

ZEEGEZICHTEN/ SEASCAPES

NAVIGATING THE PICTURE PLANE

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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1 Introduction

The moment one art imitates another; it becomes more distant from it by repudiating the constraint of its own material, and falls into syncretism, in the vague notion of an un-dialectical continuum of arts in general. ... The arts converge only where each pursues its immanent principle (Adorno 1995: 67).

This dissertation explicates the work produced during the course of my Masters of Fine Art (MFA) at the Michaelis School of Fine Art. For a better understanding of this body of work, it is important that I relate the events in part that led up to its production.

My intention from the start (in selecting a change of working location from The Netherlands to South Africa) was to test my practice, not only against the practical and theoretical contingencies influencing its production up to the end of 2003, but also how a specific geographical and political milieu affects its making.

To do this I need to interrogate both bodies of works, those produced immediately before my MFA, as well as those arising during my studies in Cape Town. My art-historical field of reference consists mainly of West European and twentieth century American art and art theory.



Figure 1 *Untitled (mattress)* 2001, 1800 mm X 1400 mm oil on canvas.



Thus South Africa signified a geographical and art historical distance from my work's field of reference.

My work produced in The Netherlands is strongly influenced by its locale. Its subject matter¹ is centred on the painting as a location in itself wherein acts of mediation between the motif and its context occur,² thus embodying the process of painting as marking a territory. This theme is further explored in section 2.

My previous production assisted in developing a practice that profoundly influences my MFA works. This practice will serve as a reference for examining the differences and similarities between both bodies of work. My intention is to draw strongly from my own archive

1. By subject matter I mean the concept of an individual painting as a whole, including the motif and its interpretations, the method, the relation between motif and method and all these aspects in relation to their forming a complete picture.

2. Context refers here firstly to the geographical location in which the painting is positioned. Secondly, it refers to the painterly context of the motif within the painting as transformed object.



Figure 2 *Untitled (mattress)* 2001, 1260 mm X 2000 mm oil on canvas

of artworks made prior to the MFA. I believe this to be valid within the aims of my study, as suggested in the title.

My practice can be characterized in the following manner: a material object or location serves as a motif in my painting for a period of time. In the production of a series of paintings around a particular motif, a relationship between the motif and the method³ evolves. The painting becomes the sum total of the experience of the practice wherein the motifs assist access to understanding of the work. The paintings develop along formal lines. This does not exclude the formal connotations⁴ or the possible textual and thematic connotations⁵ of the motif.

I explain this practice in order to clarify my position regarding painting; that it should not be possible to interpret it in text alone. I will expand on this idea in section 4.

As the objects of research into the influence of location within this practice as working methodology (and in hand) the MFA works presented here function as a refined study and summary of the former works, hopefully assisting in defining my practice as a painter more precisely. Furthermore, in pursuing the MFA, I aimed towards developing work that embodies the research it deals with, as opposed



3. The method refers to the concrete, formal journey that a painting contains. This means the factors which are unbiased by specific meaning: the technique, form, colour, size, proportions and surface qualities of the material object.

4. By formal connotations, I mean the connotations that the concrete motif, considered without textual or thematic meaning, implies. A mattress has formal connotations with the canvas, for instance, the size, proportion and material.

to constructing theoretical parallels, or a body of text outside the frame. Instead of applying textual theory to the works, I aim to define the work and enquire into its nature from within its reality.

My recent practice has brought about an awareness of a political dimension to pictures and picture making, in the sense that the practice of painting may be understood as analogous to writing an historical text historicizing a moment or an experience in real time.

My work is strongly influenced by its history in two distinctive respects. The works develop through several stages, each one initiating the following; the residue of these stages should be seen as its tangible history evident in the final form of the work.



Figure 3 *Dog/ Gun* 2002, 1780 mm X 930 mm oil and egg tempera on canvas.

Secondly, my works imply a chronological continuum. The links between the works are not accidental. The one feeds the other and this notion is at the core of the issues researched in the practical work and commented upon in the dissertation.

Finally since I privilege a reading of painting through sight, as opposed to text or its affiliations, I present later in the text, by way of qualifying my beliefs, a personal definition of painting.



5. By textual and thematic connotations I mean the connotations that can be communicated textually or verbally. These are connotations that have no relation to reading the motif through sight alone. Thematic connotations are the connotations that are implied. These are initiated by the textual connotations but refer to a broader theme. When sleep is a textual connotation of a mattress, solitude, for instance, is a thematic association.

2. An appraisal of the works prior to the MFA series of paintings (2000-2003)

Perhaps once upon a time you took her photograph, and it happened that all your attention was concentrated on the image you were making, not on her, the source of the image (Coetzee 2005: 97).

The works presented in this section were produced as part of a Bachelor of Fine Art course at the Academy of Visual Arts (AKI) in Enschede, The Netherlands. They embody a study of the medium, and assisted in developing a personal definition and practice of painting.⁶

As stated in section 1, the MFA works are in many respects a continuation of my former practice. It is therefore necessary to discuss the core values of this practice in order to fully understand the MFA works.

The origin of my practice is illustrated by paintings of mattresses produced in 2001 (fig. 1 & 2). After the first painting of a mattress a recognizable context, a bedroom for instance, mostly disappeared from the works and what remained was a study of the object reformulated in its painterly context.



Figure 4 *untitled (hungry girl)* 2002, 440 mm X 230 mm crayon on paper



I attempted to reach an idiosyncratic, visual definition of the motif outside its potential for textual connotations, thereby causing a detachment from literary interpretation. I aimed to partly isolate the motif from its textual and thematic connotations seeking rather to promote its essence as a primary form within the painting.

The repeated depiction of one object contributes to this visual definition as it signals an attempt to define the object within the pictorial defined by the practice.

Individual motifs appeared in the works generally for six to twelve months. However, this was not chronological, as they would disappear

6. These works have not been explicated previously.

for a period and emerge at a later stage.

In addition to the main motifs discussed in the following section, other motifs (fig. 3 & 4) would appear in minor works. These I call peripheral, in the margin, noteworthy for their capacity to un hinge the textual connotations of a major motif as well as the formal means employed in the major works of that period.

The motifs of the prior works can be classified roughly in four groups. The following section explores these groups and identifies the significant ways in which they relate to each other.



Figure 5 *untitled (mattress)* 2001, 700mm X 750 mm oil on canvas

2.1 Motifs

2.1.1 Mattress

The mattress is analogous to the actual canvas that carries its depiction, through an equivalence in size. The first series of four were each approximately the size of a single mattress.

Textual connotations range from sleep, sex and sexual violation to thematic connotations such as solitude, silence, trauma and refuge. As

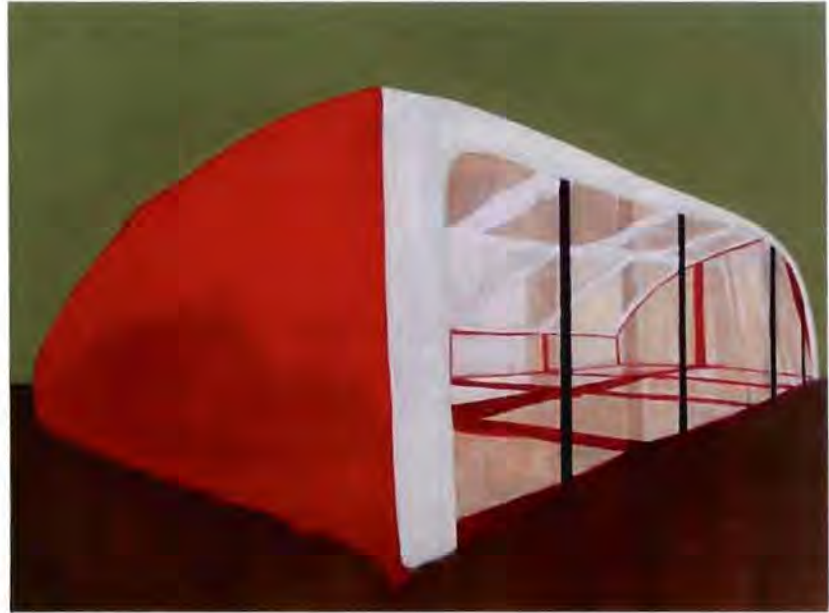


these notions are clouded by subjective interpretation they cannot be accurately defined. Thus the significance of the mattress for the painting is located within the method rather than in its value as motif. Although the specific formal and textual connotations of the mattress assist the process of the paintings, the broadness of the range of connotations is more important in influencing the painting's development. The broad range of connotations, and simple form, allows the method to implement its own, formalistic notions necessary to construct an idiosyncratic, visual definition of the motif in relation to the method. The context of the mattress is scarcely defined in most of these works, only enough to introduce a sense of locus.⁷

The notion of events about to take place, or having taken place, in

7. With locus, I mean a space and location, both concrete (as depicted, a bedroom, for instance) and abstract; the painting itself as a location for painterly events. Furthermore, locus refers to a location where events are either about to happen, or have previously taken place.

Figure 6 *Untitled (tent)* 2002, 2710 mm X 2040 mm oil on canvas



relation to the mattress is expanded in a work such as *untitled* (fig. 5). The doorways imply a presence beyond the walls of the room.



2.1.2 Tents and architectural plans

Tents and plans are used analogously to signify the act of occupying the picture plane. I do so to explain the activity of painting as marking territory. This notion is further reinforced in this series by the introduction of architectural symbols.

Tents are transient structures which provide a temporary home for their inhabitants. They are not homes in a permanent sense. The possibility of seclusion through silence or refuge, for instance, is unavailable to their inhabitants. While tents offer protection from the elements, their fabric is at the same time transparent to sound and not opaque; they consist of selectively permeable membranes. These textual, thematic

and formal qualities are resonant with possibilities for painting. The architectural symbols amplify ambiguity in this context (fig. 6 & 7).

The plans are ambiguous in the sense that they present a past and present architectural structure concurrently. This ambiguity is initially enquired into within the works depicting plans that relate to personally significant past events or locations. Within the paintings they serve as plans on which new, tent-like structures are assembled. Redefinition towards visual idiosyncrasy takes place simultaneously, firstly by the tent-structures as they redefine the plans and vice versa. Secondly, the plans function as a symbol that attempts to occupy and thus define the picture plane itself.

The works that employ drawings derived from engineering plans, recognizable by their technical visual language, indicate a move away from personal associations towards formal connotations. The motifs are in these works specifically in order to intrude purely formal matters within the paintings (fig. 8 & 9).



Figure 7 *untitled (plans)* 2003 715 mm X 530 mm oil and gouache on canvas



2.1.3 Swimming pools

The absence of the possibility of seclusion in tents, and the notion of unfulfillment, alerted me to the subsequent motif, the swimming pool.

The public swimming pool as a motif indicates a further search for seclusion within a broader realm, beyond the personal and intimate. The pool contains the notion of seclusion through silence, notably the space under the water surface as opposed to a noisy, echoing space above. Furthermore, the distinct separation of silence and sound signifies the water surface as a border.

The swimming pool is depicted as an isolated floating structure

8. By literal, I mean here the actual bricks and mortar of a pool.

Figure 8 *untitled (plan and tent)* 2002,
870 mm X 1110mm oil on canvas



(fig. 10 & 11) in the painting, somehow supported by paint, but significantly detached from a literal containing structure,⁸ thus emphasizing the process of detachment from literary interpretation highlighted in the introduction to this section.



2.1.4 Hospital corridors and benches

The concept of locus, in regard to the works presented in this section, is influenced by the emergence of the locations from a hospital, and the objects found inside it, as motifs for the paintings. The specific corridors, corners and objects are drawn from the day clinic section of a hospital, where the waiting and assessment rooms are connected by long, clinical, empty and slightly disconcerting corridors.

This explains the sense of silence and anticipation found in most of the works. The bench is introduced to accentuate this feeling of anticipation, and composes relationships with the other motifs, hence



Figure 9 48K 2002, 700 mm X 1450 mm oil and pencil on canvas.

the appearance of the bench in the tent structures (fig. 12, 13, 14).

2.2 Summary of affiliations

2.2.1 Thematic associations

Thematic associations of the motifs in these works include borders, anticipation, disenchantment and seclusion. These themes mostly overlap and relate to each other, as outlined above. Furthermore, the motifs and their connotations are closely related to and intertwined with the method.



Borders are a metaphor for the understanding of painting as comprising a relation between method and motif. They also point to the subsequent binary location of meaning within the painting, both in textual and formal aspects.

