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An unreal realm

Painting as a means of reflecting on oneirism

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MFA

2013

University of Cape Town

DECLARATION

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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Documentation and commentary on the body of practical work submitted for
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An unreal realm

Painting as a means of reflecting on oneirism.

INTRODUCTION

My interest in oneirism grew out of my search for a concept that would encapsulate my concerns in painting at the start of this project, namely the formal values I exploited, the quotidian subject matter I favoured, and the sense of contemplation I wished to convey.

The correlations I perceived between my concerns and oneirism became more emphatic as my research progressed. The more I read about oneirism, the more I became aware of how the concept could be translated into painted form, a process which in turn inspired my practice. This document serves as a means to reflect on something of this complementary process. Within this framework, my discussion of theories related to oneirism is presented to amplify my painting practice.

As a reflection on oneirism, the body of work submitted for my MFA comprised paintings in ink and oil. Many pieces were based on snapshots of views and objects in my



Snapshot taken from my balcony; image cropped from snapshot; painting based on cropped section.

surroundings. I often cropped the photographs to focus on a single object or a minor detail of a view. My approach was figurative, although it verged on abstraction depending on the source imagery I selected. I used a close-value palette that was dominated by chromatic greys. The structure of my paintings is quite simple in formal terms and my work is generally small in scale. I used these features and selected my subject matter to parallel theories about the oneiric zone that I discovered in my research.

In terms of my aims in this project, and the media and approach I used in my practice, the figurative paintings of Italian artist Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) and contemporary Belgian painter Luc Tuymans (b. 1958) were most compelling. I responded to their muted palettes and, for me, their work shares a contemplative quality, despite differences in subject matter and approach. However, I was also intrigued by certain artists who used media other than paint to produce work that related to my concerns. I thus touch on the work of some of these artists, in addition to Tuymans and Morandi.

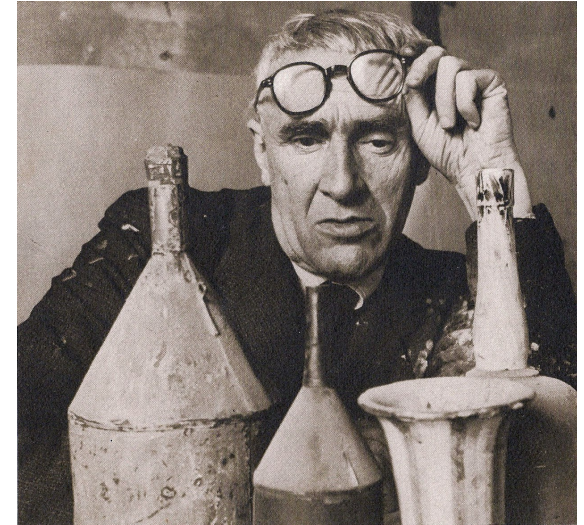
Luc Tuymans has been painting figurative works since the mid-1980s. According to Emma Dexter, senior curator of the Tate Modern in London, he is “one of a small group of artists who, during the 1990s, has reinvigorated the whole practice of painting” (Tate 2004: online). The structure of his compositions is formally simple and his palette is bleak and dominated by greys. His subject matter is wide-ranging and appears to be quotidian. However, the titles of some works and/or appended texts allude to subjects of considerable historical and political gravitas.

Giorgio Morandi died almost five decades ago but current interest in his work is widespread and his paintings have featured prominently in recent biennales and art fairs. Morandi’s oeuvre is dominated by still-lives, but he also painted a number of landscapes and a few urban views. Although his work is figurative, it leans towards abstraction in the

simplicity of its compositional structure and his muted close-value palette.

I have a longstanding interest in the work of Morandi, and in terms of this project I found it significant that his paintings seem so congruent with notions of oneirism. Coincidentally, a photograph of the artist that intrigued me when I came across it some years ago seems to relate perfectly to my concerns with oneirism. The photograph shows Morandi contemplating a collection of two strangely-shaped bottles, a vase and what looks like a wooden mallet. These objects are recognisable as some of those that feature repeatedly in his still-life paintings. Morandi is shown full-face with the objects standing almost at his eye level, in the foreground of the picture. His expression seems to me to be rather puzzled, as if the objects are unfamiliar; his gaze does not look entirely fixed on the objects. He holds his spectacles to his forehead and his eyes appear to be looking in subtly different directions. I imagine that his vision is out of focus, as is often the case with daydreaming. As quotidian phenomena often stimulate mind-wandering and the pictured objects are mundane, it strikes me that the photographer has captured Morandi in the process of oneirism. In my view, the photograph could serve as an illustration of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's (1884-1962) observation that "[i]n his solitary reverie, the dreamer of cosmic reverie is the veritable subject of the verb 'to contemplate'" (Bachelard 1971:174).

In his extensive writings on oneirism, Gaston Bachelard prefers the word 'reverie' over 'daydreaming' or 'oneirism.' However, other writers who focus on the subject tend to use 'oneirism' interchangeably with 'daydreaming', rather than 'reverie'. The word 'oneirism' stems from the Greek 'oneiros', which simply means 'dream', and most lexical references define oneirism in relation to both daydreaming and the dreams of sleep. In this paper, I use the term exclusively as a synonym for daydreaming.



Herbert List, *Giorgio Morandi in his studio, Bologna, Italy* (1953). Photograph.

Two books by Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of reverie* (1960) and *The poetics of space* (1958), are key references in this dissertation. Of equal importance is *The imaginary: a phenomenological psychology of the imagination* (1940), by French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). All three books concern the nature of the imagination and explore the relationship between the imagination and reality. While Jean-Paul Sartre hardly mentions oneirism in *The imaginary*, Bachelard's books centre on daydreaming. Of particular interest to me are the correlations I perceive between Bachelard's and Sartre's ideas concerning the nature of the mental image in what Sartre calls the imaging consciousness. As I understand it, the imaging consciousness is the seedbed of oneirism.

Part of the discussion in *The imaginary*, *The poetics of reverie* and *The poetics of space* concerns ideas around perception, and I draw on these ideas to a lesser extent. Perception was a focus of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), and I reference some of his thoughts in this document. While the ideas of more neoteric writers enjoy greater currency in contemporary art and philosophical discourse, I feel that the writings of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and, in particular, Bachelard have a poetic quality that is apposite in presenting reflections on the nebulous realm of oneirism. In addition to these references, I draw on the writings of certain psychologists and neuroscientists whose discoveries I feel relate to the philosophical ideas that I reference. While I do not pretend to have a profound knowledge of any of the theories I touch on, I present here in brief the concepts that informed my painting practice in this project.

At the start of my Masters degree, my interest focused on the poetic potential in painting via depictions of the urban, peri-urban and industrial environment of Cape

Town to reflect on the equivocal emotions I harbour for the city. I find Cape Town simultaneously attractive and repellent, familiar and remote, abstract and concrete. My daydreams, often sparked by views of the city, could be described in similar terms. In reflecting on oneirism, my subject matter is still dominated by details of the built environment, but has expanded to incorporate other imagery I relate to daydreams.

The title of my project, *An unreal realm*, is a reference that for me connects to Sartre's notion of the 'irreal' world of the imaging consciousness. Both Sartre and Bachelard use the term 'image' to refer to the mental images of the imagination, but they also use it in relation to material imagery. I am mindful of the wide definition of the term 'the image'¹ in contemporary art discourse, including reference to material image and mental image, and try to qualify my use of the term where necessary, or substitute the word 'imagery'. I use the term 'poetics' to draw attention to my interest in formal values of painting, such as colour, texture, tone, light and other compositional elements in my own practice and in the practice of others.

I have structured this document into six chapters and a conclusion:

In Chapter One, *Unreal city*, I explore early influences on my painting. I begin with a quote by Bachelard and a brief reflection on the poetry of T.S. Eliot (1888-1965). I comment on the work of the painter Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) and introduce the work of Giorgio Morandi.

In Chapter Two, *Oneirism*, I touch on certain scientific and philosophical theories that have informed my understanding of oneirism and, in turn, my painting practice. I draw on philosophical writings, penned chiefly by Sartre and Bachelard, and refer to aspects of research into oneirism by particular scholars in psychology and neuroscience.

In Chapter Three, *A profound silence*, I explore the work of Giorgio Morandi and

¹ See Schwabsky 2005 (online) for more on this subject.

Luc Tuymans and focus on the way in which, for me, their paintings give material form to the ethereal realm of oneirism. I conclude the chapter by summarising the features of the paintings of Tuymans and Morandi that interest me in relation to notions of oneirism.

In Chapter Four, *Painting within a broader frame*, I touch on works by certain artists whose medium is not painting but whose poetics, for me, suggest an otherworldly oneiric state. In particular, I focus on the photographs of German-born American artist Uta Barth (b. 1958), whose field of interest is the nature of perception. Additionally, in terms of my interest in the built environment as subject matter, I consider the work of German photographers Bernd (1931-2007) and Hilla (b.1934) Becher.

In Chapter Five, *Reflecting on oneirism in painting*, I discuss my painting practice with regard to my attempt to articulate the unreal realm of oneirism. In my discussion, I draw on my readings in various disciplines, including art discourse related to painting.

In Chapter Six, *Triggers and trajectories*, I discuss my body of work, in which I emphasise my experience of oneirism as episodic by producing work in series. I begin by commenting on the role of titles in painting, with particular reference to Tuymans and Morandi, and explain my decisions with regard to giving titles to my own work. I conclude the chapter with some remarks about the installation of my paintings.

In the conclusion of this dissertation, I reflect on my work more generally in terms of the aims of this project.

CHAPTER ONE

Unreal city

According to Gaston Bachelard, no reverie or daydream has value unless it is inspired by poetry. Elaborating on this belief, he writes:

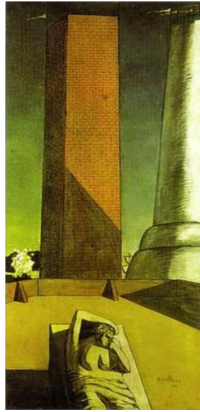
... great poets teach us to dream. They nourish us with images with which we can concentrate our reveries of repose. They present us with their psychotropic images by which we animate an awakened oneirism.

(Bachelard 1971:158)

In this regard, I find it significant that my interest in the city and its environs as subject matter was inspired by poetry, specifically the poems of T.S. Eliot that focus on the urban condition. The phrase I used as a provisional title at the start of this project was “Unreal City” which constitutes line 60 of *The waste land* and is repeated in line 207. Eliot’s attitude to the city was one of ‘romantic irony’ (Southam 1974:18), influenced by



Bridget Simons, *Holyhood* (1979). Oil on board. 20.5 cm x 12.7 cm.



Giorgio de Chirico, *The philosopher's conquest* (1914). Oil on canvas, 125 x 99 cm. Art Institute of Chicago; *The awakening of Ariadne* (1913). Oil on canvas, 134.6 x 65.1 cm. Private collection.

his reading of the work of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and other French symbolist poets. In his explanatory notes to the reader of *The waste land*, Eliot acknowledges that the phrase 'unreal city' was inspired by two lines of Baudelaire's poem *Les Sept vieillards* (*The seven old men*). Baudelaire's lines read in translation:

*Crowded city, city of dreams,
Where in broad daylight the spectre stops the passer-by.*

For me, these lines conjure the unsettling paintings of Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico, whose work was an initial influence on my painting practice. De Chirico's particular vision was stimulated by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and Otto Weininger (1880-1903). According to the American critic James Thrall Soby (1906-1979), Nietzschean concepts prompted de Chirico's use of late afternoon light in his paintings:

To de Chirico, Nietzsche's most remarkable innovation was 'a strange and profound poetry, infinitely mysterious and solitary, based on *stimmung* (which might be translated ... as atmosphere), based, I say, on the *stimmung* of an autumn afternoon when the weather is clear and the shadows are longer than in summer, for the sun is beginning to be lower'. (Soby 1966:28)

The subtly deceptive nature of de Chirico's iconography was engendered by Nietzsche's belief that the enigma of the phenomenal world exists in the idea of a hidden reality beneath the surface appearance of things. Various anomalies disrupt the almost plausible realities de Chirico presents in his work: perspectives are exaggerated or subtly distorted; a normally crowded sunlit city square is deserted; statues, shadows and manikins command empty city streets; a clock announces midday but the shadows are those of late afternoon.

