the body, as seen in Caravaggio’s painting of *Judith and Holofernes* c.1581 (Figure 2.1), where a swag of blood-red fabric hangs over Holofernes’ bloody decapitation. Another such

expanse of red cloth is seen in Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* 1601-1605/6 (Figure 5.2), hovering above her on her deathbed. Hollander describes it as like "an airborne stream of blood" (2002, p65). Here, drapery is not only associated with the flesh and fluids of the body, but also with the chaos of the body *in extremis*.



Figure 5.2: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Death of the Virgin* 1601-1605/6, oil on canvas, 369x245 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

The draperies in Ribera's *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* (Figure 2.2) elaborate the relationships between the figures. The torturers wear more garments than St. Lawrence, which intensifies our sense of his vulnerability. The fabric that girds St. Lawrence's otherwise naked body (Figure 5.3) is ostensibly a loincloth, but in its form and the manner of its rendering it produces an intensely folded space that conceals, but at the same time draws attention to the site of the saint's physical vulnerability. The saint's clothing has been removed and the gathered-up drapery of what appears to be his cloak is held - bunched - to make a solid form in the hands of one of his torturers

(Figure 5.4). The crumpled fabric of the cloak is both surface and substance; it seems to hold the earthly identity of which St. Lawrence has been stripped by his torturers – a metaphorical flaying.



Figure 5.3: Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* 1620-24 (detail), oil on canvas. National Gallery of Victoria.

The skin of the body separates “whatever is visible from the parts of ourselves that are hidden” (Elkins 1999, p42), but the skin itself is divided into layers: “an inside ‘cellular fabric’ – the dermis – and an outside ‘horny fabric’ – the epidermis” (p42). The skin is therefore “both dividing and divided, at one and the same time inside, outside, and ‘between’” (p42). Drapery, with its skin-like qualities and resonances, has the potential to speak of the entangled relationship between the internal and external body or, in the case of this painting, the material and the spiritual.

The apparently incidental passages of drapery in Ribera’s *Martyrdom* seem to convey much meaning in their folds. The draperies capture in condensed form the optical contrasts that characterise the painting as a whole: between the light, opaque flesh and the encompassing darkness. The drapery marries the extremes of light and dark otherwise seen in the figure and its surrounds and seems to encapsulate, in these intense passages of paint, the profound themes dealt with in the work as a whole – the “fundamental yet formidable contrast between light and dark – the contrast, that is, between the visible and the invisible, which exist in dependence upon one another”

(Strinati 2004, p51) Draperies, while ostensibly peripheral “stage setting” are, in fact, fundamental to the effect of this painting.



Figure 5.4: Jusepe de Ribera, *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* 1620-24 (detail), oil on canvas. National Gallery of Victoria.

The fold is the place where distinct boundaries are blurred: surfaces turn inward and disappear into darkness then reappear in the light. Inside and outside are made continuous; oppositions dissolve and are reconfigured as intertwined relationships, indissoluble into separate entities. The fold is a form that visualises a continuity between dark and light, inside and outside; seemingly contrasting states are pictured as connected, folded inside one another.

The Deleuzian Fold

In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1993) based on writings of the seventeenth-century mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (Germany, 1646-1716), Deleuze conceptualizes drapery in Baroque painting in terms of folds. In Baroque painting, folds

acquire an autonomy and a fullness *that are not simply decorative effects*. They convey the intensity of a spiritual force exerted on the

body ... in every event to turn it inside out and to mold its inner surfaces (p122).

For Deleuze, folds have both physical and spiritual significance. The relationship between these is imagined by Leibniz (according to Deleuze) as a building with two levels, the matter below and the soul above. There is, in this formulation, a sense of light and dark: “two levels of the world separated by a thin line of waters” (p31) but they are in the nature of layers, rather than in opposition. In the Baroque structure there is “the lower floor, pierced with windows, and the upper floor, blind and closed” (p4). The upper room is “a dark room or chamber decorated only with a stretched canvas ‘diversified by folds’, as if it were a living dermis” (Leibniz qtd. by Deleuze 1993, p4). These two states of being are in communication – there is an infinite fold that “moves between matter and soul, the façade and the closed room, the outside and the inside” (p35).

The upper room is conceived of as very dark, “in fact almost decorated in black” (p31); Deleuze associates this with the use of a dark ground by Baroque painters, on which they place “the darkest shadows, and paint directly by painting towards the shadows” (p31). The value of this method is that objects and figures appear to project out of the background: “colors spring from the common base that attests to their obscure nature, figures are defined by their covering more than their contour” (pp31-2). The unifying tone provided by the ground came from the inside of the painting - the “trait of interiority” spoken of by Riegl (2010, p218); the dark is *within* the light rather than opposed to it.

Drapery was fundamental to meaning in Baroque painting, but not as *independent* subject matter. As a discrete visual form, it remained the province of drawing studies until the early twentieth century, and was not fully accepted as subject matter in its own right until the late twentieth century (Doy 2002, pp4-6). Doy considers drapery to have been of “little importance to modernist art” pointing out that “although conventional notions of drapery never entirely disappeared from twentieth-century visual culture... the main concerns of many artists, photographers and designers lay

elsewhere” (p5). Doy thereby overlooks the use of drapery and other forms of ‘fold’ to be found in the paintings of a number of Surrealist artists, including Kay Sage, Dorothea Tanning and René Magritte, in whose work it took on psychological meanings.

Surrealism and Drapery

Drapery and things that drape occur frequently in Surrealist works. In the context of Surrealism, the forms of drapery might suggest a relationship between inside and outside, material and immaterial, or the conscious and the unconscious. Mary Ann Caws makes an explicit connection between Surrealism and the Baroque, noting a common tendency towards “reversals, upside-downness and in-outness” (1997, p4) and affinities with the notions of changeability, indeterminacy and disguise (p5 after Rousset), all functions of the fold. The Baroque’s survival through the twentieth century, according to Buci-Glucksmann, takes the form of a “modernism radically different from the ‘ideologies of progress’, one which nearly always emerges out of the depths of a crisis” (qtd in Doy 2002, p143). This is consistent with the genesis of Surrealism.

Surrealist art is imbued with melancholy. The paintings of the Surrealist René Magritte, for example, resonate with themes of loss and death, and these are frequently symbolised by drapery forms. The image of a covered face is a recurrent theme and often takes the form of a fabric drape. In other works, “mounds” of drapery appear. In *The Invention of Life* 1927 (Figure 5.5), a woman and another figure covered by a sheet, “like a child’s image of a ghost” (Sylvester 1992, p156) stand together in a landscape. The shrouded figure might be someone who has disappeared, has been forgotten, or lost.

The hidden is also a consistent theme in Magritte’s work:

everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible doesn't show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is apparent (Magritte qtd. in Sylvester 1992, p24).

He made a clear distinction between that which is hidden and that which is invisible: “what is visible can be hidden – a letter in an envelope, for example, is something visible but hidden, it isn't something invisible. An unknown person at the bottom of the sea isn't invisible, it's something visible but hidden” (qtd in Sylvester 1992, p28).



Figure 5.5: René Magritte, *L'invention de la vie* (*The Invention of Life*) 1927, oil on canvas, 80x116 cm. Private collection, Brussels.