Anticipation is generally visualized by the emptiness of locations in both the painting as a whole and the motif. This signifies an analogy between the process of the painting and the process involved in developing the motifs. To some extent expectations are projected; the white canvas as an initial stage brings forth expectations of painterly events waiting to take place, as does every ensuing stage of the work. Disenchantment is closely related to anticipation, and is also visualized

Figure 10 *Untitled (green and pool)* 2002, 900 mm X 1515 mm oil on canvas.



by the significance of the process. Deficient stages within the development of the painting are responsible for the successive layers as they initiate a reaction or resolution.

The notion of seclusion elucidates the individuality of the works as well as their attempts to cross-reference within the body of works as opposed to reference to events outside.

Furthermore, the works aim to construct images and visual concepts



that closely rely on the medium and are unable to be translated into another medium. Therefore the works communicate a singularity by retreating into seclusion within the body as a reality.

2.2.2 Painterly values

The motifs were selected for the paintings firstly because of their potential painterly values, after which they proceeded to engage with the thematic associations outlined above. These values are traditional to painting, most significantly perspective, proportion, transparency, light, medium and techniques and colour relations. By working in series the motifs enabled me to study the practice of painting with

specific focus on these values.

The main painterly values of the mattresses are initially proportion and colour. As noted in section 2.1.1, the form and scale of the mattress is analogous to the canvas. This allows the painting to develop according to an abstract practice, detached from its representation of a mattress. Thereafter, in relation to the focus on the locations in which the mattresses were placed, perspective was a significant matter of concern.

The tents initiated a focus on the relation between transparent and opaque application of the paint, in regard to both the thematic affiliations of the tents and to perspective and suggestions of space. The period in which the works focused on tents saw a deepening concentration on colour qualities, and the introduction of the medium egg tempera (fig. 15).

The maps are mostly attached to the tents and are concerned with the inquiry into the function of drawing and marking territory in painting. They also emphasize the search for an idiosyncratic relation between motif and method within the painting.

The maps define the space on which the tents are constructed, the



territory they mark, and indicate reflection on the origin of the tent structures. This reflection is either formalistic, concerning the relation with the painting, or subjective, concerning the relation with the personal reasons for representation.

Painterly values of the swimming pools are also concerned with spatial suggestions both within the object and in relation to its context within the painting. There is a stronger definition of a horizon in these paintings, emphasizing the importance of the textual emptiness surrounding the motif. In so doing, the horizon directs the gaze at the material, away from the pool.

The period in which the paintings of swimming pools were produced is

Figure 11 *Untitled (horizon and pool)*
2002, 1220 mm X 690 mm egg tempera
on canvas mounted on board.



characterized by a heightened focus on colour. This is strongly influenced by the introduction of egg tempera, initiating the use of raw pigments for both oil and tempera paints. Egg tempera allows one to manufacture a colour with more premeditation than is possible with colour offered in a tube of oil paint. Tempera brought about an awareness of the dynamic factors of colour: value, hue, chroma all of which are easily manipulated. The medium also initiated a change in subject matter, as the transparency of the egg tempera allows prior stages to stay visible while still influencing the final stage.



2.2.3 Method

The works presented in this section firstly highlight the ambiguous use of the motifs. As outlined in sections 2.1.1 to 2.1.4, the thematic and textual connotations of the motifs are important for the production of the works. However, the main focus is on the formalistic events that constitute the painting as a whole. The motifs become consumed in the method by which they are depicted, creating a subject matter that is an amalgam of both motif and method. The paintings rely profoundly on their formal features for the creation of the visual idiosyncratic value I am looking for in my paintings.

The motifs are unstable since they serve firstly as thematic notions and secondly are employed to create a formal continuity through the works. This continuity enabled me to focus on method. Although the discussion of motifs in section 2.1 is somewhat chronologically ordered, the motifs in the works do not appear in such order. The tent, for instance, is mostly intertwined with the plans, and the hospital benches suddenly emerge in the tents to emphasize the emptiness and the notion of awaiting events that an empty space can summon.

The history of the painterly events remains visible on the canvas. This visibility of former layers enables understanding of the painterly events executed in the process of developing the painting from a premise of meaning towards an illumination of the events that take place in relation to the painting's identity as subject.



Figure 12 *untitled (After an accident with a lift in the hospital)* 2003, 1835 mm X 1700 mm mixed media on paper



14. *Untitled*, 2002. 175,5 X 280 Egg
tempera on canvas.



3 Introduction to the MFA paintings

... 'What does it mean? ... ' And I would say, 'Well, what it means is the sum total of all the moments at which it happens.' Because that's the way in which leitmotiv works. You bring it back at moments and it's a way of connecting those moments. And then you look at those moments together and that's the meaning of the motif ... (Salman Rushdie in: Reynolds &



Noakes 2003: 14)

Unlike the prior works, a characteristic of the MFA works resides in the coherence of the motif. In other words, the motifs in these later works are less transformed. Also they are chosen from a narrower field, the maritime seascape.

Subject matter in representational painting is normally perceived to reside in the motif or the abstraction of a recognizable notion. In his essay *Subject and Subject Matter*, Mark Rothko (2004: 76) describes the ambiguity inherent in the notion:

It may refer to the recognizable elements in a picture, such as objects we



13. *Untitled (tent & benches)*, 2002. 65 X 278 Oil on canvas.

know, an anecdote we can recognize, a mood that is familiar to us, or even some more remote association with our experience. The use of the word in that sense implies the recognition of these elements and quite generally the order in which they have been named; that is, most people will first recognize objects, secondly their relation in an anecdote of either situation or action, next the subjective qualities, either in their reading of expression or the general mood of the picture, and finally the more abstract experience to which the picture refers, such as the establishment of mood without recognizable objects or anecdotes, for example, gaiety, sadness, nobility, squalor, etc. ... The second use of the word *subject* seeks to describe the objective of the picture.

I use subject matter in the MFA works in Rothko's second sense, with subject denoting "the objective of the picture ... the painting itself, and all the statements it makes simultaneously" (Rothko, 2004: 76). In fact



this description applies to the underpinnings of my practice, in former works as well as the MFA works.

The prior works focused primarily on the formal events that constitute a painting. This was at least partly enabled by the restricted depiction of the motifs and their communication of thematic content.

I have chosen to draw motifs from the maritime landscape in order to research the relationship between the motif and the formal aspects of the works. The textual analogy between the painting and the maritime landscape is elucidated further in sub-section (ii).

15. *Untitled (cirkeltent)*, 2002. 70,5 X 135
Egg tempera on canvas.



The maritime motifs are primarily affiliated with the textual notions of the painting, which complicates any attempt to put the painterly values on a par with textual meaning. The motifs remain strong visually and also extend the potential for literal interpretation. As a result, the struggle to find visual solutions is more evident.

The idea communicated by the painting must be understood as a concept that is a consequence of the work. The emphasis on the painterly-ness of the process underlines the reluctance to be consumed by language.



Comparing the MFA works with earlier paintings allowed me to study the influence of a change of location and geographical context on my work, its method and practice. This process uncovered several factors at the origin of my practice, showing their presence in both bodies of works.

i. The manner in which the motifs and themes emerge

Objects, places and the experience of and within them trigger my choice of motif. These experiences are visualized by the first paintings in which each motif appears, since they, to some extent, define a context in which the motif might have been encountered (fig. 1).

9. By the visual archive, I mean the collection of motifs that appear in the works.

Subsequently, the motif develops into an idiosyncratic element within the visual archive.⁹ The motifs are then characterized in general, visual terms; they become abstractions of the original forms. Their formal definitions are largely evasive, as seen in figure 17; the pool is recognizable mostly by the lines on the floor, which are distorted and carried on into other works such as figure 16.

In the MFA works by contrast, this effect is less pervasive.

ii. Motifs and subject matter

The motifs in former works differ from each other in origin and are used primarily for their painterly-ness; texture, surface quality, and spatial impression, all relate to the painting through formalistic affiliations, as described in section 1 (see footnote 4).

The motifs used in the MFA works are clearly related in origin, as they are part of one landscape, the maritime. Associations alternate more powerfully between formalistic and textual connotations than is the case in the earlier works. The maritime association itself relates to an understanding of the painting as an historical account as it signals a passage through different stages of the painting. This passage leaves its traces and imprints on the canvas. Furthermore, painting as a



vessel of visual translation¹⁰ shares a notion of transport with the maritime milieu.

iii. The wave-form in which the narrative takes place

The MFA body of work is projected as a flowing narrative to be understood metaphorically as a chronicle in the process definition and translation. The subject matter keeps on being interpreted by the material and the motif alternately, in a wavelike motion. Sometimes the method takes over from the motif, and at other moments, the motif challenges the method.

The works present a dedicated study of their motifs by repeating them

10. By visual translation, I mean the translation of a visual idea into an image. I will expand on this concept in section 4.

11. By lyrical, I mean the looseness of the textual and formal associations, both within the paintings and in the titles applied to them. Lyrical further refers to a poetic or expressive notion within the works. I will expand on this subject in section 3.4.3.

16. *Untitled (Nomad)*, 2003. 99 X 128
Pencil & waterpaint on paper.



several times, thus constructing associative connections with their counterparts within the body of works. This in turn allows the body of works to be seen as a whole.

In addition to portraying an analytical notion, the associations and repetitive use of the motif and forms introduce a lyrical structure.¹¹



This structure emphasizes the works as a whole since the relations between the paintings propose a way of reading.

The associations are also harboured in the titles, some of which contain allusions to myth, music and history. The titles arise in the process of development of the works, not prior to them. Thus the titles constitute an elaboration on the works, in the same way that the title colours the drawn bathtub in a drawing by Mark Manders (fig. 18).

The MFA works aim for a concord not least because this also accentuates their analytical aspirations. This unity relates to both the context of production, the studio, and to the shift of territory discussed in section 1.

The MFA works were pursued with my former practice in hand. The studio therefore was transformed into a place relating to my former studio. The routine that defined the prior works also defined the current works, and in consequence, the context in which they emerged. The studio underwent a temporary colonization, so to speak.

In comparison with the prior works, materials and techniques are employed with greater precision in the MFA works. They present a heightened focus on the artificial, material history of a canvas, the process preceding final image. This is an effect of the strong textual meaning of the motif, which therefore requires stronger interventions to equalize its thematic significance and that of the formal painterly events. This occurs through the introduction of new media and interventions: obscuring sections of the image with opaque coats of oil paint and beeswax; revealing parts by washing layers off and cutting out the motifs.

3.1 Motifs

Formal painterly events restrain the literal meaning of the motif. A nonchalant painterly definition, a smudge of paint, a scratch, or a background colour challenges the specifics proposed by the motif



(fig. 19 & 20). As a result emphasis is placed on the meaning of the motif in relation to the material. This subjective-ness to textual connotations is elaborated by the emptiness that surrounds the motif; its context is mainly material, rather than depictive. Before one can restrain the motifs however, their full meaning has to be understood before it can be challenged by the formal matters of the paintings.

3.1.1 Bollards, jetties and quays

The bollard indicates the starting point of this body of work. Metaphorically the bollard is a sign for a beginning or end; it implies a journey, both by a boat and by the work. A specific mushroom-shaped



18. Mark Manders. *Yellow bathtub*. 1997. The double figure vomits the letter 'O' in the water of the bath which is made yellow by the title (Manders 2002: 66).

bollard is used as it shows deep marks where the ropes have worn it down. What cannot be read, however, is whether a boat has left or is about to arrive. This illustrates the range of connotations, undefined as such, but important nonetheless. Quays are an extension of the bollard as motif, depicting the foundation of the bollard. Images of jetties counter this foundation as they merely drift on the water and are, at most, attached to the edge of the painting.

Like the bollards, the quays imply a journey. The absence of water in most works suggests the dilapidated state of a harbour that has not been in use for a while. In effect it suggests the absence of water in general, the impossibility of traveling to travel at all since, in the work, boats are the only means of transport (fig. 21 & 22).

