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Robert Griffiths Hodgins
and Tragicomedy

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A dissertation submitted to the Wits School of Arts, division of Fine Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Fine Arts) (by dissertation).

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Abstract

This dissertation offers the dramatic genre of tragicomedy as a critical entry point to the interpretation of Robert Hodgins' oeuvre. It examines the possible formal corresponding properties between tragicomedy, as outlined by Verna Foster, and selected paintings from Hodgins' oeuvre. These mechanisms involve the juxtaposition of conflicting impressions, such as those created by instances of the grotesque, the employment of multiple perspectives and the play-within-the-play. The paintings *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*, *Three Characters in Search of a Painter– and I know some smart-ass critic will say: 'Well, they didn't find him, did they?'* and *A Conservative Still Life* feature in this discussion. It addresses tragicomedy and Hodgins' dualist visions and their potential to be interpreted politically as oblique comments on homogenised culture. It discusses tragicomedy as an ambivalent and abrasive theatrical form and suggests that the deliberate artifice in both Hodgins and tragicomedy can be approached as a mental projection. The plot features of Renaissance and late modern tragicomedy are compared to Hodgins' employment of anonymous figures and the figures' relation to their backgrounds. The notion of late modern tragicomedy as indicative of the death of tragedy and the tragic hero is introduced. The proliferation of everyday people as central characters in late modern tragicomedy is addressed and the relevance of Hodgins' use of stereotypes and caricature considered. The dissertation examines the political climate that informed the presentation of power of pertinent creative practitioners. *A Beast Slouches* is discussed as a manifestation of absurd power with reference to Yeats, Shakespeare and Jarry. It investigates Hodgins' appropriation of Jarry's Ubu as displayed in the lithograph series, *Ubu Centenaire: Histoire d'un Farceur Criminel* and draws a comparison with Ionesco's *Macbett*. It introduces the view of tragicomedy as the employment of a comic foundation with which to approach the tragic in a post Second World War paradigm and reasons that Hodgins, likewise, formally applies a comic caricature-like visual language to approach complex or tragic themes. The works on my exhibition, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two acts* of February 2011 is discussed in relation to this body of research.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts (Fine Arts) (by dissertation) in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

_____

Nicole Lindeque

___ day of _____ 2011.

Contents

Abstract ii

Declaration iii

Acknowledgements iv

List of Illustrations vi

Introduction to Hodgins and Rationale 1

Chapter 1 7
Madhouse with a View of Tyburn and Tragicomedy
The Grotesque: Aesthetic and Effect
Multiple perspectives: Form and Effect
Play-within-the play

Chapter 2 18
Political Dimensions of Tragicomedy
An Abrasive Tradition
Deliberate Artifice in Form and Effect

Chapter 3 27
Plot Features: Renaissance and Modern
Characterisation: The Powerful and Powerless in Renaissance and Late Modern Tragicomedy
Late Modern Tragicomedy: The Death of Tragedy
Late Modern Anti-heroes and Hodgins:

Chapter 4 38
Hodgins and Absurd Power
Killing Machines: Macbeth, Ubu and Macbett

Chapter 5 49
The Comic as a Vehicle for The Tragic

Chapter 6 54
Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts

Bibliography 63

Illustrations 68

Acknowledgements

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List of Illustrations

1) Robert Hodgins, *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*, (1994), oil on canvas, 905 x 1210mm. Collection: Private Australia. Figure 1

2) Robert Hodgins, *Three Characters in Search of a Painter– and I know some smart-ass critic will say: 'Well, they didn't find him, did they?'* , (1998), oil on canvas, 910 x 122mm. Collection: Not specified. Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.102 Figure 2

3) Robert Hodgins, *A Conservative Still* Life, (1986), oil and acrylic on canvas, 1125 x 170mm Collection: Private. Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.81 Figure 3

4) Robert Hodgins, *Nude with Hat*, (2004), oil on canvas, 600 x 600mm. Collection: Private Johannesburg Figure 4

5) Robert Hodgins, *Forty Eight Chairs*, (1997/8), diptych oil on canvas, 905 x 242mm. Collection: Private Australia Figure 5

6) Robert Hodgins, *Women Waiting for Godot*, (2003/4), oil on canvas, 900 x 1200mm. Collection: Private South Africa Figure 6

7) Robert Hodgins, *Howling at the Edge of Dawn*, (1997/8), oil on canvas, 915 x 121mm. Collection: Private Johannesburg Figure 7

8) Robert Hodgins, *If You've Got it, Flash it!*, (1999), oil on canvas, 1220 x 910mm. Collection: Not specified . Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.120 Figure 8

9) Robert Hodgins, *We're Just a Couple of Swells (We Stay in the Best Hotels)*, (1997/8), oil on canvas, 910 x122mm. Collection: Not specified. Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.128-129 Figure 9

10) Robert Hodgins, *Important Men with Important Cigars*, (1997), oil on canvas, 910 x 122mm. Collection: Not specified. Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.124 Figure 10

11) Robert Hodgins, *King and Queen of Spain*, (2004), oil on canvas in heavy gilt frame, 600 x 900mm. Collection: Private Portugal Figure 11

12) Robert Hodgins, *A Cozy Coven in Suburbia*, (2000/2), oil on canvas, 91 x 122mm. Collection: Not specified. Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.89 Figure 12

13) Robert Hodgins, *Businessman on his Best Behaviour*, (1996), oil on canvas, 1220 x 91mm Collection: McKinsey Incorporated, S.A. Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.68 Figure 13

14) Robert Hodgins, *The Tyrant in his Shirt Sleeves*, (1993), oil on canvas, 915 x 1215mm. Collection: UNISA Art Galleries. Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.122 Figure 14

15) Robert Hodgins, *Mob*, (2000), oil on canvas, 910 x 910mm. Collection: University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, donated by Mrs. L.A. Givon and the artist. Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.114 Figure 15

16) Robert Hodgins, *A Beast Slouches*, (1986), acrylic/oil on canvas, 1175 x 170mm. Collection: University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.40 Figure 16

17) Robert Hodgins, *Ubu Centenaire: Histoire d'un Farceur Criminel No.7 South Africa -197? - Interrogator*, (1997), stone lithograph with screenprint colour, 260 x 300mm. Collection: The Artist. Reproduced in Doepel (1997), p.63 Figure 17

18) Robert Hodgins, *Ubu Boxing Promoter*, (2001/2) oil on canvas, 46 x61mm. Collection: Not specified. Reproduced in Fraser (2002), p.104 Figure 18

19) Robert Hodgins, *Ubu and the Art School Nude*, (1984), oil on canvas, 450 x 305mm. Collection: Michael Godby and Sandra Klopper. Reproduced in Doepel (1997), p. 51 Figure 19

20) Robert Hodgins, *Ubu and the Sad Old Men*, (1984), Tempera on pressed board, 343 x 495mm. Collection: Isador and Arlene Segal. Reproduced in Doepel (1997), p.50 Figure 20

21) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 1, 2011 Figure i

22) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 2, 2011 Figure ii

23) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 3, 2011 Figure iii

24) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 4, 2011 Figure iv

25) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 5, 2011 Figure v

26) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 6, 2011 Figure vi

27) Nicole Lindeque, *No Thanks, Fine Thanks (part 1 & 2)*, (2010), oil on canvas, 1518×1115mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure vii

28) Nicole Lindeque, *7th Floor University Corner*, (2008),oil on canvas, 1450×705mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure viii

29) Nicole Lindeque, *Family Portrait (You magazine)*, (2008), oil on canvas, 1275×825mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure ix

30) Nicole Lindeque, *Portrait*, (series)(2008), (1) oil on canvas, 445×260mm, (2)(Square grey panel), acrylic and linseed oil on canvas, 305×300mm, (3)(Black panel), oil on canvas, 754×202mm, (4) oil on Canvas, 603×202mm, (5) oil on canvas, 420×137mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure x

31) Nicole Lindeque, *Wake (part 1), (*2009), oil on canvas, 1111× 111mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure xi

32) Nicole Lindeque, *Donald Gordon*, (2008), oil on canvas, 510×805mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure xii

33) Nicole Lindeque, *Missing*, (2008), oil on canvas, 1210×865mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure xiii

34) Nicole Lindeque, *You can't learn to swim without...*, (2009), oil on canvas, 1060×740mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure xiv

35) Nicole Lindeque, *Olivedale Still life with flowers*, (2008), oil on canvas, 755×605mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure xv

36) Nicole Lindeque, *Testing*, (2011), oil on canvas, 751×385mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure xvi

37) Nicole Lindeque, *No Thanks, Fine Thanks (part 1)*, (2010), oil on canvas, 1518×1115mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure xvii

38) Nicole Lindeque, *No Thanks, Fine Thanks (part 2)*, (2010-11), oil on canvas, 1518×1115mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure xv

39) Nicole Lindeque, *First day back*, (2008), oil on canvas, 620×6250mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure xvii

40) Nicole Lindeque, *Portrait of Georgia*, (commission 2011), oil on canvas, 751×385mm. Photographer: Marius Neetling Figure xviii

41) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 6, 2011 Figure xix

42) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), watercolour on watercolour paper, 275×355mm. Figure xx

43) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), pencil, masking tape on watercolour paper, 275×355mm. Figure xxi

44) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 7, 2011 Figure xxii

45) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), ink and waterbased enamel on paper,

240×335mm. (3) Figure xxiii

46) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), ink and acrylic on watercolour paper,
240×335mm. (4) Figure xxiv

47) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), ink on watercolour paper,
240×335mm. (5) Figure xxv

48) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), acrylic and ink on paper,
240×335mm. (6) Figure xxvi

49) Nicole Lindeque,*Untitled*, (2008/9/10), pencil, masking tape and ink on paper,
275×355mm. (7) Figure xxvii

50) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), waterbased enamel on watercolour paper,
275×355mm. (8) Figure xxviii

51) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 8, 2011 Figure xxix

52) Nicole Lindeque,*Untitled*, (2008/9/10), waterbased enamel on watercolour paper,
53) 245×185mm. (9) Figure xxx

54) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 9, 2011 Figure xxxi

55) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), pencil and masking tape on watercolour paper,
275×355mm. (10) Figure xxxii

56) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 10, 2011
Figure xxxiii

57) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), watercolour and ink on watercolour paper,
225×175mm. (11) Figure xxxiv

58) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), watercolour and ink on watercolour paper, 225×175mm. (12) Figure xxxv

59) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), watercolour and ink on watercolour paper, 225×175mm. (13) Figure xxxvi

60) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), watercolour and ink on watercolour paper, 225×175mm. (14) Figure xxxvii

61) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), watercolour and ink on watercolour paper, 225×175mm.(15) Figure xxxviii

62) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), watercolour and ink on watercolour paper, 225×175mm.(16) Figure xxxix

63) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 11, 2011 Figure xl

64) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), waterbased enamel on watercolour paper, 410×310mm. (17) Figure xli

65) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), acrylic paint on watercolour paper, 225×175mm. (18) Figure xlii

66) Nicole Lindeque, *Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* exhibition view 12, 2011 Figure xliii

67) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), watercolour and ink on watercolour paper, 410×310mm.(19) Figure xliv

68) Nicole Lindeque,*Untitled*, (2008/9/10), pencil, masking tape and ink on watercolour paper, 275×355mm. (20) Figure xlv

69) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), ink on watercolour paper, 410×310mm.(21) Figure xlvi

70) Nicole Lindeque,*Untitled*, (2008/9/10), pencil on watercolour paper, 275×355mm. (22) Figure xlvii

71) Nicole Lindeque, *Untitled*, (2008/9/10), mixed media on paper, 240×335mm. (23) Figure xlviii

72) Nicole Lindeque,*Untitled*, (2008/9/10), ink on watercolour paper, 245×185mm. (24) Figure xlix

Introduction to Hodgins and Rationale

Robert Hodgins has contributed to South African art from the late 1950s through his work as a teacher and lecturer, but it was not until the late 1980s that his career as an artist took off. Hodgins retired from teaching, at age sixty-three, to begin a full-time painting career in 1983. Three years later, he was awarded the prize at Guest Artist on the Standard Bank National Festival of Arts exhibition curated by Alan Crump. This award and the accompanying opportunities inaugurated his professional career and ensured national exposure for his work as the exhibition toured around South Africa. Since then, Hodgins' painting practice has been met with enthusiasm and interpreted as “rampant play” (Geers 2002:68) “a process of memory” (Powell 1986:03) or a visual “cross-current” (Atkinson 2002:13). He has been revered by critics, who describe him as “prolific”, like a “mad botanist”(Atkinson 2002:13), the “old man mad about painting”(Godby 2002:70) and “the greatest painter in the history of South African art” (Geers 2002:68). What such statements or opinions always reiterate, is that Hodgins' practice is perceived to arise from an individual with a remarkable aptitude and understanding of paint and a keen enjoyment of the medium which translates into his practice in printmaking and ceramic work as well.

Hodgins' production is founded on his relationship with the material. The artist leaves the material to direct and guide the image. Starting off with little pre-planning or pre-thought, he allows a smear of paint, an interesting visual tension or literary phrase to evolve and develop into a process of action and selection, doing and undoing. The image thus emerges from the paint in an fluid, uninhibited manner, which then, on reflection, can be directed, edited or continued. Where spontaneous gestures or 'mistakes' are made they are examined and considered before a decision is made to retain or delete them. Loose brush marks or crude renderings are contrasted by shrill lines or meticulous detailing - thick paint by delicate glazing. (Powell 1996:04)

The artist's experimental approach extends to his selection of materials as well. He paints using multi-media, oil paint, industrial acrylics (house paint), artist’s acrylics, enamel paints, varnishes and linseed oil. He has, in his early career, painted on board, but later began to restrict his practice to stretched linen canvas, which he places upright or flat on a table. As is evident from his experimentation with materials, Hodgins' approach to image-making is open and playful, which manifests in the formal vitality of the final products. His colour selection is vibrant. The surfaces and brush marks are varied. His juxtaposition of literary reference and image is at times piercing, at others poetic. His figures and objects appear animated through their spontaneous description and

are essentially comically stylised as rounded, fat, sometimes block-like shapes.

The amount of playful experimentation involved in the production and made visible in Hodgins' work entails that the 'meaning' of his output becomes elusive or ambiguous. In a single image, Hodgins can combine allusions from literature, pulp fiction, art history, current affairs or popular culture. The disparity created by the inclusivity of his referential decisions echoes the fragmentation in the everyday experience of reality. Hence Powell employs the analogy of memory, or "the process of memory", as an entry point to the work's interpretation, as the analogy can accommodate disparities in time, logic and connotation.

The aim of this dissertation is similar to that of Powell in that it attempts to establish a framework for the interpretation of Hodgins' painting based on analogy, in an approach that is perhaps not conclusive, but more adept at accounting for and accommodating the incongruous nature of his production. Among the many possible approaches to the interpretation of the work, the genre of tragicomedy, to which references can be found in Hodgins, offers itself as an important avenue for further exploration. Thus the writing proceeds to explicate selected paintings from the artist's oeuvre using the dramatic genre of tragicomedy as a critical framework. The central deviation between this approach and that of Powell's is that Powell's analogy of memory serves to point to the postmodernist tendencies that are visible in Hodgins' images. By contrast, the writers with which Hodgins will be most closely compared in this dissertation are termed late modernist or proto-postmodernists as their approaches display both modernist and postmodernist impulses. Samuel Beckett, for instance, is such an example. By inference then, this dissertation suggests that Hodgins' work broadly belongs to the same paradigm.

To explain Beckett's position within this frame, Steve Connor draws a comparison between the use of language in Joyce and in Beckett to illustrate the difference between modernist and postmodernist tendencies. Connor states that Joyce's modernist approach attempted to reach the ultimate in words' ability to mean something or the "maxima allusive inclusiveness" and thus his work tends towards "omniscience and omnipotence". By contrast, Beckett's "minimalism" or his work's reluctance to promote meaning inclines towards the manifestation of "ignorance and impotence" and can therefore be considered postmodernist as it embodies a rejection of former modernist ideals (Connor 2004:70). Connor explains:

> In one sense, Beckett's refusal of the arts of success might be said to mark the

> inauguration of postmodernism, in that it involves a refusal of modernist potency. … In another sense, the austerity of Beckett's work, especially his later work, such as *Company* and *Ill Seen Ill Said*, seemed like the last reassertion of a modernist impulse to master the world in the word, though not by bulimic absorption of reality, but rather by anorexic abstention from it. The work will be defined and maintain its integrity by an ascesis rather than an excess. Beckett's work can be said to be postmodernist in its powerful remission of the power of the artist, and its suspicion of the idea of the integrity of the work, but modernist in its continuing sense of the fragile, residual vocation of the condition of "being an artist," even if one is condemned to failure.(Connor 2004:70)

As Connor suggests, as opposed to authors such as Joyce, Beckett approaches writing with a scepticism towards the modernist notion of the integrity of the work and the power or importance of the artist/author an attitude that can be considered postmodernist. However, the seriousness with which he communicates this doubt towards concepts such as integrity, meaningfulness and originality serves to maintain the importance of such distress and therefore acts to reconfirm the modernist notion of the unique artist.

Hodgins' work, like that of Beckett, exhibits scepticism towards modernist values by its appropriation of characters such as Ubu or Hogarth's Rake, its emphasis on literature, its narrative quality and the integration of popular imagery, all characteristics identified by Powell as postmodern. However, Hodgins has crafted his own visual terminology instead of following the postmodernist propensity for the appropriation of existing painting styles or forming compositions of found imagery in their original visual language. Therefore the modernist impetus to assert an unique or original identity and vision prevails. Yet, like Beckett, Hodgins distrusts the power of the artist to make meaning beyond the aesthetic, to inspire social change or encourage new directions in artistic appreciation. The work tends to constantly undermine any meaning that might be extracted from it and as such presents the viewer with a visual puzzle, the significance of which is always elusive. Thus, similar to that of Beckett, Hodgins' work displays modernist agency in a state of crisis or at the point where the post-modern is being inaugurated.

The genre of tragicomedy, however, exists independently of an easy division into periods, as a category in theatrical form and effect with roots in texts from much before the twentieth century. This partially motivates the interdisciplinary shift that will be made in this dissertation in expounding relations between Hodgins' work and elements of the theatrical. Employing the dramatic genre of tragicomedy to understand Hodgins' production allows this examination to elaborate on the aesthetic resemblances between Hodgins and the writers he often references, such

as Shakespeare, Jarry, Yeats, Eliot, Pirandello and Beckett. It similarly provides a means to account for the *effect* of these literary intertexts and popular imagery by its emphasis on dramaturgy. It also facilitates a study of the narrative progression employed by the artist and enables an engagement with Hodgins' portraits as fictitious characters in invented worlds. All three of these additional modes incline towards a fuller qualitative enquiry and paradigmatic analysis of this particular artist than is perhaps encompassed by an individual visual art theory. In this way this examination will supplement existing critical analyses, predominantly those produced by Ivor Powell.

The discussion begins with an examination of the formal corresponding properties between tragicomedy and Hodgins' painting and then moves towards an interpretation of the content. The first section will outline Foster's definition of 'tragicomedy' and introduce her concepts of the 'tragic' and 'comic' as modes of engagement and detachment. It will further discuss the devices employed to combine these effects and establish the particular ambiguity of the 'tragicomic' to which Foster refers as “double vision”. The theory on these mechanisms has been developed by dramatists such as Chekhov, Pirandello, Dürrenmatt and Ionesco. These mechanisms include the juxtaposition of conflicting impressions, such as those created by instances of the grotesque, the use of multiple perspectives in a single play and, finally, the play-within-the-play.