Magritte employed classically-inclined drapery as a visual form with psychological resonances. In *Les Amants* (*The Lovers*) 1928 (Figure 5.6), the lovers' heads are draped in “veils” that completely cover their faces. In Doy's words, the veil,

used metaphorically and symbolically, ... refers to a partly concealed truth, which can be perceived by the lifting of the veil, not only by its complete removal. The lifting of the veil opens up the possibility of understanding. The veil signifies revelation and concealment at the same time (2002, p130).

She goes on to quote from a conference paper titled ‘Veiling as an Artistic and Metaphysical Principle’: “Thus the veil veils and unveils, hides mystically and reveals – and at the same time it *shows* this oscillation” (Peres qtd in Doy 2002, p130). *Les Amants* (*The Lovers*) is deeply melancholy; the figures are locked in a moment of both intimacy and isolation, the fabric drape manifesting these apparently contradictory states as one.



Figure 5.6: René Magritte, *Les Amants* (*The Lovers*) 1928, oil on canvas, 54x73 cm. Richard S. Zeisler Collection, New York.

Magritte’s use of the image of drapery over a face has frequently been related to Magritte’s mother’s death by drowning and the story that: “when her body was recovered her face was found to be covered by her nightdress” (Sylvester 1992, p12). Whether or not the story is true, Sylvester calls it “brilliant, mythic in its poetry. The veiling of the face by the nightdress is an inspired mixture of the complacently romantic and the shockingly erotic” (p12). The story also helps to explain the erotic charge intertwined with the sense of loss running through Magritte’s work.

Contemporary Drapery and the Return of the Repressed

The tenuous position of drapery forms in modernist art was the result of a kind of repression, according to Bryony Fer (1998, p11). Drapery is one of those ‘overlooked’

aspects of painting “to which an odd sort of anxiety had often been attached” (p10). To draw attention to it was to “foreground superfluous incident which might threaten the coherence of the image” (p10).

At the beginning of the twentieth century,

The taste for the decorative in clothing and furniture was pathologized as feminine, as embellishment, as style, as excessive. To make the draped folds of diaphanous cloth the significant incident within the frame of the image is to make manifest that which had been constantly repressed within modernism in favour of a pared-down simplicity of geometric form (Fer 1998, p11).

Fer’s contention that the recent resurgence in drapery forms in painting amounts to a “return of the repressed”, invokes the psychoanalytical basis for Surrealism and the notion of the fetish. She writes, however, that “to take that material of cloth and gesture and transform it into something like a mobile language of desire also speaks of a realm of femininity which the language of fetishism can hardly contain” (1998, p12).

In contemporary painting, Gen Doy sees a relationship between drapery and the body “whether a body is actually present or not”, notions of the feminine, eroticism and “the pleasures and ambiguities of painting as a medium” (2002, p181). In the hands of contemporary painters, drapery is again associated with the body, but this is not a coherent body. In the work of the Scottish artist, Alison Watt and the Australian painters Jude Rae and Amanda Robins, drapery is a form that blurs boundaries between inside and outside, animate and inanimate, self and other.

Alison Watt (Scotland, 1965-)

Of the three artists whose work is examined in this section, Alison Watt’s seems furthest from mine in its concerns, despite correlations in terms of subject matter, the

evidence of prolonged handling of materials prior to painting (Wiggins 2008, p18), and parallels in the final works' references to the body. In contrast to my work, however, the body evoked here is smooth, creamy and well-behaved.



Figure 5.7: Alison Watt at work in her studio at the National Gallery London; the work *Pulse* is at the far left. Video still.

The works comprise details of drapery – folds, knots, crevices – at huge scale (see Figure 5.7), so large as to take on the ethereal quality of clouds rather than fabric or skin. The colour and the rendering contribute to this otherworldly quality, along with the smooth and satiny surfaces. Rather than creased, wrinkled or bound, these surfaces are sensuous in their fluid twisting and knotting.

In apparent contradiction of the “feminine” resonances attributed to images of drapery by Doy, Fer and others, Wiggins, in his catalogue essay for Watts’ exhibition, suggests that there is a “masculine” quality to the work *Pulse* 2006 (Figure 5.8), and that the knot in the painting might be linked to “that ubiquitous item of male fashion from the romantic period, the white knotted cravat” (2008, pp18-20). Watt does not contradict this; in fact, when looking at cravatted men in portraits by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Jacques-Louis David in the National Gallery in London, she reported being

fascinated with the arrangement of fabric around the neck and the shape that it was creating, and how the fabric seems to have an

independent movement. It seems to swell and curve and snake around the neck in a way that seems to be quite separate from the person it clothes (qtd in Wiggins 2008, p20).



Figure 5.8: Alison Watt, *Pulse* 2006, oil on canvas, 304.8x213.4 cm. Private collection.

What she highlights here is the way draperies historically associated with the body can seem to take on a life of their own; inanimate cloth becomes animated, with the potential to create meanings that are related to the physical body, but not constrained by its familiar forms.

Jude Rae (Australia, 1956-)

Jude Rae's large paintings of draped, folded and twisted cloth developed from early work with still life (Doy 2002, p182). She is one of a group of artists discussed by Gen Doy, who "emphasise the sensual nature of drapery in association with both the

feminine and the process of painterly representation itself” (p182). Rae’s work focuses on large draperies that “almost seem to engulf the viewer” (p182).



Figure 5.9: Jude Rae *Nexus II*, 1994, oil on canvas, 182x121.8 cm. Collection of the artist.

In the painting *Nexus II* 1994 (Figure 5.9), an image of a bulging surface fills the entire space of the painting. The surface is punctuated, deeply indented, as if marked by the recent presence of a body. The form appears soft like a feather quilt, but at the same it might be more substantial - part of a body - creased, dimpled flesh or constricted intestine. It suggests bodily presence, but also the absent body. The colour is cool and greyish: the surface of creases and folds, of fabric or skin could equally be made of marble. It thus oscillates between softness and hardness, lightness and weight, presence and absence.

The painting is large, approximating the height of a human figure, but the scale of the subject matter makes it ambiguous. The sense of a soft, yielding surface is comforting, but at the same time it produces a feeling of claustrophobia, as the surface seems to

push out to engulf the viewer. The filling of the space of the painting with such an indeterminate form produces disorientation. The swells and troughs roil like an ocean's surface with no stable anchor points. The form seems to push out of the space of the painting but is also in places pulled back– it might be inhaling and exhaling or releasing and constricting.

The tensions in this work, between weight and weightlessness, release and constraint, and the sense of mystery – of what might be inside this strange, but familiar, shape - are attributes of my own work. The significant difference is that in Rae's *Nexus II* the form fills the space of the painting, and threatens to escape from it. The drapery forms in my paintings, on the other hand, take on their own individual shapes and personalities; they seem to sit or hang at the entrance to the painted space.

Of Rae's work, Doy writes that: "even though no body is present, we are faced with a gendered absence, of a kind of repression of the feminine, which seems to struggle for expression behind the cloth that both hides and suggests it" (2002, p183). However, "like drapery in the corner of an 'old master' painting, feminine language is marginalised and overlooked, until it appears centre-stage in Rae's paintings and undermines traditional hierarchies" (p183). My own interpretation of these works puts less emphasis on the "feminine"; I find, instead, ambiguities in terms of gender identity that suggest a self always in a liminal state, more or less precariously balanced between inside and outside, self and other.

