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A Wounded Surface

Dissolving the Human Form

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A Wounded Surface: Dissolving the Human Form

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Documentation and commentary on the body of practical work submitted for the degree of Masters of Fine Art
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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:

Date... 20 June 2011

Abstract

This text offers an exploration into painting and metaphysical states of being and provides a framework for the reception of my body of work submitted for an MFA degree.

In this project I am concerned with the translation of personal experiences to a canvas marked with oil paint. The experiences engage memories and stories mined from my family photographs, while also located in an experience of illness in my own body. Rather than directly illustrate these events, I have engaged with associated emotional states, such as feelings of loss, fear and uncertainty. My concerns are expressed either through fragmented or dismembered painted figures, or are engaged through the medium's materiality, explored and evoked through the visual and visceral qualities of a painted surface.

An important part of my reading on carefully posed groups in formal family photographs is Marianne Hirsch's *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (1997). Gathered at symbolic rites of passage, the family photograph offers ideal images of certitude, of familial togetherness and of happiness. In this body of work I reject the appearance of stability and search my family photographs for traces of ambivalent and unsettled bodily or emotional experiences.

I search for visual equivalents of uncertainty, exploring paintings, drawings and photographs that engage equivocal forms. I examine artistic endeavours that allow for indecision and chance as integral to the process of making and am interested in the traces of revisions and changes in such works. In light of this I consider the work of two contemporary painters, Penny Siopis and Marlene Dumas, who paint the human figure. Their paint – pushed and pulled, erased, splashed and dripped, proves particularly compelling for my interest in the processes of painting, and in their work I locate the disruption of the delineating boundary of the painted form. James Elkins's *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (1999) is instructive in my thinking about paintings of the human body.

I situate the work within associated philosophical ideas regarding bodily boundaries in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (1982) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's posthumous book *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). In addition I consider ways in which the human body has been represented medically. Informed by Claude Gandelman's *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts* (1991) I explore "haptics in extremis," an approach to painting located in X-ray imaging. I engage concepts of paint and surface in Alois Reigl's dichotomy of optics and haptics and explore the painted surface as palimpsest for the human skin.

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Oil on canvas
2010-11

Introduction

An elemental fragility typifies skin, a vulnerability to internal or external violation, to overwhelming physical sensation. Not only is skin the largest organ of the body, but it is also its primary surface. It clothes our flesh and is the outside containing our inside. It protects and marks us.

(Richards 2005: 17)

Colin Richards brings attention to the nuances of the body's skin as a threshold between the outside world and the inner body. While the skin is the body's outer surface, it is also intrinsically connected to its inside. The translucent skin on an open wrist, the palm of a hand or the bottom of a foot puts one in mind of this by offering glimpses of veins just below. A wounding might tear open the skin to further expose its layers or travel into its deep interior.

My concern with the transparency of the skin and a potential disruption to its surface necessarily involves my interest in probing outer surfaces to find what is concealed beneath.

This concern is located inside the physical body where illness occurs, invisible to the unaided eye. Further, I explore a collection of my family's formal photographic group portraits, concerned with my family's latent physical and emotional vulnerabilities¹.

This body of work, *A Wounded Surface: Dissolving the Human Form*, traces the progress of human figures (derived from family photographs) that are disrupted in the process of painting. Becoming less and less specific, they dissolve until only vestiges of recognisable forms remain. There is a wounding to the painting's surface as much as to the human form. The surfaces of the paintings are disrupted, transgressed, broken and discoloured. They show the residue of what once appeared whole – the family photograph, the familial unit and the body.

Outline of Sections

In *Section 1: Family Photographs*, I explore the apparent certitude of immortality in my family album, aided by a poignant photograph by Richard Avedon, which portrays his father, Jack Avedon, in the years leading up to his death. In Marianne Hirsch's notion of the "familial gaze" (1997) I investigate the projection of a holistic sense of self, ensconced in family, that keeps such fragmented bodily and familial experiences hidden.

In *Section 2: Uncertain Forms*, I consider equivocal or indistinct forms that might suggest an emotional counterpoint to the defined moment in the formal

¹ My own sense of bodily vulnerability was intensified by my personal experience of illness as I was diagnosed with

Hodgkin's Lymphoma at the start of this project.

portraits of my own family. I explore Edward Steichen's soft-focus photograph *Mary and Her Mother* (1905) and trace its precedent to the visual qualities of softness in Leonardo da Vinci's *sfumato* technique.

I then look at visible traces of indecision and uncertainty in the mark-making of artistic processes, exploring revisions to paintings in X-ray photographs of those paintings and Marlene Dumas's utilisation of erasure in *Martha – Sigmund's Wife* (1984).

The second part of *Section 2: A Softened Edge and the Body* considers painted human forms with indistinct outer boundaries. In the work of Penny Siopis and Marlene Dumas the dissolution of the human figure addresses both the formal relationship between figure and ground and the concerns of a fragile human body². The border of the figure is viewed as the body's skin, and hence its disintegration suggests a philosophical reading of the interaction between the self³ and its surrounds. I consider Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of "the flesh" (1968) and Julia Kristeva's writing on abjection (1982) to explore the interrelation between self and other, and between the self and the world around us.

In *Section 3: Haptics and Optics: Painting and the Body*, I focus on the materiality of painting in Alois Riegl's dichotomy of optics and haptics. Through Penny Siopis's *Pinky Pinky: Furry Face* (2003) I explore the tactility of haptic vision in the corporeal qualities of her paint. I use the term 'embodied'⁴ to signify the qualities of paint that manifest conditions of the human body and its skin – cracking, bleeding, congealing and coagulating. I investigate Claude Gandelman's "haptics

in extremis", an approach to painting the inside body that originates in X-ray vision, and show PET scans of my own body to open up a comparison between painting and medical representations of the body.

In *Section 4: Reflection on my Work*, I place my works in categories to offer connections to explorations in this text. I have, in places, included my photographic source material or photographs of the works in progress to make visible the shifts that occur in the process of painting. I focus, however, on the creative (and destructive) technical processes of the works discussed by tracing the histories retained in their surfaces.

² The term 'figure' is used in this text to signal the figure / ground relationship, a formal concern of working on a two-dimensional plane. The figure as a mark or object on a surface separates it from the field of the canvas, or ground. The human figure refers to the represented human form.

³ 'Self' is used to describe the inner subject or consciousness, the subject involved in action and cognition and interpretation of the world – while also distinct from it (Remes & Sihvola 2008: 1).

⁴ I use the definition of embody as "impart[ing] a material, corporeal, or sensual character to" (OEDO 2011: s.v. 'embody'). In the text, however, I also use this word to describe gestural painting or instances in which the artist feels a bodily connection to the painted surface.



Richard Avedon
*Jacob Israel Avedon, businessman and
father of the photographer, Sarasota,
Florida, August 25, 1973*
Black and white photograph

Between 1969 and 1973, Richard Avedon took a series of photographs of his father Jack, who was very ill with cancer. His father's illness, fear and vulnerability become palpable in this series of photographs.

In *Portraits* (2002: par 1) Richard Avedon describes his father's response to the photographs as "wounded." Avedon writes a letter to his father to appease his father's hurt for the portrayal. The following is an extract from the letter that was published in *Portraits* and was accompanied by the photograph that is reproduced here. The extract reads:

Dear Dad,

I'm putting this into words because phone calls have a way of disappearing in the whatever it is. I'm trying to put into words what I feel most deeply, not just about you, but about my work and the years of undefinable father and son between us. [...]

There was a picture of you on the piano that I saw every day when I was growing up. It was by the Bachrach studio and heavily retouched and we all used to call it "Smilin' Jack Avedon" – it was a family joke, because it was a photograph of a man we never saw, and of a man I never knew. Years later, Bachrach did an advertisement with me – Richard Avedon, Photographer – as a subject. Their photograph of me was the same as the photograph of you. We were up on the same piano, where neither of us had ever lived. I am trying to do something else. When you pose for a photograph, it's behind a smile that isn't yours. [...] I love your ambition and your capacity for disappointment, and that's still as alive in you as it has ever been.

Do you remember you tried to show me how to ride a bicycle, when I was nine years old? You had come up to New Hampshire for the weekend,

I think, in the summer when we were there on vacation, and you were wearing your business suit. You were showing me how to ride a bike, and you fell and I saw your face then. I remember the expression on your face when you fell. I had my box Brownie with me, and I took the picture.

I'm not making myself clear. Do you understand?

Love Dick.

(Avedon 2002: par 2)

In the photograph taken of Jack Avedon in 1973 reproduced at the beginning of this section, he appears uncertain and insecure, almost desperate. It differs substantially from Richard Avedon's description of a confident man in the Bachrach studio photograph. In his photographs, Avedon contests a presentation of self carefully constructed through pose, performance and photographic convention. Rather, he searches for a portrait filled with the intensity, disappointment and fear that he recognises in his experiences of his father. He reveals painful feelings and experiences that are usually suppressed from public display.

This section is an exploration of family photographs that keep such moments of vulnerability hidden. I explore a carefully constructed photograph of my parents on their wedding day that was taken by Anne Fischer¹. In this photograph I look for the discrepancy between the subjects and their representation in light of Avedon's concern regarding the Bachrach studio photograph that pictured his father, in a way, as a stranger. In the letter he recounts that "it was a photograph of a man we never saw, and of a man I never knew" (Avedon 2002: par 2).

¹ Fischer was a popular wedding photographer in Cape Town in the 1960s and 1970s.



Anne Fischer. Jonathan and Vicki (née Lewin) Palte. 31 August 1975. Black and white photograph.

This photograph was taken of my parents on their wedding day on the 31st of August, 1975. It pictures a toast that occurred between my father, Jonathan Allan Palte and my mother, Victoria (Vicki) Deborah Palte (née Lewin).

In the photograph, the curtain divides the background into two separate spaces distinctly occupied by bride and groom. The darker curtain accentuates the whiteness of my mother's veil and wedding dress that in turn contrasts the rich black of my father's tuxedo and bow tie. The white flower on his left shoulder, perhaps a hint of softness, meets the frills of her dress.

The bride leans in towards her groom and their poses mirror one another: each face is seen in profile and framed by dark hair (though my mother is framed again by her veil) and their skin shares similar tonalities. They each gently, or perhaps elegantly, hold a wine glass, smile and look into the other's eyes.

A visual connection is made between the meeting of their eyes and the imagined chink of their glasses. This is reinforced by the compositional lines that parallel the direction of their hands to the implied direction of their glances. The raised glasses and my mother's wedding ring point to a promise to the future. They look past the immediate present of the wedding towards the future of their marriage. They move from their roles as bride and groom to wife and husband. The pictorial doublings — two hands, two glasses, two eyes and two halves of smiles picture this idea of "becoming one."

However, behind the apparent natural harmony of this image is an enforced construction. My mother is right-handed, evident in the image as her watch is worn on her left arm. It would have been instinctual for her to pick up the glass with her right hand. However, she lifts the glass with her left hand to allow her and my father's bodies to mirror one another in the photograph. This points to the highly constructed nature of this photograph. The point is amplified by placing it adjacent to the photograph of another couple that were photographed by Anne Fischer eight years before.

1 "Becoming one" is a phrase often used to talk about the coming together of two individuals in the marriage union. For example, the phrase is used in Joe Beam's book about marriage, *Becoming One: Emotionally, Spiritually, Sexually* (1999).



Anne Fischer. *Jonathan and Vicki (née Lewin) Palte*. 31 August 1975. Black and white photograph.

While one could attribute the similarities in these photographs to the established conventions of the photographer, my parents' choice of Anne Fischer, a popular photographer in Cape Town at the time of their wedding, is telling. When asked about their choice of photographer, my mother inadvertently revealed her desire to fit in with society by saying, "everyone used Anne Fischer in those days." My father added that the majority of the photographs in the wedding section of the *Cape Times* newspaper were attributed to Fischer².