Foster's account of the tragicomedy is unique in that it attempts to identify and engage with the theatrical devices through which the tragicomic tone is communicated to an audience. Her emphasis on dramaturgy and the mechanisms of tragicomedy helps this study to bridge the gap between the fields of theatre and the visual arts, whereas other texts focus solely on tragicomedy's historical progression and the shared points of departure between playwrights. The dramatic techniques will be compared to corresponding artistic mechanisms, primarily those displayed by the painting *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn.* Hodgins' *Three Characters In Search of a Painter* and *A Conservative Still Life* will also feature in this discussion as supplementary examples.

The second part of this dissertation examines tragicomedy as a dramatic expression intent on plotting the relationship between characters and their worlds. It analyses the paradigmatic shift between the Renaissance and modern tragicomedy and investigates Hodgins' possible position within this historical framework. The section first examines the difference between the types of plot structures and characters that are representative of the two periods and compares these to Hodgins' treatment of narrative space and presentation of characters in *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*. The following section of the dissertation considers how the mode of tragicomic dualism affects

ambivalence towards the presented characters in modern plays. It also discusses Hodgins' affinity to ambiguous or dualist characters as presented in the example of *A Beast Slouches* and in his numerous renditions of Alfred Jarry's Ubu. It similarly considers the modern conception of tragicomedy as indicative of 'the death of tragedy' and how the comic has come to be perceived as a vehicle for the tragic in modern theatre. The move from the comic to the tragic is compared to Hodgins' fundamental stylistic approach: caricature-like rendering executed with material immediacy.

Before the discussion can commence, it is necessary to note that the modern playwrights who form part of this discussion such as Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Albee and Stoppard have all, in one way or another, been associated with the Theatre of the Absurd as defined by Martin Esslin. The Theatre of the Absurd, however, is not so much a dramatic movement or genre as it is a collection of traits and theatrical conventions which the theatre critic found to be similar in the work of a group of playwrights from the late 1940s to 1960. Esslin attributes the term "Absurd" to the work of these playwrights as he views them as a visual manifestation of Absurdism, an existential philosophy proposed by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and expressed in his fictional work such as *The Outsider*.

Born out of the European intellectual despair of the thirties, Absurdist philosophy retreats from the pursuit of conviction and embraces metaphysical doubt. Camus addresses the post Second World War condition, disillusioned by dreams of progress through rationalism, and offers a perspective on life that is devoid of meaning in which even the pursuit of metaphysical certainty is foolish. As Camus explains: "At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." (Camus 1975:13) It is this absurd condition of existence, where all action is essentially useless, hopeless and meaningless, which the Theatre of the Absurd is said to explore, Esslin states:

> The Theatre of the Absurd (…) can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our time. The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. (Esslin 1968: 23)

According to Dutton, the association of these playwrights with European existential philosophy endows their work with an intellectual heaviness that can obscure the obvious comedic impulses of

their plays. J.L Styan similarly states that the Theatre of the Absurd, as a blanket term is not “always appropriate to the forms of theatrical hysteria associated with it.” (Styan 1962:217) Although the term 'the Theatre of the Absurd' proved an effective promotional tool for British theatre in the sixties, the term did little to promote existing genre study into these plays. Likewise, the placement of American writers such as Edward Albee or even the British playwright Tom Stoppard into a European paradigm is somewhat forced and confuses the traditions and terms of reference from which these playwrights depart. Therefore the genre critics mentioned above, refer to 'modern tragicomedy' instead of the Theatre of the Absurd in their discussions, as this term allows these plays to be more open to analysis in terms of existing and established dramatic forms and themes. To avoid encountering similar problems to those mentioned by the theorists, this dissertation has refrained from associating Hodgins' production directly with the Theatre of the Absurd because of this type of theatre's steadfast philosophical implications. However, any tragicomedy, as a cultural product, is subject to paradigmatic analysis contingent on the playwright and the era from which the plays depart and as all of the plays referred to in this text as 'modern tragicomedies' were produced during the late 1940s to early 1960s they collectively stand as a document of a particular milieu influenced by the then recent memory of World Wars, the Great Depression, the emerging civil rights movements and political assassinations. As such, 'Absurdism', as a position of disillusionment, disenchantment and suspicion, permeates the discussion of modern tragicomedy and Hodgins as a thematic impulse, but should not be misread as a philosophic declaration. Neither Hodgins nor most of the writers mentioned under this rubric, with the exception of Ionesco, have identified themselves as 'absurdists'.

Chapter 1

Madhouse with a View of Tyburn and Tragicomedy

Writing on tragicomedy, Foster reflects that finding a definition for the genre can be likened to "the proverbial blind philosopher attempting to identify an elephant. The individual who gets hold of its trunk thinks it is a snake, he who grasps its tail supposes it a rope, while she who clasps one of its legs believes it to be a tree." (Foster 2004:01) She goes on to suggest that the reason for the difficulty in explaining the genre lies in the multitude of different applications of the term throughout history "since Plautus first coined the term as a joke in his *Amphitryon*" (Foster 2004:01), but also in the various modes that tragicomedy can assume, e.g. tragic and comic, romantic, pastoral, satiric or melodramatic. Richard Dutton similarly expresses his apprehension towards the genre by asserting that "[i]t is a term that has been expropriated by individuals for their own purposes, often without reference to historical precedents." (Dutton 1986:9) According to Dutton, playwrights such as Gaurini and Fletcher in the Renaissance, and Brecht, Artaud and Pirandello in the modern era have all asserted that they were writing 'tragicomedies', but "it is far from obvious that there is any common thread running through these claims or that their definitions have common points of departure" (Dutton 1986:9). However, the employment of the term by modern playwrights, such as Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, which he termed ' a tragicomedy in two acts', has prompted the aforementioned critics, as well as David Hirst, Eric Bentley, Karl Guthke and Ruby Cohn, to investigate and re-examine the nature of these plays and establish family resemblances within the genre between instances from the Renaissance and late modern times.

In her general description of tragicomedy Foster suggests that a tragicomic play must be able "to offer a more comprehensive and complex understanding of human experience than either tragedy or comedy and to evoke in its audience a more complicated response, pleasurably tragic, painfully comic, to that experience" (Foster 2004:01). In Dutton's view, tragicomedy "aims not just to mix tragedy and comedy but to create a distinct middle mode, the parts of which are artfully subsumed to create a unified whole which will give an audience a unique experience." (Dutton 1986:21) Hence, the overall characteristic of tragicomedy is that it contains both tragedy and comedy, but that this combination or conflation of emotional states results in a more complex emotional register in the presentation and reception of the play. In so doing, the tragicomedy can represent the nature of human existence in a more complex way than is possible in purer forms of either tragedy or comedy. Thus, if a play were to contain elements of tragedy and comedy, but these properties did

not affect or modulate one another, but remained locally contained, the play would not be a tragicomedy[1]. Tragicomedy is not only an ambiguous genre in that it combines both the tragic and the comic, but embodies these qualities in such a way as to communicate a disjucture between the two forms, for instance, the "painfully comic" or "pleasurably tragic". By contrast, plays that explore an emotive middle ground, that employ both comic and tragic mechanisms, but, unlike tragicomedy, are never comic nor tragic are either designated: sentimental comedies or *comédie larmoyante* in France, bourgeois tragedy of the eighteenth century, the serious drama or *drame* (theoretically developed by Diderot), the Romantic drama or melodrama of the nineteenth century. (Foster 2004:111) Foster concludes: "To generalise, then. Tragicomedy, Renaissance and modern, evokes mixed tragic and comic responses in its audience in a way that is both stimulating and provocative". (Foster 2004:14)

Foster's account of what elements constitutes the tragic and comic in tragicomedy is derived from the measure of engagement and detachment in the audience. She suggests that the tragic causes feelings of empathy and involvement in the viewer, whereas the comic is used as a means to create or maintain distance between the audience and the action or characters. As such, her interpretation of these phenomena appeals to the notion of the "model audience" (Foster 2004:04-5), a theoretical concept derived from reception studies in literature which is used to study the *implied* and *ideal* viewer of a specific performance. It is an *implied* audience, as it can be traced and constructed through the writing and context of a specific text and it is *ideal*, as the model audience is envisaged to be capable of the greatest conceivable understanding of the performance. Furthermore, the model audience is assumed to be aware of the various interpretations of the text throughout history, as well as the cultural contingency of their own interpretation.

Assuming the position of the model audience, Foster loosely characterises tragic effect as an "intense emotional involvement", where the audience is painfully alert to the ironic ruptures between "what is and what might have been". Tragedy is also defined as the experience of emotions such as "Aristotelian pity and fear, the Renaissance awe and astonishment, [and] the more modern sense of horror and despair" (Foster 2004:14). By contrast, when she refers to comedic effects on the audience, she implies "laughter, that is both critical and sympathetic", as well as "a wry appreciation of incongruity" and "some degree of detachment". (Foster 2004:14) Foster points out

1 As Foster posits: "When the grotesque or the satiric is incorporated into tragicomedy, it tends to be local, contributing to the emotional complexity of the play, but by no means determining its genre or accounting for its total effect. (Foster 2004:15)

that the measure of disengagement she refers to also applies to the audience's cognition of their own responses while they recognise the dramatic techniques by which their reactions were elicited.

At first glance the painting, *Madhouse with a view of Tyburn* (1994) (fig.1), confronts the viewer with warm tones of red, yellow and orange that suggest heat or fire. The paint is applied expressively, perhaps even crudely, with visible brush marks and introduces the image as a potential imaginary or metaphoric space. On closer inspection, the depiction's subjective modality is confirmed as the composition is made up of five fragmentary images that act as part of the foreground, middle ground and background and describe gallows, half-naked men, a telephone suspended from the sky, three cell doors and a floating head. The nature of the space is ambiguous, with the one half of the image depicting the interior of a building and the other what is outside. In a similar vein, it is neither day nor night. The foreground figures are half-dressed, one semi-infantile, and another part-figure part-ground.

The chronology of or relationship between events in the narrative of the painting is not obvious. The images in the background could either represent what has occurred, what has resulted in the figures in the foreground, or the entire image can be read as one single instance of time, represented by different locations or from multiple viewpoints. Nevertheless, the employment of a composite format in the image signals a narrative mode. This format presents the most general analogy that can be drawn between Hodgins' work and theatre or tragicomedy in that both employ narrative devices to communicate the passage of time and in so doing address 'experience'. The nature of this experience, however, is more difficult to define.

Hodgins' image contains a fair amount of "ironic ruptures", between day and night, interior and exterior, history and the present, distortion and form and the clothed and the naked. To gain a greater understanding of the effects of these disjunctures on the viewer and the resulting paradigmatic implications, the writing will first investigate the theatrical devices with which the simultaneous modes of engagement and detachment in tragicomedy are thought to be achieved, as outlined by Foster, and compare these to visual devices presented by the painting. Once a formal relation between Hodgins' painting and tragicomedy is established, a broader paradigmatic comparison will commence.

The dramatic means that Foster describes, by which the forms of engagement and detachment are achieved, involve the *juxtapositioning of opposing qualities* such as the 'grotesque and the sublime'

and the use of metatheatrical devices, for instance, the *play within a play* or the employment of *different perspectives within a single play*.

The Grotesque: Aesthetic and Effect

According to Foster, in both Renaissance and modern tragicomedies the grotesque appears as a combination of the repulsive and ridiculous and can pertain to the nature of events in the narrative or to characters themselves. Victor Hugo describes the manifestation of the grotesque in Cartesian terms: as a demonstration of the duality of man between body and mind or the physical and spiritual. He suggests that the grotesque pertains to the body's abject presentation: the physically defective or ugly. Hugo goes on to posit that the dramatic grotesque is an illustration of the "human beast" which is in constant opposition to the sublime or the soul "purified by Christian morality" (Hugo 1965:358). Bernard Mc Elroy echoes Hugo's proposition that the grotesque pertains to the physical or bodily realm of existence, but does not incorporate his religious analogy[2]. To Mc Elroy: "The source of the grotesque in art and literature is man's capacity for finding a unique and powerful fascination in the monstrous" (Mc Elroy 1989:01). He further posits: "As an aesthetic category, the grotesque is physical, predominantly visual" (Mc Elroy 1989:06).

Hugo's conception of the conflict between the grotesque and sublime in human nature is personified by certain tragicomic characters. Shakespeare's Leontes in *A Winter's Tale*, for instance, displays instances of brutish jealousy and also times of overwhelming spiritual distress. Likewise, Beckett's Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* has troubles with his prostate, which acts to heighten the dramatic impact of his fleeting moments of reflection on the tragic nature of his existence. The employment of instances of grotesque action or displays in tragicomedy moves to distance the audience from the content by allowing a moment of reprieve from dramatic tension or narrative suspense and acts therefore to control the measure of engagement and detachment in the audience. Thus, this disruption can potentially be experienced as comic or can alternatively also serve to the deepen the emotional intensity as it acts in juxtaposition to the more serious or tragic content.

In *The Grotesque: The Critical Idiom*, Philip Thompson echoes Hugo's conception of the 'Human beast' in his analysis of the potential relationship between caricature and the grotesque. He posits that caricature is the exaggeration of features to the point that they become laughably ludicrous.

2 Mc Elroy specifically adresses the grotesque in literature and in visual arts, following from theorists such as Wolfgang Kayser, Mikhail Bakhtin and John Ruskin. Hugo's conception of the grotesque is aimed at explicating the dramatic grotesque.

However, if this exaggeration is taken further and the caricature starts to approach the monstrous, the image becomes grotesque as “the grotesque has a strong affinity with the *physically abnormal*.” (Thompson 1972:9).

The crude execution of the forms displayed by the painting *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn* approaches the grotesque. In the background, lighter hues of flat colour are applied over a dark base in a rough, almost frantic manner, suggestive of psychological crises or anxiety that acts on a visceral level. The image is described in the language of caricature in that the objects are reduced, stylised and 'coloured in'. For the most part, the subjects presented remain quite two-dimensional, reminiscent of amateur handling. Areas on the door handles, the centre stairs, the receiver and the figures display tonal modelling, but these instances of three-dimensionality act only to off-set the overall flatness of the image. The rough handling of the subjects results in distorted illustrations and alludes to figurative deformation or malformation in the subjects. The figure in the foreground right, for instance, becomes almost amorphous due to the lack of definition in its features and the rounded shape of its body. The subject appears infantile, or underdeveloped. The grotesque is therefore achieved through crude, visceral rendering and the figurative distortion that results from exaggerated caricature.

Akin perhaps to the condition of conflict between the carnal and spiritual in human nature in tragicomedy is the struggle between human primitive nature and civilised conduct that is seen in the figures of *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*. In the case of these figures, however, it is not the grotesque that disrupts the content of the image as posited by Hugo, but the instances of social order that disrupt the dominant grotesque confusion. For instance, the bits of clothing on the figure serve to highlight the subject's fleshy nudity. The body of the figure, although distorted, would not necessarily evoke the grotesque if not for the bow-tie around its neck and medallions stuck to its chest. Similarly, the babe-like associations partly result from the opposition to the connotations of these particular items of clothing on the figure. As the binary to the formal and military associations of the bow-tie and medallions the subject's natural, civilian or innocent nature becomes more discernible. Therefore, analogous to Hugo's conception of the grotesque in tragicomedy, the foreground figures simultaneously embody the 'savage' as grotesque and the 'civilised' as sublime.

Ivor Powell, with reference to Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, describes this image as exemplifying the socially constructed nature of homogenised culture through the exploration of the binary relative states of order and chaos, madness and civilization. He posits that each instance of

disjuncture represents a function that is being denied or a norm that is being interrogated. The suspended telephone, for instance, does not connect to a greater social grid and as such, instead of representing human inter-connectedness, highlights isolation as a symptom of the human condition. Concurrently, the nude figure in the background undermines the function of the gallows. Instead of implementing it as an instrument of execution, the figure stares out towards the viewer as it balances on the diagonal beam, employing it as a jungle gym or look-out point. The function of the gallows then, as with the telephone and clothing, is underscored through the denial of its purpose. (Powell 1996:08) Powell thus suggests that the work exposes the limitations to categoric thinking about reality in homogenised culture. The representation therefore has a political dimension as it problematises these binary states.

Multiple perspectives: Form and Effect

The disjuncture created by the denial of the function of the content in the image causes the viewer's perception to oscillate between what is and what should be, in this instance, what the gallows are being used for in the context of the painting and what its 'real' function is or should be. According to Foster, this dual perception is a hallmark of tragicomedy and what she refers to as “double vision”. (Foster 2004:26) Similar to the effect produced by juxtaposing opposing qualities such as the sublime and the grotesque, this dual view can also result from the type of characters that are presented or the perception of events. As mentioned earlier, tragicomic characters often display dualistic personalities by embodying instances of the grotesque, which modulate the audience's response between empathy and indifference towards them. Foster suggests that in order to establish duality in the audience's perception of events, tragicomic dramatists employ the technique of multiple perspectives on the content or construct a play-within-a-play. To explain the effect of multiple perspectives in a single play, Foster refers to its use in medieval tragicomedy where the contingent, historical view of the characters would be framed by the eternal perspective attributed to God. Thus this technique constitutes another way in which to modulate an audience's emotional distance towards the content. As Foster, using the example of the Corpus Christi play, reiterates:

> ...the double vision characteristic of tragicomedy is provided by the overlapping of the historical perspective of the characters and the eternal perspective of God and of the audience's own knowledge of how events work out (...) – that produce the fusion of potentially tragic (historical) and comic (eternal) perspectives. This fusion of perspectives modulates the audience's response between the tragic and comic poles of engagement and detachment. (Foster 2004:3)

Foster thus posits that, when combined, the historically contingent perspectives make it easier for an audience to engage with the content or believe in the presented reality and therefore experience the events depicted as tragic, whereas, by contrast, a metaphysical perspective allows the audience to emotionally distance themselves from the seriousness of the content and thus have the experience of comedy.

