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PRESENT ABSENCE / ABSENT PRESENCE

A Visual Interpretation of Melancholy, Loss and Longing

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Present Absence / Absent Presence
A Visual Interpretation of Melancholy, Loss and
Longing

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requirements for the award of the degree of Master of
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DECLARATION

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

Signature: *B Wildenroer*

Date: 24 / 11 / 07



In memory of my mother

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Introduction

In this project melancholy and the related experiences of loss and longing as explanatory concepts, are the basis from which I visually interpret the body of practical work that emphasises the role of emotion and personal experience in locating meaning. In section One I start by discussing the idea of a 'present absence' and an 'absent presence' with reference to the ideas of Roland Barthes and how not only photographs but also objects from personal collections can be seen to embody a presence in the absence of its referent.

I discuss the concepts of melancholy, loss and longing. I give a definition of melancholy and elaborate on how it has been interpreted in different texts through the ages. The relationship between melancholy and the sublime as well as the connection between melancholy and the imagination are discussed. I compare views of melancholy as a clinical condition with opposing views of it as being an aesthetic experience of emotion. The role of mood in the creative process and the relationship between emotion and language are also discussed. I give a brief overview of different changing

interpretations of melancholy in the arts from the Renaissance to the present and discuss the *Vanitas* as a recurring theme in these works.

In section Two I address the work of contemporary artists whose work has influenced me. I point out the manner in which their work can be interpreted as examples of contemporary *Vanitas* and how their work deals with loss and longing. In particular I look at the work of Anya Gallaccio, Zoe Leonard, Ricky Swallow, Felix Gonzales-Torres and Lien Botha.

Section Three engages with my own creative practice and discusses the methodology and processes employed in the production of my work. I elaborate on ideas of presence and absence in collecting and recollection and discuss the relationship between collecting and photography. I discuss each individual piece in the body of work by referring to how different themes such as feelings of loss, longing and futility are located in the work.

SECTION 1: THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1.1 Present Absence/ Absent Presence¹

¹ After Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (2002).

² Pearce and also Kristeva to whose work I will be referring draw from Semiotic theory as the process by which meaning arises during the assessment and analysis of sensory information. Different theoreticians such as Ferdinand Saussure, C. S. Peirce and Roland Barthes have developed models to explain this theory. Simply put, this would entail a relationship between three aspects: the perception of something that physically exists in the world (signifier), a concept or object to which the perception makes reference to (signified), and an image thought or concept that is formed in the mind as a result of the perception and which relates to the object (sign).

[I]n Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past (Barthes 1981:76).

I have been influenced by ideas of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ as elaborated by Roland Barthes, specifically in his work *Camera Lucida* (1981). Although Barthes’ writing deals mainly with the idea of presence and absence as related to photographs, I have found it valuable with regard to other physical objects, specifically those found in private collections such as personal souvenirs and mementoes.

I am interested in the manner in which both objects contained in personal collections and images of objects such as photographs can be seen to act as both physical objects and bearers of content. Barthes sees the photograph as “a certificate of presence” (1981: 87) even though this presence “is always invisible, it is not it that we see” (1981:6).

On a similar note Susan Pearce sees objects such as photographs and other mementoes as acting as both “signifier” and “signified”² (1995:236) and because they function as a portable reminder of that which is not there in concrete form, they symbolize both presence and absence.

Photographs and mementoes are linked not only to the present but also to the past and are often mere signifiers of that which they refer to, with the real referent not being present (Baudrillard 1996, Barthes 1981 and Sontag 1977). Because they have an indexical relationship with that which they refer to, they can be seen to constitute the practice of investing concrete material objects with abstract notions of time, history and personal narrative. Collected objects and images can all be seen to function as indicators of the Barthesian notion of “That-has-been” (Barthes 1981:77). They act on both a visual and signifying level.

Consequently an understanding of the significance of these objects would depend not only on the visual appearance of the physical objects, but also on the subjective interpretation of both the creator and the observer of these objects.

Since it could be understood that tangible objects such as mementoes, souvenirs and photographic images can act as substitutes for that which they refer to, they offer a slice of the past and this 'past' can then be collected, kept, framed and/or organised.

It could be said that the memories and emotions induced by a collection of objects come from an intertextual dialogue between different timeframes in the past and the present (Kuhn 2003:397). They seem to "give mock forms of possession: of the past, the present, even the future" (Sontag 1977:167) and through collecting them we are able to unite the "past and future into a potentially permanent present" (Aigner 2000:66). Such objects also act as reminders of the transitory nature of life, the immateriality of imagination and memory, and what Sontag refers to as "time's relentless melt" (1977:15).

To a certain extent Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is largely preoccupied with a melancholic response to the subject of death.

He relates death to temporality and a confusion between presence and absence:

by attesting that the object has been real [the certification of past-presence], the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive [a delusion of present-presence], because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ("this-has-been"), the photograph suggests that it is already dead (Barthes 1981:79).

Barthes's claims need not only be relevant to photography. Many physical objects carry the persistence of the past into the present and like photography invite a melancholic response from the viewer. In the following chapter I will discuss how the concept of melancholy can refer to an emotional response to physical objects, as well as be used to describe the objects themselves. I will also emphasize how ideas of presence and absence come into play when melancholy is experienced as an 'aesthetic emotion' (Brady & Haapala 2003).

³ This term is often used in connection with the Romantic poets especially Milton and Keats and is elaborated on by Raymond Klibansky, Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl in *Saturn and Melancholy* (1964:218).

⁴ This term is used to refer to melancholy as associated with the notion of creative genius (Raymond Klibansky, Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl (1964:241).

⁵ Both Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva discuss melancholia as a clinical condition in respectively *Mourning and Melancholia*(1917) and *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989).

⁶ There is no general consensus or fixed meaning for each term with 'melancholia' and 'melancholy' alternately being used to either describe an emotional state (for example Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984)) or a mental disorder (for example Kristeva in *Black Sun* (1989)). In this paper I will mainly refer to 'melancholy' as an emotional quality as opposed to 'depression', the clinical disorder.

1.2 Melancholy: A Definition

Besides my other numerous circle of acquaintances I have one more intimate confidant—my melancholy. In the midst of my joy, in the midst of my work, she waves to me, calls me to one side, even though physically I stay put (Kierkegaard 1992:44).

I have found the definition of the beautiful. It is something intense and sad [...] and a desire for life together with a bitterness, which flows back upon them as if from a sense of deprivation and hopelessness[...] Melancholy may be called her illustrious spouse, so much so that I can scarcely conceive a type of beauty which has nothing to do with sorrow (Baudelaire in Akcan 2005).

Melancholy has been interpreted in different ways and has been given different names and subcategories by numerous writers that include Aristotle, Richard Burton, Immanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Melanie Klein and Julia Kristeva. It has been written about as 'poetic melancholy'³ and 'melancholia generosa'⁴ as well as melancholia or depression⁵ and is generally understood as a feeling of pensive sadness, the intensity of which may vary. While some theorists' approach have been clinical and have equated it with mental illness, others placed more emphasis on melancholy as a subtle emotion that often plays a role in the conception, interpretation and appreciation of the arts⁶.

Jennifer Radden, in her historical outline of different descriptions of melancholy, points out that contemporary definitions of melancholy were arrived at as a result of the assimilation of different collected writings on melancholy from the past, and that they seldom resulted from any empirical or clinical study (Radden 2000:19). In the same vein, Akcan (2005) proposes that melancholy be seen as a 'construction' that resulted through a series of translations which she sees as representing an emotional human condition. She believes that the meaning of melancholy as a non-pathological mood has been greatly shaped and influenced by psychoanalytical research over the last century, which has seen the initial use of the word 'melancholy' replaced by the term 'depression' (Akcan 2005). I will distinguish between a clinical and an aesthetic interpretation of melancholy in more detail in a later section.

In *Black Sun* Julia Kristeva makes use of the term 'melancholia' and explores it as phenomena in art, philosophy as well as psychoanalysis (1989). She suggests that melancholia is an occurrence which is underscored by the longing for a lost identity of attachment. Although I agree with Kristeva's thoughts on

the relationship between emotion and artistic language, my understanding of melancholy differs in the sense that I do not equate it with illness and would suggest that there is a distinct difference between depression and melancholy.

Melancholy can be fed by loss and longing and often consists of contradicting emotions. It can be differentiated from mourning in that it is not always necessarily linked to a specific loss, but can surface even at the most arbitrary moments. Paganoni explains that in such cases it could be expressive of a more “general fear felt by the self when facing existential instability and historical change” (Paganoni 2000:8). He is of opinion that melancholy also indirectly speaks of the fear of death, but does so in “a state of passivity in which the awareness of changes, decay, and end is filtered through a specific bittersweet reverie” (Paganoni 2000:8). In section two and three I will elaborate on how such notions of transience and the ephemeral are utilized to evoke an emotional response in my practical work, and that of the contemporary artists who have influenced me.

The historian Frank Ankersmit describes melancholy as an experience that originates from a “paradoxical union of the feelings of loss and love, that is, of the combination of pain and pleasure in how we relate to the past” (in Holly 2007). This simultaneous experience of pleasure and displeasure can be seen to relate to the category of the sublime which I will discuss in more detail in the following section.

