

Introduction

A primary motivation for this research report is to establish a critical framework for the production and reception of the body of paintings and the exhibition that I have produced for this degree. The critical framework focuses on the concept of trauma as it relates to contemporary painting. But before I proceed I would like to give a brief background to my painting practice as a way of contextualizing the emergence of my current concerns.

In my fourth year of study for my Fine Arts degree at the University of Cape Town, I encountered the work of French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, specifically her theory of the abject¹. The seductive/repellent dialectic promoted in her theory of abjection made sense for me in terms of the strange delectation I experienced in response to strongly visceral paintings, that is, paintings with an assertive material surface. My practice and my research then became focused on the potential of this type of painting for stimulating my interest in producing affect in my work, and in turn in the viewer's response. Effectively the visceral materiality stood for the 'stuff' of the abject; in other words, certain abject material analogies and iconographies. However, while the abject offered an appropriate framework for my work at the time, the theory felt less appropriate for other paintings that later came to intrigue me. What has remained constant however, is my interest in psychoanalytic theory and its relationship to art.

During the gap year between my undergraduate and Masters Degrees I was involved in an armed robbery. I was shot and left paralysed from the waist down. The intense double-trauma resulting from the incident had the effect of giving me a new perspective on life, and most importantly on painting. I have thus come to see the event as a fortunate misfortune. As I discussed with my supervisor in the beginning stages of my Masters, it was not the actual event of being shot or being paralysed that was so thought-provoking for me in terms of painting. Rather, it was, and remains, the intense and

¹ As developed in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

overwhelming moments of emotion and sensation that permeate my daily life because of these experiences that prove to be so peculiarly stimulating for painting.

These revelations prompted me to try to understand not only how ‘real life’ trauma might stimulate painting – or how painting might embody trauma - but how trauma could signify as a concept in contemporary art. I was keen to situate my work within a larger critical context, but in a way which did not diminish the power of the raw vulnerability I experienced as a consequence of my trauma as motivation for my painting. In the process of my research I discovered many theories that provided such a critical context. Here the work of visual culture theorist Ian Heywood was important, especially his idea of a ‘singular expressive moment’ in painting. For Heywood this ‘singular expressive moment’ involves a particular kind of ‘transformation’ between form and content which manifests as strong affective presence in and through the surface of the painting, a phenomenon which has the power to ‘resist paraphrase’ or preclude straightforward interpretation (1999:210).

For me the most effective aspect of such a transformation of the painted surface,² in relation to a concept of trauma, is its visceral qualities worked in conjunction with certain other formal values. This is not to suggest that depictions of trauma in more ‘realist’ painterly terms are not effective in stimulating affect in the viewer. It is more a matter of emphasizing the affective power of form and materiality in invoking trauma and seeing this emphasis within a specific theoretical framework and painting discourse. It is thus within this framework that I comment on my own painting and that of the other artists I have chosen to explore.

The writings of cultural theorist Mark Seltzer are key to this report. Seltzer has made a significant contribution in developing a model of trauma that concurs with my interests. In his article, ‘Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere’ (1997), Seltzer

² For the purposes of clarification, I see the painted surface as strictly a two dimensional material support - canvas, board, paper or other - on which paint and other mixed media is applied. It is also, for me, a signifier of modernist painting. As noted, my interest is in the painted surface in which materiality is stressed.

argues that contemporary culture has become fascinated with the 'wound', a mass attraction to the 'torn and opened body' found in car accidents, serial killer novels and movies, and its proliferate use in the media (1997:3). Seltzer bases his theory of 'wound culture' on the 'borderland concept' of trauma as between the physical and psychical. He describes how, contemporaneously, trauma has come to function as a borderland between the 'individual and collective, private and public order of things':

'The wound and its strange attractions have become one way... of locating the violence and the erotics, the erotic violence, at the crossing point of private fantasy and collective space...' (Seltzer, 1997: 5).

He designates the beguiling uncertainty of trauma, as it signifies a 'breakdown' of 'private and public registers', as the 'flashpoint' (Seltzer, 1997: 4).

As Seltzer has developed trauma as a borderland concept in reflecting on our rapacious modes of engagement, I here borrow his conceptual scheme for looking at certain contemporary paintings which provoke trauma as a material embodiment of a borderland between an inside and an outside, private and public, physical and mental, fantasy and reality. For me, the borderland is embodied as a tension between surface and subject-matter manifest through the assertion of the paint medium. I see Seltzer's 'flashpoint' as a term that aligns for me with Heywood's 'singular expressive moment', where it characterizes the affective dimension of these 'borderland' tensions as they register a rupture or 'breakdown' of surface values.

The aspect of the wound, or trauma, as an interaction between an 'inside' and an 'outside' and its bearing on the production and reception of artwork is similarly theorised by curator Jill Bennett in her seminal book on trauma and art, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (2005)³. Bennett's book deals with the way in which certain artworks on trauma are constructed in a process which does not in itself rely on literal imagery of trauma. For instance, she discusses South African artist Gavin

³ The book is associated with an exhibition on trauma that Bennett co-curated with Jackie Dunn titled *Telling Tales* (1998). The selection of works for this show was based on various artistic practices that did not explicitly reference traumatic events, but through certain material and technical processes were evocative of prevailing traumas that affect contemporary life.

Younge's artwork *Forces Favourites* (1997), an installation of a circle of video-machine-laden bicycles recording his trip through Angola. As the work refers to the aftermath of war in Angola, Bennett's motivates how Younge's approach evokes the traumatic effects of war but works against a 'tendency to revelation' (2005: 89). The evidence of devastation is captured by his video camera, but is juxtaposed by his focus on the more mundane minutiae of daily life in Angola. Bennett sees this as an affective tension; trauma evoked through 'putting an outside and an inside into contact' (2005: 31). One of her central tenets is that trauma evades clear-cut binaries of the 'subject', 'self' or other – rather, she describes trauma as '...neither "inside" nor "outside", it is always lived and negotiated at the intersection' (Bennett, 2005: 12).

For all that Bennett recognizes trauma as a conceptual 'device' in contemporary art, her focus has been on art that refers to and narrates real-life traumatic events. In this way it inevitably aligns with a tendency in contemporary art that falls under the rubric of identity politics and in which individual and social traumas are intertwined in larger representations of power and history; an implicit consciousness-raising regarding the self and community. Another example of an exhibition in this vein is *Trauma*, mounted at the Hayward Gallery in London in 2001. Curated by Fiona Bradley, Katrina Brown and Andrew Nairne, this show focused on how art may engage with the real traumas which permeate contemporary life (Bradley, F., et al. 2001: 7). While recognizing the importance of real life traumatic events as a source within this context, my focus is more with painting that I see as embracing trauma as a concept via Seltzer's 'borderland'. To repeat, this borderland is 'somewhere' between an inside and an outside, a 'place' embodied through a particularly assertive material surface. By way of these concerns, my inquiry also engages what painting may tell us about trauma, to what a theory of trauma may tell us about painting.

The wide range of practices that occur in the field of contemporary painting, some of which I'll be discussing, makes notions of the painted surface an especially complex issue. In *Vitamin P: New Perspectives on Painting* (2002), a key book on contemporary painting, art theorist Barry Schwabsky discusses how contemporary painting is

‘fascinatingly difficult’ to qualify because it cannot be defined by its ‘method, style, material, subject or theme...’ (2002: 008). As Schwabsky goes on to suggest, it may be in the ‘direct experience’ of a painting and the particular forms of affect it emits that a relevant engagement with contemporary painting can take place (Shwabsky, 2002: 008). By a ‘direct experience’, I see Shwabsky’s suggestion as implying looking at how a particular experience is achieved by the actual and visible operations of surface over a semantics-based interpretation of subject-matter; although I am also aware that he is not suggesting that painting is unmediated.

In a similar vein, art theorist Dan Nadaner has argued that painting as a form of communication is problematic because it is no longer seen as ‘a window on the world’ or as a means of transmitting lived experience (1998: 169). Nadaner argues that rather, an analysis of ‘visual form as visual form’ is more appropriate to the task and the purpose of painting than analogies or metaphors found in text (1998: 172). He proposes finding words to describe ‘the entire painted surface’ as more relevant than picking out signifiers as subjects within a painting (Nadaner, 1998: 172).

If the signifiers of subject, or subject-matter cannot entirely account for a painting’s affective presence, how we may construe the painted surface in contemporary painting deserves attention. In classic modernist painting, surface was the signifier but within very circumscribed terms⁴. Art theorist David Joselit suggests a chief development in our understanding of surface came with the advancement of flatness in modernist painting (1985: 293)⁵. But unlike the modernism formalist art critic Clement Greenberg proposed in which he dismissed any account of painting that was not purely formal, including psychological dimensions, Joselit suggests that there is a paradoxical quality of ‘psychological depth’ to painting about surface in the modernist tradition (1985: 293). The deliberate flatness of surface necessitates, as Joselit argues, a depth to be produced

⁴ ‘Raphael treats his paintings as windows through which we look into imaginary space; the modernists focus our attention upon the surface of that picture window itself’ (Carrier, 1985: 109).

⁵ The essential flatness of the painted surface may be constructed, as Joselit discusses with reference to Greenbergian theory, by an actual thickness or depth of surface as in bas relief, or a compression of illusionary space and depth through form, or the laterally pronounced effects produced by very large canvasses as seen in Abstract Expressionism; effectively where the two-dimensionality of the surface plane is acknowledged (Joselit, 1985: 294).

from an 'inner source' in both the painter and the viewer (1985: 295). According to Joselit, the shift from illusionary depths to flatness is countered by a transference of the 'event' from the conscious to the unconscious (1985: 293). The flat surface of the modernist painting is therefore perceived as a 'density or even an impaction of feeling' (Joselit, 1985: 295). Joselit points out that there has been an excessive division in the reading of modernist and postmodern painting, particularly in the discernment of qualities of surface (Joselit, 1985: 306). His argument is that the psychological depth he accords to the flat surface in modernist painting maintains its role in contemporary paintings; it is part and parcel, as Joselit intimates, of a cultural evolution of looking.

The way in which contemporary painting can utilize the affective or psychological dimensions associated with conventions of flatness and depth holds a profound interest for me in this research, especially where these register as a tension of surface. Art historian Dario Gamboni articulates these concerns as 'a dialectical tension where surface turns to subject and subject to surface...' (Gamboni, 2002: 70). It is hence part of a rhetoric which can be mobilized for different ends. I look at paintings where this psychological depth is manifestly articulated through form, paintings which make explicit reference to surface.

A key task in this research – in both practical and written components – has been to articulate the painted surface as trauma; a borderland between conscious and unconscious, or inner and outer sources of reference as defined by Joselit. I have selected two South African artists whose work I suggest powerfully embodies the borderland space of trauma. I am not looking here at South African painting as a category; rather the painters I have chosen to focus on are South African painters, as am I, whose work specifically asserts the tensions inherent to a borderland concept. I look at one of Penny Siopis's works on paper, where surface is central to the flashpoints provoked by her approach to materiality and form. I also look at paintings by Marlene Dumas who also achieves distinctive flashpoints by setting up a conflict between surface and subject-

matter. I am aware that both artists have been written about in terms of trauma.⁶ But, as indicated above, my interest is less about the ‘meaning’ constituted through iconography of trauma – as has generally been the case in the relevant writing on these artists – but to concentrate more on the form. The production and reception of my own painting is also included as a key manifestation of how I see trauma operating through painting.

In Chapter One, I discuss how trauma operates as it is theorised in several key texts relating to contemporary culture and the psyche. Beginning with the term’s origins in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, I briefly review the way in which trauma provides a framework for theorizing around contemporary modes of viewing and discourse. As I will discuss, it is trauma’s enigmatic capacity for rupturing psychical oppositions and bringing about a blurring of previously separate, organized worlds into one unforeseen expression that explains its attractiveness for analogizing in contemporary discourses and most importantly to this report, the kind of painted surface I am exploring.

For instance, one theoretical effect of trauma that has valence for contemporary representations and for stimulating affect is the disjuncture and dislocation of time and space. Trauma occurs as the definitive threshold between past and present experience, producing a rupture in time. As literary theorist James Berger points out, a concept of trauma, ‘...provides a method for interpretation, for it posits that the effects of an event may be dispersed and manifested in many forms not obviously associated with the event’ (1997: 572). A painting that may embody trauma exceeds, or indeed disperses the reference to any past experience, becoming an affective ‘other’ in the present. I will touch briefly on French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard’s notion of the ‘postmodern anachronism’ or the *figural* ‘event’, as well as Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit* as relative to this aspect of trauma in painting.

⁶ *Red: The Iconography of Colour in the Work of Penny Siopis* (2009) KZNSA Gallery: Catalogue
Marlene Dumas – Measuring your own grave (2008) Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art.

I will also draw connections with trauma and current discourses around modernism and postmodernism for the way in which these bodies of knowledge shape ideas on contemporary painting. As noted above with reference to David Joselit, modernist initiatives may hold relevance to the processes and practice of contemporary painting. I will discuss briefly how trauma as a borderland concept in contemporary painting encompasses these concerns.

In Chapter Two I draw on other writings that align with a theory of trauma as they work to determine the nature of the painted surface. These include Jill Bennett's evocation of aspects of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. This has proved relevant to my objectives on discourse that focuses on meaning and affect generated through the surface. I will also draw on Deleuze's writing on the paintings of Francis Bacon (1981), particularly his invocation of French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard's notion of *figure*. Lyotard's notion of *figure* is discussed as a correlative philosophy for understanding the process of displacement or rupture in representation that can take place under a concept of trauma in painting. French philosopher Georges Bataille's theory of the *Informe* (1997) is also pertinent to understanding how ruptures in formal dichotomies may be brought about, especially in a material sense. The scope of *informe*, or the formless, becomes more complex in a context where the displacement or rupture of form and content still explicitly utilizes an iconographic reference. Dario Gamboni's thinking in *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (2002) is also useful here. Gamboni focuses on the 'ambiguity and indeterminacy' of surface and subject-matter as a route to producing and perceiving affects that eschew their own referential frames (2002: 9).

