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Modes of Painting in the Self-Portraits of Marlene Dumas

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Johannesburg, 2012

Abstract

This MA dissertation explores modes of painting in selected self-portrait paintings by Marlene Dumas via an interdisciplinary method drawing mainly on Charles Peirce's theories on semiotics as well as Jacques Lacan's theorizing on the development of subjectivity through the so-called “mirror stage.” The research begins with the assumption that in creating/representing the self-image on the canvas, the artist is exploring his/her self. The self-portrait can thus be considered to be a means of examining the artist’s inner life. By exemplifying Lacan’s “mirror stage” alongside Peirce’s semiotic conception of *the dialogical self*, it also assumes that the artist engages in a dialogue with both his/herself and O(o)thers in the procedure of making the self-portrait. Such a dialogue could be regarded as a process of identification with the self and a process of constituting the self.

This dissertation also proposes that the act of painting itself and the painterly surface play as important a role as the image/subject matter in viewing Dumas’ artworks. In considering Peirce’s sign theory of *index* and *icon* sign, a painting can be regarded as a kind of sign with an indexical property offering evidence of the painter’s existence. Painting can thus be described as a complex practice that engages with psychic and somatic matters of the artist. This research therefore assumes that the artist’s inner life might be known via the reading of signs he/she uses and makes in a painting. Such reading of signs is in fact always a combination of the artist and viewer, this research thus tries to establish *how* meaning in Dumas’ work is possible rather than *what* her paintings might mean.

My own creative work is discussed in relation to the above concerns, such as the notion of self, the relationship between subject matter and painterly surface. How these theories affect or relate to my practical works is considered in the analyses accompanying individual works.

Declaration:

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

_____

Haifeng Xuan

_____day of _____, 2012

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Special thanks also go to the Chinese community in South Africa. The source material used in this study came from them and I am grateful for their willingness to share their life-journey experiences with me. I am also grateful to many friends who gave their time and allowed me to use their photographic images towards my work. Lastly, I acknowledge my parents for their continuing support and constant belief in me.

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Introduction

I first encountered the paintings of Marlene Dumas in 2001 during my studies towards the Advanced Diploma in Fine Arts at Wits University when my tutor, the late Prof. Alan Crump (1949-2009), showed us some colour slide images of her work. Her impressive portrait paintings deeply affected me and at the same time I was surprised to find a striking similarity between her watercolour portraits and Chinese ink painting – an "ink-centred scholar painting"[1] (Clunas, 1997: 160), which I had studied during my undergraduate training in China.

My further research into Dumas' paintings revealed that her frequent technique of using very thinned down oil pigment is quite similar to her method of using ink and wash on paper, which is the primary medium in the tradition of Chinese ink painting. Dumas' expressive portrait painting conveys a sense of unease and tension, which I argue is foregrounded in the handling of her medium. She uses her medium, either oil on canvas or ink and wash on paper, to set up an instability through creating a tension between the likeness of her painted subject and evoking the emotional through her painterly process. Interestingly, this tension seems to relate closely to a similar preoccupation with control and letting go in the tradition of Chinese ink painting (to be discussed more fully later on). In examining this correlation between Dumas' work and the tradition of Chinese ink painting I hope to throw some light on inherent properties of painting being adopted by contemporary artists in reinvigorating portraiture.

This study will require critical examination of the theoretical field of painting

[1] In ancient China there are two distinct traditions of painting. The idea of "Chinese ink painting" I refer to in this study derives from Clunas' "ink-centred scholar painting." Clunas notes that "[…] since the Tang dynasty at least, two distinct schools of painting have existed [in China], named the Northern and Southern schools. The Northern school, characterized by meticulous brushwork and intensive use of colour, was sustained largely by professional painters and is inferior. The Southern school (ink-centred scholar painting), the manner of painting practiced by scholar-amateurs, manifests brushwork principally in ink, and is superior." See Clunas, Craig (1997), p160-161, **Art in China**, (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

and portraiture. Mieke Bal's[2] approach to the study of the portrait in her book *Reading Rembrandt* (1991) offers a useful interdisciplinary method which is deeply informed by semiotics but also maintains a certain freedom of approach in combining this with other methods. For example, when she analyses Rembrandt's self-portraiture, she combines the methods of semiotics and psychoanalysis. In this research I will adopt a similar semiotic approach together with an examination of Charles Sanders Peirce's "semiosis"[3] and his triplicate division of signs[4] in examining Dumas' work. However, formalist concerns, psychoanalytic theories such as Jacques Lacan's theory of the so-called "mirror stage" as well as Richard Wollheim's theory of "seeing-in" will also inform this research. To quote Michael Hatt, "[…] semiotics has often been combined with other methods," and "[…] by seeing all phenomena as signs, semiotics aims to break down disciplinary boundaries and reveal the more general laws governing culture" (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 211). By using such an interdisciplinary method (i.e. combining the methods of semiotics and psychoanalysis) based on semiotics, my aim in this study is to establish *how* the meaning of Dumas' work is possible, rather than *what* her paintings might mean. This is to say, the meaning of Dumas' art is not fixed and could be interpreted from many different perspectives and my research thus focuses more on examining the ambiguities or instabilities in her work and seeing how these may be unpacked and analyzed.

I start my exploration of Dumas' portrait paintings by examining two independent but interrelated aspects, namely her *subject matter* and *the*

---

[2] Mieke Bal (1946) is Professor of Theory of Literature in University of Amsterdam. Her particular application of the literary theory to the visual arts "is highly innovative" (http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/m.g.bal/index.html). In her book **Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition** she demonstrates how to use an interdisciplinary method, combining the methods of semiotics and psychoanalysis, to *read* portrait paintings. Her bold innovation in cultural analysis encouraged me to apply an interdisciplinary method based on semiotics to this research.

[3] Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) was an American philosopher, logician, mathematician, scientist and the founder of pragmatism (Weiss, 1965: 1). His theory of *semiosis* – "the process of signification" (Bal and Bryson, 1991: 188) and his triplicate division of signs are often to be used in the study of visual art.

[4] My use of Peirce's semiotics in this study may not coincide exactly with Peirce's original idea, but as Hatt points out, in the study of art history "[h]is [Peirce's] theory of signs has been removed from its original context and has often been combined with principles antithetical to Peirce's own" (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 209).

painterly surface in her portraits, two major and often discussed motifs in the discourses around Dumas' art. The relationship between subject matter and the painterly surface is, in a sense, a relationship between iconic sign and the indexical sign as expressed in Peirce's tripartite division of signs – *icon, index* and *symbol*. Wollheim's[5] theory of "seeing-in" explains how a spectator could/must be aware of both the subject matter and the painterly surface in a representational painting. In other words, a viewer could/must be aware of both iconic and indexical signs in a painting simultaneously. It is true, as Peirce suggests, that sometimes the iconic sign is also simultaneously an indexical sign. For example, in some Chinese ink paintings, a dot may suggest a leaf while a line may suggest a trunk. This dot and line are iconic when they are read as the imitation of the leave and branch; they are also indexical at the same time, i.e. in existing as brush marks – the dot and the line.[6] But Peirce's tripartite sign system cannot explain why some viewers focus only on the subject matter in the painting while others are attracted by the painterly surface. In examining Wollheim's "seeing-in" and Peirce's "semiosis" more closely I found both theories to embrace some evidence of a so-called "reader-or reception-oriented theory of art" (Bal and Bryson, 1991: 188), which suggests that the viewer/reader determines which one (the iconic sign/the subject matter or the indexical sign/the painterly surface) comes to the foreground or embracing both simultaneously or equally. This is to say that the meaning of a painting could be interpreted in different ways by different viewers.

In this study, I will examine specifically Dumas' self-portraits through which I hope to throw some light on how her approach to painting impacts on the reading of her more introspective works. In addressing the subject of Dumas' painting of herself, the study of the notion of self clearly shifts into the

[5] Richard Wollheim (1923 – 2003) was a British philosopher. He is renowned for "the intelligence and coherence of his philosophy of art" (Van Gerwen 2001: 1), especially in painting.
[6] An example image of Chinese ink painting can be seen at: http://m.iphotoscrap.com/Image/924/1225173583.jpg

foreground. I will employ Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage"[7] and Peirce's "semiosis" to examine the conception of self. Lacan's mirror stage presents an account of how one's self, in the process of becoming a social being, was constituted primarily through the process of identification of one's own specular image in a mirror. Such an assertion suggests an inherent split/gap in the structure of one's self. In order to identify the specular image as his/her own, one has to separate oneself from the external realities/the things surrounding him/her in the mirror stage. Therefore, the mirror stage can also bring the self into the social environment, and lead from the "specular I" to the "social I."

Peirce's theory of signs produces a semiotic conception of the *dialogical* self (Singer 1980: 486), which suggests an inner dialogue between someone and his/her self. This inner dialogue can be similarly identified in Lacan's mirror stage. A self-portrait, in this sense, could be regarded as an inner dialogue between the artist and his/her other self (the represented image on canvas), and a dialogue between the artist and other persons (the spectator, for example) or external social realities. The procedure of making self-portraits is, in this sense, the procedure of identifying and constituting the artist's self.

The relationship between the theoretical and practical component in this dissertation is established through the concern around modes of painting in the study of portraiture. It is not only about how theoretical research instructs or affects my practical work, but also how my artistic practice helps me to grasp/apprehend some elusive implications of related theories/disciplines. For example, I made a self-portrait painting *Self-portrait as Fragments* (2010, Fig.9)

[7] Jacques Lacan (1901 – 1981) was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist. His ideas of "mirror stage" and "gaze" have had an especially significant impact on art theory (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 186-189). Lacan first presented his theory "mirror stage" at the Fourteenth International Psycho-Analytical Congress at Marienbad in 1936, but "failed to submit a written text to be included in the proceeding of the Congress" (Muller and Richardson, 1994: 26). No original text on "mirror stage" thus remains and the only text on this theme we may read today was published in 1949 titled "*The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*" (ibid).

after reading Lacan's *mirror stage*. In this work it was my intention to paint myself by observing my own body directly rather than with the use of a mirror, i.e. as a form of immediate self-perception from where I was looking. Such an undertaking helped me to understand how one's vision of a complete image of self is built upon a specular image, which is in fact a form of misrecognition of the self.

This study will not attempt to focus on locating Dumas' art within contemporary painting practice (although some comparison with other artists' self-portrait paintings is integral to the topic of this research) or to identify new values in her art. Rather, I would like to read Dumas' art from a specific (Chinese immigrant living in South Africa) perspective to interpret her portrait paintings so as to then hopefully arrive at some new insights on the inherent properties of painting and the notion of self in the study of self-portraiture by Dumas and my own.

Chapter one introduces Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage" and Peirce's semiotic theory applied to conceptions of self. I consider how the study of self-portraiture can be examined according to such theoretical formulations.

Chapter two examines *subject matter* and *painterly surface* according to Peirce's sign system and Wollheim's "seeing-in." The chapter later focuses on five portrait paintings (including her self-portraits, her friend's portrait, her daughter's portrait and her grandmother's portrait) by Dumas where I combine observations on the psychoanalytic "mirror stage" and the semiotic sign system to address how meaning emerges and how the notion of self could be explored in these paintings.

In chapter three I introduce my own creative work, my background and artistic training as well as my intention in making portrait paintings. I address the

relationship between the theoretical study and my own practical works and in my conclusion I draw together the findings of this study.

Part I: The Theoretical Component

"You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens, (I am interested in seeing my eyes only when they look at you): even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images."

--- --- *Roland Barthes (1995: 36)*

Chapter One — The Self and Self-Portraiture

For the purpose of investigating Dumas' modes of painting alongside her subject matter I have chosen to focus on few of her *self-portraits* as the subject of this study. The subject in these paintings by Dumas is thus herself and those who could be regarded as herself, for example her portrait of her grandmother and daughter through which one can see her also representing herself.[8] I therefore do not focus on her more controversial images of sex workers, terrorists or corpses that have so often been foregrounded in the publications and debates around her work. Such a study of Dumas' self-portraits demands an examination of the theoretical field around the genre of self-portraiture. Many texts on self-portraiture that I have come across make psychoanalytic observations in relation to the topic, and before exploring examples of Dumas' self-portrait paintings in the next chapter, I wish to engage with Lacan's theory of the so-called "mirror stage" as a significant theory informing the study of self-portraiture. Peirce's semiotic understanding of the notion of self[9] will also be examined in this context.

