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# Violence and trauma and the influence of Francis Bacon in the paintings of Robert Hodgins

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**2012-01-18**
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# Violence and Trauma and the Influence of Francis Bacon in the Paintings of Robert Hodgins.

Nathan Jansen van Vuuren.
2011

I declare that this is my own unaided work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

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Nathan Jansen van Vuuren

Date ……

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# Acknowledgments

I dedicate this thesis to Tarryn and Rob.
Special thanks to Walter, for all your support throughout.

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# Table of Contents

Abstract ..... 1
Introduction ..... 2
Chapter 1: Trauma Theory and the Affective Encounter in Art ..... 20
Chapter 2: Traumatic Illusionism ..... 38
Chapter 3: Hodgins and Bacon: More real than reality ..... 57
Chapter 4: A Moment of Recognition ..... 91
Conclusion ..... 119
Bibliography ..... 123

**List of Illustrations**

A Beast Slouches (1986) ..... 4
A wicked man sumptuously attired (1996) ..... 25
Old School Blazer (1982) ..... 45
Lacan's graph of Visualality ..... 50
The object of our desire (1999) ..... 55
Various wounds (1999) ..... 60
Black Man White Man (1998/2000) ..... 71
Ubu and the Black Politician (large version) (1983) ..... 77
Ubu - Man About Town (1997) ..... 78
Ubu and the Commanders in Chief (1981/82) ..... 79
Ubu Interrogator 1 (1983) ..... 80
Boardroom Series I (1994) ..... 83
Boardroom Series II (1994) ..... 84
Boardroom Series III (1994) ..... 85
Boardroom Series IV (1994) ..... 86
Boardroom Series V (1994) ..... 87
Untitled: Figure 1 (2009) ..... 91
Head 1 (2010) ..... 102
Head 2 (2010) ..... 103

.

Head 3 (2010) ..... 104
Untitled: Figure 2 (2010) ..... 107
Shoes (2009) ..... 108
Chair (2009) ..... 109
Flowers (2009) ..... 110
Rabbits (2009) ..... 112
Veil (2009) ..... 113
Portrait (2009) ..... 114
Untitled (2010) ..... 115
Untitled (2010) ..... 116
Untitled (2010) ..... 117
Untitled (2010) ..... 118

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## Abstract

In this research I critically examine features of violence and the related notion of trauma as articulated through visual-formal language in the figurative paintings of contemporary South African artist Robert Hodgins. The significant influence of Francis Bacon pertaining to these themes is considered in examining Hodgins' presentation of the human body within extremes. Both artists' paintings focus on the human figure and allude to violence and the experience of trauma in their iconography but I also examine their expressive handling of medium as critical to reading such artworks in terms of trauma. I examine recent trauma theory and its application to the visual arts to locate my discussion around Hodgins' paintings as approaching trauma through certain affective dynamics. I then examine Hal Foster's analysis of Andy Warhol's *Death in America* images and how the concept of trauma and affect are seen to be significantly internal to such artworks. I subsequently consider how Hodgins' paintings may be seen to address psychological trauma as an experience of an event that the subject cannot fully integrate into his/her experience. My primary aim is to investigate the strategies and approaches which Hodgins employs and how the works are realised as a transmittable language of sensation through the visual medium of paint and its subsequent affect. As such it is an enquiry into how Hodgins' paintings can be seen to embody experience. In a final chapter I discuss my own concerns in the paintings submitted towards this degree in light of the above.

## Introduction

South African painter Robert Hodgins (1920-2010) developed a complex visual style which one could say was borrowed from a well of painterly styles from various art historical sources and he devised and refined a visual language that is best described by instinctive mark making, but always characterised by calculated choices and adjustments. As an intuitive painter practicing over many years he understood the subtleties and limits of his medium. Marion Arnold (1986: unpaginated) comments on Hodgins' paintings as being both intellectual and emotional and her text is supplemented with a quote from Hodgins that reveals his tremendous passion for painting:

> They are products of a disciplined knowledge of the craft of making art, and the art of transforming life into paint. His own preferences for certain artists' work reveals something of Hodgin's artistic personality: '...you know, what's fascinating about Rembrandt or Daumier is to see the enormous passion being put into drawing or painting, but also being aware of the organising intelligence that is working at full blast as well. And it's this combination of the two that always has fascinated me. The really passionate painter is using his brain like it's a part of the passion. That, to me, is marvellous.'

I had the privilege of having regular meetings with Robert Hodgins over the last months of his life to discuss his work and interview him. He passed away in March 2010 following a diagnosis of lung cancer a few months earlier. He loved painting and loved to talk. In fact he was far more interested in sharing the latest gossip pertaining to the art world than talking about his work. Most of my recordings of interviews contain anecdotes from his youth or humorous stories about his two dogs.

In her recently published book *South African Art Now*, Sue Williamson (2009: 186) introduces Robert Hodgins as follows:

> Often called South Africa's 'King of the Canvas' and self-described as 'an optimistic old sod', Robert Hodgins occupies a hallowed place in South African contemporary art. Massively prolific, his works, characterized by

> fluid brush strokes, seem like visual versions of stream-of-consciousness language, occurring almost as compulsively as thought itself pours from the brain. Yet they consist of complex themes and sophisticated painting techniques. Although he had been painting since the 1950s, British-born Hodgins came to prominence on the South African art scene during the 1980s. His acerbic, Francis Bacon-influenced critiques of power like *A Beast Slouches* 1986 presented an image of the apartheid state as a lumbering colossus, taxed by guilt and uncertainty.

In my conversations with Hodgins about his work he constantly referred to aspects of Bacon's paintings, from the early crucifixion images to the later more subdued portraits. Bacon was clearly the artist who had the strongest impact on Hodgins' work but he also spoke of other major painters such as Goya, Guston, Picasso and El Greco. His interest in Bacon went beyond his painterly style and expressive, emotive painting. Hodgins sought out the intimate details of his life. He knew the details about his lovers, his major successes and failures and showed a particular interest in Bacon's later work which he considered good but also criticized for being too soft and serene in comparison to the more angst-ridden early paintings. Hodgins would often speak about Bacon's attitude toward painting and life as a kind of affirmative rebellion and independence. He (Personal communication, 4 April 2009) would describe Bacon's attitude as that of a nineteenth century aristocrat, a "fuck you, I'm going to do what I please, thank you very much" attitude.

In his painting *A Beast Slouches* (1986) we see a work that epitomizes Hodgins' powerful command over the medium of paint and as in many of his paintings the influence of Bacon is certainly evident. In its wounded and deformed appearance, the figure depicted recalls many of Bacon's similarly distorted figures and the bandage suggests the bondage and containment that features in many of Bacon's works (to be discussed further later on). The brushwork also recalls Bacon's haphazard brush strokes which he often used in the initial stages of a painting to evoke an image or figure from his unconscious. Besides Bacon, Hodgins was also keenly aware of German Expressionist painting and strong influences of Otto Dix and George



*A Beast Slouches* (1986), oil on canvas, 1117.5 x 170 cm.

Gross are also detectable in this painting, notably in the use of strongly delineated forms and distorted figures.

*A Beast slouches* is one of the first paintings executed by Hodgins after retiring from his teaching post at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. By looking at a painted triptych that Bacon considered to be his first mature work, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) [1] certain similarities become evident. As in Hodgins' *A Beast Slouches*, these three paintings each contain a distorted figure with features of open mouths, bandaging and crouching poses. Scala (2009: 32-33) comments on Bacon's paintings as follows:

> The creative process and its effects are famously described by the artist in terms of injury done to the body: "Painting is like one continuous accident mounting on top of another," whence the battered image emerges from a "coagulation of non-representational marks." Although Bacon claims to avoid story line in favour of painterly techniques that "come onto the nervous system much more strongly," he also enacts a narrative of pain inflicted from without – torsos that have been lashed, faces bruised or squished into submission, bandaged limbs, and muscles twisted and gripped. As with beauty, the perception of abjectness lies in the eye of the beholder; Bacon's work blurs the distinction between horror and aesthetic pleasure.

I would like to focus specifically on the central panel as I believe this yields the most significant comparative detail. It contains a limb-less figure propped up high on a linear apparatus above a stool-like form, not too dissimilar to Hodgins' slouching beast which is supported by an inverted mine head in the form of a prosthetic leg. Hodgins' creature seems to have amputated limbs and in both paintings the body is thus reduced to a somewhat simplified form. In Bacon's painting a dark shadow delineates the underside of the body with a half-crescent defining the back of the figure. The most extreme protrusion describes an extended neck looping off the body to the left, reflecting the sweeping curves that define the body. Hodgins' work features more broken lines, abrupt slicing of limbs and the use of opposing colours to render the beast. The head

[1] To view an image of *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) see: http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=674&tabview=image

appears rather stump-like with only the mouth suggesting some form of facial feature. Bacon's three figures do not loom like a colossus as Hodgins' beast does and they seem to be painted in an orange interior, thus signifying an enclosed space. Bacon's title also states that the figures are sitting at the base of a crucifixion rather than hulking over a landscape. Most significantly, this image, like Hodgins' beast, features bandaging which could be read as a blindfold loosely draped over the beast's head or eyes. In Hodgins' painting it appears on the stump of the beast's right arm but the head looks similarly covered or wrapped by something.

*A Beast slouches* has been widely interpreted as a strong response to the tension felt during the volatile political climate just prior to the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa. Hodgins himself was quoted as follows below a reproduction of this image in the book *Panoramas of Passage: Changing Landscapes of South Africa* (1995):

> Johannesburg is a mining town promoted to a city. But all around is the mining town's history. Among such mementi are great stretches of crystalline, seemingly saline sterility through which traffic threads like ant-lines. Against this lurches the beast who is a travesty of the great Michelangelo, with a bandaged arm that is also a wounded penis, supported by a prosthetic device which is, in fact, an inverted and disused mine head, the sort that still litters Johannesburg's historical landscape (48).

Painted in 1986, a time of heightened political violence and oppression from the apartheid regime, it is inevitably read as a response to the trauma and tension of the time and in an interview with Ivor Powell, Hodgins parallels what he was feeling at the time with the same tensions he was so aware of before the second world war:

> I have a sense of the prelude to the thirties all over again. In so many ways. A kind of ruthlessness about politics. A ruthlessness in personal relationships. A kind of slight panic in the air that forces one to be ruthless. I feel that the eighties are going to be terribly like the thirties. Lets hope to God they don't end up the in the same way! This is the first time I've known that feeling of the thirties back again. That feeling abroad when I was just coming into adolescence and early manhood, that awful sense of

> panic, that sense that people are going to do dreadful things because of their panicking [...] (Powell, 1984: 36).

Powell (1996: 11) notes the impact of Hodgins' painting during this time, notably his paintings of the Ubu[2] character that features in Alfred Jarry's Theatre of the Absurd:

> To those living in South Africa at the time, Hodgins' Ubu provided some of the most potent – and most imitated – of images produced of the human condition in a country torn apart by internal conflicts. They expressed a quality of disgust, a wasteland of values that were deeply resonate of the time. Although few of the paintings actually refered directly to what was happening in South Africa.

As well as being a specific response to the immediate public conditions in South Africa, *A Beast Slouches* resonates just as much in deeply personal, private experience. Hodgins (Personal communication, 15 January 2010) once commented: "my work is a reaction to the atrocities and abuse of power in the 20th century, if I were to summarize…".

The canvas is dominated by the hulking figure bent-over a landscape. The general emanation of colour is grey with washed whites and touches of blue creating the sterile landscape that Hodgins refers to. Where there is flesh it is rendered in pink, ochre-pink and red applied with a rather dry brush. The painting portrays an apocalyptic scene, the wounded giant stumbling across the landscape. In this sense Hodgins' image is

[2] In a interview with Ivor Powell (1996:1) Hodgins speaks of Ubu as follows: " Ubu is himself not only ignoble, he is a familiar historical figure: the clown in power, the clown who seems so funny that it's easy to forget he is evil…Nero, Goering, Idi Amin…In making a series of paintings based on this play (Ubu Roi), what was then available was a sense that Ubu could be taken out of his place in Jarry's work and shown as anything from viciously triumphant to merely foolish." The following quotation aptly addresses Alfred Jarry and his character of Ubu Roi: "The plays of Alfred Jarry are considered by many to be the first dramatic works of the theatre of the absurd. They are credited with a great number of literary innovations and are seen as major influences of the dada and symbolist movements in art. *Ubu Roi* (translated as *King Ubu* and *King Turd*) is Jarry's most famous work. *Ubu Roi* eliminates the dramatic action from its Shakespearean antecedents and uses scatological humor and farce to present Jarry's views on art, literature, politics, the ruling classes, and current events.*Ubu Roi* first saw life as schoolboy farce, a parody of Felix Hebert, one of Jarry's teachers. Co-authored with his friend, Henri Morin, the skit was transformed into a marionette play through several versions. In 1891, Jarry published a story, ''Guignol,'' reminiscent of the Punch and Judy performances popular throughout Europe, which showcased a vile and murderous Pere Ubu. A two-act version of *Ubu Roi* with songs for marionettes, *Ubu sur la Batte*, appeared in print in 1906."
http://www.enotes.com/ubu-roi

somewhat reminiscent of Goya's *The Colossus* (1811)[3] painted during the violent era of the French invasions of Spain in the early nineteenth century. The enormous body of a giant is depicted standing or walking through a landscape. In Goya's painting the body of the giant takes up the centre of the canvas and could be seen to be buried up to his knees or else standing amongst the mountains. His posture looks aggressive, especially the clenched fist, and his eyes seem to be closed, possibly representing blind violence. Small figures are seen fleeing in all directions to escape from this giant and act as a dramatic contrast to his size.

As already pointed out, the beast in Hodgins' painting has his right leg amputated at the hip and replaced with a colossal prosthetic support in the form of an upturned mine head. There is a sense that it is almost buckling under the pressure of the weight of the enormous body above it. The mine head is painted in crude black lines that look more drawn than painted. The stump of the leg looks as if it is bundled in cloth and is delineated in similar black line to that of the support. The left leg stretches forward and appears brawny in its musculature. The red marks suggest straining ligaments in the groin and the resulting bulging of an upper thigh. Ochre-pink and red marks suggest a knee bone and black and grey marks provide additional structure to the leg in Hodgins' characteristically economical way. The lower leg seems flattened out and strangely fragmented. A white triangular shape appears like a slice halfway down the calf and is reinforced by a thick, short black line. Further black lines are used to indicate the beginnings of the foot and a thin black line defines the spine in the back and the outline of the mass of the left shoulder. Emphasis is achieved by a thicker line under the arm pit and the shoulder of the right amputated arm. The left arm supports the bulk of the body and hand and fingers are roughly sketched by way of short, dry red lines.

The head of the beast appears helmet-like and bruised in its red colouring. The facial features are simplified and indistinct and there appears to be wounding as indicated by diagonal and vertical slashing across the face. Black lines are drawn down into the

[3] For an image of *The Colossus (1811)* see: http://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/the-colossus/

neck and continue as streaks down the back. One eye is discernable through what appears to be a caged or strapped structure across the face and gives the head an appearance of the mythical Cyclops. A mouth-like form with white spots suggesting teeth appears below the eye but may also read as a second eye in its similar structure and coloration to the other eye.

As Hodgins himself notes, the amputated arm with its red tip resembles a penis wrapped in bandages. A loose end of bandaging trails off at the elbow. Along the horizon of the landscape we see a procession of vehicles, the "traffic that threads like ants" that Hodgins refers to and which contrast dramatically against the vast scale of the beast. A truck on the bottom right corner has the letters 'FAM' painted in red. Hodgins (Personal communication, 11 April 2009) suggested that this might refer to famine but was not explicit about it. Rayda Becker (2002: 38-39) describes this procession of vehicles as reminiscent of a trail of refuges and goes on to say about the painting as a whole that "[t]his is not some polite alteration, but a distortion that can only be described - and understood - in the vernacular of war. Colours are harsh and unpleasant". A light blue area above this line of vehicles could be read as a hillside and a darker blue area defines the sky behind the back of the figure.

In our very first conversation about this work Hodgins (Personal communication, 11 April 2009) commented that this painting always comes back to haunt him and added that "...it involves history without my knowing it was about history". This comment suggests that Hodgins arrived at imagery in an unconscious or intuitive way, i.e. images seemed to filter through from memories and recollections. The figure of the beast was triggered somewhere deep in Hodgins' memory and is also reminiscent of William Blake's depiction of Nebuchadnezzar,[4] an image that Hodgins recalled from his childhood. It was commonly used in London as an anti-liquor campaign poster and as he said: "I saw it without looking at it." The amputated arm, resembling a bandaged

[4] In chapter 4 of the biblical book of Daniel is the account of King Nebuchadnezzar. Interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the prophet Daniel announces that the king, due to his pride, will "be driven away from people and live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched in due from heaven." (Daniel 4: 25, New International Version). The interpretation comes to realisation and for seven years king Nebuchadnezzar is like a beast of the field.

penis, reminded Hodgins only on completion of the painting of an event from 1942 when he was serving the British army in Alexandria, Egypt. One of Hodgins' friends was a brothel frequenter, a place "...which was very, very squalid". On having visited this brothel and in order not to be demoted, it was common practice for soldiers to "...wrap one's cock in a piece of medicated paper to protect oneself from VD." That particular soldier, after wrapping his penis in this medicated paper, went out to meet some family members at a popular tea spot in Alexandria. As was the custom of the day, men wore very short pants and unfortunately some of the paper had unravelled, hanging loose out the bottom of his shorts. Needless to say, all who observed this, including the man's family, knew what he had been up to (Personal communication, 11 April 2009).

Violence and trauma are implied in this image on several levels as I have tried to point out in my description above. It is an image that was produced at a time of violence and political tention in South Africa. Violence appears to have been enacted on the beast itself, his amputation and the bandaging of his arm/penis and the mangled face attest to this. It is an image that came from the depths of Hodgins' memory and emerged through the physical act of painting – a body memory of a wound that perhaps the mind had almost forgotten.

Before embarking on further discussion of Hodgins' paintings and the influence of Francis Bacon I will sketch a brief background to both artists' careers and point out some of the similarities of interests that they shared. Robert Hodgins was born in England on the 27 of June 1920, grew up working class and was schooled in London. Hodgins' exposure to the visual arts happened by accident and at a young age. During the long school holidays he found himself often locked out of home and wandered into art galleries and museums, because they were "…free, warm and dry". Hodgins describes these first encounters with art as fragmentary and almost frivolous as there was nobody else there to talk about such things (Hodgins, 2002: 22). Hodgins later met his great uncle from South Africa who insisted that he come and live there and provided the finance for the trip. At the age of eighteen he arrived in Cape Town, South Africa, where he worked as an insurance clerk and completed his matric in the evenings. When

World War 2 broke out he served in Alexandria, Egypt, in the transport division of the British army, despite being unable to drive a car. It was in the army where Hodgins, for the first time in his life, met people who took the arts seriously (ibid: 25).

In Alexandria he was introduced to the household of Georges de Menasche, a very rich couple who were serious collectors of art and owned a grand library. Both were admired by Hodgins. Hodgins was then transferred to England to run a camp for 'non-white' escapees from prison of war camps (ibid: 26). After he was discharged he began teaching art at the age of twenty six whilst attending Goldsmiths College. He initially attended evening classes but later on studied full-time, majoring in painting. In fulfillment of Goldsmiths requirements, Hodgins rigorously drew and painted nudes. This formal grounding in observational study of the human form continued to be a major drive and theme in his work. In 1954 he returned to South Africa as he had received a teaching post and began working as an art teacher at the Pretoria Technical School of Art. He continued to paint, having his first solo exhibition in Johannesburg. He then changed career to become a journalist writing for a magazine called *Newscheck*. In 1966 he returned to teaching art, now at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, which he continued for seventeen years. Since his retirement he committed himself to painting and produced some of his most provocative paintings in the climate of South Africa's recent history. Rayda Becker (2002: 39) comments:

> When he returned to painting, he abandoned the generic art-school nudes, and moved from simply imagining the beautiful towards arousing unease, and into the violent and distorted imagery with which we are familiar today.

Hodgins has been compared to the likes of Walter Batiss and Irma Stern and in his stature as a dominant figure in the field of South African painting he has even been considered by some, before his death, to be South Africa's greatest living painter. (Atkinson, 2002:12; Geers, 2002: 68).

Francis Bacon (1909-1992), was born in Dublin to English parents, Christina Winifred Bacon and Capitan Anthony Edward Mortimer Bacon. His father claimed collateral

decent form the Elizabethan philosopher, Francis Bacon (Peppiatt, 2006: 163). Francis Bacon was sent away from his family to London after his authoritarian father caught him trying on his mother's underwear[5]. Bacon went on to stay in Berlin, then in Paris where he saw Picasso's biomorphic images which greatly influenced his work. Bacon returned to London around 1929 and established himself as a furniture, tapestry and rug designer. He would regarly use his tubular furniture designs to present his distorted figures in his paintings later on in life. In the 1930's Bacon painted a series of significant works including some crucifixions and in 1934 he held his first one man show which failed to spur much interest. As a result Bacon gave himself over to gambling and other vices. A further rejection of his work from the International Surrealist Exhibition held in London in 1936 caused Bacon to spiral into depression and he destroyed a great portion of his existing works and painted very little until 1944. In 1944 Bacon painted *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* which caused an outcry when exhibited the following year at the Lefevre Gallery.

Bacon continued throughout his life to paint strong, violent images that pulsate with flat colour and twisted figures. He is now known as one of the best English, twentieth-century, post-war, figurative painters and is considered by some to be the most distinguished figurative painter of his time. Amin Zweite (2006: 9) provides the following description of his work:

> When you look at the paintings of Francis Bacon, you encounter depictions of human bodies twisting, melting away and in some cases dissolving. Sometimes several figures are locked in a struggle, in other instances human mingles with animal. Bacon focuses on rendering the physical presence of flesh in paint, avoiding the anecdotal and narrative. He presents bodies that are damaged and frail looking, though they can at the same time exude vitality and aggression […] Characteristic of his work

[5] Bacon had a terrible relationship with his father: " Bacon père had died in 1940, but memories of this threatening, tyrannical presence would not have faded, all the more so because, as Francis freely admitted, the brutal Captain had been the first man to arouse his sexual feelings". Bacon's father found Bacon too feminine for his liking and had his asthmatic son whipped by his stud farm grooms. Peppiatt asks the questions if this early experience may have contributed to the sadomasochism that would later define his sexuality (Peppiatt: 2006: 35).

> are far-reaching transformations of received ideas about picture making and a decided aversion to any kind of illusionism.

Bacon's subject and principal theme was, as with Hodgins, the human body, occasionally venturing beyond the human body to exploring painting animals and landscapes. Bacon never painted from life but rather appropriated images from the mass media, found books and journals. Most notably, Bacon was particularly interested in and used photographic plates from Eadweard Muybridge's *The Human Figure in Motion* (1955/1907)[6] as a stable of references for his many studies based on the human form. Bacon compounded Muybridge's photographic images with the drawings of Michelangelo of which he acquired many reproductions that he also used and manipulated as preliminary studies for major paintings. Scala (2009: 31) comments that "Bacon […] only rendered portraits of people he knew intimately […] but exceptionally, he used photographs so as not to be inhibited by the "injury I do to them" as he sloughed off their effigies." Violence and brutality are central to Bacon's art although he never intended or even admitted his work to being horrific. On imagery of butcheries, crucifixions and wounds, themes he considered common to all humanity and a part of daily reality, he commented the following:

> The violence in my life […] it's different to the violence of painting […] it's to do with an attempt to remake the violence of reality itself […] it's the violence also of the suggestions within the image itself which can be conveyed through paint (Sylvester, 1980: 81).

