Research Report
For the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Art
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Renée Lesley Koch

402839

In-conclusion: Resisting Resolution in Recent Paintings by Penny Siopis.

Synopsis:

This research report focuses on two parts of perception, namely the gathering of visual data (*looking*) and the interpretation of such data (*seeing*). I examine the way that *materiality*, in recent paintings by Penny Siopis, functions to *resist* the insistent narrative image, by producing ambiguity, indeterminacy or imprecision.

In my practical research I explore ways to fore-ground *looking*, to resist *seeing* the representational image and to create a state of perceptual tension, which engages the viewer in *re-looking*.

School Graduate Head:_____**Date**_____

Supervisor:_____**Date**_____

Student:_____**Date**_____

Declaration in terms of Rule G27

I hereby declare that this research report

a) Is my own unaided work, under the guidance of my supervisor at Wits University, David Andrew;

b) no substance or any part of it has been submitted in the past or is being or is to be submitted for an award at any other university;

c) the information used in the *research report* has been obtained by me while employed in a part-time capacity by the South African Board of Jewish Education at King David High School Linksfield.

Signed:_____

Date:_____   Place:_____

Dedication:

To Robert, Abigail and Kira, for your inspiration.

Thank You:

To David Andrew, my supervisor at Wits University, for his insight, encouragement and patience;

To Colin Richards, for his perceptive comments;

To Penny Siopis, for her exceptional generosity in giving me access to her working process;

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Contents

Aim

In this research report I aim to examine the tension between the representational image and materiality in Penny Siopis' recent paintings and the way this tension corresponds to two cardinal aspects of visual perception: *looking* and *seeing*. Within the search I want to focus on the role played by the material properties of the medium (such as viscosity and miscibility) in *arresting* the image formation. Following this, I am interested in addressing three key areas:

1. To find out how the artist "sets up conditions for chance", manipulating the known properties of the material, both to create and to resist the image.
2. To differentiate between *looking through painting* and *seeing.*
3. To briefly situate the work within modernist and contemporary art practices.

Introduction:

This project is about *painting* as a form of *noticing* (Richards 2009, field notes).The key components of this discussion are, therefore, medium and perception. These terms necessarily implicate another, representation, which can be seen as a synthesis of the first two, in visual art. In this project I make a deliberate distinction between *looking* and *seeing*, as constituents of perception. In particular, I attempt to find ways to describe *noticing* as a highly nuanced form of perception, in which that which is *noticed* often lies outside the set of data selected for its contribution to semantic interpretation or pattern-recognition. There are a number of ways to differentiate between *looking* and *seeing*. These methods function as models of the distinction I wish to make. The first of these is the visual-verbal binary, also referred to in discussions around "narrative" in visual art. The second model I wish to explore is the distinction between types of image. Here, Barry Schwabsky's (2006/7, unnumbered page) version of the indexical image as the artist's response to something in the environment is contrasted with iconic or symbolic images. The image as potentially both abstract and representational raises another model for this discussion. The form-image debate that arose around Clement Greenberg's writing can be seen as a third model for examining a perceptual tension that occurs in *noticing*.

A fourth model I would like to draw attention to is the distinction between the haptic and the visual and, in particular, Laura Marks' contribution that "haptic visuality" integrates both approaches, so that the "eye acts as an organ of touch" (2004, p. 4 of 6).

The study of perception is clearly not limited to the field of art. In this project, I wish to use Dario Gamboni's idea that perception can be seen as the (imaginative) 'interpretation of the '"chaos of sensory data" into a mental image' (Prinzhorn cited in Gamboni 2002, p.14). In this definition, the mind's treatment of the sourced (visual) data is an intrinsic part of the process. The fifth model for exploring *noticing* is, therefore, the distinction between two thinking styles: the first being an automatic form of pattern-recognition, possibly linked to the limbic brain, while the second is a more cogitative process associated with the cortical region of the brain. Finally, the sixth model comes from psychology and makes use of Jerome Kagan's (2009, p. 31 - 32) idea that there are three types of knowledge construction: semantic, schematic and procedural. The usefulness of this model is that it makes it possible to identify the contribution of materiality, alongside representation, to the construction of meaning that occurs in painting. It becomes clear from this model that many of the ideas that were positioned as binaries should be re-framed as contributory, if dissenting, voices in a richer, more complex construction or understanding of experience.

The relationship between visual art and language is important as it impacts on the way the practical research is written up, but must also be seen as a fundamental part of the history and theory of art. The visual and the verbal can be separated only very briefly, as the human mind's drive to interpret the unfamiliar leads to a process that Francis Edeline (cited in Gamboni 2002, p. 15) has described as "semiotic". Paul Wood (2002, p. 13) describes Modernism as a movement that attempted to sever its relationship with language, particularly with narrative, but argues that language continued to be used within modernist artworks (such as Cubist collages) and to create the theory that positions the viewer relative to abstract work. In contemporary art, language has been reinstated.

With regard to writing about art, I have found that my practical research has at times been hampered by the limitations of the language I have used to describe it. I also

wish to acknowledge that there is some contradiction in trying to describe, in words, the painterly qualities of Siopis' works, and others, including my own, which in many ways defy translation. The relationship between the visual and the verbal remains interesting and challenging precisely because of the impossibility of translating directly from one to another (Baxandall 1991, p. 69-70, 73). There is always an interpretive gap formed when one of these disciplines is used to translate the other. While technically this gap may be seen as an obstacle, the interface between these disciplines is a fertile space which continues to offer up possibilities for research.[i] It is therefore important, at the beginning of this report, to establish a frame of reference and define certain art historical and critical terms which attempt to translate the visual.[ii]

Chapter 1 lays out the terms of reference under the two headings: "Perception" and "Medium". Chapter 2 attempts to situate my discussion of painting in an art-historical context. Here I refer to key texts and ways of using language to refer to medium and perception and the tensions that arise from different ways of understanding them. Chapter 3 gives a detailed discussion of Siopis' process in both early and recent works. Particular attention is paid to her use of "chance" and her careful editing of the results of experimental processes. The last chapter, Chapter 4, deals with my own painting and attempts to integrate the theoretical and practical components of this project.

Chapter 1

Terms of reference

The first set of terms all have to do with perception. They are *noticing*, *looking* and *seeing*, *choosing not to see*, *optical* and *haptic visuality*, *image*, *arresting* and *unsettling* the image. Thereafter, terms dealing with the medium of painting will be discussed: *materiality*, *surface*, *natural* and *determined* types of *mark-making*.

Perception

Noticing

Colin Richards (2009, field notes) offers a definition for 'art' as 'a form of noticing'. From the context of the discussion, in a seminar for the Masters in Art course, I took this definition to refer to the way an object becomes art in the visual and mental *experience* of the *viewer*. The power of this definition, for me, lies in the not-so-obvious distinction between *noticing* and other forms of observing. To *notice* something, to me, is to become aware of it in a particular way. What is *noticed* is not the same as what is *seen*. We don't *notice* a friend arriving at our door, but we might *notice* the same friend looking distracted or preoccupied. What we *notice* is there, but not so obvious. Michael Baxandall (1985, p. 6) writes that looking and thinking occur "off" the subject, rather like astronomers look "off" a star. Not looking at the "centre" (Baxandall 1985, p. 6) requires a certain frame of mind from the viewer.

Apart from the *noticing* engaged in by the viewer, there is that engaged in by the artist herself in selecting something to be represented or presented as art. This *noticing*, on the part of the *painter*, is my particular interest.

Representational painting requires *looking* in a particular way.

The linearity of looking at a painting

Baxandall (1985, p. 3) wrote about *looking* at paintings, in the context of writing an explanation of the work. He points out that while the painting is a simultaneously available field, *writing* about the painting is linear. He contrasts the gait of writing with that of *looking*. While the two are very different, it is true, *looking* at the painting is not instantaneous; there is an element that is temporarily linear. After a generalised scan

of the whole, the viewer engages in a series of "fixations", selecting particular elements to observe more closely. I would like to apply Baxandall's (1985, p. 3) notion of *looking* at the painting to the painter's process of *looking* at the object or scene to be represented. The painter, who is conscious of the object in a nominal way, must reject the closure that recognition offers and revisit the details of the object again and again in order to translate its elements into paint.

Looking and seeing
I am interested in a fine distinction between *looking* as an act of visual research and *seeing*, which for the purposes of this report involves the (imaginative) 'interpretation of the '"chaos of sensory data" into a mental image' (Prinzhorn cited in Gamboni 2002, p.14). These two acts are part of perception, but they also parallel thinking styles, to which I shall return at a later stage.

To *look* is to direct one's (visual) attention at something. To *see* is to make sense of, identify and interpret what is being looked at. Initially, one type of *looking* seems to be a precursor to *seeing*, but the mind's instinct to interpret data is so quick and insistent (Taleb 2007, p. 66) that *seeing* is almost instantaneous. It takes a certain sense of disconnection to re-*look* at data that has already been interpreted. *Looking* is an act we can choose to do even after *seeing*.

Image
Perception produces an image and artists make images, some of which are representational. Where Greenberg (1939) separated the "form" of a work from the image (representation) it might produce, Schwabsky (2006/7, unnumbered page) makes the point that abstract forms constitute an image.

For the purpose of this discussion, it is helpful to distinguish between representational images as between three kinds of signs. "Iconic images" have a visual correspondence with the object they represent: they look like the object; "symbolic images" require imaginative interpretation and are often created by some kind of consensus: they have little visual correspondence with the object; while "indexical images" record the presence of the object which gave rise to it.

Having described three types of representational image, the boundaries of the term "representation" itself become blurred. The indexical image is representational if it is seen as such. In other words, if a viewer recognises the causal relationship between

the object that gave rise to it and the image, it can be said to represent the object. However, the lack of visual correspondence may render the image completely abstract. For example, a shadow cast by an object is indexical and might correspond visually with the shape of the object, in which case it is also representational. When a shadow is cast on an irregular surface, it remains indexical, but its shape loses correspondence with the shape of the object. If a viewer was not aware what the original object was, and could not identify the shadow's shape, would the image be representational? Does representational painting depend on the viewer's ability to recognise the object that stimulated the painting, or is it possible that some paintings are the artist's indexical response to an object and yet lack sufficient correspondence with the mental image of the object, that is, they are both representational and abstract? I suggest that the separation of *looking* from *seeing*, separating the act of sourcing visual data from the screening and interpretation of data that corresponds to pre-set patterns, may produce images that are, in fact, representational, but not recognisable, and therefore, abstract.

While Siopis employs both iconic and symbolic (potential) imagery in her work, my practical research explores painting as the production of indexical images. In the final chapter I will discuss the contribution of schematic and procedural forms of knowledge construction in an attempt to describe the contribution made by highly acute *looking,* that resists the formation of stereotypical patterns as a default choice, to a richer and more complex form of perception.

Haptic Visuality
Deleuze and Guattari's (cited in Marks 2004, p. 5 of 6) discussion of the "optical" and the "haptic" provide an important way to describe different relationships artists have with their depicted objects or environment. In their discussion of these two ways of viewing landscape, the authors argue that "optical" viewing is the coloniser's mode. It aims to dominate a landscape by dividing it and naming its parts, so as to occupy the land. This is "striated space", "striations" being the marked divisions by which the "optical" view is created. They are the reference points. The vantage point is distant and the delineations correspond to a map.

In contrast to the colonisers, nomads occupy "smooth space". In this view, the landscape is inhabited and known in an embodied way. As the nomad moves through the landscape, she learns to know the curve of a riverbed, the form of a hill. This is a close view. An objective (distant) sense of scale and proportion are irrelevant to the position of the nomad. The here and now of the landscape dominates over the political positions on a map.

In her essay *Haptic Visuality*, Marks (2004, p. 4 of 6) explains that the term "haptic" comes from psychology. "Haptein" referred to a kind of vision that "grabs" the thing it looks at. Aloi Riegl (Marks 2004, p. 4 of 6) argued that the art of ancient Egypt created a physical space while in ancient Greece art aimed at an illusionary (optical) space. Riegl attributed a certain idea of 'progress' to the diminishing of physical tactility in art, but Marks wishes to revalue this attribute. According to Marks, there is never a complete separation between the haptic and the optical. (Marks 2004, p.4 of 6). Marks coined the term "haptic visuality" in an attempt to integrate two types of vision in such a way that the "eye acts as an organ of touch". This is not a denial of depth, nor is it pure abstraction, but a kind of viewing that is embodied, where subjectivity is traded for a degree of objectivity: the object looks back at us. A diminishing of the border between 'self' and the observed 'other' leads to an affective experience.

Two Types of Viewers

The "landscape" mentioned by Deleuze and Guattari (cited in Marks 2004, p. 5 of 6) is both the real environment and the representation of it. Two possible "landscapes" produce two types of viewer: the painter as viewer of the immediate environment and the spectator who views the artwork. This distinction has become important in this project as it determines the type of *looking* without *seeing* that is possible. As a painter, I *look* and choose not to see "striated space", but "smooth space". The spectator *looks* and is prevented from *seeing* traditional "striations" that correspond to recognisable references. As a result, the work appears abstract.

