

University of Cape Town

Not today but, tomorrow

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Not today, but tomorrow.

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

Signed by candidate

Signature:

signature removed

Date: 31/05/2010

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Introduction

‘Not today, but tomorrow’, the title of this body of work, references a collection of daily lists I assembled during my first year of the Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) programme. I had written ‘not today but tomorrow’ on one of my Monday lists and that was all. It seems a fitting description and context for this body of work as I try to hold on to the moment, today, in anticipation of what is yet to come, tomorrow.

During the last two years I have watched my grandmother age and become ill. My family have become cautious, kept on alert, unsure of how long she would be with us. I also became more concerned with her image, her role within in the family, and the dynamic of what would happen if she, the heart of our family, were to die.

My visits home became more frequent in 2009, due to the imminence of my grandmother’s death. During a visit in September, I found my grandmother in intensive care, surrounded by family gazing upon her frail figure, preparing for her death. ‘Miraculously’ (as she likes to call it according to her inherent Catholic faith), she came out of intensive care and returned home two weeks later. However, as I returned to Cape Town before her recovery, I retained an intense anxiety from the emotion of preparing for her death. I remained in this suspended state as I did not witness her full recovery. I also realised I would have to experience this all over again when she dies.

To summarise what is to follow in this text, in this body of work, I explore my own manifestation of anxiety as an experience of the void¹, in which I

¹ Void: “*noun* [usually sing.] (*formal or literary*) A large empty space: *Below him was nothing but a black void. (Figurative) The void left by his mother’s death was never filled. adj. 1~ of sth. (formal) Completely lacking sth SYN DE-VOID: the sky was void of stars. 2. Not valid or legal: the agreement was declared void. 3. Empty: void of spaces. verb 1. (law) to state officially that something is no longer valid. SYN INVALIDATE, NULLIFY 2. (formal) to empty*

relate the angst of fear of loss, as absence or emptiness. In my work I give form to my own notions of the void by relating it visually to the context of the still life genre, and the everyday. My aim is to render the void visible in the representation of my objects, still lives, family's image and domestic environment as 'moving stills'. My moving stills are videos that appear as photographic still images. As I reference my everyday environment through the still life painting genre, I employ the language of de-familiarization by using composition, light, and time - staging – to render the familiar strange.

In this paper, I highlight and examine my own artistic references and influences. I unpack the still life paintings of Juan Sánchez Cotán (1561-1627) and Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664) in relation to their use of de-familiarisation and illusionism. I explore the work of Bill Viola and his ability to render the void visible in the awareness of self, through the staging of sound and time, in order to convey a sense of spirituality that is reflected in the viewer's experience of his work. I examine the experience of highlighting the everyday as isolated moments in time through the work of Sam Taylor-Wood. In Candice Breitz's work, I explore what I identify as a strategy of de-familiarization, especially in her ability to make the familiar strange through a process selection and translation. Finally, I reflect on Chris Marker's use of the still image as 'frozen moments' as a site for memory and reflection in his film *La Jetée* (1962).

I then investigate my own methodology and process in relation to my role as, what Julia Kristeva describes as the 'bearer of death' through the rendering of my familiar (my family's image and domestic environment) in a state of immortal sleep. I go on to describe each work submitted for examination followed by my conclusion.

Making visible

As indicated above, 'not today, but tomorrow', is derived from a personal tension, an unknown anxiety towards my family and domestic environment, which emerged when I acknowledged the possibility of my grandmother's death. My experience of this anticipated loss brought about a distress that figures in this body of work. At the start of the project, my aim was to locate this feeling of unease. I needed to witness, to make visible, the unfamiliar tension I had towards my family and domestic environment. I wanted to spotlight this unfamiliar change to ensure it would not go un-remarked. I had to witness, watch and attend to this change, making it visible to those around me, in my own urgent state of awakening.

Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida* (1980), describes the act of looking at a photograph as though it were "a 'wound': I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think." (Barthes 2000:21). Barthes' metaphor of the 'wound' relates to the physical experience of seeing something for the first time through the affect and response it has on the viewer. However, I would like to extend Barthes's 'wound' metaphor to include the emotional effect on the psyche of the viewer. In experiencing the 'wound', that is, seeing my grandmother on that hospital bed, I needed to re-enact that experience of looking in order to see, feel, notice, observe and think.

I first had to locate this feeling of anxiety, which in itself is a difficult task, as a feeling is not something that you can hold and describe in its infinity. "The problem with infinity is of course, that it can never be seen but only imagined; we can apprehend it without necessarily comprehending it" (Grootenboer 2005: 78). It is difficult to unbundle an experience of a 'sense of self', in the awareness of emotion (self reaction and response). I came to associate this indescribable 'sense of self' with notions of the 'void'. My understanding of the void is as a silent force, an invisible presence, existing within and engulfing the everyday, where narratives

are absent moments in a still and deafening silence. I evoke this notion of the void as having an affecting presence, which I manipulate through the form of time and the visible presence of the dark infinite space.

1.2

Void within a void

The empty space between the epochs, the empty nothingness that yarns wide, the nothingness for which everything comes too late and too early, the empty abyss of nothingness beneath time and the aeons, which time tries to bridge over cautiously and on a hairline by stringing moment to moment in order to conceal the stony petrified crevice, oh the abyss of unformed time must not become visible, must not be allowed to gape open; no interruption must occur, time must flow on incessantly, each moment simultaneously enclosing the end and the beginning, the moulded time... (Von Drathen 2009: 4).

There are many different interpretations of the void in the scientific² and spiritual³ domains. I do not intend to provide a theoretical explanation of notions of the void in this text. I will be looking at the perception of the void as a site for projection where the void becomes visible through the perceptions and projections of the mind. In other words, the void is visible in the emotional response to the transference of self, felt through the awareness of absence, loss, fear, and uncertainty.

The void has been described as dark, silent and still. A void is an empty space, a space that has yet to be filled, or a space that was previously filled but is now empty. A void can be understood as a feeling, situated

² "A spatial fluid, a medium for the propagation of light waves and electric fields, or *absolute space* that provides a privileged position for observing motions of bodies (atoms)" (Atoms and Void 1999:1).