Scala (2009: 32) furthermore comments as follows on Bacon's treatment of the figure:

[6] The website of the Nation Museum for media in the United Kingdom summarises Muybridge as follows: "Eadweard Muybridge produced the first rapid sequences of instantaneous photographs, capturing animals and people in motion, and his work in taking and projecting such photographs led to the invention of motion pictures. His books Animals in Motion (1899) and The Human Figure in Motion (1901) are still the basic references on the movements and gaits of many animals." http://www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk/~/media/Files/NMeM/PDF/Collections/Cinematography/PioneersOfEarlyCinemaMuybridge.ashx

> Splayed and deliquescent, [he] reduces it to the bloody consistency of meat. Bacon's statement that "we are all potential carcasses" was a realistic assessment of the unprecedented brutality of our time. He lived through the civil uprising of the Sinn Fein movement in Ireland, where he was born; the carnage of the two World Wars; and the implicit threat of societal violence directed toward homosexuals like himself. Bacon depicted the body in pain, not only the existential pain of humanity articulated by philosophers in the aftermath of World War II but also the somatic experience of hurt that is, in turn, powerfully evoked in the individual viewer. With representations of flesh in extremis, Bacon established the premise for a modernist aesthetic of empathy [...] What he called the "tightrope" between figurative painting and abstraction gives rise to the heightened perception of our own bodies as percipient and susceptible to harm. "With oil painting being so fluid," he stated, "the image is changing all the time while you're working. One thing either builds on another or destroys the other." That he enacted the struggle between creation and obliteration on the human form redoubles the startling effect of aliveness in the viewer.

Bacon's production was driven by two deep-seated positions, the first being an atheist belief that man is an accident and needs to make his own significance and the second being his fundamental position as a painter; he sought to address the problem of existence in a godless world where photography had taken over as the main form of representation (Gale & Stephens, 2008: 14).

Both Bacon's and Hodgins' work involves a process of sublimation, sublimation as a cognitive process involved in the processing of traumatic experience, of the formal-expressive languages of paint and the suggestions of the painted image derived form photography or memory. The site thereof, for both artists, is the body; much of their pictorial language and painterly devices involve a rupturing, altering transformation and re-configuring of the human form. These features can be conceptualised as a breed of wounding upon the painted body. David Sylvester (cited in Scala, 2009: 32) refers to Bacon's rendering of his figures as "arising out of their own flesh."

Hodgins' paintings are known for their rich use of strong, even psychedelic, colour. He often used burning yellows, hot reds, and acid greens to produce works that present the body in extreme states. His figures, whether a sumptuously soft, pink nude, a fat-faced

businessman, or a political tyrant, are frequently shown to be exposed to conditions and experiences implying violence and the experience of trauma. These instances are alluded to in the representation of war and revolution, wounding, missing limbs, nooses, and blood. But beyond these representations, the trauma and violence may also be seen to be inscribed in the various viscosities of paint and nuances of colour suggesting flesh or bodily fluids. Even the often vast, flat absences of colour in many of his canvases may prompt something like the unconscious of the traumatic.[7]

The works of Hodgin's which I intend to discuss do not necessarily illustrate literal violence or trauma, but rather often allude to sensorial, emotive sub-currents. Thus violence or trauma also refers to the affective processes of the psychological or residue psychosomatic, thereby alluding to the sensory, the emotive, and the intellectual. Whether representational or engendered through the autobiographic mark, these themes are generated through his considerable skill and engagement with the medium of paint. I intend to explore the emotive or affective operations in Hodgins' artworks and consider the strategies and approaches which he employs to inscribe the works as a realized, transmittable language of sensation through the visual medium of paint. By examining contemporary theories of trauma discourse within the visual arts I will elucidate the possibility and operations of these ideas, as well as where they may lead in interpreting Hodgins' paintings.

Through the 'otherness' of paint[8] or the particular qualities thereof, the concept of violence in Hodgins' paintings can be said to be a 'removed' violence, as he himself (2002:18) states:

[7] Bennett (2005:1) speaks of works that evoke the process of post-traumatic memory but manage to avoid being classified as a trauma work because of this evocation of 'after the fact' realization, the dogging, removed realization of memory. The work may seem to be about something entirely different. The trauma is not apparent within the narrative line of the works, if narration exists, nor within indented meaning of the art work, "[…] but in a certain affective dynamic internal to the work."

[8] The otherness of painting refers to the property of painting to suggest something outside of cognitive visual reality, but not outside of reality itself, that can only be expressed through the visual formal languages of painting. The reason this is isolated within painting is because these languages are essentially painterly, that is they speak of painting and are developed through painting, thus it can be said that they have developed through the field and history of painting.

> […] it suddenly occurred to me that the violence I paint is always removed. It is always somewhere else in history, somewhere else in geography […] it's not in South Africa, or even in Africa.

I propose that it is largely a violence of vision; the figures or characters are often seen as dismembered, deboned, or in some way ruptured and evacuated but by no known physical means other than through the act of painting, i.e. in the unique treatment of the figurative image in his paintings. As Atkinson (2002: 18) puts it, Hodgins has a distinct ability to "produce chillingly effective visual instances of the archetypal unconscious," that is, in his painting he is able to knit together meaning that is common to certain forms, yet unspecific in a way that the horrors we may perceive in his works have no claim to any one person or event. This notion ties in with contemporary trauma discourses within the visual arts, as I will demonstrate in the ensuing chapters. In particular, the context of psychological response or condition, as suggested through the viewing of his works, will be examined alongside trauma discourses in considering how his work can be seen to be able to embody experience.

Trauma is compounded with, and will be negotiated alongside, concepts of memory or, more specifically, 'sense' or 'extraordinary' memory. Traumatic memory implies a state of shock or numbness, thus a remove from the literal events of the trauma or violence experienced, as Jill Bennett (2005: 38) explains:

> [...] sense memory is about tapping a certain kind of process experienced not as remembering of the past but a continuous negotiation of a present with indeterminable links to the past.

The affective response to violence and trauma which I will address in my discussion of Hodgins' and Bacon's paintings is situated within trauma discourse and its recent application to the visual arts. Of particular importance is Jill Bennett's book *Emphatic Vision* (2005), in which she explores the operations of affective artworks and the affective nature of visual language. Aligning with such current theories of trauma discourse within the visual arts which address affective responses to artworks, I will

investigate the extent to which these artworks, which may or may not directly address trauma, hold the possibility to parallel or even mimic the process of traumatic memory.

In Chapter One I examine trauma theory and its recent application in the visual arts. I begin by considering how trauma theory can be seen to address ways in which to approach the complexities of trauma, mourning and history in contemporary culture and how such theories may relate to my examination of Hodgins' work. Focusing specifically on the emotive encounter in art, this chapter addresses the complex relationship between trauma and artistic representation, acknowledging art as a carrier of emotive energy. Trauma studies address the psychological workings of trauma and of how and where art and trauma interface and have offered a language that attempts to explore the unspeakable and to understand what some artworks do in terms of "bearing the imprint" of trauma, affect or emotion (Bennett, 2005: 23). Viewing trauma as a mode of interpretation, Jill Bennett and Roseanne Kennedy point out similarities between the psychic experience of trauma and certain aesthetic forms and discuss traumatic memory in terms of how it is applicable to painting. I discuss Hodgins' work as approaching trauma through certain affective dynamics that come across through the use of his medium and discuss his work *A wicked man sumptuously attired* (1996) to illustrate this. The unsettling and abject nature of this painting speaks of extreme material sensation conveyed through painterly qualities. Cathy Caruth's observations on the repetitive nature of traumatic experience and Grizelda Pollock's comparison of psychoanalysis to archaeological excavation with regard to the location of repressed memories are briefly discussed in relation to certain 'charged fragments' identified in Hodgins' paintings that speak of traumatic memory function as a confrontational 'jolt' in the present.

In Chapter Two I follow a close reading of Hal Foster's *Return of the Real* (1996). In his text Foster uses the concept of trauma to theorize the compulsive aspects of Andy Warhol's repetitive images of car crashes in his well-known *Death in America* series of silkscreens on canvas. I consider Foster's analysis of traumatic realism in addressing the aspects of shocked subjectivity and compulsive repetition in Warhol's work in

relation to Hodgins' fixation on bodies and heads as the object of trauma. Foster suggests that illusionism may be interpreted in terms of trauma and relates psychoanalytic theory to the visual arts through Lacan's theory of visuality and the gaze. He addresses a shift in conception and in practice in contemporary art from reality seen as an "affect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma" (1996: 146). I argue that Hodgins' work can be seen to reveal the 'real' in this sense through the way in which his work can be seen to 'rupture' and 'tear' to reveal something of the 'real' as described by Foster. I examine selected paintings of Hodgins to highlight the emotional register in his work and how a penetration of the 'real' can be seen to occur. Hodgins' and Bacon's human figures display a 'troubled' subjecthood - bodies ravaged by the real, the traumatic. In discussing Hodgins' painting *Various Wounds* (1999) I point out the deep connections between his paintings and Bacon's in articulating ambiguous form, the violation of the body and the tyranny of the gaze.

Chapter Three focuses more closely on the influence of Francis Bacon on Hodgins' work. Both artists' painting processes are similarly steeped in the unconscious and influenced to an extent by surrealism. The distortion of the human form deployed as a kind of pictorial innovation characterises both artists' works, but in response to very different impulses. Whilst I identify such similarities, I also point out that Hodgins' painting is in several respects very different to Bacon's. Hodgins' work is more poetic, seductive and even lyrical in approach to the medium of paint than Bacon's tougher, more uncompromising and even brash in handling. Yet both artists seem to be after a similar end in exploring the embodiment of feeling through form and material in testing the emotive constructs of painting. For Hodgins the character of Ubu facilitated a new expressive intensity in his painting, allowing a raw emotiveness to come to the fore.

Chapter 4 addresses my own creative work submitted for this degree and the influence of both Bacon's and Hodgins' approaches to painting. I start off by discussing Bacon's use of accident as a crucial means for production in deliberately provoking randomness to arrive at an unpredictable outcome. Such an engagement with chance and contingency is equally at play in the works of Hodgins and I have learnt a great deal

from my conversations with him in seeking out my own painterly language and approach to an expressive use of the medium of paint. In my work I try to work around the opposing ideas of 'rupture' and 'numbness', i.e. a sense of disruption that carries emotive impact and an opposite sense of deprivation of feeling to create images that have a quiet and melancholic intensity. The paintings of Michaël Borremans have also interested me in their imaginative use of a naturalistic painterly language while also disrupting and undermining the illusionism to a certain extent. My approach to this body of work submitted for the MA in Fine Arts degree was strongly influenced by Hodgins' suggestion to find a way of creating a moment of recognition out of a moment of irrationality which I took on in reverse in taking a moment of recognition (the idea of the likeness of a recognisable portrait) in order to create a moment of irrationality.

In my conclusion I draw together the ideas explored in this research and reflect on how I have positioned Hodgins' work in discussing trauma as a veiled and emotive undercurrent to his paintings. My consideration of trauma theory as a language that provides insight into the workings of artworks that deal with issues of trauma is aimed to throw some light on how Hodgins' works can be viewed in such terms.

## Chapter One: Trauma Theory and the Affective Encounter in Art

In this chapter I focus on theories that may throw some light on the affective operations of the paintings of Robert Hodgins. More than sentiment or emotional attachment that one may feel for works of art, I seek to probe for legitimate seats of emotion/affect present in reading into the paintings of Robert Hodgins. Recent theories in 'trauma studies' pose the most intriguing case for affect in visual art and present important ideas, particularly in conveying and structuring an argument that can facilitate the expressive, affective and emotional potential of art beyond that of language or narrative, and in opening up possibilities about the way we can view art. Trauma theory offers the opportunity to feel into an artwork first, or rather recognize an unspoken affective appeal to the senses made by an artwork before one embarks on a later imprint in the intellect. Seeing emotion of affect through trauma theory justifies a view of a real, emotional impact of an artwork. I intend to explore some of these theories on trauma pertaining to the visual arts in my examination of Hodgins' paintings.

Trauma studies emerged in the early 1990's in the United States with the emphasis on "[…] facilitating the cultural expression of trauma as a means of understanding experience" and are positioned as an "[…] interdisciplinary area within humanities" which addresses ways to approach the complexities of trauma, mourning and history in contemporary culture, with an emphasis on empathy toward trauma survivors and their testimonies (Bennett & Kennedy, 2003: 3). Bennett and Kennedy (ibid) elaborate:

> Informed by psychoanalysis and focused predominantly on the Holocaust, trauma studies has provided a framework for studying testimonial expression - both oral and literary - via the study of the literature of the Holocaust and the videotaped testimonies of survivors […] *by identifying the psychic and institutional impediments to speaking trauma, and to read the gaps and silences that necessarily accompany the process of testifying* (My emphasis added).

In this view, trauma 'separates' from the encounter that may have caused it and as the above quote also demonstrates, trauma studies focus on the 'after the fact' testimonial

expression. But for testimony to exist, trauma must have first been *felt as an affective encounter.* Due to the 'impediments to speaking trauma' it can be perceived as a non-narrative event, thus it can be considered to be outside of normal cognitive representation (memory being a normal cognitive representation). Bennett and Kennedy also point out that trauma studies expanded more recently to include work from other regions of the world such as contributions addressing the Vietnam War and child abuse and also work emanating from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission addressing the politics of testimony and the traumas associated with apartheid[9]. They (ibid: 9) touch on the complex relationship between trauma and artistic representation in the following quote:

> In a provocative and much discussed passage of negative dialectics, the German critic Theodor Adorno drew attention to the impossibility of art 'after Auschwitz', arguing the 'aesthetic principal of stylization' serves to transform the event of the Holocaust, removing its horror in a way that does an injustice to the victims (Adorno, 1973: 362). But, he contended in a later essay, if 'to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric […] literature must resist this verdict…It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can find its voice […].'

To remove the 'horror' out of the experience of Auschwitz or any real violent, traumatic experience is to do injustice upon the reality of lived experience. Adorno observes firstly that the remove of emotion, stylised through artistic intervention or representation, alienates an important event and strips it of its affective power. However, he also recognises the potential of art to contrive, for example in the case of lyric poetry, as well as elucidate and thus later on places the voice of suffering solely in the hands of art, acknowledging art as a carrier of emotive energy. Adorno bestows upon art the ability to complete the understandings of emotive experience (in history or memory) and

[9]SAhistory.org summarises the TRC as follows: "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was a court-like body assembled in South Africa after the end of Apartheid. Anybody who felt they had been a victim of violence could come forward and be heard at the TRC. Perpetrators of violence could also give testimony and request amnesty from prosecution. The hearings made international news and many sessions were broadcast on national television. The TRC was a crucial component of the transition to full and free democracy in South Africa and, despite some flaws, is generally regarded as very successful." (http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governence-projects/TRC/index.htm)

maintains that a transgression is committed when the affective capacity of art is ignored and its potential to contribute to the real, emotive nature of experience is overlooked.

This 'voice', i.e. the affective capacity of art, can convey sensation and carry emotional essence which Bennett describes as the capacity of "bearing the imprint of trauma". This applies not only to general representations of trauma, but is also more generally about holding an affective relationship between an artwork and the art viewer/artist. Trauma studies offer a language that attempts to explore gaps and silences, the otherwise unspeakable. Through this set of ideas one could begin to take on the 'unspoken' in a painting, addressing the affective nature of painting perhaps through the subtle viscosities of paint that, for example, communicate sensation through colour, line, texture and form, and this is what I would like to do in examining examples of Hodgins' paintings (Bennett: 2005: 23).

According to Bennett, Hal Foster's book *The Return of the Real* (1996) provides the best analysis of trauma's appearance in visual art (ibid: 5). Foster describes an oscillation of feeling in contemporary art and culture and suggests as a possible explanation "[…] the dynamic of psychic shock" (ibid: 166). There is a seeking out of affect and in turn a denial of feeling anything at all. But Bennett (ibid: 5) has also described Foster's text as merely loaning certain jargon within trauma, "[…] a diagnostic analysis conducted from within the discipline of art theory, providing a way in which the figure of trauma is troped or borrowed to describe a condition that already pertains within the art world." Thus arguably affect or emotion has always been a constituent part of the visual arts, but within trauma studies, as a distinct field of study, it is only a recent application. I believe that trauma, affect or emotion is invested in art and that the borrowing that Bennett suggests Foster does is useful and necessary to understand what some artworks do. In order to achieve this, an understanding of the psychological workings of trauma is required, and more so, an understanding of how and where an art and trauma interface should be mapped out. In the following chapter I will examine Foster's text more closely.

In the introduction to their book titled *World Memory* (2003)[10], Kennedy and Bennett suggest that the language of and around trauma extends beyond the lived experience of trauma and in psychoanalytical terms, trauma is considered to linger beyond, or is more lasting, than the individual lived experience of trauma. They (9) say in their book:

> The dominance of literary criticism in the formation of the field of trauma studies supports […] that trauma is not only a lived experience; it is also a *mode of interpretation*, which can be used to make sense of cultural experiences (My emphasis added).

To view trauma as a 'mode of interpretation' allows certain byways or parallels to be made in seeking for an interface that best describes the affective operations of art. By affective operations I refer to the emotional, sensual and visceral impact or force of art as a language, beyond or separate of any lived experience of trauma. My focus thus resides heavily on the side of the psychological and emotive in the visual arts but this does not exclude the possibility of affective responses to artworks leading to critical thinking, resulting as such in a more profound understanding of art and trauma. Bennett's (2005: 7) reference to the work of philosopher Gilles Deleuze to connect art and thought is perhaps appropriate to quote in this context:

> In his early work *Proust and Signs,* Deleuze coins the term, *encountered sign* to describe the sign that is felt rather than recognized or perceived through cognition. Deleuze's argument is not simply […] that sensation is an end in itself, but that feeling is a catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought; we assume […] that the best philosophy is motivated by a love of wisdom, but this is not, in fact, the case, since there is nothing that compels rational inquiry. For Deleuze, affect or emotion is a more effective trigger for profound thought because of the way it grasps us, forcing us to engage involuntarily […].

Following the above quote it is feasible to view an emotive encounter with an artwork as more compelling than a more rational, intellectual approach to an art work.

[10] Jill Bennett is a senior lecturer in Art Theory at the University of New south Wales and Rosanne Kennedy teaches cultural theory and gender studies in the School of humanities at the Australian National University. In this Book they address trauma and memory in contemporary global culture.

In their book Bennett and Kennedy point out similarities between the 'psychic experience of trauma' and certain aesthetic forms. The concept of traumatic memory, as a component of the psychic experience of trauma, is vital because an understanding of the psychoanalytical concepts of traumatic memory ensures an understanding of how these ideas are applicable to the painted image and thus ultimately in understanding the affective nature of art and conceiving of a language that convincingly carries these ideas within art. I will apply some of these ideas in discussing examples of Robert Hodgins' paintings.

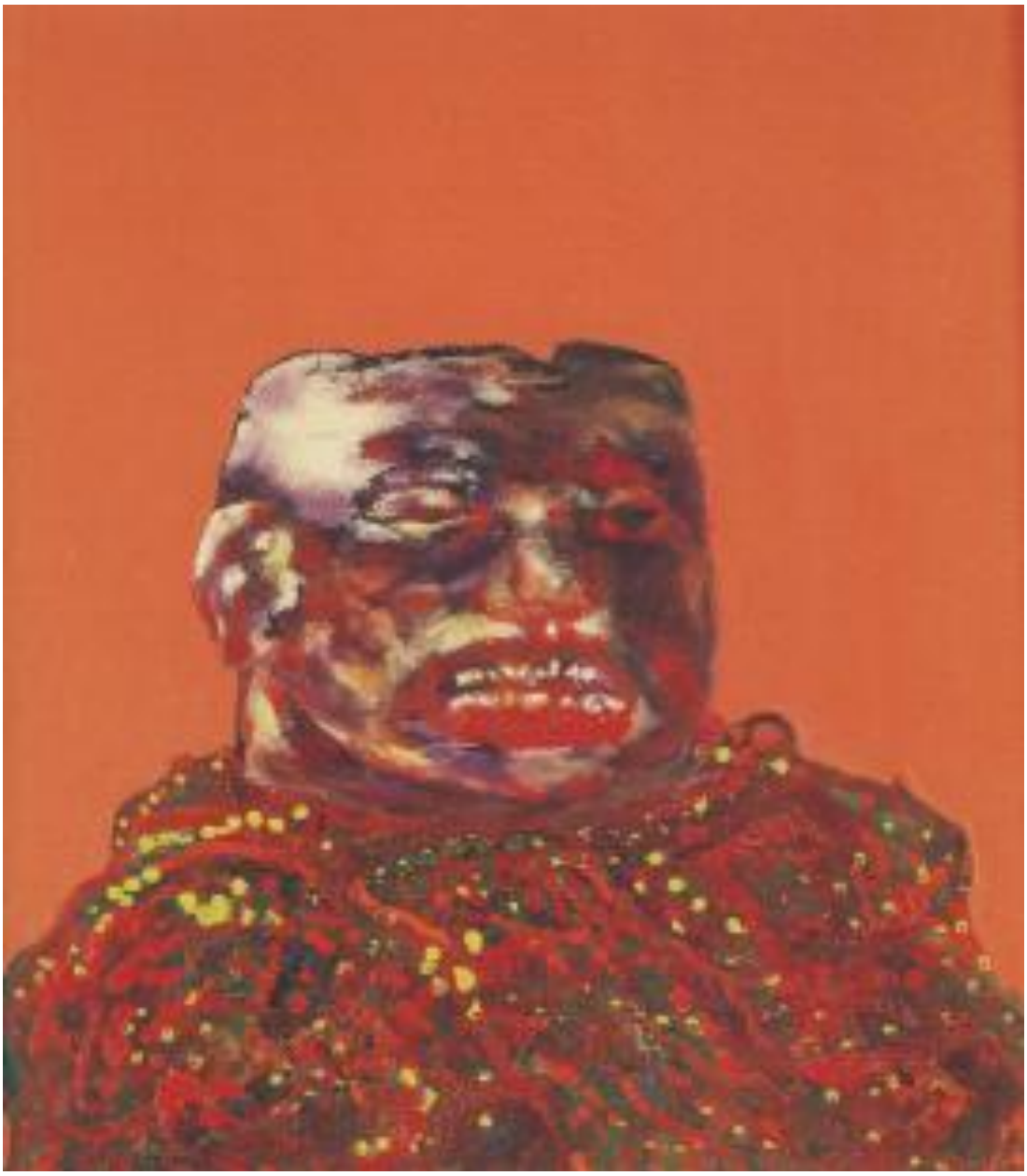
My interest resides in the emotive-intellectual force of Hodgins' paintings, but to say that they are primarily about trauma or could be considered as a form of 'trauma art' would be a reductive reading of his work**.** Bennett (ibid: 3) emphasizes that "to identify any art as 'about' trauma and conflict potentially opens up new readings, but also reduces the work to a singular defining subject matter in a fashion that is often an anathema to artists, who construe the operations of their work as exceeding any single signifying function." To reduce Hodgins' work to a single point of interest would be simply wrong. Conversely, I would say that one cannot deny that his work does indeed deal with some aspect of trauma, even if he doesn't declare it as a conscious intent or preoccupation while painting.