Two selves

Apart from the two types of viewer, there are, in haptic visuality, *two selves*. Griselda Pollock (2005, p. 51) writes that,

> (p)ainting is a working process, not a medium. It signals a working on the borderlines of the meeting between one self (the painter) and another (the

material otherness of the work) but also the imaginary otherness of what that working is pulling to the surface as an image, with which the painter will engage, at some point identify and at others recognize as other.

Siopis' recognition of the material "other" is of central importance to this work.

Medium

Surface

In painting, materiality and surface are closely aligned. The smooth surface in illusionistic painting can be seen as a meeting place of the world of the spectator and the illusionary world of the painting. 'Within' the painting exists a world of illusion, of the magical effects of visual elements on the mind. In such works, the surface or borderland is "denied" (Robbins 2002, p.1) and facilitates the viewer's imagined entry into the world of the painting. However, when the materiality of the work is fore-grounded, it resists such attempts at penetration, drawing attention rather to itself. An *assertive* surface may obscure the representational image or it may present the material *as image*. The surface in Siopis' painting is a barrier to imagined entry to the world of illusion. Far from repulsive, however, the surface invites haptic viewing of the materiality of the work, demanding of the viewer that she look again.

Process of Painting

In the paintings under discussion, materiality asserts itself as (part of) the content of the work. This materiality also serves to disrupt and delay the formation of representational images in the work and, by implication, in the mind of the viewer. Studying the artist's *process* provides a rare opportunity to watch theory *being painted*. Practical research involves layer upon layer of decisions, observations and assessments. Acting on these thoughts pushes the boundaries of knowledge and makes the resulting theory visible. I hope to use the observation of *process* to inform my attempt to excavate the theory which, I believe, is embedded in Siopis' work.

In particular I am interested in the way Siopis balances the development of the work's materiality with the representational image that is formed in this process.

Messy "Other" of Paint

Baxandall (1991, p. 72) made a note of the reductive quality of language when it is used to explain painting. He points out that the reader would not be able to reconstruct a painting from the description of it. Over and above the interpretative gap that exists between the visual and the verbal, paint as a medium has a particular

facility of expression which cannot be generalized as an image or translated into words. Pedro Erber's text, *Theory Materialised: conceptual art and its others*, (2006) works with W. J. T. Mitchell's notion of picture theory: attempting to read theory within pictures. However, Erber draws attention to the unrepresentable, that which demands to be translated but which always resists translation, namely the materiality of the work. A study of Siopis' paintings must acknowledge the contribution of this painterly "other".

Arrest

In Siopis' paintings, the assertion of materiality *arrests* the image, both on the canvas and in the spectator's mind. Siopis (2010, field notes) explains that in her work there are two *arrests* of the image. She makes a comparison with the *arrest* of the image in photography. The first *arrest* is in the selection of a particular moment from innumerable others; the second, photographic, *arrest* happens in the darkroom as a result of chemical processes, where the photographer *arrests* the process of development which "fixes" the image. For Siopis, in painting, there is also the selection of imagery, but the most important *arrest* occurs within and as a result of her process. Siopis welcomes the indeterminacy of the image produced in her medium. Some of the elements of the painting appear to arise "spontaneously" as a result of the unpredictable effects of the medium. As the artist works, she makes a series of decisions about the emerging images: what to retain, what to remove and what to develop.

In my own work, the *arrest* is of a different nature. I do not work in such a deliberate way with projection and imaginative interpretation. Rather, I aim to *arrest* the image in the process of *perception*. I am interested in innumerable *arrests* that occur in the *linear process of looking* at a "simultaneously available field" (Baxandall 1985, p. 3). Schwabsky's (2006/7 unnumbered page) notion of painting as an indexical image, which is a record of the sensation produced within the artist, is extremely helpful in clarifying these visual *arrests*. The *arrest* occurs somewhere between the impression and the interpretation, for the spectator of the work. For me as a painter, the *arrests* occur with each of many visual events that collectively constitute the process of *looking through painting*.

Natural and Determined Marks

Siopis (2010, field notes) refers to "chance" elements that occur in her work. In contrast to these, she also describes some marks as "more determined". The irony around the label "chance" lies in the artist's skill with the medium. She is able to predict, with sufficient accuracy, what effects her process will produce, even though she works in unconventional ways and welcomes "surprise" results. The interpretation of "chance" has something to do with the quality of the mark, which *appears* not to have been caused by human hand, but to have arisen out of the natural interaction of fluids of various kinds on a ground which is affected by gravity. For the purpose of this report, I have called these *natural* marks, as they depend on the physical properties of the medium and not manipulation with brush or other tool. Rather than being read as lines, shapes or gestures, such marks appear to be stains, drips, pools, puddles and floods of fluid paint. *Determined* marks are clearly those manipulated by the artist's hand on the canvas itself. Brush marks are an example of *determined* marks. There is something *deliberate* and *intentional* about them.

I am aware that the term *natural* may present difficulties here. I considered using the term *literal*, from Leo Steinberg's (cited in Batchelor 1997, p. 15) description of Rauschenberg's work, but there is an important difference between Rauschenberg's use of material and the issue I wish to address. Rauschenberg drew attention to the *literalness* of material, as opposed to its manipulation in the service of an illusion. In his work the material stood for itself (Batchelor 1997, p. 15). This may be true of certain sections of Siopis' work, but more importantly, the "chance" effects in her work *appear* to have occurred spontaneously (even though we understand the artist to be highly involved in the process.) It is this "untouched" quality that I have described as *natural*.

In *Potential Images*, Gamboni (2002, p. 16) describes as "natural images" those which are stimulated by naturally occurring objects in the environment, such as rocks on a mountainside. By the imaginative interpretation of the viewer, these objects give rise to images such as figures and faces. These images do not exist outside of the viewer's imagination, yet they are provoked by the natural environment. The mystique that surrounds such projections is based on the notion that these images were "not made by human hand". *Natural* marks have a similar appeal. It seems that

the "untouched" appearance of the marks provides a greater incentive for viewers to project imaginatively into the work, whereas *determined* marks are understood as the artist's intentional expression.

In the preceding paragraphs I have outlined key terms for this research report and their particular use in this document. These terms will be used to plot an overview of the fortunes of *representation* and *abstract form* in the recent history of painting.

Chapter 2

What painting is: the art-historical debate

"Image" versus "Form"

In an interview with Sarah Nuttall (2009, p. 1 of 6), Siopis described being interested in the "knife-edge" tension between representation and abstraction, and in a later conversation at her temporary studio in 2010 (field notes), the artist described her work as dealing with the issue of "what painting is supposed to be".

Maurice Denis's statement about a painting being both a war-horse (for example) and an arrangement of colours on a plane surface is at the heart of the debate about what painting is (supposed to be). According to Christa Robbins (2002, p. 1), Ernst Gombrich believed that it was not possible to see both the "war-horse" and the abstract arrangement at the same time. The "war-horse" is in the field of interpretation. The "abstract arrangement" may be said to be in the field of visual data. However, when Gombrich says it is not possible to see both the abstract arrangement and the war-horse at the same time, he is surely referring to the abstract arrangement as an *interpretation*, as *seeing*, not as *looking*. Clearly we *look* at the abstract arrangement (visual data) and *see* the war-horse at the same time.

This project is an attempt to find a "knife-edge" state in which the viewer does not necessarily *see* the one or the other, but sees the potential of both at the same time.

The role of Language and Narrative in Visual Art

Representation and perception are allied to language. As Edeline (cited in Gamboni 2002, p. 15) says, "to recognise something is already to behave semiotically." Wood (2002, p. 13) writes that pre-Modernist academic art "was centred on the proximity of art and literature", in many cases a visual manifestation of classical and biblical narrative. Modernism, however, was a movement of "form", according to Clive Bell and Roger Fry (Wood 2002, p. 10). Whereas the representational image was associated with language, form was seen as untranslatable, like "visual music".

It would be incorrect to say that instrumental music cannot be interpreted, but the role of the imagination is paramount; the interpretation is a projection. Galvanno Della Volpe (Hay 2011, UNISA-symposium) states that different art forms have specificities which make a direct translation between them unhelpful and crude, but

that it is possible to use devices in the destination art form to express meanings that are contained in the original, even though it appears as an elaboration. An example of such a device is Della Volpe's notion of "filmic realism", in which a director may add a scene to the film version of a book, in order to portray, "realistically" in film, what the original contained in its text.

The act of painting is also a translation: of the act of *noticing*. It is the painter's challenge to use the material in such a way as to portray, "realistically", the quality of the *observation*, even if there is some distortion or imprecision with respect to scale or perspective.

Like music, abstract art can be interpreted, but not translated directly. The visual data makes an appeal to the senses that brings to mind remembered embodied experiences, which have been encoded in memory, but not necessarily as language.[iii] Whereas iconic and symbolic images are semantic (Edeline in Gamboni 2002), purely indexical images (specifically those that are non-iconic, non-symbolic) are outside of language because they cannot be reduced to code for the purpose of storing the information in long-term memory.[iv]

The Avant-garde and Language

The avant-garde's attack on Modernism, through the Dadaists and Surrealists, challenged the segregation of the visual and the verbal (Wood 2002, p. 10), but Greenberg's writing helped to maintain the formalist position. His opposition to the *image* in *The Avant-garde and Kitsch* is an opposition to the *representational* image. Greenberg's form was non-referential.

In his retrospective account of Modernism (Harrison 1997, p. 9), Greenberg tracked the development of Modernism as a progression away from representation, towards abstraction. From the time of Courbet, Modernist artists had increasingly drawn attention to the *means* of making art (Robbins 2002, p. 1). At the end of this (Modernist) trajectory, Minimalism employed the literalness of material to counter illusion with pure form (Wood 2002, p. 10). Since that time, however, the iconographic reading of the work once again became paramount in, for example, feminist and poststructuralist writings.

The separation of language from painting makes it vulnerable to criticism that painting which "appeals to the eye alone" (Fried in Wood 2002, p. 16) loses touch with the rest of life, loses it "gravitas". That representation is political has been established by Edward Said (cited in Macfie 2000, p. 107) who argued that colonized peoples were first "represented" as "inferior" and "in need of domination", before they were forcefully subjugated. As a political tool, Gyorgy Lukàcs (Hay 2011, UNISA symposium) argued that realist art was the best style for the proletariat. The ease with which representational art can be translated into words may be part of its appeal in the service of a cause. Narrative is easier to encode and store in memory than (seemingly) unrelated data (Chabris and Simon 2011, p. 168 - 174) and the representation of issues of power is therefore clearly communicated.

Siopis' oeuvre demonstrates a long commitment to resistance of a political nature in which the "representation of politics and the politics of representation" (Siopis in Stainer et al nd.) are key themes. Siopis' work has never, to my knowledge, been entirely abstract; representation has always been an essential part of the work. In addition, Siopis' own deeply internalised theory is a critical part of her art. To some critics, however, her latest paintings have lost their connection to the political. It is arguable that these paintings are more narrowly focused on destabilising representation as such, than challenging ideologies, but the work has far-reaching implications for thinking and perceiving that, while not focusing directly on "the political" may be said to deal with the *politics of perception*. This may therefore be the most "political" of all her work.

Stereotyping and "othering" are perceptions based on ideologies. When we interpret data, we search, selectively, for confirmation of preconceived ideas and values, (Taleb 2008, p. 50) and objects. The disruption of the icon therefore has the potential to be "political" in a very broad and encompassing way. It is about undermining accepted visions and representations, even ideologies.

No contradiction
In the introductory essay for the book, *Vitamin P*, Schwabsky (2002, p. 08)) wrote that there was (in the year 2000) little "contradiction between abstract and representational painting" because of the polemical nature of painting: each painting is not so much a representation of an image, as an image that exists to represent

painting. In a later text, (2006/7, unnumbered page) he further insists that any serious manifestation of painting must take a position on the dichotomies within painting, such as representation versus abstraction, and make one of these the subject of the painting (Schwabsky 2003, p. 1). I believe this is what Siopis' latest work does.

Today's painters, says Schwabsky, (2006/7, unnumbered page) "do not believe the proliferation of the image is something to be cleared away in order to see reality, but rather, they are to be seen more clearly." Like Matisse, these artists see Bergson's images *in* the visible world. Schwabsky argues that the Bergsonian image is indexical, a trace of a perception that has a connection to prior reality, no matter its formalist attributes. Schwabsky continues, "The Bergsonian image is not necessarily a whole 'picture', but any simple or complex sensation, so that the pictorial elements… of which an abstract painting might be composed – are also already images." (2006/7 unnumbered page)

In *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Rosalind Krauss (1985) refers to the "picturesque" in a similar way. Artists appear to see in their surroundings what already exists as a picture, according to artistic convention.

In Siopis' work there is "no contradiction between abstract and representational painting" ,to quote Schwabsky, (2002, p. 08) but the artist deliberately sets the one up against the other, through the emphasis on materiality. In an interview with Nuttall in 2009, Siopis (Siopis in Nuttall 2009) describes her process with a directness that reveals the value she attributes to the physical properties of her medium: "It starts formless, or rather as abstract splashes or drips of coloured liquid on paper…" Siopis uses language like "run" and "pool" and "I might break the skin of a pool already congealed to make it run again." The focus is primarily on the making. Signification follows: "I start to attach to the shapes in a process, not unlike discerning images in clouds, pictures in stains, presences in shadows. I follow the shapes. They trigger a train of physical enactments." This interview followed Siopis exhibition "Paintings" at Michael Stevenson, Cape Town, in 2009.