³ Religion has tried to grapple with this invisible matter in search of answers and meanings pertaining to one's existence. In the creation of different belief traditions, religion has placed special importance in the idea of the void. Ideas of the after life have been placed within the idea of the void as 'heaven' as an untouchable realm where one resides after death. This makes the unfamiliar territory of death more familiar and less feared.

in an unconscious space, of unease or unknowing, of loss or yearning, of anticipation or suspense. A void is a place of infinite time, where spirituality exists and the 'awareness of self'⁴ is felt. Samuel Beckett viewed the void as a constant reminder and subject experienced through time. His ability to draw out infinite time in his work is experienced in *Waiting for Godot* (1953), where the passing of time is witnessed as a repeated narrative that never ends. "In the Beckettian universe, the characters take refuge in repetition, repeating their own actions and words and often those of others – in order to pass the time" (Pilling 1994:69). This cyclical pattern of time and motion gives shape to the void, a ritual that creates a sense of purpose and existence. In Beckett's work, time is played out in the everyday, as a means of gaining an understanding of the void.

Ulrich Baer makes a connection between the ancient Greek philosopher Democritus's scientific atomic and void hypothesis in relation to the way we view the visual world through the medium and process of photography (Baer, 2002). Democritus taught that, "perceptions of the world ... are nothing but projections of our minds out there ... nothing but a swirl of atoms in a void" (Baer 2002:5). By simplifying such a complex entity, Democritus is able to clarify our understanding of indescribable, intangible matter as mere 'projections of the mind'. Baer similarly describes photography as a means of viewing "each image as potentially disclosing the world – the setting for human experience – as nothing but atoms moving in a void" (Baer 2002:5). Photography works as a means to disclose or project the mind's unconscious desire and emotion into the void (image).

Rawson, in his *Sacred Tibet* (1991), describes the void by using a metaphor of the sky. A "potent metaphor for the Void, often used in Tibetan art, is the sky. As the sky is the emptiness that offers clouds to our perception, so the Void is the 'space' in which objects appear to us in

⁴ Buddhists believe in the 'void' or 'way of emptiness' (Shunyata) as an empowered space of 'self awareness'. This space has been described as "the hollow of a pregnant womb" (Epstein in Baas Jacob 2004:34), a potential space where fulfilment is created from emptiness through an awareness of the self in the world - "a sense of spaciousness that holds and suffuses the stuff of the world" (Epstein in Baas Jacob 2004:34).

response to our attachments and longings” (Rawson 1991:11). Virginia Mackenny, in her discussion with Ingrid Winterbach, about her works *Foam Along the Waterline* (2008), describes the sense of void in her work as a “confrontation with self ... but also a place of unknowing, an internal space, where fear and faith align” (Mackenny 2008:16). Mackenny acknowledges that the presence of this void is felt through her objects and thought patterns existing suspended out there in the blue of her unbound space. Mackenny goes on to say “the void is all around us. In a sense one either falls into it or one must leap into it consciously. We are in it and of it, whether we like it or not” (Mackenny 2008:18).

I view the void as empty space allowing for the metaphysical experience of a viewer to exist, by experiencing time, or by feeling the uncertainty of the unknown, the unfamiliar or the strange. It can be a physical space, as in the blue unbound space in the surface of Mackenny’s paintings, or abstract, as in the empty darkness of the abyss. My aim, unlike Hermann Broch’s experience of the petrified crevice, is not to conceal the void, but to stare in awe into the abyss with a spotlight in hand, enabling it to gape open and expose its silent nothingness.

My interest lies within the void, in the subtle ‘swirls of atoms in a void’, the paused moment between fright and flight, the instant before reaction, the suspended animation and the silencing of the self. I attempt to give image to this void, whether it emerges as an illusion of my current experiences, of unconscious thoughts, fears or dreams in my quest for meaning and reflection. ‘*Not today, but tomorrow,*’ is my attempt to shed light on my void, making its presence visible in order to expose and witness the projections of my mind. “You must look, and look, and look...until you are blind with looking. And out of blindness comes illumination” (Bernard Berenson in Baas Jacob 2004:26).



1. Juan Sánchez Cotán, 1602, Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber, oil on canvas, 64.8 x 81. Fine Arts Gallery, San Diego, California.



2. Francisco de Zurbarán, 1633, Lemons, Oranges, Cup and Rose, oil on canvas, 62.2 x 109. Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California.

Still life as void
Artistic precedent of the figuration of the void

The still life painting genre can be understood as a means of understanding the visual representation of the void through the inanimate objects of the everyday. The language of this genre is central to my understanding and depiction of my moving stills. When I force the people (my family) and objects (family pets and domestic settings) that surround my everyday life to be still, they become my *mise en scène* in my tableaux. I render them unfamiliar by removing their context through the use of illusionism and de-familiarisation building on the precedent of the still life painting genre. In this section, I explore still life paintings by Juan Sánchez Cotán (1561-1627) and Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664) in relation to the figuration of the void and elucidate their relevance to my work.

2.1

Awakening through empty space

Still-leven or still life, a term derived in the 1650s by the Dutch inventories, was used to describe “a painting of a motionless model” (Lowenthal 1996:6). A still life is a study of the inanimate objects of the every day and is a way of witnessing the “individual senses and ‘humors’... the elements or seasons which shaped and moulded [human] environments...” (Sander 2008:13). This genre was seen by the Parisian Academy of Art in the seventeenth century as the lowest category of picture making because it did not use narrative, human figures or movement (Schneider 2009:7). The still life painting was regarded as a mere recording of inanimate objects of the domestic everyday making it a difficult genre to access. However, artists defended their practice by noting, “that in principle it is aesthetically and technically irrelevant whether the depicted subject is sublime or trivial. The artistic achievement is the same in both cases”

(Schneider 2009:9).

The absence any physical depiction of humans allows anonymity to become the focus so that everyday objects, and otherwise overlooked, objects become significant in the presence of the picture plane. This enables the artist to embed their own domestic domain into the world through the depiction of personal and everyday objects. The still life subject matter of the mundane created a system of interpretation by directing the viewer's attention to a fictional system of disguised symbolism "codes and meaning and codes of representation" (Rowell 1997:14). Disguised symbolism is a concept developed by art historian Erwin Panofsky that came to be associated with the hidden, religious symbols embedded within the everyday object of the Dutch still life painting genre.

The development of still life created "an evolving system of representation and of meaning, directly related to the transformation of society and of artistic discourse" (Rowell 1997:9). This creates a 'semiotic chora' which defines the relationship between the signifier and signified⁵. Julia Kristeva suggests that the relationship between 'the semiotic element of language' and the 'symbolic element of language' is in the motion of the "'semiotic chora' the space which drives enter language" (Oliver 2002:24). A continuous process of (being and becoming), to and fro, in the process of language through the ongoing act of interpretation.