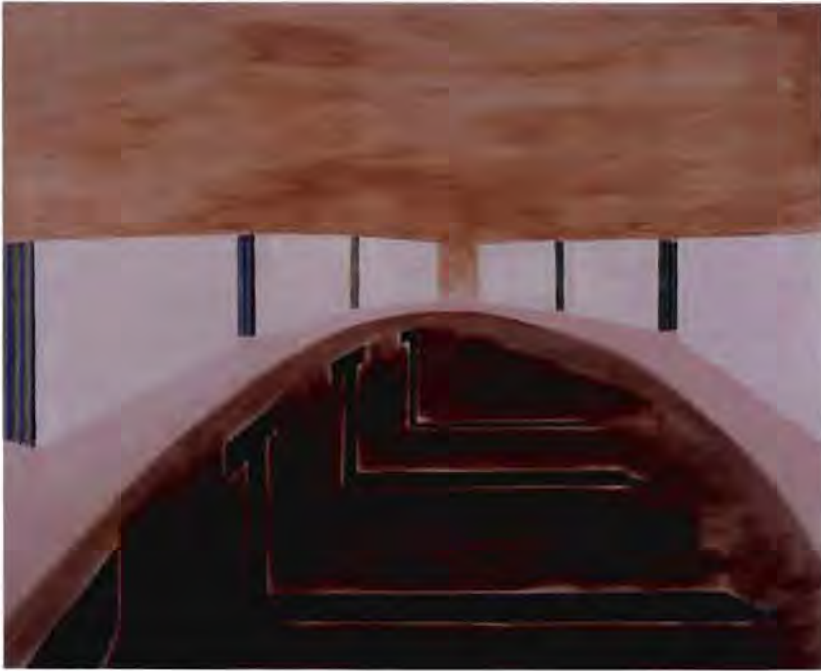
3.1.2 Ropes

Ropes are the signifiers of the state between land and sea, that which holds the two together, connection and communication. However, in the work they are never depicted as such, never attached to both at the same time. This creates a suggestion of the possibility of movement. Additionally, the ropes are frequently depicted as constraining the boat, and the image, simultaneously (fig. 23).



3.1.3 Boats

The boat is the final motif that emerged in the works in the wake of hints from earlier motifs at its necessary presence despite its absence. The work required an understandable definition of its aims: the boat was introduced to illuminate the notion of inquiry. The movement that a boat implies refers to the journey undergone by the painting to arrive at its final stage, a stage defined by reflection on its own history. The boats appear static in the works, hover, in order to restrain the thematic movement (fig. 24).



17. *Untitled (Glass sheets, pool)*, 2003.
122 X 101 Oil on canvas.

Barthes (1983: 6) states on the Nautilus of Jules Verne;

The ship may well be a symbol for departure; it is, at a deeper level, the emblem of closure. An inclination for ships always means the joy of



perfectly enclosing oneself, of having at hand the greatest possible number of objects, and having at one's disposal an absolutely finite space. To like ships is first and foremost to like a house, a superlative one since it is unremittingly closed, and not at all sailings into the vague unknown: a ship is a habitat before being a means of transport.

In this mythology of seafaring, there is only one means to exorcize the possessive nature of the man on a ship; it is to eliminate the man and leave the ship on its own. The ship then is no longer a box, a habitat, an object that is owned; it becomes a travelling eye, which comes close to the infinite; it constantly begets departures.

The MFA works rely on a specific small class of rowing boat to induce



19. Detail *Der Fliegende Holländer* (Plate 14).

an intimacy with the painting. The boat is depicted in a simplified manner, which supports the notion of metaphor. This value refers to the material that is used, and the canvas, as a field of inquiry that tempers the connotations of the boat.

3.1.4 Life-jacket

The life-jacket, *Diving Dutchman* (fig. 25), is an example of the visual associations employed to aim focus at the internal associations in the body of works as a whole. The viewer is invited to discover that the works cross-reference and explain each other and suggest potential entrances to the viewer. It functions as a note in the margin¹² of the other paintings, representing a textual affiliation with the motifs.

A pretence of assimilation into the rest of the body of work is visualized by its borrowing of material and colour from other works. However, the significance of *Diving Dutchman* extends beyond its posturing. The seemingly illogical presence of this painting aims to contradict the solidity of the other works. The life-jacket constitutes an intention to survive. This may be understood firstly as the survival of the viewer, as it presents a new lead within the seemingly circular chronicle of paintings. Secondly, the life-jacket shows an intention to



survive in a different context, as the paintings will be shipped to and exhibited in The Netherlands.

3.2 Summary of Textual Affiliations

Like the earlier works, the MFA works also deal with borders. They do so by employing the maritime theme, which helps to reference complex aspects of borders. This includes the paintings themselves as analogous objects.

For example, maritime law and etiquette is largely based on common law, but develops according to its maritime environment. Figure 26

12. Peripheral works are discussed in section 2.



shows a photograph of captive Allied captains aboard the *Atlantis*, a German armed merchant raider in the Second World War. This extraordinary ship changed appearance numerous times. For instance, it would change from apparent British merchantman to Russian warship. The ship would be painted in the appropriate colours and props were constructed on deck to hide its guns. The mission of the *Atlantis* was to destroy Allied ships and imprison their passengers. A total of 1 283 sailors and passengers whose ships were sunk by the



Atlantis were taken prisoner.

There was not enough space to lock up so many prisoners so a temporary social order was established by means of the general order of a ship. Captive crew members still had to address their captains respectfully, as did the crew of the *Atlantis*. Maritime etiquette thus prevailed over the sentiments of war, a stark contrast with events on the mainland at the time.

The borders that separate a ship from the ocean and the mainland initiate the construction of an idiosyncratic structure, necessary for survival and the prevention of mutiny. A famous example of the complexity of this concept is the mutiny on the *Bounty*.



The *Bounty* was employed to deliver the breadfruit tree, to provide food for the slaves, from Tahiti to the West Indies in 1787. Its voyage was rudely ended by the famous mutiny however. Greg Denning (1992) studied the events that led up to the mutiny. The captain's presumed bad language and poor social skills have traditionally been regarded as the main cause of the revolt. Denning questions the singularity of this presumption and explores other elements that might have been crucial to the mutiny, including the ship's interior



measurements, the position of the captain's cabin, the postponed date of departure and the delay at Tahiti which allowed the crew to engage with the locals for five months.

Directly after the mutiny, the crew invented their own hierarchy and political system aboard the ship, producing new uniforms in order to communicate the equality of the mutineers. However, this order did not function very long either, as the group of sailors eventually split. The main group started a colony at Pitcairn, an island that recently came under scrutiny for institutionalized sexual abuse of the girls on the island by the men, most of them direct descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers.

The natural borders of the location influenced the sentences that were subsequently imposed. If sentenced according to common English law, most of the men would have been locked up, depriving the island of the manpower necessary to function adequately. Alternative sentences were therefore imposed.

The bollards, quays, jetties and ropes indicate the relevance of the land, a broad, metaphorical notion of a point of reference and origin within the work. This serves to contextualize the idiosyncrasy of a painting, analagous in some respects to the world outside of it but, as in the examples cited above, capable of developing its own structure, social, political and moral for instance.

As in the former works, the paintings insinuate a presence by the depiction of objects that are related to human actions. This occurs both on the level of the motif and on the level of method, since the presence of the painter is strongly implied through the formalistic interventions described in section 3.

3.3 Location of motif in constructing the subject matter

The nautical objects discussed above, most literally the boats,



visualize the analytical nature of the subject matter.¹³ The boat functions as a vessel in the works as a whole, firstly, by purely appearing in most works and, secondly, by means of the textual affiliations with the painting as outlined in Section 3, point ii.

Thus the main significance of the boat lies not in its border-crossing meanings, but in the fact that it is used for these works. The question "Why boats?" is the question the work asks itself, just as it asks the questions, why brown, blue, square, severed, brilliant, small and so on.

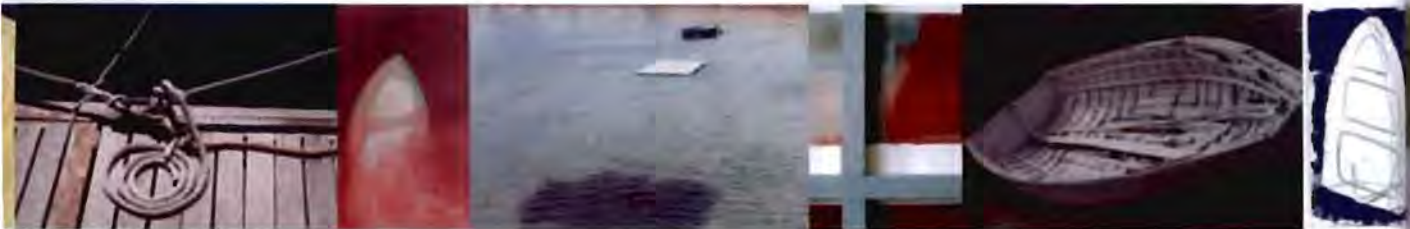
13. As noted in section 1: 'I aimed towards developing work that embodies the research it deals with.'



3.4 Method

3.4.1 Repetition and Associations

By repeating the motif and formal events, the works emphasize the inquisitiveness of the paintings. Repetition further signals the importance of the motif in constructing the subject matter, as it is a



sign of study. In his discussion of Cy Twombly's work, for example, Barthes asks (1988: 168) "... doesn't the schoolboy learn the essence of a table by copying its name laboriously?".

Twombly's work is also pertinent to the discussion of my practice, for its similar strong reliance on painterly events to convey its subject matter. As Barthes (1988: 166) notes: "The materials are the *materia prima* as for the Alchemists. The *materia prima* is what exists prior to the division operated by meaning ... The demiurgic power of the painter is in this, that he makes the materials exist as matter."

Twombly's work seems to evade a traditional sense of meaning, by shunning traditional techniques, but it is this effect itself that becomes

the subject of the work. The titles that most of his works bear clarify the importance of something beyond the indications of the titles (fig. 27).

The Italians? Sahara? Where are the Italians? Where is the Sahara? Let's look for them. Of course, we find nothing. Or at least – and here begins Twombly's art – what we find – namely the painting itself, the Event, in its splendor and enigmatic quality – is ambiguous: nothing 'represents' the Italians, the Sahara, there is no analogical figure of these referents; and yet, we vaguely feel, there is nothing in these paintings that contradicts a certain natural idea of the Sahara, the Italians (Barthes 1988: 172).

As for my work, I aim to direct the viewer's gaze from the textual connotations of the motifs towards the painting as a whole, the practice that connects them and the process that led up to the final stage.

3.4.2 Significance of the process

The history of the canvas, the formalistic process, is a crucial sphere that conveys subject matter in this body of work. Former actions and layers are unveiled by several means. The past's influence on the present, and the manipulation of the past in order to propose a



certain present stage of the work, are reflected by these means.

Previous layers are deliberately obstinate in the process: the pigments challenge the next coat of paint with a difficulty of a cover up. In addition, removing layers of paint, covering parts with thick coats of beeswax and oil paint and cutting parts out of the canvas are actions intended to focus attention on the history of the material, and its manipulation (fig. 28).



23. *The Albatross's Tale of a Nightscape* (Plate 17).

3.4.3 Lyrical structure

The lyrical structure is created by referencing in the titles and within the works themselves. This structure conveys the communication between producer and viewer. It is influenced by the location of production and it also proposes a mode of reading to the viewer.

The mode of reading is a significant aspect of the MFA works. As part of the analytical intentions, understanding the process is significant. The lyrical structure proposes to shed light on visual and thematic connotations that have taken place in the process. Its function is therefore to initiate accessibility into an idiosyncratic reality, as pursued by the paintings.

The location of the lyrical elements shifts between formal and textual vicinities. *Two Trails Ship* (fig.29), for instance includes two corresponding boat forms, one centrally placed, the other signalling a thought away from the central form.

Diving Dutchman (plate 20) and *Ferry Tales* (plate 22) are examples of individual works that employ associations illustrated by either textual or formalistic relations between motifs. These works are isolated by their differences, although aspiring to belong to the main body of works.



They refer to the other works only by single, obvious, affiliations rather than through the textual and formal relations within the other works.

This illustrates the installation effect that the studio brings to the works. The studio is an important influence since the works are produced in groups and relate to each other during production.

The lyrical structure also conveys reflection on the paintings by embodying different media. For instance the drawings function as footnotes to the paintings. The process of translation from idea to form and vice versa is expanded within the drawings because the medium allows less premeditation and visual reflection.

