

**WORKING FROM THE BODY:  
Subjectivity and the Artistic Process**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is about the subjectivity of the body, and what this means in terms of my artistic practice. Composed in two sections, the first section addresses issues of personal history as content, the use of language in relationship to visual art, and experimental language as a tool to communicate visceral knowledge. I discuss the feminist critique of cultural, artistic and academic hierarchies, and explore how these themes inform my work.

The second section examines the body of work I have developed within the MFA program. I explain the artists who have influenced my development, and give specific examples, whenever possible, of formal and conceptual influences. I use images of my own paintings, studio, and exhibitions to illustrate the progression of my practice. In conclusion, I contemplate the upcoming thesis exhibition, and explain my intentions regarding its completion.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE .....	i
APPROVAL/SIGNATURE PAGE .....	ii
ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
INTRODUCTION .....	1
PART 1. SELF AS THE SITE OF METHODOLOGY .....	4
Visual Art and Language .....	8
Poetic Language and Cixous .....	12
Material Ambiguity .....	14
Memory and Sensation .....	20
Embodied Experience .....	21
Painting and Touch .....	26
PART 2. ARTISTIC INFLUENCE & STUDIO PROGRESSION .....	29
Formalism, Mark Rothko and Hans Hofmann .....	30
Surrealism, Philip Guston and Francis Bacon .....	37
Animation and William Kentridge .....	41
Installation, The White Cube and Wangechi Mutu .....	48
Thesis Exhibition .....	53
REFERENCES .....	55
APPENDIX I: DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION OF THESIS EXHIBITION .....	56

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Espezel, Mandy. <u>Soft Hands</u> .....	34
Figure 2. ---. <u>Heavy Hangers</u> .....	36
Figure 3. ---. <u>Heavy Dance</u> .....	39
Figure 4. ---. <u>Untitled</u> (Studio Image).....	42
Figure 5. ---. <u>Untitled</u> (Studio Image).....	43
Figure 6. ---. <u>Masky Beast</u> (Still Frame).....	45
Figure 7. ---. <u>A Body Spectacular</u> .....	49
Figure 8. ---. <u>A Body Spectacular</u> (Detail) .....	51

## INTRODUCTION

I'm aware that everything I know I cannot say, I know only by painting or pronouncing syllables blind of meaning. And if here I have to use words for you, they must create an almost exclusively bodily meaning. I'm battling with the ultimate vibration. To tell you my substratum I make a sentence of words composed only of the now-instants. Read, then, my invention of pure vibration, without meaning except that of each bubbling syllable, read now what follows...

Clarice Lispector, The Stream of Life.

I'm having trouble beginning. I should introduce myself and my work. Lay things out right away. Be direct. I value direct, genuine, vulnerable communications. I have no stock in irony, or bamboozlement.

My practice as an artist is based in the visceral knowledge and material reality of the body, and its relationship to systems of visual exchange. Due to the nature of my practice, I have chosen to approach the MFA Support Paper as an opportunity to explore related themes in writing. I will explore and reference examples of scholarly critique that challenge the Cartesian structure of the scholarly institution. I will employ multiple voices, as there are multiple selves, in an attempt to examine my artistic practice in as full and rich a process as possible.

I will lay out the faults, the difficulties, the non-linear thought patterns. Lay out the content/form conundrum. Introduce yourself: I am an artist who works in an intuitive fashion. Planning, analyzing, strategizing, are not usually a part of my methodology (with the obvious exceptions of this paper and the upcoming thesis exhibition). Writing is/can be an enjoyable practice. Before grad school, I wrote for a number of local venues in Edmonton. I wrote about art exhibitions and plays and artists. I wrote what I thought and

what I felt. I am comfortable writing about art that is not my own. Writing about my practice, about my/the work; that is the tricky/slippy bit. That is the fish that slimes through my fingers and flops flatly back into the water.

A previous version of this introduction (and there have been many) began with “I am a painter.” This statement gave the illusion that I knew what my work was, and that I knew what I did. I was a Painter and I made Paintings. This is not the case. I am struggling. I am struggling with my work. I am struggling with my words.

Where does all this struggle take me? Where does it take the work? There I am vulnerable, and it is a difficult thing to put into language, to put into words. It is embarrassing, to be so open. This is partly because so much of my work is autobiographical, and partly because I don't always know what I'm doing while I'm doing it. When I try to figure out what the work is while it's still happening, I experience studio paralysis. I'll lift up a brush and think: “Can I still use oil paint if my work is about confronting social and material hierarchies? Maybe, if you use it on cardboard.” Or: “How can you make a painting of a figure if you're arguing against codes of identity representation? Well, maybe it's not really representation, but a kind of autonomy of object and image.” And so on.

In the process of writing this paper, I began searching for answers before I knew what the work was going to be, or could be. These questions, this internal dialogue, was happening before (before I began writing this paper) but I did not feel the bizarre need to pre-determine the outcome of the studio work in order to fit the dialogue. This was an unexpected and crippling hurdle. It has enforced for me a belief in intuition within process.

It has also forced me to lay out and look at the guts of my work, which is usually a felt thing and non-spoken.

This paper is about the idea of painting in a contemporary and bodily context, and my struggle with writing that experience. This paper is about myself, and what it means to work from the self. This paper is about my artistic practice, the artists that have influenced me, why my art is what it is, and how it has changed.



## **PART 1. SELF AS THE SITE OF METHODOLOGY**

The standard scholarly voice, of male authority whether used by women or men, has been unitary, flat, dry, and self-censorious.

Joanna Frueh, *Erotic Faculties*.

Why paint? The question is old. But I, relatively, am not. I suppose that means I'm still trying to catch up. I was trained as a painter. A Painters Painter, if you know what I mean. Do you know what I mean? I mean... Painting in the Modernist tradition of Painting. Painting was about Painting. It was about making formally successful images. I thought this was all there was.

My painting is about my body. This statement encompasses a number of essential ideas that form the conceptual framework of my practice, such as the universality of material (body and material, art materials and non-art materials), the illusion of body/mind separation (and subsequent hierarchies), and the subjectivity of experience. I can only know the world through my own body, and this subjectivity is a phenomenological form of knowledge. These ideas feed not only my painting process, but my lexicon of imagery as well. My artistic practice is informed by the lived experience and historicity of my body, the subjective, specific experience of body-as-a-source-of-knowledge. I therefore will/must write about the body to talk about painting.

The way I think about and engage with art begins with how I learned about it. Or rather, how I didn't learn about it. Painting, the idea of painting is subjective. The way I (all of us) understand painting, and all art, and all things, is subjective. Everything I know, and think I know, is informed by my specific history and the historicity of my body. My perspective is rooted in where I am from.

I was born and raised in the isolated community of Fort McMurray, which is located in the Boreal Forest of Northern Alberta. The isolation there was somewhat oppressive, but it was also a fantastic place to develop an active imagination. My primary source of education took place through reading novels, and in the out-of-doors, in the not-yet developed swamps, ponds, trails and forests that surrounded my home. I moved to Edmonton after graduating from high school, having seen little of the world beyond my small but rapidly growing community.

The education I received at the University of Alberta was largely based in the formal elements of visual art (composition, colour, line, texture). I was encouraged to look to the painters from the New York School of the 1940's era, and to the "masters" of painting for guidance. My role models were Manet, van Gogh, and Bonnard. I drank up Hofmann, Gauguin, Picasso, Rothko, Gorky, and de Kooning. I felt at home with Bacon and Guston. There were contemporary figurative painters discussed: Jenny Saville, Lucian Freud and John Currin, for the figure painting class, and Peter Doig, for his weirdness and colour and photographic references. (Marlene Dumas, Louise Bourgeois and William Kentridge were later influences). Little emphasis was placed on any non-painting contemporary art or artists that blurred the lines of painting. There was no discourse around feminist or conceptual art theory and/or practices. I finished my BFA with a highly developed material and visual sensitivity, and little contemporary context. I experimented with non-traditional materials, but my lack of exposure to contemporary art limited what I thought painting was, or could be. Slowly, this started to shift. I wanted to develop my artistic language and scope of knowledge, so I decided to return to school.