An interrogation of the practice and nature of painting can be detected in the works of both of these artists: the handling of materials prior to painting, the staging of these as subject matter and the way these are presented, rendered in paint on canvas. For the Australian artist Amanda Robins, the process of making the work is at the forefront of her concerns. In *Slow Art: Painting and Drawing as a Meditative Process* (2009), Robins writes about "meditative practice" in painting and drawing, whereby the artist loses herself (p3). She finds "the idea of the fold containing the universe ... useful in conceptualizing meditative practice" (p18) and the study of drapery.

Amanda Robins (Australia, 1961-)



Figure 5.10: Amanda Robins, *Harris Tweed (Open Coat III)* 2004, oil on linen, 184x122 cm. Collection unknown.

Robins' paintings exist between still life and drapery. The paintings are large, the actual size of the overcoats that are their subject matter. The coats are treated as still-life objects, turned inside out, "the silken linings are pinned back like flayed rabbits to reveal fleshy folds and seams that still hang heavy with the scent of absent bodies" (Dean 2005, p7). They are spread out so that they make a flat surface; the inside-out sleeves hang off the main form. In *Harris Tweed (Open Coat III)* 2004 (Figure 5.10), the sleeves become pendulous shapes hanging in front of the flat shape of the coat, transforming it into some unrecognisable object. In *Lovelocked (Open Coat IV)* 2004 (Figure 5.11), the sleeves are pinned so that they hang towards the edges of the coat (and the painting); in this work the form is still recognisable, but also suggests the interior of a body.

The colours of the paintings give the sense of "shot" (changeable) colouration in the coats' silky linings. They give an impression of evanescence, as if they change as they move. In *Harris Tweed (Open Coat III)* 2004, the colours move between green and

purple, in *Lovelocked (Open Coat IV)* 2004, between vermilion and pink. The combinations suggest bodily membranes, bodily fluids, the purple and green evoking both sensuality and sickness, the vermilion and pink, blood and skin.



Figure 5.11: Amanda Robins *Lovelocked (Open Coat IV)* 2004, oil on linen, 184x122 cm. Collection unknown.

At first glance, the works are beautiful. They create the perception of a slippery, satiny surface, but as one gets closer that perception fades as the surface breaks apart into rough marks. The overall impression of the work is of smooth tonal transitions, but these disappear up close. The painted surface becomes, resolutely, just that, a painted surface (Figures 5.12, 5.13). And this is not the luscious surface of a Ribera painting; it is awkward and uncomfortable, seems unfinished and almost careless. Illusion drops away to be replaced by the shock of revelation. To then move away from the surface is to have the beauty of the satin reinstated, yet with a lingering sense of unease, as if we have been entangled in secrets we would have preferred stayed hidden. By comparison, the figures in my paintings refuse to give up their secrets, as can be seen in Figure 5.14. Even when brush marks become apparent and the weave of linen is revealed, there still seems to be some elusive content remaining.



Figure 5.12: Amanda Robins *Harris Tweed (Open Coat III)* 2004 (detail), oil on linen.



Figure 5.13: Amanda Robins *Lovelocked (Open Coat IV)* 2004 (detail), oil on linen.

I viewed Robins' works in the exhibition *Touch Too* at the University of Technology, Sydney. The space had low lighting that gave a certain mysterious air to the paintings – as if I was seeing something secret. The imagery of opened overcoats is suggestive of a perverse sexuality, but that meaning gets no purchase on the imagination: the satiny lining immediately becomes the focus. This too suggests the body revealed, but it is an ambiguous and ambiguously-gendered body. It is neither clearly wet nor dry, inside nor outside, male or female, revealing the hidden or concealing the visible.

In *Slow Art: Painting and Drawing as a Meditative Process*, Robins makes comparisons between her work and that of Jude Rae and Alison Watt, pointing out that

in the works of those two artists, “the drapery is seen in close-up and the whole object itself is secondary, [whereas Robins’] approach is most often focused on the object as a discrete and self-sufficient entity” (2009, p95). The distinction is significant: whereas Rae and Watt’s paintings “prevent entry into the object, preserving its mystery” (p96-7), Robins’ use of the whole garment as a still-life object has a resonance that is “wider and deeper and allows a set of contemplations around the idea of self as well as the body” (p96). The “open-coat” paintings (as Robins calls them) are more confronting. There is

a kind of violence to the gaze as it offers up and reveals the subject to us. Because the coats are opened and displayed to us, they make the viewer complicit in the exposure. What was inside is brought outside, as in a flaying or dissection” (p97)

The contemporary drapery works I have referred to here deal with the sensuality of cloth and of paint, with ideas about the body and the self, but Doy points out that there are other, more “barbaric” meanings attributed to imagery containing fragments of cloth, especially in contemporary news photography. She draws our attention to images of drapery that, instead of signifying luxury or display, sensuality or even comfortable domesticity, signify death: “photographs of disasters, acts of horrific barbarism, victims of famine and persecution of various kinds” show people clothed in rags, blankets or shrouds, covered with sheets of cloth or plastic” (2002, p214), or alternatively, shreds of cloth signify the aftermath of terrible disasters.

These alternative readings of draperies are implicated in the works I have examined, as in my own. Contemporary painting is situated in a context that understands drapery as having embedded in its pictorial form histories of the body in all its possible states between birth and death, male and female, beautiful and ugly, healthy and fragmented, passive and hostile.



Figure 5.14: Leonie Watson, *I don't want to talk about it* 2010 (detail), oil on linen.

Drapery in *desire*

In my work, drapery takes definite though ambiguous forms. These forms suggest bodies but are clearly not. They might be parts of bodies - perhaps internal organs - but are not convincingly so. The figures in *the buddy system part I* (Figure 5.15) look vaguely sexual, but might also resemble internal organs or socks taken from the laundry basket. Their complex surfaces attract the gaze, drawing it in but ultimately refusing entry; they suggest contents without revealing any. Their positions in the space of the painting hint at the drama of narrative, but none is forthcoming. Movement, it is implied, has been stilled, as if an action has been interrupted by the imposition of the viewer's gaze. They entice but never satisfy.

The figures seem naked at the same time as they appear wrapped. There is an oscillation between a state of vulnerability and one of protection. It is unclear whether we are looking at the inside or the outside of this figure. We might be looking at something stripped of its external "skin", or the skin itself bunched into a shape that suggests the contents it once held.



Figure 5.15: Leonie Watson, *the buddy system part I* 2009, oil on linen, 46x51 cm. Collection of the artist.

The constrictions imposed on the figures in some of the paintings in *desire* produce a more intense condensation of the drapery form than in any of the Baroque or Surrealist works examined. This is particularly pronounced in the paintings *slow leap* (Figure 3.1) and *swag* (Figure 3.11). The constrictions more clearly define a shape for the figure, and at the same time complicate the surface. The intense folding makes the nature of the object even more elusive.

Though their natures are ambiguous, the actual forms in my paintings are very specific (Figure 5.16). The detailed surface topography of folds and creases gives them an almost taxonomic credibility: the appearance of truth. The heightened awareness of surface enhances the viewer's sense of their physical presence. At the same time, the "truth value" of the works makes even more intense the frustration produced by the impossibility of penetrating the meanings of these forms.