4 A personal definition of painting

4.1 Introduction

My practice embodies a reflective focus on the medium which in turn plays a role in developing the idea of painting. My paintings strongly emphasize the process of production. In this way I propose a way of reading paintings primarily through the medium. The questions posed by Reinhardt (1991: 224) are of the essence:

There is something wrong with the way art history has been taught and written for over thirty years in and out of our university-academies of art ... How should art history be taught and written? Backwards? Forwards? Sideways? All at once? How do time and true art take a single road? How is false art to be cast out if true art is not to be sidetracked or railroaded on the train of art history?

The reading of painting relies fundamentally on looking. I feel that the actual painting is often diminished, within art discourse, to a mere illustration of a particular concept, the power of the image trumped by textual description. Painting seems to have been misused and



24. Coleridge's Albatross (Plate 19).



misinterpreted in order to capture it in words. The reading of a painting is often textually biased either because the painting mostly presents a textual concept, or because the viewer attempts to translate a visual image into verbal language. As Bryson (1988: xvi) notes:

Academic art history reacts to the image by seeking documentation: that is where it does its reading — in documents (I sometimes have the sense that patronage studies, in particular, will read *anything* rather than read the painting).

In the following section I reflect on Magritte's work, to elucidate this perspective. The discussion of Magritte also aims to illustrate what I mean by allowing painting a kind of reading by giving pride of place to



25. *Diving Dutchman* (Plate 20).

the medium itself. Subsequently I will discuss two examples of misinterpretation of painting and how these contribute to a distorted understanding of the medium.

A linguistic and conceptual approach is or should not be entirely applicable to the interpretation of painting. It is the painting's responsibility to initiate the approach; therefore I will look at the artwork's role in constructing guidelines and the effect of those guidelines on the linguistic or verbal reading.

My personal definition of painting¹⁴ is further aimed at the relation between understanding the medium and employing this understanding in order to read paintings fairly. To some extent understanding can arise through textual readings. However, this cannot be the sole or even the main tool since the realm of paintings is primarily opposed to verbal discourse. Thus my definition or anti-definition is merely a proposal that the shortcomings of the word in relation to the image should be weighed.



4.2 Magritte

Magritte's works *L'usage de la parole I* (1928-9) (fig. 30) and later *Les deux Mystères* (1966) (fig. 31) are examples of problematic paintings that promote misreadings and misconceptions in the perception and production of painting.

Magritte described himself as ... "a man who thought and communicated his thought by means of painting" (Gablik 1970: 9). This statement is crucial to an understanding of this section in which I argue that Magritte is not a painter, and that his work, whatever we would like to call it, should not be included in a serious history of painting.¹⁵

14. Since I insist on the primacy of the image, I have a "definition" only in a liminal sense, a kind of anti-definition or counter-definition. This counter-definition is employed in order to clarify my work, its relation with discourse, and the work's stance in regard to other artists and paintings.

15. The history of painting I am referring to here, like my counter-definition of painting, is a device employed for the sake of this dissertation only.



26. Prisoner-Captains aboard the Atlantis.

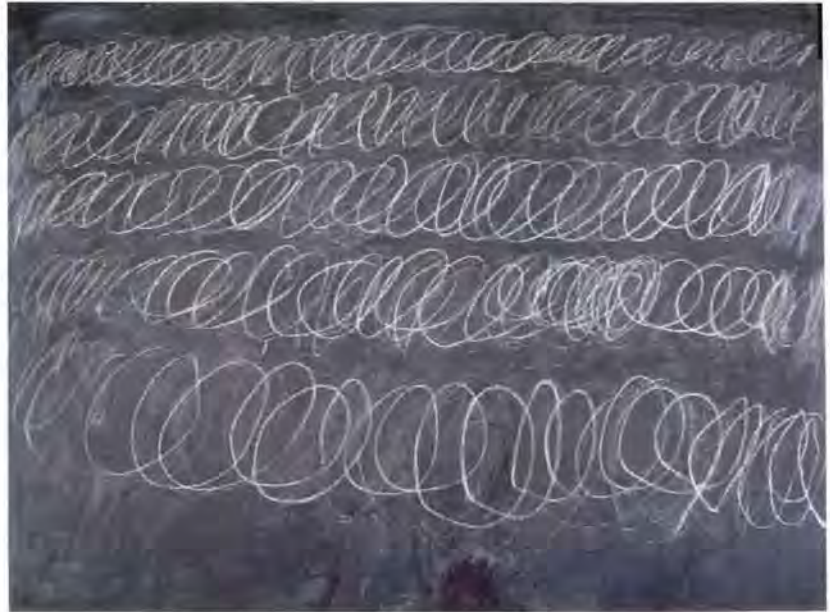
I envisage a dismissal of Magritte from the history of painting because I propose to exclude every work that does not acknowledge the embedded concepts¹⁶ of the medium itself. My disapproval of these works is based on the way of reading that they instigate, exemplifying what I find problematic in art discourse and in its practice of defining painting.



My proposed dismissal of Magritte is obviously biased. We use the same medium in a loose sense. In my opinion however he ignores entirely the value of the medium in telling us his thoughts. Furthermore, Magritte's claims that he just wanted to communicate his thoughts through painting, and did not want to be called an artist (Gablik 1970: 9) are slightly questionable. Magritte's *Renoir* or *Impressionist* and *Vache* periods¹⁷ clearly make it possible to criticize his work within the context of painting, as opposed to within a philosophical realm. About his *Renoir* period, Van Melkebeke (In Gablik 1970:151) said: "That which represented the final flowering of one of the most beautiful painters of all times, the last glow of a charming and sensual soul, is now the ridiculous tool of the most bigoted of disciplinarians."

16. These include the incommensurability and evasiveness which separate painting from other media, notions explored further in section 4.4.

17. *Vache* is literally translated from French as cow, which Magritte used as a parody on *Fauve*, meaning wild beast. *Vache* is usually translated as "nasty". (Gablik 1970: 151)



Although he did eventually abandon these techniques because they added an irrelevant element to the essence of the problems that were his real concern (Gablik 1970: 149), Magritte did not stop painting and so continued to be open to criticism on his use of the medium.

My criticism is not simply aimed at his technical abilities, as these have



never been greatly lauded. It is mostly his failure to use the medium in constructing subject matter that I criticize in this section. This approach is at the core of my definition and my work, and therefore the benchmark against which to test other works and artists.

L'usage de la parole I and *Les Deux Mystères* are often hailed as very important works, or at least influential. Foucault's essay *Ceci n'est pas un Pipe* (1983), seems to say everything that can possibly be said or identified within these works, rendering their visuality useless. Foucault even goes so far as to place *Les Deux Mystères* in a classroom, with an embarrassed, troubled teacher, a vapour creating a pipe-form, and laughing students. In so doing he negated the work itself, showing us that the visualization of Magritte's thought is the only

concept of the work that is worth discussion. The text encapsulates the work; the visual image is verbalized and so destroyed.

The specific painterly material used is irrelevant to a reading of this work. The work is very clear, nothing more than the depiction is shown; there are no abstract values analogous to, or embedded in, the painting. The work is completely translatable into verbal language. Although the meaning of the work depends and reflects on the fact that it is a painted image, the written account of it is sufficient to convey the significance of the fact that it is a painting. The textual meaning is important, nothing more.

It may seem questionable to use Magritte as an example since I first declare that he is not a painter and then use his work to define painting. The justification for this is that I do not aim to dismiss entirely the verbalization of painting. As noted earlier, I intend to look at the artwork's role in constructing guidelines and the effect of those guidelines on the linguistic or verbal reading.

Another criticism that could be raised is that it maybe a bit narrow to judge works, as I do here, out of their time and context. However, the fact that these particular works by Magritte have much resonance in the history of art (playing a role in informing the production and the



28. *Der Fliegende Höllander* (Plate 14).



reading of paintings themselves) justifies my approach.

L'usage de la parole I is a good example of an image that illuminates the notion that the representation of an object is not the object but a mere illustration of it. The addition of title and text to this work removes the painting further from the realm of experience of painterly value. It is a painting that is read and understood through text alone. As an illustration of an idea, it might be sufficient but there are better artists and works of art which deal with the same subject in the painterly realm.

I propose therefore a removal of Magritte, and from my counter-history of painting the insertion in his place of Cy Twombly.¹⁸

18 The counter- history is based on a narrow selection and comprises very few painters, which explains the small number of references to other works and artists in this document.

4.3 Cy Twombly

There are many other examples of alternative approaches but Magritte's dismissal of the medium is what I am mainly concerned with here, and Twombly, to me, represents a clear opposite (fig. 27 & 33).

Cy Twombly deals to some extent with the same issues as Magritte, but greatly differs in practice, since the idea emerges from the work. Magritte's course of production, by contrast, commences with the idea. In valorizing Twombly it is pertinent to quote Barthes (1988: 166) again: "the *materia prima* is what exists prior to the division operated by meaning; an enormous paradox since nothing, in the human order, comes to man unless it is immediately accompanied by a meaning, the meaning other men have given it, and so on, in an infinite regress."

Twombly's work further renders Magritte dispensable by dealing as closely as possible with the motifs, paint trails, for instance, are unmistakably trails. When reading Magritte's work in parallel with Twombly's, the former's shortcomings are evident. Magritte aimed to convey his thoughts about the meaning of both object and representation of the object, but, compared to Twombly's trails, Magritte's pipe has no meaning within the application of the medium itself. In addition, Magritte's painterly treatment has very little in



29. *Two Trails Ship* (Plate 16).



common with the value of the object it represents – or tries not to represent.

Twombly concerns himself with the medium. His works must be seen to be fully experienced. Magritte's work by contrast, may be understood or experienced outside of the painting's presence.

4.4 Definition and classification of painting

In section 4.2, I discussed Magritte's work in the light of a certain framework that qualifies an image as a painting. This framework is largely dependent on my own practice and art-historical field of

reference.

The legacy of Modernism causes me to value a painting by its own values. As Greenberg (1993: 85) states: "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."

I will try to clarify why I opt for this particular way of viewing a painting. Furthermore, I will explain why this is not so much a Modernist vision as a timeless framework based on the possibilities of the medium.

Nadaner (1998: 4) argues that:

An alternative look at painting in relation to critical theory ... discloses several concepts highly generative for the valuing of painting. These include, ... the floating signifier, metonymy, and incommensurability. Other concepts in critical theory that seem potent for the understanding of painting include the concepts of non-semiotic analysis (Elkins, 1995), stressed passages (Caws, 1989), eluding definition (Linker, 1984), transgression, and negation.

These concepts contribute to the "understanding of painting as



30. Magritte, *L'usage de la parole I* (The use of words) 1928-29.



painting", regarding the painting as "a world of events which relates to experience in complex ways" (Nadaner 1998: 4). These "complex ways", he says, "are better understood by close reading of specific painters and works" (Nadaner 1998: 4).

Like Elkins (1998), Nadaner proposes, a different way of reading painting, by including the painterly concepts mentioned above. The different ways they describe do not make it easier to classify or read paintings. Elkins attempts to make pictures more difficult, his reason being that general art history makes pictures seem too easy to read, by interpreting them simply as systems of signs, or as mere examples of visual language. What gets lost, according to Elkins, is the "picture as *picture*" (Elkins 1998: xi).



31. Magritte, *Les deux Mysteres* (The two Mysteries) 1966.

Elkins (1998: 5) argues that the concept of semiotics cannot be applied to paintings because it is fundamentally a linguistic system:

Despite its claims to be neutral between linguistic and other sign systems, semiotics slights the meaning of marks, bringing visual narratives unpleasantly close to written ones (so that without illustrations in the text, it would sometimes be difficult to tell if a semiotic account was referring to a painting or another text). In the end, semiotics shrinks the notion of what a picture is, assimilating pictures to texts and overlooking their painted strangeness.

'Semeiotics', on the other hand, as Peirce defined semiotics (Elkins 1998: 5), seems to be a broader and thus more usable concept when reading and defining painting. As Tejera (1988: 10) notes: "Peirce's analysis of signification aims to uncover the features of anything that functions as a sign." Peirce's focus is on the possibilities of all the signs which together might construct a larger signifying sign; this does not mean that any mark is necessarily a sign.

It is this opening up of the possibilities that I am interested in here. As Elkins (1998: 5) observes, "In semeiotics ... any mark could function as a sign, although signs for scenes and figures might be different in



kind from signs that are nameless brushstrokes."

To rephrase what I have said before: what I am concerned with here is not a specific way of reading paintings. My concern is rather with opening painting up to different readings, on the one hand, and, on the other, to define what a painting is and to show why a work like Magritte's would not fall within my definition of a painting.