Hodgins (Personal communication, 11 April 2009) himself states that he seeks to create a reality that is "more real than reality", by which he means perhaps a more 'raw' and 'stripped down' interpretation of reality due to a mediated perception afforded by the process of painting. The process of painting is certainly always foregrounded in his work and I would say that his work could be seen to approach trauma through a certain affective dynamic, more so perhaps than addressing it directly in the subject matter and iconography. There is certainly evidence in his work of a preoccupation with the atrocities and abuses of power in the twentieth century, especially in the various incarnations of the character of Ubu which address the dark soul of man. But beyond the iconography and the references in titles to subjects alluding to violence and trauma, I want to argue that Hodgins approaches emotion of trauma indirectly through his great

empathy for the poetics of painting. He demonstrates extraordinary sensitivity to the medium, particularly when painting figures and heads.

*A wicked man sumptuously attired* (1996) (oil on canvas, 63 x 53cm) is a striking example of one of Hodgins' most dominant subjects, the head. Hodgins rarely painted portraits as recognisable studies of people, thus the distinction of referring to his works as 'heads' rather than 'portraits'. His 'heads' are never of anyone in particular, they don't seek to be a likeness. Disassociation from life or a specific character opens up the possibility for the head to undergo various transformations, reductions and accidents without being constrained by having to achieve likeness.

In *A wicked man sumptuously attired* the head of a well-set man is positioned in the centre of the canvas, surrounded by gloriously soft but ascorbic ochre-pink. The head itself is roughly square in shape, echoing the square format of the canvas and jutting out slightly on the left in the form of a crude ear. A small, triangular indentation appears on top of the flat head, slightly off centre to the right. Possibly indicating a parting in the hair, this slash in the head also carries associations of a cut or wound. The strangest and most overriding feature of the head is its mouth. The lips throb scarlet red and are thick and the corners of the mouth are turned down. The mouth is slightly open in the form of a grimace, perhaps in disgust, disdain or indicating speech frozen in mid-sentence. Displayed are two rows of misshapen teeth and a slight indication of a blood-red tongue. The texture of the face is described in patchy tones of light and dark; Prussian blue or black for the dark and white for the highlights. Smears of the same red paint from the lips occur in dabs across the face, giving the head a reddish glow that makes it appear flushed, possibly suggesting anger or rage. But again, it also suggests a form of wounding or scarring. The head is positioned on top of what can be described as a rich miasma of swirling red striations and yellow dabs of paint applied against a flat, green ground. This miasma resembles ground flesh in its texture and represents the 'attire' described in the title. But more than being read as a worn cloak, the bulk of this mass with the head perched on top tends to resemble the form of a heavily decorated cake.



*A wicked man sumptuously attired* (1996), oil on canvas, 63 x 53cm.

Hodgins has created a general emanation of a presence, alluring, beautiful but also grotesque in that one seeks out a face in a sort of physiognomic exercise. This painting has the foreboding presence of violence and maliciousness. Hodgins often creates visual oppositions or oxymorons in his works as is also underscored here in the title describing the man as both sumptuously attired and wicked. We are stuck with a powerful overall impression left by the painterly details of the wicked man's face against the flat background, the mass of the head, the throbbing lips, the apparent scars/wounds and the miasmic mass of the attire. In so doing, Hodgins presents a reality at the edge of sensation, it is an unsettling painting. Questions one may ask oneself are: am I seeing wounds? Has the head been decapitated and perched on a fleshy support? However, life is still implied in the expression rendered by the mouth. The eyes seem semi-absent or suggest that they may be closed, showing only what could be read as eye sockets.

All these features emphasise the abject nature of *A wicked man sumptuously attired,* painted as it is in a mode of extreme material sensation. An affective dynamic between artwork and viewer is immediately established in the viewing. One is compelled to ask of oneself: what if this were my own body undergoing such sensations? And yet there is also doubt if any sensation is being felt by the depicted character at all, affect is recognised and also denied. The painterly qualities that constitute the man's head are very apparent to us as viewers but he himself seems to be unaware of his wounds. Is this altogether just a psychedelic representation of a tyrant's ego?

In her book *Emphatic Vision* (2005: 2), Jill Bennett refers to 'affective dynamic' as art's contribution to trauma studies and says about artworks displaying this dynamic that they "[…] endeavour to find a communicable language of sensation and affect with which to register something of the experience of traumatic memory and, thus, in a manner of formal innovation." *A wicked man sumptuously attired* renders sensation through the rich surfaces of colour and texture, the implied wounding and ambivalence seen, for example, in the materiality of paint in the miasma that walks a tightrope between flesh

and attire. Through all this, Hodgins can be seen to demonstrate that painting potentially stimulates sensation through formal innovation, as Bennett puts it.

Furthermore, Bennett (ibid: 1) points out that more often than not works that actively deal with or approach affect, may strangely elude "[…] classification as trauma works largely because they in some way evoke[d] the process of post-traumatic memory without declaring themselves to be about trauma […] in many cases they appear[ed] to be about something else." In this sense she states (Ibid: 7) that it would be best to understand trauma–related art as "*transactive* rather than *communicative.*" This aspect of art dealing with trauma having a certain remove from it, or displaying an ambiguity in this regard, is also evident in Hodgins' painting of the wicked man where he plays a game of contrasts of repellent forces. The title suggests both ugliness and beauty - wickedness and sumptuousness. He also sets up such contrasts visually through depicting the lavish garment as resembling something like a meat cake. The head also conveys either the excesses of a living tyrant or the death of a martyr. Details such as the mouth remain ambiguous as a gesture of extreme pain or expression of lavish pleasure.

No discernable narrative can be read into the painting; it stands alone as outside of time or history, a single moment separate from any traumatic event. As Bennett (ibid: 29) puts it: "Part of what the imagery conveys is precisely a condition of confusion." What is felt by such a work cannot be directly transcribed into direct representation or common communicable memory, "[…] it offers fragments of memories, written onto the body. These can be read only in reference to the viewer's bodily sensation. To see images is to be moved by them - not in the sense that one is touched by the plight of a character in a fictional narrative - but in the more literal sense of being affected, stricken with affect."

The first question that arises here is how such an art work can be seen to evoke the 'process' of post-traumatic memory yet also avoid classification as a work about trauma. Although Bennett (ibid: 1) suggests that the trauma within in an art work is not in the

apparent meaning nor normatively understood but rather found to be "in a certain affective dynamic internal to the work", this dynamic seems to differ for every artist and even bodies of works. Thus an approach of openness of feeling and relating when viewing a work is required. I can suggest that this dynamic, whatever it may be, acts through operative elements, or ruptures within the painting of Hodgins. In the case of *A wicked man sumptuously attired* the most striking rupture is in the alluring, yet simultaneously repulsive, luscious red mouth that itself appears like a wound in the head.

Hodgins cannot himself be identified as a trauma survivor nor can his works be said to be about a traumatic event. Much of his work deals with fantasy and fiction; the imagination plays a major role in his work, yet in certain ways it can still be said to communicate affect. Trauma is an elusive term to pin down in the visual arts and ways of identifying trauma in art works need to be examined. This can be achieved through the application of existing theoretical psychoanalytic models, much of which has been applied already within the literary fields to identify trauma in text, but very little has been focused on visual art. Bennett (ibid: 2) positions art not within trauma, or vice versa, but in a more productive sense, art is placed alongside or parallel to trauma in the form of a question: "[…] what is it that art itself does that gives rise to thinking and feeling about this subject?" Thus the focus for dealing with trauma and art lies in the 'thinking and feeling' of art, not the contextual labelling of 'trauma art'. Here the affective operations of art are important and how this positions art in a place of unsettlement or conflict that may allude to trauma.

Robert Hodgins (Personal communication, 11 April 2009) often comments in relation to his own work that subject matter is not content, and when asked about the skull-like nature of the head in *A wicked man sumptuously attired* he responds by referring to the importance of the emotive potential of a painting: "I did not think of it in terms like that, but that does not mean that I did not feel it in terms like that". What is important is that the art work is engaged in a practice that "[…] sees the art work as generating sensation so as to produce an encounter in the present" (Bennett, 2005: 28).

Trauma is understood as being unrepresentable. The nature of extremely emotional traumatic events seems to make it more difficult to remember than that of an ordinary event. This has lead theorists within the field to view post-traumatic memory beyond the scope of language or the public sphere due to the difficulty found in the testimony function of trauma. An artwork that approaches or deals with trauma should have a facility to evoke such complexities concerning affect and memory, but as Bennett (ibid: 3) suggests, this art would not conform to the "logic of representation":

> The kind of imagery that operated in this vein – of mediating affects, sensations, and traumatic memory – cannot be reduced to a form of representation. And insofar as such imagery serves to register subjective processes that exceed our capacity to represent them, certain of its features might be understood as reflecting those of traumatic memory (ibid: 23).

It is imperative to separate art from the primary experience of trauma as discussed above; seldom is a work of art or artist rooted or connected to an actual trauma. At most I am drawing some parallels between art and trauma discourse as a bridge to open possibilities of an affective encounter with an art work that can lead to critical enquiry. Not to entirely draw a hard line between trauma and art, it is possible that art can contribute to trauma discourse in an interesting way. The primary experience of trauma that is the traumatic event itself, cannot be taken, shared or transmitted to a secondary witness, such as those who might be witnessing a traumatic event on the television. In terms of Hodgins' work concerning actual violence and trauma, he himself (Hodgins, 2002: 60) refers to a remove from the actual violence or creating rather an ambiguous event around violence that occurs in his works:

> [...] the violence I paint is always removed. It's always somewhere else in history, somewhere else in geography [...] it's not in South Africa, or even in Africa [...] the violence in my paintings is a fictional construction. I don't know whether it would be honest to allow people to believe that it's a reference to the violence in the world we actually live in.

The violence that Hodgins paints belongs significantly only to his paintings, it is not owned by any particular history and yet by means of a set of associations we still recognize it. Hodgins has an ability to act as a common cipher for these kinds of events and affects filtered through a sharp mind and celebratory painting process.

Bennett takes on this issue of primary experience. If any art claims to hold the experience of violence and/or loss then it is essentially taking ownership of an experience that by rights does not belong to it. The possibility of claiming another's traumas sits "uneasily with the politics of testimony" (Bennett, 2005: 3). Thus, what testimony asks of art, Bennett continues, is not a faithful translation but alternatively the facilities contained by art to contribute to this politics in an interesting and productive way. In order to proceed further we need to be aware of the operations of traumatic memory and its inherent unrepresentability, and thus an understanding of the difference between normal memory function and traumatic memory function.

A necessary understanding of the psychic operations that underpin memory is crucial to an appreciative view of the affective experience of trauma and the potential for artistic innovation or expression. The emphasis on understanding is due to the fact that within these discourses, both art and trauma, at a particular point sensation and/or emotion is felt. This experience is an inherent part of traumatic recollection. In the original Greek, trauma literally means 'wound', thus referring to a physical break of the body. The concept and imagery of the ruptured body is of particular importance to Hodgins and, in particular, his major influence Francis Bacon. Both artists have painted wounds and use oil paint as "a medium uniquely suited to convey the carnal properties of flesh – to symbolize what lies beneath the exterior: the emotions, memories, and vulnerabilities that arise from the interactions between the body and the world" (Scala, 2009: 1). Hodgins often depicts the body as if rupturing through paint and as a specific kind of 'wounding' where the paint's expressiveness adds to the reading of vulnerability of flesh. As in the paintings of Bacon, he often renders the body warts and all and depicts it as if harmed and with its flesh seemingly maimed. Here I suggest a more supple use of the concept of the wound as rupture, a break that is not only applicable to one's body

but one that is represented in these paintings, not only iconographically but a rupture that has a physical presence through the medium of paint, and at certain points paint can mimic the material of the body; flesh, blood, puss or urine.[11]

Moreover, beyond being quasi-physical, the rupture also occurs in the mind of the viewer (or remains in the trauma survivor). Hodgins seems to insert such ruptures when he introduces visual paradoxes in his work that unsettle or bring a sense of ambiguity into the reading. In A *Beast Slouches* this can be seen, for example, in his depiction of the amputated arm as a penis. As Cathy Caruth (1996: 3), associate professor of comparative literature and English at Emory University, positions trauma: "[…] the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind". This is further emphasized by Richard Terdiman (1993: 247) in the following passage:

> Most of the time, the formative determinations of the memory complex, being ubiquitous and constitutive of present reality, seem transparent. This induces us to ignore their evidence. But in those moments and at those sites where *some disturbance* of this transparency, some eddy in the seemingly unremarkable flow of the past contents into the moving window of the present becomes predictable, then suddenly the past no longer goes without saying (My emphasis added).

In *Present Past* (1993) Terdiman states that memory goes unnoticed most of the time or recognised in what is an automatic function. Memory remains transparent or silent in its process. It is a part of our everyday present lives where the past, as constituted by memory, is experienced along with the present in a rather unremarkable way. Until, that is, a memory becomes a distinct event. This distinction is between normal memory

[11] On this point of viscous bodily matter and the corresponding qualities of paint, Elkins points out that "there is an affinity between the slurry of fluids in a surgical operation – the saline wash, blood, and cut tissues – and the mix of pigments and oils in a painting. Artists who have tried to depict the body's insides have often drawn parallels between the body's thickened liquids and the sticky media of oil painting; among the painters that come to mind are Francis Bacon, the later Ivan Albright, and the early Kokoschka" (1999: 116). Scala further comments that "[f]or artists such as Francis Bacon and Hyman Bloom, who painted imaginative views of the insides of the body, the stickiness of oil paint makes it a mirror of the body's gelatinous essence. Their works inspire the same reactions – disgust, fear, a feeling of being in the presence of death – that are provoked by the sight of actual viscera, organs, or brains. Such a literal linkage between paint and human substance can be thought of as a kind of incarnation; not the sacred 'word made flesh,' as the Bible describes Christ, but the secular 'paint made flesh,' as the artist transcribes humanity" (2009:2).

function, and a kind of extraordinary affective memory, a disturbance is brought about by the attempt to process a traumatic memory. At the moment of disturbance within this transparency, there the past confronts or calls attention to itself, no longer invisible or passive but now remarkable in a strange way.

A further distinction is required to sift out the extraordinary nature of traumatic memory from that of our conventional memory function. Normal memory functions in such a manner that the past and all forms of perception can be collapsed into what is called "subjective paradigms of the psyche" (ibid: 258). These subjective paradigms suggest a set of understandings or functions that process memory in a communicable digested way. The paradigms enable us to compartmentalize and communicate our memories, thus bringing them into representation. The past constituted as experience through normal cognitive memory is processed, formatted and digested. The digested past thus is constructed to a form, sign, or representation within the conscious, thus a conscious memory is available for recall to the conscious and we can sift through them not unlike paging through images in a magazine; easily accessible and mediated.

Bennett places normal memory functioning within representation. Regular memory is connected to thought and speech, it is understood and communicable, thus its stands in an open ground and can be understood by a general audience. Bennett (2005: 25) addresses the work of writer Charlotte Delbo who too places common memory within the public sphere: "Delbo invokes the notion of ordinary or 'common' memory to describe a socially or popularly understood discursive framework, designated as the site where history is written". Common memory for Delbo and Bennett is thus not just a subjective narrative form, functioning solely within the individual, but rather it is a form of language that allows such narrative, or memories, to be communicated or retransmitted and taken in by others.

The other form of recollection is more confrontational, it stands out in such a manner that the past cannot be ignored as a result of the traumatic nature of these experiences or events. These confrontations or moments of disturbance in normal memory function

expose the past. It is as a jolt in your present reality, it becomes an unavoidable factor, an object, an obstacle or like a wound to the body of memory. Traumatic memory distracts and calls for immediate attention in such a way that it is no longer a memory representation but a real experience. This second system of memory is extraordinary memory, traumatic memory or sense memory. It is seated within the unconscious. Thus we are not aware of its operations nor do we suspect the possibility of these memories manifesting. The unconscious memory system can be described as the persistence of the past as carried in memory traces or memory fragments aloof in the unconscious. Bennett (ibid: 23) describes this extraordinary memory effectively in the following quote:

> […] experiences are processed through cognitive schemas that enable familiar experiences to be identified, interpreted, and assimilated to narrative. Memory is thus constituted as experience transforms itself into representation. Traumatic or extreme *affective experience, however, resists such processing. Its unfamiliar or extraordinary nature* renders it unintelligible, causing cognitive systems to balk; its sensory or affective character renders it inimical to thought – and ultimately to memory itself (My emphasis added).

Sense memory seems to hold the very physical imprint of an event. Here traumatic memory is configured outside of normal memory; to function differently "[…] it is a modelling that allies trauma with avant-garde projects in the arts. That which is "beyond representation may find expression within experimental formal languages" (ibid: 15).

One cannot hold common memory and sense memory irrevocably apart as an encounter with an art work relies on the interface of both affect and representation: "As sense memory is spoken in any given space, it is bound up in a dynamic encounter with a structure of representation, a question of putting 'an outside and an inside into contact' " (Bennett, 2005: 31). This idea is central to understanding imagery of this kind as a negotiation that takes place at a point of interface. Delbo and Bennett recognize the importance of common memory in terms of writing of histories, although it is unable to recognize the traumatic nature of a historic event such as the Holocaust. Thus sense memory's "[…] production […] becomes a contingent and culturally situated practice – linked to social histories - that requires framing against a back drop of cultural

knowledge" (ibid: 26). In *Impossible Memories and the History of Trauma* (2003) Ester Faye (161) describes memory traces of sense memory as "[…] a threatening and malignant excess in language. This excess concerns the memory as unconscious. Psychical material of past experiences persist and betray, through their repetition, the presence of something real and traumatic left over from the past." This 'threatening and malignant excess' evokes the duality in Hodgins' work, where, even in the more passive compositions, certain menacing features are seen to rupture through.

The reoccurrences of these charged fragments of memory brings to the fore the belated or latent nature of what constitutes traumatic experience. It is not the original or primary experience but the repetition, its return. Memory here becomes an arena of forgetting a traumatic memory and the chance of it, be it altered, to return. The cultural critic Cathy Caruth, in her work *Unclaimed Experience* (1996: 17), speaks of this latent and repetitive nature of the traumatic experience using Freud' s concept of temporality; deferred action or the "*nachträglich.*"[12] "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after it's forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experience at all."

Moreover, Caruth (ibid) calls traumatic experience "the wound that cries out, addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth […]". The wounding of the mind is not as easily healed and closed like the wound of the body, but better understood instead as an event that "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (ibid: 4). Thus this wounding is an inflection or break in the mind's perception or experience of present reality. Caruth continues to say that trauma is not located in the original event but is found in the undigested form that returns to the survivor later at a different time and place. Caruth (ibid) points out that this wound that cried out is beyond a wounded psyche, but in

[12] Jean Laplanche comments on the notion of *nachträglich* as follows: "This notion is important to any understanding of the psychoanalytic conception of time. It implies a complex and reciprocal relationship between a significant event and its later reinvestment with meaning, a rein-vestment that lends it a new psychic efficacy." (http://www.answers.com/topic/deferred-action#ixzz1M9YcD65v)

belated form it is always a manifestation, a reality, or a truth in the sense of its unassimilated nature.

Another point of interest here is the inherent unknowing of these events – that is being unavailable to the conscious – more specifically what was not known in the first instance of a real event. The truth that appears belatedly, what others have called the traumatic real "[…] cannot be linked to what is known but also to what is unknown in our very actions and our language" (ibid). Thus the past is only attributed a traumatic meaning in its second coming and the primary event of trauma is only remembered by its initial forgetting.

In her essay *The image in Psychoanalysis and the Archaeological Metaphor* (2006: 3), Griselda Pollock provides an insight into this 'unknowing.' The archaeological metaphor opens a reading of the image in visual arts and the process of creativity viewed through various psychoanalytic filters of human subjectivity. In this reading through an engagement of human subjectivity, and the unconscious, is imagined an "[…] archaeological structure: a palimpsest of time, meaning, history, memory, and oblivion". The core of traumatic memory is unspeakability, 'oblivion' being poignant in this understanding which captures the notion of the irretrievable meaning of origins: "The formative phases and events of human childhood, archaic memories, and feelings preserved, like artefacts in the tombs of ancient civilizations, but by the mechanism of repression [which] at once erases and encrypts traumatic memories" (ibid: 10).

Here the process of psychoanalysis is compared to the excavation of ancient artefacts of a tomb, where the repressed memories are placed at its traumatic site as the 'fetish' or artefact. It is a memorial marker that has left an indecipherable trace and past within the unconscious. Like an ancient relic the mnemic trace's initial significance is erased, encrypted and fractured, buried like a relic within the unconscious. We cannot know what their original meaning was or what the function of this object was, only that it calls for interpretation and speaks of unknowable truth (ibid).

How can these ideas about irregular, re-occurring traumatic memories be applied to the paintings of Hodgins? One approach would be to examine the way in which he achieves or arrives at his images. Hodgins' images are ciphered through his experience and the act of painting. This is inevitably connected to memory. In my introduction I examined *A beast slouches* (1986) and one of the most extraordinary aspects of this work is that it mimics a traumatic memory itself. It was not the fact that he had painted a penis as an amputated arm that was traumatic. Only after finishing and seeing the work did he realise that he had unconsciously painted something he had forgotten - through the representation of a wrapped penis/amputation. Such a charged fragment can be seen as an obstacle or a wound to the body of memory, a threatening and malignant excess in (visual and painterly) language. And like traumatic memories, such fragments are reoccurring yet subtle. Hodgins' fragments persist, seduce and betray; they emerge through seemingly celebratory colours and docile scenes. The charged fragments are fugitive and evasive. One senses that they should not have been there or that their presence is unexpected. The fact that we don't see them initially is what adds a certain element of shock. In this manner they possess a certain confrontational prowess.

## Chapter Two: Traumatic Illusionism

> The same species which can produce the Beethoven Ninth Symphony and *Guernica*, can produce the concentration camps. It's a mystery I don't know how to get past, and this is partly my subject matter. I have an appalled compassion for man (Robert Hodgins in Powell, 1984: 42).

> One is in a way trying to find a metaphor for the wonder and horror of a world in which terrible things and beautiful things exist together. I can't get over the fact that there are roses in a world where somebody can get massacred; the fact that the two can co-exist is to me a kind of a numbing wonder in my head and that's what I'm trying to find a metaphor in painting for. Robert Hodgins (Arnold, 1986: unpaginated).