Their desire for an established or ideal image can be explored through Marianne Hirsch's notion of the "familial gaze" that she writes about in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (1997). The "familial gaze" can be seen as an image of wholeness and happiness that the subjects project in front of the camera³ (Hirsch 1997: 7, 11). They put forward their preconceived idea of a loving couple, each with a holistic sense of self, yet ensconced in their union. In the words of Roland Barthes (2000: 13), "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am." Fischer creates this pictorial description of "becoming one", placing the couple in relation to societally perceived expectations of family,

2 Conversation with my parents, 3 April 2011, Cape Town.

3 The "familial gaze" resists a single, comprehensive definition. I have summarised the term as I understand it.



Anne Fischer. *Malcolm and Annette (née Agulnik) Roup*. 1968. Black and white photograph.

and in her construction reinforces such norms.

The projected image of wholeness in the photograph, while cohesive in its presentation, is at odds with the myriad and often conflicting experiences of self. This dislocation that occurs between the portrait and the portrayed is explicated by Barthes who suggests that a subject can only have a fragmented perception of his or her own body and only the image can represent the body whole (Bloemheugel & Mot 1995: 20). He describes this discrepancy between self and image by saying "[...] 'myself' never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and 'myself' which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp, 'myself' doesn't hold still, giggling in my jar" (2000: 12). Jacques Lacan's articulation of the self suggests that the presence of a photographer is irrelevant altogether: our experience of subjectivity is already a disjunction between a present self⁴ and a projected self. We experience our bodies from within *and* we experience an external and projected self in what Lacan terms the *moi* (or ego) (Lacan in Hirsch 1997: 89). The ego, by virtue of position as separate from the present self, perpetuates a fragmentation in the experience

4 The present self is an experience of self in the current moment, rather than a previous memory or anticipated version of self (Hirsch 1997: 89). It is located in the idea that the self is not a continuous, unchanging entity.



Newspaper clipping of my parents' wedding photograph. *The Cape Times*. 1975.

of being. The projected wholeness in the photograph echoes Lacan's mirror stage as a projection of an ideal self (of wholeness) that occurs in the mirror, which is a misrecognition and contrasts the fragmentary bodily experience of the child (Hirsch 1997: 101).

The subject is dependent on the image for a feeling of wholeness and stability. And yet, it is what is not whole that is pertinent to this project. Insecurities, vulnerabilities and unexpected moments of self or family hold perhaps more vividly with present experiences than those hidden beneath the "familial gaze." It is in the gruelling scrutiny of Richard Avedon and also informed by Irving Penn, who suggests, "[...] often what lies behind the facade is rare and more wonderful than the subject knows or dares to believe" (Penn in Mozzato 2010: online). In the prelude of his letter reproduced at the start of this text, Avedon describes his father's response as "wounded." That wounding is pertinent here; it is a wounding that pierces the surface of the projected screen and allows entry into a hidden and humane place.

In Jamaica Kincaid's fictional story of *Annie John*, the protagonist, Annie, contests the image of bodily wholeness as represented in a photograph when she experiences bodily and emotional difficulties.

Bewildered by physical changes that beset her body and an increasingly fraught relationship with her mother at the onset of adolescence, Annie selects photographs in which the so-called innocence of her childhood is determined as an uncontested moment⁵: she chooses pictures of herself in her white dress or school uniform, one of her at communion, and as a bridesmaid at her aunt's wedding (Kincaid 1997: 27). Annie expresses abhorrence of her sexuality and her emotional contest with her mother by physically wounding these family photographs by thoroughly washing them with soap and water. Perhaps like a photographer with her negatives in the darkroom, Annie soaks the photographs and controls the development of the image. When she wakes up the next morning, "None of the people in the wedding picture except for me had any face left" (Kincaid 1997: 120).

By stripping the photograph of its image, Annie weakens the moment defined in the photograph. She erases her family photographs to pry open their surface, literally revealing an absence beneath the single surface of a family picture. The photograph's "lost wholeness"⁶ begins to signal the fragmentation experienced in her being and in her familial unit. The ruined images (with partial forms and dissolved bodies) allow her to locate a more fluid and permeable subjectivity (Hirsch 1997: 197).

During my own illness, I recognised something in Richard Avedon's images of his father and in the story of *Annie John*. Both Avedon (Snr) and Annie find themselves in unsettling bodily experiences, one facing the end of his life, the other at the threshold of adulthood. Both Avedon (Jnr) and Annie look for ways to engage with this intense and uncertain time through making pictures (both creating and destroying). It is a tentative and tender space that I look to find in my paintings and that I engage in this text.

5 In *Pictures of Innocence*, Anne Higonette (1998) argues that childhood innocence is a constructed cultural ideal.

6 I borrow this term, the "lost wholeness" of the body, from Rosalind Krauss's description of Jackson Pollock's work. She explores his work as a disrupted body that denies the gestalt of the body whole (Krauss in Elkins 1999: 17).

Section 2:

Uncertain Forms



Edward Steichen
Mary and Her Mother
1905
Silver print
34.8 x 27.5 cm

Uncertain Forms

I would like to say that we prize distinctness and clarity, in objects as well as in philosophy, ultimately because we need distinct and clear bodies and faces.

(Elkins 1999: 4)

Elkins's words offer a connection between the forms we seek (as viewers and makers) in art with questions about our existence; our need for certainty in philosophy pertains to a desire for coherent images. Perhaps this pursuit of surety in our being manifests in drawing or painting in line as a defined contour. In photography, sharp focus with its emphasis on detail provides such clarity.

In this section, I explore the opposite to such

certitude. I consider the qualities of forms that would carry *tentative* conditions such as doubt or vulnerability, in an intermediary area of experience in which both personal life and artistic process contribute. I explore approaches to art making in which uncertainty and chance are integral to the artistic process and which might manifest in that which is unclear, softened or indistinct.

I investigate the complex nuances of a softened edge, found in photography, painting and drawing. I begin this section with Edward Steichen's *Mary and Her Mother* (1905), a soft-focus photograph from the early years of photography, with an eye to engaging its relationship to paintings both old and contemporary— from Leonardo da Vinci to Marlene Dumas.



Edward Steichen, *Mary and Her Mother*, 1905, Silver print, 34.8 x 27.5 cm.



Eugène Carrière, *Maternity*, c. 1890, Oil on canvas, 49 x 64.5 cm.

Edward Steichen was one of the best-known exponents of the Photo-Secession¹, a small cadre of 'Pictorial' photographers operating in America in the early 1900s. Pictorialism emerged as an artistic style in photography in the 1890s in response to the accepted role of photography as a visual record of the world in fine detail (Peterson 1997: 13). The Pictorialists engendered artistic expression in photography with subtle transitions of tone, low tonalities and carefully composed compositions (Peterson 1997: 16). Steichen apparently spent hours admiring paintings in the Louvre, looking to draw inspiration from the traditional arts into photography (Costantini 1997: 8).

He found his inspiration in the Symbolist vision of Eugène Carrière², a forerunner of the Nabi group, who was known as a painter of mothers and children, nudes and portraits in "a misty monochromatic style" (Longwell 1978: 16). To highlight this influence, I have placed a painting by Carrière, entitled *Maternity*,

alongside Steichen's photograph, *Mary and Her Mother*.

While Carrière's misty atmosphere is considerably more sombre and muted than the light that beams across *Mary and Her Mother*, we can see *Maternity's* influence on the subject and treatment of Edward Steichen's photograph. Tender moments of motherhood are expressed by the adult subjects who protectively coddle their children. Both *Mary and Her Mother* and *Maternity* are intimately cropped, drawing the mother and child together in close physical proximity to the frame. The melting tones at the back of Mary's mother echo the dissolution of figures in the painting, each with a limited illusion of depth, no pure white nor black. The differences between these works, however, bring to light the objectives and challenges of Steichen's utilisation of the softened edge. Carrière's mother and child are painted figures and thus have no physical constraints; they can escape the limitations of the corporeal to become an evocation of a symbolic mother and child. Their heads and hands imaginatively conjoin as their bodies dissolve into the darkness. The physicality of the figures in *Maternity* is thus more fluid than is suggested by the apparent strain in Mary's mother's neck as she tries to look at her daughter and bear her weight at the same time. The difference here lies in an inevitable dichotomy between painting and photography, succinctly stated by contemporary painter Marlene Dumas when she says, "If you take a

1 Steichen was closely aligned with the Photo-Secession, headed by Alfred Stieglitz. This group included Gertrude Käsebier, Frank Eugene, Eva Watson-Schütze and Clarence H. White (Peterson 1997: 9, 14).

2 Steichen wrote that Carrière's painting "[...] secures an exquisite feeling of atmosphere and shrouds that in a lovely sentiment" (Steichen 1901: 75).

photograph, there's always something in front of you, but with a painting there's nothing."³

The "something" in front of Steichen is his living subjects. He is closely fettered by their physical presence, by what Roland Barthes (2000: 5-6) calls the "ça a été", the contingency of the photograph on its index⁴. Steichen softens the light in *Mary and Her Mother* to create a unifying cloud that overlays the physical connection to the body of the subjects, its hard edges and texture. The ensuing celestial glow of gentle halations⁵ transforms Mary's bonnet into a halo. Steichen also omits the biographic details of his subjects in his vague title, *Mary and Her Mother*⁶. Their anonymity and softened forms lessen the "this has been" of the photographic referent and projects them into an imaginative and even mythological realm, similar to Carrière's symbolic mother and child.

Steichen follows the lead of the Symbolist painter and engages with stylistic devices to translate his inner vision. He forgoes the conventional path for photographers in the early 1900s, as he refrains from presenting an apparently clear and objective rendering of the physical world. Rather, he worked in the darkroom using silver or platinum printing or gum-bichromate processes to diminish detail and modify darks into lights and graduating greys (Caffin in Longwell 1978: 173). His engagement with darkroom processes over the immediacy of a soft-focus lens allowed him more freedom in the making of the photograph and opened up some of the possibilities offered by the painter's techniques. The emphasis on

process in painting is articulated by Marlene Dumas, who says, "You can't take a painting. You make a painting" (Dumas in Schwabsky 2009: online). Steichen was engaging with ways to *make* a photograph.

The complex challenges of his process are not visible in the photograph of *Mary and Her Mother*. In his penchant for harmony, Steichen allows only imperceptible tonal shifts that result in an unthreatening and reassuring image⁷.

The precursor to the soft-focus photograph exists many centuries before in the *sfumato*⁸ techniques of Leonardo da Vinci. The indeterminate edge (in a similar way to Steichen's) dissimulates the mark of Leonardo's hand and makes his authorial work invisible (Nagel 1993: 14).

Leonardo utilised the *sfumato* technique to create an image that was less than clear. In Leonardo's words, "when you transfer to your work shadows which you discern with difficulty and whose edges you cannot distinguish, so that you perceive them confusedly, you must not make them definite or clear lest your work look wooden as a result" (Leonardo in Nagel 1993: 9-11).

In the *Mona Lisa* he creates an equivocal form through a process of revealing, concealing, emerging and disappearing into subtle diffusions in space. The vague and shifting boundaries at the corners of her mouth and eyes offer an enigmatic expression that has caused an ongoing discussion around the mystery of her identity. The use of *sfumato* thus seems to obscure external reality rather than create a clear window

3 The quotation comes from an interview with Marlene Dumas conducted by Robert Enright (Shiff 2008: 145).

4 For Barthes (2000: 76) the photograph's index or photographic referent is "not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph."

5 Halation is a term for the spreading of light beyond its proper boundary, often occurring in highlights (OEDO 1989: s.v. 'halation').

6 The Photo-Secessionists were known to focus on their own more rarefied surroundings (Peterson 1997: 16). A Google search revealed that Steichen's wife, Clara, gave birth to a daughter Mary in 1904 (Encyclopædia Britannica Online 2011: s.v. 'Mary Steichen Calderone').

7 After 1910, commercial photography adopts soft-focus techniques to idealise its subjects (Peterson 1997: 70). The haze of softness can result in a decisively sweet image and corresponds, literally, to Anthony Savile's summation of sentimentality as a process of seeing the object of its affection in a false light (Savile 2002: 316). Sentimental is defined as the "[...] expressive of the tender emotions, esp. those of love" (OEDO 1989: sv. 'sentimental').

