

**TRAUMA AS A BORDERLAND CONCEPT
IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN PAINTING**

Jessica Webster

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Fine Arts.

Supervised by Professor Penny Siopis

Johannesburg 2010

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to give a special acknowledgement to Professor Penny Siopis. Her input has been priceless and I feel singularly lucky to have had her guidance and supervision. As a prolific artist and profound teacher, she is also a role-model.

Starting from scratch is never easy, but there have been a number of people who have also helped make my transition to a new life and a Masters at Wits better in every way. My parents, Penny and Chris Webster, who have facilitated the quest for a strong mind both financially and emotionally. My sister, Bryony Webster, for being constant in love and praise to an artist's tortured soul, and infusing my life with fun. Sally Thompson, who has walked Emmarentia Park flat with me, while providing free therapy sessions and dispensing wisdom and advice on the art world. Beatrix and Peter, who, aside from incessant barking, remind me every day about the really important things in life.

.

DECLARATION

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

.....

Jessica Webster

1 February 2010

Abstract

In this report I explore trauma as a concept in contemporary painting. I interpret certain South African paintings that assert the affective dimension of the painted surface as particularly compelling manifestations of a concept of trauma. I frame my discussion in terms of Mark Seltzer's (1997:5) theory of trauma as a 'borderland concept'. I see Seltzer's concept as analogous to certain formal values these South African paintings deploy in relation to the painted surface, primarily the tension between materiality and iconography, form and formlessness, figure and ground and surface and depth. I draw on aspects of psychoanalytic theory and discourses on contemporary painting to support my discussion. I analyze selected paintings by Marlene Dumas and Penny Siopis within this framework. I also discuss my own paintings and Masters exhibition as pertaining to a concept of trauma. I argue that trauma as a borderland concept offers a means of appraising contemporary painting in a way that resists an overly semantic or purely perceptual interpretation.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Trauma as a Borderland Concept in Contemporary Painting.....	10
Chapter 2: Surface as Flashpoints in Contemporary Painting.....	21
Chapter 3: Trauma as Flashpoints in Penny Siopis and Marlene Dumas.....	36
Chapter 4: Trauma and Painting.....	50
Conclusion.....	66
Selected Bibliography.....	69

List of Illustrations

(In order of appearance)

Redon, O. before 1903. *Profile on Red Meanders*. 52 x 36 cm. Pastel
(Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

Gauguin, P. 1888. *Seascape with Cow or Above the Abyss*. 72.5 x 61 cm. Oil on Canvas
(Musée de Arts Decoratifs, Paris).

Twombly, C. 1957. *Olympia*. 184 x 261.25 cm. House paint, crayon, and pencil on
canvas (Private collection).

Tàpies, A. 1965. *Mattter in the Form of a Foot*. 130 x 162 cm. Mixed media on canvas
(Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona).

Bacon, F. 1949. *Head II*. 80 x 64 cm. Oil on Canvas (Ulster Museum, Belfast).

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

Siopis, P. 2002. *Pinky Pinky: Mirror Eyes*. 41 x 50 cm. Oil paint and objects on canvas
(Sasol Collection).

Siopis, P. 2002. *Shame no. 1*. 18.5 x 24.5 cm. Mixed media on paper (Private collection).

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

Webster, J. 2009. *Autobiography as Mandala*. 123 x163cm. Oil paint and wax on canvas (Johannesburg Art Gallery).

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

Webster, J. 2009. *Calcinatio*. 22 x 31cm. Oil paint and wax on canvas (Private Collection).

Webster, J. 2009. *Siren*. 43 x 38cm. Oil paint and wax on canvas (Private Collection).

Webster, J. 2008. *Eagle Chained to a Ground Animal*. 33 x25cm. Oil paint on canvas (Private Collection).

Webster, J. 2009. *Familiar*. 234 x 143 cm. Oil paint and wax on canvas (Private Collection).

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

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

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