I began my MFA degree at the University of Lethbridge in the fall of 2009. At the time, my work was about “painting-as-image-making.” Surrealism informed my approach, in the forms of automatic mark-making and intuitive figuration. This process continues to be important to my methodology, which has expanded to include questions around the social implications of contemporary artistic practice. What does it mean to paint, to make art now? What does it mean to make art about bodies, to paint from my body (subjective, gendered, female, classed, raced, white, not-white, not-raced, not-classed, not-female, not-gendered) now? Painting has melded with sculpture, video, physical bodies, performance, and limitless variations of application, material, structure, and conceptualization. What does it mean to choose to make “things about the body” when “things” and “the body” are less and less essential within a technological era? What am I making, and why am I making it out of tangible materials?

As my practice evolves and my awareness of contemporary art and art theory expands, I find that my work, and the language I use to speak about my work, no longer needs to fit within my previously limited Modernist definition of painting. When I use the term painter or paintings within this text, I refer to a contemporary version of the word that encompasses a wide array of material and approaches within a multi-faceted and multi-media practice. That is to say:

Painter = Artist (who is concerned with ideas of painting, among many things).

This may seem obvious, but, as I have explained, it was not for me. Now I feel that contemporary painting is an opportunity for a state of difference. My painting is a

purposeful, and considered acknowledgment of my body, and your body, through the material body.

## Visual Art and Language

...[I]n contrast to other forms of research, the methodological trajectory of artistic research and its related production of knowledge cannot be easily defined. ... Therefore, artistic research should explicitly request tolerance, an open attitude, and the deployment of multiple models of interpretation.... Conceiving artistic research as a differential iconography gives it the capacity to avoid anchoring the image in a one-dimensional hermeneutic.

Henk Slager, Art and Method.

Mind and body, inside and outside of the body, form and concept: these binaries are some of the problems. Resisting hierarchies through painting/art is the basis for the conceptual framework that I situate my work within. I will create a dialogue (whilst muddling about in an ontological sea of words) about how the body/my body is a source of knowledge and content within my practice as a contemporary artist. I will follow in the example of Hélène Cixous, Elizabeth Grosz and Joanna Frueh. I will rely on their example to be innovative in the use of language, and their unabashed philosophical discussions of love, eroticism, hierarchies, material and the body. I attribute my literary style to their example, and am structurally reliant on those authors that embrace the knowledge of bodies within their written expression. They are my literary guides through this written experience.

The semiotic condition of the written language conflicts with the body-specific-content of my work. The relationship is a complex one. The written word contains its own multifaceted meanings; significations specific to cultural understanding.<sup>1</sup> Words are

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<sup>1</sup>Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) 256.

in constant reference to something other than themselves, to a collective meaning of what the word signifies, and to our individual interpretations of that meaning. If “[a]rt is a state of encounter,” as Nicolas Bourriaud states in Relational Aesthetics, then the words used to describe that encounter, including the process of a visual practice, will therefore always be wanting.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to communicate the content of material/visceral experience through the written language within the traditional system in which it functions. The word is constantly both itself and its signified meaning, but never the thing it is itself describing.

I write Red. I write Hand. I write Tongue. And then I think about how these words feel.

How does one write about painting? Joanna Frueh calls for the voice of the “erotic scholar” in her text Erotic Faculties:

The erotic scholar is willing to be sloppy, as sex is sloppy - the movements, the fluids people crave and fear in a time of sexual epidemic - as life is sloppy - full of unexpected untidy events jumbled like puzzle pieces in a box. The erotic scholar understands, too, that sex is elegant - the movements, the satisfaction of desire - and that life is also elegant when intellection puts together the pieces of the puzzle.<sup>3</sup>

The possibilities of interpretation within the visual imply a *denial* of, or the potential for the *intentional avoidance* of, factual statements. Let us embrace the possibility of being wrong. Or rather, let us acknowledge that, in art, there is no “right.”

Henk Slager suggests in Art and Method that this state of non-factuality is not only

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<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, “Relational Aesthetics,” Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art, ed. Claire Bishop (London: MIT Press 2006) 162.

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Frueh, Erotic Faculties (Berkeley: California UP, 1996) 5.

legitimate as academic research, but that the contemporary educational institution must be accepting of this multifaceted state of un-sureness. Exploration and production without guaranteed outcome is valuable, as well as necessary in order to avoid intellectual and cultural stasis.

Over the past two years I have asked myself many questions about what I do as an artist. Questions about how I think about painting; my painting and painting that is not my painting and painting that is not painting. I have found that my theory is based on an acceptance. A wanting. A discovery. A celebration of material knowledge and bodily exchange. What then is the purpose, *my purpose*, within the written thesis? This question directs me to an alternate version of the question: What does the written word hold for me?

Experimentation.

This is a body of writing to ... not explain (certainly not explain), but support my graduate thesis exhibition. A difficult, slippery task to help me understand my own thoughts and thought patterns. A space to reflect on the developed meaning of the existing work, and the path to take in the next steps.

I don't believe that the word can validate the image. "... I don't see why artists should say anything," states Louise Bourgeois, "because the work is supposed to speak for itself. So whatever the artist says about it is like an apology, it is not necessary..."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Louise Bourgeois, Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father (London: MIT Press, 1998) 15.

I am uncertain of words. I am uncertain of my own words. When I write about my practice, there is a blatant confusion. A lack of physicality. An embarrassment. An emphasis on the importance of the visual experience. I want to write, “Come, let’s you and I go look at the work together. Let’s you and I experience what we are trying to say.”

There is an intense anxiety pervasive throughout my interactions in the world. I feel this anxiety sharpen and swell when asked to write about my artistic practice. I always suspect failure. In this moment, I wish to express a linguistic longing for an indefinable satiability.



## Poetic Language and Cixous

There are texts written by Writers of Words which function bodily as only poetic Writers of Words can make Words function. They make the up most of their Wordness. I think of Hélène Cixous, who wrote in The Last Painting or the Portrait of God, “I would like to write like a painter. I would like to write like a painting.”<sup>5</sup>

Cixous spoke of the instant. The capturing and exploring of now, a moment, the flicker of light. Cixous strove to remain always present, always engaged. This is how I work in the studio. I would like to write like Hélène Cixous.

Cixous’ writings about love and the written word are instrumental in how I have chosen to approach writing about painting. In her text Coming to Writing, Cixous wrote:

Everyone is nourished and augmented by the other. Just as one is not without the other, so Writing and Loving are lovers and unfold only in each other’s embrace, in seeking, in writing, in loving each other. Writing: making love to Love. Writing with love, loving with writing. Love opens up the body without which Writing become atrophied. For Love, the words become loved and read flesh, multiplied into all the bodies and texts that love bears and awaits from love. Text: not a detour, but the flesh at work in a labor of love.<sup>6</sup>

I would like to write from love. I would like to write how I paint: intuitive and responsive. I would like to write a love letter to painting. I want to write a body of words that is of similar visceral affect and bodily substance as a painting. In my awkward groping for a written language, I am confident in my painterly one. I see the lexicon of

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<sup>5</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Last Painting or the Portrait of God,” Coming to Writing and Other Essays, ed. Deborah Jenson (Boston: Harvard UP, 1991) 104.

<sup>6</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Coming to Writing,” Coming to Writing and Other Essays, ed. Deborah Jenson (Boston: Harvard UP, 1991) 42.

imagery that I have developed through material interaction, and I feel its affect and potency. Within painting, there is a bodily language, replete with visceral meaning, incapable of being articulated. I think of my work, my painting, my process, as an evolution; what Elizabeth Grosz calls a “constant exchange.”<sup>7</sup> Something that is, in its essence, uncertain. *In Flux*.