8 While the invention of *sfumato* is usually attributed to da Vinci, Cennino Cennini had used forms of the term "sfumare" in an artistic context in the late fourteenth century. (Brunello in Nagel 1993: 7-8). *Sfumato* refers to the creation of subtle transitions of tones that seem to melt into one another. Leonardo described it as "without lines or borders, in the manner of smoke" (Oxford Art Online 2007-2011: s.v. 'sfumato').



Leonardo da Vinci. *Mona Lisa*. 1500-1507. Oil on panel. 60 x 47 cm.

onto the world (Nagel 1993: 17-18). In Alexander Nagel's words, "the known always and everywhere leads to the unknown, and by a passage infinitely gradual" (Nagel 1993: 18).

On the other side of this development toward 'unknowing' are the processes of discovery evident in Leonardo's preparatory drawings. While there is a noticeable difference between the visible markings of his paintings and his drawings, Dario Gamboni suggests that they share the quality of inchoate states; the *sfumato* technique in its mystery retains something of the drawings' dynamism (Gamboni 2002: 17, 30). In Leonardo's exploratory drawings for *The Virgin and Child with St Anne*, he wrestles with the placement and poses of the figures across different media. Nuanced gestures and forms are created through lines that are constantly modified, softened through erasure and reworked in a manner of sketching, known as



Leonardo da Vinci. *Study for the Madonna and Child and Saint Anne*. Date unknown. Pen and ink. 15.2 x 8.7 cm



Leonardo da Vinci. *Study for the Madonna and Child and Saint Anne*. Date unknown. Lead-point, 21.8 x 16.4 cm.

pentimenti. From the Italian *pentimento*,⁹ meaning 'repentance', *pentimenti* refers to visible traces of an alteration to a painting or drawing that suggest the artist has changed his or her mind during the process of painting (Grove Art Online 2007 2011: s.v. 'pentiment').

Ernst H. Gombrich sees the unrestrained lines of Leonardo's drawings as a way for him to keep his ideas open and uncontained (Gamboni 2002: 250). In Leonardo's terms, the ambiguous object "stimulate[s] the mind to various discoveries" (Leonardo in Gamboni 2002: 16-17) by allowing the matter to come into being through its making.

Strategies for engaging uncertainty also manifest in contemporary artistic practice. William Kentridge suggests that an ambiguous form allows chance and accident to disclose "the grammar that the form itself imposes."¹⁰ Marlene Dumas's *Pregnant Image* is an example of a *painting* in which the form is suggested through its process. The painted image is a composite of the pregnant stomach of the artist with a face derived from the photograph of a friend (Bloemheugel & Mot 1995: 23). According to Dumas's description, the legs "came out of the paint itself" (Dumas in Bloemheugel & Mot 1995: 23). This development (of the legs) is a feature of Dumas's intuitive process. Rather than beginning with a predetermined idea, she allows clues to emerge from the painting that guide the direction the painting will take". Likewise, Francis Bacon followed his instinct while painting when he shifted the form of a bird into that of an umbrella, because "it suddenly suggested an opening-up into another area of feeling altogether" (Bacon in Bogue 2003: 122).

Pertinent to this discourse is the possibility that process may remain visible to the viewer. Leonardo's drawings show his interrogations of multiple forms and compositions in the evolution of the drawings, which can stimulate the viewer to trace his movements and



Marlene Dumas. *Pregnant Image*. 1988-90. Oil on canvas. 180 x 90 cm.

9 *Pentimento* also translates as 'remorse' or 'second thoughts' (Larousse Dictionary Online: s.v. 'pentimento').

10 Kentridge is quoted from a Masters Class that he presented at the Michaelis School of Fine Art on 9 April 2010.

11 Dominic van den Boogerd points out that Dumas worked on *Pregnant Image* for a number of years (van den Boogerd 2009: 57), signed at the bottom with the dates 1988/1989/1990. This reveals something of the difficulty of her process.



James Sey. 2010. *X-Ray 1, X-Ray 2, X-Ray 3*. Digital prints.

the findings revealed beneath the Picasso. In Sey's examination, the X-rays revealed completely different compositions behind two of the works. *Girl with a Pitcher/The Huntsman* reveals a two panel image of a Virgin and Child, while Laubser's *Lake Garda* obscures a self-portrait of the artist. *Regina Cordium* makes visible only its brushwork (*X-Ray 3*) (Sey 2010: online). The X-rays reveal the history of the paintings in the movements of the artists' hands and their changing subjects. Sey, however, does not merely show the X-rays. He occupies a curious position between that of

the conservator who X-rays the work and the painters who originally engaged in the process of making the paintings, and utilises a different, third medium to make his discovery visible, adopting his findings into his process of making. He obscures parts of the X-ray image by introducing new forms (such as flames in *X-ray 1*) and produces it as a digital print. In so doing, Sey brings attention to an interplay of possibilities in painting. Some areas of the underpainting can be left visible while others are reworked into new surfaces and different forms.



Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* (details). 1907. Details of X-radiographs of the painting.

Marlene Dumas engages with such possibilities in her painting processes. In *Martha – Sigmund's Wife* (1984) her constant revisions to the image through visible rubbings, wipes and smudges echo the dynamism of shifting edges and unfixed forms of Leonardo's drawings.

Dumas utilises erasure as an integral part of her *pentimenti*. Her use of turpentine allows her to keep the painting's surface soluble and alive. 'Martha's' right eye is the result of erasure that has almost dissolved its form. In other places Dumas scrubs the surface to make visible its underlayers, as seen in 'Martha's' mouth, which is visible only through the traces of its history. Responding to a question by Virginia MacKenny about her use of turpentine to thin an image, Dumas disclosed her uncertainty while painting. She said, "[...] this was not done on purpose. It developed from the fact [of] not knowing *beforehand* where I was going to go [...] *Now if things went wrong; I'd wipe it off, rather than build it up*" (Dumas in MacKenny 2008: 50; emphases those of Dumas). The softness manifests as visible traces of her self-consciousness and doubt in the process of making, and creates an indeterminate and unresolved expression in her subject.

Dominic van den Boogerd poetically terms Dumas's mode of working as "escape routes in the monolithic construction of the image" (van den Boogerd 2009: 42). In its denial of a potentially unified (and glossy) surface, Dumas's production brings attention to the expression *non-finito*,¹⁵ the intentionally unfinished artwork. The painting, not a preparatory sketch, is left in its inchoate process of making. There are thick layers of opaque red paint across her face while other areas, such as the mouth, are only smudged echoes of earlier paint. Dumas leaves open many potential readings of the ambiguous forms.

¹⁵ *Non-finito* refers to an intentionally unfinished work, rather than an accidentally incomplete one. A useful example of the latter is the text, *The Visible and the Invisible* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty that was compiled from working notes after his death. In the book's forward, Editor Claude Lefort addresses the "[...] strange silence to which *the interrupted conversation abandons us*" (Lefort 1968: xi; emphasis mine). Here lies a useful distinction, as the *non-finito* welcomes interruption as integral to the conversation.

The indistinct or unfinished form suggests the work of an artist who is engaged in the processes of unearthing or discovery, mindful of the challenges of working in this way. De Stijl artist, Piet Mondriaan, was said to destroy his works after endlessly shifting forms around. When asked about this, the artist replied: "I don't want pictures. I just want to find things out" (Morgan in Van Hout 2009: 35). These "things" are not only formal concerns. Art making provides a place to mediate life experiences that often unexpectedly find their way into the artwork. The unfinished artwork is a reminder that there is infinitely more searching to be done. *Non-finito* is the artist's "[...] pilgrimage to a better understanding of the universe, knowing that he [or she] will never reach ultimate knowledge"¹⁶ (Miki & Vervoordt 2009: 72).

¹⁶ Here Vervoordt is referring to the conceptual underpinning of *In-Finitum*, an exhibition curated by Axel Vervoordt, Daniela Ferretti, Giandomenico Romanelli and Francesco Poli at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice 2009 (Vervoordt 2009: 5). The premise of the exhibition was the relationship between the unfinished and the infinite (Miki & Vervoordt 2009: 72).



Marlene Dumas
Martha - Sigmund's Wife
1984
Oil on canvas
130 x 110 cm



Penny Siopis
Twins
2009
Oil, ink and glue on canvas
100 x 100 cm

A Softened Edge and the Body

A distinction does create a boundary which divides, but that self same boundary simultaneously and irrevocably connects that which it separates.

(Flemons 1991: 28-29)

Douglas Flemons¹⁷ wants to unlock ways of thinking about divisions in human relationships by emphasising the points of connection on either side of a boundary. The quote by Colin Richards that I utilised in the introduction to this document adds to this discussion. He explores the skin as both on the outside of the body and yet intrinsically connected to its inside (Richards 2005: 17).

In painting, the outline of a represented figure creates a 'human' form and distinguishes it from any other form on the painted surface. It may also be a key focus in the formal compositional organisation of

a painting, marking a distinction between figure and ground. Conceptually, the outline of the body becomes the bounding envelope of the self; the softening of its edges through a loosening of mark, for instance, threatens this distinction. The dissolution of form might suggest a loss of being, as is beautifully articulated in commentary on *Winter Landscape*, a work by the early twelfth century artist Li Kung-nien. The writer observed "the shapes of objects appearing and disappearing in vast emptiness, hovering between existence and nothingness."¹⁸ The loss of self, however, is not only a loss into world, but a potential place of interaction with the world.

In this part of section two, I explore the nuances of a softened edge in the fragile painted bodies of Marlene Dumas and Penny Siopis.

¹⁷ Douglas Flemons holds a doctorate in family therapy. In 1991, Flemons was Assistant Professor of Family Therapy at Nova University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida (Flemons 1991: back cover).

¹⁸ This description is derived from *Xuanhe huapa* ('Xuanhe collection of paintings', c. 1120), a catalogue of paintings in Emperor Hui-tsung's collection. The quote comes from the commentary that accompanied the presentation of this work at the Art Museum, Princeton University (Gamboni 2002: 24-25).



Marlene Dumas
Dead Girl
2002
Oil on canvas
130 x 110 cm



Théodore Géricault. *Study of Two Severed Heads*. c. 1818. Oil on canvas. 50 x 61 cm.

For Kristeva the corpse makes death visible as it shows the body, which is the container of the self, as a body devoid of life. It threatens the distinction between the self as subject (consciousness) and the self as object (the corpse), and hence threatens its existence. In Dumas's *Dead Girl* the body's edge is softened, erased and often just a rough and unbound mark that causes the figure to merge into the ground, formally and figuratively. The shared colours and opacity of the body and ground provide a visual analogy for her solidifying body, while its softened edges threaten the body's containment by weakening the bounding envelope that keeps the self intact.

The painting's composition reinforces abjection. Dumas clearly situates the body on the horizontal plane. Linda Nochlin explores the consignment of the human

subject to a horizontal axis in Théodore Géricault's *Study of Two Severed Heads*, likening his presentation of the figures to meat on a butcher's table (Nochlin 1994: 20-22). Rosalind Krauss points out that the vertical plane mirrors the body. A body placed on the horizontal axis is then experienced as a bodily absence or a loss of coherent form in the empty vertical plane¹⁹ (Krauss 1993: 93-94). The weight of the horizontal composition causes the body to feel a heaviness as a pull towards the ground, echoing Kristeva's words of the corpse, where the "[...] entire body falls beyond the limit" (Kristeva 1982: 3). It is palpable in *Dead Girl* in the smear

19 Krauss explores the horizontal framework in the work of Cindy Sherman.

of crimson paint in the lower left corner that leaks out of the head at its place of impact and draws attention to the limit of the canvas, thereby pointing to the world beyond the canvas's frame.