"A sort of "dancing body" (from the Greek khoreia, meaning "dance"), the semiotic chora is in perpetual motion. It energizes the sign (as well as the subject) by placing expulsion at the core of its structure. Just as dance allows the dancer to explore an infinite chain of body movements, the semiotic chora is an infinite potential for creating signifying movements" (Prud'homme and Légaré 2006:3).

These 'autonomous pictorial objects known as still life' (Sander 2008:21) have provided modern viewers (art historians) with a site for projection from which they can embed their own familiarity onto the inanimate

⁵ "A sign is defined as a psychical entity consisting of a SIGNIFIER (an acoustic image) and a SIGNIFIED (a concept)" (Macey 2000:352).

objects, thereby detaching them from their context (Sander 2008:21). The still life is “a structure that both invents and distances its object and thereby inscribes again and again the gap between signifier and signified that is the place of generation for the symbolic” (Rowell 1997:16). It is in this way that the still life creates the gap where the symbolic can exist, giving way for interpretation and engagement of the viewer and subject.

It is in this gap or empty space that my notion of the void exists or in the ‘semiotic chora’ of the everyday, created by the signifier and the signified. The void is made visible by drawing the viewer’s attention to the overlooked, and unnoticed, when objects of the everyday are removed from context and narrative. The artist alters the viewer’s perception by challenging the viewer to see past the picture plane. Lowenthal (1996:6) describes the still life as a gestalt⁶ whereby “...its character shaped by the artist conception, which is inevitably more complex than the sum of individual meanings”. The still life creates a network of symbols greater than the objects induced by the artist’s perception - “a self-generated, self-referential, and self contained system of signs” (Rowell 1997:16).

It isn’t necessary that you leave home. Sit at your desk and listen. Don’t even listen, just wait. Don’t wait be still and alone. The whole world will offer itself to you to be unmasked, it can do no other, it will writhe before you in ecstasy (Kafka (1924) 2006:108).

When one stares into the void, the mind is allowed to wonder. It is my contention that the still life genre can elicit this Kafkaesque gaze suggested in the quote above. The still life has served to clarify my own understanding of the allure of the void as it enables both artist and viewer to look past the visual field of the everyday (table, food, subject or ‘rhopography’⁷ by rendering of the familiar unfamiliar through de-familiarisation. Still life painters from the 1600s were able to awaken the viewers attention by making every day familiar objects unfamiliar,

⁶ Gestalt is an organised whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts (Macey 2000:160).

⁷ “Rhopography (from *rhopos*, trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that ‘importance’ constantly overlooks” (Bryson 1990:61).

a method known as 'making strange' to bring about new ways of seeing (Harrison and Wood 2003: 280).

By employing illusionism and de-familiarisation through their use of light, colour, composition, foreground and background, the viewer is awakened through the artist's perception and presence. Illusionism is an artistic technique used to give a naturalistic impression of the real by using "pictorial techniques such as perspective and foreshortening to deceive the eye (if not the mind) into taking that which is painted for that which is real" (Chilvers 1990:294).

The viewer's response to a work's presence is sometimes dependent on the work's familiarity, its resonance with our own experience. Yet it is also at times its unfamiliarity that has the most profound impact on our experience (Baas and Jacob 2004:167).

2.2

Making Strange

When driven to extremes, hyper attention not only produces an interval between the perceiving self and objects; it separates the self from other selves. The subject *stares* or *glares* at the world. Still life can hardly avoid quickening attention, but beyond a certain point the self becomes enclosed within itself, saturated with perceptions now of manic or obsessional intensity (Bryson 1990:88).

In the convention of still life painting, objects were taken out of their original context and rearranged for the purpose of painting. For example, food items were removed from the kitchen and placed in an unusual composition disassociated with their normal function as a means of consumption. This process of removing the context awakens the viewer's attention to that which is unfamiliar. The isolating of the object from human condition changes the way in which one sees and one is drawn to attend more closely. One of the characteristics of the still life genre is the distinction between the foreground of the laid table setting and the blank backdrop or free space from which the objects are revealed, illuminated and staged (Grootenboer 2005:73).

What interests me in the works of the still life painters Juan Sánchez Cotán (1561-1627) and Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664) (see Illustrations 1 and 2) is that although both paintings use similar de-familiarisation techniques (through the staging of light, chiaroscuro, composition and dark backgrounds), the viewer's experience of the void differs. This different experience is a consequence not only of the objects they have chosen to represent, but of the way the objects have been placed to create free space within the picture plane. This technique makes the everyday strange and creates new perceptions for the viewer.

This is illustrated in Juan Sánchez Cotán's hyper realistic painting *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (1602) depicted in illustration 1. In this painting we see a quince, cabbage, melon and cucumber being displayed in a manner that is unfamiliar. The quince and the cabbage hang suspended from string, while the grounded melon is cut open and exposed, is with the cucumber hanging precariously over the edge. All of the illuminated fruit and vegetable objects are individually isolated and simultaneously engulfed by the darkness of the background. This gives the viewer a sense of solitariness or isolation, created by the geometric composition of objects, contained within the private cave of a dark cantarero⁸.

In 1603, a year after the painting was produced Cotán became a lay brother in the Carthusian monastery, a practice based on solitude and inner reflection. This provides the context from which this still life was produced (Schneider 2009:124). The presence of Cotán is felt within the objects of the painting when one becomes aware of the context of the signified. The emptiness of the picture plane is made visible through the darkly painted background, vacant of objects. The viewer loses a sense of perspective as the eye is drawn into the darkness of the void, suggesting an infinite space.

Hanneke Grootenboer (2005) relates this invisible sense of perspective

⁸ A cantarero is "a cooling space where the preservation of foods are hung on strings (piled together, or in contact with a surface, they would decay more quickly" (Bryson 1990:66).

to the idea that the objects in Cotán's painting serve as a *mise-en-scène* - "the black void emerges as a black hole, which offers a *mise-en-scène* for the fruit and vegetables' appearance; it also, however, makes visible the emptiness of perspective itself" (Grootenboer 2005:125). This staging of objects offers a visible distraction to the invisible in which the viewer becomes lost. Groontenboer goes on to relate this to the Lacanian notions of *screen* and *gaze* used in psychoanalysis in the forming an identity. The *screen* refers to the external representation that we interpret in forming an identity. This is one's self-image in relation to what one sees and how one understands social and historical difference. The *gaze* is the experience of how one sees or how one wants to be seen and the interpretation of that process (Silverman 1996:18). "The screen is merely a function, a *mise-en-scène* if you like ... as image as well as veil, the screen shows as much as it hides" (Grootenboer 2005:126).