1.3 Melancholy and the Sublime

Melancholy shares several resemblances with the sublime as defined by Immanuel Kant. According to Kant the sublime can be seen as a complex emotion that consists of a combination of pleasure and displeasure (in Brady & Haapala 2003). The displeasure resulting from the sublime is the effect of the senses and imagination being overwhelmed by the vastness or power of some object. This produces a feeling which verges on fear. Because the subject is safe, the experience is one of awe rather than real fear. It is from the combination of feelings of being on the verge of fear and having respect

⁷ These negative aspects may include “feelings of loneliness, emptiness, sadness from loss, and the fear or dread that sometimes accompanies longing” where the positive aspects usually rely on “reflection, when we dwell on happy memories or fashion elaborate fantasies.” (Brady & Haapala 2003).

for both humanity and nature, that the pleasurable feelings of exhilaration and upliftment associated with the sublime, stems (Brady & Haapala 2003).

Just as is the case with the sublime, melancholy can be seen to have a dual nature that is composed of negative and positive emotions⁷ in combination with certain reflectiveness with regard to a certain absent object (Brady & Haapala 2003). According to Brady and Haapala, melancholy alternates from negative to positive aspects, and it is because of this duality and the specific nature of melancholy, that distinguishes it from emotions of sadness, sorrow, despair, and depression, that it can be considered an *aesthetic* emotion (2003).

Lyotard discusses ‘melancholia’ and ‘novatio’ as different modes of the sublime which are capable of conveying the unrepresentable, and that are both characterised by “an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain”. He distinguishes between them by pointing out that where the ‘novatio’ mode of the sublime is not characterized by a consensus of taste, and thereby denies itself consistent material for reflection and collective nostalgia, ‘melancholia’ often

has a consistent form in art and literature. Melancholia can continually offer its audience material for reflection in a way which would underpin ideas of nostalgia (Lyotard in David 1998). Even though such material would not necessarily evoke feelings of melancholy in the viewer, the emotional quality would still be evident to the viewer.

1.4 Melancholy as a Clinical Condition in relation to Melancholy as an Aesthetic Experience of Emotion

Jennifer Radden’s *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (2000) discusses different views on melancholy as forming part of a clinical condition. Julia Kristeva specifically can be seen as representative of such a clinical approach. However, Kristeva does not strictly see depression as pathology but also as a discourse with a language to be learned. She alternately uses the terms depression and melancholia, scarcely distinguishing between the two. Instead she rather focuses on their common structure. She views this as being an “experience of object loss and of modification of signifying bonds”, as well as

the resultant “intolerance for object loss and the signifier’s failure” to act as substitute for the lost object (Kristeva 1989:10). She points out that “if loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it, it is also noteworthy that the work of art as fetish emerges when the activating sorrow has been repudiated” (Kristeva 1989:9). In this sense, even though her emphasis is on melancholy as a clinical condition, she seems to recognise the role melancholy plays in the realization of creative work.

Theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin offer an alternative to the clinical tradition by discussing melancholy as having an aesthetic quality.⁸ Even though their interpretations are hinged on a notion of melancholy with emphasis on sorrow and sadness, they do not directly equate melancholy with a clinical understanding of depression.

In an essay entitled *Melancholy as an Aesthetic Emotion*, Emily Brady and Arto Haapala⁹ focus on an aesthetic experience of melancholy and distinguish between two different melancholic moods. The first entails that there is a specific object

which is absent, and it is the feelings of longing for this object which brings forth a melancholic state. The second involves being in a place or situation which arouses a melancholic mood, but in this case there is no absent object which elicits such a mood (2003). Brady and Haapala argue that apart from melancholy being an emotion in other contexts, it is one often found in the contexts of art (2003). In this sense art objects are invested with a “narrative of some kind, a sequence of fictional events, in which fictional characters and places become the intentional objects of our melancholy emotions” (Brady and Haapala 2003).

Contemporary scholars of philosophy and aesthetics, such as Katarina Elam, also focus on this aesthetic aspect of melancholy. In an essay entitled *Emotions as a Mode of Understanding: An Essay in Philosophical Aesthetics* (2001), she discusses the emotion as sometimes being characterised by “sadness without a cause” and at other times being the result of the experience of some absence. The fact that there is an absent object is an indication that memory is involved and this memory of a once present object becomes the narrative which feeds melancholy (Elam 2001).

⁸ See T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 375-376 and Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London, New York: Verso, 1998), pp. 140-158.

⁹ Emily Brady is a lecturer of aesthetics at the Philosophy Department of Lancaster University in England and Arto Haapala is a Finnish philosopher, aesthetician and Professor of Aesthetics at the Institute for Art Research at Helsinki University.

¹⁰ That melancholy is often associated with nature is evident in the prolific references to melancholy in the work of the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron (Reed 1962:140).

Brady and Haapala attempt to emphasise the relevance of melancholy as an aesthetic emotion, not only in our emotional responses to the natural environment¹⁰, but also in our response to art works (2003). The reflective nature of melancholy results from the fact that “its objects are often indirectly experienced through memories, thoughts or imaginings related to an absent object” (Brady and Haapala 2003). This links to Barthes’ notion of an ‘absent presence’ and a ‘present absence’, and the role that the imagination plays in realising the absent object as discussed in section 1.1.

1.5 Melancholy and the Imagination

Through our imagination we are capable of transferring meaning to the “place where it was lost in death and/or nonmeaning” (Kristeva 1989:103).

The role of imagination is an important aspect of melancholy as it is through imagination that we make connections between the past and the present.

Kant sees imagination as something that enables that which is absent to be made present. He understands imagination as a sense of “representing in *intuition* an object

that is not itself present” and of “*perception* in the absence of an object” (Arendt 1982:79). Hannah Arendt draws a correlation between that which Kant refers to as the “faculty of imagination” which enables the mind to perceive that which is absent from perception, and what was known in Greek philosophy as *nous* (a sense “through which you look steadfastly at things which are present though they are absent”). She draws a distinction between the “it-is” that is perceptible in that which is present, and the “it-is” which is even though present in the mind, absent to the senses (Arendt 1982:80). This phenomenon, as emphasised by Barthes and Sontag, is well illustrated by the photograph as it is an example of an object which stands in for something or someone that is absent. It is only through the imagination that we are able to recall the subject as something other than the flat piece of paper on which it appears.

Imagination can also serve to deepen feelings of melancholy. Imagination has the ability to make memories more lucid and appropriate and is often used to “embellish or fantasize around the memories of melancholy”. In this regard Kant sees imagination as a precondition for memory (Arendt 1982:80). In such a

case it is the fusion of imagination and memory, that supplies the “narrative in which melancholy is anchored”, that permits us to extend the emotion “creating new scenarios as sources of pleasure and meditation” (Brady and Haapala 2003).

Elam points out that when we interact with an artwork, our experience of the artwork cannot be separated from our life history (2001). She sees the past as not only influencing the present but also our aesthetic experience of it (Elam 2001). She views melancholy as more or less “intertwined with art as an affective feature,” in the sense that we experience art not just as “a bundle of objects, but a way of understanding” (Elam 2001).

1.6 Mood and the Creative Process / Emotion and Language

Melancholy and associated feelings of anxiety and longing are all emotive states which I suggest have been instrumental in both the realization and reading of my practical work.

In *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Richard Burton describes melancholy as being associated with such diverse emotions as sorrow, fear, shame, disgrace, hatred, anger, discontent, self-love and death of loved ones (1989:272). Melancholy, as an emotional quality, has parallels with feelings of loss, longing or yearning for something, as well as with feelings of nostalgia or the emotions involved with reminiscing (Brady and Haapala 2003).

Bullock & Trombley emphasise the role of emotional responses to artworks by stating that the experience of an artwork is not concerned with the “factual information to be gained from the things perceived, nor with their practical uses, but rather with the immediate qualities of the contemplative experience itself” (2000:12).

In an essay entitled *How does art express emotion?* Ismay Barwell¹¹ emphasises the fact that emotions embodied in artworks are often ambiguous, complex and of a unique nature in the sense that they resist being described in words.

¹¹ Ismay Barwell is a contemporary theorist who focuses on feminist philosophy, aesthetics and narrative theory.

She explains that it is because of this that we often use the term 'expressive' when referring to such artworks (Barwell 1986:175). She emphasises that an artwork not only seems to express a certain emotion when the artist intentionally attempts to portray such an emotion, but that it could also be the result of partly unintentional expression of emotion as a spontaneous " 'spewing forth' or ways of 'giving vent' to the emotion in question" (Barwell 1986:176). According to Roger Scruton a work of art can be seen to possess the ability to express "thought, attitude, character, in fact, anything that can be expressed at all" (in Barwell 1986:175). Such an artwork would then tend to "evoke that emotion *in the imagination* of an attentive audience, but this evocation need not be emotionally loaded" (Barwell 1986:177). In other words, the viewer would recognise the emotion but not necessarily experience it.

The idea of a narrative being created by the expression of emotion is dealt with in Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Kristeva asks the question "Is mood a language?" (1989:21). She explains that by creating "in a material that is totally different from that which constitutes mood" the

artist "transposes affect into rhythms, signs, forms" (Kristeva 1989:22). In this manner, the "*semiotic* and the *symbolic* become communicable imprints of an affective reality", which may then be perceptible to the viewer of such an artwork (Kristeva 1989:22). Kristeva sees art as a means through which the melancholic can secure some kind of 'hold' over the 'lost Thing' " (Kristeva 1989:97). She refers to the "Thing" as something that is unrepresentable and that "suggests an insistence without presence", and as something "real that does not lend itself to signification" (1989:13). She sees artistic mechanisms used to "decompose and recompose signs" as "an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing" (1989:14).