Dead Girl is not only created by form and composition, but through the paint on its surface. Dumas is an image maker, but also a painter who draws attention to the paint itself as a carrier of sensation. She says, "I always wanted to paint how it feels to kiss someone. I never wanted to illustrate two people kissing one another" (Dumas in von Gustorf: online). Pertinent to the subject of *Dead Girl*, the surface of the work is severely damaged. The obliteration of the face is not only damage inflicted to the image, but is also embodied in the fragility of the surface itself. MacKenny draws attention to Dumas's abundant use of turpentine, which pushes the binder out of the pigment and threatens the "paint's ability to grip the surface of the canvas effectively" (MacKenny 2008: 50). In MacKenny's words,

Her oil paint does not merely represent or refer to something else: its very degradation becomes an integral part of the ontological vocabulary of the work. It is a beleaguered substance, a materiality under threat. That the turpentine eats at its heart, undermines its very substance, speaks more cogently to Dumas's concerns than an assured medium.

(MacKenny 2008: 50)

While there is a notable difference between what an artist might do deliberately or accidentally in their process of making, and what happens to the image over a prolonged period, Dumas's abraded surfaces bring to mind Leonardo's support, damaged by time. The surface in disrepair informs the reading of the fragility of the figure, as the figure's representation is no longer preserved in perpetuity. The tarnished surface becomes a signifier of the impermanence of things and ultimately of the transience of human life²⁰.

20 The relationship between the patina-ed (or imperfect) object and issues of impermanence can be tied to the Japanese concept of *Wabi-Sabi*, which is both an aesthetic principle and a philosophical or spiritual approach to life (Koren 2007: 21, 23).



Marlene Dumas. *Dead Girl* (detail). 2002. Oil on canvas.



Leonardo da Vinci. *The Last Supper* (detail). 1495-98. Tempera on gesso, pitch and mastic.

I began this section by exploring equivocal forms as a counterpoint to the sharp edges and fine detail of my family photographs, with an eye to engaging experiences of vulnerability or doubt rather than the apparent emotional stability represented by the subjects of the photographs. I investigated softened edges, erasure and transparency to explore artistic practices whose marks leave visible traces of uncertainty. While the dissolution of the figures' edges in Siopis's *Twins* opens up a meaningful interaction between its subjects, the softened form and abraded surface of Dumas's *Dead Girl* is a haunting reminder of the solitary experience of being, and its dependence on the continued functioning of the physical body.

Section :

Haptics and Optics
Painting and the
Body



Parents (side view)
2010-11
Oil on canvas

Philostratus' story, *Imagines*, written around A.D. 20, presents itself as the record of a lecture tour of paintings in a house outside Naples.

As Philostratus describes each painting for the benefit of his admirers, he addresses himself to a ten-year-old boy, the son of his host. Stopping in front of a painting depicting the death of Menoeceus outside the walls of Thebes, Philostratus praises the wonderful way the painter has shown Menoeceus pulling the sword from his body. Philostratus would have been standing to one side of the painting, with the boy next to him and the spectators ringed around. "Let us catch the blood, my boy," Philostratus says, "holding it under a fold of our garments; for it is flowing out, and the soul is already about to take its leave, and in a moment you will hear its gibbering cry."

(Elkins 1999: viii)

The story shows a viewer's empathy towards the painted body: Philostratus treats the damage to a pictured body as an injury inflicted on a living being.

James Elkins uses this story to demonstrate how, in his relationship with a painted body, he projects his being onto the figure and internalises its gesture. He observes, "As my body moves, or as I think of moving, the body I behold also shifts", while "[...] my image of myself is mingled with the way I respond to the pictured body" (Elkins 1999: vii). He gives psychological and physical examples of this experience, suggesting that looking at a twisted figure agitates his mood while viewing an elongated figure makes him feel taller (Elkins 1999: vii).

While Elkins is speaking to the viewer's experience of a painted body, his observations are also pertinent to the artist, who activates this relationship in the process of making.

This section of my text is an engagement with the artist's potential empathetic response with the painted subject, in this case the figure. I explore how the painter engages with surface – both the surface of that which is depicted as well as the surface of the canvas itself. In this engagement the boundary of the canvas becomes a potentially malleable space as the artist begins to treat it as an extension of the body.



Jackson Pollock. *Greyed Rainbow*. 1953. Oil on canvas. 182 x 243 cm.

Contemporary painter Luc Tuymans suggests that artists always project their "own physicality upon the image" (Tuymans in Aliaga 1995: 622). Unlike Elkins's projection onto the painted figure, the artist actively guides the configuration of the painted form, resulting in a resemblance between a painting and the artist's being. Tuymans makes example of Spanish Renaissance painter, El Greco, and speculates that like the figures in his paintings, El Greco must have been tall and "thin in character" with a long head (Tuymans in Aliaga 1995: 622).

It is not known whether Tuymans's speculations have any basis in reality, but it is clear that a canvas engaged with by an artist carries a trace of the artist's bodily movements. In Jackson Pollock's *Greyed Rainbow*, for example, the drips and dapples are records of the exact bodily motions that he was making at the time of painting and evoke sensations one might

associate with those motions, such as tears streaking a face or cuts (Elkins 1999: 13, 15). In this way, painting can be explored as a language of the body that is still present even where the painted body is not. An abstract painting can "[...] resonate with a sense of the body more strongly and persuasively even than photographs or academic studies of the nude" (Elkins 1999: 13). Elkins utilises this example to point to embodied modes of making, and in such works notes that engagement with the surface is foregrounded.

The differences between representational and experiential modes of painting are at the core of art

1 Here I use the word 'embodied' to describe the aspect of gestural painting in which the movements of the body create the forms of the painting.

historian Alois Reigl's dichotomy between optics and haptics². Optical perception serves the representational image, scanning the objects according to their outlines (Gandelman 1991: 5). Haptic perception, on the other hand, privileges the material presence of the artwork (Marks 2000: 162-163). Derived from the Greek *haptikos*, "capable of touching", the haptic eye penetrates the canvas, going inwards through the surface and into its many layers, "finding its pleasure in the texture and grain" (Gandelman 1991: 5). I imagine it as an arrow going inwards or coming outwards, as opposed to optical looking which moves *across* the surface. The experience of viewing is then a dialectic of these two visions; viewing an image is not dissociated from experiencing its surface, instead one moves through images and in between surfaces.

The haptic eye that engages in materiality is more closely related to tactility and embodiment³ than optical looking (Richards 2005: 15). The body internalises the physical experience of the textures of paint and the grain of the canvas through the eyes, which operate as "organs of touch" in a necessary process of synaesthesia⁴ (Marks 2000: 162). The painted surface is felt inside the body of the artist in a moment of interconnection that Laura U. Marks suggests "muddies intersubjective boundaries" (2000: 163). In this engagement the artist begins to treat the painted surface as an extension of his or her own body.

Painting encourages this relationship, as paint simulates the corporeality of the body and some of its actions; it bleeds, congeals, it dries into a crust. Leora Farber cites Penny Siopis in observing that oil paint built up into impasto "evokes association with the human skin and flesh, changing as it does in time, aging, wrinkling and cracking as it loses juices" (Farber in Richards 2005: 17). The skin of impasto paint may also stretch over a



Penny Siopis. *Pinky Pinky: Furry Face*. 2003. 51.4 cm diameter. Oil and mixed media on canvas.

surface like a scar, holding a trace of where the internal layers have been closed.

Penny Siopis's *Pinky Pinky: Furry Face* uses the paint on the canvas as a substitute for the skin of the body. The canvas becomes the face, covered in a film of paint that is distressed, disrupted, agitated, laboured and further wounded by the 'eyes' that are embedded in it. There is a very faint shift into (tonally) darker paint around the eyes that might intimate a face and neck, a barely intelligible relationship between figure and ground.

As seen in the disintegration of Dumas's paint on its surface, haptic visibility gives physical expression to the trauma of the body, or in Siopis's words, the agitated surface is a way "to introduce trauma into the very act of figuration" (Siopis in Richards 2005: 19). The disruption of the painting's surface, its cracks and wounds, suggest an external violation to the figure. However, the fragile inner body is also expressed on the skin: the emotional and physical body communicates either distress or symptoms of illness through rashes, swelling, blushes, acne and boils (Elkins 1999: 47). In this way, the skin operates as an "interface" between surface and depth (Richards 2005: 14). *Pinky Pinky: Furry Face* suggests a moment of interconnection between the inside and outside, where haptic and embodied⁵ modes of making intermingle.

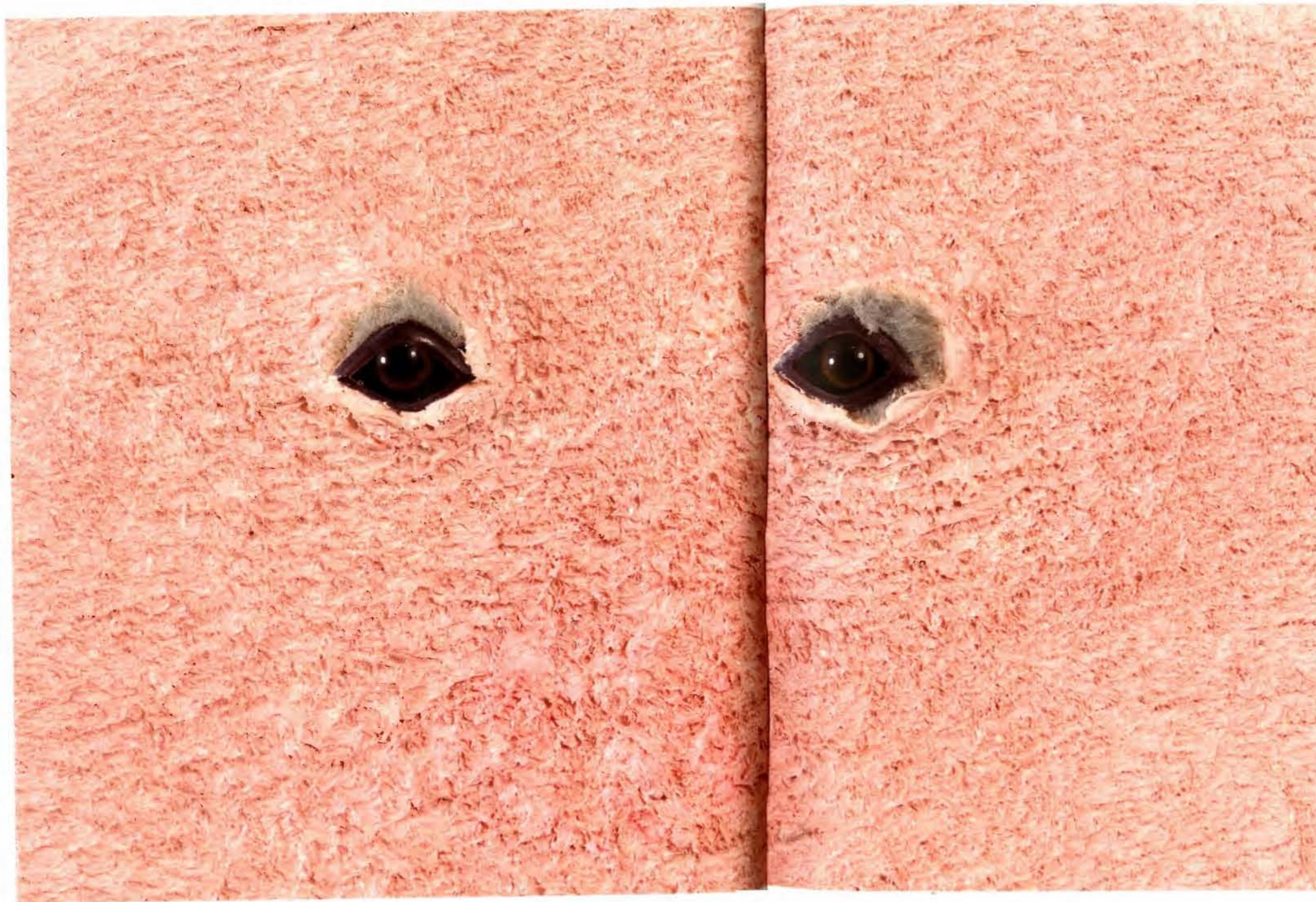
The inside of the body is, however, only suggested through the surface of *Pinky Pinky: Furry Face*. It

2 This dichotomy was later renamed by art historian Heinrich Wölfflin in his *Kunsthistorische Grundbegriff: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst (Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art)*, 1921, who wrote of the linear (das Linearische) versus the painterly (das Malerische) (Gandelman 1991: 5).

