A farewell to meat: rendering ambivalence & transgression

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Publication details
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For My Father
Verum, Vires Et Officium

Only the fools know what it means…
My heartfelt thanks and acknowledgement go to my supervisor John Smith for more than four years of sagacious guidance and support. John was also instrumental in my obtaining a generous scholarship, without which, the execution of this work would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank Steven Alderton at the Lismore Regional Gallery for giving me the opportunity to exhibit my work and the staff at the gallery for their assistance in hanging the show.

My deepest thanks and love go to Lollie for reminding me that context is everything and for changing the course of my life.
A FAREWELL TO MEAT: 
Rendering Ambivalence & Transgression

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment 
of the requirements for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Arts and Social Sciences, 
Southern Cross University 
Lismore NSW

2008
This exegesis speaks to the body of work constructed over three years between February 2004 and April 2007, assembled and exhibited at the Lismore Regional Gallery in May 2007 under the title *A Farewell To Meat: Rendering Ambivalence and Transgression*. Written concurrently with the production of the paintings, this writing maps the literature surveyed and documents the studio research undertaken.

This research consisted of collecting imagery from a wide range of sites and allowing it to trigger abductive pictorial responses. Erupting from this collecting process, social texts such as TV and radio news, cultural texts such as cinema and literature, and the subtext formed by my own dreams and nightmares were conflated to become a kind of mythology that informs the paintings and artist books in the exhibition. My studio research on one level, became a kind of phenomenological investigation that probed and responded to a media saturated consumer culture, whilst on another level, it seeks to facilitate the injection of an element of cognitive dissonance back into this culture.

The resultant creative output utilises the efficacy of the image and the subversive power of metaphor to engage with several interconnected themes. These range from the dialectic of truth and illusion in the painted space, to power relations, marginalisation and the possibility of finding holes in that maze without exits we call ‘capitalism’. An ostensibly atavistic utilisation of figuration and oil paint is intended as a ludic rebuttal of 20th Century/modernist notions of minimalism and the so-called ‘end of painting’. The relationship within the paintings between the medium and the message (the paint and the illusion) seeks to operate like the drapery found in paintings from the Baroque era that antinomically both reveals and conceals the forms beneath it. This scopic contradiction serves as an anamorphosistic mirror which, in my own work, highlights the subterfuge and legerdemain currently operating behind the veil constituted by technology and contemporary mass culture.
The goofy, cartoon-like nature of the paintings and the aleatory strategies deployed in their construction, bear witness to the profundity of play in contrast to the burdensome yoke of labour. The artist books articulate more fully the innovative nature of the research and complement the paintings in a way that adds the dynamic of a digital dimension to the more traditional methods of oil painting on canvas.

As a crassly instrumental reason insists on tightening its grip on human affairs, everywhere emphasising efficiency over playfulness, and as coercive structures of order continue to reduce my ontic options to an ever-diminishing range of superlatively insipid and uninteresting purchasing ‘choices’, the capacity for play, for ridiculousness, for absurdity, noise and laziness, for me, became symbolically central.
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INTRODUCTION

NEGOTIATIONS WITH TERROR

Myth is not important because it is myth, it is important because of what people do, and think and claim to know, in the name of a reality that may be no more than myth.¹

To set the scene and introduce this document I have used the title Negotiations With Terror in order to blur details and confuse the issue. In recent years, these words have been used repeatedly in political rhetoric to signify the impossibility of reasoning with an apparently implacable enemy cast as cowardly, psychotic and evil, that is, ‘terrorists’. Here though, I have appropriated this catch phrase to situate my thesis as a deliberate engagement with the inchoate, the ambiguous and the obscure.

I did not set out with a clearly defined research question as I felt this would have been anathema to my chosen methodology. I did however, initially propose to use my studio practice to explore mythmaking propensities within Late Capitalism,² that is, how we might construct myth about our time, our culture and ourselves.³

¹ Ziauddin Sardar, Orientalism (Buckingham-Philidelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p.14
² Frederic Jameson locates Late Capitalism as beginning around the late 1950s or early 1960s as “a third stage or moment in the evolution of capital” and “a purer stage of capitalism than any of the moments that preceded it.” He seems also to define Late Capitalism as being indistinguishable from a postmodernism which is “fascinated… by this whole “degraded” landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader's Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel.” Frederic Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism [World Wide Web] (1991 [cited 15/5/2004); available from http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/jameson.htm.
³ For a detailed treatise examining how the supersaturated conditions of mass communication have facilitated the transformation of fiction into modern myth within a drastically foreshortened time scale see - Herbert F. Tucker, Hit and Myth: Modernity, Mythography, and Cultural Incorporation [World Wide Web] (University of Virginia, 1995 [cited Nov 2005); available from http://etext.virginia.edu/osi/. ‘Solicit cultures and they present you with their myths; map a myth and you have x-rayed the culture it lives in. […] The once authored fiction attains and keeps mythic status through the self-propelling popular mechanics of fame in an era of mass publicity. Glistening with recognition, the modern myth infiltrates the cultural memory banks, where dwell the secular immortals. There it becomes available in a de facto public domain for appropriation by whoever wants it, and for purposes that may range from highbrow fiction through political cartooning to the selling of peanut butter.’ pp. 3-5
From this emerged what I considered to be the pressing need to offer some sort of critique of the repressive wave of radical conservatism\(^4\) currently pervading Western Capitalist Democracies (that is, the U.S., U.K., parts of Western Europe et cetera), with a focus on Australia.\(^5\) This in turn led to a nascent array of questions, focal areas and aims.

In this time—labelled ‘hyperreality’ by Jean Baudrillard—the referent has vanished and signs no longer represent or refer to an external world, merely referring to themselves and to other signs.\(^6\) As visual artist, as painter, as Trickster, how do I then deal with this? Moreover, how do I engage with issues such as oppression and dominance whilst acknowledging that this very thesis statement could be construed as the domestication/colonisation of what I am compelled to nominate as my ‘art practice’ by an institution looking to codify and systematise its diversity into an acceptable scientific norm? The illusionistic language I eventually arrived at, in its possibly atavistic, ugly and buffoonish way, I see as being both derived from and intended to speak back to the artifice, legerdemain and subterfuge of these times.

At no stage however, did I intend for the work to become didactic or specifically political propaganda. In fact, rather than using this work to proclaim that I can envision a better world, or to designate such-and-such as a bad thing, my intention was to engage with the noumenal and make work that might speak poetically to an overwhelming and oceanic sense of *not* knowing. I sought in other words, to make work that embraces uncertainty and in the face of a system that everywhere

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\(^5\) Even though Australia could be defined as a ‘mixed economy’, it is increasingly dominated by capitalism.

seems to emphasise efficiency over playfulness, highlight cognitive dissonance in
the hope that this maverick trajectory might constitute an act of transgression.

Edmund Burke cited Obscurity, Power, Terror, Difficulty and Vastness, as
facilitating sublime experiences.\(^7\) Terror is not only crucial to feelings of the
sublime, notes Richard Devetak,\(^8\) but is in fact, its source. Terror, he says, is
heightened through power, shapelessness, limitlessness and especially darkness.\(^9\)
Darkness and Obscurity for me then, link my work to the sublime, coming in
response to the sublimity of Power and Terror, and the ineffable and potently
cruel and violent forces presently haunting the civilised, human world.

Mikhail Bakhtin wrote of transforming ‘cosmic terror’ into a gay carnival
monster\(^10\), and in so doing described cosmic terror as ‘the fear of the
immeasurable, the infinitely powerful’ and ‘the fear of that which is materially
huge and cannot be overcome by force’.\(^11\) This cosmic fear, he tells us, is
defeated by laughter.\(^12\) If my art-making comes in response then to repression, or
what I might call “cosmic terror”, my intention has been to use art-making to
recast the feelings associated with this cosmic terror in a sardonic light. The
placing of the demons of fear, grief and anxiety outside myself, where they are
represented by dismal figures, faecal references, neurotic spaces, and the near
monumental scale of several of the paintings, thus became an attempt to degrade,
humanise, and ultimately transform the intensity of this cosmic terror into a gay
carnival monster. I set out then to examine the idea of the art-maker as a
Trickster, a ritual clown or fool, and explore how an engagement with this
archetype might function as the basis of an innovative art practice, incorporating

\(^7\) Edmund Burke, “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and
York: Longman, 2003), pp. 499-505
\(^8\) Richard Devetak, The Gothic Scene of International Relations: Ghosts, Monsters, Terror and the
Sublime after September 11 [World Wide Web] ([cited Nov 05); available from
\(^9\) Ibid. ([cited).
p. 335
\(^11\) Ibid. p.335
\(^12\) Ibid. p.335
the possibility of making a valid and communicable art that, ironically, both critiques and celebrates the world.

My strategy developed over time into one wherein I opened myself up to absorption in a wide range of contemporary discourses and allowed these to impact upon what I was making. The imagery within the paintings emerges then as a bricoleur’s response to a text-scape, the major thrust of my creative strategy having been predicated on an engagement with the often confusing hypertexts, constantly shifting contexts and sometimes horrific subtexts that appear to effervesce all around me in these times of increasing social, political, environmental and cultural upheaval.

Here, cultural texts such as contemporary and historical art, literature and paraliterature (science-fiction, comic-books and magazines), rock music and cinema have been predominant sources of inspiration and material. Social texts such as radio and TV news reports of world events at one end of the spectrum, and anecdotal autobiographical narratives at the other, prevailed as a background, against which, I acted upon impulses triggered by forays into the former category of texts. Academic texts provided a variety of theoretical contexts that, as they impacted upon my practice, tended to influence not only how I went about making, but also how I was to regard what I was making.

I considered my studio processes as grounded research wherein, a text at hand might trigger or influence the development of a painting, subsequent reflection upon which, often instigating deeper research into a previously unexplored field, topic or discourse. The nexus highlighted by Martin Jay, Angela Ndalianis and Mieke Bal as existing between the historically located Baroque period and the emergence of a baroque aesthetic in the films, literature and art of the postmodern era, is one example where my studio research inadvertently led me to a particular discourse. Another example occurred when I recognised that the spaces I was constructing within the paintings often seemed to be approximating those within

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13 When referring to the historical Baroque I have capitalised the word, not however when I refer to baroque as a characteristic.
paintings from the late 18th and early 19th century Neoclassical period, a period characterised for Thomas McEvilley by the interplay between the beautiful and the sublime, when 18th century Rationalism was giving way to 19th century Romanticism. In both these instances, an ensuing engagement with the type of works being made in these periods, and the discursive spaces they have come to occupy, was to then influence the direction my own work was to take.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have said that ‘any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be’. Accordingly, I found that the screens dividing the three categories of texts listed are often vague and diaphanous; sociologists, for example, might analyse rock music and cinema while semiologists might probe the function of the Trickster archetype. Similarly, constructing this body of work has allowed for a rhizomatic interweaving of the personal and the more universal, in that, childhood memories might inform a particular painting as much as the latest news from a war zone. Negotiating my way through this in order to impose some sort of cohesion upon the work (in the sense that it might be Dionysian to dream but Apollonian to relate it in the morning) has had me following a red herring down a cul de sac on more than one occasion. This too however, was to become an aspect of my method.

Realising that I will always read and interpret any text through the veil of my own tendencies, I decided to interpolate, that is, to weave detail into the desolate spaces that I seemed to be both occupying and constructing. So, although at first I set about collecting images and tracing them onto canvas, I was eventually to start elaborating upon the distortions and TV ghosts that emanated from this collection similar to the way steam might rise from a compost heap. In other words, following a year of collecting and experimenting, I ceased palimpsestically collaging found images in order to make paintings, and began instead to concoct my own figures and scenarios, suspecting all the while of course, that I was


probably doing more remembering than imagining (if, in fact, there is a
difference). In time however, I did return to the image collection, albeit with a
fundamentally altered approach to techniques of paint application and the
placement of figures within the pictorial space.

I considered my practice nomadic, in that I drifted from a methodology grounded
in taxonomy, to one that utilised digital image manipulation technology, and then
on to one that echoed an ostensibly traditional oil painting practice. Literally
nomadic people might speak several languages and call a vast territory home; as I
wandered, I wondered what I, as nomad, might carry as a marker of consistency.
This became images painted on canvas. For me, it is a language inherited from
my mother’s line, from the iconography in Roman Catholic churches, from comic
books, and of course, from a lifetime of watching TV. Notwithstanding
minimalism, abstract expressionism and several other late-Modernist isms and
critics, and perhaps in the face of ‘new media’ such as digital hyper-art and video
installation, for me, inscribing imagery onto stretched cloth with paint has
remained this marker of consistency which, in a pluralistic climate of multi-
temporal heterogeneity, still seems admissible, sustainable and relevant.

‘Nothing in art is obsolete, so long as it can still be put to human use’,16 writes
Donald Kuspit in a commentary on the tenebrous existential allegories of
Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum. Kuspit says that by ‘showing that Old Master
methods are still fresh and meaningful’, Nerdrum indicates that ‘however much
human beings are subject to the terror of annihilation anxiety, whether for
individual or social reasons, the consummate artistry with which their suffering
can be represented triumphs over it.’17 Although I do not claim the term
‘consummate artistry’ for myself, and although the materials and methods I
deploy in the studio situate my practice outside the category one might nominate
as ‘Old Masterism’, I am still making work that consists of painting pictures on
canvas. This occurs at a time that could be called post-the death of painting, or
post-the rebirth of painting, or post-the end of art, or post-postmodernism, or, just

16 Donald Kuspit, The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century (Cambridge University
17 Ibid.
post-Suzi Gablik’s The Reenchantment of Art.\textsuperscript{18} Here then, despite all these 
posts,\textsuperscript{19} for me, a necrophilic aura of mystery surrounds the unearthing of ‘Old 
Master’ techniques and materials, and the viability of allegory to explore 
psychomachy.

It was interesting to discover that the figurative painters Odd Nerdrum and Jorg 
Immendorf are both said to have trained with Joseph Beuys\textsuperscript{20}. Hearing of this led 
me to consider a level of performativity involved in the production of my own 
work. This stemmed from a certain reflexivity where I started to feel that 
‘everything’ has already been done, that there is no longer any such thing as 
originality, and, perhaps like the contestants on Big Brother,\textsuperscript{21} I became aware of 
myself being aware of myself. I asked: \textit{Am I performing even in the solitude of 
the studio?} The actual labour involved in the construction of the paintings 
became an integral aspect of the art, and the faces and figures derived from self-
portraiture recurring throughout this collection, became emblematic of this 
questioning. In turn, the paintings themselves may be read as props in a one-man 
performance piece wherein, I both incriminate myself as a character complicit in 
the bleak world I project, and interrogate the position I occupy as artist—a 
position I recognise as being ironically one of both privilege and marginalisation.

This reflexive performativity tended to carnivalise my practice so that, in the 
studio, I was either the king slumming it with the peasants, or the village idiot 
attempting to give discourse to the professors. That the paintings are 
representational, figurative, illusionistic, and appear to allude to the Baroque or 
Neoclassical periods, as though Jackson Pollock et al had never been, constitutes 
for me, a marker of Tricksteresque ambivalence. A ‘neither/both logic’ is at play

\textsuperscript{19} Homi K. Bhabha in the first few lines of \textit{The Location of Culture}.(New York: Routledge, 1994) 
writes: \textit{Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of 
the ‘present’, for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial 
prefix ‘post’... p. 1}
\textsuperscript{21} A so-called ‘reality’ TV show wherein a group of young adults are selected to live in a contrived 
domestic space under televised surveillance twenty-four hours a day for several months. Every 
couple of weeks one or two of these people are voted off the show by viewers; the last person 
remaining in the house wins a million dollars. Acutely aware of the cameras, the contestants 
invariably ‘act naturally’ or appear to perform themselves.
here.\textsuperscript{22} Attempting to envision the work installed, I think of the billboards and hoardings seen at Luna Park, or the travelling fairs that would establish themselves by the beach every summer in the bayside suburbs of my youth. Ironically, I am reminded also of the narrative sequence presented by the Stations of the Cross.\textsuperscript{23} Here then, the profane and the sacred would appear to converge at the intersection of the sublime, the everyday and the ludic, echoing for me, the carnival. I thus locate, the mordant body of work comprising this thesis within the discursive structure of the ‘carnivalesque’, or that which mediates ‘between a classical/classificatory body and its negations, its Others, what it excludes to create its identity as such’.\textsuperscript{24}

Curator Russell Storr, commenting on Santa Fe’s Fifth International Biennial in 2004, spoke of ‘Homo Ludens’ (the man who plays) as being the soul of that show. Responding to questions relating to the artist as ‘divine trickster’, and to the ‘ludicrous dimension’ of contemporary art, he said: ‘In a period when aggressive ideas of what is right and proper crowd us on all sides, a little serious play and some signs of unusual life seem to me like a good basis for an exhibition.’\textsuperscript{25} This kind of thinking not only underpins the character of my thesis but, in as much as it has led me to engage with the Trickster, also provides Möbius-strip linkages back to my initially proposed exploration of contemporary modes of myth construction.

George Kamberelis’ writings on postmodern qualitative research methodology have been most influential here.\textsuperscript{26} He describes most Trickster myth cycles as open, non-linear, experimental texts in which episodes may be read in any order.

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
23 Roman Catholics will be familiar with the series of images that line the walls of the church to narrate in pictures the last hours of Christ’s life including his execution.
26 Kamberelis is associate professor of literacy studies at the University at Albany in New York. His research has focused primarily on genre studies, discourse and identity, and the philosophical and theoretical foundations of qualitative inquiry. \textit{Qualitative Inquiry}, 9, no. 5 (2003)
\end{flushright}
without a loss of meaning. There is a connectedness here to my methodology, but it is also my intention that the installation functions in a similar fashion, so that there is no order that will result in a single, linear, cohesive, coherent narrative. Like the episodes in Trickster myth cycles, whatever the arrangement of paintings, the viewer will always be left with disruptions, contradictions, paradoxes and loose ends. This might correspond to or reflect my ambivalence regarding an amalgam of the aforementioned texts, but ironically, it may allow the emergence of a kind of immanent meta-narrative that hovers in a sublime distance as something unsaid or unsayable.

The first part of this document Diaspora, introduces and explores the range of discursive material that has impacted upon the way I set about making the work. Firstly, I introduce the story of the dispersal of carnival as told by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in The Politics and Poetics of Transgression and attempt to identify the linkages between my own art-making practice and the discursive carnivalesque. Anecdotal and autobiographical recollections regarding the childhood influence of both my mother’s painting practice and Roman Catholic iconography are mentioned, alongside speculation about the origins and significance of the ‘idiot’ converging with the Olkowski-Deleuzian notion of a ‘stuttering philosophy’.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha emphasises the importance of Westerners learning to exile themselves in a process of constant renaming and displacing, while Lawrence Grossberg speaks of the global postmodern culture’s need to ‘pluralise and deconstruct itself’. As a vehicle for reflecting upon and exploring this renaming, displacing, pluralising and deconstructing, much of my studio research has

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27 Kamberelis, “Ingestion, Elimination, Sex and Song: Trickster as Premodern Avatar of Postmodern Research Practice,” p. 699n
28 Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.
focused on the disruptive function of the Trickster.\textsuperscript{31} My engagement with the Trickster arises in part from the analogous relationship I perceived between the way this character functions in several indigenous cultures from around the world and the way the artist might operate in my own.