[8] In a sense, all works by an artist are to some degree self-portraits, for it fully attests to the artist's subjectivity and personality. But, it is not my intention to arrive at a definition about "self-portrait" in this study. Furthermore, there is no any authoritative or unique or fixed definition of "self-portrait." As I examined in section 1.2.1: "Self-portraiture as a word/a sign grows. The meaning/definition/conception of self-portraiture in use and in experience changes, grows and transfers." I chose Dumas' five portrait paintings as her self-portraits in order to examine how the notion of self could be explored in these paintings, rather than wanting to define what the self-portraits is or in order to distinguish any self-portraits from "non-self-portraits."

[9] Ideas about the concept of the self are various, as Gen Doy notes: "[F]or Descartes […] the self was a certainty; […] For McRobbie, […] the self is less a fact than a socially constructed myth. Yet, for Tom Lubbock, the notion of the self reappears as the essence of human existence – consistently a focus of artistic attention and expression for centuries" (Doy, 2005: 1-2). I do not attempt to carry out an examination of different ideas around the notion of the self, rather, I only choose some contributions on the study of the self to be explored in relation to my investigation into self-portraiture in this research.

1.1 An Investigation into The Self

This section contains two sub-sections, namely: *The Split Self in Lacan's Mirror Stage* and *The Dialogical Self in Peirce's Semiosis.* By examining Lacan's theory of mirror stage and Peirce's theory of semiosis, this section assumes that the self is not only split/divided, as examined in section 1.1.1, but also socially constructed rather than given or "natural," as examined in section 1.1.2. This split and socially constructed self is an inbuilt feature in the constitution of one's self. In this sense, the procedure of making a self-portrait by an artist might replay the moment of the mirror stage during which an inner dialogue between the artist and his/her self and a dialogue between him/her and other persons (the spectator, for example) as well as external social realities takes place.

1.1.1 The Split Self in Lacan's Mirror Stage

> *"I am sure I'm going to look in the mirror and see nothing. People are always calling me a mirror and if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see."*
>
> --- --- *Andy Warhol (Freeland, 2010: 253)*

Lacan's theory of how the sense of self comes into being through the so-called "mirror stage" suggests that when it is an infant, the child does not have any real sense of its own boundaries until at some stage in its development it sees itself in a mirror and is aware of itself as a complete image. Then the child recognizes itself as a whole body, a whole being separated from other bodies by its own boundary. In Lacan's view, this is the moment of the creation of the ego/the self, the inaugural moment/inauguration of subjectivity (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 186). The birth of the ego/the self/the I is not "a result of any parental intervention," but "takes place in and through the looking glass." For Lacan, "the mirror is the mother of the ego" (Barzilai, 1999: 88).

Lacan's mirror stage presents an account of how the ego/one's self was constituted primarily through the process of recognition and identification of one's own specular/reflected image[10]. Such an assertion indicates that the mirror stage is not just a specific moment in the psychic or mental development of an infant, but actually a primary and permanent structure of subjectivity. As John Muller puts it: "[T]his mirror like reflection, then, serves as the form that in-forms the subject and guides its development" (Muller, 1994: 29).

This inherent structure of subjectivity formulates the way in which one perceives one's self. The significant fact from this to be considered in the context of this study of self-portraiture is that the mirror stage suggests an inherent split or gap in the structure of one's self and a conflictual relationship between the self and its image/the specular encounter, as well as a relationship between the self and its external/social reality. As Shuli Barzilai puts it: "The 'I' is an optical effect, a mir(or-im)age, a trick done with mirrors […] The I formed in and through the specular encounter is not just illusory but radically unstable, split, divided, ex-centric to itself" (Barzilai, 1999: 105).

In the mirror stage, when the child sees itself in a mirror, the process of identifying or recognizing itself commences, but at the same time, spontaneously the alienation of the self sets out. Barzilai puts it as follows: "[…] 'mirror stage': the encounter with a specular counterpart that precipitates the bipolarity of identification/alienation in the subject" (ibid: 2).

The image in the mirror is in fact only a fantasy of the self, "the carbon copy of the self" (ibid: 103). The sense of the self that the child perceives from the mirror is in fact a misrecognition of the self. A kind of split or separation of the

[10] In Lacan's theory, "the essential function of an image is 'in-form-action,' which we take literally to mean 'giving form to' something – whether this be the intuitive form of an object as in knowledge, or the plastic form of an imprint as in memory, or the form that guides the development of an organism" (Muller, 1994: 28). This is to say, the reflected image in the mirror plays an important role in the constitution of the subject or one's self.

self arises from this moment (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 186). In Hatt's words: "[…] in seeing itself in the mirror and recognizing itself, the child is alienated from itself. The child sees itself out there in the mirror, as an image and mistakes the reflection, the representation, for itself" (ibid). This is to say, a self sees another "self" in the mirror. In Barzilai's (1999: 83) words: "[T]he self sees the *self-same* image in the dialectical encounter" (Barzilai, 1999: 83).

In the mirror stage, while the child sees itself in the mirror, a real/physical distance between the corporeal body and the specular/illusional body emerges. In other words, the body and its image locate actually at two different places in a real space. These two separated "bodies" – "the tactile body here and the visual body there – constitute only one body."[11] The essential factor is the recognition of spatial distinction – a distinction "between reality and its symbols or representations" (ibid). This physical, spatial distinction between the child and its-same-image is the primary gap which is inherently and permanently constituted in the structure of one's self. Such a split/gap of one's self is incompatible (ibid: 84).

According to Lacan, the "self-same image" or the specular counterpart of the self could be regarded as "the other" (ibid). Elizabeth Grosz notes that "[…] the mirror stage is conditioned on: [1] The child's first recognition of a distinction between itself and the (m)other/mirror-image (self-as-other)" (Grosz, 1990: 32). In general, the "other" is "anyone who is separate from one's self" (Ashcroft 1998: 169). In Lacan's mirror stage, the image of the child that is reflected or represented in the mirror could be regarded as the one who is separated from that child's self. In this sense, the mirror image/the specular self could be defined as the *other*. The *other*, in Lacan's theory,

> […] is that who resembles the self when the child […] sees its image in

[11] Wallon's opinion as summarized by Barzilai.

> the mirror, that image must bear sufficient resemblance to the child to be recognized, but it must also be separate enough to ground the child's hope for an 'anticipated mastery'; […] This other is important in defining the identity of the subject. (ibid: 170).

Homi Bhabha[12] also suggests that the self "is constructed in its relationship to the other" (Corrigall, 2010: 351). For Bhabha, for the self to exist "is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus" (ibid; Bhabha, 1994: 63). The relationship between the self and this "other"/the specular self is conflictual.[13] This dual relationship refers to the relation not only between the self and its specular image, but also between reality and the imaginary.

In the mirror stage, the moment when the child has jubilantly identified the specular image as his own, he then turns his head toward his mother or father who carries him, "as if to call on him to ratify this image" (Ashcroft, 1998: 170). For Lacan, this mother or father represents a big Other. This big Other is regarded as the locus of the birth of the ego.

In Lacan's theory, a distinction is made between the "other" and the "Other":

> […] the other – with the small 'o' – designates the other who resembles the self, which the child discovers when it looks in the mirror and becomes aware of itself as a separate being […] The Other – with the capital 'O' – has been called the *grande-autre* by Lacan, the great Other, in whose gaze the subject gains identity. The Symbolic Other is not a real interlocutor but can be embodied in other subjects such as the mother or father that may represent it. (Ashcroft, 1998: 170).

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[12] Homi K. Bhabha (1949) is the Anne F. Rothenberg professor of English and American Literature and the Director of the Humanities Center at Harvard University. Bhabha is a very important figure in the study of postcolonial theory, cultural change and power. He has published numerous works among which *Nation and Narration* and *The Location of Culture* were reprinted as a Routeledge Classic in 2004 (http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~humcentr/about/homi.shtml).

[13] I will not further examine why or how this dual relationship is conflictual in this study, but it is important to mention it here, for the conception of a "dialogical self" which I will examine in the next section emerges from the relation between the self and its specular self.

In other words, the child “discovers both himself and the ‘reality’ around him” in the mirror (Muller, 1994: 30). The mirror stage then suggests a new experience of the relationship between the self and both big and small “(O)others.” As Barzilai puts it:

> Far from closing down or narrowing the outer world, far from representing an impasse, the mirror apparatus opens up new paths for experiencing both the child’s own body, and the persons and things around him. (Barzilai, 1999: 107).

This is to say, the child discovers not only himself “in an external image,” but also this external self-image is surrounded by “the images of other subjects” and “[i]t is in such fashion that the ‘social dialectic’ begins” (Muller, 1994: 31). The mirror stage therefore can bring the self/the inner life into the social environment/the external reality, and lead from the “specular *I*” to the “social *I.*” Barzilai provides a clear description of this transformation as follows:

> Lacan insists on the diametric opposition between the carbon copy (image) and the original (subject) […] Imagine an enlarged photograph of one’s self awakening to life. The duplicate becomes a replicant, a monster wanting to be master. The mirror image – or, condensed into a word, the “mirage” – is not only whole and nonhuman as opposed to fragmented, turbulent, and human; it is an “exteriority,” an outside that is also inside. (Barzilai, 1999: 103).

In Lacan’s view, this is the moment “[…] in which the mirror-stage comes to an end and inaugurates, by the identification with the imago of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy […], the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations” (Lacan, 1977: 5).

However, in the mirror stage, the child can also experience and then identify that his "specular I" is also separated[14] from other persons/subjects or external realities. Thus, the split/gap exists not only between the self and its specular image, but also between the self and its surroundings/external realities. As Barzilai puts it:

> The ego experiences a perpetual rift that is modeled on the child's dual relations with its specular counterpart. Thus, the mirror stage presages (the genetic view) or, alternatively, presents (the structural view) through dramatic exemplification "a certain level of rupture […] between man's organization and his *Umwelt*," that is, between inwardly lived and external realities. (Barzilai, 1999: 103).

The self is therefore, as examined above, not united, but split/divided. Art, especially the self-portrait, might replay the moment of this mirror stage in which the sense of self, and at the same time the sense of separation/alienation between the self and both "(O)other"/its specular image and external reality, is represented.

1.1.2 The Dialogical Self in Peirce's Sign System

> *"His thoughts are what he is 'saying to himself,' that is, is saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time."*
>
> --- --- *Charles S Peirce (1934: 281)*

Peirce's theory of signs, which he calls *semiosis*, can be employed in the study of the self. In fact, Peirce has made some contribution to the conception of the self, as Milton Singer notes:

[14] In Lacan's view the *separation* between the self and the Other could be defined as "a want" which means that the subject "wants to separate" or "wants to get out" from "the Other" (Feldstein, 1995: 49).

> […] an application of Peirce's general theory of signs will produce a semiotic conception of the self […] a semiotic conception of the self is consistent with the social and cultural nature of the self […] he [Peirce] did introduce two principles that were to become crucial for the further growth of a semiotic theory of the self. One of these principles is the dialogical structure of sign-action, or semiosis, and the other is the social-symbolic nature of personal identity. (Singer, 1980: 486, 493).

For Peirce, the identity of the self cannot to be found in the individual organism. "It was, rather, an 'outreaching identity' that connects the feelings, and actions of one individual with those of others through the processes of semiotic communication. The self is thus both a product and an agent of semiotic communication, and therefore social and public" (ibid: 489). Furthermore, "Peirce's semiotic conception of the self is not only logical; it is 'dialogical.' The self is an interlocutor in a dialogue with other selves as well as a signified object and interpretant of a specific code of signs" (ibid: 494).