I will now give a brief discussion on changing perceptions of melancholy in the arts, by placing specific emphasis on the *Vanitas* as a recurring feature in these artworks.

1.7 Melancholy and the *Vanitas*¹²: Changing Perceptions from the Renaissance to the Present

Before an image, finally, we have to humbly recognize this fact: that it will probably outlive us, that before it we are the fragile element, the transient element, and that before us it is the element of the future, the element of permanence. The image often has more memory and more future than the being who contemplates it (Didi-Huberman 2003:33).

Definitions of melancholy in the visual arts have ranged from depictions associated with daydreaming, elation, grief and inactivity, to that of fury and violence. It has been depicted as “permanent states to passing moods, ephemeral moments of introspection and daydream and entrenched scenarios of suffering and agony” (Sarafianos 2005). Often ‘melancholy’ has been depicted as a character, very often one of female gender¹³, whilst others have been more concerned in evoking ‘melancholy’ as a mood.

Depictions of melancholy during the Renaissance often hinged on Cornelius Agrippa’s formulation of the three different forms of melancholy, namely *melencholia imaginativa*, *melencholia*

rationalis and *melencholia mentalis*.

These terms respectively referred to melancholy as being associated with invention and creativity; discursive reasoning; and mental illness (Perlow 1997).



Perhaps the most discussed image of melancholy is Albrecht Dürer’s *Melencolia I* (1514) (Fig. 1).

Melancholy has been extensively discussed, most notably in Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl’s seminal work *Melancholy and Saturn* (1964). Dürer’s depiction can be seen as a methodical consideration of the idea of melancholy, rather than an

¹² According to the online Oxford English Dictionary the term ‘vanitas’ is a Latin word which is an exclamation of disillusionment or pessimism or a reference to futility. It is mentioned in Ecclesiastes 1.2. Different translations appear such as “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (King James Version of the Bible) and “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (New International Version of the Bible).

¹³ With regard to the gender of melancholy, Holly points out that it is interesting that it has been portrayed as female through the ages and that even though any sex could be considered to be melancholic, Melancholia seems to be female (2007)

Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer. *Melencolia I* (1514), engraving.

¹⁴ See Edmund Burke's *Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756).

¹⁵ See Immanuel Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764).

Figure 2. Giuseppe Arcimboldo. *Autumn* (1573), Oil on canvas,

attempt to evoke a mood. It depicts the female figure of melancholy surrounded by different objects and instruments traditionally related to specifically 'imaginative melancholy', which was associated with geometry and the crafts (Klibansky, Panofsky & Saxl 1964:345). Dürer's depiction, rather than focusing on expressions of feeling, is more concerned with transforming "all the traditional signs of the melancholy disease" into "symbols of abstract ideas" (Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl 1964:346). He portrays different traditional motifs associated with melancholy, such as the purse and keys, the drooping head, the clenched fist and black face. The emphasis here is on the symbolic content of the work.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century melancholy often manifested in the form of *Vanitas* still-life painting and the idea of the *memento mori*. The transience of life was often the subject of *Vanitas* painting with subjects ranging from fruit and flowers about to decay, melting candles, withering flowers and skulls.

The symbolic use of fruit and vegetables as objects which are subject to decay is evident in Giuseppe Arcimboldo's painting *Autumn* (1573) (Fig. 2).

Arcimboldo's work can be seen as an

example of an early *Vanitas* painting that makes obvious references to the transience of life, and the idea that life's pleasures are only temporary. This work elicits melancholic feelings due to the nature of its subject matter. The title, *Autumn*, can be interpreted to refer to the significance of things dying, but also hints at the idea of beauty in decay.



Melancholy's association with the sublime became evident in the nineteenth century. A preoccupation with the sublime is evident in the work of the Romantic artist, Caspar David Friedrich. His

famous *Monk by the Sea* (1808-10) (Fig. 3) is often seen to reflect the Burkean¹⁴ and Kantian¹⁵ notion of the sublime experience of nature. Friedrich often portrayed melancholic figures that are in a captivated contemplation of their surroundings. In this work the dramatic mood of the painting does not only depict a melancholic figure, but also serves to evoke an emotional response from the viewer.

In the twentieth century, the Surrealist painter Giorgio De Chirico was well known for his different studies of melancholy, which include examples such as *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914) (Fig. 4), *Hermetic Melancholy* (1918-1919) and *Jeux Terribles* (1925-1926). His works are often characterized by a very anxious and dramatic tone and an overwhelming sense of loss. Several of his works make reference to the link between melancholy, transience and death by means of the inclusion of clocks. In other works he extends the use of fruit as used in the *Vanitas* tradition, such as in *The Uncertainty of the Poet* (1913) (Fig. 5).

Picasso's *Death's Head* (1943) (Fig. 6) continues the relationship between the *Vanitas* theme and the subject of melancholy and serves as another example

of how the history of melancholy often draws from the *memento mori* and *Vanitas* traditions.



Figure 3. Caspar David Friedrich *Monk by the sea* (1808-1810), Oil on canvas.



Figure 4. Giorgio De Chirico, *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914), Oil on canvas.



Figure 5. Giorgio De Chirico, *The Uncertainty of the Poet* (1913), Oil on canvas.

Figure 6. Pablo Picasso,
Death's Head (1943), Fired
clay.

A mood of melancholy often surfaces in the portrayal of lonely figures in Edward Hopper's work. To some extent the figures in his work recall Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1808-1810). Hopper's *Woman in the Sun* (1961) (Fig. 7) depicts a nude woman standing by a bed and could be seen to reflect feelings of disenchantment. Non-smiling and gloomy, the figures in his landscapes, seascapes and empty houses have a sense of disquiet about them, and have the ability to make the viewer feel ill at ease.

More recent interpretations of melancholy, such as Ron Mueck's, *Untitled (Big Man)* (2000) (Fig. 8), features a giant man in a meditative pose. The posture and introspective presence in this work echoes other artworks such as Durer's angel in *Melencolia I* (1514) (Fig. 1), as well as Rodin's *Thinker* (1880) (Fig. 9) and Vincent van Gogh's painting, *The Portrait of Paul Gachet* (1890) (Fig. 10).

Even though *Untitled (Big Man)* shows visual similarities to Durer's *Melencolia I*, it differs in the sense that the figure, rather than being seen as representing melancholy, elicits an emotional response from the viewer. This results from the scale, materiality and physical presence of the sculpture.



Depictions of melancholy over the last five centuries have ranged from direct portrayals of it as a character, to depictions of figures or objects in environments which have a tendency to invite feelings of melancholy.

The symbolic references contained in the works discussed in this section have changed along with the ways in which definitions of melancholy have changed over the ages. Recent definitions of melancholy have shifted from that of melancholy as a clinical condition, to that of melancholy as a temporary mood or emotional state.

Interpretations of the *Vanitas* have also changed from previous historical portrayals. Even though the subject of seventeenth century still-lives was death and transience, the artworks themselves remained durable physical objects.

In contemporary culture the subject of human mortality has not disappeared and has an added potency with the prevalence of the aids epidemic¹⁶. Differing from earlier portrayals, contemporary artists are no longer necessarily creating durable artworks, but have incorporated the processes of decay and erasure into the contemporary *Vanitas*.

In the following section I will discuss the works of contemporary artists whose work, rather than being actual depictions of melancholy, can be seen to have a melancholy character, and the ability to embody certain emotional qualities associated with melancholy.



¹⁶ Such concerns are especially evident in the work of contemporary artists such as Felix Gonzales-Torres and Zoe Leonard whose artwork resulted from having lost loved ones to aids related illnesses.

Figure 8. Ron Mueck, *Untitled (Big Man)* (2000), Fibreglass, resin, silicone



Figure 9. Auguste Rodin, *Thinker* (1880), Bronze.



Figure 10. Vincent van Gogh, *The Portrait of Paul Gachet* (1890), Oil on canvas.

SECTION 2: CONTEMPORARY REFERENCES:

2.1 Contemporary Artists: Loss and Longing in the Contemporary *Vanitas*

In this section I examine the work of five contemporary artists whose work has specific melancholic content, or the tendency to elicit a melancholic response from the viewer.

The working method, style and materials of these artists have either informed or influenced my practical body of work. I have selected for discussion one or more art work from each artist on the grounds that the works are either transitory in nature, or could be seen to embody aspects, qualities and characteristics of mourning and or longing. On the other hand some of these works also attempt to preserve decaying objects or to halt time, a strategy that I often employ in my practical body of work.

Why do artists make ephemeral artworks in a culture where value is ascribed to that which is collectable and has a sense of permanence? The answer to this question is probably not

to be found solely in the art world's seeming preoccupation with economic values as opposed to other values, but in an understanding of the relationship between ephemerality, mourning and loss. Most of the artists whose work I discuss do not create work that has any direct market value, and many of the works are temporal in nature, usually only lasting for the duration of the exhibition. In fact, without the actual decay and disappearance of the art work, it would not function as the artists intended. Often such works only continue their existence in the form of documentation or other forms of residue from the actual work. A central theme of such work is the ephemeral. It requires the acceptance of the inevitable disappearance of the work, implying the act of letting go. These works could then be seen to convey and embody not only a bitter-sweet emotion, but also an acceptance of that which is transient.