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) 11.

## Material Ambiguity

Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart.

Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies.

So it must be a love letter to painting. I think about the sensation of painting. The sensation of painting (from) my body. Suddenly. The realization of visceral specificity. The subjective knowledge of a body. Jane Bennett refers to material knowledge in her book Vibrant Matter, an energy that resonates between my body and all bodies and your body.<sup>8</sup> An innate connection between all bodies. Begging the question: What is a body? What is the value/meaning of a body? What is a human body? A person. A mind, skin, organs... without organs:

You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit. People ask, So what is this BwO? - But you're already on it, scurrying like a vermin, groping like a blind person, or running like a lunatic: desert traveler and nomad of the steppes. On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight - fight and are fought - seed our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous defeats; on it we penetrate and are penetrated; on it we love.<sup>9</sup>

Emotions, humour, thought. What is a not-human-body? Organic/Inorganic.

Material. Body of work. Material Bodies.

Within the material experience, there is an exchange of knowledge in which the fundamental meaning is bodily subjectivity and sensation. Linguistic language is based in

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<sup>8</sup> Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010) 58.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987) 150.

dichotomy. The cultural understanding of the separation between body and mind, man and woman, myself and other, is rooted in this problematic and dualistic way of thinking and communicating.<sup>10</sup> By embracing ambiguity, images deny (or rather, have the potential to deny) those hierarchies that are innate within a dichotomous, sign-based language. Though I acknowledge that images can also exist as signs, or icons. What I am investigating is the potential of images and material to challenge mimetic meaning. I am interested in the body politic created by pursuing images and environments that challenge these hierarchical frameworks.

I feel that I am (that I must be) both aggressive and embarrassed about the words I associate with my work. I must make clear their intention. Words, like images, have a probability of being misunderstood (or Miss-Interpreted)<sup>11</sup>, and therefore should not be rushed.

I associate my visual practice with the word Ambiguity. Ambiguity is about confronting hierarchies. Ambiguity is a word that points towards inexactness. Rejection of definition. The visual ambiguity of the bodies in my paintings, the refusal of naming images, of naming categories of bodies, is a “conceptual” element within my painting process and the contemporary framework I situate my work within. Ambiguity becomes an ethical statement; a politic. A philosophy. In The Ethics of Ambiguity Simone de Beauvoir wrote that:

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<sup>10</sup> Grosz 3.

<sup>11</sup> Marlene Dumas, Miss Interpreted, ed. Arlette Brouwers, Marlene Dumas, Selma Klein Essink (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1992).

The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won.<sup>12</sup>

The ambiguous body in my work is the result of an intuitive process of image making, where the “style” of the painting is not predetermined, but rather found through a series of responsive decisions. The painting is not about the idea, but about the making. It is after the making, perhaps during the making, that the idea begins to form. The artist Marlene Dumas describes the symbiotic relationship between ideas and making in the following way:

Because I also use ‘Surrealist’ (and other) methods, such as chance and sudden ideas beyond my control, it is never a case of: here is my intention and I translate that into an image and there is only one correct interpretation. The image is a combination of sudden flashes. I can describe various areas of meaning, but the final content comes about after the work is completed and not before, often at the expense of my first idea. The point is the impossibility of certainty, not defining a concept.<sup>13</sup>

The two streams of thought (conceptual and physical) are not exclusive, and inter-relate to the degree that I am incapable of separating process from content.

Philip Guston painted from himself, and his finding of imagery, finding of visual language, through autobiographical reference echoes and informs my own intuitive process. Guston holds a level of import in my mind (and within my love of painting) principally because of his work, the actual paintings he made (or rather, because of the

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<sup>12</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1948) 129.

<sup>13</sup> Dumas 17-18.

way my body responds to his paintings, the sensation of sight, and the meaning communicated). He spoke of *painting itself* as a conversation, as an experience.<sup>14</sup> My painterly methodology, this thesis, is about my body, the subjective knowledge and historicity of the/my body, and the materiality of information exchanged between a body (my body and your body) and that of a painted body. Painting, the act of painting, is a felt thing.

My painting is hair, and skin, and anxiety and love. To better explain what I mean by the limitations of words, let me elaborate one in particular: *hair*. I think perhaps what I mean when I write *hair*, is actually *what hair feels like*. The experience of hair. Hair running through fingers, hair being pulled out, hair on my tongue. Questions form around hair: Is it animal hair or human hair? Is the hair attached to the body, or is it shaved off? Cut off? Is it arm hair, chest hair, pubic hair, armpit hair? Is it real hair or a depiction of hair? Is the hair attractive or abject? Can I make an image where it exists as both? These tactile experiences of hair are what the idea of hair is in my paintings, or what I want them to evoke.

My painting is touch. The sensation of touch. Hands. Teeth. The feeling of fingertips on a carved wooden handle with fine bristle hair secured in the metal ferrule tip. The hairs of that brush, in my hand, pulling through ground pigments suspended in oil. The feeling of a knife, of steel blades, cutting through fibrous paper; tiny vibrations sent up the arm through the delicate bones of my fingers. Wood splinters stuck in my skin; under my nails. The smell of oxidizing paint/drying glue/oily rags. The weight of

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<sup>14</sup> [A Life Lived](#), doc. on Philip Guston (Michael Blackwood Productions, 1981) VHS.

the object. The tearing of skin. The sensation of sight. The subtlety of light against a surface and the glory of colour. A sizzle-tingle-ache. A sensuous moment of contact between the physical substance of my body and the material of making; the life of the painted body.

I am thinking about the materials used in the making of art. I am thinking about Jane Bennett and her text Vibrant Matter, where she states:

The aim here is to rattle the adamantine chain that has bound materiality to inert substance and that has placed the organic across a chasm from the inorganic. The aim is to articulate the elusive idea of a materiality that is *itself* heterogeneous, itself a differential of intensities, itself *a* life. In this strange, *vital* materialism, there is no point of pure stillness, no indivisible atom that is not itself aquiver with virtual force.<sup>15</sup>

What does this theory of “vital materialism” mean to my practice? My mind and body are not separate entities of a total self. Form and content are not separate qualities within one body (be it a physical, spiritual, painted body, or otherwise).

The hierarchies of mind and body are reflected in the hierarchies inherent within the discourse within the visual arts. In her text Against Interpretation, Susan Sontag discusses the evolution of the separation of form and content. Sontag argues that, “all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bennett 57.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966) 4.

It is my desire to re-address the connectedness of “form” and “content” in conjunction with the political separation of “mind” and “body”. There is no hard edge that defines you from me. Our bodies are not closed systems. We are porous and fluid. “To be fluid is to be in love.”<sup>17</sup> Our bodies are in constant flux with what we think of as “the outside world” (that is, a world outside of what we think of as ourselves, our bodies). I interpret Bennett’s theory of material universality as a doorway into understanding and deconstructing hierarchies; a theory of intimacy between the material body and “artistic” material. Thus: My body is made of the same material as paint and dirt and oil. My paintings are ambiguous bodies made from/of my body.

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<sup>17</sup> Frueh 3.



## Memory and Sensation

Rooted and rootless. Each passion, each effort, each event materialized bears with it its own model... the work space and space of creation is where she confronts and leaves off at the same time a world of named nooks and corners, of street signs and traffic regulations, of beaten paths and multiple masks, of constant intermeshing with other bodies' - that are also her own - needs, assumptions, prejudices, and limits.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha, When the Moon Waxes Red.

I never know what to say when I'm asked what my work is about. There is never really a clear answer to that question, because the answer is always changing.