To comprehend Peirce's conception of the dialogical self, as both agent and product of semiotic communication, it is necessary to examine what "semiotic communication" means in his theory of *semiosis*. Commonly, every communication involves two individuals: a speaker and a listener (Feibleman, 1960: 129). In Peirce's so-called "semiotic communication," the speaker refers to the "utterer" while the listener would be the "interpreter." The utterer is "the producer of a sign" (Singer, 1980: 493), the interpreter could be "anything sufficiently sentient to receive the impression of a sign and entertain an interpretant" (Feibleman, 1960: 130).[15]

[15] The idea of "interpretant" is very abstract and obscure in Peirce's semiotic theory. For Peirce, the interpretant is not a person or anyone/anything who interprets, rather "[…] the interpretant, in Peirce's usage, is always and necessarily another linguistic sign – or better, set of such signs" (Dewey, 1946: 87; Singer, 1980: 496). The interpretant is "what the sign produces in the mind of the interpreter" (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 210; Peirce, 1940: 99-100). Further investigation into the "interpretant" can be seen in section 2.1.2.

In this sense, a semiotic communication is a dialogue between the "utterer" and the "interpreter." However, in Peirce's theory we must be alert to the fact/idea that the utterer and the interpreter of a sign is not necessarily being defined as two separate subjects or two persons/things. In fact, the utterer and the interpreter may be the same individual who has a different name or functions differently in different segments in a process of semiotic communication. This is because a sign could never come into being until it is interpreted or perceived or accepted as a sign – "something […] stands to somebody for something (*else*) in some respect or capacity" (Peirce, 1940: 99). Thus, the interpreter is also the utterer/the producer of a sign, the listener is also the speaker, but not at the same time.

To understand this, we can refer back to Lacan's mirror stage to examine how this kind of dialogue between the "utterer" and the "interpreter" communicates in this instance. In the mirror stage, the physical/corporeal body could be regarded both as the "utterer"/speaker and the "interpreter"/listener of the sign, while its specular image is a sign which stands to somebody (the child himself, for example), for something else (the body of the child or the conception of the self/ego, for example) other than itself (the specular image). The child is the utterer while he is in front of the mirror as the *producer* of the sign – the *producer* of his specular image; the child could also be the interpreter while he is in front of the mirror as the *examiner/receiver/perceiver* of the sign (his specular counterpart) during the procedure of identifying the reflected image as his own.

Thus, the "utterer" and "interpreter" may exist in the same person. This is to say, a person or a subject could be both an utterer/a producer of a sign and an interpreter "in whom the interpretant is determined"[16] (Feibleman, 1960: 130).

[16] The relation between the "interpreter" and "interpretant" is defined by Peirce as follows: "I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines as effect upon a person

This is a kind of dialogue or an inner dialogue which happens in one's inner world. In other words, one's self could speak or be in dialogue with one's *other* self. Singer puts it as follows: "[T]he conversation of man with man is only one of the dialogues in Peirce's semiotic theory of the self. There is also the inner dialogue of the self with its self" (Singer, 1980: 499).

However, it is important to point out that, in Peirce's theory, such "inner dialogue of the self with its self" locates itself "between two phases of the ego." In Peirce's words, "[…] a person is not absolutely an individual. His thoughts are what he is 'saying to himself', that is, is saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time" (Peirce, 1934: 281; Singer, 1980: 494). In Roman Jakobson's view, Peirce's notion of "inner speech" is "astutely conceived"; it "is a cardinal factor in the network of language and serves as one's connection with the self's past and future" (Jakobson, 1973: 33; Singer, 1980: 499).

Thus, the process of identifying the specular image as his own image by a child is a kind of dialogue not only between the child's self and his other/specular self, but also between his past self (the original physical body as the "utterer") and the future self ("the better considered self of the immediate" as the "interpreter").[17] The result of this semiotic dialogue between the utterer and the interpreter of the sign in the mirror stage is that the self "is not identical with the individual organism." "The self may be less or more than the individual organism. Less when, in the flow of time, the inner dialogue brings a new phase of the self into life, and more when, in dialogue with other organisms, there emerges one loosely compacted person" (Singer, 1980: 495). This "loosely compacted person" is "the man's circle of society (however

(interpreter), which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby immediately determined by the former" (Singer, 1980: 497). Further investigation of "interpretant" can be seen in section 2.1.2.

[17] In Peirce's study of the self the "reference to the future is an essential element of personality" (Singer, 1980: 494). However, because such examination of the "future self" lies outside of the focus of my research into self-portraiture, I will not examine this dialogue between the past and the future any further.

widely or narrowly this phrase may be understood)" and, "in some respects of higher rank than the person of an individual organism" (Singer, 1980: 494). This is to say that the "loosely compacted person" is in fact one's "socially constructed" self.

Here Peirce suggests two dialogues that can similarly be identified in Lacan's mirror stage. In front of the mirror the child experiences in play the relation between the movements of his body and the reflections which includes "the child's own body, and the persons and things around him" (Lacan, 1977: 1). Thus, Peirce's dialogue with other organisms becomes a dialogue between the self and the Other – other selves/subjects or environment/social conditions surrounding the self. Thus, both Peirce and Lacan may suggest that the development of the self must come through "observation and inference" (in Peirce's usage) or "identification" (in Lacan's usage) from "external facts" (which includes the specular self in the mirror and environments surrounding it). In this sense, the dialogues examined above are this kind of "observation and inference" or "identification" of external realities (Singer, 1980: 499).

Such "observation and inference" or "identification" of external realities brings the I/the self out from the corporeal body/the individual organism and into social realities. The self therefore is not only split/divided as examined in the previous section, but also socially constructed rather than given or natural. This "socially constructed" self does not mean one's growing-up life/self affected by social events, rather it is an inbuilt feature in the constitution of one's self. In this sense, the procedure of making a self-portrait by an artist could be regarded as an inner dialogue between the artist and his/her self and a dialogue between him/her and other persons (the spectator, for example) as well as external social realities.

1.2 An Investigation into Self-portraiture

There are two sub-sections to this section. The first, titled *Self-portraiture as a Sign*, employs Ferdinand Saussure's theory of sign and also Peirce's theory of *symbolic* sign to examine how the meaning or definition of the term *self-portraiture* could "grow" or change in use and in experience. This sub-section concludes that the word, the sign – *self-portraiture* – shows us very different meanings nowadays from those of our predecessors. The second sub-section, *Self-portraiture as a Genre*, is based on Shearer West's broadly chronological description of self-portraiture as a genre. This sub-section examines three key words – "mirror," "self-consciousness," and "means" – relating to the origin of self-portraiture as a genre which points towards some of the properties of the study of self-portraiture.

1.2.1 Self-portraiture as a Sign

> *"Despite the evidence, we are tempted to think that the self-portrait should be a relatively simple form to understand; after all, we do not have to consider the intersection between artist and sitter that often raises unanswerable questions for the third-party viewer."*
>
> --- --- *Wendy Wick Reaves (2009: 1-2)*

Self-portraiture, in the first place, is a word, a term. For Saussure, it is a linguistic sign which unites a concept and a sound-image. These two "primordial characteristics" in a linguistic sign could be replaced respectively by *signified* and *signifier*. The linguistic sign as a "whole result[ing] from the associating of the signifier and the signified" is arbitrary; the bond/relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. The meaning of a linguistic sign is determined by social rule and semiotic convention, i.e. a word means something less because it refers to an object or event in the world than it is part of a system. Therefore, a word or a sign is a convention. The meaning of a word or a sign resides in and is determined by a system and is produced or interpreted differently (Saussure, 1959: 66-67; Culler, 1981: 24; Hatt and Klonk,

2006: 202-204).

Self-portraiture is a word/a sign of which the meaning is determined by social convention and can be interpreted differently. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary gives a definition of “self-portrait” as “a portrait of oneself” (Crowther, 1998: 1067). Sean Kelly believes that Rembrandt’s “use of the self-portrait as a vehicle to question his persona, role and position in society, […] contribute[s] to an understanding of self-portraiture as a fundamental means of self-scrutiny” (Kelly and Lucie-Smith, 1987: 5). And Robert Rosenblum states that “artists’ self-portraits are usually believed to reveal the private side of a public profession, the visual equivalents of reading the intimate letters or journals of a famous writer” (Elger, 2004: 21). Moreover, Lucas Samaras regards self-portraiture as a kind of self-investigation. In his own words, “professional self-investigation – which is what a good self-portrait is – is as noble a search as any other” (Prather, 2003: 8). Against Samaras’ idea of “self-investigation,” Edward Lucie-Smith argues that “the self-portrait survived, not as a means of self-appraisal or self-examination, but as a means of creating a myth” (Lucie-Smith, 1987: 23). He is insistent that “every artist has to invent his own myth” (ibid). The above observations point to the variety of interpretations and approaches to the subject and underscore its complexity.

Self-portraiture as a word/a sign could be classified as a s*ymbol* in Peirce’s tripartite division of sign types, namely *icon*, *index* and *symbol*. As Peirce puts it, “all words, sentences, books, and other conventional signs are symbols” (Peirce, 1940: 112). Hatt points out that Peirce’s *symbol* is closer in meaning to Saussure’s linguistic sign, and as mentioned above, Saussure revealed the conventional nature of the sign. For him, there are no natural signs, all signs are conventions (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 209). Peirce partially agrees by saying “we do find symbol early and often used to mean a convention or contract” (Peirce, 1940: 114). He indicates, in Aristotle’s understanding, that a noun is a

symbol, a conventional sign (ibid).

Self-portraiture is a noun, a symbol and a conventional sign. That it is a convention means its meaning is generated/produced, determined and utilized by a social community. For example, *self-portraiture* has been regarded as one's autobiography or a means to one's inner self by some art writers. Such interpretations of *self-portraiture* are conventional, which could be shared in a community of those who research the genre of self-portraiture in art history, art criticism or art theories.

According to Peirce a *symbol* is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object (ibid: 102). Hatt interprets Peirce's insistence on the role of rules or laws as alignment with Saussure's emphasizing of the conventional nature of the sign (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 209). In Hatt's words: "Finally (after icon and index), there is the symbol, which is closer in meaning to Saussure's generic sign. It is a mark or word or image whose meaning is conventional" (ibid). Like Saussure, Peirce emphasizes the role of rules or laws here: a symbol means something because all the members of a community use it in that way (Peirce, 1940: 112). In Peirce's own words, "symbol, once in being, spreads among the peoples" (ibid: 115).

But what Peirce insists here is that *symbol* does not just play a "role of rules or laws," but rather it is itself "a general type or law." As he puts it: "[A] Symbol is a Representamen whose Representative character consists precisely in its being a rule that will determine its Interpretant […] A symbol is a law, or regularity of the indefinite future" (ibid: 112). And, more importantly, not only is it (symbol) general itself, but the object to which it refers is of a general nature. Now that which is general has its being in the instances which it will determine

(ibid: 102). This is to say that a symbol does not indicate any particular thing, rather it denotes a kind of thing. *Self-portraiture* as a symbol cannot indicate any individual/single self-portrait painting or sculpture or photo, but implicates a sort or category of paintings/sculptures/photos that could be regarded as *self-portraiture*. But *self-portraiture* does not in itself identify those paintings or sculptures/photographs, rather "it is applicable to whatever may be found to realize the idea connected with the word" (ibid: 114). In other words, *Self-portraiture* does not show us a self-portrait painting/sculpture/photograph before our eyes, but supposes that we are able to imagine those paintings/sculptures/photos, and have associated the concept of self-portraiture with them. It is "itself a kind and not a single thing" (ibid).