Ephemeral art can be seen as work both of and in time. It often requires the passing of periods of time to fully experience works that may include the melting of a block of ice (Gallaccio), the disappearance of sweets (Gonzalez-Torres) or the withering of fruit (Leonard).

2.2 Anya Gallaccio: The Flower as Symbol of Transience and the Ephemeral

British artist Anya Gallaccio, creates work which could be described as being temporal, poetic and melancholic Her installation *Red on Green* (1992) (Fig. 11) depends on change and transformation.

The work consists of ten thousand red roses. The flowers have been decapitated with the green stems and leaves forming the base which is overlaid by the red rose petals. This creates a work that is multi-sensory and pervaded with a strong sense of loss, change and mortality.

By focussing on nature, beauty and decay, Gallaccio creates works which have the appearance of a mass grave. Like many of her other works, *Red on Green* (1992) recalls the use of flowers at funerals. Gallaccio depends as much on the emblematic nature of the flower as on their impending decay, to refer to the cyclical nature of life and death. *Red on Green* (1992) was designed in such a manner that the work only lasted for the

duration of the exhibition. After the work had withered away, Gallaccio took what was left of the ten thousand dried out flowers, ground the different parts of the roses to a dust which she then bound with beeswax, linseed oil and dammar. What has remained of the installation are two crayons, one red and one green.

In other works Gallaccio also often uses ephemeral materials such as fruits, vegetables and flowers to explore fragility and evanescence.



Figure 11. Anya Gallaccio, *Red on Green* (1992), Installation.

Her works are usually in a state of flux, but sometimes Gallaccio draws a halt to such transformation and suspends time. This she does by casting in bronze that which will either decay and wither or take on a new life cycle such as in *3 Potatoes (I Dream'd in a Dream)* (2001) (Fig. 12).

Figure 12. Anya Gallaccio, *3 Potatoes (I Dream'd in a Dream)* (2001), Bronze.



Figure 13. Anya Gallaccio, *Preserve "Beauty"* (19991-2003), Gerbera flowers, glass panels.



By casting the vegetables in bronze the potential for new life and growth, as indicated by the sprouts growing from the withering potatoes, is negated and frozen in time. Gallaccio seems to be juxtaposing the fragile organic material she often uses with the idea of permanence often propositioned by art (Honigman 2004).

In opposition to this work, *Preserve "Beauty"* (19991-2003) (Fig. 13) makes reference to the effects of time and decay. For this work Gallaccio pressed Gerbera flowers between glass sheets. As the flowers gradually decay over the course of time, their sap runs out and they wither, and the work transforms into a new state.

2.3 Zoe Leonard: Loss and Longing

Like the work of Gallaccio, the work of New York based artist Zoe Leonard also brings forth associations with the seventeenth century *Vanitas* tradition.

Whereas the *Vanitas* paintings merely depict the decay of objects, Gallaccio and Leonard's work are intended to be transitory and subject to decay itself. In the case of works such as Gallaccio's *Red on Green* (1992) and Leonard's *Strange Fruit (for David)* (1992-1998) (Fig. 14), only the photographic documentation of the work will eventually remain.

The loss of a close friend prompted Leonard to create *Strange Fruit (for David)* (1992-1998), a work which could be seen as a meditation on loss and mortality and reminds one of the apparent human need for relics, souvenirs and mementos. The work deals with the counterpoint between mortality and immortality, and because of its subject matter and temporal nature could be seen as a work that both "portrays death" and "faces death" (Temkin 1998).

Strange Fruit (for David) (1992-1998) consists of over three hundred fruit skins, such as avocado, citrus fruits and bananas, from which the artist had removed the flesh, dried the skins and then proceeded to sew the skins back together again using coloured thread, zippers and buttons. The result recalls notions of the fragility of the human body as a vessel, and carries suggestions of both loss and the futility of repair.



Figure 14. Zoe Leonard,
Strange Fruit (for David)(1992-1998).
Installation.



Figure 15. Zoe Leonard.
Strange Fruit (for David)(1992-1998)
Detail.

¹⁷ Of the inception of the work Leonard says "It was sort of a way to sew myself back up. I didn't even realize I was making art when I started doing them. I had just come back from India and was impressed with how each scrap of paper, each bit of wire was used to its maximum, to the very end of its possible useful life. One morning I'd eaten these two oranges, and I just didn't want to throw the peels away, so absentmindedly I sewed them back up." (Leonard in Temkin 1998)

¹⁸ The process involved working with a conservator: shock-freezing the pieces and then penetrating them with Paraloid B72 under a vacuum.

Figure 16. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Loverboys)* (1991). Wrapped sweets.

Leonard explained the act of making this piece as a therapeutic action that would involve some sort of healing¹⁷. After an initial attempt to conserve these pieces¹⁸ she rejected the conserved pieces, deciding that she was not satisfied with the mere facade of decay, and preferred the work in an unpreserved state. After the work was bought by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the work was exhibited at intervals which made the imminent decay of the work more prevalent.

2.4 Felix Gonzalez-Torres: The Threat of Erasure

Gonzalez-Torres draws upon memory and personal experiences in his art. His partner's death from AIDS prompted a series of works in the form of paper stacks, candy spills, billboards showing one bird in lone flight, and pillows bearing the indentations of the heads of an absent couple.

Gonzalez-Torres' rooms filled with spilled candies could be seen to mimic the wasting away and eventual disappearance of the body. One of a series of such works, *Untitled (Loverboys)* (1991) (Fig. 16), consists of a pile of blue and white

wrapped sweets. The work takes on another significance when one is reminded that the weight of the pile of sweets is equivalent to the combined weight of the artist and his partner.



In works such as *Untitled* (1992) (Fig. 17), which forms part of a series of photographs of skylines, the movement of a solitary bird in flight is captured in a manner which evokes both feelings of

tranquility and despair. The circling bird is presented as a stack which is made up of an unlimited series of printed copies. Gonzalez-Torres allowed for these copies to be taken as gifts by individuals visiting the gallery, with the agreement that it is replenished by the gallerist. In this work the “photograph gains its authority by appearing to repeat its referent without addition, by repressing the photographic signifier” (James 2001).

The sweets and printed copies were offered by Gonzales-Torres to be removed and consumed by gallery-goers. Of this the artist said that he “hated to be present to see people take sheets of paper from the stacks or candies from the piles”. He felt that it was an invasion of his self, like the demise of his own body (Gonzalez-Torres quoted in Rosen 1997:47).

The disappearance of the objects used in these works carry the “threat of erasure of the memories and life they had shared” (James 2001). The fact that Gonzalez-Torres stipulated that the sweets were to be repeatedly filled up again after being removed by gallery goers, only compounds the fact that the mourning is something that is repeatable and underlines the futility underlying feelings of loss and longing. To Gonzalez-Torres the act of

“letting go” and the “refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of a disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form” was an attempt on his part to “rehearse his fears of having [his partner] disappear right in front of [his] eyes” (Gonzalez-Torres quoted in Rosen 1997:44).

The stacks of printed copies and sweets are ambivalent objects that are caught between representing the combined bodies of the artist and his partner, and the melancholic reflection on their impending death.

2.5 Ricky Swallow: *Killing Time* as a Contemporary *Vanitas*

Ricky Swallow’s installation *Killing Time* (2005) (Fig. 18), consists of a table covered with what appears to be different fish, lobster, crab and oysters carved from laminated Jelutong wood. For this work Swallow draws from his interest in the passing of time, as well as dealing with personal memory and experiences from his past. The artist replicated the table from the one he and his family enjoyed dinners around as a child.

Figure 18. Ricky Swallow,
Killing Time (2005). Jelutong.



Figure 19. Ricky Swallow,
Killing Time (2005) (Detail).



Figure 20. Ricky Swallow,
*Field Recording/Highland Park
Hydra* (2003), Jelutong.



His father was a fisherman and in the work Swallow depicts different sea creatures that were familiar to him in his youth.

The work strongly recalls formal composition and subject matter of the seventeenth century *Vanitas*, and refers to “life, death, and the transience of material possessions” (Day 2006). The fact that the artist had to kill his subject matter in order to use them as models for his sculpture, further adds poignancy to the work. The title of the work ‘*Killing Time*’ also serves to make one aware of the time consuming practice of carving wood, and serves to heighten the viewer’s awareness of the passing of time. Swallow delves into his own past but proposes new and “extended narrative possibilities for objects in a time after our own”, literally turning “real life to still life” (Day 2006).

Another work of Swallow’s that recalls Gallaccio’s potato bronzes is *Field Recording/Highland Park Hydra* (2003) (Fig. 20), which highlights the manner in which objects carry the marks of time. The work consists of a hand carved rendering of a prickly pear cactus onto which passers-by have carved different inscriptions. Swallow carefully recreates the plant along with the graffiti markings which have formed part of the plant as it

grows. This work, like Gallaccio's potato bronzes, seems to capture the enduring ability of a living thing to thrive even in the face of threat and decay.

2.6 Lien Botha: The Melancholy of Collecting

An artist whose practice reflects a dual interest in photography and collecting is Lien Botha. According to Frydryczak, collecting shares many characteristics with not only the photographer, but also the activities of the child, the gatherer, the Flaneur, the allegorist and the ragpicker (2003:182). Frydryczak looks primarily at collecting as it is interpreted and rationalized in the writings of Walter Benjamin¹⁹, and aims to show how his thinking on collecting locates the activity of collecting, not only as particular to postmodernism, but also as a means of participating in postmodern culture (Frydryczak 2003:180).