By drawing connections between these theories and a theory of trauma, I translate the vicissitudes of trauma directly to the painted surface. As I work to establish, some paintings may come to embody the borderland of trauma through a conscious engagement with form, as articulated as surface. As noted above, a flashpoint is embodied in the visceral residues of Penny Siopis and the regressive life-forms of Marlene Dumas. I will look at one work from each of these artists and analyze how these particular surfaces and their formal organizations work to disrupt the borderlines of inner

and outer worlds, self and other, past and present, in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four I discuss my own painting within this context. I focus on the significance of the process of making individual works and the presentation of my paintings in my exhibition *I knew you in this dark* held at David Krut Projects in August 2009.

Chapter 1

Trauma as a Borderland Concept in Contemporary Painting

The perplexing and paradoxical implications of trauma have stimulated the making and reception of much contemporary art (Bennett, 2005: 6). Trauma has also found valence in wider contexts of theory and philosophy. Literary theorist James Berger suggests that the inundation of traumatic events, broadcast through media and continually portrayed in movies, have contributed to this phenomenon producing what he sees as ‘contemporary modes of viewing the world’ (1997: 572). This suggests that trauma shapes not only modes of relating to the subject but by proxy the manner of identification with the subject. Cultural theorist Kirby Farrell concurs in his book, *Post-Traumatic Culture* (1998), that trauma functions as ‘a strategic fiction that a complex, stressful society is using to account for a world that seems threateningly out of control’ (1998:1). As a ubiquitous influence on contemporary culture, I see trauma as an apposite strategy for conceptualizing, or indeed identifying, the intense affect manifested by contemporary paintings. However, I suggest that this type of painting is effective in registering the operations of trauma in a manner which does not rely on obvious testimony or realistic depiction but through formal means of the surface.

In this chapter I draw from the experiential characteristics of trauma as it is theorised in psychoanalytic as well as relevant cultural texts. I briefly outline how trauma operates on micro and macro levels and the influence this operation may bear on theorising art production, specifically painting that asserts the physicality of surface as an affective means. To situate such painting I draw connections with trauma and certain modernist and postmodernist imperatives. The scope of my project limits my discussion of modernism and postmodernism but I feel it is crucial to touch on this material in order to establish the conceptual function of trauma as it pertains to contemporary painting.

Trauma has proved to have far-reaching significance and prevalence within its origins in psychoanalysis itself. Psychoanalyst Max Hernandez has pointed out that most psychoanalytic theories are themselves situated within a form of trauma (1998: 135). Trauma studies theorist Cathy Caruth asserts the primacy of trauma. She cites Freud's trajectory of thought within his oeuvre of psychoanalytic theory 'from trauma as an exception, an accident that takes consciousness by surprise and thus disrupts it, to trauma as the very origin of consciousness and all of life itself' (Caruth, 1996: 104).

Trauma finds its linguistic roots in the Greek word for wound, a term for a physical puncture literally situated between an inside and an outside. Freud later used the analogy of a physical wound to theorise about psychological trauma (Colebrook: Online). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) Freud was concerned with the enigmatic impact of the traumatic event on the individual, a psychopathology that involves 'a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli' (Freud in Hernandez, 1998:136). Here the wound is a psychical one; trauma manifests as a rupture, or indeed a flashpoint, between fantasy and reality, and past and present experience. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott would later posit this area between inner and outer worlds, subconscious/conscious, fantasy and reality, as 'potential space'; all humans being compelled to mediate between these realities in order to function in society (Ogden, 1990: 90). In contemporary psychoanalytic theory, it is generally understood that with a traumatic event the subject is unable to make the distinction between fantasy and reality. The force or shock of the incident momentarily (or permanently) collapses 'potential space', the intermediary area through which the world can normally be understood (Caper, 1999: 88). As cultural theorist Lyndsey Stonebridge illustrates, 'The problem is not so much that the dream becomes reality; it is that it becomes impossible to position oneself securely inside or outside reality or dream, history or prehistory' (2000: 81).

Likewise for Seltzer, trauma problematizes the location of the subject, whether it be internal or external, fantasy, reality, private or public (1997: 4-10). His concept of trauma has ramifications for the logic of the progression of time: traumatic experience can manifest disjuncture between past and present experience. Jill Bennett has addressed

this aspect in which, as she notes, trauma can cause ‘cognitive systems to balk’ (2005: 23). Central to her project is how the memory of trauma obfuscates tensions between past and present experience, or as she describes it, an experience that is felt ‘both internally and externally’ (Bennett, 2005: 11).

In the construction of his theory of trauma, Freud was concerned with the way in which the shock of a traumatic event seemed to be re-experienced by the patient years after the event, what Silvan Tomkins describes as an inability to ‘turn consciousness off’ (1962: 4). Freud’s earlier theory of *Nachträglichkeit*, a concept of the temporal structure involved in child sexual abuse, was taken up by Freud in his later work on trauma. *Nachträglichkeit*, which is translated as ‘deferred action’ involves a reinterpretation of a real or imagined past, one in which a past is brought forcefully into focus as a present object of cognition (Colebrook: Online). As psychoanalytic theorist Friedrich-Wilhelm Eickhoff describes it, the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* places emphasis on the memory with traumatic significance; not the event itself (2006: 1453). What is important to understand about what Berger calls the ‘temporal hermeneutics’ of trauma, is that the experience of a present recollection surpasses the past event (1997: 572). Hernandez describes the complexity of trauma as marked by a ‘disjunction’ between the actual experience of trauma and present recollection (1998: 138). This disjunction I see as a flashpoint, one that potentially leads to an experience of *Nachträglichkeit*. The concept of *Nachträglichkeit* is important in my approach to certain paintings which elude explicit recall to the past in their subject-matter yet traumatize recollection by setting up flashpoints, or disjuncture, through a particular approach to form and the surface.

The clinical implications of trauma function similarly in a cultural sense, but the rupture, or flashpoint, extends to modes of relating on macro levels. As noted in the beginning of this chapter, Kirby Farrell is concerned with how trauma as a cultural ‘trope’ sustains certain needs in a postmodern, post-traumatic culture. Farrell defines ‘modern life’, as it is shown through media of movies, newspapers and books, as ‘inherently crippling’ (1998: x). Whereas Farrell (1998: 12) thus describes trauma in its tropic sense as ‘a

critically responsive interface between people', Seltzer (1997: 10) sees trauma as an utter 'breakdown' between 'psychic and social registers'.

As a defining trope of contemporary culture, Seltzer suggests, trauma is an enigmatic force which provokes a 'breakdown' in difference between such dialects as inner and outer worlds, the psyche and social, complicating the position of the subject in representation (1997:10). The confusion 'from within or without' calls into question the origins of the subject of trauma, whether the subject is 'self-determined' or 'event-determined'. This fundamental uncertainty intimates a 'breakdown' in the conviction of distance between subject and object, self and other, or 'private and public' spaces (1997: 4-10).

The difficulty in locating the subject of trauma is amplified by a complex temporal structure, where the events of history themselves are called into question. In trauma, on both individual and collective levels, there is no longer a question of 'simple models of experience and reference' (Caruth, 1996: 11). It is precisely where trauma engenders a lack of clarity towards the subject which I suggest provides an innovative space for making and looking at art which itself eschews straightforward interpretation. My interest in this regard, as I have noted, is specifically on painting where surface is emphasized.

In *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (2005) Jill Bennett discusses trauma's capacity for rupturing 'cognitive processing' and how its sense of being 'beyond the scope of language' can be a stimulus for art (2005: 3-5)⁷. In the book, Bennett focuses on artwork that fundamentally references past traumatic experiences as they occur on micro and macro levels, from personal experiences of sexual abuse, to works on the political warfare in Ireland and the 9/11 attack in New York. Her purpose is to show that these artworks, ranging from video installations, photography, drawing and painting, do not rely on subject matter that directly references these traumas but undertake to evoke a

⁷ Within its themes of disjuncture and temporality trauma provides impetus for 'avant-garde projects' within the arts (Bennett, 2005: 6).

sense of trauma through a ‘communicable language of sensation and affect’ (Bennett, 2005: 2). This aspect of her writing is crucial to how I explore trauma in my own painting and in the comment I make on specific works of Siopis and Dumas. That Bennett draws from Deleuze’s philosophizing of sensation and affect is also important for my exploration as I find that these phenomena are critical to my project. Deleuze characterizes what he calls the ‘encountered sign’ as the aspect of art that is felt, rather than thought – as a way of theorizing the singular force of affect as it is produced in particular artworks (Bennett, 2005: 37). As Bennett explains, the ‘encountered sign’ is seen by Deleuze as effective in an artwork because it forces the viewer to ‘engage involuntarily’ (2005: 7).

In this Bennett’s observations concur with my interests. Art, on trauma or otherwise, does not require a ‘faithful translation of testimony’ (Bennett, 2005: 3). Art that references trauma may furthermore not be confined by identity politics, an emotionally slanted interpretation, or a semantic base where ‘meaning’ rather than ‘form’ is advanced as essential to interpretation (Bennett, 2005: 4). Rather, an ‘engagement with sensation’, or affect, is necessary to locate the content of trauma (Bennett, 2005: 7).

However, Bennett’s intention is to show that within the endeavour to communicate trauma through art, art may provide new ways in which to view trauma. Her aims are based on a ‘critical and self-reflexive empathy’ as a means to access the content of trauma as it is experienced in real life (Bennett, 2005: 8). As noted, I am less interested in trauma as an event in the real which may or may not require an empathic enquiry into its representations, than trauma as a concept in painting that aligns with Seltzer’s borderland model and certain contemporary discourses on art. Here I specifically refer to those which touch on the operations of rupture and dislocation of the subject and how such experiences might be extrapolated onto the surface in contemporary painting. The improbabilities and ambiguities trauma heralds for the subject, its trope as a feature of modern life and contemporary modes of making and viewing, provide scope for more specialized ways of discussing the process that is at the heart of much contemporary painting.

Thus, a significant backdrop to the purposes of this report is the way a concept of trauma might evoke some shifts taking place in critical discourse on painting, where the signification of the subject in representation is being questioned. For example, Nigel Whitely has challenged contemporary criticism itself for what he calls an ‘intellectual(ist) preoccupation’ with semantically disinterring *meaning* from artwork (1999: 99). Instead, he calls for increased dialogue between *form* and meaning; ‘imaginative empathy’ and a sense of ‘aesthetic discrimination’ as by-words for a renewed focus on the singular experience of the artwork, as art (Whitely, 1999: 117). As with Deleuze’s theory of sensation, the notion of ‘imaginative empathy’ is important to my project of looking at paintings that escape straightforward interpretation. That much painting manifests an affective dimension which does not precisely equate with its perceived source of reference, an engagement with a particular approach to form and surface can offer a means for interpretation of subject-matter. As I briefly discussed in the introduction, Nadaner similarly argues for an analysis of visual form as more appropriate to determining the subject of a painting (1998: 172).

Lyotard likewise criticizes the explicit semantic analysis of artworks, where their perceived meaning for political or social ends is characterized. However, he also finds fault with the analysis of works that rely purely on a ‘reading of affects’, one that disregards the informed choices made by the artist in the practical organization of a work (Lyotard, 1989: 158). We should see artwork, according to Lyotard, not as ‘substitutes concealing objects or the goals of drives, but as concentrations of libidinal energy on the surfaces of the visible and the articulable...’ (1989: 159). As Lyotard contends, it is through the visible operations on the painted surface and the affect that arise from such operations – what I interpret as flashpoints – seen in conjunction, or tension with, its subject matter, that a more direct approach and relevant engagement with the complex methods and subjects of contemporary painting can take place.

That much contemporary painting is necessarily ambiguous and uncertain as to its subject requires such a mediated approach. The ‘intermediary status’ of painting is commonly acknowledged (Gamboni, 2002: 214). Art theorist Griselda Pollock characterizes the ‘intermediate nature’ of painting as:

a working on the borderlines of a meeting between one self and another...[it] becomes a new kind of process which takes us to the borderline of one subject and another that can become a threshold for a new understanding. (2005: 60)

I propose that drawing on a concept of trauma may be a route to reckoning with the intermediary status of particular contemporary paintings in a way that positively destabilizes an emphasis of its semantic signification⁸. With an emphasis on ‘the space between’, trauma defines the focus on the borderline space, or borderland, at which a certain dialectical tension between form and content may trigger affect. By way of this focus on the embodied borderland, the vigour inherent to some paintings for crossing notional borderlines of subject and self in a way that ‘speaks’ to a contemporary audience may be more fully grasped. Furthermore, the formal values manifested by the painted surface, as a crucial feature of a painting’s faculty for both meaning and affect, may be better understood.

The literal experience of trauma as it is understood as a form of violence is important to the way in which I engage it here as a form of enactment on the painted surface. The enactment marks the surface as assertively physical. The physicality is asserted through a comparison with what is not, or resists, and this is a form of illusionism defined by a smooth contained surface. This is not to deny the affective power of other forms of manifesting trauma through the painted surface. In her Master’s dissertation, artist Karin Preller makes a persuasive argument for the significance of Hal Foster’s notion of ‘traumatic illusionism’ in this respect. Here Foster invokes trauma as ‘contact’, primarily in realism, between dialects of the ‘referential *and* simulacrum, connected *and* disconnected, affective *and* affectiveless, critical *and* complacent’ (Foster in Preller, 2001: 63). The surface articulation of trauma attributed to realism or more representational paintings may be relevant to the kind of contemporary painting I am discussing. However, my focus is on painting that eschews both realism and its more abstract counterparts in the assertion of materiality and form that registers in tension or conflict with subject-matter. Therefore, I see the operations of surface in such painting as analogous to violence for the way in which it ruptures or achieves a ‘breakdown’ of organized pictorial logic.

⁸ An interpretation principally concerned with meaning.