In *desire*, fabric and folds refer to the body without representing the body. The "anatomy" of drapery is suited to representations of skin surfaces and folds, to invaginations, constrictions and protuberances, to body fragments that are neither clearly internal nor external. These non-specific bodily references might engender desire, or they might repulse.



Figure 5.16: Leonie Watson, *slow leap* 2012 (detail), oil on canvas, 101.5x76 cm.

The fold is a way of visualising the relationship between inside and outside, between material and immaterial, of picturing the self as both object and subject. In so doing, the fold becomes a model for understanding human subjectivity. In *The Deleuze Dictionary* (2005), Simon O’Sullivan writes that the notion of the fold – “enables Deleuze to think creatively about the production of subjectivity” (p103). The fold is “on one level...a critique of typical accounts of subjectivity – those that presume a simple interiority and exteriority (appearance and essence, or surface and depth) – for the fold announces that the inside is nothing more than a fold of the outside” (p103). For Deleuze, “there is a variety of modalities of folds – from the fold of our material selves, our bodies – to the folding of time, or simply memory. Indeed subjectivity might be understood as precisely a topology of these different kinds of folds” (O’Sullivan 2005, p103).

For Mieke Bal, the focus on subjectivity has encouraged “a navel-gazing sterility”, whereas the fold moves beyond this;

... its visual appearance ... while ‘catching’ and hence imprisoning the look whose autonomy it threatens, also lures and seduces. Attracted to its inner secrets, we want to know ... what is in it. But there is nothing ... (2001b, p325).

By way of demonstration, Bal examines Caravaggio’s *Death of the Virgin* (c. 1605-6) (Figure 5.2), having found it in the Louvre in a position and lit in such a way as to make its viewing problematic. The time and physical contortions involved in trying to find an angle from which to see the swag of drapery suspended above the body of the Virgin made her (painfully) aware of her interaction with the painting as it unfolded *in time*, and of this as an aspect, not only of its installation in the gallery, but of the work itself. She discovers that “its narrative dimension derives ... from its appeal to an interaction with the viewer, to its own processing in time rather than to representing time ... ” (p328).

Bal writes that this painting “does not ‘give itself’, although it pretends it does” (p330):

if we take that large curtain literally, it is an embodiment of the baroque fold, an instruction for use that tells you that depth circles back to the surface, the only outcome of the voyage through a picture plane ... the viewer arrives at a big black hole, where the vanishing point should be, but isn’t (p330).

The fold produces “a cyclical look, without outcome” (p330). The painting creates an illusion that is never completely severed from the reality of the viewer. The viewer is always brought back to their own position in front of the painting.

Draperies signal a move into the space of illusion, but in their foldings produce a blurring of the boundary between reality and illusion. Their visual homology with skin and other membranes of the body makes them suggestive of the uncertain relationship between inside and outside, body and self, self and other.

Wrapping and layering suggest hidden secrets, but also the swaddling of infants, the shrouding of a dead body or, less benignly, imprisonment or even torture. They suggest comfort but also constriction, domesticity but, at the same time, isolation. Folded surfaces attract the eye, but frustrate attempts to penetrate below the surface. Part of their meaning is always, in a sense, hidden.

My paintings take advantage of these resonances. In them, drapery takes forms suggestive of personae that distinguish themselves by their shape, position and their relationship to other forms. The wealth of detail creates the illusion of truth, but delivers only uncertainty about the substance and origin of these forms; the viewer is able to understand them only through their relation to the space of the painting. The folded forms keep drawing the eye back to the intimacy of their surfaces and thence back to the viewer's own position in front of the painting.

Conclusion

Mieke Bal's encounter with Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* at the Louvre supports my conviction that Baroque painting viewed in the twenty-first century can both affect a viewer and yield valuable insights. She interprets her experience of the painting's draperies in terms of the time they take to visually process rather than the time they represent. The draperies and their folds function to draw the viewer into an illusory space that nevertheless remains connected to their position in front of the painting (2001b, p330) at a specific moment in time. The fantasy of the painting is embedded in the reality of the viewer.

My own attraction to and deployment of material, symbolic and psychological tendencies of the Baroque period acknowledges an ongoing tradition in painting whereby the material and the immaterial are conjoined. In the Baroque this was an expression of a psychological tension "haunted (and enlivened) by the intense consciousness of the underlying dualism" of the period (Panofsky 1995, p38-45), or what Jose Antonio Maravall calls an "equilibrium always at stake" (qtd. in Dimakopoulou 2006, p76), between the physical and the spiritual.

Contemporary interest in the Baroque is theorised by Dimakopoulou in terms of the affinity between the fold and melancholy, based on the notion of melancholy as "a cultural trope that involves the disjunction and the interrelation between the self and the world, between the contingent and the transcendent" (p75). She couples this with Deleuze's notion of the fold, a "unifying concept...an intermediary trope that resists the distinction between essence and appearance, subject and object" (p75). Thus Dimakopoulou sees the fold as both "the antidote and foil of melancholy; both are intermittently symptoms and ways of overcoming the antinomies and the discontent of modernity" (2006, p76).

The convergence of “inner and outer” in the relation of the self to the world, as contemplated in Baroque painting, is also seen in Surrealism, a movement that is part of “the great baroque tradition”, according to Caws (1997, p4). The Baroque search for a visual language through which to envisage a relationship between earthly and spiritual realms is echoed - albeit in a secular form – in Surrealism’s inversions and juxtapositions. Whereas Baroque artists were responding to the spiritual crisis of the 17th century, the Surrealists sought a way to purge human relations of the excessive rationality they saw as responsible for the crises of the 20th. Their methods were based on the interpenetration of dreams and reality, a modern trope akin to the Baroque notion of duality. The drapery and folds that serve in Baroque painting to speak of the relationship between the material and spiritual realms also appear in Surrealist imagery, where they suggest the hidden as well as the possibility of revelation.

In contemporary painting the function of the fold shifts towards an examination of the relationship between body, self and other. When folds appear in contemporary works they “lurch” between solid form and complete collapse (Fer 1998, p.11), evoking sensuality as well as abjection. Folds may suggest the body but equally its absence; they produce uncertainty about its boundaries. In the works in *desire* drapery takes on ambiguous forms that are not clearly identifiable as animate or inanimate. They suggest bodies - perhaps organs – but they resist definition. They seem to harbour hidden content but at the same time appear exposed and vulnerable; they seem revealed but remain essentially unknowable.

In these ways the Baroque and Surrealism have informed my exploration of hidden, repressed or otherwise elusive aspects of self. The Baroque has been foregrounded in this research but Surrealism has been an insistent underlying presence. I have woven together these two historical models into what may seem a surprising combination. My research reveals hidden relationships between these apparently disparate sources, at the same time as it acknowledges their continuing relevance to a contemporary art practice.

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Image Sources

- 0.1 Leonie Watson *I don't want to talk about it* 2010, oil on linen, 101.5x76 cm.
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(Photograph by Bernhard Fischer)
- 0.2 *desire*, FCA Gallery, University of Wollongong, March 2012, installation view.
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Deposition from the Cross 1600-1604, oil on canvas, 300x203 cm.
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- 1.2 Annibale Carracci
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- 2.1 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
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Collection unknown.
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Lovelocked (Open Coat IV) 2004 (detail), oil on linen.
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(Photograph by Bernhard Fischer)
- 5.15 Leonie Watson
the buddy system part I 2009, oil on linen, 46x51 cm.
Private collection.
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slow leap 2012 (detail), oil on linen, 101.5x76 cm.
Collection of the artist.
(Photograph by Bernhard Fischer)

Full citations for image sources are included in the references to the main text.