In viewing the *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (1602) one is dependent on the balance between both foreground and background in witnessing and experiencing the void. The eye is captivated and attentive to the sensitive rendering of the objects, yet at the same time drawn to the darkness in search of meaning, anticipation of a great revelation. Dark backgrounds were employed as a device, a means of eliminating context and environment, therefore bringing attention to the foreground by illuminating objects that are isolated and contained within the picture plane. "The void serves as a device for convincing us of a painting's truthful appearance, while also generating space for ambiguity..." (Grootenboer 2005:89).

Highlighting the still object elicits an alternative life that comes under scrutiny through the creation of ambiguity. The positioning and use of light became an important means of seeing the familiar in a new unfamiliar way. The process of de-familiarisation and the use of light and chiaroscuro enables artist Francisco de Zurbarán to alter the everyday. In Zurbarán's *Lemons, Oranges, Cup and Rose* (1633) one experiences the extreme use of light and dark, making the objects rendered unfamiliar to our sensory knowledge of the objects. Light is used to direct attention to the objects, changing their inherent character, so that they are no longer

tactile and familiar, but stark and glaring (Bryson 1990 72-75).

In Francisco de Zurbarán's *Lemons, Oranges, Cup and Rose* (see illustration 2) we see a table laden with lemons and oranges and a cup with a rose placed on its saucer. What immediately strikes when looking at this painting is that the viewer is witnessing the objects on the table at eye level. The objects confront the eye with their stark quality but the linear composition prevents the viewer from entering. The frontal and linear composition forms a barrier so that the viewer's eye is unable to penetrate the free space. Without any objects leading the eye to the background, one is forced to confront the glaring foreground with no means escape. Unlike Cotán's *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* where one can hide within the void, Zurbarán's objects hold power over the viewer dismissing one's familiarity with everyday objects.

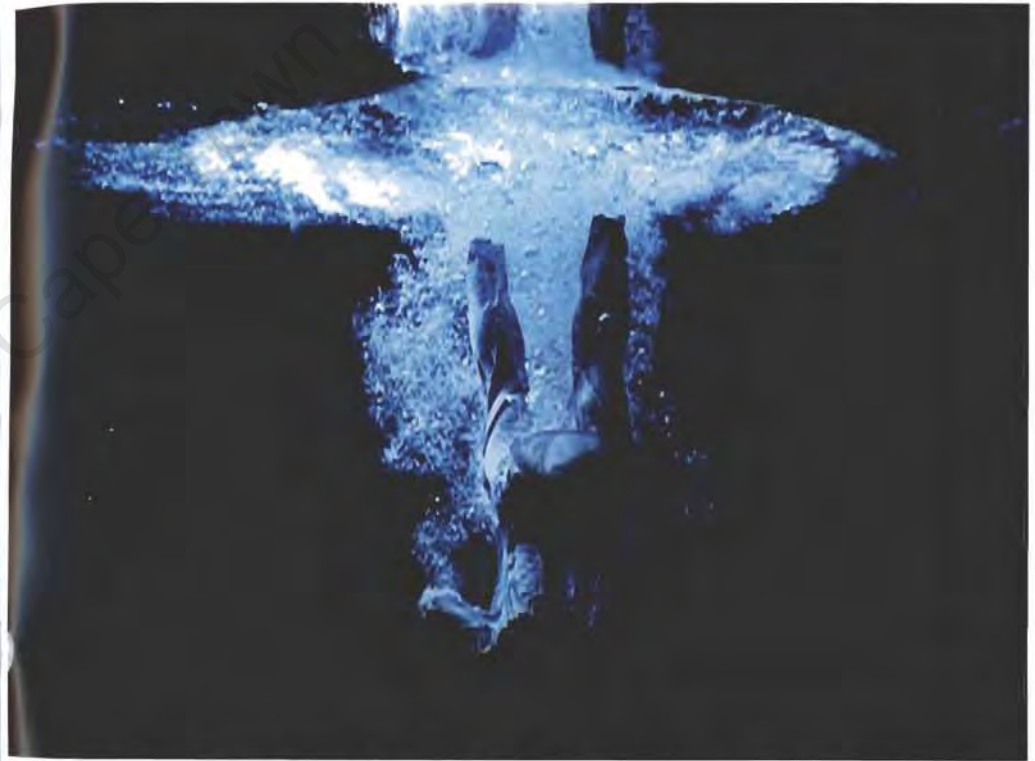
Both Cotán and Zurbarán depict familiar objects in manner that seems "unreal, unfamiliar, un-creatural" (Bryson 1990:88), forcing the viewer to become absorbed into the artist's perception. This allows the self to be experienced "...in terms of fellowship but also of perpetual revelation" (Bryson 1990:89). However, this perpetual revelation in the experience of the still life, like the void, elicits a "tension and sensation of unfulfilled desire" (Rowell 1997:19). Rowell describes the still life genre as fictional but linked to desire:

The perceived objects of the still life occupy an ambivalent position between the real world and the system between presumed iconographic model and the abstract sign. Yet ... their reality, is less appealing and magnetic than their status as a sign, its significance elusive and contradictory, and its distance from what it pretends to but does not directly signify ... (Rowell 1997:19).

This desire is created by what remains suspended in the projections of the mind of the signifier that is yet to be revealed by the signified.



3. Bill Viola, "Departing Angel" from Five Angels for the Millennium, 2001. Video/sound installation.



4. Bill Viola, "Birth Angel" from Five Angels for the Millennium, 2001.
Video/sound installation.



5. Sam Taylor-Wood, *The Last Century*, 2005. DVD-Duration 7 min. 12 sec.



6. Candice Breitz, Mother, 2005. 6 hard drive, 6 channel installation; 6 synchronizable hard drives, 6 plasma displays, colour sound, 11 min, steel frame; dimensions determined by space.



7. Candice Breitz, *Father*, 2005. 6 hard drive, 6 channel installation; 6 synchronizable hard drives, 6 plasma displays, colour sound, 11 min, steel frame; dimensions determined by space.