My work is about the person I am, my perception of myself, what feeds the development of my own identity, and what continues to inform it. There are some experiences, some facets of lived time that stick to a person. That have stuck to me, as a person; as an artist. These experiences, these histories, inform who I am, and they inform my practice. They inform how I think about my work and how I experience all things and all art. When I speak of the subjectivity of the body, this is what I mean: history. Stephen Horne calls it "embodied subjectivity."<sup>18</sup> This history is a collecting of phenomenological knowledge that is physically present within the bodily self and which is consequentially (intrinsically) physically present in the work.

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Horne, Abandon Building (Montreal: 11 Press, 1994) 11-12.

## Embodied Experience

First, there is the confusing, wondrous, and often horrifying memory of childhood. "...[C]hildren are in some sense unrepressed. Or, to put it another way, in the child the conscious and the unconscious are not yet separated."<sup>19</sup> Within childhood there is distortion. There is no separation between imagination and reality. The mystical and impossible sleep beside the mundane and everyday events and materials of life. Horror is real. Devils are palpable. Guilt and anxiety have extraordinary weight. Play is not only an activity of fun, but also an absolute necessity in the fight to maintain some semblance of balance; some connection to the concrete world, to fight the body-guilt intrinsic within religious doctrine. There are a variety of spaces moved through: bedrooms, homes, neighborhoods, hideouts, back roads, workplaces, stockrooms, and highways. There are the people who moved through those spaces with me. There is the landscape and isolation of Northern Alberta. The forest. The sky. The cold. The light. The smell of the woods. The overwhelming nocturnal croaking of frogs buried in the mud of the swamp behind the house. The beaver dam. The exploration. A largely unchanging group of friends, present since the start of memory. There is the smallness. There is the secrecy. There is the lack of exposure to outside cultures. There is the dilemma of being from an *Oil Town*. But that comes later. There is the work ethic and sense of pride in labor. There is family, friends, and space. Place. A complexity of personal history that is indescribable and inseparable from location.

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<sup>19</sup> Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1959) 23.

There is betrayal. The first betrayal. An internal knowledge that it will not be the last. The breaking of trust for the first time by someone you love. There is a slow finding of independence and self.

There is moving away from home, leaving Fort McMurray and pursuing a life without the safety of a known community. A moment of clarity in which a trust in direction was unearthed and secured, without any explanation or defense.

There is a confrontation of weakness and ignorance within the self and within others.

There is an understanding of one's own linguistic and cultural identity. What you are perceived to be in the world. The words that apply/are applied to you. The shaping of an identity. Recognizing myself as working class, as small town, as privileged, as objectified and sexualized, as female, as straight, as queer, as other and not other. Learning to see myself as raced. Learning to see myself as white. "White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange."<sup>20</sup>

There is seeing how all these parts of myself are inherent within my work, within the paintings I make. Considering how the representation of identity, of gender, of sexuality, of the body, of race, of ambiguity, functions in the painting of bodies.

There is discovery. Of all kinds. Physical. Intellectual. Emotional. Artistic. Sexual. Political.

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Dyer, White (New York: Routledge, 1997) 11.

There is finding art that sticks.

There is the Pietà, and the quality of light in Florence, where everything is lit with gold from within.

There is Hofmann, and Rothko. A room full of Rothko's. Glowing. Hofmann with his heavy slabs of juicy paint on top of muddy stains, and Rothko, lighting the room as if I were back in Florence. The memory of the physical sensation created by their work. These are the qualities of sensation that I endeavor to bring to my work. To make an object that can stick, and be carried in another's body as sensation. As memory.

Then there is a memory of something outside of myself. There is the first death. There is standing in a hospital room. There is the stilling, paralyzing effect of deterioration. The sensation of grief. Of decay.

The description of embodied experience in regard to death manifests in my painting through imagery that confronts the abject. Grosz describes the abject as:

Detachable, separable parts of the body - urine, faeces, saliva, sperm, blood, vomit, hair, nail, skin - retain something of the cathexis and value of a body part even when they are separated from the body. There is still something of the subject bound up with them - which is why they are objects of disgust, loathing, and repulsion as well as envy and desire. They remain (peripheral, removable) parts of the body image, magically linked to the body. They illustrate the narcissistic investment in the body image: these body products can only be negatively coded (with disgust or horror) because there is also the possibility (and the prior actuality) of a love of the body and all its substances.<sup>21</sup>

Then there is painting afterwards. The question of what do you paint afterwards.

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<sup>21</sup> Grosz 81.

Then there is the first love. When painted, the first love manifests through bright colours and physicality of mark. The finding of imagery that reflects something desired. Painting becomes a celebration. After the first love becomes a lost reality, no longer present, the sensation becomes memory, a source of contemplation. Somewhere to look and say “that was what was, and now it is gone, and I am now a different person.” A pain. The heat and agony at one’s own floundered experience. The acceptance of the end of that experience. Tentative lines and lots of erasure. The memory of a neck. What you used to look at while you fell into sleep.

There is the finding of a concrete and stable love. A love for painting. A love for others. A love for my own body. The realization that these are not separate things.

These elements, these sections of self, are there. Always. As an artist, they are there. They are there in the work, as traces. Form and content; embodied. The body is there, tangible within the material of the paintings making, which is body as much as it is paint, and canvas, or paper, or flesh, or what-have-you.

There is painting. Looking at and making paintings. Having your heart crushed by failed paintings, and returning to them with bandaged hands. Again and again.

There is the cyclical and essential act of falling in love with painting; giving over. There is falling in love with making paintings and finding paintings. Seeing knowing feeling paintings. Consuming them. Daily. Repeatedly. Immediately. Paintings flow through bodies.

The desire to consume is a kind of lust. We long to have the world flow through us like air or food. We are thirsty and hungry for something that can only be carried inside bodies. But consumer goods merely bait this lust, they do not

satisfy it. The consumer of commodities is invited to a meal without passion, a consumption that leads to neither satiation nor fire. He is a stranger seduced into feeding on the drippings of someone else's capital without benefit of its inner nourishment, and he is hungry at the end of the meal, depressed and weary as we all feel when lust has dragged us from the house and led us to nothing.<sup>22</sup>

Paintings resist becoming empty commodity through their emotional consumption. There is the consumption of paintings through the body and being consumed by the painted body. This is a body of writing about painting the body (not the figure, mind you, but the body). What is *figure*? A representation. Baudrillard's Simulacra. The *body* is different. Not representation. Not Mimesis. Ambiguity. Lust. Love. A Gift. Representation and not at the same time.

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis Hyde, The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World (New York: Random House, 1979) 12.

## Painting and Touch

What then is my art about? Being open to the experience of myself and all selves that surround me and are a part of what/who/how I am. Your body is/on/and my body. Feeling you through my body. Feeling my way through a Painted Body. The touch of skin (hands/fingers/arms) against painterly materials, which are as specific and complex as the skin stretched across the smoothtight palms of my hands.

“In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”<sup>23</sup> These structures, these images that I form, that I find. Your tongue. A painted tongue. My tongue. Your tongue tracing lines and circles over my skin. Over a canvas. Over and in my body. Over the hairs of a brush. Over and in between my lips. Against my teeth. Through the wetness of paint. Entangled with my tongue. My painting is how this feels. Painted bodies moving together.

Painting is how we feel.

Derrida. The touch of sight. Touching through my eyes. Touching a painting through my eyes. My eyes/My mother’s eyes: blue eyes that only I see through and that I did not make. Feeling a painting through my/our eyes. Feeling a painting through breath, a shared breath. The smell of paint. Of sweat. Of effort. The smell of a body's effort. Being alert to what is exchanged. Being open to what is possible and what is being asked.

Write about painting. Words about paint. The shape my mouth makes when I say *Paint*. The way my tongue hits the roof of my mouth when I say *Body*.

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<sup>23</sup> Sontag 14.