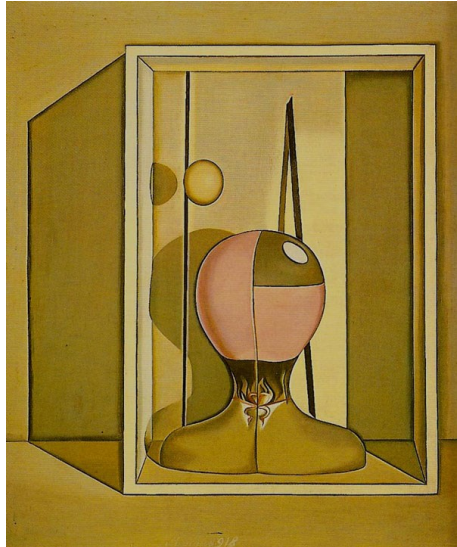
De Chirico appears to use shadows to evoke a dreamlike eeriness in his paintings that, for me, is more closely related to the dreams of sleep than to daydreams. In Bachelard's view, "[r]everie shifts blocks of thought without any great worry about following the thread of an adventure. In that, it is much different from the dream, which always wants to tell us a story" (Bachelard 1971:106). Certainly, stories seem implicit in some of the titles of de Chirico's paintings, such as *The philosopher's conquest* (1914), *The awakening of Ariadne* (1913) and *The soothsayer's recompense* (1913). De Chirico's work can easily be described as 'foreboding', 'mysterious' and 'threatening', epithets that are suggestive of dramatic narrative. According to German-born American art historian Benjamin Buchloh, de Chirico himself described his paintings as "stages decorated for imminent but unknown and threatening acts" (Buchloh 1981:45).

De Chirico lived in Paris between 1911 and 1915, and his work was greatly admired by avant-garde artists and writers. Among his admirers was the poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), who described de Chirico's enigmatic paintings of this period as 'metaphysical' (Gale: online). In 1917 in Ferrara, Italy, de Chirico met fellow Italian artist and erstwhile Futurist Carlo Carrà (1881-1966). Together they founded an art movement named *Pittura Metafisica* (Metaphysical Painting) after Apollinaire's description of de Chirico's paintings. Characterised by work that suggests the disquieting nature of the mundane, the movement was short-lived. It ended in acrimony over Carrà's book about the movement, eponymously titled *Pittura Metafisica* (1919), in which de Chirico's role was understated.

Under the banner *Pittura Metafisica*, de Chirico staged a number of group shows in which the work of Giorgio Morandi was included. Not many paintings by Morandi date from this period, as he destroyed much of his early work (Museum of Modern Art:



Giorgio de Chirico, *The soothsayer's recompense* (1913). Oil on canvas, 135.6 x 180 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.



Giorgio Morandi, *Metaphysical still-life* (1918). Oil on canvas, 71.5 x 61.5 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; *Still-life* (1919). Oil on canvas, 51.5 x 55 cm. Private collection.

online). In my view, most of the paintings that survived this severe edit are remarkably prosaic in relation to the enigmatic quality with which Metaphysical paintings are associated. Examples of Morandi's paintings of this period are *Metaphysical still-life* (1918) and *Still-life* (1919), which comprise odd collections of heavily outlined objects bathed in a warm, bright, even light. Janet Abramowicz, an American artist and writer who worked with Morandi and wrote a book about him, feels differently about this work. Abramowicz describes it as "full of paradoxical diversity, Dadaesque irrational surprises and combinations of simplicity and complexity, irony and humour and austere subtle tonalities and dramatic sensuality" (Abramowicz 2004:54). Abramowicz contends that "it was in his so-called Metaphysical paintings of 1916-20 that he first found his voice, for the *metafisica* was the birthplace of Morandi's poetry" (Abramowicz 2004:54). In this regard, I have come across only two examples of Morandi's work of this period that, for me, hint at the direction his painting was to take after his break from *Pittura Metafisica*. The first is his sublime *Bottles and fruit bowl* (1916) in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. The other painting, titled *Flowers* (1920), is significantly similar to a still-life of a vase of flowers that he painted in 1948. In both paintings, a vase holds a few tightly compressed flower heads: the vessel is throat-like in shape and seems to be sucking in its contents. In turn, the relatively expansive surrounding space, which is barely defined, almost engulfs the vase. A subtly unsettling dissonance pervades both paintings. Although the later work is more loosely painted, Morandi's palette is limited in both paintings and tonal modelling and depictions of cast shadow are reduced. For me, these paintings evoke the realm of oneirism as I understand it from my readings of writings by certain philosophers and scientists. I focus on these readings in the next chapter.



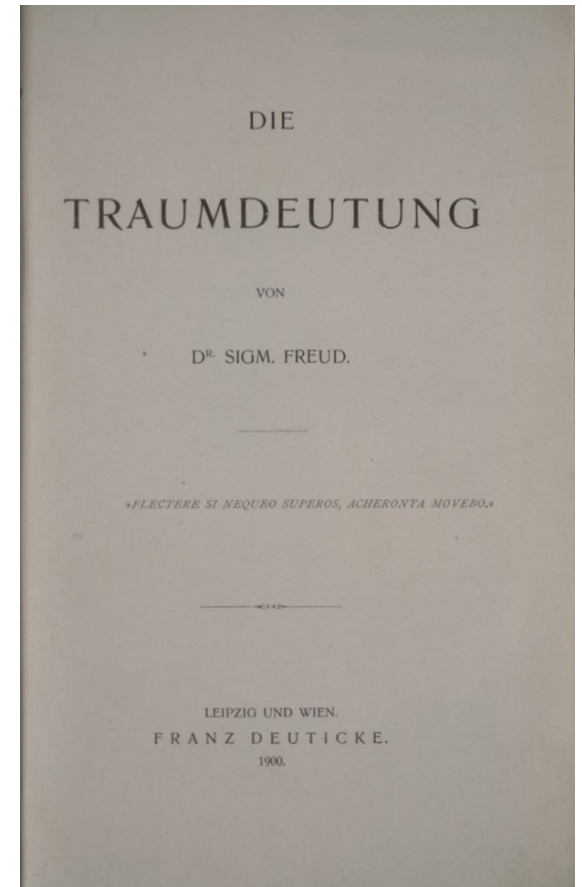
Giorgio Morandi, *Bottles and Fruit bowl* (1916). Oil on canvas, 60 x 54 cm. Gianni Mattioli Collection. Long-term loan to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice; *Flowers* (1920). Oil on canvas, 46 x 39 cm. Private collection; *Fiori* (1948). Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 cm. Private collection.

CHAPTER TWO

Oneirism

In this chapter, my discussion of ideas related to oneirism as held by certain scientists and philosophers is by no means extensive. I refer only to concepts that resonate with my own experiences of oneirism and with my painterly practice.

At the turn of the twentieth century, keen interest in human consciousness was generated by the Austrian neuroscientist and psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud introduced his idea of the unconscious in his seminal treatise *The interpretation of dreams*, published in 1899. He identified three types of consciousness: a conscious state that is fully aware; a preconscious state in which the attention is relaxed; and the unconscious, where repressed fears, desires and memories are harboured. Freud believed that the content of the unconscious is revealed through the symbolic imagery of dreams during sleep. Because oneirism is marginally volitional, the imagery in daydreams is less likely to reveal the unconscious and may carry no symbolic meaning at all, which perhaps accounts for Freud's putative dismissal of oneirism as



Original cover of German edition of Sigmund Freud's *The interpretation of dreams*, published on 4 November 1899.

“infantile and neurotic” (Tierney 2010: online).

Freud’s influence on the development of psychology as a discipline was profound. His apparent disdain for daydreaming, therefore, may have inhibited research into oneirism until the 1960s, when it was pioneered by cognitive psychologist Jerome L. Singer (b. 1924). Singer’s research revealed that daydreams range from those that are creative and constructive to those that are decidedly disruptive. For the average person, however, oneirism is a common cognitive process that is most often concerned with mundane issues. Oneiric episodes occur spontaneously and can be sparked by a variety of sensual stimuli. Episodes are transient and last split-seconds, or can endure for longer periods. Some people spend as many as half their waking hours daydreaming, albeit intermittently (Singer 1974; Glausiusz 2009).

According to Bachelard, oneirism can range “from rather clear reveries to formless musings” (Bachelard 1971:151). The ideal reverie, in Bachelard’s opinion, is a “union of imagination and memory” (Bachelard 1971:104-105). In light of this contention, it is interesting to note that dreams, memory and the imagination constitute the so-called ‘default network’ of the brain (Kaufman & Singer 2012: online). The ‘default network’ is the area of the brain that remains active in the absence of cognitively demanding external stimuli. Opposed to it is the ‘working memory network’ or the ‘executive network’ of the brain that operates in the state of full consciousness. The American neurologist Marcus Raichle (b. 1937) made this discovery in 2001, with the aid of positron emission tomography (PET) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), technologies that he helped pioneer in the late 1960s.

In the wake of Raichle’s findings, the relationship between the default network and the executive network of the brain has been fiercely debated. Some theorists maintain

that the two networks operate independently of each other. An opposing view is that both brain networks operate simultaneously in certain situations. For instance, while daydreaming on a task that demands attention, the executive network may be activated in attempting to rein in the default network (Tierney 2010: online). Theorists who hold the latter view assert that cooperation between the default network and the executive network of the brain is the only condition in which oneirism can be creatively productive: the daydreamer must daydream with awareness in order to revert to full consciousness and act upon an inspirational idea as soon as it is recognised in the imaging consciousness. If not, these ideas may be lost forever.

Decades earlier than this debate, the American clinical psychologist Erika Fromm² (1909-2003) averred that a distinguishing feature of all daydreams, whether creative or not, is a state of awareness, which separates them from the dreams of sleep. In a paper published in the *Social Service Review* by the University of Chicago in 1976, Fromm observes that the sleeping dreamer is not able to control his or her visions, whereas the daydreamer, to some extent, can orchestrate his or her oneiric imaging (Fromm 1976).

Analogously, reverie is defined by Bachelard as “an oneiric activity in which a glimmer of consciousness subsists” (Bachelard 1971:150). Sartre voices a similar idea in *The imaginary*. In describing consciousness in the hypnagogic state (the period prior to sleep when the senses grow numb), Sartre affirms that the subject can still reflect; in other words, he or she remains conscious of consciousness (Sartre 2004:44).

In *The imaginary*, Sartre makes so little reference to daydreaming as to dismiss the notion. However, numerous parallels can be drawn between Sartre’s statements about the imaging consciousness and theories regarding oneirism. For example, Sartre declares that the imaging consciousness is a state “in which the gaze loses itself (whether it meets

² German-born, Erika Fromm was Professor Emeritus in Psychology at the University of Chicago when she died, aged 93. In a book published in 1964, titled *Dream interpretation—a new approach*, Fromm and her co-author, psychoanalyst Thomas Morton French, challenged some of Freud’s theories regarding dreams. Although her interest in dream interpretation continued, Fromm is best-known for her influential scientific and theoretical contributions to the field of hypnosis. (Harms 2003: online).