Botha's methods entail collecting, both physically and by means of her camera as part of her working process. A sense of the personal and allusion to private identity is evident in her *Book of Gloves* (2001) (Fig. 21).

For this work Botha photographed a collection of gloves. The title of this series of photographs refers to a



¹⁹ Benjamin's ideas on collecting prefigures that which Frydryczak considers to be the spirit of postmodern collecting and is expressed in several texts such as *Unpacking my Library* (1973), *One Way Street and other writings* (1997) and *The Arcades Project* (1999).

Figure 21. Lien Botha, *Book of Gloves* (2001), Photographs.

²⁰ E-mail correspondence with Lien Botha, 3 September 2005.

Figure 22. Lien Botha,
From the series *Suzy's Lovers*
(2005), Photographs.

'book', recalling notions of albums or identity documents. Her gloves act metonymically, as the artist refers to that which is absent from her images. In a similar vein the physical photograph also acts metonymically to that which it represents.

A similar interplay between presence and absence is evident in *Suzy's Lovers* (2005) (Fig. 22). According to Botha, this photographic series deals with the photograph's capacity to impart a sense of continuum in time. She refers to the manner in which we imbue physical objects with properties of departed loved ones.

For Botha,

It is the unbuttoning, the thread, the sleeve, the pin falling and being heard which will stay beyond memory. So after a farewell we will hold the last worn membrane close and smell the departed's presence a while longer. Cloth hovers as much as it seduces and protect. This is how we are mostly remembered²⁰



Botha's preoccupation with mementoes and souvenirs was often foregrounded in earlier works such as *Memorabilia* (1992) (Fig. 23 and 24) and *Africana Collectanea* (1994) (Fig. 25 and 26).

Botha utilizes both found and made photographs and objects to construct responses to her material and psychological world. She conducts this in a manner that is similar to an "archaeologist and archivist" (Jamal 2002:7). By using collected objects and photographs she seeks to uncover "stories and traces of stories" (Jamal 2002:7).

In a series such as *Africana Collectanea* (1994) Botha evokes the past in the present by making use of the physical layering of objects invested with memory (Jamal 2002:3). In doing so she seduces the viewer into her process of combining, associating, remembering and forgetting again. What Botha has collected are, however, not only images and objects. By using her camera, what she "has collected is her (own) past" (Jamal 2002:4), she preserves in the present.



Figure 23. Lien Botha, From the series *Memorabilia* (1992), Photograph.



Figure 24. Lien Botha, From the series *Memorabilia* (1992), Photograph.



Figure 25. Lien Botha, From the series *Africana Collectanea* (1994), Photograph..



Figure 26. Lien Botha, From the series *Africana Collectanea* (1994), Photograph.

²¹ The title refers to Carl Peter Thurnberg, a botanist of note who lived during the late eighteenth century. Together with his students he collected plant species from places as far and wide as Tahiti, New Zealand, Australia, France, Spain, Austria, Siberia and Greece.

Figure 27. Lien Botha, *After Thurnberg (Cucumis Africanis)* (2005), Photograph.

Figure 28. Lien Botha, From the series *Radio Maria* (2002), Photograph.

Figure 29. Lien Botha, From the series *Radio Maria* (2002), Photograph.

These works seem to prefigure her consequent use of botanic specimen in more recent work such as *After Thurnberg*²¹ (2005) (Fig. 27). In this work the idea of collecting becomes even more apparent, especially when considering the title. For *After Thurnberg* (2005) Botha has photographed a collection of uprooted indigenous South African flower species. The two-dimensional surface of the photographs calls to mind the practice of pressing, pasting and preserving flowers in albums. However, the flowers Botha used here are unearthed and wilted, holding only the promise of having their impending decay preserved by means of the photograph.

In *Radio Maria* (2002) (Fig. 28 and 29) Botha draws a correlation between preserved museum species and analogue photographs. For this work Botha photographed dead moths pinned down, to create stills of the already frozen motion of the winged creatures. The work recalls notions of transformation and the cyclical nature of life and death, and like many of her other works can be seen to function as a *memento mori*.



SECTION 3: THE PRACTICAL BODY OF WORK: Methodology and Process

The curator Charlotte Day, sees the *Vanitas* as “a poignant reminder of our mortality, a weighing up of losses to gains, and an invitation to experience the present moment more profoundly” (2006).

The melancholic iconography of the *Vanitas* makes this genre appropriate to express ideas of presence and absence in my own work.

The still life or *Vanitas* features as a predominant theme in my work, both in two-dimensional and three-dimensional form. These range from traditional still life arrangements to flower studies and sculptural still lifes. The still life compositions that make up the body of work are mostly compiled of a variety of collected objects.

The photographic process and use of liquid photographic emulsion is an element in most of my work, and is used to underline notions of transience and the paradoxical relationship between presence and absence.

3.1 Presence and Absence in Collecting and Recollection

Collections are essentially a narrative of experience; as objects are a kind of material language, so the narratives into which they can be selected and organised are a kind of fiction (Pearce 1995:412).

Each stone he finds, each flower picked and each butterfly caught is already the start of a collection, and every single thing he owns makes up one great collection. (...) Scarcely has he entered life than he is a hunter. He hunts the spirits whose trace he scents in things. (Benjamin in Frydryczak 2003:185)

We collect images and objects for various reasons²². The urge to collect seems to be inherent to human nature, and collecting formed an intrinsic part of my own childhood experiences. In the practical body of work, my processes have involved the compilation of various collections of both physical objects and of photographs. In the production of the practical body of work, I have sourced from these private collections in an attempt to establish different narratives (Fig. 30).

In some works oblique and playful references are made to the collecting processes of scientific study. In other works the nature of the collected objects is more personal. It is not only physical material objects, but also narratives of

²² Some of the motivations listed specifically by Pearce include aesthetics, leisure, a desire to reframe objects, the pleasing rhythm of sameness and difference, establishing a sense of community, extending the self and achieving immortality (1992:69-88).

Figure 30. Barbara Wildenboer, Work in progress, Found and made objects in cardboard boxes.



personal memory that are contained and preserved in these collections.

The idea of objects representing a material language, and collecting being considered as constituting a narrative, have been expressed by several authors such as Bal (1994), Pearce (1995) and Stewart (1984). An aspect that greatly influences the existence of a narrative, and one that I employ in my own work, is the representation of time. The relationship of the still image to time is constructed by the ordering of events before and after it, whether these events are suggested by the image or object

itself, or as a result of the individual memories of the viewer of these images. The reading of narratives in my work would not necessarily be linear or chronological, as I view them to rather disclose meaning in a manner which is similar to the workings of memory. The images and objects contained in the various collections do not convey a linear narrative. Rather, they are affected by the manner in which they aid and interplay with memory, and consequently that will affect their reading. Hirsch places emphasis on these unseen factors that influence our reading of such objects. She sees the practice of reinterpreting

these narratives as “a space of many possible stories, with many possible interpretations” (1997:214-215). Bal also considers collections to communicate meaning in a non-linear fashion, and adds that a collection is a chronologically disordered narrative (1994:101).

According to Benjamin the interpretation of objects in collections does not depend on the object but rather on its subject, in other words, “all the relations, associations [and] ideas connected with it” (In Frydryczak 2003:395). The images and objects that make up my individual works can be seen to function as traces, codes or clues to a meaning that is situated somewhere else, and has to be deciphered like a puzzle. Both object- and photograph- based collections in my works can be created and decoded “materially (object-ively)” as well as “discursively (semiotically, *qua* meaning that is)” (Bal 1994:98). In this regard Bal distinguishes between the apparent objectivity of material matter and the subjective nature of the narrative. She does this by referring to verbal texts and states that even though they are “printed and made accessible” at the same time, they are “subjectively produced by writer and reader” (Bal 1994:98).

Another important focus of my work centres on the idea of death, decay and the transformation of matter from one state to another. I select subject matter and materials that are pervaded with a sense of mortality, and that sometimes also have an ‘uncanny’²³ quality. This corresponds to the sentiments of Baudrillard who reflects on the nature between collecting and death. He observes that “the object is the thing with which we construct our own mourning; the object represents our own death” (Baudrillard 1996:97). Baudrillard believes that,

A person who collects is dead, but he literally survives himself through his collection, which (even while he lives) duplicates him infinitely, beyond death, by integrating death itself into the series, into the cycle (1996:97).

In the following subsection I will elaborate on the relationship between collecting and photography by discussing how and why photography can be seen as a means of collecting. I also explain how I have applied photography as a means of collecting in my own practical work.

²³ It is particularly photography’s capacity to create uncanny images and the strangeness that results from the shift between boundaries of what is ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ that is of interest to me.

3.2 Collecting and Photography

In *On Photography* Susan Sontag emphasises the idea that photographs can be considered to be artifacts themselves in the sense that they seem to have the status of found objects (Sontag 1977:69).

The act of photographing and that of collecting have similar outcomes: that of investing material objects with an abstract notion of the past, and to preserve it in the present. Both the object and the photograph can serve as pointers and producers of memory and potentially elicit emotion. It is argued that we collect objects and images because we feel the real referent to be dominant in the image (Barthes 1981 and Sontag 1977).