8. Chris Marker, La Jetée, 1962. 4 Film stills, Argos Films.

University of Cape Town



Methodology - Contemporary References

In this section, I explore the works of contemporary artists that have informed my methodology and approach to my work. By reviewing the processes my contemporaries use, I am able to explicate my own methods of practice and use of moving stills as a momentary portal conveying emotion in the unfamiliar enactment of the stillness of time. Elements of the works of Bill Viola, Sam Taylor-Wood, Candice Breitz and Chris Market, which have informed my understanding of the void, the distortion of time, the process of de-familiarisation and still film, are discussed. I discuss the contribution of each artist to my work methodology as a background to exploring my own work later.

3.1

Bill Viola **Void as Feeling**

I have suggested that my sense of anxiety, as a feeling or self awareness, is evident in the sense of the void in my work. Bill Viola's work also contains a sense of the void. Viola, as a practising Buddhist, uses his art to convey his personal and universal human experience of self-awareness. He manipulates the imagery of his videos by staging of sound and time to convey a feeling or sense of spirituality that can be reflected in the viewer's experience of his work. His work is premised on the belief that art is an exchange that reflects back into the viewer's consciousness (Jasper 2004:189). Viola's philosophy enables him to recognise that "art resides in life itself, that as a practice it derives from the quality of experience, depth of thought, and devotion of the maker, not the virtuosity of the object or the success of its presentation" (Viola 2004:249).

In Viola's practice he speaks about the role of art as a site for projection. He uses the example of religious art images of Mother Mary where believers project their worries onto her image "not to experience the story of a woman who lost her son", but as an outlet for their inner reflection - "they bring the story to the image". Viola believes the role of art is to provide the viewer with a means of reflection, "the viewer becomes the projection screen for the image" (Viola 2004:256). I am interested in creating a similar experience, so that the void that I experience in my work serves as site for my projections.

Viola defines this interaction as a "process of moving between the conscious and the unconscious...the visible and invisible world is one of the definitions of spiritual experience" (Viola 2004: 256). Viola's work elicits a visceral sense of emotion in his viewers (see illustration 3 and 4). In *Angels for the Millennium* (2001), a five part projected sequence of an *Ascending Angel*, *Creation Angel*, *Fire Angel*, *Birth Angel* and *Departing Angel*, a figure rises, falls, ascends, sinks or floats in the darkness of the water. These are meditative works in which Viola uses the metaphor of water to explore the properties in which "...water gives life, sustains and blesses life, and takes life away" (Grotenhuis 2004:178).

Viola uses this works to induce a sense of awe through his use of sound, pace, light and darkness in an unfamiliar, yet emotive, experience. The viewer is overpowered by the abstracted imagery through its scale and sensory exposure. Viola manipulates time to alters the viewer perception and create a meditative response through the use of slow or accelerated pace. Viola describes this manipulation of time as a strategy to recall an experience of emotion, such as one recalls a car crash in slow motion. The digital medium of video/film allows one manipulate the experience of time to induce this kind of response.

He relates the experience of time to the loss of his father - "...my father was dying slowly. This was the last year-and-a-half of this life, and it was like a long disturbing slow motion film leading to an inevitable climax" (Viola 2004:251). One experiences a range of emotions in relation to the passing of time. In my own work, I fabricate a sense of infinite time

through the manipulation in my videos. I am thus able to evoke a stillness of time which aids in the representation of my void.

3.2

Sam Taylor-Wood
Distortion of time

I came across Sam Taylor-Wood's *The Last Century* (2005) after I had completed *August 2009* and immediately developed an affinity to her work. Taylor-Wood's video work evokes sensitivity towards emotion, whether personal or universal, that is played out in time. Everyday narratives are treated individually, as isolated moments that are played out in the presence of time, enabling one to attend more closely to those details of life. Her work has been described by Harland Miller as "stills for films that hopefully one day would be made" (Miller 2006:37). There is a hidden tension in her work that is never revealed. Her works are narrative stills, without beginnings or endings, maintaining a suspense in the viewers' imagination.

The Last Century (see illustration 5) appears as a photograph of five people in a bar. However the occasional blinking and breathing inform the viewer that this is not a photograph, instead they are watching real time. Ward (2006:59) argues that in a "reversal of cinematic norms, filmic time is transformed into photographic time" (Ward 2006:59). Ossian Ward argues that the experience of watching this work is similar to watching a Samuel Beckett play as the passing of time is experienced in the meaningless routine of the everyday, or, in this case, a cigarette burn out. The cigarette takes seven minutes and twelve seconds to burn out.

Taylor-Wood forces her subjects to remain still and witness the banality of the cigarette burning. This enables the viewer to witness the unnoticed, as the action is isolated and movement is stilled. The background noise and cigarette burning become the primary concern. Taylor-Wood distorts time, pauses it, by altering hierarchies, to highlight the everyday. Unlike

The Last Century where time burns out and ends, time in my work, is never ending, eternally looping, enabling me to witness the complexities of my everyday life.

3.3

Candice Breitz
De-familiarization

Candice Breitz employs a cut and paste⁹ strategy in the construction of her images. She uses sound and video as “a process of selection and translation” of popular culture to render our familiar as unfamiliar (Beccaria 2005:20). This process of re-construction and re-identification allows Breitz to harness the viewer’s idealized memory, making the process of recognition strange and unfamiliar. I am interested in the process of de-familiarisation which makes the familiar strange and the experience of reinterpretation it creates. I will be exploring this in relation to Breitz’s *Mother* (2005) and *Father* (2005) in illustration 6 and 7.

Breitz uses the familiarity of popular culture, existing in the idealised characters of Hollywood blockbusters and in the catchy lyrics of pop music, as her subject matter. She draws her subject matter from the everyday proliferation of contemporary culture and relates them to their familiar presence in the comfort of our private spaces. She shows popular culture as a familiarity experienced in homes as a constant presence in our everyday lives. Yet when we choose to look closer, through simplification and re-configuration, its presence is no longer comforting and familiar.—

In the work *Mother*, Breitz uses the familiar faces of Faye Dunaway, Susan Sarandon, Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton, Julia Roberts and Shirley MacLaine as mother figures. In the same way, she selected Tony Danza, Dustin Hoffman, Harvey Keitel, Steve Martin, Donald Sutherland and Jon Voight as father figures in *Father*. Breitz’s cut and paste technique allows her to digitally mask out and remove actors and actresses from the context and roles which they previously played. By removing background,

⁹ A term used in digital technology applied when editing media.

and context, she repositions her appropriated characters against a black background, creating an open space into which the character is centrally placed.