Erika Fromm was not related to the social psychologist Erich Fromm.

nothing [...] or constantly meets pin points [...]” (Sartre 2004:49). In discussing the daydreamer in *The poetics of reverie*, Bachelard similarly notes that “[t]he eye which dreams does not see or, at least, it sees with another vision” (Bachelard 1971:174). These observations are echoed in the research of Jerome L. Singer. Under clinical conditions, Singer registered that we suppress “the complex stimulation available to our open eyes while we are lost in reverie”, allowing our eyes “to go out of focus temporarily, or to focus on infinity” (Singer 1974:421).

There is a significant correspondence between Sartre’s concept of the ‘captive consciousness’ in the hypnagogic state as described in *The imaginary*, and Bachelard’s rumination on the nature of daydreaming in *The poetics of reverie*. Bachelard writes:

In his (*sic*) reverie without limit or reserve, the dreamer gives himself (*sic*) over body and soul to the cosmic image which has just charmed him (*sic*). [...] Other images are born from the first image, come together and mutually embellish each other. [...] A universe can be born from an isolated image.

(Bachelard 1971:175)

Correlatively, Sartre defines the captive consciousness as a state in which the subject is “paralysed by a kind of auto-suggestion” (Sartre 2004:44): limbs stiffen, control over thoughts is lost and random impressions enchant the mind. “[F]igures are transformed in rapid succession,” Sartre observes, “a line becomes a string, a string becomes a face, etc.” (Sartre 2004:47). He adds that these “faint forms disintegrate under observation, and yet endlessly reshape themselves” (Sartre 2004:49).

As opposed to forms perceived in the physical world, Sartre opines that mental images are ‘irreal’ in terms of space, colour and form (Sartre 2004:129). In mental imaging, Sartre maintains, “knowledge is immediate” (Sartre 2004:9): the imaging

consciousness “delivers [the mental image] as a whole” (Sartre 2004:10), in other words, all aspects of the imagined form are given to us at once, in the totality of our sensual and rational experience of the object or view in the phenomenal world. In *The poetics of reverie*, Bachelard expresses a corresponding idea: “The imagining consciousness holds its object (such images as it imagines) in an absolute immediacy” (Bachelard 1971:151). He adds that “[i]n the poet’s reverie the world is imagined, directly imagined. [...] the cosmic image is immediate. It gives us the whole before the parts” (Bachelard 1971:175).

According to Sartre, in contradistinction to unreal forms that occur in the imagining consciousness, material forms in physical space must be learnt in order to perceive them: perception results from the study over time of phenomena in the corporeal world. To illustrate this point Sartre notes that, although a cube has six square sides, all six sides cannot be viewed simultaneously and it is impossible to apprehend any one side as being square. It follows then, in Sartre’s view, that an observable object “is present for us externally and internally at the same time. Externally because we observe it; internally because it is in it that we observe what it is” (Sartre 2004:11).

Sartre’s theories of perception correspond with the views of many theorists, among whom is Daniel Schacter (b. 1952), professor of Psychology at Harvard University. In his book *Searching for memory: the brain, the mind and the past* (1996), Schacter identifies two regions of the brain that are active in perception: the ‘perceptual representation system’ and the ‘semantic memory’. The function of the perceptual representation system is to recognise the physical appearance of words and objects. The semantic memory comprises the “intricate network of concepts, associations and facts that constitutes our general knowledge of the world” (Schacter 1996:169), which is the system responsible for extrapolating meaning from visual stimuli. Schacter notes that “[t]he two systems

normally [emphasis added] operate in seamless cooperation ...” (Schacter 1996:184), which suggests to me that an hiatus may occur between seeing something and identifying what is being presented to vision. In such an event, seen objects must be momentarily unintelligible, especially when they are not the focus of attention.

In this regard, Sartre maintains that “[in perception] something appears that is then identified as a face [...] judgement rectifies, organises and stabilises perception [...] consciousness must focus on the object” (Sartre 2004:39). Merleau-Ponty makes a parallel observation in pointing out that “[t]he object, psychologists would assert, is never ambiguous but becomes so only through our inattention” (Merleau-Ponty 1962:6). A major spark of oneirism in my experience is this moment of inattention, when I have not clearly deciphered cues delivered by physical views or material objects. In Bachelard’s opinion, “[c]osmic reverie makes us live in a state which must be designated as ante-perception” (Bachelard 1971:174), in other words, oneirism is a form of consciousness that precedes rational thought and objective knowledge of the world.

In this regard and in terms of my project, I am encouraged by certain remarks about painting made by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. According to Irish/French academic Carolyne Quinn, Merleau-Ponty believed that “[p]ainting returns its viewer to a pre-linguistic ‘silent’ realm” (Quinn 2009:19). Merleau-Ponty contended that, in the development of culture, language played a secondary role to the primary role assumed by the visual realm. He believed that this explains the multivalence of paintings and the residual affective experience of a work of art after exhaustive formal analysis. In his influential essay *Eye and mind*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—painting scrambles all our categories, spreading out before us its oneiric universe of

carnal essences, actualized resemblances, mute meanings.

(Merleau-Ponty 2011:459)

In this brief exploration of theories related to oneirism and human consciousness, I have raised only those points that resonate with my experience of oneirism and that have informed my painting practice.

In summary, oneirism is a common feature of human cognitive function. It is associated with the 'default network' of the brain, which is activated whenever concentration is relaxed. In oneiric episodes, eyes remain open and vision is centred on nothing in particular, or is set on infinity. Oneirism occurs spontaneously and is sparked by various sensual stimuli. A major trigger of oneiric episodes is the moment of inattention when an object in the material world presents ambiguous cues to the 'semantic memory'. Oneirism is a transient state that can be fleeting or of longer duration. In the process of oneirism, the daydreamer remains aware of consciousness and full consciousness can be restored in an instant. Oneirism is characteristically visual. Mental images are often related to the mundane and shift randomly from shape to shape or subject to subject. They may relate to each other in some way, or not at all. Mental images present to the imagination only what is already known by the daydreamer. Typically, mental images are unreal in form, tend to lack intense colour and are spatially indeterminate.

For me, aspects of the painting practices of Luc Tuymans and Giorgio Morandi suggest ways of materialising in paint my understanding of oneirism. I discuss the work of these two artists in the next chapter in relation to the aims of this project.

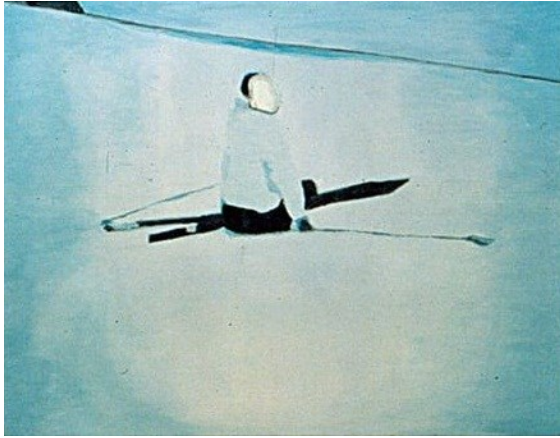
CHAPTER THREE

A profound silence

In this chapter I explore aspects of the poetics of Giorgio Morandi and Luc Tuymans to reflect on how their work connects, for me, with the notions of oneirism I have gleaned from my readings, my personal experience and my painting process.

Contemporary critics often compare the work of Luc Tuymans and Giorgio Morandi in terms of its poetic quality. Ironically, Tuymans once dismissed Morandi's work as "poetic bullshit" (Searle et al. 2004: online). Regardless of Tuymans's protests and despite contrasting conceptual concerns and the decades that separate the careers of the two artists, there are many points of comparison between their paintings. Significant for me is the quality of visual silence that pervades the work of both artists. In my experience the realm of oneirism is silent, and silence, in turn, often stimulates oneirism.

Swiss-based writer and curator Konrad Bitterli cites Luc Tuymans as stating in 1997 that "every one of my works is intended to create a vacuum", adding that "[i]mages,



Luc Tuymans, *The architect* (1997-98). Oil on canvas, 113 x 144.5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden; *Cargo* (2004). Oil on canvas, 150 x 196.5 cm.

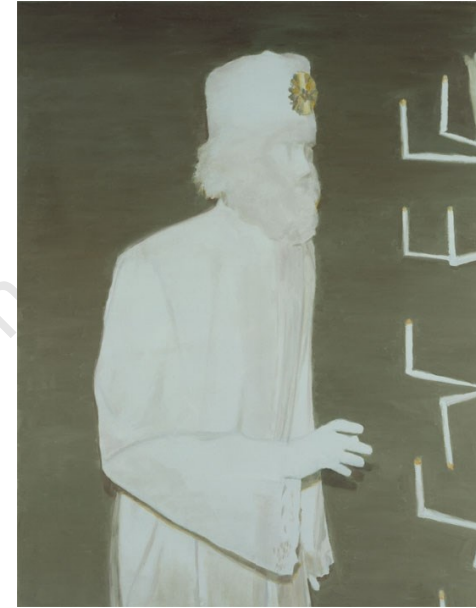
Giorgio Morandi, *Still-life* (1957). Oil on canvas, 30 x 35 cm. Musée Jenisch, Vevey, Switzerland.

when they work, should have this tremendous intensity of silence, a silence or emptiness that is ‘full’” (Bitterli in Berg 2003:108-9). By describing his paintings as “pictures of empty rooms, of isolated things, pictures of a world that is frozen beneath the gaze, shattered, deathly still” (Loock et al. 1996:56), Tuymans clearly perceives his work as having a certain visual and conceptual silence. Significantly, the Italian critic and art historian Cesare Brandi (1906-1988) described Morandi’s paintings as “islands of silence” (Bandera & Miracco 2008:292).

For me, one of the aspects of the paintings of Tuymans and Morandi that conveys a sense of silence is the structural simplicity of their compositions. Tuymans’s paintings are often centred on a single object or figure in a way that suggests a visual ‘stillness’ in the pictorial field. Examples of such works are *The architect* (1997-98) which features a solitary fallen skier, and *Cargo* (2004). The latter work depicts an isolated ship viewed from a slightly elevated position. Although equally simple in structure, Morandi’s compositions seldom comprise a single object. However, in many of his still-lives the forms are so tightly arranged in the centre of his compositions that they suggest a single unit, as in *Still-life* (1957).

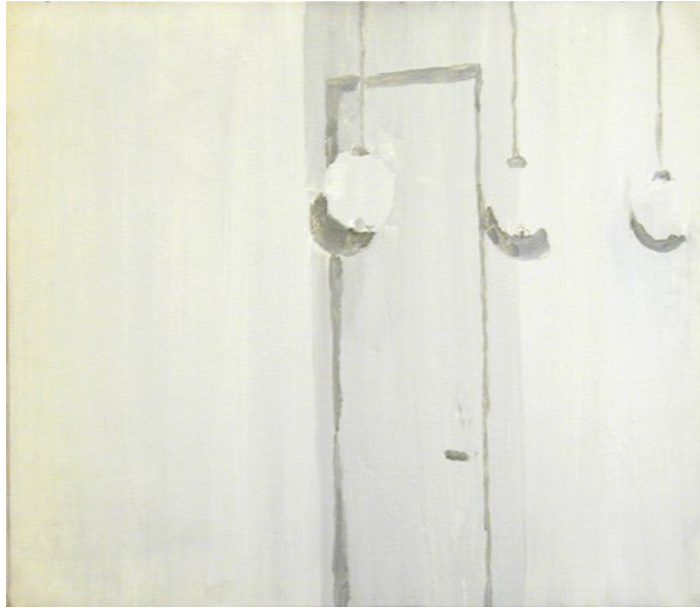
The dearth of detail used in describing the objects depicted and the pictorial setting in which they are arranged in the work of both artists emphasises the elemental quality of their compositions. This sense of radically pared down imagery recalls, for me, Sartre’s notion of the ‘essential poverty’ of the image in the imaging consciousness. According to Sartre the ‘essential poverty’ of the mental image is predicated on the fact that “different elements of an image maintain no relations with the rest of the world and maintain only two or three relations between themselves: those [...] that I could note or those that it is presently important to retain” (Sartre 2004:9).