The way in which I articulate this breakdown as symptomatic of trauma resonates with much contemporary discussion over the relation between modernism and postmodernism. As I discussed in my introduction, David Joselit sees this distinction as excessive particularly as far as notions of the flatness of the painted surface are concerned (1985: 306). With the varied and multiple approaches being taken globally in contemporary painting, there is little constructive use in arguing for or against either school of thought, especially since, as Joselit points out, the divide is often negligible to begin with. However, I do want to outline the methodologies involved because as I explore in the following chapter, it is through a critical stance to certain modernist principles which may reveal how flashpoints manifest on the painted surface.

For James Berger, as I have noted, what facilitates the manifold functions of trauma in contemporary discourses is that it provides a means of theorizing around the ‘unrepresentable’ (1997: 573). To repeat: a theory of trauma may be characterized as a trope by its borderland location between inner and outer worlds, the psyche and the social. It also manifests as a temporal borderland that obfuscates experience of memories between the past and present. Within this uncertain space, being neither inner nor outer, trauma stands as an ‘endless testimony to the impossibility of being’ (Caruth, 1995: 53). This connects, Berger argues, with the aims of postmodern and poststructuralist theory (1997: 573).

Poststructuralist postmodernism has been characterized by Hal Foster, among others, as a focus on that which disrupts representation (1984: 67)⁹. This focus forms part of the motivation for why theorists such as James Berger have aligned poststructuralist postmodernism with the vicissitudes of a theory of trauma; they both fundamentally draw from, and are sustained by, a particular relationship with some of the ideas of modernism (1997: 573). Cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen argues that the ideological differences

⁹ To briefly explain, poststructuralist postmodernism has been identified by theorist Hal Foster, among others, as one of two opposing strains of postmodernism (1984: 67). ‘Neoconservative’ postmodernism opposes poststructuralist postmodernism in that it assumes a ‘humanist’ outlook as a return to history and the subject; in its most basic sense, a return to representation. Poststructuralist postmodernism on the other hand, offers a critique of representation and the subject by focussing on certain phenomena that don’t correspond with our understanding of history or the subject (Foster, 1984: 67).

that made up the teleological framework of modernism have broken down, in a postmodernism that operates in a 'field of tension' (1984: 48). This 'shift' in fundamentally modernist ideas is mirrored in poststructuralist theory, which according to Huyssen is a 'revenant' of modernism:

a modernism of playful transgression, of an unlimited weaving of textuality, a modernism all confident in its rejection of representation and reality, in its denial of the subject, of history, and of the subject of history; a modernism quite dogmatic in its rejection of presence and in its unending praise of lacks and absences, deferrals and traces. (1984: 39)

Hal Foster similarly argues that poststructuralist postmodernism supports a 'fragmentation' of history and initiates a 'dispersal of the subject' (1984: 73). Like Huyssen he affirms that the poststructuralist strain of postmodernism, while it 'displaces' modernism, simultaneously 'recuperates' it (Foster, 1984: 73). Foster furthermore describes postmodern art as 'disentrenching' its given medium and involves a 'destructuring' of the object as well as a 'decentering' of the modernist subject (1984: 75).

For Lyotard, the postmodern did indeed constitute a shift in the dynamics of modernism, particularly in aesthetics, in the necessity for re-invention (Rachjman, 1998: 4). Temporal structures are intrinsic to Lyotard's idea of the postmodern. Readings define's Lyotard's notion of the 'postmodern anachronism' as a 'temporal aporia', a 'gap' in the psychical structure of time which 'disrupts' a notion of progression (1991: 53). Lyotard also calls this the 'figural event', where a normative sense of time is disrupted (Readings, 1991: 53). Representation triggers a certain form of shock, producing a 'singularity' which is out of order with its reference. As Lyotard writes, 'In sum, there are events. Something happens which is not tautological with what has happened' (Lyotard, 1991: 57). Most important to this discussion is how Lyotard sees postmodernism as a new way in which to 'singularize' and 'complicate' modernist critical theory (Rachjman, 1998: 17).

From my emphases of the discussions above, it becomes apparent that the conditions of post-structural postmodernism largely align with a language of trauma in terms of both

the complication of the subject and temporal logic. Poststructuralist postmodernism, in its most simple sense, does not disregard modernist principles. It finds ways, as discussed above, of complicating these principles. A concept of trauma in painting, as it connects with these poststructuralist strains, has a similar purpose. I refer back to Mark Seltzer's definition of trauma; as signifying the 'uncertain' space between 'the privacy of the subject' and 'collective forms of representation, exhibition, and witnessing' (1997: 4). It is within this model that the experience of painting may be understood in a contemporary context. As a defining trope of contemporary culture, trauma is description, analysis and interpretation of the 'breakdown' between such dialects as inner and outer worlds, the psyche and social; in turn obscuring the subject in representation. As with poststructuralist postmodernism, trauma as a concept focuses on the 'gaps' or indeed on the 'absences, deferrals or traces' manifested by a breakdown of these worlds or spaces. This breakdown may be embodied on the painted surface as a complication or shift of the aesthetic qualities associated with modernism as well as its more representational predecessors. As I will show on a more practical level in the next chapter, it is where these complications or shifts are asserted on the painted surface that flashpoints may manifest.

A concept of trauma, as it is put forward in this report, also then intersects with certain philosophies of art whose aim is to displace the experience of art from common categorizations, and as is my goal, shed light on the nature of paintings that provoke intense affect. In the following chapter, I outline certain philosophies by Deleuze, Lyotard and Georges Bataille in this regard. Their philosophies are designed to locate an ulterior language through which to speak about painting and the singular affect it has to offer; an affect that cannot be entirely accounted for by semantic logic. Through a comparison of these ulterior languages, my aim for trauma as a concept that defines particular operations in some contemporary paintings moves from abstract theory to thinking about the tangible processes that compose the surfaces of these paintings. As discussed earlier, my aim in conceptualizing trauma may not concern artists who fundamentally draw on personal or political traumatic events to create artwork on trauma in the real. Rather, my focus is on the paintings themselves and the way in which the

surface complicates any given subject-matter in a singularly expressive manner. An engagement with the qualities of surface which register this complication, or indeed breakdown of the subject is facilitated by a concept of trauma as a *device* by which the painting generates affect. If trauma is ‘beyond the scope of language’, and stands as ‘an endless testimony to the impossibility of being’, these extraordinary implications may offer a means through which to focus on contemporary paintings that exceed straightforward interpretation in extraordinarily affective ways.

Chapter 2

Surface as ‘Flashpoints’ in Contemporary Painting

The intermediate nature of much contemporary painting, often evoked by a fundamental ambiguity towards subject-matter, theme or style, precludes a definitive or absolute interpretation. However, that painting is acknowledged as complex in this way is not a contemporary phenomenon; the debate over the function of painting has clamorously evolved over the past century. Two basic approaches formulated during this time have shaped our understanding of painting. One position is concerned with the semantics of the original purpose of the work, and the recognition of the social and historical differences in spectatorship (Bryson, 1991: 1). Art theorist Norman Bryson discusses how on the other hand, there are theorists who are more interested in a ‘perceptual’ account of painting and art in general (1991:1). Quite apart from historical or social concerns, the objectives of this approach are centered within the emotional content of an artwork, or the affect generated¹⁰. However, as artist and writer Penny Siopis suggests, both approaches are relevant to the contemporary moment, particularly in regards to South Africa and its complex art-historical background. Contemporary painting need not rely on what she calls the ‘now rather fixed specular binaries of identity politics’ (2005: 35). Rather, she suggests, its multiple possibilities for materiality and form can evoke intense emotional content; content that, with reference to the complicated history of South African painting, may nevertheless engage with the ‘cultural moment’ (Siopis, 2005: 35).

In the book *Vitamen P: New Perspectives in Painting* (2002) Barry Shwabsky similarly suggests that there is no ‘best way’ to look at contemporary painting: neither a semantic nor a perceptual method of looking is ‘sufficiently powerful or all-encompassing to take

¹⁰ The ‘perceptual’ nature of art was essentialized in modernist art practices; some argue that it was Cézanne’s 1907 memorial exhibition, in particular his ‘*Blue Landscape*’ (1904-6), which provided impetus for future painting which, through a rejection of representation, was wholly focused on the emotional qualities of materiality, form, colour and the surface (Vaizey, 1999: 286).

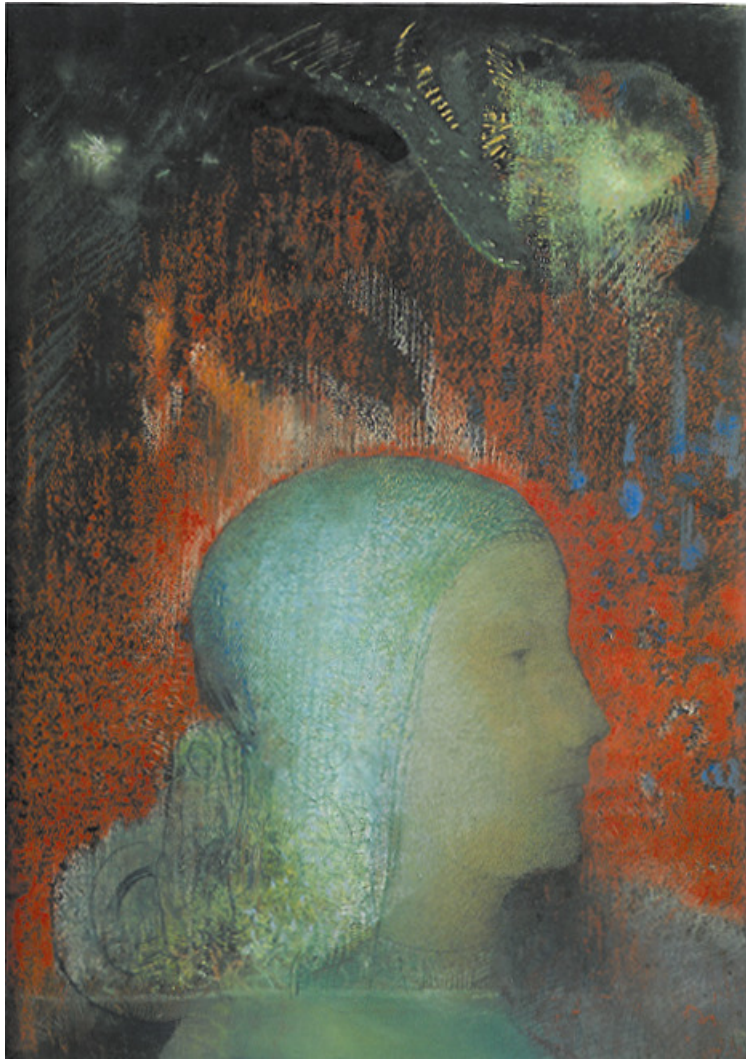
in all possible pictorial effects' (2002: 007). I concur with both Siopis and Shwabsky's views; both approaches are important in enabling a multiplicitous response that contemporary painting elicits in the viewer. However, whilst acknowledging this tension, as noted thus far, my emphasis in this report is towards the perceptual side of painting – the side of sensation. In my view, this is because semantic reading of paintings have dominated in postmodernism in a way which arguably underplays the affective dimension offered by the painted surface and other formal values such as ambiguity - the affective dimension that drives my own painting and that of the artists I discuss in this report. This phenomenon is understandable as a reaction to the valorization of the purist visuality propagated by modernist formalism¹¹ but I feel there is more to the painted surface than formalism accounts for. Here of course, my interest is in the way that certain formal articulations of the surface might be understood as manifestations of trauma. I must stress that my interest is not so much on the phenomenon of reading form that might make, for example, an expressive mark stand for an agitated psyche – as is often the case in psycho-biographic readings of the expressivity of Van Gogh¹². My interest is, as I have already stated, in how form may manifest trauma as a borderland concept between surface and subject-matter in painting.

In formulating these concerns I have found art historian Dario Gamboni's book *Potential Images, Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (2002) very instructive. Gamboni's text centers on an art-historical inquiry into the modes of representation from the late 19th to early 20th century. As noted, Gamboni defines 'potential images' as fundamentally involving ambiguity and indeterminacy. He cites Jean-Didier Urbain's definition of the 'crypto-image' as an equivalent definition of the potential image: 'a sign that oscillates between the desire to be disclosed (to be an image) and the temptation of the void satisfied by utter effacement' (Urbain in Gamboni, 2002: 70).

¹¹ See discussion below.

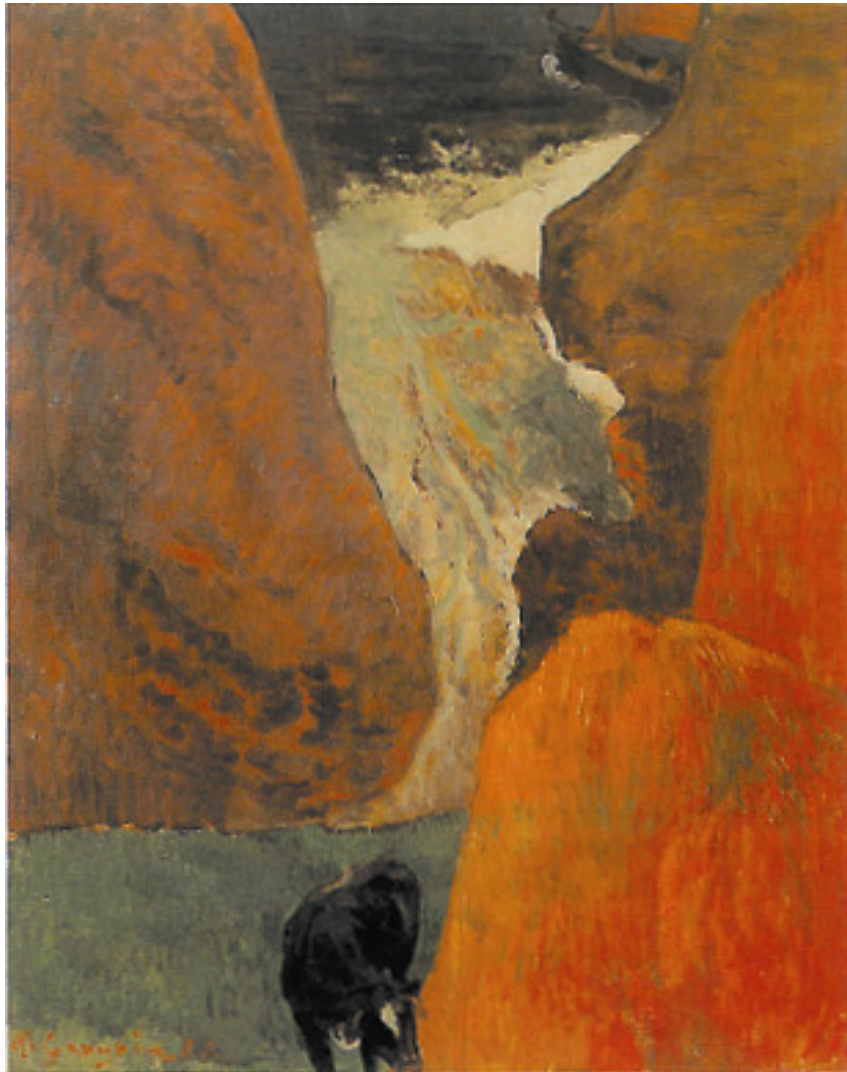
¹² I need to note here that the expressivity that expressionism promoted is not my focus. Hal Foster's critique of expressionism as a 'critical enterprise [that] is often reduced to an abstract, ahistorical opposition between tradition and the individual talent' articulates my point (1984: 69).

