CLAIMING PROCESS

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For Eleanor and Chris

CLAIMING PROCESS:

A strategy of production in approaching notions of self, biography and community in painting.

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Addendum/Errata

p 3, 57, *Njabulo* should read *Ndebele*
p 5, *...on the southern side of the Thames...* should read *...on the banks of the Thames...*
p 14, (line 5) *women* should read *woman*
p 17, *...Sylvia's feelings being perceived...* should read *...Sylvia's negative feelings being perceived...*
p 18, the first paragraph should read *...woman, to feel this way. In its lack of sensitivity towards Sylvia I expose my own prejudices and judgement of her as a 'subject'. I believe the painting shows my negative feelings about her behaviour and creates an impression that she should 'pull herself together'. Sylvia and I are both 'privileged European foreigners' and the white mothers of mixed race children, at the time of making this painting we were both newly adapting to life in South Africa, perhaps the distancing mechanisms employed in this painting reflect my fear that our circumstances could easily be construed as reflecting each others.*
p 21, *figuarative* should read *figurative*
p 53, *Giotto* should read *Sassetta*

CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

My project is an exploration of process within the painting medium, themed round my experiences of 'self' and community, as located in my past and present circumstances. Throughout my work, my intention has been to explore my social, personal and political 'beliefs' in order to create a body of paintings that both reflects and challenges my 'belief' structures. In my work there are contradictory desires for change and stability, and an ongoing struggle between location and dislocation.

Most of my life has been spent in South London, Britain, in a neighbourhood made up predominantly of immigrants to Britain and their offspring. This neighbourhood has gone through constant evolution/change/expansion and amalgamation, people's identities have formed and re-formed, and familial cultures and 'boundaries' have blurred beyond recognition (40 per cent of the children of this community are of mixed-race origin). Although fundamentalism and cultural separatism have re-emerged across Britain, in South London the divide between where one culture ends and another begins is no longer discernable. As a result of my 'communal' upbringing and my family's politicisation, I grew up intensely interested in how communities change through the actions of individuals.

At the age of twenty, fuelled by a desire to find common human purpose, I joined the Communist Party in Britain but I found it completely lacking in communal spirit (I felt it operated as a forum for the theoretical construction of a 'new world', completely lacking in anything I could conceive of as addressing the issues emerging from societal enactments in my community or personal struggles).
My early work experience in an old-age home and factories had taught me the importance of people being viewed as individuals in maintaining their dignity and sense of choice[1]. Working in community based organisations in Britain and South Africa I discovered how the sharing of intimate experiences encourages exchange, dialogue and communion and can promote the growth of whole communities.
When I began painting (at the age of twenty-three) I found there was an imperative to evoke intimacy and access my own 'voice'.

I believe my practical work for the Masters programme has been shaped jointly by my experience of the British 'culture' in which I grew up, my experience of family and of South Africa as a 'foreigner' – especially the complex didactic of being a 'white middle-class' (read British) foreigner in South Africa living in a rich, white, suburban environment (compared to my neighbourhood in Britain and most areas in South Africa), and living here with my black British husband and mixed-race daughter. By exploring issues that arise out of these didactics within a personal

1. At the age of fourteen I began working voluntarily in old age homes. I discovered how important it is for people to share their stories and be treated with respect as individuals. I saw how an absence of these basic requirements shrivels people both mentally and physically and how the validation of individuals leads to them both attempting to expand their horizons and challenge their limitations. At the age of fifteen I started my first paid work, in a local cheese factory and then in a rubber factory. From this work I gained personal insight into how the universe feels when contracted into the length of a day's work, spent on one 'meaningless,' repetitive interaction, and I experienced within a matter of weeks my own sense of shrivelling. (I remember forming a crush on another worker simply to have something to keep my mind occupied.). Both factories I worked in employed staff illegally, broke health and safety regulations and expected staff to work minimum fifty hour weeks yet no one complained. I packed these jobs in predominantly because of the inanity of the production and the overwhelming nature of a system that clearly would not change. At eighteen I began work in the community sector initially on a government training scheme in my own community. I discovered my vocation, to create situations in which individual and societal change could occur.

forum, I hope to create work that serves as a tool for communication and elicits a sense of intimacy and participation in the experience, rather than spectacle.

Morgan suggests (in *The End of the Art World*) that 'the audience for art wants to feel intimacy in human expression in spite of all the indications that spectacle has taken over' (1998: xxii). It is my contention that 'personal' aesthetic and narrative content in painting may have a socially transformative effect, by way of broaching intimacy. I believe intimacy could lead to different enactments and constructions of society.

In the first section I look at how environmental factors affect the aesthetic and social understandings of art – with particular reference to locating 'self' within an urban construct – I look at issues relating to 'community' and 'identity', with particular emphasis on how these pertain to my work. I shall explore the relevance I perceive societally of examinations of self, identity and community within painting – namely their potential to act as transformative vehicles.

In the second section I explore those theoretical models that I believe have limited the societal scope of painting by placing painting within the orbit of restrictive 'meanings'. Stuart Hall (quoted by Richards 1999: 180) highlights the ways 'meanings' are constructed societally:

> Events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects outside of the sphere of the discursive; but only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning. Thus ... how things are represented and the "machineries" and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – a formative, and not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life.

I would suggest that this statement is a double-edged sword. One can have a 'formative' role in redefining culture through 'scenarios of representation' yet only within 'specific conditions, limits and modalities' do they have 'meaning'.

Part of my desire to critique past and present conscriptions of 'meanings' in art and the 'machineries' and 'regimes' that represent them is to demonstrate their inadequacy in generating challenging, transformative and socially 'meaningful' art. It has become apparent to me that the reception of my paintings may be dictated by the viewers' expectations of the painting premised on their 'understanding' of art construed within restrictive 'meanings'. I argue that paintings with social content antithetical to the mainstream 'political' agendas of their day have often been marginalized by Western theorists. This subject is of particular interest to me as an artist from the 'West' and trained in the 'West'.

I shall look critically at the 'Western linear model' and the frameworks that evolved from it to assess painting. In my view it has been the most pervasive system (world wide) in setting agendas/theoretical models for painting since the Late Renaissance. Metcalf discussing the impact of Western constructs on art world wide (1994: 218)

contends: 'In modern society the inside is normally associated with the most powerful socio-economic groups existing at the centre of cultural power. They demonstrate, exercise, and preserve their power through their ability to create and enforce the dominant definitions of normal and deviant, superior and inferior.' In *Rethinking African Arts and Culture*, Osundare challenges the 'complacency with which Western theories take over the global literary and intellectual arena' (Njabulo, Osundare 2000: 115, 117). I suggest that the Western 'linear model' has had far-reaching consequences for how 'art' has been documented and classified and concur with Ames, who contends that 'classification is one of the major legacies of the so-called Age of Reason' (1994: 260). In the second section I shall focus on those models within the 'linear construct' which have acted as controls or 'closed classes' on painting and have, I believe, reduced the capacity of painting to be viewed as a transformative agent within society, particularly from the perspective of Western art theories.

In the third section I look at privileging process as a strategy for creating 'transformative' art, with a particular emphasis on improvisation in creating intimate, narrative structures. To improvise means to extemporize, literally to work out of the time. As improvisation has, by definition, no liminal end point, I would suggest that it is a matter of process, not conclusion. Elkins, in *What painting Is* (2000: 78), writes about the links between alchemy and improvisation in painting. He contends that 'what an artist knows is principally what will happen in the next second, not the next hour or month. Thoughts at the moment of beginning are only guideposts, and the actual substance of the work is entirely inchoate.' This suggests multiple possibilities within the process of the work as well as multiple interpretations ' [the] painting becomes a collaboration between the artist's desires and the unpredictable tendencies of the paint' (Elkins 2000: 121). In the fourth section I discuss how I make paintings in relation to the previous sections.

Overall I agree with Morgan who, in writing about contemporary art and critical theory, asserts that:

> the challenge is how to rediscover the act of seeing in this desperate age of speed and information, how to slow down and regain consciousness (and feeling) and how to enter the world once again with an open mind and a new vision of what the future may hold with the prospect that it may actually benefit our lives. Artists have the power to redefine culture in their own terms – this is the crux of the matter in art today' (1998: xxii).

Perhaps one of the most potent means we have of 'regaining consciousness' and 'slowing down', is acknowledging communication in art rather than conclusion and intimacy rather than spectacle. I attempt to make painting in a manner which privileges process over conclusion, with a view to creating work that is both physically durable and socially relevant.

SELF AS SITE OF DIALOGUE – subjectivity, personal testimony and biography

'The more the people unveil [the] challenging reality which is to be the object of their transforming action, the more critically they enter that reality ... In this way they are consciously activating the subsequent development of their experiences. There will be no human action if man were not a 'projection', if he were not able to transcend himself, to perceive his reality and understand it in order to transform it' (Freire 1972: 29).

In this section I shall briefly discuss some of the implications – as I perceive them – of positioning 'self' within the remit of painting, looking particularly at areas of interest that have arisen out of this search.

I shall draw on my own background and experiences by means of explanation for some of my explorations.

Using subjectivity as a means of engaging with social concerns

Paulo Freire, the author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, contends that subjectivity is essential in enabling social transformation. 'To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history, is naive and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible – a world without men, the objectivistic position is as ingenious as that of subjectivism, which postulates men without a world. World and men do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction.' (1972: 77). Freire maintains that one needs to assert subjectivity in order to critically examine the themes which constitute our reality and act upon them. In my painting I attempt to transcribe and explore events that I perceive as the 'themes' of which my life is constituted in order to explore and communicate my own social and aesthetic understanding of my experiences. Giroux, discussing the relevance of subjectivity to 'Resistance Postmodernism', contends that 'We are able to negotiate and redraw maps of meaning, desire and difference; [Resistance] Postmodernism inscribes the social and individual body with new intellectual and emotional investments and it calls into question traditional forms of power and accompanying modes of ligitimation.' (1991: 200).

When I first looked at Carel Weight's paintings, in the context of the Tate Gallery in London, I found it clumsy, awkward and naïve and I experienced embarrassment for him and his work. I was aware that it was the intimacy of my experience of his work that I found discomforting. Weight adopted an idiosyncratic personal style that premised narrative content and expression over 'formal' considerations, creating personal spaces within an urban construct which is uncommon among British artists portraying working-class environments.

Weight clearly felt both an empathy with his surroundings and a distancing (he

describes himself as middle class, of German and English origin and raised in a working-class neighbourhood in South London). This dichotomy is, I believe, characteristic of the general psyche of urban dwellers living in mixed cultural and class environments. His works' placement in an established state art institution brought his personal dichotomy into the public sphere, the public in this instance being predominantly white, middle-class gallery goers. It struck me then that state-owned galleries in London would become more accessible to the general public if more work reflected the multiple personal, complex realities of individuals from the city, and enabled wider reflections on 'reality.' Both Tate galleries in London are national institutions on the southern side of the Thames, and with free admission they are not as such inaccessible to the majority of Londoners. At present Carel Weight's work reads as an anomaly in the vast sea of formal art at the Tate Gallery, and is rarely shown. (My initial unease with his work was, I believe, enhanced by my recognition of the places he represented and of my own intimate experiences within his work, as if he had 'exposed' my reality in the context of the formal gallery.)

My response to Weight's paintings intrigued me, and I sought out other examples of his work. I found that to view them I had to lose my notion of 'art training' and 'correctness' and find other means to access them. I was moved by these works and the images stuck with me and grew in my imagination. Their aesthetic corresponded in many ways with my own, and I recognized the narrative contexts. In looking at the paintings and learning to appreciate their complexities and subtleties, I felt participation in the process of creating them within my construction of meaning. Cardinal, in *The Artist Outsider*, contends that '...the appeal of certain artworks might lie in their capacity to inspire a fantasy of participation whereby the viewer imagines joining in the very processes of their making. This speculation could hardly apply to works in the classical mode in which the principle of *ars est celare artem* tends to discredit any reminder of material fabrication' (1994: 35).

Weight enabled me to see the power of painting placed within the construct of personal/societal narrative and personal aesthetic and encouraged me to make work within the orbit of my own experience.

Biography

In the process of painting I use cultural, political and familial 'realities' as sites for exploration, asserting that 'actualities' are situated in lived experience. By placing myself within my work I hope to create an opportunity for exploration of the facets or themes that constitute my reality, as an ongoing process of enquiry. Freire contends that 'apart from enquiry, apart from the praxis, men cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful enquiry men pursue in the world with the world and with each other' (1972: 46). In adopting an autobiographical approach within the framework of my perceived experiences I hope to create work that operates as a vehicle for exploration and 'interchange.'

By using autobiography as a starting point for my work, I root the work in an interpretation of 'actual' experience. Biographical writing had a huge influence on me in childhood. Primo Levi's *If this is a man*, George Orwell's *Down and Out in London and Paris*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Nell Dunn's *Up the Junction* stand out as having a seminal influence on my formative years. They inspired me to actions and behaviours that may otherwise have lain dormant; they articulated different ways of seeing and perceiving the world as well as ways of experiencing it and interacting with it. They spoke to the individual's ability to enact change and to self-determination not as a political objective but as a reality, creating a personal, partial view of events. Giroux (1991: 69) argues that 'partiality becomes a political necessity as part of the discourse of locating oneself within rather than outside of history and ideology.' And as Barasch (1998: 27) contends, 'Pure perception would require us to shed the impact of accumulated culture that is part and parcel of our human existence.' I believe that the strength of the books I have mentioned lies in their ability to paint a multifaceted picture of the events they record, a picture that manages to go beyond most works of fiction which often reduce the individual elements to their relevance as a vehicle for plot.

I looked at artists who have used painting as a means of expressing 'personal' aesthetic that reflected their multifaceted vision of community and representation (such as Courbet, Weight, Shahn, Salomon, Bearden and Bester), and found that their work, although using many formal devices, was personalised by its placement in the context of the artists own experience, subject matter and process, in line with their own aesthetic bias.

I believe that humans do not share one central, aesthetic norm, and that aesthetic understanding is learnt primarily through familial and societal experience. By exploring personal aesthetic I believe one can create a wider diversity of understanding and appreciation of art than within the confines of 'centralized' or 'normative' procedure. I also believe that, as cultural histories are not fixed entities, aesthetic understanding is open to reinterpretations. Painting can be perceived as a site for posing problems rather than offering solutions. Disjuncture, disharmony, self-diversity and conflict could therefore be seen as relevant objectives. Welch (1990) opines, '[radical] Postmodernists are arguing for a plurality of voices and narratives, that is for different narratives that represent the un-representable, for stories that emerge from historically specific struggles' (quoted in Giroux 1991: 69). Gustave Courbet's work demonstrates the societal and personal engagement that personal narrative and aesthetic content may enable.

Courbet grew up in a peasant farming family and as a painter he wished to reflect these origins and the community in which he lived. At the time pastoral scenes in France were primarily used as a vehicle to romanticize and idealize the rural, 'to underwrite and consolidate the attitudes and perceptions of respectable society' (Frascina 1993: 73). Courbet, on the other hand, wanted to depict his family and community, and in so doing he demythologized the 'pastoral'. His work depicted

the disparities between rich and poor and the social ambiguities of the new age, which conflicted with the notion of the pastoral forever held in the idealized past[2]. I see my work as similar to Courbet's in my desire to articulate personal space (in my case within the urban context).

Courbet developed new ways of painting using a fast, loose brush stroke and incorporating sand in his paint to add body and texture. He attempted to capture a brief moment of real time (that predated Impressionism) and gave a sense of reality or 'closeness' as opposed to a grand, theatrical space. He centred his work on the mundane and personal rather than the epic, thereby denying the viewer distance from the people in his paintings. He challenged the stereotype of the 'pastoral' with his choice of subject matter and his approach to painting, by contesting the notion of 'right' representation instituted by the Salon and attempting to create intimacy between the work and viewer. I believe that in so doing, he effectively created a space for dialogue and 'interchange' rather than control.

Frascina (1993: 79) asserts that Courbet's paintings 'called into question the value of the bourgeois audience's privileged understanding of art and its traditions, and by implication undercut the prestige of those whose self-image was flattered by their educated competence in consuming art – something that set them apart from the "lower" social orders ... The proletariat could understand Courbet not just as well as the bourgeois, but better ...' I contend that in placing his work within his own experiences Courbet was able to actively challenge accepted roles of depiction in society by providing an alternative view to that of the Salon. Courbet's work demonstrates the power of a personal/social approach. His work suggests the possibility for artists to gain new audiences for art and encourage new practitioners through the placing of art in a societal context, within the context of a personal aesthetic[3].

Environment and its effect on social and aesthetic 'understanding'– in particular relation to my work

The use of narrative content in my painting stems primarily from a desire to communicate how 'self' identity is formulated within the constructs of the family, changing community and the personal identity of public space. I do not perceive family and 'culture' as a single entity but as a constant movement in many

2. Bird (2000: 98) draws parallels between Courbet and Golub: 'Golub's paintings of the 1980s place him in the tradition of Courbet, for whom history was an event that happened between social agents interacting across the sphere of daily life, but in which relations and differences have symbolic value. Attention to detail was crucial to the specifities of pose, gesture, attire, facial expression and, significantly, the gaze, the recognizability of social roles but equally, the negation of the stereotype.'

3. Frascina (1993: 79, 80) uses Courbet's work to discuss the active role art can play in society: [His] practice stands in a different relation to modernity from either juste milleu art or Romanticism. His work raised serious issues that the bourgeois art of the Salon had almost abandoned. In Courbet's works, art loses its "aestheticism," its privileged status as "art for art's sake" in order to become something that matters socially and politically. This is one way – some theorists would say the only way – that artists can escape, even temporarily, modern "normalization"; it is one of the few ways they can avoid having their work stripped of social meaning and reduced to a commodity in the ever-extending network of capitalistic relations.' Courbet's work also reflects theanger work can generate by challenging establishment /norms', Louise Peisse, a conservative critic of the time, considered that 'the nation is in danger ... [Courbet's] painting is an engine of revolution' (quoted in Frascina 1993: 73)

directions. My cultural ancestry is diverse and fragmented. Each generation on both sides have married outside their own religious group, class and/or country of origin. Although my mother's parents were both born in South Africa, her mother has cultural roots in Italian, French, Malayan and English cultures and her father in German, Russian, Dutch and Jewish cultures. My mother was born in America and raised in the Lebanon.