In my interviews and conversations with him, Robert Hodgins was always perplexed at the thought that trauma could be seen to be present in his work. The aspects of violence, wounding and 'trauma' evident in the subject matter in Hodgins' work are depicted as if situated in some other unknown place and history, a fictive world, exaggerated and at time nightmarish, created in the paintings. I have already mentioned the 'remove' he often cited when it comes to the violent imagery in his painting. In terms of this he once suggested (Personal communication, 3 December 2009), in response to my questioning about the origins of features of violence in his work, to having an internal reservoir of churning images and ideas: "...I don't know where it comes from, at some point it went into Mother Hubbard's cupboard with everything else, and they seem to filter through into the works." Bacon expressed a very similar approach to image making when he said: "I am like a grinding machine, [...] I look at everything, and everything goes in and gets ground up very fine," and as Peppiat (2006: 5) notes: "Along with photography and the history of art came almost everything that had a visual existence, from newspaper prints to desert books and lipstick." Bewildered by the world they found themselves in, both Bacon and Hodgins sought to reconcile the contradictions they were so aware of through the act of painting. Marion Arnold (1986: unpaginated) comments on how Hodgins deals with such disparities through painting:

> In order to locate pictorial equivalents for this paradox of existence, Hodgins had to reconsider the notion of the beautifully rendered image. He

> has discovered ways in which the intrinsic nature and appearance of paint can reinforce the identity of figurative form. The dry, scruffy mark and the impoverished line have entered his vocabulary of paint signs. Paint is used with meanness as well as extravagance. Compositions are constituted from fragments rather than cohesive shape interaction. Visual unity is no longer a matter of balance and stylistic purity.

At first examination Hodgins seems to maintain a distance from what disturbs him. He feels it but does not recognise what it is or where it comes from and expresses this by using words such as: 'a mystery I cannot get past' or 'a numbing wonder' as seen in his comments quoted at the start of this chapter. It seems to me that here lies a certain dissociation in subjectivity and confusion in position and time. Some may conclude that this dissociation in subjectivity relates to Hodgins' choice of creating a fictive world in his paintings. However, Hodgins (Personal communication, 9 April 2010) once expressed to me that what happens within a painting is "more real than reality" which leads me to believe that the world he imagined, although fictive, was rooted in reality and had to do with his personal experience and sublimation of reality. To me this confusion and dissociation, caused by the contradictory nature of the world, suggests an experience of *shock* or *trauma* or even a shocked or traumatised subject. Foster (cited in Michelson 2001: 69) describes this kind of feeling of loss and unease as "[...] an encounter where one misses the real, where one is too early or too late [...] but where one is somehow marked by this encounter."

In this chapter I follow a close reading of a section of Hal Foster's chapter *The Return of the Real* in his book of the same name (1996) where he analyses contemporary art through a traumatic perspective, specifically focussing on works by Andy Warhol. He demonstrates how the concepts of trauma and affect are significantly internal to certain artists and artworks, something that I would argue applies equally to the works of Robert Hodgins. I will try to address some of the points raised by Foster in examining selected paintings by Hodgins. In *The Return of the Real* (1996) Foster engages in a reading of critical models of thought in art theory since 1960. He begins by pitting together two very different viewpoints concerning pop art and does so in order to formulate a fresh way of viewing particular images and experiencing artworks.

Foster begins by addressing two trajectories of art since the 1960's: a minimalist genealogy of the neo-avant-garde that opposed realism and illusionism and a pop genealogy that included some pop art, most superrealism and some appropriation art that is committed to realism and/or illusionism. Both genealogies viewed in a contemporary light have undergone some revisions, in particular the pop genealogy, taking on fresh attention for "it complicates the reductive notions of realism and illusionism advanced by the minimalist genealogy" (1996: 127). Foster (ibid: 128) points out that "our two basic models of representation miss the point of this pop genealogy almost entirely: that images are attached to referents, to iconographic themes or real things in the world, or, alternatively, that all images can do is represent other images, that all forms of representation (including realism) are auto-referential codes". He (ibid) says that most accounts of post-war art based in photography divide somewhere along this line of the image as referential *or* the image as simulacral and in his view "[t]his reductive either/or constrains such readings of this art, especially in the case of pop." Foster (ibid) then goes on to test this thesis against the *Death in America* images of Andy Warhol from the early 1960s, his series of silkscreen images on canvas depicting scenes of car accidents, electric chairs and other traumatic subject matter related to scenes of death and violence that he says "inaugurate the pop genealogy."

Foster points out that the simulacral reading of Warholian pop is advanced by critics associated with poststructuralism. Critics such as Foucault, Deleuze and Baudrillard, focus on the sheer superficiality of pop (for them Warhol <u>is</u> pop). Their notion of the simulacral depends on the example of Warhol <u>as</u> pop. Other critics and historians who advance the referential view of pop "tie the work to different themes: the worlds of fashion, celebrity, gay culture, the Warhol Factory, and so on" (ibid). Foster identifies Thomas Crow as presenting the most intelligent version of the referential view, disputing the simulacral account of Warhol in his essay *Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol* (1987). Crow argues that Warhol's images are not indiscriminate and that Warhol as artist is not impassive as the poststructuralist critics purport. Instead, he finds, "underneath the surface of commodity fetishes and media stars 'the reality of suffering and death'; the tragedies of Marilyn, Liz, and Jackie in particular are said to

prompt 'straightforward expressions of feeling'" (ibid: 130). Foster says that Crow finds "not only a referential object *for* Warhol but an empathetic subject *in* Warhol, and here he locates the criticality *of* Warhol – not in an attack on 'that old thing art' (as Barthes would have it), but rather in an exposé of 'complacent consumption' through 'the brutal fact' of accident and mortality. In this way Crow pushes Warhol beyond humanist sentiment to political engagement." Crow writes in a reading of Warhol's electric chair images that "he was attracted to the open sores in American political life" and Foster remarks that "far from a pure play of the signifier liberated from reference," Warhol belongs to the popular American tradition of 'truth-telling'" (ibid).

Foster (ibid) finds neither reading of Warhol's work wrong, in fact they are equally persuasive and he poses the question whether one could read the *Death in America* images as "referential *and* simulacral, connected *and* disconnected, affective *and* affectless, critical *and* complacent?" Foster (ibid) believes that this is possible if we read them in a third way, that is to say, in terms of what he calls "traumatic realism." Foster (ibid: 131) notes that one way to develop this idea is through Warhol's famous motto: "I want to be a machine" and points out that usually this statement is used to confirm the blankness of the artist and art alike, but that it "[...] points less to a blank subject than to a shocked one, who takes on the nature of what shocks him as a mimetic defence against this shock: I am a machine too, I make (or consume) serial product-images too, I give as good (or as bad) as I get." Foster goes on to consider Warhol's compulsion to repeat as being "put into play by a society of serial production and consumption. If you can't beat it, join it, Warhol suggests. More, if you enter it totally, you might expose it; that is, you might reveal its automatism, even its autism, through your own excessive example." This capitalist nihilism is performed ambiguously by Warhol: "there is a subject 'behind' this figure of nonsubjectivity that presents it *as* a figure," and what Foster finds fascinating about Warhol is that "one is never certain about this subject behind: is anybody home, inside the automaton?" Foster maintains that these notions of shocked subjectivity and compulsive repetition "reposition the role of repetition in the Warholian persona and images" and he goes on to point out that through these repetitions several contradictory things occur at the same time: "a warding away of

traumatic significance and an opening out to it, a defending against traumatic affect and a producing of it" (ibid: 132).

Foster identifies his theoretical model as based on Jacques Lacan's concerns in the 1960's with defining the real in terms of trauma (in his seminar *The Unconscious and Repetition* which was roughly contemporaneous with the *Death in America* images). Here Lacan defines the traumatic as "a missed encounter with the real. As missed, the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it must be repeated" (ibid). Lacan stresses that repetition is not reproduction; in turn, Foster (ibid) uses this notion as an epitome of his argument in saying that:

> [...] repetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier). Rather, repetition serves to *screen* the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also *points* to the real, and at this point the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition. It is a rupture less in the world than in the subject – between the perception and the consciousness of a subject *touched* by an image […] Lacan calls this traumatic point the *tuché*, in *Camera Lucida* (1980) Barthes calls it the *punctum*.

The rupture, *punctum* or *tuché* is thus "a confusion of subject and world, inside and outside. It is an aspect of trauma; indeed it may be this confusion that *is* traumatic" (ibid: 134). For Foster the *punctum* in Warhol's images "works less through the content than through the technique, especially through the 'floating flashes' of the silkscreen process, the slipping and streaking, blanching and blanking, repeating and colouring of the images." Foster refers to such slippages of register or washing in colour as 'pops' which "[...] serve as visual equivalents of our missed encounters with the real […] they seem accidental, but they also appear repetitive, automatic, even technological (the relation between accident and technology, crucial to the discourse of shock, is a great Warhol subject)" (ibid).

In Warhol's *Ambulance Disaster* (1963) Foster points out an "obscene tear" that effaces the head of the slumped woman in the lower register of the two repeated images and comments that the rupture "[...] works less through content than through technique"

(ibid). It is from this feature that a *punctum* arises for him rather than the fully depicted head of the woman in the upper register of the print. Foster refers to this tear as a hole which occurs "[...] at the level of technique where the *punctum* breaks through the screen and allows the real to poke through" and through such tears "[...] we seem almost to touch the real, which the repetition of the images at once distances and rushes towards us." "In this way," Foster comments, "different kinds of repetition are in play in Warhol: repetitions that fix the traumatic real, that screen it, that produce it." It is this multiplicity that Foster points out "makes for the paradox not only of images that are both affective and affectless, but also of viewers that are neither integrated (which is the ideal of most modern aesthetics: the subject composed in contemplation) nor dissolved (which is the effect of much popular culture: the subject given over to the schizo intensities of the commodity-sign)" (ibid: 136).

It may be possible to read Hodgins' work in a similar way as the response of a shocked subjectivity, i.e. according to such a model of traumatic realism where the approach to subject matter and technique articulates some form of working through by way of repetition, "repeating an image to screen a traumatic real, which is nonetheless returned in this very screening", as Foster puts it (ibid: 138). Such a reading may be approached from looking at Hodgins' complex imagery that includes characters, places and narratives as well as his process of painting. Hodgins may not engage in compulsive repetition quite as Warhol does, but his work does seem to fixate on bodies and heads as the object of trauma: bodies in massacres, wounds on a body, even the powerful, suited body of a tyrant is often depicted as if scarred and damaged. Other bodies are depicted as if dissolving or disintegrating. The heads such as *Untitled* (2 African Heads) (1984), *A wicked man sumptuously attired* (1996), *Medea in middle age* (1985), *Don Giovanni in hell* (1999/2000), *Black man White Man* (1998/2000) all attest to a similar way of fixating on images of heads and bodies that evoke a form of trauma. An observation by Scala (2009: 33) may be of interest here, namely that Bacon "reserves his most extreme deformations for the head and hands, the primary portals of the senses, as if to emphasize the language-destroying capacity and paradoxical sensory deprivation of acute distress. Bacon's bodies are tortured bodies, caged, poked,

scrutinized by impersonal bulbs of blinding light and, in the foundational image of inflicted suffering, crucified." In his fixation on deformed heads and bodies Hodgins can be seen to present the human form in similarly unsettling ways, although mostly in a more satirically humorous mode. Arnold (1986: unpaginated) comments as follows on the complex process and enigmatic nature of Hodgins' paintings:

> For a painter, ideas materialise inwardly in the imagination and the mind as well as within the physical arena of the canvas, it may be possible to discuss the way images germinate and grow in terms of paint, and to consider how technical procedure help to shape ideas. It is not, however, possible to explain fully the enigma of the completed painting where mind, feeling and eye have interacted. One can go only so far in stripping away the technical secrets, or in unravelling the meaning of metaphors or symbols. Ultimately complex paintings tease the eye by projecting their presence but guarding their identity.

Hodgins' 1982 painting titled *Old School Blazer* (tempera on board, 35 x 19cm) may be a good example to examine more closely at this point. In this painting the vertically formatted composition portrays a figure, presumably a schoolboy (suggested by the title), dressed in a butter yellow blazer and shirt and tie. The figure is cut off just above the knees and the background is painted in a thick, black-grey colour which appears much like the texture of dark leather. The top part of the trousers is painted with the same viscosity as the background and is only separated by way of thickly painted red lines that also indicate the edge of the blazer with its collar and pocket. This line is also continued upwards into the bulbous form of the head. The yellow blazer has hints of green along the edges which also carry through into the hand, tie and the head. A vertical stripe of green also appears between the right sleeve and centre line of the jacket. Perhaps these green lines suggest the folds of the blazer or maybe even some kind of staining as would be expected on a rebellious schoolboy's clothing.

The left arm is too short in proportion to the rest of the figure and is bent slightly upwards in its gesture of 'giving the viewer the finger', i.e. making an offensive hand gesture with the extended middle finger. The hand is a cool green that grows denser towards the opening of the sleeve, and touches of yellow and transparent red also



Old School Blazer (1982) Egg Tempera on board, 35x 19cm.

outline the hand, reducing it to a short stub. Above the right hand the blazer pocket contains a small, red book. The white shirt collar funnels upwards to the neck and is drawn in solid thick blue and black outlines. The tie is eel-like, painted in a watered down Prussian blue and green. Light yellow highlights on the tie give it a silky appearance.

The head looks like a ruptured cyst, squeezed out like toothpaste from the tight collar and extends snail-like out and up to the left. The face is seen in profile, revealing a thrown-back head with heavy brow and pursed lips. The averted head imparts a rather impersonal and disconnected feel to the painting. The head is orange-yellow in colour with green streaks travelling up the neck and below the cheek and nose. More green streaks appear at the back of the roughly square head. Red squiggles and dabs indicate wrinkles or direction of the oozing of the face. The overall impression is of a very blemished and crude head suggesting pock marks on the acne covered face of a pubescent schoolboy. Humour is certainly present in Hodgin's caricatures and is sometimes also evident in his titles which seem to downplay the true states in which we find his figures presented. *Old School Blazer* is indicative of this, the painting is rich in its handling and yet it represents a somewhat degraded and unflattering character. The content itself is rather ordinary but made extraordinary in both an appealing and non-appealing way through the painting process. The title seems to reinforce this oscillating effect in its bland suggestiveness of an old item of used clothing.

In this way Hodgins' paintings are quite often beautiful in their painterly handling but unsettling in what they depict. We ease into a Hodgins painting, seduced by the celebratory colours, bright surfaces, and delicious handling of paint. We are drawn into something that is initially almost festive, harmless and innocent but then realise that it is not so. In this sense Hodgins achieves something similar to what Foster (cited in Michelson, 2001: 72) points out in Warhol as "[...] a warding away of traumatic significance *and* an opening out to it, a defending against traumatic affect *and* producing of it." Foster (1996: 131) suggests that Warhol's 'blank' self-projection of being an impassive subject may significantly rather be a shocked subject "[...] who takes on the

nature of what shocks him as a mimetic defense against this shock." Thus in his blankness Warhol takes on the very character of what shocks him; the commodity machine. Such a posture of taking on a system and allowing oneself to be engulfed by it as a means of exposing the mechanisms of that system (as a kind of reaction to what shocks or challenges) has been adopted by several contemporary painters. It is evident, for example, in the paintings of George Condo who takes on cartoons, as the following passage by Holzwarth (2009: 108) describes:

> [Condo] is best known today for his caricaturesque, sometimes frankly absurd portraits that display a fair share of irreverence […] His fervent imagination has produced an endless gallery of broken heroes whose faces and bodies are distorted into comic grimaces of terrifying contortions. Often frozen into bizarre expressions that could either be of joy or despair, Condo's clownish, transfixed figures compose a grotesque fresco on the human condition.

In a review of his work Jennifer Higgie (http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/time's_fool/) says the following:

> George Condo's paintings describe a ribald world of crazed, comic engagement, theatrical illogic and a furious indifference to conventional niceties. Lush, delicate swaths of paint delineate bodies penetrated by other bodies, pierced by objects ranging from harpoons and daggers to carrots, or plagued by mental disquiet; insanity is the order of the day, served with a side helping of shy cruelty.

And in a similar vein, John Currin has been "[...] signalled out as one of the more polemical figures in a loosely affiliated group of figurative painters that came into prominence in the early 1990s." His work has been described as follows:

> Taking Francis Picabia's late nudes as a conceptual as well as pictorial model for his work, Currin can be aligned with a specific vein of figurative painting—a genealogy that might run from Sigmar Polke to Martin Kippenberger, from Alex Katz to Glen Brown. This antagonistic strain of painting has invented various strategies in order to toy with modernist taboos, confronting earnestness and vulgarity, the high art tradition and commercial image making (Gingeras: 2002: 68).

He recently immersed himself in painting unabashedly pornographic works which are directly drawn from porn sites taken off the internet. He says of these works:

> I thought it would be interesting to make them explicit and see if there is any mystery or any space left after you completely drain the potential. It's like when you don't show things, you build up a kind of voltage. So what happens if you totally open it up? Is the painting going to have any kind of energy at all? In a way, these are very unsexual paintings (http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/john-currin-the-filth-and-the-fury-795525.html).

Lisa Yuskavage similarly explores confrontational sexuality in her kitschy soft-core images of female nudes which push notions of viewership and voyeurism:

> […] her pastel-coloured paintings of big-titted girls with pouty lips and vacant stares revealed a perverse, imaginative take on the female nude as receptacle of the male gaze. They deliberately push sexualized subjects at the viewer. Her salacious exaggerations of the ideal female body, which borrowed as much from Mannerist distortions as from porno cartoons, were uneasily received […] Only recently have critics come to recognize her provocative brand of figuration as a significant practice (Harris, 2002: 344).

Hodgins often spoke of a Mr Hyde, a figure he puts on occasionally during painting in the studio. This reference to the criminal character in Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde(1886)* may point to his adoption of such a position of 'taking on the nature of what shocks him.' But whether this reference to Mr Hyde was meant as an enforcing of a strong sense of criticality and high standards in his works (as per the sly nature of Mr Hyde), or to take on a posture of what shocks, was never quite clarified. Arguably this character could be seen to relate to the wonderfully colourful but dark caricatures that occupy his painted worlds; the businessmen through which in this regard he expressed his views on bureaucracy in South African politics and society. Perhaps he was channelling the dictators and tyrants that expressed his views on the abuse of power. It was the latter that he was most clear about, as demonstrated by the opening quote to this chapter, i.e. his concern for the abuse of power and the atrocities of the twentieth century and finding a metaphor in painting for the co-existence of good and evil.

Traumatic Illusionism

In a further section of his essay subtitled *Traumatic Illusionism*, Foster suggests that illusionism may be interpreted in terms of trauma. Here Foster relates psychoanalytic theory to the visual arts through Lacan's theory of visuality[13] and the gaze. Lacan distinguishes between the 'look' and the 'gaze' as follows:

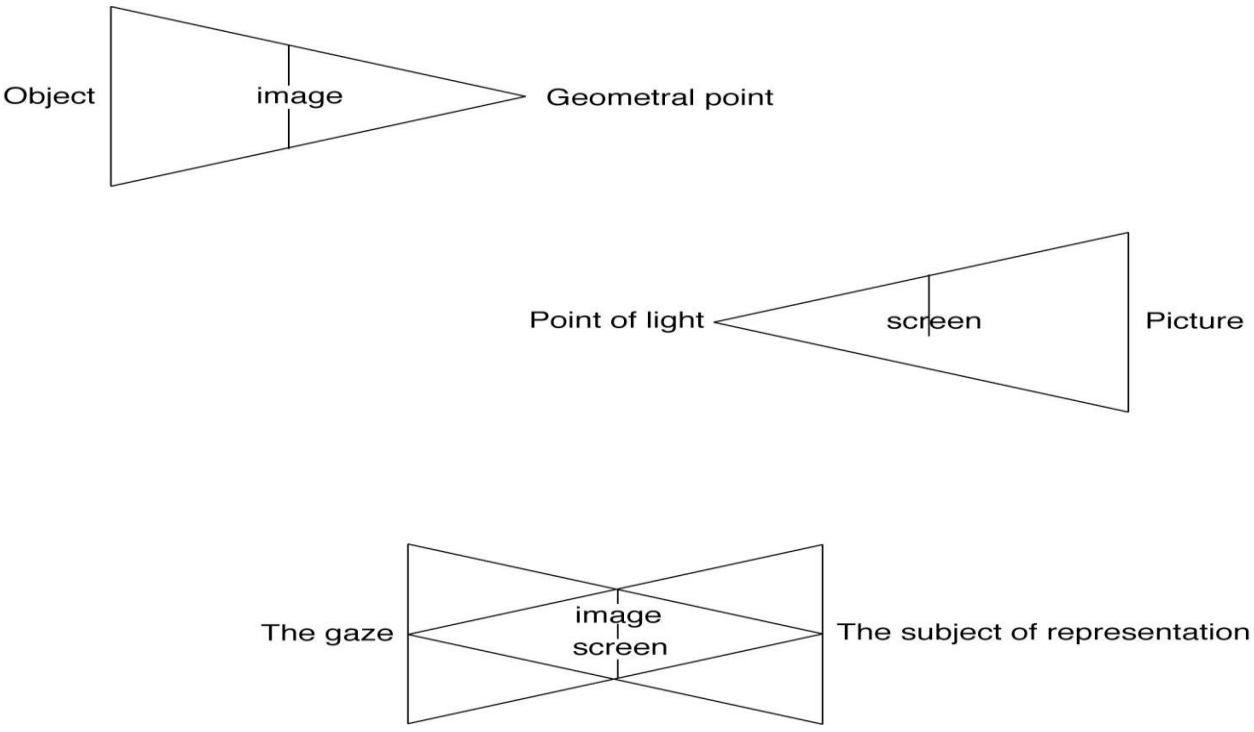
> There may be a male gaze, and capitalist spectacle is orientated to a masculinist subject, but such arguments are not supported by *this* seminar of Lacan, for whom the gaze is not embodied in a subject, at least not in the first instance […] Lacan distinguishes between the look (or the eye) and the gaze […] he locates the gaze *in the world*. As with language in Lacan, then, so with the gaze: it *preexists* the subject, who, 'looked at from all sides,' is but a 'stain' in 'the spectacle of the world.' Thus positioned, the subject tends to feel the gaze as a threat, as if it queried him or her […] Lacan challenges the old privilege of the subject in sight and self- consciousness […] as well as the old mastery of the subject in representation […] Lacan mortifies this subject in the famous anecdote of the sardine can that, afloat on the sea and aglint in the sun, seem to look at the young Lacan in the fishing boat 'at the level of the light, the point at which everything looks at me is situated.' Thus seen as (s)he sees, pictured as (s)he pictures, the Lacanian subject is fixed in a double position, and this leads Lacan to superimpose on the usual cone of vision that emanates from the subject another cone that emanates *from the object*, at the point of light, which he calls the gaze (Foster, 1996: 138-139).

The cone of vision which Foster (ibid) refers to here is "familiar from Renaissance treatises on perspective: the subject is addressed as the master of the object arrayed and focused as an image for him or her positioned at a geometral point of viewing." But Lacan demonstrates that "I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the picture." The subject is thus also "under regard of the object, photographed by its light, pictured by its gaze: thus the superimposition of the two cones, with the object also at the point of the

[13] Cited in Foster, H., 1996.p. 139.

light (the gaze), the subject also at the point of the picture, and the image also in line with the screen" (ibid).