"Self-portraiture is a *law*" means it governs individuals (any single self-portrait work), and prescribes some qualities of *self-portraiture* to those single self-portrait works. But this *law* is not a fixed, certain or unchanged one, rather it is itself a "regularity of the indefinite future" (ibid: 112). This is to say that "symbols grow" (ibid: 115). *Self-portraiture* as a word/a sign grows. The meaning/definition/conception of *self-portraiture* in use and in experience changes, grows and transfers. The word, the sign, the symbol – *self-portraiture* – shows us very different meanings nowadays from those of our predecessors.

1.2.2 Self-portraiture as a Genre

Amongst the foremost writers on self-portraiture as a genre as it relates to this study is Shearer West. In her book *Portraiture*, West describes self-portraiture as a genre in a broadly chronological form. For her, self-portraiture could be regarded as a signature, experiment, autobiography, self-fashioning, self-presentation and self-exploration. She suggests that self-portraiture relies on the presentation of frozen moments; it can convey little but traces an actual life; in a kind of visual principle, self-portraiture forces the viewer to look in a

mirror and see the artist looking back. According to West:

> The history of self-portraiture is one of the most fascinating and complex of the whole [portraiture] genre. Because self-portraits merge the artist and the sitter into one, they have the allure of a private diary, in that they seem to give us an artist's insight into his or her own personality. However, interpreting self-portraiture as a transparent account of artistic personality is to ignore the many other factors that have an impact on both its creation and reception. While the representational qualities of self-portraits allow them to be used as a means of self-examination, they have also functioned, for example, as signatures, as advertisements for an artist's skill, and as experiments in technique or expression. (West, 2004: 163).

West discusses self-portraiture in several sections such as *The Self-portrait as Signature, Experiment, and Publicity*; *Self-portraiture, Gender and Artistic Identity*; *Self-fashioning and Self-presentation*; *Self-portraiture and Autobiography* as well as *Self-exploration and Psychoanalysis*. These relatively independent sections seem to suggest that it is difficult or even impossible to fully define the concept of self-portraiture or to summarize the connotations of self-portraiture. As examined in the above section of *Self-portraiture as a Sign*, the meaning or the interpretation of *self-portraiture* is conventional, uncertain and changeable. However, in spite of numerous possibilities of the interpretation, self-portraiture is clearly linked closely to the artist's self as all features of self-portraiture finally point to the artist's self.

West observes that there are very few examples of self-portraits created before the sixteenth century in the West. In ancient times and the early fifteenth century, artists normally made their self-portraits as a kind of footnote or signature. In Edward Lucie-Smith's words, "the use of the self-portrait as a

kind of signature reappears in the Middle Ages" (Kelly and Lucie-Smith, 1987: 9). For example, the self-portrait of Benozzo Gozzoli appears in his fresco *The Procession of the Three Kings* (1449) and Jan Van Eyck represented his self-portrait in the convex mirror of *The Arnolfini Marriage*. It functioned as a signature or footnote "to be responsive to the needs of their workshop and patrons" (ibid; West, 2004: 163). West points out that the emergence of so-called "autonomous self-portraiture" in Europe depended on some technical and social conditions (West, 2004: 163). She lists three important conditions which stimulate the flourishing of self-portraiture as a genre in the sixteenth and subsequent centuries. These three conditions are outlined as follows:

> First of all, mimetic self-portraiture relied on the existence of flat mirrors, which were not readily available outside Venice (where they were invented) until the fifteenth century. Secondly, in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, there was an increasing self-consciousness about identity, and a corresponding growth in the production of autobiography and other forms of self-narratives. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for portraiture, there were significant changes in the status of the artist in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, inspired by the advent of academies and art theory that emphasized the intellectual qualities of artistic production over the mechanical ones. At a time when conceptions of the artist's role were changing, the self-portrait proved to be one means for an artist to reinforce and enhance this new idea of his or her worth. (ibid: 164).

From the above-quoted statement we can find some key words relating to the origin of self-portraiture as a genre which points towards some of the properties of the study of self-portraiture in the following centuries and even to the present day. These key words are "mirror", "self-consciousness", and "means" (which could be interpreted as a method or a way of doing something).

For example, the “mirror” which is now employed more in its metaphorical meaning than its physical existence, has been approved as one of the most important key words in the recent study of self-portraiture. Brenda Schmahmann comments:

> Artists have traditionally produced self-portraits by looking into mirrors. More significantly, inherited or conventional ideas about the role and purpose of self-portraiture have been underpinned by thoughts about the act of mirroring reality or self, and these have a bearing on the ways in which self-portraits are understood and the values that are ascribed to them. (Schmahmann, 2004: 7).

In Liana Cheney’s words, “one creative invention […] was the mirror – the principal visual instrument for obtaining an authentic reflection of the self” (Cheney, 2000: 1). And, “the mirror provided the painter with an invaluable image, the reflection of the self, which the artist used to immortalize that self” (ibid: XXII). Pascal Bonafoux also argues that the self-portrait is the portrait of the painter/sculptor by him/herself done with a mirror (Bonafoux, 1985: 96). Thus, “the self-portrait as an authentic copy of the mirror is itself a mirror” (ibid).

“Self-consciousness” has often been discussed in psychoanalytic interpretation of self-portraiture that examines the artist’s consciousness, not only of his/her social status but also of his/her inner life. In this sense, self-portraiture is “an intimate record” of the artist’s personality, “a revelation and a confession” (Cheney, 2000: XXII). As exploring/examining one’s inner life, self-portraiture has been often regarded as a “means”, a “way”, or a “channel”, a “journey” employed by artists, rather than as a representational image of the artist’s face or body. As Marie Laurencin says: “I love portraits. To me a portrait is like a voyage; it has to me the attraction of a new experience.

When I make a portrait, I feel as though I were traveling through another person" (ibid: 174). But such ideas that argue that self-portraiture is "a tool that enable[s] artists to explore their own psychological states" is a twentieth-century phenomenon (West, 2004: 165). For a very long time, self-portraiture has been regarded as an artist's technical experimentation. The most famous example of this might be Rembrandt. As Christopher Wright puts it: "Rembrandt's restless experiments with technique are also obvious in the two small self-portraits […] There is still the same preoccupation with surface observation [...]" (Wright, 1982: 21). West also notes:

> The assertion of [the artist's] status was only one of the reasons artists produced self-portraits. Self-portraits often originated as opportunities for technical or thematic experimentation […] Rembrandt, for example, was to use self-portraits to explore the effects of chiaroscuro (light and dark) on his work. […] Van Gogh […] used self-portraits to experiment with different techniques: […] the brushwork of Impressionism and neo-Impressionism […] In these cases the portraits could serve many functions: as a mapping of ageing, an exploration of psychological change, or an expression of varying moods. (West, 2004: 164).

West further points out that self-portraiture engages with artistic identity, but "how that identity is represented and perceived is heavily influenced by the status and gender of the artist at different periods in history" (ibid: 165). For example, women artists, such as Rosalba Carriera and Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun, represented their roles "as stylish and learned ladies or working professionals at their easels with palettes" (Cheney, 2000: 118), while the Ugandan-born artist Therese Musoke used the self-portrait to "signify the artist's experience with the two realities of her existence, her African essence and her European education and painting style" (ibid: 202).

In fact, as West points out, artists never simply present their status or gender identities in an unthinking or un-selfconscious way. As she notes:

> In many instances the gender of the artist had an impact on the way in which he or she chose to portray themselves, with some roles being more commonly assigned to women than to men, and vice versa. Because the self-portrait is both an object of artistic creation and a self-exploration, ideas of gender and status are never far beneath the surface. (West, 2004: 172-173).

In her chapter titled *The symbolic self: women painters' quest for identity in the twentieth century*, Cheney concludes that "self-representation signifies and incorporates psychological and spiritual self-identity" (Cheney, 2000: 185). The relationship between self-portraiture and autobiography is examined by many writers in a variety of ways. As Ludwig Goldscheider observes, "there was the convenient comparison to hand, between Autobiography and Self-portrait" (Goldscheider, 1937: 9). West notes that the flourishing of self-portraiture in Europe coincided with the advent of autobiography as a genre (West, 2004: 173). But Goldscheider points out that autobiography and self-portraiture have very different fields of application. The painter's self-portrait may be repeated many times, as in the case of Rembrandt who executed hundreds of self-portraits, however, "the verbal self-portrait" – the literal autobiography can never be repeated because "memoirs cannot be written over again, they can only be continued" (Goldscheider, 1937: 9).

When looking at a self-portrait one "can be tempted to test the artist's view of himself against what is known about their life, and to see the artist's self-representation as somehow indicative of their feelings or appearance at the time the work was produced" (West, 2004: 178). This is to say, autobiography can be "narrated" through pictures/paintings. Barbara Steiner

argues that the process of how autobiographers observe themselves equates with artists looking in a mirror, both writers and painters “open themselves up to observation by their readers” (Steiner, 2004: 15).

Paul de Man points out that there are inherent limitations of autobiography as a record of an individual’s life (West, 2004: 178). He argues that “whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture” (ibid). West interprets this concept of the “technical demand[s] of self-portraiture” as “the limitations and possibilities of the medium in which the life story is conveyed” (ibid: 179-180). She ends her exploration of the relationship between self-portraiture and autobiography as follows:

> So, unlike written autobiography, which can appear to convey a life story through time, self-portraiture relies on the presentation of frozen moments, which as de Man says, “produces … the life” of the subject, rather than offer reflections of it (ibid).

In Steiner’s words, both autobiography and self-portraiture claim “[a] link between the narrating subject (the author), the life or episode of a life described, and the work that describes it” (Steiner, 2004: 16).

1.3 The Self-portrait and Psychoanalysis

This section explores the relationship between the notion of self and self-portraiture. The sub-section 1.3.1, *The Self and Psychoanalysis*, examines how psychoanalysis provides a powerful method for analyzing the notion of self and self-portraiture and assumes that self-portraits can convey the idea that an artist is investigating his/her inner life and therefore suggest a form of self-exploration. The sub-section 1.3.2, *The Self in the Self-portraiture*, combines Lacan's theory of "mirror stage" and Peirce's semiotic conception of "dialogical self" and suggests that self-portraits present both a sign of the artist him/herself and a sign of an other. The procedure of making self-portraits – during which the artist engages in a dialogue with both his/herself and O(o)thers – is a process of getting a sense of one's self or the searching for one's self.

1.3.1 The Self and Psychoanalysis

> *"Art is an obsession with life, and after all as we are human beings, our greatest obsession is with ourselves."*
>
> --- --- *Francis Bacon (Braun, 2009:40)*

As examined in sections 1.1 and 1.2, the contribution of psychoanalysis, especially Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, on the development of self has provided a powerful method for analyzing the complexities of self-portraiture, the complexities of the self as the other, the complexities of the subject as the object, as well as the complex relationship between the original and its image/the portrait. As West notes:

> Underlying all self-portraiture is the mystery of how an individual sees himself or herself as other. A self-portrait involves an artist

> objectifying their own body and creating a ‘double’ of themselves […] The viewer of a self-portrait also occupies a strange position of looking at a metaphorical mirror that reflects back not themselves but the artist who produced the portrait. Viewing a self-portrait can therefore involve the sense of stepping into the artist’s shoes. These qualities make self-portraits both compelling and elusive. (West, 2004: 165).

Richard Brilliant presents an incisive study of self-portraiture that starts with the Greek mythology of Narcissus who was doomed to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water (Brilliant, 1991: 45). In discussion of this “narcissism complex,” Brilliant asks, “who was Narcissus if not himself, and how could he, the original of the reflected image, a form of natural portrait, be less real in his own body than in this alter ego, so powerfully attractive as an object of love” (ibid). Brilliant therefore focuses on the complexities of relationship between the original, who presents himself/herself in the world and the image/the portrait, as a subsequent representation of that person/the original. He concludes that, in the self-portrait, “self-representation and artistic representation come together in the singular portrait image, but often uneasily” (ibid: 46).