For any project of definition it is necessary to know how paintings are read, and this can be reversed to some extent into what the work should make possible. If the reading of pictures requires certain concepts, then these concepts must also be in the work if it is to be perceived as painting rather than illustration. Therefore a painting is a

picture that can be read — even if the objective of a work is to show the impossibility of reading or interpretation this should be visualized accordingly.

Specific concepts and the level at which they appear in a work are obviously intentions of the artist. Nevertheless, one may suggest that there should be an inquiry into the balance between certain broad concepts in painting necessary for the work to qualify as a painting within the definition. Ideally the definition of painting should emerge from the intrinsic possibilities of the medium.

A work has to proclaim its use of the medium in relation to its subject matter because the medium contains a vast landscape of possibilities. Defining these would prove problematic, as I believe every painting defines its own possibilities.

In order to avoid isolation of the painting within a realm of incommensurable events, other concepts can be taken from the readings and their criticism to some extent. Thus they can be transformed and can become useful in developing characteristics of the medium. Such a process locates the developmental condition within the process of production.



The lack of inquiry into the dynamics of the balance between form and content can be understood as the weakness found in *L'usage de la parole I*. It is not a painting,¹⁹ or rather; it does not qualify for discussion in the context of painting as I define it.

4.5 The ideal order for the different stages of reading painting

I will now interrogate the application of a balance between form and content in painting to the reading of painting in general.

Lyotard (In Kosuth 1991: xv) assumes that we think in sentences and that the visual "is employed to 'manifest' the unreadable of writing, to

19. This might be like riding a *hengstig* (hot-blooded) horse: the harder you kick it, the more pleasure it experiences and the less it moves.

advance an absent 'presence' from and to the perceptible, visible presentation". By contrast, Kosslyn (1994) and Paivio (1986) assert that concepts are visualized rather than verbalized in the brain. In other words, thought does not occur in language, or not only in language. This picture theory of mental images, although widely accepted at one stage, mainly in the eighteenth century (Kosslyn 1994: 1), has become less popular, according to Michael Tye (1988: 497) "because it has been recognized that the claim that mental images are pictorial is really very puzzling. After all, mental images are not viewed with real eyes."

Paivio (1986: 53) states that "any representational theory must accommodate the functional duality found in the language system. The language system is peculiar in that it deals directly with linguistic input and output (in the form of speech or writing) while at the same time serving a symbolic function with respect to nonverbal objects, events and behaviours".

If concepts are visualized before they are verbalized in the viewer's mind, the logical order in which reading of visual images has to take place might be to devisualize painting, and thus re-conceptualize it.

This procedure is aimed at understanding the journey the artist made from a particular mental representation – his visualization of a certain



concept – to the work and the choices involved. I must emphasize that it is not the particular mental image of the artist that the viewer should grasp, but rather the process and mode of translation. Such understanding enables translation of the work in the mode that is determined by the artist, the time span, or pace of the work, for instance, bearing in mind that interpretation cannot but be subjective.²⁰

In other words the viewer has to focus visually on those *ongrijpbare* (elusive, impalpable, intangible) or "incommensurable" (Nadaner 1998: 4) concepts that make up the visual content (form). From there the viewer can decide or experience whether the marks are significant to an understanding of the work, which can then be read accordingly.

20. The intentions of the artist are relevant only when they are emphasized in the work. "The work of art can neither be identified (as psychological aesthetics claimed) with the creator's state of mind, nor with any of the states of mind that it provokes in the subjects who perceive it: it is clear that every state of subjective consciousness has something individual and momentary about it that makes it ineffable and incommunicable in its totality, whereas the work of art is intended to mediate between the author and the collectivity" (Mukarovsky 1988: 1).

32. Cy Twombly, *The Italians*, 1961.



The aim is the possible construction of the framework, the possibilities, rather than the subjective, irrelevant content of that framework. Burckhardt, for instance, approached works of art, as he did historical periods, seeking to uncover the internal relations among their parts rather than their connections with what lay outside them (Gossman 1988: 27).



This order of reading, conceptualizing the image through a visual course, can be employed only with those works that embody a certain balance between the medium's concepts. These works show awareness of the qualities of the medium, and offer an account of the choices made in regard to adopting (and adapting) the concepts of the medium, or denying them. Understanding the work in this sense brings the viewer closest to those incommensurable concepts mentioned above.

The difference between this mode of reading and traditional semiotics²¹ is that "uncovering internal relations", as Burckhardt did (Gossman 1988: 27), does not necessarily happen in language,

21. By traditional semiotics I mean semiotics as proposed by Saussure, strongly originated in linguistics, and, according to several people, not applicable (Bal & Bryson 1991: 193).

33. *Untitled (mattress)* 101,5 X 110 Oil on canvas.



22. This conversation might have been the reason for a subsequent interest in margins or frameworks, for the only explanation I could think of was that there was something in the margin of the work that connected conceptually with the margin of that visual experience. Maybe the mentally visible conceptual framework of the work and his view of the river scenery had significant similarities. This is an example of how, through close viewing of a work, the viewer experiences the work in a way that goes beyond the intentions of the artist, even though, subjectively, the structure of this kind of reaction is significant.

contrary to Lacan's assumption (Lacan in Ehrmann (ed.) 1970: 118). When a concept can be visualized in the mind, an image can be conceptualized through the same, visual course it took in the artist's mind to form the image.

By way of illustration I recall a conversation with a former lecturer, Kees Smits, in 2002. I had been working for a period only on paintings depicting mattresses, when Smits came into the studio and described how he had just recalled my painting (fig. 33), in a context that had nothing to do with the subject I was working on (at least that is what I thought until then). While cycling over a bridge, under which rowing boats were gliding on the water, he recalled in detail the work which he had seen a week earlier, not as a memory that appears because of

linguistic associations, but rather triggered by the visual experience of that moment.²²

According to Kosslyn (1994:406) imagery and perception share common mechanisms. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to examine the scientific and psychological aspects of this claim, but it is important to note that the issue is not an art-philosophical one only.

4.6 Validity of painting

The validity of painting and art as a whole has often endured apocalyptic criticism; the end has been announced numerous times. Douglas Crimp (1981) says in his paper "The End of Painting" that "the symptoms of painting's terminal condition were now [in the 1960s] impossible to ignore", since artists "abandoned painting", declared they were "just making the last paintings which anyone can make" and "contaminated their work with photographic images" and the reappearance of photography itself.

Crimp explores "the end of painting" in relation to an exhibition curated by Barbara Rose.²³ Despite noting that Rose's exhibition was "an easy target for hostile criticism" (Crimp 1981: 73), he proceeds to use the



exhibition and her accompanying statements to prove his point. In addition, Crimp misuses statements by Reinhardt and Richter, forcing them out of context, and also deploys an anti-photography statement by the American painter Richard Hennesy.

To cite photography as a reason for the end of painting is fundamentally tenuous, reflecting strong misconceptions. It is a very long time since painting has gone beyond literally representational or realistic aims. Crimp cites the claim that Reinhardt was "just making the last paintings which anyone can make" (Crimp 1981: 75). This statement must be seen in relation to Reinhardt's (In Bois 1991:14) own writing in order to avoid misuse and misunderstanding:

23. American Painting: The Eighties, MoMa, Fall 1979.

If history has to be thought of as evolution at all, it can only take the shape of a spiral; there can be no end nor can there be any beginning: "the end is always a beginning."³⁰ The whole notion of the "death" of art (or of painting) is ridiculous, not only because art is always already "dead"³¹ (it is not an organism), but because this death would presuppose a horizon beyond the field, which is both naïve and impossible. ... If I were to say that I am making the last paintings, I don't mean that painting is dying. You go back to the beginning all the time anyway³².²⁴

When read in the context of his own statements and work, Reinhardt's black paintings (fig. 34) do not signal the end of art itself. This underlines the fact that the work creates its own rules by which it should be judged, and the related need to be careful to avoid assessing a work on presuppositions. Reinhardt's actual intention was to make paintings that could not be misunderstood, signs that did not signify (Bois 1991: 11).

Arthur Danto's essay "The End of Art" (1986) must be understood in terms of "The End of Art" actually meaning the end of the developmental history of art; he suggests that a certain narrative development is finished. Artistic freedom or pluralism is apparently the cause of the impossibility of any further large narrative.



In Danto's (1986: 115) words:

As Marx might say, you can be an abstractionist in the morning, a photorealist in the afternoon, a minimal minimalist in the evening. Or you can cut out paper dolls or do what you damned please. The age of pluralism is upon us. It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means. When one direction is as good as another direction, there is no concept of direction any longer to apply.

In my view, Danto's conclusion that all directions are equal, involves a misunderstanding of the individual characteristics of media. What should be taken into account here are the medium-specific concepts, including those described by Nadaner in section 4.4. It seems that

24. Footnotes 30, 31, 32 refer to citations in the original text.

conceptualism is for Danto, and many with him, a standard by which to discuss all arts.

This attitude highlights Magritte's predicament and his deficiencies as a painter. To say that one direction is as good as another is to say, like Magritte, that he paints only to express his thoughts, and furthermore that '*l'art de peindre est un art de penser*' (the art of painting is an art of thinking) (Vuegen 1998: 15). Of course, Magritte chose the medium for some reason; he thought painting represented a valid means of expressing the problems with which he was struggling (Gablik 1970: 9) If the choice of a certain medium is not emphasized in the work however, the work becomes translatable into any (visual) language, which is where pluralism starts.

Danto describes the opposite of pluralism metaphorically as a purging, as if the arts cannot live next to each other, like Rwanda's Hutus and Tutsis (Danto 1986: 21).

I do not understand why multiple directions of art (or anything else) cannot exist alongside each other. Again, Danto supposes wrongly that all arts have or should have one common value.²⁵

To produce a picture with the highest level of realism used to be a goal



Figure 34. Ad Reinhardt. *Abstract Painting*, 1960–65.



towards which the visual arts aspired. This is a narrative with a definite goal, and if this goal is achieved (and according to Danto it is, due to photography and cinema) then there is no longer a narrative. The next target was, instead of capturing the appearances of things, characterizing the nature of art itself (Carrol 1998: 18-19). Warhol's Brillo Boxes complicated this target. Danto's thesis about the end of art is mostly based on that work, and he thinks Warhol is the

... nearest thing to a philosophical genius the history of art has produced. He brought the history to an end by demonstrating that no visual criterion could serve the purpose of defining art, and hence that Art, confined to visual criteria, could not solve his personal problem through art making alone (Danto 1990: 287).

25. I am not saying they do not share anything at all; they do share the unfortunate imposition of the term Art, for instance.

The impossibility of further theoretical development seems a questionable concept on which to base the end of art, as he defines it. Danto places all the emphasis on the theoretical aspects of art but does not sufficiently recognize the visual properties that still persist. Obviously he knows, and has seen since 1986, that art is still being produced.

It might be impossible to indicate a definite change in art which would allow the developmental history of art to continue. However, a reconsideration of the definition of the history of art with more emphasis on the separate media and their properties might be enough to foreground painting and its values.



5 Conclusion

As mentioned in 4.1, my personal definition of painting flowed from my practical work. The struggle between text, textuality, image and form, visualized by Magritte, is present in my work. However, my definition and practice insist that it is from within form that text or textual connotations emerge. This means that my practice privileges an openness of enquiry whereby possibilities that may arise during the production of the painting (within real time and within moments of reflection) are given space.

The MFA works represent an enquiry into the roots of my practice, its context and its structure. The motifs are objects of analysis. However, the process of analysing the motifs brought to the surface a conflict between them and the material. This conflict, as expressed on the picture plane, is the subject matter of my work and dissertation.

The conflict that arises within both the dissertation and the works is at the root of my practice and influences my opinion of other artists and art discourse. A critical stance concerning the perception and production of painting is evident in my personal definition of painting.



I envisaged this dissertation as the production of a document that resembles the practical work to a certain extent, rather than an attempt to validate the work within a theoretical field. I believe that the work fundamentally validates itself. This notion is at the core of this document and my understanding of the MFA.

To allow my work to develop within its own reality, I employ reflections in the form of peripheral works, titles and fragmentary visual definitions.²⁶ These are meant to signal shifts to and from the main body of works and their parallel, textual, understanding. Therefore, although this dissertation aims to define a particular moment within my practice, I anticipate that this practice will evolve. Imminent works may well resist or further emphasize my definition of my practice and

26. By fragmentary visual definitions I mean an openness communicated by the works: an openness to change, a willingness to account for developments and oppositional notions.

painting. "Navigation" is understood as conscious movement through a metaphorical minefield, with the works constituting the field in which I simultaneously instal and circumvent the mines.