The screen refers to the "schemata of representation," the conventions of image making. It is through the screen that the object gaze is mediated, tamed, represented, made into a sign, made symbolic and safe, protecting the subject from the object gaze. Foster describes the screen as "the sight of picture making and viewing, where we can manipulate and moderate the gaze." Without this access to the symbolic which the screen affords we would be as animals: "[…] caught in the gaze of the world; they are only on display there." Thus, they are without the symbolic and touched by the real (ibid: 140).




Lacan retells the classical tale of the *trompe-l' oeil* contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasios where Zeuxis paints grapes in a way that lures birds, but Parrhasios paints a veil that deceives Zeuxis, who asks to see what lies behind the veil and concedes the

contest in embarrassment. Here Lacan demonstrates the difference between man and animal, where animals are concerned with the surface; significantly man is concerned with what lies behind the veil. “And behind the picture, for Lacan, is the gaze, the object, the real, with “which the painter as creator […] sets up a dialogue.” The real always lies behind the screen calling to us in subtle seduction, it cannot be represented, “it is defined as such, as the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter, a lost object” (ibid: 141).

The screen becomes the heart of perception, where man mediates the gaze of the world. Lacan describes the gaze as dangerous, thus the need for mediation and negotiation of a kind of laying down of the gaze “[…] as in a laying down of a weapon […] Lacan imagined the gaze not only as maleficent but as violent, a force that can arrest, even kill, if it is not disarmed first” (ibid: 140). Thus, the gaze is conceived as a potentially violent force if not neutralized. Traditional picture making, according to Lacan, seeks to remove the teeth from the gaze so to speak, before it bites, before it seizes us in its grip. Traditional picture making seeks to tame the gaze: “[s]uch is aesthetic contemplation for Lacan: some art may attempt a *trompe-l’oeil,* a tricking of the eye, but all art aspires to a *dompte-ragard*, a taming of the gaze” (ibid).

Foster (ibid) puts forward that some contemporary art rejects this pacifying of the gaze and says: “It is as if this art wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire, or at least to evoke this sublime condition”. Such work “moves not only to attack the image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that it is already torn” (ibid: 141). Later in his essay Foster (ibid: 146) addresses this in terms of a shift in conception, i.e. “from reality as an affect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma” and he sees this shift as being definitive in contemporary visual art, theory, fiction and film. From this shift in conception has come a shift in practice which he goes on to graph, “again in relation to the Lacanian diagram of visuality, as a shift in focus from the image-screen to the object-gaze” (ibid). He goes on to demonstrate this shift in the works of Cindy Sherman and artists whose work employs “the artifice of abjection” (ibid: 153).

Hodgins' work can be seen to attempt to reveal the 'real' through the way in which he articulates the painted surface. Foster's (ibid: 136) comment about the rupture or punctum in Warhol's work is relevant here, i.e. that it "[...] works less through content than through technique." He refers to this 'tear' as a hole which occurs "[...] at the level of technique where the *punctum* breaks through the screen and allows the real to poke through." And through such tears "[...] we seem almost to touch the real, which the repetition of the images at once distances and rushes towards us" (ibid). Foster thus demonstrates that in Warhol the tear or rupture occurs at the level of technique. I would like to propose that a similar thing occurs in Hodgins' work through his articulation of painterly technique, i.e. in the painted surface. Hodgin's work can be seen to 'rupture' and 'tear' to reveal something of the 'real' as described by Foster.

In a publication on Hodgins titled *Robert Hodgins* 2002, the critic and art historian Ivor Powell (2002: 44), in his essay *Through Ubu's Eyes: Ambiguity in Hodgins*, writes about a painting called *Ubu—Man About town, 1997* (oil on canvas, 91.5 x 121.5cm). Powell identifies a specific "arresting" detail in the painting that causes him to be "[…] wrenched and jolted into the painting." Powell identifies this detail as Ubu's monocled eye. The eye is crudely painted as a red dot in the middle of Ubu's face and is surrounded by thinly painted yellow ochre. The monocle is drawn in as a perfect circle in a grey wash. Here Powell (ibid: 44) notes a confrontational emotional register to the painting: "The monocled eye of Hodgins' Ubu engages us with a tellingly different emotional charge." He continues to describe how the red dot confounds the viewer: "Instead of the eye that engages us, our human responses, we are confronted with a red dot that arrests and repels the viewer's psychological entry into the picture, while nevertheless establishing a psychological register of its own within the painting as a whole."

Hodgins once spoke to me about the importance of introducing a "moment of irrationality" into a painting and that when one attempted to introduce such a 'moment of irrationality' it was an attempt to create something that was "…more real than reality".

Ubu's monocled eye expresses for Powell a rupture in much the same way as the punctum, a moment of irrationality for Foster in Warhol. Hodgins conveys something to the effect of this attempted penetration of the 'real' when he speaks of his pursuit in painting as being like seeing a "…rat running up a drainpipe, never catching or seeing it, I have only ever glimpsed its tail, and my, what a magnificent tail." Hodgins' often soft, seductively painted characters sometimes draw you in by their appearance of vulnerability and fragility but at times they are also rendered so loosely that they appear as if they are disintegrating. They can appear almost corrosive and acidic. To adopt Lacan's idea of the graph of visuality I would say that Hodgins' characters seem in such instances to be subjected to the gaze where they become weathered and degraded and suffer the loss of subjecthood. Hodgins captures something similar to the rupturing of Lacan's screen in the instances where wounds are formed and skin evaporates and discolours, members detach, decompose and deform, all the while becoming less themselves; the subject itself surrendering to be an allusive bodily fluid (Personal communication, 8 January 2009).

The Image Screen

Hodgins paints at different levels of intensity, from the subject's integrity remaining intact (at times barely) to the point where it may truly summon up what Foster refers to as the 'real'. In this discussion I shall demonstrate this by evoking Lacan's concept of the gaze and refer to the different points on his diagram of visuality. In *The Return of the Real* Foster notes (1996: 146): "[…] a shift in focus from the image-screen to the object-gaze. This shift can be traced in the work of Cindy Sherman […]" and he goes on to map her work along three points on the Lacanian diagram of visuality; the subject-as-picture, the image screen and the object gaze. In examining a work by Hodgins in the next few paragraphs I would like to consider it similarly in terms of Lacan's graph to the way in which Foster considers Sherman's work, namely that it lies at the point of the "image-screen" shifting toward the "object-gaze," quivering between the affects of the gaze and safeguarding against it. At this point on Lacan's graph the screen becomes

like a semi-permeable membrane, allowing flows of the real or traumatic through breaks of the screen.

A painting by Hodgins titled *The object of our desire* (1999) (oil on canvas, 91X122 cm), features a subject under the gaze turning to the point of the grotesque and a loss of self awareness. While Hodgins never directly acknowledged the connection, even when I asked him, this image does recall the popular biblical theme of *Susannah and the Elders* (one of the additions to the book of Daniel, considered apocryphal by Protestants) which was painted from about 1500 by many famous painters including Rubens, Van Dyck, Tintoretto, Rembrandt, Tiepolo and Artimisia Gentileschi. It was a popular theme partly because of the possibility it afforded for a prominent nude female in history painting. The story goes that Susannah, a fair Hebrew wife, was falsely accused of adultery by two lustful elders who secretly spied on her whilst bathing in the garden. On her way back to her house they confronted her and threatened to claim that she had met up with a young man in the garden unless she submits to having sex with them. She refuses and is subsequently condemned to death but the young prophet Daniel soon finds serious inconsistencies in the elders' account of what they claimed to have witnessed and in turn they were sentenced to death for their evil deed. As such it is an instructive moral tale about lust and the corruption of officials, a theme that is close to the sentiments expressed in Hodgins' quotations at the start of this chapter.

Much of the area of this rectangular canvas is taken up by three rather bizarre looking characters arranged in a triangular portrait grouping. Two of the three characters are positioned in the left half of the canvas and in their cooler tones they seem to merge into the flat, ultra-marine background. The third figure which takes up almost the entire right half of the canvas juts out strongly in its bright pink coloration and strikingly painted red lips. The two figures on the left seem to be eyeing the figure on the right, the object of their desire. The flat blue of the background is punctuated in the top left corner by a nucleated spot of black which appears behind the figures.



*The object of our desire* (1999), oil on canvas, 91 x 122cm.

Shorter than the figure behind him, the first figure on the left appears to have no neck and, painted in a cool emerald green vapour, it appears as rather macabre and sinister. The large, lustily charged eyes, the left positioned higher and larger than the right, seem to bulge out while the smiling, clamped mouth expresses a sense of delight at the sight of the naked pink figure to the right. Flashes of purple within the green suggest a deathly complexion and almost create the sense of a photographic negative. The large head is rendered in quick strokes to define the crease of the chin and jaw, the hollow of the ear, the nose and the wedge-shaped eyes. The shirt is painted with black over the blue wash. The black paint is thicker in some areas such as the chest and sleeves. Fine upward jabs of a darker, more purple-blue, form lines that appear to meet at the bottom of the head.

Behind the first figure is a larger character painted mostly in white and blue. His overall posture suggests a strong, powerful being, muscular and solid in the way that he looms above the smaller figure. The head appears solid but the eyes in particular seem underdeveloped. The outside of the cobalt pupils repel the surrounding paint and intensify towards the centre. Paint is scrubbed in with a light cobalt blue across and down the left side of the head. A small ear protrudes from the back of the head. Swift strokes of paint are used to crudely define the nose, the blunt mouth, and a bit of the structure of the head. Fine, grainy spray seems to underlie all these features. The lower left cheek is left white, exposing the raw canvas. Scrapes of additional white areas outline the ear and upper right cheek. The imposing form of this figure is accentuated by his white shirt with dry blue scuffs suggesting folds at his midsection, hinting at the curvature of muscles in the shoulder behind the head of the smaller figure. With a brilliant compositional device the smaller figure is joined to the pink figure to the right by way of a small section of the larger character's red belt peeking through.

The pink character, unlike the other two, is naked and is painted in what seems like a fine, semi-transparent, pink film, at points only slightly increasing in density and thickening to form the ridges of the nose, eyebrow ridge and chin. The figure is nearly formless in appearance. Deboned like a jelly fish or single cellular organism he/she

appears tender and delicate. The flesh appears sensually soft, beautifully supple and oozing upwards. The mouth echoes a wound; it is long and slightly oval. It is delineated by two red ribbon-like lines indicating the lips, almost as lipstick crudely applied in a drunken fashion. The first ribbon-like line begins at the top left corner of the mouth and bobs across the top, circling towards the bottom, stopping just past half way. The second ribbon-like line finishes the last quarter of the lower lip. Teeth are created by allowing the fluid pink paint to run down in a multitude of drops forming white spaces between the furrows of pink paint, producing an unnerving but also comical grimace. Four blurry, blue dots appear on the pink form, two for the eyes and two for the nipples. The nipples vary slightly from the eyes as they are more circular and clearer due to what appear to be two round oil stains in the centres of the blurs. The delicacy of the eyes and nipples coupled with the lightness and thinness of skin suggest a bodily sensitivity at these points which allows the medium to convey a kind of sensual tactility. Perhaps more poignantly, these factors point both to a body at the end of sensation, a skinned corpse or a body at a more extreme level of sensitivity.

At this point I would like to invoke Foster's (ibid: 149) text on the abject as "[…] a category of (non) being […] as neither subject nor object, but before one is the former (before full separation from the mother) or after one is the latter (as a corpse given over to objecthood)". Foster (ibid: 153) continues:

> According to the canonical definition of Kristeva, the abject is what I must get rid of in order to be an I [...] It is a fantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it – too much so in fact, and this overproximity produces panic in the subject. In this way the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, the fragility of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body (again the privileged realm of the abject and the paternal law) both spatially and temporally, then, abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, 'where meaning collapses' [...].

In the *Violence of the Real* (2006: 96) Armin Zweite describes Francis Bacon's paintings of figures in terms of the abject as follows:

> The body's boundaries are broken open from the inside, the inner world and the outer world flow into one another. The living body is opened up as if it were dead meat. In the painting process more and more pressure is exerted on the subject until it breaks down [...].

A certain parallel could be made to Hodgins' pink figure in *The object of our desire*. Beyond the title's reference to the pink figure as an 'object', other connections to the notion of the abject as Foster outlines it can be made when examining the manner in which the figure is described through the application of paint. Armin Zweite (2006: 9) expands on his description of Bacon's work as follows:

> When you look at the paintings of Francis Bacon, you encounter depictions of human bodies twisting, melting away and in some cases dissolving. Sometimes several figures are locked in a struggle, in other instances human mingles with animal. Bacon focuses on rendering the physical presence of flesh in paint, avoiding the anecdotal and narrative. He presents bodies that are damaged and frail looking, though they can at the same time exude vitality and aggression […] Characteristic of his work are far-reaching transformations of received ideas about picture making and a decided aversion to any kind of illusionism.

Hodgins' pink figure's subjecthood seems to be "troubled" and in a state of near dissolving as a result of the fluidity of the paint, which perhaps also suggests the fluid state of the body and touches "[…] the fragility of our boundaries" (ibid). The absence of limbs in the pink creature, her lack of bones and the apparent 'decayed' nature of her two companions, all suggest an image that if one were to map on Lacan's diagram of visuality would be positioned on the image screen in much the same way as Foster describes Sherman's work.

## The Full Brunt of the Real

Hodgins never presents the body at the point of obscenity, but he does paint forms on the verge of the obscene (the obscene being a full breakdown of the image screen). Due to the staging of painting, presenting the obscene is impossible as it, by definition,

demands an absence of subject and staging. Hodgins presents a 'before the fact' staging of bodies ravaged to the limits by the real, the traumatic.

*Various wounds* (1999, oil on canvas 91X121cm) is a painting that Hodgins was very reluctant to talk about. He would dismissed the work stating that he did not know what it was about or could remember what he was thinking at the time of its making. One would be tempted to believe him if it were not for the fact that this painting was kept in his personal collection and, even more so, hung in a privileged position in his home above the fireplace. Due to my line of questioning in terms of the influence of Bacon I believe Hodgins was avoiding too much of a direct link to the British painter. I believe that this painting, more than most, is deeply connect to his investigations into Bacon's work, beginning with the title itself referring to wounds, a subject that Bacon was utterly occupied with throughout his career. The rectangular canvas is overrun by a radiant, ascorbic yellow. A green, rectangular outline reframes three nudes lined up as if posing for a photograph, a device that is perhaps derivative of the linear framings found in Bacon's paintings such as *Head VI 1949* [14]and the left hand panel of his Triptych *Inspired by T.S. Eliot's Poem "Sweeney Agonistes," 1967*[15]*.* Such framing devices frequently carry associations of cages in Bacon's work, as perhaps most evident in the screaming Pope series painted during the 1950s, but the frame within a frame also sets up a shallow stage-like space suggesting a dramatic tableau of sorts. It may thus suggest potential action or narrative in a dramatic sense.

The bodies are painted in soft, fuzzy pinks and oranges with the luminescent yellow still shining through from behind, rendering them somewhat transparent. The first body, starting from the left, could be male on account of the musculature of the arm but the single pectoral muscle is rather breast-like, i.e. feminine. The shoulder, collarbone, neck and head on the left side are delineated by a white line. Touches of green stipple the wide, oversized head. The figure seems to have no hair and the eyes are painted simply as two brown dots. The wide nose is formed by a faded brown line and patches of

[14] For an image of Head VI 1949 see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Head_VI_(1949).JPG
[15] For an image of Triptych *Inspired by T.S. Eliot's Poem "Sweeney Agonistes," 1967* see: http://hirshhorn.si.edu/dynamic/collection_images/full/72.16.a-c.jpg



*Various wounds* (1999), oil on canvas, 91X121cm.

orange and red appear on the left side of the face where a small crude ear is suggested. The head is less bubble-like than that in The object or our desire, but still not solid in appearance. It is more dough-like in appearance. Through a vertical pull of motioned marks downwards we are met with three 'T' shaped red-orange stabbings, like the dried blood of scabs. We are confounded in this painting by an uncertainty of the boundaries between various bodies it is difficult to distinguish one figure from the next.

Along with the presence of wounding, this painting reminds one of many of Francis Bacon's depictions of figures, for example in his 1962 painting *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*[16]. The central panel presents a bed with what appears to be a foreshortened, reclining figure. The bed is surrounded by a characteristically rounded room of which the floor is painted in a bright, flat orange and the walls a brick maroon. The figure appears to be a fusion of several figures where the distinction between limbs and body parts becomes impossible to decipher. The body appears as if opened up to reveal the internal flesh and signs of wounding are suggested by red paint drips and slashes that function as stains on the bed and body. The wounding transgresses beyond the body itself in marks on the walls and the black, drawn blinds behind and the whole picture is thereby enlivened by the visible process of its making which signifies a kind of "trauma inflicted during the image's formation" (Scala, 2009: 29). Such suggested wounds appear in Hodgins' canvas as well in the form of linear scrapes in eroded pink and red. These could similarly register as wounds, as in Bacon's painting, which are seen to exist even beyond the boundaries of the body. In Hodgins' painting the bodies have all but disappeared into the yellow background.

The head of the nude depicted on the right is shaped like a round fish bowl and the head of the left-hand nude is also quite chubby and highlighted by a discontinuous white outline. On the forehead of the figure on the right are horizontal slashes of scarlet. The red paint streaks appear thicker where the paint brush first touched the canvas and thereafter drag more thinly across the canvas. The 'chest wounds' of the left-hand

[16] For an image of *Three Studies for a Crucifixion1962* see: http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/showfull/piece/?search=Three%20Studies%20for%20a%20Crucifixion&page=&f=Title&object=64.1700

figure together with these streaks across the brow of the second nude suggest strangely shared stigmata. All that remains of the second character's face are his main features dissolving into the acidic yellow. The shapes of the eyes are loosely defined but the left pupil is oddly absent. The nose is defined by green and brown stains that drag out towards the well defined, red ear. Quick, brown lines suggest the shadow of the upper lip and the recess below the lower lip as well as the crease of the chin. An oversized neck connects the balloon-shaped head to the body. The round of the left shoulder is stained a dirty brown and the rest of the arm is fully modelled and muscular in appearance. The redness of a short, horizontal line on the torso adjacent to the elbow area appears wound-like, much like the markings on the torso of other figure and again the nude 'melts' into the yellow of the canvas.

A mangled looking, pink body that could also be read as a conglomeration of several bodies appears between the two nudes as if propped on either side of their shoulders. Like the central panel of *Three Studies for a Crucifixion 1962* there is confusion as to where one body ends and the other begins. It appears as if several limbs and segments of a torso 'sprout' out between the two figures. The chubbiness of these small limbs suggests the forms of an infant, but what may briefly look like a child's leg can simultaneously be read as the right arm of the large figure on the right. This central mass of ambiguous forms contains various points of recognition or suggests certain bodily features, one being an orange-red, stained wound situated in the lower central part of the canvas and another which may be a navel/anus/nipple just to the right and above it. A right hand, which is simply defined by way of brown lines and pink paint, seems to hold out a form resembling a baby's pacifier. There is no presence of a neck to what could be read as a child-like body, but an open mouth and nostrils are clearly discernable above the shoulder of the figure on the right. These features appear distinctly ape-like, especially with the size and placement of the two nostrils above the mouth. The oversized white teeth draw attention to the open mouth and its placement at the centre of the composition makes it a distinct focal point in the image. It suggests some form of utterance, perhaps a scream?

The wide open mouth with rows of bared teeth is a common feature in many of Bacon's paintings, notably his series of screaming Popes. James Elkins (1999: 39), in considering Gilles Deleuze's account of the "body without organs" and his writing on Bacon's work in his book titled *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation* (2005), describes the screaming mouth in many of Bacon's paintings as a conduit for the release of tension and energy and says the following:

> In *Francis Bacon: Logique de la Sensation*, Deleuze describes Francis Bacon's paintings […] as if Bacon's figures were nearly unrepresentable, churning, fluid bodies straining to escape through the confining envelope of their skin (or trying to burst the armatures or stages that function as skin metaphors). In Deleuze's account, if Bacon could make a painting of the moment of escape, when the fluid body evacuates itself through the mouth (vomiting into a drain, or screaming), or leaks out into its own pooling shadow, or exists as a froth, or a drip, or a jet of water, then the body would become unrepresentable.

He further mentions Bacon's *Portrait of George Dyer Staring at a Blind Cord* (1966)[17] in which he sees this as nearly happening:

> George Dyer's body spurts in a white splatter and also oozes off into a corner, out of the picture. To Deleuze, Bacon's paintings must always exhibit the same three elements: the fermenting 'meat' of the figure, the sharp 'circle' that encases it (whether this is literally a circle or an elliptical platform, a railing, a surreal cage, or an airy frame with two flimsy blind cords), and the harshly colored 'material substance' that beckons to the figure from beyond its reach. In Bacon, the body without organs is inaccessible, but its possibility is very near.

Elkins (ibid: 38) considers Deleuze's theories, "based on Freud's bizarre assertions in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that all life aspires toward the simple protoplasmic cell, the irreducible water balloon exemplified by the mouthless, anusless amoeba" suggestive but also points out that "as acts of imagination they cannot approach the complexitiy and metaphorical richness that exist in the body's actual membranes, or the

[17] For an image of Bacon's *Portrait of George Dyer Staring at a Blind Cord* (1966) see: http://www.bridgemanart.com/image/Bacon-Francis-1909-92/Portrait-of-George-Dyer-Staring-at-Blind-Cord-1966-oil-on-canvas/1e1cf4f358b145f1b0a3ad19a23d7418

varieties of pressure and turbulence in Bacon's paintings." He (ibid: 41) continues by saying:

> Consider for example the possibility that membranes might become more complex instead of simpler, or that they might fold in, rather than confining the body against a force that threatens to rupture outward. A membrane is something by which we are enfolded: it can be skin, or skin metaphors from underwear and bedsheets to the forms of interior architecture. But membranes also *infold*: they turn inward toward one another, involving, forming skin upon skin, hiding and protecting what is inside. Involvement means 'in-turning', and invagination, the standard medical term for any infolding, is a common occurrence in membranes. (In the same way, an irruption is a violent break or tear in an infolding, propelling the contents inward, while an eruption expels contents outward.) [...] what happens in any one of Bacon's bodies is more troubled than a single urge. The bodies are specific about their contents – their mixtures of membranes and cartilage, pieces of bone and newspaper, plastic and muscle – and they are exact about their forces – pushing outward, but also infolding, ripping, scraping, and seething without direction. If Deleuze's, Lacan's, and Freud's accounts of the skin fall short when it comes to pictured bodies, then it is on account of the body's sheer complexity.

Elkins' observations are interesting in relation to both Bacon's and Hodgins' paintings of figures. In Hodgins' *Various wounds* many questions arise. What are we presented with? Is it a family portrait, and if so, what are we to make of the aspects of trauma, i.e. scars and wounds? The title itself points to this. The compositional focus here is drawn primarily to the central mass of ambiguous body parts, with the enlarged mouth appearing in the middle of the canvas. What Foster would call "the violated body" (1996:152) describes the scene in this image in which the object gaze completely invades the subject and where the abjected subject is reduced to a carcass. Hodgins' handling of paint in this work demonstrates an ultra-awareness of the flesh of the bodies under what could be said to be the tyranny of the gaze. Everything about this painting is in flux; between definition and lack thereof, subjecthood and abjection, the traumatic and the screening of it. Foster's (1996: 149) following comments seem appropriate here:

> Such images evoke the body turned inside out, the subject literally abjected and thrown out. But they also evoke the outside turned in, the subject-as-picture invaded by the object gaze. At this point some images pass beyond abject, which is often tied to substances and meanings, not only toward the *informe* a condition described by Batialle where significant form dissolves because the fundamental distinction between figure and self and other, is lost, but also the obscene, where the object gaze is presented as if there were no scene to stage it, no frame of representation to contain it, no screen.