Madhouse with a View of Tyburn creates a double perspective arising from the tension between the representation and the title. The stylised, caricatured language of the image lends a subjective or imaginary dimension to the subject matter. By contrast the title, *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*, relates this image to a particular historical context, thus signalling parallel themes in the content between the evocation of private, subjective experience and the reference to an historical institution. Hodgins explains:

> The point of the madhouse... is it's not a psychiatric ward and it's not a lunatic asylum and it's not a home for the mentally unstable. The mad house for me is a purely 18th and 19th century thing...Bedlam, which has the horror about it that people went there to be amused, they found the inmates funny. Now that seems to me quite different from any other word that describes people who are mentally unstable, unable to cope.
> To deliberately pull it into modernity, say in the '*Madhouse with a view of Tyburn*' – which is the 18th century place where people were hanged...” (Powell 1996:07)

The title, *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*, therefore, hints at an explanation for the nature of the content by placing this within the context of the 18th Century, during the time of executions at Tyburn. Hodgins combines the image of Tyburn with that of the madhouse, although there is in fact no evidence that an asylum existed from which Tyburn was visible. Hodgins' inclusion of this contextual landmark endows the work with specific historical connotations. As Hodgins comments, the term 'madhouse' does not have the medicinal associations that have subsequently been developed around homes or institutions for the mentally ill. The word 'mad' is similar to 'demented' or 'crazy'. It is deliberately crass and offensive to a modern viewer. These words, unlike 'mental illness' or 'psychological instability', do not denote disease or defect, but describe these conditions as qualities of an individual. As Max Byrd in *Visit to Bedlam: Madness and Literature in the Eighteenth Century* explains:

> The degradation of confinement was not limited to the degradation of poverty. Caged, chained, beaten – the madman of the Augustan Age was brutalized in fact: regarded as an animal, he was treated exactly like one. The madman's supposed powers to endure the coldest weather without clothing or shelter were proof of his inhumanity... (Byrd, M. 1974:45)

In retrospect, the type of terminology suggests that these homes were not places where people were helped to recover or learn to maintain their mental health, but buildings where the 'mad' could be kept and viewed. As Byrd further posits: “The cells of Bedlam were in reality the cells of a human zoo. The animality of madness cannot be too much emphasized. Medical theory in Augustan England considered most kinds of mental illness incurable (and inexplicable) – hysteria seemed the only exception” (Byrd 1974:45).

The historically specific contextual frame that the title provides shifts the viewer's perception of the content. Instances of incongruity that, without this reference, might have seemed humorously macabre appear disturbing as the reality of the history of Bedlam or Tyburn is envoked. Similarly, the crude, spontaneous caricature which appears as a comic celebration of the bizarre, is tempered by the insinuation of cruel voyeuristic amusement. Therefore the contingent account of human experience provided by the title of *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn* lends the content a tragic air. The image, on the other hand, as a subjective perception - an imaginary, caricature-like reality - is executed in an essentially comedic vernacular. Thus the work combines tragic and comedic points of view and fuses oppositional modes of engagement.

The concept of the 18th century madhouse describes a marginal space in society. It is neither a mental hospital nor a zoo. It is a space where social order breaks down as horror and cruelty become conflated with voyeuristic amusement. It is a metaphoric limbo where individuals are made to suffer as they wait to be released, recover or die. The in-between or limbo quality of the content and form of this image encapsulates the fluid spirit of tragicomedy. As Dutton states; “throughout a play, situations can be *simultaneously* comic and tragic, ambivalent in their implications, disconcerting precisely because it is unclear how either we or the characters are really supposed to react to them.” (Dutton 1986:11)

Play-within-the play

The dualist vision created by the disjuncture in perspective by the image and title of *Madhouse with a view of Tyburn* is also created in the English Renaissance example of Robert Greene's play, *Scottish History of James IV* (c.1590). Contrary to what its title suggests, Greene's play is not a historical re-enactment of the Scottish court of 1520, but involves a satiric, pseudo-historic account of the endeavours of the monarchy in 1520, which parallels or parodies the rulership of the Scottish court of 1590 in certain ways. (Foster 2004:43) The result of this conflation of time periods or

perspectives on reality has very much the same effect as seen in *Madhouse with a view of Tyburn.* The historically specific context is combined with the subjective or imaginary interpretation to produce a tragicomedic dualist vision and maintain the particular middle-mood between engagement and detachment with which the genre is associated.

However, in this example, Foster suggests that Greene employs another distancing technique to modulate the audience's perception of the content, the *play-within-the-play*. Traditionally, the play-within-the-play involves the characters performing a play within the story. According to Foster, in Greene's example this method is produced by narrator characters that introduce and comment on the events in the play, the Scottish lord Bohan and Oberon, King of Faeries. The two narrator characters thus become the surrogate authors and audience of the play, thereby further framing the content or distancing the viewer from the action of the story. This also occurs in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where Vladimir and Estragon's occasional commentary on their activities, in comments such as "This is awful!" (41) or "That wasn't such a bad little canter" (42) serve to induce the play-within-the-play[3](Foster 2004:44 & 166). The comments by Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* cause the audience to become aware of their perception of the piece, their mental assessments and emotional states and thus take a comedic form. In *Waiting for Godot* the experience of waiting is the primary concern or premise of the play and therefore the action of the piece is particularly uneventful or onerous. Esslin elaborates: "*Waiting for Godot* does not tell a story; it explores a static situation." (Esslin 1968:48-67) Vladimir and Estragon's self-critical comments function to disrupt the discouraging experience of waiting by objectifying it.

The possible visual corollary in Hodgins to the theatrical device of the-play-within-the-play is the mechanism of the-frame-within-the-frame. As the-play-within-the-play can be achieved by the remarks of surrogate audience and author characters in tragicomedy, so too can the-frame-within-a-frame be accomplished by the use of commentary titles in Hodgins. One such example is the painting, *Three Characters in Search of a Painter – and I know some smart-ass critic will say: 'Well, they didn't find him, did they?'* (1998) (fig. 2). In this example, the commentary title or frame-within-a-frame acts to solicit a response from the audience or promote engagement rather than to

3 In Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Time features as the narrator character and serves to initiate the distancing device of the-play-within-the-play, but also repeatedly refers to the story as an "old tale" (5.2.28, 61; 5.3.117). This reference, likewise, functions to distance the audience from the content by placing it in the past, in an 'other', more inscrutable time. (Foster 2004:46) Hodgins' indication of another time in the title, *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*, does result in the content becoming further removed. However, this reference is to a specific documented time period in history does not afford the work the same 'mythic' or mysterious properties that the citation "an 'old tale'" in *The Winter's Tale* does.

distance the viewer from the content as seen in the previous examples.

The contents of the painting involve two partially drawn heads and an upper-body in the foreground, framed by a stage curtain and a bottom red panel of colour in the background. The image is executed in flat areas of colour, with little descriptive detail or variation in surface treatment or textures. The lack of definition in the painting signals that it was abandoned before its completion. Thus 'abandonment' becomes one of the themes of the work, which is echoed in the reference to Pirandello's tragicomedy, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

The Pirandello tragicomedy involves six characters who go to the theatre to find their creator/ author in the hope that he would give their existence direction and thus purpose. However, they arrive to find that the author, 'Pirandello', is not there and as a result one of the characters, Father, assumes his role. Yet, he can only supply the Actors with scenes from their family's past to perform as he was born a character and does not have the imaginative qualities of an actual person. The character's adoption of the role of the author serves to initiate the play-within-the-play and in so doing highlight the absence of the authorial presence and the character's inability to deal with this dilemma. Similar to the Pirandello tragicomedy, the characters in the painting of Hodgins are in no position to address their lack of definition or incomplete state. Thus, by inference, Hodgins' *Three Characters* can be interpreted accordingly, as an expression of the human condition as one of 'abandonment'. (Foster 2004:162)

However, the illusion of authorial absence created by the plight of the characters in Pirandello's *Six Characters* is not achieved in Hodgins' *Three Characters* as it is not simply the characters who lack further definition, but the entire image. It is thus difficult to empathise with the situation of the figures as there is nothing in the image to contrast their 'abandoned condition' to in the frame. In an anticipatory response to this lack of engagement, Hodgins includes the additional commentary in the title or frame-within-the-frame of, *and I know some smart-ass critic will say: 'Well, they didn't find him, did they?'*. The additional abrupt defensive remark functions to surprise or shock the viewer by the juxtaposition of two mode of engagement, that of critical consideration and that of belief in the image.

Hodgins' secondary commentary solicits a corresponding response to that invited by the comments of Vladimir and Estragon. By objectifying the execution and content in the image, the remark acts to emphasise or draw attention to these properties, thereby countering the emotional indifference the

audience might feel. Therefore, in this example Hodgins' use of a commentary title or frame-within-the-frame does not serve to emotionally distance the audience from the content, but invites their involvement in and consideration of the image in the same way that Vladimir and Estragon's comments sustain audience participation in *Waiting for Godot*.

Chapter 2

Political Dimensions of Tragicomedy

The secondary defensive comment in the title of *Three Characters* also serves to widen the discussion of supposed authorial absence to include a socio-political dimension. By anticipating a potential critical response, the title makes reference to the power structures involved in the interpretation of art objects. Thus the work problematises artistic authority by opposing the autonomy of the artist with the authority of the critic in estimating and attributing artistic worth. In this way the painting is designated as a political site, a site of contested meaning, polarised by the artist and the smart-ass critic.

The socio-political dimension to this image opens it up to a discussion of social structures or the organised nature of everyday reality and facilitates a postmodernist reading of the work. As noted in the analysis of *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*, Ivor Powell has taken Hodgins' exploration of binary relations such as order and chaos and madness and civilisation to indicate a political position that assumes an oblique stance toward homogenised culture in that it makes visible crises in established binary states. So, too, can the exploration of crises in artistic authority in *Three Characters*' be accounted for as a socio-political statement underlining the precarious nature of socially constructed value in visual art. Therefore both *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn* and *Three Characters* have assumed political dimensions that can be analysed according to their social import.

Madhouse with a View of Tyburn and *Three Characters* can, however, also be subjected to metaphysical inquiry. *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*'s conflation of perspectives, in both the title and the image, the historically specific reference and the more contemporary subjective reflection, points to a pattern in experience, a persistent quality of existence. Therefore the work can be read as a philosophic statement on the nature of a specific reality. Similarly, *Three characters in search of a painter - and I know some smart-ass critic will say: 'Well, they didn't find him, did they?* can be interpreted alongside the Pirandello text, as a reference to the human condition confronting the loss of a greater authority or pre-existing value, and the human dilemma arising from the need to deal with this crisis. Thus the analysis reveals that both paintings contain socio-political dimensions, even though they cannot be described as unequivocally socio-political in tone or subject. Instead, in

both cases, this tendency can be subsumed under a greater thematic rubric of instability, discernible by the various demonstrations of crises in qualities or states. The tension that is established in *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*, for instance, involves the rupture between fictive and historical reality or between imagination and rationality. Reason is subverted and corporeality is undermined; the world is presented at a point of fissure. This idea of paradigmatic fracture can equally be applied to *Three Characters*, where an internal crisis is displayed in artistic integrity by the disjuncture in focus between the work and the commentary title. The work is shown in crisis with itself, in doubt about its own aesthetic value and the authority of the artist in determining meaning. The subsidiary theme of loss of authority perpetuated by the inter-textual reference to Pirandello echoes the uncertainty in established ideals and the position of the artist.

This specific ability of the artworks to invoke a political as well as metaphysical interpretation is yet again analogous to the genre of tragicomedy, as Foster posits:

> Tragicomedy is, coincidentally with its contrivance, conscious of its own artifice and thus inclines to be metatheatrical. It focuses on metaphysical rather than social aspects of human experience, though it might have social and even political dimensions as well. (Foster 2004:14)

These two examples from Hodgins are thus analogous to tragicomedy in that their socio-political dimensions act to contribute to a more ambiguous reality. A summative example of a work that exhibits a central tragicomic device is the painting, *A Conservative Still life* from 1986 (fig. 3). This work invites an interpretation that includes socio-political conjecture as well as broader philosophic concerns.

Analogous to the tragicomic play-within-the-play, *A Conservative Still life* displays the use of a frame-within-the frame as a parodic device to comment on the tradition of still life painting. In this case, the effect arises from the treatment of the image space rather than from the use of intertext or commentary titles. The frame-within-the-frame acts to distance the audience from the image, shifting the representational aspect from the painted objects towards the genre or convention. The frame-within-the-frame also places a strong emphasis on *how* the contents is illustrated.

The title of the work introduces it as a still life painting, which has strong historical connotations, but also institutional connotations due to its association with formal exercises in art training or skills development. In addition, its presentation as a *conservative* still life connotes an aesthetic of reservation, balance and moderation: elements that are associated with a well-mannered, traditional

approach to painting that can be dull, predictable or overly cautious. Hodgins, however, attacks the subject matter with uncompromisingly aggressive lines and crude stylisation. The entire image could perhaps better be described as a drawing with paint, rather than a layered composition of colour and tone. There are no fluid or painterly areas of handling nor is there any attempt to create the illusion of space between the objects and their background. Instead, the image is composed of a network of lines: somewhat crude, thick, aggressive cross-hatching, the all-over uniformity of which creates a tapestry-like impression which serves to flatten the perspectival space.

The objects in the image belong to traditional still life types or still life clichés and include a pot plant, a skull, a bowl of fruit and a bouquet of flowers in a jug-like vase. Hodgins' crude treatment of these forms suggests a resistance to the associations and ideals that they connote. The unrefined quality of handling is echoed by the ‘mistake’ in the inscription of the title below the frame, where the spelling error, ‘consertive’, has been corrected to 'conservative'. The additional frame in the image thus acts to signal that the combativeness in the stylistic tone is not directed towards the objects or depicted scene but towards the entire concept of the conservative still life underlying the tone and manner of execution. These unexpected aesthetic decisions make the viewer aware of the limitations or boundaries inherent in the concept of a conservative still life and underscore the dissent implied by the choice of execution. Thus in the image, the-frame-within-the-frame becomes a parodic device, employed by Hodgins, to communicate an oppositional stance towards institutional forms.

However, if the overall title is considered as a secondary frame and not simply a repeat of the in-frame inscription, the nature of the work would lead the viewer towards quite a different conclusion. If the overall title is considered as a secondary frame, this description of the work would undermine the position of deviance that is implied by the treatment of the image and begin to suggest that a subversive parody of the conservative still life remains, despite all critical engagement with it, a form of the genre. The work would thereby inherently problematise the potential of internal dissent that could be likened to the paradoxical plight of Pirandello's 'Father' character in his attempt to overcome the limits of his nature. Thus, the title of the work, as a secondary frame, acts to induce a 'double vision' on the content and takes a tragicomic form.

An Abrasive Tradition

The emphasis on artifice in tragicomedy is a result of the various distancing techniques that have

been discussed, which contribute to create the specific middle-mood with which the genre is associated. Likewise, in tragicomedy the use of two-dimensional characters and elaborate, unlikely or repetitive plots function to maintain a level of disbelief in the audience and thus encourages them to reflect on the play in its entirety. Therefore, again, the viewer's perception is torn between 'what is' and 'what should be'. This emotional tension that the viewer is forced to experience places specific demands on audiences and explains why these plays are described as “challenging” or “abrasive”. As Dutton states:

> [T]his self-conscious art/nature discrepancy, with the special demands it makes of an audience, is a characteristic of all true tragicomedy, though its local operation may differ according to the precise styles and methods of the authors. The sophistication of its conventions, careful modulation of mood as it perplexes its characters, inevitably makes tragicomedy a challenging, even an abrasive mode. (Dutton 1986:34)

In terms of Foster's theory on the tragic and the comic as modes of engagement and detachment, the artificiality of these plays would serve to disengage the audience from feelings of empathy for the characters or their situation and is as such a comic device. In a play such as Beckett's *Endgame*, for instance, the characters themselves might comment on the events of the play, which functions as a strategy resembling the play-within-the-play, to disrupt the realistic illusion of the action and cause the audience to become aware of their own involvement in watching the play. One such example is when Clov asks, “What is there to keep me here?” and Hamm replies, “The dialogue” (p.38). In another example the moment of self-reflectiveness pertains to the meaning of the play:

> *Hamm*: We're not beginning to ... to … mean something?
> *Clov*: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (*Brief laugh*). Ah that's a good one!
>
> (p.27)[4]

Although these disruptions in the reality of the story can be humorous, as seen by Hamm and Clov's dialogue, the overall effect is a tension between emotional states, between relief and involvement, best described as a state of ambivalence, the experience of which is not necessarily pleasant. Styan echoes Foster by stating: “Like the fits of laughter we suppress in church, tragicomic tensions can be mortifying. They can be induced as well by an incongruity of the solemn and the ridiculous as by the sudden quirk of mind that recognises the ugly beside the beautiful” (Styan 1962:264). However, Styan posits that it is the non-cathartic natures of these plays that account for their poignancy. As he explains:

4 Quoted in (Dutton 1986:82)

> The detachment of comedy is not allowed us, nor the sympathy of tragedy. All the instinctive psychology of the man of the theatre is needed to achieve this particular tension: he must mix sufficient reality to hold our belief with sufficient unreality to have us accept the pain of others. At the point of balance, we are in pain ourselves, and the play is meaningful. (Styan 1962:257)

It would perhaps be difficult to assert that Hodgins' use of visual and intertextual tensions has a painful affect on the viewer, but it nevertheless remains true that the tragicomic aspects of his production are emotionally complex and challenging. Brenda Atkinson, for instance, describes Hodgins' "source of power" as an "affective cross-current" in his work, which she characterises as "unsettling". Atkinson elaborates:

> 'Cross-current' is perhaps a limited description of so complex a visual and emotional event. It implies one thing encountering and resisting another, and although this is usually the case with Hodgins' work, the effect is usually of innumerable conflicting, complementing elements that communicate beyond the rules of the visual. At his best, Hodgins manages, through the otherness of the painting, to invoke in the viewer unsettling recollections, recognition, desires. (Atkinson 2002:13)

It is this dissertation's contention that Robert Hodgins creates images that embody ambiguity that is not only bitter-sweet or uncanny,[5] but engender a tension or ambivalence that can be likened to that of the tragicomic. As Marion Arnold posits, "Hodgins seeks what he calls, "the trembling edge to a picture". [...] He jars as well as pleases the eye." (Arnold 1986:08) This contradictory quality, whether attributed to the formal elements of paint or to his combination of image and title is expressive of a paradigmatic concern, as Arnold suggests, "Hodgins is seeking the pictorial means to render a paradox of which he is acutely conscious. It is the paradox of the co-existence of beauty and ugliness" (Arnold 1986:07). To Arnold, Hodgins explains:

> ...the same species which can produce the Beethoven Ninth Symphony and Guernica, can produce the concentration camps. It's a mystery I don't know how to get past, and this is partly my subject matter. I have an appalled compassion for man. (Arnold 1986:07)

In interview with Ivor Powell, this sentiment towards art-making persists:

> One is in a way trying to find a metaphor for the wonder and horror of a world in which terrible things and beautiful things exist together. I can't get over the fact that

5 *Compulsive Beauty*, by Hal Foster, explores the ironic ruptures in Surrealist work in terms of Freud's theory on the uncanny. Artists such as Magritte, Ernst and de Chirico establish various visual ironies in their paintings, but in doing so retain a serious tone. The paintings are either ironically disquieting or display a perpetual frustration in the visual.