My shift of territory instigated a reflective point of view. Effects of this shift of territory, can be seen in the stronger contrasts between applications of material to the canvas and the emphasis on visualizing the painterly histories in the paintings. The latter is, I believe, a result of my recent awareness of the tangible effects of history on South Africa. The rapid changes in South Africa signify to me a strong contrast with the less evident recent historical evolution in The Netherlands.







6

Explication and narration of the paintings and drawings



1 *Seine High Tide* (2004)

Size: 160mm x 610mm

Medium: Egg tempera

2 *Seine* (2004)

Size: 160mm x 610mm

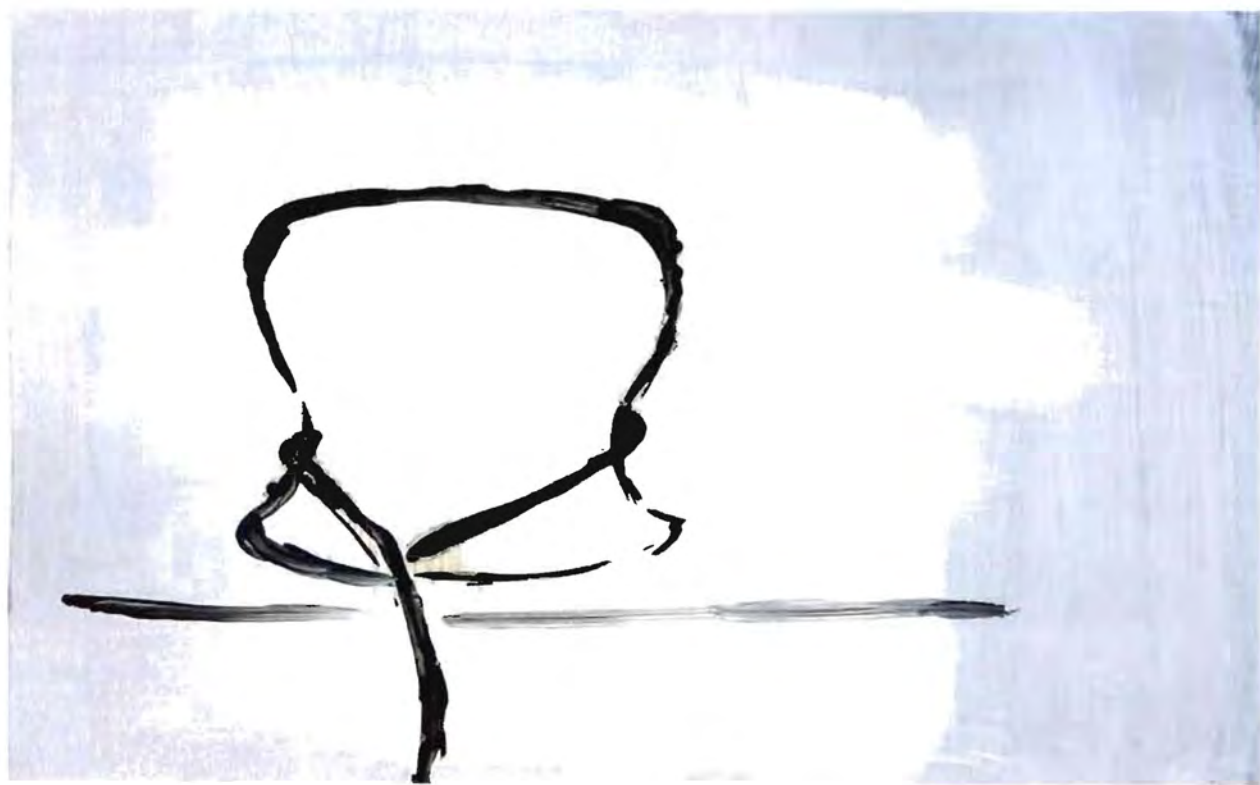
Medium: Egg tempera

3 *Seine Low Tide* (2004)

Size: 160mm x 610mm

Medium: Egg tempera

The three *Seine* paintings are the first representations of the bollard within the body of works. The bollards were initiated by a memory of Paris. Photographic research in Paris by friends could not find this particular, mushroom-shaped bollard. It is actually memorized from a harbour in The Netherlands but became confused with the quays of the Seine in my memory.



4 *Colonial Bollard* (2004)

Size: 510mm x 810mm

Medium: Oil-paint

This canvas had another depiction, which was rudely destroyed by a bird that flew into the studio. Its droppings bleached the previous stage. It is now covered by white paint, bearing a loosely drawn bollard as its signature.

The title makes a loose reference to this event. The original motif for this canvas was a tent structure, derived from my previous works. The bird's action and my practice is analogous to an act of colonizing the canvas: first by the bird messing on it and, secondly, by me signing the canvas with a bollard form.

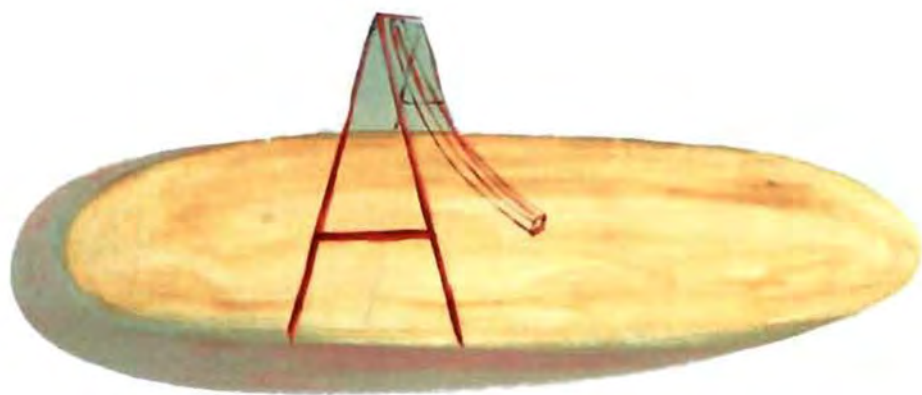


5 *White Jetty* (2004)

Size: 160mm x 610mm

Medium: Oilpaint

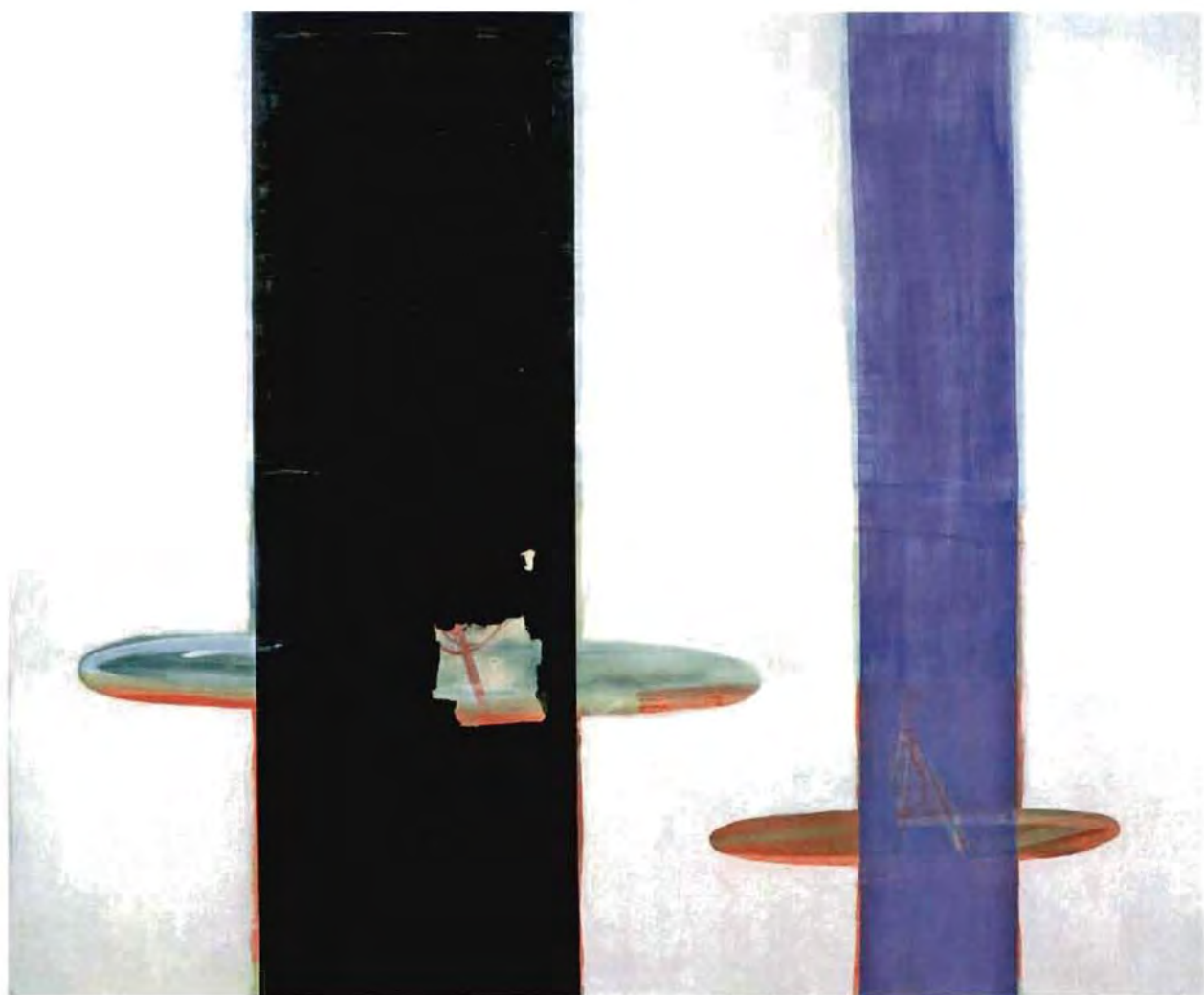
White Jetty points to a complexity of borders and the crossing of them. A border is implied by the depiction of the jetty, and the boat which is meant to voyage towards the horizon, away from the land. The painting illuminates a notion of immobility as the jetty disappears into the paint, and the boat is still tied to both parts of this jetty. Furthermore, the absence of water describes an evasiveness of the motif as there is no painted foundation for this depiction. The boat is drifting, entangled, liberated and abstracted within a painterly and textual realm simultaneously.



6 *Swing* (2004)

Size: 511mm x 1009mm

Medium: Oilpaint

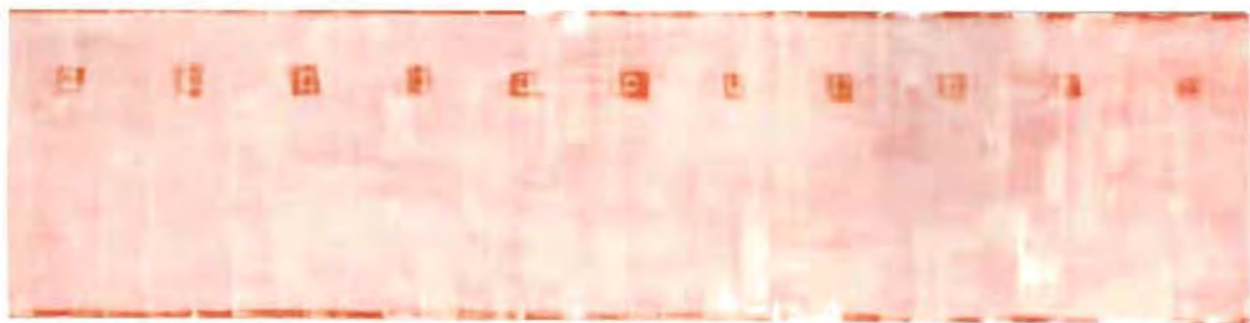


7 *Swings* (2004)

Size: 150mm x 1810mm

Material: Egg tempera/ Oil-paint

Both *Swing* (Plate 6) and *Swings* relate to the rest of the body of works through thematic affiliations. The swings, like the boats, are depicted in a way which challenges the use of the motif. Although depicting movement, the ropes are too long and therefore the seat would smash against the ground if it were a real swing.