In Gamboni's view, the focus on 'the onlooker's state of mind' predisposes certain work to a resistance of the divides between abstraction and figuration (2002: 9). French artist Odilon Redon (1840-1916) is a focal point in Gamboni's book as the one of the earliest artists who actively pursued work that, 'belongs both to the perceived object and to the perceived mind and maintains itself on the fringes of both' (Gamboni, 2002: 77). Gamboni likewise looks at the Surrealists, who in their interest in psychological symbolism, rejected 'pure abstraction' for an inquiry into 'the region bordering the inner and outer worlds' (Ernst in Gamboni, 2002: 211).



Odilon Redon, before 1903. *Profile on Red Meanders*. 52 x 36 cm [Pastel]
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Gamboni cites Natasha Staller's discourse on Seurat – how the form of his brushstroke manifests as an 'organized conflict between depth and surface, representation and non-representation...' (2002: 84) He also discusses Gauguin, who in Gamboni's view was similar to Seurat in his interest with materiality as stimulus for 'feelings and thoughts' (2002: 86). Cezanne's drawings, he states, 'are an exercise in the shapeless', forcing the spectator to draw their own sense of recognition (2002: 113).



Paul Gauguin, 1888. *Seascape with Cow or Above the Abyss*. 72.5 x 61 cm [Oil on canvas]
Musée de Arts Decoratifs, Paris

Gamboni submits that this period, where the ‘notion of representation and the various forms it takes are questioned and challenged, but without representation being completely abandoned or rejected’, constitutes the base from which much 20th century art, including ‘postmodernist’ art, has developed (2002: 9). The ‘potential image’ reaches its apex in postmodernist painting, which Gamboni sees as beginning with Robert Rauschenberg and involved a ‘pictorial surface that let the world in again’ (2002: 219).

Indeed the very term ‘potential’ – ‘of energy, existing but not in action, latent; existing in possibility not in actuality’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 1994) – points to an uncertainty in the locale of the subject. It is pre-existent to the subject, yet it exists within the subject as an ‘energy’ impending; to be ‘potential’ is in and of itself to exist on the borderlines of exterior and interior realities. If postmodern painting has ‘let the world in again’ as Gamboni states, it is to the extent that tensions between certain ‘worlds’ are recognised, allowing for an inhabitation of the ‘potential’. As Gamboni demonstrates throughout his art-historical inquiry, the ‘potential’ within art is manifested by the ambiguity and indeterminacy between surface and depth, iconography and materiality, form and formlessness. Drawing from Gamboni, I see the potential for trauma in painting as an assertion, and in some cases, a hyper-emphasis of tension between these painterly values.

The art-historical imperatives of the surface in painting are key to understanding how some contemporary paintings manifest the borderland of trauma through surface. One of the fundamental objectives of Modernist painting was to classify itself exclusively within its domain, a ‘self-referentiality’ of the objectives essential to painting (Fried, 1982: 221)¹³. The implication for painting was thus that the status of ‘painting’ should be made ‘explicit’ (Carrier, 1985: 109). Unlike the illusionistic painting practices stemming from the Renaissance era, where painting is a ‘window on the world’, Greenberg emphasized that the recognition of ‘flatness’ and the ‘delimitation of flatness’ of the surface is imperative to the experience of painting as autonomous (Fried, 1982: 221).

¹³Clement Greenberg’s argument was that art had to have valence within itself, as an experience particular to the possibilities of its medium. The ‘purity’ of art was thus characterized by its reduction to the distinctive practices involved in each art form. As Fried explains, ‘The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of every other art.’ (Fried, 1982: 221).

As I noted in the last chapter, Andreas Huyssen has argued that with the collapse of the teleological framework of modernism, postmodernism now operates in a 'field of tension' (1984: 48)¹⁴. I see the postmodern 'field of tension' in painting as drawing from both modernist principles, such as flatness, while also utilizing the illusionary effects of depth. It is by an intended engagement and assertion of tension held by these qualities of surface, which may give rise to flashpoints. Art theorist James Elkin's analogy of skin with the surface is pertinent to my meaning: 'From the point of view of skin, the world is a series of invaginations and pockets, with no meaningful way to distinguish what is inside from what is outside' (Elkins, 1999: 44)¹⁵. If we compare Elkin's view of skin with the painted surface, the capacity of surface then exceeds the idea of its two-dimensional reality as something that transfigures the logic of flatness; where surface becomes depth, and depth can materialize as surface. Skin, as art theorist Colin Richards describes it, as 'quintessentially an articulation between surface and depth; an interface' (2005: 14).

Elkin's analogy is mirrored in Lyotard's writings where he describes a 'single libidinal surface without thickness or limits' as the catalyst in the 'lowering of barriers' between 'exterior' and 'interior reality' (1989: 164). If the surface as skin is a medium of interface between inner and outer worlds, I put forward that by holding surface and depth in tension¹⁶ the affective qualities associated with surface in its flatness or depth, as conscious or unconscious, stemming from an inner or outer source, are by extension held in tension, or even conflict. Specifically, the point at which the painted surface assertively registers this tension as rupture, dislocation or disjuncture, I see in terms of the flashpoint.

The qualities of surface that give rise to flashpoints of affect are integrally related to the manner in which materiality and form operate to disrupt surface and depth and their concomitant figure and ground relationships. I find certain philosophies on painting as

¹⁴ Artist and critic Virginia Mackenny argues that whereas flatness was seen as a reduction to painting's 'pure form' in modernist ideals, in postmodernism it refers to a 'levelling of values' (Mackenny, 2008: 20).

¹⁵ Art theorist David Bunn describes the painted surface as skin: 'a hardened, organic covering that is both shield for some imagined inner vulnerability, and a signifying surface' (Bunn, 2007: unpublished).

¹⁶ For example, whether it be in startling simultaneity or a fragmented dispersal of flatness or depth across the picture plane. These will be discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4.

comparable to my endeavors with trauma in that they give us a way of looking at the constitution of the painted surface in relation to a breakdown of organized pictorial logic¹⁷, a phenomenon I see as corresponding to the borderland of trauma that Seltzer speaks of. As I discussed in the last chapter, Jill Bennett draws from Deleuze's concept of the 'encountered sign', the sign of sensation, to substantiate her claim that art on trauma need not reference literal traumatic imagery but can effect a sensation of trauma, which in Deleuzian philosophy, and as Bennett submits, may arguably provoke a deeper mode of thought and critical inquiry than an 'explicit statement' (Bennett, 2005: 8-10).

I have found that understanding trauma in the painting process has a special connection with Deleuze's assertion, with regard to sensation, that we should see and understand painting in terms of its capacity for 'rupturing life', in other words how it might create or unmask connections between realities and fantasies not otherwise readily available (Colebrook, 2002:12). According to Deleuze, affect, as a sensory experience of a bodily or psychic nature, should be freed from its traditional or more common representational source so that it is not easily identifiable. Art then comes to function as a communication from inner, 'sensory' worlds (Colebrook, 2002: 23).

Deleuze has pointed out that there are two ways in which modern painting attempts to disengage affects through sensation. One is through the perceptual nature of abstraction, where the condensation of form and surface preclude any explicit representation of subject-matter. The other, which he exemplifies through Francis Bacon's work, is in Lyotard's notion of the *figural*. *Figure* is elucidated by Lyotard where he talks of an 'unsuppressible gap' between sensation and cognition, where the artwork is 'constantly on the edge of its own rupture' (1984: 43). This 'unsuppressible gap', or 'interstitial space', Lyotard denotes as manifesting the function of the *figural* (Rachjman, 1998: 8). As Lyotard theorized, these interstitial spaces that *figure* inhabits give rise to 'bad forms' or 'un-forms' which involve a new perspective on figure and ground relationships and are

¹⁷ I see the term 'organized pictorial logic' as standing for the known or traditional organization of the painted surface in both realism as well as the modernist imperatives of abstraction. My focus, like the philosophers I'm discussing, is on paintings that resist these poles of representation.

thus resistant or incommensurable with the pictorial logic of space and time (Rachjman, 1998:8).

Deleuze connects the work of the *figural* with a ‘violence’ of sensation because of its extraordinary approach to the subject through ‘bad form’: here the figure is, to quote Deleuze, ‘no longer isolated but deformed; sometimes contracted and aspirated, sometimes stretched and dilated’. He goes on,

‘The Figure is not simply the isolated body, but also the deformed body that escapes itself. What makes deformation a destiny is that the body has a necessary relationship with the material structure: not only does the material structure curl around it, but the body must return to the material structure and dissipate into it...’ (1981: 13).

Sensation, in other words, is generated by a tension held between form and formlessness, this tension literally ruptures or erodes figure and ground perspectives, in turn conflating the subject and the surface (Ford, 2005: 393). As both philosophers submit, it is at this point of physical rupture that intense affect, or sensation, may arise, ‘rupturing’ the reality/fantasy, inner/outer divide. Indeed, the acknowledgement of the ‘unsuppressible gap’ is pivotal in my conceptualization of trauma. Lyotard’s *figure* is a recognition of the ‘interstitial space’ between tensions of form and form’s ‘undoing’ (Rachjman, 1998:8). This brings to mind Freud’s definition of the work of the artist, as one of ‘mastery’ and ‘regression’ (Jurist, 2006: 1317). Here I associate ‘regression’ with as a pre-linguistic space of indeterminable chaos; an interior world that precludes any rational identification with reality; a realm of formlessness. ‘Mastery’ is its opposite, a world of order and logic, of reason, and ‘good’ form. It is at the point, or the borderland, where ‘mastery’ and ‘regression’, form and formlessness meet, that ‘bad form’ might arise. The *tension* between form and formlessness is what is significant in my concept of trauma. It is at the place of ‘bad form’ that a painting may enfold the qualities of ‘mastery’ and ‘regression’ simultaneously and manifest affective flashpoints.



Cy Twombly, 1957. *Olympia*. 184 x 261.25 cm [House paint, crayon, and pencil on canvas]
Private Collection

Cy Twombly's *Olympia* (1957) is a case in point. I draw from Twombly's work as it is referenced in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's book *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997) however I interpret it in this report according to my concept of trauma. Here, the borderland is supremely manifest; Twombly's approach to surface *is* the subject-matter. Titled after art-historical paintings which were popular for their imaging of the Greek goddess, the painting features a surface which has been scratched and marked. The only reference to Olympia is in the text 'Olympia' scratched into the surface, cut off by the edge of the canvas. The mythic ideology of Olympia is defaced under Twombly's apparently violent, regressive enactment on the surface. The repetition of scrawled forms overlaying each other in no apparent order evoke the psychotic's sense of time and space, an obsessive compulsion to revisit and disfigure this surface area. However, these destructive marks create a seductively haptic experience of levels of depth and texture,

the rubbing and disintegration of some marks dispersing and disintegrating the forms across and into the picture plane. What is fundamental to this research is that it is not only Twombly's violent scratches that invoke a notion of 'trauma', it is Twombly's 'mastery' of this otherwise regressive practice which causes Twombly's work to surpass itself and come fully into affective, resonant being. These flashpoints of surface, taking form in the very destruction of form, rupture the originary relation between form and meaning, surface and subject-matter; a phenomenon I feel relates to Deleuze's idea of art as a 'disengagement of affects' from the original source, giving rise to a 'violence of sensation'.

As noted, the relationship between materiality and iconography is furthermore intrinsic to the creation of flashpoints of the painted surface. The resistance to organized pictorial logic which finds its place in 'un-form', in Lyotard's philosophy, is echoed in Georges Bataille's philosophy of *informe*, or the formless (Bois & Krauss, 1997: 108). As above, I see Bataille's philosophy as aligning with trauma as a borderland concept in painting for the way in which it focuses on the surface as a source of affect. I am looking at Bataille as his theory is explored by Bois and Krauss in regards to modernist art practices, in particular his emphasis on materiality. Similarly to both Deleuze and Lyotard, Bataille sought to undermine the hegemony of language and the kind of thinking that arises from pure semantics. Bataille's endeavour with *informe* was to collapse all distinctions which had hitherto laid claim to a rational order of things; in art his philosophy finds expression in attacking the divisions of 'form' and 'matter'; it is 'matter' which constitutes the device of displacement:

...matter is whatever reason cannot drape with a "mathematical frock coat", whatever does not lend itself to any metaphorical displacement, whatever does not allow itself to be in-formed. (Bois & Krauss, 1997: 31)

Informe is to describe this collapse as it takes place not only between form and matter, but also within the logic of space and time (Bois, Y. & Krauss, R. 1997: 252). Like Lyotard, how this operation is achieved in Bataille's theory is through a process of creating 'bad form', here through a hyper-emphasis on materiality. The excessive use of

materiality, in other words, can become a means of displacing the signification of the content towards something 'other', of overwhelming its reference, indeed of destroying any relation of signification between not only form and content, but figure and ground, surface and depth (Bois & Krauss, 1997: 135). However, contrary to Lyotard's understanding of oppositions which do not fully negate each other and more in line with the objectives of modernist principles, Bataille would destroy any lasting boundaries of signifying difference.