Timothy Findley sticks in the mind, becomes fodder for imagery:

So little was known and so much was rumored about the plague, there was nothing with which it had not been credited. Lunacy, rape and murder had all been blamed on sturnusemia; loss of sight and hearing, impotence and miscarriage had also been named as side-effects. Two things were known for certain: in the latter stage of the illness, the victim's skin became speckled in much the same fashion as birds are speckled - and the brain was burned away by fever. Just as rats and their fleas had spread the bubonic plague, so birds and their lice - especially those on starlings - were said to be the universal carriers of sturnusemia - and thus, the terror of birds and the D-Squad extermination process.<sup>24</sup>

Findley's description of his imagined disease and its physical manifestation of "speckling on skin" became intertwined in my mind with the speckling paint effect used by Wangechi Mutu in her collages and paintings. Mutu's speckles started to read as symptoms of a propagandized illness, which I then began to use as an element in my own paintings (unconsciously at first, and then upon realization of what I was doing, purposefully).

Fingers. Speckled Hands. A Fiction. The drag of paper edges on the tips of paint-speckled fingers. Hot sparks that dance over me, and lightly sizzle over the smoothness of my skin, over the smooth-film of a painted skin. Stained fingers, tracing patterns and dancing through my hair/through the hair of the brush. Your hands that can hold and touch my face as I hold and touch the painted face. Your hands. Painting hands and painting hair. Painting the abject and the erotic. Painting how it feels to touch another's body. To touch your body. To touch the painted body.

To realize my own body.

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<sup>24</sup> Timothy Findley, Head Hunter (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1993) 7.



Realizing what I appreciate in the work of others. A generosity of self.

Imagination. Seeing the importance of movies and novels in my visual language.

Painting is about how my body is here, in this space, next to your body, in the same space. Together and apart and over again we are moving. This is a dance. There is a dance between my body and your body and my body and the painted body. We are dancing through a space of vibration. Our bodies are in a perpetual state of *fluxus*.

How do you make/construct/think of/ develop a painting? My body's response.

To colour. To form. To taste. To light. To sensation. Painting how my body feels.

Painting how this specific experience of my hand, lifting the material, feels. Painting how my subjective/collective/reflective self feels. Paint moving fluid on a surface. Sinking in to the canvas. Sliding over top of freshly gessoed masonite, sanded smooth by a smooth hand. By my hand. Paint melting into the intricate fibers of paper. Paint, oily, slick, being mixed spread scrubbed scraped molded modeled manipulated. With my hands. By my hands. Painting my/your/our body.

“Write about painting,” they say. And suddenly, I know how.

## **PART 2. ARTISTIC INFLUENCE & STUDIO PROGRESSION**

Art is magic. So say the Surrealists. But how is it magic? In its metaphysical development? Or does some final transformation culminate in a magic reality? In truth, the latter is impossible without the former. If creation is not magic, the outcome cannot be magic. To worship the product and ignore its development leads to dilettantism and reaction. Art cannot result from sophisticated, frivolous, or superficial effects.

Hans Hofmann. The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts.

In this section, I will discuss the artists that have influenced my artistic practice, and describe the development of that practice in terms of studio production and conceptual context. I will proceed chronologically, relative to my own evolution. The artists I am going to discuss have affected my work and thinking either directly or indirectly. In the cases of direct influence, I will explain how and why such powerful influence took place, and where possible, provide visual examples. In the non-direct relationships, I will be unable to provide specific examples of influence, but will give contextual information to explain the more emotional and intuitive aspects of my progression. I will begin with the artists that were the main sources of visual reference I utilized as an undergraduate student. This will help to contextualize the evolution of my current work.

## **Formalism, Mark Rothko and Hans Hofmann**

During the first three years of my undergraduate degree I was heavily influenced by Abstract Expressionism. I believed in the power of paint to communicate emotional and spiritual selves through artistic process. Though I had many stylistic influences during this period, there were two main painters I looked at constantly for theoretical guidance. They were Mark Rothko and Hans Hofmann. My conceptual framework developed under their umbrella. I was devoted to emotional communication and spirituality within art, and attempted expression through formalist ideals. The influence of Rothko and Hofmann on my practice was amplified after seeing their paintings in person during a trip to New York in my third year of university. The physical sensation and memory of their work stays with me, even now, as I write this sentence. I remember how the colour felt, and the emotional impact their work had on my person.

I learned from Hans Hofmann that there is no separation between the formal elements of painting and the conceptual elements. Hofmann taught me about colour, and about the sensuality and celebratory nature of paint. He also taught me that the power of the art object is entirely dependent on the significance of the process used in its making.

The above quotation from Hofmann continues:

The significance of a work of art is determined then by the quality of its growth. This involves intangible forces inherent in the process of development. Although these forces are surreal (that is, their nature is something beyond physical reality), they nevertheless depend on a physical carrier. The physical carrier, commonly painting or sculpture, is the medium of expression of the surreal. Thus, an idea is communicable only when the surreal is converted into material terms. The artist's technical problem is how to transform the material with which he works back into

the sphere of the spirit.<sup>25</sup>

Hofmann's theory about material and spiritual communication is as relevant to me now as it was six years ago. I am still pursuing a spiritual and bodily communication through material expression. Upon reflection, it is the hierarchy of materials that Hofmann alludes to that I have come to question and explore. It is significant that Hofmann, in his description of the material process, does not isolate paint as the only medium where transformation can take place. The relationship between the artist and their material is where significance is determined.

Rothko was also a powerful conceptual influence. His emphasis of emotional dialogue within art through colour connected with my own experiences and artistic ambitions. Though familiar with the critic Clement Greenberg and his postulations on the flatness of painting, his theorizations of Rothko's work were not what influenced my admiration. Greenberg's influence on the University of Alberta's Art Department is well known. Large abstract paintings and geometric steel sculptures, until recently, were synonymous with the program. Greenberg, in many ways, has been the catalyst of my formal development. He became, or symbolized, what I was reacting against, and now is a part of the whole of how I understand my practice.

The emotional impact of Rothko's painting is, for me, the important element of his work. Rothko is glowing colour, fuzziness of edges, and luminosity of paint. These are his formal elements that I am drawn to. Rothko gave me glazing, and a sensitivity to light. Rothko also gave me repetition, and investment of the self in one's work. His work

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<sup>25</sup> Hans Hofmann, The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1966) 39.

influenced my understanding of scale in relationship to content. Rothko believed that larger works (that is, larger than human scale) were actually *more* personal, rather than *less*, because they confronted the viewer with themselves, with the scale of their own bodies. This idea was in direct conflict with the general assertion that smaller works were more intimate, and therefore able to communicate in a more direct and personal way with the viewer.

The issue of scale has not been, and probably cannot be, absolutely resolved. I believe that painting, specifically, has a very direct and complicated relationship to issues of scale. This is a question that is present within my current work. There is a difference of sensation between paintings that are of a larger scale compared to those that are smaller, because of both how one's body interacts with the finished piece, and how different it is to create marks from the fingers and wrist as opposed to gesture of the hand, or even the full arm.

To illustrate the importance of scale, I will compare two of my own paintings. Made through similar processes, they are of greatly varying size. The first work is from a series of small paintings I completed in April of 2010, all roughly 9 x 12" in scale. These works have a specific softness of mark and delicate handling of light. As a group, these oil paintings feel related to classical Dutch portraiture. I think of Vermeer's 1665 painting, The Girl with the Pearl Earring, or van Dyck's Henrietta Maria of 1635. Both of these classical paintings use similar compositional organization: a central figure, sitting in, and within, a surrounding ground that has little specific information. The ground acts as a framing tool and lighting/contrast device.

In the work Soft Hands (*Figure 1*), completed in 2010, I make use of a similar compositional structure. The process of making this painting began with a light stain of purple, rubbed into the gessoed ground. Next there was the finding of form. This particular painting is, figuratively, connected to the memory I have of seeing Michelangelo's Pietà while in Italy in 1999. The image is comprised of a large central figure, and a smaller figure which sits upon the lap of the former. The connection to the Pietà was not planned, but became apparent after finding the initial forms through a process of delineating the background space from the figurative space. This process of intuitive figuration allows images to form without personal dictation. I use this automatic technique because it allows for powerful personal associations, while remaining ambiguous enough not to limit a viewer's interpretation. My association of Soft Hands with the religiously significant Pietà is a subjective reading, likely due to my own Catholic upbringing and personal bodily memory of seeing the sculpture in person. This subjectivity of interpretation guided the formal development of the image, but remains only one of its possible meanings.