> there are roses in a world where somebody can get massacred; the fact that the two can coexist is to me a kind of numbing wonder in my head and that's what I'm trying to find a metaphor in painting for. (Powell 1984:42)

The description of tragicomedy, as a disconcerting genre, is essentially a modern development. Renaissance critical writing, for instance, follows from Aristotle's definition of comedy and tragedy as expressed in his *Poetics*, where the difference between the two genres are made unmistakably distinct. The first and most sound attempt at blending these forms was made by the Renaissance critic, Giambattista Guarini in his essay, *Compendio della Poesia Tragicomica* of 1601. (Foster 2004:18) Guarini's account distinguishes between the genres by their form and effect, which he refers to as their instrumental and architectonic ends respectively. As Foster describes, Guarini posits that tragedy and comedy both possess the architectonic end of catharsis. Foster explains:

> Tragedy imitates horrible and pitiable actions, its architectonic end being the purgation of terror and compassion. Comedy imitates the actions of private individuals that cause laughter; its architectonic end, which Aristotle omitted to mention, is, according to Guarini, the purgation of melancholy. (Foster 2004:19)

Tragicomedy is a formal conflation of tragedy and comedy or a combination of the two instrumental ends. Yet, as Foster elaborates, Guarini asserts that its effect is the same as comedy, the catharsis of melancholy:

> Tragicomedy imitates both tragic and comic actions; its instrumental end is thus mixed. Its architectonic end, however, must of necessity be single, since if the play produces both laughter and tears, one must be subordinated to the other. For Guarini the architectonic end of tragicomedy is identical with that of comedy: the purgation of melancholy. (Foster 2004:19)

The modern conception of the genre more often describes the relation between the comic and tragic as fluid or mutable, so that the two forms can at times be indistinguishable from each other. Beckett and Ionesco, for instance, agreed upon the symbiotic relationship between tragedy and comedy. Ionesco went so far as to posit that there is no difference between tragedy and comedy, that comedy is simply a realisation of the tragic, which he understood in a late modernist sense to be the hopeless or the absurd. (Foster 2004:32) As the perceived boundaries between the comic and tragic become eroded the cathartic import of the genre becomes less discernible, as evinced by the comments of Dutton and Styan above.

Dutton hence offers another approach to the understanding the genre. Instead of attempting to identify the genre's specific psycho-spiritual effect, he posits that tragicomedy, both Renaissance

and modern, can broadly be considered as a form of ritual theatre that is concerned with expressing the relation between the individual and the unknowable or mysterious forces that impact on or affect our reality. He goes on to suggest that the deliberate artificiality of tragicomedies means that they can only be understood if approached in the same way as myths or fables. Dutton explains; "These plays do not offer a literal, photographic picture of the world ... They offer something more condensed, oblique and mysterious, an artifice which seeks to convey truths hidden from everyday reality." (Dutton 1986:27)

Deliberate Artifice: In Form and Effect

Tragicomedy, during the Renaissance and late modern era, is characterised as a self-conscious practice because it displays its artificial or constructed nature. According to Dutton, post Second World War plays such as Ionesco's *The Chairs*, as well as Renaissance plays, such as Shakespeare's *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* deliberately emphasise their artifice through elaborate or unlikely plots, the appearance of two-dimensional, buffoonish characters or stylised language (nonsense or operatic). Although the characters and settings might resemble reality, the situations that the characters find themselves in and the manner in which closure is achieved more closely resemble myths, nightmares or dreams. As Dutton suggests, Renaissance tragicomedy was associated with pastoral literature, which in turn overlapped in part with satire. Central to these forms is an enduring question of Renaissance literature: "[W]hat is the proper relationship between art and nature, between man's creative imaginative capacities and the imperfect world into which he is born?" (Dutton 1986:51) The enquiry comes to the fore in *The Winter's Tale* in a argument between Perdita and Polixenes about the practice of 'improving' plants by artificial means (IV.iv. 79-103). However, the relation between artifice and nature is more frequently considered in human terms rather than in relation to plant life and involves questions such as, "what are the possibilities of human improvement, of attaining the ideals of chivalry, of being truly civilised, of creating a true and holy Empire on earth?" (Dutton 1986:51) The painting *Madhouse with a view of Tyburn* poses a similar dilemma to the viewer by the conflation of the savage with the civilised, order with chaos. It exposes the civilised as a contingent state, dependent and determined by the relation to its binary, thereby problematising the limits of such a conceptual construct. Thus the work embodies the disparity between the ideal and actual, nature and artifice, the question that lies at root of the overtly theatrical tragicomic form.

The apparent artifice inherent in the form of tragicomedy means that these plays are more accessible

when approached as a mental projection or a vision of the imagination. In Renaissance tragicomedy, the lead characters come into contact with ghosts, Gods,[6] consult oracles, face conflicts between their ability to reason over their emotions, drink potions, debate, interact with mundane characters and don disguises. The plot changes in bizarre and unpredictable ways, in such a way that the characters are constantly trying to come to terms with the events. In late modern tragicomedy, there are no supernatural beings or monarchs, but the plots are equally disconcerting. Seemingly meaningless plots, the use of cliché, nonsense or simply repetitive dialogue combined with perpetual non-sequinurs produce dream-like or nightmarish realities. As Styan explains:

> In this visionary world of farce, tempo can accelerate madly, as in Ionesco's *The Chairs*, or slow down to the point of strain and torture, as in *Godot*. The action can be unpredictable, Pozzo can go blind, Lucky can go dumb, death can be sudden, […] Life is not a well-made play; it is angular, startling, unmotivated, irreverent. In imagination, time and space, cause and effect, can be quite illogical – one wakes in the night to discover that what had seemed five minutes has been five hours. This is a fully conventional theatre of the imagination to shake us into recognizing the real business of existence. (Styan 1962:220)

As Styan describes, tragicomedy is a 'theatre of the imagination' and as such conflates the real and imaginary in order to present the quality of existence that can best be described as a mental projection. Reality is mostly experienced in between the objective events or objects of reality and an individual's memories of events and associations and connotations. Tragicomedy fuses these different experiences of reality in a way that, according to Styan, encompasses the *quality* of experience more fully. As Styan continues; “Such dualism permits a fullness of statement: it is inclusive, as the mind is inclusive, of the passion with the bawdy, the sacred with the profane, the sublime with the ridiculous”. (Styan 1962:286)

Ivor Powell suggests that Hodgins' approach to painting can be likened to the process of memory. (Powell 1986:4) In a way that resembles the nature of mental processes such as dreaming, imagining, or remembering, Hodgins' treatment of the composition allows for space and time to become conflated and events and associations or connotations to become indistinguishable from one another. Analogous to modern tragicomic plots, causality in the narrative is indeterminate. As mentioned earlier, the contents of the background in *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*, for instance, could either represent what has occurred, what has resulted in the figures in the foreground, or the entire image can be read as one single instance of time, represented by different locations or from

6 In the plays by Beaumont and Fletcher this is not the case, but in Shakespeare's *Pericles* the goddess Diana visits the title character in his sleep. Similarly, in *The Winter's Tale* Apollo's oracle at Delphi informs Leontes that Hermione is innocent. (Dutton 1986:31)

multiple points of view. In this subjective imaginary space, rational order is ruptured. The example shows a deviation from logic by the composite treatment of space. The organisation of surface area subverts the perspectival space as seen, for instance, in the relation between the cell doors and the gallows. By their size, the doors are closer to the foreground than the gallows, but the horizon line upon which they rest proves that they are actually further away. The strange disintegrating geometric shape behind the figure in the foreground on the right acts in a similar way. It is at once a continuation of the horizontal surface and a vertical barrier that serves to block or further foreground the two figures from the rest of the image. As such Hodgins' *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*, like tragicomedy, presents a subjective mental projection of the quality of experience that allows for incongruity in logic, time and identity. Similarly, the artist's emphasis on the abstract, material aspects of painting results in subjects and objects that are not naturalistic, determined or specific, but instead maintain a precarious balance between abstraction and figuration. As Hodgins comments to Powell:

> I've always had two ambitions as a painter. One is to make colour so real that it dominates or even creates the picture...The other ambition is – while keeping one toe in reality so you realise you're looking at something derived from the human being – to take it as far as Picasso did, so the connection between representation and abstraction is stretched almost to breaking point. (Powell 1984: 46)

As reflected in this quote, Hodgins' paintings encapsulate a tension between the materiality of paint and the representation. His interest in maintaining this balance implies that he does not portray any actual person or object, but rather a collection of exaggerated qualities that comes to represent a sort of archetypal personality or object type, analogous to the figures and objects that are portrayed in cartoon strips. It is therefore not possible to identify the represented image with our everyday reality. The physicality of paint, the intensity of colour and the stylisation of the subjects assure the undeniable artifice of the image. Thus, Hodgins' painting, as the example of *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn* illustrates, can only be approached as a mental projection and in terms of mental or imaginary states.

Chapter 3:

Plot Features: Renaissance and Modern

Tragicomedies are usually plot-driven plays; the story progresses by what *happens* to the characters, rather than by the characters' decisions or *actions*. Hence, the structure or artifice of tragicomedies are generally the most prominent feature. As both Renaissance and late modern tragicomedy are concerned with the relationship between humans and the hidden or unfathomable external forces that effect their reality, the plots are either complicated or improbable in the extreme, such as in Renaissance theatre or, as in late modern theatre, seem to consist of non-events. In either case, the characters are seen to react with a similar confoundedness or incomprehension in response to the events of the story. Thus bewilderment and frustration are frequently some of the most prominent themes in these plays. (Dutton 1986:23)

The audience is rarely encouraged to view the characters as individuals, but rather as representative types put on trial by the events in the plot. Renaissance tragicomedy, for instance, centres around characters that are faced with increasingly complex, ever-changing situations in which they experience great ethical or emotional dilemmas in such a way as to foreground "human fallibility". Some of these predicaments include: "lovers on the point of being obliged, for reason of state, not to marry, or to marry the wrong person; two men desperately in love with the same woman; good Kings becoming dangerous tyrants; loyal subjects tempted to treason; honourable men tempted to incest."(Dutton 1968:49) Thus the characters find themselves in situations where their morality is in constant conflict with surprising and unforeseen events, and this creates dilemmas that they appear unable to resolve, no matter how strong their intention to do so.

The elaborateness and complexity of the Renaissance plot is in most instances replaced in post Second World War tragicomedy by the non-plot or non-occurrence. The story does not develop by the succession of events that leads to a satisfying conclusion, but explores a specific, sometimes static, situation between characters and their circumstances. Styan posits that "[t]he modern movement has been to admit triviality into human stage behaviour, and to make drama of it" (Styan

1962:275). As Styan suggests, 'triviality' is explored to its extreme and it is in this extreme that the characters find themselves unable to cope. These plays explore the commonplace aspects of human nature, qualities such as “stupidity, boredom, carelessness, doubt, disappointment, caprice, reluctance, vacillation, bungling, mediocrity,” essentially every facet of the mundane. (Styan 1962:275)

The plots can be cyclical, such as in Beckett's *Endgame*, where the beginning lines are echoed in the end, and the interaction between characters progresses by bouts of elliptical dialogue, as can be seen, for instance, between Aston and Davies in Pinter's *The Caretaker,* or consist of repetitive actions or routines, as displayed in *Waiting for Godot* and Ionesco's *The Chairs*. In these plays, the activities of the characters are not motivated by the characters themselves, but are rather a reaction to the contexts in which they find themselves.

The circumstances in which modern tragicomedic characters generally find themselves involve strange situations that they cannot escape from and in which they are seen struggling with their own helplessness, uncertainty, passivity, sense of alienation and feeling of meaninglessness. Characters might find themselves trapped in a story, such as in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, in a reclusive, enclosed place such as the mansion in Pinter's *No Man's Land* of the utopian town quarter of Ionesco's *The Killer*, or on a remote location, exemplified by the secluded island lighthouse in *The Chairs*. As these examples indicate, most late modern tragicomic settings retain a certain wondrous quality due to the peculiarity of their locations.

Waiting for Godot, for instance, takes place on a desolate country road in the middle of nowhere. According to Styan, Beckett personally supervised the play's 1961 production at the Odéon. The indeterminate nature of the location is suggested by his treatment of the stage as a simple, almost empty space. (Styan 1981:126) For these performances, the only visual references on stage to the location were a stumpy rock and a frail, slender tree designed by Giacometti. (Styan 1981:131) Styan similarly points to the sparse use of stage décor as a means to simulate not only human isolation, but also an expanse with mysterious potential. Beckett's treatment of the stage thus presents his characters alone in an ostensibly incomprehensible universe where anything could happen, but as the play progresses nothing does.

Hodgins sets his characters in various locations and at different time-periods, which range from the non-specific everyday in paintings such as *Nude with Hat* (2004) (Fig. 4) or the diptych *Forty Eight*

Chairs (1997/8) (Fig. 5) to the historically significant as seen in the lithograph *October 1929* (1994/5). For the most part, these settings are imaginative spaces that, once framed by the title, become more circumscribed as in the case of *Madhouse with a View of Tyburn*. In a way that is comparable to Beckett's stage treatment for *Waiting for Godot*, the backgrounds of his paintings remain relatively minimal; objects are rendered to establish a type of setting but not an actual place. His objects are thus not unique to a particular place; they are general symbols with which these spaces are identified. They function to suggest a type of location or a general environment. The sparse use of contextual trappings or background detail imbues Hodgins' painting with a staged quality by the sheer economy with which he approaches objects as signifiers of meaning. Likewise, the open-ended bareness of the backgrounds maintains a similar mystery to the stage treatment of Beckett. *Women Waiting for Godot* (2003/4) (Fig. 6), for instance, references Beckett's production and also illustrates Hodgins' treatment of the background as a stage-like indeterminate zone.

Hodgins presents an essentially monochromatic image of two figures in seated positions in *Women Waiting for Godot*. The background is suggestive of an open, non-specific space and time. In this image, Hodgins uses a complementary and interdependent pair of characters, which often appear in late modern theatre,[7] specifically in plays by Beckett. The bald woman on the left, for instance, is actively directing her gaze out to the left of the frame, her left arm raised, displaying an open hand just below her right shoulder. The body on the right appears calmer, inattentively staring into space and thereby completing the active/passive configuration.

The two characters found in *Waiting for Godot* are the vagrants Vladimir and Estragon. They are introduced where they find themselves near a tree on a rural road, waiting for a Mr Godot, with whom they consider themselves to have an appointment, but who never arrives. In a way that is similar to Hodgins' visual protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon have opposite or balancing qualities. As Esslin explains, Vladimir is more practical and Estragon more creative. Estragon is unpredictable, Vladimir more constant. Vladimir remembers past events, Estragon tends to forget them instantly. It is primarily Vladimir who expresses his hope that Godot will come and change their condition. Estragon remains unconvinced throughout, and at times cannot even remember Godot's name. Esslin points to the consequence of the characters' differing and conflicting natures by saying:

7 Such as in Ionesco's *La Leçon* (The Lesson), Adamov's *La Parodie*, Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and Beckett's *Endgame*.

> The opposition of their temperaments is the cause of endless bickering between them and often leads to the suggestion that they should part. Yet, being complementary natures, they also are dependent on each other and have to stay together. (Esslin 1968:48)

The characters are therefore not only trapped in a perplexing and continuingly frustrating situation, but also in their relationship with each other. Although their opposing temperaments prevent them from acting harmoniously, they depend on each other for definition and have been interpreted as two sides of a single personality, and even as "the conscious and subconscious mind". (Esslin 1968:67)

The figures in Hodgins' *Women Waiting for Godot* have different features and gestures, but they are treated in a way that shows similarities to Beckett. Both figures are drawn in thick solid lines, containing and echoing their large, block-like solid frames. What this appears to suggest is that although the figures are not identical, they are akin in their position and predicament, not unlike the Beckett characters. The emphasis on the figures' circumstances rather than their separate identities is underscored by the lack of gender information in the figures. There is almost nothing to suggest that these figures are female, except for an indication of blusher found on the cheek of the woman on the right, and in the title. Therefore the title, in this case, is crucial for an understanding of the image and for positioning the work conceptually. In contrast to the non-descript, solid, block-like forms, the background in Hodgins *Women Waiting for Godot* seems to be imbued with a mysterious potential, brought on by the subtle lightning above and between the figures. The reference to Beckett allows the background to be interpreted as a space of futile expectation.

Characterisation: The Powerful and Powerless in Renaissance and Modern Tragicomedy

In addition to the apparent lack of intricacy in the structure of late modern plays as opposed to those of the Renaissance, the type of characters employed in either case is also greatly divergent. During the Renaissance the lead characters mostly represented members of the nobility or monarchs. The seriousness of these figures needed to be maintained and thus restrictions were placed on the type of verse that they were allowed to speak. As Foster explains:

> Such characters, when they suffer (as they generally do in rather sensational circumstances), tend to see themselves as tragic, and in the resonances of the often superb (if self-regarding) blank verse they are given to speak they carry along with them a tragic aura regardless of the comic elements surrounding them or inherent even in their behaviour. It is easier to make middle- and lower-class characters such

> as are typically portrayed in modern drama appear comic rather than tragic if only because of the kind of language they can most usually be given. (Foster 2004:12)

Although these restrictions on language no longer apply, most late modern tragicomedies, such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, show the central characters either as social outcasts or as Ionesco's Bérenger character, as middle-class everymen. Thus their vernacular would be more adaptable to comedy.[8]

These differences are not so much bound to social requirements or rules of decorum and language effect as they point to a greater paradigmatic divergence in Renaissance and late modern culture. In post Second World War tragicomedies the central characters are what Styan refers to as "comic-pathetic hero[es]". They are human to the point of impotence; in crisis they resort to wishing and hoping rather than heeding or acting. (Styan 1962:269) When characters display virtues or vices, these qualities lack the seriousness of intent displayed in Renaissance tragicomedy. As Styan points out, "courage can be accidental, pride can be humiliating, love can be animal, revenge can be spiteful, just as cowardice can be understood, avarice can be pathetic, and selfishness and petty vanity can be amusing." (Styan 1962:275) The characters are unable to express themselves, unable to relate to each other, with language often becoming the point of rupture. Dialogue frequently becomes reduced to meaningless clichés, a cross-talk of nonsense language or "inanely repetitive self-reflection" as they attempt to come to terms with their condition. (Dutton 1986:15) The central characters become comedic because they fail to fully realise or communicate the gravity or hopelessness of their situation. In this sense they are similar to the subordinate or comic characters in Renaissance tragicomedy. Comparable to Lucky's soliloquy in *Waiting for Godot* or the self-reflection of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the clown in *The Winter's Tale*, for instance, attempts to communicate the serious and unfortunate events he had witnessed. The clown, however, is so overwhelmed and baffled after witnessing the ship wreck of Antigonus and Perdita and Antigonus' subsequent death in an attack by a bear that his story-telling becomes comical. As Dutton posits: "Nature, in the forms both of the sea and the bear, has destroyed many human beings, but the art of the play – the comic presentation – renders the fact emotionally ambivalent in context, even neutral."(Dutton 1986:36) Akin to central characters in modern tragicomedies, the clown's inability to communicate or make sense of what had taken place renders the events simultaneously "of the utmost importance and laughably insignificant". (Dutton 1986:36)

8 Importantly, these characters tend to develop a tragic persona as their language turns increasingly poetic, as seen for example in the checkered language of Beckett and Pinter or Irish idiom of Synge. [Foster, V.A. 2004:12]

Like the clown in *The Winter's Tale*, as a result of their extreme powerlessness and the futility of their endeavours, late modern characters often appear two-dimensional and comic. Thus, the comic is born out of a fundamentally tragic situation, Foster reiterates;

> In modern tragicomedy, by contrast, the protagonist represents the common type of humanity, beset by doubts and fears that are not ultimately resolved, isolated even from those closest to him, uncertain of the meaning of his existence or of why he suffers; without a sense of meaning something, such a character cannot be tragic, though his situation often is. (Foster 2004:13)

Renaissance tragicomedies, such as Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, on the other hand, affirm the importance of the character's position and the seriousness of their distress. The central characters are shown in a position of manifest distinction and confronted with great dilemmas. Although they are ultimately not in control of the outcome of events, the sum of their actions contributes to the just resolution at the end of the play. As Dutton suggests, Renaissance tragicomedy, as the example of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* proves, thus invites a dual perspective on human action or agency that it is simultaneously noble and insignificant. Dutton explains:

> Seen from one angle, as in tragedy, everything that the characters do is crucially important, a necessity in the wider scheme of man's existence. Seen from the other angle, however, as in comedy, none of it matters at all, since the gods (or whatever) will ultimately dispose everything as they will, and we can only take it on trust that this will be for the best for us too. (Dutton 1986:43)

Nevertheless, the agency exhibited by Renaissance tragicomic characters exceeds that of the characters in the post Second World War plays such as *Waiting for Godot* or *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Far from having Renaissance happy endings, these plays have no conclusive resolutions. The actions of modern characters do not feed into a wider scheme of human endeavour and as such remain without meaning or significance. Thus Renaissance tragicomic characters,such as King Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, are viewed as tragic characters in a comic or ultimately benevolent universe, whereas the characters in late modern tragicomedy are seen as comic figures in tragic or potentially hopeless situations[9].