8 *Commuters, three scenes* (2004)

Size: 1380mm x 3020mm

Medium: Egg tempera/ Oil-paint

This work consists of three parts, each bearing a separate painterly scene. The top part depicts bollards, enveloped by a coat of white paint. This implies the individuality of each, and a resistance to interaction, emphasized by the immobility of the boats in the lower part. The painting implies an attempt to contain movement as the boats, like the bollards, are detached from their purpose and restricted.

The middle part further defies the representations by depicting colour only, a silent scene in between two strongly interacting depictions. The middle part becomes the only location implying space and movement, by functioning as a horizon for the boats, and a plane that constitutes subtlety and silence among the struggling objects.



9 *Commuters 2 (view on train wreck)* (2004)

Size: 1550mm x 3020mm

Medium: Oilpaint/ beeswax/ Egg tempera

This work relates to *Commuters* (Plate 6) through size and lay-out. The first part of the title bears the same implications; the subtitle (*view on train wreck*) is based on a scene from Emile Zola's *La Bête humaine*.

In this scene, a train derails outside a house. The cold and snow force the commuters to leave the train and seek shelter in the house. The old woman who lives in the house has just died and her husband and daughter are feverishly searching for the money which they believe she has hidden somewhere. The woman has always looked at the trains going from and to Paris through the window, recognizing the regular commuters in a split second. At last they are not moving and are even in her presence, but for her it is too late.

The painting represents drawings of the HM Bark Endeavour (Captain Cook's ship), drawings of slave ships and Viking ships. Their movement has been restricted by the representation, as they are merely plans of ships. The bollards and ropes, as in *Commuters*, are constrained by the material. A mere yearning for movement, as in Zola's scene, is represented.



10 *Untitled (snoek and boats)* (2004)

Size: 2000mm x 810mm

Medium: Egg tempera/ Oil-paint



11 *Legacy/wasteland* (2005)

Size 820mm x 1010mm

Medium: Oil-paint

Legacy refers to the three boat figures, which seem to be in three positions at the same time, thus representing the boat's history or legacy.

Both the rope and the green area at the bottom suggest an aim of linking the boat figures. But this is impossible as the boats appear to drift outside of the picture plane and are detached, by means of colour, from the background. The rope signifies the attempt to relate the paint to the boats, by emerging from the paint and developing a relation with the motif by being textually related. The rope embodies the border between text and image, by functioning as both, while respecting the wasteland in between.



12 *Boatprints* (2005)

Size: 460mm x 2800mm

Medium: Egg tempera/ Oilpaint

Boatprints was at one stage a part of *De Vliegende Höllander* (Plate 11) but, after its liberation by the cut-out, it was no longer valid and useful to keep it there. The prints emphasize the individuality and split of this painting, by stamping a signature-like motif on the work. It also insinuates boats lying on a jetty and helplessly drifting in a plane other than the water, the plane of the painting, by appearing out of synchronization with the jetty.



13 *De Vliegende Hollander* (2005)

Size: 1700mm x 2800mm

Medium: Egg tempera/ Oilpaint/ Woodstrips/ Cord

De Vliegende Hollander (The Flying Dutchman) started its journey from Holland to India on Good Friday. By ignoring the importance of this day, and literally questioning God's powers, the captain evoked God's anger, and challenged him to use his powers to bar the ship from reaching its destination. The ship seemed thus to be doomed from the moment it left the harbour. The captain is portrayed as a ruthless ruler of his ship, keeping order among the crew through floggings, hangings and other extreme punishments.

By endlessly trying to round the Cape of Good Hope, with a constant view of Table Mountain, the captain loses the crew's trust and they flee the ship in the smaller boats employed to tow the ship around the Cape. The crew still aboard sets the sails on fire and jump over board to swim to the shore. The captain is left alone on his ship, without sails, and the masts on fire. After several months the devil comes aboard to make a deal with the captain, who hands over control of the ship to him in order to round the Cape eventually.

The devil tells the Captain that the date of leaving Holland was not important to God. What was important and what had caused his misfortune was his treatment of the sailors. The ship became a legendary ghost-ship, apparently encountered by many ships that rounded the Cape of Good Hope.

This work is illustrated in the band of images running through the dissertation, depicting several of its stages.



14 *Der Fliegende Höllander* (2005)

Size: 2310mm x 1350mm

Medium: Oilpaint/ Beeswax

The title of the work refers to Wagner's *Der Fliegende Höllander* (The Flying Dutchman). The music bears a significant relation with the painting, firstly because opera in general is a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This painting illustrates the aim of oscillation between the events that constitute the work. The process and the manipulation of these events are the main subjects of the work. The cut-out is an effect of balancing the boat's connotations with the form, as this is the most significant event of the work, subjecting the motif to the method. The work reveals its material structure, the wooden stretcher, and suggests a frank account of the painting's past. However, painting the wooden structure constitutes a manipulation of the past and the subjection to the final form of the painting as a collection of events.

The title is also applicable to the specific notions of the boat. Thematic affiliations between the work and its title are illuminated by the myth of *Der Fliegende Höllander* (The Flying Dutchman).

The libretto of Wagner's *Der Fliegende Höllander* is based on a novel by Heinrich Heine. In this narrative the captain is able to go ashore once every seven years, to search for a faithful wife to free him from endlessly wandering the ocean. He eventually finds the daughter of a captain he meets when approaching a harbour. The girl has always dreamt of freeing the Flying Dutchman captain's of his burden. The captain refuses to take the girl with him, but after declaring her passionate love, the girl throws herself into the ocean, thus freeing the captain of his burden.

The painting contains direct thematic affiliations with the myth as described here. The action of cutting out the boat signifies a liberating event, both for the formalistic and thematic concepts and in relation to the girl who, by committing suicide, liberated the Flying Dutchman.

Earlier stages of this work depict the boat as a static and entangled object. Residues of this stage are still evident in the inner part of the boat. The significance of this past is emphasized by the whiteness of later coats of paint and beeswax, suggesting the distance between both stages. Space is further implied by the literal space between the motif and its painterly context, and the wooden structure that appears in front of the motif.

The fluidity of the top section can be read in relation to parts of the opera, which, by musical means, signify the presence of water and the movement of the ship in its maritime environment.



15 *Krachtige Hollander, Gold Trip* (2005)

Size: 410mm x 3020mm

Medium: Egg tempera

The title is a reference to an essay I wrote in 2002 about a work by M. Daudeij entitled *Gold Trip*. A short summary of this work follows.

Two buildings situated in an office park in Amsterdam and linked by a parking garage stood empty for a few months and were stripped of all useful materials. Daudeij initiated a tour through the dilapidated buildings, at night. First, we had to sneak on to the property, which was guarded by security men. He had set up a way to get into the building but this had to be done quickly and quietly. After entering, we walked through the dark, underground parking garage to the first building. There were objects left by homeless people and the garage was partly flooded, constructing a rather sinister atmosphere. We walked up the stairs a couple of levels before descending and entering the second building. We then went to the top of the building where I had to wait while Daudeij went into a room and closed the door. The wind was blowing through the staircase and through holes left by the removal of doors and windows.

I was led into the room, and sat on a swing. Above me was a hole in the ceiling through which I saw the dark sky. All around me were golden balls, lit up by candles that were scattered over the floor. Left alone in the room, after the rather puzzling tour through the buildings, the wind howling, I swayed in the midst of the golden balls. Every move forward caused a view through the hole, framed by the golden balls.

The painting dedicated to this work contains the viewpoint as a literal relation, as it indicates looking up. Silence and the notion of anticipation are other reasons for this dedication.



16 *Two Trails Ship* (2005)

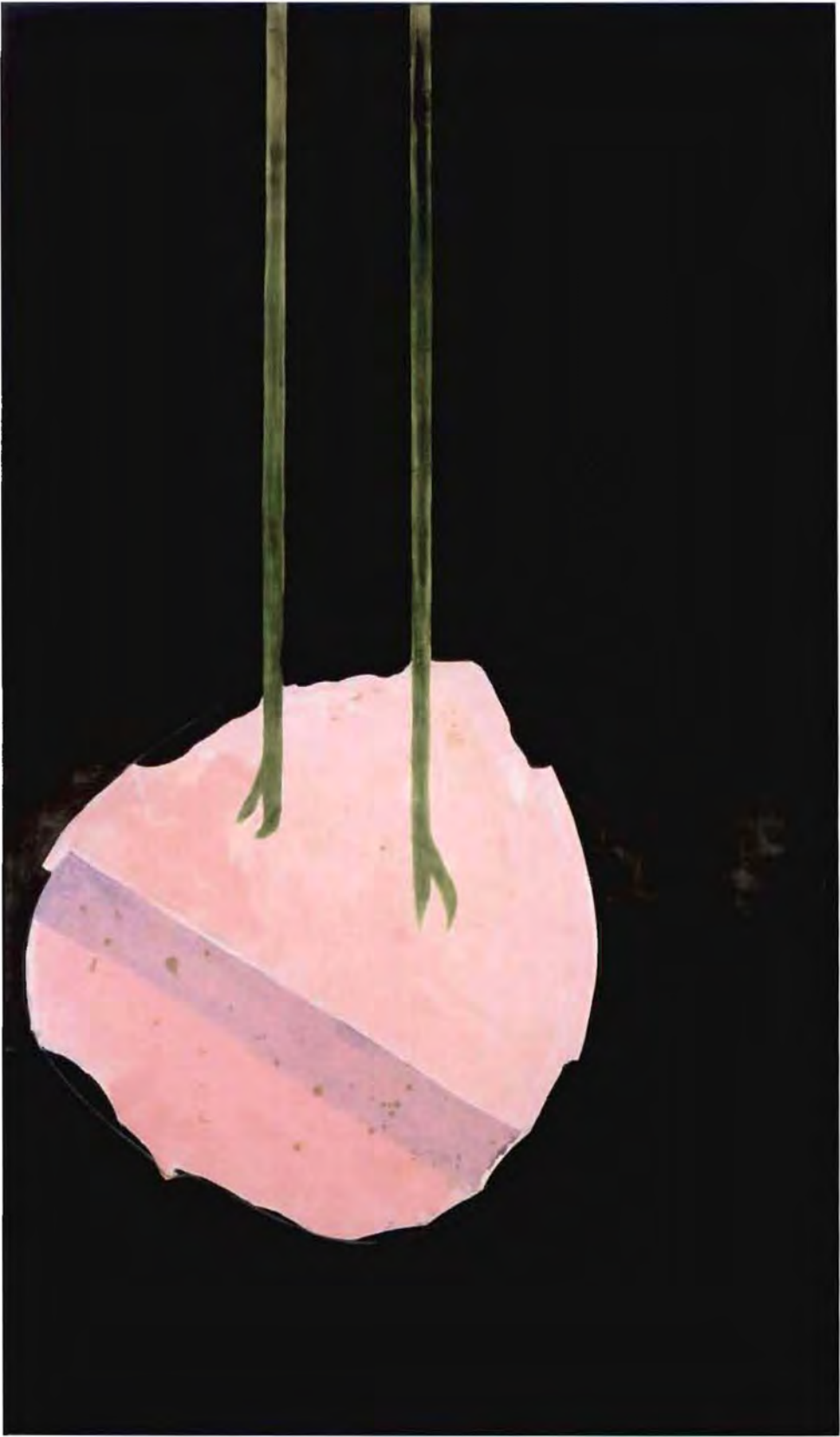
Size: 2310mm x 1360mm

Medium: Egg tempera/ Oil paint/ Beeswax

This painting is a significant illustration of my understanding of painting as analogous to the politically biased writing of history. It visualizes an ongoing struggle towards definition, firstly by covering parts with thick, tar-like beeswax and oil-paint, to cover up its history. Secondly, washing parts off signifies an attempt to grasp the past of the work; both notions are employed so as to balance the past with the present.

The factors that define its final stage are residues of the painting's process, alternately concerned with the past and the present of the work and offering a balance between them as its final stance.

A small red boat functions as a clue towards understanding the painting. It is placed outside of the central motif to signal a thought about the rest of the plane, and therefore proposes an entrance from this event towards its surroundings.



17 *The Albatross's Tale of a Nightscape* (2005)

Size: 2310mm x 1350mm

Medium: Egg tempera/ Beeswax

The albatross suggests a living creature within this fairly static work. The title implies that the painting is an account of the albatross, thus emphasizing the process of translation that takes place within a painting. The unknown language of the albatross is a metaphor for visual concepts, as they are both detached from literally translatable concepts. The albatross spends most of its time in the air, constantly moving over the surface of the oceans, going to land only for breeding. In the maritime realm, the albatross is metaphorically loaded, signalling good fortune, while the death of an albatross on board ship signifies extremely bad fortune.