My father's family (whom I have never met) are Irish Catholics on his father's side and Jewish on his mother's. By British standards of stratification my mother would be considered middle-class in origin, my father working-class. This diversity encompasses many complexities (for instance, three of my close ancestors were involved in the Second World War; one as a Nazi party member, one with the Allies and one who was killed in a concentration camp) and estrangements (my father's parents, in order to distance themselves from their estranged Jewish and Catholic cultures, lost contact with their family, left Ireland for England and became puritanical Protestants).

The first five years of my life were spent with my extended family in a small English village, and I lived in Beirut for six months at the age of nine. I lived in South London for the rest of my childhood and most of my adult life. I have spent most of my life in a small, both amalgamating and evolving community (roughly 40 per cent of the children there are of mixed ethnic origins and the 'face' of the neighbourhood has gone through constant change as people come and go). I still consider this area to be my neighbourhood/home.

My perception of urban space is not of an overwhelming monolith but of personal and public spaces filled with individuals. I believe my vision and aesthetic are inextricably interlinked. Living in a neighbourhood where most people are known to one, the city takes on a personal aura: rather than seeing people as a mass of bodies, individuals are distinguishable presences (pic.ref 60). Living in a street with people from more than 30 different countries, with wide access to other people's homes, meant there was no perceived central aesthetic norm (terms such as 'high' and 'low', sublime and kitsch meant very different things to different people). My mother hoarded most things that passed through our house, creating a space in which there was literally no room for distance. This, coupled with streets full of people, meant that the notion of 'linear perspective' could only ever exist for me as theory. Having already suggested that environmental experience shapes aesthetic, I believe that my experience of the city has been shaped by my life within it.

I have astigmatism in both eyes, which my optician in South London suggested was probably caused by environmental factors. My vision denies me the hazy view of distance and sharp relief of foreground that one-point perspective incorporates. Instead, my eyes focus independently, which means they are constantly adjusting and readjusting. Accustomed to the constant movement of urban life, I am able to pick out detail in the distance in sharp relief. My sense of perspective is one of curvilinear planes with little distinction between fore and background (the effects

of astigmatism on the planes and spaces in visual imagery can be seen in the work of Francis Bacon, who had acute astigmatism (Trevor-Roper 1988: 50).

I am visually comfortable and aesthetically at ease with complexity, detail, mess, 'unfinish' and a profusion of colours, and I think this reflects my formative social/aesthetic experiences. I am aware that, although I appreciate the paintings of many artists, those from whom I derive most pleasure and whose work I find most moving are those who are closest to my own 'aesthetic' understanding. My work responds to that of artists such as Duccio, Sasssetta, Bellini, Goya (miniatures), Weight, Romare Bearden, Ben Shahn, Charlotte Salomon, Peter Blake and Willie Bester. In them I find, although each has a very different aesthetic vocabulary, a trace of their visual experience that is similar to my own. In my work the desire to find a painted vocabulary which reflects my aesthetic and social experience of my world, is increased by my perception of a dearth of painting (in particular in Britain) that reflects the multiplicity of experiences of urban space. Stallabrass, writing on trends in current art practice in Britain in relation to urban spaces, contends that modern artists relate to the urban as the new 'pastoral' in art 'that is about common people but not for or by them' (1999: 239). In his book *High Art Lite*, he highlights two distinct themes in this new 'pastoral' art. Firstly, that it is mostly about the spaces people inhabit as opposed to the people (in fact much of the 'urban pastoral' shows empty housing estates, empty cars and sights of vandalism), looking at these spaces from a distance as historical artefact 'as if it was viewing the archaeological remains of some disaster or the passing of an era' (1999: 247, 248). Thus the complex, multifaceted realities of 'cultural' interactions and interchange and people themselves have been largely ignored. Secondly, by evoking a sense of the 'degraded them' as inhabitants of the urban plane, the artist evokes a superior albeit ironic 'us' for his/her viewer. (1999: 237-255).

By creating intimate, fragmented work I hope to allude to the importance of individual voice and experience over that of the 'monolith', and to explore the intimacy of urban 'reality.' I believe one can challenge the restrictive themes that stereotypes of 'reality' place on us through the use of personal narrative in which individuals and personal enactments take precedence over the overview.

Throughout my art training I have been told by art professors that my work, 'although talented', is 'overcrowded', 'chaotic', 'too messy', 'too detailed', 'a cacophony', 'convoluted', 'kitsch, 'unfinished' and 'looking back' as opposed to 'cutting edge'. Each of these critiques relies on a 'value' judgement based on notions of a 'correct' imagery which may be shaped by the viewer's own 'aesthetic sensibility' and understanding.

'"Deviations" and "discontinuities" that are the hallmarks of art can be painful for some audiences and supremely pleasurable for others, depending on their aesthetic experience' (Perrin 1994:179). She contends that this phenomenon occurs because the brain's ideal state is equilibrium and when confronted with the unknown or novel, the brain responds to it with fear, pain and frustration (1994:178). One could surmise

from this that if the aesthetic or experience of equilibrium of the viewer tallies closely with that of the maker's, the disruption will be minimal, whereas when there is a greater distance, the effect could be aversion or an inability to relate to the work.

Taking as an example the experience of many middle-class Britons, I would suggest that a person who grew up in a large space, with room for distance and linear perspective – who perceives crowds as full of strangers and the rural as an open plane, whose house has clean lines and one or two impositions of 'taste' – may have an 'aesthetic sensibility' which privileges clean lines, tonal values, simplicity, finish and 'formal' values over narrative and process. This 'aesthetic' corresponds largely to academic expectations of painting in Britain.

Amos contends that the 'formalist' language developed out of 'closed classes' of learning in the West has little veracity when artists' painted languages fall outside of its boundaries:

> Formalism ... still stalks the land of art ... [it] means an insistence on privileging a formal reading or response to an object above all others ... [and] it closes off much of the cognitive exploration complex artefacts may invite. [This] is least offensive when it is applied to the work of elite culture and artists who share formalist values. But when this ... sensibility is imposed on things created in entirely different contexts, cultural arrogance appears. (1994: 268)

A perceived absence of imagery reflecting families of 'multi-ethnic' origins

My understandings of space, location, self, community and identity have all been shaken by my experience of South Africa. One of the dominant themes that has emerged – subconsciously – in my painting, especially in South Africa, has been the enactment of self in relation to 'race'. Being in South Africa, I am more conscious than I was in Britain of perceptions of 'race', 'cultural heritage' and space affecting one's 'reality', as well as of how my own 'reality' and self-awareness were shaped by my experiences in the past. I am aware that in some ways my paintings here operate as a personal compensation for an absence of imagery reflecting families of different ethnic origins here and in Britain.

The diversity of my own cultural heritage is reflected in my partners and in those of the vast majority of the South London community where I grew up, yet it is not reflected in visual imagery in Britain

The vast majority of the community in which I grew up, including my own family, were first or second-generation British[4], many from mixed cultural backgrounds. In the last British census for which my partner and I were eligible, we were invited

4. The 1981 census for my community (the Tooting ward) showed 34.5 per cent of the heads of households were born in the New Commonwealth or Pakistan (this is the surrogate statistic 'for the percentage of Blacks and Asians' [Rex 1988: 58]). And five per cent were born in Ireland (Wandsworth Borough Council planning department 1981 census, ward profile 1981). This figure does not reflect how many second-generation immigrants lived in the ward or cultural mixing occurring at this time or previously.

to define ourselves as black and white respectively. My daughter, had she been born then, would have been defined as the same as the 'head of household' (in the 2001 South African census the recorder completed our forms himself and defined my husband as African, myself as white and our daughter as coloured), thus radically reducing the diversity of cultural options we could ascribe ourselves[5].

Cultural mixing –across colour- in Britain has, until recently, been perceived by cultural theorists largely as a rejection of self and self-identity according to Katz (1996). Though Hutnik, writing in a contemporary British context, asserts:

> It is not difficult to imagine that a child, say born in England of one (white) Scottish and one (black) Jamaican parent now living in South London could, when asked, define himself as English, Black English, West Indian, Scots, a Londoner or a South Londoner in turn, depending who asked him the question, why they asked it and what else was happening at the time. Equally it is not hard to imagine the same child "claiming" all those identities, not because he lacks a single identity focus and is [therefore] in "crisis" but because multiple identity is itself a healthy choice (1991: 157).

I believe one can acknowledge 'multiple identity' as a healthy choice, yet at the same time accept that this is problematised by an absence of imagery that reflects this diversity/complexity. Of the thousands of figure paintings I have seen in London, only a handful have depicted black people and I cannot remember ever seeing an image of a family of noticeably mixed ethnic origins. There are none in the older collections of work at The National Gallery or The Courtauld, and none in the contemporary collections at The Tate, the Tate Modern or The Saatchi. Contemporary art trends may suggest that many artists have moved away from figure painting, yet The Tate, for example, has major holdings of contemporary figure painting, none of them showing 'mixed-race' families.

One in eight children under five years of age in Britain (according to the 2001 census) are of mixed-race origins, yet this is in no way reflected in images on television, in artworks or literature. When mixed-race couples are portrayed on television in Britain they are usually positioned in the following ways: as a vehicle for discussing 'race issues'; as middle-class without any construction of cultural histories or differences; or as working class and deviant. Mixed-race children are often used in advertising in the role of the white child's friend, without any portrayal of parents of different ethnic origins. Maureen Reddy writing as a white feminist mother of mixed-race children in America contends that interracial couples are usually portrayed in literature or film from "the outside" and as "pathological" (1994: 10).

5. Within my home community, at least 40 per cent of the children are of mixed racial origins. Prior to 2001 no census in British history has given recipients the option for mixed cultural origins (Tizzard, Phoenix 1993: 4). Before 2001 children were either categorized as having the same ethnic origin as the parent listed as the 'head of household' or they were categorized as 'other'. The 2001 census has created similarly reductive results as it only allowed for two ethnic identities per person, for example black and white or black and Indian or white and Irish.

That acknowledgement is needed of existence (or visibility) for mixed-race families in Britain is demonstrated sociologically by the fact that mixed-race children are far more likely to be in care than either white or black children, especially when their mothers are white (Katz 1996: 199, 202) Katz contends 'that this is likely to be due to social workers' moral judgements about white women's ability to look after black children' related to their supposed 'Pathology' in choosing to be in an inter-racial relationship in the first place (1996: 197, 202). In my choice of imagery for my painting I acknowledge that there is an impulse to create images that reflect my familial and societal identity as a means of exploring and seeing my 'voice'.

Although I would suggest that no age in art has reflected the true diversity of people and their opinions, perhaps our age may offer a broader spectrum of voices and aesthetics, if the history of Western art (which has come to be associated with the most cohesive expression of grand narrative) is acknowledged as having been inherently unstable since it only encompassed a very narrow perception of reality. I suggest that different 'voices' and aesthetics could reflect, in their diversity, wider, multifarious choices and enactments of life, if they are seen as linked to the notion of human agency. Rortry, in particular reference to 'ludic Postmodernism', states that: 'Postmodernism has a tendency to democratize the notion of difference in a way that echoes a type of vacant liberal imperialism ... some versions of Postmodern discourse want to recognize and privilege the marginal without engaging the important issue of what social conditions need to exist before such groups can actually exercise forms of self and social empowerment' (quoted in Giroux 1991: 72, 73).Giroux also quotes Nancy Harstock who asks 'why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subject-hood becomes "problematic"?' (Hartsock quoted in Giroux 1991: 79) It is interesting that just at the moment other voices are starting to be heard, the very notion of voice is viewed suspiciously. Different 'voices' in art offering alternative visions could offer a wider understanding, and challenging, of 'realities' in our world. In this respect I concur with Isaak in her statement that in broadening the horizons of art there 'is an invitation to expand our conversational community, widen our frame of reference, and look forward beyond the present impasse known to us variably as late capitalism, Postmodernism, or post-feminism' (1996: 80).

Making a 'mark'

Linda Hutcheon, writing on postmodern problematics, contends '... that contradictions are inevitable and, indeed, the condition of social as well as cultural experience. To smooth them over would be bad faith, even if it would also be our normal reaction within a humanist context. The narrator of Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* puts it this way: "I myself manage to hold large numbers of wholly irreconcilable views simultaneously, without the least difficulty. I do not think others are less versatile"' (1988: 7).

One of the didactics in my painting is the acknowledgement of the complex, unstable self as well as the self which has a desire for location and placement – the desire to make 'a mark' and find 'commonality.' One of the primary factors that motivated me to make autobiographical work was a need to be part of the 'conversational community' and a belief in the power of self-expression in effecting communication and thereby change.

Charlotte Salomon's work was seminal to my process of creating work within an autobiographical framework. Her life work was an autobiographical opera entitled *Life? or Theatre?* It incorporated a series of gouaches, with written texts accompanied by an operatic soundtrack. Within this structure the narrative and images evolved to encompass her changing experiences. She was German and Jewish, was forced to move home frequently and experienced numerous suicides within her family (she was killed in Auschwitz in 1942 shortly after completing *Life? or Theatre?*). The styles, colours, perspective and speed of delivery in her work change to meet the needs of the image and her desires as a painter, yet her vision as a whole is held together within the format of the narrative, autobiographical structure. I believe her work demonstrates the strength and veracity of adopting a biographical framework. Her intimate autobiographical body of paintings communicates her experiences and traces her life, creating a picture of her as a complex, contradictory individual which counteracts the monolith of stereotyping of people (particularly Jewish people) within Germany at the time of her painting.

I believe that Salomon's paintings call for intimacy with the viewer, which arises as an extension of her own intimate relationship with her practice as well as her formal processes. Leon Golub describes the assertion of 'self' in painting, through its process and one's intimate relationship with it as follows:

> For me the canvas is equivalent to the wall ... I feel an intimate relationship between my hand and the wall, my hand and the external world. It's about crossing borders – the border between yourself and the wall is equivalent, in its way, to crossing a river or going on a hunt – the most primitive expression of engagement with the world. The machine is an extension of the hand and so is the brush, but there is an intimacy to the touch of the brush against the surface which is an assertion of self in a certain way, which I still think has expressive possibilities. Of course other media have this also, but this peculiar kind of intimacy has, for me, in some residual way a relationship to tattooing, to marking the body ... (Golub quoted in Bird 2000: 176).

The term tattooing infers a number of cultural signifiers – the act of ritual scarification, of marking belonging to a certain group (sailors, prisoners etc), permanent alteration of the body and of self-image (at least as long as the body lasts). Tattooing in the 'West' has also come to embody the spirit of individualism, the marking of self to inscribe difference. In autobiographical/social painting the analogy of the tattoo could be used to describe the literal concretization of the fluid, impermanent, unstable, intimate self into a more enduring form. On a personal level, my pleasure in painting about my family stems from a desire to see

'self' recorded (which in itself marks my sense of a perceived absence) as an acknowledgement of my existence and aesthetic; the primal desire to leave 'a mark'.

Stuart Hall, a black British intellectual, has written extensively on identity and ethnicity particularly in relation to the diaspora, (he is also married to a white women (Hall 2000: 414) which I believe may have a bearing on his interest in identity as formed across difference). Hall states 'it may be true that the self is always, in a sense, a fiction, just as the kind of "closures" which are required to create communities of identification – nation, ethnic group, families, sexualities, etc – are arbitrary closures; and the forms of political action, whether movements or parties, those too are temporary, partial, arbitrary. It is an immensely important gain when one recognizes that all identity is constructed across difference' (quoted in Hooks 1995: 11). Whilst I concur with Hall I also believe that the recording of identities, however arbitrarily they may have evolved, mark our existence, as well as our ability to effect change through our intimate relationships with others - by claiming self. One of the factors that encouraged me to centre my work in autobiography was the desire to ensure that my work, which is inherently contradictory, cannot be viewed as an overview of 'identity' or 'culture' – I would like it to be viewed as an intimate perusal of my interpretations of experience.

In the practical application of my painting I use a number of structures to evince intimacy: small format canvases, details, multiple perspectives and narrative content fed from recent experiences. The formats of my paintings are sustained by my evolving aesthetic sensibilities. Within this constraint the image is reached improvisationally, in order to keep the work as open as possible to new explorations and enactments that emerge through the process (while the emotional charge and details of the experience are still fresh). In my painting there is an attempt both to locate and challenge my own 'voice'. Nancy Spero says of her assemblage works, which deal with notions of women's freedoms, 'I wanted to depict women finding their voices, which partly reflected my own developing dialogue with the art world, that somehow I had a tongue and at least part of the language of the world, there was an interchange. I'm speaking of equality, and about a certain kind of power of movement within the world, and yet I'm not offering any systematic solutions' (quoted in Isaak 1996: 27). Isaak contends that Spero's work never offers 'wholeness, unity and completion.'

In my work I acknowledge that 'unwholeness', disunity and incompletion are necessary by-products of the contradictory and complex search for placement and identity. Bauman (1988: 81) states that 'to say, as it is commonly said, that modernity led to the "disembedding" of identity, or that it rendered the identity "unencumbered", is to assert a pleonasm – since at no time did identity "become" a problem; it could exist only as a problem.'

Considering 'self' awareness – in particular relation to my enactment of 'self' in the South African environment

One of the main areas of inspiration for my work is the bond associated with family, in particular my relationship with my daughter which I perceive – like my relationship with my mother – as something that goes beyond the notion of individuality and speaks to continuation and renewal. Rouch asserts that the women's role in pregnancy calls into question 'the fundamental binary opposition – between the natural and rational.' 'The difference between "self" and other is, so to speak, continuously negotiated' (Rouch quoted in Alexander 1998: 8). This role, I believe, is constantly renegotiated through the lives of mothers and their children. However, with the notable exceptions of Alice Neel and Paulo Rego, this has been little represented in the Western tradition of painting.