In view of this distinction, the figures presented in Hodgins' *Madhouse with a view of Tyburn* are to a greater extent analogous to late modern tragicomedy than to those of the Renaissance. As

9 As Foster states: “In Renaissance tragicomedy the suffering or erring protagonist are usually potentially tragic figures in an ultimately comic universe...In modern tragicomedy the individual is more often a comic figure in a universe probably tragic or at best uncertain.” (Foster 2004:12)

mentioned before, the title lends a tragic air to the content of the image by placing it within a specific context. However, the title serves only to modulate the viewer's perception on the type of space represented, not on the nature of the characters. Although the entire image is treated in a comic, caricature-like vernacular, the omission in the title of any specific information about the occupants, such as their names, cell numbers or period of detention, means that these bodies remain faceless and thus unreal or imaginary. They do not become specific or actual in any way and therefore cannot be tragic. The subjects do not seem to be cognisant of their predicament or possess any autonomy within this scheme. They are mannequin-like in that they simply form part of the 'tragic' scenery. The viewer is not made to feel empathy for the figures specifically, but for their general situation. The same can be said for the figures presented in *Women Waiting for Godot* as well as those displayed by *Three Characters*.

Late Modern Tragicomedy: The Death of Tragedy

According to Alastair Fowler[10], the term 'tragi-comedy' suggests that the genre is in essence a variant of comedy, as this is the noun part of the word, with 'tragi' being the adjectival prefix. This reasoning would complement the Renaissance tragicomic conception and form. However, as Foster points out, the tragic component of the genre is viewed as more pronounced in modern manifestation of tragicomedy. (Foster 2004:14) This is partly due to the historic decline of tragedy as a dramatic genre. Karl Guthke posits that in more contemporary drama, for instance, the themes and problems that previously appeared in tragedies have been subsumed by farce[11]. Similarly, Friedrich Dürrenmatt theorises that the decline of tragedy seen in post Second World War drama is a result of modernisation and the shift in consciousness with which individuals approach their environment. He suggests that tragedy, as a genre, is an inappropriate vehicle for the communication of a late modern paradigm as it relies on the notion of the tragic hero, which has been replaced by tremendous tragic events not caused by individual action, but by the activity of anonymous corporations or bureaucracies[12]. As Dürrenmatt elaborates:

> Tragedy presupposes guilt, despair, moderation, lucidity, vision, a sense of responsibility. In the Punch-and-Judy show of our century,[...], there are no more guilty and also no responsible men. It is always, “We couldn't help it” and “we

10 Fowler, A. (1989) “The future of Genre Theory: Functions and Constructional Types” in Cohen, Ralph, ed. *The Future of Literary Theory*, New York: Routledge, pp.291-303, quoted by Foster, V. 2004:12

11 Guthke, K. (1966) *Modern Tragicomedy: An Investigation into the Nature of the Genre*, New York: Random House, Inc., p. 10, mentioned in Foster, V. 2004:13

12 Dürrenmatt, F. (1982) *Plays and* Essays, ed. Sander, Volkmar, New York: Continuum, mentioned in Foster, V. 2004:31

> didn't really want that to happen". And indeed, things happen without anyone in particular being responsible for them. Everything is dragged along and everyone gets caught somewhere in the sweep of events. We are all collectively guilty, collectively bogged down in the sins of our fathers and our forefathers. We are the offspring of children. That is our misfortune, but not our guilt: guilt can exist only as a personal achievement, as a religious deed. (Dürrenmatt, F.1958:31)

Renaissance tragedy, like its tragicomedy, centres on the lives and endeavours of individuals who are in powerful positions. These characters are shown to possess autonomy, a will by which the narrative seems to be directed. As in Renaissance tragicomedy, the actions that the central characters pursue tend to contribute to a greater will which the individuals are not yet cognisant of or cannot foresee, but which would not be possible without their volition. The central figures in tragedies are much more developed than in tragicomedies and tend to grow as events unfold, thus causing the audience to be more empathetic to the actual character rather than to just their situation. It is, however, the presented will of the character which makes the final outcome of the events tragic as the audience views the figure's growth and development throughout the play and observes the character making decisions whilst knowing the final outcome will be death. Thus tragedy relies on the audience's realisation of the dramatic irony of the character's situation, which without the figure's presumed independent power or will cannot be achieved. Associated with the concept of power, free will or autonomy is the notion of guilt and responsibility. Although the fate of the character is presupposed by the recognition of the genre, the sense that the Macbeth, for instance, is responsible for his final demise and guilty of the violent actions throughout the play is preserved by the simulation of the figure as an individual with free agency.

Late Modern Anti-heroes and Hodgins

In a post Second World War dramatic paradigm the notion of individual responsibility has largely been displaced by collective and bureaucratic action. As Dürrenmatt postulates, the loss of individual agency has dissipated feelings of guilt and personal responsibility. Similarly, the stress on bureaucratic procedure problematises the late modern perception of the powerful. In tragedy the employment of eminent societal figures as central figures helps to secure an audience's attention and lay the foundations for the character to be their special victim.[13] However, Leech posits that the perceived personal agency of powerful individuals, as traditionally employed in tragedy, has become troubled through regulation and public scrutiny. As Leech elaborates:

13 "Yet of course it is a dramatic convenience if the central figure is given a position of manifest eminence. He will appear to have a special claim to our attention, and, (…), a special claim to be our victim." (Leech, C. 1969:36)

> In our scheme of things, the higher the eminence, the greater the responsibility and the more restricted the power. A shop steward or a students' leader (lacking major responsibility) can exercise authority more easily than a prime minister, a president of a business firm or a university. This seems indeed to be increasingly the situation even with the princes of the church. In the drama, as for a long time in the novel, we now have ordinary men as heroes, for almost all the extraordinary men live private lives and are therefore in that sense ordinary. (Leech 1969:36)

Thus, late modern tragedy, such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, more often sees everyday people as central characters as their actions are less restricted by obligations to their title or role. Ordinary characters are freer to pursue their own interests and act on their own decisions. Similarly, powerful individuals are viewed in their private lives, where the social importance of their positions is less acute. As the setting moves from the socially significant to the banal, the potential for truly tragic consequences to the figure's actions tend to decrease. As a result the final product is usually a serious drama, not true tragedy, which explains the modern decline in the genre.[14]

Robert Hodgins' rendering of individuals are reminiscent of certain archetypes or stereotypes within society, generally recognisable by their attire or uniforms. These character types include housewives, businessmen, politicians, military men, boxers, scholars, activists, theatre goers, performers and sportsmen. As seen in the analysis of *Madhouse with a View*, Hodgins' portrayal of social groups extends to the limits of cultural community, to the boundary between the socially acceptable and the socially reprehensible or unstable. Within these parameters, his representation of society pertains to the domestic and recreative, the institutional and the punitory or corrective. Unlike Beckett, the artist does not portray any groups that venture outside societal bounds, such as the two drifters or vagrants in *Waiting for Godot*. His oeuvre boasts no homeless people, freakishly deformed individuals or religious mystics. Hodgins' characters are thus always within the bounds of social influences. They shape and are shaped by the structures of power. They are subject to rules and regulations as are their initiators, enforcers and resistors. Their identities are conditional states, prescribed and protected by cultural etiquette or convention. Hodgins' choice in character types reflects life as a tentative system, where identity is determined by the relation between an individual and his or her environment. These characters do not venture into the abyss or reflect on themselves to find meaning; rather, they turn their attention to the moon in ritualistic ululation as in *Howling at the Edge of Dawn*, (1997/8) (fig. 7) look to each other for definition as in *Women Waiting for Godot*, or wrap themselves in a suit to gain some significance as suggested by *If You've got it, Flash* it!,

14 Steiner offers the following insight: ”Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama, but not tragedy.” (Steiner 1961:8)

(1999) (fig. 8). Thus Hodgins' characters are, for the most part, expressive of pragmatic concerns, rather than metaphysical perplexities, closer to those of Pinter than those of Beckett.

The emphasis on stereotypical attire and caricature-like mannerisms in his treatment of figures tend towards descriptions of social role-play. The artist plays with a dual idiom of identity and masquerade as he explores such themes as dehumanisation, deception, pretention, vanity, self-importance and homogenisation within social interactions and positions.

The notion of social role-play is manifest in various examples such as *We're Just a Couple of Swells (We Stay in the Best Hotels)* (1997/8) (fig. 9), *Important Men with Important Cigars* (1997) (fig. 10), *If You've Got it, Flash it!* (1999) and in *King and Queen of Spain* (2004) (fig. 11). In *A Cozy Coven in Suburbia* (2000/2) (fig.12), and *Businessman on his Best Behaviour* (1996) (fig.13), for instance, a dual perspective on the figures is induced by the choice of treatment and the titles of the images. Both *A Cozy Coven in Suburbia* and *Businessman on his Best Behaviour* represent everyday scenes of people engaged in trivial activities. In both cases, the background information is specific to the extent that a particular type of context can be established, but it is also non-descript enough to be any location. The rendering of the figures is likewise developed sufficiently to distinguish the average age, race and class of the characters, but simplified or stylised to the extent that a further determination of their identity would be speculative. The figures are thus turned into specimens or even stereotypes of their age, class and race. The stereotypical nature of the scenes makes the forms simple to identify, but also sustains the characters' general anonymity as with the figures of *Madhouse with a View*. In these examples the titles act to emphasise the performative aspect of the scenes.

A Cozy Coven, for instance, displays a group of plump, congenial-looking women chatting with one another. Most of the image is rendered in deep blues and greens in contrast to the heads of the figures, which are treated in orange and ochre tones. When combined with the title, the rich blues and greens along with the shadowy tones in the background create the impression that the figures are not simply a group of frumpy chatty acquaintances, but perhaps that the viewer is privy to a secret gathering of housewives involved in conspiracy. The choice of the word “coven” has ominous or occultist connotations when applied to an assembly of women and thus invests the work with a sinister undercurrent that perhaps the image itself does not suggest.

The second example, *Businessman on his Best Behaviour*, shows a bald-headed businessman seated

in the centre of the frame on a sofa-like shape and dressed in a blue suit with a white-collared shirt and red tie, and having a drink. The figure resembles a marionette through its slender, stick-like limbs and rigid posture. The eyes of the figure gaze upwards out of the frame in a dream-like state. The features are further defined by the grin drawn onto the subject's face. The mouth is slightly parted displaying a bit of the businessman's tongue. These elements combine to create the impression that the figure is somehow innocently oblivious to being viewed. The phrase, 'on his best behaviour', is a cliché and its use is often ironic. Thus the title, *Businessman on his best behaviour*, hints that this is only a façade, that the businessman is not as benevolent or harmless as this image would suggest.

In both these examples Hodgins explores the dissonance in the appearance and the 'true' natures of the figures they present. In either case the titles impart an element of deception to the image. As a result, a sense of ambivalence toward the figures is elicited from the viewer. It is uncertain whether the characters are ordinary sincere citizens who have been falsely accused by the title or presenting a social façade and thus deceptive and untrustworthy.

It is worth noting, however, that the figures are not rendered with an awareness of the viewer and the possible assumptions that might be attached to their behaviour. As in these two examples, Hodgins generally presents his figures engaged in some or other activity to which the viewer is an invisible spectator. With the exception of images such as *The Tyrant in his Shirt Sleeves* (1993) (fig. 14) and *Mob* (2000) (fig. 15), his figures are never seen doing any actual thing that could be deemed immoral, but the titles nevertheless encourage suspicion toward their actions whether inside or outside the frame. Thus the titles often underline the prejudices associated with the stereotypical characters.

There seems to be a relation between Hodgins' use of prejudicial titles and Dürrenmatt's notion of inherited sin. Like the guilt of the inherited sin of fathers and forefathers that cannot be escaped in a modern paradigm, the figures in the images might not be guilty of or responsible for immoral action, but still cannot escape being the victims of social prejudice. The businessman is forever guilty of being a businessman as the housewives are of being housewives. In this sense they echo Pirandello's character's plight in that they are trapped by their identity. The dilemma, however, is presented in a comic style which renders it less as a state of despair and more as an idiosyncrasy within social relations.

Chapter 4

Hodgins and Absurd Power

Dutton, Esslin and Hirst identify the Frenchman Eugene Ionesco and Irishman Samuel Beckett as the forerunners of the Theatre of the Absurd. Esslin views their plays as expressing the mental anguish or intellectual despair of man's realisation of the absurd condition or the meaninglessness of his existence. Ionesco was a self-proclaimed Absurdist. Beckett, born in Ireland, lived most of his life in France and chose to adopt the language in much of his writing even though English was a perfectly accessible language in many parts of the world. Thus the association of Ionesco and Beckett with French intellectualism in the tradition of Sartre and Camus is fair as it does not seem to impair or distort a reading of their work. (Dutton 1986:13) Besides being of European dissent or choosing a European lifestyle, these playwrights were also much older than the other writers who have been mentioned in this discussion. Beckett, for instance, was born in 1906 and Ionesco in 1909, whereas Albee's birth year is as late as 1928, followed by Pinter in 1930 and Stoppard in 1937. The difference is not only twenty years, but also being a witness to advent of the First World War and having experience of the Great Depression during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Therefore it is not surprising that both Beckett and Ionesco's work, after the Second World War, would take on more of a pessimistic or hopeless tone and explore inability, instability, impotence and meaninglessness to a more noticeable extent than the latter playwrights.

Robert Hodgins was born in England in 1920, roughly ten years after Beckett and Ionesco and ten years before Pinter. The First World War had ended two years before Hodgins' birth and he was raised by a single, working class mother during the Depression. Due to financial difficulty, Edith put Hodgins in the National Children’s Home and orphanage where he would be placed under foster care. At age ten, Edith reclaimed her son and Hodgins found himself in Paddington, London. He describes this period of his life as “grim” and characterised by “emotional, psychological, and often physical squalor: bed bugs, a sofa as often as a bed”. (Hodgins 2002:22) In 1934, at the age of

fourteen, the pressures of working-class life demanded that he leave school and become, first, a delivery boy at a shop called the 'Libraire Populaire' and then an office worker in Soho. In 1938, Hodgins' South African uncle sent for him to live with him and his family in Cape Town. Here, Hodgins completed his Matric while working as an insurance clerk. Afterwards, he enlisted in the Union Defence Forces in 1940, during the Second World War, as a member of the transport division. Hodgins was first stationed in Kenya and then in Egypt, near Alexandria. After a disagreement with his CO, Hodgins was transferred to England. In 1945, the War ended and Hodgins was discharged. He subsequently enrolled in the Emergency Teachers Course in Camden Town London. Between 1947 and 1950, Hodgins taught in London's East End during the day and continued with compulsory art classes at Goldsmith College as part of his training. In 1950, he registered as a full-time student on recommendation from the school. Afterwards Hodgins returned to South Africa to lecture at the Pretoria Technical College School of Arts in 1954. (Hodgins 2002:24-27)

Hodgins' formative years coincide with the inter-World War period, which is marked by Civil War,[15] the Great Depression and particularly the rise of totalitarian regimes. The Wall Street crash of 1929 inaugurated the Great Depression felt in the 1930s. In 1931 and 1933, for instance, Britain and the USA respectively abandoned the Gold Standard. The wide-spread unemployment and poverty that resulted undermined the security of the recently established regimes in Europe and as Michael Howard posits, "shook the confidence in the validity of liberal democracy itself". (Howard 1998:109-110) The alternative offered by communism and the Soviet Union became increasingly attractive to the organised working classes as well as members of the Western intelligentsia. The Fascist regime in Italy, founded by Benito Mussolini in 1922, was concurrently gaining momentum in staunch opposition to liberal democracy. (Howard 1998:110) These newly established systems of reform were built around charismatic leaders, the likes of whom had not been seen throughout history. Figures such as Benito Mussolini, Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler established cult-like leaderships by the use of intimidation, terror and shameless propaganda or as Richard Stites puts it, "fictions of popular rule masking a ruthless totalitarian behemoth". (Stites, 1998:125) What Stalin and Hitler managed to achieve during their leadership in terms of infrastructure and military developments was by no means unimpressive. Stalin transformed the industrial and agricultural structure of the Soviet Union with his Five Year Plan. Great factories, hydroelectric dams, canals and cities appeared overnight. (Stites 1998:124) Hitler's ambition, on the other hand, was to

15 In 1920 the Anglo-Irish treaty was signed to create the Irish Free State within the British Empire, which divided Ireland into the dominantly Protestant north and the largely Catholic south and ensued in a Civil War. 1930 saw the Revolution in Argentina and in 1936 the army revolt under General Franco marked the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. (Howard 1998:109-111)

establish Germany as a world power beyond the scale of his imperial predecessors' wildest fantasies. He started by creating, at least what seemed to be, economic stability in the country; eradicating unemployment and restoring German esteem, both locally and with international relations before beginning the process of reclaiming territories that were seized under the Treaty of Versailles. (Howard 1998:110)

However, the progress made by the Soviet Union and Germany under these leaderships came at a human cost. Stites cites Stalin as “the most powerful and murderous leader in all of the twentieth century”. (Stites 1998:123) Known to have had many real and imagined enemies and a vast yearning for vengeance against anyone he suspected of treason, whether commoner or political rival, Stalin's growing paranoia culminated in the assassination of Sergey Kirov in 1933 and the beginning of the Great Purge in 1936. Millions of innocent civilians were acused of some or other form of treason and died in prisons, torture chambers or in labour camps known as the Gulag. (Stites 1998:124) Hitler's improvement to Germany, at the cost of democracy, seemed to benefit nearly all sections of German society, except the Jewish population. Against them, Hitler “unleashed a persecution of a brutality unexampled in Western Europe”. (Howard 1998:110) Four years after Hitler proclaimed the beginning of the Third Reich (1934), with himself as the Führer, the Nazi pogrom against Jews reached full force with phenomena such as the *Kristallnacht* or 'Night of Broken Glass'. Millions of Jews were sent to concentration camps where they slaved, starved or were put to death in gas chambers. (Howard 1998:110-112)

The events of the inter-World War period and the actions of its leaders informed the post Second World War perception of power. Post WW2 theatre, generally speaking, expresses a disillusionment with and apprehension toward power and powerful figures. This is most obvious when examining the playwrights' responses or revisions of classical tragedies. Lamont, in response to Ionesco's *Macbett*, for instance, posits:

> The French dramatist has read Shakespeare's play with the twentieth-century apprehension of the ruthless mendacity of our leaders, and then shifted in revealing ways episodes and characters in order to bring out in his 'pretense' the deceitful reality of those who, claiming to serve history, serve their own ends. (Lamont 1973:234)

As mentioned earlier, Karl Guthke posits that the themes and problems that previously appeared in tragedies had been subsumed by farce in a post WW2 climate. Thus, this section will examine examples of Hodgins' depictions of power and compare these to Ionesco's farcical revision of the

Shakespearean tragedy, *Macbeth*, entitled *Macbett*. The writing will firstly address the concept of 'absurd' power or the tension between the superhuman and inhuman that appears embodied in figures such as Stalin or Hitler by examining the painting, *A Beast Slouches* (1986) (fig. 16).