Luc Tuymans, *Rabbit* (1994). Oil on canvas, 59.3 x 71.5 cm. Private collection; *The worshipper* (2004). Oil on canvas, 193 x 147.5 cm.

Tuymans interrupted his painting career in the early 1980s to experiment with the medium of film. His experience in editing film informs the various ways in which he reduces detail in his paintings. Often he crops his photographic sources so severely that his subjects are severed from the original context in which they were shot. Another strategy he uses is to bleach out detail, as in photographs where the subject has been too close to the flashlight of a camera. This approach is exemplified in *Rabbit* (1994) and *The worshipper* (2004). In other examples, detail is obliterated by the suggestion of all-pervasive or penetrating light. Such light effects can engender a sense of threat or



violence in that they sometimes evoke an interrogation room, as in *Lamproom* (1992) or security floodlights, as in *Foundations* (2008).

Morandi stripped detail from the objects used as references in his still-lives by removing all labelling and coating the surfaces with off-white or greyish paint. This intervention serves to obviate any incidental light effects, such as reflections. His urban views and landscapes were based on selections he made with the use of a telescope, which did little to clarify the indistinct imagery on which he focused, and detail remains limited.

Luc Tuymans, *Lamproom* (1992). Oil on canvas, 48.5 x 55.7 cm.; *Foundations* (2008). Oil on canvas, 192 x 128.5 cm.

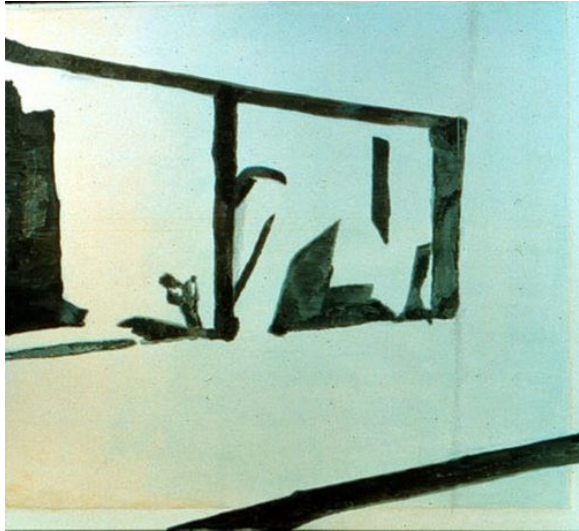


Giorgio Morandi, *Landscape* (1962). Oil on canvas, 30 x 35 cm. Museo Morandi, Bologna; *Still-life* (1960). Oil on canvas, 24.8 x 28 cm. Tate collection, London.

Muted colour adds to the paucity of detail in the compositions of both artists, accentuating the idea of silence in their work. Tuymans's imagery, painted in pale tints, blue-tinged greys and whites, appears diaphanous. Morandi favoured a warmer palette of bleached pastels but the effect is no less ethereal. The otherworldly quality in their work is emphasised by the near-absence of cast shadow and tonal modelling. The ghostly aspect of the objects in their compositions evokes a feature that typifies oneiric imagery, according to Sartre. In Sartre's opinion, an image in the world of the imaging consciousness is a "shadow of an object with its shadow of space" (Sartre 2004:132).

Tonal modelling and the presence of cast shadows generally suggest the materiality of objects in physical space. Cast shadows and shading are therefore often used by painters, poets and writers who wish to conjure an idea of three-dimensional space in their work. In her paper *On vivacity: the difference between daydreaming and imagining-under-authorial-instruction*, literary critic Elaine Scarry (b. 1946) points out that in literature, shadows are introduced to "confirm the solidity" of things (Scarry 1995:11). "Shadows on the floor of this [imaginary] world assure us that that floor can support [...] heavy creatures" (Scarry 1995:11) or any other solid things the author wishes us to imagine. In his essay *Eye and mind*, Merleau-Ponty makes a similar observation in discussing *The nightwatch* (1642) by Rembrandt (1606-1669). He notes that "[t]he hand pointing toward us in *The nightwatch* is truly there only when we see that its shadow on the captain's body presents it simultaneously in profile" (Merleau-Ponty 1961:6).

When Tuymans and Morandi do use shadows in their work, they often flout convention by painting them in such a way that they take on the appearance of solid form. One of the effects of this strategy is a breakdown of the distinction between figure and ground. Typical examples of this approach in Morandi's work are *Landscape* (1962)



and *Still-life* (1960). A similar oscillation between figure and ground in Tuymans's work is most pronounced in two series of paintings, titled respectively, *Recherches (Investigations)* (1997-98) and *The time* (1988). The latter series includes a portrait of playboy Nazi Reinhard Heydrich sporting a pair of dark glasses.

In the work of both artists, the indeterminacy between figure and ground is accentuated by a blurring effect of the painted mark in shaping contours. This blurring is in part the result of the close-value palette and wet-in-wet method of paint application they each use. Surfaces in Morandi's paintings are thick and buttery, built up with wavering brushstrokes. As a result, the edges of forms in his compositions are often

Luc Tuymans, *Recherches* (1997-98). Oil on canvas, 139 x 151 cm. Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg; *The time* (1988) 4/4 - portrait of Nazi Reinhard Heydrich. Collage and oil on cardboard, 41 x 40 cm. Private collection.

Giorgio Morandi, *Still-life* (1962). Oil on canvas, 30.5 x 30.6 cm. National Galleries of Scotland.



Luc Tuymans, *Against the day II* (2008). Oil on canvas, 231 x 171.5 cm.; *Wonderland* (2007). Oil on canvas, 353 x 547 cm.

indistinct. His *Still-life* (1962) is a fine example. By contrast, Tuymans's method of painting is typically rubbed-in, which renders a chalky surface quality and rough texture. He applies his paint in agitated strokes, blurring distinctions between forms, as in *Wonderland* (2007) or *Against the day II* (2008). The fragile distinction between positive and negative shapes destabilises spatial relationships, amplifying the formal ambiguity that characterises their work. Forms appear to slip in and out of focus and in





this I see a connection to the shifts in vision that occur in the process of daydreaming, as noted by Sartre and Bachelard, as well as by the psychologist Jerome L. Singer.

Scale in the paintings of both Tuymans and Morandi is often difficult to determine and adds to the ambiguity of their imagery. In a number of Tuymans's compositions there is no indication that the paintings are based on tiny models rather than life-sized views or objects. Examples of such works are *Drum set* and *Hut*, based on small paper models Tuymans made in 1998. Two earlier examples, painted in 1989, are *Suspended* and *The cry*, which are based on models of figures and scenes produced in Germany after the Second World War. In *Suspended* and *The cry* there is a subtle disjunction between the relative sizes of the depicted figurative elements, which adds to the disquieting atmosphere.

In Morandi's still-lives, the shapes he paints could as well relate to buildings as to the domestic objects he depicts. Janet Abramowicz notes that "in a Morandi still-life, bottles become architectural facades or cathedrals and spires" (Bandera & Miracco 2008:120). The flat, simple shapes Morandi uses in his landscapes and urban scenes render imagery equally ambiguous. Abramowicz comments: "[t]he more you look, the less certain you are that what you actually see is really there" (Abramowicz 2004:9).

Sartre identified ambiguity as an intrinsic property of the irreal object of the imaging consciousness. In his opinion, the "essential ambiguity of the irreal object" is "one of the principal factors of fear in imagination" (Sartre 2004:132). To qualify this observation, Sartre opines that the clarity of imagery in perception is reassuring. Imaginary objects, he maintains, "are by nature suspect" in that they are indistinct and therefore ambiguous. Given that the work of both Tuymans and Morandi is imbued with ambiguity, it is unsurprising that a sense of unease pervades their work.



In my view, Morandi's supremely mundane subject matter further links his work to oneirism, where quotidian concerns prevail. As noted, the still-life compositions that dominate Morandi's oeuvre are based on constant re-arrangements of a collection of simply-shaped domestic objects such as vases, bottles, jugs and jars. He painted a limited number of urban scenes near his apartment in Bologna, and a few landscapes, viewed mostly from his bedroom window of the country house his family owned in Grizzana.³ In terms of this project, Morandi's limited choice of subject matter appears to reflect the advice Bachelard gives daydreamers in this regard. "To keep company with objects," Bachelard counsels, "there must not be too many. One does not dream well in beneficial reveries before dispersed objects" (Bachelard 1971:166).

To claim that Tuymans presents everyday imagery in his paintings may sound contentious in light of his concerns with serious historical, political and psychological

Luc Tuymans, *Drum set* (1998). Paper, 30 x 36 x 10 cm.; *Drum set* (1998). Oil on canvas, 194.5 x 121.5 cm.; *Hut* (1998). Oil on canvas, 123 x 115 cm.; *Suspended* (1989). Oil on canvas, 60 x 40 cm.; *The cry* (1989). Oil on canvas, 37 x 45 cm.

³ Since 1985 the village, thirty kilometres southwest of Bologna in the Emilia-Romagna region, is called Grizzana Morandi in honour of the artist.



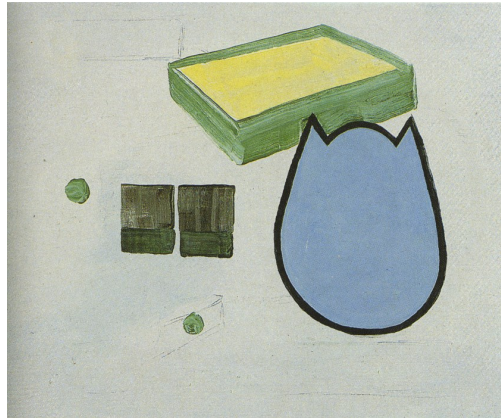
Luc Tuymans, *Gas chamber* (1986). Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm. Collection Museum Overholland, Amsterdam.

⁴In some texts, the concentration camp at Mauthausen-Gusen is identified as the location of the source of this composition, but photographs of Dachau's gas chamber bear a closer resemblance to the image in Tuymans's painting.

issues. But Tuymans has admitted that, in the absence of titles or contextual explanations, his subject matter would be mundane. In an interview with J.S. Marcus of *The Wall Street Journal* in 2009, he observed that without the title *Gas chamber* (1986), his painting of the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau “would be just a basement” (Marcus 2009).⁴ Similarly provocative is the title *Child abuse* (1989), given to a composition of objects that are rendered so schematically as to defy definitive identification.

Tuymans's subject matter is wide-ranging, in keeping with the gratuitous nature of contemporary painting, noted as a feature of the discipline by art critic Barry Schwabsky in the introduction to *Vitamin P* (Brauvart 2002:8). Tuymans paints anything that arrests his interest. He makes frequent reference to the Holocaust or Belgian colonial atrocities in his work, but he seems equally preoccupied with the banal, painting subjects that include pot plants, animals and the interiors of hotel rooms. By association with more emotionally and politically charged subjects, Tuymans's most innocuous scenes hint at threat. In commenting on this aspect of his work, Tuymans says: “[a] lot of my imagery has a sense of cosiness which is turned into something terrifying. Anything banal can be transformed into horror” (Loock et al. 1996:20). For me, this statement appears to reflect his averred belief in the ‘banality of evil’, the term coined by political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) in describing the early 1960s trial of Nazi Adolf Eichmann, one of the masterminds of the Holocaust. Incidentally, South African born painter Marlene Dumas also refers to Arendt's idea of the ‘banality of evil’ in her work. The title of her self portrait *Het kwaad is banaal (Evil is banal)* (1984) references the concept directly.