C. W. Spinks designates the Trickster as ‘the undifferentiated hero who, in ludic form, is used to satirise the conventions of cultures whose narratives tell about him’.\textsuperscript{32} Whereas a total absence of limits and restrictions in a culture may lead to dissipation through anarchy and chaos, inversely, an overemphasis on control may result in stagnation. The Trickster function seems then, to emerge in a culture as a deliberately disruptive force that blurs boundaries, questions conventions and parodies the powerful. Seen often as foolish, lazy, inappropriate and an insult to polite company, the Trickster and the artist, as dwellers on the margins of culture, both venture out into what could be deemed the non-cultural, bringing this back to disrupt, but ultimately enrich, the cultural. I expand here on how my engagement with this character informed the development of a methodology. ‘Trickster’, Myrdene Anderson suggests, ‘leads us to the edge and we obligingly leap into liminality.’\textsuperscript{33}

Extending from these ruminations on the Trickster, I reflected upon the polarity of work and play and the fall from human being to human resource. I was stirred here by the writings of Terry Eagleton in \textit{After Theory}, John Holloway in \textit{Change The World Without Taking Power} and Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in \textit{Empire}. These commentators urged me to rethink notions such as the ‘denatured context’, and the idea stipulated by N. Katherine Hayles in \textit{Chaos Bound} that ‘the disappearance of a stable, universal context is the context for the postmodern

\textsuperscript{31} Spinks says of this figure: \textit{Whether trickster be animalistic as Raven or Coyote in Amerindian cultures or cunningly human as Jacob in Hebraic culture, he charts the edges of the cultural world. Whether trickster be divine as Loki in Norse myth and Hermes in Greek myth or metaphysical, psychological, and alchemical as Mercurius in Jungian analysis, he charts the human form, and whether trickster be incarnated as clever fool, war chief, shape-shifter, tinker, con-artist, or cartoon character, she is with us. From the shamanistic versions of hunter-gatherer tribes to the more ambivalent jokster protagonists of contemporary narratives, trickster performs a number of fundamental services to culture. - from C. W. Spinks, “Trickster: Cultural Boundaries and Semiosis,” \textit{The American Journal of Semiotics} 14, no. 1-4 (1997). p. 3

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

Although such notions had initially been prompting me to make work that, for the most part, consisted of assembling collisions of empty signs extracted directly from collected material, and enjoying the haphazard narratives that emerged, this later came to seem like aporia, or a kind of passive nihilism.

I relate how my encounter with these writers (Eagleton, Holloway, Negri and Hardt), in conjunction with a revisiting of the paintings of the Baroque and Neoclassical periods, became pivotal in my movement away from the palimpsest to develop an uncompromising imagistic language. At the end of this chapter, I delve into a Norwegian debate that uses the work of the aforementioned Odd Nerdrum to interrogate the space occupied by what is called Art, as distinct from that which is called Kitsch.

Part Two @ The Chocolate Factory is primarily a documentation of the processes involved in the making of this work. I begin by describing my studio as a ‘derelict space’ or an autonomous zone that could be one of Brian Massumi’s holes in the habits of capitalism. If Part One deals with those texts that furnished me with a theoretical context for the work, Part Two examines how I engaged with texts such as fiction, poetry and music while I painted, and the nascent, ritualistic nature of this engagement. I describe the task of accumulating imagery from a variety of sources and how this was then processed and used in the construction of the paintings.

An early exposure to the work of the Dadaists of the early 20th century is offered as being causal in the development of certain strategies for making work. From here, guesswork, games and a rhapsodomantic modus operandi led, like the DeleuzoGuattarian rhizome, to an encounter with semiotic theory, and via the function of the Trickster, with Charles S. Pierce’s notion of ‘abduction’.

36 Rhapsodomancy refers to the opening a book of poetry at random as a method of divination.
Included in this section is some analysis of several of the paintings, specifically those that mark turning points in the development of the thesis. These analyses, wherein I describe the genesis of certain figures, pictorial devices and my motivations for constructing various spaces, serve to map my occupancy of the studio and the development of the project. Here also, I document the procedures that culminated in the series of artist books installed with the paintings.

In the conclusion I introduce clouds and then discuss how Bakhtin’s idea of ‘unfinalizability’ relates to the ongoing unfolding of my practice. I reiterate the importance of painting slowly and consider the impact of Jean Baudrillard’s writing upon my work; I then question whether it is still at all possible to make art that transgresses. Riding my proverbial horse backwards into battle, I find that the centre could perhaps be everywhere, whereas the circumference remains nowhere to be found—or maybe it is the other way around. The carnival, while it has been forced to pitch camp on the barren margins of both culture and behaviour, a rusty old fun-park way out past the edge of town, ironically, also emerges like a scary clown face in the midst of the market place—a hideous idiot-grin that just won’t go away. I have hitched my cart to this clown’s mad parade.

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38 Kamberelis, “Ingestion, Elimination, Sex and Song: Trickster as Premodern Avatar of Postmodern Research Practice.” p. 701
Beneath the familiar history of Europe runs another, subterranean one. It consists of the fate of those human instincts and passions repressed and displaced by civilization.39

‘Carnival is revolution’ declares Umberto Eco, ‘kings are decapitated (that is, lowered, made inferior) and the crowd is crowned.’40 Historically, the Romans introduced Carnival in Europe and, later in Christian times, it became three days of folly before the rigors of Lent. Lent was (and to a degree remains so for devout Catholics) a period of fasting and austerity observed to commemorate the time Christ spent alone in the desert before his crucifixion. During Lent the Catholic Church forbade the eating of meat, hence, the word ‘carnival’ comes to us from the Latin carne vale, or, ‘farewell to meat’.41

In line with their axiom that the socially peripheral can become symbolically central42 (itself an instance of Bakhtin’s theory of Carnival as a locus for the inversion of binary oppositions43), Peter Stallybrass and Allon White propose that

41 Ibid.
42 Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. p. 5
43 Ibid. p. 8.

Barbara Babcock defines ‘symbolic inversion’ as ‘any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes,
the carnivalesque has been marked out as an intensely powerful semiotic realm precisely because bourgeois culture constructed its self-identity by rejecting it.\textsuperscript{44} N. Katherine Hayles similarly suggests that disorder has become a focal point for contemporary theorists because it offers the possibility of escaping from what are increasingly perceived as coercive structures of order.\textsuperscript{45} In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallybrass and White relate the story of Carnival’s dispersal since the Renaissance: of how the bourgeoisie, in its desire to distance itself from the ‘lower’ classes and subsequently the messy, disruptive, violent nonsense of Carnival, gradually dispersed the latter to liminoid positions on the psychic and geographic margins of Western capitalist society.\textsuperscript{46} The rigors of Lenten rule became the norm in Europe\textsuperscript{47} and Carnival—associated by the middle classes with dirt, lowness and bestiality—became a mere remnant of ‘Pagan’ times.\textsuperscript{48}

In spite of this diaspora, Stallybrass and White tell us, Carnival tropes have tended to emerge from the very centre of this society. Jazz music, surrealist art, advertising hoardings, pop festivals\textsuperscript{49} and Freud’s case studies of early 20\textsuperscript{th} century hysterics\textsuperscript{50} are cited by Stallybrass and White as examples of the carnivalesque erupting from within the midst of bourgeois life: these ‘thematics of Carnival pleasure’ being namely ‘eating, inversion, mess, dirt [and] sex’.\textsuperscript{51} To expand upon this and to perhaps contemporise their list I might note the carnival gibberish woven into the jingoistic double-speak of contemporary politicians, and

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid. p. 202
\textsuperscript{45}Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*. p. 265
\textsuperscript{46}Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. p. 191
\textsuperscript{47}Ibid. p. 22
\textsuperscript{48}Ibid.

According to Michel Foucault the ascendancy of this Lenten rule incidentally paved the way for the instigation of hospitals, barracks, prisons, schools and institutions. Foucault relates the development, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of methods used for imposing ‘constraints, prohibitions or obligations on the body’. The exercising of a ‘subtle coercion’ upon the individual and the codification and partitioning of time, space and movement made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, ‘which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility’. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991). pp. 136-8

\textsuperscript{49}Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. p. 181
\textsuperscript{50}Ibid. pp. 174-182
\textsuperscript{51}Ibid. p. 182
the evocation of clowns and sideshow freaks in our neo-hagiographic obsession with celebrity and celebrities. I see too, the carnival’s mountebanks and snake-oil salesmen venerated by the advertising industry’s relentless stoking of the fires of our false desires, and the tragic paradox occurring when (despite dwindling natural resources and a depleted, toxic environment) the manufacturing industry intensifies its drive to both nurture and furnish these false desires.\textsuperscript{52} The carnival fat-man/lady and the tropes of gluttony and the Grotesque\textsuperscript{53} seem also to manifest in our inexorable and Rabelaisian levels of consumption.

Jonathan L. Beller notes that ‘our desires for deviance, our bouts with psychopathology, even our fantasies of wealth and power… as is well known to advertisers, media moguls and cold war policy makers alike… can also readily be made to turn a profit for Big Capital.’\textsuperscript{54} I began to wonder if Stallybrass and White’s ‘carnivalesque diaspora’ has progressed to such a degree, that the hegemonic capitalist system and the corresponding emergence of an individualist society, has turned itself inside-out to become a perpetual, rather than what was formerly a seasonal, carnival. The topsy-turvy perversions and enchantments intrinsic to carnival or, the ‘collective cleansing ritual’\textsuperscript{55} once ‘open to all the people’,\textsuperscript{56} were earlier shunned and prohibited as peripheral and threatening to the polite bourgeois society of Western Europe. In order for them to be put on the market and sold as commodities however, variations of the liberatory constituents of the carnival have now been subsumed into and become central to the capitalist system.

\textsuperscript{52} Peter Singer writes extensively about this in the early chapters of his book Peter Singer, \textit{How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest} (Milsons Point: Random House, 1997).

\textsuperscript{53} “The term ‘grotesque’ derives from the Italian grotta, a grotto or cave and originates from the 15\textsuperscript{th} century discovery of bizarre and monstrous wall ornamentation in ancient Roman dwellings or grottoes. As a form of artistic representation it may be characterised as a deformation of the real-life, with verisimilitude yielding to caricature, often of human features and of plant and animal forms. In literature it often involves freakish appearance or behaviour found in a tradition stretching from Swift through Kafka to Mervyn Peake.” From N. Cornwell, “The Grotesque,” in \textit{The Handbook to Gothic Literature}, ed. M.Mulvey-Roberts (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998). p. 273


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
Foucault suggests in *Discipline and Punish*, that criminality is not so much born of exile, but ‘by means of ever more closely placed insertions, under ever more insistent surveillance, by an accumulation of disciplinary coercion’;\(^{57}\) while Curtis White tentatively puts forward a conclusion drawn from the logic of Adorno’s aesthetic, that is, that ‘art is a response to repression.’\(^{58}\) Drawing a line between these two notions, I suggest here that my own emergence from a staunchly conservative and patriarchal, Roman Catholic background with a middle-class emphasis on discipline, conformity and hard work (the ceaseless Lenten rule) stands as a contributory factor, if not the *primum mobile*, of my ongoing drive to subvert normality, or at least via my art-making to allude to the extant possibility of this. Hence, my fascination with the discursive space opened by carnival.

**A COUNTER-INSTITUTIONAL MODE OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION**

Ella Shohat and Robert Stamm write that Carnival as an artistic practice embraces ‘an anticlassical aesthetic that rejects formal harmony and unity in favour of the asymmetrical, the heterogenous, the oxymoronic, the miscegenated.’\(^{59}\) Carnival forms a ‘counter-institutional mode of cultural production’,\(^{60}\) a force which emerges from its cyclical and calendrical beginnings to become ‘proleptic of the avant-garde’\(^{61}\) and the avant-garde’s ‘impulse toward social, formal and libidinal rebellion.’\(^{62}\)

Bakhtin\(^{63}\) called ‘carnivalization’ an ‘extraordinary flexible form of artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery

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\(^{57}\) Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. p. 301
\(^{60}\) Ibid. p. 44
\(^{61}\) Ibid.
\(^{62}\) Ibid.
\(^{63}\) Cited in Ibid. p. 35
of new and as yet unseen things.’ Shohat and Stamm situate ‘Carnivalesque art’ as ‘anti-canonical’ in as much as it rejects ‘the construction of an ideal type or language of beauty in relation to which other types are seen as inferior, “dialectical” variations.’ In keeping with this repudiation of the ‘arrogant monologism’ that ‘exalts only one legitimate culture, one narrative, one trajectory, one path to aesthetic creation’, and engaging with the notion of ‘simultaneous, superimposed spatio-temporalities’, wherein all artistic texts can be viewed as palimpsestically embedding ‘semantic treasures from multiple epochs’, my commitment to painting (and perhaps figurative painting in particular) at this time, especially in the face of the institutionalised domination of current curatorial practices that appear to hail ‘post-studio’ art practices, could be construed per se, as being ‘anti-canonical.’

I thus regarded my studio practice as the site for a kind of micro-carnival. Here then, in the light of the ‘multi-temporal heterogeneity’ proffered by Shohat and Stamm (in contrast to a ‘stagist and “progressive” history where realism, modernism and postmodernism are thought to supersede one another in a neat and orderly linear succession’), and allowing myself a certain delinquency, monstrous and hybridised processes operate as a personal negotiation with, and indeed a (line of) flight away from aporia. This disorients, as McEvilley puts it,

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64 Heuristic or heuristics originated as a theological term and could be defined as the flip-side of hermeneutics and, whereas hermeneutics arises as the result of colonising a medium (e.g., print) in the name of a discourse (e.g., truth), heuristics begins when one notices that this colonisation is always incomplete - inadequate and unfinished. *Heuristics Defined* [World Wide Web] ([cited 2004); available from www.yk.psu.edu/~jmj3/home.html.
66 Ibid. p. 27
67 Ibid. p. 29
68 Ibid.
70 Ibid. p. 29
71 Ibid. p. 27
72 Regarding delinquency, Foucault quotes from *La Phalange*, 15 August 1840: ‘He prefers liberty; what does he care if others see it as disorder? It is liberty, that is to say, the most spontaneous development of his individuality, a wild development and, consequently, brutal and limited, but a natural, instinctive development.’ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* p. 292
‘the sense of the inevitability of historical sequences’,\(^{73}\) and culminates in the grotesque and often absurd content of these paintings.

**Mass Culture and Mass Culture**

Reflecting upon both my connection to, and possibly atavistic approach to painting, one of my earliest memories is that of my mother painting—the smell of oil paint and turpentine permeating the lounge-room as I sat watching TV or reading comic books back in the 1960s. Also, every Sunday for the first fourteen years of my life I attended the Catholic mass and there, as I sat on hard wooden pews, the quasi-Baroque images depicting Christ’s execution, and the plaster statues of saints lovingly reproduced by Italian craftsmen provided some relief from the crushing boredom. I can still picture the life-sized statue of Jesus on the cross, the veins beneath his skin and the finely painted trickle of blood on the marmoreal flesh of his plaster feet, pierced as they were by a plaster nail. Above the altar hung an enormous painting of The Ascension, a copy perhaps of an Annibale Carracci or a Guido Reni. In this painting, the disciples, aghast in the folds of their luminescent drapery, surround the radiant figure of Jesus as he ascends into voluminous, golden clouds.

It occurs to me now, that although my Catholicism has well and truly lapsed, this protracted, fourteen year period of scrutinising and absorbing the paintings and statues in the churches of my childhood, when conflated with early impressions of an intrusive mass culture, and the smell of my mother’s oil paint, might form a seminal basis for my current art-making tendencies.

**Why Painting?**

It might be presupposed by some that painting has become the bourgeois commodity *par excellence*, my ongoing preoccupation with it thus, contradicting

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\(^{73}\) McEvilley, *The Exile’s Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era.* p. 137
any apparently anti-bourgeois stance I may appear to take. Perhaps to an extent, this is the case. Donald Kuspit suggests on the one hand, that painting is ‘elitist entertainment, a status symbol, an investment property’ for the wealthy and powerful. Elsewhere however, he rejects the ‘death of painting’ and extols its power ‘to evoke and convey what is subjectively fundamental in human experience.’ He describes Marcel Duchamp’s dismissal of painting as a rejection of the spontaneity and expressivity of the body, and of the hand in particular. In forsaking this ‘olfactory masturbation’ (painting), Kuspit says, Duchamp also forsook the rhythms, activities, growth and materiality of the body implicated in painting. As bell hooks has said, ‘To transgress we must return to the body.’

Others might proclaim on the other hand, that as a contemporary visual artist I ought to be investigating the efficacy of new media such as video, photography or digital media. Although these forms have played on the margins of my practice (see Compendiums of Indolence p. 73), painting in the solitude of the studio allows me the most immediate access to ‘aesthetic osmosis’, a Duchampian term used by Kuspit to describe ‘a transference from the artist to the spectator… taking place through the inert matter, such as pigment, piano, or marble.’ ‘Authentically modern painting is radically individual and existential,’ Kuspit declares, ‘and as such, sets the model for modern art of all kinds, that is, for art

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74 In my own experience, despite almost two decades of a potentially compulsive dedication, I have found this practice, or what could be described as my ‘painting habit’, not so much a gateway to bourgeois affluence as a confirmation of my status as prole. Like Cuba, although I may have gained some autonomy over my means of production, access to markets remains strictly limited. As Juan Davila recently wrote: ‘Within the commercial and state gallery art scene, now both so market-oriented, social concerns and figurative narrative are things long forgotten.’ Juan Davila, Artlink, Vol 23 #1, 2003. p. 19
75 Kuspit, The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century. p. 2
76 Ibid. p. 1
77 Ibid. p. 2
78 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
which is a matter of psychic life and death, in that it aims to defend the true self against exploitation by instrumental-administrative society…’

Contemporary Danish artist Michael Kvium who, although he is well versed in utilising contemporary electronic technology in the production of his videos and performance works, ‘continues to paint because it is the only medium by which the strange, visionary world of his imagination can leap so directly into our own’. Similarly, for me there is still currency in the capacity for paint to be manipulated in such a way as to construct quasi-illusionistic spaces inhabited by quasi-illusionistic figures. I designate this as a ‘gramatica jocosa’, or laughing grammar, ‘in which artistic language is liberated from the stifling norms of correctness.’

Although I do not necessarily equate my painting practice with masturbation, if, as Kuspit suggests, ‘paint is the smelly liquid of lonely sexual discharge’ and painting is thus masturbatory, I concur with him when he says that this ‘perverse form of masturbation… however compulsive an activity, affords a sense of spontaneous, vital release.’

Fig. 1. Subterfuge: The Implications of Junk Mail.
Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 50cm x 150cm. 2004.

82 Kuspit, The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century. p. 4
84 Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics.” p. 46
85 Kuspit, The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century. p. 2
86 Ibid. pp. 3-4
**Work or Play/Tools or Toys?**

Culture, claims Terry Eagleton, bears ‘witness to the profundity of play, in contrast to the burdensome yoke of labour.’\(^{87}\) And, while this is my work (my *insubordinate* labour perhaps), it is also a game I have been playing with language and culture, with images, with spaces, and, of course, with paint.

C. W. Spinks posits play as ‘activity of the Margins’\(^{88}\) and looking at the modern division in Western culture of human activity into work and play, creation and recreation, seriousness and frivolity,\(^{89}\) he cites ‘discovery as play’ as being ‘one of the chief markers of complex neurology, creativity and social learning’, and suggests we ‘take the formal and pragmatic difference between tools and toys as minimal’.\(^{90}\) As a ‘sign-using species’ we use toys as functional tools for learning and discovery\(^{91}\) and as such, they are semiotic entities—‘tools are toys and vice versa’\(^{92}\).

Whilst on the one hand employing a visual language (partly inherited from my hybridised culture and partly constructed in response to the work of other artists both past and present) to speak back at and lampoon coercive structures of order, I have sought also to allude to and engage with the ineffable: with perhaps what Kuspit refers to as ‘mystic states of psychic aliveness.’\(^{93}\) On this note then, as ‘a crassly instrumental reason’\(^{94}\) insists on tightening its grip on human affairs, everywhere emphasising efficiency over playfulness, the capacity for play, for ridiculousness, for absurdity, noise and laziness would for me, appear to become ‘symbolically central’ as a mechanism for achieving, or at least indicating the ineffable, the unsayable that lies beyond mechanical effort.