The viewer is able to recognise the faces of the actors, yet finds it difficult to place them in the context in which they previously existed and this is discomfiting. They are a familiar part of popular culture yet are rendered unfamiliar within the context they are being presented. It is this de-familiarisation process, the altering of the familiar, or making strange, that I find interesting in relation to own my work. I manipulate and change the context in which my objects and family exist, representing them as unfamiliar in the altered realm of my videos.

3.4

Chris Marker *La Jetée* (1962)

Film still/still film

The opening narration to Chris Marker's film *La Jetée* (1962) is "this is the story of a man marked by an image of his childhood". *La Jetée* (see illustration 8) is a fragmented narrative of Marker's main character's journey "to call to past and future in the rescue of the present" in a post-apocalyptic Paris. In this underground experiment, Marker's main character is selected for his ability to recall strong mental images. This ability is used by scientists in the film as a means of recreating a time and a place that existed in Paris. What is important for me, is the way Chris Marker uses the still image, as frozen moments, as sites for memory and reflection told through the narrative of his photographs.

The footage is constituted by still photographs that are brought to life as they shiver awake in the static medium of film. Witnessing the still image in the genre of film makes one more aware of the image, unlike a moving image in real time. The eye is given time to explore the images, with the aid of a narration which alerts the viewer to the autobiographical account of the main character's journey in time. The recalled photographs allude to the character's memory as 'frozen moments of time'. Memory is recalled

as an image paused. There is no distinction between past and present or real time and memory. The main character's images serve as "fragments that make up the suspended life of this subject who is composed entirely by his suffering of time" (Schefer 1990:3) which the viewer observes together with the scientist in the film.

The main character exists within the projections of his mind, unaware of what is past, present or future. I identify with the main character as he is stuck in an in-between space, between past and future, unsure if this is reality, memory, or dreams. My work is situated within this space. It is neither present, future nor past, it exists in-between, paused as "time builds itself painlessly around them" (*La Jetée*, 1962).

Marker employs a Kafkaesque narrative based on the anxiety-ridden moments of everyday experiences. Kafka's literary awakening is similar to the narrative in photographs. You are given no introduction to the image as the image exists in its own moment of time. Like Barthes's wound, you first need to see, feel, notice and observe, before you can think. The psychological state of awakening in Franz Kafka's literary characters and Chris Marker's characters is a conscious psychological state that I employ when viewing my images. In *Metamorphosis* (1913), Franz Kafka's protagonist is enlightened when he wakes from a state of sleep to find everything is different to how it previously existed. The reader is part of this shared awakening, by being given no prior information to his previous condition.

In a similar way, what is pertinent in this work by Chris Marker and my own practice is the way in which the narrative of *La Jetée* is told by still yet moving frames. It is in this ability to make the viewer conscious of a frozen moment, a photograph alive within the noise of a film genre, and in my case, a still yet moving image. This awakening changes the way in which the viewer sees, allowing the viewer to be present in the movement of paused time.

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9. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1601-1606, Death of The Virgin. Louvre, Paris.

Process

In this section, I explore the process undertaken to develop the body of work I am presenting. Firstly, I explore Catholic iconography and the role of the Virgin Mary in relation to my grandmother's role in the family. I capture this characterisation in my *August Series* (2009) using Caravaggio's depiction of the Virgin's death in the painting *Death of the Virgin* (1601-1606) as reference. Secondly, I examine the power of moving stills to witness the immortal sleep of time by bringing the dead back to life in the living images they possess through their representation as recorded periods of time. Thirdly, I examine my role as the bearer of death as I embody my subjects and objects with my own anxieties. Finally, I explicate my role and obsession as an observer of my family. The mediums from which I attain my visual material, the camera, the projector and computer, enables me in a role which is comfortable and customary, the role of the observer.

4.1

Assumption

My work is situated within the context of my Roman Catholic upbringing. I was taught to identify with the iconography of the Catholic Church. This symbolism is echoed in the iconography of my still films. I was taught to recognise the symbolism of Mother Mary at an early age. The devotion to the Virgin Mary has been celebrated throughout Christian iconography and particularly in the Roman Catholic Church. She is depicted in her role as a mother, a humanistic figure, to symbolise all that is good and pure.

The day of Mary's assumption into heaven has been marked as a day of celebration on the Catholic calendar. "All powerful and ever-living God, you raised the sinless Virgin Mary, mother of your son, body and soul to

the glory of heaven. May we see heaven as our final goal and come to share her glory” (Collins 1975:754). As Catholics we are taught to turn to Mary as a spiritual mother figure in times of need and fear. In the prayer of Hail Mary we are assured that she will “pray for us, now and at the hour of our death amen”.

Consumed by this belief, I, as a child, related the Mary figure to the identity of my grandmother, the matriarch of the family. As I now have to acknowledge the fragility of her existence, I return to the imagery of the Catholic faith which romanticises Mary’s death and her assumption into heaven. This identification leads to the characterisation of my Grandmother’s role as Mary in my still film series *August 2009*.

I explored religious paintings to examine this association. In this process, the naturalistic, intimate paintings of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) informed the staging my work. Caravaggio’s depiction of the Virgin’s death in the painting *Death of the Virgin* (1601-1606), shown in illustration 9 is an important point of reference in my work. The painting depicts the end of the Virgin’s mortal life, when she is still swollen and lifeless, but is dead, not asleep.

In his simplified portrayal, Caravaggio blurs the lines between a ‘sacred history and a contemporary event’, inviting the viewer to participate intimately in the mystery and myth of this event (Askew 1990:3-18). Caravaggio was known for depicting the emotion of his characters rather than the religious iconography of the church. In my still films I aim to capture the emotion of my subjects through the unusually long duration of their pose, which is intended to focus the attention on a specific moment, interaction or emotional state.

The viewer’s attention is held by the carefully crafted composition leading the eye to the presence of the figures holding the form together and drawing the focus of the viewer onto Mary’s lifeless figure. The simple, unadorned dramatisation of the moment, heightened by his staging through chiaroscuro and theatrical drapery draws the viewer back to the moment of the death of Mary.

The other important characteristic in Caravaggio's work is stillness. He refrains from using continuous action in his paintings. This allows the viewer to be present in an eternal moment of mourning and loss. The apostles and Mary Magdalene stand motionless around her body in a state of shock and mourning absorbed by the present moment and experience of time.

4.2

Immortal sleep

Time eliminates the emotion of loss (I do not weep), that is all. For the rest, everything has remained motionless (Barthes 2000:75).