The work further elucidates my endeavour to assert subject matter as an effect of form. The boat, still recognizable, is threatened and saved by the material simultaneously. The black coat, the nightscape, partly covers the outline of the boat, only to be redefined by the transparent beeswax.



18 *Nachtsteiger (Night Jetty)* (2005)

Size: 690mm x 1010mm

Medium: Oilpaint/ Beeswax

The jetty is drawn rather than painted. The background seems to contract or recede from the drawing, while revealing a different colour underneath. The foundation of the jetty, painterly and textual, is oscillating. This is emphasised by the coat of semi-transparent green beeswax and pigment. The layered colour suggests that part of the representation is seen through night-goggles.

The work suggests a notion of departure through the resolute perspective, causing the end of the jetty to appear floating in the paint. The division between the two panels further elucidates a sense of detachment. Breaking up the representation into two sections emphasizes the supposed connection between both parts of the jetty, and between motif and the painting, as the painting determinedly divides its motif.



19 Coleridge's *Albatross* (2005)

Size: 2310mm x 1350mm

Medium: Egg tempera/ Oil-paint/ Beeswax

As in *The Albatross's Tale of a Nightscape* (Plate 15), this living creature is introduced to elucidate the notion of translation.

In Coleridge's poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), the good-fortune-bringing albatross, is shot by the narrator. The effects of this event are the suffering and eventual death of the crew, and the mental and physical torture of the mariner himself. Only after he frees himself of the dead albatross that was hung around his neck as a symbol of taking responsibility for his sins does the wind resume and the ship sail on.

A valuable relation between this story and the painting is that after accounting for deeds, happenings, layers, the subject, both ship and painting are able to move, transport and convey.



20 *Diving Dutchman* (2005)

Size: 2010mm x 1110mm

Medium: Gouache/ Beeswax

See section 3.1.4 for discussion of this work.



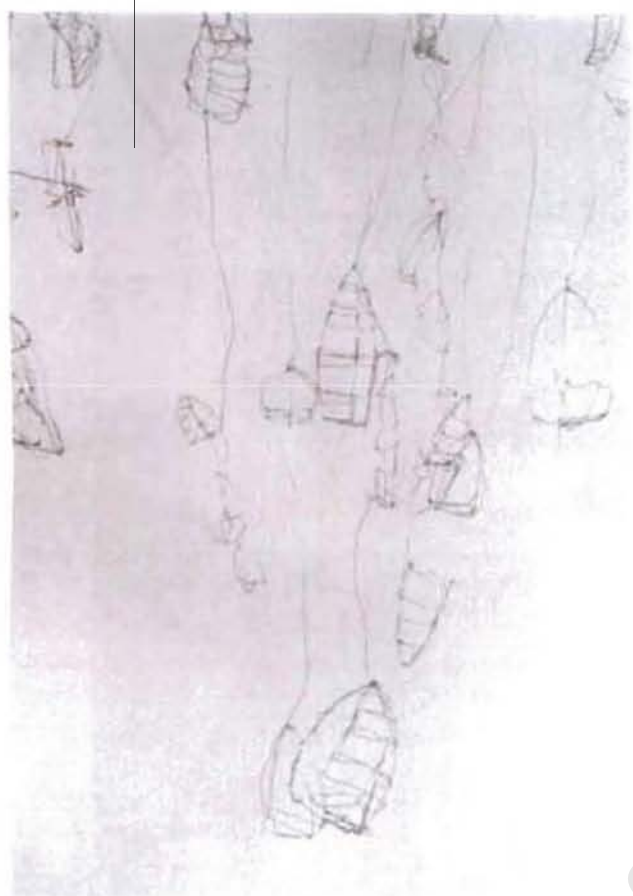
21 *Naval Feuds* (2005)

Size: 2310mm x 1500mm

Medium: Egg tempera/ Oil-paint/ Beeswax

Naval warfare and maritime law in general informs some of the work as noted in section 3.

The title is applied to this work because it deals with a concentration on formalistic choices, and strongly visualizes the process of decisions involved. The dimensions of the painting are adjusted so as to allow a central composition of the boat form.



22 *Ferry Tales* (2005)

Size: Ranging from 50mm x 60mm to 100mm x 150mm

Medium: Steel wire

Ferry Tales is a work that emerged in the margin of the paintings. It is located outside of the paintings but refers to and reflects on them. Its function is to introduce the lyrical structure discussed in 3.4.3, along with the drawings, *Diving Dutchman*, and the band of images printed throughout this document. *Ferry Tales* elaborates on the interaction between the paintings, constructing visual links, from a painting, to the steel wire models, to another painting. It cleans the visual palate, so to say.



South-Easter



South-Easter tree

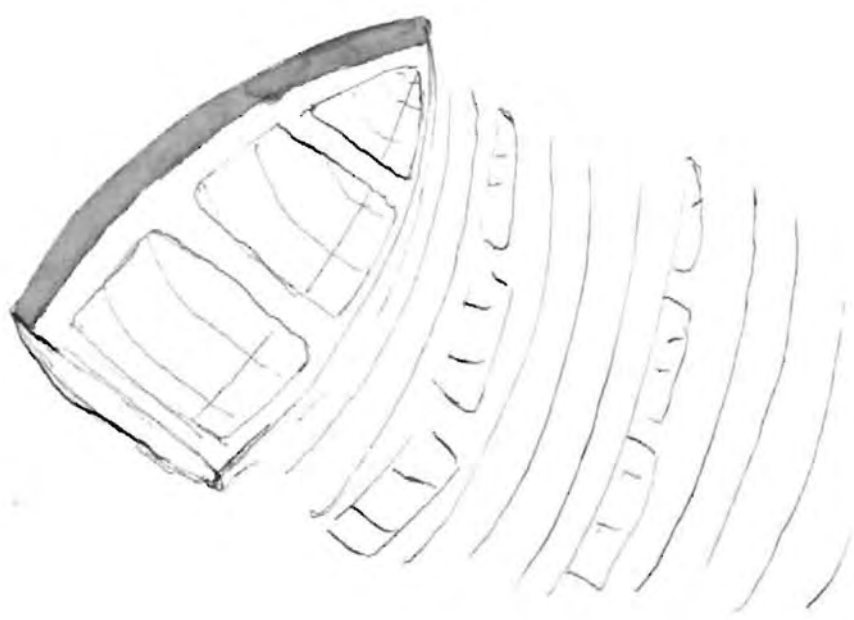
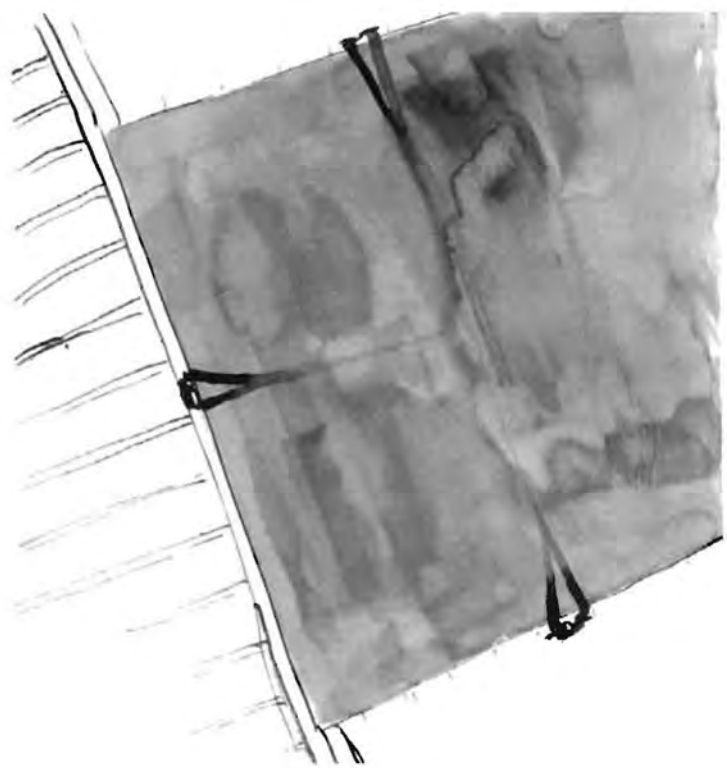
23 South-Easter

Size: 120mm x 150mm

The material of the drawings is ink on paper and they are all produced in 2005.

24 South-Easter Twee

Size: 120mm x 150mm

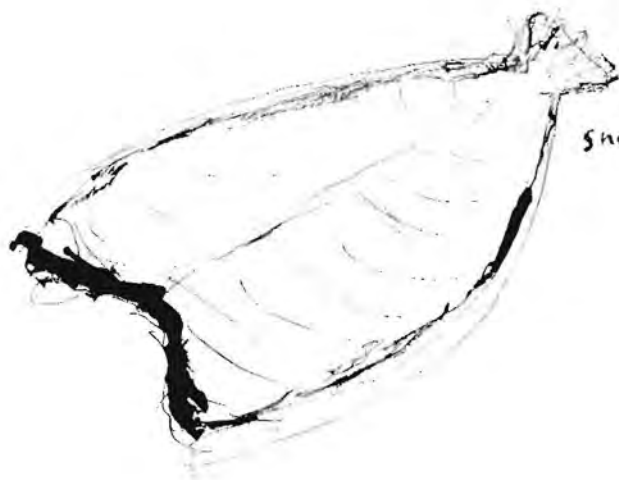


25 Empty Harbour

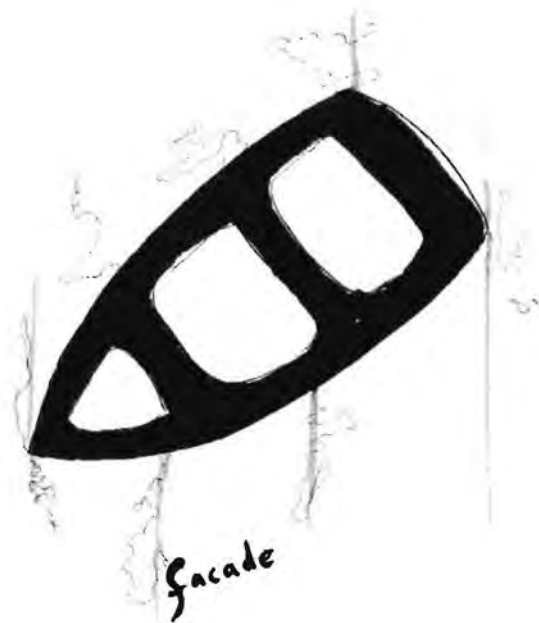
Size: 190mm x 180mm

26 Boat Echo

Size: 120mmx 150mm



snoek not caught
no boat
no quai
no catch



facade

27 *Snoek*

Size: 190mm x 300mm

28 *Untitled*

Size: 230mmx 190mm

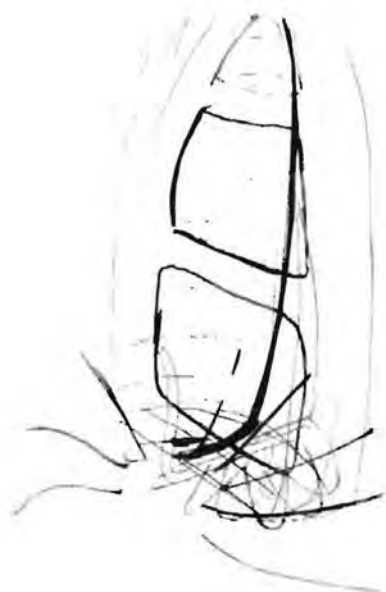


29 *Quay*

Size: 190mm x 300mm

30 *Untitled*

Size: 300mm x 1740mm



31 *Confused Rudder*

Size: 360mm x 180mm

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Figure 27: Varnedoe, Kirk. 1994. *Cy Twombly, a Retrospective*, p. 123. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 30 & 31: Gablik, Suzie. 1970. *Magritte*, p. 130. London: Thames and Hudson.

Figure 32: Varnedoe, Kirk. 1994. *Cy Twombly, a Retrospective*. p. 110. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 33: Ibid. p. 127.

Figure 35: Reinhardt, Ad. 1991. *Ad Reinhardt*, p. 99. New York: Rizzoli.