In my conception of trauma as a borderland concept, I do not see materiality for the way in which it may obliterate or collapse iconography or figure and ground relationships in totality. Rather, the way in which it may rupture iconographic elements or figure and ground relationships becomes significant for the way in which it asserts itself in relationship to, or in tension with, its iconographic reference. Examining how relationships between materiality and iconography become ruptured is key in perceiving the intensities generated, or how flashpoints occur in a painting.

What Bataille calls 'alteration' is one example of material deployment that is useful to my research. 'Alteration', in Bataille's view is the 'initial desire to destroy or deface a surface' (Bois & Krauss, 1997: 150). Bois and Krauss define 'alteration', the trace or mark on the surface, as in and of itself 'violent':

For if to make a mark is already to leave one's mark, it is already to allow the outside of an event to invade its inside. It cannot be conceived without "the non-presence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present. (Bois & Krauss 1997: 151)

Antoni Tàpies's *Matter in the Form of a Foot* (1965) stands as an example here. Virginia Mackenny cites Tàpies as comparing himself to a 'researcher in a laboratory' because he is 'the first spectator of the suggestions drawn from materials' (2008: 30). Indeed in this example, the imaging of the foot, as it summons classical examples, exceeds its reference in Tàpies's treatment of materiality and surface.



Antoni Tàpies, 1965. *Matter in the Form of a Foot*. 130 x 162 cm [Mixed media on canvas]
Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona

The thick materiality causes cracks and distressed areas, which are further punctured by an 'alteration' of deliberate scratches and holes. The relation to a foot, its iconography, becomes less apparent in its unnatural, industrial colouration and brutal scarification, which flattens the image towards the surface and distorts the foot into a monolithic, scarred and diseased thing. As suggested by the title, materiality informs the subject as much as the iconography of the foot. The hyper-emphasis of materiality and its destruction of the surface, invoke the dichotomies inherent to a concept of trauma as a wound emblem. This tension thus works to create a flashpoint of uncanny visceral dislocation.

My aim is here to show that the tension produced in certain paintings by the rupture of painted surface and the erosion of figure/ground relationships as a challenge to pictorial coherence via excessive materiality and ‘bad form’ can be seen as physical manifestations of the concept of trauma. These painterly features also evoke the rupture in the logic of time and space, a rupture that is also a characteristic of trauma. I suggest that it is through the ‘breakdown’ of these logics that the ‘opening of relation’ to others indicates Mark Seltzer’s notion of a ‘traumatic collapse’ of the boundaries between the self and other, private and public (1997: 9).

I would like to give shape to these ideas in specific painted form via a description of Francis Bacon’s painting, *Head II* (1949). Deleuze sees Bacon’s paintings as functioning in Lyotard’s sense of the *figural* because they maintain a tension between the figurative and the abstract: in this way the *figural* ‘disengages’ affects from originary poles of representation and constitutes an ‘elevation’ of ‘the forces that constitute sensation’ (Ford, 2005: 393). While I draw from Deleuze’s use of the *figural* in my analysis of *Head II*, my aim is to reflect in a small way on how time and space may be estranged in painting under a concept of trauma.

The iconography consists of a strange form that rests on a theater stage-like structure, complete with a curtain backdrop. The disembodied form, at once animal, human, and slab of flesh gives rise to a gaping, toothy mouth. Similar to the eroticized markings of Twombly’s *Olympia*, this horrific revelation is uncannily accompanied by textures of paint which encrust the mouth, rising and falling away to the outer reaches of the picture plane. The dappled variegations of colour and light furthermore create an experience that is at once seductive and repellant.



Francis Bacon, 1949. *Head II*. 80 x 64 cm [Oil on canvas] Ulster Museum, Belfast

It is in the tension held between the familiarity with what sees, accompanied by the disconcerting unfamiliarity of the 'un-form', that the experience of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* occurs. As Bennett suggests, one cannot accurately communicate a personal traumatic experience (2005: 11). Rather, the art should work to 'mimic' the shock of trauma. In other words it should communicate a trauma that may be felt and understood by viewers through their own experiences, or as Bennett puts it; 'a form of memory for more than one subject, inhabited in different modalities by different people'(2005: 11). No longer the conventional setting for gay performance, '*Head II*' stages a scene of a traumatic 'opening of relation'; the public platform as vanguard for a shocking disclosure.

Jill Bennett writes, '[t]he skin of memory is notoriously permeable – particularly the skin of traumatic memory which is at once "tough" and "impervious", but also broken, ruptured, and scarred.' (2005: 41). *Head II* 'mimics' the shock of trauma not by its iconography alone, but by visceral, scarified materiality which ruptures and disfigures form. I recap Gamboni's phrase of 'a dialectical tension where surface turns to subject and subject to surface...' (2002: 70) The emphasis of this tension, as a fraught relationship between surface and depth, materiality and iconography, form and formlessness, I see as the operations of trauma at work. Furthermore, it is through these operations that affect manifests as flashpoints between the private and public, past and present experience.

In the following chapter, I investigate in detail the bearing a borderland concept has on the interpretation of surface and how flashpoints arise in the paintings of Penny Siopis and Marlene Dumas.

Chapter 3

Trauma as Flashpoints in Penny Siopis and Marlene Dumas

Marlene Dumas and Penny Siopis are both established artists who have engaged with the subject of trauma in their painting for many years. Certain of Dumas's paintings dealing with trauma have been focused on the uncanniness elicited by her use of paint and the surface to depict bodies in distress. In her series *The Fog of War* (1988), her expressive rendering of portraits of prisoners and civilians, derived from press imagery of the conflicts in the Middle East, creates an uncertainty towards whether the figures depicted are alive or dead. In this the series is aimed at highlighting the trauma of war, or what curator Emma Bedford describes as the 'dehumanising effects' of conflict (2008: 49). However, the 'dehumanising effects' expressed through Dumas's subject-matter as an uncanny relationship between life and death are also reflected in her work in less explicit ways via the form of her treatment of her painted surface.



Marlene Dumas, 2006. *The Fog of War* (*Friendly Fire*, *The Fog of War*, *The Refugee*, *Collateral Damage*).
45 x 35 cm. [Lithograph on paper] (Standard Bank Corporate Collection).

According to David Bunn, Siopis is ‘one of our most significant archivists of trauma’ (2002: 4). Her *Pinky Pinky* (2002) series of paintings have been interpreted almost exclusively in these terms, with the visceral painted surface signifying powerfully to evince trauma as the provocative subject-matter. Furthermore, the impasto form of *Pinky Pinky* and indeed her earliest paintings, has often been theorized in relation to skin (Richards, 2005: 21; Bunn, 2008: 149). The series explores a local (South African) urban legend in which Pinky Pinky, imagined as a pink ‘tokoloshe’, terrorizes adolescents as they visit the school bathrooms (Williamson, 2002: Online). While the series invokes the mythologizing of race relations in post-apartheid culture, the trauma of sexual violence is key, as Pinky Pinky threatens to rape girls if they wear pink panties.



Penny Siopis, 2002. *Pinky Pinky: Mirror Eyes*. 41 x 50 cm. [Oil paint and objects on canvas]
Sasol Collection

As Siopis has commented, much of her work has centered on trauma as a fraught relationship between childhood and the *Nachträglich* coming-into-being of adulthood: what she calls ‘the magic of childhood and a dawning consciousness of the gaps, even betrayals, of this sense of magic and innocence’ (Isaacson, 2005: Online). Although the work I focus on here, namely Siopis’s *Shame* (2001-2005) series, also figures trauma in a sexually tainted iconography, I must stress that I use trauma here as a concept, as a means

to explore how the physical properties of the painted surface are made to stand as flashpoints of shame.

I make the paint do things – drip curdle and congeal – to visualize emotion. To create, alter and destroy an image in one go and see in its destruction another thing appearing, is exhilarating... I love how painting fixes the flux and flow before your eyes, congealing into something alive and dead at the same time. (Penny Siopis in interview with Sarah Nuttall, 2005: 36)

In the *Shame* series (2001-2005) Siopis produces a concentrated fusion of the possibilities painting has to offer in terms of trauma, particularly when thinking of trauma as an ‘opening of relation’ between private and public registers. Griselda Pollock has argued that Siopis’s work utilizes the thrusts of modernist painting, like surface, materiality and flatness, towards socio-political, specifically feminist ends (2005:14). Although the *Shame* series does explicitly connect the vicissitudes of this emotional state to the female body, what is pertinent to this research is that it is, as Pollock suggests, through the relationships she sets up through the painted surface that Siopis provokes an intensely emotional content that implies a form of devastating psychological exposure.

Siopis has described her work on shame as part of her interest in the ‘poetics of vulnerability’ more generally (2005: Catalogue). She observes that shame ‘... is the opposite of dignity, a visceral emotion that signifies the risk or reality of a collapsed subject-object relation. Self is turned inside out, exposed for all to see.’ (2008: 143). Siopis designates shame as ‘ambivalent at its core’, involving both ‘assertive agency and vulnerable victimhood’ (2008: 146). I see shame here as being in line with the concept of trauma as the flashpoint between private and public registers. This flashpoint realm, as a poetics of taciturn vulnerability and brutal presence, is manifested through Siopis’ approach to surface. Here her approach engages while it disrupts the delimitations of painting: the borderlines that separate surface and subject-matter, subject and object; propelling the work into a deeply wrought trauma arena.



Penny Siopis, 2002. *Shame no. 1*. 18.5 x 24.5 cm [Mixed media on paper] Private collection

The painting I will be analyzing is strictly not an autonomous work. The *Shame* series comprises over a hundred small paintings of the same size. Siopis combines these in different ways to shape the work. This combination depends on the spatial and conceptual context of exhibition. These paintings are placed side by side in rows of no less than six pieces; sometimes these join to form a single frieze around the gallery space and at other times the rows form a grid. Clearly this presentation sets up a situation of relational viewing with connections invariably suggested between paintings. This format of rows also implies narrative structure, but the type of images and treatment of surface denies sequential readings. Rather they appear more like fragments of memory. I have thus taken the liberty to single out one fragment – one painting – to discuss. My motivation here is that I am of the opinion that this work stands for the ‘feel’ of the series generally. This notion seems to be confirmed by the fact that it also happens to be the most reproduced of the series, something I assume the artist, in part, determined.

The painting I have selected shows an impression of a painted red female figure sitting hunched in the upper left center of the picture plane. Text reading ‘I’m Sorry’ is imprinted via rubber stamp next to the figure. The words appear to emerge from the girl’s head. There is scant detailed depiction of the body, save for some finely painted fingers on her right hand which droop to her cross-legged knees. The dark red, almost black hair that encircles her head matches the deep pool of blood-red paint that almost floods the lower half of the page. The smallness of the painting is key to the affective viewing experience I am interested in. From afar, the work seems like inkblots on a paper. The viewer is required to go close-up to the work to be able to discern form; a forced intimacy that I suggest sets the viewer up as penetrative participant.

Siopis’s primary medium in this instance is lacquer paint. It is the type commonly used to produce the effect of stained glass in craft contexts. Siopis makes the medium drip and congeal to form pools. Its residue exceeds the shape of the figure and bleeds into the ground, staining the paper support. The paint is furthermore distressed and cracked; the disturbance is felt in the possibility of the very materiality of the daubs of glass paint - it could perceivably be blood, both fresh and dried. Writer Colin Richards has commented on this manner in which the surface is ‘both literal and conceptual’, where Siopis’s use of

paint is 'object, sign and surface' (2005: 7). Thus the objecthood of the distressed painted surface is autonomous, but it can also register as a sign, or flashpoint, of emotional distress. Without the addition of figuration the fragility of the paper, stained and dripped upon, becomes a mottled document; a bloodied rag; a membranous tissue; and almost only incidentally, a painting.

The troubling composition the medium takes on as the surface is integral to Siopis' project of imaging shame. Nuttall and Siopis herself, have likened this mark-making to Rorschach inkblots (Siopis, 2005: Catalogue, Nuttall, 2005: 141). However, Rorschach inkblots are compositionally symmetrical. In Siopis's work, the flush of red materiality troublingly exceeds this type of order; there is no seeming logic to the deposit of paint on the paper. For me at least, the bloodiness of the paint threatening to stain the pale ground of the paper evinces the kind of fascinated horror found in the surgeon's theater; a clinical, sanitized space being effaced by a scatological jettison. In her own writings Siopis describes the background of the shame paintings as 'both left, and actually made, white and can be read as negative ground on which nothing happens as well as ground positively blanked out, as if information has been covered over.' (2005: 19). Through a conceptual lens of trauma, both thoughts on the surface are relevant for the way in which they describe the surface as integral to the painting. Moreover, I see the form of Siopis's mark-making as aligning with Bataille's notion of 'alteration' as an enactment of violence; the paper surface is permeated and damaged by the seeping effects of the viscous medium.

I have noted Bois and Krauss's statement that the formless 'displaces' form and content (1997: 15), and I wish to connect their comment to this work. My interest is how the ostensible content - a girl sitting in a pool of red (blood?) - is displaced through Siopis' approach to form. Although the figure of the girl seems to merge with the pool in colour and form, the figuration does not slip completely into formlessness. A tension is set up between form and formlessness here, a tension that is key to Siopis's painting more generally. She has frequently commented on this aspect of her work as being connected to Bataille's *Informe* (Nuttall, 2009: 3). I would like to link this tension between form and

formlessness in Siopis's painting with the 'bad form' of Lyotard, a phenomenon he associates with the 'unsuppressible gap' between sensation and cognition (1984: 43). Siopis heightens this 'gap' through, as noted, the powerful tension between form and formlessness. The cognizant aspect of the iconography as a girl sitting in, or beside a pool, or void, is opposed by the bloody connotations of the fluid threatening to collapse form. This tension between materiality and iconography gives rise to a flashpoint of primeval viscosity, where sensation and cognition meet in tense partnership.