Erika Billeter points out the close link between self-portraiture and psychoanalysis more directly. In her words: “Every self-portrait is a dialogue with the ego” (West, 2000: 182). She “refers to Freud’s idea that the human psyche is based on a constant negotiation between the id (instinctual drives), the ego (the sense of self), and the superego (the conscience)” (ibid). In this regard, she argues that the mental instability of the artist, which was a sign of his/her creativity, inspired artists to use self-portraiture as a means of exploring the tensions between their drives and ego-states. Furthermore, Cheney adds that the self-portrait is an intimate record of an artist’s inner life. It is more

self-analytical and revealing than merely a recognizable representation of a person: “The contemporary artist intensifies this search for the inner self, often using symbolic and surrogate forms of representation of both self and others” (Cheney, 2000: XXIV). In discussing specifically female self-portraiture, she is concerned with the function of female self-portraiture in painting as a source of revelation, an expression not only of the artist’s personality but also her psychological makeup**.** Dumas’ work often depicts women, their expressions, their bodies and facial typologies, their self-image and their ideals. As will be further examined in section 2.2, all portrait paintings I selected to explore in this study are female portraits.

Amongst the variety of applications of psychoanalysis to the study of self-portraiture, Lacan’s theory of the so-called “mirror stage” is perhaps the most useful one. As Mieke Bal points out, “self-portraiture as a genre can be partly related to the mirror stage since it is a symbolic restaging of that crucial moment when one misrecognises oneself as an image elsewhere in the world” (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 187).

The self-portrait “is a way to recover that primal experience of emerging self-hood by re-presenting the self as other” (Bal, 1991: 307). Ernst Rebel also notes that self-portraits “[...] are testimonials in which the artist's ego as his own model at the same time relates to other people. Artists depict themselves as they want to be seen by others, but also as they want to distinguish themselves from them” (Rebel, 2008: 6).

Self-portraiture may thus be seen to replay the moment of Lacan’s mirror stage. This is to say, an artist who stand before the canvas, just like the child in front of the mirror, creates a self-portrait that in fact is misrecognised as the self. In other words, this is a way of reinforcing the sense of self that emerges in the mirror stage. So, in creating/representing the self-image on the canvas, the

artist is alienated from his/herself. As already mentioned above, West notes that: “Underlying all self-portraiture is the mystery of how an individual sees himself or herself as other. A self-portrait involves an artist objectifying their own body and creating a ‘double’ of themselves […]” (West, 2004: 165).

This alienation not only enables the artist’s self to appear on the canvas as an *other* and to be seen by himself and *Others*; but also enables the self-exploration, through self-portraiture, to be a means of journey to the artist’s inner life. Or as Kelly defines, self-portraiture is a kind of “fundamental means of self-scrutiny” (Kelly and Lucie-Smith, 1987: 5).

West states that “self-portraits can convey to the twenty-first century viewer the idea that an artist is investigating their inner life rather than playing out social or artistic roles,[18] or referring to specific events or moments. Self-portraits seem to suggest a form of self-exploration […] An artist would choose deliberately to explore their states of mind through self-portraiture” (West, 2004: 180).

1.3.2 The Self in Self-Portraiture

> *“Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought.”*
> *“[I]t is that the word or sign which man uses is the man himself.”*
> --- --- *Charles S. Peirce (1934: 189)*

As examined in section 1.1.2 *The Dialogical Self in Peirce’s Sign System*, Lacan’s mirror stage can be exemplified in Peirce’s semiotic conception of *the dialogical self* which means that a child could have two dialogues, both with its own specular image and its surroundings, in the mirror stage. In the procedure of making self-portraits there are also two dialogues or communications at play:

[18] The artist can also do the both at once, for example Dumas investigates her inner life and plays out her artistic role simultaneously in her painting *The Painter* which I examine in section 2.2.1.

one of them is the dialogue between the artist's self and the represented image of the artist; another is the dialogue between the artist's self and *Others. A*s examined in the previous section, this Other includes other people/subjects and external realities.

Thus, for the artist to make a self-portrait is to engage in a dialogue both with him/herself and with Others. During such dialogues the sense of the artist's self is constituted similarly to Lacan's description of the child in front of the mirror. As Anthony Elliott puts it:

> […] [Lacan] positions the self in communication with others from the outset […] Lacan's identity-framing communication process commences with the mirror stage (the confusions and evasions of imagination) and reaches a rehearsal for adult social relations in the Symbolic Order, in which the construction of the self through language results in the imposition of sexual identity. (Elliott, 2001: 59).

The Other in Lacan's theory is symbolic. This "Symbolic Other" is "not a real interlocutor" which can not only "be embodied in other subjects such as the mother or father that may represent it" (Ashcroft, 1998: 170), but also, and more importantly, be embodied in the speech, the language. This is to say the identification with the imago of the specular counterpart in the mirror stage, *the I,* is restored by "socially elaborated situations" and it is in fact restored/objectified by language. In Hatt's words:

> […] Lacanian theory asserts that representation and language shape the person and his or her sexuality […] the external social and symbolic structures […] determine and shape us […] Lacanian *infant* is a kind of *tabula rasa*, simply waiting to be scripted by language. (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 187).

The mirror stage in Lacan's view is defined "not as a proleptic encounter, or figure of things to come, but rather as a figure of speech" (Barzilai, 1999: 98). Lacan's mirror stage is therefore a kind of allegory. This is to say that it is not necessary to have any real child in front of any real mirror, or the mirror stage does not have to refer to any real situation in which a child plays in front of a mirror. Barzilai puts it as follows:

> […] the child who sees the semblable is not just any child or a typical child but also a type of psychical structure. The figure of the child incarnates the Lacanian concept of the ego (*moi*). The mirror-image itself is also a metaphor for a relational position. It is a depository for the dialectical irresolutions of the imaginary order. Both the actual infant and the virtual one thus take on the quality of conceptual paradigms. If, as Lacan contends, the "*mirror stage* is a drama", then its dramatis personae embody abstract ideas. (ibid: 96).

If we employ Peirce's *semiosis* to analyze this "metaphor" of the mirror stage, we may find that the "dramatis personae" are also simultaneously embodied by the "language" or "speech" in the "drama" of the mirror stage. In the *speech* of the mirror stage, the *dramatis personae* may function like a word. According to Peirce's three divisions of signs (icon, index and symbol), a word is a symbol or symbolic sign because it depends on "conventional definitions and customary usage of the symbolizers" (Singer, 1980: 489). And for Peirce, man is also a symbol, and he notes: "[A]t any instant then man is a thought, and as thought is a species of symbol, the general answer to the question 'what is man?' is that he is a symbol" (Peirce, 1958: 351).

Thus both man and word are symbols or work as a symbol in Peirce's theory. Then, man can work like word, and word can work like man: a word is able to learn, to acquire more information as a man; and more importantly, a word is

able to shape man's thinking and, man and word can "educate each other." In Taylor's words: "[T]he self is both made and explored with words" (Taylor, 1989: 183). Peirce puts it as follows:

> […] a word may learn. How much more the word *electricity* means now than it did in the days of Franklin; how much more the term planet means now than it did in the time [of] Hipparchus. These words have acquired information; just as man's thought does by further perception. But is there not a difference, since a man makes the word and the word means nothing which some man has not made it mean and that only to that man? This is true; but since man can think only by means of words or other external symbols, words might turn round and say, You mean nothing which we have not taught you and then only so far as you address some word as the interpretant of your thought. In fact, therefore, men and words reciprocally educate each other; each increase of a man's information is at the same time the increase of a word's information and vice versa. So that there is no difference even here. (Peirce, 1958: 353; Singer, 1980: 488).

Therefore, in Peirce's view, "[I]t is that the word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself" (Peirce, 1934: 189). Because the idea that self-portraiture is a word/a sign as examined in section 1.2.1, so we may say that the self-portraiture which man makes is the man himself. But what makes man different or distinguishes him from a word? It may be the consciousness. In Peirce's words, "[What] distinguishes a man from a word? There is a distinction doubtless […] It may be said that man is conscious, while a word is not" (ibid: 188). For Peirce, "consciousness is sometimes used to signify the *I think*, or unity in thought" and "[…] every state of consciousness [is] an inference; so that life is but a sequence of inferences or a train of thought" (ibid). In the same way, what makes an artist different from his self-portraiture? It may be said that

the artist is conscious, while his self-portraiture is not. Furthermore, it also may be said that the *self* is conscious, while the self-portrait is not. So, the self-portraiture made by an artist is the artist him/herself, but the artist is different from his/her self-portraiture, for the artist is conscious while his/her self-portraiture is not.

In Peirce's theory, when we think, we present some feelings, images or conceptions that serve as signs to our consciousness (ibid: 169). And, because these signs follow from and depend on "our own existence," "everything which is present to us is a phenomenal manifestation of ourselves" (ibid). But at the same time, that everything is also a "phenomenon of something without us," "just as a rainbow is at once a manifestation both of the sun and of the rain. When we think, then, we ourselves, as we are at that moment, appear as a sign" (ibid). Therefore, "[a]ll our 'knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts' (ibid: 158), by means of multiple chains of signs that make up the inferences" (Singer, 1980: 489). Similarly, the self-portrait which could be regarded as the specular image present to our minds (including the artist's mind) appears both as a sign of the artist him/herself and a sign of other (without the artist him/herself).

Singer notes:

> […] everything that is present to our minds should appear as a sign of ourselves as well as a sign of something without us […] "just as we say that a body is in motion, and not that motion is in a body", we ought to say that "we are in thought, and not that thoughts are in us." (ibid: 490-491).

If we go back to Lacan's mirror stage we might have the right to say that the

body (both corporeal and specular) is in identification, not that identification is in the body; more precisely that the self is in identification/constitution, not that identification/constitution is in the self. The specular image, such as a self-portrait, present to our minds appears as a sign of *self* and also "a sign of something without" *self* – (a sign of *other/Other*, or a sign of misrecognized *self*). Thus, in the procedure of making the self-portrait the artist engages in a dialogue with his/herself. Such a dialogue with both his/herself and O(o)thers is a process of identification with the self, the process of getting a sense of one's self, or the searching for one's self. And therefore, to make a self-portrait is to constitute the artist's self. The end of the manufacturing of the self-portrait does not mean that the search or the process of constituting one's self ceases. As Charles Taylor notes: "[T]he search for the self in order to come to terms with oneself, […] has become one of the fundamental themes of our modern culture" and "the modern self is in process of constitution" (Taylor, 1989: 183, 185). Or, the search for self continues through one's whole life to "attain autonomy before death" (Lacan cited in Barzilai, 1999: 96). In contrast to Stuart Hall's words,[19] the self "is not in the past to be found, but in the future to be constructed" (Mercer, 2008: 210).

[19] The original quotation by Stuart Hall is: "[I]dentity is not in the past to be found, but in the future to be constructed" (Mercer, 2008: 210).

Chapter Two — Modes of Painting in The Self-portrait Paintings by Marlene Dumas

"My fatherland is South Africa,
my mother tongue is Afrikaans,
my surname is French.
I don't speak French.
My mother always wanted me to go to Paris.
She thought Art was French, because of Picasso.
I thought Art was American,
because of Artforum.
I thought Mondrian was American too,
and that Belgium was a part of Holland.
I live in Amsterdam
and have a Dutch passport.
Sometimes I think I'm not a real artist,
because I'm too half-hearted,
and I never quite know where I am.
Home is where the heart is, 1994"

--- --- *Marlene Dumas (2009: 127)*

As many art critics have pointed out, Marlene Dumas' experience of growing up in a particular time and a particular place – apartheid South Africa – offered her a "rich matrix of political, cultural and social influences that have influenced her thinking and experience" (Bedford, 2008: 34). In Dumas' own words: "[…] that's [so] important to my work, as well as being white in a black country influenced my philosophy of life" (ibid).

Marlene Dumas is a female "Dutch artist of South African origin" (Van Alphen,

1997: 250). She was born in Cape Town in August 1953. After her father's death in 1966, Dumas attended Bloemhof Girl's High in Stellenbosch. In 1975 she graduated from Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. After graduating, she won a major art grant from the university to study abroad for two years. She chose to study in Holland where she attended Ateliers '63 in Haarlem, an artist-run studio program in which she teaches today.