3 Embodiment here is the body's experience of the textures of paint and surface.

4 Synaesthesia is defined as "a sensation in one part of the body produced by a stimulus applied to another part" (OEDO 2011: s.v. 'synaesthesia').

5 Here the 'embodied' mode of making refers to the artist's relationship with the painted surface. Experiences in her body are projected onto the canvas, finding visual equivalents in the painted surface.



Penny Siopis
Pinky Pinky: Furry Face (detail)
2003
Oil and mixed media on canvas



Penny Siopis. *Twins*. 2009.
Oil, ink and glue on canvas. 100 x 100 cm.

corresponds to Gandelman's description of haptic looking as "focussing on the picture's surface as if to touch or penetrate it" (Gandelman 1991: 111; emphasis mine). Gandelman suggests another form of visibility to render the interior body. He calls this mode of looking "haptics in extremis" and likens it to the intensified vision of an X-ray (Gandelman 1991: 111). Rather than pulling off or cutting open the body, the X-ray makes the outer skin transparent, revealing the organs, muscles, arteries and bones of the body. Expressed in terms of painting, this suggests that transparent layers of paint, by creating depth in the canvas, can become visual analogies for the inner depths of the represented body.

By way of example, Siopis's *Twins* makes visible the operations of the flesh, dissolving the outer skin of the body into transparency. The wood glue that Siopis utilises has a semi-transparent quality and allows light to pass through it. Within it, the twins' delicate veils of bodily entities appear to fuse and pull apart amidst opaque surfaces that suggest bone, with a dynamic reaction at the point of their bodies' intersection. Here, Gandelman's analogy of X-ray vision articulates some of the experience of seeing, but is limited in its inability to evoke the inherent painterly qualities. The X-ray imaging of Siamese twins Daniel Kaye and Donald Ray



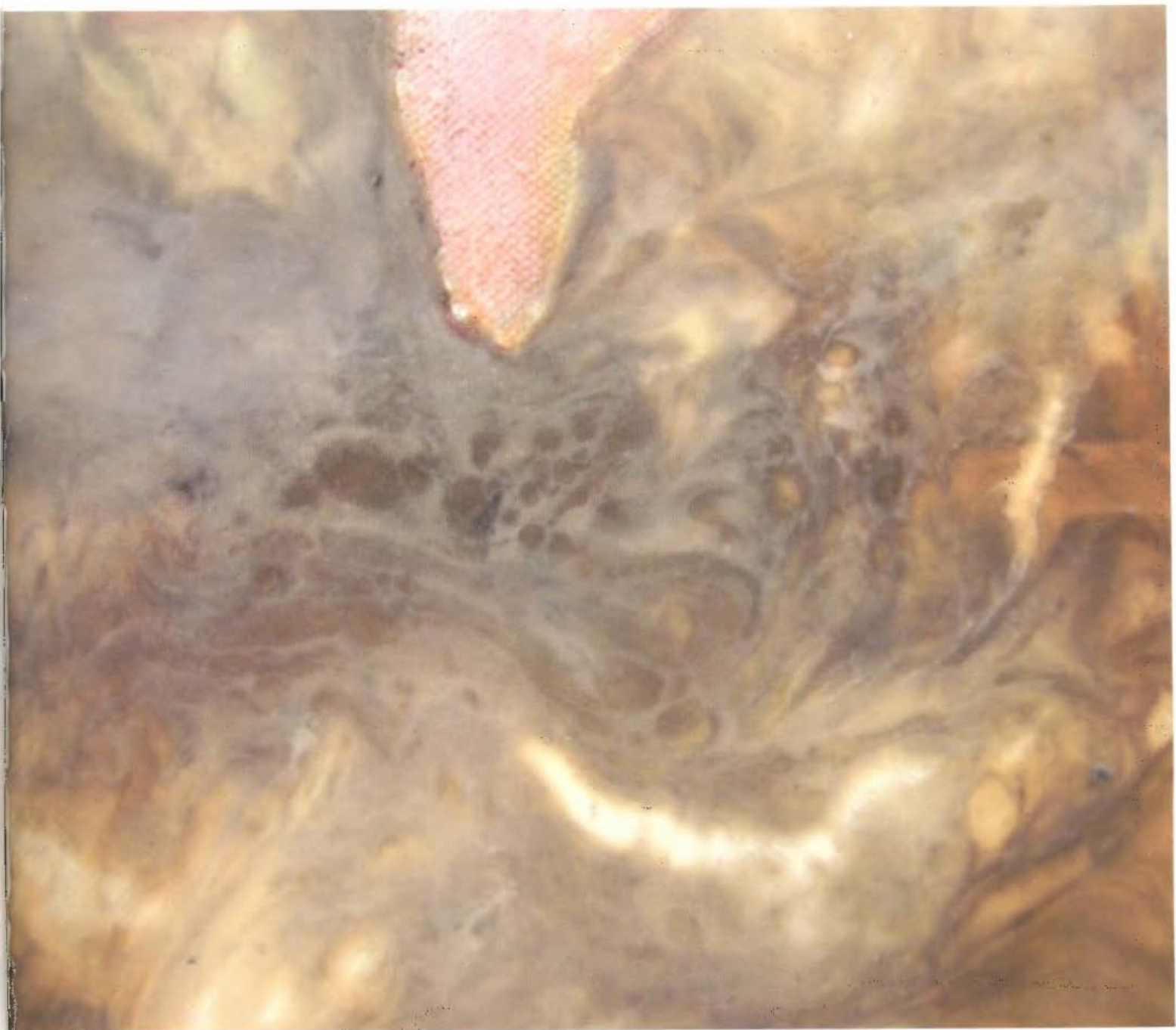
An X-ray of Siamese twins Daniel Kaye and Donald Ray Hartley, joined at the waist with common legs.

Hartley, by comparison, appears anaesthetised and still. The evacuation of the bodily substance in the X-ray's single surface differs from the liquid viscosity of Siopis's surface that suggests that the body is constantly at work while also deteriorating.

However, the ability to look at an X-ray with detachment is unlikely when viewing an X-ray of one's own body. By way of example, James Elkins describes the body in positron-emission tomography (PET) scans as a "weightless soft-cloud" (Elkins 1999: 145). However, when I view PET scans of my body taken during my own illness, each patch of colour holds intense resonance and physical weight.

Some still images of my PET scans are reproduced overleaf. The software that is used to view PET scans allows you to scroll the mouse of the computer to navigate through the body, from its position at the dermis and into the body⁶. The PET scans pierce through the body dissolving much of it into transparency. The

6 Epidermis is defined as the "protective outermost portion of the skin", whereas the dermis is the "deeper layer of the skin underlying the epidermis and made up of connective tissue" (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online 2011: s.v. 'epidermis', s.v. 'dermis').



Penny Siopis
Twins (detail)
2009
Oil, ink and glue on canvas

skeleton and organs are left visible while illness or tumours (amidst other tissues) light up.

When I look at the scans of my body taken in 2009, I physically experience its transparency as a loss of the body. Seeing the body fade away is as terrifying as Kristeva imagined. I feel intense vulnerability when reminded that my being is dependent on the functioning of the body's organs.

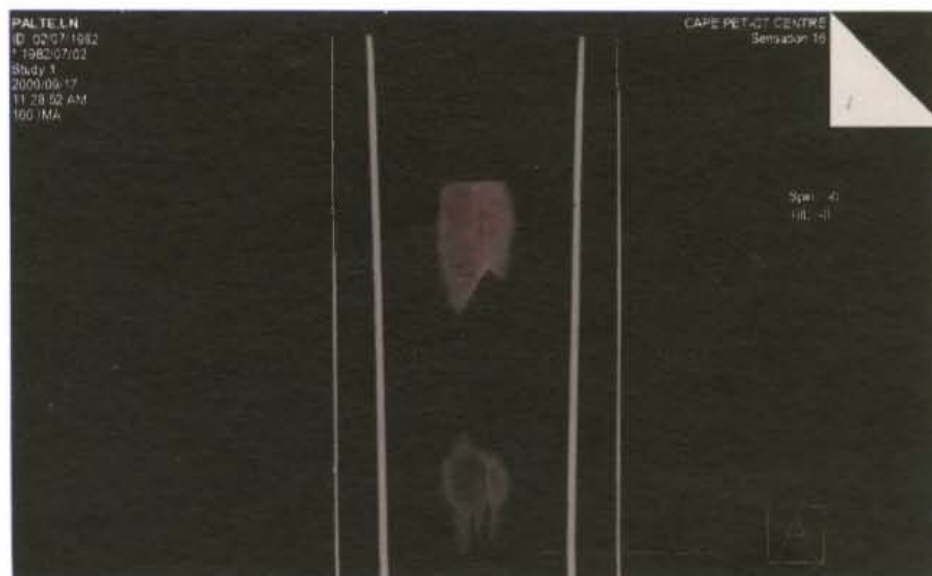
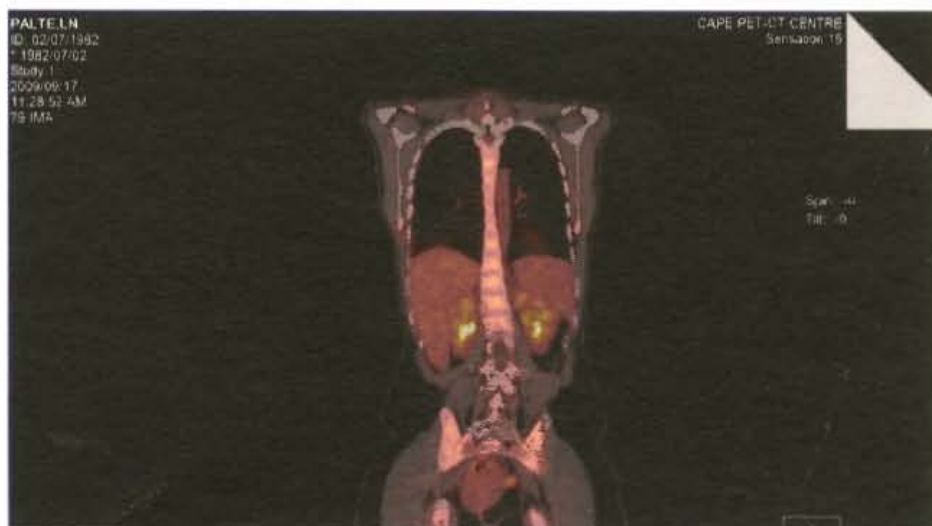
I have shown the scans here to prompt a connection between my experience as the subject of the scans and as a painter; both are deeply engrossed in a bodily experience. The scans make visible that which cannot be seen by the unaided eye. As proposed by "haptics in extremis" it offers a way of imaging and imagining visual qualities of the inner body while deepening our comprehension of the body. The many layers of the body penetrated by PET scan imagery echo the many layers of a painting that create the depths of a canvas. The X-rays of painting are also pertinent here as they make those layers transparent, thereby revealing insight into the creative processes involved in making a particular work.

The connections between paintings and X-rays or PET scans are also complex. While both X-rays and scans show the locations of illness, the experience of that illness may differ. The cancerous lymph nodes that were located in my throat, lungs and abdomen expressed their symptoms in other parts of the body as fatigue, swollen glands and itchy skin. Paint allowed me to evoke the physical sensations and emotional experiences associated with my bodily fragility – dripped, smeared, smudged and pulled apart from its pigment on the surface. Marlene Dumas articulates her experience of painting by saying that "the contemplation of a work (when it 'works') gives a physical sensation similar to that suggested by the work" (Dumas 1998: 25).