As noted, Tuymans's imagery is sourced mostly from photographs – his own and



those relentlessly disgorged by the mass media. In order to avoid representing his source imagery too faithfully, Tuymans photocopies and re-photographs the original photographs, progressively degrading the references. This procedure has been interpreted as a comment on the corruption of imagery through mediation, but Tuymans explains it as an attempt to “analyse the image until it’s entirely dead, and I know every inch of it, and then also bring it to a point where it sort of in my terms ends, and that ending will be recreated in paint [...]” (BBC3 2005). To my mind, therefore, Tuymans presents imagery in his paintings that is detached from reality and from which he can learn nothing more. Significantly, one of Sartre’s claims for the irreal image in the imaging consciousness is that “one can never learn from an image what one does not know already” (Sartre 2004:10).

To ensure that his paintings are never close copies of his photographic source material, Tuymans gives himself little time to refine his work, by completing a painting rapidly in one sitting (Berg 2003:85). Another reason he gives for this habit is “to keep

Luc Tuymans, *Child abuse* (1989). Oil on canvas, 55 x 65 cm. Private collection.

Marlene Dumas, *Het kwaad is banaal* (1984). Oil on canvas, 125 x 105 cm. Van Abbemuseum Collection, Eindhoven.



Luc Tuymans, *Still-life* (2002). Oil on canvas, 347 x 500 cm. The Saatchi Gallery Collection.

⁵ *Still-life* (2002) is Tuymans's response to the horror of the 9/11 terror attacks in North America in 2001. Tuymans intends that the enormous scale of the painting in relation to its banal subject matter should convey a sense of supreme impotency in the wake of acts of monumental horror.

intensity within the painting” (Marcus 2009: online). By contrast, intensity in Morandi's work results from his approach to painting as a slow process of overlays which involve subtle adjustments of shape and tonal value. In my view, the relatively small scale of Morandi's paintings adds to this intensity. Although not as small as Morandi's work, the paintings Tuymans produced before the early 2000s are all modestly-scaled. Tuymans's present hangar-sized studio has provided the space to enlarge his compositions. Ironically, Morandi's habit of giving generic titles to his paintings is echoed in the title *Still-life* Tuymans gave to a mural-sized painting of 2002. His composition even echoes Morandi's habit of concentrating objects in the centre of the pictorial field.⁵ Despite its huge size, the painting is sublimely contemplative. In my view, however, a modest scale remains apposite in suggesting the intimate, contemplative locus of oneirism.

In terms of my understanding of oneirism, the paintings of both Tuymans and Morandi suggest to me ways to give painted form to notions of this ethereal realm of consciousness. Tuymans's compositions are simple and are often limited to the representation of a single object or figure. In this regard, Sartre notes that the hypnagogic image is isolated (Sartre 2004:166) and Caroline Picart quotes Bachelard as stating that “reverie is entirely different from the dream by the very fact that it is always more or less centred upon one object” (Picart 1997:61). As noted in this chapter, Morandi's paintings seldom present a single object, but his compositions of tightly arranged objects often suggest a single unit. The arrangements are often centrally positioned in the pictorial field, which emphasises a sense of singularity. Both Morandi and Tuymans present imagery that is muted in colour, can be read as unreal in form and is spatially ambiguous. These are features that both Sartre and Bachelard point out as characteristic of the image in the imaging consciousness. In the work of both artists,

detail is reduced, three-dimensional modelling is minimal and cast shadow is almost absent. Indistinct contours and broken edges of brushwork engender a subtle oscillation between figure and ground which is suggestive of the unsteady focus associated with oneirism.

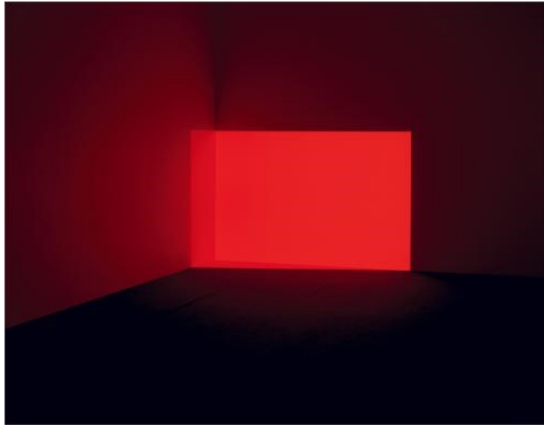
In the next chapter, I consider artwork produced by artists using media other than paint that, for me, evokes the unreal zone of oneirism.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER FOUR

Painting within a broader frame

American art theorist Douglas Fogle curated a show titled *Painting at the edge of the world* at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis in 2001. In the essay he wrote for the catalogue, Fogle questions the nature of painting in contemporary art. In commenting on the erosion of boundaries between art disciplines, he cites the reaction of art critic Howard Halle to an exhibition of photographs by Andreas Gursky in 1999. In Halle's review of the show he acknowledges the painterly qualities of Gursky's photographs and concludes that "[p]ainting' is a philosophical enterprise that doesn't always involve paint" (Halle in Fogle 2001:18). Fogle appears to support Halle's re-evaluation of painting as "a way of organising the world that represents neither truth nor fiction exclusively but rather a little of both. Whether an artist uses a brush or a camera to achieve that goal, scarcely matters" (Halle in Fogle 2001:18). In the book *Painting* (2011), American curator and art theorist Terry R. Myers describes painting as a "zone of



James Turrell, *Acro-red (corner projection)* (1968). Light projection; *Ganzfeld APANI* (2011). Light projection.

Mariko Mori, *Transcircle* (2004). Light installation, 336 cm. in diameter, nine acrylic totems, each 110 x 56 x 34 cm.

contagion, constantly branching out and widening its scope. Painterly practices emerge in other genres such as photography, video, sculpture, printmaking and installation” (Myers 2011:158).

Paralleling painting in many respects is the profoundly poetic work of American artist James Turrell (b. 1943) and Japanese installation artist Mariko Mori (b. 1967). For me, their work with colour-in-light to affect our perceptions of space subtly evokes the unreal world of oneirism. Examples of Turrell’s work with light are *Acro-red (Corner projection)* (1968) and his contribution to the Venice Biennale in 2011, *Ganzfeld APANI* (2011). Mori’s interest in light is evident in works such as *Transcircle* (2004). The light effects they use show the ephemeral quality of light and its changeability. These qualities are suggestive of Sartre’s observation that the imaging consciousness is a state of mind in which images change incessantly, the world of the imaging consciousness being “a world in perpetual motion” (Sartre 2004:47).



With regard to the perpetual motion in the imaging consciousness, the movement inherent in video art and the filmy materiality of the medium renders it ideally suited to the representation of the fleeting nature of oneirism. “Some physical objects”, according to Elaine Scarry, “have features that more closely approximate the phenomenology of imaginary objects than do others. In fact so true is this that we often speak of actual mist, actual gauze, filmy curtains, fog, and blurry rain as dreamlike.” (Scarry 1995:12). Installations involving these and/or similar elements may be used convincingly to convey the state of oneirism. Works that spring to mind are (*bearings*) (1996), an installation by Ann Hamilton (b. 1956), and video works by Bill Viola (b. 1951), such as *The crossing* (1996), and *The fall into paradise* (2005).

Certain stills photography can also suggest oneirism. As American writer and filmmaker Susan Sontag (1933-2004) comments, “[a] photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence. Like a wood fire in a room, photographs –

Ann Hamilton, (*bearings*) (1996). Two black silk organza curtains, mechanical devices, dimensions variable. Museum of Contemporary Art, Montreal.

Bill Viola, *The crossing* (1996); *The fall into paradise* (2005). Video/sound installation.



Uta Barth, *Field no. 8* (1995). Colour photograph on panel, 58.4 x 73 cm.; *Ground no. 38* (1994). Ektacolour print on panel, 50.8 x 50.8 cm.

especially those of people, of distant landscapes and faraway cities, of the vanished past – are incitements to reverie” (Sontag 2001:48).

Rather than incite reverie, the photographs of American photographer Uta Barth, for me, allude to aspects of oneirism. Her work intrigues me for the way in which it focuses on the mechanics of perception. Heavily informed by Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on this subject, perception has been the theme of Barth’s work since the early 1990s.

Critics have commented that Barth’s photographs share sensory qualities with various art forms, particularly painting (Lee 2004:37). Her photographs have been compared with the work of the Impressionists, certain Minimalist artists, German artist Gerhard Richter (b.1932), and Dutch seventeenth century artist Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) (Lee 2004: 57). The work of Vermeer has a particular fascination for Barth and, in her explanation of her interest in his paintings, she identifies features that resonate with my understanding of the nature of oneirism. “What I like about Vermeer’s work”, she says “[is] the investment in the everyday in the non-event [...]. Also I have always been interested in the quality of light and how light really is the primary subject of the work. Light and a certain quietness, slowness, stillness. You can hear a pin drop in those paintings” (Lee 2004:11).

Barth attributes the perceived correspondence between her photographs and the discipline of painting to the “blurriness” of most of her photographs. She asserts that this blurriness “approximates the painterly and deeply subjective gesture of the brush” (Lee 2004:57). This soft focus or out-of-focus aspect of her work is a result of the shallow depth of field she uses. She exploits this technique in order to draw attention to the nature of peripheral vision in perception.

In 1994 Barth made a cycle of works titled *Ground*, in which she approximates

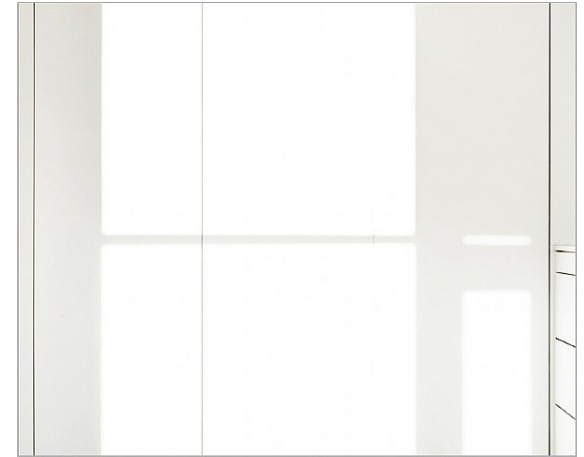
peripheral vision. In these out-of-focus works, such as *Ground no 38*, details are concentrated at the edges of her compositions to suggest the ephemeral and incidental features of reality that are overlooked when vision is focused elsewhere. Focus in her cycle *Field* exhibited in 1996 is non-existent. In works such as *Field no 8*, a bleached out, blurred area is surrounded by vague suggestions of contextual detail.

The lack of focus in Barth's photographs collapses distinctions between positive and negative shapes. As a result, the photographs appear corporeal, a feature I see as a visual equivalent of Merleau-Ponty's idea of the 'flesh' or the matrix in which beings and objects exist and interconnect in concrete reality (Quinn 2009:21).

The surfaces of most of Barth's photographs are matt, which she maintains creates optical confusion in that there is "no shiny surface on which to stop ... you don't see the surface, you don't know where to stop and focus" (Lee 2004:16). With reference to the matt finish in Barth's photographs, the British painter, art critic and theorist, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (b.1945), observes that the effect "causes one to divide one's attention between an image of measureless depth and the matt surface" (Gilbert-Rolfe 2004:107).