If we accept the 'bad form' in this painting is not only a source of rupture between what is seen and what is sensed, it also refers to a child's drawing. Under Siopis's hand though, these pigmented recollections of infancy are infected, indeed traumatized, with a bloodily sexualized flavour. The singularity of the sense that this object is both a child's, and an adult author's creation, provokes what might be understood as a dissonantly *Nachträglich* moment. As Siopis reveals in her writing, this reference to a child's drawing is no accident: 'It is in how we see our childhood hurts, real or symbolic, that shame comes over and over us again in adulthood' (2008: 155). Whether the image is based on a past or a present, whether either is in fact real or not, is questioned and exacerbated by Siopis's approach to form. The work straddles these worlds powerfully, if uneasily.

The imaging of the text, in its fine curlicue format, juxtaposes the 'bad form' of the rest of the image. 'I'm Sorry' is stamped on to the surface, becoming part of the figuration but also rising above it as a kind of last-minute graffitied speech-bubble. One is forced into a posture of oscillating looking; the image in its compellingly childish formlessness disrupts the delicate forms of the text and the apology it offers, but poignantly, the conventionality of the phrase effaces the disquietingly autographic dabs of paint. In this, the authority of the text over the image is eschewed, further pushing the work from an epistle of the everyday, to a fragment fluttered from deep within.

As noted a 'fragment' is an apt way of looking at the work. Although the orientation of the figuration is ostensibly vertical (the girl sits up), the congealing of the red pool and the way in which the paper is stained informs the viewer of the performative nature of the

process of working. There is evidence of horizontal working – the paper must have been lying flat for a significant period for liquid paint to splatter, pool and congeal according to gravity and porousness. This inverted, almost inappropriate approach to painting on such a small scale is compelling. The flashpoint here arises from the erratic approach juxtaposed by the obsessive leaning towards diminutive detail; it fosters an interpretation of sense of a disoriented dispersal of a self, a scattering of parts that have now been pinned up on a wall for all to see.

Within these manifold conundrums set up between subject and object, personal and public, inner and outer worlds, lies the flashpoint of trauma. Sarah Nuttall furthermore describes the *Shame* series as that, '[t]hey suggest, in a highly complex way, that at the limits of the ugly, the abject, the repulsive, horror and disgust, beauty might be found; that beauty stands in intimate relationship to ugliness' (2005: 18). One could continue the flashpoint description thinking about Freud's dichotomy of mastery and regression. By accessing the most regressive qualities of matter and its associations with bodily fluids; and the most regressive qualities of form, Siopis's approach to painting speaks eloquently of the emotional realm of shame.

Painting is a language which may be likened to, as Siopis says, 'a carnal document': 'Paint has – for me at least - always operated as a physical emanation of entangled thoughts and feelings' (2008: 156). Siopis writes that her initial idea on the *Shame* series was to use one of her rubber stamps saying 'Shame' by dipping it in glow-in-the-dark ink and stamping it all over her body, and then photographing herself in the dark (Siopis, 2008: 151). As she says later in her text however, the fact that the *Shame* series is a body of painting is crucial to the way in which meaning and affect could be figured (Siopis, 2008: 156). It is interesting to me to think about why it makes a difference that she painted 'shame' instead of any other medium. To have photographed her body as the site of 'shame' would, in my mind, have created an unequivocal link between the word, the image and its format. Through paint and the surface however, shame passes into an implicitly emotional realm beyond the linguistic relationships of image and word, sign and signifier. In a material embodiment, sensation and affect immerse meaning. Like trauma, which gives name to the singular shock of contact between inner and outer

worlds, past and present experience, painting has the capacity to condense within its physical and philosophical frame an extraordinary crossing between usually disconnected spaces: as a 'carnal document', it is a material and symbolic fragment of the self that crosses into a public, collective space. Siopis's *Shame* painting makes this crossing explicit.

As noted in the beginning of this chapter, Siopis and Dumas have both engaged with the subject of trauma in their painting, albeit for different ends. It is worth comparing their differing approaches to get a sense of the way in which Dumas's practice is illuminated by a concept of trauma, a practice that in some cases, particularly the work I focus on, does not produce anything ostensibly traumatic. The subject-matter of *The First People (I-IV)* (1991) consists of four babies painted on individual canvases. Whilst the subject matter is babies, the content is more difficult to pin down. It is precisely because of this inherent ambiguity that these paintings are well-suited for thinking about painting in terms of trauma as a concept. Dumas has said of her work that in retrospect she can see 'that it was not the nude I was looking for, nor the posing figure, but the erotic conditions of life I was after – two 'subjects' confronting each other' (1999: 31). Clearly the erotic conditions of life are also inflected with trauma.

Both Siopis and Dumas work with the body in representation. Yet in many ways, the similarities end here. As discussed, Siopis's painting on shame explicitly manifests the notion of a traumatic 'opening of relation' to others. Dumas's work, on the other hand, operates in such a way as to complicate the idea of a relative self. While Siopis's painting tends to draw one in to a viscerally intimate sense of self and the body, Dumas's painting seems to obscure the relationship between the self and the body; as noted, her approach to surface serves to 'dehumanise' the bodies under representation.

In *The First People (I-IV)* (1991), four babies are painted on four large vertical rectangle canvases. Depicted as swollen and unnaturally pigmented, they hover ominously in their long formats.



Marlene Dumas, 1991. *The First People (I-IV)*. 4 Parts, each 180 x 90 cm [Oil on canvas] De Pont
Stichting, Tillburg

Like *Shame*, *The First People (I-IV)* is simple in structure and ostensible subject matter, but the form of the painting suggests a very much more complex set of ideas that align the affective properties of paint on a surface. This is what motivates me to define these two different paintings in terms of trauma. What I would like to show here is that in Dumas's work, the 'form', and by this I include colour, composition and surface, constitutes the meaning of the work as that which is in tension with the subject-matter. I see this tension in terms of the borderland of trauma; the flashpoints arising from her distinct approach to surface.

Siopis's method of painting tends to blur iconography through the threat of surface materiality. In Dumas's paintings, the iconography is unambiguous as to its subject. However, ambiguity is a central affect of *The First People (I-IV)*, as it is with most of Dumas's work. The artist achieves this ambiguity in several ways. Her use of photographs as source for her paintings is key here. Much has been written about this aspect of her painting and the relationships she sets up between photographic realism and the expressive flair of her own trace. Dumas has stated that she uses photographs and not just her imagination because: 'I don't want to worship my own handwriting' (2005: 152). It is precisely in the tension, and in some areas, conflict, between the realistic and 'un-realistic' qualities of her painting, that ambiguity manifests. In evoking the photographic source, her expressive trace (made through application of paint as well as its reduction through scraping and rubbing the surface) produces a strong autonomy to painting. Marks, traces and residues do not always come together on the canvas to produce the kind of contained form we often associate with realism. It is as if the spaces left as a consequence of her process are unfinished. In this they could denote an unidentified capacity, a mysterious, threatening potency belonging to the subject; in this case the babies of *The First People (I-IV)*. These gaps made as a consequence of this tension between descriptive and expressive form suggest the bodies represented here are contaminated by something outside the known human experience; a dehumanising of the self as 'other'.

An initially striking aspect of the works is their scale, in relation to their subject-matter. The monstrosity of the undeveloped trunks and limbs of the infant-figures are dissonantly un-babylike. In this they appear dehumanised. It is not only the scale which gives cause to such qualities. As in Penny Siopis's painting, there is a disorientation of horizontal and vertical planes. While the paintings are vertical, the imagery is as if seen from above, producing a disconcerting, vertigo-feeling, viewpoint. Propped up, petrified, they confer an uncanny sense of incongruity. However, the largeness of the figures is also integral to the effect of the series as a whole. I see a link between the structure and composition of Dumas's work and Deleuze's definition of *figure* as that where 'the body has a necessary relationship with the material structure: not only does the material structure curl around it, but the body must return to the material structure and dissipate into it...' (1981: 13). The expansiveness of the infant-figures, cropped by their heads, lends emphasis to the surface as its own entity, rather than as a support structure or background to the bodies depicted; here, '...surface turns to subject and subject to surface' (Gamboni, 2002: 70). The relationship between the paintings, the expansiveness of surface repeating the pattern of the infant-form, accentuates this tension; juxtaposing the subject of babies with a subjectivity of surface.

The centricity of surface is initiated by the paintings' construction and it persists in the use of materiality and the tonal values its give rise to. Critic Virginia Mackenny discusses Dumas's method of 'dulling' the oil paint by scrubbing the surface with turpentine, in this way muting the richness of colour and eschewing the 'viscerality' of the paint (2007: Online). In *The First People (I-IV)*, the tension between the rubbed areas and the thicker, richer areas of paint alternate between floating on the surface, or erupting towards the viewer. At times it flattens the image towards the picture plane, at others it creates unquantifiable depths. The ostensiveness between flatness and depth, visceral paint and washed-out canvas is not localized to the forms but rather plays out across each picture plane and across the series as a whole, further obscuring the human element under portrayal. This tension is heightened by lines of thick black paint which outline and punctuate areas of the figures. In some places they describe the limbs as amorphous claws, or the line flattens as it demarcates the edge of a body. An eye becomes a deep

black, fluid, hole. The materiality of Dumas's paint - the thin washes in some areas, and bold, unfinished strokes in others - work towards conflicting ends of surface and depth, disrupting and dislocating the iconography. Indeed it is the tension between the material deployment of the paint and the figuration that forms the basis for the continually changing relationships between not only figure and ground, but form and formlessness. It is in this ostensive back and forth of 'pure' colour and muddied paint, the described versus the demarcated, that a flashpoint of 'dehumanisation' arises, one that does not speak as much about babies and their bodies, as about the affective dimensions of surface.

These effects are furthermore conveyed by Dumas's use of colour. In comparison to Siopis's *Shame* painting, the deep reds of *Shame no. 1* refer pointedly to the inside stuff of bodies, while the relationships of colour in *The First People (I-IV)* serves to dehumanise the bodies in representation. This dehumanizing quality is well expressed by Dominic van Boogerd who describes Dumas's use of colour as living 'both apart and together' on the surface, in that the hues 'occur independently' of the subject-matter (1999: 25). It is important to see the colour in *The First People (I-IV)* in its spatial tensions between the different paintings but also within the subject-matter. In *The First People (I-IV)*, there is recourse to naturalistic or local colour in the pinky, fleshy hues that permeate the forms in some areas. However, these give way to whites, greys, blues and in the case of the second painting from the left, one murky yellow hand. As Richard Schiff describes Dumas's work, the colour is: 'specific to the painting...colour as an arbitrary mark that resists becoming a sign.' (2008: 158). The babies in Dumas's paintings resist qualification or signification as babies because of the tension between naturalistic and unrealistic colour; the affect and the ambiguity arise from their disruption of one another, again not only within each painting but across the series. Through these flashpoints manifested by colour, surface is again raised as focal to the content of Dumas's work, as opposed to the possible semantic signifiers of subject-matter:

I was accused by women of misusing babies. It has been said that I mistreat grown-ups, but at least they could defend themselves and babies couldn't. And even if a baby looked like that, they did not want to see them that way, it was

said. Then I was accused of speaking the truth but apologizing for it. Then I was very tired. (Dumas, 1999: 29)

In the discussion above I have drawn out the strange allure and affect of her work as stemming from tensions or conflicts as flashpoints between her approach to realistic depiction and expressivity, between painterly surface and subject-matter. Another kind of flashpoint which I feel gives rise to affect in Dumas's work is a tension between randomness and specificity. In Dumas's decision to have four images of babies instead of three or five, I perceive a sense of randomness, or to use Schiff's term, 'arbitrariness' (2008: 158). I also see her choice of baby imagery as random in the context of her extensive oeuvre: men, women and babies in various states and poses have all fallen subject to her canvas frames. However, this propensity towards imaging the human body in general is offset by the specificity she confers on the surface. It is by the seemingly random and innocuous choice of subject-matter against the specificity of a particular hand marked by scrawling black line, or a particular part of the head bruised with an opaque grey wash, for example, which I feel gives rise to the affect of her work.

Barbara Bloom has described Dumas's work as the 'relationship between existence and its origins, in terms of both human life and art' (1999: 55). Through the lens of a trauma conceptual framework, it is these epistemological relationships which Dumas's paintings work, in a *Nachträglich* way, to rupture and invert. These thoughts seem to correspond with a quote I used in the beginning of this report, where Cathy Caruth describes Freud's trajectory of thought on trauma, 'from trauma as an exception, an accident that takes consciousness by surprise and thus disrupts it, to trauma as the very origin of consciousness and all of life itself' (Caruth, 1996: 104).

The flashpoints manifested by the qualities of surface in the paintings of both Siopis and Dumas may work towards singular affective ends where they achieve a breakdown of the self/other, private/public and past/present divide. But if the origin of consciousness, as trauma, consists of an unbounded mediation of time, the self and the world, both Siopis and Dumas evoke this eternal process as an embodied mediation of surface and its vicissitudes.

Chapter 4

Trauma and Painting

In my introduction I wrote about my experience of being shot and left paralysed. The obvious question is: to what degree have these very real traumas driven my current artistic concerns? There is no question that my interest in working with affect in my painting process and the ways that I show my work have been affected in a profound way by the trauma I experienced. But, of course there are other factors that could also account for the development of my interest in trauma as a concept, factors that are quite independent of my traumatic experience.