In my discussions with the artist in 2010, she acknowledged that she often begins with a source image, but a comparison with the end product demonstrates that the source is only a starting point. The role of the source image appears to be either an

art-historical reference, re-interpreted in an entirely new context, or an aid in familiarising herself with colours and shapes of the subject matter, so that she can "recognise" these in the *natural* marks made by the medium.

Untranslatable "Other" of Paint

In *The Shock of Beauty: Siopis' Pinky Pinky and Shame series*, Nuttall draws attention to "the material textures of Siopis' work…thick and tactile, accretions that give weight to that which may be resisting our comprehension" (Nuttall 2005, p. 136). Nuttall's text is filled with words that directly describe the material surface of the work, "(L)acquer-like textures of glass and mirror paint, suggestive of blood and body fluids cast in resin, of an embalmed wetness. Emotion becomes frozen into stains and pools of lacquer in works of extraordinary affect and beauty." Later, "(p)ink turns into deep red, and flesh and fluids suggest that which hurts, which causes the suffering, yet are also symbolic of the human capacity to feel, create and become." Nuttall's precise writing attempts to attach meaning to paint, but its greatest value, to me, lies in the way it points to the materiality as a *source* of meaning for the viewer.

The Process of Painting

The writing of James Elkins in *What Painting Is* (2000, p. 95) pays particular attention to the painted surface, and also to the actual process of painting. In his discussion of Monet's work he describes the painted marks by conjuring up their individual qualities, the particular colours and the shape of the brushstrokes. While Baxandall (1985, p. 3) wrote that a painting could not be constructed from the description of it, Elkins claims that an attempt to visually "read" the material surface of a painting can still be misleading, as his attempt to copy a painting by Monet proved. The work could not be replicated by arranging similar shapes and colours of paint onto the canvas. Elkins became intrigued by the *order* of the brushstrokes, overlaying one another. The *process* applied by Monet created the work we are all familiar with. This is an example of procedural knowledge, where the artist's experience, his knowing how to respond to his developing work as well as experimentation and a certain sense of not knowing, sets apart paintings like the series of water lilies.

Siopis' process-based works can be located at this art-historical juncture as an assertion of both aspects of painting: image and painterly form. *Surface* is the meeting place of the image and the material "stuff" of a work, the site of the struggle

between the two forces. A glance at Siopis' early work will show these interests have consistently been engaged with. The politics of representation is a central concern in Siopis' oeuvre and so is a fascination with her medium's material properties.

Representation and materiality in Siopis' earlier work.
Siopis' recent paintings deliberately set image against abstract form. In a selection of her former works, which I shall discuss here, the artist had already begun to set these two elements (image and form) against one another, employing them as two strategies to force the viewer to revisit the imagery and arrive at new meanings. Two of Siopis' early works, *Melancholia* (1986) and *Patience on a Monument, 'A History Painting'* (1988), are examples of work that challenge the politics of representation. In an apartheid-era South Africa, the control the state exercised on representation produced an extreme form of "othering" of black South Africans. *Patience on a Monument* draws attention to the power of these images as Siopis culls pictures from school text books and assembles them with paint in a landscape of so much debris. These are images that are (to be) discarded, that have outlived whatever value they once had for the apartheid state.

In *Patience on a Monument, 'A History Painting' (1988)* there are at least two layers of iconography merged into one on the surface. From a distance the work comprises a female figure, black, sitting atop a pile of indeterminate objects, peeling a lemon. There is little that is heroic about her body language or her actions, but the lack of any competing single object gives a quasi-monumental look to the figure. The figure is painted and so is the background of debris, it appears, but there is something not quite clear, not able to be read from a distance and this requires a closer look.

The ground from which the figure emerges is a composite surface. It is an amalgamation of countless small images, photocopied from textbooks and the like, representations of the colonizer and the colonized according to the dictates of those in power. Inserted among these representations of people are images of cultural objects such as shields (representing the 'tribal' African) and Anton van Wouw's sculpture (representing representations *of* Africans). These images are all merged with the paint and the paper into a multi-layered surface. Multiple levels of reality co-exist here. The original images, copied, cut and collaged onto the canvas represent both the stereotypes they stood for in their home publications and the critique of this

representation. The notion of representation as constructed finds a parallel in the way Siopis constructs the rubbish heap out of the once-didactic images. An embodied viewing experience, promoted by the tactile surface, heightens the affect of the work.

Patience on a Monument, 'A History Painting' (1988) is an ironic artwork because it mimics a panorama, as Pollock writes: "the space though which white settlers could imagine an empty, un-inscribed, wild territory" (Pollock 2005, p. 51). There is some kind of illusionary depth, a receding wasteland of rubbish pictures with the lone figure on top, but the surface teems with life and a disruptive scale that reopens the representation and forces us to examine the basis of the stereotypes. This makes for two types of surface, one penetrable, but only partly so, from a distance; the other impenetrable, at close range. The unifying paint here acts to pull together two image layers, pulling the viewer in close from afar.

Surface has been a prominent aspect of Siopis' work from her early "cake paintings" in which oil paint is built up into the object it represents or symbolizes. The use of dried and drying paint to stand in for aged wrinkling flesh or the peel of a lemon takes it to the border of representation, in which it no longer facilitates illusion so much as it arrests vision on the actual surface of the work. Throughout Siopis' oeuvre disrupted surfaces of paint, layers of printed paper with paint and objects, drapes and veils of cloth, both real and illusionary, enact a complex relationship between subject matter and form (Richards, 2005, p. 27). No easy read, the works promise meaning and conceal it within their layers at the same time. A parted curtain conceals, but also points toward a promised unveiling, just as a pointing hand shows. (Richards 2005, p. 27)

In hindsight, accumulation in *Melancholia* appears to predict the physical accumulation of found objects in Siopis' later installations (Steiner et al, nd). The objects are, to Siopis, the debris of colonialism, the totems of apartheid (and) the tokens of liberation" (Siopis in Mbembe 2005, p. 118). The function of these accumulated objects is "to disturb the boundaries between the personal and social significance of things" (Siopis in Mbembe 2005, p. 119). The way materiality functions to disrupt the iconographic reading is what interests me in these works.

In the installations, Siopis packs and lays the objects together, sometimes in colour fields, as in *Sacrifices.* Here the objects no longer stand for themselves and lose their separate quality. They become a surface of indeterminate depth (Richards 2005:, p. 27) in which the multiplicity of objects produce an excess of affect, what Jennifer Law calls "embodied catastrophe" (Law 2005, p. 111). Piles of objects signify catastrophe to Siopis, such as the piles of possessions of holocaust victims. Accumulating fetishes produces a disembodiment, Siopis told Law (2005, p. 111). Both the amassing of the objects and the appeal to the body produce an embodied experience in the viewer.

In the installations, the no-longer-discreet objects contribute to a thickened layer, the surface of the work. It is as though we find ourselves within *Patience* or *Melancholia.* As Brenda Atkinson writes about *Reconaissance: 1900 – 1997* (1997), "(t)he surfaces of the painting seem to have mutated into the surfaces of the installation." Juxtapositioning items that can cause harm with objects of play, symbols of evil and childhood together, the artist also deliberately overlaps some objects, frustrating the viewer's ability to see everything clearly. In addition, the haptic sensibility it arouses functions to destabilize the original signification of the objects. The memories they elicit lose their own borders; the personal and the social blend and identity is disrupted. The hybrid installations no longer hold out notions of former cultural purity. Instead they represent the continual and continuous migrations of people and things which, as Siopis says, "cross the boundaries between past and present, personal and public" (Siopis in Mbembe 2005, p. 119).

Further veiling was produced in *Sympathetic Magic* (2002), an exhibition held at the Gertrude Posel Gallery (Law cited in Richards 2005, p.27). This exhibition functioned as an installation, but contained within it discreet works such as *Will* and *Sympathetic Magic.* In the latter, objects were installed as if arrested in the process of packing or unpacking: some in layers of white packaging material, some in crates fully or partially boarded. The tension between concealing and revealing invested the objects with additional interest, but viewers were barred from the objects as they were installed behind glass.

In the paintings as well as the installations, the surfaces of Siopis' works offer the spectator an intimate view in which boundaries become diminished. In this haptic

experience the eye, acting as an organ of touch, surfaces memories of previously felt experiences. Like "smooth space", the work is experienced in an embodied way, without reference to cardinal points which give iconic and symbolic images their certain meaning. The disruption that occurs is therefore all the more effective.

Gamboni and indeterminacy

Siopis (2009, field notes) acknowledges the writing of Gamboni in his book, *Potential Images*. A central concern of Gamboni's is the collaboration of artist and viewer in the production of images. His book is devoted to the importance of "ambiguity, indeterminacy and polysemy in art" (Gamboni 2002, p. 9), which produce works that are "deliberately open to the freedom of the reader's reaction". The author gives three definitions for "ambiguity". They involve multiple interpretations, dual categories of interpretation and the third, which is most important for my purposes, "what lacks precision and disturbs" (Gamboni 2002, p. 13). Gamboni is interested in works that are representational, but that produce uncertainty about the exact content of the interpretation. In my own work I am interested in work based on observation, but which "lacks precision" in the sense that it lacks the features that make it possible to recognise and interpret the objects observed. This interpretative interruption has the potential to disturb the natural process of perception.

Perception and thinking styles

Gamboni (2002, p. 9) introduces his book, *Potential Images*, by giving a brief overview of the psychology of perception. He defines perception as the interpretation of visual data by the mind, and stresses that imagination plays an important role in the interpretative stage. In this research report, I will be using Gamboni's definition of perception as a starting point. In particular, I am interested in the notion that perception has two parts: namely the reception of visual data through the eyes, and the interpretation of this data by the mind. For the purposes of this research report I refer to the first stage as *looking* and the second as *seeing*.

It is important to acknowledge that perception involves all the senses and that even a focused visual experience draws on elements of other senses such as touch, balance and proprioception. I do refer to the haptic as an important contributor to the visual experience, but a more complete discussion of the role of the other senses is outside the scope of this report.

Gamboni's writing is of interest to my project, as it examines instability in the interpretative stage of perception. His work is concerned with the mechanisms that produce ambiguity in interpretation and places great emphasis on the imaginative participation of the viewer, stimulated by the ambiguous effects of an image.

I am interested in a similarly unresolved mental state, but with different causes. My project does not rely on imagination, but on mechanisms within the process of *looking through painting* that disrupt recognition.

The contents page of the monograph, *Siopis*, edited by Kathryn Smith, has a quote from Siopis that is of particular interest here. She says, "(l)ooking, with a specific consciousness, is a way of thinking for me. It is as if thoughts unfold from my eyes and attach to things" (Siopis 2005, unnumbered page).

My interest in Siopis' work and that described in *Potential Images*, is firstly, in the sense of mental tension produced in the viewer, in which the mind seeks a resolution of the data, and, being frustrated, continues to strive for it. I am also interested in whether a correspondence can be found between *looking* and *seeing* and two (roughly) distinct types of thinking, described variously by cognitive psychologists. This is a field, like perception, that is well beyond the scope of my project. As a result I refer to two recent publications that have popularised particular ideas around thinking.

The two thinking styles that have a bearing on this project are the fast and automatic versus the slow and reflective. Nassim Taleb (2008, p. 81) calls the first, "experiential" and the second, "cogitative". Taleb's "experiential" process, believed to be the domain of the limbic system (Taleb 2002, p. 82) includes what Chabris and Simon describe as the "rapid automatic processes involved in perception" (Chabris and Simons 2011 p. 230) while the "cogitative" process, which is associated with the cortical part of the brain (Taleb 2002, p. 82), is more effortful, reasoned, logical, progressive and self-aware (Taleb 2008 p. 81). I consider "interpretation" or *seeing* an "experiential" process, as it is effortless, automatic, fast, opaque (unconscious) and can lead to errors (Taleb 2008, p 81). Through my practical research I hope to activate the kind of *looking* that corresponds to "cogitative" thinking, in which data is revisited and interpretation remains open for a longer period.

According to Taleb, both systems of thought are useful. While "experiential" thinking dominates, it is reductive and inaccurate. "Cogitative" processes are slower and more self-conscious, but mentally 'expensive' and therefore, rarer. The real problem, for Taleb, is that "experiential" thinking leads to misplaced confidence as it is *unconsciously* selective. In this process, only information that *confirms* a preferential pattern or interpretation is taken note of, while data that negates the theory is rejected. Taleb refers to this habit as the "narrative fallacy". In addition, interpretation is domain-specific so that we are less likely to recognise objects that appear out of context. Chabris and Simon devised a now-famous video experiment (2011, p. 5 - 8) in which 50% of research subjects did not see a woman dressed in a gorilla suit walk onto the court in the middle of a basket-ball game, presumably because they were not expecting to see one. It is necessary, says Taleb, to deliberately revisit data in order to avoid the "narrative trap", to remain flexible and resilient in an uncertain and fast-changing world. Taleb is particularly concerned with over-confidence in analysing major risks related to economics. I am interested in the quality of perception.