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\(^{88}\) Spinks, *The Laughter of Signs: Semiosis as Trickster* ([cited]. p. 14
\(^{89}\) Ibid.([cited]).
\(^{90}\) Ibid.([cited]).
\(^{91}\) Ibid.([cited]). p. 15
\(^{92}\) Ibid.([cited]). p. 14
\(^{93}\) Kuspit, *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century*. p. 5
\(^{94}\) Eagleton, *After Theory*. p. 97
The Trickster: A Strategy for Evading Identity

The Fool’s journey describes the process of becoming-other, and this becoming… is unlimited.95

One day early in my scholastic career as I was walking through Lismore, I happened to look on the ground and find a poker card: the joker96. Having read a little about the Tarot I was aware of the significance of this joker, or fool—this floating signifier. In keeping with my practice of collecting potential source material, I pocketed the card. The next day, as I was walking between classes on the university campus, a car pulled up beside me and a man, whom I had never met before, leaned out of the car and handed me a piece of paper, upon which was written a poem called The Joker—Simply God. Although the poem itself read like sentimental New Age psycho-babble, in retrospect this instance of synchronicity between my finding the poker card one day and being handed the poem the next, served to ignite my connection (at least in regard to my art-making) to the strange order of chance embodied for me by the figure of the Trickster.97

96 William Irwin Thompson writes that the joker from a deck of playing cards is a transform of the image of the Palaeolithic shaman: ‘that his floppy ears were originally an animal skin, that his phallic wand is a calendrical stick and the measure of time, and that his bells are testicles and show the old cosmology in which one carried one’s semen in one’s head.’ From William Irwin Thompson, Imaginary Landscapes: Making Worlds of Myth and Science (New York: St.Martin's Press, 1989). pp. 140-141
97 Much of the material I have found regarding this figure comes from mythologists and anthropologists who observe the existence of the archetypal Trickster in a diverse range of indigenous cultures. For the Chinese there is the Monkey King popularised in the Japanese television show of the 1980s, who steals the peaches of Immortality from Heaven. (Whalen Lai, From Protean Ape to Handsome Saint: The Monkey King [World Wide Web] (1994 [cited 17/08/05]; available from http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-EPT/whalen.htm.) In the Irish Druidic tradition Brigid is a shamanic Trickster and shape-shifter; both hideous and beautiful; manipulative enchantress and giver of good things. (Leigh Ann Hussey, Lady of the Depths: Primal Goddess of Celtic Shamanism [World Wide Web] (1988 [cited 17/08/05]; available from http://www.elfhill.com/leighann/writings/brigid.html.) In Nigeria the Yoruba have Esu-Elegbara, a divine Trickster figure who interprets the will of the gods to man, and carries the desires of man to the gods. Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, god of fecundity and generation and master of the barrier that separates the divine from the profane. A list of his qualities include individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance and uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture. (Henry Louis GatesJnr, A Myth of Origins: Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey [World Wide Web] (Oxford, 1988 [cited 17/08/05]; available from http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/gates.htm.)
Homi K. Bhaba ‘urges us to see the adoption of a mask or sly role as an instance of performative agency that unsettles, effects change, and ironizes all notions of real identity.’ 98 Taking note of the work of artists such as Luke Roberts, Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura99 (all of whom play with assuming fictional personas in the realisation of their practices), I saw the potential for myself to adopt a mask in order to explore playfully the evanescence and provisionality of subjectivity as a flow, and to question its reification into fixed identity. This takes place at a time when coercive structures of order (political, societal and economical) would seem to be progressively limiting my ontic options.

John Holloway suggests that the postmodernist attack on the notion of subjectivity is simply an attack on the bourgeois identification of subjectivity with identity.100 He locates the subject of bourgeois theory as an innocent, healthy, freely self-determining individual,101 but warns us, that:

To identify the bourgeois subject with subjectivity as a whole is a most murderous throwing out of the baby with the bathwater… since subjectivity, as movement, as negation of is-ness, is the only possible basis for going beyond identity, and therefore beyond the bourgeois subject.102 (My Italics)

My strategy then, for vituperating and distancing myself from this ‘bourgeois subject’, as well as engaging with the idea that my sense of subjectivity is a flow (whereas my identity is perhaps a fiction), has been to slyly adopt the persona of the Trickster as a kind of self-carnivalisation. This Trickster according to Spinks, is the one who ‘keeps changing shape and experimenting with a thousand identities, including shifts in sex, in a seemingly never-ending search for himself.’103 ‘In his rawest form,’ Spinks continues, ‘(he) is pure ambivalence; he

99 Specifically an exhibition at the Queenslan Art Gallery entitled ‘Smoke and Mirrors’. May 2005
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid. p. 71
For the North American Lakota the Heyokah seems to fulfil the role of both shaman and clown: ‘Heyokahs operate through opposites. The Heyokah's purported wisdom, imparted to a seeker,
is always the border creature who plays at the margins of self, symbol and culture’. He is ‘the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries’. The Trickster can ‘change bodily forms’ and ‘walks the edges of the Sacred and Profane to practice behaviours which to most normal folk are insane, sacred or blasphemous.’

**Fig. 2.** Self-portrait series. Synthetic polymers on timber panels. 2005

could be the exact opposite of the answers the person may have expected. The laughter surrounding the results could be a lesson for the entire community.’


So, the Heyokah here operates as the ‘wise fool’ and the shaman together, servicing the tribe but without, in Spink’s words, ‘the dogmatic and institutional authority of the priest’

Spink, *The Laughter of Signs: Semiosis as Trickster* ([cited]. p.1

Blair A. Moffett describes how the Heyokahs were permitted to do all acts in reverse of the usual order, or ritually backwards.


Similarly, among the Hopi and Zuni: ‘the clowns are priests with high office and specific types of ritualised clowning to perform. Often this includes dealing with everything left out of the formal aspects of religion: sexuality and scatology especially, but also anything taboo, physical and mental deformity, grotesque character traits, and perversity.’


Moffett puts forward that this Tricksteresque function serves as a *speculum mentis* or ‘mirror of the mind’ (p.4) which carries the vision of the tribe ‘beyond the data of the mere brain and senses.’


104 Spink, *The Laughter of Signs: Semiosis as Trickster* ([cited]. p. 1

105 Ibid.([cited]. p. 14

106 Ibid.([cited).

107 Ibid.([cited).
Having in the past worked as a professional actor in film, television and theatre, I connect immediately with the idea of a ‘shape-shifter’. Spinks’ descriptions however, also resonate strongly with my own sense of marginality on other levels, that is, my current position as a visual artist at a moment when economic-rationalism and instrumental-reason might designate this choice as a road to ruin. The location of my studio on the outskirts of a regional town, could also be seen as having an analogous correlation to the former.

Like Helen Lock, questioning whether modern tricksters exist at all, I wondered: Who, if anyone, maintains this role in my own culture? Could it be the artist? Alone in his/her studio s/he is separated from the din of everyday life, and not necessarily out of an elitist, heroic arrogance, or egotistical solipsism. From my own experience I would suggest rather, that this self imposed exile is born of an urge to study the chaotic patterns emerging from that din, and via aesthetic osmosis, to infuse his/her observations with a sense of the ineffable in order to preserve the ‘impulse to transcendence… in a secular society that denies there is any’. It is in this context that Larry Ellis’ depiction of the Trickster/shaman resonates with my own experience as an art-maker. Ellis describes the Trickster/shaman as ‘a liminal figure, a mediator who stands between the supernatural world and the world of the People’ and as one whose power is ‘grounded in a unique bond with the otherworld that is often established in a ritual of isolation, fasting, and meditation’. For me this corresponds with the solitude, penury and periods of intense focus commonly associated with art-making.

Spinks tells us that the investiture of the artistic sign ‘lies in its cultural association, and its pleasure lies in its ability to disrupt normal perception’, this causes ‘individuals to look anew in light of the disorientation of an imbalance between semiotic stability and dynamism, between an ever changing environment

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109 Kuspit, *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century*. p. 5
111 Ibid. ([cited).
and a stabilised cultural map’. Trickster as Art, or his/her play at the margins and boundaries of culture ‘allows human beings to find an adaptive way to handle their own cognitive dissonance and to focus on the problems which arise because of the difference in reality and the cultural maps’. This becomes a salient point in relation to the way my art-making attempts to negotiate/expose/exaggerate the discrepancies between ‘the cultural map’ and the realities of my everyday existence. ‘As a culture draws its maps more rigidly’, says Spinks, ‘the Trickster function is obligated to walk the cultural margins that much more persistently.’ It is in this regard that I saw my adherence to the practice of representational painting as a means of toying with the tension between what is marginalised and what is central.

Taking on the role of the Trickster to make art that would seem to regard my culture with a critical, even pessimistic eye, ironically, also acknowledges my own complicity in this culture and its fall. Claire Colbrook suggests: ‘buffoonery falls, enjoys the humour of the fall, laughs from on high at the falling buffoon, and remains implicated in the fall.’ Because we can ‘never overcome singular viewpoints and achieve a God-like point of view’, and to avoid falling into ‘smug self-recognition’, she states that, the ironic attitude must recognise that we are all ‘subject to a cosmic joke’ and that ‘we are all part of this falling.’

Important for me also in this regard, is the capacity for humour to infuse and thereby offset the often-nightmarish characteristics of what I produce, reiterating the Bakhtinian notion that cosmic terror is defeated by laughter. For Spinks, the Trickster ‘is the undifferentiated hero who, in ludic form, is used to satirize the conventions of cultures’ and is ‘connected with the generation of marginal signs

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113 Ibid.([cited]).
114 Ibid([cited]).
115 Ibid.(cited).
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid. pp. 50-51
119 Spinks, The Laughter of Signs: Semiosis as Trickster ([cited]).
either as personal or cultural change’. 120 ‘The Trickster is a joker, one who laughs at his own pain and potential and the limitations of himself and his culture’. 121

**ANTI-METHODOLOGY & NOMADISM**

Nomadism is an invitation… to start cultivating the art of disloyalty to civilization… 122

Ulmer has identified each of Descarte’s six books of the *Discourse* and then proposed its opposite as a principle of his anti-method. 123 This anti-method became the basis of my method, offering me a means of negotiating the antinomy inherent in a thesis devised in part to confound rationalism, whilst meeting the requirements of an academic, and therefore somewhat unavoidably rational, research project.

Inna Semetsky describes the Fool in the Tarot as the one ‘who is always on the road, always in the process of becoming’ 124 and Alan Ramón Clinton says that this

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120 Ibid. ([cited]. p. 1
121 Ibid. ([cited]. p. 2

**ANTI-ONE:** Problem: inhibiting effect of concern with error. Take Don Quixote as a positive emblem. Rely on fictional extravagances as sources of invention.

**ANTI-TWO:** Antimethod steps: (1) Any starting point is fine; no matter how absurd the idea, do not judge it. (2) Take the problem as a whole; treat it as a gestalt; cast it in the form of an image. (3) Juxtapose this gestalt with other images at random. (4) Assume that any given part suffices, that completeness is not necessary.

**ANTI-THREE:** Moral rules: (1) Mock and parody the customs of one’s country. (2) Wander aimlessly (vagabondage). (3)Follow one’s desire. (4) Do not look or seek anything in particular, but let things come or happen as they will.

**ANTI-FOUR:** Take entertainment as the primary dimension of experience. Cogito: I am without importance, therefore I play. Imagination and dreams are more reliable than reason.

**ANTI-FIVE:** The body is the source of value and the ground of action. There is no distinction between human and machine, between living and dead or artificial memory and mind. Take the machine as model for mind.

**ANTI-SIX:** Anyone could do this, could discover these things and write this discourse. Seek publicity rather than work. Abandon all attempts at mastery and renounce the ambition to master nature.

124 Semetsky, "Adventures of a Postmodern Fool." p. 59
figure allows ‘nothingness to acquire a positive value’. Working with and as the Trickster authorised for me an heuristic methodology, or, an anti-methodology as in Gregory Ulmer’s epistemology of performance, wherein knowing is making, producing, doing, acting. My questions and their elusive answers would emerge therefore, from the milieu of my processes.

Acting-out the Trickster as a liberatory strategy and incorporating Ulmer’s anti-method, led me to designate my practice as nomadic. Wandering the smooth surfaces of discourse, I adopted nomadism as a kind of ‘critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour.’ As Foucault says: ‘the lyricism of marginality may find inspiration in the image of the outlaw, the great social nomad who prowls on the confines of a docile, frightened order.’

Rosi Braidotti employed the term to describe a state of mind, a strategy for negotiating the power structures of what she calls the ‘sedentary phallogocentric monologism of philosophical thinking’ and ‘a way of stepping out of the political and intellectual stasis of these postmodern times.’ In terms of perhaps attempting to negotiate with, or at least trying to distance myself from these phallogocentric, monological structures, and of also broadening the parameters of my practice, I was drawn to Braidotti’s description of nomadic consciousness as, not taking on any kind of identity as permanent, and as a creative sort of becoming: a ‘performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and knowledge.’

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127 Ibid.
128 Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Thought. p. 5
129 Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. p. 301
130 Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Thought. p. 30
131 Ibid. p. 4
132 Ibid. p. 33
133 Ibid. p. 6
When Dorothea Olkowski cites a definition of nomadism as ‘non-systematic theory, a discontinuous line, a mere collection of points’, she could be describing the way I operate in the studio. Here then, not only is this nomadic consciousness played out in the initial selection of source material, that is, photographs and images et cetera, collected from mass cultural sites to be traced, collaged and cannibalised into the paintings, but also as I allow myself to diversify and redirect the way the paintings are evolving.

Following a year of making paintings that, in terms of materials and approach, seemed to resemble street art or graffiti; I changed direction and began to make work that more resembled a perverse translation of 19th century salon paintings. A ‘non-systematic theory’, thus became a non-systematic practice; an approach which followed Ulmer’s injunctions to ‘wander aimlessly’ and ‘follow one’s desire’, ‘not looking or seeking anything in particular, but letting things come or happen as they will.’ I could then, identify linkages between this type of methodology and the practices of dérive or détournement coming out of the Situationist International movement in the 1950s and ‘60s in France.

The term nomadism also holds other implications that for me, touch upon the work/play binary mentioned earlier. Deleuze and Guattari write: ‘It is a vital concern of every state… to vanquish nomadism’ and Holloway reminds us that: ‘Capitalism’s survival depends on capturing those in flight. Workers must work and produce value. Capital must exploit them. Without that, there would be no

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135 Ulmer, Heuretics: The Logic of Invention. pp. 13-14
136 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
138 In 1992, Sadie Plant wrote: "to dérive was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed." From Sadie Plant, The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age (London: Routledge, 1992). Available from www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%A9rive (Cited Aug 2007)
139 Deleuze, 1000 Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. p. 385
capitalism.’\textsuperscript{140} Under the requirements of capital then, Holloway continues, ‘people must be deprived of their freedom to do what they like’,\textsuperscript{141} and via ‘the establishment of property, the appropriation of the land and other means of living and doing’,\textsuperscript{142} freedom is gradually enclosed, hemmed in, so that in the end ‘people have no option but to choose freely to be exploited.’\textsuperscript{143}

I thus came to regard this entire project as a possible opportunity for me to attempt to take flight from this system, that is, from subordinated labour. My nomadism, which encompassed my studio based painting practice as well as my approach to a literature survey, became a performative metaphor reflecting my antagonism towards capitalism and the maze-without-exits constituted by private property, a scream of defiance at the coercive structures that seek to convert human beings into human resources and subordinate every aspect of my life to money. ‘For capitalist man,’ writes Peter Singer, ‘the sole purpose of one’s life is (and here he quotes Max Weber), “to sink into the grave weighed down with a great material load of money and goods.”’\textsuperscript{144} On another level of course, I could perhaps compare the romanticism implicated by my identification with the role of nomadic artist with the romanticism implied by an adherence to the notion that my humanity cannot and will not be determined by the flow of capital.

\textsuperscript{140} Holloway, \textit{Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today}. p. 205
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid. p. 206
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{144} Singer, \textit{How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest}. p. 66
**THE SLEEP OF REASON, THE AGE OF IDIOCY**

The Age of Reason sought to banish monsters borne of myth, superstition and religion. Rather than disappearing however the monsters simply reappeared elsewhere; they fled from the Enlightenment’s illuminated spaces into the dark shadows it cast. They became constant reminders of the powers and mysteries that elude even Enlightenment’s Reason. Not only were they potent signs of Reason’s ‘other’, they were outgrowths of a perverted Scientific Reason, as in Mary Shelley’s Monster in *Frankenstein*.\(^\text{145}\)

Nuclear destruction, is the outcome of rational thought.\(^\text{146}\)

![The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters. 1799. Etching. Francesco Goya.](image)

In the course of this work I have examined thousands of images and although most of these tended to be forgotten, others, such as Goya’s etching *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (**Fig.3**) from the *Los Caprichos* series of 1799, remained and became emblematically poignant. I reconsidered the title, and speculated that Goya might have actually been positing reason itself as a kind of torpor that, via its occlusion of all phenomena falling outside the rigid boundaries of the rational, could result in the production of monsters more vehemently than

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\(^{145}\) Devetak, *The Gothic Scene of International Relations: Ghosts, Monsters, Terror and the Sublime after September 11* ([cited]). p. 3  
could some kind of laxity in our slavish dedication to instrumental reason. Richard Devetak would appear to agree. He notes on the one hand that ‘Goya seems to be saying that Reason… must govern the imagination, it must remain awake, vigilant, otherwise its enemies, the forces of darkness, will be unleashed on humanity’,\textsuperscript{147} but on the other hand, that ‘the Rationalist dreams fostered by the Enlightenment are just as capable of producing their own monstrous aberrations’.\textsuperscript{148} Pondering along these lines, I began to consider the implicit irrationality or idiocy perhaps playing itself out in what I call my ‘work’.

From the Greeks, who developed the political system known as democracy (wherein every citizen [except slaves and women!] had not only the right, but also an obligation to participate in the governing of the nation), we also inherit the term \textit{ιδιωτης} (\textit{idiotes}) or ‘idiot’.\textsuperscript{149} Originally, this referred to one who (due to being ill-informed or unaware) declined or neglected to participate and, participation being seen here as noble, the term ‘idiot’ (as well as having evolved into the etymological root of words such as \textit{idiom} and \textit{idiosyncratic}) became a term of derogation in everyday parlance. I speculated again, that in the face of the current dearth of independent and unbiased media (resulting in ill-informed and unaware citizens\textsuperscript{150}) combined with an increased level of specialisation in politics (tending to offer most of us little more opportunity for participation than a cursory vote every three years) perhaps, despite all the obsequious rhetoric about ‘freedom and democracy’, we are now all in danger of becoming the \textit{ιδιωτης}.\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{147} Devetak, \textit{The Gothic Scene of International Relations: Ghosts, Monsters, Terror and the Sublime after September 11} (\textit{cited}). p. 4
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid. (\textit{cited}). n.
\textsuperscript{150} Lewis Lapham, long-time editor of Harper’s Magazine in the U.S. gave an address entitled \textit{Make-believe Democracy} for the opening of the Sydney Writer’s Festival in May 2005. His country, he says in this address, has become a make-believe democracy because political debate and dissent is stifled, the media is compliant, and the population under-educated. His fundamental concern is with the loss of the democratic liberty to disagree and to question. For a full transcript of his speech see - Lewis Lapham, \textit{Make Believe Democracy} [World Wide Web] (2005 [cited Oct 05]; available from www.abc.net.au/m/bigidea/default.htm.
\textsuperscript{151} Commenting on \textit{The Complete Idiot’s Guide} series of books, Kelly M. Cresap suggests that “The series assumes that in an age of information overload, intense specialization, and rapid obsolescence, basically everyone is caught between feeling like an idiot and not wanting to feel this way.” Kelly M. Cresap, \textit{Pop, Trickster, Fool: Warhol Performs Naivete} (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004). p. 226
Roland Barthes asked us to: ‘Imagine someone who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions... by simple discard of that old spectre: logical contradiction’,¹⁵² someone who, ‘mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity.’¹⁵³ This sounded like a description of the character I was seeking to embody in the studio as well as a reference to the antinomy that often seemed to pervade my art-making. Barthes follows however, with a caveat: ‘Such a man would be the mockery of our society: school, court, asylum, polite conversation would cast him out.’¹⁵⁴ John Ralston Saul seems to echo this when he says, that to argue against reason means arguing as an idiot or as an entertainer who seeks only to amuse.¹⁵⁵ My intention nonetheless, was to employ what Deleuze and Guattari might call ‘anti-oedipal forces,’ that is, forces that ‘escape coding, scramble codes, and flee in all directions’.¹⁵⁶

Colebrook says: ‘One cannot say that one rejects, or wants to argue against rationality, for to make this accusation against reason one must employ reasoned arguments. One either remains at the level of manifest contradiction [...] or one performs rather than states the contradiction.’¹⁵⁷ On one level then, the writing of this document in compliance with institutional requirements, constitutes the employment of reasoned arguments to make accusations against reason. On another level however, the entire process of mapping and documenting the inquiry into transgression that underpins my studio procedures, remains ironically for me ‘at the level of manifest contradiction’. With specific regard to the construction of paintings, where I often operated on a ‘first idea-best idea’ basis, I saw myself as performing the contradiction and assuming the guise of a self-confessed idiot to perhaps thwart the idiocy of these times. Rather than this being a restriction though, it allowed me access to an intuitively based process of developing works—divination almost. Of course, I run the risk here of suggesting that I have

¹⁵³ Ibid.
¹⁵⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵⁷ Colebrook, *Irony*. p. 60
no shortage of ‘idiotic’ ideas, this apparent idiocy nevertheless, was to become a sustainable modality.