Asking a subject to hold a pose requires stillness, but it enables the camera to gaze on its subject. I use the narratives and conventions of photography to capture and construct a moment when I film my subjects. I ask my subjects to hold their pose as I gaze from behind the camera. This enables me to capture their immobility suspended in motion. Susan Sontag, in her essays *On Photography*, describes the act of taking a picture as a predatory act.

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they have never seen themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have, it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed (Sontag 1971: 14).

It is in this predatory act of control or possession that I am able to immobilise my subjects and transform them into objects. I bear witness to and capture their mortality and in turn claim ownership of their image.

My moving stills possess a power similar to the photographic still frame as they are able to bring the dead back to life in the living image they possess. Barthes describes the photographer as an agent of death in which the photograph refers to the "past, 'this-has-been' ... [that]... produces death while trying to preserve life" (Barthes 2000: 79 and 92). In my process, this notion is inverted as my subjects are not dead or even completely still: they are inhaling and exhaling, breathing and occasionally moving,

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10. Annie Leibovitz, A Photographers Life, 1990 – 2005. Black and white photograph.

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11. Annie Leibovitz, A Photographers Life, 1990 – 2005. Black and white photograph.

within the film still. I have momentarily suspended their action to witness and acknowledge their death, in the hope to accept the movement of time. In the capturing of my subject in the act of suspended animation, my still films allude to my anxieties of death associated with their stillness and my grandmother's state of sleep. My still films resonate a state of sleep which appears as death, existing in an in between consciousness that I witness and anticipate as the acknowledgement of my wound.

“All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability” (Sontag 1971:15). It is interesting to relate Sontag's words to those images taken by Annie Leibovitz of Sontag before and after her death. Annie Leibovitz, in the documentary about her career *Life through a Lens* (2007), talks about the image of Susan on the runway (illustration 10 and 11). Looking at Susan while flying her back home in her ill state from the hospital she said “it's the first time I thought I should take some pictures”. In the same way, although I try to conceal this fact, I am also creating a *memento mori* in pausing and witnessing the immortal sleep of time in my still films.

Bearer of Death

Opposite to religion or alongside it, “art” takes on murder and moves through it. It assumes murder insofar as artistic practice considers death the inner boundary of the signifying process. Crossing that boundary is precisely what constitutes “art”. In other words, it is as if death becomes interiorized by the subject of such a practice; in order to function he must make himself the bearer of death (Kristeva (1974) 2002:56).

Julia Kristeva (1974) describes the artist as ‘the bearer of death’. She argues that being identified as a ‘scapegoat’ enables the artist to symbolically represent and experience rebirth through the representation of art. This artist’s licence “... giving rise to the aesthetic fetishism and narcissism supplanting theology” (Kristeva 2002:56). Previously, until recently pointed out, I had never seen myself in the role of Kristeva’s bearer of death. I realise now I have become the subject of my own work, as I invest my subjects and objects with my own anxieties. They, as the art object, become the signifiers of myself.

The trauma of my grandmother’s illness created a shift in the family’s hierarchies and dynamics. As I am situated outside of the family environment while living in Cape Town, this shift has allowed me to observe my own state of awakening. The distance has enabled me to explore the unravelling of my own unconscious and conscious fears of my grandmother’s death and my acknowledgment and experience of time. My grandmother’s image became the object of my fixation and the centralised focus of my own anxiety. It was not only her role and persona I wanted to represent, but her image as an object and symbol of my anxieties. I was able to play out my own unconscious fears by visualising her death.

I returned home to Johannesburg to film my family and domestic surrounding in a series of tableaux in the process of my work. I asked my family to stand motionless in their constructed poses as I film and capture

their action in a state of stillness. I capture their 'moving still' image, and I transform them from "subject into object" Barthes (2000:13). In immobilising my subjects to the point of stillness I am able to witness them in an unfamiliar state. This unfamiliar image enables me to project my own characterisation onto my subjects in the experience of time.

4.4

Family

My family has always played an important role in my work and life. I was brought up in a close family unit where weekends and Tuesday night family suppers were spent in the company of each other. (Over the years their persona have become the audience and subjects of my work). I am drawn to the uncanny resemblances between them and myself, finding comfort and discomfort in our similarities. Their image has been the subject and the obsession of my work for a few years now, even when I try to escape their imago¹⁰.

I always seem to be drawn back to my need to observe, collect and monitor their image, as some sort of anthropologist who checks in to see their developments. My role within the family has always been that of an observer. As a shy child, I was able to participate quietly in boisterous family gatherings by watching and observing the many personalities of my family members. This pastime developed into a personal obsession adapted to my everyday experiences and interactions with the world. I would use this ability to go unnoticed as a witness observing what situations and personalities reveal in the presence of time.

What is important for me in my 'moving stills' is the intimacy of my relationship to my subjects, my family. I am able to alter the imago of my family members through the gaze of the camera. The camera empowers

¹⁰ Imago "refers to unconscious prototypical figures constructed on the basis of real or imagined relationships within the family as the individual learns to situate him or herself with respect to other family members" (Macey 2000:200).

me, as director, to command discipline and respect from my subjects. The camera brings an almost automatic submission when placed between my subjects and myself. I am able to use the safety of the camera to direct and observe without feeling objectified.

My subjects become compliant in the presence of the camera. In the guise of the camera, I am able to maintain my role as observer and viewer, while examining their image in the conscious presence of their living breathing moving images. I use my family members to perform the narrative tableaux and fictions of my concern. Their personas, within the family hierarchy, inform the character of their role in the moving still. Due to my grandmother's ill health I have become especially concerned with her image and she has become the centre and urgency of my tableaux.



12. Robyn Nesbitt, Still Life with white flowers, 2009. Video Installation, 1 plasma screen, 1 dvd player, dimensions determined by space.



13. Robyn Nesbitt, *Still Life with Parrot*, 2009. Video Installation, 1 plasma screen, 1 dvd player, dimensions determined by space.



14. Robyn Nesbitt, In the Garden, (Dog (buddy), Christmas tree, Parrot (Monkey), Lemon Tree), 2010. Video Installation, 4 Plasma screen, 4 dvc players, dimensions determined by space.

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15. Robyn Nesbitt, *Flowers for Cynthia*, 2009, Video Installation, 1 plasma screen, 1 dvd player, dimensions determined by space.



16. Robyn Nesbitt, August series, (Hold, Sit, Stand, Bed), 2009. Video Installation, 4 plasma screen, 4 dvd player, dimensions determined by space.

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17. Robyn Nesbitt, Family Portrait, 2010. Video Installation, 1 plasma screen, 1 dvd player, dimensions determined by space.