In archaeology photography is generally used to “record, document, and illustrate what has been found” (Shanks 1997:2). Early forms of collecting such as hunting, fishing, botany, geology and relic hoarding had to depend on devices such as nets and traps for physically acquiring objects. Some form of system or vehicle to physically transport what had been collected was also required (Mitchell 2003:284). Researchers and excavators often use the camera as a quick means

of note taking and record keeping, with the camera being considered to be a mere mechanical or electronic means of reproduction (Shanks 1997:3). Instead of using nets and traps, the camera can be used to capture the objects. Photography in an archaeological context can therefore not only be considered to be a valuable tool in the process of collecting (objects), but also be considered to possibly constitute the process of collecting itself (by capturing and collecting images).

In my practical work I have ‘collected’ an array of objects such as fish, clouds, flowers, birds and insects through means of photography. I have emphasised their physicality by treating the images in a similar way as an archeologist, botanist or entomologist would handled the original objects that had been photographed. By stretches of the imagination, scraps of paper become insects that have to be pinned onto Styrofoam, two dimensional photographs of flowers are pinned down along the actual dried versions, and photographic images of birds are contained in eggs within nests. By juxtaposing these images with more concrete collected objects such as stones, eggs and nests, it has been my intention to reinforce the idea of them as physical found objects.

3.3 The use of Silver Gelatin Emulsion

Photography must have dark places. While it seeks the light for its images, it requires the dark for its transformations. Photography flits about the daylight world like a nervous bird, anxious to return to its shadowy nest. Photography pilfers luminescence, stealing a handful of photons for each exposure, entrapping them in the sticky membrane of emulsion (Durant 2003:8).

The use of photographic emulsion has enabled me to juxtapose a variety of collected images onto different surfaces such as paper, stone, glass and wood. In works such as *Pine* (2007) (Fig. 34), *Forbidden Fruit* (2007) (Fig. 40), and *Suspended: Slice of Life* (2007) (Fig. 42), I have made use of silver gelatin emulsion as a means to create the appearance of a photographed image fused with a material object. Because of the consistency of the liquid emulsion it runs into indentations and cracks in the stone to create an appearance that to some extent resembles that of a fossil. Even when applied on cotton paper or wood the emulsion seeps into the surface to create a quality which is unlike commercially available photographic papers.

The surface onto which I apply the emulsion dictates what the final image will look like, and often the images contain 'flaws' and irregularities which serves to emphasize a certain organic quality. I have also opted to sometimes contaminate the processing chemicals by adding small amounts of fixer to the developer to create stains and discolouration in the images. It has not been my intention to print flawless images on these surfaces, but rather images that would be suggestive of the passage of time and processes of decay.

In other works, for example *(Dis) quiet* (2007) (fig. 58), I have used digital printing to document some of the objects bearing emulsion prints in order to offset the contrast between the organic appearance of the objects, and the digital quality of the prints. The act of photographing objects containing photographs has been used to emphasize the passage of time. By re-photographing existing photographs, different timeframes are made to co-exist on one surface.

3.4 Individual Works

In this section I give an individual discussion of each of the artworks in the practical body of work. The works will be discussed in terms of how they engage with the interplay between presence and absence, and embody certain thematic concerns discussed in the previous section. Often the stories told by a collection of objects are to a large extent informed by our own subjective sentiments and values (Pearce 1995 and Stewart 1984). Even though most of these works stem from personal experience I have opted not to dwell on the exact events and experiences which have informed the work. I rather emphasise the emotional quality of each work, which I believe can be experienced independently from a knowledge of personal narratives.

It has been my intention not to merely illustrate melancholy, loss or longing but rather to embody or imply it in my work. Ideas of stillness, a sense of disquiet and feelings of futility are other themes that run through the body of work. These ideas have governed not only the content, but also the form of most of the artworks. The use of fragile and decaying materials is counter pointed with an almost

obsessive attempt to capture or preserve these materials from decay.

The materials that I have been working with consist mainly of organic materials such as stones, nests, bones, flowers and eggshells. These objects are often combined with other man-made or found objects that have a more direct link to mathematical or scientific processes, such as measuring devices or texts from Natural History Encyclopaedias. Objects are concealed, printed on, juxtaposed with other objects or otherwise altered in order to transform them into new configurations, and to suggest alternative readings and meanings of these objects. I have focused on aspects pertaining to change and transformation. I often make reference to attempts to capture or fix that which is in the process of changing by means of pinning or tying down, wrapping, or otherwise covering the collected objects.

3.4.1 *Constellations (Rings of Saturn)*

In *A Lover's Discourse* (1978) Barthes elaborates on the association between the image of clouds and emotion by stating that

there are subtler clouds, all the tenuous shadows of swift and uncertain source which pass across the relationship, changing light and its modelling; suddenly it is another landscape, a faint black intoxication. The cloud, then, is no more than this: I'm missing something (Barthes 1978:170).

For *Constellations (Rings of Saturn)* (2007) (Fig. 32) I have used images of clouds as I found them to be an effective means of expressing the sublime nature of inner experiences. The precarious nature of clouds also makes them an apt image to represent the volatility of our emotional states. Clouds are also often the sight of imagined fancies, and through



Figure 31. Barbara Wildenboer, *Constellations (Rings of Saturn)* (Detail) (2007).

the working of imagination and memory
they can have form and significance
projected onto them.

In this work the photographic process
is applied in an attempt to capture that
which is fleeting and forever changing.
The work consists of seven digitally
printed circular photographic images
of clouds, each with a star constellation
pinned onto the surface of the image.
The constellations used are those named
after birds such as Aquila: the eagle,
Corvus: the crow, Cygnus: the swan and
Grus: the crane. The reference to Saturn
in the title derives from early associations
between the planet and the melancholic
temperament.



Figure 32. Barbara Wildenboer,
Constellations (Rings of Saturn) (2007).
Installation: Archival ink on cotton rag paper
with pins and thread in MDF frames.(2007).

3.4.2 *Pine* (2007)

In the work *Pine* (Fig. 34), images of dead fish collected from the beach were printed onto a mass of beach stones. The title of this work is a play on the meaning of the word 'pine' as described in the online Free Dictionary, where it is interpreted as the name of a certain kind of wood, or as "a lingering, often nostalgic desire", and to "wither or waste away from longing".

In this work the dual nature of the photograph as acting as both a presence and absence of its referent, comes into play. The misleading intermingling of perceived presence and distance is meant to produce characteristics that signals loss, death and absence. Further the dead weight of the mass of stones contained in the boat is suggestive of an inability to stay afloat, suggesting a sense of futility.

Figure 33. Barbara Wildenboer, *Pine* (2007) (Detail).





Figure 34. Barbara Wildenboer, *Pine* (2007), Silver gelatin emulsion on stone, pine.

3.4.3 *Fleeting* (2007)

Fleeting (Fig. 36) can be read as a sculptural *Vanitas*. It is characterized by an almost obsessive attempt to collect, capture and keep that which is transitory and ephemeral. The work consists of a large net containing many bird nests, with the ends of the net flowing away from the work in a manner which emulates a bridal veil. Each nest contains a hollow egg onto which a photographic image of a bird has been printed. The depictions of birds, although imitating live birds, are actually images of stuffed birds that

make up part of natural history museum collections. Like the act of taxidermy and photography, the work elusively attempts to capture life and pause time. The work engages with notions of ephemerality and transience. The theme of futility is extended in this work in the sense that the eggs and possibility of new life are captured within the net, making the work speak more of death and decay than birth and renewal, thereby echoing the concerns of seventeenth-century still-life painting.

Figure 35. Barbara Wildenboer, *Fleeting* (2007) (Detail).





Figure 36. Barbara Wildenboer, *Fleeting* (2007), Silver gelatin emulsion on eggshell, bird nests, netting.

3.4.4 *Flowerbed* (2007)

Where does this black sun come from?
Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible
lethargic rays reach me, pinning me down
to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to
silence, to renunciation? (Kristeva 1989:3).

Kristeva's reference to beds recalls ideas of a bed as a private place and the site of subjective personal experiences. Beds are places in which we are conceived, are born and give birth in, sleep in and dream in.

Flowerbed (Fig. 38) consists of a single bed made from Iroko wood into which a mattress filled with the strong scented heads of lavender flowers has been fitted.