Fig. 4 Journal entry. Felt pen and gouache on cartridge paper. 2004

FROM STUTTERING PHILOSOPHY TO CANNIBALISM

Perhaps the idiocy of these times has prompted Dorothea Olkowski and Gilles Deleuze to suggest that philosophy is stuttering.\textsuperscript{158} This happens, they put forward, when ‘the language system is in motion, in perpetual disequilibrium, so that it stutters, murmurs, mumbles, and breaks up in a heterogeneity of time and space.’\textsuperscript{159} Olkowski describes stuttering philosophy, as an ‘ontology of becoming,’\textsuperscript{160} ‘accommodating a plurality of centres, superimposing and mixing perspectives and points of view.’\textsuperscript{161} She offers this as a positive disruption to Aristotelian organic representation, hierarchically distributed, in Deleuze’s words,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[158] Olkowski, \textit{Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation}. p. 14
\item[159] Ibid.
\item[160] Ibid. p. 2
\item[161] Ibid. pp. 24-25
\end{footnotes}
around ‘one centre, a sole and elusive perspective’ which ‘mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing’.\textsuperscript{162}

Thinking here then, of the stupefying overabundance of information that inundates contemporary life, and in the form of advertising, news bulletins, movies, pop-music et cetera, accelerates the etiolation of the referent, I had in mind the enduring image of Robert De Niro’s character in the film Brazil.\textsuperscript{163} De Niro plays Harry Tuttle the outlawed air-conditioner repairman who, towards the end of the film as he attempts to help the hero escape, is inexplicably and somewhat ridiculously besieged by sheets of wind-borne newspaper. He writhes and struggles but the swirling paper sticks to his body until he is completely covered. When the newspapers finally disperse, he has vanished.

![Image](Fig. 5 Chaos Comes Before All Principles 2004. Synthetic Polymers on canvas. 150 x 50cm)

At the beginning of this project, the notion of a philosophy that is stuttering in the face of the ossification of the referent seemed to draw me into a space of contracted ambivalence. Conversely, this ambivalence then also served as a point of departure in line with Ulmer’s dictum: \textit{Any starting point is fine; no matter how absurd the idea, do not judge it.}

Shohat and Stam describe how the Brazilian modernists of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century made the trope of cannibalism (anthropophagy) the basis of an ‘insurgent

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{163} (Terry Gilliam 1986)
aesthetic’\textsuperscript{164} by digesting imported cultural products and exploiting them as raw material for a new synthesis, ‘thus turning the imposed culture back, transformed, against the colonizer.’\textsuperscript{165} Along similar lines, and in accordance with strategies I had been previously using to construct paintings, I set out to accumulate a plethora of visual information gleaned from mass culture. Echoing perhaps Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg, the paintings I made in the initial stages of this project became palimpsestically inscribed with chaotic networks of colliding signs, mutely operating as vague and incoherent mirrors to the visual noise of contemporary life.

Ultimately however, descriptions such as mute, vague and incoherent, read too much like well behaved, inoffensive and inconsequential. Paintings that could be described as belonging to the Abstract Expressionist or Minimalist traditions, have been hanging elegantly and unobtrusively in corporation foyers for decades. McEvilley writes of an earlier generation of painters who also felt that ‘painting itself was polluted as an instrument of truth or criticism by its long deceptive use as decoration.’\textsuperscript{166}

Standing in the midst of the work I made at this time, I felt as though something was missing. I seemed to be addressing the vagueness and incoherence of the recent philosophical past (this ‘stuttering philosophy’) rather than the very specific and pressing hyperreality of now. Was I fiddling while Rome burned? Do I compromise the autonomy of painting by entertaining such questions? Barthes said: ‘What liberates metaphor, symbol, emblem from poetic mania, what manifests its power of subversion, is the preposterous.’\textsuperscript{167} I was thus prompted to begin to investigate a way to make these paintings impact upon reality with a more specific, poignant and preposterous rudeness.

\textsuperscript{164} Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics.” p. 49
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{166} McEvilley, \textit{The Exile's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era}. p. 194
OVERLOOKING THE DENATURED CONTEXT

Difference, hybridity, and mobility are not liberatory in themselves, but neither are truth, purity, and stasis.¹⁶⁸

I was never interested in abstract art.¹⁶⁹

N. Katherine Hayles defines cultural postmodernism as ‘the realization that what has always been thought of as the essential, unvarying components of human experience are not natural facts of life but social constructions.’¹⁷⁰ She terms this process denaturing¹⁷¹ and then applies it to language and context. ‘[A]ll texts,’ she says, ‘are penetrated by infinite numbers of intertexts so that contextual horizons are always constructions rather than givens.’¹⁷²

Denatured contexts, Hayles assures us, are extremely common.¹⁷³ Hayles cites MTV (dubbed the ‘pornography of semiotics’ by Greil Marcus¹⁷⁴) as an example wherein, the superabundance of quick cut diverse imagery (a dancing demon cuts to a singer with blue hair, to cows grazing in a field, then to a burning car) creates ‘a technological demonstration that any text can be embedded in any context.’¹⁷⁵ Hayles puts forward that what these music videos tell us is that ‘the disappearance of a stable, universal context is the context for postmodern culture.’¹⁷⁶

Writing in 1990, she makes a convincing argument that works to foreground ‘the interrelation between traditional ideas of order and repressive ideologies,’¹⁷⁷ as

¹⁷⁰ Hayles, _Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science_. p. 265
¹⁷¹ Ibid.
¹⁷² Ibid. p. 266
¹⁷³ Ibid. p. 272
¹⁷⁵ Hayles, _Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science_. p. 272
¹⁷⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 16
well as critiquing the ‘presuppositions within older paradigms that made universalisation appear axiomatic.’ Ten years later however, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri refute this kind of relativist stance and would have us remember that: ‘The postmodernist epistemological challenge to ‘the Enlightenment”—its attack on master narratives and its critique of truth… loses its liberatory aura when transposed outside the elite intellectual strata of Europe and North America’. ‘In the context of state terror and mystification,’ they suggest, ‘clinging to the primacy of the concept of truth can be a powerful and necessary form of resistance.’

I am reminded again at this point of Holloway’s ‘innocent, healthy, freely self-determining individual subject of bourgeois theory’, that rare, elite bird who enjoys certain rights, a certain level of wealth and a certain position in the global hierarchy, and for whom alone resonates, in our present imperial world, the ‘liberatory potential of the postmodernist and postcolonial discourse’. Here too, I recall Eagleton’s warning that ‘the more predatory and corrupt capitalism grows, the less easily it can mount convincing defences of its way of life.’

So, although we in the ‘postmodern’ West have been blithely attempting to denature language, context, time and space, insisting on the provisionality of the body and recasting universal truths as apocryphal, has the spread of this thinking had a sort of Pyrrhic victory? At the time of this writing, I remain subject to corporeality, and accordingly, still require food, water and shelter to survive; hunger, cold and destitution being, it could be argued, not subject to relativism.

In 1958 British playwright Harold Pinter wrote: ‘There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and

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178 Ibid.
179 Negri, *Empire*. p. 155
180 Ibid. p. 155
181 Ibid. p. 156
182 Eagleton, *After Theory*. p. 152
false. In his recent Nobel Lecture however, he reframed these words adding: ‘I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?’

Reflection along these lines led me out of and away from a space where my paintings were becoming the vague palimpsests mentioned earlier. I wanted to address, critique and parody the über-narratives to which a great majority of us would currently appear to be subject. In an attempt then, to bring about a new synthesis, an ‘insurgent aesthetic’ that turns the imposed culture back against the coloniser, the works evolved to consist of an uncompromising imagistic language, a kind of ‘mid-point mimesis,’ avoiding entirely illusionistic realism yet not disintegrating into abstraction. Although this language may indeed be read as low-brow, brutish, clumsy and ugly, for me it evokes a deceptive clarity, a non-specific specificity which, in the form of a speculum mentis (mirror of the mind), derives from and is intended to speak back to the deceptive clarity and subterfuge of these times.

**GOING BAROQUE**

Despite all our rational systems, reality has a way of revealing to us that it is a culturally constructed impostor.

The various discourses, to which I felt myself drawn, began to seem contradictory. Like economic growth as a be-all-and-end-all—a societal raison d’être—the basic premises underpinning my practice began to tear themselves

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184 Ibid.([cited).


186 Kamberelis, ”Ingestion, Elimination, Sex and Song: Trickster as Premodern Avatar of Postmodern Research Practice.”(cited)
apart. While I seemed to be arguing on the one hand, against restriction and coercive structures of order, my approach to composition, subject matter and application techniques on the other hand, were tightening up to become perhaps evocative of the pre-modern.

I made a conscious decision however, to embrace these apparent contradictions and subsequently saw a possibility for the relationship between the medium and the message—the paint and the illusion—to operate like the drapery found in paintings of the Baroque era that often seemed to antinomically both reveal and conceal the forms beneath. It was in the context of considering the notions of illusion and truth that I began to look again at the 17th century Baroque. Although I had no intention to commit to an extensive study of this complex period and do not feign to present such here, a glimpse into the connections between the aesthetic traits of the Baroque and those of postmodernity, offered me license to further develop the exuberance and deliriousness of what I was painting. For a start, smearing oil paint over synthetic polymers (an 'old' medium over a 'new' one) for me, became a material allusion to a multi-temporal heterogeneity, a jumbling-up and confusing of a linear reading of art history.

In revisiting the work of several Baroque painters, I inadvertently came across the discourse highlighting the affinities existing between the historical Baroque and postmodern periods. Both epochs, as Angela Ndalianis observes, 'underwent radical cultural, perceptual, and technological shifts that manifested themselves in similar aesthetic forms.' By way of illustrating these nexuses, Ndalianis compares the literally labyrinthine spaces occupied virtually by players of today’s computer games with the dizzying extravagance of a Pietro Da Cortona ceiling painted in the 1630s.

Martin Jay describes the 17th century Baroque as arising in opposition to the 'lucid, linear, solid, fixed, planimetric, closed form of the Renaissance', and as

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187 An instance of the type of serendipity facilitated by using the Internet as a research tool.
189 See for example Da Cortona’s ceiling fresco *Glorification of the Reign of Urban VIII* in the Gran Salone of the Palazzo Barberini Rome, painted between 1633-1639.
being ‘painterly, recessional, soft-focused, multiple and open… bizarre and peculiar’.\textsuperscript{190} Quoting French philosopher Christine Buci-Glucksmann, who identifies the Baroque with a ‘madness of vision’ (\textit{La Folie du Voir}), Jay refers to the Baroque fascination for ‘opacity, unreadability and the indecipherability of the reality it depicts’.\textsuperscript{191}

The baroque self-consciously revels in the contradiction between surface and depth, disparaging as a result any attempt to reduce the multiplicity of visual spaces into any one coherent essence. Significantly, the mirror that it holds up to nature is not the flat reflecting glass… vital to the development of rationalized or “analytical” perspective, but rather the anamorphosistic mirror, either concave or convex, that distorts the visual image – or more precisely, reveals the conventional rather than natural quality of “normal” specularity.\textsuperscript{192}

The deliberately indecipherable and artificial spaces tendentiously developing in my later paintings in this suite, I read as being aligned with this ‘contradiction between surface and depth’. Likewise, reflecting upon the social, cultural and theoretical texts in which I had been absorbed, the mirror my paintings held up to the ‘nature’ constructed by these texts would seem more attuned to this ‘anamorphosistic’ distortion than to rationalisation and analysis.

Ndalianis tells us that for the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, the Baroque implied an ‘art or music of extravagance, impetuousness, and virtuosity… believed to lack the reason and discipline that came to be associated with Neoclassicism and the era of the Enlightenment’, and was understood as possessing traits that were ‘unusual, vulgar, exuberant and beyond the norm’.\textsuperscript{193} She compiles a list of qualities that have more recently led to the designation of several contemporary films and film directors as baroque: ‘melodramatic style’, ‘excess spectacle’, ‘mythic proportions’, ‘grandeur’, ‘hyperbolic’, ‘intertextuality, parody, and a

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid. p. 17
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{193} Ndalianis, \textit{Neo Baroque Aesthetics in Contemporary Entertainment} ([cited).
carnivalesque attitude’, ‘stylistic excess and performativity.’ Although I had been considering these terms in reference to my painting, conversely, there are several other aspects of my own work–such as its descent into the macabre and the grotesque–that do tend to distance it from the baroque.

Fig. 6 The Deadbeater (If ya wanna make an omelette…)

Oil and synthetic polymers on canvas. 130cm x 150cm. 2006

194 Ibid.([cited).
Ndalianis writes that ‘to the Neo-Baroque,\textsuperscript{195} truth and reality was always beyond the individual’s grasp.’\textsuperscript{196} Returning to a theme presented earlier in this writing, in a similar vein, Kamberelis speaks of the efficacy of the Trickster function, embodying illusion, metamorphosis and dialogue, to remind us ‘that despite our covering concepts, reality in some ways always eludes us because it is forever being produced and not really always already there’.\textsuperscript{197} By aligning myself with this Trickster function and by serendipitously echoing certain qualities of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century Baroque, I sought to evoke an interrogation of ‘reality’, whilst of course, remaining aware that it was beyond my grasp and not really always already there.

\textbf{Odd & Kitsch}

As a corollary to my re-examination of the type of paintings produced in the Baroque era, and subsequently the Neoclassical period of the late 18\textsuperscript{th} to early 19\textsuperscript{th} century, I encountered the work of contemporary Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum. Using oil paint on a linen support traditionally prepared with rabbit skin glue and primed with lead white, Nerdrum constructs scenarios wherein moribund figures exist against bleak landscapes—pale, cold flesh surrounded by black Icelandic stone and dismal, overcast skies. In one image entitled \textit{Buried Alive} (see \textbf{Fig. 7}), a gaunt male figure, barefoot and naked to the waist, is caught in the process of burying a terrified woman in what could be the rubble of a slagheap. The scene appears medieval, yet this is contradicted by the presence of a modern rifle at the feet of the digging man. In the distance to the left what appears to be a castle is reflected on the surface of a lake, to the right this is echoed by what could be either craggy towers of rock or ruined sky-scrappers rising up out of the rust-coloured, post-apocalyptic gloom. Even though I was only able to view tiny

\textsuperscript{195} The ‘verbal exuberance and delirious style’ of Latin American writers of the 1950s such as Jorge Luis Borges, came to be known as the Neo-Baroque. Obsessive concerns with illusionism and the questionable nature of reality found in this literature echoed the 17\textsuperscript{th} century Baroque. \textit{Ibid.} (cited).
\textsuperscript{196} Ndalianis, \textit{Neo Baroque Aesthetics in Contemporary Entertainment} (cited).
\textsuperscript{197} Kamberelis, “Ingestion, Elimination, Sex and Song: Trickster as Premodern Avatar of Postmodern Research Practice.” p. 693
reproductions downloaded from the Internet. I was drawn to both the funereal drama and skilful execution of these images.

![Buried Alive](image-url)  
*Fig.7 Buried Alive. 117cm x 110cm. Oil on canvas. Odd Nerdrum. 1996.*

In a series of essays accompanying the images, Jan-Ove Tuv (who describes himself as Nerdrum’s assistant and a ‘kitschpainter’) uses Nerdrum’s practice to examine the space between the terms Art and Kitsch, and what he sees as the necessity of clearly separating the two. Tuv describes Art as a ‘200 year old phenomenon’, a ‘German concept from the 18th century’ based on a hostile view of the human body’, and ‘the third and most aggressively imperialistic child of Hegel’; an ‘evil’ that eschews emotional narrative, sensual feelings and skill. It

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198 www.nerdrum.com (cited 3/6/06)
199 Because of this, according to Tuv, the conventional idea that Art is an eternal phenomenon and includes everything from cave paintings to Rembrandt to what is being made today, is wrong. For him this seems to be a kind of retrospective colonization performed by Kant/Hegelian critics, curators and art historians. ‘Rembrandt’ he states, ‘was not an artist because the Art ideology was not invented in his time.’
200 After Nazism and Stalinism.
aims ultimately, he infers, at metaphysics and a subsequent rejection of craft and is a demise of the object where ‘Art is most fully itself when it no longer exists’.

Tuv writes that: ‘According to Hegel, Art shall become pure philosophy and spirituality’ and here, ‘where “indifference” permeates all production of Art and all texts about it’ he continues, ‘there is no difference between Mondrian and Jeff Koons.’

Immanuel Kant is described as the Prussian pietist who not only ‘hated the idea of personal happiness’, but who is also ‘the cornerstone of all ideas about art’. Tuv disdainfully attributes the notions of the importance of originality and aesthetic indifference to Kant as well as the maxim: ‘it is when you do not know what you are doing, that you are creating art’. The artist then, says Tuv, as one who does not know what he is doing, needed ‘an ordinary guy to look after him’; this ordinary guy was the critic/curator/art historian, and for these the artist became merely a supplier of raw material selected according to the artist’s compliance with the Kanto-Hegelian imperative. Kant wrote negatively about paintings that move you because for him, Art must never take hold of your personal feelings, it ‘must by no means turn sentimental or emotional’. Therefore, sincere, classical, figurative expression is not a more humane Art—it is not Art at all. ‘Every emotional expression based on good handcraft automatically becomes Kitsch’, Tuv seems to lament.

This term Kitsch is framed redemptively by Tuv however, who writes of it as ‘a positive name for the values banned by Art’—‘if you do not abide by these (Art) rules then you are Kitsch and thus abide by other rules.’ Kitsch, says Tuv, has been applied disparagingly to those painters whose values were serious, human expression, because they did not want to dehumanise Art and enter a playful, ironic and indifferent relation to the body.

Returning to Odd Nerdrum, Tuv relates that Nerdrum is not interested in making Art in the Kanto-Hegelian definition of the word and that he shows complete non-compliance with Art-rules and their ‘contempt for handcraft, contempt for the past and contempt for natural studies’. Nerdrum rejoices in the term Kitsch if it embraces that which Art rejects and once Nerdrum himself supported this term,
critics who had previously ridiculed him for being Kitsch, tended to then reconsider their criticisms and offer reassurance that in the light of postmodernist irony, he was in fact Art. Given that Nerdrum studied with Joseph Beuys, I wondered if this was all a tricky and ironic Beuysian strategy adopted in order to avoid classification and play games with the curatorial elite.

There is a jumbled syntax in the language of these essays that comes, I assume, as a result of them having been translated from Norwegian into English. However, discounting this, there are other discrepancies in Tuv’s thesis when viewed in the context of Odd Nerdrum’s paintings. ‘Kitsch is never ironic’, Tuv states, and yet I read much irony in Nerdrum’s images. The anachronistic rifle at the feet of the digging man in Buried Alive described above is one example, as is the collision of the repulsive and the seductive in Shit Rock that portrays three female figures defecating with their backs to the viewer in flagrante delicto, also the horror and madness in the face of the living man in contrast to the calm beauty of the dead girl in Old Man and Maiden. Elsewhere, Tuv makes the point that Art is concerned with the zeitgeist and social critique, while Odd Nerdrum (positioned here as being emblematic of Kitsch) is not. I might argue that Nerdrum’s work with its inchoate and perverse obfuscations, is very much of and about this time. Ironically, Tuv’s strong opposition to KantoHegelian transcendentalism might also see him in accord with social/sociological approaches to Art-making.