While recognition and interpretation are instinctual and necessary for survival (Chabris and Simons 2011, p. 230), it can be argued that some conclusions are arrived at erroneously, or at least, superficially. It is possible that our highly-developed ability to *see* undermines a more careful sourcing of data. This has implications for the way we *are* in the world and for the way we make sense of experience.

Recognition looks for patterns (Simon and Chabris 2011, p. 156) within data and tolerates huge gaps (Simon and Chabris 2011, p. 158) in the structure of such patterns. My goal is to undermine the conclusion that we are looking at an incomplete pattern. I am interested in the aesthetic and mental pleasure to be gained from taking time to *look* at and know visual details that don't readily contribute to mental patterns. *Noticing* visual particularities and being sensitive to the contribution of other senses enriches perception and, finally, interpretation. Unlike Gamboni, I do not celebrate the imagination's ability to turn a schematic image of geometric shapes into a face; I want to disrupt that recognition, to delay interpretation, while all the time recognising that interpretation is the mind's goal.

The duality I am interested in can also be discussed from the perspective of semiotics. The visual data correlates with the signifier (to use Saussure's model) or the representamen (in Pierce's model). In my painting practice, there is an object, which Pierce acknowledges, but I attempt to paint without recognising the mental image in the object. The viewer is therefore precluded from interpreting the sign as referring to the object. The only interpretations that are available are to see the work as abstract or as a representation of the act of painting. The discussion on semiotics is not a principal focus of this document. It is merely an acknowledgement that some of this theory could be used to describe the process I am interested in: *looking* with a specific consciousness, to refer to part of Siopis' statement, is an integral part of the process of painting.

Gamboni's two-part definition to perception may imply that *looking*, receiving visual stimuli through the eye, precedes *seeing* or interpretation. However, the ability to recognise objects is a clear evolutionary advantage and has developed to the point that it appears to be immediate and unavoidable (Taleb 2008, p. 82). It becomes clear that the careful *looking* I am interested in is not the precursor to interpretation, but a more deliberate *revisiting* of data, in which selection is not based on pattern-recognition, but on visual interest. It is possible that Deleuze and Guattari's description of the "nomad's" experience of landscape may help to describe the type of *looking* I am interested in. It has to do with an intimacy between painting subject and object, where *looking* is exploration, not nomination. "Losing oneself in observation" (Nel 2010, field notes) comes close to describing the mental state of the painting experience.

My images are not abstract, even if they are not meant to be recognised. They are based on acute observation of objects in my environment. They are not symbolic either, in that the painting does not rely on a conventional correlation between the image and some metaphoric idea. The painting refers to the objects examined, but it also refers to the process of *looking through painting*.

I am interested in the first part of Gamboni's definition of perception, the sourcing of visual data. If interpretation is aided by the imagination and "snaps" to pre-set images, such as human faces, the question arises as to how much visual data is not taken into account, in the process. The generalising and reductive nature of

recognition and language means that information which does not fit the narrative or schematic mental image might not be encoded and may be lost. In addition, I am interested in the disparity between the linearity of the process of *looking* and the quality of the sign as a singular and reductive idea. Baxandall (1985 p. 3) refers to the "gait" and "pace" of looking which changes from a rapid scanning in order to take in a generalised, if imprecise, impression of the whole, to a series of rapid fixations. The selectiveness of looking is made evident when Baxandall (1985, p. 3) asserts that it would not be possible for a reader to reconstruct the original painting from the description given of it by a writer. In the same way, a *record of looking at an object*, in painting, is not a replica of the object, nor necessarily a reliable representation of it, but the documentation of the *process of looking* at the object, with the purpose of translating the elements of visual interest into paint.

Gamboni (2002, p. 15) writes that images that are ambiguous or partly hidden prolong the cycle of hypothesising for a possible interpretation and therefore provide a circumstance within which other information is considered and re-evaluated. This is evident in Siopis' work. The disruption of representation that occurs through the assertion of materiality prolongs the process of interpretation. Within this space, Siopis invites viewers to re-examine conventional ideas about violence and pleasure, for instance. Indeterminacy or ambiguity therefore function to delay closure and to allow imaginative interpretation.

In contrast to Siopis' work, my project focuses on the way *the process of painting* produces a visual revisiting of data, through *looking*, that allows for the production of an image that is based on careful and focussed observation, but does not lead to an (easily) recognisable (iconic) image. The painterly image that is produced is not interpretative, but indexical. The painter is unavoidably aware of the objects she observes as already-interpreted, named objects or ideas. In the *process of painting*, however, she must disconnect such an interpretation from the *process of looking*. Visual data must be examined in a naïve way, and assigned value for reasons other than the fit with a pre-set pattern. In *looking to paint*, the object's materiality must be re-examined and noted. Such a painting is not a representation of the object, but a representation of the *process of painting*.

The spectator of the work, who is not the painter, has a different experience. This viewer may not be privy to the definition of the object and sees only the documentation of the process of painting. In this case, it is possible that the indeterminate nature of the work leads to a prolonged period of *looking* as the precursor to *seeing*. The delay or disruption of the recognition phase keeps the mind in limbo as it naturally strives for closure.

I do not suggest that it is either possible or desirable to prevent interpretation completely. The formal elements of an abstract painting also constitute an image, and an 'image' is already an interpretation. Gombrich believed it was not possible for viewers to see the 'war-horse' and the 'abstract qualities of paint' at the same time (Robbins 2002, p. 1). Mental processes are fast and it is difficult to say whether or not it is possible to recognise an object and simultaneously hold such recognition at bay. For the artist, in *looking* as part of the *process of painting*, both views are necessary. What I hope to produce in the spectator, however, is a prolonged cycle, not only of hypotheses for interpretation but of the particular stage of perception in which visual data is sourced and given value.

Chapter 3

**A discussion of Siopis' recent work and processes.**

In the context of this research, a full study of perception would be an over-ambitious task and arguably outside of the realm of only an art theory framework. This project focuses on certain aspects of the artist's perception *in the process of painting*. How the artist chooses to *look* or, to *see*, is fundamental to the quality of the work. Whether and how the artist chooses to fore-ground materiality as a more urgent focus of attention is a separate, but related, notion. In choosing *not to see,* the opportunity is created to demonstrate and pay attention to the particularities of the medium.

I was privileged to visit Siopis, first at her home and studio in 2009, and then to observe her at work in her temporary studio at Wits University in January 2010. I shall attempt to describe the artist's process with reference to two paintings: *A Child Frightened by a Bloom* (2010) and *Blow Up* (2010) at a particular stage in their realisation. Both these paintings and a third, *Furioso* (2010), will be discussed in a later section as completed works which later hung in an exhibition at Brodie Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg, in September 2010.

My intention in visiting the artist's studio was not so much to create a complete record of her working process as to try to isolate and identify some of the working decisions made in the process of painting. A fascination with paint involves an intense exploration of all the things that paint can do. Choosing a repertoire of techniques, from these more or less random experiments, leads to work that is true to both of Pollock's "selves": the painter and the paint (2005, p. 51). Siopis' minute-by-minute decisions express her theory about what painting is. Her delicate balancing of image with materiality is the result of a continuous weighing of these two forces. Each is given attention, in turn, and pushed back again.

In the production of the two works, *A Child Frightened by a Bloom* and *Blow Up,* Siopis' process consisted of, essentially, two forces: the goal to which she oriented the work, a broad subject matter; and the "chance effects" of the material which she manipulated through her knowledge of the qualities of her medium. By setting these two forces against one another, a work is created that exists "between apperception and perception" (Gamboni 2002, p. 14). Siopis sets up conditions for the materials to

form random shapes, marks or patterns on the canvas. These marks which appear to be "spontaneous" are acknowledged and allowed to exist *as material*, giving their material states *as* meaning. Some of the forms that result have the potential to be interpreted. Where such imagery arises and contributes to the work, the artist will preserve and reinforce their forms; those that do not contribute will be edited out.
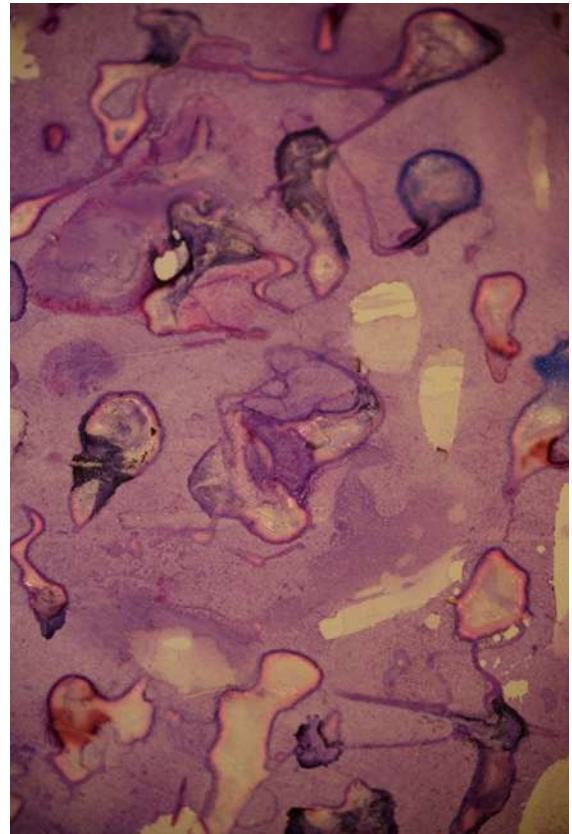
Figs. 1, 2

Paint marks appear "spontaneous" if they are random, and if the quality of the mark seems to be *natural* rather than determined. I have chosen the term *natural* to focus on this particular quality in Siopis' painting. Such marks look like those made by the action of natural forces on materials, for example by water dripping, running or pooling. *Natural*-looking stains that are formed by evaporation leave crystals of pigment and crisp edges.

Fig. 3

In contrast, marks that are *determined* by an artist have a consistency that results from being manipulated *on the canvas* as well as from the relative speed of the artist's hand (apart from the obvious iconicity of images such as human faces). If a *natural* mark is required, the artist must give up some control and leave paint to dry or cure over time with somewhat unpredictable results. Siopis is not uncomfortable with this unpredictability. Like the Surrealists nearly a century ago, she sets up conditions for chance elements to enter the work. This is not to say she has no control. Not only does she control the initial conditions, but consecutive edits mean that only favourable outcomes are retained. The "chance" element is not entirely random, but the *appearance* of the marks made in this way is more likely to lead to ambiguous readings. These marks are also more likely to attract attention to themselves as independent matter and therefore *unsettle* the image.

In what follows I attempt an account of *A Child Frightened by a Bloom* and *Blow-Up*[v] at a particular point in their realisation.

When I first saw the two paintings I have selected for this study, *Blow Up* had just a layer of expressive marks (a brown explosive form), which offered no clues toward an interpretation.

Fig. 4

The medium had been applied over the large format by using gravity to pull the sluggish glue slowly "downwards". To achieve this distribution, the artist tilted the canvas at a slight angle, relying on the property of glue, which is its slow, but steady, drying time, to "freeze" its motion at a particular stage. As glue will flow only when it is fresh from the bucket, exposure to air begins a drying process that will supercede the pull of gravity, causing the material to set in its path like flow-stone or a glacier.

Fig. 5

The trace of the medium's movement is recorded in the congealed material which leaves the viewer vulnerable to projecting a continuous movement. It appears only to have been caught in a moment of time, after which, it seems, the movement will continue.

The brown form's complex shape was made by tilting the canvas first in one direction, then another. In its final orientation, the large brown form at the bottom of the canvas appears to be heaving up, while an ominous resevoir of brown glue hangs above, threatening to spill its destruction onto the ground.