As a result of my bodily connection to painting, the apparent subjects of my work – members of my family – are often also conduits for my own experience. I draw on memories and sensations associated with the portrayed family members while I fixate on the painted surface with my experiences of illness or pain. The paint physically marks, with bodily actions, a disruption to the surface of the represented figure – bleeding, congealing and scarring, while also showing up where

the paint has been distressed by cracking, leached colour or lost lustre. In this way, the haptic qualities of paint offer insight into experiences *within* the body that might otherwise be only superficially perceived with optical looking.

Screen shots as one navigates the PET scans. Image 56, 79 and 100 (details).





Parents (2) (detail). 2010.
Side view shows the mark of paint on the surface that creates the illusion of depth in the canvas.

*Every picture is a picture of the body.
Every work of visual art is a representation of the
body.*

*To say this is to say that we see bodies, even
where there are none, and that the creation of a
form is to some degree also the creation of a body.
[...] This is a beautiful and complicated subject,
the way our eyes continue to look out at the most
diverse kinds of things and back echoes of the
bodies.*

(Elkins 1999: 1)

Elkins brings our attention to a search for the body and a desire to see it even in its absence. In this project, *A Wounded Surface: Dissolving the Human Form*, the body is central to the work and yet is often only suggested by the paint – either as a partial, incomplete form or through the paint's materiality. Its many equivocations provide a useful point of entry for reflection on the work.

The relationship between the figure and ground is critical. The figure in this project is both the painted human form and the marks on the surface that in the primary layers of painting open up a canvas to the possibilities of space, creating ground and depth (Sayre 1994: 65). In my painting, the figure is often conflated

with the ground, obscuring the articulation of space. The human figure, manifesting as an imperfect form, falls into the painting's depth and is submerged in a field of drips, stains and other marks. At other times the painted body' spills out and appears to coalesce with the background, pulling it up to the surface as a floating pool of colour. The relationship between figure and ground is not only a formal concern, but a conceptual one. The dissolution of the figure operates as a tension between finding a connection to the body and, as Barthes suggests, an experience of alienation in its representation. Many of the paintings in this section are rooted in my own experience of wanting to control my own failing body. Here the disintegrating painted body falls into abjection, losing its borders and merging with the ground.

In the processes of making, I strove to keep the painting fluid and alive, oscillating between 'figuring' (or bringing a figure into being) and disfiguration.

¹ The 'body' is also used interchangeably. Here I refer to the body as a representation of the human form, whereas at other moments I use body to refer to my own physical body. I use the term 'embody' to describe the materiality of paint or the surface of the canvas that manifests conditions of the body.

Working Closely with the Photographic Source Material



Source material for *The Wedding Bouquet*. Photograph of my grandparents on their wedding day, Sonya Palte (née Klein) and Sidney Palte. 13 February 1949.

A photograph is cut from time, a slice of life. The violence of photography is that it severs its subject from life. And the miracle of the photograph is that it asks us to restore it to its context, to the life from which it has been severed.

(Sayre 1994: 70)

Sayre points to the photograph as an indexical mode of representation: it is connected to the physical

presence of the subjects. However, the photograph also detaches the subjects from their temporal, physical reality, petrifying their living, breathing bodies within an image and holding them there, ageless and mute¹.

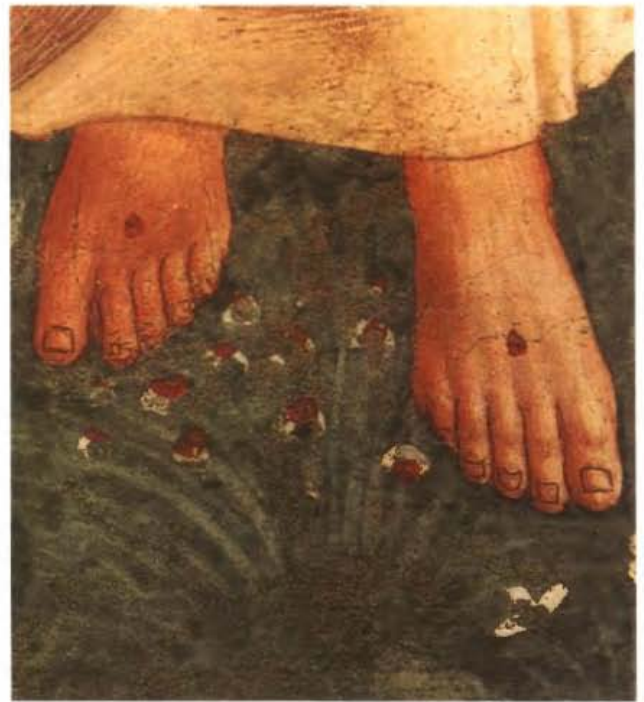
¹ For Roland Barthes (2000: ii) the transformation from living subject to photograph is mortifying.



Fra Angelico. *Noli me Tangere* (detail). c. 1438-50. Fresco.

As an instance in which the subject is visibly present yet palpably absent, the photograph echoes Lacan's experience of the self as simultaneously present and projected; and therefore absent (Hirsch 1997: 89). In my painting I project my present experiences of family onto the bodies of the subjects sourced from photographs. I investigate whether, in its fluidity, painting might unfix the photographic image and open up the idiosyncrasies and personalities of its subjects. Perhaps the process of painting can (tentatively) bridge the temporal separation caused in the photograph by building up and presenting multiple views (and experiences) over time (Mullins 2006: 17).

The shifts that occur in the process of translating and reinventing a family photograph in paint are visible in the following three paintings that originate from formally posed family photographs, taken on special occasions. While they retain echoes of the formal presentation of the original source material, erasures caused by rubbing out and painting over the image disrupt the cohesive presentation. Imaginatively, the absences refer to the familial narratives that are repressed in the photographs: family conflicts, struggles and illnesses, while marking the effects of distances



and deaths on the family². I am also concerned with the moments that are not as primal as death or illness, but rather relate to what Richard Avedon called the "undefinable" moments of family³ (2002: par 2): moments that are uncertain or uncomfortable. Such moments are pertinent to this series of paintings; prompted by disrupted forms, dissolving contours and ambiguous shapes.

Georges Didi-Huberman, in his writings on Fra Angelico's frescoes of the Florentine monastery of San Marco (c.1438-50), makes note of the equivocal red patches in Fra Angelico's *Noli me Tangere*. They appear over plants in the background scenery and over Christ's body, suggesting both flowers and the stigmata as they pass over the landscape and onto the flesh of Christ (Didi-Huberman 1995: 20). While the material form of the red patches is unchanging, their specific placement within the canvas opens them up to ambiguous readings as both malevolent and benevolent at the same time.

² Marianne Hirsch's chapter entitled *Resisting Images* (1997: 189-217) is influential here.

³ At the end of his letter, reproduced on page 17, Avedon states, "I'm not making myself clear" (2002: par 2). He stages the struggle to define (verbally and pictorially) the difficult moments of family life that exist outside of the established conventions of family photographs.



In *The Wedding Bouquet*, the formal organization of the wedding photograph is disrupted by floral forms that mutate into constantly shifting shapes across the canvas. The flowers from the bride's bouquet become headrests, a boutonniere and mysterious shapes that linger in the upper right of the canvas. To the right of the bride, midway up the canvas, sits a little girl in a nebulous space. In front of her abdomen the floral motif intensifies in pigment, luminosity and opacity. Divested of the symbolic purity of the white orchid in the bouquet, this patch of pink paint becomes ominous. In its preeminent material presence on the surface of the canvas it locks all the ambiguous depths of the rest of the painting into the layers beneath. The tentative, thin layers of paint and fluctuating forms create a counterpoint to the solidity of the figures in the source material. The painting thus suggests a more ambivalent experience than the happiness and stability inscribed in the wedding photograph.

The Wedding Bouquet
2009-2010
Oil on canvas
160 x 240 cm



This page and overleaf: *My Primary School Graduation*. 2009-10. Oil on canvas. 160 x 240 cm.

My Primary School Graduation also began with a documented rite of passage, from a photograph taken at the end of my primary school career. In this childhood photograph, I posed in front of a larger than life-size self-portrait that I had painted. The photograph interests me as it mediates two representations of self, one for the camera and one in my childhood painting.

The distortion on the little girl's body in *My Primary School Graduation* is a conflation of the childhood painting with the child posed in front of it. The erasure that occurs with further applications of paint causes a barely discernible distance between the figure and its ground. The effaced figures are partially formed and locked into different intervals of the ground, itself unfixed and changeable.

Outstretched hands are subsumed in the surface of paint, with only a whisper of this gesture left in the interlocking of hands in the far right of the painting. The painting excavates what might have been a subtext of the photograph: a little girl seeking approval for her painting, and through her pose, for the camera. In *My Primary*

School Graduation she leans forward and reaches out, extending her arm in a bid for reciprocation.

The three paintings in this section, *Working Closely with the Photographic Source Material*, offer a technical and imaginative reworking of their source materials, revising important ceremonial events – a graduation (primary school), a bar mitzvah and a wedding. Erasure, through solvent-activated removals and further applications of paint, makes fluid (as in liquid paint) a single moment that was frozen in the past by the photograph, integrating physical and emotional changes that have occurred since the photograph was taken. Spatial disruptions in painting can open up the flattened and fixed space of a photograph to reveal many layers that shift the figures out of their formal poses. The paintings evoke more unstable experiences of being.



My Primary School Graduation (work in progress). July 2009. Oil on canvas. 160 x 240 cm.



My Primary School Graduation (work in progress). August 2010. Oil on canvas. 160 x 240 cm.



Works that Engage a Damaged Surface



Paternal Grandmother (detail), 2010. Oil on canvas.

In the following works, my engagement with surface is deepened. The paintings begin with formally posed photographs. However, as the paintings develop indicators of the ceremonial occasion and the

particularities of the subjects fall away. Associated qualities of the photographic subjects remain to inform the paintings, but are muddied with projections of my body and imaginative reworkings suggested by the forms in the paint.



Source material for *Parents*. Photograph of my parents on their wedding day. Vicki Palte (née Lewin) and Jonathan Palte. 31 August, 1975.

Parents and *Paternal Grandmother* are derived from photographs in which the figures are vertical and formally posed. In the paintings they are placed on the horizontal axis, creating a noticeable shift – it pierces through their projected happiness and confidence to suggest a moment of intimacy and physical frailty not conventionally captured in a photograph. Fragile figures and partially dismembered forms emerge from relentless revisions and erasures.

Parents (overleaf) bears little resemblance to its source photograph. Inventions of colour disregard the original black, white and grey photograph, engaging instead a palette with a high emotional register. Smears and smudges surrounding the figures are traces of the reworking of the positions and poses of the bodies.



Source material for *Paternal Grandmother*. Photograph of my grandparents on their wedding day. Sonya Palte (née Klein) and Sidney Palte. 13 February, 1949.



Parents
2010-11
Oil on canvas
120 x 180 cm



Parents (detail). 2010-11. Oil on canvas. 120 x 180 cm.

Their inverted bodies appear as mother with newborn child swaddled on her chest. The bowtie of the resting figure, however, operates as a signifier of his adulthood. The crusting paint at the truncated bottom also disrupts this potentially harmonious image in its suggestion of a severed limb.

Linda Nochlin offers a pertinent observation on the compositional cropping evident in paintings. In Edouard Manet's *Music in the Tuileries* (1862), Nochlin recognises the cropped picture surface on the left side of the painting as both an influence of the photograph and a cut off view of the body (Nochlin 1994: 31). For Nochlin, Manet's fragmented body is rooted in the modern experience, which is characterized by "a loss of wholeness, a shattering of connection [...]" (Nochlin 1994: 23-24).

In *Parents* and *Paternal Grandmother* the 'crop' occurs not at the edge of the canvas but in the open spaces, thus causing a bodily truncation. This disruption references the photographic source material and suggests a physical and emotional fragmentation – a

besieged body and the anxiety associated with it.