Colour in Barth's photographs is generally subdued and her most recent inkjet prints represent imagery that is limited to whites, greys and black. The series called *Compositions of light on white* (2011) comprises photographs of rigid geometric shapes. A series titled ... *and to draw a bright white line with light* (2011) records a softly undulating line of light reflected on to a gauzy curtain.

Untitled (98.5) (1998) is a triptych of photographs that depicts three variations of a landscape viewed through a multi-paned window. In none of the photographs is the focus quite clear. Evidence of rain on the surface of the window panes is just noticeable in one photograph. In one of the other two photographs, focus is vaguely directed at the area



Uta Barth *Compositions of light on white no. 6* (2011). Inkjet print, 91.8 x 112.4 cm.; ... *and to draw a bright white line with light (Untitled 11.3)* (2011). Inkjet print, face-mounted against matt acrylic, 95.6 x 142.2 cm. (framed).



immediately inside the window and in the other, the area of interest appears to be just outside the window. For me, the triptych recalls the ephemeral nature of oneirism and the shifts in focus I experience while daydreaming.

An interesting feature of this triptych is its installation. Two photographs are mounted next to one another and a gap as wide as one of the photographs separates them from the third photograph. According to Sheryl Conkelton, Barth uses this device to introduce “a time delay that suspends logical sequence and returns the viewer to the present and the real from the fiction of the representation” (Conkelton 2000:72). The intention to alert the viewer to the ‘present and the real’ while viewing imagery that suggests the realm of the imagination, recalls, for me, the notion that daydreamers maintain a state of awareness of consciousness during oneirism.

Although the work of German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher is very different from Uta Barth’s work, I find it compelling in relation to the subject matter I draw on. The focus of the Bechers’ oeuvre is limited to representations of industrial structures photographed in Western Europe and North America (Cooke 2012: online).

Uta Barth *Untitled (98.5)* (1998). Triptych.
Colour photographs, each 96.52 x 121.92 cm.



Typically, the Bechers' photographs focus on single structures and are archived taxonomically in terms of type, as in *Water towers*, *Mine heads* and *Gas furnaces*. The earliest photographs date back to 1959 when the couple began their collaboration. Although their approach relates to the documentary photography of the 1930s, their work is evocative of an otherworldly realm, recalling the paintings of Giorgio Morandi. Significantly, photographs from the Becher archive were mounted alongside Morandi's paintings in an exhibition hosted at the Morandi Museum in Bologna in 2009. Similarities between the Bechers' photographs and Morandi's paintings reside in features such as the frontality of the imagery, the pellucid light and limited cast shadow.

Some of the features I use in my paintings in an attempt to evoke the ethereal world of oneirism relate to features I have highlighted in the work of Uta Barth and the photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Other features echo aspects of the poetics of Tuymans and Morandi, discussed in the previous chapter. In the following chapter, I discuss my painting practice in terms of my aim to reflect on oneirism in my work.

Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water tower c. 1920 Liege Belgium* (1968). Gelatin silver print, 19.53 x 15.4 cm. Collection San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; *Lime kilns Harlingen NL* (1963). Photograph, 91.4 x 75.2 cm.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reflecting on oneirism in painting

In this chapter, I discuss my painting practice. I describe and reflect on my approach to painting and my choice of subject matter. In addition I discuss certain formal values and technical processes that I exploited in my work in an attempt to evoke notions of oneirism.

As noted in Chapter Two, dreams, the imagination and memory form the default network of the brain. In light of this, it appears reasonable to me to assume that dreams, the imagination and memory are closely associated, if not interlinked. In Bachelard's view, as highlighted in the same chapter, the most sublime daydreams emanate from a union of memory and the imagination. This would account for the correlations I see between Jean-Paul Sartre's notions regarding the imagination and concepts related to oneirism. Additionally, it would explain the imprecision of memory. In the close

association between memory, the imagination and dreams, memory must be influenced – to a lesser or greater extent – by the imagination and dreams.

American critic and curator Alison Gingeras (b. 1973) attributes the present increase of interest in painting to the plethora of artists whose focus is memory. Gingeras points out that painting in its suggestive and inventive potential provides an ideal vehicle through which to conjure the idea of memory, which is, according to her, “nebulous, malleable, ever-changing” (Gingeras 2005: online). Gingeras adds that memory is often awakened through sensual association prompted by vague details. Because “advanced painting seeks ambiguity” in the view of Scottish-born curator Russell Ferguson (in Gingeras 2005: online), painting has the capacity to stimulate imaginative association, stirring memory and, for me, by extension, oneirism.

According to Bachelard, memories of the house in which one was born (and lived in as a child) provide the stimulus for the most transporting experiences of oneirism. In *The poetics of space*, he writes:

... [I]f I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. (Bachelard 1969:6)

In that his writing is poetic, Bachelard uses the term ‘house’ both literally, to refer to the physical structure, and figuratively, as a metaphor for the cranium that ‘houses’ the brain and the mind, the wellspring of the imaging consciousness.

With reference to Bachelard’s literal use of the word ‘house’, few people in first world western cultures experience birth at home. Although I was born at home, my family moved six times in the first seven years of my life, so memories of the houses I lived in as a child are vague and I certainly do not recall the house in which I was born.

As I have lived in my present home for most of my life, it seems significant that my reflection on oneirism was fuelled by the photographs I took of views of my domestic surroundings as source material for my paintings in this project.

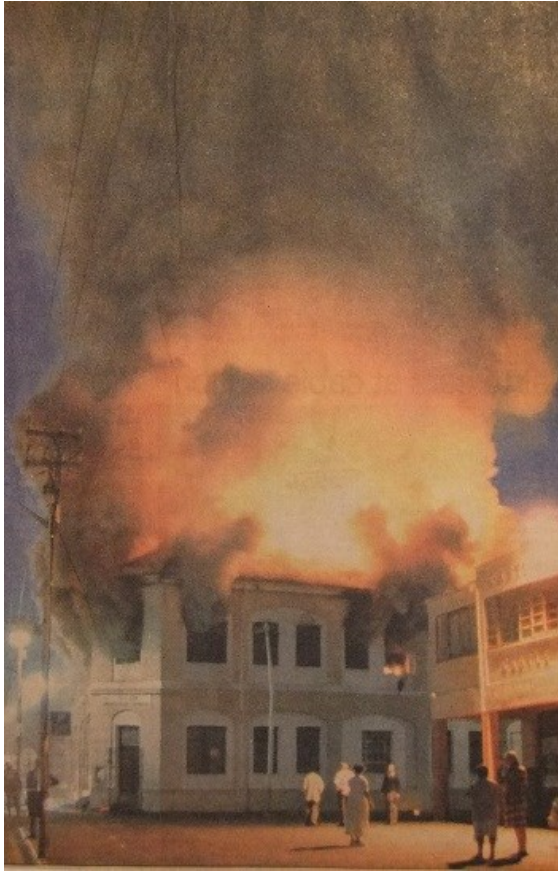
The snapshots on which I based my paintings are in many ways random. They feature elements in my house such as ornaments, light fittings and architectural details, the peri-urban environment viewed from my house and details of the urban and industrial environment of Cape Town. As I have lived in Cape Town all my life, I view the city as an extension of my home and much of the imagery in my paintings is based on views of the commercial and semi-industrial environment of the city.

With regard to paintings of banal subject matter, British curator Norman Rosenthal (b. 1944) makes a provocative comment in the catalogue of the show *Apocalypse*, held at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2000. He writes:

Painting on canvas has become a difficult art. To avoid banality it is ever more necessary to confront that very banality of everyday experience; the things which strike the painter as worthy of attention seem usually arbitrary and become startling just because beauty (to which painting inevitably aspires) is so close to the banal and so far from the heroic.

(Rosenthal et al. 2000:24)

In pondering this statement, I realised that I am startled by seemingly banal things in the environment usually only when they appear in certain light conditions. Ephemeral effects of light can transform mundane things such as factory buildings or office blocks into ethereal phenomena: for a split second, their grimy concrete presence is dissolved by beatific brightness or enigmatic veils of shadow. These transient light effects generally rob objects of their three-dimensional definition, creating the spatial ambiguity



Examples from my collection of newspaper photographs of burning structures, n.d.

suggestive of the oneiric realm. Such encounters with objects and spaces trigger or correlate with my daydreams and constitute the subject matter of my paintings.

I use photography to mediate the views and objects that excited my interest for the rich source of aleatory compositional discoveries that my snapshots offer. I often based my paintings on ambiguous details that were not the focus of the photographs. As a result, the imagery in my paintings often appears abstract, despite its figurative source. I exploited the range of forms presented in my snapshots, from the representational to the almost abstract, to suggest the vagaries of focus I experience in the process of daydreaming. This range of forms also correlates with the imagery in my imagination, which can fluctuate from the most eidetic to the nebulous.

I all but excluded the human figure from my compositions to convey the oneiric state of consciousness as a locus of solitude. The only works in which I have included the human figure are two compositions that feature burning buildings. The paucity of detail in the rendering of these figures, however, is so extreme as to reduce the human form to a cipher.

The choice of burning structures as subject matter may seem out of keeping in a project based in the quotidian, but as Alison Gingeras notes:

[w]ith the saturation of twenty-four hour news channels and the endless stream of infotainment available on the Internet, the spectacle of disaster – whether natural or man-made – has become one of the most banal forms of experience in contemporary life. (Gingeras 2005: online)

Susan Sontag expresses a similar view in an essay titled *In Plato's cave*. Sontag asserts:

The vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world has given everyone a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible

seem more ordinary. (Sontag 2002:51)

The sources for my paintings of burning structures were newspaper clippings from many years ago. No contextual reference remains; the imagery has lost its original meaning and retains only personal symbolic value.

I often chose odd angles from which to photograph the imagery I used as references for my paintings. I also shot from a distance or very close-up, from above or below. In a way that seems pertinent to my work, Gingeras comments on form and memory in relation to the work of German artist Wilhelm Sasnal (b. 1972). She writes:

Each picture is like a jump cut, taking the viewer back and forth in time and space, from near present to distant past, bird's eye view to microscopic close-ups that dissipate into abstraction. This telescoping in-and-out resembles the way the human mind retains and transforms memories, converting them into a string of ever-mutating images.

(Gingeras 2005: online)

Gingeras's phrase, 'a string of ever-mutating images' recalls, for me, Sartre's observation (noted earlier in this paper) that images in the imaging consciousness transform rapidly from one thing to another.

Sartre asserted that the image in the imaging consciousness is unreal in colour. In light of this and in relation to the aims of my project, I find it significant that I was drawn to photograph subject matter that was subdued in colour. Further, in my paintings my palette is dominated by chromatic greys.

Many artists and writers have commented on the effect of grey in painting. South African artist Mark Hipper (1960-2010) describes grey as a colour that is "mediated and removed from the immediate sensory experience of the world" (Hipper 2010:87).



Eminent German painter Gerhard Richter is recorded as having a similar view. In the catalogue *Jasper Johns: gray*, Richter is cited as saying that grey “makes no statement whatever; it evokes neither feelings nor associations; it is really neither visible nor invisible ... It has the capacity that no other colour has to make ‘nothing’ visible” (Rondeau & Druick 2007:70). In commenting on the greys used by the American painter Jasper Johns (b. 1930), curator of the Art Institute of Chicago, James Rondeau, writes that grey “plays host to the intangible” (Rondeau & Druick 2007:29), adding later that grey can be used “to conjure a zone of ambiguity” (Rondeau & Druick 2007:31).