Choosing to use gravity and drying time as manipulative techniques results in *natural* marks. By using the force of gravity to affect the marks made, the artist is appealing to our remembered observations of physical matter. We interpret the direction of the motion based on our knowledge of the behaviour of *material* and not as the result of an iconic field of meaning within which certain actions are possible.
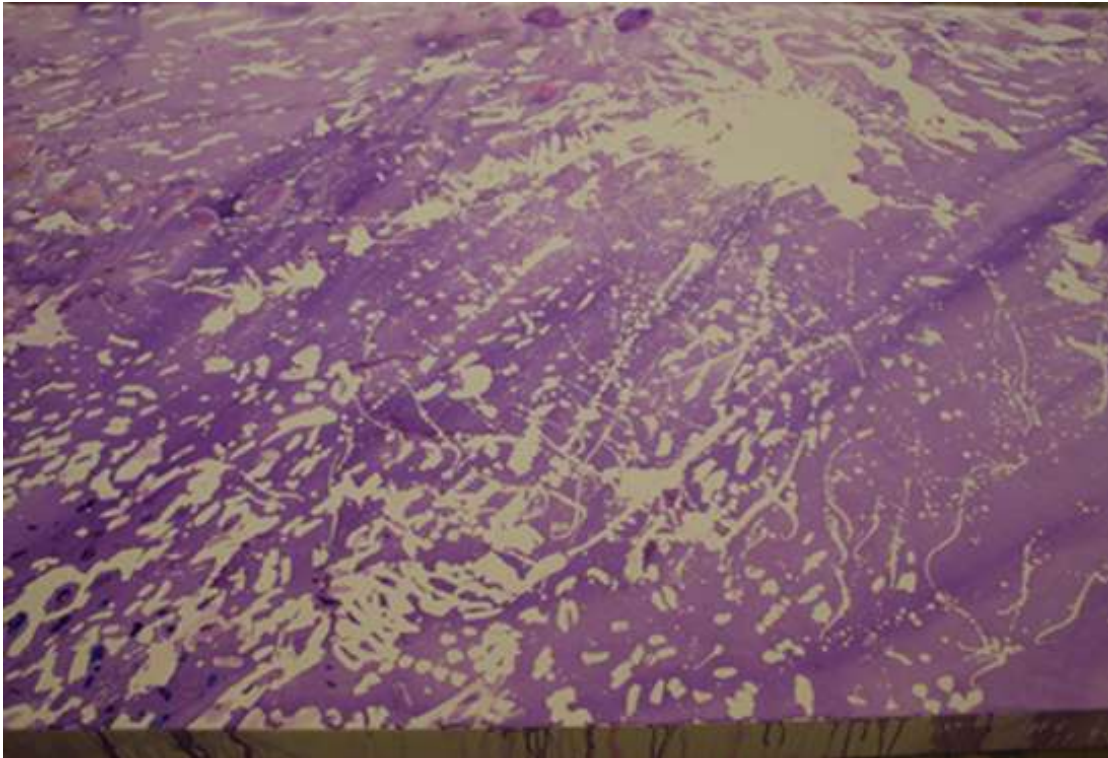
Fig. 6

At that stage, the other painting, *A Child is Frightened by a Bloom,* had an initial stain of purple on the canvas. The ink had been washed over masking fluid, which blocked out the negative shapes of two figures and other amorphous strokes. The initial expressive "gesture" laid down the visual movement and emotional energy of the work. After applying more masking fluid to the canvas, to preserve some parts of this stage, Siopis again applied liquid ink and glue. The flow of these two fluids was manipulated by tilting the canvas, spraying water into the medium or manually splashing the fluid into areas she wanted to stain. These actions produce *natural* marks into which the artist works with further process, maintaining a delicate balance of control and chance.
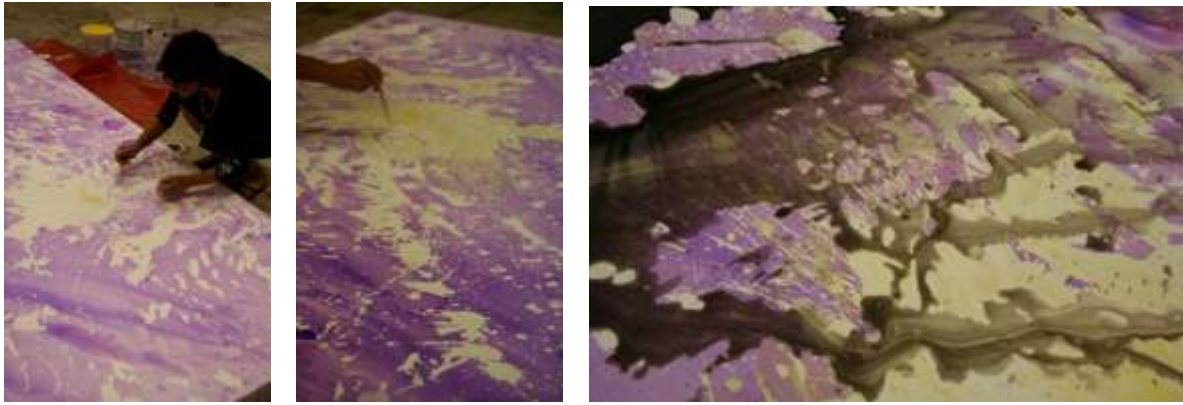
Figs. 7 - 9

Figs. 10 - 13

Siopis has chosen to explore materials that can be worked with in a way that is spontaneous, intuitive and most significantly, that produces unplanned effects that are the result of physical laws and chemical reactions not intended by the manufacturers. By working in a space outside of the manufacturers' recommendations, Siopis has chosen a medium that produces surprise effects.

The three ingredients of Siopis' present experiments are white glue, ink and water. White glue, also known as cold glue or wood glue, is not designed for painting, although it is essentially an acrylic medium. Siopis makes use of the acrylic properties of this material, as well as its relative compatibility with water and water-based inks. The inks with which Siopis stains the glue or canvas are designed to be used on paper and with water only, if a solvent is required. Moreover, different brands of ink are not intended to be used in the same solution as incompatible ingredients can cause the mixtures to 'curdle'. This results in unexpected colour changes, but can also cause the pigment to drop out of the solution and settle

heavily on the ground. The combination of inks and the acrylic glue create further unforeseen reactions which give the work a fresh injection of spontaneous marks which the artist can select and edit for her own purposes.


Figs. 14, 15

In the images above two main effects can be seen: the pooling of water and the glue's resistance to the liquid. Puddles of ink-stained water have collected in random shapes and flow around little islands of glue or masking fluid. As the surface of the canvas becomes more layered with glue, the liquid ink will increasingly be affected by this substructure. Essentially, the artist is pitting these two qualities of stability and instability against each other. What is interesting for this research is the way these formally incompatible products create *natural*-looking marks and spontaneous effects.

These photographs represent a particular stage in the development of *A Child is Frightened by a Bloom.* The pink, purple and green ink have been splashed onto the canvas and allowed to mingle with water. Streams of liquid run together, merge and separate again. Intense purple ink washes into lilac and mauve, neutralised by green. Some pigments settle out of the solution in spots and streaks while streams of dark purple recreate the veined appearance of blossoms without the need for accurate shapes. The forms provoke and elicit long-term memories of material in its various states. The embodied viewing that this produces lends an authenticity to the work. Haptic viewing is promoted here: the intimate knowledge of objects up close, without reference to their edges; without the necessity of naming them; the feel of stuff. What it is, is not important, but *how* it is, communicates.

Decisions are taken about which colours to overlay, how much water to add, what directional forces to apply to the material and how to retard, block and obscure the ink with glue. The material, however, seems to have a life of its own.

A field of purple is built up of these small images. It has components that reference a flurry of jacaranda blossoms, but the *indistinctness* of the marks prevent this interpretation from settling. The image is kept at bay by the ambiguity of the marks. Many viewers would be familiar with Max Ernst's *Two Children are Frightened by a Nightingale* (1924), which deals with irrational dread. Perhaps, here, blossoms are a threat to the child. However, Siopis (2010, field notes) is interested in the way *marks* take on anthropomorphic qualities. In certain Japanese prints, falling rain is depicted as a field of ink-strokes. These marks have an assertive quality and appear to threaten the scurrying figures in their own right. "Rain *pelting* or *beating* down" are phrases that reveal a human tendency to ascribe subjective powers to nature. (Siopis 2010, field notes). This painting is another interesting example of irrational fear, but Siopis goes further. *Paint* is made menacing in this work.

Baxandall (1985, p.57) writes that descriptions of artworks tend to assign a cause to a quality. For example, in Libanius's description, which Baxandall (1985, p. 1) quotes, "firm design" is attributed to the artist's "assured handling" of the medium. While Siopis' colour field is carefully balanced and finely nuanced, the viewer of her work has difficulty in assigning a *cause* to the marks made other than that of the physical properties of the medium and the forces of nature. It is this apparent contradiction between design and chance that creates the work's mystery. It also makes projection by the viewer more likely and the results, "uncanny" (Prinzhorn in Gamboni 2002 p. 14).
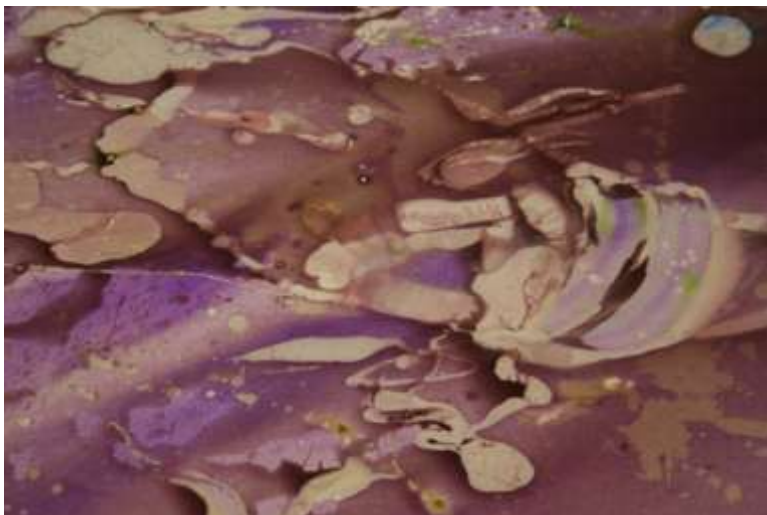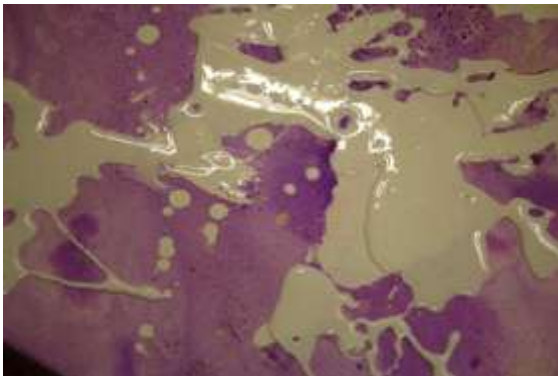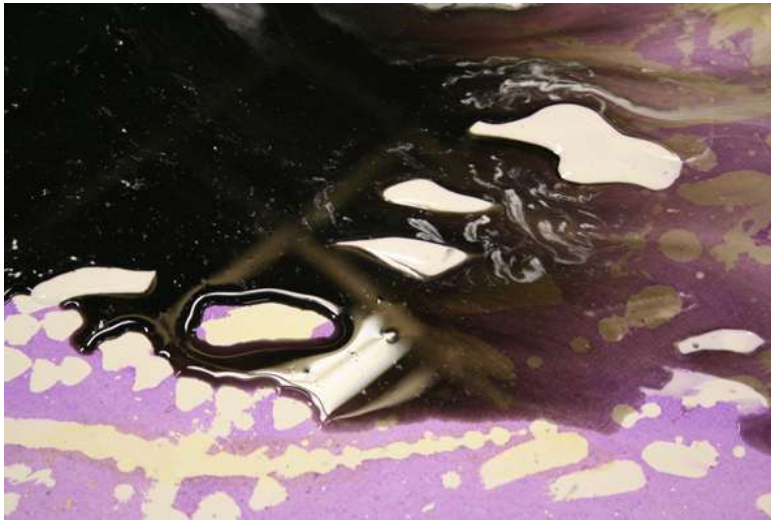
Figs. 16 - 21

There are many photographs from this period in Siopis' studio that provide aesthetically satisfying images. They reveal the sensuous allure of the medium of paint in its constituent parts. They represent lost moments in the work's progress, as the paintings change with time. The liquid dries, glue congeals and pigment concentrates in different places. And more paint will be layered on top.

Siopis may choose to impose imagery on the work at any stage. In *A child is Frightened by a Bloom*, 2010, she began by sketching two childish figures and masking them with glue to maintain the lightness of the canvas. In the finished work only one figure remained.

At other times the artist may wait for images to emerge from the spontaneous marks. These may be reinforced in order to 'fix' them, almost as a photographic image is fixed. The fixing of an image is also something that occurs in the viewer's mind, once visual data has been interpreted as a meaningful sign. Other areas of the painting produce "potential images", to use Gamboni's phrase. The artist leaves these areas ambiguous, content to allow space for the viewer's projection (Siopis 2010, field notes).

Sometimes Siopis' editing process involves removing a dried strip of glue. The effect of this is similar to pulling off masking fluid and exposes the clean white canvas underneath. In many respects this medium is, like other water-based mediums, dependent on the white of the canvas to produce light areas. The works' particular translucency is the effect of light reflecting off the white canvas below layers of transparent ink. The translucent (dried) glue allows less light to be reflected back, but nevertheless creates a peaceful glow. White areas can also be reclaimed by sponging off the colour, rubbing back to the canvas. This approach has softer edges and retains some texture as colour that settled in the minute hollows of the canvas remains.

Figs. 22 - 25

The quality of Siopis' mark-making is the most arresting aspect of the works under discussion. Some marks are made directly by the artist's hand, while large fields of colour are clearly too large to be the effect of a single gestural stroke with brush or roller. They are the stains of fairly large volumes of water and ink which flood and flow over the huge canvasses to produce unified swathes of colour. The edges of the giant stains dry with the characteristic hard edge seen in water-colour. The unity of the large "mark" magnifies the expressive gestural value of the medium within this large format. Variations of colour or texture are formed as the internal pools of different coloured inks and the glue drop out of the solution onto the canvas surface.