In the summer months that followed the completion of the smaller paintings, I was engaged in a project with the Southern Alberta Art Gallery. My supervisor, Dagmar Dahle, and I were asked to contribute to the exhibition *On Your Marks*. The theme of the show was about collaboration between artists, and the different forms that collaboration can take. Dahle and I represented a student-teacher collaboration, where we worked on our practices separately, but collaborated through conversation and conceptual exchange.

This period of research resulted in a series of works on paper, and three paintings, which were each 48 x 36". The scale increase was an intentional effort to make paintings

that engaged with the scale of the human body. Though I approached them with a similar working process as the earlier series, their overall aesthetic and resulting effect was drastically different. Rather than the delicate marks and flickering of light created by carefully applying glazes and sanding away pigments, these paintings were more physically labored, and became about their flatness as objects.



Figure 1. *Soft Hands*, 2010, oil on masonite panel, 12.5 x 9.5".

The painting Heavy Hangers (*Figure 2*) demonstrates this transition. This painting also began with the application of a thin stain of colour, this time yellow, which was rubbed into the surface of the masonite panel. I then worked intuitively to find the form that would inhabit that specific support. Heavy Hangers began as a very ambiguous form, with the sense of hair and skin coming through subtle stains and drawerly graphite marks. Compositionally similar to the earlier series, the painting is comprised of a central figure, located symmetrically in the center of the image. This figure however, did not have any direct reference to a previous artwork or memory. The figure within this painting is about the dialogue between the object being made, and the artist making it. This painting is about the relationship of my body to the (mental and physical) activity of painting.

I return to the issue of scale. There is an obvious difference in paint handling and application between the two works. As mentioned before, the body's response to making marks at the scale of the hand, as opposed to the arm, creates a very different psychological presence within the image. The second painting feels more handled, more visceral. It is about the physicality of the paint itself, while aggressively remaining a flat image. There is no attempt at illusion of space. The ground that surrounds the figure is scraped away in places, while remaining thick and flat in others.

What I find particularly important in the comparison of the two works is the technique of removal in terms of mark making. In Soft Hands, the area of the face has been very lightly sanded to create a sense of flickering light. In this way, the act of removal is connected to the scale of mark making one would expect to see on an image this size, and therefore is not a destructive force. In Heavy Hangers, we read the removal of paint in a very different way. The paint scraping is seemingly less controlled, and used



not as the depiction of figure or light, but rather as a tool to reveal the layers of paint existent around and within the figure itself. The scrape marks are large, and come from an obvious physical gesture. Their presence alters the way the rest of the image is interpreted, providing contrast to the controlled glazed surfaces which they surround.



Figure 2. *Heavy Hangers*, 2010, oil on masonite panel, 48 x 36".

## **Surrealism, Philip Guston and Francis Bacon**

Within both of the series that Soft Hands and Heavy Hangers developed from, there is evidence of influences other than those I have already discussed. Near the end of my undergraduate education, I became interested in Surrealism. I was struggling between what I felt were my abstract painting roots, tied to Hofmann and Rothko, and my growing ambition to introduce figuration and auto-biographical reference into my practice. My peers at the time were separated between those who worked in “pure” abstraction, and those that worked from photographs. I’m generalizing of course, but this was my interpretation of the situation at the time. I was unsure of how to proceed, since I had no real conceptual or process-based interest in working from photographic sources. The only other option seemed to be to work from life, and though I found figure painting sessions useful, they felt more like training sessions rather than a creative artistic process.

It was then that I enrolled in a class about Surrealism, and a window of possibility opened. I realized that the imagination was considered a valid source of imagery, and could be used as a visual source. I began to experiment with intuitive processes of image formation. I became intrigued with Joseph Cornell and his assemblage/boxes, and began making assemblages of my own. I delighted in the Surrealist drawing game the *exquisite corpse*, and found I was more and more interested in images and objects that were about the weird and uncanny. I recall Meret Oppenheim’s Object (Breakfast in Fur) from 1936 being especially important to my sense of object tactility. I could feel the fur from that tea cup on my tongue... against my teeth. I thought that this was fantastic, being able to create such sensation in your viewer.

By the time I graduated from the University of Alberta with my BFA in 2007, I was embarking upon the development of my own visual language. I became invested in the work of Philip Guston, who I saw as having previously walked the road I was currently on: in between abstraction and auto-biographical non-representational figurative painting. I refer mostly to his paintings commonly thought of as his “mature” style, where he re-introduced the figure into his painterly language in the late 1960’s. Guston created caricatures of the world “in order to stress the character of the action in his compositions.”<sup>26</sup> In paintings such as The Studio, from 1969, Guston seemed to address my own conceptual concerns: the history of painting, the identity of the artist, and the anxieties and neuroses of life.

In addition to Guston, I was also looking at the work of Francis Bacon. I admired Bacon’s compositional structures, and his use of colour to create psychological spaces. I began to incorporate his formal techniques of depicting space through simple geometry, and combining that with what I think of as the “Guston” way of forming images. The resulting work was a kind of Abstract/Surrealist hybrid-style.

Francis Bacon opened the possibility of the surreal creature as a representation of the human condition, whereas Philip Guston gave me the process of how to find that image and the permission to work from the self. Both artists communicate psychological states of being, emphasized through constructed and imagined environments. Take for example a painting titled Heavy Dance (*Figure 3*) from 2008. In this work, I am clearly using a number of Bacon-esque formal devices. I compare this painting to his triptych

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<sup>26</sup> Dore Ashton, Yes, but... A Critical study of Philip Guston (New York: The Viking Press, 1976) 137.

Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion, from 1944. In Bacon's work, perspective lines are used to create a fundamental sense of space, which helps to ground the otherwise un-rational figure. By grounding the figure spatially within a logical structure, one sets up a visual tension, emphasized through colour to indicate psychological weight. Guston's influence is also displayed in the rounded, caricature nature of the figure, and in the intuitive painting process I used to find it.

Looking at Heavy Dance now, it is clear to me that even though I was no longer emphasizing a connection to Rothko or Hofmann, their influence is still present in the paint handling and use of colour as an emotional communicator. The challenge became finding figures through process and complicating their relationships with the ground and with the viewer, through scale, colour, mark, and viewpoint. These were the issues I was concerned with upon application to the MFA program at the University of Lethbridge.



Figure 3. *Heavy Dance*, 2008, oil on masonite panel, 24 x 24".

These were my concerns, but there was also a larger, more general concern. I was wrestling with a lack of context. I felt that I was making paintings without knowing what I wanted to be making, or why. This feeling of trepidation came from a realization that even though I had an extensive visual and material knowledge, I had little conceptual framework or background in which to situate my practice or inform my work. This was perhaps the main reason I decided to return to school. I wanted to develop the language I felt I lacked.

## **Animation and William Kentridge**

My MFA studio work began with an exploration of small scale material and colour experiments. I took small blocks of scrap wood and glued sample squares of linen onto them, then painted these solid, pure (non-mixed) colours in thin washes of oil paint. I then nailed finishing nails onto the surface of the coloured blocks, and manipulated pieces of paper in front of them in mask-like shapes, with string bits and beads hanging slightly in front of the flat surface plane (*Figure 4*). These assemblage pieces were only initial studies, or sketches, to get into what I think of as the “studio mind”, but now I feel these works anticipated the juxtaposition of materials I would later come to utilize in my larger installations.