18. Robyn Nesbitt, Not today, but tomorrow, 2010. Video Installation, 1 projector, 1 dvd player, dimensions determined by space.



19. Robyn Nesbitt, Pretend to sleep, 2010, Video Installation, 2 projectors, 2 dvd players, dimensions determined by space.

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Not today, but tomorrow

It has always been important for me to visualise what my final presentation would look like. Not only as an important factor in my process in witnessing my own moving stills, but in configuring them in a manner that they are able to communicate to and witness each other. For the purpose of this exhibition, I have edited out certain works, but I shall be alluding to them here in conversation with the following selected works.

5.1

In the Garden, 2010

(Dog (Buddy), Christmas tree, Parrot (Monkey), Lemon tree)



In the Garden is mostly about the fear of forgetting. As I get older and my visits home become less frequent, my illusion of home becomes less concrete. My homecoming experiences and memories seem out of place, different, as I grow separate from home.

In the Garden is my attempt to hold onto old companions, the family dog, Christmas holidays, garden hide outs and parrot conversations. I force them to remain as still as objects. They become the *mise-en-scène* of my void. Isolating my memories of home, by illuminating them, allows me to hold onto them, to record and remember them, before they no longer exist. The dog, Christmas tree, parrot and lemon tree are objects of my existence, symbols embedded with the memories of my past. By capturing them and forcing them still in time, I hope to keep them still in my memory.

The fragility of the intimate object, or the frailty of the secret, cleaving the subject (the self) to this tenuous thing that we usually take to be a sign of our unique individuality; our justification and our licence for braving this waning of time always come by way of an insignificant little ritournelle, a tiny machine that repeats our access to childhood (Schefer 1990:3).

5.2

Flowers for Cynthia, 2009

(Flowers in vase)



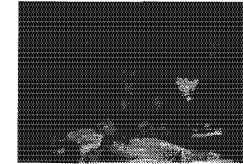
My father's mother was extremely superstitious and no one was allowed to have dead flowers in the house. She believed that they would bring death to the home. When filming *Flowers for Cynthia* I remembered this belief.

A vase of flowers is left until they are dead. I filmed *Flowers for Cynthia* for the period of one minute for twelve days capturing their being and their dying. Selecting day six for the final work, I watched as the flowers opened, withered and fell. The flowers are left in a half empty murky vase of water. One is reminded of what was and what will be, caught in between.

5.3

August 2009

(Grandmother and family surrounding her)

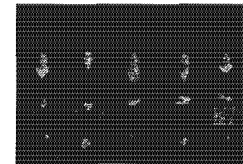


In this work I reference Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* which I have previously discussed. This work is one of the *August* series in which I compose my family around my grandmother's 'dying' figure. Using the language of painting for its ability to portray emotion through the stillness, I construct poses for them to enact. They are told to hold their pose for as long as possible while staring at grandmother. In staging these emotional states, my aim is awaken my family's awareness by acknowledging my enactment.

5.4

Family Portrait 2010

(Family sitting in a row)



Kaja Silverman (1966) describes the formation of early body image as a "process of construction [that] must be endlessly repeated, since lacking any stable referent - it undergoes repeated disintegration and transformation" (Silverman 1996:13). In other words, subject formation is not a moment, it is a process of to-and-fro.

In 2009 I filmed my first family portrait. They all stood on the stairs in front of the family home holding their pose for the camera, waiting for my instructions. In 2010, I repeated the family portrait, but this time I asked my family sit and look towards the camera. Engaging their gaze, I am able watch from behind the safety of the camera. They are told to sit for as long as they can.

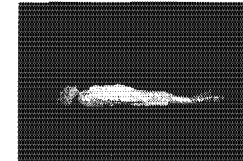
From the early period of portraiture “the relationship between artist and model/sitter was theatrically construed, not only was the artist called on to perform as an actor he was also the spectator of the performance” (Berger 2000: 13). The performance is the constructing of an identity and of roles. This performance, and the purpose of the portrait, is to function as a form of representation, “the portrait presents-performs, displays, stages-not of a person but of an act of self representation” (Berger 2000: 13) as in a staged or theatrical play.

In order to produce this work, I needed my family to be present in the witnessing of my awakening, not only as a representation of myself, but as the objects of my obsession.

5.5

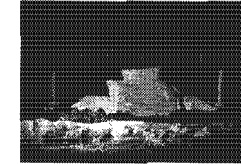
Not today but tomorrow 2010

(Grandmother suspended)



In this work I place my grandmother centrally in the picture plane, in an in-between state between ascending and descending. She floats suspended in space. The meditative, lulling quality of her breath gives me a sense of calm as I watch her lie, silent and still, illuminated in the dark. She serves as an anxious reminder, suspended before disappearing, engulfed in the darkness. Reminding me of the void.

Pretend to Sleep 2010
(Grandmother in bed and out of bed)



James McCarthy in *Death Anxiety* (1980) writes about the child's first experience of death when viewing a corpse as the understanding "that death is a state of permanent immobility with shut, sightless eyes, a state of profound sleep or both" (McCarthy 1980:17). In the work *Pretend to Sleep* I asked my grandmother to lie down on the bed and pretend to sleep. I watched her while she lay still and 'asleep'. Her immobility is disrupted by the occasional foot twitch, reminding me of her being alive. I then filmed the bed once she has left, disturbing nothing. The memory of her is embedded in the sheets and the discoloured cushion cover. I pretend she is gone, she has left us and I try to imagine how that feels through the image she possesses.

Conclusion
Void as unfulfilled desire

In this process of exposing and understanding the source and site of my void, I employ the still life painting genre as a language from which I make my every day familiar objects, unfamiliar, in my still films. In my still films I have come to illuminate my own anxieties of the every day, through the distortion of time, the process of de-familiarisation and still film. I use the staging of my family and everyday objects as the *mise-en-scène* to my void, from which I am able to project my unconscious desire and emotion into the void.

In completing this body of work, *Not today, but tomorrow*, I was left with a feeling of unfulfilled desire. I have spent time with these images, surrounded by a stillness that does not reveal, and a tension that does not give in. I had hoped that exposing my void through the objects of my signified, would enable me to find answers and a sense relief. I would understand of my own anxieties toward death and the movement of time. But instead I realise that they exist in and of themselves, never changing, never revealing, maintaining my gaze of wonderment through their immortality. It pleases me that they will exist, trapped in this state for eternity, as mnemonic reminders trapped in time, reminding me of the void within my void.

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