One such factor was the MA coursework I undertook which focused on trauma and art¹⁸. It was in this course that I first came upon much of the literature that I draw on in this research report and have found compelling accounting for some of my processes in my painting. In addition I have always been interested in psychoanalysis. However, the main point I wish to stress here is that I have resisted drawing from the traumatic event of the attack and its consequences in a direct way: I have steered clear of it as subject matter for my painting. If this personal trauma has any real effect on my work - apart from stimulating in me a heightened sensitivity to moments of emotion and sensation - it has been as a source of inspiration and a means for interpreting my work. In this way, I became drawn to trauma as a way of thinking about painting within a discourse that asserted a strong affective dimension. Thus my interest in Jill Bennett's (2005) idea of empathic vision, in making and viewing artwork. As she points out, it is not only the subject matter but the form that has affective power.

As I have discussed throughout my previous chapters, trauma manifests as restless exchange between inner and outer worlds, fantasy and reality, private and public spaces, past and present experience. I see my paintings as functioning in this terrain for the

¹⁸ Masters of Arts in Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Coursework: Construction of Contemporary South African Art (2007).

manner in which the painted surface – particularly that which is assertively physical - may evoke these relationships. It is through an ever-evolving process that I feel my paintings may visualize the delimiting, or, as often the overwhelming vagaries, that penetrate the more ‘normal’ sense of the everyday, and ‘speak’ about the underlying currents through which life revolves. In Chapter One I described trauma as being a germane idea for the description, analysis and interpretation of certain singularly expressive paintings. In a similar light, I see the notion of trauma as a critical lens in the process, practice and production of my paintings.

In this chapter I intend to discuss my painting process. My motivation here lies in the fact that my work is process based. But, more to the point the painting process is key to the topic of trauma as a borderland concept as I see it. This should be clear from the theoretical framework I have established thus far. To avoid repetition I will refrain from re-iterating these theoretical concerns. I will describe my process of working and reflect on its significance to the topic where relevant. Specific works that exemplify particular approaches to form and materiality and how these features are manipulated for affective ends will be discussed. Showing the products of this process – in this case through an exhibition – was also a process. I will thus also briefly discuss my approach to my exhibition.

The use of trauma, as a critical hermeneutic lens, has thus followed a tapering path between the paradigms that form the basis of my research. I titled my exhibition, *I knew you in this dark*, as a descriptive phrase for the passages and processes I explored to find the place, the flashpoint, of singularly expressive contact. I also used titles for the paintings that seemed open-ended, for all their apparent literariness. I borrowed most of these from a book on Jung and his treatise on alchemical symbolism¹⁹. My motivation here involved seeing the surfaces of my paintings as a ‘process’ of symbolization. I stress ‘process’ to underscore the indeterminate nature I want my paintings to reflect, an

¹⁹ Edinger, E.F. 1995. *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy*. Illinois: Open Court.

imagination-inducing indeterminacy arising from formal tensions in and through the painted surface.

Certain aspects of the paintings were key to exposing how the painting process functions for me in realizing the concept of trauma. For instance, scale and colour were an important part of the concept in the display of the exhibition. Through my research, I found that the scale of some works gave impetus to particular forms of affect. For instance, in Penny Siopis's *Shame* series (2002) I saw that more chaotic or violent works are often even more intense if they are on a small scale. Analysis via a trauma 'lens' reveals that this occurs because the dislocation between larger-than-life emotions and compressed space enforces a concentration of energy on the limited surface. However, paintings can also be affective in large scale as literally invasive of spectator space. As I discussed in the chapter devoted to her work, Marlene Dumas achieves this effect in *The First People (I-IV)* (1991) through the enormity of her infant figures. I therefore utilized the variation in the scale of my paintings to create a set of spatial relationships between works that reflected my interest in the strange relationships that trauma can manifest. I arranged some smaller works in configurations for the way in which they related to each other. Other works were intended to appear as more autonomous.

My use of close-value colour was aimed at a similar purpose. Most of the works have grey and black backgrounds. Some are off-white. Where I did use colour, particularly in blue and greens, these tones leaned towards greyer hues. In my exhibition I contrasted these deeper tones with instances of brighter colour, with red in small areas of some paintings. A number of works are awash with red tint. My aim was to heighten the sense of flashpoints with moments of colour, in the individual works, but also in the greater display of the show.

The imagery I used was also critical to my process of creating flashpoints. I used pictorial references that are rich in the possibility of projection and transformation, for me, and hopefully for the viewer. These included human figures, animals and objects mostly from the domestic realm. My aim was to transform these 'everyday things' through the

painting process and treatment of the surface so that their forms might suggest something other than what they conventionally represent. My earlier works were more obviously indicative of this transformation as a tension between surface and subject-matter. For instance, in *The Fire of the Dragon being both Fanned and Extinguished* (2008), the iconography of domestic interior and figures is much easier to decipher than that of later works for all that there is a challenge to pictorial logic through colour, ambiguity, figure and ground indeterminacy in parts and material disruption of the surface.



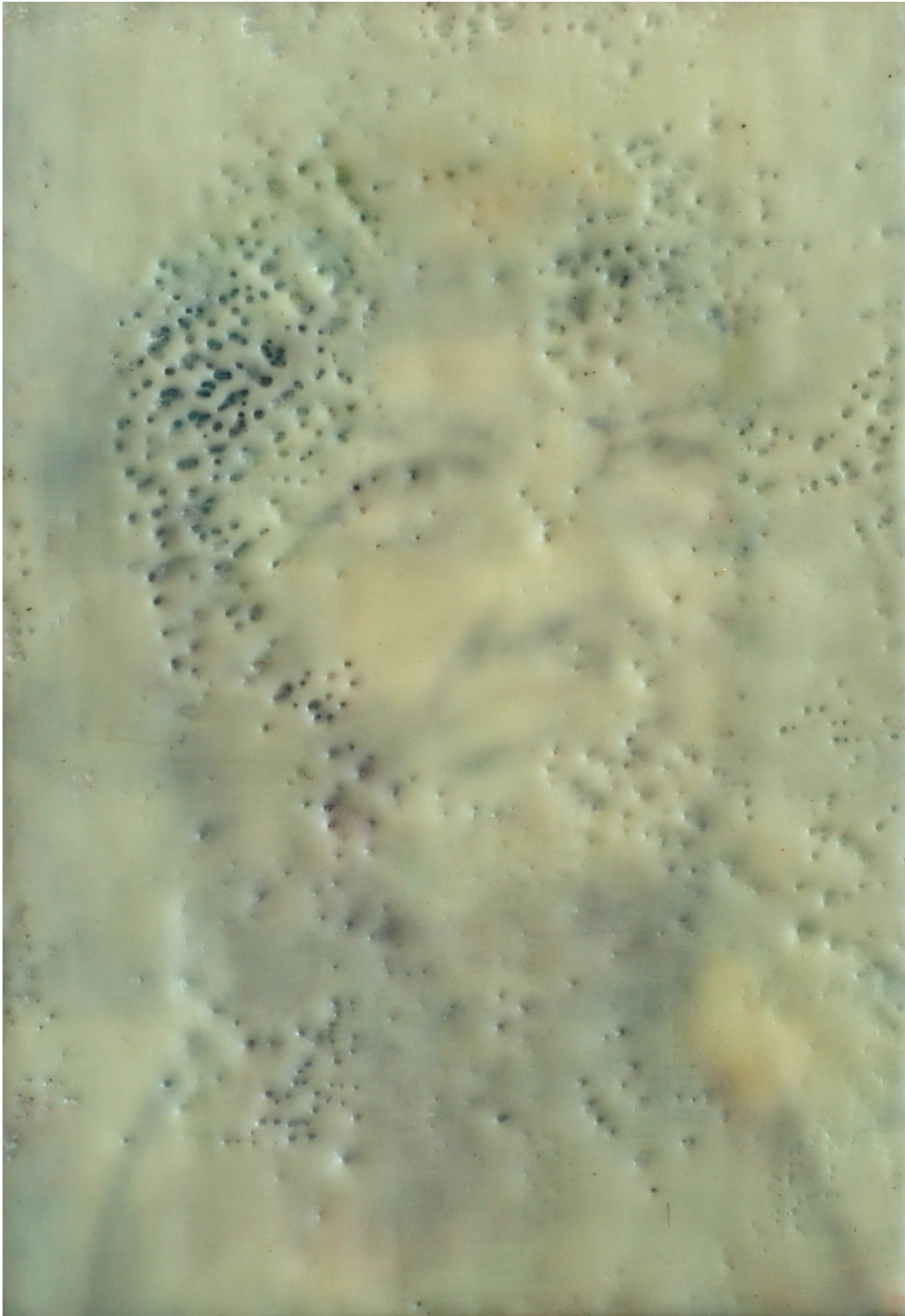
Jessica Webster, 2008. *The Fire of the Dragon being both Fanned and Extinguished*. 103 x79cm
[Oil paint on canvas]

As my emphasis on formal ambiguity and indeterminacy through stressing the materiality of the painted surface developed, the paintings became less reflective of their pictorial reference or subject matter, and more about the affective properties of the medium

constituting the painted surface. It is through these tensions between form and content that trauma may figure and through which the flashpoints may arise. I would like to stress again that my aim in articulating trauma through a transformation of the imagery I used was not towards explicitly literal trauma-driven ends. As a conceptual device, trauma as flashpoints holds values in tension. A simultaneity of effects on the surface was therefore important to achieve.

The primary mode of expression in my work is through the method of encaustic painting, which involves applying hot, pigmented wax to the canvas with brushes and palette knives. For me, wax is an intriguing medium for the often unpredictable ways in which it can be manipulated to manifest affect. Wax looks and feels like flesh. Painted in layers, it can simulate the folds and wrinkles of human skin as well as to evoke an association with the interior of the body. Under certain conditions it forms bubbles and pock marks and when melted too many times accumulates a scatological detritus. The association of wax with the human body makes it possible to imagine cutting or piercing a wax surface analogous to perforating skin.

Depending on the opacity of the pigment used, wax can also register as a transparent layer where the viewer is able to see through to the image underneath but not know how deeply the surface underneath might lie. For me this connects to Joselit's argument that flatness and depth can equate with inner and outer psychological levels respectively. Wax asserts the surface as an actual physical dimension, yet it can suggest depth through its translucency. Through its surface qualities, wax can be used to transcend normative ideas of the painted surface as either flat or illusionary and can hold these values in uncanny tension (See *Calcinatio* (2009) below).



Jessica Webster, 2009. *Calcinatio*. 22 x 31cm [Oil paint and wax on canvas] Private Collection

I have also experimented with other mediums such as oil paint, watercolour, acrylic, oil pastels and paint thickeners. Paint thinners were used to dissolve oil media so as to create a residue on the surface, a trace that is suggestive of a stain. This rubbed away effect reveals the bare canvas. Indeed, through these experiments the canvas surface itself became a feature in some paintings. The visible warp and weave of the canvas signifies in both horizontal and vertical directions, and making this an intentional feature of the surface works to confuse figure/ground distinctions (See *Siren* (2009) below). If the painted surface is symbolic of skin, as implied above, then my work has been focused on emphasizing the idea of skin as an interface. Maintaining this tension was crucial to the idea of a borderland concept.

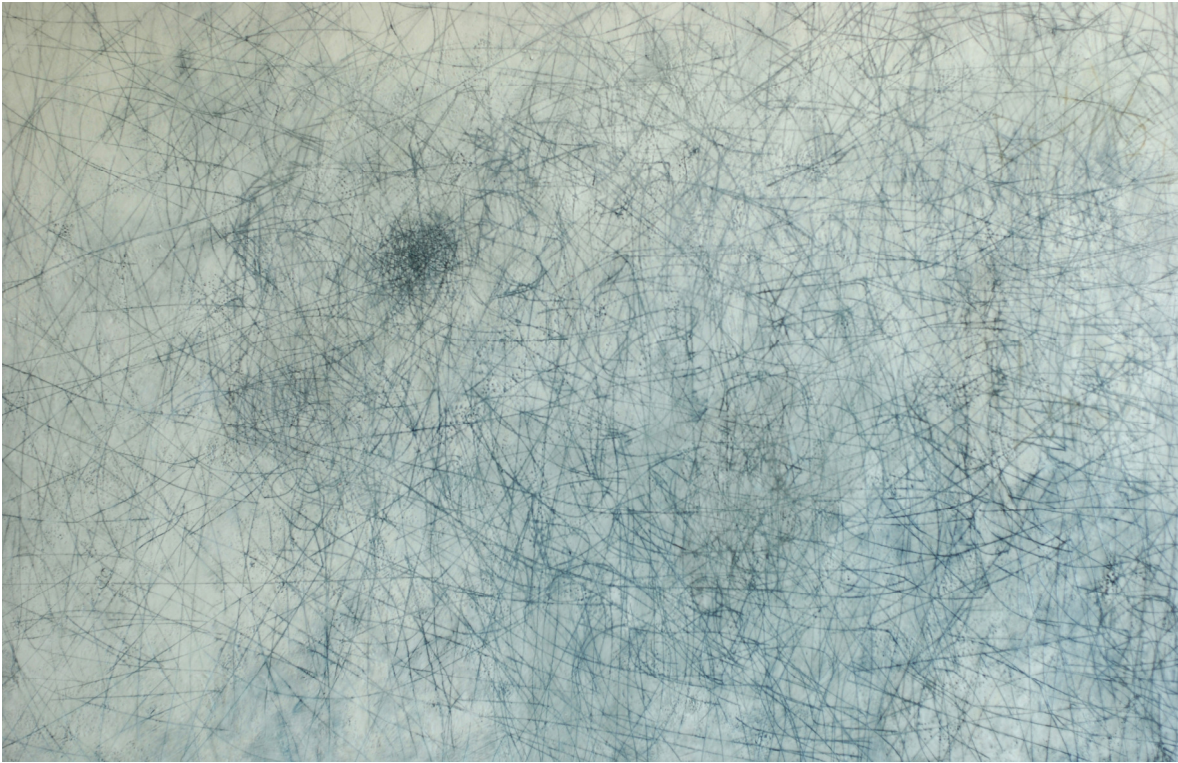


Jessica Webster, 2009. *Siren*. 43 x 38cm [Oil paint and wax on canvas] Private Collection

In my investigation of qualities of materiality and surface I developed certain aspects intensively with each adopting a specific rhetoric that gives it a particular atmosphere. I also drew from Lyotard's idea of 'bad form' but more specifically the notion of 'un-form'. As I discussed in previous chapters, Lyotard gives emphasis to 'bad form' or 'un-form' as a quality of *figure* and as I've suggested, it is also a quality of trauma as it creates another kind of tension, between form and forms 'undoing' (Rachjman, 1998:8). My objectives were to achieve a sense of form coming undone - fragmenting or dispersing - as an emphasis on the disruption of figure and ground, surface and depth.