Appendix

Sources for traditional oil painting materials and methods

The technique of painting with pigments suspended in oil has ancient origins. The drying oils necessary to oil painting were probably known to the Greeks, and the technique of mixing resin with a drying oil to make varnish was common in Byzantine times (Eastlake 1960, vi, p14). Aetius (mid-5th to mid-6th century) describes the use of oil varnishes to cover gildings and encaustic paintings (ctd in Eastlake 1960, vi, p20) and in the twelfth century “Lucca” manuscript, a process was described whereby a tinge of transparent yellow was mixed with varnish for application to tinfoil in order to imitate gold (p30). Several writers in the eleventh century “distinctly describe the mixture of solid colours with oil for the purposes of painting” (p31). However, it was in the 16th century in the Netherlands that oil painting as a stand-alone method was perfected by John of Bruges in Flanders (Vasari 1960, p226), the artist otherwise known as Jan van Eyck (Netherlands, ca. 1380/90-1441).

There is some dispute as to which of the van Eycks (Jan or his older brother, Hubert) was responsible for the significant development of the oil method (for e.g. Brown in Vasari 1960, p227 n1; Gombrich 1960, p170; Fagg, 1970, p9), but it is widely accepted that a painting by Jan van Eyck - the *Arnolfini Portrait* 1434 - is one of the first, and an “exceptional” example of oil painting method (Seidel 1993, xiii), skillfully demonstrating the potential of this newly-perfected medium. Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001) has suggested that the painter was probably asked to record the moment of betrothal depicted in the work, as a witness might – hence the prominence of the artist’s signature along with the words “was present” above the mirror in the centre of the composition (1960, p174). The sense of witnessing the scene is enhanced by a surfeit of visual information. The painstaking modeling of form and the recording of intricate detail allowed by the slow-drying quality of oil painting created the

impression that “a simple corner of the real world had suddenly been fixed to a panel as if by magic” (p173).

There is evidence that viewers have, at certain times in history, been more observant of the subtleties of the painted image than are 21st-century audiences. It makes sense, then, that painters of those times would pay much closer attention to the technical means of producing particular optical situations. According to Michael Baxandall (Wales, 1933-2008), viewers of paintings in fifteenth-century Italy were quite attuned to subtleties of hue, to a degree that today would be unusual in the average viewer. One example of this is that in paintings with religious themes, the quality of pigment used for garments indicated the importance of the figure they clothed (1972, p11). Ultramarine, one of the most expensive and difficult colours of the fifteenth-century palette, was available in varying grades and cheap substitutes, each of which had its own optical character. The best quality ultramarine had a violet tinge and would be used to render for example, Christ or Mary in a biblical scene, while a lesser quality would be used for the rest of the painting (p11). This visual acuity and attention to subtle optical distinctions was assumed and therefore taken into account in the production of paintings.

Early treatises such as those to be examined here were written in a context where the optical qualities of paint were assumed to be integral to its function; the aim of these technical “manuals” was to instruct in the preparation of painting supports, the use of oil paint to effectively render subject matter and maximize optical effects, and to assure the archival soundness of finished paintings.

“Secrets” of the old masters

The materials and techniques of oil painting have been documented since at least the 11th century when the Benedictine monk Theophilus wrote about the technique of oil-based wall painting in his text *Schedula Diversarum Artium* (“On Various Arts”) (Brown 1960, p6). However, it is the seductive surfaces of oil paintings by the masters

of the Renaissance that have since inspired countless texts on their “secret” methods and materials. Whereas today’s artists have at their disposal an array of painting materials that have been developed to the point that paint is thought of as “colour in a tube”, for Renaissance artists and those who came before, paints had to be concocted from different materials and in varying conditions. The ways in which they were made were basically experimental and the techniques developed were passed around between artists.

One of the first publications to reveal the new techniques being developed in the wake of the Renaissance was *Della Pittura (On Painting)* by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), which appeared in Florence in 1435-6, around the same time as *Il libro dell’arte, o Trattato della Pittura* by the Florentine painter Cennino Cennini (c.1370-c.1440). However, Cennini’s writing “summed up medieval practice” (Spencer 1966, p11), whereas Alberti was more concerned with writing about new developments, thereby “paving the way” for the Renaissance. His own monumental contribution, in *Book One* of the treatise, was the mathematical formulation of the rules of one-point perspective which would be pivotal to painting in the Renaissance (Alberti 1966, pp43-59).

One of the most widely known texts about - and contemporary with - the Renaissance, written in 1550 and appearing in a second edition in 1568, was *Lives of the Painters* by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574). The text included *Vasari on Technique: Being the introduction to the three arts of design, architecture, sculpture and painting, prefixed to the lives of the most excellent painters, sculptors and architects* (1960). Professor Baldwin Brown (1849-1932), in his introductory essay to the 1907 edition of Vasari’s text, lists a number of other treatises dating from the mid-sixteenth century, such as those of the Florentines Raffaello Borghini (1537-1588) from 1584 and Giovanni Battista Armenini (1533?-1609) from 1587; and of the Spanish painters Francisco Pacheco (1571-1654) in 1649 and Antonio Palomino (1653-1726), the work of the latter consisting of three volumes produced between 1715 and 1724. Brown considers all of these to contain “matter of interest”, but points out that some of them rely heavily on Vasari (1960, p7), thus contributing little in the way of new information.

It is worth noting that Vasari's introduction was left out of Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* when it was translated to English in the middle of the nineteenth century because at that time, according to Brown, "not much interest was taken by the reading public in the technical processes of the arts" (1960, p3). However, this attitude was about to change; two significant works on early oil painting techniques were published in 1847 and 1849 (Eastlake and Merrifield, respectively). The first publication of Vasari's introduction in English (in 1907), is stated as being the result of William Morris's influence, which had awakened the public to the "interest and importance" of questions of technique (Brown 1960, p3). The introduction was republished in 1960.

Vasari's work is one of a group of sources dealing with the optical/material qualities of oil paints: those that deal with the materials and techniques of the "old masters" from the point of view of contemporaries of those painters, and/or the painters themselves, which have later been translated and republished (examples of which have been already mentioned). In addition to these, there are publications by later writers who have based their investigations on these early treatises but reinterpret them according to their needs and those of their contemporaries. One such text is Donald Fels' *Lost Secrets of Flemish Painting* (2001) which includes a translation of the *De Mayerne Manuscript, B.M. Sloane 2052* written in the 17th century by Theodore Turquet de Mayerne (1573-1655). The text includes Fels's own interpretation of various treatises; he draws from Cennini, De Mayerne, Vasari and Armenini among others, as well as the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, and 18th, 19th and 20th-century guides to old masters techniques such as those of Sir Charles Lock Eastlake (1793-1865) published in 1847 and Mrs Mary P Merrifield (England, 1804-1889), published in 1849, which are based partly or wholly on earlier manuscripts. Fels' publication includes works by a contemporary painter Joseph H. Sulkowski, based on the culmination of this research, "The Fels System of Painting in Oil" which uses contemporary materials combined according to recipes that are based on information gleaned from traditional technical sources.