The power of the painting lies in its ruptures, the wounds. Foster (166) goes on to point out: "[…] for many in contemporary culture truth resides in the traumatic or abjected subject, in the diseased or damaged body" and he notes that many artists seek a fluctuation between affect and non-affect in their work:

> […] many artists today seem to be driven by an ambition to inhabit a place of total affect and to be drained of affect altogether, to posses the obscene vitality of the wound and to occupy the radical nihility of the corpse.

He (1996: 152) also comments that "[o]ften, too, the body appears as a direct double of the violated subject, whose parts are displayed as residues of violence and/or traces of trauma […]." They are absent victims of violence but also lack self awareness of being victims (as they are still refusing to acknowledge the gaze and still in their own delusion of the image screen). We thus only find the presence of a nose, a phantom arm, mouth, head, skull and blood which indicate the 'real'. Foster calls this a "probing into the wound" (ibid) of the lost subject. In this way trauma is persuaded upon and within the subject, in that what made the subject a subject is now removed and what is left is just a corpse.

Hodgins and Bacon seem to have similar ends in mind in their approach to painting figures. Zweite (2006: 228-229) notes the French critic Deleuze's observations on Bacon's works in his book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (2005) and these are worth citing here:

In essence the concern is to render perceptible and visible the invisible forces which deform, alter, violate and often even destroy the flesh of Bacon's figures. This exertion of force is what Deleuze calls 'sensation'; it reveals itself as deformation and reaches its fullest extent in the scream. In the rejection of all conventions, in the process of flaying and debasing, Deleuze sees Bacon's pictures as exposing the interrelatedness and reciprocal influence of human and animal creatures. 'Man becomes animal, but not without the animal becoming spirit of man, the physical spirit of man[...].' According to Deleuze the relationship between cause and effect is manifested not so much in form and content as in substance and force; the works evoke those subcutaneous energies which exert an effect on the depicted physical subject. Deleuze points out one force which plays a special role: inertia. Bacon paints flesh which, however firm, drops off the bones, is deformed, contorted by spasms, or metamorphosing into a tissue of nerves. But ultimately the deformations are not indicative of cramp or coercion, nor is torture involved although it sometimes appears that way. On the contrary, Deleuze sees the most natural postures of a body which, having reorganised itself under the influence of some primal force, now expresses an eloquent message of elemental simplicity: a 'desire to sleep, to vomit, to turn over, to remain seated as long as possible[...].'

## Chapter Three: Hodgins and Bacon: More real than reality

As already indicated, when I first questioned Hodgins about reading his paintings in terms of features of trauma, or rather that his work might be seen to contain a traumatic vein, he did not recognise this in his work himself. I have to admit to a certain extent that neither did I completely recognise features of trauma as much as I *felt* them in his work, i.e. through what they conveyed by way of his execution in the paintings. In the very first interviews he thought I was seeking an autobiographical trauma within his own life that may, inadvertently, have influenced his work. He spoke at length of his childhood in London, his home experiences, schooling and going to work at a very young age, later the war, his experiences in Egypt, South Africa and his teaching career. Despite this information not really being what I was after, it was too interesting for me to say that I did not want to hear it. I felt that he was letting me further into his world, more than he would perhaps usually do. He once told me of the myth-making it takes to make an artist and hence the need to create a mask or public persona, but I believe he realised later on that I was not hunting for something based on pretence, a fictional idea that needed to be conjured up or proven to be there through traumatic experience. What Hodgins and I both realised in conversation was that what I sought was extremely fugitive. Trauma was there, not to be found in the blatantly obvious but as Hodgins put it to me: "what you are looking for is very difficult as it is behind the curtain" (Personal communication, 14 January 2010).

Hodgins often said that subject matter is not the content of a painting and the idea of searching for something 'behind the curtain' was certainly something that Francis Bacon was also keenly aware of. In his essay titled *Bacon's Scream* in the book *The Violence of the Real* (2006), Armin Zweite (2006: 92) foregrounds the notion of a clearing of veils or screens when he notes that Bacon distorted images not because he set out to violently deform figures:

> Instead the distortions should be seen as symptoms of how subjects of the portraits perceive themselves when their status and their social facade disintegrate. Social status, self stylisation, role playing, in this Bacon saw

> a kind of disguise of the individual which he sought to remove or penetrate in his portraits. This necessarily resulted in distorted expressions and physical deformations, [...] 'When I look at you across the table', said Bacon to Sylvester, 'I don't only see you but I see a whole emanation which has to do with personality and everything else. And to put that over in a painting, as I would like to be able in a portrait, means that it would appear violent in paint. We nearly always live through screens – a screened existence. And I sometimes think [...] that perhaps I have from time to time been able to clear away one or two of the veils or screens'."

And in *The Logic of Sensation* Gilles Deleuze (1983: 233) quotes Bacon directly:

> 'Great art,' the painter said on 26 June 1973, 'is always a way of concentrating, reinventing what is called fact, what we know of our existence – a reconcentration [...] tearing away the veils that fact acquires through time. Ideas always acquire appearance veils, the attitudes people acquire of their time and earlier time. Really good artists tear down those veils.'

Bacon seemed in this sense to be addressing what had been lost to representation, perhaps through over exposure by way of the advent of photography. Bacon endeavoured to bring to life the fact of truth that had been obscured; he sought to somehow conjure the real through painting. Peppiat (2006: 5) highlights Bacon's emphasis on the unconscious and the impact that surrealism had on the artist in seeking to tear trough the layers that 'fact' had obtained:

> With its insistence on the significance of the unconscious and its fascination with the 'chance encounters' of quite disparate things, surrealism – including Picasso at his most surrealist – was no doubt the single most important influence on his development, however much he distanced himself from the whole phenomenon thereafter. But, as with his other borrowings, Bacon rapidly absorbed surrealist attitudes and techniques and turned them into something unmistakably his own.

It is easy to see the influence of Bacon on Hodgins. Hodgins' process is similarly steeped in the unconscious and is undoubtedly influenced to an extent by surrealism. But it is important to remember the context in which Bacon's work was made and that Hodgins was acutely aware of this when commenting to Judith Watt (1995: 15):

> He'd call these unmentionable pieces of paint his 'Furies'[...] it's to do with shock, of normality being destroyed in what might otherwise be a fairly straight forward work.

Hodgins knew that what Bacon was doing was a formalised distortion of reality, in particular on the human body, which he deployed as a kind of pictorial innovation. In his own work Hodgins would use such distortions to his own needs but in response to a very different impulse. A good example of adopting a theme from Bacon and inserting it into a contemporary South African context is a painting called *Black Man White Man* (1998/2000, oil on canvas, 60,5 x 50cm) which depicts a screaming, pink face 'hooded' by a larger, brown face behind it. The smaller head, painted in quick strokes of fleshy pinks and a light Naples yellow, is strongly offset against the dark brown of the larger head with its wide-set eyes. The eyes of the smaller face appear closed and the right eye is surrounded by a dark blue patch, likely the bruising of a black eye. The most striking feature of the painting is the open mouth which can be clearly read as a feature borrowed from Bacon's paintings of screaming figures, one of the most direct quotations that Hodgins would use from the works of Bacon. Bacon's famous images of screaming Popes painted after Velasquez (1951-65) are "vivid studies of socially produced deformations of the individual" (Wieland Schmied *et al*, 2000: 33). Scala (2009: 33) points out that "Bacon's black cavern of the scream [bears out what] Elaine Scarry has argued, namely that the internal trauma of pain resists language, as one is reduced to cries or whimpers" and such features clearly enact a narrative of pain and suffering." The inside of the screaming mouth in Hodgins' painting is painted a hot red receding into a black smear. Conceivably, as with Bacon's screaming figures, Hodgins sought something raw and primal, but one can't help but note the satirical humour in this painting, as opposed to the expression of existential pain and suffering in Bacon's works, which clearly points at white paranoia prevalent in South African society. The diminutive pink face lets out an anxious shriek in front of the looming black face behind it.

Despite their similarities, Bacon and Hodgins are very different painters, fundamentally so. Both artists utilised the accident of paint and processes of the unconscious, yet I

would argue that Hodgins was more poetic, subtle and even lyrical in his use of the medium. A Bacon painting appears tough, uncompromising, at times brash and less seductive in its handling than a Hodgins painting. Thus it would be exceptionally reductive to see Hodgins' work as directly derivative of Bacon's work. It is well established that Hodgins had a feverish imagination that he used in an extraordinary way:

> [...] Whatever impulse it is at any given moment that throws up the specific images or colours or moods is itself something with a logic located in the unconscious. But rather than explore these gestalts through the abstract means of painting – colour, texture, etc - Hodgins passes those materials, as it were, through a filter of received imagery and impression. In this way the automatic and personal element hooks into a common cultural property, though in a way that is more complex and layered than straight forward representation (Powell, 1996:13).

In talking with Hodgins about Bacon and his work, he would often step into the shoes of Bacon, almost as an actor would enter a character. Not that he wanted to be Bacon but Bacon had become a character in Hodgins' world as much as the plump nudes and the businessmen that he often depicted. He was attracted to the flamboyance and tragedy of Francis Bacon. He would refer to the movie *Love is the Devil* (1998, directed by John Maybury with Derek Jacobi in the main role) based on Bacon's life, portraying him as an overly camp and nasty personality. On occasion (almost every time I saw him) he would parody this bitchy, theatrical and exaggerated Bacon much to the delight of his present company. Hodgins did not usurp Bacon's interests – stemmed by a fan-based obsession – but rather he shared in common interests. Zweite (2006: 19) comments on the following interests of Bacon's:

> […] he repeatedly alluded to Greek tragedies, those of Aeschylus in particular, but also to Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot and other writers, and of course to Sigmund Freud. In the visual arts it was Michelangelo, Velázquez, Rembrandt, Poussin, Ingres, van Gogh (although in his case he was more interested in the letters than the paintings), Degas, and the drawings of Giacometti, Duchamp and Matisse. Above all, however, it was Picasso's overture that fascinated Bacon again and again.



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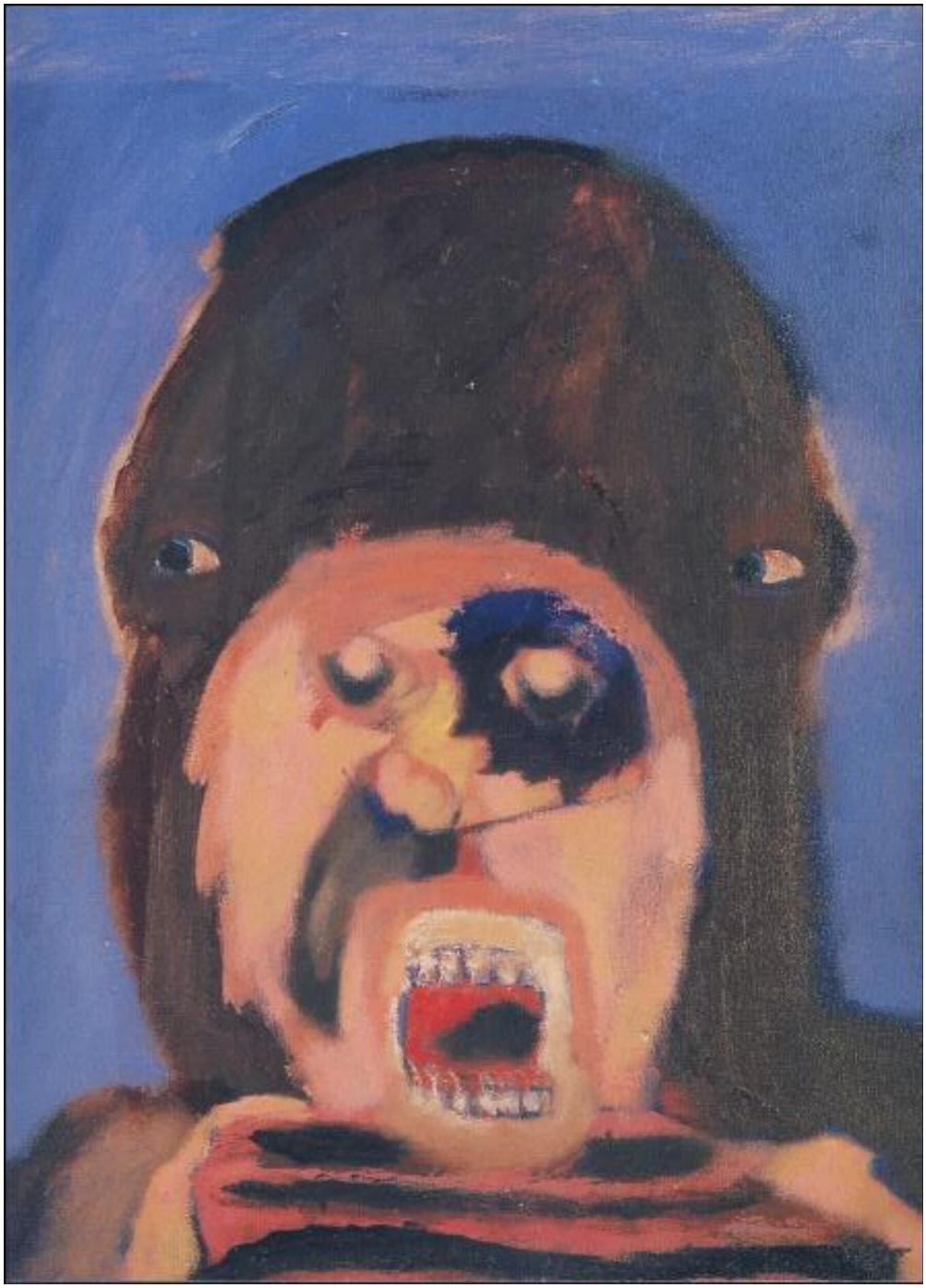

*Black Man White Man* (1998/2000), oil on canvas, 60.5 x 50cm.

Unlike Bacon, Hodgins never revealed any single philosophical or, for that matter, spiritual driving force that drove his ambitions. He had a love for painting and a great curiosity while Bacon seemed driven by a more unified force; he was a more despairing individual while Hodgins was a great optimist. Bacon was driven to make his life significant; everything he did often had existentialist underpinnings:

> The connection was not misguided in that Bacon shared the basic view of this movement all his life. After the death of God, as Nietzsche had said, existence had lost its meaning. Life, delimited by birth and death, was the only indisputable thing about existence. Because there were no longer binding norms and generally valid principals or obligatory rules, every solipsistic individual was on his own and had to give direction and a goal to his own life – and to do so with great intensity (ibid: 18).

There is a common ark between Bacon and Hodgins and this connection lies in their similar references to and their awareness of the great vulnerability of mankind. As Zweite (ibid: 11) notes on Bacon:

> He himself defined the framework of reference as both general and timeless/subjective and current [...] The re-invention of reality and the violence of reality linked with it relate to the problematic existence of man and his great vulnerability, but also to the fact that what makes man human is extraordinarily fragile and at risk .

And Hodgins is noted to have said: "I'm more aware of human beings as small defenceless creatures" (Ludman, 1984: n.p.).

Hodgins loved people, they bewildered him. Beyond the abuse of power in the 20th century, his other grand subject was the human being. Like Bacon he sought an essence, a 'realness' in painting not unlike the 'essence' that Gertrude Stein sought in literature and expressed in the following quote in terms of the notion of repetition:

> For Gertrude Stein, repetition is more than a mere linguistic – logical or musical –syntactic process. It is rather a phenomenological attempt to close in on the essence of the thing that bears a certain name. This turning away from the traditional substantive character of description is

> most clearly expressed in her well-known saying: “a rose is a rose is a rose” (Kolacka, 2006: 206).

Stein’s mantra reminds me of Hodgin’s (in various personal conversations) frequent expression: “well, a painting is a painting is a painting.” In this context repetition must be seen as distinct from a process of mass production and rather as a process of constant re-evaluation or concentration on seeking meaning through formal and material properties of painting. In other words, not a desensitising process whereby what is made deteriorates or becomes metonymic of what it used to be, as in mass production. As the following quote on Gertrude Stein continues:

> During a lecture in Chicago the writer explained this tautology as follows: “Now listen! I’m no fool! I know that in daily life we don’t go around saying ‘is a...is a... is a...’ but I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years.’ By declaring war on the substantive, Stein wants to overcome conventional designations which immediately evoke certain associative emotions (ibid: 206).

Hodgins sought, even pursued, aspects of painting that he admired in other painter’s work. He often spoke of Phillip Guston painting a coffee mug and how the slight difference in colour from the background to that within the space inside the ear of the mug made all the difference in that painting. In an interview with Ivor Powell (1984: 42), Hodgins speaks of incorporating a kind of ‘bad painting’ he had seen done by the German expressionist painter George Grosz: “I’m perfectly willing to go back to elegant glazery and beautiful things, but now it would be put against the other thing. It no longer interests me to do that kind of painting by itself. What does interest me enormously is mixing things.”

He saw other painters as reference for painterly devices or feasible experiments applicable in his own studio, as Mary Jones (in Jordan, 2004: np) notes: “One can discern the art historical influence of painters such as Francis Bacon, [...] however, Hodgins is at play and does not regard this as sacrosanct territory.” In the same way Hodgins sought aspects of Bacon’s work in his own painting because he admired Bacon’s work so much, but even more so; he was after a similar end. In thinking about

their work one can speculate as to what exactly this might have been. Both artists excelled at drawing the viewer in and both painters excelled at embodying feeling within forms and material/matter. Both artists had the ability to suggest a presence with a few strokes of the brush.

Hodgins' attentiveness to the emotive constructs of painting spurred his interest in Bacon. Zweite (2006: 99) notes on Bacon:

> For all these observations and discussions, it should be emphasised that with Bacon's works as with other works we are dealing with constructs. What we see is constructed emotions, which cannot be straightforwardly identified with comparable everyday phenomena. The emotions presented are subject to the rhetorical conventions of the visual arts; they are the manifestations of strategies for creating an impact.

This applies equally to Hodgins' work. Despite his frequent quoting, Hodgins maintains a distinctive voice in his work and what he attempts to achieve is to paint as close to feeling and intuition as possible. As Hodgins himself puts it in an interview with Powell (1984: 44):

> The real point [...] is that one knows that one has order in one's own being. The only way to destroy that order is to put a bullet through your head, and then finally you've lost it all. But however irrational and disordered it may be as experience, these fragments are ordered because that's you. The world as I know it is a series of apparently random snap shots. How do I reflect that? How do I react to that? I don't think it's possible any longer to do it only through art, for the same reason that art has become one more fragment of experience. But, at the same time, when you are quoting, as you call it, the fact that you personally make that line which both refers to something else and achieves your own purpose – that fact makes it yours, makes it something other.

Before he painted his Ubu[18] images Hodgins considered his painting to be well mannered. Ubu awoke a genuine edge in painting for Hodgins, opening a reality where

[18] Hodgins once commented: "Ubu is a wicked bastard, but at the same time he's a fool...You have these guys who are dangerous but funny. Goering was one of those kinds guys. Hitler was as much a bastard, but he wasn't funny" (Ludman, 1984:n.p.).

his totality of emotion, experience, power and wit coagulated in and through his painting. The character of Ubu facilitated a violent 'jolt' or sudden realisation of the real, which had to do with what is painted as well as how it is painted. A door was opened for Hodgins, a rupture of sorts for a revelatory new expression in his works, an intensity that had not been there before:

> My paintings suddenly took a quantum leap [...] I had produced canvasses before in a dutiful way […] With Ubu, I began to find I could keep all these and at the same time bring them to life by mixing in social comment and experience. That's the moment when painting began to take off for me. (Ludman, 1984: n.p.)

Hodgins found that within the bracket of Ubu, endless variations of paintings existed, not unlike Bacon who through violent sexual experiences was able to open a door to expression. Peppiat (2006: 4) comments on this in Bacon's work as follows:

> […] more than anywhere, in the confusion of extreme pleasure and extreme pain, Bacon found access to a reality – the rawest emotion, the undisguised scream – that most situations in life disguised. And later in his own version of 'Emotion Recollected in Tranquillity', Bacon was free to flay his lovers and himself on canvas with an abandon that would have proved fatal in reality, drawing with supreme cynicism on medical textbooks, scientific photography and the entire history of figure and flesh painting in Western art.

Where before the nudes and figures were more passive and polite, with Ubu they suddenly became sinister, charged with the contrast he sought out in painting: a brutality while remaining pathetic at the same time.

Hodgins assimilated everything and it seems everyone into 'Mother Hubbard's cupboard'. In many ways his characters are fragments of the self, Ubu was as much a self portrait as Bacon had become a Hodgins' character like Ubu. They are similar - at least they were to Hodgins - both cruel, cunning and at times sadistically funny. Hodgins would often tell an anecdote of the neo expressionist painter Julian Schnabel who during his exhibition opening was flattered to see that Francis Bacon was attending.

Schnabel approached Bacon, gushing as he was a fan, and asked Bacon what he thought of his work. At this stage of the story Hodgins' had already assumed his Bacon character, placing his hand on my arm reassuringly and he would say in an exaggeratedly camp accent (as if I were Schnabel): "Give it up dear boy, you have no talent" (various personal communications).

This anecdote reminds me of a painting Hodgins did in 1983 titled *Ubu and the Black Politician (large version)* (Tempera on canvas 91 x 122 cm). The character of Ubu is represented as a well dressed man in a white suit sitting next to the black politician on a red couch. Ubu is shown placing his hand on the black politician's arm much like Hodgins did with me in telling the story of Schnabel and Bacon. Hodgins' portrayal of Ubu's face with its rounded but square-shaped jaw, the peering eyes and the neat flick of the hair could well be a portrait of Francis Bacon.[19] The way in which Ubu is dressed also alludes to Bacon's sharp fashion sense. Hodgins never connected this particular painting with Bacon at all but it seems likely to me that Bacon would feature in his works seeing that he had such a strong influence on Hodgins' work.

In many of Hodgins' paintings the encounter with Ubu is a seemingly passive one. Often Ubu is standing or sitting and merely peering, as in the above painting or *Ubu-Man About Town* (1997, oil on canvas, 91.5x 121.5) and *Ubu and the Commanders in Chief* (1981/82, oil on canvas 91 x 12 cm). Despite their passive agency the Ubu's hold a sense of authority and sinisterness. For me the most intriguing in terms of the influence of Bacon is *Ubu Interrogator 1* (1983, oil, enamel and tempera on board 23 x 33.5cm). It is painted in a series of warm greys while the image is drawn out with a broken, dark line. Ubu is sitting behind a rectangular desk wearing a suit, black tie and large black sun glasses with perfectly round lenses. Ubu appears poised with his eyes deadlocked on the viewer. While the picture puts forward a passive encounter, the title suggests something more sinister or even potentially violent. The tenor of this image

[19] For a photograph of Francis Bacon to illustrate his resemblance to Ubu in this painting see: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/7535593/Francis-Bacon-In-Camera-at-Compton-Verney-review.html



*Ubu and the Black Politician (large version)* (1983), tempera on canvas. 122 x 91cm.