Paternal Grandmother shows a diminishing body deteriorating with age. Derived from a wedding photograph in which my grandparents appear in their youthful beauty, the painting isolates my grandmother. Her body is recumbent, shifting and moving on the

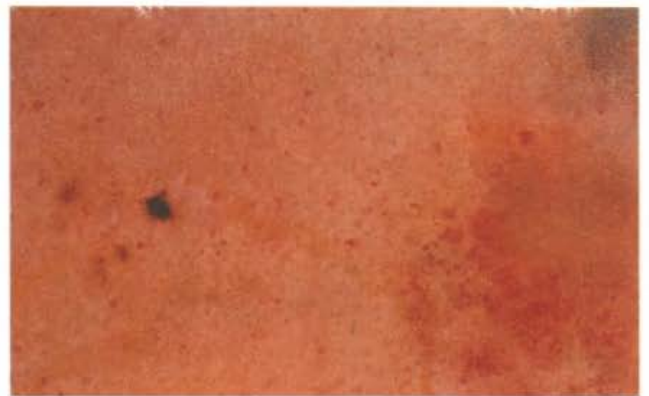


Édouard Manet. *Music in the Tuileries*. 1862. Oil on canvas. 76 x 118 cm.



Paternal Grandmother. 2010. Oil on Canvas. 76 x 114 cm

painting's ground. As suggested by Rosalind Krauss, the horizontal plane disrupts the coherence of form that mirrors the upright body (Krauss 1993: 93-94). The horizontal orientation also privileges the space around the figure to aid an exploration of the figure's aberrant submersion into the ground. Pools of viscous membrane, liquidised and pouring out from the body, signal the loss of control of the body; as an echo of the fluid discharge of afterbirth it also registers as a place of nativity. This connection between aging and birth suggests something of my grandmother's current frailty, which has caused her to lose many of her physical abilities so that she now needs assistance, as an infant does.



Paternal Grandmother (details). The detail on the bottom right shows an imperfection in the grain of the canvas that is co-opted into the disruption of the surface.



Paternal Grandmother (detail). Paint was poured onto the surface when the canvas was horizontal. The side view shows the places where pools of paint settled on the surface.

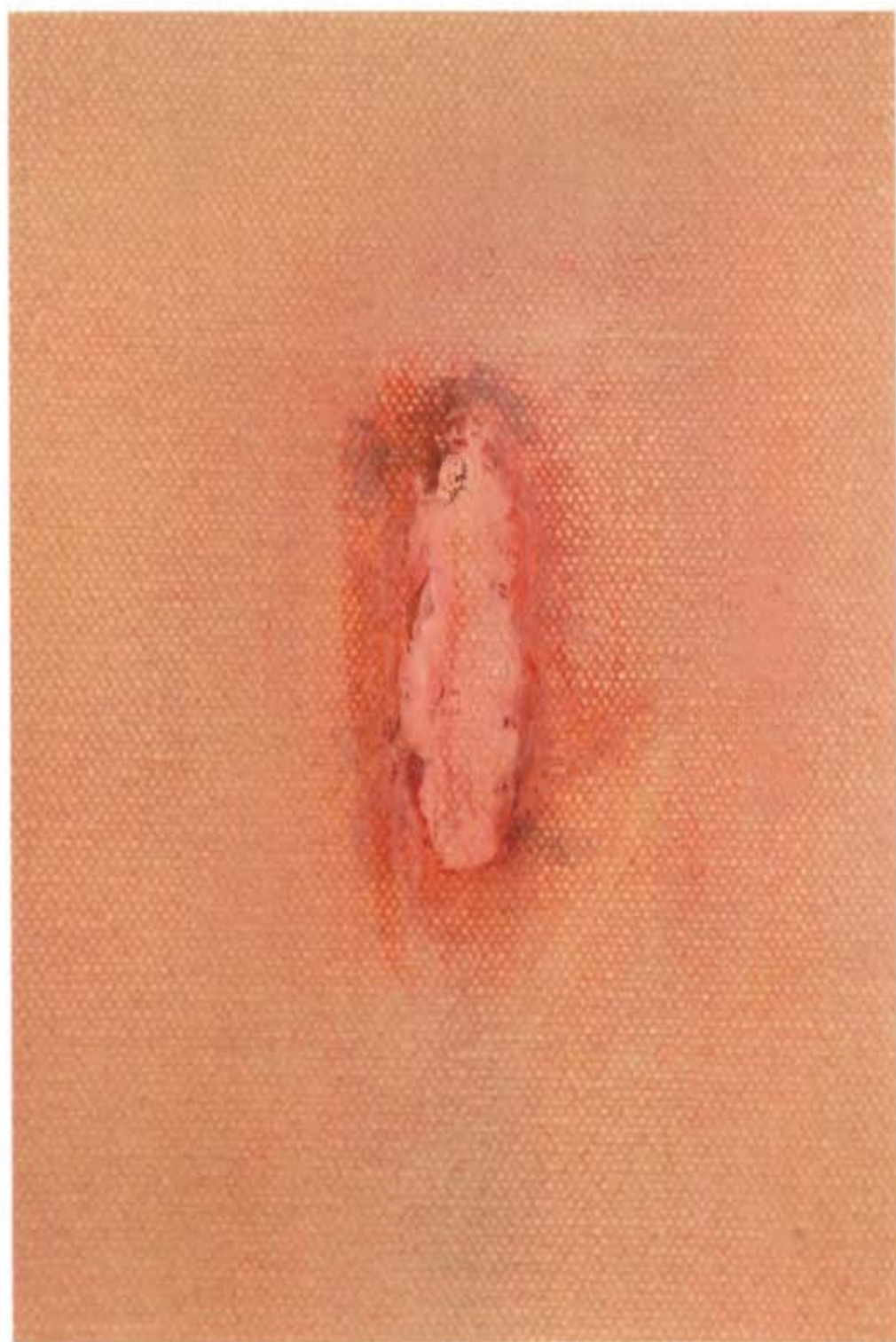
In the process of painting *Paternal Grandmother*, fluid stains of paint were floated on the surface and disrupted the layers beneath. They settled into a tenuous skin of speckles where the pigment pulled away from its solvent, linking the fragmented form of her body to its distressed surface.

The emphasis here is on the painting's material presence and firmly shifts the conversation from the *photograph* and the represented image to *painting* and its surface. In my process, my attention also shifted from an urge to disrupt the photographic image to testing the limitations of the canvas. I pushed the surface by breaking what I understood to be the established rules of painting; I poured wet paint into paint that was not yet dry, painted lean over fat, scratched, pulled and pooled. In *Parents*, for example, the surface is so severely abraded that the scumbles⁵ of its final layers failed to hold⁶. The disruption to the weave of the canvas creates an anxious surface that is not a congenial location up which to create or describe an image. Rather, the surface becomes a repository for my bodily concerns. Damage that has been experienced in my body is projected onto the canvas through aggressive application of paint. For Claude Gandelman, writing on the sliced and mutilated canvases of Lucio Fontana, the "violence felt in the self is done to the medium, to the skin of the medium, that is, to the canvas" (Gandelman 1991: 130).

The paint evinces this injury since paint that is distressed, like skin, bruises, discolours and breaks open into the layers beneath. The increasing corporeality of the paint in turn suggests a disruption to a physical body. In *Parents* (2), for example (overleaf), impasto paint that is ripped open to cause a laceration in the paint also suggests an open wound.

5 Scumbling is a dry-brush painting technique. A brush applied with stiff paint is gently moved across the surface of the canvas so that only the upper weave of the canvas takes the paint.

6 The ruptured weave of the canvas would usually result from sanding the surface, but here it occurs through incessant reworking of the surface.





Parents (2)
2010-2011
Oil on canvas
180 x 120 cm
Previous page: *Parents (2)* (detail)

In *Family Group* the ground is visibly wounded. It is pushed to an unstable state in the process of rigorous making. The figures were painted, stained, dripped and scumbled. They were painted in and pulled off, scrubbed, erased and invigorated with an intensity of colour. These were not, however, the figures that are now visible. It was not until the work was turned upside down that the painting suggested a meaningful way forward in the forms that emerged from the paint itself. Some of this process is documented in the photographs on the next page.



7 The title alludes to the initial composition, derived from a formal group photograph taken at my parents' wedding. The mention of a familial group points to the absence of additional figures.

Family Group
2010-11
Oil on canvas
120 x 180 cm



May 2010



August 2010

Family Group (work in progress)
2010-11
Oil on canvas
120 x 180 cm



December 2010



February 2011 (canvas turned upside down)



Family Group (detail), 2010-11. Oil on canvas. Lacerations and protrusions in the paint indicate an uneven surface beneath.



Family Group (detail), 2010-11. Oil on canvas. Side view that shows pools of paint sitting inside crevices that were unintentionally created by pulling off paint.



Family Group (detail), 2010-11. Oil on canvas. Side view at the man's face.

The brutality inflicted on the canvas occurs visibly in the paint. This detail shows the use of the painting medium Liquin[®], applied to forcibly bind the paint to the surface. Sharp transitions from shine to dullness are testament to the abraded surface that has lost its primed layers.

While in this selection of works I have shown the implications of my process on the paint that becomes distressed and sullied or pulls apart; the injury to the canvas as a result of the paint's application is explored in more depth in the next category of works.

8 Liquin is a transparent painting medium commonly used for glazes.

Vestiges of the Body



She Could Not Be There (detail), 2010-11, Oil on canvas, 120 x 180 cm.

In these works the represented figures seem to disappear: scattered across the paintings' surfaces are fragments of the body: half faces, partial torsos, dangling legs and a hanging foot. The figure has not disappeared but its coherence is dispersed across the canvas. The entire ground of the canvas becomes the body: the surface is covered with paint to suggest skin and daubs of thick paint create the bodily viscera.

With one exception, the source materials for these paintings are from photographs of my parents holidaying with my grandparents in the year after my parents were married. They are posed yet informal, often taken on outdoor excursions. The photographs are less the area of investigation in this section than the transitions that occur in the painting.



Maternal Grandmother. 2010-11. Oil on canvas. 120 x 180 cm.

In *Maternal Grandmother* I worked from a photograph of my late maternal grandmother. In the preparatory layers of the painting I achieved a visual likeness in the rendering of her face and dress, and yet the later disruption to this form felt closer to my feelings of loss. Her mole, expressed in impasto paint and pressed out from her cheek, became a tangible signifier of her presence. A similar form is repeated and subsequently severed in other parts of the canvas.

Her body opens up in vestiges across the canvas. These shapes transgress its surface: first as bruising, some dry like scabs, others slightly more viscous; as they become darker and create a sense of depth, they suggest entry into the body's depths. Midway up on the left of the composition a pattern derived from the curtains in the photograph becomes a strange protuberant patch of white paint, redolent of a scar that protrudes from the body's skin.



Maternal Grandmother (detail). 2010-11. Oil on canvas.



Source material for *Maternal Grandmother*.
Photograph of my grandmother, Tilly Lewin. 1976.



Paternal Grandparents, 2010-11. Oil on canvas, 120 x 180 cm.



Source material for *Paternal Grandparents*.
Photograph of my grandparents,
Sonya and Sidney Palte. 1976.



Self-portrait (detail), 2010. Oil on canvas. 120 x 180 cm.

Paternal Grandparents and *Self-Portrait* are informed by the transparency of the outer skin in X-ray imaging. Residues of the figures exist in very thin registers of paint. In *Paternal Grandparents* they appear very fragile, connected by interweaving arms. The horizontal lines on the figure's body suggest the stripes of a shirt or a ribcage. These streaks also suggest the motion of fingers dragging across the surface and thereby imply the touch of my body.

In *Self-portrait*⁹, the figure dissolves in an otherwise open space, leaving only the lower section of the body

and a thin trickle of paint just above the truncated body. This barely visible detail becomes ambiguous and can be read as an intentional linear mark that demarcates an edge of the figure's upper body, or just as a mark within the canvas's ground, as pigment that has separated to the edge of a pool of solvent.

While most of my paintings offer a moment of connection between qualities of the photographic subjects and my own body, *Self-portrait* begins with my body. It offers a play between a representation (and projection) of my body in a photograph and my projection (and representation) of my body in paint. In *A Body of Paint* (overleaf) I let go of the initial subject as represented in the photograph and allow the painting (both as noun and verb) to lead the process.