Siopis (2010, field notes) believes the ability of the work to form a representational image in the viewer's mind creates a productive tension between the potential of the reference and the physical reality of the material. The reference provides a context against which to tension the non-referential aspect of the work. Also, the interpretive field that is opened up by the image makes it possible for the viewer to project into partly formed images (and complete them). A purely abstract work would be too open; the field needs to be limited in order to have meaning.

To maintain this tension, the artist carefully controls the emergence of the image. She can create detailed sections in a very determined way with these materials, but probably the most common operation is working with the materials' ability to resist the image, to prevent its surfacing completely. If necessary, an over-determined detail can be removed, sponged or overlaid in thick glue or darker paint.

The notion that the materiality *resists* the image represents imagery as *insistent*, as having a life of its own. It indicates that the need for mental closure pushes the artist

as well as the viewer towards fixing the image, permanently. What is interesting about this work is its ability to disrupt and delay the image's emergence, long enough for the materiality of the work to be the focus.

Siopis often begins with source material (2010, field notes), but the work that it gives rise to is a far remove from the seminal image. At various stages of her working life, Siopis has appropriated images from the history of art. In this series, figures from Japanese prints surface in the porcelain-like translucency of the tinted glue-medium. The images translate an *idea* about Japanese figures in art, rather than the original images themselves.

The forms which teeter on the edge of recognition and dissolution are all the more compelling because of their *potential* to signify, while their intrinsic qualities are arresting when the work is seen in exhibition.

These works do not reproduce well. The reduction of surface to image that occurs in photography, compounded by the demands of representing the work in its entirety, as a recognizable icon, does the work a disservice. Viewing the work is a process of exploration. It is also a haptic experience. The impulse to run one's fingers over the surface is evidence of the importance of touch in perception. Each mark or cluster of marks invites the viewer to linger, exploring its qualities, reading its particularity while different angles produce a variety of reflective effects. The resolution of the image into an iconic form is delayed, interrupted. This experience is part of the meaning of the work, and its pleasure.

The finished works seen at Brodie Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg, August to September 2010.

From the exhibition, I have selected *A Child Frightened by a Bloom* (2010), *Furioso* (2010) and *Blow Up* (2010) as the focus of the next section of this report.

A Child Frightened by a Bloom

Fig. 26

This large work was placed opposite the entrance to the gallery. As viewers entered the room, they stepped into a visual field of purple, mauve and lilac marks, with the small figure of a naked child in the bottom left corner. The child is secondary. Its flattened form is almost transparent. It is the flurry of paint that is the primary image, assailing the viewer and the child who runs, arms thrown up, from the storm. Like figures scurrying from pelting ink-rain in Japanese prints, this figure is fleeing aggressive marks of paint. The material nature of paint upstages iconography. Recognition is kept in check, while the viewer tries to access a half-remembered sensation, a primal knowledge of how things are, how matter behaves. It is why we know to fear, even if we don't know what we fear.

At bottom left, a single shape, roughly as big as the child, separates from the purple mass of the large canvas. Ink has run veins in the glue, like that of a jacaranda blossom, but the scale is not realistic. It is not the outer edges of the shape, but rather, the internal structure, the materiality, that references the bloom. The relative iconicity of this form, separated as it is from the most aggressive mass of paint, offers a hypothesis for interpretation, but simultaneously contradicts it. In the same way, the title, separated from the work in the display, is an unsatisfactory lead, except insofar as it references Ernst's work.


Fig. 27

The deliberate play on Ernst's title, *Two Children are Frightened by a Nightingale*, (Siopis 2010, field notes) positions the work for the viewer and confirms the role of imaginative projection in interpreting the work. The random shapes of Siopis' work are un-named, un-recognisable, like shapes that frighten in the dark. The *natural* marks, which are stains, splashes and drips, are records of material process.

Here, materiality has its own energy, suggested by the overlapping, indeterminate edges of the marks. Crisp-edged stains jostle with scrubbed and faded marks. In this work there are no cardinal points, no references; only paint matter advancing. Such anxious space recalls the shortness of breath in dreams where we run but never move, while the object of our fear meanwhile advances.

The explanation that the child may be frightened of the bloom is not what this work is about. We know that because we recognise the malevolent potential of the paint. It is

about formlessness and a human desire to subjugate the unfamiliar. It is less about irrational fear than about fear of the irrational.
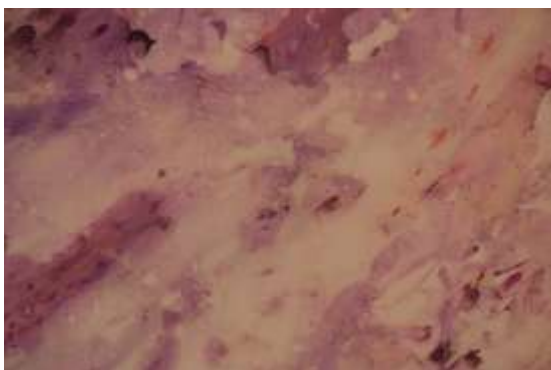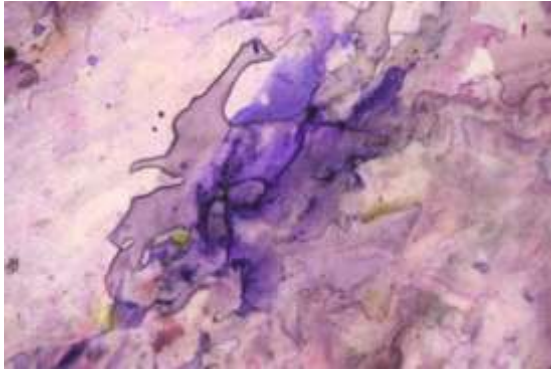
Figs. 28 - 33

Furioso (2010)

Fig. 34

More than any other painting at this exhibition, *Furioso* makes an appeal to the viewer's natural pattern-recognition process. The painting provides barely sufficient data for the mind to see an octopus, while material presents qualities that reference flesh, raw and skinned, blood and other bodily fluids. It seems mammalian, not fish. A startled human face, an arm and a leg emerge from amidst tentacles as big as the limbs.

The closure is incomplete, however, as the disruption of figure-ground conventions tip the scale of credulity. Painted ground violates the figure, disrupting depth perception. Foreground and background alternate and heave. Siopis has used figure and ground both to surface and to submerge an image that reveals itself and simultaneously subsides into the painted ground. Beautiful and nauseating at the

same time: fatty whites, pinks, reds and a touch of blue like veins on pale skin. Elsewhere, the pock-marked surface glistens while glue clots like blood.

Within this traumatised surface, carefully rendered suckers on tentacles maintain the tension between reference and the slippage of material. As much as the image fixes us in a horrified stare, the surface draws us closer still. The drama represented or alluded to by the iconography is rendered in subtle contrasts, intriguing for its technical allure.

Furioso is image *and* material. Like an earlier work, it draws on myth to provide a framework for the display of material states as metaphor for human experience. We experience the impossible, the fantasy (Siopis 2009, field notes) because we know *how matter is*, we read paint in its own language. Under the influence of Georges Bataille's writing in *The Tears of Eros*, *Furioso* explores the heterology of violence and pleasure.

Figs. 35 -39

Figs. 40 - 42

Blow Up (2010)

Fig. 43

In contrast to *Furioso*, the painting called *Blow-up* seems fairly abstract and innocuous at first glance. A huge cloud of opaque brown medium hangs in the top part of the painting and seems to be still moving. Upward-moving forms rise up from the bottom where detailed flotsam offers a tentative reading of the work. Small faces and part-figures float uncertainly in paint matter. The more one looks, the more

ominous the shape overhead appears: a reservoir of destruction, while the faces down below are caught between agony and ecstatic surrender.

Medium floods the lower sides, sweeping along painterly debris of black ink splatters like charred remains, trapped in the congealing glue.

Red and orange turn tongues into flames, sleep into death and the cloud into destruction. As in *Furioso*, *Blow-Up* brings Bataille's heterological high and low closer together. In this work the strange meeting of pleasure and pain, beauty and destruction is made possible by ambiguity in the representational image. Relaxed faces have surrendered, either to sleep or to death, to pain or to ecstasy. One face's open mouth signals both agony *and* the adenoidal sleep of a child.

Apart from the iconography, the surface of the work communicates its own contradictions. In this work material seems to be moving, flowing imperceptibly, hanging momentarily before bursting or surging upward. The suspended moment is laden with possibility. Black scraps of ink are suspended in space. Pastel-coloured glue-blobs take on an ominous character as they are flung violently to the corners of the work.

Paint has formed its own unnamed objects that hover in a material field, speak in a language of suggestion and relationship. Figure-ground configurations make no sense yet assert their presence.

By creating *natural* marks, Siopis has tapped into a language of form. We read these actions as those of natural materials. The glue which set in its downward movement references the solid-fluid forms of glaciers or flow-stone. These natural forms present us with motion frozen in our human perception, our short attention span. The painting is frozen in our gaze. We are persuaded the movement continues all the while even though our sampling of this motion is too short to measure a difference. It is the form that stands for the movement.

Determined marks used by painters skilfully render the representational or abstract forms that express the artist's intentions. They are deliberate. Siopis' *natural* marks do not have this quality. They appear not to have been *painted*, but to have *occurred*, to have a life of their own. Perhaps this is why they allow us to project so freely; why we imaginatively interpret the forms in a number of ways.

Detailed views of the painting reveal material realities that have no representational value but intrigue us, draw us in to the *how* of the work. As Baxandall (1985, p. 57) writes, the attribution of cause to a description is a natural human tendency. Chabris and Simon (2011, p. 170) write about the preference for narrative in interpretation. Here, the process that formed the marks and the appearance of the marks are linked with a certain license. This attribution of anthropomorphic qualities to form or material is an interest of the artist (2010, field notes) and can be seen clearly in all three works discussed.

The ability of the work to speak back to the viewer is seen, in part, in its manipulation of the viewer's physical space. All of these works require more than one viewing position. From afar, the 'cloud' in *Blow-Up* reads as an undisturbed unified shape. This presents the viewer with an apparently reducible image, but when the viewer is drawn into a near viewing position, figures and part-figures conflict with materiality and call for a different reading.

Mieke Bal (Cherry 2008, p. 1) writes about the artwork as a partner in a conversation. In her critical writing, the artwork contributes. It speaks, it thinks. The work's agency, which Jacques Rancière (2009) writes of, may be linked to the indeterminacy of Gamboni's *Potential Images*. In all of these models, the work maintains some freedom; it refuses final interpretation and produces a degree of uncertainty. It arrests the process of perception in a space where interpretation seems imminent, but incomplete.

Rancière (2009, p.114) writes that "the … pensiveness might then be defined as this tangle between several forms of indeterminacy." Later in the same text he writes that the transition from a Classical representational regime to a Modern aesthetic one is the transition from activity (narrative) to thought (2009, p. 120). "Pensiveness" is a way the text signals that it has "meaning in reserve… it puts every conclusion in suspense" (2009, p.123).

Siopis' works discussed here do not give themselves up to reductive readings. They produce a confrontation, which in turn creates a pleasurable, productive dissensis. They make one go back and look again.
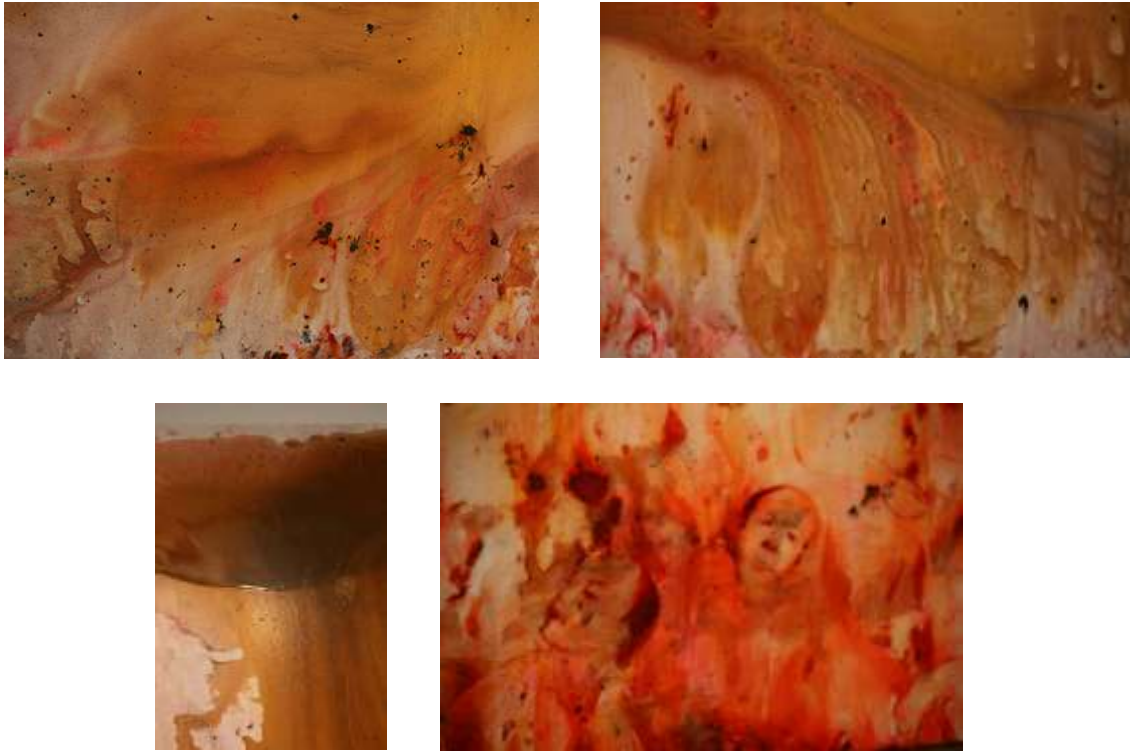
Figs. 44 - 47

As a statement about painting as discipline, Siopis' recent work positions itself as a synthesis of abstraction and figuration, creating a productive tension between the two. Each of the paintings discussed here is, to return to Schwabsky's idea (2006/7, unnumbered page) not (so much) a painting of an image, but an image of painting. In these canvasses by Siopis, like earlier works referred to by Richards, meaning cannot be limited to the iconographic reading of the work. It is to be found, equally, in the particularity of the medium, the untranslatable, the messy *other* of paint (Richards 2009, field notes).