In the 'West' men have made most of the celebrated visual representations of 'mother and child'. Isaak, speaking in the context of 'Western' art infrastructures, says that the representation of mother and child has, in the past, commonly been associated with the male gaze, where the mother is placed as the passive 'conduit' for the male offspring – most commonly as the representation of Mary and Jesus, where 'the Virgin Mary is represented as the unwitting "interval" from the Name of the Father to the Son, with any traces of matrilinearity expressly disavowed' (1996: 140). In this role the mother is host to the boy, not girl child. An alternative familial depiction is given by Paula Rego, whose paintings depict the confusion between maternal bonding, self and the 'world' enacted in a variety of ways: the struggle by the girl child and mother for control over the male husband/ father; the struggle between mother and daughter; and the struggle between sister siblings. I believe that the mundane 'realities' of 'female life' present a broader spectrum of possibilities for envisaging womanhood.

The first six years of my life were spent for the most part in a women-only household comprising four generations of my family (my grandfather, a seminal influence in my life, was working overseas for most of this period). Born illegitimate, I had no paternal figure to legitimate myself against. My early sense of identity was primarily informed by the matrilineal line. With none of my family members in a sexual relationship, and with no television, my identity as a woman was not (within the sphere of my home) informed by stereotyped images of women as defined by their 'looks' (weight, age etc) or sexuality – the 'postmodern fears' which Bauman (1995: 105, 125) describes as body consciousness. I did, however, notice the lack of validation of women in their own right outside of the family home (for instance, people would get up and move if my mother and I sat next to them on the bus, because my mother was unmarried). My exposure outside of the home to multifarious enactments of motherhood and womanhood – many of them negative – created complex and problematic notions for me of 'societal motherhood'. In South Africa the notions of race and culture form complex interactions with my comprehensions of gender, family and motherhood.

As no one in my family drives, my experiences of Cape Town's public spaces have been shaped by walking the streets, shopping and using public transport to get to Khayelitsha (where I facilitate an art class once a week). Gender issues also arise in the domain of 'public space' in Cape Town. It is clearly not safe for most women to be 'out' alone after dark in most areas. Thus my experience of Cape Town raises complex personal issues of gender and race, which would not be of primary concern in many other locations. As a biographical painter whose interests include people's interactions and interpretations of space, my paintings inevitably include these social dynamics. My own prejudices are unearthed in my exposure to other people's, and the process of painting inevitably challenges my assumptions.

When I wander the streets of Cape Town with my daughter and/or husband, I am aware of every person we pass staring at us (many of them stopping, some pointing). In many people's eyes, as a family with different ethnic/racial origins we do not conform to a family 'norm', and to some we are clearly abnormal. This 'stare' provokes multiple reactions in each of us, depending on our moods. Often we ignore it; sometimes one or another of us is incredibly angry; sometimes we are amused. My five-year-old daughter showed me a number of facial expressions she had devised for 'when everybody looked at her on the street.' My awareness of 'race' was particularly acute prior to my husband's visit to this country. His arrival in South Africa has stopped people asking if my daughter was 'adopted' or 'really mine'.

This experience and my recent marriage have created a heightened/exaggerated sense of self and familial identity in the sharing of the experience of location/dislocation, and I see this new 'identity' playing out in the images of my paintings. They are inspired by my strolling round the city. They are not those of Baudelaire's 'flaneur' (stroller), the painter of 'modern life' who 'sees without being seen and perceives events unfolding without a past and with no consequences' (Bauman 1995: 92). I am constantly aware of my vision being shaped and reshaped by changing circumstances.

As a result of my experiences, my work is concerned with the spaces people inhabit and how 'identity' and environment affect people's behaviour. I have particular interest in public spaces – restaurants, shopping centres and points of cultural interaction and exchange. It is the points of transformation that engage my interest, moments of exchange in which I am unclear about my interpretive ability, where the constant shifting and sifting of the event in my memory and on the canvas evokes an image of reflection. It was not a sense of irony that prompted the painting of my daughter and I within the grounds of Valkenberg mental hospital, but rather an initial impulse based on a feeling of complete wellbeing, a sense of being at one with the world and with my daughter on our walk home from her school. It was only with hindsight that the sense of 'at-homeness' I had felt in the grounds of a mental institution overlooking a motorway reminded me of my/our dislocation (pic.ref 69).

In Bill Ainslie's words:

> An artist in South Africa is necessarily a sort of liminal man. A person on the threshold of society or on the outskirts of society ... a person who cannot simply accept what the society lays down as norms. His or her job is to question them, so that the people within the society can have their eyes opened to other possibilities and other realities, which people in their 'busyness' so easily overlook. It's the artist's job to remind people of the transcendent side, which underlies or overlays human activity. The artist's job is to look for meaning, to provide the meanings by which man orders his life. And in that way she or he is a liminal person. (extract from paper written in 1982, 1995: 269).

As an 'interloper' in South Africa there is an objective quality to my reality here; an ability to distance myself from my own interaction in space and an awareness of the absurdity of my own cultural didactic and circumstances. In not 'belonging,' I believe there is an even greater pull towards the intimate and a desire for shared experience. I would contend that this didactic produces a degree of humour in my work. Freud refers to female humour as the 'triumph of narcissism'. He contended that humour is an assertion of the ego which 'refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality' (quoted in Isaak 1996:13). I would rather my humour reflected the French feminist Kristevas's assertion on experimental verbal play: 'Nonsense [that] makes nonsense abound with sense: makes one laugh' (quoted in Isaak 1996: 15).

In my work I often use exaggeration of facial expressions. According to the eminent neurologist Semir Leki, facial recognition (who someone is) and recognition of expression (what someone means) occur in two separate areas of the brain. One could infer from this that an exaggeration of both elements in a human being produces a greater degree of identity recognition and an ability to relate to 'feeling.' Gayford writes: 'That we have a special dedicated centre for expression [in the brain] helps explain how subtle and miraculous our abilities are to read what people are thinking' (letter to Hockney 2001: 249).

The first painting I made in South Africa is entitled *Sylvia* (pic.ref 61). It is about belonging and not belonging and about fear, judgement, control and friendship. In the painting Sylvia's face becomes a caricature of hysteria. 'Witness the hysteric. This shearing happens to the soul through the obsessional symptoms: a thought that burdens the soul, that it doesn't know what to do with' (Lacan quoted in Isaak 1973:10). I found this face through multiple attempts to actualise it, and it represents both a variety of feelings that I have for Sylvia and a reflection of my own anxieties.

When I showed Sylvia this painting she asked how I knew she felt this way about breast-feeding. The painting expresses the barriers (as a result of social pressures) to Sylvia's feelings being perceived in a 'normative' way. It also reflects my own contradictory feelings about babies (having nursed my own premature child every two hours for six months), and about 'rights' – whether one has the right, as a

woman, to feel this way. There is also an exposure to my own prejudices and value judgements – a dislike of Sylvia as a 'privileged foreigner' (like me), for not 'pulling herself together'; a sense that, as the white mother of a mixed-race child, she should be a 'better role model'. Another dimension to the painting is that Sylvia is in fact my friend. My initial concept was of Sylvia breast-feeding. Another idea, which came later and was proffered by a third party, was that in this painting Sylvia, unbeknown to me, was wearing a traditional Zulu bridal dress, which creates further complexities.

In my work, my surroundings and past enact in unforeseeable ways. Contradictions are constantly negotiated and renegotiated, between the personal and objective; Cape Town and London; the rational and irrational; the serious and nonsensical; the spiritual, the atheist and the political.

> When one leaves her or his country or place of origin (deterritorialization), everyday life changes. The objects, which continually reminded one of the past, are gone. Now the place of origin is a mental representation in memory. The process of reterritorialization begins. The hologram provides a model for conceptualizing the deterritorialized image. A hologram ... is created by the interference, interaction, or border between two cultures ... It takes a critical view of authority and supports the imaginative ... a carnivalesque dispersal of the hegemonic order (Political Unconscious, quoted in Hicks 1988:56).

On another level it is a reordering and reconfiguring of those elements that make up my life. Merill (1988: xii) asserts that 'the process of re-theorizing the objects and experiences of everyday life in the modern world is precisely the process of transforming that world into one that will have to be recognized differently, ordered along different coordinates, and perhaps without any unified centre at all, allowing us to take up again the pursuit of the good and beautiful in practical and life-enhancing ways.'

'NORMATIVE' PAINTING – Looking at the legacy of privilege, societal 'norms' and the politics of art from the 'West'.

'To truly champion artistic freedom we must be committed to creating and sustaining an aesthetic culture where diverse artistic practices, standpoints, identities and locations are nurtured, find support, affirmation and regard; where the belief that individual artists must have the right to create as the spirit moves – freely, openly, provocatively, prevails' (Hooks 1995: 138).

In this section I shall look at the societal effect of certain art forms and art procedures being privileged over others. This section is informed to a large degree by my experience and observation of 'linear' teaching practices in English, French and American academies. In order to gain critical purchase over my own work I believe it is necessary for me to examine my own training and 'cultural heritage' and to acknowledge my own 'political' and social understanding of art, as well as my own 'agendas.' As the focus of this dissertation is on painting I shall limit my discussion of the 'linear model' to its relationship with painting, although in many cases it applies to other art forms and societal constructs.

The need for critical purchase

I have an interest in, or predilection for, the work of artists who use an improvisational process within a narrative construct and 'produce paintings which speak of contemporary historical (social and personal) experience in the manner of their making (that is through their forms themselves)' (Fuller 1980: 95). I am drawn to art which adopts an informal/experimental/personal rather than formal didactic in its mode of expression. My inspiration to paint was aroused by the works of artists such as Duccio, Bellini, Courbet, Bonnard, Beardon, Shahn, Saloman, Golub and Bester, all of whom I believe have made work in this vein.

I was originally drawn to these works by their strength of presence, the access they gave to process, and a feeling of immediacy and intimacy in their images and brushwork. In looking at how these works had been documented, I found that the artists had in one way or another been marginalized, either by a lack of acknowledgement for the possibilities for painting that their work engendered and/or by the positing of their work within the genre of 'social/political' painting. In Modernist language, at least, this relegated them to a role of lesser importance than those artists whose works were perceived as being primarily concerned with painting as an end in itself (one of the points I shall explore in this section is the contention that all art work is in some sense 'political', and that 'political' criteria have been used in assessing what constitutes 'good painting').

Constance Perrin posits one of the reasons for an absence of affirmation of certain artists in her essay 'New, Unusual and Difficult Art':

> To find our feelings about and our vision of "our worlds" "transformed" and "re-formed" is to experience upheaval of familiar understandings, styles, norms, and the meanings these support. Is this not the very "seduction and danger" of art that Plato banished from the ideal republic?' [Perrin quoting Hauser] ... Like finely articulated spines, meaning systems are backbones to acting: slipping a single disc realigns meanings ... When this happens a sequence of neurophysiological responses we call fear and distress is set in motion ... humans transform [these] into social disdain, disvalue, disparagement, abuse, stigmatizing, prejudice and avoidance. These are social manifestations of the automatic distancing and resistance we call fear' (Perrin 1994: 176).

Thus one could contend that art that serves to 'normalize' experience has been supported by the 'West' at the expense of that art which seeks to transform it as a result of 'fear' engendered by change. By marginalizing the works of some artists it may be that in the 'West' there are systems which 'in the name of preservation of cultural knowledge ... achieve neither true knowledge nor true culture' (Freire 1972: 53).

Having looked at art which, in my opinion, has been marginalized, I examined it's counterpart – art which was promoted and supported by the systems of its time. I asked why certain forms of expression have been valued over and above others, and what impact this factor has had on art production, especially in relation to painting. The 'fear' Perrin discusses in relation to work that is 'challenging' could be posited as a primary factor in artists forming group allegiances, and why those who have not wanted, or been able to, have been 'marginalized.' In expanding her argument Perrin alludes to 'ordinary logic' which 'sends us searching for a closed class in which to include it' (1994: 177). Systems of 'normalization' for art predicated in the 'West' in earlier epochs might still influence the criteria of judgement and 'taste' used in relation to painting and the 'categories' into which work is placed.

A number of factors which have prompted this cursory glance at 'reductive art models' are cited below:

Firstly, by looking at the linear history of 'Western' painting as a reductive model, I lend support to modes of working which lie outside of this discourse and which inform my working methodology. These are; improvisation in narrative art, the notions of 'oneness' and transmutation, social content and a commitment to intimate expression in art, explorations of self and attempting to create durable work. I hope to demonstrate in this section that it is the 'rules' imposed by the 'West' on painting, and not the painting medium itself, that has hindered its ability to function as a transformative social vehicle.

Secondly, in spite of postmodern theoretical discourse, many students around the world (especially at the beginning of training, at school and foundation level) still use art training methods garnered from the scientific, linear model of 'Western' art, i.e. perspective, tonal values, set palettes, 'clean' image and working from the model. Many theories are also linked to this model: creating a 'finished' piece; creating a 'uniform' body of work; predicating form over content and the support of simplicity. John Berger asserts that, rather than being perceived as conventions, the 'Western' 'rules' in art came to be seen as 'The Truth' (quoted in Fuller 1980: 50). I suggest that without an understanding of the underlying philosophy of these 'rules', they become arbitrary signifiers that lead to control, rather than experimentation. I have spent five years training in British Art institutions (Chelsea School of Fine Art for foundation and The Slade for my degree). Both these institutions taught figuarative art following systematic procedures which evolved out of Western training models, this experience informs much of this critique.

The 'Western' model of training is often referred to as traditional or Academic. I believe this model has a number of potential disadvantages for artists. It trains them to see in a very limited way and societally it reaffirms or privileges the notions of a 'correct' image/working practice. This creates problems in interpretation for artists using alternative strategies in figure making or coming from different models of training. As an example, at the French Academies artists drew from plaster models before drawing from the naked body. Anfam (1985: 108) asserts that this 'helped to inculcate in the students a mannered vision of nature, which encouraged them to draw the live model in a conventional, idealized and un-individual way. Their drawing style had already been formed.'[6].

Thirdly, I would suggest that painting as the basis for experimentation and exploration of self and societal concerns, may not be easily mediated through the appropriation of fixed principles, theories and rules (which have adhered to painting in the 'West' for the last four centuries). I believe the 'normalizing' of some approaches to painting at the expense of others has marginalized art production that lies outside of whatever the current trend (and historical past) facilitates. Thus figurative painters who do not adhere to certain principles may be sidelined or dismissed by those on the 'inside' simply because they do not accept the popular 'principles.'

Fourthly, I suggest that all painting is either a conscious or subconscious political act. Frascina asserts that 'to understand the production of art and its meanings requires awareness of artists and critics as agents, explicitly or implicitly, within political affairs or life' (1999: 142). I believe one's life experiences to a large degree shape one's aesthetic and social understanding. Thus the viewer's aesthetic sensibilities may play a fundamental part in how they facilitate and experience

6. I would hypothesize that the continued use of naked models, which bear no personal relation to the artist (beyond being the receptacle of their gaze) continues both the reliance on the quantifiably 'correct' approach to drawing and maintains a distance from individual exploration. Furthermore, this model creates problems of interpretation for the viewer used to ascertaining figurative art's aesthetic on 'principles' of fixed rights and wrongs. This potentially removes the viewer from the visceral and social experience of the work at hand. This model also reduces the likelihood of exploring the potential of the paint medium.

works of art. Art that corresponds to the aesthetic of the viewer may be seen as apolitical, rather than a political reaffirming of the viewer's 'norms'. For example, many of the Impressionist painters exercised 'political' judgement in their choice of subject matter, which was in many cases client orientated, yet there was widespread consensus at their time of production that their art represented *art por l'art* (I shall discuss this in greater detail later in this section).

Fifthly, the history of painting in the 'West' is referred to primarily as 'Western', which implies a generalized group history, heritage and identity. As an artist from the 'West,' I believe it is essential to challenge criteria of 'judgement' which have created what I would suggest is a false impression of group identity based on collusion and conformity under the auspices of the term 'Western.' This notion has been challenged and discredited by cultural and feminist discourses, primarily on the basis of class and gender discrimination which disenfranchised (from painting production) the majority of people in the 'West.' For example, 'until the end of the nineteenth century women were prevented ... from receiving the training considered essential for a career in the visual arts' (Goldstein 1996: 61). One could infer from this that the disenfranchisement of the majority of the 'Western' populace meant they played little role in painting's production, meaning and content. I would suggest that painting in the 'West' has inscribed the values of only a small minority of its populations.

I believe these points are relevant here because they highlight the need for explorations of personal/social experience that enrich, widen and problematize our understanding of identity and culture rather than narrow the possibilities for art within a 'formalist' framework.

Patronage, State control and the sustaining of 'normative' art forms

It is my contention that painting has the ability to act as a transformative agent but that its exploration as a medium has been radically curtailed (in the 'West' and by the 'West'). Since the time of the late Renaissance, systems of State and market force control have subjugated art to suit the needs of the patronage system. The intention of the artist has in many cases been harnessed on one hand to the needs of the institution's desire for self-promotion and prestige, and on the other to the patron's or State's desire to articulate their identity. In many instances this serves to create an illusional group identity and to project nationalism to the outside world.

Government support of Abstract Expressionism in the USA during the Cold War is a good example of this imperative in recent times. Peter Fuller uses the example of MOMA (the Rockefeller-backed art institution) and their direct involvement in supporting and promoting Abstract Expressionism, particularly for overseas shows, 'to let it be known that America was not the cultural backwater that the Russians ... were trying to demonstrate that it was.' According to Fuller, Thomas Braden, a

former MOMA executive secretary who supervised CIA cultural activities in the 1950s, stated: 'enlightened members of the bureaucracy (CIA) fully realized the propaganda value of marshalling dissenting opinions within the framework of agreement on cold-war fundamentals.' '[He] and his colleagues, wherever possible, supported the avant-garde (read Abstract Expressionists) rather than the realists' (Fuller 1980: 79).