During the working on my paintings for the degree, my working process was generally focused on two main methods for generating trauma through 'un-form', methods through which I could achieve a sense of form becoming dispersed, and in a sense reflecting indeterminacy. One was a deliberate disruption of the surface, as noted above. A technique I favoured in this regard was scratching into the wax or paint layer of the surface. I began this experiment by painting over an existing painting and scratching into this overlay in repetitive movements with knives and needles. This action resulted in exposing parts of the layer underneath, leaving thick paint residue on the surface. To me, this is very effective as an 'alteration' of the image, through implicitly destructive mark. The mark disrupts the surface and produces an excessive materiality. The scratch also makes the idea of a rupture between an inside and an outside explicit. Here, the inside and the outside of the surface are present to the work as a simultaneity of effects.

My large wax and oil paint work, *Familiar* (2009), is a painting entirely focused on the form of the scratch. I began by painting a layer of white wax across the entire surface. The scratch gave emphasis to the idea of a wound. It was therefore important that the form of the scratch lent itself to a sense of wound or rupture; a quality of scratch that would make the sense of a violent 'alteration' explicit. But as discussed in Chapter Three, Cy Twombly 'masters' the form of the scratch so that the violence or regressiveness of his mark-making is haptically sensitized, creating its peculiar affective presence. It was important to me that in a similar way, the sense of rupture was held in tension by the overall effects of the scratches; an enactment of trauma, an intimation of a violently rendered kind of performance but simultaneously an inviting optically panoramic field.



Jessica Webster, 2009. *Familiar*. 234 x 143 cm [Oil paint and wax on canvas] Private Collection

As *Familiar* developed, I became intrigued with the idea of a field as a concentration of figure/ground relationships. I see 'field' as an apt term for describing the emphasis and expansion of 'ground', as opposed to 'figure', and which works to focalize surface. I experimented with utilizing repetition in figurative ways to create different modes of field. For instance, in *Death's Head Points to the Cosmic Sphere* (2009) I repeated the image of sunglasses with grey washes of oil paint against a close value grey/green background, which ascended over the upper reaches of the picture plane. The representational content, a hooded man in sunglasses, became obscured and generated a field of shapes and translucent washes of paint. The field produced by these operations creates a tense figure and ground relationship which in turn suggests an indeterminacy of form.



Jessica Webster, 2009. *Death's Head Points to the Cosmic Sphere*. 48 x 33cm [Oil paint and wax on canvas] Private Collection

I also used repetitious figures in *The Violent Tortured in a Rain of Fire* (2009). Here the figurative qualities of people in red shirts in a green pool are manifested as abstract shapes producing a visual simultaneity through repetition and a non-hierarchical spread through and across the surface. The forms furthermore fragment and disperse making surface and depth all but indistinguishable.



Jessica Webster, 2009. *The Violent Tortured in a Rain of Fire*. 52 x 32 cm [Oil paint and wax on canvas]
Private Collection

However, I found that the capacity for generating a field is emphasized by large canvasses, where ground expands to field more literally. Stressing the formal tensions between surface and depth, and materiality and iconography, can heighten and accentuate the large surface as field. I see my painting, *Autobiography as Mandala* (2009), as holding these qualities in paramount tension, generating a field where form and content are inextricably related.



Jessica Webster, 2009. *Autobiography as Mandala*. 123 x 163cm [Oil paint and wax on canvas]
Johannesburg Art Gallery

The first field I utilized is the colour field. I flooded the surface with grey/green wax. Although the forms and the objects in the painting are clearly figured, in fact some are in relief, the colour field diffuses the iconography. The close-value of the grey/green tones work to disrupt figure and ground, generating an indeterminate dispersal of surface and depth. The texture of the wax contributes to this dispersal. The thickness of wax generates coarse and irregular areas while in others it achieves a smooth and translucent surface. These effects are not localized to the forms but are instead dispersed across the surface indiscriminately. I furthermore painted thin lines of grey and white over and across the wax and the forms that rose from underneath. While some lines served to define the objects depicted, others were layered almost arbitrarily above and beneath each other. I painted more translucent green wax over some areas and seen in conjunction, the definitive lines and the more haphazard lines seem to suggest perspective and depth while simultaneously indicating surface. Thus, multiple levels of flatness and depth are suggested by the forms in relief and the line running over and disappearing into the waxy layers. The wax itself asserts the painting's surface as a physical dimension but evokes depth through its translucent materiality. The treatment of close-value colour and line across the expanse of the surface hold materiality and iconography, surface and depth in a field of tension so that the imagery appears to melt and dissolve with flashpoints of clarity.



Detail of '*Autobiography of Mandala*' 2009

I see my painting, *Cerebus as the Entangling and Devouring Aspect of Prima Materia* (2009), as the cumulative result of my explorations into the region of trauma. For me this work epitomizes the precarious borderland space of trauma because of the way in which its representational content merges with surface in a way which simultaneously asserts flatness and depth. The flatness is emphasized through the assertive materiality of the wax and paint surface. The depth is evoked through the way in which certain parts of the painting suggest illusory shapes, albeit that they do not cohere in pictorial logic.



Jessica Webster, 2009. *Cerebus as the Devouring and Entangling Aspect of Prima Materia*. 45x45cm [Oil paint and wax on canvas] Private Collection

I describe the work in detail so as to draw attention to particular aspects that might not be clear in the reproduction. On a 45 x 45cm canvas board a strange assembly of materiality and form fills the format. Smooth hues of blue, green, and black form an illusion of depth towards the outer reaches of the picture plane. This space is interrupted by jagged black lines and deep scratches filled with red and green paint running up and centrally across the surface. White paint has been roughly formed over parts of the surface; in some areas seeming to taper off or disappear altogether while solid paint dabs and visible brushstrokes mark the surface in others.

As noted, the process involved in creating *Cerebus* functioned for me in fully realizing the conceptual operations of trauma. I found that surface as ‘ground’ was emphasized by its square format because it signifies in both horizontal and vertical directions equally; precluding much portrait or landscape-format subject-matter. I therefore began by looking at imagery that was interesting in its compositional possibilities for emphasizing the centrality of surface. I started by painting the image of a racing track at night. I painted the deep hues over the entire surface and evoked the lights of the cars by painting thin white lines across the surface, making some seem to disappear into the night-like depths in a field-like manner. I then left the painting until I found the image of an old woman’s hand which I found compelling. I painted this image over parts of the first image. In some areas I scratched the surface to give it the sense of old scarified, ruptured skin and painted in shadows where the bones and joints arose. I think this layer is important to the efficacy of the painting as a whole because my efforts were aimed at a certain realistic effect. For me the viscosity evoked by these operations hold the abstract qualities of the background and foreground in check. Later, when I came across a photograph of a small girl biting into a hamburger I turned the canvas on its side and roughly painted in the forms over the underlying layers in white paint. As a thin wash of paint, it creates a field as an ambiguous figure/ground relationship in and of itself. It furthermore half-way reveals the matter beneath. I describe this process because it was by thinking of surface, and not strictly of the imagery I was using, that my practice began to reflect the kind of tension I wanted present to my paintings.

Thus, the development of ‘*Cerebus*’ arose out of a process that was itself somewhat ruptured and disjointed in approach, driven by an awareness of surface. This is not to say that it is an ideal way of approaching painting but it brought home for me that the awareness of surface may often be the single most important factor in painting. The three different approaches I took to surface fragmented and dispersed the imagery of each opposing layer. However, what is most successful to me about the painting is that the three layers of imagery and surface do not register intense fragmentation. The layering of the images centrally across the surface creates one being - a rabbit, a fly, an unearthly being biting into a bun - a being that nevertheless continuously threatens to fragment. The indeterminacy effected through the formed patinas of the surface and their formless residues and the disjuncture between surface and depth integrates surface and subject, constituting an unfamiliar entity. This ‘other’ refuses any station of the abstract or representational, real or imaginary because the qualities of surface and form are neither ‘inside’ nor ‘outside’ of these modes of practice - they are present to the work in a singular simultaneity. I see the extraordinary outcome of this fraught tension as firmly situated within the realm of trauma.

I would like to end this description of some of my work by including a short passage from the artist’s statement I wrote for my exhibition:

In many ways, I feel that the painting process is analogous to life - life as fraught by endless negotiations of insecure passages between feeling and thought, fantasies and realities, and the clutter of relationships these dialogues ensue. In painting, as in life, one navigates through, in and around the agencies of intuition, the knowledge of past experience and the conditions of culture. The journey is punctuated with flashes of happiness, of the absurd and of trauma; revelations beyond our control compelling prevaricating perspectives – to be overwhelmed, or to draw a line in the shifting sands of being. (*I knew you in this dark* at David Krut Projects, August 2009)

My painting process has thus far been fundamental to the ultimate production of my paintings. I have found that it is indeed within the psychological and physical journey of making a painting that the psychic and emotional regions otherwise difficult to grasp, are reflected.

Conclusion

The burgeoning and manifold practices that occur in the field of contemporary painting have raised many important questions about the status of the painted surface. In modernist formalism the painted surface was valorized, with flatness purging the painting of illusionism and thus signalling the disciplinary specific purity modernism espoused. But the painted surface was also an index of expressivity, inscribed as it was, with values of authenticity, originality and universality. These values were justifiably critiqued within postmodernism, as conceits of the western male subject (Carrier, D. 1985:108). From a critical postmodernist perspective expressivity was a fallacy, a phenomenon that naturalised convention. As Hal Foster argues in his critique of the expressionist position,

To [this] position, a wide range of art is natural (what is thought more natural than freedom of expression?). But art is precisely unnatural – indeed, both art and freedom consist entirely and only of conventions (Foster, 1983: 9).

With the critique of expressivity the painted surface became less important in postmodernism. Indeed painting in general – the favoured discipline of modernism – suffered something of a demise. Semantic interpretation of artworks became the norm in the heightened discursive context of postmodernism. But such signifiers of subject, or subject-matter can not always account for a painting's affective presence. In this regard Penny Siopis has recently commented, 'In my experience over-developed attention to iconography often comes at the cost of materiality and follows too rigidly the conventions of system and theory' (Siopis, 2009: 80).

The current revival of interest in painting seems to reflect something of this need to find ways of interpreting paintings that do not rely heavily on semantics, but give more significance to the painted surface. But, by so doing, this does not mean reverting to modernism's tainted expressivity. Other ways of interpretation need to be found. My interest in this report has been to articulate such a way via the concept of trauma.

It is my view that using the concept of trauma to think about the painting as an affective means through the visible material operations that constitute the painted surface, will contribute towards avoiding modernism's essentialism and postmodernism's discursivity.

This is why Mark Seltzer's articulation of trauma as a borderland concept has been a central theme. Seltzer draws from the trope of trauma to locate the culture of relation to the subject in representation as a conceptual tension between self and other, private and public spaces (Seltzer, 1997: 4-10). As pointed out by Seltzer and in my view, this conceptual tension may best be seen through the very visceral image of the wound, the wound being, as noted earlier, the original definition of trauma. A wound is simultaneously inside and outside, surface and depth, figure and ground, materiality and iconography. And, as Jill Bennett asserts, trauma is the phenomenon of being '...neither "inside" nor "outside", it is always lived and negotiated at the intersection' (Bennett, 2005: 12).

A wound is a break in the skin, a rupture of something smooth and contained. Thinking about painting via an emblem of a wound makes it difficult to undervalue the affective power of the painted surface and its materiality. But the wound is also a powerful icon. A concept of trauma works to escape a singular emphasis on either iconography or materiality by focusing on the relationship between the two. Furthermore, the stressing of this relationship on the painted surface as manifested by operations of rupture and dislocation is crucial to the concept as trauma. An engagement with the qualities of surface which register these relationships in an assertive manner is facilitated by a concept of trauma as a *device* by which the painting generates affect.

Lastly, to re-iterate, I see a concept of trauma as a tool for investigating how the painted surface may manifest affect as a result of the conscious manipulation by the artist of painterly conventions. For instance, as I stated in my introduction, David Joselit's argument is that the psychological depth accorded to the flat surface in modernist painting maintains its role in contemporary paintings (Joselit, 1985: 293). Trauma as a concept emphasizes the relationships between flatness and depth and how, as

conventions, they may signify on the surface. In this way, trauma recognizes these conventions and schools of thought; avoiding essentialist claims without denying the cultural influence these conventions may hold on modes of viewing.

As stated, a particularly assertive material surface is therefore an essential determinant to the objective of interpreting these relationships as they manifest an affective dimension. But the assertive materiality is not an effect. It should read as a consciousness on the part of the artist of the conventions of painting. This is implied by Marlene Dumas in her statement about painting: 'For me, painting has to show its method, how it becomes what it is; [it should] move back and forth from the "illusion" to the "gesture"' (Dumas, 2008: 150). The acknowledgement of the method, or its visible construction, emphasizes the surface as the basis for a particular experience of painting. Trauma as a borderland concept theorizes the productive tension of surface as where these conventions, qualities and methods make contact.

Finally, painting in a contemporary moment offers much to think about. I have tried to draw attention to this fact in my writing on those aspects I find stimulating in contemporary painting, whether they be the theories on painting or the examples I have chosen to analyze as epitomizing new challenges. As Barry Schwabsky (2002: 008) states, 'one must always be prepared to add new aesthetic axioms' and herein lie my aims for seeing trauma as a borderland concept, in the production and reception of contemporary painting. A concept of trauma may not give insight into all forms of contemporary painting existing today. However, it does offer one route through which to understand the painting process and the inimical affect it may offer.

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