This work however was not my expected direction. In the months before coming to the University of Lethbridge, I was thinking about animations. This was the result of an earlier excursion to New York City, in 2005, where I was exposed for the first time to the work of the South African artist William Kentridge. I have a vivid memory of excitement as I watched a charcoal drawing grow, move, breath, be erased and transform. I was watching Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old [Her Absence Filled the World], a film from 1991. Kentridge’s process of stop-motion drawing/films were visually and intellectually exciting. Under his influence, I became eager to introduce the elements of time and movement into my work.

I was, however, unsure of how to begin. I needed to find a way to put down the baggage of Modernist Painting. I looked back to the surrealist approach of automatic drawing, and to the artist Louise Bourgeois. Bourgeois represented a way of working that

utilized the surrealist system of image making, but also addressed the misogynistic tendencies of the movement. Bourgeois worked through auto-biography, and developed a lexicon of personal imagery that originated from the body. I was also interested in the work of the Winnipeg based art group The Royal Art Lodge (1996-2008), whose collaborative techniques seemed to me to be connected conceptually with the surrealist *exquisite corpse* methodology. I became particularly interested in the drawing style of the artist Marcel Dzama (one of the R.A.L.'s founding members), for his inventive worlds and playful/disturbing characters.



Figure 4. *Untitled (Studio Image)*, 2009, linen mounted on wood, oil paint, nails, paper, beads, string, ink, pencil crayon. Dimensions variable.

I began making works on paper: drawings of characters made out of graphite and gouache. These drawings became paper cut-outs of figures that were not based on

observation. They came from an intuitive process of image making, a combination of Guston's and Bourgeois's influence in process, Dzama's in style. These figures, or characters, began to seem trapped in their paper surroundings; the rectangular white sheet limited what they could possibly be (always a drawing). I started cutting them free and arranging them around the studio, experimenting with how the cut-outs could interact with the space, as well as with the non-cut-out works (*Figure 5*).



Figure 5. *Untitled (Studio Image)*, 2010, mixed media, dimensions variable.



These cut-outs manifested into a number of different bodies of work. They were combined with other materials and turned into collages. They were built up with blocks of wood and formed into dimensional layered assemblages. I used them as silhouettes and stencils, to make a group of images that experimented with the repetition of form. The paper cut-outs also became part of a series of stop-motion animations.

I built an inventory of visual imagery during this initial time in studio. I developed two figures, or characters, that I felt emotionally and intellectually connected to, and which appeared repeatedly in the collages and assemblages. One of the characters I titled *Beast*, the other *Masky*. *Masky* and *Beast* were gouache and graphite drawings, each roughly the size of my hand. They embodied the key themes I was concerned with. *Beast* was a portrait, a silhouette, a figure that contained a face, body and legs. We could see inside of *Beast*, and its insides were fragmented, red dots of wet explosion. *Masky* was *Beast's* counter portrait. The other self. *Masky* also had a head and a body and legs, but we did not see inside its body; *Masky* was self-contained. Once these characters were formally developed and I had investigated their possibilities as static images, it was time to experiment with them through video.

The first animation was called *Beast* (Note: animations are included as electronic documentation; see Appendix). In it, the character of *Beast* is found and transformed through a drawing process; adding information and taking away, building up bodies and then destroying them. *Masky* makes a brief appearance, but is a small and agitating influence. Although this project was my first time using a video camera, and the experience of editing the piece was a struggle, the result was exciting enough to inspire me to attempt the process again.

I subsequently produced Masky Beast (*Figure 6*), a piece in which a conversation takes place between two characters. More narrative in form than Beast, Masky and Beast confront one another, interchange, become one element, and then separate. This work is a clear examination of relationships with others and with ourselves. Its themes are identity, gender, and physical representation. Masky and Beast are two parts of the self. Materially made of the same substance, they nonetheless conform to the illusion of separation and difference.



Figure 6. *Masky Beast* (Still Frame), 2010, 2:12 run time.

The third animation was a departure from the Masky and Beast characters. The narrative structure of Masky Beast felt predictable and restricting. Reflecting on Kentridge's work, I re-considered the use of my materials and approach. The result of

this reflection was to address the medium of oil paint within the context of animation. The outcome was Paint Lick, a stop-motion recording of imagery within the painting process. The piece follows a singular painting through a progression of images and transforming figures, which undergo a series of mutations into abstraction, until they are eventually destroyed. This piece was exhibited in Edmonton at two separate venues. First, at the *Alberta Student Film Festival* in March of 2010, where it screened at the Metro Cinema. The movie theatre space is a transformative psychological arena, similar to the formality of the traditional art gallery, but with an added intensification of viewership. The theatre is a gathering place for individuals to be absorbed into a group mentality. Viewing Paint Lick in that environment, at such a large scale, was both terrifying and elating.

The second venue for Paint Lick was at Enterprise Square as a part of the arts festival *Nextfest*, in June of 2010. Projected in the gallery space which formerly housed the Art Gallery of Alberta, the context completely altered the piece. Unlike the previous screening at the Metro Cinema, the piece played in a loop, allowing viewers to observe it multiple times. The sound was amplified by the gallery walls, and the resulting effect was far more emotionally potent.

After completing this series of animations, I stepped back from using technological media. I returned to the studio to work with physical material. I did not know yet what the conceptual implications of the video works were. I knew they were an important step in the progression towards addressing the permanence of the image, but it was unclear how I could pursue this direction further.

The work that followed was the series of 9 x 12" paintings and the summer collaboration with Dahle that I have already discussed in terms of scale. Both bodies of paintings were displayed formally in a traditional manner, where the edge of the image is the frame, and the gallery wall is unaddressed. The second year of my MFA took my work in a different direction.

## Installation, The White Cube and Wangechi Mutu

The white cube is usually seen as an emblem of the estrangement of the artist from a society to which the gallery also provides access. It is a ghetto space, a survival compound, a proto-museum with a direct line to the timeless, a set of conditions, an attitude, a place deprived of location, a reflex to the bald curtain wall, a magic chamber, a concentration of mind, maybe a mistake.

Brian O'Doherty, Inside the White Cube.

My work over the past year has been a combination of simultaneously developing individual paintings, drawings and assemblages in relationship to installation experiments. The first experiment took place in my studio, and was inspired by the memory of the following event:

*I walked to school one day during the start of the fall semester, and was overwhelmed by the blueness of the sky and orange-light movement between the autumn leaves. As I walked beneath one of the trees, a gust of wind tore through its branches, and I was assailed by a wave of dry frantic leaves. The experience was like walking through a material screen of orange in order to reach the other side of blue. I arrived in my studio and thought of what it would be like for my work to exist within that space.*

I immediately began transforming my studio into a space that reflected this experience. I built a ceiling/sky out of sheets of plastic, tissue paper, glitter and blue paint. I created a screen of leaves out of construction paper, string and ribbon. The choice to use these craft materials in the construction of the space was at the time instinctual, but I now link it to a larger concept of material universality present within my work. By situating oil paintings and other art objects within a space that utilizes non-traditional fine art materials, I am

contrasting the integrity and meaning of both; suggesting that their histories are in conversation.

I developed an expanded version of this installation in the MFA exhibition *In Progress*, held in February of 2011 at The University of Lethbridge Penny Building in downtown Lethbridge. The title of my installation was A Body Spectacular (Figure 7). This exhibition was an important moment for the evolutionary progression of my artistic practice. In it I was able to experiment with the installation ideas I had been testing in my constructed studio space. I approached the entire gallery space as the canvas, and arranged individual pieces of work throughout in such a way as to engage the space of the gallery as a part of the work itself.