Chapter 4

The works by Siopis, which I have discussed in this project, are interesting to me because they introduce indeterminacy which unsettles the representational image. This produces a tension within the viewer who is caught between *looking* and *seeing*, who is forced to return to the material data again and again to re-group, while trying to arrive at an interpretation. Siopis' work is aligned quite closely with the notion of "potential images", as described by Gamboni, in which the viewer's imaginative interpretation completes the work. Representation, both iconic and symbolic, is facilitated by determined sections of the work which allow viewers to project into the remainder and form symbolic associations. Interpretation is opened to ambiguity, but interpretation remains the aim of the work.

In my own painting, I am less interested in symbolic projections than in the arrest of the perceptual process itself. I wish to explore the way that *looking through painting* is *linear* and consists of separate visual events, some of which involve a broad scanning, but others which are minute fixations. I am interested in the way tactile qualities inform vision and the way a painter can achieve intimacy with the objects she observes so as to create or inhabit "smooth space" (Deleuze and Guattari cited in Marks 2004, p. 5 of 6). In short, I want to leave a record of the *process of looking through painting*, which suspends *seeing* or interpretation in the search for source data that is selected for its visual interest and not its contribution to pattern-recognition.

In an attempt to isolate certain moments in the *process of painting*, I limited my project to the use of paint as medium and to acutely observational practice. Over the duration of the research many approaches were tested and evaluated for their ability to produce a record of the process of *looking through painting*. The distillation of ideas that I was working with can be seen most clearly from the vantage point of the curated exhibition shown at the end of the process. In particular, the two large light-coloured works, 5 and 6, have considerably reduced and refined the acute *noticing* that I was interested in from the start. The decision to eliminate all the additional information that would normally contextualise the selection, both of motifs within the work and works to display, serves to assert that which is tenuous and establish a platform for future projects.

I have taken an almost scientific approach to the research, working within the confines of my project. While a lot of contemporary painting involves a "contagion" with practices that are not traditionally associated with painting (Birnbaum 2002, p. 158), this project limits itself to the use of paint as medium and highly nuanced *looking* as approach. Under these conditions, I have explored the process of *looking through painting* and attempted to isolate the particular contribution of the chosen medium to the artist's sourcing of data as something to be *noticed* and then translated into paint. This acute *noticing* has a relationship to historical styles of naturalistic painting, but at the same time, there is a contemporary focus on the nature of perception, on the one hand, and on the investigation into the "dichotomies of painting" (Schwabsky 2003) on the other.

"Distillation" and "editing" are words that describe the whole process of curating this exhibition. Over the course of this project, I have generated a large body of work. Within this, a number of distinct phases can be seen. These represent the exploration of particular approaches in an attempt to bring my painting, writing and thinking into line. Each of these phases offered up new lessons, mostly about what to leave out, both in terms of subject matter and representational approach. For instance, I tried early on to undermine tone as an indicator of visual (illusionary) depth, and later I let go of the co-ordinates of scale and proportion. In another phase I worked at separating visual elements as distinct motifs in an attempt to represent the separate visual events that constitute *looking*. The final, and probably most significant, strategy came about through many experiments with materiality, but can be seen as a disruption of figure-ground conventions. The sustained period of experimentation also produced a growing confidence in the process of painting itself, and the way that process offers up lessons, which when amplified lead to statements about the fleeting that can be given with a certain clarity and assurance. In effect, the final product of this research project is a contradiction, a notion I shall return to later.

In a discussion with Siopis (2009, field notes), the artist spoke about the nature of process work in relation to curated and published exhibitions. As discussed in chapter 3, above, Siopis works in an experimental way with materials, setting up conditions for chance events. Her control lies in the editing process; both while a work is being formed, and through her rejection of certain canvasses that did not produce useful results. Siopis also spoke of a visit to the studio of Marlene Dumas

where she saw a similar process and selection taking place. The technical freedom arrived at in these artists' works can be achieved only through being willing to generate an excess. This helps to dispel the "myth of genius" in art where every artistic gesture is seen as precious. The greatest lesson I learned from this project was to "listen to" or notice the voice of material making a contribution to the disruption of the image. Rather than creating a planned disruption with determined marks, I learned to use the natural effects of paint to disrupt even my own intentions.

In curating my final exhibition, space became extremely important. A sparse quality in the selection of the works opened up feelings of space within the works. Relationships were created between the works and the space, and between the works themselves.

Figs. 48 - 51

The reduced nature of the exhibition is seen in both the relatively small number of works selected from the body of work, and the spare quality of the paintings themselves. What I hoped for was a quality of "elegance", where the bold selection of that which is *noticed* momentarily would lead to a pared-down experience, a *noticing* within the viewer as well. The work has an austerity combined with a sensuality which can be seen as a mark of highly selective, highly nuanced *looking* and *noticing*. The "spare" quality introduces a sense of quiet into the work. It represents the listening that is needed in conversation, in this case between the painter or viewer and the paint. As has been said about the monastic "vow of silence", it is not that speaking is disallowed, but that silence is valued so highly; it should be broken only in highly selective situations. I have had to learn to hold back some involvement with the canvas, to leave much unsaid. The seemingly blank areas of canvas represent this absence, which speaks quite forcefully about what did not happen in the work.

A similar "spare" quality can be found in the work of a number of established contemporary painters. Josephina Ayerza (n.d.) likens the spaces in Jacqueline Humphries' work with the silence in language. Adrian Searle (2011, p. 1) describes the reductive quality of Wilhelm Sasnal's work as "a terrible, bleak economy," which points to the potentially unsettling quality of this "silence". Sasnal's work also creates space for the voice of paint. In *The Gym Lesson* (2000), the apparently unfinished background creates a disruption of this otherwise illusionary space. Broken, incomplete, brushstrokes lift the surface by giving it an abstract quality. Another work, *Landscape* (2001), has a row of houses disturbed by a paint stain, rather than the "smoke bomb" it apparently represents. The rest of the work is ominously quiet.

These works by Sasnal are important as they exemplify the relationship between pictorial information and "abstract" materiality that is at the heart of my research. The notion of disruption, which is seen in Sasnal's work, is central to the research. Sasnal's paint stain/smoke bomb in *Landscape* 2001 is acutely eloquent. Disruption, here, is not a diminution of the work's ability to communicate, but rather the contribution of a dissenting voice into the conversation about complex realities.

Contradiction exists in Siopis' work and also in the paintings of Elizabeth Peyton. As Emma Dexter (2005, p. 8, 9) writes in the introduction to *Vitamin D*, imagery and

materiality do not always agree. The writer points out that while Peyton's imagery (portraits of celebrities) appears to communicate admiration, her medium "allows for the possibility of irony and self-consciousness." Humphries also works with contradiction in her painting. She pits line against ground, but at times they become one, "an apparent negation, but without the one cancelling each other out" (Ayerza, n.d., p. 2 of 6). Destabilisation remains key in Humphries' paintings, even if she does not try to determine the content (Brown, 2009, p.1).

Kagan (2009, p. 31 - 32) describes three ways of constructing knowledge: semantic, schematic and procedural. Semantic knowledge has become dominant in contemporary society, but schematic and procedural knowledge are still extremely important in certain fields such as medicine, where doctors read patients' physical symptoms (schemata) and apply procedural knowledge in treating them. I believe that painting's intrigue is its ability to combine all three of these ways of constructing knowledge in a single work. While Kagan sees representational images as schematic and language as semantic, Edeline (cited in Gamboni 2002, p. 15) claimed that the interpretation of images is a semiotic action. It is possible that terms like "semantic" may mean different things in neuropsychology and philosophy. Once again, it is not within the scope of this report to address this issue in detail, but the idea that interpretation, meaning or knowledge can be constructed differently is very important to this project. Perhaps images are both semantic and schematic, in the sense that some part of the image is interpreted and encoded as language whereas other aspects of the information gained are more visual. In painting, the materiality of the work offers up both procedural knowledge and schematic knowledge which is not decoded semantically, but is based in the memory of visual and embodied experience. Living and playing with physical material prepares viewers to interpret the states of matter through faculties that are both visual and haptic. The schemata of the mark that results allows viewers to draw on procedural knowledge. This is an embodied response to the work, in which a causal inference can be made about the material process that gave rise to a particular mark. Representation and abstraction are not helpfully seen as binaries. They are both used to construct knowledge or meaning, but in different ways and with different emphasis. The dissent they produce is not a "cancelling out", but the enrichment of experience.

The boundary between painting and drawing does come under some scrutiny in my works, particularly in relation to the open areas of the work. Dexter, in her introduction to *Vitamin D*, attempts to separate drawing from painting. She draws on Norman Bryson's notion that the drawn image emerges from a blank space, a reserve that is "perceptually present, but conceptually absent" (Bryson in Dexter, 2005, p. 6). She states that drawing's "reserve therefore functions as a device to keep away…totality, (a) force that painting is subject to" (Dexter 2005, p. 6). The works that I have produced for this project are not subject to painting's "totality", as Dexter would have it, but remain paintings in some way.

A few of the works have literally untouched areas of bare canvas (except for the commercial primer with which it was sold). This "ground" functions as an absence against which the presence of the painterly mark is contrasted, in a manner similar to drawing. In later works, however, the "ground" was prepared, either in in black primer, or in white paint that was brushed on in a multi-directional stroke (5 and 6). This latter application agitates the surface, so that while on the one hand, it reads as an untouched white "ground", on the other, it is a surface, breaking up light in its texture. Similarly the black-primed canvases (4 and 7) have an ambiguous quality. The even-toned black could be read as a "ground" on which the white paint marks are asserted, but the strong black paint disrupts its reading as a negative space. It oscillates between positive and negative, blurring absence and presence. These black paintings came closest to mimicking the contradictory relationship between light and darkness, on the one hand, and representational art on the other. Light, which is seen as negative in representation, gives form to objects that would otherwise be subsumed into shadow. While the moment of twilight informed my project from the start, these paintings are no longer about this moment alone. Now, due in part to the paint speaking back, they are explorations of fractional stages of perception. What is satisfying is the disruption to purely semantic interpretation that is produced by the instability of the figure-ground relationship.

Figure and ground define what is being *looked* at, what *seen*. In the large paintings, I used a household paint that has an extremely matt finish. Using the white "universal undercoat" over other paint acts to reduce the mark to negative, like bare canvas. There is no gloss to distinguish the mark from the ground and a positive mark made in this paint takes on a negative quality. In the large black painting, 7, some of the

white areas were painted in universal undercoat. This positive mark, defined by its edges, takes a background position due to its matt quality, while other sections painted in traditional oil paint seem to sit on the surface.

At this stage I would like to discuss the small painting, 12, which was made about two-thirds of the way through the project. Although it is quite different from the last paintings, it facilitated a constructive disruption in my own way of seeing. The source of the painting is a photograph of the sea seen through a hole in the bulkhead of a wrecked and rusty ship, the original paintwork of which was a grey-blue. In the painting the foreground object, the ship, acts as a framing device through which the background sea is viewed and asserted. The remnants of grey-blue paint on the rusted iron occupy an ambiguous space as both foreground (ship) and background (sea).

The rusted metal is treated as an intricate surface on which both the view of the sea and the paint remnants are given in bold impasto. The role of the framing device is that of the reversal of figure and ground, so that the background view is asserted. However, the rusted metal's surface, painted with a commitment to every square inch, asserts itself in turn. The impasto of the view abstracts it into an object of indeterminable nature and the paint remnants, some of which were peeled off the palette as dry skins, further destabilise the image.

Later works do not appear to have the same commitment to the surface as this painting, but the oscillation between figure and ground in the "open" spaces of the black-primed surfaces (4 and 7) and the agitated white surfaces (5 and 6) are a subtler version of the same kind of disruption.