The number and variety of approaches to be encountered in these treatises, guides and manuals, both historical and contemporary, reveals that while generalisations may be

made about, for example, specific optical qualities pertaining to particular chemical compounds (that is, pigments), the preparation and use of these basic materials has varied considerably. References to traditional oil techniques are often stated in terms of the “secrets” of the old masters, as if there is some hidden knowledge. The reasons for recording the techniques of preparing and employing pigments and binders, in the first instance is largely due to the unstable nature of pigment – binder mixtures in the early days of oil painting. Only fifteen or so pigments were available to artists of the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries, and each had their own characteristics. Ultramarine, for example, was prohibitively expensive (Taft and Mayer 2000, p15), indigo was prone to rapid fading (Eikema Hommes 2004, p10), darkening was a problem encountered in paintings that used verdigris glazes (p51) and some combinations of pigments were incompatible (Taft and Mayer 2000, p16). The painters of the Renaissance and the Baroque each had their own ways of preparing and employing their paints to avoid such complications. The methods we now call “traditional” were developed through the practices of the more adventurous artists, and the more successful they were in their experimentation, the more likely their recipes were to be sought after and recorded for others to use. Having said that, there were particular times in which methods had become relatively standardized. G. Baldwin Brown, in a 1907 review of Vasari’s introduction to the *Lives of the Artists*, notes that the methods of the Renaissance artists referred to a century earlier by Alberti were still developing, but by the time of Vasari’s writing - 1568 - had become a standardised and the practice of the arts an “easy routine” (Brown 1960, p255). This situation no doubt made it possible for Vasari to gather together descriptions of materials and methods in favour at that time and write about them with some authority.

While there is little doubt that some methods of paint preparation and application were kept secret to “increase and protect the power” of artists’ guilds (Doerner 1969, p317), Donald Fels makes an observation that suggests another reason why Renaissance and Baroque techniques of painting had been lost and/or considered “secret”. He quotes a description by Jonathan Stephenson in his 1989 book *Material and Technique of Painting* of “Hogarth’s Act”. The 1735 Copyright Act instigated by Hogarth acknowledged the intellectual content of art and thus changed the status of artists from

tradesmen to professionals. Stephenson notes the drawback of this development: painters “were forced to turn their backs, at least publicly, on the practical side of their activities, denying the existence of manual labour in the creative process” (qtd. in Fels 2004, p3). According to Stephenson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy at the end of the eighteenth century, was

an appalling painter technically. He used materials unwisely and recklessly, often with disastrous results. Privately, however, he was obsessed with the techniques of the Old Masters and even cleaned away a Caravaggio to nothing in an attempt to find out how it was done (qtd in Fels 2004, p3).

Fels attributes to the separation of artists from their craft the loss, by the beginning of the 18th century, of knowledge about the techniques and practices of Italian and Flemish painters from the seventeenth century and before (p3). By the middle of the 19th century, these techniques were again the subject of investigations, for example those by Eastlake (1847) and Merrifield (1849). Max Doerner (1870-1939) followed these in 1921 with a more readable and far more practical guide to old masters’ materials and methods.

The period of time between Doerner’s publication and the present has seen the introduction of new painting media and considerably less attention given to traditional methods, but Ralph Mayer’s 1940s publication *The Artist’s Handbook of Materials and Techniques*, now in its fifth edition, and covering traditional and non-traditional media, attests to a continuing, if undervalued, interest in technical matters. In the 21st century, a renewed fascination with traditional painting techniques and virtuosity in the work of, for example, Sam Leach (Australia, b.1973), Michael Zavros (Australia, b.1974) and Margaret Ackland (Australia, b.1954) is noticeable after the “deskilling” driven by “numerous artistic endeavours throughout the twentieth century” (Foster et al. 2004, p531) and by the post-object tendencies of the late 1960s onwards. This move reveals a return to an appreciation of not just the sensual appeal of oil paint, but also a new appreciation for spatial illusion and the way these two aspects might work

in concert to create meaning (Taft and Mayer 2000, pp42-49) in a post-conceptual context.

Appropriate to this new climate are recent sources of technical information that take a scientific approach to painting based on modern knowledge of the chemistry of pigments and binders. One such text is W. Stanley Taft and James Mayer's *The Science of Paintings* (2000) which approaches painting as "material presence" (p2), investigating the physics and materials science that allow an artist to "give...life" to an idea (p8). Taft and Mayer consider paintings as constructions aiming to "utilize the physical characteristics of matter and light as well as the physiological mechanics of vision" (p95). They foreground the fact of a painting as an object; but go on to emphasise that the interaction between this object and the viewer has the potential, through sensory reception, to "generate profound experiences" (p95).

"Coloured muds in a sticky substance"

A painting is an object and, as such, is subject to the laws of the physical world. It has structural requirements, especially if it is to last for any period of time. One of the discoveries I have made in researching the history of painting methods is that certain materials and techniques that today we consider to have aesthetic intent were originally used for more pragmatic reasons; certain materials and methods important in the past for their structural and archival qualities have "surviv[ed] the motive which gave rise to [them]" (Eastlake 1960, vi, p385). For example, Gothic masters and early Renaissance painters mixed into their white gypsum grounds "thin reddish or yellowish, also greenish coats of earth colours" to reduce the absorbency of the ground and give longer working times but also found them useful as mid-toned grounds (Doerner 1960, p21). Painters continued to use these mid-toned imprimatura when chalk grounds were replaced by more flexible oil grounds suitable for canvas even though these were less absorbent and did not require the same treatment (p21).

The notion of "added value" also applies to the use of linen. Linen gained favour around 1500 as a painting support because it was strong, lightweight and easily

transportable – it could even be rolled up and then (re)stretched over a wooden frame when it reached its destination (Vasari 1960, p236). Fabric supports were used earlier in Venice than elsewhere because in that city “rising damp meant that fresco was an unstable medium for wall paintings” (Kirsh and Levenson 2000, p28); it had the additional advantage that it “did not split nor harbour worms” unlike wood panels (Brown in Vasari 1960, p237: footnote) and it was readily available in the form of sail canvas. Linen is today valued for many of these same attributes, but also for the advantages of its surface qualities for the painting process (Mayer 1991, p289), qualities which - according to Wise - Titian, Tintoretto and Paolo Veronese had already used to “give texture and vivacity to the oil paint” (2011, p69).

Information about specific ways of applying paints to a painting support once the structural ground has been laid down – details of the processes of layering, alternating opaque and transparent pigment layers and so on as used by, for example, 17th century painters - is somewhat elusive. Brown and Garrido in their book *Velasquez: The Technique of Genius* (1998) use radiography, infrared reflectography and pigment analysis (p7) to discern the nature and thickness of paint layers; by examining this empirical data alongside iconographical information, they are able to make determinations as to the way particular appearances have been created. This approach has also been taken by conservators, restorers and art historians trying to distinguish between the original work and additions of paint and varnish subsequent to the artist’s completion of the work (for example, Eikema Hommes 2004).

