

## **Introduction**

The aim of this study is to investigate how selected sculptures by Jeremy Wafer (b. 1953) specifically his *oval* series, may be seen to figure the body through an experience of reduced forms.

A primary concern will be to examine Wafer's reductive articulation of form, surface differentiation and material, in order to allude to a humanised object. The study will focus on how these primary organic forms can possess deep resonant allusions to human physiognomy, what forms they possibly could allude to and the emotional reactions they could evoke, as every work of art is a representation and absorption or digestion of the body. If the body is not actually present or evident, one searches for bodily forms or metaphors.

This area is of particular interest as it looks at an aspect of how the viewer, from a post-structuralist position, may become actively involved in the sculpture, visually, physically and spatially.

Wafer's reductive sculptural language will also be analysed in terms of notions of secrecy or covertness relating to the human form. In studying the sculptures there is an awareness of containment and introversion and thus conversely the possibility of exposure, realisation or revelation.

The liminal state between suggestion and knowledge or insight is what Victor Turner defines as having 'a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people at many psychobiological levels simultaneously.'<sup>1</sup> This 'multivocal' character in Wafer's reductive sculptural language is part of the intrigue of his works: minimal and at the same time, not.

It is necessary to investigate how a contained 'secrecy' is manifested in Wafer's 'quiet' and iconic forms that are emblematic of and allude to metaphorical and allegorical referencing. Their ambiguity may become

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, 1969, p.128



accessible not only through what Elkins calls 'visceral seeing'<sup>2</sup>, but also through tangible experience and association. The 'sense of disquiet' is evoked by their ambiguity. I shall confront this aspect by looking at dichotomies such as the African and European, present and past, mind and body, inside and outside, macro and micro, excess and simplicity, quiet and disquiet and the transition and blending to form the 'unifying pattern' that Wafer's sculptures present. By considering these binaries from a Post-Structuralist perspective, they become interdependent and a unison.

The role of process, repetition/pattern/rhythm and seriality in these artworks are researched within this context.

Through an awareness of scale and the anthropomorphisation of the object, Jeremy Wafer's *ova/s* may allude to bellies or torsos with bumps, swellings, curves, cuts, wounds, holes, scars, blemishes, gooseflesh and tears on the skin. They could also refer to bodily orifices, ritual markings and scarification, evoking manifestations of the body in a very physical manner. Wafer's objects recall tactile and sensual associations with skin, no longer smooth and taut but having been subjected to some form of transformation: distorted, disrupted, wounded, scarred, patterned and marked. As these conditions are revealing of experiences of the body/physiognomy, so Wafer's forms disclose their metaphoric resonance. Revealing also suggests concealing: it is in this instance that the reductive aesthetic employed becomes the vehicle to reserve and control access to knowledge or insight: what is concealed may be far more essential and powerful than what is displayed. The question remains whether these allusions are innate to Wafer's work or projected by the viewer, and what compels the viewer to project this, in what Betterton describes as 'the fluidity of viewing position'<sup>3</sup>.

The allusions Wafer's *ova/s* may make to the human body without direct or actual mentioned reference is also pertinent to my own work.

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<sup>2</sup> Elkins, 1999, p.viii

<sup>3</sup> Betterton, 1996, p.190



The significance and necessity of this study lies in that little has been written about the art of this South African artist, and I believe that academic research will contribute to the understanding of his meditative and reductive sculpture that concerns itself with personal, universal and specifically African issues.

Lola Frost's (2001) discussions on Wafer's visual structures, the role of history and the artist's vision as seen in the body of his work are an extensive source of information. The system, order and repetition that characterise his work are features that are 'the substratum for a set of subtle, complex and powerful effects that operate together with a variety of social, cultural and ethical meditations.'<sup>4</sup> Frost's text is the most comprehensive on Wafer's work, and incorporates many aspects regarding his oeuvre, yet it is a loaded text of multiple meanings and associations constantly appearing and overlapping.

In an interview with David Bunn (2002), Wafer describes his use of reductive form as 'narrowing focus and looking at one thing at a time is the only way to see anything'<sup>5</sup>. Wafer also mentions how he has 'increasingly become interested in what Umberto Eco called the semiotic web, a notion that things are not defined 'in themselves', but by way of their relation to all other things.'<sup>6</sup> This is relevant as his *ovals* become humanised forms precisely through association with and in relation to the body.

In David Bunn's (2005) article on Jeremy Wafer's work in *art south africa*, he concentrates more on Wafer's abstracted, site-specific installations. As he says, 'Wafer's work exhibits a deep fascination with the non-expressive, seemingly rational languages used to grid, map and describe evident patterns on the earth.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Frost, 2001, p.7

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* p.11

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* p.7

<sup>7</sup> Bunn, 2005, p.33



Paul Edmunds (2002) remarks aptly on how the principles of Wafer's work, whilst operating within systems and structures, remain fractionally beyond our grasp.

'Fundamental forms' [...] that one never seems to get to the bottom of'<sup>8</sup> refer to Wafer's drawing on minimal and post-minimal art in his early work, according to Kathryn Smith (2000). Reference is made to the liminal or interstitial aspects of his art, binary spaces where meaning is constantly being produced.

Sue Williamson (1989) also refers to the enigmatic qualities of his work, even though the concern for surfaces, structures and contrast is clear. Links between binaries are yet again used to underline this aspect. Coincidentally, Williamson and Jamal (1996) mention that the shift may be subtly political: a utopian hybridisation of the African and Western as seen in his *Mounds: Scratched, Pocked and Imped*.

It is from this text I have gleaned the term 'sense of disquiet', specifically referring to the integration of opposites that are fluid in interpretation. The works appear to be passive, but also possess an evasive internal mechanism that evokes unease and disquietude in the viewer.

Brenda Atkinson (1998) writes on how 'formal relations and their diverse permutations gradually reveal questions of human endeavour, the political, the aesthetic conjunctions and disjunctions of African artistic production and Modernist imperatives, and the body-as-fetish and social organism within these.'<sup>9</sup> This statement is relevant regarding the concept of transformation and hybridisation in Wafer's sculptural forms.

By considering Suzanne Michele Kriek's MA dissertation (1999), Wafer's art can be contextualised within a broader frame of reference in contemporary South African minimalist aesthetic and a contemporary sculptural ethic superimposed within an historical African context.

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<sup>8</sup> Smith, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Atkinson, 1998.



Virginia Mackenny in *10 Years 100 Artists* (2004) writes about Wafer's minimalist sensibilities that are rooted in the material terrain of South Africa. In this short essay she mentions how his associative, informed and diverse works deal with aspects like appropriation, mapping, territory and measurement. His mostly geometrical and abstracted works are revealed as being in a field of relationships that link all things – again, a return to Umberto Eco's 'semiotic web'.

In the catalogue from the exhibition *In the making: materials and process* (2005) at the Michael Stevenson Gallery, Wafer explains the surface and colour articulation of the works on exhibit, including his use of red, black and white clays and pigments and how they relate to both African healing methods and landscape. He also refers to his work processes and use of repetition.

In all the texts on Jeremy Wafer's artworks, the ambiguity of his reductive language in combination with loaded metaphor becomes patently evident.