For me, the encounter with this discourse elicited ontological questions about my own practice. Perhaps a KantoHegelian reading of the paintings I was making and accumulating would find them too redolent of egotism, emotion and sentimentality, overly narrative and obsessed with handcraft. Alternatively, the ‘kitschpainters’ might complain that I do not display a sufficiently developed level of skill to be considered Kitsch; I do not work from nature, and the work is too driven by social concerns. This argument does however, take me back to Kuspit’s commentary cited earlier (see p. 18), which pivots around Marcel Duchamp’s rejection of painting along with the all the rhythm, activity, growth and materiality of the body implicated therein. Once again, the philosophy

\[201\text{ For images of Nerdrum’s work see www.oddnerdrum.com}\]
stutters and polycentric pluralism locates me everywhere and nowhere, right at the centre and way out on the edge.

With a certain sense of awe, I study images from Caravaggio and Rembrandt; with an equal sense of wonder do I regard the work of artists such as Jake and Dinos Chapman. What I am doing here seems pre-modern, and yet how I read this is postmodern. I think of a hummingbird that moves so fast it appears to be still and know that the same could not be said of an elephant. Perhaps this is what painting is like.
PART TWO

@ THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

The Chocolate Factory\textsuperscript{202} has not made an Easter egg since the early 1980s and for the following decade hippies and junkies squatted here. After 1996 though, when the conservative government made it increasingly difficult for itinerants to claim the dole, the hippies moved away and several of the junkies overdosed in these damp, lonely rooms now rented as artists’ studios.

Not far from the river, near the old cheese factory, the panel beaters, and the dilapidated hulk of another defunct dairy-food processing plant, brindle dogs on chains patrol overgrown Cyclone-fenced yards. At night, the street is lined with

\textsuperscript{202} Although not entirely central to the work I produced, that is, it is neither site based nor site specific, it would be remiss of me not to at least mention the location and ambience of my studio space, and the impact these have had on the nature of the work made there between 2004-07.
tow-trucks, but during the day, the surrounding houses seem abandoned. Mutely fading in the afternoon sun, flannel shirts, tracksuit pants and worn out AC/DC T-shirts dangle from rusted Hill’s Hoists, like the forlorn corpses of electrocuted flying-foxes on power-lines. Through broken windows and fly-screen doors leak the faked sincerities of American daytime TV. Here on the industrial side of the river some days smell like glue and others like pig shit.

**Daydreaming At School**

*Any starting point is fine; no matter how absurd the idea, do not judge it.*

All this material, from the ancient tales to these modern psycho-spiritual battles, raises the question of how any order—spiritual, secular, psychological—should relate to its own dirt. On the one hand, if purity often ends in sterility, no order should locate its dung heaps too far from town.\(^{203}\)

I regarded my studio as a derelict space: a space Brian Massumi might describe as having become dysfunctional for molar\(^{204}\) purposes, allowing holes in the habits of capitalism—a zone of autonomy like daydreaming at school.\(^{205}\) Here in this autonomous zone, I engaged in an extended performative occupancy of the ‘world-upside-down’, employing hybridised processes to develop a heterogenous visual language. This language utilised a *gramatica jocosa* (laughing grammar)\(^{206}\) to explore the dynamics of potential forces and stereotypes operating in the dominant culture that have, perhaps, contributed to the shaping of my own meandering sense of identity.

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\(^{204}\) In physics this term *molar* relates to a body of matter rather than the properties of its molecules or atoms. Massumi has appropriated this term from the writings of Delueze and Guattari where it is used to designate a culture or society as an entity rather than as being made up of its parts.

\(^{205}\) Massumi, *A Users Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*, p. 103

In keeping with my strategy of allowing myself to be creatively triggered by absorption in a variety of texts, it became my habit in the studio at the beginning of 2004 and then throughout the time I spent here, to listen to the news on the radio while I worked. I began to suspect that we are living literally in the ‘world-upside-down’. In this enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy, Orwellian realm, war is peace, truth is lies, and an overabundance of information seems to obfuscate a famine of meaning.

I began to collect. My scheme being to mimic, distort and parody a suffocating mass culture in which objects are images, images are signs, signs are information, and information fits on a silicon chip. I sought to expose and exaggerate the subterfuge that, from behind a twinkling electronic membrane (the very sexy disguise constituted by advertising and mass culture) ratifies, propagates and reinforces rigid hierarchical structures that demand intelligibility, fixity and hegemony.

One of the frightening things about the so-called totalitarian systems is that governments in those cases were all-powerful and could seal off entire populations through the use of propaganda and indoctrination. Advertising and the highly commercialised mass media that we live with today do something comparable.

I thus began this project by harvesting imagery from newspapers, magazines and advertisements, images from the Internet, packaging and comic books—the detritus

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207 In 2004, the U.S declared ‘mission accomplished’ in Iraq. However, the apparent existence (somewhere) of so called ‘weapons of mass destruction’, cited as the original reason for invading Iraq (prior to this being changed to ‘regime change’ and then ‘to install democracy’), were declared ‘non-existent’ to minimal public outcry—minimal, at least in terms of what was reported by the media. Meanwhile in Australia, men, women and children—whose sole crime was to arrive here and ask for asylum—were being vilified and imprisoned indefinitely behind razor-wire, either in ‘detention centres’ in the desert, or on isolated Pacific islands. Once again, this was taking place to (ostensibly) minimal public outcry. A so-called ‘war on terror’ was touted as grounds for the truncating of civil liberties in both Australia and the U.S.; civil liberties incidentally, which it has taken centuries of struggle to establish. Later the same year conservative regimes were re-elected in both countries. Although not intenrinding to engage with these events directly, it is in the context of having regarded these contemporary socio-political global phenomena as texts mediated by television, radio and newspapers, and as such, source material for paintings, that I note the fear, grief and anxiety I experienced at this time in response to these phenomena.

of mass culture. The same mass culture that was just beginning to gather speed in the 1960s when it was celebrated/exploited by Warhol, now operates at hyper-speed, to infiltrate and colonise every nook and cranny of our lives.

**AN ONTOLOGICAL DISTURBANCE**

In processing this harvested material, I recognised a recurring theme of inchoate and perverse foreboding. George Vassilacopoulos and Toula Niccolacopolous refer to the ‘ontological disturbance’ that haunts the idea of ‘white belonging’ in Australia.\(^{209}\) Perhaps my innate tendency to engage with the darkness on the edge of town, with freaks, with headless and broken bodies, and with ‘low’ culture, is a reactive foil or shadow to the type of mythology used to construct an idea of ‘Australia’, or the notion of a nation. If the consensus narrative remains one of healthy, affluent, suntanned white-people (the bourgeois subjects) frolicking on the long, white beaches that encircle vast quarries and farms, if this story continues to promote the fallacy that we are a nation unspoiled by race and class divisions, and if this lie persists in maintaining the tenet of Terra Nullius, the shadows that lurk behind these stories then, are bound to be dark indeed.

Long before the existence of Australia was ever confirmed by explorers and cartographers it had already been imagined as a grotesque space, a land peopled by monsters. The idea of its existence was disputed, was even heretical for a time, and with the advent of the transportation of convicts its darkness seemed confirmed. The Antipodes was a world of reversals, the dark subconscious of Britain.\(^{210}\)

Taking a line from this I refer to Nick Cave’s novel of 1984 *And The Ass Saw the Angel*.\(^{211}\) The protagonist here is an inbred and deaf-mute hillbilly called Eucrid Crow who has been raised by deranged and alcoholic parents in a dilapidated shack on the outskirts of a town where the rain has hammered down incessantly


for years. Scorned by the townsfolk and haunted by demons, Eucrid builds a fortress of rusted tin and barbed wire, an odious sanctuary for himself and his vicious mongrel dogs. In this kingdom of autonomy he fashions animal bones, rotting meat, shards of metal and pitchforks into diabolical booby-traps. Amid his nightmares, Eucrid daydreams of wreaking vengeful havoc upon the town and its mean-hearted inhabitants. The end reveals that the entire story consists of a flashback Eucrid has been having as he sinks into the muddy swamp in which he will soon drown.

Although Cave has situated his story in an imaginary American backwater, I felt in his descriptions a certain resonance to my own position in regional Australia. It occurred to me that this story was foretelling the obsessive and compulsive days I was to spend alone in a dusty, disused factory on the outskirts of Lismore. I saw myself as Eucrid occupying a derelict space within a derelict space within a derelict space, wondering, as I did, when this space would be inundated with stinking floodwater.

Fig. 9 Chocolate Factory studio in 2004.
The search for the best, the most poignant and irresistible image, is like shopping, that is, compulsive and ongoing. And, as could also be said of shopping, the hunger driving my image collecting could be designated as vampiric. Clifton Snider cites the vampire as also a kind of Trickster, both of which could then be seen as demons.

In *Chaos Bound*, Hayles tells the story of two demons. The Demon of the First Kind’s task was to preside over a box of gas divided by a partition, and to sort through the gas molecules by opening and closing a shutter in the partition, allowing only the fast molecules to pass through. These molecules he then took away to make work. The Demon of the Second Kind also presided over a box of gas, but instead of sorting the molecules, he watched their endless dance. Whenever the molecules formed words that made sense, he used a diamond tipped pen to write them down on a strip of silver paper—‘*Rickshaws, rents, roaches and all histories, prophecies and accounts of all things in creation up til the day the sun burns out*’. This second demon, mesmerised by the information emerging from the chaotic system of gas molecules, is trapped watching for eternity. Hayles here is painting chaos as an inexhaustible ocean of information rather than a void signifying absence; perhaps what comes at us from mass culture is both.

At different stages during the process of image collection, I related on the one hand to the Demon of the First Kind–selecting, sorting, processing, disregarding—and, on the other hand, to the Demon of the Second Kind mesmerised by the flow. After hours spent perusing the Internet, second hand bookshops, newsagents or the library I often returned to the studio unsatisfied with my harvest. Many times, I pondered over a particular image, made preliminary drawings that I photocopied onto a transparent acrylic sheet, only to then later disregard them. These acrylic sheets came to form an archive, assembled to serve as a playful index to the

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213 Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*. pp. 7-8
214 Ibid.
215 Ibid. p. 8
paintings. As this collection continued to grow and spill over into other folders, any latent narrative was further obfuscated as each image lost its particular significance (the elusive referent) to become part of a visual static.

**Rhapsodomancy: Juxtaposing the Gestalt with Other Images at Random**

As my collection of found images lay on the dirty floor accumulating paint drips, boot-marks, dust and filth, I realised what I was doing was akin to rhapsodomancy, wherein a book of poetry is opened randomly as a method of divination. I was operating at the edge of chaos: the edge of chaos where the components of a system never quite lock into place, and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence. I watched cigarette smoke ascending in baby-blue tendrils. The molecules move chaotically, yet there is a deeper level of order at work preventing them from dispersing randomly the moment they leave the tip of the cigarette. This deeper level of order somehow works to maintain and orchestrate the all-too-familiar, yet always new and unique arabesques.

I fluctuated between feeling uncomfortable with the chaos, and then feeling that this apparent chaos, or more specifically, the strange, subterranean order operating beneath it (once again the unsaid/unsayable), was the means for belying and eluding coercive structures of order and was therefore integral to the project.

When information technology severed the relationship between text and context by making it possible to ‘embed any text in a context arbitrarily far removed from its point of origin’, context was denatured. With this in mind, I used an overhead-projector to trace the collected images onto canvas; I assembled haphazard narratives, repeating certain figures again and again like a stuck vinyl record or a section of film that replays incessantly until it collapses into nonsense. Exploiting the power inherent in the false, the positive power of ruse, like a fool using words from an incomprehensible language, I placed forms out of context. Attempting to reconfigure the sublime ineffable into a newer context and posit

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217 Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*. p. 266
nature/denature as ‘same’, I combined the view from above with the view from below, figure and ground merging with borrowed comic-book styles, crisp outlines with accretion.

**Voluntary Inexactitude**

Phillip Guston, Roy Lichtenstein, Juan Davila, Sigmar Polke and David Salle, to name a few, have all exploited the form of the comic strip or cartoon. John Ralston Saul says that as electronic images of real people improved to the point of perfection, the ‘awkward, naïve, unsophisticated, voluntarily inexact form of imagery’ comprising the cartoon, increasingly became ‘the release mechanism of the visual imagination or, rather, the human need to exaggerate.’

Having lived and been educated amid the urban sprawl on the east coast of Australia in the final decades of the 20th century, the excrescencies of commercial mass culture have inevitably had more impact upon me as an art-maker than has the European fine art tradition. Specifically moreover, as a maker of images, I have been more seduced by the ‘low’ material of comic artists from the 1960s and ‘70s such as Robert Crumb and Ed ‘Big Daddy’ Roth, than by the master-works of Pierro Della Francesca, Picasso, Monet or Poussin. Perhaps because my encounter with the European canon has always been mediated by the printing process, that is, I have only ever seen these works as reproductions in books, the differences between ‘high’ and ‘low’ have been minimised.

It was not my intention though, to reproduce cartoons like Lichtenstein, or even to include appropriated cartoon figures (after Salle) from the range of mass-cultural material at my disposal. I acknowledged the cartoon form as an influence however, and although using the overhead projector to trace images does facilitate a high level of realism or correctness, I allowed a certain ‘voluntary inexactitude’ or grotesque clumsiness to play out in the work. I considered this a means of making an ‘opening’ for the viewer, whilst still leaving myself the space to play the game with materials, spaces and suggested narrative. The use of synthetic

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218 Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*. p. 461
219 Ibid.
polymer paint combined with acrylic house paint enabled a flat, deadpan, paper-like surface that contributed to the paintings’ resemblance to over-blown comic book frames.

**Repetition & Ritual**

The seriality implied by my engagement with the comic/cartoon form prompted me to consider repetition. Trinh T. Minh-ha speaks of introducing difference into repetition, so that ‘reproduction is never quite reproduction of the same, and viewers or readers are invited to return to a familiar ground only to find themselves drifting somewhere else’.\(^{220}\) Painting the same face repeatedly, altering scale and colour on one, omitting certain details on another, I considered: ‘repetition with displacements means…that one can use again and again the same statement while differing the objectives (if any), the contexts, the tones, the punctuations’\(^{221}\).

In the context of her film work, Minh-ha refers to a statement that is repeated again and again, but slightly altered with each repetition; she suggests here that the spoken words are thus given a ‘ritual charge’.\(^{222}\) I started to comprehend the significance of this in regard to the way I was painting the same figure, with erasures, displacements and alterations each time. As well as lending a degree of unity and cohesion to the work, in the face of the often disparate elements I was assembling, this repetition also highlighted the ritualistic nature of what I was doing, illuminating ‘that sacred mode’ present when ‘we are centred on the process.’\(^{223}\)

\(^{220}\) Morelli, "The Undone Interval: Trinh T. Minh-Ha in Conversation with Annamaria Morelli.." p. 12

\(^{221}\) Ibid.

\(^{222}\) Ibid.

Fig. 10 The beginnings of *We Have No Intelligence*. 2004.

Fig. 11 Early painting that formed the basis of *Twilight of the Idiots*. 2004.

I began to grow more aware of myself inhabiting the studio as a ritual, one that I performed almost daily throughout the period of the survey. The walk through town and across the river to reach The Chocolate Factory was followed by a
descent into a subterranean passageway leading under the main room of the factory to my studio. Passing through this corridor, which I imagined as an airlock or antechamber separating my activities outside from those within the catacomb-like studio, I had to then stumble blindly through dank smelling darkness until I could locate the light-switch.

Having been an altar boy in the Catholic church when I was a child and later having attended Hindu ceremonies in India, the selecting and mixing of paint has come to hold for me (albeit obliquely) sacramental or devotional implications akin to the preparation of communion wafers, wine and incense in the Catholic mass or khum-khum, ghee and prasad²²⁴ in the Hindu ceremony. Following the mixing of the paint, sometimes an hour would pass while I reflected upon where the paint was to be applied. Unlike however, the gothic pipe-organ tones of the Catholic mass or the tranquil drone of the tamboura in a Hindu yajna²²⁵, I had the gravel in a garbage-can voice of Tom Waits, the gloom-laden rants of Nick Cave, and the grim and worrying news on the radio to accompany me. These hung in the air to lend the studio an atmosphere of apostasy, snake worship and thaumaturgy.

In those moments, my preconceived ideas regarding the day’s painting might be entirely disregarded and I would find myself pouring liquid plastic onto a canvas laid on the floor, or spending two hours cutting out a stencil. I could spend these hours sitting in the same position in deep concentration, then spend the next hour walking around the studio with a bucket and a brush, splashing one colour onto a number paintings. Following several hours of this often-frenzied activity, I could become quite oblivious to the passage of time. The ritual would then close in reverse. I would pause and smoke, reflecting upon what I had done before packing up the paint, washing brushes, switching off the light, stumbling through the dark corridor and out into the night to walk across the bridge back to my home.

²²⁴ Red tumeric, clarified butter and blessed food respectively.
²²⁵ Fire ceremony.
I worked in this way for the first twelve months of the project. Using synthetic polymer paints, spray enamel, stencils, oil stick, graphite pencils and collage, I worked in a loose and unstructured way, the canvasses serving more as sites for accumulation than as pictures. The feigned transgression of dribbling paint and an anti-aesthetic attitude soon seemed however, studied and insipid. My practice had become ineffectually anarchic, embodying a vague brand of nihilism. The Fool had walked over the cliff; the nomad found himself wandering impotently in the desert.

**A Cartoon of Alien History**

Ira Livingston asks us to imagine that aliens have infiltrated the earth, but they are ‘neither localized in bodies nor extended in space and time the same ways humans are.’ He continues:

> Let’s say an ensemble of certain aspects of various textual, biological, and technological phenomena (e.g., snake motions, telephones, heterosexuality) together constitute the alien bodies, the movements of which are complexly articulated between them. If we were able somehow to map these features together (like connecting the dots to make a constellation) and to show their movement through the discursive time-space manifold of their mapping, we could make a kind of animated cartoon of alien history.²²⁶

Reflecting on the multidimensionality alluded to by Livingston’s ‘animated cartoon of alien history’, I began to paint smaller horizontally aligned canvases. Taking a line of flight away from arboreal frameworks, I determined to be less overtly engaged with the ‘mythology’ issuing at me from the electronic media and, working nomadically and rhizomatically, to use these panels to disrupt and recontextualise the original panels. Hiding the earlier work while I made these new paintings was a tactic I used to prevent myself inadvertently contriving linear narrative into the latter.

Playing on the words ‘alien history’, I introduced recognisably Australian icons such as Skippy the kangaroo from the 1960s TV show, linear drawings of Australian soldiers, recognisably Australian cars, the death mask of Ned Kelly and (perhaps less recognisably) a turd copied from Juan Davila’s *A Sentimental History of Australian Art*. Whilst functioning as parodic references to the canon of non-Indigenous Australian painters (Nolan, Drysdale, et al) the placement of these elements also located my objects topographically, perhaps offering the viewer access to the work via fragments of (albeit chthonic) recognisability. These lower panels, when placed in position, again tended to reiterate the installation’s allusion to the comic book form.

**Doors**

Working along similar lines, I prepared eleven vertically aligned timber panels, designed at first to fit in between the diptychs I had now constructed. On these new panels, I began to toy with introducing perspective to conjure shallow illusionistic space—the cupboard, the cramped room. Thomas McEvilley designates this type of shallow space in painting as ‘less a space for intimacy than a symbol for human captivity, for society as a nightmare, inescapable because there is no place else to go’. Returning to the image collection, I projected disparate figures and objects onto the ground and played with these, inhabiting and/or defacing the spaces there constructed.

It was my intention that these timber panels comprise another textual layer in the installation. Along the lines of what Braidotti describes as ‘patterns of dissonance, a polyphonic play, a game of multiplicities, that may collapse into cacophony and even shock’, I sought to have the content of these panels upset, confuse and contradict the space established by the work already done. Here, images of plastic chairs, vacuum cleaners and bananas lifted from advertisements and junk-mail resonate visually as they appear and re-appear, obliquely yet rhythmically linking the various panels like a board game.

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Fig. 12 Studio shot showing ‘doors’ on the left installed alongside works on canvas. Note ‘Skippy the Bush Kangaroo’ in the lower panel on the right.