Another strategy that helped to disrupt interpretation or seeing was the reduction of the colour palette to near monochrome. When different objects are represented in colour, their hue helps to unify each object and so separate it from the next. By eliminating colour distinctions, boundaries between objects and shapes became blurred. In this case, the variations within the paint's materiality became more noticeable, giving paint a stronger voice in the conversation.

Uncertainty and doubt are clearly visible in this project. They are symptomatic of a move away from modernism's certainty about interpretation, about knowing what it is

we are looking at. They are about a mind-set that welcomes ambiguity and multiplicity, which returns to source data, again. Uncertainty creates space for conversation, as in Bal's approach to art criticism. In my painting process, the other voice I was listening for was the materiality of the paint, which stems, in part, from my research into Siopis' paintings, where I was interested in the quality of *natural marks* Siopis produced in her work. The central importance of paint to my own project was reinforced by the realisation that the fluidity of the material was representational of the fluidity of light and the way this allows forms to emerge from and sink into darkness, as well as the fluidity of thought that allows boundaries between previous ideas to be breached.

A genuine conversation *with paint* requires the willingness to accept unplanned events, to recognise the value of chance occurrences, even mistakes. Siopis deliberately sets up conditions in which spontaneous effects will occur in her process and then selects from and edits these to achieve a painting which is both abstract and representational. Humphries uses spray paint to reduce the effect of the deliberate gesture. She believes she has to destroy paintings, rather than make them, that she takes responsibility for her actions as well as the "happenstance" in her work (Brown & Humphries, 2009, p. 10). Sasnal is another artist who acknowledges the contribution of chance in his work. The mistakes "take the work beyond intention" (Searle, 2011, p. 1).

The painting, 6, was the result of such a contribution of chance. The oyster-coloured paint was meant to be the under-painting for the lightest parts of the work. Once painted, it asserted the negative space in such a surprising and convincing way that I left the work as it was.

The major contributions of paint to this conversation have been accidental disruptions to figure-ground configurations and a growing abstraction. While there is a clear precedence for this approach in the work of Abstract Expressionists in the 1950's (Robert Motherwell and Antoni Tapies, in particular), I have doggedly stuck to the approach that this project is perceptual; it is about *noticing*. While the selection of motifs has undoubtedly led to abstracted work, the paintings are always a response to something *noticed*, keenly observed in the world outside the painting. In many

discussions abstraction and representation have been seen as binaries; in this project they work together.

An exhibition of abstract painting called *The Indiscipline of Painting* currently showing at The Mead Gallery, University of Warwick, shows works selected by Daniel Sturgis that are the products of artists engaging with the "languages of abstraction" (Warwick Arts Centre 2012) over the last 50 years. Many contemporary artists are highly sensitive to the art-historical positioning around painting and 1950's abstractions' leading role in that drama. Art criticism formulated increasingly restrictive definitions of painting until there was no room to move, but people who paint know, as Terry Myers (2011, p. 12) writes, that not everything that can be said about painting has yet been said.

Another current exhibition that collectively questions historical attitudes to painting is *Painting Expanded* at Espacio 1414, San Juan, Puerto Rico. The "expanded" nature of the curated show is evident in works such as Polly Apfelbaum 's *L'A- ZP*, 1994-2011, which is a kind of carpet painting of brightly coloured fabric and Gelitin's *Flower Painting*, 2010, which is plasticine on wood. This flattened sculptural material has created a novel kind of painting combined with craft that challenges the "heroism" of the discipline of painting.

The collection includes many other works that do not have a drop of paint in them, but there are those that use paint as a dissenting and contributory voice. Glenn Ligon's *WHITE # 12*, 1994, is black, made from oilstick on canvas. It speaks to Matias Faldbakken's book scan, which is a mechanically printed field of black, scanned from a book cover. Ligon's work is also a field of black, but the worked surface simmers with letters that appear to have been created through rubbing (frottage). The conversation between these two works centres on the role of materiality and the haptic in perception.

Guest curator Marysol Nieves (2012) writes that in some of these works "paint makes a contribution to the outcome that speaks of procedural research into the ways paint can make meaning, or disrupt it." This amounts to collective research about what painting can be. "Perhaps it is the inquisitive nature of their approach— seemingly unencumbered by the weight of history—that informs the dynamic spirit

and heterogeneity of recent painting, thus ensuring its on-going potency" (Nieves 2012).

I am interested in particular examples of work from the exhibition, *Painting Expanded,* that appear to give value to the ways "paint can make meaning or disrupt it" (Nieves, 2012). The first is the painting *Untitled (D 66),* 1998, by Christopher Wool, which makes use of opacity and effacement. The work consists of an over-painting, clearly done on top of an initial series of marks. What is more important than the image underneath is the act of painting over, yet not so as to obliterate prior marks, but rather to give them value by shrouding them in mystery. Humphries' *Untitled*, 2011, explores painterly marks, both acknowledging and defying the technical properties that made oil paint so useful in creating illusion, while Amy Sillman's *Pink House*, 2004, is a work that sits uncomfortably and questioningly between representation and abstraction. Representation seems to alternate with abstraction in Josh Smith's multi-panelled *Untitled (JSC 10228),* 2010, which appears to combine real leaves with paint. Some panels hold gestural equivalents of the leaf images, while some are smears of paint that work on the imagination to conjure up images of leaves purely because they exist in a grid of other leaf images.

Angel Otero's *I can hear the world beginning,* 2011, through its wrinkled skins of oil on canvas, challenges the penetrability of the painted surface. It is a surface of another kind, like a found surface on which time and chance have made their mark. It also seems like a conceptual map, onto which viewers might project imaginatively.

In the works mentioned here, there is a dissonance between the image and the medium. The paint contributes information that is schematic and procedural, which does not perfectly support the semantic knowledge constructed in response to the image. I would venture that this marks one important difference between contemporary painting and older historic forms: where previously the formal qualities may have supported the representation as harmony supports the melody in music, now the different voices produce a dissonance that speaks of a contemporary loss of certainty. Perception is so much more complex than pattern recognition, during which process only selected data is encoded. The remainder, which produces uncertainty and complexity, is routinely discarded. In this project I have attempted to *notice* some part of that *remainder* and arrest it in paint.

Schwabsky (2006/7, unnumbered page) writes that artists see the (Bergsonian) image in the environment. In my process, motifs are *noticed* because they have qualities that lend themselves to painting. Gary Hume (cited in Schwabsky, 2006/7, unnumbered page) says, "Everything's found. I recognise it as my painting and then I paint it." As Humphries says of Cecily Brown's work, even though the paintings are figurative they "approach concerns that are more properly in the domain of abstraction: certain ways of using paint, making forms, the way the image disperses and re-congeals" (Brown & Humphries 2009, p. 12). I believe that the painters selected for this research look for opportunities to construct schematic and procedural knowledge through their medium on the one hand and semantic knowledge through the representational quality of their images on the other.

The desire or opportunity to paint is not dependent on heroic themes. The sources of the works in my project were unimportant, or un-heroic. They were photographs, interiors, still-lifes or landscapes, but increasingly, as the notion of a conversation *with paint* grew, the sources were the earlier paintings themselves. In each case, the real concern was with *noticing* and representing that which is fleeting and allowing the contribution of the painted mark to be amplified, both through the large scale of the works and through the elimination of distracting pattern-forming details. *Looking through painting* is one of the things that painters do. As the Raster Gallery's website (2009) says of Sasnal's paintings, they are less about the objects than about "the deepest recesses of consciousness, between the visible and visual memory. They are fractured in a natural way as this is how they relate the difference between *looking* and *seeing*" (emphasis my own).

Conclusion

My painting for this project arises out of a very personal and particular way of being in the world. My awareness of my surroundings and my experience is not always served by my education or traditional ways of thinking. There is always a plausible explanation or narrative to cover events, but the gap between the narrative and the experience is haunting. In perception, there is a visual gap between the reading of objects and the experience of *looking*. Safety may be found with the known, but the untranslated, the tenuous and fleeting, once *noticed*, cuts the moored image adrift. What begins is an uncertain process of responding to an ever-changing view of what is, as the paint has a say in its formation.

In this project I have tried to focus the practical research on *looking through painting*, on the particularly nuanced *noticing* that painting as a process gives rise to, both in the observed field and on the surface of the canvas. The project is a series of questions about what painting does. It also looks for relationships between visual experience and cognition by linking the blurring of imagistic boundaries with fluidity of thought. The paradox that is produced is this: that the product of intense *looking* is seemingly unrecognisable, but infinitely representational. It requires a different way of understanding "representational" and re-values other forms of knowledge construction (than semantics).

Contradiction and paradox are part of the contested realm of contemporary painting. The expanded field of painting intersects with disciplines that may have nothing to do with paint (Halle in Nieves, 2012) and arguably even fields of knowledge that have nothing to do with art. I have been interested in some ideas from cognitive psychology as well as research into the way that different individuals' experience is processed (such as sensory integration disorder and high sensitivity). The necessarily narrow scope of this research report does not allow for a development of these topics, but they do have a bearing on the "contagion" that Daniel Birnbaum (2002, p. 158) speaks of. I find it interesting that some contemporary painters see painting as allied to thinking. To Humphries (nd, p3 of 6) painting is a medium of thought or thinking in material. It allows painters to externalise something that is internal. Siopis (2005) also compares looking and thinking.

This project has examined the way that painting as a process affects perception, by facilitating a nuanced *noticing* within the observed environment and on the surface of the canvas. Along with the work of other contemporary painters, these works ask questions about what painting is, what the process of painting does and whether the much debated "binaries" of representation and abstraction are not perhaps complimentary contributors to a richer, more complex image of that which is perceived, and of perception itself. The role of paint as medium is critical here both because the natural properties of the medium blur the boundaries between shapes (and ideas they stimulate), and because schematic and procedural knowledge is constructed alongside semantic knowledge. It suggests that, to refer to Myers (2011, p.12) once more, not everything that can be said about painting has yet been said.

The Paintings

Fig, 52
1. 2011. Egg tempera and acrylic on canvas.

Fig. 53
2. 2011. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

Fig. 54:
3. 2011 Oil and alkyd on canvas.

Fig. 55:
4. 2012 Household paint on canvas.

Fig. 56:
5. 2012 Water-soluble graphite, oil and household paint on canvas.

Fig. 57:
6. 2012 Water-soluble graphite and household paint on canvas.

Fig. 58:
8. 2011 Oil , acrylic and alkyd on canvas.

Fig. 59:
7. 2012 Household paint and oil on canvas.

Fig. 60:
9. 2011 Oil and gesso on canvas.

Fig. 61:
10. 2011 Oil and gesso on canvas.

Fig. 62:
11. 2012 Oil and gesso on canvas.

Fig. 62: 12. 2011. Oil on canvas.

Fig. 64: 13. 2012. Oil and gesso on canvas.

Fig. 65: 14. 2012. Oil and gesso on canvas.

Fig. 66:
15. 2011 Oil and enamel on canvas.

Fig. 67:
16. 2011 Oil, gesso and acrylic on canvas.

Fig. 68:
17. 2012 Oil and household paint on canvas.

Fig. 69:
18. 2012 Oil and household paint on canvas.

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Fig 62: 11. 2012. Oil and gesso on canvas, 120 x 100 cm.

Fig 63: 12. 2011. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm.

Fig 64: 13. 2012. Oil and gesso on canvas, 70 x 55 cm.

Fig 65: 14. 2012. Oil and gesso on canvas, 70 x 55 cm.

Fig 66: 15. 2011. Oil and enamel on canvas, 77 x 60 cm.

Fig 67: 16. 2011. Oil, gesso and acrylic on canvas40 x 50 cm.

Fig 68: 17. 2012. Oil and household paint on canvas, 150 x 100 cm.

Fig 69: 18. 2012. Oil and household paint on canvas, 150 x 100 cm.

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NOTES

[i] Prof Kenneth Hay, of Leeds University, delivered a presentation on the relationship between visual art and language, with respect to PhD study in Visual Art, at a symposium at UNISA, 23 September 2011. He presented some examples of the ways PhD students in Visual Art had managed the relationship between their practical research and the university's requirements for a written dissertation.

[ii] Words that are being defined selectively for the purposes of this report will be given in italics. Words used selectively by other authors will be given in quotation marks.

[iii] Research into the reliability of memory demonstrates that subjects "remember" words or visuals that did not actually occur in the test they were exposed to, but which support the meaning of the test. This suggests that meaning is not stored either as language or as an image, but is recreated by the subject when he or she is called on to remember something. The meaning of the event is stored in some other way. (Chabris and Simon 2011, pp. 46 - 49)

[iv] Chabris and Simon (2011, pp. 49 - 52) deal with the unreliability of memory. In this book the authors explain that information in its raw form is too complex to remember and so the mind uses selection and pattern-recognition to reduce the information to code that can be stored and retrieved more readily. This results in a loss of original data. Research subjects will "remember" details that are consistent with the meaning of their memories, even if video evidence shows the events they remember did not occur. So *seeing* paintings may involve the reduction of the "abstract arrangement" to a "war-horse" for the sake of using less memory space.

[v] The paintings did not yet have these titles, but in hindsight I recognised them as those that later hung in the Stevenson exhibition.