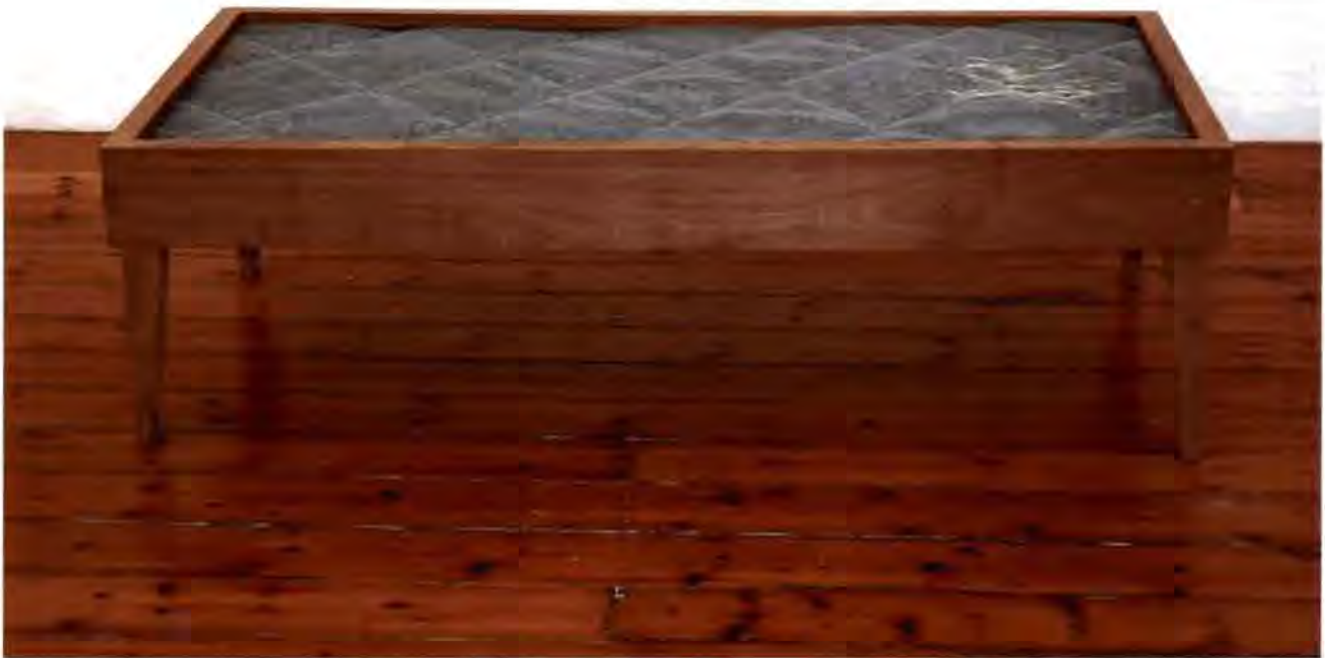
The sense of smell forms a large part of this work. The experience of smell is not only ephemeral but also intangible. Even though it is experienced in the present, it evokes strong associations with the past. The use of scent was also significant to me because smell is frequently rooted in childhood experience. Smell often has the ability to "reactivate the time and places in which they were first experienced", and to produce what could be described as a form of "olfactory 'homesickness' or, when the associations are unpleasant, simply a 'sickness' " (Elwes 2004:11).

The olfactory scientist Upinder Bhalla draws attention to the relationship between smell and emotion and notes that the "areas that register smell are connected to the limbic system, the interface between memory and emotion" (Elwes 2004:11).

The idea of smell also links to the ideas of presence and absence as its effect is temporal and only lasts for a limited

Figure 37. Barbara Wildenboer, *Flowerbed* (2007) (Detail).





period of time, after which its initial effect either fades or disappears altogether. It was also of interest to me that the sense of smell is more acutely developed in women than in men²⁴, particularly when taking into consideration that females are traditionally perceived to be more

emotional than men (Briton & Hall 1995). Smell has the ability to “invade the bodies of audience members, triggering changes in the olfactory systems that themselves activate emotional responses based on the vagaries of individual history” (Elwes 2004:12).

Figure 38. Barbara Wildenboer, *Flowerbed* (2007), Dried lavender, insect netting, pins, thread, iroko.

²⁴ This is according to the research of Uwe Ackerman, the Director of the Science and Medicine of Athletic Performance Institute at the University of Oxford, see p. 12 in Elwes, C. 2004. “A Meeting of Minds” in Arends, B. and Slater, V. (Eds) *Talking Back to Science: Art, Science and the Personal* London: The Wellcome Trust.

3.4.5 *Forbidden Fruit* (2007)

Forbidden Fruit (Fig. 40) consists of a series of egg shapes carved from Jelutong wood. Each form is filled with pebbles or larger stones bearing images of insects,

worms and a bird. Some of the pebbles are round and smooth, but some appear to have little cavities in them as if they are being eaten away by worms.

Figure 39. Barbara Wildenboer, *Forbidden Fruit* (2007) (Detail).





Figure 40. Barbara Wildenboer, *Forbidden Fruit* (2007), Silver gelatin emulsion on stone, jelutong.

Even though the wooden forms containing the stones are easily recognisable as egg shapes, they also carry the likeness of fruit or seedpods suggestive of life and growth, but like a photographic image, the moment is frozen in time and neither growth nor decay is possible.

The title of the work is an allusion to the biblical parable where Adam and Eve gain knowledge of life and death after eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and for which they are banished from Paradise²⁵.

3.4.6 *Suspended: Slice of Life* (2007)

In *Suspended: Slice of Life* (Fig. 42) the photographic process is used as a means of collecting and preserving. The work consists of bits of torn paper exposed with photographic images of insects and birds from natural history collections. These are pinned onto Styrofoam board covered with insect netting. The different museum and botanical specimens that have

been printed onto the scraps of paper are presented in a large cloud shape. The birds and insects are lifeless, but have twice been suspended in time in order to appear as they would in life, first through taxidermy or drying and then by means of photography. As in *Pine* (Fig. 34), the work also draws from photography's ability to animate its subject matter.

Figure 41. Barbara Wildenboer, *Suspended: Slice of Life* (2007) (Detail).





Figure 42. Barbara Wildenboer, *Suspended: Slice of Life* (2007), Silver gelatin emulsion on cotton paper, insect netting, pins in MDF frame.

3.4.7 *Perch: Timeline* (2007)

Figure 43. Barbara Wildenboer, *Perch: Timeline* (2007)

The idea of the passing of time and cycles is the subject of the work *Perch: Timeline* (Fig. 44). It consists of a length of wooden measuring rulers in conjunction with a series of outlines of birds cut from balsa wood. In the centre the wooden birds tumble down in a funnel-like formation which references the female reproductive organ. The shape of the falling birds can also be read as a chrysalis or falling leaves. The work references the cycle of time and transformation of matter. I have selected the image of birds in combination with an object of numerical measurement in order to emphasise the idea of the brevity of life in the greater scheme of things. The word “perch” in the title refers not only to the actual wooden pole that acts as resting place for birds and the physical action of perching, but also to its archaic meaning as a linear measure of approximately five meters. As underlined by the title, the work can also be interpreted as a timeline. I have intentionally worked with ambiguity of meaning in the way the birds can either be seen to be ascending or descending the ‘perch’.



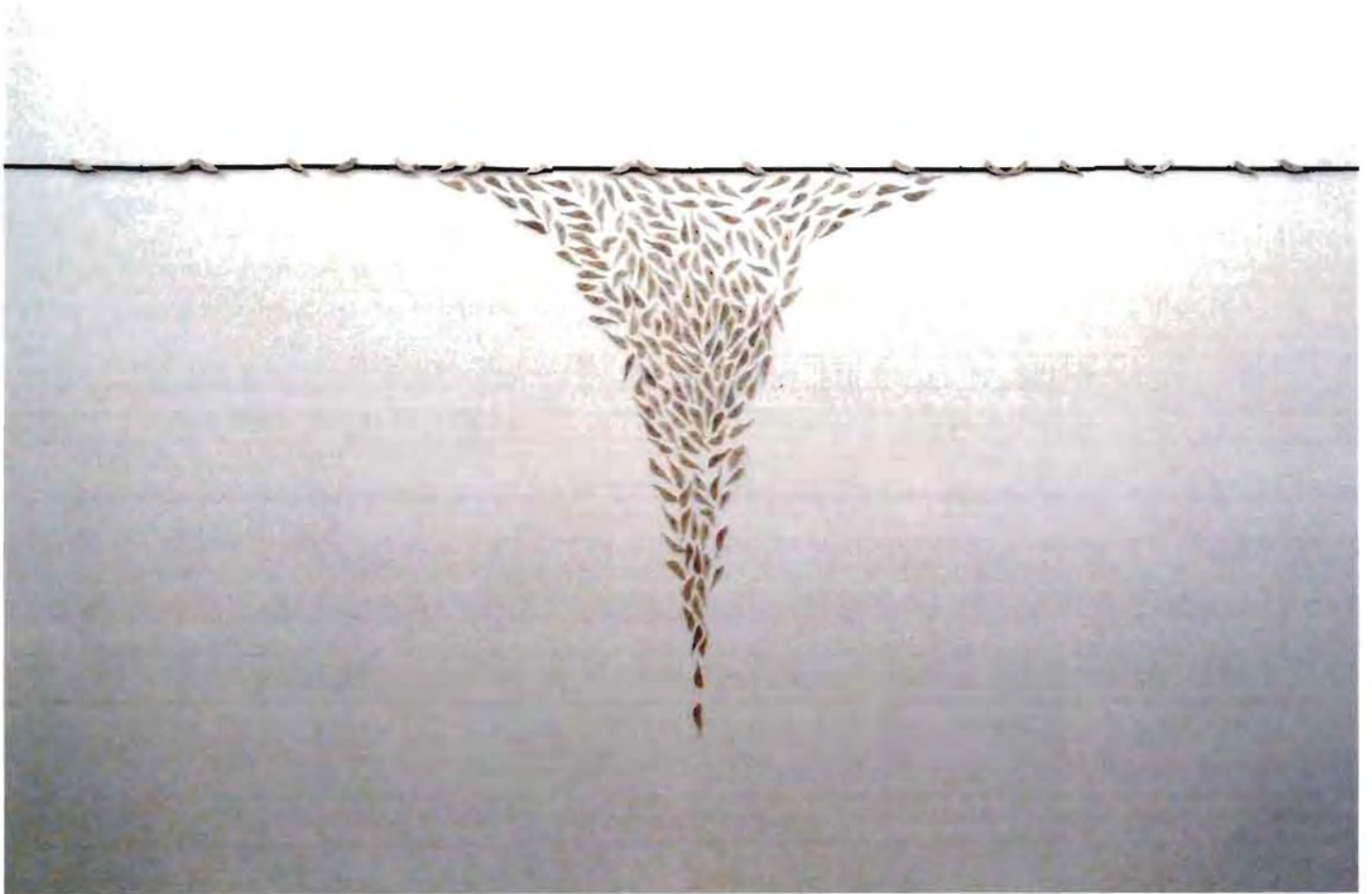


Fig. 44. Barbara Wildenboer, *Perch: Timeline* (2007), Balsa wood, ink, measuring rulers.