*Ubu - Man About Town* (1997), oil on canvas. 121.5 x 91.5cm.



*Ubu and the Commanders in Chief* (1981/82), oil on canvas. 122 x 91cm.



*Ubu Interrogator 1* (1983), oil, enamel and tempera on board. 23 x 35.5cm

reminds me of a series of paintings Francis Bacon did in the 1950's known as the Blue Man series and which Peppiat (2006: 46) describes aptly in the following quote:

> These enigmatic, dark blue figures emerging from a dark blue ground stand out by their precisely delineated, almost clinical composition and deliberately restrained, cold colour, as if Bacon were making his art as a conscious attempt to regain the control he had lost so spectacularly in his own life […] one can sense a sinister calm beside the cry, a more subtle interlocking of the central image and its surrounding structure, a more knowing manipulation of the paint itself as well as the warm and cold tones.

A white shirt with red and maroon striped tie is also silk-screened in each of the panels. The red and maroon stripes are diagonally placed on the tie in each of the panels except the final one where they are printed horizontally. This is not the only difference marking the fifth panel; a cloudy grey-lavender area resembling a table surface stretches across each of the panels except the last panel where it ends in an abrupt slice. The fifth and final figure is also sunk slightly lower in register.

The major interruptions or 'ruptures' in the fields of these panels are the heads of the figures. Crude and quick brush stokes of yellow ochre, burnt sienna, burnt umber, raw fleshy-red and a lighter flesh tint pink loosely render each of the heads. The tight perfection of the stripes, the lushly painted backgrounds together with the raw and crude marks are deliberately combined here to achieve what Hodgins refers to as a combination of 'good' and 'bad' painting and which he discusses as follows:

> You know if one has a painting as gentle as a rose in one part and above it a crude drawing with a brush and black pen and ink, I think you start casting doubt on the prettiness of the rose and perhaps even on the crudeness of the other thing. One is in a way trying to find a metaphor for the wonder and horror of a world in which terrible things and beautiful things exist together (Powell, 1984: 42).

Both sets of work, i.e. Hodgin's painting and Bacon's series, convey a sense of encountering a person in authority such as visiting a school principal or meeting a person in office. In the shallow tableau of the confrontational setting, the men

appear poised, steadied at a distance and guarded with an air of authority behind their respected desk and bar table. They peer at us, their guests, without the surprise of recognition. There is little doubt that Bacon's sinister blue men with their peeling eyes were sought out in pubs for brutal sexual encounters. Ubu, like the blue men, stares right at the viewer through dark glasses that look like binoculars, scrutinising us behind the shades. A sense of distance and impersonality is conveyed through which Hodgins manages to create tremendous tension in his work.

Like Bacon, Hodgins occasionally worked in series through which he was able to further explore pictorial tension by way of suggesting continuous narrative elements in a durational sense, even if nothing in particular was occurring in these sequences. Hodgins' ability to build such tension is evident in a work made up of a series of similar images called *Boardroom Series I-V* (1994, silkscreen and oil on canvas) in which he explores variations of the same theme. Consisting of five square panels (each 75cm by 75cm) a stout, seated figure in a blue pinstriped suit is depicted roughly in the same position on each of the canvases. The backgrounds to these figures are painted loosely in a continuous, pale Naples-yellow wash. A fluorescent ceiling light, as commonly found in an office environment, is painted in a flat titanium white in the first two panels. These lights extend from the far right on the first panel across to the left of the second panel to establish a clear connection between the two. As a result of these connections and continuities, the figures appear to be one and the same individual repeated. The striped suit in each panel is depicted in alternating black and blue, the blue varying from a French ultramarine to a paler tone. The black stripes are silkscreened onto the blues and lend a strong impression of movement or visual shimmering which enhances the flashy ostentatiousness of the suit.

This too was conceivably a device appropriated from Bacon who, as Zweite (2006: 101) states: "[...] deliberately combined the pure with the impure, the dignified with the primitive, elevated status with existential danger, locating them within a single isolated figure. In Hodgins' work the tight-knittedness of the panels is directly confronted with



*Boardroom Series I* (1994), Silkscreen and Oil on Canvas. 75 x 75cm



*Boardroom Series II* (1994), Silkscreen and Oil on Canvas. 75 x 75cm



*Boardroom Series III* (1994), Silkscreen and Oil on Canvas. 75 x 75cm



*Boardroom Series IV* (1994), Silkscreen and Oil on Canvas. 75 x 75cm



*Boardroom Series V* (1994), Silkscreen and Oil on Canvas. 75 x 75cm

moments of fluidity and movement to create an 'anxious' image. Powell (1996: 14) points out that Hodgins' painted figures are in a fluid state of becoming through the use of his medium:

> Becoming is a particularly fertile notion. Becoming is, in a way, the opposite of the given. It is active rather than passive, it is fluid rather than fixed. It is consciousness in a state of flux, consciousness acting upon the materials of experience in order to render them up as something they were not before, something that makes them appear differently and perhaps more incandescently to the perception. In Hodgins' work, certainly, it gives the world back as something in which the fixed and received is transformed and exposed to the acid of doubt. The world (as cued in by the representational and quotational elements) is given back to us in ways that are surprising and disturbing and not infrequently, darkly visionary. Perhaps most importantly, the treachery of our own perception, its volatility in reading the work, makes us partners in the practice of remaking and interrogating experience.

A state of becoming or flux is equally at play in Bacons work, as Zweite (2006: 72) points out:

> [… ] Bacon dramatises the process by which form takes shape or disintegrates. Looking at his works, the viewer is constantly forced to ask whether he is looking at something emerging or something fading - deeply unsettling experience. The rough brushwork and the unstable formal structure, frequent crude or clumsy effects (deliberate or unintentional), spatial concepts that are deliberately unclear, dark colours combined with glaring high-lights, and above all the fact that his figures seem to be subjected to a constant process of change, with a tendency to dissolve into pure materiality, to lose themselves in an emergent mass of indefinable particles and indecipherable marks - all these elements give the pictures a considerable degree of authenticity and enhance their suggestive impact, an impact which is not only visual but also psychological in nature.

In Hodgins' series the marks that constitute the head threaten to fall apart. In the first two panels the head seems to hold together with some degree of integrity, only to begin to dissipate by the third and then to gather up again in the fourth. There is a feeling that the figure is slipping down and sideways from panel to panel. Reinforced through the play and presence of the fluorescent light in the first two panels, especially since their

positions alter slightly from one panel to the next, there is the sense that the figure is slipping sideways off the ground. One is not sure in the first place whether the figure is soundly grounded. The final panel holds the greatest anxiety where the figure bobs slightly downwards at the point also where the lavender-grey table surface ends abruptly. The most extreme fracture is in the head in the final panel where it is at its most degraded and deformed. There is a foreboding sense that the head is finally about to self-destruct and become incorporeal outside the confines of the suit and one is not sure whether the paint is able to pull back into some kind of harmony. Arnold's (1986: unpaginated) following comment reflects on how Hodgins is able to conjure up tension in works such as these:

> An interest in the absurd, the grotesque and the brutal has not produced vulgar painting. The idea of viciousness, illogicality and discordancy would be visually boring if a painting, as a totality, were made from crude marks and unpleasant surfaces. Hodgins seeks what he calls, "the trembling edge to a picture." He achieves this through juxtaposing the considered mark and spontaneous gesture. He uses the element of surprise and brings together loveliness and nastiness. He jars as well as pleases the eye.

Bacon's and Hodgins' figures manage to walk a fine line between oblivion and life, they exists in a transitory state like purgatory. Their paintings can be said to 'rupture the screen' where 'the real' degrades the subjecthood of their figures. Hodgins alludes to this as an interesting idea of figures falling into objecthood and in his characteristically slippery way he comments:

> Somebody at a lecture I was giving made the point that I don't paint the human figure at all, what I paint is still lifes. It's an interesting idea, but I'm not sure what it says about me. That I paint the human figure as a still life. (Hodgins, 1996: unpaginated)

The point of Hodgins' treatment of figures as if they were still lifes may relate to the state of flux of subjecthood or the state of deterioration in which they are shown. The figures seem to be undergoing a continual course of change. In Bacon's case this seems to point to a dialectical tension between life and death or as Zweite (2006: 9)

puts it: "[…] all his pictures are metaphors of life in which the dialectics of coming into being and perishing, life and death are inscribed." Zweite (ibid: 10) furthermore touches on the affective response on a viewer in that when confronted with a painting that oscillates in this way between subject and objecthood we tend to question our own validity:

> We don't coolly perceive the things he depicts as mere objects. We are confounded. In the face of the disconcerting, indeed monstrous and alarming things in the picture, we start a process of self-reappraisal. Aesthetic experience is thus also self experience.

Both Bacon's and Hodgins' paintings can be said, as Powell puts it (1996: 14), to hang in a "precarious and unstable balance between the abstract and expressive life of the paint" and the "volatile suggestion of representation on the other." It is precisely within this tension that their paintings communicate to the viewer and to quote Zweite (2006: 9), they often go so far as to "verge on dissolving shapes and extinguishing subjects. 'Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all' – this line of Breton's acted out almost as a lodestar for Bacon," and one can say that this applies equally to the works of Hodgins.

## Chapter Four: A Moment of Recognition



*Untitled: Figure 1* (2009), Oil on canvas. 90 x 60cm.

Francis Bacon used accident as a crucial means for production and as Zweite (2006: 15) points out, “[...] anything accidental, be it positive and constructive or negative and provocative becomes a stimulating factor. He said in 1962: ‘You know in my case all painting [...] is an accident’.” Bacon would later state that the accident was the “[...] most important and fertile aspect” of a work (ibid: 215). Zweite describes accident in terms of Bacon’s work as "[...] deliberately provoked randomness with unpredictable outcomes, or an incalculable breach of artistic-aesthetic coherence – [it] cannot always be separated clearly from the concept of contingency” (ibid: 213). Bacon was purposeful when it came to inciting accidents. His accident was uniquely his though; the ‘style’ of the random brushstrokes and the linear qualities of the pressed corduroy against his portraits. It was a very specific kind of accidental mark and predilection of paint that he sought:

> So I foresee it in my mind, I foresee it, and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint. I use very large brushes, and in the way I work I don’t in fact [know] very often what the paint will do, and it does many things which are very much better than I could make it do. Is that an accident? Perhaps one could say it’s an accident, because it becomes a *selective process which part of this accident one chooses to preserve.* One is attempting, of course, to keep the vitality of the accident and yet preserve a continuity” (ibid: 215) (my emphasis added).

Not only was Bacon specific about the marks he made through the painting process, he attributed meaning to what initially were simply meaningless marks. Zweite (ibid: 225) expands:

> […] Bacon endeavours to take accident as a departure point, to accept what has arisen spontaneously as the initiation, yet then to modify, to transform, to control it and finally to ascribe some function and hence some sense to the apparently meaningless, be it a sense of restraint, the unassimilable, the disconcerting or the grotesque. This is what Michel Leiris meant when he wrote: ‘These pictures [...] being filled with pure living presences indicative of nothing other than themselves, and therefore stamped with as absence of sense – with, in other words, *nonsense* – seem, in the dazzling nakedness of the very moment [...], to be images in keeping the inanity of our situation in the world as ephemeral beings, more capable than other living creatures of brilliant and pointless ecstasies.’

The most creative and innovative part of my own production is also in the use of accident. Before painting *Untitled Figure 1* I had been working on large canvases which I approached by layering quickly painted washes of different colour over each other until I was satisfied with the resulting surface. Using found, created or drawn imagery I would then project images onto these canvases and then overlay these multiple images, painting relatively quickly and rendering the image schematically by tracing outlines. Occasionally I would then paint in further details. At the time I was interested in the working approaches and 'bad painting' aesthetic associated with neo-expressionist painters of the 1980's[20] such as the work of Julian Schnabel.[21] I had been working on these large canvases for about a year and found this kind of painting approach rather frustrating as the canvases appeared very unresolved but also at times overworked. During the course of this period I had been meeting regularly with Robert Hodgins to interview him and to ask questions about his work for my research. However, he seemed more interested in talking about my work than his own and insisted on seeing it.

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[20]Justin Wolf comments on neo-expressionism as follows: "Many artists have practiced and revived aspects of the original Expressionism movement since its decline in the 1920s. But the most famous return to Expressionism was inaugurated by Georg Baselitz, who led a revival which dominated German art in the 1970s. By the 1980s, this resurgence had become part of an international return to painting, in which very different artists, from Julian Schnabel and Francesco Clemente to Jean-Michel Basquiat, turned in expressionistic, primitivist and romantic directions to create work which delved into history and myth, and affirmed the redemptive power of art." [http://www.theartstory.org/movement-neo-expressionism.htm/]

Wolf continues:
"...Neo-Expressionism has become synonymous with conservative trends in the art of the 1980s rather than the avant-garde. Even though many of the movement's artists incorporated political and cultural content, few were interested in the leftist politics associated with a contemporary trend, critical Postmodernism. They did not feel obliged to glorify the world or "tamper with reality," as Clemente once put it, but simply work with form and depict the world as it existed, in all its harshness and ugliness. This led to a vibrant debate about the value and purpose of painting, in which Neo-Expressionism was often held up as an example of all that was wrong with the medium. Nevertheless, this criticism did little to dampen the style's success, and its decline had more to do with the collapse of the market at the end of the 1980s than any shift in values. [http://www.theartstory.org/movement-neo-expressionism.htm]

[21] Julian Schnabel had "his first solo show, at the Mary Boone Gallery in 1979, however, that Schnabel would truly come to be regarded as a major new force in the art world. He participated at the Venice Biennale in 1980, and by the mid-1980s had become a major figure in the Neo-expressionism movement. By the time he exhibited his work in a show jointly organized by Boone and Leo Castelli in 1981, he had become firmly established. His now famous "plate paintings"—large-scale paintings set on broken ceramic plates—received a boisterous and critical reception from the art world. A reputation for making brash pronouncements about his importance to the art world - *I'm the closest thing to Picasso that you'll see in this *#@ life* - engendered contempt from both colleagues and the viewing public. Schnabel is currently represented by The Pace Gallery in New York." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_Schnabel

On viewing the works, Hodgins told me that they were not yet paintings but only beginnings of paintings layered one on top of the other. We both agreed that they were unresolved and 'not working.' Hodgins suggested that I should try to paint some conventional heads or portraits on a more domestic scale.

He (personal communication, June 3 2009) furthermore advised me to seek out my own expression and to "figure out how to make a 'Nathan' painting." Taking up this challenge, I began work on *Untitled: Figure 1 (2009),* a portrait of my wife wearing a white, buttoned-up, collared shirt against a white wall which I painted from a photograph. I attempted to achieve a likeness which proved very difficult and frustrating. I painted over what I had done many times, focusing on the face and trying to get it right.

At one point, out of complete frustration, I attacked the canvas, the face in particular, with a turpentine soaked rag followed by some swift strokes across the face with a large brush laden with dark purple paint. I left it in my studio for a week to allow the turpentine to dissolve the layers of paint and mix in with the dark purple so as to distort the features. During that week I worked on some drawings of the same face only to scribble over them in a similar way as I did with the painting. My reaction to the painting made me think of Francis Bacon and how he readily deployed accident and the unconscious in his work and how exacting he was about his 'accidents.' As Peter Bürger (2006: 33) points out: "Bacon's painting process too derives its energy from the tensions between even the paint applications and gestural brushstrokes, just as his entire working process is characterized by the contrast between calculation and spontaneity." Bacon set out to achieve a set image but he would inevitably become dissatisfied with the result, perhaps much in the same manner that I was at the time of my painting the portrait.

Thus, as Burrows (2010: 160) states, the image Bacon would be addressing "[…] lacks the intensity he is aiming at, and his consequent dissatisfaction with the result, which can even lead to feelings of despair, prompt him to resort to chance", i.e., he provokes it in order "to break the willed articulation of the image." Bacon deliberately used random

brushstrokes, wiped out sections or even threw paint at the canvas. Of course this "chance has an element of direction to it, because the painter does not throw the paint absolutely anywhere but at a particular part of the image. In the next phase of the work Bacon examines the result of his chance intervention. If this has opened up new unexpected dimensions, he can build on these and define them – otherwise he repeats the chance process. The work evolves in this way in a complex interplay of directed chance and critical appraisal of the changes this chance introduces" (Burger, 2006: 33).

Before, I had been tentatively exploring chance marks in my work. However, unlike Bacon, my idea of accident had to do with an explosion of randomly and quickly applied marks that mostly appeared as a quickly applied wash on a flat, nondescript area on the canvas. When one observes Bacon's work, the act of chance, most of the time, is directed towards the figure, either the face or the entire body. What I had been doing was more indiscriminate as I was not thinking about the mark I was applying. I began to approach the canvas with a new intensity, one of "calculation and spontaneity" where I broke away from "willed articulation" (ibid).

Hodgins (personal communication, 3 June 2009) once commented that "every mark you make represents your totality. When I had students I was very aware that they were bringing their totality to the work, and most of them were only 18 or 19 years old [...] make sure that you don't misrepresent your totality by making a careless mark". I found this a strange thing to say by an artist who, in a similar vein to Bacon, used marks and stains to conjure images on the canvas. Perhaps Hodgins was talking, as Bacon did, about a selection process, asking the question: what do I keep and what do I paint out? Thus I began to think very carefully about the kind of mark I should make and returned to the portrait, aware of the language used to describe Bacon's paintings and how vividly demonstrative his accidents were. The following passage by Zweite (2006: 217) articulates the notion of accident succinctly in relation to what I have discussed so far:

> Accident's territory is essentially in the palpable signs of the artist's work process; it manifests itself in the paint-saturated brush on the canvas […] these marks, these traits, are irrational, involuntary, accidental, free,

> random. They are nonrepresentative, nonillustrational, nonnarrative. They are no longer either significant of signifiers: they are a-signifying traits. [...] these almost blind manual marks attest to the intrusion of another world into the visual world of figuration. [...] They mark out possibilities of fact, but do not yet constitute a fact (the pictorial fact)."

At one point in our conversations, Hodgins challenged me in terms of Bacon's accidents where he observed that Bacon pins a moment of recognition within the chaos of irrational marks, a device that seemed to work rather effectively to resolve his figures. Instead I decided to approach the challenge in reverse to create a moment of irrationality within something immediately recognisable, and to use creatively what had happened to the portrait of my wife. The head of *Untitled: Figure 1* (2009) seems almost fully formed but during various stages of its creation it had been destroyed and reconstituted. The final disruption, the application of turpentine and the dark purple paint, effectively formed much of the basis of the final painting. The right side of the head was the most dramatically distorted and reduced to where the edges of the head and the background merged and there was no longer a clearly discernable boundary. The ear is implied by touches of dissolved red and orange. If one were to designate a locus of a 'wounding' in the painting, it would be in this instance as, at this point, the paint is most dissolved, exposing the ochre under-painting. Both eyes recede into a darker upper register in the canvas and appear as unevenly placed holes. Reminiscent of a skull, the eye sockets appear to be voids; the left eye is completely empty and lost in darkness. The right socket has an eye drawn in a black outline. The eye is grey and turbid, the dark iris catching a hint of light to describe moistness. This eye appears blind and murky yet it still holds a gaze from this singular point.

From above the nose, the eye and forehead appear wiped and streak across the face. This top half of the face becomes somewhat indistinct as it merges into a shadow. The neck leading into the shirt is also darkened and reduced by shadow with only dabs of lighter skin-tone. I imagined the shadow as a veil that extends downwards and towards the edge of the canvas. It is semitransparent but also originates from within the face only to drop behind the figure on the right. Thus the background is not exempt from the kind of corrosion that affects the face. What I was trying to do was to imagine a 'force'

within painting that I could add to my subject to allude to the kind of language used for Bacon's paintings: violence, wounding, distorting, insides and outside exposed. A kind of painting where image and paint combine to express a material rupture as well as a literal, illustrative one. Daria Kolacka (2006: 210) alludes to these qualities in Bacon's work:

> What is unsettling is the strange consistency of the painted bodies and the disintegrating structure of their facial features. Sometimes it seems as through Bacon is looking from underneath the skin – as if he wanted to wound the figures in order to render their faces and emotions visible.

The entire painting is in a state of quiet volatility. The arm on the left is painted with a transparency, allowing signs of the under-painting to come through. A further feeling of vulnerability and tension occurs at points such as the right arm and in areas of the shirt where fine, hairline fissuring had been caused by the generous use of turpentine. The arm on the right is more heavily painted and recedes into shadow where the background is painted mostly grey with loser white brush strokes indicating more intense light.

Using this single painting as a starting point, I was able to further conceptualise the rest of my output. I decided to frame future paintings around the seemingly opposing ideas of 'rupture' and 'numbness.' My idea of numbness refers to the abandoning of affect, a deprivation of feeling, power or motion, what it is to feel stupefied or paralysed. Both numbness and rupture relate to psychoanalytic concepts addressing the shock of trauma; the subject is elevated through rupture, and evacuated through shock, simultaneously. The figures or subjects I have depicted undergo a rupture of some sort as I have tried to indicate in *Untitled: Figure 1 (2009)* but are seemingly completely unaware of this rupture.

In approaching portraits by way of the above, I explored various means of breaching, parting, adding tumours, breaking, bursting, and dissolving to sever or affect the figures in some way. Most of the figures are painted on bleak grey backgrounds against which

the bodies and faces are then rendered in warm yellow, earth tones. I set out to paint single figures, objects, or portraits from photographs that I had taken myself or else found. The 'rupture' or 'shadow' in these works usually takes the form of black-blue or purple pools of paint. They are a mixture of oil, turpentine and pigments that at times resemble a form of bruising or wounding or also ectoplasmic manifestations and shadows. These ruptures can act as veils, visual anathemas, or as areas that appear wet and reflective.

A feeling of melancholy and a psychological 'silence' achieved through exploring a muted pallet are some of the hallmarks of the contemporary Belgian painter Michaël Borremans[22] whose work appeals to me a great deal. What interests me most about his work is that it has the look and feel of paintings of old. Like he has done, I too have looked to historical painters such as Diego Velázquez, Francisco Goya, Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas for a painterly language. In his essay *Michaël Borremans : Ventilating a Nihilist Vision*, Jeffrey Grove (2009: 5) states that Borremans embraces "[…] paint historically and materially, not only for its transcendental potential, but also for its deterministic, illusionary quality." I have always been fascinated by such traits of illusionistic painting, especially the transcendental aspects. It bestows a sense of awe in terms of its history in Western art. In the case of my work the content itself suggests something other-worldly happening through introducing extoplasmic forms and shadowy features in the portraits.