This distanced art from the position it had begun to enact as an agent for social change through the Works Progress Administration (WPA). 'American art of the mid-twentieth century was not accidental. It was driven, we now know, by economic and political forces whose interest lay in the separation of art from social meaning and therefore the separation of the artist from a valued, functioning place in society' (Bird 2000: 9).

The American critic, Clement Greenberg, who supported non-figurative art and advocated Abstract Expressionism and formalism over content in the 1940s, asserted that painting should 'confine itself to the disposition pure and simple of colour and line and not intrigue us by associations with things we can experience more authentically elsewhere' (quoted in Fuller 1980: 58). Fuller (1980: 82) writes that 'Greenberg had a huge influence on the way 'modern art' was perceived at this time.' His statements criticising the making of art with a social/political context, are problematized by the knowledge we have of his own political agendas. Greenberg was on the executive committee of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (affiliated to the Congress for Cultural Freedom) during the 1940s, and had editorial control of their magazine. Both of these organizations were anti-communist and the magazine operated as a vehicle for exposing 'Soviet sympathizers' and supporting non-figure based art. In the 1970s it was discovered that the Congress for Cultural Freedom had been covertly funded by the CIA throughout Greenberg's time in office, through the use of dummy foundations (Frascina 1999: 226, 234). Knowledge of political engineering of Abstract Expressionism and abstraction in the USA, at the expense of art that attempted to challenge societal norms, is now widely available. Yet little has been done to reinstate artists who were discriminated against during the Cold War to positions of relevance in the 'history' of American art.

In recent times other technologies and developments have expanded the scope for what is encompassed in the term 'art' (as posited in the 'West'). I suggest that many of these productions are still largely enacted within the patron-producer dynamic. In recent times, according to Frascina, the projection of art as an expression of national identity in the West has come to include the notion of a permissive society in which one is free to be different and critical. Frascina critiques this dynamic in relationship to recent art production in the USA: 'Cultural and political amnesia enables the United States to police or manage dissent and at the same time to make a few more bucks by encouraging the production of commodities and media spectacles in the market of ideas. This market ... poses little actual threat to capitalism. For them there is nothing better than to encourage

dissent, with its novel forms ripe for co-modification, when its more troublesome manifestations are contained and fragmented' (1999: 229). The supposed permissiveness of 'free speaking' democracy and global culture in which each voice has equal purchase belies the reality of the system, in which the capitalist democracy is no more Utopian than communism or dictatorship, as its existence relies both directly and indirectly on an unequal trade relation with poorer new democracies or undemocratic countries to sustain its wealth.*The Rich-Poor Divide* shows statistics, based on Oxfam's findings, which demonstrate the unfair relationships and unequal distribution of global wealth between rich and poor countries (Garlake 1995). Frascina contends that this permissiveness masks the reality of oppression and suppression within democracies (Frascina 1999: 219-229).

Hutcheon suggests that much of the work that is perceived as relevant in the context of the permissive society is that which reflects the newness of the 'Western' model. It is fractured from an unappealing past and yet paradoxically reinstates the Modernist notion of progress through its embrace of 'modern technologies.' Hutcheon writes in specific relation to postmodernism: 'The paradox ... is an ideological one, for the art is both critical of and yet complicit with the cultural dominants of our time: liberal humanism and mass consumer culture' (1988: 2). In an attempt to maintain control over the dissemination and display of my work I do not sell my work to private companies or individuals. To enable public access to my work, and critical dialogue to emerge, I loan my work to public/state institutions (for example St.Georges Hospital in South London have nine of my paintings on permanent dislay) and display work regularly from my studio (at present from Greatmore Art Studios, where I am based). In order to maintain this ideal I support myself financially through community, and teaching work.

Morgan suggests there is a rejection of spiritual values in consumer art markets : 'In essence, it is the power of investment that tries to keep art on a neutral stage with its pragmatic aegis to guard against the encroachment of spiritual value into the global terrain of speculation and exchange' (1998: 33). I believe it is with these views in mind that the critic de Ville (*Modern Painters* Autumn 2001: 54) writes:

> Considerable swathes of the knowledgeable art-viewing public – together with most younger artists – do not now, to any significant degree, regard painting as a currently interesting or viable medium. The consensus is that there is very little left to painting but the gesture of painting; little but the increasingly vainglorious promotion by the artist of the artistic 'I'. This 'I' – so this consensus goes – entails the projection of a consistent signature style which is usually minimalist and/or conceptualist in derivation, and in which the painterly representations are deliberately outmoded. Painting is, in effect, little more than a performance.'

It is interesting that painting is often referred to as a 'traditional' medium and artists who paint are perceived as using 'traditional' means, in contrast to artists who use other mediums, who are often referred to as 'cutting edge' or 'avant-garde.' This maintains the Modernist projection of a linear, progressive model, which was critiqued by early postmodern positions.

I contend that figurative painting within this epoch which attempts a personal account of perceived 'reality' is doubly impeded, first by a series of prior 'rules' or 'normalizing' agents, and secondly by its perceived irrelevance in modern consumer culture.

Linear reading – historical contextualisation

I shall now look briefly at the 'history' of painting as laid out in the 'Western' linear tradition. I shall explore a number of facets of this system, and a number of critics' hypotheses as to why it was predicated. This section highlights the infringement on painting's expressive qualities that this system has engendered, as well as a number of 'absurdities' that 'academic' paintings have been premised on.

The history of painting within scientific theoretical terms has been limited by the boundaries of a linear historical reading, i.e. 'such and such, leading to such and such.' Belting says:

> Two of the possible ways of seeing the work of art within a history of art [are] as a station along the path of art, perhaps even helping to determine the course of that path. Or it might be an attempt to achieve or to fulfil an aesthetic norm. If it has not yet fulfilled the norm, then it remains open-ended in the direction of this assumed goal. If the work of art has realized the norm, then it becomes the last stage of an anticipated development, and at the same time the reason for initiating a new development' (1987: 67).

By adopting a process whereby historical work is seen as a logical progression in which artists inform 'the path' or work to an aesthetic norm, one is teaching artists to work academically by rule and measure, or in rebellion against this stance. Creating new rules and procedures, one puts the artist on a metaphorical ladder where an initial discovery by a painter is seen as a first step ascending to their own or others' purification of this discovery.

I suggest that the linear model of art not only predicated rules of procedure for making images, it also created a model which advocated 'correct images,' thereby disempowering artists in their desire to articulate meaning beyond these boundaries. In the 'West' figurative painters in the last century have often maintained the use of 'correct,' 'normative,' non-challenging imagery containing no overt politics and claiming no social responsibility. There is a preponderance of painting that is a transcription of an initial idea and of painters who create signature styles through the use of fixed palettes and similar brushstrokes across the painting, in line with 'formalist' notions.

I believe that art within a linear model which values purity over risk does not facilitate transformative art practices. In this system each development becomes a refinement of its predecessor, possibly hampering, rather than supporting, artists who wish to operate beyond its boundaries. I shall look briefly at the systems, inspired by Vasari and Da Vinci, which were then predicated by the French

Academies. These were the most coercive paradigms in the 'West' reflecting this tradition. I shall attempt to demonstrate that 'correct' art practices have been encouraged by state systems, as a means of gaining social control and prestige through nationalism.

Giorgio Vasari (1511-74)

In late Renaissance Italy, the period was marked by an extreme desire to encapsulate art in a rational scheme. 'During the sixteenth century, art reflected the contemporary view that self-control was the most desirable feature of a personality. Thus, emotions, which in the fifteenth century had remained as relics of the late Gothic period, disappeared from art' (Della Croce 1998: 27). This period saw the introduction of science as we know it today. I suggest that this influence, in tandem with the notion of self-control and an upsurge of nationalism, led to the reordering and codifying of art histories, the institutionalization of art and the 'rules' that came to be perceived as fact within the Academies.

Vasari's book, *The Lives*, is responsible for many misunderstandings about early Renaissance work. He sought to create a history of Italian art in which work led naturally from the initial search for purity and simplicity of the early Renaissance to the achievement of divinity in work from the later period.

> 'In his view painting came to satisfy two standards, one which we may call realism, the imitation of nature, the other which we may call the ideal, the creation of beauty. Of the two, realism appears to have precedence. It is the necessary condition of good painting that it contains no mistakes, no distortion of natural appearance ... To him and to the whole age the overriding aim of painting was religious, and this aim had come to imply a demand for verisimilitude' (Gombrich 1986: 95).

In Vasari's model the experimental phase of the early Renaissance is considered marginally important. Vasari predicated the notion that nothing reaches fruition on its initial conception. From the late Renaissance period the emphasis was on line, tone, form, homogeneity and 'purity' rather than colour and content. This led to the reductive nature of art practices in Europe[7]. In order to facilitate the linear progressive model, which he championed, Vasari arranged artists of the Renaissance in three periods, giving emphasis to those artists whom he perceived as following the 'correct path', using a 'chronological historical ordering ... to create a flowing model of progression' (Rubin 1995: 226-230). He chose Giotto as the initial progenitor of the new form and ended with Raphael and Michelangelo. Vasari's 'unilinear history, modelled after classical rhetoric, is dismissive of forms of art based on alternative principles or simply produced in other cities ... Vasari laid the foundation for the history of art of the academy. To be sure, his rhetoric had to be adjusted to new settings and his hierarchy to some degree shuffled. But his was the basic "history" taught in academies, astonishingly, for some three hundred years and more' (Goldstein 1996: 76).

7. This emphasis was contrary to that of the early Renaissance, when the multicultural, multi-religious and multi-stranded societal frame encompassed much broader modes and alternatives for expression. I shall use examples of the earlier models' breadth and capacities later in this paper.

Three possible reasons for Vasari predicating this model are:

First, and most importantly, he was a salaried member of Duke Cosimo's court, 'where artistic and political vision were combined to express the glory of the Tuscan state ruled by Cosimo de Medici' (Rubin 1995: 199). Most of the changes Vasari made to The Lives were in order to include Medici patronage (Rubin 1995: 227), and as Rubin states (1995: 200), *The Lives* is both 'explicitly Medicean and implicitly academic.'

Second, as an accomplished draftsman, but a weak colourist, it was in his interest to champion the line.

Third, he wished to position himself in the most prestigious era of Italian art. He inserts himself again and again in the third section of *The Lives* as friend, patron and advisor.

Vasari created a history for Renaissance art that is distinctly nationalistic by favouring the Roman model of antiquity over the ancient Greek (or any other), as he considered the first to have the right attributes of purism and the other to be barbarous (1963: 17). Artists from earlier periods whose work stemmed from diverse roots, such as Bellini, were relegated to the sideline and Duccio and Sassetta, whose work was closer to the Greek model than the Roman – in favouring colour, decoration and narrative – were completely ignored. Vasari listed five principles upon which, he believed, art should be predicated: rule, order, proportion, drawing and style (Rubin 1995: 236). His belief was that the artists of the late Renaissance embodied these ideals and therefore it followed that late Renaissance art became associated with control, and control became associated with 'good' art. One of the explanations for this is given by Anfam in his book *Techniques of the Masters* (1986). It is worthwhile quoting at length as it highlights the practical application of the 'academic' system prevalent at the time.

> During the Italian Renaissance, artists like Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Michelangelo (1475-1564) had struggled to raise the status of the artist from the medieval position of humble artisan. Because painting was felt to soil the hands and involve manual labour it had not been accorded the status given to scholarly pursuits such as music, mathematics and literature. In order to rectify this, when the first art academies were funded in the sixteenth century, they taught only the most intellectual aspects of art – the scientific study of anatomy, the geometry of perspective for constructing an illusion of space and, most importantly, drawing. Although colour is a real presence in nature, line as such does not exist. The outlines, contours and shadings used in drawing are technical devices intended as a way of enabling artists to translate the appearance of three-dimensional objects onto a flat surface. Therefore by stressing the superiority of drawing, artists were emphasizing the most intellectual and abstract aspect of their work, the elements in which the humanizing, rationalizing influence of the human mind could best be seen. Painting, or colouring, was relegated to a secondary role because of its association with the senses and with the vulgar imitation of raw nature, as well as with the dirty, practical side of art. At all costs painting had to be seen to appeal to the higher, moral side of the human mind, not

> merely to satisfy sensual appetites. This split between the intellectual and the senses, between line and colour, artist and artisan, was perpetuated in seventeenth-century France (p 104).

Anfam contends that the 'academicising' of art practice led to a fundamental lack of knowledge of the capacities of materials and their inherent characteristics. 'The dissolution of traditional practical know-how had gone hand in hand with the rise of academic training in the seventeenth century ... not only was the knowledge of materials lost, techniques for handling them survived only to become sterile rules, meaningless and misunderstood by those who used them' (1986: 115). I shall assert that the reduction of art practice, in line with 'scientific rationale,' was flawed from the outset as it could in no way match up to the complexities and innovations of the medium and the artist's involvement with substances.

> The formulation of a body of principles is said to depend on the use of reason and is thoroughly systematic ... [but] science is not an absolute gauge of what counts as knowledge ... [for] a preoccupation with laws and theories – with scientific method – may reveal lack of intelligence and deep thought ... I suggest that the real difficulty is the inveterate conviction of our [Western] culture that a man has not thought hard about an issue unless his thought has culminated in a sophisticated system of laws and theories' (McMillan quoted in Perrin 1994: 195).

From the time of the Late Renaissance, formal arrangement, simplicity and flow became requisites for painting (rather than, for example, complexity, disorder and disjuncture). Elevation of mind was esteemed more than the questioning of values and/or exploration or innovation. It is reasonable to assume that 'scientific' reasoning or logic was perceived as having greater 'value' than common sense or practical experience.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

Da Vinci wrote a number of 'notes' on art (*The notebooks* 227-399), which have been seminal in art practice. He attempted to relate his scientific findings – perspective, light and colour – to the art process. In attempting to create a basis for elevating art he consigned it to formula.

Da Vinci stated: 'Perspective is much more than just a skill and technique for showing space. It is both a science and a relationship to reality which gives not only the artist but also the viewer access to harmonious space with proportional relationships that faithfully reflect reality' (quoted in Della Croce 1992: 27). Renaissance perspective is based on 'projecting a grid plane to a single vanishing point' (Isaak 1996: 160). The grid is supposed to create 'identical meanings in all [viewers]' by way of its 'mathematical, exact, impersonal, objective statements' (Edgerton quoted in Isaak 1996:160). Da Vinci's view of one-point perspective did not allow for other ideas about space: 'Those who are enamoured of practice without science are like a pilot who goes into a ship without rudder or compass and never has any certainty where he is going. Practice should always be based upon a

sound knowledge of theory, of which perspective is the guide and gateway, and without it nothing can be done well in any kind of painting' (notebooks, p 283). His assertions about perspective are based around the work of the painter/mathematician Pierro Della Francesco and others like him, who used one-point perspective in their paintings. This asserted itself as one of the primary rules in academies and colleges and is still taught in many art schools around the world. I wish to assert that linear perspective used 'scientifically' has no effect in painting beyond creating a stylistic illusion.

The only way to obtain an accurate one-point perspective drawing is through the use of one eye, as with the viewfinder of a camera. This completely ignores the fact that we have two eyes that are able to move round, focusing and refocusing faster than perception can monitor[8].

Viewing a painting that operates one-point perspective forces the viewer into the position of seeing a work that only has one vantage point or place of access. Scanning, depth and complexity are reduced to a series of procedures. One is reduced to the role of spectator rather than participant in dialogue with the work. One is not able to enter and move around the work at will. Isaak contends (1996: 160) that linear perspective and 'gridding' were used by Europeans who, having divided the world by 'longitudinal and latitudinal lines' could make it seem 'natural' to 'divide and lay claim to portions [of it]. 'This representational system was understood as the paradigm of divine order, for the conquest of the physical world ...' One of the reasons linear perspective, the grid and order have become so popular in the West is posited by Edgerton, who contends that 'once the surface of the earth was conceptually organized into a rectilinear grid, it took on a new sense of conformity. It was no longer to be thought of as a heterogeneous assemblage of frightening unknowns' (Edgerton quoted in Isaak 1996: 160). Which takes us back to Perrin's argument that fear of the unknown' prompts conformity and rejection[9].

To give some idea of the level of controls 'scientific' precepts had on painting (and my belief that there is a certain amount of absurdity in the system), it is useful to look at a number of extreme examples of 'correct' representation advocated by Da Vinci in his notebooks (p 241), in which he describes how people of various ages should be depicted:

> Women should be represented in modest attitude, with legs close together, arms folded, and with their heads low and bending sideways.
>
> How old women should be represented as bold, with swift passionate movements.

8. One-point perspective is often taught in art colleges with students closing one eye and using their pencil as a measure/guide in front of it, judging the distance of the object by way of the pencil, thus training one to see both statically and in a way that we do not naturally perceive things.

9. At the time of the late Renaissance, one-point perspective was utilized as a tool and had not yet become the 'rule' that Da Vinci predicated and which came to pass in the Academies. It was commonly used to maintain narrative rather than as the 'window' with which we now associate it. Artists maintained the story with one-point perspective, through the use of small figures in the background read as in the past, and larger figures in the foreground read as in the present. This mirrors the way early Renaissance artists often used the centre or foreground as present (Turner 1997: 107). These links have often been ignored.

> Like the infernal furies, and these movements should seem quicker in the arms and heads than in the legs.
>
> Little children should be represented when sitting as twisting themselves about with quick movements and in shy timid attitudes when standing up.

In Da Vinci's theories on the 'correct' use of colour, he is equally didactic. Colour is perceived as largely related to tonal and lighting effect, and therefore its ability to model and create a facsimile of 'nature'. His theories do not extend to an examination of the substances of painting, and he rarely painted, which may explain why '*The Last Supper* [is now] a crumbling ruin, the effect of media that could not harmonize with one another' (Elkins 2000: 37). Da Vinci's views on painting have had a direct impact on academic practices, as have his views on linear perspective, which still impact on art training today. These 'rules' concentrate on 'formal' content (the image), as opposed to how one paints (the craft).