Dumas has had numerous exhibitions since then and her reputation has steadily grown. She has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions internationally, including some high profile exhibitions such as *Documenta 7 and 9* (in 1982 and 1992), the *Bienal Sao Paulo* in 1985, the *1995 Johannesburg Biennale* and the *1995 Venice Biennale*. Although she is always defined as a South African born artist, Marlene Dumas only had her first solo exhibition in South Africa in 2008 which she titled "Intimate Relations."[20]

Marlene Dumas is renowned for her portrait and figure paintings/drawings. Her central concern or subject matter focuses on the human form. In Dumas' own words: "I'm interested in what a human being is capable of" as "[i]t was always the face or the figure, even when I was small. I never did a tree" (Bagley, 2008: n.p.; Solomon, 2008: n.p.). Her subjects include herself, her daughter, her grandmother, images drawn from the media such as those of super-models, terrorists, drowning victims, hanging victims, and images drawn from pornographic sources. Most of her image sources are based on photographs which she collects from magazines, newspapers, postcards, books and pornography. She describes this as the use of "second-hand images and first-hand experience" (Dumas, 2001: 12).[21]

[20] David Krut comments that "'Intimate Relations' was chosen by Dumas for the exhibition title as a way of framing the curatorial vision and selection of work to focus thinking around questions of what constitutes intimate relations and how these relations between people, places and objects are structured." (http://www.davidkrutpublishing.com/1336/marlene-dumas-2)

[21] In my view, "first-hand experience" may refer to Dumas' own experience, especially her experience in having

Dumas' concerns with subject matter as well as painting and its particular qualities are ably counterbalanced in her work, as has been commented on by various critics. In Emma Bedford's words: "[…] her interest in lived experience does not diminish her concerns with the nature of art, the problematics of painting and drawing, and the particularities of representation. In these, her heightened sense of surface parallels her sensitivity to skin, that permeable layer between self and other" (Bedford, 2008: 34). In other words, the qualities of applying paint material to a surface, the visual enjoyment of form, tone, colour, shape and line and the properties of medium such as luscious watercolour, fresh oil pigment and passionate brush-strokes, are always foregrounded in the reading and making of her paintings. The irrational, the spontaneous, the unpremeditated are celebrated in Dumas' art. Her technique of painting is based on the ability of achieving a balance between control and letting go and exploring the tension between sensibility of skin and surface.

Dumas' biography, which I do not dwell on too much here, offers some valuable insights into certain themes within her work, including self-portraiture as autobiography, self-awareness, and self-exploration. Her South African origin and gender are especially significant in this regard and her living experience is central to her work. In this chapter I have chosen to focus on five of Marlene Dumas' portrait paintings to examine her self-exploration of her inner life. Before examining these works more closely, I will briefly address subject matter and painterly surface with reference to Peirce's sign system and Wollheim's "seeing-in" as well as painting as a performative practice in contextualizing my approach to Dumas' work.

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grown up in South Afica. For example, under the political pressure of the apartheid years, viewing erotic images and films was strictly prohibited. This may be a reason why Dumas focuses so much on political and sexual subjects. Furthermore, this "first-hand experience" may also suggest that all portraits she made more or less contains her *self* in it.

2.1 Subject Matter and The Painterly Surface in Dumas' Art

This section I employ Peirce's tripartite sign system and Wollheim's theory of "seeing-in" in analyzing the relationship between subject matter and painterly surface. The two sub-sections are respectively titled: *Subject Matter and The Painterly Surface in Peirce's Sign System* and *Subject Matter and The Painterly Surface in Wollheim's "Seeing-in."*

Peirce's sign theory, in terms of regarding painting as a sign that possesses both the iconic and the indexical character at same time, suggests that concentrating on the painterly surface is in fact an act of paying attention to the presence of the painter; seeing the brush marks is to acknowledge the painter's existence. Wollheim's theory of "seeing-in" suggests a "reader-oriented" art theory which may explain why some critics focus on the subject matter of Dumas' art, while the artist herself prefers to have more attention paid to the painting itself. Furthermore, Dumas' particular approach to a painting can be said to re-create the subject, which in turn compels the viewer to rethink the subject matter of her art.

The last sub-section, *Painting as a Performative Practice in Dumas' Artworks*, based on the findings of the previous two sub-sections, suggests an ontological understanding of painting as both a trace of the painter's performative act and a material presence which is suffused with the painter's subjectivity. This suggestion implies a shift from the former understanding of painting as a representational practice to the describing of painting as a complex practice that engages the painter's psychology and his/her bodily action. Three of Dumas' portrait paintings, *The Blindfolded Man* (2007), *The Next Generation* (1994-1995) and *The Witness* (2002) are discussed and analyzed respectively in three sub-sections.

2.1.1 Subject Matter and The Painterly Surface in Peirce's Sign System

"Paintings exist as the traces of their makers and by the grace of these traces."
--- --- Marlene Dumas (Christov-Bakargiev, 2007: 36)

In reading up on Charles Peirce's semiotics I found that his taxonomy of sign types could be used to analyze Dumas' work, both in terms of her subject matter and her approach to painterly surface treatment. Semiotics is based on linguistic study and it reads the world as a system of signs (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 200-201). A painting could also be read as a system of signs. Peirce offers a tripartite division in semiotic signs: *icon*, *index* and *symbol*. I will refer only the icon and the index here to analyze the subject matter and the handling of painterly surface in Dumas' art.[22]

According to Peirce, a sign is something that stands for something else than itself in some respect or capacity (Peirce, 1940: 102). An icon is a sign, or functions as a sign, because of some resemblance to its object. In other words, the icon works by way of resemblance. It proposes a similarity between the object and the sign itself. It looks like the object and is "used as a sign of it." An iconic sign may represent its object mainly by its similarity, but this does not necessarily have to be "an accurate likeness," it simply means that this iconic sign stands for a certain object or objects, whether "any such object actually exists or not." Iconicity is the quality, or character of such signs in relation to their object (Bal and Bryson, 1991: 189; Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 209; Williams, 2009: 246; Peirce, 1940: 99, 102, 104,105).

Different to the icon, an index is a sign, or functions as a sign, not because of the resemblance to an object, but because of "some material or causal relation to its object" (Williams, 2009: 246). An indexical sign works not by resembling

[22] Peirce's third sign – *symbol* has been used to analyze the concept of *self-portraiture* in chapter one, section 1.2.1: *The Self-portraiture as a Sign*.

the object but by providing evidence of the object's existence or presence. An index may not necessarily look like its object, but it is "really affected by that object." The indexical sign does not offer the similarity between the object and itself, but "has some quality in common with the object" (Peirce, 1940: 102). The function of an index is essentially based on the object's existence, while such existence is not necessary to the icon (Bal and Bryson, 1991: 190; Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 209; Williams, 2009: 246; Peirce 1940: 102, 108).

But it is difficult, "if not impossible, to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality" (Peirce, 1940: 108). This is to say, an indexical sign is often at the same time an iconic sign, or contains iconic and other qualities of the sign. A painting, especially a figurative painting, is both iconic and indexical. In other words, a painting could be regarded as a sign that possesses iconic and indexical characteristics simultaneously.[23]

In this sense, a representational painting is not merely an iconic sign in that its surface can also be read as an indexical sign. The subject/image represented in a painting can certainly be regarded as an iconic sign due to the resemblance of the object to its represented image/the subject (not the painting of it), while the surface of a painting can be regarded as an index, or indexical sign, due to it having been *really/physically affected* by the painter.

For example, the blindfolded face in Dumas' portrait painting *The Blindfolded Man* (2007)[24] is iconic as it resembles and refers to the sitter – a terrorist. It

[23] It is necessary to point out that even though the painting may be an icon and an index at same time, the object that the icon or the index refers to is often different. In other words, the object of the iconic sign in a painting refers to the image/the subject represented on the canvas, while the indexical sign (the brush strokes, for example) refers to the painter/the artist. In Dumas' portrait painting *The Blindfolded Man* (2007), the iconic sign refers to that blindfolded man/a terrorist, while the indexical sign/the painterly surface refers to the painter, i.e. is attributable to Marlene Dumas. Only when the subject is herself, for example in her self-portraiture, both iconic and indexical sign would refer to the same object, namely Marlene Dumas.

[24] An image of *The Blindfolded Man* by Dumas can be found on: http://www.artlinked.com/Object/2261/Marlene-Dumass-The-Blindfolded-Man-2007

may not actually look like that terrorist in the real world, but the sign system enables people to recognize that this image represented on the canvas stands for that particular person – the terrorist, even though the depicted terrorist might not really exist in the world.

Meanwhile, the expressive surface in *The Blindfolded Man* is indexical which reveals not only the movement of Dumas' hand, her body, or provides evidence of her physical presence as she made the painting, but also conveys something of her mood, feeling/emotion in the making of the image. In this sense, the painting's indexical property (the painterly surface) may play a very important role in annotating or interpreting Dumas' art, due to the index providing evidence of the painter's existence and presence in making the painting, i.e. as trace thereof. According to Peirce, there is no similarity between the indexical sign (painterly surface) and its object (the painter) in terms of resemblance, but the index/the surface does have some quality attributable to its object/the painter (Peirce, 1940: 102). Such quality offers a real connection between the index and its object, between the surface and the painter, much like the relation between the signature and the signer. It denotes the "personal style" in the connoisseur's usage.

More precisely, the brush marks and the stained surfaces left by liquid pigment such as paint or ink on a support (canvas, papers or boards) are the indexical signs which are traces/marks left by a painter's activity of painting. They are not the (iconic) signs of what is represented in the painting, but rather the (indexical) signs of an artist/a painter who touched/daubed the surface of canvas or papers. In James Elkins' words, "a brushstroke is an exquisite record of the speed and force of the hand that made it, […] painting is scratching, scraping, waving, jabbing, pushing, and dragging" (Elkins, 2000: 96). Donald Kuspit also notes: "[…] every mark on the canvas is felt […] to be suffused with subject" (Kuspit, 2000: 4).

But even those viewers and critics who acknowledge the importance of the painterly surface in Dumas' work tend to value it in terms of its subject matter. The "representative quality" of the image/the iconic sign in Dumas' painting may lead many viewers to focus their initial attention on the subject matter of her painting. This is why most writings on her work tend to concentrate on issues such as sexuality, politics and racism as many of the images in Dumas' painting are of sex workers, terrorists and corpses. Emma Bedford, as already quoted earlier, comments that Dumas' interest in subject matter does not diminish her concerns with problems of painting, but she concludes her review of Dumas' work as follows:

> In thinking through the barbarism of people towards each other, Dumas is able to articulate, through her art and her writings, her position and viewpoints from a subjectivity which is not only informed and shaped by Africa and the West, but through which she holds up for scrutiny the many and various ways in which those worlds collide and impact on one another. (Bedford, 2008: 49).

Such an impressive sounding statement says little about Dumas' process of painting which the artist herself would likely prefer to have more emphasis placed on. Dumas herself complains about this when she says: "[…] they [the critics] […] only respond to the image and not to the painting. Because they are not looking at a painting, but actually at a photograph […]" (MacKenny, 2008: 49). In other words, she points out that what the critics are actually seeing in her works is not "a photograph" but an icon, or an iconic sign. And, what she complains about is not the neglecting of the painting, but the neglecting of the index, or the indexical signs in her work. For Dumas the painting itself (the indexical sign) is what she is really concerned with.

What many viewers therefore tend to neglect is not just the painterly surface

but the existence/presence of the painter – Marlene Dumas. In other words, concentrating on the painterly surface is in fact an act of paying attention to the presence of the painter; seeing the brush marks or stained traces is to acknowledge the painter's existence – Marlene Dumas' existence in this study.

My focus on Richard Wollheim's theory of "seeing-in" in the next section may provide some reasons why some critics indulge in the subject matter of Dumas' art, while the artist herself prefers to have more attention paid to the painting itself.