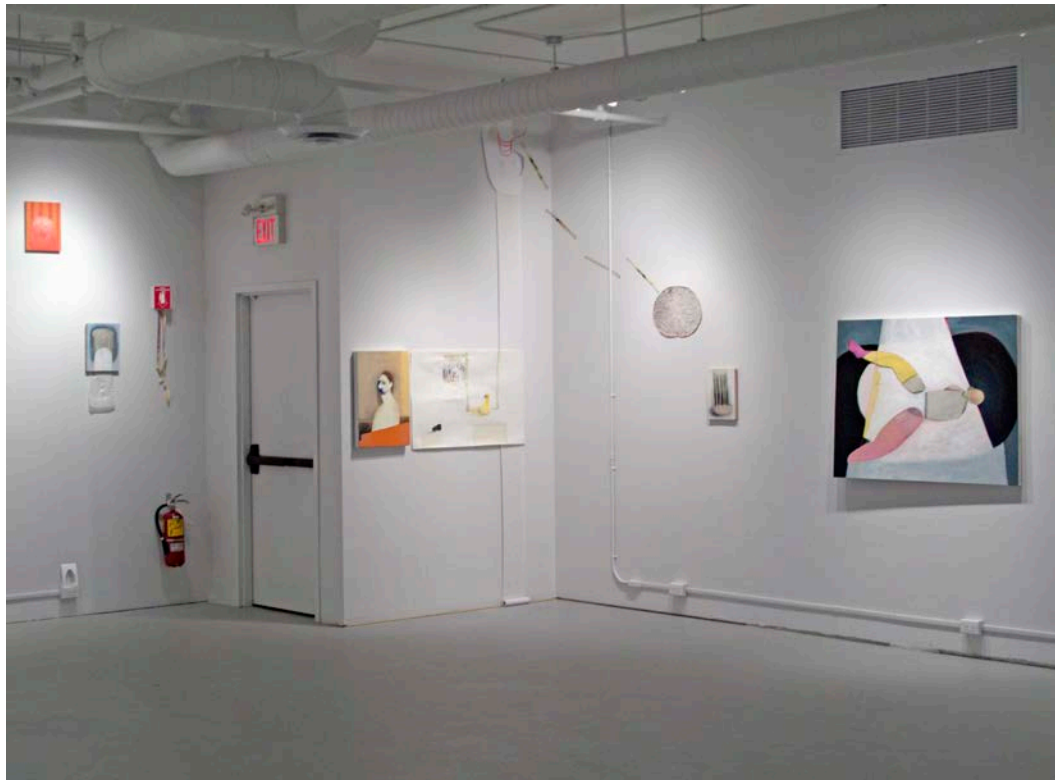


Figure 7. *A Body Spectacular*, 2011, mixed media, dimensions variable.

The transition of my practice from making individual works, where content exists entirely within the objects edge, or frame, to confronting ideas of situational context was influenced by a number of factors. Though the initial construction within my studio took place in response to an unplanned event, my subsequent reflections and research furthered my desire to follow this direction. Brian O’Doherty’s Inside the White Cube presented a historical framework for the evolution of installation as artistic practice. O’Doherty lays out the chronological progression of painting to include the gallery within its content. Context of space became a part of the subject. O’Doherty confronts this transition in the following way:

With postmodernism, the gallery space is no longer “neutral.” The wall becomes a membrane through which esthetic and commercial values osmotically exchange. As this molecular shudder in the white walls becomes perceptible, there is a further inversion of context. The walls assimilate; the art discharges. How much can the art do without? This calibrates the degree of the gallery’s mythification. How much of the object’s eliminated content can the white wall replace? Context provides a large part of late modern and postmodern art’s content.<sup>27</sup>

While installing A Body Spectacular I chose to utilize the whole gallery space; the floor, the top corners of walls, shadows. Spaces where artworks would traditionally not be found. The entire gallery became a space to compose within. The art object exploded to encompass the world around it. The painted surface existed simultaneously as its own surface and as a surface on the skin of the wall. I thought about how the viewer would move through the space; how the presence of bodily work would be felt. Material juxtapositions created space for ambiguous bodies and psychological energy. This

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<sup>27</sup> Brian O’Doherty, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space (Berkeley: California UP, 1976) 79.

approach attempted to declare that all matter within the space was a part of the conversation.



Figure 8. *A Body Spectacular* (Detail), 2011, mixed media, dimensions variable.



In the development of this installation, I looked to the work the artist Wangechi Mutu as an example of how to address the gallery space in relationship to individual art works. I refer specifically to her 2010 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario This You Call Civilization? The catalogue for this exhibition demonstrates Mutu's physical engagement with the gallery space.<sup>28</sup> Walls are gouged and painted to look like open wounds; imagery from individual work pours out over the edge of the piece and explodes over adjacent walls. Mutu's approach of incorporating the gallery space through material informed my own decisions on how to address the process of installation for A Body Spectacular, as well as guiding the projection of the final thesis exhibition that will take place in September of 2011.

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<sup>28</sup> Wangechi Mutu, This You Call Civilization? exh.cat. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010).

## **Thesis Exhibition**

The thesis exhibition will take into consideration the themes I have discussed throughout this paper. The purpose of the exhibition will be to further my experimentation with installation, and to address the use of traditional and non-traditional materials within a constructed space within the gallery. I plan to create an environment that will contextualize individual works, the gallery space and the viewers' body. I will be utilizing materials that provide contrast to the work I have made throughout the MFA program: materials such as mylar, felt, and cotton. My aim will be to produce an exhibition that addresses the conceptions of the body, hierarchy, and subjectivity.

The space I will be working within is structurally divided into three sections. I am allowing this to inform my approach. The window space at the front of the gallery will refer to the earlier installation I created within my studio. It will be an experimentation of how to provide a place for complete absorption of the viewer into the created space. I will be exploring the sensation of colour as light, and transposing the two elements of sky (blue) and leaves (orange) into the space itself, to act as both a lighting system and psychological indicator.

In the remaining sections of the gallery I will reflect on previously described models of installation. The first section will utilize direct interaction with the gallery space, akin to the work *A Body Spectacular*. The second section will follow the traditional system of hanging paintings, as in the *On Your Marks* exhibition, and will include the incorporation of the animations. By approaching each space individually, with consideration to their conceptual and spacial relationships, I hope to create an

exhibition of contrasting and mutually contextualizing situations in which the viewer can navigate, be challenged, and develop their own understanding of the work.

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## APPENDIX I: DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION OF THESIS EXHIBITION

### Contents:

One digital video disc. Documentation of Mandy Espezel's MFA Thesis Exhibition.

### Image List:

- 01 Paper Leaves in Warm Small Hands / Entrance View / 2011 / Mixed Media / DV
- 02 P.L.W.S.H. / Banner Detail / 2011 / Construction paper and string / DV
- 03 P.L.W.S.H. / Maquette / 2011 / Mixed Media / 23 x 16 x 10.5"
- 04 P.L.W.S.H. / Installation View / 2011 / Mixed Media / DV
- 05 P.L.W.S.H. / Installation View / 2011 / Mixed Media / DV
- 06 Blue Stitches and Paper Clouds / Installation View / 2011 / Mixed Media / DV
- 07 B.S.P.C. / Installation Detail / 2011 / Mixed Media / DV
- 08 B.S.P.C. / Installation Detail / 2011 / Mixed Media / DV
- 09 B.S.P.C. / Installation Detail / 2011 / Mixed Media / DV
- 10 Paintings and Video / Installation View / 2009 – 2011 / Mixed Media / DV
- 11 Paintings / Installation View / 2010 – 2011 / Oil on masonite panels / DV
- 12 Paintings / Installation View / 2009 – 2011 / Oil on various supports / DV
- 13 Deep Bath / 2011 / Oil on masonite panel / 48 x 36"
- 14 Orange Sash / 2009 – 2011 / Oil on canvas / 24 x 16"
- 15 Blue Toothed Madonna / 2011 / Oil on masonite panel / 48 x 36"

### Video List:

1. Black Rain Cloud.....Run Time: 00:01:10
2. Beast.....Run Time: 00:01:53
3. Masky Beast.....Run Time: 00:02:12
4. Paint Lick.....Run Time: 00:02:51