3.4.8 *Iris: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (2007)

²⁵ The New International Version Bible, Genesis 2:17.

²⁶ The Darat Al Funun garden has further significance in the sense that its owner, Suha Shoman maintains the upkeep of this garden in memory of her late husband Khalid Shoman.

In the work *Iris: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (Fig. 45) reference is made to classification and collecting in scientific collections of the nineteenth century, as well as to the tradition of Dutch *Vanitas* flower painting.

For this work I collected a specimen of each of the flower species growing in a memorial garden in Amman, Jordan²⁶. After photographing each individual specimen the flowers were carefully pressed in an attempt to preserve them.

The pressed flowers were then sewn and pinned onto the digitally printed images that act as a constant reminder of their transient nature.

The emphasis is on fragility and evanescence, and even though the photographs will stay, ultimately in time the actual flower will wither away. As Virginia MacKenny wrote in the catalogue essay for an exhibition of MFA students entitled *Come* (2007), the pins and thread “both decorates the form and obscures the

Figure 45. Barbara Wildenboer, *Iris: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (2007), Digital print on canvas, pressed flowers, pins, thread in redgum frames.



very object it attempts to represent”
and that in effect it “wryly captures the
impossibility of objective scrutiny or
permanence in preservation” (2007:5).

Julia Kristeva sees beauty as possibly
being inseparable from the ephemeral and
consequently from mourning (1989:97-98).
She asks the question

Can the beautiful be sad?...Or else is the
beautiful object the one that tirelessly
endures following destructions and wars in
order to bear witness that there is a survival
after death, that immortality is possible?
(Kristeva 1989:97-98).

By asking these questions, Kristeva
emphasises the fact that desirable objects
are often more so as a result of their
impermanence.

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Figures 46. Barbara Wildenboer, *Iris: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (2007), Digital print on canvas, pressed flowers, pins, thread in redgum frames.





Figure 47. Barbara Wildenboer, *Iris: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (2007), Digital print on canvas, pressed flowers, pins, thread in redgum frames.

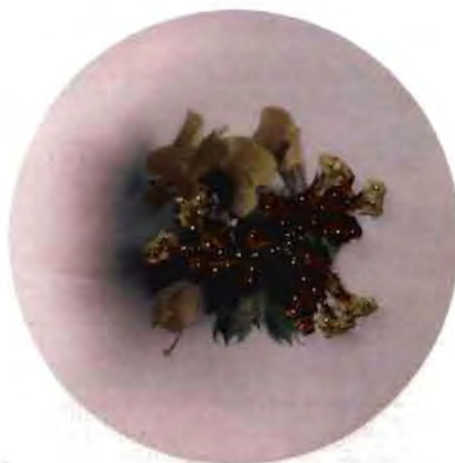
Figures 48. Barbara Wildenboer, *Iris: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (2007), Digital print on canvas, pressed flowers, pins, thread in redgum frames.





Figures 49. Barbara Wildenboer, *Iris: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (2007), Digital print on canvas, pressed flowers, pins, thread in redgum frames.

Figures 50-53.
Barbara Wildenboer,
*Iris: Yesterday, Today,
Tomorrow* (2007),
Digital print on
canvas, pressed
flowers, pins, thread
in redgum frames





Figures 54-57.
Barbara Wildenboer,
*Iris: Yesterday, Today,
Tomorrow* (2007),
Digital print on canvas,
pressed flowers, pins,
thread in redgum
frames.

3.4.9 *(Dis)quiet* (2007)

The idea of traces of things which are no longer present is explored in the work *(Dis)quiet* (Fig. 58). The work consists of a series of photographic still-lives of cardboard boxes containing a selection of organic found objects that have been transformed through being wrapped, printed on or merged. Most of the images consist of photographs of other photographs, drawing attention to the passage of time and serve as a futile attempt to capture and record visible ephemera of change. The potential for the photograph to act as means of preservation has, however, partially been negated in that sections of these images have been cut from the picture plane, leaving openings where the image used to be. The emphasis is on the failure of the photographic signifier to stand in for the lost object.

The original boxes used for storage and collection have been discarded, and their contents reconfigured into other works. The objects and images include animal bones, stones and eggs that have dead creatures printed on them, wrapped Proteas and abandoned nests. The photographs also serve as a form of inventory of some of the images and objects used in the other works, such as in *Pine* (Fig. 34) and *Fleeting* (Fig. 36).



Figure 58. Barbara Wildenboer, *(Dis)quiet* (2007) Archival ink on cotton rag paper, silver gelatin emulsion on cardboard, netting, thread.

Figure 59. Barbara
Wildenboer, *(Dis)quiet* (2007)
(Part of series), Archival
ink on cotton rag paper,
silver gelatin emulsion on
cardboard, thread.





Figure 60. Barbara Wildenboer, *(Dis)quiet* (2007) (Part of series), Archival ink on cotton rag paper, silver gelatin emulsion on cardboard, thread.

Figure 59. Barbara
Wildenboer, *(Dis)quiet* (2007)
(Part of series), Archival
ink on cotton rag paper,
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Figure 62. Barbara Wildenboer, *(Dis)quiet* (2007) (Part of series), Archival ink on cotton rag paper, silver gelatin emulsion on cardboard, thread.

Figure 63. Barbara Wildenboer, *(Dis)quiet* (2007) (Part of series), Archival ink on cotton rag paper, silver gelatin emulsion on cardboard, thread.



Conclusion

Key thematic concerns that run through the body of practical work, include the perception and experience of presence and absence, a preoccupation with the ephemeral, as well as underlying ideas of futility and disquiet.

It has been my intention to emphasize the emotional qualities of melancholy, specifically with regard to the manner in which it occasionally emerges as part of the narrative conveyed by creative work. My concern has been with the emotional qualities that are embedded, not only in the material, but also in conceptual aspects of the work. I believe that certain emotive qualities can be experienced, or at the very least recognised, on either a sensory or a psychological level.

In my work I have attempted to create an emotional landscape that is characterized by an awareness of the co-existence of beauty and sadness, life and decay, and the fixed and the ephemeral.

Ultimately, I have attempted to give a visual interpretation of what is perhaps best described by the following words in Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl's *Saturn and Melancholy*:

there are echoes of another world, a world of neither prophetic ecstasy nor brooding meditation, but of heightened sensibility where soft notes, sweet perfumes, dreams and landscapes mingle with darkness, solitude and even grief itself, and by this bitter-sweet contradiction serve to heighten self-awareness (1964:230).

Afterword

In *Camera Lucida* (1981) Roland Barthes reminisces about the life and death of his mother after discovering an old photograph of her as a little girl. On a more contemporary note Rachel Cusk, in *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2002), writes about another kind of loss, that of the sense of self as an individual experienced as a result of becoming a mother herself.

Cusk's account of motherhood is perhaps unconventional, mostly because her views are so insistently bleak, but I could relate to her experience of childbirth as an occurrence that denies you a sense of autonomy. At times motherhood has caused me profound anxieties and left me with reservations about being cut off from the life I once knew, and the transformations of self that resulted from becoming a parent.

The absence of my own mother compounded the strangeness of having to fulfil such a role myself. After the birth of my first child I was treated for post-natal depression and my mood shifted from

one of futility and despair, to one which can best be described as a melancholic acceptance of the challenges and life changes that I was faced with.

My relationship with my mother, and my own experience of pregnancy, childbirth and becoming a parent, has served as a starting point to deal with contradicting emotions and to confront personal conflicts. These events in my personal life have informed my creative process. At times this was intentional, though this was not necessarily always the case, as it was only once certain works had been completed that specific choices that I had made became clear to me. Part memory and part imagination, these reflections on birth, life, death and personal transformation have resulted in a body of work that to me is not merely characterized by a pessimistic state that involves helplessness and despair. Rather, it is a bittersweet contemplation of people, places and times that are lost, that I long for.

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- Figure 52 Barbara Wildenboer, Iris.,
Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow
(2007) (Part of series).
- Figure 53 Barbara Wildenboer, Iris:
Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow
(2007) (Part of series).
- Figure 54 Barbara Wildenboer, Iris:
Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow
(2007) (Part of series).
- Figure 55 Barbara Wildenboer, Iris:
Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow
(2007) (Part of series).
- Figure 56 Barbara Wildenboer, Iris:
Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow
(2007) (Part of series).
- Figure 57 Barbara Wildenboer, Iris:
Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow
(2007) (Part of series).
- Figure 58 Barbara Wildenboer,
(Dis)quiet (2007).
- Figure 59 Barbara Wildenboer,
(Dis)quiet (2007) (Part of
series).
- Figure 60 Barbara Wildenboer,
(Dis)quiet (2007) (Part of
series).
- Figure 61 Barbara Wildenboer,
(Dis)quiet (2007) (Part of
series)
- Figure 62 Barbara Wildenboer,
(Dis)quiet (2007) (Part of
series).
- Figure 63 Barbara Wildenboer,
(Dis)quiet (2007) (Part of
series).