2.1.2 Subject Matter, The Painterly Surface and Wollheim's "seeing-in"

> *"One cannot 'see' something if you are looking for something else!"*
>
> --- --- *Marlene Dumas (MacKenny, 2008: 49)*

> *"[N]othing compels you to receive from the image what it gives; instead, what you get is whatever you take."*
>
> --- --- *Richard Shiff (2009: 43)*

In his study of perception Richard Wollheim offers a mode of "seeing-in" which explains how a spectator responds to a painting. Through "seeing-in," he suggests a twofoldness with the simultaneous perceptions: one of the pictorial surface, the other of what it represents. This is to say a viewer/spectator could/must be aware of both the surface of painting (the painted surface) and the thing or the person represented in the painting (the subject matter).

Following on my introduction of Peirce's sign theory in terms of regarding painting as a sign that possesses both the iconic and the indexical character at same time, Wollheim's explanation comes as no surprise. The iconic and the indexical sign in a representational painting or in a painted image cannot really be separated from each other. The viewer must be aware of both simultaneously, what Wollheim calls the "twofoldness" (Wollheim, 1987: 46).

But Peirce's sign system cannot explain why some viewers tend to concentrate on the subject matter/the iconic sign, while others are attracted to painterly surface/the indexical sign. In reading up Wollheim's theory of "seeing-in," I found it answered this question to some extent. According to Wollheim, seeing-in

> […] is a distinct kind of perception, and it is triggered off by the presence within the field of vision of a differentiated surface […] The distinctive phenomenological feature I call "twofoldness," because, when seeing-in occurs, two things happen: I am visually aware of the surface I look at, and I discern something standing out in front of, or (in certain cases) receding behind, something else. (ibid).

Wollheim describes this (seeing the image and the painted surface at same time) as two aspects of a single experience (seeing-in). He emphasizes that these two aspects are distinguishable but also inseparable, and more importantly, seeing-in allows that one aspect could come to the fore while the other recedes. In fact, distinguishing between "standing out in front of" and "receding behind" already indicates preference of one aspect over the other. For example, if a viewer is focusing on the subject matter of a painting, he/she will discern something (the image) standing out in front of something else (the painted surface). On the contrary, if the viewer is focusing on or attracted by the painterly surface, he/she will discern the image receding behind the painted surface or, he/she will discern the painted surface standing out in front of the image (ibid: 47).

I was attracted to Dumas' portrait paintings, for example *The Next Generation* (1994-1995)[25], by way of such "twofoldness," one being the ink and wash, the

[25] An image of *The Next Generation* by Dumas can be found on: http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/reviews/esman/3esman3-25.asp

brush strokes, or the stained surface of paper; another being the face represented on the paper. For me, the most attractive thing in Dumas' art is her expressive painterly surface rather than the faces or bodies she paints. So, I will see these faces "receding behind" the painterly surface. But other viewers would see the faces "standing out in front of" the painted surface if they are first and foremost attracted to the particularities of the facial features.

Sometimes, and maybe frequently, such preference for one aspect of the "twofoldness" of seeing-in "gets carried to the point where the other aspect evaporates" (ibid). This is the very reason why Dumas feels that critics "only respond to the image and not to the painting" in Dumas' art. But "the twofoldness of seeing-in does not […] preclude one aspect of the complex experience being emphasized at the expense of the other" (ibid). It is in fact the viewer's/reader's choice which determines which aspect of the twofoldness comes to the foreground. In Dumas' words, "one cannot 'see' something if you are looking for something else" (MacKenny, 2008: 49).

Wollheim comments:

> In seeing a boy in a stained wall I may very well concentrate on the stains, and how they are formed, and the materials and colours they consist of, and how they encrust or obscure the original texture of the wall, and I might in consequence lose all but a shadowy awareness of the boy. Alternatively, I might concentrate on the boy, and on the long ears he seems to be sprouting and the box he is carrying – is it a bomb, or a present for someone? – and thus have only the vaguest sense of how the wall is marked. (Wollheim, 1987: 47).

This is actually a "reader-or reception-oriented theory of art" (Bal and Bryson, 1991: 188). Mieke Bal explains how the "reader-oriented theory of art"

happens in her study of Peirce's semiotics. In Peirce's sign theory, all three sings – icon, index and symbol – produce meaning through the same process of signification which he calls "Thirdness": a *Sign*, or *Representamen*, is a First which stands for a Second – its *Object*, and as "capable of determining a Third – its *Interpretant*" (ibid). The First is the sign which stands for something else than itself, the Second is the object for which the sign stands, the Third is the interpretant which is not the person but "what the sign produces in the mind of the interpreter" (Hatt and Klonk, 2006: 210; Peirce, 1940: 99-100).

Bal describes this process as one that "involves the production and the interpretation of signs, both equally fundamental" (Bal and Bryson, 1991: 188). She suggests this process "provides a logical basis for a reader-or reception-oriented theory of art" (ibid) and puts it as follows:

> When one sees a painting, say a still-life of a fruit bowl, the image is, among other things, a sign or representamen of something else. The viewer shapes in her or his mind an image of that something with which she or he associates this image. That mental image, emphatically not the person shaping it, is the interpretant. This interpretant points to an object. The object is different for each viewer: it can be real fruit for one, other still-life paintings for another, a huge amount of money for a third, "seventeenth-century Dutch" for a fourth, and so on. The object for which the painting stands is therefore fundamentally subjective and reception-determined (ibid).

But Bal does not point out that this object to which the interpretant points is not necessarily the object for which the sign stands. For example, "a huge amount of money" is not the object for which the sign/the painted still-life stands, but the interpretant's own object – the imagination of the high price of the painting or the fruit or something else, which is generated/produced by the interpretant

– the mental image of the still-life painting. The object the sign/the painted still-life stands for is that original/real still-life in the physical space, rather than "a huge amount of money." Peirce's notes that "a sign … it stands itself to the same Object". The different things imagined by viewers are the Third's thirds. Peirce refers to this object/"a huge amount of money" as "the Third's thirds," the Third's interpretant – not the Third's Second for which the sign stands (Peirce, 1940: 100).

The object for which a sign stands must be the certain one in Peirce's *semiosis*. For example, in Dumas painting *The Witness* (2002)[26], the painted surface as an indexical sign must stand for the artist/the painter/the maker – Marlene Dumas, while the image of an Asian women as an iconic sign refers to a certain person. The painting itself as a sign with both iconic and indexical character must refer to "a Marlene Dumas portrait painting," rather than "a Marlene Dumas sculpture," "a Marlene Dumas landscape painting," or "a Rembrandt portrait painting." In Peirce's words, "a Sign […] is a First […] to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object" (ibid). Peirce continues:

> The triadic relation is genuine, that is its three members are bound together by it in a way that does not consist in any complexus of dyadic relations. That is the reason the Interpretant, or Third, cannot stand in a mere dyadic relation to the Object, but must stand in such a relation to it as the Representamen itself does. Nor can the triadic relation in which the Third stands be merely similar to that in which the First stands, for this would make the relation of the Third to the First a degenerate Secondness merely. The Third must indeed stand in such a relation, and thus must be capable of determining a Third of its own; but besides that, it must have a second triadic relation in which the

[26] An image of *The Witness* by Dumas can be found on: http://www.artthrob.co.za/02nov/images/dumas01a.jpg

> Representamen, or rather the relation thereof to its Object, shall be its own (the Third's) Object, and must be capable of determining a Third to this relation. All this must equally be true of the Third's thirds and so on endlessly […]. (ibid).

The face in *The Witness*, as a sign, stands for an Asian woman and is shaped as a mental image in the viewer's mind. This mental image is the Third/the Interpretant which points to another or other objects (other Thirds), which are different for each viewer; for some viewers it can be racism or politics, for me it is a Chinese ink painting.

Thus, the process of such signification, or according to Peirce, the process of "semiosis," offers "a logical basis for a reader-or reception-oriented" interpretation of art (Bal and Bryson, 1991: 188). This is to say the meaning of a painting could be interpreted in different ways by different viewers/readers, which Roland Barthes refers to in terms of "the death of the author" and "the birth of the reader."[27] In Wollheim's words, the viewer "simply, for the pleasure of the moment, or for some enduring consideration, overruled the intention of the artist" (Wollheim, 1987: 51).

The notion of "the birth of the reader" as privileging the viewer's agency in the reception or reading of an artwork offers a possibility of reversing the conventional relationship between the subject matter and the painted surface in the tradition of Western oil painting. In this tradition the painted surface is often described as the medium that supports the represented subject matter. In short, the painting conventionally exists for the image. However, the reader-oriented "seeing-in" could reverse such a conventional relationship,

[27] The well-known essay by Roland Barthes *The Death of the Author* argues that writing and its author are unrelated. Barthes says:"[T]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes, 1977: 147). Rather, "[T]he reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (ibid: 148).

namely as "the image is for painting."[28] In this study, from my point of view, the image/the subject matter is for the painting/the painterly surface in Dumas' art. The iconic sign in Dumas' painting exists to serve the indexical sign. In fact, as I have already pointed out earlier, Dumas' particular/inimitable approach to a painting can be said to reform/re-create the subject which in turn compels the viewer/critic to rethink the subject matter of her art. The faces or figures in Dumas' paintings exist as Dumas' personal way of making paintings. In other words, "[T]he painting emphasizes that meaning in portraits is what we bring to them, rather than something inherent in the image" (Freeland, 2010: 256). As Barry Schwabsky notes:

> Contemporary painting retains from its Modernist and Conceptualist background the belief that every artist's work should stake out a position – that painting is not only a painting but also the representation of an idea about painting. That is one reason there is so little contradiction now between abstract and representational painting: In both cases, the painting is there not to represent the image; the image exists in order to represent the painting (that is, the painting's idea of painting). (Schwabsky, 2007: 8).

2.1.3 Painting as a Performative Practice in Dumas' Artworks

> *"[…] painting is not a picture in the first place, but it is a performance."*
>
> --- --- *Marlene Dumas (MacKenny, 2008: 50)*

> *"Unlike a photograph, you can't 'take' a painting and then absent yourself (the taker)."*
>
> --- --- *Marlene Dumas (Kinley, 1996: 2)*

An important facet of Dumas' art is that most of her portrait paintings are based

[28] In this regard we can read Rembrandt's portrait painting in terms of "use of texture and impasto to suggest the substance of the paint itself in relation to the illusion of the substance it depicted" (Bomford, 2006: 33；Parton, 2010: 28).

on photographs rather than live sitters. When an artist uses photographs as a source for portraits, the relationship between the sitter and painter is clearly different to having the actual person to work from. In conventional Western portraiture, to paint a live person means to "[…] paint not a figure but a relationship between two people – the painter and the model […] What is painted is that relationship – an intimate dialogue" (Christov-Bakargiev, 2007: 33). But in Dumas' case, no such relationship can ever develop when she paints a face/figure from a photograph (which includes photographs of herself, her daughter and her grandmother). So, what is being painted in Dumas' portraiture "is the representation of a form of inevitable distance and separation, the solitude and loss caused by photographic vision itself" (ibid). Moreover, it could also be the representation of an idea of painting, or the representation of the paint's/material's presence, or the trace of the painter's performative act.[29]

In the study of semiotics, a photograph can also be regarded as an "indexical sign" by virtue of it being a "trace" left on film as a result of exposure to light when taken by a person and thus suggests the presence of this person. In Dumas' case, most of the photographs she uses as source material are not taken by her. It thus reveals her absence from the scene where the face/portrait was captured. This is to say, what is being represented in Dumas' portraiture is not the reference of a real person, but the reference of the image of that person/the iconic sign of that person. The portrait is not in any sense a "pure" representation of an actually existing person, but an idea about how the portrait could be painted in this or that way.