The linear progressive model of art created a set of precepts within which art in the 'West' was viewed and which reduced work to a series of stylistic innovations, through which one gauged 'mastery' by a series of signifiers and rules. The imposition of rules meant that a distance was created between the artist and their material. I would suggest that these rules negated both alternative modes of expression and opportunities for exploring the physicality of the paint.

Painting as a means of expression and vehicle for exploration was further restricted within the French Academies, where art practice involved a lengthy training process in which the artist attained 'skills' step by step and remained removed from the political, social and emotional realities of life[10].

> 'In the formulating of a "rule" based art, the composition of paintings became rigidly compartmentalized. Subject matter ... fell into distinct hierarchy according to the degree of spiritual elevation it was felt to display. Lowest on the scale were still life, animal painting, rural landscape and genre or domestic scenes ... the most highly respected type of painting was history painting, which represented heroic deeds from the history of the Greeks and the Romans ...' (Anfam 1986: 106).

Impressionism

Impressionism has been inserted historically as the imperfect start to modernism, announcing a break with the Academic model. I shall suggest that although it marked stylistic 'advances' in painting, it may have been another transcription of the Academic model. Very briefly I shall look at Impressionism as I believe it embodies many of the attributes that have come to be attributed as Modernist.

10.'A typical student's training at the Ecole lasted five years. Artists would work in the morning in the studio from the bust, and then – when sufficiently proficient – from the figure. The afternoons were spent making detailed copies of drawings and paintings in the Louvre, concentrating on their composition. This quantifiable art training legitimized art's standing as a middle-class pursuit and safely ensconced it in academia, inevitably leading to a loss of individualism among artists. By the nineteenth century, the academic training of the artist had become ritualised into a rigid formula, which was self-perpetuating and changed only with great reluctance to meet the new needs of the age' (Anfam 1986: 106).

In 'Western' culture in the late eighteenth century the 'romantic' notion of the artist as outsider emerged in which the artist, placed outside of societal concerns (beyond the boundaries of academic learning), was free to represent the 'infinite'. At its most extreme, Romanticism came to be associated with 'a belief in the metaphysical powers of the artist that were to "radiate outwards from poetry to transform the whole world"' (Cubbs 1994: 83). Cubbs asserts that 'it was this romantic view of artists as world visionaries which inspired the Modernist notion of the artistic avant-garde marching heroically ahead of the rest of society ... armed ...with an irreverence for the past' (1994: 83). I wish to make two points about this notion. Firstly, the notions of *art por l'art* and the direct view of nature, which are commonly perceived as attributes of Impressionism, are challenged both by the heavy reliance of many Impressionists on the Academic model and their adherence to heavily politicized subject matter. I make this point in order to demonstrate my assertion that there is no neutral ground in art, no art por l'art. Secondly, Impressionist 'techniques' suggest that the more theory based painting becomes, the less interest there is in its physical properties. This suggests that the more theoretical, the less durable art becomes, seemingly relying on signifier as opposed to substance. By arguing these points I believe I strengthen my own position in making art with social content and concern for the substance (subject matter and paint) of my work which I premise over the theory.

Political agendas in Impressionist art

Frascina (1993: 108) contends that in France it has been government policy since 1848 'to eliminate political and class-based difference by stressing an eclectic individualism. Not only was this a political objective but also an artistic one.'

And further (1993: 61), that after the revolution 'the bourgeois wanted to perpetuate the illusion of aristocratic and superior French taste that was a necessary weapon in the growing mercantile competition with England and Germany.' Denvir (1987: 134) suggests that links to culture were maintained, by Impressionists, through the use of imagery which promoted middle-class values: 'Impressionists were conservative in their political opinions, and more intent on achieving social and official recognition than popular ideas of the "avant-garde" might lead one to expect.'[11]

It is clear that many Impressionists chose their subject matter with middle-class patrons in mind. Degas, in a letter to Tissot dated 18 February 1873, writes about his painting, *The Cotton Buyer's Office*. Completely removed from the harsh

11.Although Impressionists rejected the historical, epic, narrative structure of the Academy they continued using its motifs in a way that has similarities. Naked women were still employed strictly in their ability to portray femininity as opposed to personality. Renoir stated, in conversation with Berthe Morisot, that 'nudes seemed to be one of the essential forms of art' (Denvir 1987: 156). Boudin, one of the early Impressionists, wrote to a friend on 3 Sept 1868, asserting that the middle classes had a right to be represented: 'The peasants have had painters who have specialized in painting them ... That is good, but quite honestly, between ourselves, don't those middle-class men and women walking along the pier towards the setting sun also have a right to be fixed on canvas' (quoted in Denvir 1987: 39). This prompts speculation that in spite of claims by Impressionists for independence or irregularity, these were within the strictly demarcated boundaries of their class associations and patronage base. Jansen (1978:71) contends that 'Impressionism ... had nothing of the plebeian about it, to make an unfavourable impression on the bourgeois public: it was rather an "aristocratic" style, sensual and epicurean ... bent on strictly personal experiences, experiences of solitude and seclusion.'

realities of the cotton industry in New Orleans, it shows a group of well-dressed white men calmly examining cotton, while the man in the centre reads the newspaper. Degas asks his friend in London to 'preserve the good will of these gentlemen for me. In Manchester there is a wealthy spinner, who has a famous collection. A fellow like that would suit me perfectly ... for any cotton spinner who wants to have a painter should select me' (quoted in Denvir 1987: 68)[12].

Anfam (1985: 167) asserts that 'Impressionists were concerned with "Visual sensations". Instead of depicting a scene modified and "corrected" by the intervention of the intellect ... the Impressionists tried to unlearn their received knowledge of the visual world.' This assertion goes against many of the Impressionists' own methodologies, which adhere closely to learnt academic principles.

Many Impressionists drew in their images before painting them, as can be ascertained by examining X-rays. Monet, for example, drew in the outlines of his work with a paintbrush before starting, and Pisarro drew on the canvas with a pencil (picture reference Bomford 1990:123 and 138). In particular relation to the figure, this decreed a static reality which goes against our notion of Impressionist 'actuality' and our perception of the work as spontaneous. In addition to this essential contradiction, many employed 'models' in fixed poses and staged their images.

They also adhered to theoretical principles which limited and simplified the image. Sisley, in an undated letter to a friend, said 'the subject, the motif, must always be set down in a simple way, easily understood and grasped by the beholder. By the elimination of superfluous detail, the spectator should be led along the road that the artist indicates to him, and from the first be made to notice what the artist has felt' (quoted in Denvir 1987: 122).

Implications of Impressionist artists' painting methodology

The results of Impressionists having followed a scientific, formulaic approach to painting without understanding or respecting their materials have been as disastrous as they were for Da Vinci with the crumbling of *The Last Supper*. Impressionist work is very rarely viewed nowadays in its original state. Impressionist artists, wanting 'pure' or non-oily colours with similar textures, often drained their colours of oil and did not varnish the work. Bomford (1990: 100-102) contends that this process led to both weak and vulnerable painted surfaces, which have mostly now been varnished for their own protection. The result of varnishing is a uniformity and shine to the painting and a saturation of the colours[13].

The understanding of the 'high' tones of the Impressionists, and their initial intentions, is now literally muddied. Equally, the paint's individual characteristics

12. Renoir, according to Frascina (1993: 198), was 'the most emphatic in his insistence upon the virtues of "pure art"' as well as 'the most assiduous in cultivating the kinds of portrait-painting commission that could best be secured by success at the Salon.'

13. Some of the works were even varnished with bitumen (a brown tint), and as a result of time passing before varnishing many of the surfaces are dirty. A number of the colours Impressionist artists employed were also fugitive (Bomford 1990: 100-102).

have been heavily masked by the control of rough brush marks. The insistence of Impressionists on the notion of modernity has in effect left them precisely there. Their work is incapable of existing in the future in anything like its original state. Using a systemised palette, defined by the artist wanting to use specific colours in specific places, which is often the case with life and figure painting (and was used by the Impressionists) may result in inherently weak painting. Many paints are not chemically compatible, such as umber and alizarion crimson, and if a painter forces them together cracking and warping occur (also to enable a smoother bond painters often use thinners/adulterators which systematically weaken the paint).

In their intention, Impressionists rejected painting mediums from the past in favour of the present without exploring the potential for the two to meet and redefine painting[14]. By encouraging the widest possible experimentation in paint we enable the possibilities of new materials evolving and the continual manufacture of those from the past. If artists continue to paint in the wake of the Impressionists, with little care for individual paint characteristics or personalities, we will see more and more ranges like Windsor and Newton which use binders, retarders and dryers, creating a homogeneity in which the individual properties of the pigment are radically reduced[15].

Conclusion

Cubbs asserts that we are now living in an age in which 'a significant part of the art world has come to adopt postmodernism's critical project ...' [to] 'dismantle the monolithic myth of modernism' this has resulted in a period in which many artists are preoccupied with 'the widespread borrowing of popular images' and 'imitative tactics of appropriation' which refute 'the notions of authorship, originality and genius upon which the outsider mythology of Romanticism ...were founded' (1994: 83, 84). Dismantling and demystifying are essential attributes to understanding, yet I am aware of a counter-necessity. In critiquing those 'maximally cohesive' regimes in the past, we may lose sight of what makes painting important, the emotions it invokes in us and the actions it inspires. Isaak, in *Feminism and Contemporary Art*, highlights a number of women artists who sample, edit and pastiche Western male artists' work from the past. To describe the power these 'new' images serve she quotes Benjamin: 'When a painting or work of art is reproduced, the original loses its "authenticity," its "traditional value" within a given "cultural heritage"' (1996: 51). Underlying her writing is the

14. One can assert that the major predilection for 'high' colours in Impressionist work was a result of their association with scientific 'discoveries,' namely the introduction of 'new' synthetic colours most notable in the 'high' range, the introduction of the colour wheel and an aversion to the browns of the Academy. The Impressionists, for the most part, rejected earth colours and black in their work "'There is no black in nature" became a famous dictum [of Impressionists]' (Bomford 1990: 90).

Delacroix (who in many ways pre-empted the discoveries of the Impressionists) stated, 'All earth colours should be banned' (Bomford 1990: 81). Elkins, in discussing Monet's technique in relation to alchemy, criticizes his adherence to these principles: 'That, as the alchemists would say, is the imbalance of Monet's technique: it is as far towards pure fire or pure colour as oil paint can go ... Here one principle has overwhelmed the other, and the product is sterile' (2000: 107).

15. I would contend that the only colours from their range which have retained their own values are the cheap, least complicated pigments such as ochre and Davy's grey.

'displacement' and destabilizing of master/male narratives. This position requires an assumption that the work from the past had one fixed reading prior to destabilization, and centres primarily on those works made in the 'West' within the linear construct.

Herwitz challenges this notion using Titian's painting, the *Venus of Urbino*, as an example. This work, painted free hand with no under drawing, exceeds the parameters of what one would think of as 'linear work.' Herwitz states that 'it is the mosaic of voices in this picture, and the mosaic of our own reactions to it, which in relationship constitute the picture's meaning and force' (1993: 289). Furthermore, he writes that the repression of artistic complexities produce 'the loss of values of looking, the loss of a self-critical voice, the loss of what we know art to be ... one ends up exercising the authorizing norms of a position whose claim to authority one is precisely aiming to overrule (i.e. avant-garde norms licensing the right of denial through theory)' (1993: 291).

Rather than reject the past per se, I look to paintings that have in one way or another inspired me or broadened my experience of painting, and I look to how this process was enabled in a very practical way. I am aware that most works of the past that elicit a strong response in me are those in which the artist adopted an approach, which evinced a strong chance of failure. By allowing oneself to work outside of the dictates of a fixed 'normative' philosophy (whilst engaging with social/personal concerns) the material one works with is invested with power. Both the play with, and the rigorous examination of one's materials and one's own aesthetic elicits new ideas.

In the next sections I shall look at the use of improvisation in constructing narrative/social painting and its potential as a vehicle for expression and transformation. I shall look at this in relation to my own work and other artists' processes. This section bears particular relation to the works of painters of the Early Renaissance, where tempera was used with oil on a wide scale for the first time in a spirit of 'unknowing,' and of many recent painters in South Africa who use oil and acrylic in a similar, experimental vein. I suggest that in the use of new materials one need not hamper the search by attempting to control the medium, by forcing it into prior models of behaviour with a known outcome. I contend that within an improvised approach social and political concerns become ingredients which strengthen the work rather than dictate to it, which pose questions for both artist and viewer without answering them. Equally, the search for personal 'voice and aesthetic' which I attempt to locate in my work is, I believe, best facilitated through improvisational means.

THE PROCESS OF PAINTING – in particular its relationship to improvisational strategies in making work that embodies social concerns and notions of 'self'

In this section I look at improvisational strategies in creating paintings with personal aesthetic and social content. I shall examine societal constructs which have facilitated improvisation and the implications of making work applying this strategy.

Using Improvisation within the process of creation

Many of my paintings have similar spatial, figurative and colour arrangements. In using improvisation as a strategy in production I do not deny the pull of my personal aesthetic and biases, rather by immersing myself in the process of creation I attempt to reveal an 'inside' view of my perception rather than an overview.

I use improvisation to enable me to remain actively present, in the moment, while making and not succumb to a fixed narrative arrangement. I make no preliminary drawings and rarely use aids for memory. I use a broad range of colours to avoid a pre-determined colour schema and work on small areas individually so as to reduce the likelihood of an overall didactic. There is no under drawing in my work and I make no attempt to 'cover' up the 'messiness,' 'mistakes' or complexity of the process.

The narrative component of my work is particularly affected by this methodology, as my initial idea or 'story' warps and changes through the process of making.

Frost, writing in his book *Improvisation in Drama*, says '... all improvisation tends to gather at a point of bifurcation where all creative directions remain open' (1990: 44). He suggests that viewers' response to improvisation is more immediate and complex than their response to 'formal' structure. The immediacy of improvisation, and the multiplicity of 'meanings' it engenders, requires alertness on the part of the viewer. He adds that improvisation 'demands an active condition of all those who figure in the "receiver" role ... [it] is about waking us up rather than lulling us to sleep' (1990: 45). By 'waking up' the viewer, through an improvised approach, I hope to actively engage them with the work and to elicit a sense of intimacy in which they have shared power of interpretation.

'[When] improvisation is most effective, most spontaneous ... it comes close to a condition of integration with the environment or context. And consequently [simultaneously] expresses that context in the most appropriate shape, making it recognisable to others' (Frost 1990: 2). I believe improvisation as a mode of production leaves a trace or an acknowledgement of the contradictory impulses, oppositions and struggles enacted in the creation of the work, thereby giving the viewer contact with the process. Frost writes that 'improvisation is about order, and about adaptation, and about truthfully responding to changing circumstances, and

about generating meaning out of contextual accidents. It is about failing ... about trying again and about enjoying the process without straining to get a known result. It is about creation' (1990:3).

At the UCT 2002 Summer school lecture series, William Kentridge, discussing his improvisational approach to art, asserted that his work had 'a justification not a philosophy.' His work is made and remade through its process and 'questions arise in its wake.' Having worked with shadows for seven to eight years with no fixed 'knowledge or principle,' he was now, he stated, 'on reflection, able to give an informed interpretation of the process.' Kentridge says of his work that the 'chance discovery' may 'become the central heart of the piece.'

There are similarities between my process and those of Kentridge, Bonghi Bengu and Willie Bester in that I attempt to show the viewer the object as process without the need for a definitive answer. Kentridge asserts that 'calls for certainty and absolute knowledge are inimical to the process of looking'... from the 'choreography' of the piece 'meanings will emerge and be recognized, in a meeting between what we know and what is thrown up' (Summer school lecture series 2002).

In my painting the 'space' and 'narrative' structures, that reflect my personal aesthetic, have emerged through process. Frost writes that 'improvisation doesn't work entirely without a pre-existent 'text', any more than language or creativity do, but what it does do is to operate with the ever-present possibility of re-organisation – of shaking the kaleidoscope again' (1990: 169).

The 'meanings' or stories in my work have evolved through the process of making and are open to multiple interpretations (I work from an initial point of inspiration, which then evolves into something else; the individual characters which emerge in the process lead to new ideas and enactments). I believe these implied contradictions enable the narrative of the painting to act multidimensionally and unpredictably, while encapsulating something of the complex actuality of the events they pertain to.

I suggest that the use of improvisation does not rule out frameworks for creation. For example, Mike Leigh's plays are framed by an overall schema, yet the 'focus is both individually and collectively on the "why rather than just the what"' (Frost 1990: 44). Leigh's plays had a seminal influence on me in my youth in highlighting the possibilities of self-expression in a societal context, and I sense we share similar imperatives in our work. Frost writes: 'the use of improvisation enables Mike Leigh's plays to "transcend" the [Marxist-derived] view of class and social determinism which his plays tend to deal in' and emerge as 'authentic, carefully crafted and detailed examinations of character and social environment ... serious and original investigations into real experience' (1990: 42). By using improvised social narrative I attempt to create similar outcomes to Leigh's in my paintings.

A process of searching, as opposed to knowing, enables the act of recollection and improvisation in which the plot emerges in Leigh's work. The articulation of

nuance, detail, and mundanity, which emerge in the process of his work, and the predominance of supposedly incidental detail enrich and deepen one's understanding of the experiences enacted. Looking at the narrative structure in Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, George Orwell's *Down and Out in London and Paris* and Primo Levi's *If this is a man*, one can see that although there is a 'storyline' in each of these works, they wander into the incidental. One is not primarily interested in the outcome of the story but in the journey it describes and the experience of an alien environment, both of which are brought vividly to life by the incongruous mundanity of the sub-plot.