A Beast Slouches embodies a dual vision of the depicted figure, between terror and pity and between the superhuman and inhuman. Rayda Becker describes this work by stating that:

> In *A Beast Slouches*, a large grotesque bandaged creature, half-human half-pylon, stumbles across a devastated landscape punctuated only on the horizon by a line of vehicles reminiscent of the trails of refugees on the run in the many World War II movies. This is not some polite alteration, but a distortion that can only be described – and understood – in the vernacular of war. Colours are harsh and unpleasant. (Becker, R. 2002:38-9)

Various writers interpreted this image as a metaphor for the brutality, single-mindedness and desperation of the apartheid government and anticipatory of its inevitable end. This association is partly due to the title, which is derived from a quotation of the 1919 Yeats poem, "The Second Coming"[16]; "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem waiting to be born". (Yeats 1933:211) Yeats' poem presents an apocalyptic view of the future in which the power of Christian love will be replaced by a more brutal, destructive force. As Alasdair Macrae posits: "The revelation granted to the poet is not the millennial vision of St John the Divine but a 'rough beast', the anti-Christ who embodies the reverse of the now-spent Christian gyre." (Macrae 1995:155) The beast is capable of slouching before it is born because the new cycle is already present in the Christian cycle. Thus the beast represents an imminent threat. Yeats cited the poem as his prediction of what was to result in 1936 at the height of totalitarianism in Germany and the Soviet Union. (Macrae 1995:156) The opening lines present the growing directionlessness and loss of impetus of Christianity through the metaphor of the falcon that has lost touch with the falconer (Cowell 1969:69):

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.

(p.210)

16 "The Second Coming" introduces Yeats' prophetic theory on the birth and decline of civilisations as represented by cones or, as Yeats posits, "gyres". The analogy suggests that if society were a cone around which a thread is coiled and the thread unwielded from the top or point of the cone, it would cause the cone to spin. As the thread unspins towards the bottom of the cone the speed at which the cone revolves would decrease as the cone's circumference increases. The unwielding thread, however, is attached to the bottom of another cone. Thus, while the one cone is losing power, another is gaining momentum. This other force, in Yeats' view, is antithetically divergent from the initial force. (Cowell 1969:69)

Hodgins' description of his beast takes on a less prophetic or mystical tone, but echoes the sentiment of the beast as a destructive force. The artist describes it as:

> ...the kind of guy who only knows one way to organise his life – direct brutal action. Beats his kids, business rivals, socialised rugby. The bandages have something to do with those figures Bacon uses and that hand that has the faintest hint of being a bandaged penis is a reference to a mate in the army in North Africa who used to visit the army brothel in Alexandria, after which he had to wrap his penis in an antiseptic bandage as a medical precaution. As far from the intimate pleasure of sex as you can imagine – which is the point of it in my painting. (Williamson 1989:54)

Hodgins' beast is an archetype of testosterone-driven aggression. The hunched-over figure is reminiscent of the pose adopted in American football and by South African rugby players. The monstrous figure pushes forward with what seems like a complete disregard for his own well-being as he heads toward his goal. To Becker, the pose brings that of William Blake's *Nebuchadnezzar* (1795) to mind. Blake's monoprint with pen and watercolour is an illustration of the Biblical monarch after he had lost his mind. The figure is seen dragging itself or crawling on the ground on its hands and knees like an animal.

Hodgins' caustic description of the archetype expresses disgust and reprehension at mindless abuses of power and a constant resort to violence. Yet, when observing the bandaged colossus, the viewer experiences conflicting emotions of pity and fear. The stylisation of the figure dehumanises it to a huge and aggressive war-monster, the onslaught of which is not directed towards any particular end, but geared to continue until its own self-destruction. However, by reflecting on the figure's damaged and mutilated form, the viewer cannot help but feel empathy for the monster's injured condition punctuated by its isolated surroundings. The creature seems pathetic as it hobbles forward in the middle of nowhere on its pylon-leg.

Hodgins' beast seems to encapsulate the paradoxical self-destructive ambition of Stalin and Hitler in history and Shakespeare's Macbeth in literature. The Shakespearean character is presented as propelled by a fantasy of total dominance that can never be obtained or never gratified. As Perry describes: "Macbeth (...) strives for the crown only to find that it is an approximate goal standing unsatisfactorily for a fantasy of total autonomy." (Perry 2000:90) Like Macbeth, the beast's determination to dominate overrides all reason and in his pursuit of his irrational desires, the character is reduced to an animal or dehumanised state as he drives himself to his own end. The

absurdity of this condition is something Macbeth realises towards the end of the play as it concludes with a tragic expression of loss of meaning in his celebrated lines:

> Tomorrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty deaths, Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more; it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.
>
> *Macbeth*, 5.5.19-28

Unlike Macbeth, the beast does not seem at all conscious of its tragic condition or capable of reflecting on itself. Macbeth, as a more complex, developed character, is to a greater extent believable and thus solicits an empathetic response from the audience. Therefore whilst Macbeth can be viewed as a tragic figure the beast remains archetypal or inhumane.

Hodgins' unsympathetic treatment of the beast reflects something of a disillusionment with political ambition that can be compared to Alfred Jarry's deviant revision of the Macbeth character in *Ubu Roi*. Perry suggests that Jarry's *Ubu Roi* “reduces the Macbeth story to a farce of unchecked infantile appetite” (Perry 2000:86). Similar to Hodgins' beast, Ubu is a killing machine; his violent action follows without deliberation, retrospection or conscience. Like Macbeth Ubu Roi is plagued by eternal dissatisfaction. Ubu is always hungry, no amount of food is ever enough. Neither does his desire to conquer, suppress nor kill ever diminish. Moreover, he continually suffers from indigestion, evidence that his appetites for food as well as power “are driven by sheer greediness and divorced from any pragmatic end (satiation of the body, pleasure, political influence etc)”. (Perry 2000:90) Perry refers to Ubu and Macbeth as characters confronted by the “paradox of mimetic desires”. (Perry 2000:91) He suggests that the characters' aspirations are determined by competition and that they are thus driven by their competitive natures towards total autonomy. However, the closer they get to complete autonomy, the more competitors they have annihilated, the less desirable the end appears because the less competition there is. Therefore the characters' need to dominate over others is detached from any material or empirical goal and in needing to exercise this desire they are reduced to enslaved automatons. Perry reiterates:

> Consequently, as each protagonist aspires toward his impossible fantasy of perfect

> autonomy, he can do so only by exercising the kind of power over others that comes with domination in the social sphere. The gap between aspiration and action renders political power absurd. What's more, the need endlessly to exert power over others in search of this fantasy transforms both men into dehumanised killing machines. (Perry 2000:91)

In pursuit of unobtainable ambitions these characters destroy their humanity and propel themselves toward their ultimate doom. Shakespeare treats this self-destructive paradox of ambition as a tragic condition in Macbeth. According to Perry, in deviance of Shakespearean perceived aggrandisement of the protagonist, Jarry consistently conflates his Ubu character's ambition for power and ruthlessness with his gluttonous nature throughout *Ubu Roi*. As Perry describes: "He pursues office with the same boisterous infantile greed that makes him gobble up Mere Ubu's cooking before the king arrives in the play's second scene." (Perry 2000:88) Thus the political ambition of the character is shown to be inextricable from his base cravings or desires. Jarry's Rabelaisian humour demotes Shakespearean ambition to the most mundane or commonplace lower bodily desires and thus functions as a rhetoric of de-idealisation. In opposition to Shakespeare's heroic idealisation of Macbeth's condition, Jarry renders the 'paradox of mimetic desires' as a farce aimed at the bourgeois to ridicule conventionality and materialism and thus presents Macbeth as a buffoon character in the form of Ubu Roi.

Jarry's socio-critical, satiric treatment of his central character has specific moral implications. Jarry's reduction of the Ubu character to a monster bent on domination is meant as a criticism of bourgeois values and explores the effect of social convention on the individual. It elaborates on the extent to which institutionalised conduct is capable of constricting free-thought, rationality and understanding and potentially reducing the individual to a primitive Ubu state. Thus *Ubu Roi* proposes that the establishment or acceptance of social conventions leads to mindlessness, a loss of free will and unconscious evil behaviour. The play therefore sees the resistance of social convention as the solution to evil or immorality.

In a post Second World War paradigm, however, evil becomes a more entangled notion, evident in Dürrenmatt's supposition of inherited sin and bureaucratic immorality. This more complex approach to the identification of evil seems embodied in Hodgins' beast. The beast is a personification of senseless aggression and brutality. However, its only victim within the frame appears to be the beast itself. Thus the self-contained paradoxical condition of the beast does not present a clear-cut attitude toward notions of evil. Hodgins' beast is a comic character, but the image does not take the form of ridicule of sportsmen, ambition or power by presenting a buffoon character. Although Hodgins uses

phallic imagery to conflate the beast's ambition with his base desires, he maintains the grandeur of the figure by its sheer size in relation to the objects in the background. Likewise, the figure appears dehumanised by the title and caricature-like rendering, but the pain suggested by its mutilated form sustains a degree of empathetic response from the viewer. Unlike Jarry's Ubu then, the beast is not a buffoon character, nor like Macbeth is it a tragic figure. The beast appears both powerful and pathetic. The image thus presents the viewer with a situation that demands a tragic response, the protagonist of which can only be approached from an ambivalent, essentially tragicomic position.

Killing Machines: Macbeth, Ubu and Macbett

Hodgins' relation to Jarry continues through the artist's various renditions of Jarry's Ubu character. Hodgins became familiar with Jarry's de-idealised power figure through the painting of Rouault and incorporated it into oil and tempura paintings during the late 1970s. Analogous to Hodgins' beast, the employment of the evil Ubu archetype carries a different significance to the mode presented by the original Jarry text. Hodgins employs Ubu as different forms of evil throughout his oeuvre. The artist describes the Ubu character as; "... not only ignoble, he is a familiar historical figure; the clown in power, the clown who seems so funny that it's easy to forget he's evil...Nero, Goering, Idi Amin..." (Hodgins quoted by Powell 1996:3)

In 1997 Hodgins collaborated with William Kentridge and Deborah Bell on an exhibition of prints, entitled *Ubu:+-101*. The exhibition was intended to mark the centenary of Jarry's premier performance of *Ubu Roi*. In preparation for the project, Hodgins read Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* as well as Roger Shattuck's *Banquet Years* and the *Selected works of Alfred Jarry*. Hodgins titled the series, *Ubu Centenaire: Histoire d'un Farceur Criminel*, which consisted of eight graphics printed by Malcolm Christian (Caversham Press). (Doepel 1997:03) In this frequently cited series Hodgins appropriated the Ubu character as an agent of corruption, dishonesty, opportunism and genocide.

In one of the prints, a stone lithograph, entitled *No.7 South Africa -197? - Interrogator* (1997) (fig. 17), Hodgins employs stark contrasts and shrill, sharply drawn lines to present a chilling depiction of Ubu as the personification of institutionalised violence. The image contains a bald, cone-headed Ubu seated in the centre of the frame behind a desk with a dossier labled "16' DOSS." in front of him. He is dressed in a white laboratory coat with stationary in his pocket and a button shirt and tie underneath. Ubu is seen staring out at the viewer, his eyes obscured behind dark sunglasses, which amplify his insidious nature by simulating one-way mirrors. The ominous quality of the image is

further punctuated by the inclusion of everyday objects in the frame. The desk is filled with what appears to be an ashtray, pack of cigarettes and a thermo-flask. There is a watch on the wall indicating that it is six-thirty. These inclusions introduce a dissonance in the work between horror and the everyday. The implied horror and the mundane contents - the clock, flask, pocket full of stationary, cigarettes and ashtray - create a dissonance between realities and accounts for the detached, unnerving tenor of the work. Next to the desk, on the right, Hodgins includes a graphic of a circle with a cross in the middle.

As the title suggests, the lithograph is based on events that occurred in apartheid South Africa. After the 1994 democratic elections a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to investigate the human rights violations committed under the old regime. One of the major culprits identified in these investigations was a Captain Swanepoel, who, according to Doepel, tortured and interrogated civilians suspected of treason or terrorist activity. One of his victims, Hugh Lewin, went on to publish his experience with Captain Swanepoel in the interrogation room in the novel *Bandiet*. The book had originally been banned in South Africa, Hodgins, however, obtained a copy of it through a friend who smuggled it into the country. (Doepel 1997:65) The artist directly refers to the text by including the circle with a cross in it and the thermo flask. Lewin relates that Swanepoel and other police officials drew a circle on the floor and forced him to stand in it until his entire body was in pain in an attempt to gain information from him. Swanepoel watched and participated in Lewin's interrogation and casually enjoyed the contents of his picnic basket. (Lewin 1976:24-5)

With this print, then, Hodgins expresses disillusionment with South African law enforcement by conflating the concept of police authority with that of Ubu. By derisively replacing an authoritarian figure with the archetypal Ubu, Hodgins does not defy a particular police figure head, but derides a type of law enforcement agency where the means always justify the ends. Similarly, by conflating the concept of human rights violations with the banal or every day, Hodgins undermines the dramatic potential of the depiction, thereby rendering this form of evil mundane, uninspired and pathetic. With this image, Hodgins thus expresses a disgust at police brutality and inhumanity. As Ivor Powell reiterates:

> To those living in South Africa at the time, Hodgins' Ubus provided some of the most potent – and most imitated – of images produced of the human condition in a country torn apart by internal conflict. They expressed a quality of disgust, a wasteland of values that were deeply resonant of the time. (Powell 1996:03)

Moreover, Hodgins continually employs Ubu as a symbol of evil throughout his oeuvre in various guises and positions, ranging from a lecherous art teacher to a political sycophant. By placing Ubu within the realm of stereotypes, Hodgins suggests the institutionalisation of Ubu. Powell explains:

> Ubu then is more personification than personage. He is a form of evil. As his circumstances alter, so does his appearance – or perhaps more accurately, his disguise. In one painting Ubu is the Lord Mayor dressed in his robes of office. In another he is the capitalist involved in unspeakable negotiations with the military. Yet another has him seducing an equally untrustworthy black politician. He is the commander supervising massacres on Alexanderplatz in Berlin. He is the overfed flesh-monger, sharply dressed in the Last Judgement Steam Baths, where Michelangelo's *ignudi* cavort in prostitutional complicity. Ubu is the shifting and shifty face of power. His eyes are almost invariably averted, often multiply furtive. His face swims through as many styles, techniques and masks as does the face of power in history. (Powell 1986:05)

The implications of Hodgins' treatment of Ubu diverges from Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in that Hodgins treats Ubu as a social convention throughout human history rather than suggesting that bourgeois social convention is responsible for the creation of Ubu. Moreover, Ubu's appearance in more mundane settings, such as in *Ubu Boxing Promoter*, (2001/2) (fig. 18), *Ubu and the Art School Nude*, (1984) (fig. 19) and *Ubu and the Sad Old Men*, (1984) (fig. 20), suggest that his employment is not directed solely towards the criticism or deviance of figures in esteemed positions, but reiterates the commonplace occurrence of evil. Thus Hodgins' employment of Ubu does not function to ridicule or satirise, but captures a sense of disenchantment with the status quo.

The social import of Hodgins' approach to abuse of power corresponds with a post Second World War conception of evil, particular the view expressed by Ionesco's revision of Shakespeare's classic tragedy *Macbeth*, entitled *Macbett*. Both Hodgins' Ubus and Ionesco's *Macbett* approach evil as an ubiquitous, ever-present force. Ionesco's rendition of Shakespeare, like that of Jarry, maintains the central paradox of *Macbeth*, but revises the story in a manner that is specifically critical of Shakespeare's aggrandisement of powerful figures and the effect of political ambition in ruthless violence and mass killings. As Perry elaborates: "*Macbett* is intended to be a doubly radical revision of Shakespeare, eager both to illustrate absurdist elements in Shakespeare's play, and to render ridiculous those heroic aspects of the play that might obscure the meaninglessness of its violence." (Perry 2000:85)

Ionesco presents Macbett as one of many two-dimensional automaton characters that form part of a

larger political machine. Macbett exhibits his own mechanical nature by bouts of repetitive dialogue and cliché language. Similar to Hodgins' beast and Ubus, the severe stylisation or simplification of his central character is comparable to the writing of Alfred Jarry. According to Curtis Perry, Ionesco describes his Macbett as somewhere between Shakespeare and Alfred Jarry's Ubu Rex. Ionesco's *Macbett*, like Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, stands in opposition to some of the ideals that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* propounds. Where Jarry renders Macbeth a farce to ridicule middle-class convention, Ionesco relegates Macbeth's heroic aspirations for power to the conventional and collective.

Ionesco's Macbett is a decentralised protagonist as he is represented by a collection of characters. Thus Macbett is shown to operate within a bureaucratic system where ambition for power is not unusual to this specific character, but something he shares with the characters around him, Banco, Glamis and Candor. This reduction or dispersal of the protagonist's character traits diminishes any potential empathy from the audience towards Ionesco's Macbett. It simultaneously stresses the conventionality of political ambition. (Perry 2000:95-6) The evil of greedy ambition is therefore shown to be inherent in everyone that cannot be eradicated by the death of one individual. As such the play does not offer the audience the moment of catharsis at the knowledge that the evil has been removed and balance has been restored that is associated with tragedy. Instead, after Macbett's death he is simply replaced by an equally tyrannical figure, Macol. (Scott 1989:88) Ionesco's *Macbett*, then, presents evil as an all-pervasive condition and as such does not offer any conclusions or resolutions to the problem. It similarly undermines the Shakespearean aspiration for grandeur or absolute power by suggesting that ambition is not a potentially tragic trap faced only by special, chosen individuals, but that it is a common or mundane attribute that human beings collectively share and are thus collectively guilty for. (Scott 1989:84-7)

The presentation of the malevolent protagonist in both Ionesco and Hodgins relies on establishing distrust or suspicion in the viewer. Ionesco's employment of a composite vision of evil for Macbett and the performative aspect of Hodgins' depiction of Ubu underlines a disjuncture between appearance and reality. For instance, Ionesco's dispersal of the protagonists' traits means that the central character is reflected in the other characters to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish between them. Scott, for example, mentions that Macbett and Banco reflect each other to the extent that their identities become indifferentiable and it is not until they appear together on stage for Archduke Duncan's entrance that the audience is assured that they are separate characters. (Scott 1989:26-7) In this way, Ionesco's representation of political deception and trickery is formally communicated and the audience's apprehension toward the characters is established. (Scott 1989:82)

Similarly, by donning Ubu in different guises or presenting him in various forms, Hodgins invests his Ubu with a dualist nature and creates a dissonance between Ubu's presented and actual character. Yet, whether Ubu is displayed in a laboratory coat, military uniform or business suit, the viewer is assured of his intrinsic brutal or base nature and his eternal ruthlessness and approaches his various manifestations with a degree of discernment.