Opacity and transparency

The dynamic relationship between opaque and transparent passages is marked in oil paintings of the Renaissance and the Baroque. It is evident that artists consciously and strategically employed pigments that varied in these optical characteristics, but in the writings of the time, these qualities were not described as such. Alberti’s treatise of 1435-6 consists of three books; the first deals with one-point perspective, the second opens with an appreciation of painting - “you can conceive of almost nothing so

precious which is not made far richer and much more beautiful by association with painting” (1966, p64) – and goes on to deal with drawing, composition, poses and gestures of figures, the “reception of light” by figures and objects in order to achieve appearance of three-dimensional form and the use of black and white. He discusses colour relationships in terms of contrast and harmony; the latter he refers to as a “friendship of colours” (p85). There is no mention of transparency or opacity, but his discussion of the use of black and white is worth noting. Alberti exhorts painters to use black and white judiciously, advising that the studied use of “light and shade make[s] things appear in relief” (p82). He instructs painters to layer white on white in order to build it up “where the rays of light strike” (p82).

On the matter of transparency and opacity of pigments, Vasari, like Alberti, is not very informative. He writes that oil painting “kindles the pigments and nothing else is needed save diligence and devotion, because the oil itself softens and sweetens the colours and renders them more delicate and more easily blended than do the other mediums” (1960, p230). He instructs that by the oil method artists are able to render figures so that they seem “ready to issue forth from the panel” (p230). Vasari is not giving away any secrets in this passage; he is waxing lyrical about the beauties of oil painting. A more objective approach is to be found elsewhere in his writings, but there is nothing specific about the qualities of transparency and opacity. However, in relation to varnishes – which evidence points to as being, ideally, transparent - he has quite a bit to say, especially with regard to their use by van Eyck (Eastlake 1960, vi, pp257-73). Unfortunately, the abridged version of Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* (1965) offers nothing on van Eyck, as it concentrates on the Italian artists, and *Vasari on Technique* refers only briefly to the Flemish artist. Unabridged versions of Vasari’s massive *Lives of the most eminent sculptors, painters, and architects* are difficult to come by but Charles Lock Eastlake made a close study of the text for his 1847 two-volume publication *Methods and Materials of Painting of the Great Schools and Masters*.

The invention of oil painting attributed to van Eyck by Vasari makes much of his perfection of a non-darkening colourless varnish in which he mixed colours that were

thereby made more vibrant (Eastlake 1960, vi, pp257-9). Vasari refers to “glazes” of colour, but the comparison or juxtaposition of opaque and transparent colours as such, is not elaborated. The Flemish method, in fact, was essentially a glazing method based on successive layers of transparent glazes to produce variations in tone and colour (p275). Van Eyck’s method was distinguished by his skill in this regard, resulting in the glowing quality of his colours.

The apparent lack of discussion around transparency and opacity during the Renaissance is perhaps unsurprising, given that in the Renaissance the qualities of harmony and balance were valued over the qualities that would become more significant during the ensuing Baroque period – namely – restlessness and transitoriness that comes from figures being partially hidden while others emerge into the light (Wolfflin 1964, p33). This tension is partly achieved by the relationship between dark and light, between what is concealed and what is revealed, and these are relationships that are heightened by the juxtaposition of opaque and transparent colours.

Nineteenth-century writings are more useful in terms of transparent and opaque pigments and their uses. Eastlake’s text, mentioned above, interprets various manuscripts, including a comparison of the Flemish and Venetian methods of achieving half-tones; his description of these differing processes reveals the significance of transparent and opaque pigments in the layering process and the different outcomes achieved (1960, vii, p275). A series of “professional essays” by Eastlake cover many matters of technical interest to the painter including sections on scumbling - a method of creating veil-like effects with, generally, opaque pigments (p365-6), on chiaroscuro, on transparent painting and depth (“that *in-and-in* look which is unattainable in any other mode or material” (p355). He provides a fascinating explanation of the way transparent painting conveys depth to the viewer:

the impression of depth here dwelt on, is that which we experience in looking at a gem set on a bright ground. Its colour is not only enhanced by the light shining through it from within, but the eye is

conscious of the existence of the transparent medium – is conscious that its outer and inner surfaces are distinct. We have this impression even when the medium is colourless, as in looking at any object under crystal, or under clear water; however pure the medium there is always enough to mark its presence, and the objects seen through it have, more or less, the quality of depth (p353).

Interpretations of early treatises, such as Eastlake's, were more likely to draw out such information as was most relevant to painting at the time of writing; this information was expanded on by the authors' own interpretations and observations. Max Doerner's 1921 text *The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting with Notes on the Techniques of the Old Masters* (republished in 1969) is another such example, but he makes a point of commenting on the use and *abuse* of "old treatises on painting", cautioning that many have recipes for techniques totally unsuited to the easel painter or recipes that "will not stand the test of critical examination" (p317), that many of the paintings executed by unsound methods have vanished but the methods are still repeated, that old painter's manuals may have been copied many times and their meanings altered and that terminology varies greatly, as do interpretations and translations (p317)

Doerner states his aim as: "to show to the creative painter how others before him have succeeded, so that he may receive in this way fresh incentives to creative work of his own and perhaps independently discover new ways and means more readily to solve his own problems" (1969, p315). His view on oil painting is that it is "the ideal material for the expression of form" (it is important to note here that Doerner was writing before the invention of acrylic colour – his opinion might be different today). "The possibility of using the oil medium opaquely, as a glaze, or semi-transparently, to bring texture and impasto into contrast with thin, transparent color in a picture, permits of a many-sidedness of execution..." (p183). He gives close attention to the characteristics of a long list of pigments, including their handling, drying and optical qualities. He also outlines the advantages and limitations, and the different optical

effects to be achieved when transparent and opaque pigments are used on coloured grounds (pp30-31).

In terms of the relationship between dark (transparent) and light (opaque) areas of paint, Doerner states: “shadows and light stand to each other not only in the contrast of light and dark (*chiaroscuro*), but also in that of coldness and warmth. Warm shadows imply cold light, and vice versa” (1969, pp172-3); in Rembrandt’s work, he notes, the fullest use of this opposition leads to “the greatest possible material contrast between...heavy light masses and...somb(re), mysterious dark areas” (p372). The juxtaposition of light, opaque passages and dark, transparent glazes is amplified by textural differences, which are more apparent in light areas and lose their affect “with increasing darkness” (p173). Doerner points out that Rubens followed this rule when “he painted everything in the light opaquely as solid bodies, whereas the shadows he painted with glazes. Representation of textural qualities in a picture increases the effectiveness of light against dark, as well as of the color” (p173).

In a substantial section of the book, Doerner describes the techniques of the van Eycks and the old German masters - whose method Doerner characterizes as “The Mixed Technique”, theorising that they used a combination of tempera and oil methods, then outlines the methods of Titian and the Venetian school, including reference to the Spanish painters who adopted this technique (1969, pp315-373). He explores the differences in technique in relation to the different contexts of the painters. Doerner observes that the Flemish painters created “an intimate concentration upon form” (p343) which was inappropriate to the grand scale of work called for in the increasingly wealthy city of Venice (p343). In place of “highly perfected and diversified local colours which were to be viewed closely in connection with details” (pp343-4) the picture was now thought of in terms of the whole, aiming at “striking pictorial and decorative effects, masses of light and shadow independent of objects being projected over the whole canvas” (p344). Panofsky gives another interpretation: that the sense of intimacy in Flemish painting is due to “worshipful respect” of the particular; “the quality of reality belongs exclusively to the particular things directly

perceived by the senses” whereas the fifteenth-century Italians pursued “that beauty which they found embodied in the art of the Greeks and...the Romans” (1971, p8).