In each of the works I have mentioned above, there is a meandering quality as memory evokes poignant details, which deviate from the main plot, and help to create a three-dimensional picture. Herwitz uses Proust's speculations on theory in summarizing his book *Making Theory Constructing Art*:

> How delicately prepared an impression is by the total context of a person's life. Impressions are prepared by the inscription in one's memory of the places one has been: by the people known, the art felt and remembered, by the society in which one dwells, the things one's family has had, the books one has read ... To acknowledge the force of such things in preparing one's experience of the detail is to acknowledge the facts of repetition, remembrance, reliving, of living from a thousand perspectives, the same thing. These facts point to the unpredictability of an impression wrung from detail, to the role of accident and timing in occasioning it ... (Herwitz 1993: 305).

Transformation, according to the dictionary definition, is the changing or altering of something into something else. Elkins (2000: 1) uses the analogy of alchemy to describe the process of transformation in painting as follows: 'One of the purposes of alchemy is to turn something as liquid as water into a substance as firm and unmeltable as stone. As in painting, the means are liquid and the ends are solid.' I believe painting can be a transformation of ideas, thoughts, desires and sensations from the mind and body into a tangible external reality.

Attempting transformation is essentially an act of faith, a stepping into the 'unknown.' It requires an acceptance of temporality and shifting boundaries, as new experiences throw up new impulses and ideas and call up different possibilities from the past. In his book *Improvisation in Drama* Frost premises that 'accepting and staying with the state of not knowing "who" or "what" is a quite precise step towards activating a degree of present awareness, which is ready to sense and respond to a more coherent and extensive range of sensation, intuition and expression.' This openness and the acknowledgement 'that I am what I am in the present moment' enables 'an authenticity of being' in which one is also able to own one's range of past experiences both in a historical/genealogical sense and in terms of buried psychic material, recalling, through memory, 'process, rather than event'(1990: 160).

According to Paulo Freire, there is no fixed actuality, rather a series of interacting realities that need to be perceived to be surmounted. 'Themes exist in men in their relationship with the world' (1972: 78). By the adoption of themes Freire

acknowledges (in the words of Peter Furter), that 'the goal will no longer be to eliminate the risks of temporality by clutching to guaranteed space, but rather to temporalise space ...The universe is revealed to me not as a space, imposing a massive presence to which I can only adapt, but as a scope, a domain which takes shape as I act upon it' (Furter quoted in Freire 1972: 65).

Improvisation enables the challenging of 'normative' and formal expression, 'The comic and the satiric vein, often allied to improvisation, challenges assumptions about stable social personality and "bourgeois" respectability ... it undercuts... myths about the coherence of individual identity and it's consonance within a system of stratified order and significance' (Frost 1990: 14). According to Frost, improvisation creates an 'opening' to one's own life which – as a process of revealing – may enable one's own life to touch and merge with others. In this context, improvisation in painting could be perceived both as a destabilizing mechanism in opposition to 'normative values,' and as a tool to enable empathy and communication across radically complex areas.

Privileging process in art in South Africa

I am interested in, and inspired by, the wealth of work in South Africa at the present time which uses improvisation as a strategy to elicit communication. In their recent production, *Cold Waters Thirsty Souls,* the Cape Town dance project, Jazz Art, broke with 'fixed formats' (in which improvisation only occurred at the rehearsal stage). The production was loosely formatted around a series of props, or 'plot development vehicles' and the dancers/actors responded to their own experiences as a means to facilitating 'choices,' creating complexity and diversity within the dance. Each night the dance changed in response to re-configurations of expression. The guitar-based Cape Town band, Black Sunshine, with their wealth of diverse musical experiences/skills, ad-libbed their performance according to audience response.

There are a number of explanations for the reasons improvisation has had such a strong influence on South African art. I shall suggest a few possibilities below.

Firstly, the radical changes in South Africa may be reflected in the desire of artists to challenge and question their own experiences. Ndebele in his essay 'Beyond protest' (in the recent publication *Rethinking African Arts and Culture*) states: 'There must be an accompanying change of discourse from the rhetoric of oppression to that of process and exploration. This would imply an open-endedness in the use of language, a search for originality of expression and a sensitivity to dialogue. The complexity of the day-to-day problems of living in fact coincides with the demands for creativity' (2000: 34). That this is happening in South Africa is highlighted by Oliphant and Roome (1999: 178): 'The search for the doors connecting people who live in different spaces, are among the persistent strands in the visual narratives of South African art. In this context, self-portrayal must be

seen as a matrix for subjective and social currents that have destabilized identities once fixed within the hierarchies of Apartheid.' They conclude that these relate to the 'reconstruction of African agency.'

Secondly, the majority of black artists in South Africa were not able to attend academic colleges to study art during the apartheid years, so different training vehicles emerged. Some of these 'alternative structures' appear to have been initiated by individuals with spurious aims. For example Grossert, the 'educational organizer for arts and crafts in Natal', 'encouraged the recovery of traditional skills' which, according to Oliphant and Roome, was designed to 'enlist rural craft into the agenda of reinventing ethnicity as a counter to the transethnic solidarity of the ongoing struggle for liberation.' Grossert asserted that 'African artists, with their natural talents, required no teaching' (Oliphant and Roome 1999: 173-178). However spurious some of the reasoning behind a number of these models was, the systems seen in tandem created vehicles for artists to learn craft skills, improvise and 'teach' one another. I believe the existence of a multitude of approaches to teaching art in South Africa has helped enable multidimensional practices.

Other factors within the 'alternative structures' may also have encouraged improvisation. David Koloane (2000: 22) states that 'due to the absence of formal teacher training institutions for black artists, the tutors in most of the centres were practising artists.' This factor may also have been instrumental in teaching favouring practice over theory. Bill Ainslie, who founded and taught at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, writes 'one thing that fascinates me is the importance of mark making. The frankness of one's relation to the means ... a quest to discover' (extract of paper written in 1982 quoted in Cross currents 2000: 27). The Thuphelo Workshop (based on the Triangle Workshops model) which has been running since 1985, advocates improvisation. For a period of two weeks artists from different backgrounds and disciplines work in a shared environment, to produce works that respond to the situation. Robert Loder (2000: 57, 58) states that 'the concentration of so much energy and commitment into a short period of time encourages risk taking and experimentation ... [there is a] strong emphasis on process not product.'

As well as attending non-state funded art institutions, many South African artists were forced through poverty to seek out alternative materials. Without access to 'traditional' fine art materials, artists were literally forced to improvise with what they could find. Collage[16] and linocut have been two of the tools most consistently used by artists in South Africa.

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16. Collage lends itself to improvisation, and Romare Bearden's improvised collages have had an influence on the work of some South African artists. Linoprint technique, according to Koloane, 'appears to be the most characteristic medium employed in most [community] centres.' It is economical as one can reproduce the image, and is accessible to those 'working in crowded social conditions ... it does not require elaborate facilities ... [and] can be executed in any place at any time' (2000: 23).

Linocut is essentially a high-risk activity. A slight hand movement in cutting changes the linocut image forever. I would suggest that, as a vehicle for drawing, it teaches both a sureness of hand and an acceptance of change. In contrast to the use of pencil and rubber, which enables one to remove the marks of process and try again, with linocut you get only one chance. This discipline of line is very similar to my own art influence. In my childhood I was given pens, not pencils, to draw with and was told by my mother 'to stand by what I had made.'

Thirdly, another factor in generating improvisational work may be the 'art as a vehicle of struggle' call in the 1980s. This may have given artists the impetus to make work that was socially relevant or, to put it another way, 'socially active.' Art as a vehicle for change may have been acknowledged in the consciousness of the people. It may be that artists involved in challenging 'enforcing' systems may be less inclined to adhere to 'fixed principles' and practices. Frost (1990: 178, 179) contends that with improvisation one is able to side-step 'official doctrines or ideologies' and 'introduce a relativism, a quizzical undermining [and] a series of shifting perspectives on class, role, accepted standards and codes.'

I would contend that in spite of the prejudice that created alternative structures in South Africa, the challenging of 'normative' or 'reductive' approaches to art (and the rigorous exploration of materials that many artists have adopted here) has led to a revitalisation of painting. Loder (2000: 58) writes that the Thuphelo model is particularly appropriate 'for Africa, being free of the didactic implications of more formal art school education based on the European model.' I would contend that this model would be 'particularly appropriate' anywhere that artists felt the need to exchange information and ideas and experiment[17]. In spite of reservations about what these systems were predicated on, out of this period have emerged artists who are able to understand their mediums, are open to experimentation, have a desire to exchange ideas and have a concern for their work's placement within 'society'.
I have a studio at Greatmore Art Studios and I see the complexities of other painters painting processes every day. In looking at numerous art books on South African art I found a dearth of material about process. Most work has been defined on the basis of image, materials used or the 'concept,' rather than how artists have constructed their images. This imbalance serves to devalue the complexities and intricacies of process.

Njabulo Ndebele's, essay 'Beyond Protest', which discusses the challenges facing writers in post-apartheid South Africa, could also apply to painting:

> As the writer begins working on the story, they may not know where it is going, and how it is going to get somewhere, but they have to find a way ... The operative principle of composition in post-protest literature is that it should probe beyond the observable facts, to reveal new worlds where it was thought they did not exist, and to reveal process and movement were they were hidden ...The aim is to extend the range of personal and social experience as far as possible in order to contribute to bringing about a highly conscious, sensitive new person in a new society (2000: 35).

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17. To improvise is to investigate, and I would suggest that the process is neither enhanced nor negated by 'formal' training. Improvisation is, obstensibly, a re-ordering/investigation of what one knows. Bonghi Bengu, who received a 'formal' education in both America and at UCT and now creates improvised work, asserts that she stopped the practice of making preparatory drawings for paintings and began making the drawing the 'artwork' as an end in itself, in order to keep the image 'fresh and alive' ('Art in a South African Context': Summer School lecture series, UCT 2002). In doing this she has not denied her formal training, rather she has put it to her own uses.

In my work the 'informal' art training I received from my grandmother and mother (painter and graphic designer respectively), who 'taught' me to draw from life and imagination (without recourse to notions of right and wrong), combines with three years spent in the 'life-room' attempting primarily to understand paint. Rather than be dictated to by these 'trainings,' I use them when they feel appropriate within the painting.

There are huge economic/market and social pressures on South African artists to succumb to the lures of the market place. Ingrid De Kok's assessment is that 'there is a strong impulse in the country, supported and sustained by the media, for a grand concluding narrative, which will accompany entry into globalised economy and international interaction with the world.' She asserts that artists and cultural institutions need to resist the 'increasing pressure' on them for 'settlement and nation building ... If yoked to those imperatives, art too soon will become a victim to the pressure to forgive and forget' (1999: 61). In spite of these pressures it seems that many South African artists continue to 'recompose' and assert the complexity of South African life – re-figuring, re-shaping, challenging and transforming views about South African societies.

I believe the complexity of South African art is often masked within the boundaries of perjorative terms. David Koloane speaks of the iniquities of terms such as 'transitional' and 'hybrid', which are often used to define the works of black African artists. These terms imply a movement from somewhere or between two fixed points. Hooks (1995: 26) writes: 'The desire to flatten everything out into this binary model again and again is something that really blocks our understanding of the creative process.'

What I find challenging and therefore exciting about the work of many South African artists is that it is not able to be defined within the simplicity of 'formal' conscripts. I believe artists such as Willie Bester, David Koloane, William Kentridge and Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi are able to expose both the absurdity and complexities of their respective 'experiences' through the act of improvisation. When 'improvisation is most effective, most spontaneous ... it comes close to a condition of integration with the environment or context, and consequently (simultaneously) expresses that context in the most appropriate shape, making it recognisable to others' (Frost 1990: 2). Frost concludes: 'Where a culture begins to seek out that point and those skills, it is on the verge of transformation' (1990: 178).

The use of 'play' in creating images

'Man is only fully human when he plays: it is the 'will to play' (spieltrieb) which produces new combinations of matter and form' (Frost 1990: 180).

The act of playing is often an integral part of improvisation.

> The parallels between the nature and qualities of play and the rules of improvisation and creative thought are so striking that one is tempted to say they are one and the same. In both there is a need for setting rules that are apart from ordinary life ... for accepting ideas without judgement and for altering an action through the affirmation of ideas rather than the negation of them. Most of all, both call for the creation of a space in which judgement does not exist' (Izzo 1997: 15).

The space one creates for play is referred to by Izzo as the 'Temenos'. Temenos is a Greek word meaning 'the sacred circle.' This is a space in which, Izzo asserts, we

recognize societally that different rules apply to those associated with 'normal' life (1997: 9). He adds that the Temenos is not confined to social space but could allude to space inside one in which play exists. It could equally be conceived as the space for the painting.

The Shaman, clown and carnival are societal emblems for improvisational play. Acting outside of 'the rules' of societal order, they provide ways in which societies fulfil their desire to 'play.' 'The scene of the carnival, where there is no stage, no "theatre," is thus both stage and life, game and dream, discourse and spectacle. By the same token, it is proffered as the only space in which language escapes linearity (law) to live as drama in three dimensions. At a deeper level ... drama becomes located in language' (Kristeva quoted in Isaak 1996: 39).

Equally, they provide a space in which fear is 'relinquished' as right and wrong are no longer clearly delineated and 'play implementors' are able to perform the role of 'privileged political satirist, outside the confines of censor' (Towsen quoted in Frost 1990: 6).

Izzo contends that 'play has the capacity to alter our perception of time. When a player enters into a play space (Temenos), he or she knows that it is also "play time". It is a time outside the ordinary world, separate and distinct. Time has no bearing on play; it is timeless, having no past or future. Play is always a here-and-now endeavour. For a player absorbed in the game, the passage of time seems altered' (1997: 13).

Play and improvisation invite the viewer in, to join in the act of interpretation and discovery of the work. Frost (1990: 167) contends that 'the act of decoding information implies the creation of new, often unsuspected or unintended meanings out of the signals received. The audience does not only "read" the performance – in a very real sense it "writes" it too.'

I suggest that painting made in the 'spirit' of play and exploration enables the viewer to wander within the picture plane, rather than dictating to the viewer a particular enactment. 'Beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of grief is not a proscenium, a man who wails is not a dancing bear' (Trinh T. Minh-ha quoted in Richards 1999:186).

Frost, writing on the status of improvised theatre in 'Western' society, contends that the more 'formal' theatre has become the less 'communal' and 'interactive' it has become. He writes that 'through improvisation the meaning of a theatre event is being shifted, or perhaps returned to what it may originally have been. Away from the comfortable and enclosed "realism" of the conventional theatre, back towards something more disturbing, more immediate, but also more powerful and rewarding' (1990: 173,174).

I believe the same could be true of improvised painting. In the next section I shall look back at the Early Renaissance period in Italy, as the paintings of this period demonstrate the possibilities for work outside of the 'realism' of later 'historic' paintings.

Historical contextualisation – The Early Renaissance

As the Early Renaissance in Italy marks the first widespread use of oil and easel painting, this period has particular relevance to painting.

I was familiar with works from this period before I knew anything about it. Out of context, I still found many of the works deeply moving and engrossing and much of my impetus to paint stems from interaction with works by Sassetta, Duccio and Bellini. I believe much of the work of this period exemplifies the improvisational/play approach to painting previously discussed, and which I attempt to facilitate in my own working practice.

I believe the power retained in Early Renaissance work, in challenging and pleasing the audience, is inherent in the artists' working philosophies at this time, which owed much to alchemy. Elkins, in his most recent book, *What painting Is* (2000), contends that alchemy is a philosophy which encompasses risk, 'unknowing', lateral thinking and improvisation. In this section I shall look very briefly at the differences between the intentions of Early Renaissance artists in comparison to the later period, and then look at two facets of alchemy – the notions of 'oneness' or non-linear time, which enables art to remain transformative outside of its time, and 'transmutation', which explores the process of improvisation with substances.

I believe these two facets of alchemy provide a framework for understanding improvisation as a process of commitment and transformation within the painting. And transmutation is a good vehicle for discussing the practical process of improvisational painting. It also creates an alternative vehicle for discussing art practice outside of the linear model.

Early Renaissance practice in relation to the linear model

A linear progressive model of scientific reasoning which approached art in a 'logical,' linear fashion only emerged in the late sixteenth century in Italy. In Early Renaissance Italy, Christianity, Judaism and oriental teaching existed side by side with paganism. Prior to the notion of 'refined' technique or 'correct application,' complex, multifaceted, multi-sourced and multi-perspective work was created during this period. Belting (1987: 43) writes of Early Renaissance work:

> It was embodied in numerous alternatives which simply cannot be grasped with the monolithic conceptions of closed artistic styles ... With this [conception] we arrive at the problem of the alleged unity of older art versus the fragmentary nature of modern

> art. This apparent opposition ...is only partially valid. For it is nourished by an all too idealistic conception of traditional art, one which we owe in large part to romanticism. In fact, older art emerges as a sum of rival and complementary functions and their respective expressions.

It is impossible to gauge how alchemy as a direct pursuit influenced Renaissance artists. It would be rather like 'a historian tracing the echo of our own debates [who] might justly infer from the common use of such words as microbe or molecule that scientific discovery had moulded our imagination; but he would badly err if he assumed that a proper use of these words would always be attended by a complete technical mastery of the underlying theory' (Wind 1958: 22).I shall therefore talk about the wider implications of making art in a system that acknowledged alchemy, especially in relationship to the enablement this system provided for the artist's heuristic/improvisational search.

In using the term alchemy I refer to its practical application, not the perception of it as secret, clandestine methodology steeped in mysticism. As Anfam has pointed out, 'there is an incorrect assumption that the artists of the Renaissance guarded the secrets of their profession ... chemical and medicinal recipes originating from medieval and later writers ... were expressly intended to make knowledge widely available' (1985: 116).

Art as a series of 'Oneness'

> 'Implicit in [the] linear arrangement is a suggestion of misleading chronology, a temporal-ideational faction which constructs progression as a process in which ideas are used and discarded, then superseded and supplanted by new ones. This method hardly looks back except for self-justification and self-authentication ...one of the abiding concerns of the New Historicism is the reconstruction of our view of history not as a progressional, evolutionary inevitability, but as a multidirectional network of ruptured continuities ...a complex, supratemporal artefact in which the present derives its force from the unpastness of the past'
> (Niyi Osundare 2000: 114).