Fig. 13 Studio shot illustrating possible installation strategy.
Fig. 14 Early version of Sometimes Pleasure-heads Must Burn installed with horizontal panel and ‘doors’.

**Oblique Strategies & Aleatory Abduction**

He now dips into non-culture and brings in a disparate element and then dips into culture and highlights a paradoxical or arbitrary element to produce the cognitive dissonance. Or he pulls up an item of culture which is passing into non-culture and highlights it against some element more central to culture.²²⁹

In keeping with my assumed role as Trickster, of primary interest to me was the idea of blurring the distinction between work and play. Here, the term ‘aleatory’ (Greek *alea*=dice) could be used to describe the way I integrated the diverse threads comprising my opus. From an early exposure to the Dadaists, I inherited this notion of the aleatory as a kind of leitmotif to what I make. As an adolescent, I recall being fascinated by the way Max Ernst and De Chirico painted alluringly strange worlds by positioning everyday objects in unfamiliar and illogical

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relationships. Adorno mentions the ‘law of inexorable aleatoriness’ that musician John Cage imposed upon his work, and Ulmer cites the example where Cage speculates about how listening to the sound of an ashtray transformed object into process.

In a radio interview I heard in 2004, musician and producer Brian Eno spoke of his Oblique Strategies: an aleatory list of imperatives, aphorisms, diversions and tactics that he wrote down over a period of years, collected and then converted into a card system. When, in the process of recording music, Eno and his musicians would reach a creative impasse, one of these cards would be drawn from their box and the instructions therein would be followed.

- Honour thy error as a hidden intention
- Disconnect from desire
- Be dirty
- Faced with a choice, do both
- Emphasize repetitions
- Don’t be afraid of things because they’re easy to do
- Ask your body

Several of the strategies in Eno’s list such as Do the washing up, would appear to instruct Eno to stand back from the work at hand and do something else, perhaps allowing him a break wherein some unexpected or surprising facet of the work might emerge. This for me, is akin to what William Irwin Thompson calls ‘paraduction’ which he describes as a ‘voluntary way of surrendering to involuntary means of thought, of letting the mind wander to gather what associations it may, through dream, reverie, or vision.’

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231 Ulmer, “The Object of Post Criticism.” p. 101
234 Ibid.
There is a correlation here with Spinks’ observation that ‘one of the discoveries of the Trickster Figure is always the spark of fire, physical or semiotic’. And, although Thompson posits ‘paraduction’ in opposition to induction, deduction and abduction, Spinks speaks of ‘abduction’ as ‘Sudden Insight’ and a delving into the undifferentiated realm of the Pre-logical where ‘the abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash. It is an act of insight, although extremely fallible insight… but it is the idea of putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together which flashes the new suggestion before our contemplation.’

This notion of abduction, or ‘Sudden Insight’, implies a ‘semiotic mucking with the stuff of the world’ and is a means by which ‘the textual fabric grows’. Kamberelis describes abduction as ‘an incredibly complex, controversial human activity that has been woefully under-theorized in philosophy, semiotics, and psychology’. He writes:

\[\text{[A]}\text{b}duction \text{ is a particular kind of embodied and distributed human activity that is extraordinarily creative and synthetic. It seems to involve a person’s or a culture’s whole being — instinct, intuition, sensuality, affect, cognition, and so on. It is an elusive yet intense, synthetic, and often frenzied kind of activity.}\]

The manifestation of this body of work definitely involved all my instinct, intuition, sensuality et cetera, in an ‘intense and frenzied kind of activity’. The more time I spent on this project, and the more deeply I became engrossed in observing my processes, the more this became the case. To an extent, an acceptance of the idea that for me, making work is contingent upon such things as instinct, intuition, sensuality et cetera, again caused the activity to become all the more intense and frenzied. And yet, always the art seemed to happen somewhere else, in an unlocatable centre: ‘between the peanuts and the cage, 

236 Thompson, Imaginary Landscapes: Making Worlds of Myth and Science. p. 80
238 Ibid.(cited).
239 Kamberelis, "Ingestion, Elimination, Sex and Song: Trickster as Premodern Avatar of Postmodern Research Practice." p. 700n
240 Ibid.
between the darkness and the stage, between the hour and the age,’ as Leonard Cohen once sang. 241 Again I found myself in the realm of the unsaid/unsayable.

[Abduction] is the activity that is largely responsible for artistic creation, scientific discovery, mystical experience, and so on... metaphors, dreams, parables, allegories, poetry, play, and scientific breakthroughs—indeed, everything creative about art, science, philosophy, and religion—result from instances of abduction within the human sphere. 242

My identification with the Trickster was concerned with generating and maintaining an atmosphere/attitude that would allow me to be available if and when the abductive suggestion should (‘like a flash’) come to me, more so than with the actual execution of the work. This atmospheric attitude then, was my marginal territory, a borderland existing beyond and in-between thoughts. I was able to consciously consider composition, paint, surfaces, colour, and paying the rent on the studio, but the abductive flash of insight underpinning the whole procedure could be neither seduced nor coerced.

The concepts of ‘paraduction’ or ‘abduction’ served to keep me attuned to the oblique influences constantly emerging from my deliberate absorption in various texts. This began to include texts taken in below the level of my conscious awareness such as dream images, half-remembered moments from films and imagined scenarios from literature. In a way, I found myself making feedback-loops out of my personal mythology conflated with the faux mythology of my culture. This seemed to be a game I was playing with images and fragments of images lying latent in my memories, leading me from a contemplation of the particular to a contemplation of the more universal, and then back again.

242 Kamberelis, “Ingestion, Elimination, Sex and Song: Trickster as Premodern Avatar of Postmodern Research Practice.”
Using stereotypes to attack stereotypes, is an effective strategy for irony here needs no lengthy explanations or rationalisations.\footnote{Morelli, “The Undone Interval: Trinh T. Minh-Ha in Conversation with Annamaria Morelli..” p. 13}

When I first began to collect images, I made a conscious decision to restrict myself to specifically collecting images of male figures. As a male member of the tribe, I wanted to cast my male gaze exclusively on males and male behaviour—men’s business. Images of men, harvested from advertising, newspaper photographs, and television came to dominate my collection.

\textbf{Fig. 15} Detail from \textit{Stupid Fucking Whitemen}. 130cm x 150cm. Oil on canvas. 2006.
Fig. 16 Drawing from my journal made while watching George Gittoe’s documentary film *Soundtrack to War*.

Fig. 17 Collected image from the 1960s TV show *The Twilight Zone*.

Through this image collection, which became a nascent document of my obsessions, my story expanded to include other male stereotypes such as the dipsomaniacal politician, the obese superhero, or a mob of menacing footballers. In doing this, I sought to reflect upon what I perceived as a subterranean
correspondence taking place between three separate stories unfolding at the time, namely, a) the story of a team of Australian footballers who allegedly gang raped a young woman, b) the story of U.S. troops who tortured prisoners in the Abu Grahib prison in Iraq, and c) the spurious pretexts given by politicians in their feverish drive to legitimise the invasion of Iraq. Even though these socio-political ruminations might seem to fall outside the bailiwick of this thesis, in regarding these stories as texts, I was responding to the latent “whatever-I-can-get-away-with-I’m-entitled-to” subtext that seemed common to them all.

I had read Juan Davila’s essay in Artlink, where he refers to ‘the artificial conflict between formalist art with its hermetic integrity and content art with its higher purpose of social change,’ and felt I was negotiating a path between the two. While on the one hand not wishing to make overtly didactic work, there seemed on the other hand, no way that in the interest of maintaining the ‘hermetic integrity’ of painting, I could make this work at this time and remain unaffected by the narratives emerging from the texts in which I was absorbed. I was drawn to Davila’s proposed enquiry into the psychological forces that both support and resist these horrors.

Resolution occurred, but not entirely by design. I found that as I continued to work the paint, playing with lighting effects and balancing compositions, even though I might have been engaged with ‘ugly’ content—reflecting perhaps, a personal Weltschmerz—the form, that is, the paint, began to seem seductive. In this way, there developed another subterranean correspondence, that is, between the seductive qualities of the medium and the unsettling implications of the message, which became for me, an analogue to the system I was seeking to critique.

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244 Davila. Artlink, Vol 23 #1, 2003, p. 19
**Sometimes Pleasure-Heads Must Burn**

![Fig. 18 Sometimes Pleasure-Heads Must Burn.](image)

150cm x 130cm. Synthetic polymers, oil and oil-stick on canvas. 2005.

To begin with, this painting was an inarticulate mess of dribbles and slogans overpainted with found images of Captain Cook, a fork and a car (see Fig. 14). Perhaps however, in spite of my adherence to a chaotic system of working or perhaps still in alignment with it, I gradually began to refine the painting. I broke my own rule and began to use oil paint to render a more specific twilight sky and emphasise the lighting on the figures.

Although I did not intend to illustrate the episode, this painting was begun in response to the aforementioned gang-rape story. The looming figures of four football players are depicted against a late afternoon sky. The foremost figure is harshly lit from above and betrays a bleak demeanour while his three team-mates glare at him in apparent disapproval. The lighting became a key formal element...
with the late afternoon sky serving emblematically as a temporal limen and also alluding to the ambivalence of Australian masculinity.

Whilst not setting out to portray all football players as psychopaths—the gang-rape incident merely serving as a trigger—I sought, by using stereotypical figures (albeit endowed with specific physiognomic traits) to bring about a sense of uncanniness. These figures are easily recognised as football players and as such, seem familiar, yet, the relationship between them is deliberately disturbing, malevolent, and perverse. In the Australian film *Little Fish*, Hugo Weaving’s portrayal of a dysfunctional, heroin-addicted, and homosexual, former rugby star appears to be similarly attempting to probe the poison at the heart of the myth of Australian masculinity.

The uncomfortable relationship between the figures in this image, the disconcerting space they occupy, as well as the introduction of oil paint signalled an emerging focus for subsequent paintings.

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245 *Little Fish* was directed by Rowan Woods and released in 2005.
We Have No Intelligence #1

We are the hollow men,
We are the stuffed men,
Leaning together,
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together,
Are quiet and meaningless,
As the dry grass,
Or rats' feet over broken glass,
In our dry cellar.

-T.S.Eliot

Fig. 19 We Have No Intelligence #1. Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 2005.

The face of the dominant figure in this painting came from a photograph attached to a newspaper article regarding the gang-rape story. The identity of the subject of the photograph is not however, the subject of this painting. I scanned the photograph and digitally distorted it before tracing it onto the canvas so that the resulting face now bears little or no resemblance to the original subject. This face, repeated across several canvasses at one stage, came to signify patriarchy, the bullying father, and indirectly for me, the antagonism of capitalism.

Now heavily rendered in places, this painting was also begun with loose brushwork, dribbles and scrawled texts (see Fig. 10). I obsessively worked and reworked this picture before applying oil paint to the numerous layers of synthetic polymer paint beneath. This method of paint application was to become the model for the way I was to construct later paintings. Using fast-drying, water-based synthetic polymers to design and construct the architecture of a scene allowed me to make radical alterations before committing to the use of slower drying oils. Building up layers of paint in this fashion also served to endow the paintings with the crusty and, in places, disruptive surfaces.

Responding again to news reports of political subterfuge and state terrorism, and to the new super-highway being carved into the earth just north of here (Lismore NSW), or to the recently opened shopping centre, I felt (however romantically) that by painting treachery as a jack-ass I could do what mainstream corporate media conduits will not or cannot do, that is, expose the leering visage of plutocracy. Anecdotal evidence suggests that if you are not paranoid, you have no idea what is going on.

247 The construction of the former has left hills once covered in trees scarred and barren; the arrival of the latter intensifies the impression that this regional town is rapidly becoming just another outer-suburb of nowhere.
**Twilight of The Idiots**

The allure of this painting for me lies in its whimsical impenetrability, its resistance to being positively decoded. This piece also underwent multiple transformations and though there were originally two figures in this work (see **Fig. 11**), based on a repetition of the found face mentioned above, the only trace remaining now is the shirt, tie and torso of one of these. I painted the lampshade covering the figure’s head to suggest the stereotypical drunk at an office party, however, I may have fallen victim to a misrecognition of the Lacanian mirror-stage where the ‘looking subject […] projects onto others what belongs to the self but what it wishes to cast out.’

![Figure 20](image_url) **Twilight of The Idiots.**

150cmx130cm. Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 2005

The spectral image of the dead steer (found in a science text book) and the television set (originally constructed in a digital 3D computer program) were both

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traced using the overhead projector. The correctness facilitated by using the projector offsets the ineffable incongruity of the scene. Again, although I have painted each element to exist in an illusionistic space and seem to allude to a specific reality or narrative, the overall design has come about by balancing chance and formal considerations.

Almost a year after I had considered this painting finished, I began reworking it. I did this not so much to re-organise the composition, but to introduce a further ambiguity to the surfaces within the image, such as the clothing of the dominant figure and the decomposing flesh of the steer. This reworking, which consisted of using a small brush in an up-close, labour-intensive yet meditative technique, constituted a very different approach to my earlier bouts of slashing and splashing.

I cannot say definitively what this painting means; I offer that the inchoate, Magritte-like strangeness seeks to compensate for the suffocating orderliness and treacherous primacy of super-highways and shopping centres within contemporary Australian culture.

**Compendiums of Indolence**

Two men are chopping wood in the forest. One man chops all day without a break, while the other man seems to be sitting down every ten minutes or so. The second man’s pile of wood however, is considerably larger than that of the man who chops without stopping.

At the end of the day the man who did not take a break asks the other man: “How is it that your pile is bigger than mine, when every time I looked around you were sitting down to rest and I worked all day without a break?”

To which the other replies, “Every time I sat down to have a break, I sharpened my axe.”

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249 I do not have a reference for this story apart from saying that it was told to me many years ago whilst I was staying in an ashram in India and originally referred to the practice of meditation.
Much of the work that I undertook to construct the paintings was obviously and undeniably just that—work. Timber had to be procured and fashioned into frames; canvas needed to be stretched and imagery collected and processed. I made drawings and mixed paint. I primed canvases and sanded them back before applying coloured grounds. Bent into awkward and uncomfortable positions, my back and arms aching, I traced imagery onto the prepared canvas. All this physical effort seemed to validate my practice, my research, and my grant. However, punctuating all this busy-ness and labour were great swathes of time where I did nothing but sit and stare, smoking cigarettes, gazing at marks on the floor, perhaps musing at the patterns in a blob of paint.

It was during these times that I looked indolently through the old newspapers stacked in the studio, often finding a photograph I had previously overlooked, even though the last time I looked I may have been on the hunt, resolutely searching for that interesting, poignant or useful image. Rather than feeling that these periods of reverie were a waste of precious research time however, I realised these times were fecund loci of new ideas and insights. I began to wonder how I could possibly integrate this into the project.

At home, I deliberately allowed myself to become immersed in watching TV. In the evening, I watched three different versions of the news (without gaining any cogent overview or understanding of world events). I saw hours of American police and hospital dramas that left me feeling as though the world was indeed doomed. I watched people sleeping in their rooms on Big Brother at one o’clock in the morning and vintage British movies at three. I wondered how it is that the formulas underpinning this often mind-numbingly incessant array of entertainment and information (for the most part indistinguishable as “info-tainment”) have remained mostly unchanged for half a century. On the other hand, I began to formulate an idea regarding how I could use the imagery I had collected to somehow reflect the apparent dysfunctionality and disconnectedness issuing at me from the TV—the medium for me that most aptly corresponds with the culture.
I had not considered making artist books at all when I first began to collect imagery, as this was a process undergone solely to inform the paintings. After some two and a half years however, the collection itself (mostly stuffed in various folders, scattered on the studio floor, and tucked into the back of my journal) began to tell stories. This prompted me to start assembling these collected images in a way that reflected the themes underpinning the earlier paintings, that is, the haphazard and carnivalesque collisions of empty or decontextualised signs, and the disrupting or confusing of narrative. Furthermore, having had in the past some training and professional experience as a graphic artist (where I learnt to use digital imaging technology to produce advertising material for the marketing of consumer goods), deploying the same skills and technology to induce cognitive dissonance by jumbling time and fracturing meaning, now became satisfyingly ironic.

Although the images I scanned into the computer had been collected for their connectedness to themes with which I had been engaged (either the global political narrative unfolding during the years 2004-6, images of males playing sport or wearing suits, or perhaps just images which presented figures and objects in positions I could use as templates in paintings), once these became digital files I was free to place them in any arbitrary order. This allowed for surprising and incongruous visual relationships that disregarded underlying narrative. To turn the pages of one of the resulting books all this might seem like a random process, but I worked on these as digital information for months before committing to print. Too much emphasis on narrative felt overly didactic, whereas too much digression and sharp contrast in the content seemed to lack flow, rhythm and cohesion.

Several of the images in the books emerge from a practice of ‘playing around’ or ‘killing time’ using a ten-year-old software program. This program enables the user to digitally construct “realistic” landscape scenes by manipulating 2D wireframes and polygons that are then covered in “skins”. Being such an outdated program there are many glitches and the whole process is quite slow and irritating to use, however, I often found myself spending hours attempting to find the right “camera” angle and to bring about some sort of atmospheric effect. Looking at
one of the earlier artist books that includes one of these images, and thinking again of the illusory spaces emerging in the paintings, I decided to print out one of these pseudo scenes, enlarge it using the photocopier, and then collage it onto a canvas, the results being visible in the painting *Foucault’s Ass* (see Fig. 35).

This innovation became another kind of feedback loop wherein, imagery originally collected and/or made to inform the production of paintings later became material for books; this incited another practice, which in turn contributed to the way I was making paintings.

![Digital image generated in the software program Bryce® and later collaged into the painting *Foucault’s Ass*.](image)

I outsourced the binding of the books to a local bookbinder who regularly binds academic documents for postgraduate students at the university; with their faux leather covers and gold lettering, my artist books acquired a contrived air of scholarly gravitas. In the sense that the material constituting the books documented my collection (albeit somewhat incoherently and inconclusively) and therefore the construction of the paintings, the books themselves made an artform of the artist documenting his own procedures.

These traditionally bound, exquisite tomes, outwardly redolent with academic authority and arcane significance, consist inwardly of not much more than snippets of mass-cultural dross conflated with the artist’s mostly incoherent
musings. This for me, manifests a kind of Dadaist archaeology bringing into question or even lampooning the very same systems of knowledge that form the basis of why a book of this appearance might be considered important or authoritative in the first place.

Fig. 22  *Compendiums of Indolence.* Artist books made from material I originally collected as source material for paintings.

**Lines of Flight**

*Imagination and dreams are more important than reason…*

Taking a line of flight from the paintings constructed using found images, and inspired by my experiments with re-introducing perspective, I began to play with a more cryptic use of pictorial space. This marked an important turning point for the way the paintings would evolve from this point onwards, both formally and conceptually.
I began by making drawings and devising scenarios, wherein a corpulent male figure comprised the central element. Around him hovered various peripheral figures in a theatrically lit, quasi-domestic space—uncanny, alienated. I realised however, that I was working from a habitual template, in that I was continuing to hierarchically construct a centre and a periphery—a point of focus serving to anchor secondary elements. I subsequently removed the central figure and repeated the surrounding figures, avoiding the tendency to situate any one in particular as the main point of focus. To me this disrupted narratives of ‘Ones’ and ‘Others’, all the figures becoming, due to their ambiguous positioning within the perspectival hierarchy, both Ones and Others. On a micro level this mucking around with the perspective also echoes a backwards and forwards motion, a moving from the centre to the periphery and back again.

These paintings emerged from quite a different set of impulses and processes than did the earlier work, and once again I am reminded here of the concepts of paraduction and abduction, or of Breton’s instructions for automatic writing. Though the figures are still composites distilled from and triggered by the image collection, initial drawings were based on compositions which I imagined, in the sense that while I was watching TV or reading, these images flashed before my mind’s eye. I would rework the drawings several times, oscillating between telling a story in an axiomatic process of codifying mental imagery, and then erasing that story, decoding and deterritorialising.