The classical tendencies in the work of the Italian painters required placing more emphasis on tonal structure rather than the crystal clear colours of Flemish paintings. Doerner reports that Tiziano Vecelli (Italy 1488-1576), known simply as Titian, is said to have exclaimed “Make your color dirty!” (1969, p346). Doerner credits Titian with nothing less than the invention of broken colours which today (as he wrote in 1921) “play such a decisive role in painting” (p346). He is referring to the “breaking” or “greying” of pure colours with their contrasting hue – dulling red with green, for example. Such colour mixes are useful in both transparent and opaque painting, but particularly so in the depiction of three-dimensional form favoured by the Italian painters of the Renaissance and Baroque, which uses the solidity of opaque pigments to render human figures as physical entities; the “greyed” colours are used to create opaque mid-tones, rather than those produced by glazing which tend to mitigate materiality in favour of illusion.

It was apparent to Doerner that paint had a material quality that was not always desirable, depending on an artist’s intentions. He outlines the method used by Domenikos Theotokopoulos (Cyprus, 1541-1614), known as El Greco, to render *The Disrobing of Christ* (1577-1579): starting with a dark ground followed by a white underpainting, layers of local colours and glazing colours are added; the work is finished with a blue-green glaze to give the painting the feeling of a “nocturnal scene” (p348). Doerner makes this comment: “The glaze takes from those parts which are too light or too harsh the effect of being isolated and draws them harmoniously into the greater unity of the whole” adding that “[I]t also takes from colours their *material quality* and lends them mystery” (my emphasis) (pp348-9). This is a revealing comment – the material quality of paint was, in Doerner’s interpretation at least, something to be *glazed over* - hidden from the viewer’s gaze – the better to achieve the illusion of the scene.

Since Doerner’s publication, technical painting texts take either a very practical approach to the use of painting materials and methods, or a rigorously scientific one.

Ralph Mayer's *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* makes a chemistry-based analysis of the opticality of the materials of the visual arts, covering many media, including a great deal of useful information on pigments and the way light interacts with them in a paint layer. The differences in the optics of transparent and opaque pigments are explained and illustrated in a simple, easily understood manner for those not familiar with the science of optics as well as giving more rigorously scientific information such as the spectral curves for around one hundred pigments (1991, pp65-134).

As well as his thorough analysis of pigment behaviours, Mayer covers many areas of practical concern for painters. He explains the two systems of colouring in painting are body colour - the use of "comparatively heavy layers of opaque paint or pigment", and glaze - transparent colours that utilize the white of the ground (1991, p30). He points out that there is no "strict line" to be drawn between these two systems and that they can be used together, but not "mixed indiscriminately" as they are "two distinct methods of producing colo[u]r affects" (p30). Of note is his use of the term "body colour" – a standard term for opaque paint, but particularly resonant in the context of this thesis. Opaque pigments give a solidity to painting that speaks of material presence and thus makes reference to physical space and the body of the viewer. Transparent colours on the other hand, suggest space behind the picture plane – a space that is "elsewhere" with regard to the space of the viewer. Mayer states: "[T]here are few activities other than the use of artists' paints where opaque and transparent color effects are manipulated and where their differences are so significant" (p160).

Taft and Mayer's *The Science of Paintings* (2000) "follows two lines (science and art) that run simultaneously" (p1), a parallel that has ancient origins (as the writings of Pliny (Rome, 23AD-79AD) attest: see Eastlake 1960, vi, pp1-12). Taft and Mayer identify and explore the nature of painting as material object. Using the science of optics, they show how the transparency or opacity of a paint layer is dependent on the degree of scattering and absorption of incident light (p72). They define and explain *refractive index* and the way it determines opacity and transparency of a paint film,

pointing out that “painters utilize the differences in opacity and transparency...in organizing many aspects of their paintings, including the mixing of colo[u]rs and the sensation of luminosity in the paint films” (p72). The “luminosity” referred to here is a function of the way light passes through a transparent paint film and, bouncing off a lighter layer underneath, is reflected back out to the viewer so that the colour seems to emerge from within the painting itself .

Taft and Mayer apply their scientific understanding to specific works from the 16th through to the 20th century, explaining the ways in which optical phenomena contribute to the reception of meaning; skillful use of the contrasting optical qualities of different pigments allow the Archangel Gabriel in *The Annunciation* by Gerard David, ca. 1520 to appear to be “located at a precise position in the space and ... illuminated by the same light that illuminates the whole space” (2000, caption to colour plate 1) while in *Easter Monday* (1956) by Willem de Kooning, “the image and paint are integrated to such an extent that they are interdependent and inseparable” (caption to colour plate 2); the material/optical qualities of the paint become the *facts* of the painting.

The richly-illustrated text *Changing Pictures: Discoloration in 15th - 17th-Century Oil Paintings* (2004) by Margriet van Eikema Hommes is a thorough *and* thoroughly fascinating book dealing with much more than its title would suggest. In the process of considering issues of discoloration, Eikema Hommes delves into the composition of pigments and the layered construction of specific paintings, looking at these in relation to iconographic features of the analysed works. These are then compared to contemporaneous works and to writings of the same period such as those of Vasari, in order to gauge the artists’ intentions and thus to determine the degree to which pigments have altered over time. A chapter on verdigris glazing examines the pigment believed responsible for the darkening of green passages in many 15th-17th-century paintings; another chapter is concerned with the question of whether the dark areas in Raphael’s *Transfiguration of Christ* (1517-1520) are “discoloration or chiaroscuro” (p171), the answer to which could have profound consequences in terms of the “reading” of the work.

The compositional structure of dark and light in Raphael's *Transfiguration of Christ* has been interpreted differently at different times. Abrupt transitions from light to dark in the lower part of the painting are in marked contrast to the "gradual transitions...in the modeling of the draperies and flesh tones" in the upper half. According to Eikema Hommes, modern authors have assumed that the contrast in lighting between the upper and lighter parts of the painting was intentional, Raphael's aim being to highlight the "thematic contrast" of two different scenes (2004, p199) – that of Christ appearing to Moses and Elijah on Mount Tabor observed by three disciples, and below, that of "the remaining nine disciples vainly attempting to heal a youth possessed by an evil spirit" (p171). This idea, that the contrast in handling of light corresponds to contrasting content, has its origin in the 18th century (p199), and does not necessarily accord with Renaissance conceptions. While it was accepted in the Italian Renaissance that "expressive force was one of the most important aspects of a work of art" (p199), this was generally achieved through the facial expressions, poses and gestures of human figures rather than by the use of colour, light and shadow (p199). Light, of course, had a symbolic meaning relating to divinity, but this is distinct from an expressive function.

Whether or not Raphael intended for the degree of expressive force later experienced by 18th-century viewers, it was the condition of the painting – its material and optical qualities at that later time which determined, at least to some degree, the way those viewers understood it – the way it created meaning for them. My citing of this example is intended to emphasise the significance of the actual material facticity of a painting in determining a viewer's reception of meaning, and thus the fundamental significance of materials and methods to the production of meaning.

The sources for this appendix are included in the references to the main text