Chapter 5

The Comic as a Vehicle for The Tragic

Both Ionesco's *Macbett* and Hodgins' depictions of Ubu approach evil as a universal phenomenon by depicting human experience through archetypal figures and situations. In addition, both artists engage with the metaphysical problem of evil but do not offer any solutions to the dilemmas they come across within this frame. Ionesco's employment of archetypes and clichés posits a belief in universal truths, but as Scott suggests, the playwright is not convinced that any ideology or philosophy is capable or has ever been capable of eradicating evil. (Scott 1989:87) Scott suggests that, rather than a response to a political condition, Ionesco's Macbett is more reflective of his personal "pessimistic philosophy" which entails that "there is no escape from the evil, since even its antidotes involve destruction." (Scott 1989:87) To Scott, the following quote illustrates Ionesco's views:

> When I stroll through a peaceful meadow it never occurs to me that all those plants are struggling for their share of living space; nor that the roots of those magnificent trees, as they spread deeper through the ground, cause pain, bring tragedy and death. Equally, every step I take is a killer. Then I tell myself that the beauty of the world is a delusion. (Scott 1989:87)[17]

With this statement, Ionesco attests to the hopelessness of identifying and extinguishing evil and suffering as both are pervasive conditions in that any action or creation necessarily implies a degree of destruction. Scott suggests that Ionesco presents the hopeless vision of life 'signifying nothing' which is testified to by Shakespeare's Macbeth. (Scott 1989:87) However, Ionesco's distress does not manifest itself as an expression of indifference towards the problem of evil or suffering. Far from an apathetic response to the human condition, Ionesco's statements as well as his *Macbett* testify to a state of ambivalence toward these concerns. Similar to Hodgins' Ubus, Ionesco's *Macbett*

17 Ionesco, E. (1958) 'Why Do I Write?' in *Plays*, vol. XI, trans. Watson, D. and Williams, C. London: John Calder Quoted in (Scott 1989:87)

does not dismiss the violent effect of power, political agents or systems of reform by simple derision or mockery, but simulates farcical characters in a situation of tragic implications.
Ionesco's disillusioned perception toward ideals appears is shared by Hodgins. In 1994 Powell inquired about where Hodgins' "fascination with evil and sadness" in his [then] recent exhibition originated from, to which Hodgins responded:

> One thing one has always fought against is this middle-class loftiness...that all human nature is fundamentally evil and what can you do about it. Because one was a creature of the thirties, one always assumed that if you jiggled the right controls you would at least minimise it. Well, we've been jiggling the controls for the past hundred years and what the fuck's happened – seventy or eighty years... since 1914. [Powell, I. 1984:47]

As is evident from this quote, Hodgins reflects a sense of despair at the state of the world. Hodgins' presentation of evil is analogous to Ionesco's *Macbett* in that it offers no escape. However, as seen from these specific examples, both Ionesco and Hodgins employ a comic or caricature form to communicate their apprehensions. A comedic rather than tragic approach to the representation of reality is yet another hallmark of late modern theatre. The pervasive comedic rather than tragic representation of reality in post Second World War theatre points to a further divergence between these playwrights and those of the Renaissance's conception of reality. Late modern theorists take a sceptical approach toward the presupposed order of the world that tragedies rely on. Tragedies are founded on the idea that fate is an unstoppable and inevitable force that overrides any reason or understanding that mankind could arrive at about the nature of existence.[18] Fate, therefore, operates outside the boundaries of socially determined justice or values. Thus, for the tragic vision to be realised there needs to be an amount of social agreement about what is just and what is valuable. Tragedies commonly leave the viewer with questions about what is right and who is to blame. Thus by problematising justice or righteousness, tragedy fundamentally questions the possibility to determine justice or value. Instead of asking "Are we capable of knowing what is just or right?", the modern playwright struggles with the question "Is there even value in attempting to know what is just or what is right?" Modern theatre thus does not only doubt mankind's ability to reason about justice or values such as seen in tragedy, but is ambivalent about the meaningfulness of such attempts. Tragedies are bound to the concept of a *meaningful loss*, the meaningfulness of which is seen questioned or doubted by post Second World War playwrights. As Styan, referring to post Second World War theatre, remarks:

18 As Steiner posits: "Tragic drama tells us that the sphere of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance." (Steiner 1961:8)

> Their drama is that of a culture in which man, rightly or wrongly, has placed himself at the hub of the world. He has no sure God to leap to, or else he will not leap without first arguing the point. It is a drama of human vanity in which 'hell has no vastness'. It is a drama which must exclude tragedy while there is no apparent virtue in rising above the sordidness of the human condition or in trying to reach a decisive conclusion about its problems. (Styan 1962:290)

However, as Dürrenmatt posits, comedy is capable of approaching the void of meaninglessness. Comedy does not need meaning or certainty to take shape and as such can be used to create the structures upon which 'meaning' can be built. Dürrenmatt explains:

> The task of art, in so far as art can have a task at all, and hence also the task of drama today, is to create something concrete, something that has form. This can be accomplished best by comedy. Tragedy, the strictest genre in art, presupposes a formed world. Comedy – in so far as it is not just satire of a particular society as in Molière – supposes an unformed world, a world being made and turned upside down, a world about to fold like ours. (Dürrenmatt 1958:30)

Foster echoes Dürrenmatt when she states that:

> Comedy, unlike tragedy, does not need a preexisting order, for it typically creates form out of chaos, and comic invention can shape its own audience. Comedy, too, can still reach us because it is attuned to the “grotesque” (the expression of the “paradoxical”) that is so much part of the world of the atom bomb. (Foster 2004:31)

The painting *Madhouse with a view of Tyburn* as well as the portraits of Ubu relate a tragic period in human history in a comedic, caricature-like vernacular which does not claim expertise or certainty. Hodgins' use of comic stylising serves to inform the viewer about the tradition of the madhouse or historical abuses of power, in the detached manner with which we approach collective history. Yet, as opposed to satire and other forms of caricature, the style in which these images are executed does not serve to ridicule or dilute the impact, but in its crude subjective form echoes or embodies the emotional resonances with which these periods are recollected and remembered. This contradictory, emotionally raw quality is a product of Hodgins' use of emotive colour and expressive handling of paint. Thus the mode of application and selection of colour in the paint relates a felt immediacy, suggesting that this history had been internalised before it was acted out on the canvas. It is this material reality, or material tragedy with which the audience is compelled to engage. Therefore, the use of a comic, *caricature-like language* signals an apprehensive approach to the content, a lack of commitment to the reality of the image and contests the *material reality* of the image. The combination of emotional registers in Hodgins' style makes it impossible for the audience to

experience the content with total empathy or complete indifference, but rather to react with ambivalence towards the image or content.

Beyond the stylistic ambivalence expressed in Hodgins' image, the choice of contextual frame shifts the content even further from the comedic to the tragic as the events become more specific. Thus the situation the characters of *Madhouse with a View* find themselves in becomes tragic and as a result of this, the viewer is more capable of sympathising with their predicament, even though the characters themselves remain faceless, unreal and perhaps laughable. In post Second World War tragicomedy this dualist response to the characters develops as the play progresses. As the condition in which the characters find themselves becomes more and more real, the audience cannot help but realise the bitter irony inherent in these characters and simultaneously sympathise with their predicament whilst finding them buffoonish. As Styan reiterates:

> The argument suggests that, as the structure of tragicomic action grows complex and ambivalent, so must the structure of the character: … This kind of double response arises when our initial recognition of the clown in his traditional role of wit and joker is denied and contradicted, when he is shown as capable of suffering the pains of mundane life, pains that could not have mattered to him or to us in his artificial character. (Styan 1962:270)

Post Second World War theatre is marked by the use of comedy as a means with which to approach meaninglessness and hence employs comedy as a foundation for the representation of potentially tragic themes or content. Hodgins' comic characters evoke the same ambivalent attitude towards them from the viewer as do modern tragicomic characters. They engage in frivolous or trivial activity and appear two-dimensional, ridiculous or buffoonish, but through his choice of textual frames become more complex or ambiguous. Hodgins can therefore be said to employ a formally comic foundation with which to approach the potentially tragic.

This type of emotional complexity arises in consideration of Hodgins' figures as discussed in relation to *A Cozy Coven* and *Businessman on His Best Behaviour* with regard to social prejudice. In *Three Characters in Search of an Artist* the double response develops from the presented disjuncture in the discourses of power within art valuation and in *A Conservative Still Life* toward the notion of possible deviance within the genre. As a consequence of the analogies drawn in this dissertation and the resulting associations and the resemblances that have been identified between Hodgins, the tradition of tragicomedy and the work of some modern playwrights who form part of the genre, Hodgins' production appears to be an expression of a loss of certainty or stability in

established forms and ideologies that is so symptomatic of a late modernist perception. His work shows an ambivalent attitude towards the possibility of creating meaning and meaningfulness as indicated by the continuous displays of disparity between values or ideals as well as between the oppositional states of engagement and detachment exhibited by *Madhouse with a View*, *Three Characters* and *A Conservative Still Life*. As suggested by Styan in his analysis of tragicomedy, this kind of ambivalence often lies at the core of the genre. What is also evident from these examples is that Hodgins' production reflects an awareness of deliberation or debate within the various fields of culture, art and politics, but avoids settling on a position or assuming a particular stance. The work thus explores conditions of crisis within and between these fields, without offering a possible solution to or a conclusive position on these states.

Masters: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts, 2011

The exhibition is titled, 'Masters: A tragicomedy in Two Acts' after Beckett's *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. Beckett's play is perhaps the most well-known example of tragicomedy in the twentieth century. Besides providing an academic bridge, the title echoes a break that occurred during the course of my masters degree between supervisors and dissertations and signals the completion of the first part of the degree.

I selected to investigate the field of tragicomedy or Absurdist theatre because my work has always had an off-beat quality. I also enjoy the notion of the staged painting as it is presented in baroque and classical work. The work on exhibition is all a bit staged. There are two main themes that run throughout; the one is conventionality and the other is medicine. In this show I played with conventionality in terms of a few different genres of painting: the still life, the studio, the family portrait, but also with conventionality as it relates to the notion of domestic painting.

The exhibition was held on the third of February 2011 at the Wits Substation. The Substation consists of two spaces, a large high-walled main exhibition space which is connected by a doorway and steps to a top space that is much smaller and more intimate. I employed the larger area to display my paintings and the top space for the preparatory work. The preparatory work consists of watercolours, pencil and ink drawings and small acrylic and water-based enamel paintings on paper. Some of the works on paper, (fig. xx), (fig. xxxii) and (fig. xlviii), are preliminary sketches to the oil paintings on show in the main space and others are plans for paintings that did not end up being made or selected for the exhibition, for instance, (fig. xxvii) and (fig. xlvii).I do not treat my preparatory works preciously. They simply provide an opportunity to consider whether compositions for planned work would be balanced, to experiment with colour combinations and test tonal contrasts. In most cases the drawings either get damaged from being handled while I work on the larger oil paintings or I ruin them after I have decided against developing the images into oil paintings. Similarly, some of them are incomplete, because I could tell from what was already in the image that it would work on a larger scale. The series of ink and watercolour drawings seen in (fig. xxxiii) was intended to be made into larger scale drawings. However, on reflection I decided that they have an emblematic quality that on a larger scale could look poster-like and would not suit the atmosphere I wanted to create with show. The work in the upstairs space should thus be approached as a by-product of the oil paintings. They are framed in aluminium box frames to make them look more like artefacts than artworks made with a specific intent.

The paintings in the main exhibition space were not curated in a narrative manner; there is no set format or chronology in which the work should be viewed. The two side walls were each divided into three sections by supporting beams. In each section I attempted to place the works which most complemented each other together and maintain the general balance in canvas size of the show. This was important as I was aware that the examiners would enter the exhibition from the top space where the preliminary work was on show, whereas the gallery goers would enter through the bottom doors. Thus the biggest work, the two part painting *No Thanks, Fine Thanks* (2010-11) (fig. vii) was placed on the side wall, on the left if you entered from below and to the right if you entered from above. By its sheer size, the viewers' eyes would first be drawn to this work, even if it was not the first painting visible from the doorway. This work was meant as a statement piece to the exhibition, a commentary on the other work on display. Due to the height of the work, the lights caused quite a bit of glare on the top image when looking up at it, but I thought it suited the interrogation quality of the image. Standing at the top of the stairs, however, one could see the painting clearly.

The work is painted from my own photographs of a mock psychological interrogation, my own version of the madhouse. The colours are kept cool with tints of aquamarine, cobalt blues and viridian greens. The subject is seen in close-up, dressed in a purple top and white night gown. The figure defies the interrogation in the first image and in the second confronts it in a crazed state. The contrast in the images is high so as to communicate the harshness of the spotlight. Metaphorically, light communicates some sort of spirituality in painting such as in the paintings of Rembrandt. It is also associated with the after-life; where one 'walks into the light'. In this instance, the figure is avoiding looking into the light in denial of truth or death or both.

The theme of denial as it is explored in this work, to me, recalls the ambivalent impulse I investigated in Hodgins' painting. Both are 'in between' states, states of uncertainty and instability. The work on show was produced during a period of instability and uncertainty and reflects the sort of change and adaptivity that became necessary for the navigation of this terrain.

The works are all specific in that they were not created using a standardised approach in terms of style or format. I attempted to use my repertoire of techniques to better communicate the type of atmosphere that I felt the images called for. I approach paint as a visual language in the tradition and in admiration of artists such as Hodgins, Hockney and Kitaj, rather than as an aesthetic identity. When this project started I had the opportunity of meeting with Hodgins for interview on a couple of occasions. These interviews turned out to be quite irrelevant to the dissertation. I did, however,

ask him about his choice of style. He had discussed it with Powell in a number of texts which I felt reached a sort of conclusion about his approach. His response was that he does not have a style. On further inquiry, he said that if he does have a style, it is not something he would admit or acknowledge to himself and that these questions are the work of art writers and critics. His answer surprised me and perhaps in part motivated my research. In contrast to Hodgins, I feel it is safe to say that my style is a form of visual poetry based in classicism.

I painted from found images, from life and my own photographs. My choice in approach depends on the sort of atmosphere that I want the paintings to have. I am still experimenting in this collection. For instance, the family portrait is from a photograph in *You Magazine*, which to me, echoes a particular type of domesticity. The studio study is from life; it is meant to ground the exhibition to a specific context or an actual time and place. Quite a few images in this exhibition are from a medical textbook from the 1940s. The displacement of time renders them strange to start with. They are also in black and white, so they allowed me to control the colour pallet completely, without having any preconception of the original. As mentioned, the two-part painting *No Thanks, Fine Thanks* is from my own photographs. It remained relatively photographic, which I felt better communicated the impression of psychological experimentation.

Besides playing with different conventions, the work on show all in one way or another explores existential themes. The painting *7th Floor University Corner* (2009)(fig. viii), for instance, is of my studio at Wits, which is located on the 7th floor in University corner. The image was painted at night after I had just moved in from my previous space on the 4th floor. Having chosen to paint the painting from life, helped me capture the experience of hyper awareness of my relation to this new space. Motifs of alienation and anxiety permeate throughout existential writing and I found this change a productive opportunity to visually explore these themes. As part of the exhibition, the studio portrait relates the overall production of the work to a specific context. It signals that the work was made in a studio at university and mostly at night.

The painting that accompanied the studio portrait on the one wall was *Family Portrait (You magazine)* (2009)(fig. ix). Apart from appearing to aesthetically complement one another, the paintings were hung together because the family portrait actually appears in *7th Floor University Corner.* It is treated in purples and painted very gesturally. The painting was drawn from a family portrait I found in the *You* magazine. I attempted to emphasise the constructed nature of the image by making the figures appear cut-out and collaged together. In this way I attempted to point to the

found nature of the image and create a crafty impression to the painting. The figures in the painting are further rendered paler than in the original image and drawn with exaggerated red lips. The lightness of the figures' complexions is meant to allude to Victorian portraiture or life-like mannequins, but because they are mostly smiling at the camera, they more closely resemble clowns or jesters.

The red lips are meant to emphasise this element of playfulness and masquerade, but as they are painted on quite roughly, resemble some sort of violence inherent in the family members or of which they are the victims. In reading Bernard Mc Elroy, I realised I unintentionally created a grotesque version of the family portrait with this image by combining elements of violence and distortion with displacement, in the form of the figures' cut-out nature in an imaginary context, with carnivalesque jest. Mc Elroy quotes John Ruskin's definition of the grotesque from *The Stones of Venice* to explain its interplay between playfulness and threat:

> First, then, it seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that as one or the other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque; by that we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects, because there are hardly any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements: there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all idea of jest. (Mc Elroy 1989:12)

Furthermore, Mc Elroy links aggression in human nature to the grotesque as a defining feature, which includes “both the impulse to commit aggression and even more, the fear of being the victim of aggression...”(Mc Elroy 1989:04) He goes on to posit that “I do not mean merely natural aggression, but aggression by impossible, all-powerful means – which is to say aggression by magic.”(Mc Elroy 1989:04) Mc Elroy explains this magic as a tapping in to humankind's primitive or animistic fears. He suggests that the grotesque “does not address the rationalist in us or the scientist in us, but the vestigial primitive in us, the child in us, the potential psychotic in us.” (Mc Elroy 1989:05) The grotesque does not present the world as we know it is, but rather as we fear it might be. By placing the figures in a nondescript space, I dislocated the figures from a rationalist world and, following McElroy, placed them in a context where domestic violence can become magical and thus frightening.

On the following wall, to the left of the family portrait, I placed the series of five portraits, all entitled *Portrait* (2008) (fig. x). The series is composed of little, mostly elongated canvasses, the

largest of which measures 754×202mm. On three of the canvasses I painted portraits of young woman wearing wigs. The images, like those of *No Thanks, Fine Thanks*, are drawn from my own photographs, but in this case the faces of the figures have been stylised to begin to appear comic or caricature-like.

Each of the figures in the portraits is wearing a different colour wig and has a different expression. Two of the canvasses do not have portraits on them and are painted in monochrome; black and grey respectively. The black on the one canvas covers a previous portrait that on closer inspection can still be discerned, where the grey panel is treated simply as a flat grey block. The interspersion of these two canvasses amongst the portraits, allow them to be read narratively; they act as visual punctuation suggesting a pause or a lapse in time and creating a viewing rhythm.

The series was created to suggest a game of social masquerade inspired by Hodgins. The portraits, by their small size, are suppose to lend themselves to manipulation. They can be handled and manoeuvred easily. They are like dolls that one can arrange in various sequences to suggest different scenarios. The work itself, as a piece on exhibition, is purely playful, but the reaction from the people who unknowingly posed for these portraits was quite serious. The portrait underneath the black painting, for example, was objected to and thus covered up. This is not a fact that was made evident on the exhibition or alluded to in the title, out of fear that the person in question would be even more offended. Instead, it now adds a visual puzzle to the series that contributes to the notion of play or visual gaming.