Here I shall discuss the notion of 'oneness' inherent in alchemy to extrapolate some of the inferences we can glean from this idea. Klossowski de Rola says, in his book on alchemy, 'everything comes from the One and returns to the One, by the One for the One' (1973: 14). The notion of oneness inscribes the relevance of painting outside of its own time, and therefore its ability to 'transform' beyond the context in which it was created.

Unlike the linear model, alchemy posits art in a series of oneness in which each work is inherently complete. As Elkins points out in his seminal book on the link between alchemy and painting:

> If paintings could count, they would just say the number one over and over: each painting would insist on its own uniqueness, because no mark can be like any other, and no picture can duplicate another. Photographs, Xeroxes, and prints inhabit a

> different world, where images come in "editions," "copies" or "multiples." A painting or drawing on the other hand, always counts the number one. It is unique, and so is every mark on it. As every artist knows, a single brush mark can never be retrieved: if it is painted over, it is gone, and no matter how many times the same hand passes over the same inch of canvas, the mark can never be reproduced. Every mark is a different beginning: one, one, one ... and so on forever (2000: 41).

Acknowledging that work is a 'oneness' devolves the use of habit, where one work leads progressively to the next, along a simple line. Frost contends that improvisation is about being in 'the moment' and allowing it to occur (1990: 3).

The notion of 'oneness' negates the view that painting is held in a progressive, historical framework, and helps us view paintings made many years ago as actively present, just as it would have enabled Renaissance artists to view earlier work in this fashion. Metcalf argues that 'the modern, naturalized concept of time,' based on 'social evolutionary theory' (although scientifically discarded) is still with us in the way that Westerners conceive of themselves in relation to others. This notion, he says, 'promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of time – some upstream, others downstream. Civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization (and their cousins, industrialization, urbanization) are all terms whose conceptual content derives from evolutionary time' (1994: 219-220).

Early Renaissance artists did not seem to have the notion of historicity and evolution that was embedded in 'Western' art practice prior to last century. Turner writes of the Early Renaissance: 'The time itself had no such levels of abstraction to deal with the contrast before it, and in fact may have thought in terms of two manifestations of excellence that were simply different, not older and newer or worse and better' (1997: 56). An example of art as actively present, in the Renaissance period, is in people's reaction to the 'magical' properties of art, regardless of whether it was made in their era or the past. 'In 1325 the Sienese excavated a Roman copy of a statue of Venus by the fourth-century BC Greek sculptor Lysippus ... Soon feeling that it brought bad luck, they took it down and broke it into pieces' (Turner 1997: 51). 'Equally, a painting of a Madonna by a contemporary artist in Florence was believed to grant miracles' (1997: 18).

Another reason for our ability to respond to painting regardless of when it was made, is posited by Fuller, who asserts that as 'a picture has been made by a human being with a body and range of emotions – an underlying human condition ... [and] since we possess similar bodies and a similar emotional range, we can respond if he is successful in his expression, and we in our receptive attention' (1980: 36). Fuller discusses this in relation to 'the life rhythms' which enact in the process of painting, and how these rhythms enact a 'continuity of process' within painting. The inevitable contradictions of impulse or 'life rhythms' that are enacted in the struggle between what we do and don't know in the painting is (I believe) what energizes them.

When I view a painting I perceive it as an active presence, regardless of when it was made. My interest as a painter is not, primarily, in when but how a work was made, what it represents and what the artist wanted to say. If one is able to view paintings as a series of 'onenesses', this has the added advantage of repositioning painters as able to transform our viewpoint even if they had little effect on later developments in art. I am interested in how the artist struggled with their work, demonstrated in their marks of conflict and contradiction and in the areas of irritation, frenzy and boredom, and in how areas of sublimation have rewarded this struggle. In painting which shows the process by which it was made, one can tell which colours and lines were felt and which ones prescribed. In reading the painting I believe one gets deeper and deeper under its surface and one feels the emotions of the painter and their desires.

The work of Giovanni Bellini offers a good example of the range of experiences work from any age can offer, outside it's own time. His work highlights the complexity of meanings inherent in Early Renaissance art, enabled by a multi-rooted system, and demonstrates the impossibility of assuming one fixed single meaning or impulse for the work and therefore any sense of a definitive social reading, even in it's own time[18].

Yet the narrative and social content of many of Bellini's paintings are still translatable on the basis of minimal historical knowledge and our common understanding of expressive gesture.[19] In his work one can see an improvisational approach in which the search is as important as the answer. Bellini's own assertions challenge the notion that Early Renaissance work was tied to the wishes of the patron. In attempting to acquire a painting of Bellini's a patron was reminded (by Pietro Bembo, the Venetian poet and Bellini's friend) that Bellini 'does not like to be given many written details which cramp his style; his way of working, as he says, is always to wander at will in his pictures, so that they can give satisfaction to himself as well the beholder' (Kemp 1997: 237)[19].

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18. Gofen posits the Venetian light as the primary sources of inspiration for Bellini's work, 'for in Venice solid forms are almost subsumed in the miasma of sky and water: light reaches the eye both from above and below ... and Bellini saw these effects in his mind's eye as he painted' (1989: 19). Whilst Beck asserts that Bellini 'was able to expand his artistic horizon, more so than many of his contemporaries, through a shift in medium and support, on the one hand, and through the powerful stimulation of brilliant young pupils and associates like Giorgione, Sebastiano del Piombo, and Titian, on the other' (1999: 279). Gofen also gives the work mystical intent. Bellini's many images of the Madonna and child were 'probably hung over their owners' beds' as fertility talismans, which are commonly associated with paganism. 'According to popular belief, the biological process of procreation could be assisted by images [and] children, especially male children, were the sole purpose and justification of sexual intercourse ... the Christ child, the prototypical male infant ... might inspire the couples who slept beneath his image' (1989: 92, 93).

19. *The death of St. Peter the Martyr* is a good example. It is a painting of a small wood with a town in the distance. The wood fans out in a semi-circle, surrounding a sandy area in the foreground. In the centre foreground a man is being attacked by two soldiers. To the left of the clearing St. Peter has already been killed. His halo is in place and shows the viewer he has gained his 'rightful' place in heaven and as such he is no longer of concern to us. The central narrative of the painting concerns Peter's friend (who we know from historical accounts survived the attack) with no halo – he is a mere mortal and will die human. It is his face in the centre of the painting which communicates with us. Attacked by the soldiers, who are cold and methodical, his expression is both anguished and confused. The houses, the clothing and the setting all tell us this is the rural Italy of Bellini's time. The small copse of trees and the little Italian village in the distance create an idyllic pastoral scene. A man works quietly in the field beyond. This painting speaks to the possibility of horror within calm, the uncertainly of life and the fragility of action. We know historically that this man survived the attack, but in viewing him we are hurt for him not as a 'victim' or 'passive martyr' but as a human being struggling for survival. X-rays of the work show that the underpinning charcoal markings were loose and sketchy, marking the areas in the scene rather than pinning down detail. In the under-painting Bellini's initial intent is exposed. St. Peter is shown not already dead but dying, half off the ground, the soldier's knife still in his chest. In altering the painting to depict St. Peter dead, Bellini moves the focus from the saint to the human and alters the entire meaning of the piece.

'Swirling every conceivable object into the mix'

In *Alchemy the Secret Art* Klossowski de Rola describes the alchemical doctrine as 'pertaining to a hidden reality of the highest order ... a rainbow bridging the chasm between the earthly and heavenly planes ... Like the rainbow, it may appear within reach, only to recede if one chases it merely to find a pot of gold' (1973: 7). This belief may explain why so many early Renaissance artists were able to contain so many varying interests and concerns in their work. In essence the work could be perceived as a desire to explore the 'nature' of things rather than control them. Elkins suggests that part of the alchemical tradition is to merge 'the chaos of The World back into its essential onenesses. Rather than start with a 'neat' formula that could be 'pulled together, The All in All ... is an attempt to compensate for the bewildering variety of the world, by swirling every conceivable object into the first undifferentiated unity' (2000: 46). As Elkins points out, 'there is no hope of pure balance, no electrum with miraculous powers ... [as] a perfect electrum would be dead' (2000: 109). What is of interest here is not the inherently impossible goal of perfection but the process of 'swirling every conceivable object' into the mix, and the multiple readings these evince.

Another explanation for the diversity and multifaceted nature of Early Renaissance art is the accepted practice of more than one artist working on a piece. Originally, I believe, this practice enabled work to show different agendas in one piece and the mark of many hands. The fact that Early Renaissance artists' work was bought and displayed demonstrates that people of this time could appreciate complex, multifaceted imagery. This practice also enabled artists working on their own to explore different means of expression in the same painting. Hence Bellini's radically different way of representing the faces, buildings and costumes within his paintings. Lack of uniformity allows entrance to the work on a number of levels. The viewer is invited both to look around the piece and enter into it through the broken surface, to gain a sense of the artist's search. During the Late Renaissance the imposition of controls reduced the possibilities for complex discoveries and images. Cole states that in the search for 'a uniformity of style it was necessary that the work ... look whole and seamless, not a jumble of disparate styles ... it was toward this uniformity that much of the education ... was directed' (1983: 31). This is in contrast to the Early Renaissance, in which there seems to be no perception of one prescriptive rule or allegiance. Artists seemed to experiment with different ideas but did not adopt them as strict principles governing their work. The fact that most works of the Early Renaissance were religious in content and therefore tied to certain ideologies does not necessarily diminish or impede the expressive abilities of the works.

If one examines just one of Duccio's da Buoninsegna's panels for the fourteen-panelled work, *The Maesta*, (picture ref Della Croce 1998: 36) one can see numerous interests at work. In looking at the panel of the last supper, the faces are based on actual people and the tablecloth is a patterned copy of an actual design (although painted in a non-realistic fashion as a dazzling display of light). Objects

are placed randomly on the cloth as though this were an actual replica of the meal, though they are clearly garnered from the imagination except for a water jug at the front, which has been faithfully rendered lifelike. The haloes, which are likely to have been made by someone else, are tightly engraved in the gold. The whole displays a huge range of possibilities in the artist's vernacular. Posited in a single image of a known theme, the artist has created work that speaks of multiple possibilities within one image. This painting of the meal, which informs us of the painter's desires, may also serve as a reminder of Christ as human, embarking on an actual last meal.

Transmutation

The process of transmutation – of altering matter from 'water to stone' – is an abiding principle of alchemy. Transmutation is a strong analogy for improvisation and describes the process by which some artists attempt to experiment in their work and to transform matter and understanding.

Transmutation is a process of experimentation without known scientifically quantifiable properties or known results. Physical and metaphysical ingredients are brought together in the process, in which they transmute (change form) and make something solid. This process is the struggle of 'turning water into stone'. In relation to painting, the water elements could be understood as the viscous, wet elements of the paint and the subconscious traces of the artist's desire, which are then turned into an 'actual' or 'stone' reality through the process of painting. This process is antithetical to the scientific/Academy model, where a systematic approach to painting concerned primarily with surface reality leads to success or failure. The 'transmutational' process involves 'working, watching and struggling without a definitive, known outcome' (Elkins 2000: 1, 181-198). Elkins writes: 'What matters in painting is pushing the mundane towards the instant of transcendence. The effect is sublimation or distillation: just as water heats up and then suddenly disappears, so paint gathers itself together and then suddenly becomes something else – an apparition hovering in the fictive space beyond the picture plane' (2000: 188).

Although ingredients are altered or transmuted in this process, the elements that constitute the painting remain. Similar to the way in which homeopathic remedies are made, the trace of the initial intentions of the artist is 'locked' into the painting.

In the alchemical approach to painting, new or unexplored materials are sought and are then transmuted through the act of painting without a known definitive outcome. Mayer, the writer and compiler of *The Artist's Handbook*, attempted to re-energize painting through a knowledge of its properties. He writes: 'In the past, the discovery or rather the widespread application of new and improved raw materials and technical methods almost always coincided with the introduction of new art forms' (no publication date: 32). Alchemical practice negates the use of formulated devices to reach a known result. It promotes the use of known and unknown

mediums. Understanding of the properties of materials is reached through the action of painting, requiring empathy with the materials. This process enables colours, narrative and emotions to both transmute and retain individual properties or voices within the painting.

This process does not negate the use of known variables, but it asserts the principle that it is within the experimentation with unknown variables that transformation or transmutation occurs. 'Sometimes deviation from the usual is a special revelation of truth. In alchemy this was referred to as the *opus contra naturam*, an effect contrary to nature. If we are going to be curious about the soul, we may need to explore its deviations, its perverse tendency to contradict expectations' (Moore quoted in Hooks 1995: 17). What this process implies is that one can bring political, social, personal and spiritual elements to the painting process and enable them to enact and transform within the painting without subscribing to dogma or agenda. These elements thereby, in their subliminal traces, deepen rather than prescribe the experience. The artist is prepared to risk his or her previous knowledge and beliefs in the painting and discovering process. Within the act of painting, the artist acknowledges both sublimation and control, being led by the paint and leading. Elkins asserts that 'painting ... takes place outside science and any sure and exact knowledge. It is a kind of immersion in substances, and a wonder and delight in their unexpected shapes and fields' (2000: 193). And further, 'when an artist is fooled into thinking that paint can be entirely understood, then the studio becomes an annoying tedium where paint has to be pushed into place to make images' (2000: 146).

Artists working experimentally/improvisationally with materials do not need to know them scientifically as they learn through practical application. For example, one learns that umber is chalkier and faster drying than vermilion, and will crack if placed on top of vermilion; that lead white is harsh and impermeable and titanium white (which was introduced last century) is wet and absorbent and carries colours across the canvas; that zinc is stringy and unpredictable. Each paint carries its own personality and reacts differently with others. Thus the painter learns a multitude of permutations through the act of making. The artist learns to read the paint, and how far it can be pushed or cajoled into 'doing.' I believe much Early Renaissance work has endured to the present day because of the effort artists put into understanding the attributes and weaknesses of their materials. An approach I seek to emulate in my own working practice.

Transmutation of new materials

Paint has gone through massive technological transformation in the past 150 years. Acrylic, for example, has only existed for fifty years. Elkins believes 'acrylic could only be successful in the twentieth century, when painters are more likely to be impatient. In past centuries, acrylic would have seemed to dry far too quickly' (2000: 123). Thelme Newman contends that 'the new plastics' strange potential is bound to change traditional art forms because of the new technical demands and

innovations that the substance requires ... These new materials reach frontiers heretofore unknown to creative users of traditional media ...' (quoted in Roome 1999: 88). In using acrylic and oil in painting one is literally welding the old to the new, and in the process transforming the 'look' of the painting.

The introduction of acrylic signals a new era in painting, forcing painters into a position of the 'unknown'.

A number of painters highlight the breadth of possibilities the new medium brings. Leon Golub literally burns and cuts the paint, once applied, back to the canvas in which the image is locked. Willie Bester incorporates other materials into the painting and creates a multi-textured, multifaceted surface in which images literally and metaphorically bounce off the surface. Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi uses both oil and acrylic – some parts of the canvas are bare, others are dry and yet others oily – and the images are in some cases drawn with the paint and sometimes painted. Each of these artists maintains the use of the figure and carries with them past knowledge of their materials, yet each painting seems to elicit new opportunities. Rather than reject the line, colour, the figure or politics because of their past associations, they work with them in ways which alter or renegotiate their meaning, giving them new life.

WORKING PROCESS – METHODOLOGY

I adopt an improvisational framework in my working practice in which I attempt to explore and challenge my perceptions, feelings and values. By adopting an improvisational strategy I attempt to reduce the likelihood of a fixed outcome in which the painting process is didactically controlled by the image. Bonnard stated that he worked best from memory, as 'the image in front of him was too controlling' and 'overwhelmed his initial impulse.' I employ the same strategy but for different reasons. I also find working directly from subject matter controlling, but so is memory if it is used merely to transcribe what one's first impulses were. For me the intention is to start with the initial image and then subvert it through the process of painting. New impulses and contradictions are explored within the painting process and from this basis a narrative gradually emerges that re-forms the painting. The painting is finished when there is no longer an impulse to paint. This means intentionality transmutes through the painting process, which enacts with the subject matter and the materials, creating a translation rather than a representation.

In my practical work I take a number of ingredients, which could include actual events I have seen or emotional, social, political, autobiographical or imaginary elements, and mix these together with the paint in the painting. My paintings are primarily facilitated by an act of memory and emotional response to a particular place, person or event (although I occasionally paint elements from thumbnail sketches, photographs or life). The process is one of constantly losing and gaining control. Within my use of materials there is a constant struggle between known approach and the unknown.

To examine in detail how this process affects my subject matter I shall look at one example of my work, the *wedding*. (pic.ref 70)

Subject matter – *the wedding*

I had a strong desire to make a painting about my recent marriage to my long-term partner who, at the time of making the painting, was living with me in South Africa. The initial impulse was to paint our wedding cake as I still had a vivid recollection of the first bite/taste. I had forgotten the symbolism of this moment but on the day I was reminded of the strong ritual associations of marriage. In my nervous state the metaphorical symbolism was lost on me, but the first bite of cake reminded me of my presence and enactment in the ceremony. It was my first moment of self-consciousness, in which I registered the fact that I was married. In making the work, other memories were evoked and complex contradictory elements emerged. The cake cutting and sharing of the first bite is a tradition I have witnessed at all the weddings I have attended in London.

The moment of sharing the first slice of cake marks the moment in which the couple share their life for the first time. It symbolizes their sexual union, the fruition of the marriage and the union that separates them from others. My partner and I were not virgins, we had lived together previously, both of us had been married before and our wedding took place in a registry office – all of which

factors carry social implications which create complex contradictions to the notion of marriage.

Underneath the white cake there is another one – a pink and blue version made by my aunt – but it is not the cake I visualized us sharing. The painting therefore has more in common with my feelings and desires about the wedding than the actuality.