Having spent two years prior to commencing this thesis making work that, perhaps along modernist lines, explored the disruption of Cartesian perspectival structures, I was now apparently contradicting myself by again setting up illusionistic spaces within the picture plane. These spaces however, were not correct or accurate renderings of perspective, rather, they were a kind of ‘mid-

250 ‘Supply yourself with writing materials, after having settled yourself in a place as favourable as possible to the mind’s concentration on itself. Attain the most passive or receptive state of mind possible… Write quickly with no preconceived subject, so quickly that you retain nothing and are not tempted to re-read.’ Andre Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969). p. 29. Cited in Ulmer, Heuretics: The Logic of Invention. p. 7
point mimesis\textsuperscript{251}—bent, distorted and haphazard. The fuzzy, visual-white-noise effect I was initially creating with facture, dribbles and stressed surfaces, had been in preparation for the work I was about to do. Working rapidly allowed inarticulate forms such as lumps and erased underpainting to play alongside and threaten the stability of the gestalt forms in the finished work, so that the eye flickers between surface and depth, form and content, painted illusion and paint.

I continued to rework earlier paintings, erasing the noisy spray-painted texts and stencilled imagery. Working now to evoke mood, I refined the figures so that melodramatic lighting differentiated them from the background. Psychological dramas began to emerge between the various characters as I endowed them with beady eyes and near-naturalistic features.

Rather than responding, as I had been, to the news, or attempting to engage with socio-political issues directly, I was now feeling prompted to engage more with an ineffable, obscure and often absurd state of being. These new highly resolved paintings, which in a formal sense seem so concrete, for the most part however, allude to vagueness, vacuity and ennui—to the conceptually abstract in other words.

\textbf{Becoming Minor}

I made up three new stretchers corresponding to the combined size of the earlier diptychs. On the first canvas, after dividing the space into a dark area and a light area, I marked out lines meant to serve as visual shorthand for timber floorboards. I laid down a warm red-brown ground, over which I painted yellow-ochre lines. Keeping one eye on the floorboards of the studio floor and one eye on the lines I was making, I had to keep loading up the brush so that wherever possible, I could make the lines continuous. The shakiness of my hand mirrored the wavy patterns in the timber. Forced to work up close to the canvas, most of the lines strayed far

from my intention to represent ‘woodenness’, however, once I darkened the lines separating each board and mixed up a darker tint of yellow-ochre to paint the area at the border of the light and dark sections, the illusion began to seem suitably convincing.

With a loaded brush and a free hand I marked out a figure based on drawings made in response to photographs of musicians in drag. Playing on the disruption of illusionistic depth, I repeated the figure on a smaller scale at the bottom of the frame and placed larger ones nearer the top. This contradicted the way we might expect perspective to work, so I went in again and placed smaller figures in the background as well, adding another level of ambiguity to a reading of the space.
My approach to making the next two paintings of this size (*Masturbating on the 4th of July* and *Post September.* See Figs. 24 and 25) was similar. Angled lines and atmospheric perspective, together describe a space in which I could position conglomerate figures. This process took on a theatricality I had not expected. Rather than denying Renaissance perspective, I was now distorting it to speak to a world that seems anything but logical. Triggered by the visual stimuli provided by the collected imagery and motivated by the collision of my imagination with the materials I was using, I found a means of balancing goofiness with gravitas.

**Masturbating on the 4th of July**

I mixed up several tints of a synthetic light green and began to apply short strokes onto a dark red ground to create the effect (however artificial) of a lawn. Digging into my archive, I retrieved a stencil of a generic plastic garden chair traced from the pages of the junk mail regularly crammed into my letterbox. Using the overhead-projector, I traced this chair onto the ground in a range of positions and sizes.

Having toyed with images of comic book superheroes (Batman in particular) for a year, I wanted to make a conflation of this character with a Magritte-like ‘everyman’ in the brown suit that I had devised. Using Batman (traditionally a traumatised billionaire who dressed in tights to fight crime) signified for me the unsettling notion emerging from the invasion of Iraq that, as a ‘media subject’, I was being sold the idea that the good, kind and democratic ‘rich’ were fighting a war against the terrible, ‘evil’ poor—the centre perhaps, at war with the margins.

The figures sit anxiously in their plastic garden chairs. The two central figures, whose mouths are frozen into permanently muted screams, appear to be a quotation of Francis Bacon’s screaming popes, their hands clasped white-knuckled around the arms of their chairs. What kind of space do these characters now occupy?
I am reminded of the writings of Jean Baudrillard about the simulated spaces of hyperreality, where he warns us to be suspicious of that which is ‘reproduced for you so well’ that you no longer need to add or offer anything in return: ‘by giving you a little too much, everything is taken away from you.’\textsuperscript{252} The grass in this picture did not look real, nor did the lighting. In a way, I failed altogether to sell the illusion that the figures were in a suburban backyard at an evening barbecue—the originally imagined scenario. The lawn, the chairs, the entire scene appears

\textsuperscript{252} Jean Baudrillard, "Appearance's Holy Horizon," \textit{Icons: Localizer 1.3} 1998. p. 18
fake, yet there remains the illusion of depth, the allusion to space. This coexistent presentation and denial of illusion, this contradiction between surface and depth, became for me, a reflexive reference to my own self-consciousness as well as a point of imbrication for the viewer.

**Fig. 25** *Post September.*

180cm x 150cm. Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 2005
WHO THE HELL ARE WE AND WHAT THE HELL DO WE WANT?

Seeking to emphasise with scale the somatic effect of the objects I was constructing and the spaces within them, I painted over three earlier works and used these canvasses to form a triptych measuring almost four metres in width.

![Image]

**Fig. 26** *Who The Hell Are We and What The Hell Do We Want?* 2005. Triptych. 390cm x 150cm.
Superficial polymers, oil and spray-paint on canvas.

I set about meditating painting floorboards again which, this time, took several days. The space depicted in this painting is evocative of the derelict space of my studio. The six foreground figures are emaciated and disconnected from one another as they look this way and that, searching perhaps, for something lost. Each one is a ‘free’ individual existing under capitalism, yet ‘as objects, as dehumanised, as deprived of their subjectivity.’

Holloway writes: ‘To criticize society is to criticize our own complicity in the production of that society.’

I thought of myself here—thin, bald, cold, bespectacled—and in an instance of self-reflexive performativity, included a vitiated self-portrait. The face of this self-portrait however, became a mask, the shiny, plastic vacancy referring perhaps to Spinks’ ‘mysterious idiot-grin’ that ‘seems to await us and mock all our endeavours at sign, self or wisdom.’

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254 Ibid. p. 78
255 Spinks, *The Laughter of Signs: Semiosis as Trickster* ([cited]).
me, these moribund figures seem to reflect the stiffness and awkward rigidity of characters in a video game who will robotically march into a wall or over a cliff if so directed. Perhaps, in what I consider a desolate echo of Gauguin’s *Where Have we Come From? Where Are We Now? Where Are We Going?*, they are wage labourers, devoid of subjectivity, objectified consumers, human resources.

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Fig. 27 Detail from *Who The Hell Are We and What The Hell Do We Want?*


The Race To The Bottom

Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death.  

‘Cosmic terror,’ Mikhail Bakhtin wrote, is ‘the fear of the immeasurable, the infinitely powerful… [I]t is the fear of that which is materially huge and cannot be overcome by force’.  

‘Images of the material body lower stratum’ however, ‘have a prevailing cosmic connotation,’ in that, ‘dung and urine lend a bodily character to matter.’ This matter, as ‘the elemental force born from the body itself,’ allows the world and the ‘cosmic elements’ to be ‘closer, more intimate, more easily grasped,’ thereby transforming ‘cosmic terror into a gay carnival monster.’

Fig. 28 A Race To The Bottom.
150cm x 130cm. Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 2005

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257 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. p. 335
258 Ibid.
259 Ibid.
260 Ibid.
261 Ibid.
262 Ibid.
263 Ibid.
264 Ibid.
This painting is a negotiation with ‘cosmic terror.’ A form of nightmare management, painting filth is perhaps a means of reifying my apprehensions about the world into an intelligible form. In a possible echo of Peter Booth’s tortured, monstrous figures, a thickset male hunches on all fours, strings of drool issuing from his lips. Glancing over his shoulder, he appears gripped by anxiety. He has sprouted the wings of a fly in response to the filth that surrounds him. There are three of him. Which one is the real one? Perhaps captured in a moment of trans-temporal dislocation they are all the same one at different points in time.

Although I have represented filth by rendering cigarette butts and shit, in places I also used the paint itself as filth, pouring thinned paint onto the canvas and leaving it to dry partially before wiping the excess away. A wash made from the foul, grey contents of my brush-washing bucket helped to give the appearance of stains and puddles. The floor is strewn with cigarette butts and faeces; it is cracked and may split open at any moment. A bare light-bulb stolen from Guston or Bacon, sheds too much light here, signifying at once the light of consciousness and just plain dinginess.

‘Dirt,’ says Eagleton, ‘as disorganized matter, stuff which is out of place, represents a threat to the political structure.’265 Although possibly emerging as another tendentious response to my ordered and conservative upbringing, given the repressive conformity of current political trends, dirt, filth and shit for me, take on a certain metaphoric poignancy. Lewis Hyde offers that ‘periodic ritual contact with dirt’ avoids the ‘violence and sterility that seems to accompany purified order, while allowing on the other hand, not only the liveliness of a commerce between order and its exclusions but the possibility of fundamental change when the old order is dying or in crisis’.266

Julia Kristeva has said that ‘excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, et cetera) stand for the dangers to identity that come from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life

266 Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*. p. 190
by death’. The holes in the body play a part here for they represent the borders, the in-between spaces, the grotesque as “boundary phenomenon”—where the insides of the body meet the outside world—the sites of eating, drinking, defecation and sex. The tearing open, the insides being revealed, the disintegration, birth, death, the erosive consequences of time, these are the aspects of life that our contemporary culture seeks to air-brush out of the picture. Inversely, for me these elements constitute compelling subject matter.

Although in places Kuspit seems disparaging of artists who represent faeces in their art, he also writes that:

The aesthetic transformation of ugliness creates the sense of being in subliminal control of the feelings aroused by our consciousness of our own destruction and death – which confirms that we are part of the ugliness of the world. The tragic aura ugliness acquires in art makes us less susceptible to it even as it confirms that it is the permanent flaw in existence… destruction and death are no longer the stark naked truth about life… but covered by an aesthetic veil.

I became intrigued by the possibilities inherent in this concept of the ‘aesthetic veil’, which, like the drapery in some Baroque paintings, simultaneously conceals the form it reveals.

**ONLY IDIOTS SCREAM: OCCUPYING ILOGICAL SPACE**

Often I would picture a distinct scenario, but by going through the process of making a painting from this image, quite a different scenario would emerge. This occurred as a dialectic between what I ‘imagined’, what I painted as a realisation of the ‘imagining’, and then what occurred in response to that. Thus, what began in this instance as a narrative vignette about power, anxiety and wage-labour,

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269 Kuspit, *The End of Art*. pp. 190-191
involving a worker and two leering administrators, became three screaming heads, three gaping mouths perfunctorily attached to short-sleeved shirts, ties, slacks and shiny shoes—the contemporary uniform of bureaucracy. Although they are all lit by the white light of the single bare bulb, they occupy a deliberately illogical and implausible space where the largest figure would appear to be behind the others even though his feet are not visible below the bottom edge of the frame.

At first, I regarded these gaping mouths as carnival devices alluding to the borders between the inside of the body and the outside where, according to Bakhtin, ‘the events of the grotesque sphere are always developed.’ The scream I have painted for me however, corresponds more to the scream John Holloway describes as ‘a scream to break windows, a refusal to be contained, an overflowing, a going beyond the pale, beyond the bounds of polite society.’ Holloway though, also warns that ‘it is unscientific to scream’ and that ‘there is no room for the scream in academic discourse.’ Helen Lock, on the other hand, affirms that ‘the aim is, like tricksters themselves, to increase the sphere of hermeneutical possibilities.’

Because these screams are only painted and are therefore mute, academic discourse perhaps need not worry. The viewer may be prompted however, to ask why? upon encountering these screams and perhaps this monosyllabic, ontological interrogative will persist and somehow work as a charm to break the spell of our contemporary conundrum. This in turn, may serve to increase the sphere of hermeneutical possibilities.

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270 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, p. 322
271 Our scream is a refusal to accept. A refusal to accept that the spider will eat us, a refusal to accept that we shall all be killed on the rocks, a refusal to accept the unacceptable. A refusal to accept the inevitability of increasing inequality, misery, exploitation and violence. A refusal to accept the truth of the untrue, a refusal to accept closure. Our scream is a refusal to wallow in being victims of oppression, a refusal to immerse ourselves in that ‘left-wing melancholy’ which is so characteristic of oppositional thought. It is a refusal to accept the role of Cassandra so readily adopted by left-wing intellectuals: predicting the downfall of the world while accepting that there is nothing we can do about it. Our scream is a scream to break windows, a refusal to be contained, an overflowing, a going beyond the pale, beyond the bounds of polite society. In Holloway, Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today, p. 6
272 Ibid. p. 3
273 Ibid.
274 Lock, Transformations of the Trickster (cit).
Using a self-portrait as the basis of this painting (see Fig. 30), I wanted to suggest that the corpulent puppeteer has emerged from behind his curtain and stands revealed—rapacious mouth furnished with rotten teeth and smeared with what may or may not be chocolate. Piggish eyes say: ‘if there was chocolate, I ate it all.’ At the same time, these eyes seem to betray fear or wrath at having perhaps been discovered eating shit.
The drawn blind in the background is a quote from Francis Bacon and for me, alludes to the guilty, insidious secrecy of our anti-hero’s preoccupations, played out behind drawn blinds. The lurid 1970s design on the blinds is a reference to the era of my childhood, whereas, the blind itself, as suggested by the word ‘blind’, also denotes the idea of the veil. Here too, I began to use oil paint and saw the intrinsically seductive qualities of this material operating itself as a kind of veil for the subject matter with which I was engaged.

Thinking that these two large pieces might serve as ‘book-ends’ in the installation, I continued with this theme of the grotesque technocrat. In both The So-Called War On Noses and The Coprophagician’s Room, the Rabelaisian proportions of these figures fill almost the entire pictorial space to impose a sense of overwhelming claustrophobia upon the viewer. Again, there is an intentional dumb, cartoon-like buffoonery to these paintings where the artificial spaces might mimic those of the New World Order and the hegemony of American culture. Painted to satirise the climate of fear being propagated through the media since the events in New York and Washington on September the 11th 2001, the near monumental scale of these two paintings reflects the intensity of the feelings that have overwhelmed me. These feelings have arisen however, more in response to the incremental shrinking of civil liberties and the corresponding rise in militarism, than to any perceived potential terrorist threat.

The lost and broken figures could be us, or maybe aspects of ourselves that we are still in the process of shedding. For Mike Kelley it is problematic to speak of art as ‘anything more than a mirror’, so perhaps, bearing in mind my use of self-portraiture, a more accurate speculation might be that the figures in these works could be me, or aspects of myself that I am still in the process of shedding. ‘Our pictures make us,’ writes McEvilley, ‘as much as we make them.’

276 McEvilley, The Exile’s Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era. p. 89
Fig. 30  *The Coprophagician’s Room.*

180cm x 190cm. Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas.  2005
Fig. 31 *The So-Called War on Noses.*
180cm x 190cm. Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 2005
**Dr. Cornelius & The Signifying Monkey**

Continuing to work with the notion of the abductive suggestion, I began producing often-detailed drawings that came to me in response to various literary or visual texts. What emerged from these drawings was a series of Kafkaesque images that displayed no overt political or social critique.

The painting I have titled *Dr. Cornelius & The Signifying Monkey* came from several drawings made while I was reading Holloway’s *Change The World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*. Here he writes about what he calls ‘insubordinate labour’, where workers have control over their own means of production. My initial and inchoate vision was of figures crouching in a landscape, a scene I attempted to document with rough drawings. As I drew, I reflected on these unclothed figures. I thought of the insubordinate labour of my long dead ancestors who, generations ago, lived perhaps in the once great forests of central Ireland somewhere near the source of the river Slaney, whence our name is derived.

The landscape I first envisaged behind the figures gave way to a heavy draped curtain that positioned the figures in an inescapable and claustrophobic crawl-space. I made a number of studies of clothing and textiles draped over furniture so as to imbue the drapery in the painting with a degree of naturalism, and became interested in the surface/depth contradiction posed by drapery and how this relates to the way I was painting, that is, the preoccupation with illusion. This also led to possibly autobiographical allusions to the theatre and the space within the painting became a stage.

As this happened the figures became actors; they wear masks and become monkeys; the space then appeared to resemble a diorama in a museum. To further this allusion I delved into the image collection and found illustrations of bovine skeletons that I distorted and inserted, extending the legs in a joking reference to Dali’s spindly elephants in his *Temptation of St. Anthony*.²⁷⁷

Ultimately, after some time in the studio, the painting seemed crowded, vague and overly theatrical, whilst at the same time lacking drama. I painted over the two figures on the left and replaced them with a much larger figure comprised of a synthesis of collected imagery. The body of the figure originated in a drawing I made from a photograph of a corpse sitting in a chair combined with a drawing of my own face. The figure is dressed in striped pyjamas primarily to elicit a sense...
of laziness, dereliction or somnambulism, but this device also serves to link this work with others in the series.

Other paintings made at this time, namely *Dog Becomings, The Somnambulist, Foucault’s Ass, The Dead Beater: (If ya wanna make an omelette…)*, and *Cosmic Terror* emerged via similar procedures. The basic image appeared in response to textual stimuli, drawings were made and the painting begun. I then added or subtracted elements in response to the changes and developments in mood, colour and space.

![Fig. 33 Dog Becomings. 130cm x 150cm. Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 2005](image)
**Fig. 34** *The Somnambulist*. 130cm x 150cm.
Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 2005

**Fig. 35** *Foucault’s Ass*. 130cm x 150cm.
Collage, synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 2005
Although the ludic theriomorphism in several of these works would seem to constitute visual metaphor, I can only offer speculation as to what this metaphor might refer. In several of the paintings I have depicted half-man/half-beast figures which for me, not only refer back to Dorothea Olkowski’s ‘ontology of becoming’ (see p. 31) but also to Homi K. Bhabha’s description of the fin de siecle period where:

We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction…

**Flesh Conceptualised as Corpulent Excess**

In the past, I have sometimes spent several months on a particular painting before it was either shown and then stored, sold, or in many cases, destroyed. Spending almost three years in the company of the same paintings was a new experience. Not only did I now have the opportunity to live with a painting and work on it for an extended period, but I could also juxtapose a fresh painting with one that I had been developing for two years. It became metaphorical time travel, multi-temporal heterogeneity on a micro scale.

At the beginning of the final year of the project, seeking to further implicate the body in my work, I began to focus on painting flesh more effectively. Having up until this point used either generic flesh tones straight from the tube, or my own formulas with varying results, I came across a traditional formula which recommended raw sienna, raw umber, mars violet (or Venetian red), cobalt blue and titanium white. Raw sienna and raw umber I had never used before although I had had them in my kit. Mars violet I had never heard of.

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278 Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). p. 2
When I began to deploy these pigments in different combinations, not only did the flesh of the figures I was painting take on a luminosity I had previously been unable to achieve, but also the quality of the light in the entire image became considerably more dynamic. The years spent improvising with my own limited knowledge of colour and possibly intuitive feel for tone, suddenly, within a couple of weeks, seemed to gel. It was as though the secrets of the masters were revealed and a new world of light and possibility had been opened to me. This begged the question: Do I go back and apply this to the older works in the collection?

Out of deference to a certain carnivalesque dissonance (in alignment with Bakhtin’s description of the Grotesque as a ‘figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion’, or, ‘flesh conceptualised as corpulent excess to represent cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements’), some of the figures kept their original moribund pallor. Others however, subsequently acquired new flesh.

Reworking paintings that had been in the studio for nearly three years in various stages of resolution, prompted me to consider not only the notion of metaphoric time travel via a jumbling up of linear narrative, but also questions with political connotations. Was I rewriting history to reflect my new found power in the present? Was the unearthing of antiquated techniques by an isolated visual artist in Lismore obliquely mirroring a renaissance of the power structures of feudalism around the globe? Is it more the case that these power structures, like my tubes of raw sienna and raw umber, have been around for ages just waiting for the protagonists to figure out how to apply them to maximum effect?