In my painting process I mixed chromatic greys that are variously expressive, using a variety of blues, browns, reds and yellows mixed with white. Chromatic greys can be diaphanous or ethereal, and can be sparked into vibrancy by the juxtaposition of hues that may visually activate the component colours of the chromatic greys. They can suggest concrete materiality, recalling Jasper Johns’s putative belief that grey “is a neutral colour which gives the painting a more literal or objective quality than any other colour” (Rondeau & Druick 2007:48). I manipulated this variety in an attempt to create different moods in my paintings. For instance, in the series *Elevation* I intended the mood to be sombre and the paintings are accordingly dominated by a heavy, dull grey mixed with burnt umber and ultramarine blue. In the series *Smoke and mirrors* I aimed to create an agitated mood by introducing harsh contrasts between fairly neutral greys and flashes of bright colour. In the series *City of dreams* I tried to project a mood of silence and calm using subtle pastel greys, some of which tend towards blue and others that have a pinkish tinge.

Sartre points out that spatial dubiety is a feature of imagery in the imaging consciousness. I became increasingly interested in spatial ambiguity and tried to exploit

formal devices to suggest spatial uncertainty in my work, often giving equal emphasis to positive and negative shapes and seldom overlapping shapes. Shapes that overlap provide a cue in the process of perception that often helps to establish the spatial relationships between objects in the visual field. In my paintings, the suggestion of space is generally shallow and tonal modelling is near absent. I attempted thereby to reduce the illusion of three-dimensionality. I often minimised descriptive detail and inverted the relationship between solid structures and shadows in an attempt to destabilise the relationship between figure and ground.

Oneirism exists in thought only and in terms of my project, South African painter and academic Penny Siopis makes the compelling assertion that painting “is an emanation of thought” (Siopis 2005:37). Painting engages the intellect as well as the body in tracing emotional energies on a surface. In this regard, American art theorist James Elkins describes the painted surface as “a cast made of the painter’s movements, a portrait of the painter’s body and thoughts” (Elkins 1999:5). He goes on to say that “[p]aint records the most delicate gesture and the most tense” (Elkins 1999:5) He adds that brush marks “executed by a relaxed hand argues for – no, it urges me to fall into – a tranquil frame of mind” (Elkins 1999:197).

Mindful of these remarks, I was very conscious of the brushwork in my paintings. I usually held my paint brush in a loose grip and my mark-making varies from rough to a fairly refined finish. My motivation was to reflect the moods I experienced in oneiric episodes and the variety in the type of daydreams I have. The moods I experience in oneirism range from agitation to absolute calm, and my daydreams range from fleeting thoughts to more sustained passages of contemplation. I tried to register these experiences as much through brush marks as other means.

The expressive and inventive potential of paint is inexhaustible. As American art theorist and educator Dan Nadaner asserts “[p]aint, as a plastic medium, is a medium of all possibilities” (Nadaner 1998:173). Painting poses questions about representation that are manifest in the materiality of the surface. A dry surface quality predominates in my work as I seldom added oil to my paints. I mixed my paints with quantities of turpentine to produce the dry finish in many of my paintings, which emphasises the scumbling technique I often used. I generally applied paint thinly and made little attempt to conceal underpainting. In addition, I used erasure to suggest the inchoate thoughts that I often have while daydreaming. In some works, residues of paint and brushwork can be seen that create interesting subcutaneous palimpsests of marks and colours, suggesting hidden realms and recalling for me a cogent statement made by Penny Siopis. In an interview in 2005, Siopis makes an analogy between painting and skin, which “suggests something between outside and inside, surface and depth. Painting is expressive of what lies on the surface and what lies beneath, the imaginary realm [...]” (Nuttall 2005:36).

The materiality of painting has great appeal for me: I am attracted to the smell of turpentine, the texture of oil paints, the fluidity of ink and watercolours and the challenges involved in colour mixing. I relate to the description Penny Siopis gives of paint as a “carnal medium” (Nuttall 2005:36) and the analogy James Elkins makes between painting and the arcane art of alchemy in that both are “negotiations between water and stone” (Elkins 1999:1).⁶ Most of all, I enjoy the challenge of using paint in an attempt to transmute mundane subject matter into objects of contemplation and, in relation to this project, may evoke the nature of oneirism.

A discussion of my body of work is the subject of the next chapter.

⁶ In terms of painting, ‘water’ denotes the fluid medium (water, oil, egg, etc.); pigments derive from stone. Elkins equates the alchemist’s laboratory with the painter’s studio and points out that both artists and alchemists think in “substances and processes” (Elkins 1999:4).

CHAPTER SIX

Triggers and trajectories

I begin this chapter with a reflection on the convention of titling paintings and comment on my own use of titles in this project. I discuss my work in terms of my sources and draw out some of the connections I make between my painting practice and oneirism.

Morandi and Tuymans, the two artists whose work has been most influential in informing my practice, use titling very differently. Morandi's work has generic titles or is simply labelled *Untitled*. Judging from current interest in his work, these very basic titles do not appear to diminish the emotional impact of his work. However, the imperatives of the historical moment in which artists practice must be taken into account when considering titling. In keeping with the postmodern emphasis on the semantic interpretation of subject matter (Webster 2010:66), Tuymans often uses titles and appended texts to amplify the meaning of his work, as has been noted.

In commenting on the titles Tuymans gives his paintings, British art critic Adrian



Luc Tuymans, *Diagnostic view V* (1992). Oil on canvas, 58.1 x 41.9 cm.; examples of my preliminary work in acrylic ink, each 10 x 10 cm.

Searle made an interesting point in a panel discussion staged during a show of Tuymans's work at the Tate Modern in London in 2004. He noted that Duchamp viewed titles as "another colour on your palette" (Searle et al. 2004). Andrew Benjamin expands on this point in his book *Art, mimesis, and the avant-garde* (1991). He claims that a painting has two levels of existence: 'painting-as-object' and 'painting-as-object-of-interpretation.' For Benjamin a title has significance on both levels: it is useful in distinguishing one 'painting-as-object' from other 'paintings-as-objects.' In addition, he opines that a title adds an illuminating dimension to a 'painting-as-object-of-interpretation.' As language is dynamic, the meaning of a title is not fixed and Benjamin believes, therefore, that a 'painting-as-object-of-interpretation' is forever open to reinterpretation, enriching the experience of an art work in perpetuity (Benjamin 1991:78).

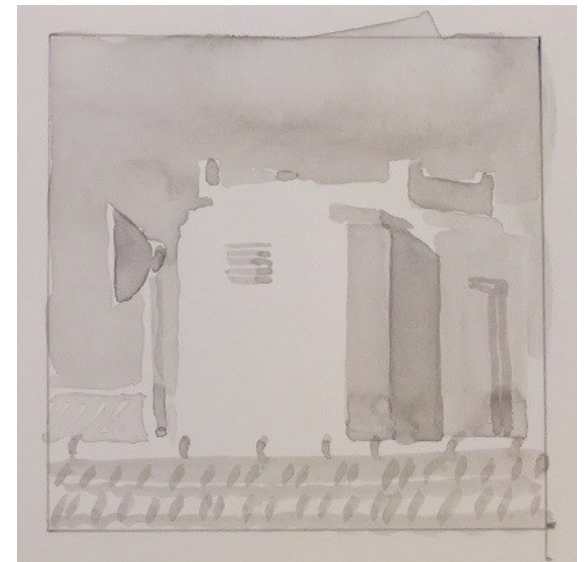
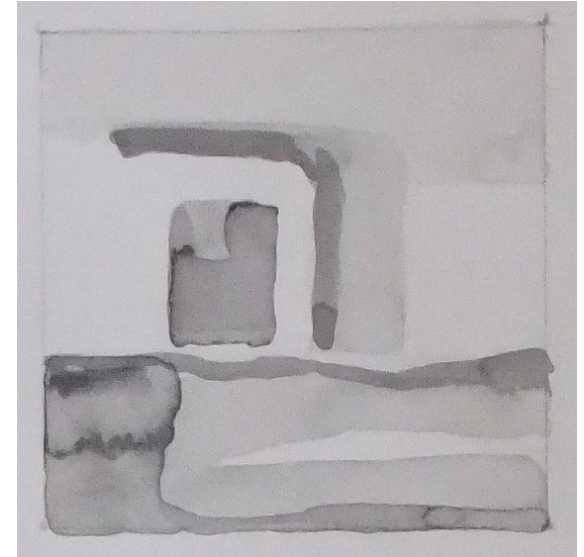
I had thought of leaving my paintings untitled to avoid directing viewers' interpretation of the work too emphatically, but in light of Duchamp's observation and Benjamin's persuasive argument, I reconsidered this idea. Tuymans often works in series. In some instances the series is titled and each piece in the series is numbered. Examples of such series are *Diagnostic view* (1992), *Heritage* (1996), and *Against the day* (2009). Despite this practice of titling and numbering, Tuymans views each of his works as autonomous. In keeping with Tuymans's model, I titled each series and numbered each work in the series, but view each of my paintings as autonomous.

The exploratory work with which I began this project remains untitled, as I view those works as experiments that initiated my field of research. This preliminary work comprises a series of paintings in black acrylic ink on paper. To keep the paintings as fluid as possible and to allow a more direct flow from mind to hand, I worked loosely using a size 12 sable hair brush, even in the smallest pieces. As source material, I used my

own snapshots of my surroundings, in addition to porcelain dolls' heads, photographed at the Milnerton flea market. The imagery I found most compelling derived from photographs of peri-urban views taken from the balcony of my house. I drew on this imagery as the basis of the first series of oil paintings I made.

As noted, by working in series I aimed to suggest oneirism as episodic. Additionally, I intended each series to allude to different types of oneirism. In some series, imagery springs from one picture to another (either obviously or unexpectedly). In other series, I painted the sort of random imagery that sparks some of my daydreams. In some paintings I attempted to capture the moment of inattention that often triggers many of my daydreams. In one series I referenced the abstract entoptic imagery generated within the optic system that extends from the eye to the neural cortex, where visual stimuli are interpreted. Entoptic imagery is most often experienced in the hypnagogic state prior to sleep. The paintings that refer to this type of oneiric imagery are based on my photographs of repetitive details in the built environment.

In a series of two diptychs and a triptych, I aimed to suggest brief oneiric flashes.





Elevation

I intended the paintings in this series to operate as objects of contemplation or triggers of oneiric episodes. In order to emphasise their quality as objects in the physical world, each painting has a bulky, though simple, rectilinear frame which I view as an integral part of the paintings.

I called the series *Elevation* for two reasons. First, I photographed the views on which I based these compositions from the elevated position of the balcony of my house. Secondly, most of the imagery used in this series depicts frontal views of buildings, known as 'elevation views' in architectural terms.

In some of the paintings the geometric shapes of the buildings are contrasted with curvilinear shapes that depict vegetation. A mixture of burnt umber and ultramarine blue is the basis of most of the chromatic greys I used.

Supports: hardboard covered with primed canvas.

Dimensions: 14 x 14 cm.





Smoke and mirrors

The title of this series alludes to representational painting as an art of illusion and relates to the subject matter I used, which ranges from mirrors to burning structures. The imagery is intentionally varied to suggest the randomness of some sequences of images in the imaging consciousness.

Some of the imagery in this series was based on my own photographs that focus on a single object, such as a window, a mirror or a light-fitting. Others derived from newspaper photographs of burning structures. These latter representations have significance for me in that one of my earliest childhood memories is of a burning factory in the suburb in which I now live. Since then, similar imagery has been a powerful stimulus of my daydreams. For me, this bears out Bachelard's belief that daydreams originate in a nexus of memory and the imagination.