Borremans plays with the appearance of truth and the illusionary. As Grove (ibid: 5) puts it: "Verisimilitude is one device he engages to seduce meaning; feinted realism provokes empathy, inviting one to identify with the depicted subject." The strange

[22] The Zeno-x website proved a good description of Borremans's work as follows:
The films, paintings, and drawings by Belgian artist Michaël Borremans (°1963) overwhelm the viewer through the use of deceleration, precision and vortex. His seductive works contain timeless images of inner drive and external force, of the latent pressure involved in being human. Behind a veil of stylistic perfection, the artist simulates common rituals of interpretation and meaning. His intensely atmospheric images are puzzles involving political and psychological patterns of perceiving the world, which oscillate in a camouflaging, fragile way between inexorable realism and nebulous distance.
http://www.zeno-x.com/artists/michael_borremans.htm

ectoplasmic manifestations emerging from the mouths and faces of the subjects depicted in my painted portraits are made possible or realisable through the naturalism of painting. The introduction of these features stems from the painterly process in my first painting, *Untitled: Figure1* (2009), where viscous painterly material was allowed to impose on the face and figure. In more recent portraits I included such interruptions more consciously as part of the mimetic illusion of the works. For the veils, shadows and emanations to exist convincingly in the subject's world they had to be shown to have a recognisable source. The settings in my work are generally stark, for example a figure in front of a blank wall or curtain, and the emanations had to come from nothing but the subject. Arising from the mouths of the sitters these forms resemble photographic documentations of ectoplasmic manifestations[23].

Bacon, Hodgins and Borremans have all made use of appropriated photographic imagery towards creating their paintings. As Grove (ibid: 8) points out, painting from photographs poses certain difficulties: "A difficulty with appropriated photographs is that no matter the reality of the scene at the instant the image is taken, it both documents and transforms that moment to fiction. The camera captures *mise en scène* present only to the viewer who observed them in the past. Photographic data is not objective, but highly subjective." Much of Borremans' source material is staged by the artist using models in the studio against a bare wall setting. In the same way most of my photographic source material was taken in my small studio from a camera set up on a tripod. The majority of the staged pictures are of myself my wife and close friends.

Photographs have often been used to "give visuality to the traumatic" and in his book *Spectral Evidence – The Photography of Trauma*, Ulrich Baer (2002: 9) comments on

[23] Ectoplasm is believed to be produced by physical mediums while they are in a trance state and is said to be excreted as a gauze-like substance from orifices in the medium's body. The physical existence of ectoplasm has not been scientifically proven but photographic documentation of such substances emerging from mediums have popularly circulated as perceptible proof of spiritual manifestations since the nineteenth century (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ectoplasm). I am not particularly interested in the paranormal phenomenon of ectoplasm but use the idea of it as a disruptive and irrational feature in portraiture (as in the popular photographic documentations) in my paintings as a means to evoke a mysterious disturbance of what is immediately recognisable.

the structural similarity between photography and trauma as follows: “Because trauma blocks routine mental processes from converting an experience into memory or forgetting, it parallels the defining structure of photography, which also traps an event during its occurrence while blocking its transformation into memory.” In his book Baer makes comparisons between the notion of the photograph’s “arrested moment and how the human psyche processes trauma” by drawing on Freud, Barthes, Benjamin and Charcot and recent trauma studies in proving that “images representing a traumatic history lack the concept of ‘future’ and forward movement that characterizes conventional documentary photographs. Traumatic memory, like the camera, freezes the moment and removes it from the forward motion of linear time” (Spicer, J: muse.jhu.edu/journals/cultural_critique/v057/57.1spicer.html).

Both Bacon and Hodgins painted from photographs and were clearly aware of the potential of photography to produce trauma-like experiences or at least disturb the viewer. I am similarly fascinated by this aspect of photographs in using them as source material in my paintings and further disrupting the recognisable. In a series of small pencil and watercolour studies drawn from photographs I explored a more intimate scale with notations for my larger paintings and introduced ‘interruptions’ (such as fluid shadows and emanations and even the directly sticking on of brown tape) in these works towards disrupting the photographic reproduction by way of introducing suggested material substance.

In my paintings I intended the interventions of rupture achieved through explorative painterly processes to be unmistakably an artistic problem to be negotiated and resolved in the studio through painting. But in the reading of the portraits these features also stand for a convulsive moment where the subject appears in an ambiguous state between ecstasy and desolation. There is a sense of melancholy about my compositions and the subjects that perhaps implies loss but I also wanted to create a sense of ambiguity as to where the ruptures are located and whether the ruptures are indeed material. The viewer may wonder whether the disturbance in the portrait is to be read as illusionistically rendered and therefore as ‘literal’ form or whether it arose

organically out of the process of paint poured/applied to the painting. I explored this idea more intently in the paintings *Head 1 (2010), Head 2 (2010)* and *Head 3 (2010)* which were based on three self portraits.

*Head 1* is shown in profile and the figure is looking toward the left. In making the source photograph for this work I tied string around my head and allowed it to pass across my mouth as a kind of gag. I wanted an image that would give the impression of the head, face and mouth being pulled and distorted and therefore under a form of strain. After a series of concept drawings I began all three paintings with an overall wash of yellow ochre. I followed this by working wet in wet in drawing in the detail of the face and background. Once the structure had been established and the paint had dried, I mixed a bowl of oil, varnish, turpentine, blue, red and black pigment. I placed the canvas on the floor and proceeded to pour the mixture over the painting and left it to dry over a period of about a week.

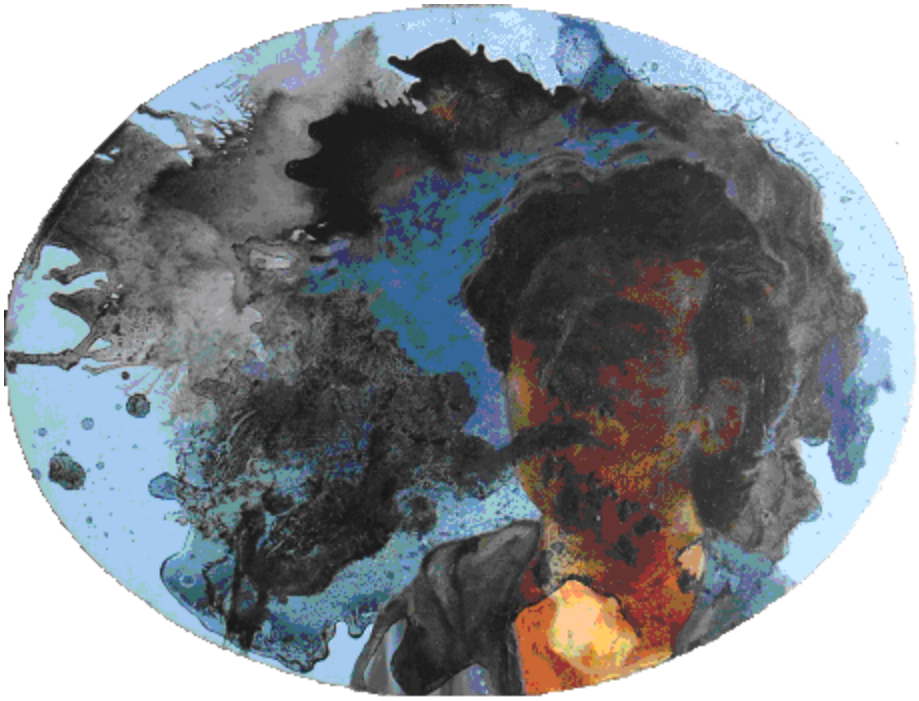
On returning to the canvas, I painted the background around the silhouette of the head using light washes and glazes of blues and greys. I thought it might be better not to paint all the details of the background completely, such as the chair and details behind it, but rather to imply them through an economy of paint. In this way the painting is not distinctly rooted to any specifics of place and thereby retains a certain 'vitality' through not being overly illustrative. The shadowy emanation painted as emerging from the crease of the string pulling at the corner of the mouth and across the back of the head has a thickened appearance where the pool of paint seems to pull at the skin, yet it also appears thin in that it remains transparent, revealing the drawing underneath. It suggests an alteration taking place, a dissolution of the head through the substance that is coming out of the mouth. The figure retains its presence and focus but also seems to be undergoing some form of change. I wanted the rupture to have a dual purpose - to be a thing in the world as well as a thing that is undoubtedly painted, i.e. to have a distinctly formal material existence. The following passage by Kolacka (2009: 208) describing Bacon's painting of a curtain comes close to expressing what it was that I was aiming for:



*Head 1* (2010), Oil on Canvas. 55 x 55cm



*Head 2* (2010), Oil on Canvas. 49 x 40cm



*Head 3* (2010), Oil on Canvas. 50 x 40cm.

> When he paints a curtain, in turn, he makes it penetrate the depicted subject. This detracts from the materiality of both the one and the other, which has a bewildering effect on the viewer's perception. At the same time, the curtain corresponds to the geometry of the space, or even forms it and becomes an element of the composition, which is just as important as the figure.

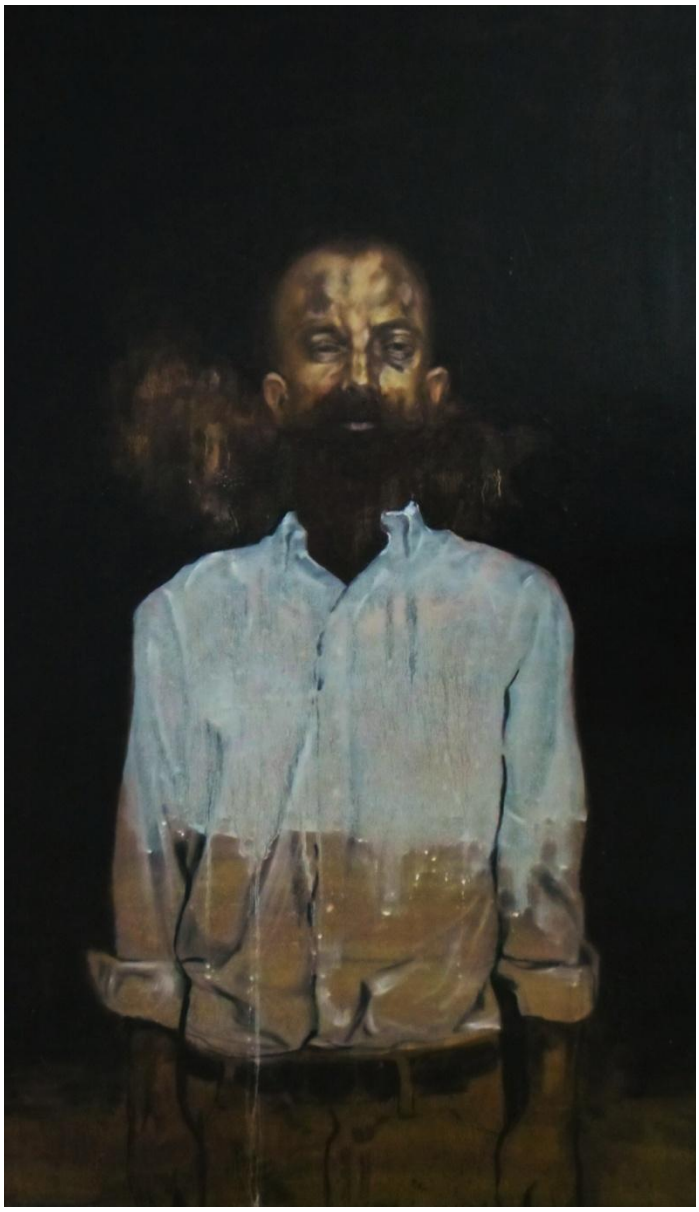
I continued exploring this idea in *Head 2* (2010) in which my approach was similar to the first portrait. There is a slight difference in angle; the head is now facing more frontally and towards the right. The rupture, as in the first portrait, originates from the mouth but does not remain within the confines of the head. Rather, it spills over and disperses into the rest of the painting and is more developed than in the first portrait. In *Head 1 (2010)* the rupture has a singular texture of the viscous mix but remains somewhat smoke-like, whereas here it has areas of fullness expressed by a coagulated impasto of paint suggesting a distinct form. This is especially evident in the right side of the mouth where the paint protrudes outward to form a sharp point.

These portraits have a sense of disconnection or a threat of loss of subjecthood in common. At times the blurs of black threaten to engulf the subject who seems unaware of its intrusion. The third head in this series, painted in an oval format, is the one most engulfed by a shadowy entity but at the same time seems most intact as a head. The entire head was painted before I proceeded to pour the mixture onto the canvas as in the previous two portraits. The subsequent layers were completed with glazes of differing intensities, producing the darkest tone around the head. Covered by the mixture and layers of glazes, the head became almost entirely obscured. To bring back the form of the head I used a lighter blue/grey wash to delineate some detail around the head and also made it appear as if some of the smoky blur was situated behind the head. The shadow in this painting appears most smoke like and, in fact, it seems to be billowing out of the mouth. Whereas in the previous paintings the substance oozes and has a more physical, material presence in relation to the heads, in this painting the shadow appears to cover and veil the head.

*Untitled: Figure 2 (2010)* depicts a portrait of a close friend in three-quarter view from the waist up on a longer, vertical format. In this painting the figure is engulfed in darkness but there is no dark shadow emanating from the figure. Instead, the 'rupture' is represented through the opposite, i.e. absence of darkness. The head appears almost severed from the neck and white shirt by way of the intense 'erasure' of this area. The shirt is partially painted in a series of white washes over a lightly toned ochre base. Here I explored the stranger possibilities of painting by limiting the white wash to only the top half of the shirt, allowing the rest of the shirt, hands and the trousers to remain unworked and only rendered in black line. The black background shimmers and is semi reflective. By adding a varnish to the medium a reflective quality was achieved. Most of the portrait was painted wet-in-wet (painting over and embedding pigment into a wet surface instead of successive layers of paint). The details of the face and shirt were painted in very swiftly. The figure's eyes are half closed and the subject seems somewhat dazed and detached.

The full presence of a subject is denied in *Shoes (2009)* with the cut-off format of pant legs and in *Chair (2009)* with the greyed out, empty chair. The paintings of the cut-off feet were an attempt to paint a portrait but also to deny the subject at the same time. The presence of the legs implies the presence of a body but the format cuts the subject out. Nonetheless, in the context of the other portraits, the figure that is implied by the feet also represents a form of rupture in that it is an absence of a figure.

*Flowers (2010)* was painted from an image found in a magazine. In subject matter is clearly very different to the rest of my paintings in this body of work and was chosen because I wanted to experiment with something other than the figure. I was curious to see how I would approach a found image that was not a figure to see how the act of dissolving the image through the chance interventions I had been carrying out in the portraits would feature differently, i.e. outside the psychological or emotive ambit of the portrait. The flowers appear somewhat eroded or burnt by way of the painterly approach.



*Untitled: Figure 2* (2010), Oil on Canvas.110 x 65cm



*Shoes* (2009), Oil on Canvas. 50 x 40cm.



*Chair* (2009), Oil on Canvas. 90 x 60cm.



*Flowers* (2009), Oil on Canvas. 120 x 90cm.

*Rabbits* (2009), Oil on Canvas. (60 x 90 cm) was painted from a found image. The source image reminded me of the exhibits I had seen at Pretoria museum just before the making of the painting. The museum contains many, if not excessive, taxidermy specimens. Some of the exhibits contain numerous cats and dogs, common birds such as street pigeon and turtle doves. The painting has the same melancholic feel as the rest of the series but is without a rupture or shadow. Instead I painted the rabbit heads with as much sensitivity as I could, notably in rendering the eyes and fur. The wall behind the rabbits at the top of the painting was achieved through a succession of blue-grey and green glazes. Taking my cue from Hodgins, where he would deliberately combine beauty and ugliness, the lower half of the painting, mostly the mount on which the rabbit heads are supported, are painted in crude black and brown marks and left unfinished exposing the under-painting and drawing.

It is painterly devices such as this, I believe, that has enabled for these paintings to become resolved and interesting to a degree. Through examining Hodgins' work I have become a better artist, and through our conversations I have gained some critical insight as with critiquing my own work and examining others. Hodgins' input and insights have proved invaluable in creating these works and well as the works that I still am creating. Hodgins truly was a painter's painter, he understood the medium so well and it is no wonder he was deemed South Africa's king of the canvas.



*Rabbits* (2009), Oil on Canvas. 90x 60cm



*Veil* (2009), Oil on Canvas. 38 x70cm.



*Portrait* (2009), Oil on Canvas. 50 x40 cm



*Untitled* (2010), Pencil, ink and tape on paper. 15 x 10 cm.



*Untitled* (2010), Pencil and watercolour on paper. 21 X 13cm



*Untitled* (2010), ink, pencil and coffee on paper, 25 x 19 cm.



*Untitled* (2010), Pencil and watercolour on paper. 21 X 13cm

## Conclusion

In this research I have examined selected figurative paintings of contemporary artist Robert Hodgins by focusing on features of violence and the related ideas pertaining to trauma and the influence of Francis Bacon's work in this respect. Painting during the apartheid years and beyond, Hodgins experienced the political and social tensions in this country and his work clearly reflects a deep concern with humanity and the absurdities of power and its effects on people. He addressed such issues with a satirical sensibility and used caricature in ridiculing corporate greed, military arrogance and hypocrisy in society. From his experiences as a child growing up in Britain during the 1930s he knew the potential for ruthlessness in all arena's of life and openly expressed his horror and disdain over tragic events of inhumanity repeating themselves. During the apartheid years "South Africa underwent periods of international censure, states of emergency, internal boycott, and increased collective organisation of anti-apartheid bodies, among other things" and working through this tumultuous period Hodgins can be seen to focus his attention again and again on human fallibility and morality in conflict (Hill, 2005: 14). Having always admired the work of Francis Bacon, it provided a language of painting that spoke of trauma and violence which struck a direct note with Hodgins, not only through its iconography but also in its approach to the medium of paint.

Scala (2009: 32-33) comments that Bacon's work "blurs the distinction between horror and aesthetic pleasure" and "exploits the ability to capture brutal sensory fact." It addresses the emotional, sensual and tragic aspects of human experience which Hodgins' work can also be seen to do, albeit in a more satirical and often humorous way. The German cultural critic Theodor Adorno, briefly mentioned in my first chapter, challenged the visual arts to address trauma in a way that would appropriately deal with trauma. In her essay *Witnessing Trauma in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Question of Generational Responsibility* (2005), Liese van der Watt comments on Adorno's challenge as follows: "Art has an indispensable role to remind us of the horrors of this world, but it is a particular kind of representation that has become improper and

undesirable for Adorno." Quoting Adorno, Van der Watt (cited in Van der Watt, 2005: 28-29) continues that it is "[w]hen the Holocaust becomes an image,"

> [that] the victims are turned into works of art, tossed out to be gobbled up by the world that did them in. The so-called artistic renderings of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with butts contain, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. The morality that forbids art to forget this for a second slides off into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic stylistic principal […] make[s] the unthinkable appear to have had some meaning; it becomes transfigured, something of its horror removed. By this alone an injustice is done to the victims, yet no art that avoided the victims could stand up to the demands of justice".

Adorno thus condemns art that provides any kind of aesthetic pleasure in the aftermath of trauma such as the Holocaust, but he also pleads for a "critical and reflexive function of art. Art has the responsibility to keep memory alive, but this should be done in a critical way that engages the viewer and moves her to reflection, and ideally to action" (ibid: 29). Van der Watt (ibid: 32) mentions Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement" which avoids a full identification with the victim's position and instead implies an "affective relation, rapport, or bond with the other recognized and respected as other." It therefore provides "for a kind of virtual (rather than vicarious) experience of other positions, through which one "puts one-self in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place."" Rather than providing "facile uplift, harmonization, or closure" in response to trauma, empathic unsettlement "should register stylistically and affect the mode of representation." LaCapra (cited in Van der Watt, 2005: 32) explains that:

> Empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit (for example, unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility).

It could be argued that Hodgins engages in a similar mode of addressing trauma, i.e. one that avoids "a response that seeks to harmonize or smooth over a traumatic past by

providing a neat narrative" which would be "completely inappropriate and in the end prove futile when the aim is to integrate the past into the present" (ibid). His work can be read as using a painterly language that challenges traditional notions of harmony, beauty, grace and skill to rather take on an oppositional stance to polite and picturesque painting. His works carry qualities that are bold, exaggerated, direct and even purposefully ugly and therefore disrupt any easy or facile reading. As I hope to have shown, Hodgins created artworks that carry a strong sense of affective experience.

I have discussed trauma theory as providing a language that enriches our understanding of works such as the paintings of Hodgins. This language helps us to begin to articulate and structure an argument that facilitates the expressive, affective and emotional potential of Hodgins' work and in turn opens up possibilities about the way we can view art in terms of aspects of trauma. I see Hodgins achieving this through an empathy for the poetics of painting; delicate viscosities of paint, placement of colour, fine or harsh line, texture and form as well as addressing themes relating to the abuse of power in the twentieth century. Hodgins manages to paint his works in a mode of extreme material sensation which one is confronted with upon viewing, producing an encounter in the present that visualises emotion. Although the viewer is perhaps at first seduced by the rich qualities of his painterly handling, the confrontation takes the form of ruptures and paradoxes achieved through the contrast of repellent forces in the physical materialisation of the painting process.

I addressed common memory as representation and extraordinary memory as the generation of affect and suggested that the ruptures or 'jolts' in Hodgins' work function in the same way as a traumatic memory fragment. This can be seen to reoccur throughout his body of work. I have attempted to address Hodgins' core concern in painting in addressing the extremes he saw in humanity and in seeking a metaphor for the paradoxical nature of existence. This is likened to a similar concerns in the works of Bacon who sought to reconcile the contradictions motivating the making of art. Hodgins seemed bewildered by the fact that a rose could exist in the same world where people are also massacred. I likened this bewilderment to that of taking the position of a

shocked subjectivity, aligning this idea to what Hal Foster argues in *The Return of the Real* (1996) where he identifies the shock of trauma as associated with repetition as it occurs in the *Death in America* works by Andy Warhol.

Hodgins creates questions, a questioning of position, of states and subjectivity through his articulation of paint that clearly draws on Bacon's representations of flesh in extreme states. Bacon situates the confrontation between flesh and the viewer close to the front of the picture space, "foregrounding and intensifying the experience of form coming into being, seemingly out of the most random correlations" (Scala, 2009: 30). Both Bacons' and Hodgins' paintings can be said to be in flux, constantly in a state of becoming and unbecoming. It was a mention of veils and curtains in reading texts on Bacon that first alerted my interest in Bacons' influence on Hodgins, not only in terms of painterly device and colour but, in a manner of speaking, as a similar interest in seeking out a certain kind of reality. The 'real' in this sense seemed to be the opposite of an illustrative or contrived image. Bacon sought to remove the veils of representation and in our discussions both Hodgins and I agreed that trauma in his own work was veiled, behind a curtain, hidden as an emotive undercurrent.

The advent of Ubu triggered a new expressive force in Hodgins' paintings of the eighties. The funny yet sinister character of Ubu appealed to Hodgins as much as the character of Francis Bacon. It was this passionate pursuit of something theatrical and flamboyant that allowed Hodgins to paint in both an ascerbic as well as beguiling manner, with empathy and cruelty at the same time. My frequent conversations with Hodgins have left a strong impact on my own development as a painter and in my final chapter I tried to articulate my own concerns in the context of the discussions on trauma addressed in the previous chapters. Exploring notions of rupture and the idea of pinning an irrational moment in an otherwise recognisable image were central to these works and Hodgins' influence and role in my development has deeply affected my own work.

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