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279 Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. p. 9
280 Ibid. p. 8
I also began experimenting with blues. I had used ultramarine blue and burnt umber which, when mixed with zinc white to form shades of grey, made an appropriate and well-behaved sky. I tried using turquoise with titanium white clouds, but found the effect harsh and sickly sweet, tending to excessively dominate the picture. Pthalo blue and raw umber mixed with zinc white made shades of blue-grey that sat back into an infinitely receding distance, without foregoing dramatic intensity.

Having found this combination of pigments to make the ‘perfect’ sublime sky, there was still something not right. That these figures should occupy a broad, sweeping vista beneath fluffy, cotton wool clouds seemed to be the wrong sort of deception. Thinking then, of the curtained-off spaces from earlier paintings (McEvilley’s ‘symbol for human captivity’ or ‘society as a nightmare’), I transformed the distant horizon line into the edge of a painted cloth, a trompe
I’oeil backdrop that confined the figures once again in a kind of double illusion. Instead of the horizon being miles away, it now seemed to appear less than ten feet away.

Fig. 37 Born to Rule. 150cm x 130cm. Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 2006
FROM NIHILISM TO THE GROTESQUE: CLOSING CIRCLES

These damn paintings get uglier all the time, uglier in human type, uglier in intention, to take over the ugliness that is the political reality of these common circumstances.\textsuperscript{281}

For several years I had eschewed everything I had ever learned about painting; I had ‘de-skilled’ and become a dribbler and a scribbler. Even though there now seemed something possibly ghoulish about my urge to investigate techniques and formulas from the past (like Victor Frankenstein digging up fragments of cadavers in order to synthesise and enliven his own constructed corpse), I had moved away from nihilism in the direction of a ‘grotesque realism’ that transgresses ‘the monologic true-or-false thinking typical of a certain kind of positivist rationalism.’\textsuperscript{282}

Thus armed, I delved back into the image collection. With the overhead projector, I experimented with organising the acrylic pages so that the diverse figures formed compositions. In an approach similar to that used by Leon Golub,\textsuperscript{283} I conflated images from various sources, using parts of figures from one image together with elements from another. In Super Friends (see Fig.36) for example, I repeatedly traced the figure of a wrestler (collected from the Internet and digitally distorted) so that there appeared to be a group of men standing together with their hands on their hips. With their faces copied from the TV guide in the newspaper, their defiant posturing is rendered absurd by their ridiculously distorted bodies and clownish attire.

By returning to the collected imagery, I had completed a circle. In these paintings all the elements I had been working with came together, that is, the collected

\textsuperscript{282} Ella Shohat & Robert Stam, "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics.” p. 45
\textsuperscript{283} McEvilley, The Exile’s Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era. p. 190
imagery, a sense of the absurdity of existence and a kind of random methodology. Towards the end of the project however, these images were no longer splashed onto the canvas; I was now rendering them as finely as I could, with lustrous flesh and the type of luminosity only achievable using oil. Instead of speeding up, my entire process had slowed down, so that rather than lunging from one rapidly executed painting to another, as I had been in the beginning, I was now squatting on the floor for hours at a time attempting to blend colours and refine atmospheric lighting effects.

**THE FOOD IS AWFUL, BUT THE PORTIONS ARE SO LARGE**

A colleague remarked upon seeing the work that, although she found the content of the images disturbing, the way I had painted them was for her, indicative of compassion. I was reminded here of the joke where two men discuss the food in a restaurant: “The food here is awful,” complains the first man. “Yes,” responds the other enthusiastically, “but the portions are so large!”

I had set out to critique what I perceived as the wave of radical conservatism pervading Western Capitalist Democracies with a specific focus on Australia. The ideological aspirations of this conservatism I saw as being analogous to Bakhtin’s description of the classical form as:

An entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off is eliminated, hidden or moderated. […] The opaque surface of the body’s ‘valleys’ acquires an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world. All attributes of the unfinished world are carefully removed, as well as all signs of its inner life.\(^{284}\)

This in turn would relate to David Bachelor’s ideal body as:

\(^{284}\) Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. p. 320
… not a place of fluids, organs, muscles, tendons and bones all in a constant, precarious and living tension with each other, but a vacant, hollow, whitened chamber, scraped clean, cleared of any evidence of the grotesque embarrassments of an actual life. No smells, no noises, no colour; no changing from one state to another and the uncertainty that comes with it; no exchanges with the outside world and the doubt and the dirt that goes with that; no eating, no drinking, no pissing, no shitting, no sucking, no fucking, no nothing.\textsuperscript{285}

My own vociferations against the current socio-political regime, that for me seems to preceptively embody the above, would fill too many pages to be included here and I must admit to having begun this project fuelled by a certain vexatiousness. However, looking at these later paintings and realising that although the angst-ridden and tenebrous spaces therein may obliquely connote the presence of pissing, shitting, murder, madness and dirt, late 18\textsuperscript{th} to early 19\textsuperscript{th} century Neoclassicism, replete with all its bourgeois kitsch connotations, ironically, would appear to be the period from whence I have appropriated my approach.

For McEvilley though, this Neoclassical period (circa 1790-1810) was characterised by the interplay between the beautiful and the sublime, where:

\ldots the beauty and orderliness of a universe supposedly comprehensible to human reason was threatened with annihilation by the encroachment of the terror and loneliness of the sublime. What had seemed to be under control now seemed to be out of control.\textsuperscript{286}

So, if on the one hand, we read this Neoclassical period as the epitome of bourgeois kitsch, I would have to admit to the contradiction seemingly indicated by my apparent appropriation of techniques and pictorial devices taken from this era to critique our own. This might highlight, by forming an analogue to the previously mentioned tension existing between the privilege implicated by my

\textsuperscript{286} McEvilley, \textit{The Exile’s Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era}. p. 141
position as artist, and the corresponding reality of the marginalisation accompanying that same position. On the other hand, I could stress the correspondence between that period, when, as McEvilley points out, 18th century Rationalism was giving way to 19th century Romanticism, and our own, wherein 20th century assuredness is perhaps giving way to 21st century uncertainty. I might instead then, emphasise the frisson that has manifested in the processes I employed in the studio to negotiate the tension between the beautiful (that is, the seductive qualities of the medium) and the sublime (that is, the terror, obscurity and darkness alluded to by the message). I might also emphasise the way that a chaotic, non-systematic and haphazard process of selecting subject matter and constructing images has evolved into an ostensibly ordered exhibition of paintings—a negotiation between the controllable and the uncontrollable.

Fig. 38 Cassandra. Synthetic polymers and oil on canvas. 150cm x 130cm. 2006
CONCLUSION
OF CLOUDS AND LAMP-POSTS

Language in art remains a highly ambiguous transaction, a quicksand, a trampoline, a frozen pool which might give way under you, the author, at any time.  

The title of this concluding section indicates the discomforture of my attempts to classify, categorise, codify and systematise the vicissitudes of my practice into an acceptable scientific norm; to transform an intrinsically ephemeral cloud—all vapid motion and ‘unfinalizable’ illusion—into a practical, functional lamp-post—all stability, utility and rigidity.

Highlighting what he calls ‘methodological syncretism’, Kamberelis repeatedly uses this Bakhtinian term ‘unfinalizable’, and states, that more than anything Bakhtin protested against totalising regimes that insist on the determinateness or ‘finalizability’ of human language and human life. Bakhtin instead, insisted that ‘language and life are open, highly contingent and “unfinalizable”’. Because of the intrinsic vagaries of my practice, I found this notion of the ‘unfinalizable’ directly applicable.

From the outset, I made a decision not to overly determine or restrict the direction of this project by posing a formal research question, preferring instead to wander heuristically around the broad theme of myth construction, adopting and/or

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287 Pinter, Harold Pinter: Art, Truth & Politics. Nobel Lecture December 7, 2005 ([cited].
288 ‘Methodological syncretism’: whereby rather than privileging a single method or approach to the practice of inquiry, researchers are encouraged to use whatever techniques, strategies, and frameworks are required to conduct the best research possible and to produce research accounts that embody verisimilitude and that are poetic, transgressive, unfinalizable, and transformative. In this regard researchers are bricoleurs whose choices about which research strategies to use are contingent on the research questions being asked, the ever-changing exigencies of the research context, and the shifting praxis goals of the community being researched. As bricoleurs, qualitative researchers are also shape-shifters who may take on multiple and gendered images: scientist, naturalist, fieldworker, journalist, social critic, artist, performer, jazz musician, filmmaker, quilt maker, essayist. From Kamberelis, “Ingestion, Elimination, Sex and Song: Trickster as Premodern Avatar of Postmodern Research Practice.” p. 675
289 Ibid. p. 701n
abandoning concepts, materials and influences as I encountered them. The word ‘conclude’ comes to us from the Latin ‘to close completely’, and, as I approached this project’s completion (in itself an arbitrary and temporally contingent boundary), the idea of drawing a conclusion from what I made seemed necessarily cloudy.

Many conclusions on the other hand, have been drawn during the process of making the work. I ultimately concluded, for example, that although I appreciated the convenience and immediacy of using synthetic polymer paint, a relatively new medium, in times which everywhere seem to insist on more speed, the slowness demanded by the use of oil paint, its seductive lustre, as well as the morbid nexus it allows to a particular tradition (with which I comply and at the same time contravene) became poignant factors. The capacity for oil paint to be used in such a way as to effectively allude to reality (a capacity that for me, has not been usurped by photography), and the games this allows me to play with figure/ground relationships, also continues to drive my practice.

In the final analysis though, the conclusion for me is manifest in the installation. This is where I made editorial decisions and concluded, however arbitrarily, that although certain works may be the result of many hours of careful consideration and labour they do not belong in the show. In preparing for the installation, I also began, perhaps for the first time, to see this body of work as a whole, and as such, an index of where I had been for three years.

As I grouped the individual works into sets and series I began here to consider the size and layout of the exhibiting space, the order in which I might hang the work, and the numerous linkages, rhymes and associations that subsequently presented themselves. Although I have tended to assemble the works according to these linkages et cetera, there remain areas of discordance where no discernable continuity seems to exist. Coming about as a reflection of the nomadic and spasmodic way I had been operating, red-herrings, cul-de-sacs and lost highways were not entirely out of context, indeed, they mirrored the combined din of the various texts I had been exploiting—the *horror vacui* of contemporary culture. There seemed an opportunity at this point however, to rework several of the
paintings by editing out those elements that had become tautological, and adding other elements to enhance the suggestion of narrative sequence. This overlaid semblance of order nevertheless, thinly veils a rich network of inconsistency, contradiction and folly.

**Radical Pessimism**

To inform the production of these paintings I have appropriated and distorted images from mass/pop culture and used these in combination with self-referential material. This constitutes for me a type of feedback loop that highlights the notion that we are indeed in Jean Baudrillard’s ‘simulation society’. Here, ‘simulacra dominate our lives and the faith in a “profound reality” has turned radically agnostic.’

In other words, we may no longer know what is real and what is not.

Baudrillard described the postmodern human condition as a combination of “fascination,” “melancholy,” and “indifference,” for which he blamed systemic nihilism and the mass media. For me, he seemed to foretell not so much events themselves, but the media saturated ground in and against which events now occur; the abundance of almost surreal news-reports supports this. I recall a TV news story from New Orleans that showed one side of town enjoying the Mardi Gras parade whilst on the other side of town fishing boats dislocated by the raging flood waters sat rotting in the streets like a scene by Dali. The people here were lamenting the destruction of their homes as busses ferried tourists around the devastated suburbs. In another story, child-soldiers filmed during the Liberian civil war are shown in one graphic scene, eating the hearts of their enemies.

Part of me recoils in horror at such stories, and yet, part of me remains calmly unaffected. Perhaps I am more horrified at the degree to which I seem to have become immune to such scenes regularly projected into my domestic space, imbued as they are with a flavour of things being all too real, and yet, too weirdly

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un-real. Although I did not set out to illustrate Baudrillard’s theories in these paintings, I have used paint here to poetically construct spaces that are un-real whilst also being too real, spaces to which ‘the simulated world of commodities and spectacles’\(^{291}\) has inured me.

‘Radical pessimism might save us’\(^{292}\) Baudrillard once wrote, and with this, he has either taunted or invited me to revel in making these gloomy, romantic paintings. Perhaps in their focus on darkness and obscurity, their refusal to offer hope or act as a panacea, together with their intrinsic material seductiveness and attention to detail, these paintings can be construed as a type of radically pessimistic cultural incursion.

Harold Pinter recently said: ‘Sermonising has to be avoided at all cost’,\(^{293}\) I do not recoil however, from the plaintive nature of what I have made. At the same time, I do not wish to limit what I have made by labelling it ‘protest art’ or even ‘political art’. I am more interested in it being read as arcane documentation of the zeitgeist, a kind of epic poem composed at the decline of an empire, at the threshold between two eras, stills from a film that was never made, disparate images lifted from footage found in a tree trunk—all knowledge of how to assemble the images into a logical and linear narrative sequence having been lost.

**Pigs, Rats and Maids: The Logic of Neither/Both**

Terry Eagleton laments that ‘the true scandal of the present world is that almost everyone in it is banished to the margins’.\(^{294}\) Without however, an identifiable centre, these margins become difficult to discern. I am forced then, to settle for the logic of neither/both,\(^{295}\) and taking the abductive guess, turn again to the

\(^{291}\) Foster, *Recodings: Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, p. 90


\(^{293}\) Pinter, *Harold Pinter: Art, Truth & Politics. Nobel Lecture December 7, 2005* ([cited]).

\(^{294}\) Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 19

\(^{295}\) Liminal modes of being articulate a kind of neither/both logic. Such a logic is radically different from a both/and logic, which implies the possibility of resolution and hence reduces a tension that is simultaneously vital, elusive, and fertile. Embodying this neither/both logic, Trickster maps a margin or a boundary that is both composed of multiple worlds practice and
Trickster. Throughout the duration of this project I kept telling myself that, like the Heyoka of the Lakota Sioux, I had to play the fool, eat sticks and dog-shit, climb down the ladder head-first, and sink to the bottom of the ocean. I had to ride my horse backwards into battle and say hello when I meant goodbye—all in the name of absorbing myself in the Trickster function. But what does that actually entail?

Attempting consciously and deliberately to remain on the margins of a virulently intrusive culture is not a walk in the park. Inversely, absorbing myself in an overabundance of texts was not such a problem. Advertising and ‘news’ is projected onto every flat surface and broadcast from every speaker, as the normativising voices of consumer culture attempt to seduce and/or coerce. What was problematic seemed to be akin to the surface/depth antinomy found in the foaming oceans, the infinitely receding clouds and the swirling drapery of a Baroque painting, or the virtually labyrinthine space unfolding within the latest video game. So many texts beckoned me to engage with them: terrifying news, images of riots, victims, earthquakes, hurricanes, car-bombs, police and torture; so many philosophers, artists, advertisers, politicians; an endless sea of electronically stored information, libraries and shops full of books, a billion words, a trillion letters, megabytes, gigabytes, a fun filled holiday for two or your money back. All this seemed to be simultaneously trying to draw me into or exclude me from some elusive centre—a centre that continues to infinitely recede no matter where I stand. Little wonder then, that the philosophy is stuttering.

Border hopping and boundary riding with the Trickster led me to interrogate the idea of ‘transgression’ and question the possibility of carrying on a practice, or of making art that could still be considered ‘transgressive’. I worked through the period where I was roughly applying synthetic polymer paint, oil stick and spray enamel; the contrived carelessness of this approach deliberately corresponding for me, to the adolescent rebellion, cheap guitars and basic chord progressions of late 1970s Punk music. As described earlier in this document however, rather than

*meaning but is really and completely neither of them.* Kamberelis, "Ingestion, Elimination, Sex and Song: Trickster as Premodern Avatar of Postmodern Research Practice." p. 695
being transgressive, this early work seemed not much more than an aporic reiteration of a now widely accepted and commercially viable style, occupying a similar space to *haute-couture* T-shirts with the rips in the right places, or contemporary “Punk” pop-stars appearing in soft drink advertisements, in other words, empty signs.

At this point rather than admitting defeat and acquiescing to the snide, nihilistic end games of post-objectism (whereupon a transgressive strategy might have been to claim that my performative occupancy of the studio constituted the work not the painted canvasses), I became like the Trickster pulling up ‘an item of culture which is passing into non-culture’ and began to move in the opposite direction. I increasingly refined the work, using careful rendering, oil paint, figuration and atmospheric perspective so that eventually I produced a kind of strange mimesis of Neoclassical painting.

Like Odd Nerdrum then, dismissed at once for being Kitsch but then claimed as postmodern irony once he himself had embraced the Kitsch label, I may have a foot in both camps. My obsession with illusionistic space and the social may disturb the modernists’ disinterested gaze, their notions of truth-to-materials and the autonomy of painting. My use of collected material from ‘low’ culture might satisfy and reinforce postmodernists, but then the fact that I still use paint will probably disappoint those insisting on ‘new’ media. Indeed, perhaps in the face of this ubiquitous demand for ‘new’ media, not to mention the superabundance in our shops and homes of commodities, the social origins in human labour of which have been extinguished, the *act of making* has in itself, become transgressive.

The apparent ambivalence implied here is referred to in the paintings themselves by the recurrence of the one-shoe-on-one-shoe-off motif, but I am also reminded of three tropes employed by Stallybrass and White. They speak of the pig, the

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296 Spinks, *The Laughter of Signs: Semiosis as Trickster* ([cited]).
rat\textsuperscript{299} and the 19\textsuperscript{th} century maid\textsuperscript{300} as being mediators between the discursive realms of animal and human, sewer and street, bourgeois house and slum. Sketching out a theory of its ambivalence, they write of the pig as transgressing animal/man opposition by having the same skin colour as Europeans, eating the same food as its human owners, and (in 19\textsuperscript{th} century rural dwellings) by living in close proximity to the house. The rat as ‘phobic mediator’, travelled easily between the sewer and the heart of the bourgeois household, as did the maid, who worked in the household before returning to her place of residence in the slums.

Similar to Trickster then, these margin-walkers trapse the filth from farmyard, sewer and slum into the living room. Perhaps this is what I have done here. I have studied the material that engulfs us everyday highlighting the dross, the insignificant, the throwaway, yesterday’s news. I have elevated the tattoo, the cartoon strip, the bubble-gum and Tarot card, to perhaps expose and exaggerate the grief and the deception, the dirty build-up behind the clean, white refrigerator, the diseased body within the Armani suit, and the slum below the gleaming skyscraper.

These paintings are a poetic negotiation with the seemingly endless stream of self-perpetuating, socially cohering mythology that issues from the overwhelmingly white-skinned, Anglo-Saxon, Christo-Capitalist culture-manufacturing machine. At the dawn of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, this chimera now regards itself as the ground against which all other cultures are compelled, via mechanisms of seduction and/or coercion, to position themselves. If I deduce from this negotiation that my culture is undergoing a type of ‘winter’, my art-making then, could be perceived as being an echo of the Trickster tales told by the aboriginal people of North America ‘in the dead of winter, “when the snakes are below the ground”’,\textsuperscript{301} tales that entertain in fantasy ‘the things (incest, taboo violations, mad egotism etc.) that could not possibly be part of the center of things’.\textsuperscript{302} Here again, like someone amid the ruins of their home in New Orleans, or the Liberian child-

\textsuperscript{299} Ibid. p. 146
\textsuperscript{300} Ibid. p. 149
\textsuperscript{301} Hyde, \textit{Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art}. p. 186
\textsuperscript{302} Ibid.
soldier eating the heart of his enemy, the socially peripheral may become symbolically central.

bell hooks said: ‘I must be willing to tell what I’ve seen. I must bear witness. I must transgress.’ And so, continuing to contribute to a pattern of transgressing in enfolding contexts, this carnival monster distilled from representations gleaned from the culture itself, as well as the demons of my own fear, grief and anxiety, now sits outside myself, and, for the briefest of moments, in the centre of Lismore’s CBD. It seemed quite reasonable, in the spirit of an ironic cultural intervention, to fill this regional public gallery with these monstrously beautiful paintings and see where that might take me, or what direction comes on offer hence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


CORNELIUS DELANEY. *A FAREWELL TO MEAT*