My memory of the factory fire is one of fascination rather than trauma. In that fires are ephemeral and their form constantly changes, I intended my paintings of burning structures to be viewed as metaphors for both the transient nature of daydreams and the perpetual motion in the imaging consciousness. However, I am aware that the idea of destruction and violence is inherent in imagery of burning structures, and I intended this conceptual link to suggest a sense of disquiet in this series. For the same reason, my paint application is sketchy and underpainting is evident. In some works I used erasure to reveal the texture of the support and allude to half-formed thoughts that often characterise my agitated daydreams. By introducing sharp contrasts of bright reds and greens into some of the compositions, I hoped to amplify a sense of anxiety in this series. Supports: plywood covered with primed cotton fabric.

Dimensions: 42.8 x 30.5 cm.





City of dreams

The title of this series was taken from a translation of Baudelaire's poem *Les Sept vieillards* (The seven old men) in which the poet describes a disturbing hallucinatory experience of the city. The experience leaves him feeling like a mast-less bark in a stormy sea. For me, the ideas suggested an oneiric episode.

Details of mundane commercial buildings constitute the subject matter of these paintings, but I intended the buildings to look otherworldly. The chromatic greys I used range from warm greys, into which I have mixed cadmium red, to greys that are decidedly blue. I used cerulean blue in the mixture of some of the greys, hoping for a more ethereal effect. In many of the paintings I made sure that the yellow primer was vaguely visible through my brushwork.

The yellow I used to prime the supports is a mixture of chrome yellow and cadmium yellow. I did not paint over the structural sides of the paintings and the halation of harsh yellow reflected on to the wall around each work contrasts uneasily with the chromatic greys I used in painting the imagery. I intended this effect to evoke the element of fear that Sartre notes as a characteristic feature of the unreal realm of the imaging consciousness.

Supports: hardboard covered with primed canvas.

Dimensions: 30.2 x 22.3 cm.





Styx

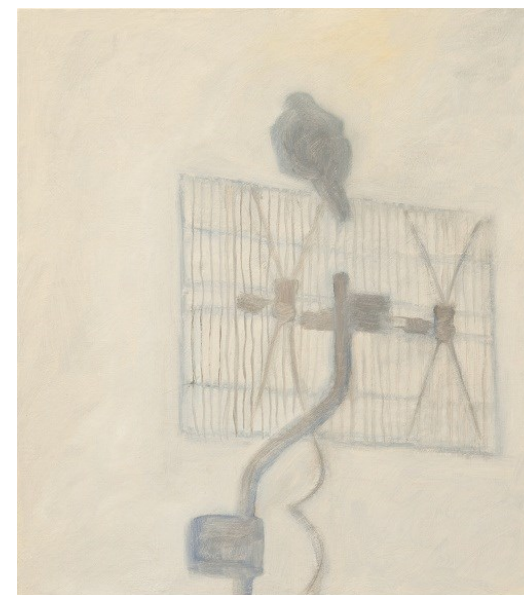
The title *Styx* refers to the River Styx that separates the living from the dead in Greek mythology. This reference relates to a death in my family that triggered the series. I also used the title for its phonetic parallel (in my pronunciation) with the word 'sticks' to refer to the stick-like wire structures that occur in most of the paintings.

I derived the imagery in this series from linear elements in the urban and suburban environment: television aerials, overhead telephone wires, an oil rig and a fire escape ladder. I included three birds in the series and a chimney cowl with a bird-like detail to provide contrast.

I used shades of grey that are mixtures of titanium white, ultramarine blue and burnt umber, to which I occasionally added alizarin crimson, cadmium red and cadmium yellow. For me, these greys had a quality of concrete physicality that created a subtly disturbing contrast with the prevalence of sky in the imagery used in this series.

Supports: hardboard covered with cotton fabric primed with acrylic gesso.

Dimensions: 49.8 x 43.4 cm.





Grids and grilles

The title *Grids and grilles* refers to my subject matter. All the imagery was derived from photographs of patterned elements in my domestic surroundings and the urban environment. Such things as a manhole cover and the grille in the back of a truck provided linear patterning. I derived curvilinear designs from the pattern of a ceiling rose in my house, a fireplace fender, and shadows cast by a chandelier. I intended the patterns in these paintings to refer to abstract entoptic imagery as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

Entoptic imagery is unique to each individual who experiences it because, as noted, it is generated within the optic system. Research has revealed that entoptic imagery becomes clearer in a trance state induced by ritual drumming, dancing, chanting and/or ingesting hallucinogenic substances. In medicine, entoptic imagery is narrowly defined as existing in the eye alone. More broadly defined, entoptic imagery is visual imagery that emanates from anywhere along the entire optic system. Interestingly, entoptic imagery is believed to be the source of the abstract forms found in rock art worldwide and across the eons. This notion was first argued by South African archaeologist David Lewis-Williams (b. 1934) (Szostek 2012: online).

In a non-trance or sober state, the entoptic imagery most often experienced is rendered by protein formations that are amoeba-like and can be seen when viewing an expanse of a single colour such as the sky or a wall. These forms are often referred to as 'floaters.' Other entopic imagery is generated by the impressions of the blood vessels in the eye. In addition, spots of light known as phosphenes and geometric patterns are commonly experienced.

I prepared the surfaces of the paintings in this series with gesso made with rabbit





skin glue, chalk whiting, water and linseed oil. The concoction had to be stirred constantly in a pot on a hotplate at a low temperature until it emulsifies. The laborious task reminded me of the analogy James Elkins makes between painting and alchemy. Each layer of gesso had to be sanded down before the next layer could be applied and five layers was the minimum requirement for an acceptable surface. For me, the surface presented a challenge. I found that paint was absorbed immediately into the gesso, precluding scumbling in initial layers of paint. In addition, the colours darkened as the paint dried, and nuances of tone seemed to flatten out. Once the gesso was sealed with a few layers of paint, I found the surface easier to work on. I tended to apply more paint than I did in painting on other surfaces and the process was slow.

When I experience entoptic imagery, my eyes dart around trying to focus on the forms that I see but as my eyes move so do the forms, constantly eluding focus. I find the experience mildly vexing and I hope that the paintings in this series evoke this feeling.

Supports: hardboard primed with gesso.

Dimensions: 30 x 30 cm.





Rhythm

This series was designed to hang in a clustered configuration. This clustered approach was inspired by the multi-panelled works of varying sizes and formats that the American artist Ida Applebroog (b.1929) has produced from the late 1980s. A typical example is *Untitled—rat* (1993).

The title of the cluster relates to the rhythmic elliptical shape that occurs in most of the paintings. To provide caesura in the series and to reference the unexpected juxtapositions of mental imagery that occur in oneirism, there are two works in which the elliptical shape does not appear. One is a picture of a city view and the subject matter of the other is an air vent in a wall. The vent was painted into a rectangular depression in the canvas, which created a reference to three-dimensional space by which I hoped to add interest to the picture.

Supports: stretched canvas; hardboard covered with canvas or cotton fabric.

Dimensions: the paintings vary in size and orientation: some are vertical, others horizontal. The smallest is 49.7 x 43.2 cm and the largest is 92.2 x 90 cm.



Ida Applebroog *Untitled—rat* (1993). Watercolor on paper, 121.3 x 99 cm.



Interview

Interview is a series of paintings made in response to an online talk between Luc Tuymans and Adrian Searle for *The Guardian* (Searle 2012: online). The talk was recorded during a show of Tuymans's work that inaugurated the David Zwirner Gallery in London in 2012. Conscious of being distracted by peripheral details in the video recording while watching the interview, I stopped the video periodically to photograph relevant scenes. I used sections of these photographs as the basis of the compositions in this series.

The brushwork in these works is fairly delicate and I used blue-green greys as a reference to the quality of light in the video. My aim was to reflect the contemplative mood in which I made the paintings.

Supports: hardboard covered in cotton fabric; one support is covered with Polish linen.

Dimensions: 28.2 x 21 cm.





Dptychs

The diptychs that represent brief oneiric flashes are titled *Compromised* and *Excursion*. To emphasise the brevity and nebulousness of this type of oneiric experience, the quality of painting in these diptychs and the triptych *Isolated* is deliberately sketchy.

In the diptych *Compromised*, the piece on the left depicts a hand shadow, an activity I found fascinating as a child. In the painting, hands cast a shadow that looks like a goose being captured or strangled. This imagery relates to a favourite childhood fairytale of mine from the collection of the Brothers Grimm. Titled *The six swans*, the story involves a princess whose wicked stepmother transforms her six brothers into swans. In order to restore her brothers to their human form, the princess must make shirts for them by a certain date. She completes all but one of the shirts by the deadline. Because the unfinished shirt has only one sleeve, the princess's youngest brother is doomed to continue life with one wing and one arm. The depiction of penguins in the painting on the right was based on a magazine photograph I kept for years. Penguins are compromised in that they are birds that cannot fly.

Excursion depicts structures in water. The imagery was based on my own photographs, one of which was taken in the Bainskloof mountains where I often spent holidays as a child. The other was taken on the sea east of Venice.

Supports: hardboard covered with cotton fabric.

Dimensions: 50.8 x 40.8 cm.





Isolated, a triptych of square works, depicts ships at sea. A photograph I took of a ship in Table Bay was the source of the imagery of the central panel. The flanking paintings that depict ships aflame were based on imagery I found on the Internet.

Supports: hardboard covered with cotton fabric.

Dimensions: 30 x 30 cm.

Although I produced my paintings in series, I painted each of them as an autonomous work. I designed the cluster of paintings to hang in a particular configuration and the series titled *Styx* was designed to hang in two rows. I envisaged the other series in horizontal bands. To emphasise the autonomy of the paintings I intend to separate the works displayed in rows by some distance. I intend to hang the work fairly low on the walls and place minimalist benches in the centre of the gallery in the hope of encouraging viewers to sit and view the paintings.

The preliminary paintings in acrylic ink will be displayed in a display case. A few larger works will be hung on a wall of the gallery.



CONCLUSION

My aim to produce paintings of a contemplative nature using mundane phenomena as my subject matter led me to the concept of oneirism as the focus of this project. In an attempt to develop an understanding of oneirism, I discovered the writings of French philosophers Gaston Bachelard, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Their writings appealed to me not only for the profundity of the concepts expressed, but also for the poetic quality of their expression, a quality I feel offers an appropriate vehicle through which to articulate ideas about the nebulous realm of oneirism.

Far from being the taboo subject that Freud's attitude of dismissal may suggest, I found that oneirism has been a topic of ongoing research in the fields of psychology and neuroscience since the 1960s. I read texts by scholars in these disciplines that gave credence to the concepts formulated earlier by the French philosophers. The more I read about oneirism the greater my interest became in developing a way to manifest the concept through my painting practice.

My interest in the work of Giorgio Morandi is longstanding and I am intrigued that aspects of his poetics relate strongly to notions of the nature of the imaging consciousness, as described by Sartre and Bachelard. Luc Tuymans's work can be closely compared with Morandi's in this regard, although I am cognisant of the fact that his concerns relate more directly to the major political, historical and psychological issues of his day. I examined the paintings of Morandi and Tuymans in relation to my aim to manifest the idea of oneirism in paint. Mindful of the fact that the definition of painting in contemporary art practice is elastic, I also considered work produced by artists in media other than paint that, for me, evokes notions of oneirism.

Informed by my research, I hope I have developed a way to amplify in words the unreal realm of oneirism that I explored through my paintings. As I discovered from my research, oneirism is an important human cognitive function in the continuum of consciousness. Oneirism is the source of creative thinking and can furnish a way of adapting to the stresses of reality. It can relieve the tension engendered by monotonous activities (Singer 1974) and provide the means to rehearse future encounters, or to process emotions such as anger without consequence (Glausiusz 2009). As a coping mechanism, some scholars argue that oneirism is vital to human psychological health. In the words of Bachelard:

There is no well-being without reverie. No reverie without well-being.

(Bachelard 1971:152-153)

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