In creating the painting I articulate both my desires prior to marriage and my feelings now, having made the commitment. Prior to the wedding I was overwhelmed by the notion of sharing my life with someone for whom I have an 'overwhelming' love, and of committing myself to that union. I was awed by the romance of the occasion – wearing the dress, holding the flowers, cutting the cake – while at the same time scared by the sharing of identity implicit in marriage and by the responsibility. This painting therefore operates on a number of levels; it is both a symbol of love and an acknowledgement of the faith inherent in the act of marriage and the fear of unknowing.

As the painting evolved I had a desire to record the guests, in particular my daughter. The wallpaper in the background was changed to a mirror, creating a distance between 'us' as a couple and 'them' by means of our respective positioning in the mirror and the time lapse between us. This creates a plural reality in which the wedding couple are segregated from everyone else. This distancing highlights both the alienation of marriage and the element of union.

This painting is the only one from this period in which I used photographs to jog visual memory (for paintings the guests). This creates another distancing mechanism between 'us' and the guests. The guests are distanced by being transcribed rather than felt (with the exception of my daughter, who is painted from memory and stands out from the others).

Painting methodology

I work almost exclusively from memory with an unrestricted palette and an unformulated agenda, using my life as source material.

I have mentioned a number of ingredients, both physical and metaphysical, that I wish to include in my art-making process in order to make improvisational/transformative work. I shall contend that transforming how we perceive and know things can be facilitated in a process by which one challenges and tests one's own assumptions and beliefs and uses under-explored or unexplored mediums. In this view painting is constituted in an act of faith and risk.

The materials I use are both new and old – gesso, oil, resin and acrylic. There is a struggle to create meaning with both synthetic and natural materials. Acrylics, oils, resins and pigments all have different properties or personalities. In the painting process I believe the challenge is to create a rhythm which encompasses these different elements while enabling them to maintain the memory of their initial

form. To this end I use adulterators or thinners very rarely (in only one of the paintings in this group of work have I used turpentine, and then only in a specific context) and I rarely deliberately premix paints, preferring to explore their potential to mix/transmute in direct application on the canvas, where I carry other colours to them. I also allow the gradual breakdown of the 'clean' palette.

I believe that to 'invigorate' the pigments and medium the paints need to break down and alter their properties throughout the work. To this end I never wash my brushes and I work with a loaded palette, which inevitably gets 'messy.' As I paint, the colours gradually lose their purity and take on other forms. The oils develop skin and dust and debris accumulate, both of which I include in the work in a process akin to alchemy. As Elkins states, 'putrefecation is a nearly universal step in the alchemical work. The clean substance has to degenerate into brackish mould before it produces anything worth examining' (2000: 69).

I never knowingly use symbolic imagery but I believe that the pigments themselves are symbolic of our present reality, in which the synthetic and natural blend and clash, and in my own reality in an urban setting. In making the work I always start with a layer of gesso overpainted with a bright 'plastic' ground of pink, purple or red. This creates a challenge in altering/retaining the work's appearance and creates an 'un-naturalistic' start that forces an act of imagination to go beyond it and make it 'real.' Giotto, in his Tempera paintings, used a similar approach in that he began the figures in his paintings with a layer of green, which was then covered in translucent red. The green shone through the red, resulting in a colour that resembled flesh tones (Elkins 2000: 120).

In each painting I use approximately twenty different pigments held in oil or resin and add more at will. I use burnt umber and Davy's grey most frequently, both of which are natural pigments and offset the brighter ones. Davy's grey is made of slate and is the colour of roads, roofs and sky in England. It is a fragile paint which disintegrates on the canvas. As it gets 'swallowed' by the brighter paints it leaves minute traces and serves to remind me of home. These colour choices are based on a mixture of intuitive and concrete understanding and an element of risk. I apply the oil over acrylic rule most of the time but allow for discrepancy if it seems important. The same applies to fat over lean. One can see the same latitude applied to 'rules' in Renaissance paintings, where artists were prepared to take risks if they felt the work demanded it[20].

I use both synthetic and earth colours, some pigments with retarders and dryers and others without. I use both colours from the earliest ranges, such as rose madder, ochre and sienna, as well as those from the new, such as the lakes and magenta. I use acrylic synthetics in the under painting, though I prefer to use permanent colours rather than the fugitives. I use gold, silver and tin as colours and acrylic, poppy, linseed oil and resin binders. Although some of the paints I use are

20. In Bellini's paintings one can see the breaking of the fat over lean 'rule' time and time again, when he alters pictures not only to 'correct' them but also to change their meaning. It is important to note that his paintings have stayed relatively intact in spite of this risk.

expensive, I use all paint sparingly. I brought approximately eighty colours with me to South Africa in 35ml tubes, and to date the only colours I have had to buy here are Davy's grey and titanium white.

I love paints that have extreme personalities, such as alizarin crimson, burnt umber and zinc white, and use them in conjunction with the simpler paints such as Naples yellow and titanium. I struggle endlessly with the greens, which I always find either too translucent or impossibly stodgy, and have on a number of occasions mixed them with gold to give them a bit of life. As my attempt is to explore my feelings and beliefs in paint, there is no attempt to 'pretty up' experience. I deliberately leave some areas roughly or messily painted and others gently toiled over. I work through whatever mood I am in, which alters through the process of painting and also alters the painting. In this way my personality is bound to the paint.

In my working process the brush performs a primary task in the facilitation of transformation. Although I use a variety of brushes and a sponge, the majority of the painting is made using one brush. I generally use a synthetic sable mix brush, which takes wear and tear throughout the process. Gradually adapting to my handling after days of use, it begins to act like a well-worn fountain pen that adapts to its owner's handwriting. I believe this enables the natural flow of the painting, allowing sublimation to occur and the work to go beyond intentionality. Hooks writes about sublimation in relation to writing: 'I have a magical encounter with words where all of a sudden something appears on my page that is totally not in line with anything I consciously thought ... folks who have gone to school and been trained, also have these moments where all the training falls away and you're at that visionary moment where you see it and can make it happen' (1995: 25).

When each painting is complete I discard both palette and brush and start anew, enabling a different rhythm to occur in new works, with the knowledge that the paint and brush will have to be 'weathered' or worn in by the work before transformation can occur.

Like the early Renaissance painters, I pursue a wide range of interests in my paintings to articulate a complex reality. Beyond the abstract process of paintings there are searches to articulate colour, light, spatial awareness, multiple perspectives, different people (who are both recognizable and at the same time idiosyncratically rendered) and, in some of my paintings, an element of time[21].

The process of improvisation in my work is enabled by making each section independently, thereby creating a work that operates as a series of moments or

21. The time element in my work relates to that of many early Renaissance paintings which employed similar strategies. In *The Wedding*, my husband and I are sharing the first bite of cake while in the background mirror we have already drawn apart and the guests behind us are no longer paying us attention. This speaks to the actuality of marriage as a passage rather than a single event. In the painting *Crystal Palace Park* the lower panel is wet and miserable while the sun is shining in the upper, implying we are making our way into this space. In Sylvia she is miserably breast-feeding while the other diners are completely unaware of her, isolating her further from the communal spirit. Each of these time continuums was created intuitively by the paintings' demands.

ideas rather than one controlling mood. Each facet of the image is individually created and acts in dialogue with its counterparts.

I create work in which there is a high degree of 'transparency,' not in order to reach certainty, but in order to reveal 'unknowing' and to create a site in which dialogue can take place, were there is no certainty of 'rightness.' I actively embrace uncertainty in order to challenge myself. The work is not mystified by a lack of acknowledgement of working processes and I make no attempt to conceal my sources. As a painting gets older it grows more and more translucent. My aim is to create paintings which can withstand this process[22].

22. As my work gets older it will reveal more of the process, the complexities and the hidden figures. The acrylic ground will fade and will equally become more apparent under the oil, and the surface and paint will gradually integrate into a less extreme dichotomy. There is no under drawing in my work and each element is created wet in wet, so there is little chance of damage, cracking, flaking or poor adhesion.

Images are shaped through the multidirectional use of the brush building the elements, which should enable them to hold together. Equally they are very thin, which also reduces the element of risk. And, unlike the Impressionists, I am not a purist and am happy to know my work will dirty and transmute with age.

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PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION OF PAINTINGS

Tooting

2000

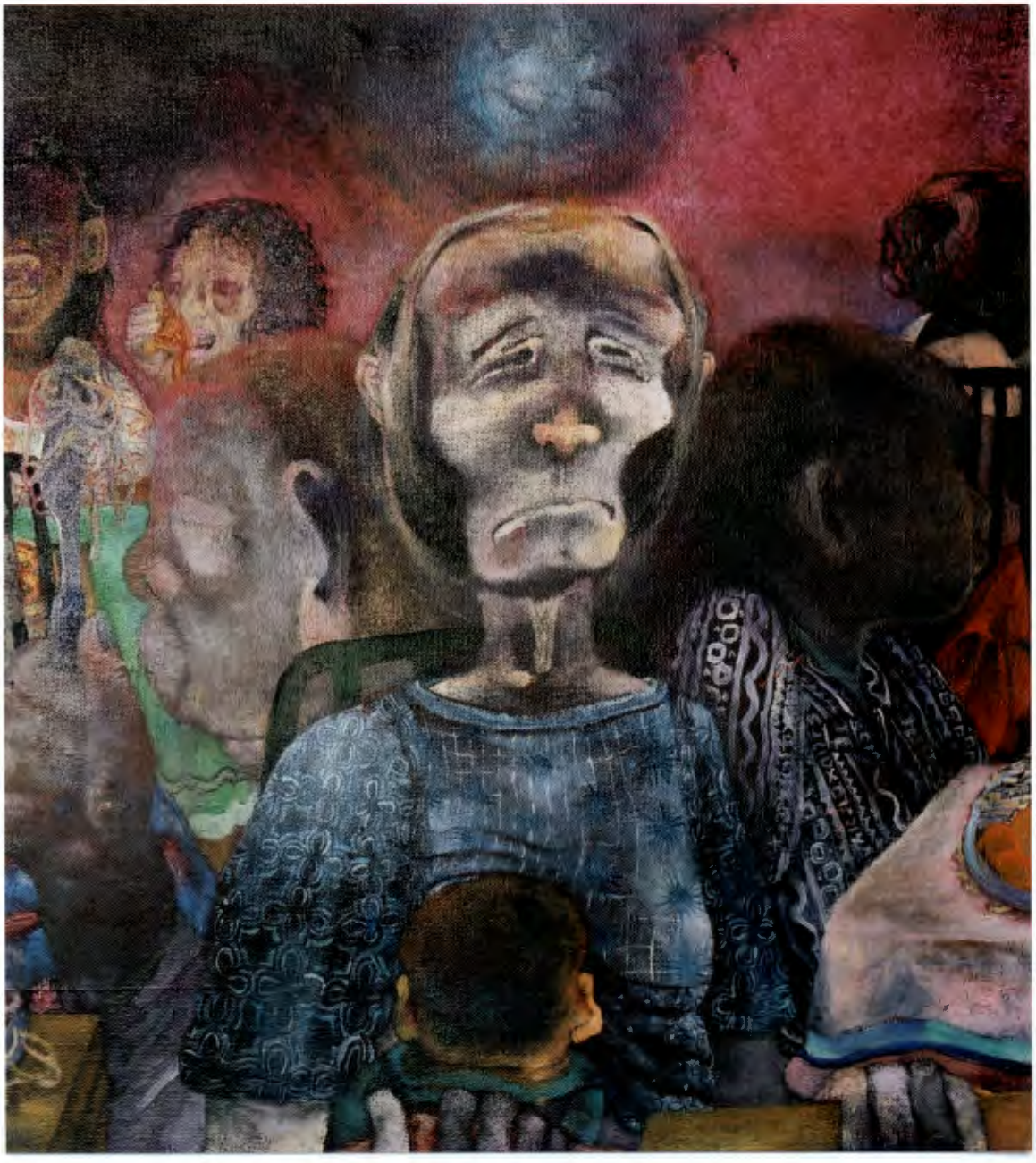
oil and acrylic paint on canvas

67cm x 90cm

Coteford Street in South London where I lived for twelve years prior to coming to South Africa. This painting was started in London and completed in South Africa; it is of my neighbours and is painted with the nostalgia of my imminent departure.

Sylvia
2000
oil and acrylic paint on canvas
52cm x 80cm

Sylvia and Sandile in Don Pedro's



Eleanor's schoolyard

2000

oil and acrylic paint on canvas

43cm x 47cm

Children at Eleanor's pre-school (Gaia Waldorf, Observatory.) Eleanor was at pre-school when I started college in South Africa and she was bullied a lot in her first year.

Senza's house

2000

oil, acrylic and resin paint on canvas

52cm x 54cm

A friend of Senza's at his house in Khayelitsha, Cape Town.

Waterfront I

2001

oil, acrylic and resin paint on canvas

78cm x 63cm

Eleanor, Chris and I having ice cream in the Victoria Wharf mall at the Waterfront, painted just after Chris left South Africa in 2001.

Waterfront II

2001

oil, acrylic and resin paint on canvas

78cm x 63cm

Chris and Eleanor in the Victoria Wharf mall standing in front of the chocolatiere. I find the Waterfront exciting and sickening as well as claustrophobic.


ESTEE LAUDE

Chris at home

2001

oil and acrylic paint on canvas

78cm x 63cm

Chris at home in South London in his flat.

Crystal Palace Park

2001

oil and acrylic paint on canvas

two panels 78cm x 63cm (photographic documentation of upper panel)

Two views of Crystal Palace Park in London, showing one of the large plastic dinosaurs in the river, and the fairground. It was a very wet day just before I left London for South Africa, following a brief holiday.

Valkenberg Hospital

2001

oil, acrylic and resin paint on canvas

two panels 78cm x 63cm

Walking home from my daughter's school (from Pinelands to Observatory) through Valkenberg Hospital.


9A
M5

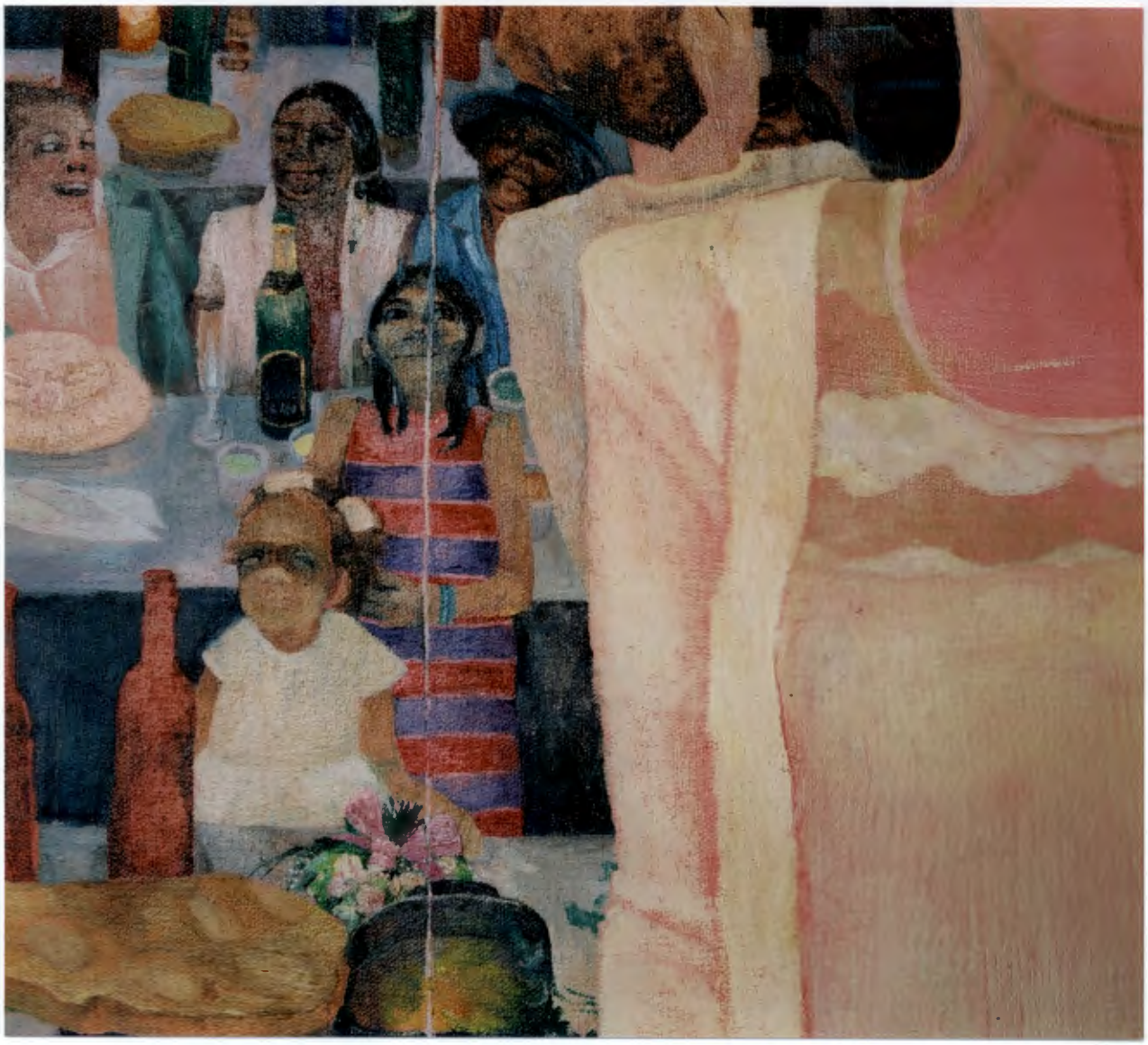
Wedding painting

2001

oil, acrylic and resin paint on canvas

78cm x 63cm

Sharing the first bite of wedding cake on Chris's and my wedding day (7 August 2001).



My back garden

2002

oil, acrylic and resin paint on canvas

78cm x 63cm

The view from my house of my back garden in Observatory, painted just before Valentine's Day and Chris's departure from Cape Town (2002).