⁹ This is the only instant in which I have posed for a photograph to create the source material for a painting.



A Body of Paint
2010-11
Oil on canvas
120 x 180 cm



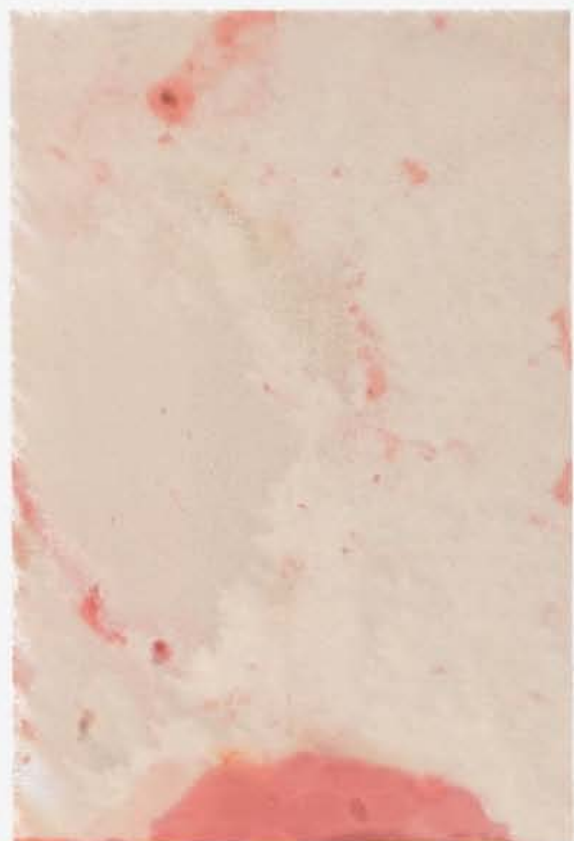


Formally, the title *A Body of Paint*, indicates an expanse of paint on the canvas. Imaginatively the title suggests the painting as a repository for my bodily experience. The distressed surface of the painting manifests conditions of the skin – speckled, freckled, creased and cracking. In the upper right corner of the painting, the paint pulls away from the surface to expose a lighter layer beneath, redolent of peeling skin. Echoes of the blues and purples from an earlier composition seep through to suggest the translucent skin of the inner wrist, barely covering veins just below.

A tactile daub of paint is reminiscent of the weight of a sac of mucous membrane inside the body. The activity on the surface of the paint, however, implies that this is an organ in decay. The failing body expresses the abjection of the subject, reinforced by evocations of the human body that spill out across the surface of the painting.

A Body of Paint (details), 2010-11. Oil on canvas.
Bottom right: A trace of fingerprints on the surface.









Source material for *Family*.

From left to right: My grandfather Sydney, father Jonathan, mother Vicki, grandmother Sonyo and uncle Howard. 1976.

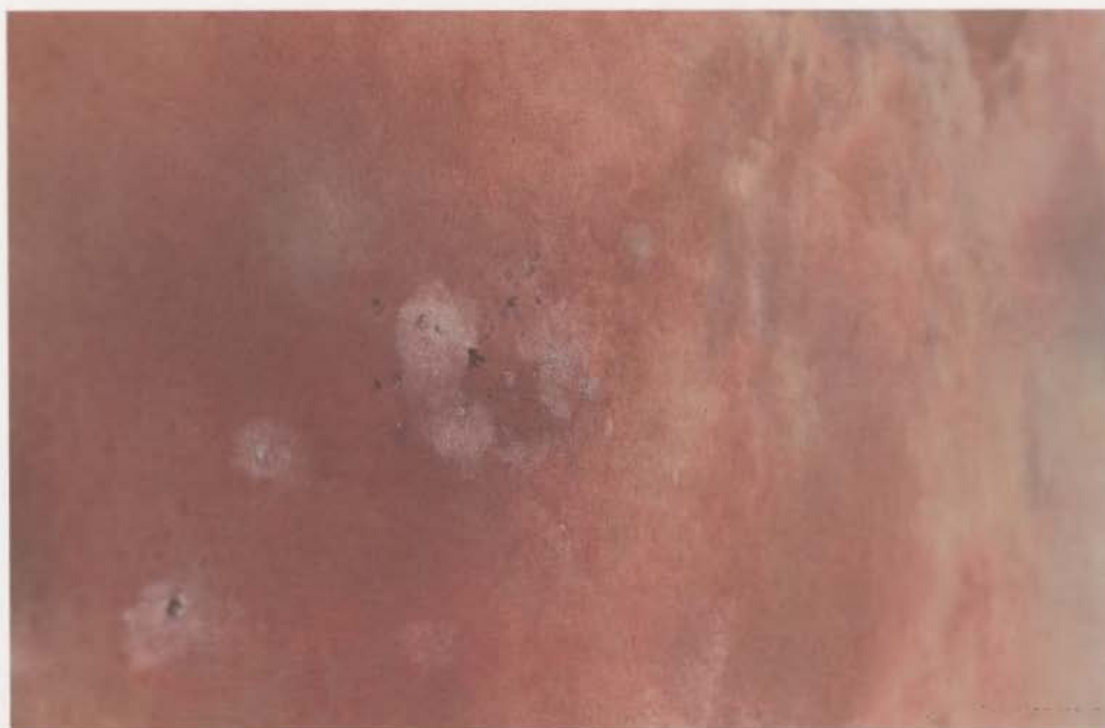
This series of eight smaller canvases, *Family*, is read as one work with a painting of my late grandfather at its heart. While fully clothed in the photograph, his skin is exposed by the painted image. His body melts into liquid, loses its containment and seeps out into the ground, while some forms are restrained, suggesting tumours that might light up in PET scans. The paint on his stomach is severely stained and very agitated to suggest an irritation. In his haunting frailty he brings to mind Richard Avedon's photograph of his father, Jack, which was reproduced at the start of this text. The painting seeks to wound the round body of the photograph and to evoke something of the distress his body experienced before his death.

Previous Page: *Family*
2009-11
Oil on canvas
Eight individual canvases, each 114 x
76 cm
Right: *Family* (detail)





Family (detail). 2009-11. Oil on canvas. Side view shows the body dissolving in paint.



Family (detail). 2009-11. Oil on canvas. This painting, bruised with swirls of agitated paint, appears next to the painting of my grandfather. Side view shows the specks of paint that project from the surface.



to engage with the porosity and damage and was hence rearticulated rather than abandoned. I turned the painting around and re-stretched it to exhibit the physical damage. This canvas occupies a position at the lower left of *Family*. At the bottom of the canvas, I poured paint with solvent onto the unprimed surface. To reconcile the wounding to the canvas, and the associated trauma of the body, I enacted a mark of protection onto this surface, suturing a line in the canvas¹⁰. The stitching becomes a performative event

of healing that inevitably causes further violence as it punctures the canvas (or skin). It enhances the canvas's illusion of corporeality, of something that needs to be held together to prevent its insides from spilling out.

The corporeality of the body then pulls away in this series. The blue paintings (such as the one above) evoke an unknown space. Perhaps they suggest the threshold to and a space beyond the material world, an absence of the body, or a place to contemplate the missing body.

¹⁰ It is the only instance in which I have made such an intervention by introducing a material other than paint (and its agents).

Both pages: *Family* (detail). 2009-11. Oil on canvas.

Top left: Front and back of the canvas that appears above the painting of my grandfather.

Left: The canvas that appears in the bottom left of *Family*. Detail showing the suture in the canvas.

Above: Side view of the canvas that appears to the left of the painting of my grandfather.

This play between presence and absence is seen also in *She Could not be There*. I was mindful of a history of hurt in my mother's family; the distance that my late grandfather created between my uncle, Milton and my late grandmother. I considered my grandmother's absence from my uncle's wedding and tried to 'place' her, surrounded by her grandchildren, into a photograph of my uncle and his bride, Marjorie.

My sense of absence was, however, the overwhelming feeling. After constant reworking, only a bare foot, a little girl's feet and the vestiges of my grandmother's face remain on this canvas. I considered her body as dispersed across the canvas and thus the entire surface becomes an evocation of her skin. In the painting there is an equivocation between the thinness of the skin on the body and the thinness of the paint as a medium which positions the painting at a liminal point between the illusion of human form and actual physical presence. On the left of the painting, below midway, an aperture suggests a space into which one could escape. On a parallel plane to this a hand was transformed into a hanging foot, fragmented by its own brushwork; it suggests a body (her body) that is no longer grounded.

She Could not be There
2010-11
Oil on canvas
160 x 240 cm





She Could not be There (detail). 2010-11. Oil on canvas.

While the play between representation and abstraction, figuration and materiality is played out on the surface of the canvas, there are other aspects to the work that reinforce this ambiguity. The sides of the canvases bear a history of the marks and colours, indecision and uncontrolled paint that has gone before. They reiterate the shifts that have occurred on the front surfaces by revealing a residue of what occurred beneath. They are not a part of the painted image, but are a part of the painting as a whole, retained as a visible element to further disclose the painting process.

This section has recreated many moments in the creative process of *A Wounded Surface: Dissolving the Human Form*. I have explored the disruption to the photographic source material, to the human form, and to the canvas itself. While excited by the creative (and destructive) processes of painting, the forms of paint are always to be read as an experience of a physical body. The body is often absent or palpably absent, signalling a fear of illness and the loss of loved ones. Both formally and philosophically, the experience of being, and being in the family, is dependent on the body's physicality.



Conclusion

In this project I have explored intersecting experiences of family, illness and painting. My way of working was to excavate the surfaces of my family photographs through the act of painting to reveal that which had been concealed; in my family and in my body.

The construction of a carefully posed projection of self in the "familial gaze" offered a starting point for this project. I probed the surface of the formal photograph, turning to my memory for the emotional content not visible in the photograph'. Working against an ideal image of self and family in the formally posed photograph, I considered a shifting and unresolved experience of self, and an often aberrant relation to the family portrayed. What emerged was a concern with the physical failings of the subjects and underlying emotional uncertainties.

I considered a softened edge and indeterminate shapes as giving visual form to physical and emotional uncertainty. The anxious surface of Marlene Dumas's *Martha – Sigmund's wife* revealed a self-doubt in the artist's act of making, visible in the fragmented layers of her painting, with its traces of erasure and reworking. Concerns regarding physical conditions are most evident when the subject of the work is a body, such as in Penny Siopis's *Twins* or in Dumas's *Dead Girl*. The collapse of the distinction between figure and ground emerges here as both a philosophical and formal concern. In *Twins*, the skin that touches the skin of the other was perceived as a place of connection. The dissolving boundary of Dumas's painted body, on the other hand, created a condition for abjection as the body lost the containment which had given it definition. The X-ray in Claude Gandelman's "haptics in extremis" breached the skin to grant access to the (fragile) inner body. Transparency emerges as synonymous with revelation, showing working processes, layers of paint and the inner body.

In my painting, the human form is shown not only as image but as directly engaged with the body through its materiality. The disruption of a clear figure / ground relationship denies the canvas its traditional role as

bearer of image and representation of pictorial space. As the figure of the human body spreads its coherence across the surface of the canvas, spaces of depth are suggested within the body, not as ground. This becomes an apparently increasingly abstract language, and yet it remains deeply figurative as the distinction between the representation of skin and the treatment of the painted surface become indistinguishable.

The X-ray as a medical technique offered an entry point into my visual explorations of the body, and yet the X-ray as the medium of an art conservator concerned with the longevity of a painting might offer an end point. An imaginative diagnosis of the failing surfaces and *pentimenti* of my paintings, projected onto and experienced as second skin, uncover experiences (of illness and memory) stored in my body in a manner that conflates what is felt with what is seen.

1 This is an imaginative act. There is, of course, nothing behind the singular physical surface of the photograph.

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List of Images

Photographs of my work: Vanessa Cowling. 2011.
(with the exception of work in progress photographs, which are my own.)

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