On the next section of wall to the left, I placed the painting *Wake (Part 1)* (2009) (fig. xi). The painting is also drawn from my own photographs and is of a figure shaking its head in disbelief. The colours used in this image remind me of Hodgins' paintings in that the vibrancy of the cerise in the background is intense to the extent that it creates an after-image. The themes in this painting echo the concerns of *No Thanks, Fine Thanks*, but they are communicated differently. For instance, instead of suggesting the shock of confrontation through harsh lighting, emotional shock is related through the blazing intensity of colour. Secondly, akin to *No Thanks, Fine Thanks*, this painting has two parts. I refrained from displaying the second part of the work on the exhibition to retain the work's dramatic potential. After *No Thanks, Fine Thanks*, the viewer should be able to envisage the second part of the painting.

The cerise and orange tones in *Wake (Part 1)* complimented the pink detailing around the figure's

head as well as the ochres and the tones of burnt sienna in the painting *The Donald Gordon* (2008) (fig. xii). Thus the two paintings were placed on the same division of wall.

The Donald Gordon is a meditation on the Donald Gordon Hospital in Parktown. It is treated as a visual poem. It incorporates the soft viridian greens and peachy pinks that I saw in the décor, signage and ward walls.

The image was drawn from an old photograph that I found as part of a photo biography on a celebrity in the back of a woman's magazine. The photograph displayed a little boy in his school uniform standing on a paved garden area in front of a suburban residence. I have stylised the entire image to appear more geometric. The treatment is similar to that of the family portrait in that it creates a cut-out impression, but in this case it is much more subtle or less aggressive. It is employed deliberately to emphasise the man-made nature of the landscape within the frame. I aimed to draw the viewer's attention to the background, specifically the area above and behind the figure's head by creating more detail in this area and leaving the foreground rather stark or undeveloped. In contrast to the built environment, the figure is drawn on using a dry brush effect that results in a hazy, gestural description of its features that resembles a ghost image and suggests temporality or transience.

On the third section of wall, closest to stairs, I placed the painting *Missing* (2008)(fig. xiii). This work is divided into three horizontal strips or areas. The centre band contains a line of five portraits that are all made to appear as though they are held in round frames. The bottom area of the work is treated with a black glaze executed in vertical brushstrokes as to suggest a curtain of black silky or satin-like cloth and becomes a podium of sorts on which the portraits rest. The upper section of the painting describes an abstract landscape; gestural brush strokes and scratchy oil pastel marks.

Many of the works on this exhibition are drawn from images from the past that once painted, become re-represented. *Missing* is a meditation on this realisation and was intended to address the concept of history and its representation. The portraits were drawn from a book on the history of photography and are of a line-up of criminals. I redrew their faces a few times and described their features loosely, therefore they lost their likeliness.

The painting manifests the process of historicising. Information is always lost and individual accounts become missing. It formally embodies the notion that representation is not the full picture.

Thus the fourth portrait is absent. In this instance, I employed the frame-within-the- frame as Hodgins has in *A Conservative Still Life* to indicate that I am addressing the genre of memorial portraiture.

On the adjacent wall, next to the stairs and doorway leading up into the smaller area of the gallery, I placed the painting *You Can't Learn to Swim Without...* (2009)(fig. xiv). The painting displays a seated male figure on an apparatus which has been mounted on top of a stage with his hands and feet sunken in ceramic basins. The image was drawn from a medical textbook from the 1940s and illustrates a method of muscular shock therapy that was commonly applied in hospitals at the time. I have rendered the image in loose sketchy lines. Parts of the image on the canvas have been painted or built up and others have been left quite raw. The image is thus still developing or starting to disintegrate. Akin to the relationship between the little boy and the building in the background of *The Donald Gordon*, the vulnerability or mortality of the figure is suggested by it remaining relatively unpainted in contrast to the basins that are painted as heavy solid forms.

The image has an uncanny, surrealist atmosphere. The title is the first part of the cliché, 'you cannot learn to swim without getting your feet wet'. I combined the image with the title to create what I consider an absurdist work in the spirit of Ionesco. I was specifically reflecting on Ionesco's first play *La Cantatrice Chauve (The Bald Prima Donna).* The dialogue is completely composed of clichés. Thus the characters are constantly speaking, but not saying very much. The use of cliché language is considered to convey the characters fundamental inability to communicate with one another. (Esslin 1968:138) The inspiration for the play was prompted by the content of Ionesco's English-French conversation Manual for Beginners. Ionesco relates:

> I conscientiously copied out phrases from my manual in order to learn them by heart. Then I found, reading them over attentively, that I was learning not English but some very surprising truths: that there are seven days in the week, for example, which I happened to know before; or that the floor is below us, the ceiling above us, another thing that I may well have known before but had never thought seriously about or had forgotten, and suddenly it seemed to me as stupefying as it was indisputably true. (Ionesco 1964:181)

Similar to Ionesco's play, my painting was inspired by the medical textbook in which I found the image. The book does not only cover procedures and treatments, but also suggests healthy ideas for holidays, decorating and entertaining. At the time of its publication this information was most likely very helpful and revolutionary, but has now become redundant. In retrospect, elements of procedures used historically in Western medicine, such as this example of muscular shock therapy,

now appear to have been based on a belief in magic rather than science or rationalism. By combining this image with a cliché that appears to relate to it, but is out of context, I aimed to accentuate the image's irrational and curious quality by a play on uselessness or the absurd.

To the left of *You Can't Learn to Swim Without...*, on the same segment of wall, I placed the painting *Olivedale Still Life with Flowers* (2008)(fig. xv). Both paintings have bits of black and purple in them and were therefore hung together to create a visually harmonious impression.

Olivedale Still Life with Flowers is painted from a photograph of flowers on top of a hospital bed side table. I took this photograph on one of my visits to Olivedale Medical Clinic while my sister was in their ICU. The Olivedale is decorated with rather bland or diplomatic paintings and prints of mostly landscapes and flowers. My still life attempts to come to terms with the dissonance between the domesticity of the paintings displayed in the hospital and the reality of what we experienced there.

The painting is the closest to abstraction in the entire exhibition. The surface is textured through a crafty acrylic technique over which the image is laid in oil pastel and picked up in areas with oil paints. The entire image was completed in one night. It was unpremeditated and executed on impulsive. I attempted to conflate the concepts of the crafty, conventional and non-descript with trauma by executing the still life in this unrestrained manner. This painting can also be related to Hodgins' *A Conservative Still Life* by its aggressive execution and subject matter, but, unlike the Hodgins work, my painting is not parodic nor does it contain a paradox. It merely aims to relate experience.

On the following wall, I placed the painting *Testing* (2011)(fig. xvi). Akin to *You Can't Learn to Swim Without...*, the image for the painting was drawn from medical textbook from the 1940s. In this case it is part of a series of illustration that demonstrate how to confirm whether someone has a heart rate or a pulse. The painting displays a male figure lying down with his eyes closed dressed in a suit, collared shirt and tie. The figure could be supposed to be unconscious, asleep or dead.

The hand of another figure, outside the frame, is seen reaching into the unbuttoned shirt of the resting figure. The opening of the figure's shirt resembles a vulva and thus endows the work with a sexual undercurrent. Without having cognisance of from where this image was found, the figure outside the frame could be interpreted either as taking advantage of the resting figure or as

attempting to aid it. The title is deliberately equivocal in order to maintain this ambiguity.

First Day Back (2008)(fig. xvii) is the second last painting I will address, but is the first painting I completed as part of the masters degree. It contains many elements that I chose to elaborate on in other works. For instance, the background resembles that of *Family Portrait.* Both paintings also display graffiti-like elements. The playful, paper doll, masquerade quality of this work is developed in the *Portrait* series and the original image is of a young boy in his school uniform which was found in the same section of the woman's magazine from which I selected the image for *The Donald Gordon*.

I painted *First Day Back* without a preconceived concept of what I wanted to relate or what subject matter I wished to address. I chose this image because it presented me with a non-descript black and white image of a full-profile figure in what could be a studio setting. Thus *First Day Back* was executed as a revision exercise of different styles and layering techniques.

The final painting to be discussed is *Portrait of Georgia* (commission 2011)(fig. xviii). This painting is the only commissioned work on the show and was therefore placed on its own section of wall as it did not fully relate to the other paintings on the show.

Unlike the other paintings, in this work, I attempted to create the impression of a figure that is bathed in a cool morning light. The colours are soft, muted tones of blues, pinks, ochres and siennas. The image was drawn from a photograph that was taken by her mother of a little girl, Georgia, sitting on a patch of grass. I instead placed the figure in a space resembling a studio setting to be able to manipulate the colours and direction of light more effectively.

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Illustrations



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

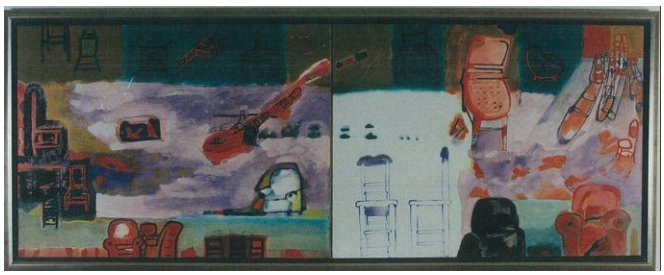


Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

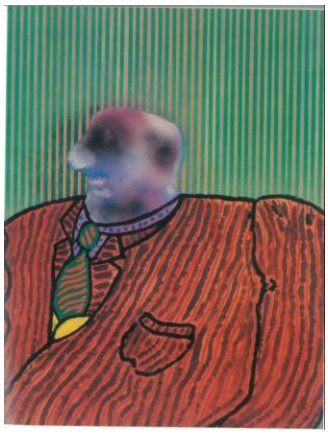


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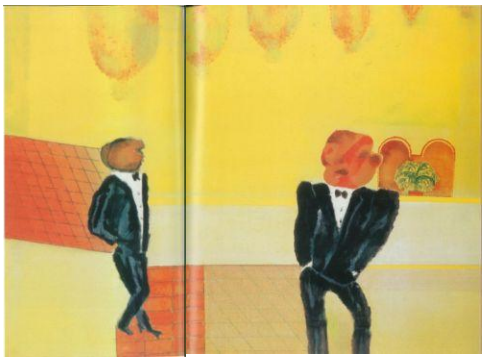


Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

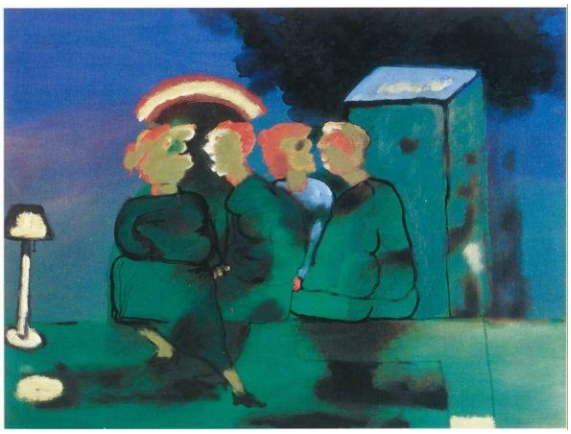


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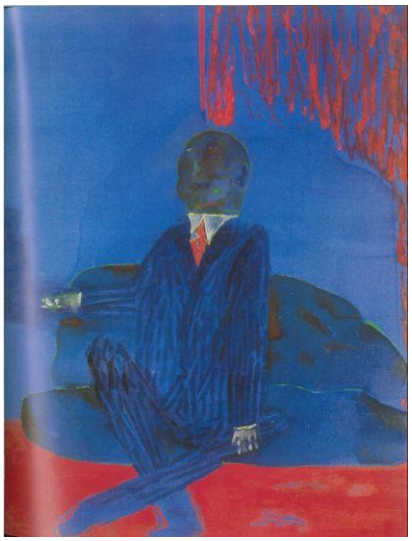


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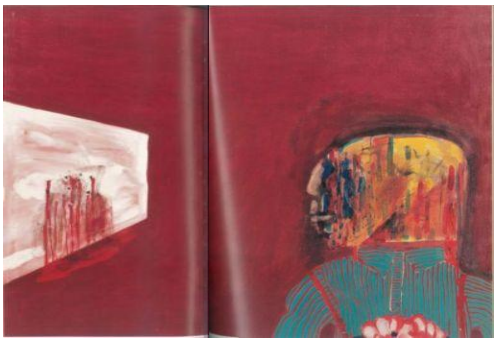


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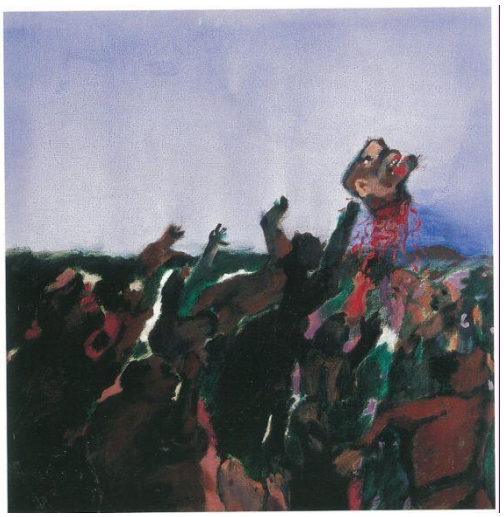


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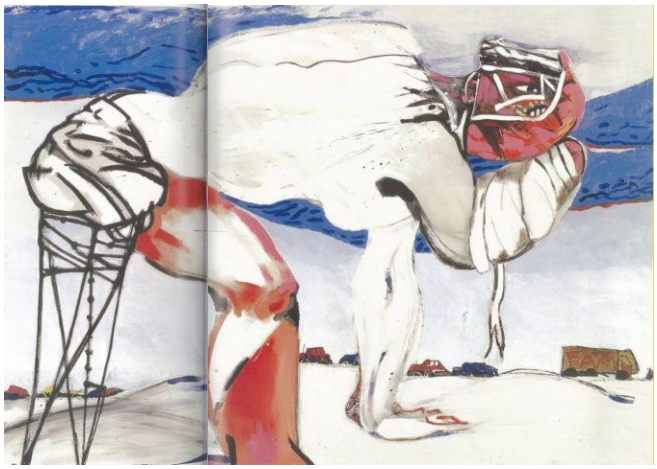


Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

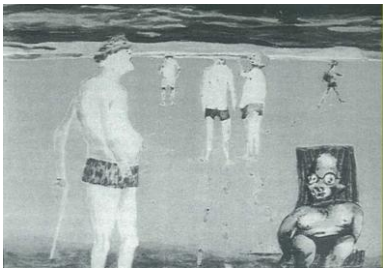


Figure 20



Figure I



Figure ii



Figure iii



Figure iv



Figure v



Figure vi



Figure vii



Figure viii



Figure ix



Figure x



Figure xi



Figure xii

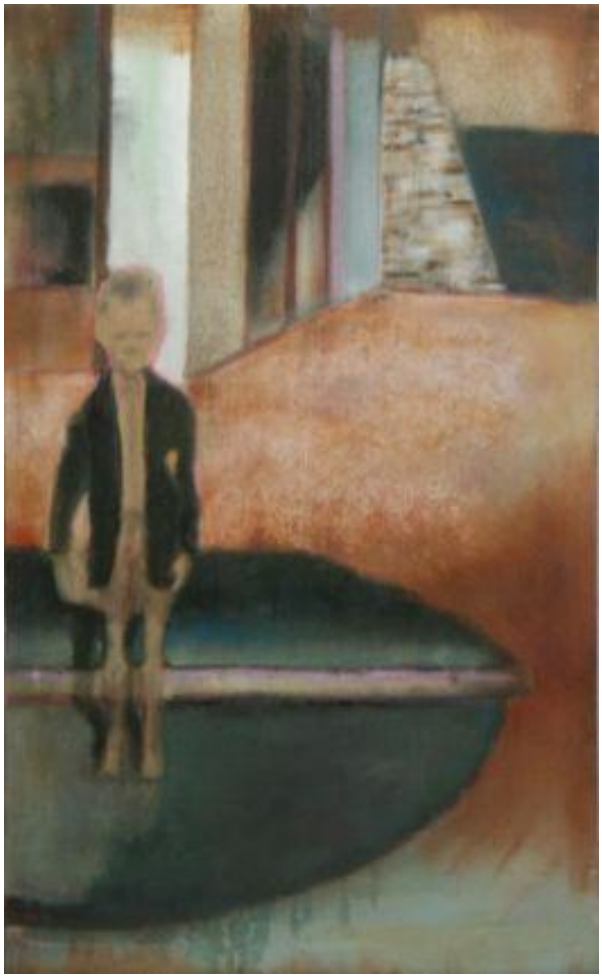


Figure xiii



Figure xiv



Figure xv

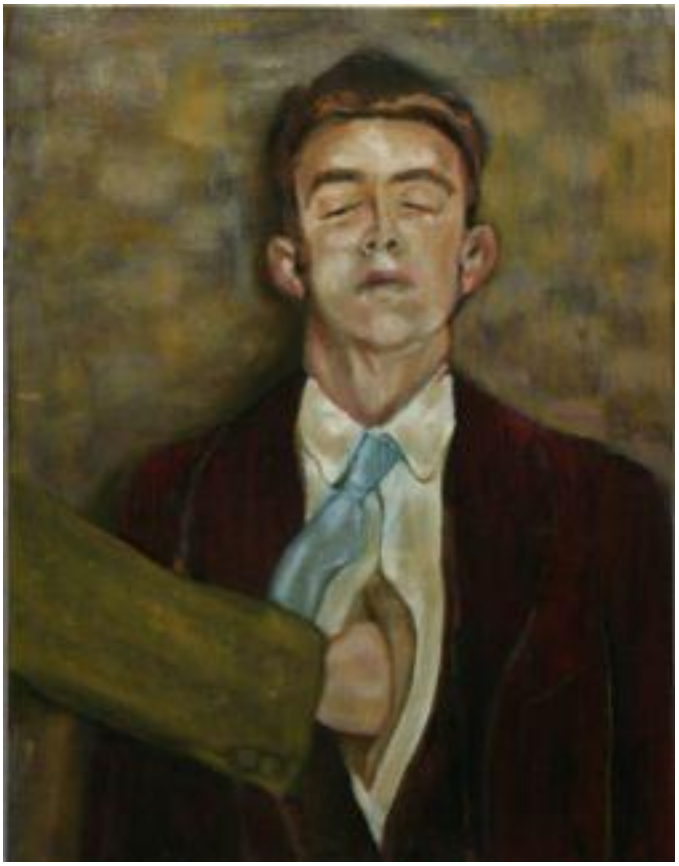


Figure xvi



Figure xvii



Figure xviii



Figure xix



Figure xx



Figure xxi



Figure xxii



Figure xxiii



Figure xxiv



Figure xxv



Figure xxvi



Figure xxvii



Figure xxviii



Figure xxix



Figure xxx



Figure xxxi



Figure xxxii



Figure xxxiii



Figure xxxiv



Figure xxxv



Figure xxxvi



Figure xxxvii



Figure xxxviii



Figure xxxix



Figure xl



Figure xli



Figure xlii



Figure xliii



Figure xliv



Figure xlv



Figure xlvi



Figure xlvii



Figure xlviii



Figure xlix