The tradition of Western art has assumed "[a] deep-rooted conviction, due to long established custom, that the aim of painting is the descriptive imitation of

[29] Bonacossa regards painting as activity, she says: "Marlene Dumas paints because painting is an activity that offers the artist unconditional freedom. Painting allows her to create 'invented and anachronistic' images, to display and relate things imagined yet capable of revealing more about the world around us sometimes than photography or documentaries" (Bonacossa, 2006: 13).

natural forms" (Fry, 1928: 238-9; Rowley, 2004: 19). However, in Dumas' art, we could say that the aim of painting is to represent an idea about painting, an idea about the portrait, rather than to imitate the "natural forms" of the subject, in other words, the subject matter/the image Dumas chooses stands for the practice of painting. As mentioned above, the portrait is not in any sense a "pure" representation of an actually existing person, but an idea about how the portrait could be painted in this or that way. In this sense, the image/the face/the subject matter exists in the brush marks and painted surface.[30] Dumas' brush marks and the painterly surface can be seen to re-build a face or body/the subject matter. Such subject/image does not exist in the real world but rather in an artist-created world,[31] namely in the painted surface. Emily Braun cites Bacon's words: "Painting is like one continuous accident mounting on top of another," whence the battered image emerges from a "coagulation of non-representational marks" (Braun, 2009: 32-33). This idea is also very evident in traditional Chinese landscape painting where "[i]ts depiction of the scenery along the […] river is not in any sense a 'pure' depiction of an actually existing landscape" but a "cultural landscape" (Clunas, 1997: 150).

This notion of re-created subject/image requires further examination of Dumas' particular approach to painting. Virginia MacKenny argues that Dumas' "non-traditional and perhaps aberrant approach to oil-painting" is integral to the meaning of her work (MacKenny, 2008: 50). Dumas' works are often executed in attenuated oil pigment or in ink and wash and both of these methods of painting are not typical of a Western oil painting tradition. Ralph Mayer states that conventional oil painting is intended to have some degree of gloss, excessive use of turpentine is likely to produce a weak and faulty coating and the paint quality so produced will generally be unsuccessful (ibid: 52). In

[30] Richard Shiff comments that, "representational painting becomes a matter of feeling the individual marks and tracings as well as the more general image they constitute" (Shiff , 2008: 150).

[31] In other words, "the artist's sensuous washes and brushstrokes return her excerpted subjects to the liquid realm of the photograph. It is as if she has painted them back to life while simultaneously reenacting the death implicit in the photographic moment" (Butler, 2008: 46).

countering Mayer's statement, Dumas could be said to "successfully" use too much turpentine in her oil painting to set up an instability through creating a tension between image and process. In other words, the painterly surface constitutes the way the subject matter is ordered and presented in Dumas' art.

This idea of "painterly surface" seems to be underscored by what Andrew Benjamin regards as "paint's presence" (a material presence) which "constitutes the way the content is ordered and presented and, as such, it is inextricably linked to the meanings we derive from a work" (Benjamin, 1996: 47; Bolt, 2004: 47). "Paint's presence" in Dumas' work is obviously critical to its meaning or interpretation as MacKenny goes on to point out:

> […] in Dumas' work the collapse of her paint is critical to the works' interpretation. Her oil paint does not merely represent or refer to something else: its very degradation becomes an important part of the ontological vocabulary of the work […] Dumas' fraught and imperiled paint surfaces dislocate our sense of surety. Her eschewal of hi-tech image making keeps her in contact with an established language that she can disrupt with an immediacy that opens up possibilities. Her compassionate involvement in a world full of uncertainty is manifest in her engagement with her practice and medium. (MacKenny, 2008: 51).

It is clear that Dumas' approach to oil-painting is very similar to her use of ink and wash on paper, which in turn comes very close to the traditional methods of Chinese ink painting. In the latter, the imitation of the resemblance of objects is abandoned in favor of the enjoyment of applying ink and wash on paper. The quality of Chinese ink painting is based on achieving a balance of control and letting go. Occasionally certain contingent or unpremeditated textures result on paper through the process of painting and are appreciated as "the work of

heaven and of the first cause"[32] by Chinese old masters (Speiser, 1960: 18).

Dumas also mentions such *casual* results in explaining why she employs a lot of turpentine in her oil painting. She says: "I have no patience to wait for paint to dry […] I want to move quickly and lots of turps does it, in the quickest way." And she continues: "One reacts to what happens on the canvas at the moment of execution, not by making preliminary sketches or knowing the end result beforehand or trying to illustrate an idea" (MacKenny, 2008: 50). Such an unexpectedly accidental achievement of a surface through the act of painting is, to a certain extent, a result of the painting's autonomous or spontaneous properties. This is to say that a painting, in its process of being produced, is in a sense "dynamic/alive" to the artist and sometimes this autonomous or spontaneous character of the painting overrules the artist's control.[33] As Barbara Bolt puts it:

> […] at some undefinable moment, the painting takes on its own life, a life that seems to have almost nothing to do with my conscious attempts to "control" it. The "work" (as verb and noun) takes on its own momentum, its own rhythm and intensity […] It performs it. The painting transcends itself and becomes a dissembling presence. (Bolt, 2004: 42).

In other words, an artist may interact with the liveness of the painting process rather than merely employing it as a vehicle to convey his/her intention. We may argue that a crucial job of a successful artist is to give life to the lifeless

[32] An 11th century Chinese poet and painter, Su Tongpo, wrote a poem that says: "He who judges pictures by the likeness of shapes, must be thought of as a child; He who hammers out verse by rule shows that he is not yet a poet. Poetry and painting are rooted in the same law, the work of heaven and of the first cause." The first cause here can be understood as the first impetus or God. "The work of heaven" here refers to some unforeseen result on the paper. See Speiser, Werner (1960), p.18, **China Spirit and Society**, (London: Methuen).

[33] In Dumas own words, "if the painting does not want to go in the direction where I thought it was going when I started, then I let it go its own way to some extent. I love chance […] Without surprise, no drawing" (Shiff, 2008: 161). Roland Barthes also notes, "once I produce, once I write, it is the Text itself which (fortunately) dispossesses me of my narrative continuity" (Barthes, 1995: 4).

materials of his/her medium rather than producing "a re-presentation of a pre-existent event, object or idea" (Betterton, 2004: 6).

Donald Kuspit comments that

> […] the sense of inner "beingness," of "dead" material acquiring a life of its own, is the fundamental test of the goodness of a work of art; for a good picture [painting] is one in which every mark on the canvas is felt to be significant, to be suffused with subject […] and in good sculpture the whole mass of "dead" metal or stone has been made to irradiate the sense of life. (Kuspit, 2000: 4).

Through this notion of "dynamic productivity" a painting is thus seen as being more performative than representational. It "comes to perform rather than merely represent" (Bolt, 2004: 43). It becomes a "dynamic object"[34] more than the medium that bears representation. In Bolt's words, "the performative act of painting produces ontological effects, which are not of a representational kind" (Ibid: 41). In Dumas' words, "[…] a painting is not a picture in the first place, but it is a performance" (MacKenny, 2008: 50).

And more importantly we may argue that in Dumas' painting, every brush mark on canvas or paper is significant and is suffused with the painter's subjectivity. In Marion Milner's words, "[…] the essence of painting is that every mark on the paper should be one's own, growing out of the uniqueness of one's own psychophysical structure and experience, not a mechanical copy of the model, however skillful" (Kuspit, 2000: 1). As Lisa Mark notes, "Dumas' work is both figural and corporeal. In the representation of one body (or bodies), another body asserts itself through the painted marks. With many forms of painting, the

[34] The material used in painting could even be regarded as "subject," as Shiff says, "[T]he painter and the paint were engaged in active existential dialogue, two 'subjects' confronting each other" (Shiff, 2008: 170).

viewer kinesthetically senses the existence and movement of another through the indexical traces of the artist's gesture, like walking on the beach and seeing footprints in the sand" (Mark, 2008: 216).

The musings of artist Basil Hallward on his process of painting Dorian Gray's portrait are also worth quoting here:

> Whether it was the Realism of the method, or the mere wonder of your own personality, thus directly presented to me without mist or veil, I cannot tell. But I know that as I worked at it, every flake and film of colour seemed to me to reveal my secret. I grew afraid that others would know of my idolatry. I felt […] that I had told too much, that I had put too much of myself in it. (Wilde, 1980: 94; Bolt, 2004: 58).

Such an ontological understanding of painting as simultaneously both a trace of the painter's performative act and a material presence which is suffused with the painter's subjectivity, implies a shift from the former understanding of painting as a representational practice to the describing of painting as a complex practice that engages with the painter's psychology and his/her bodily/somatic action. The indexical property of the painterly surface suggests a relation to the external world and the painter. The painting itself could be regarded as "an inter-subjective process," rather than merely "an object": "a practice of co-emergence involving the play of objects, bodies, materials, technologies and discourse"[35] (Betterton, 2004: 7). Mark notes about Dumas' paintings that:

> One of the ways the [paintings] derive power is through their insurgent materiality: the representational image has no more purchase on the viewer than the individual strokes, stains, and drips – as well as the

[35] This is Bolt's opinion cited by Betterton.

layers of color – that constitute the works' "traces," indexical marks of the artist's own body. The artist's evident investment in her subjects combines with the gestural fluidity of the drawn and painted marks to lend the work visceral – as well as cerebral and emotional – impact. In this way, Dumas posits a viewer who is an embodied receiver of the work, rather than merely appealing to optical and intellectual faculties. (Mark, 2008: 214).

2.2 The Self in The Self-Portrait Paintings by Marlene Dumas

In this section I combine the findings from Chapter one and section 2.1 (i.e. the self being split/given rather than united/natural; the self-portrait being seen as the artist in a dialogue both with his/herself and o[O]thers; an understanding of painting as a complex practice that engages with the painter's psychology and his/her somatic action) and apply them to an analysis of selected Dumas' portrait paintings which I read as Dumas' self-portraits. This section explores the notion of the autobiographical self, the conflictual/dialogical self and the split self respectively. It precedes three sub-sections to my analysis of Dumas' portrait paintings – *The Painter* (1994), *Evil is Banal* (1984), *Genetiese Heimwee* (1984) and *Self-portrait at Noon* (2008), while the last sub-section suggests that the *future self* of the artist in *Martha: My Ouma* (1984) tries to achieve immortality.

2.2.1 The Autobiographical Self in <u>The Painter</u>

> *"I am a painter, sincere and free, impassioned, yet patient, despising wealth and death; that is my nature."*
>
> --- --- *Salvatore Rosa (Goldscheider, 1937: 45)*

> *"At art school, I remember, my professor told me, 'You're a born painter'. I replied that I considered painting old-fashioned. All the smart artists were doing other kinds of work, so I wanted to do something else, but he said, 'My poor girl, what else could you do?'"*
>
> --- --- *Marlene Dumas (2009: 8)*

<u>*The Painter*</u> (1994) (oil on canvas, 200cm x 100cm)[36] is one of Dumas' most discussed paintings. It is a portrait of her young daughter Helena who often features as a model in her work. In comparison to other portraits of Helena, *Helena* (1992) and *Helena* (2001), this painting has the more general title *The*

[36] An image of *The Painter* by Dumas can be seen on the internet at: http://www.flickr.com/photos/artimageslibrary/4867616735/

Painter. It leads the viewer to understand this painting as being a form of self-portraiture on the part of the artist, i.e. the self of the artist can be seen through the image of her daughter. Titles play an important role in Dumas' art.[37] Barbara Bloom comments: "The titles you [Dumas] give your works are interesting: they inform me of the knowledge you would like me to have about what is being shown" (Bloom, 2009: 17). In Dumas' own words: "If a work had a different title, it would be seen differently" (ibid).

The Painter is based on a photograph that was taken in 1993. A blond toddler girl, Helena, stands in the middle of the picture, nude and glowering. She faces the viewer with an angry and direct expression. The background of the house and garden that appears in the source photograph is erased in the painting. Instead, it is painted bright and misty, which leaves Helena, the little painter, in an undefined spatial situation. The figure of the little painter in this work comes across as an image that could be reflected in a mirror, or like an image emerging from memory. As Dominic Van den Boogerd puts it: "Due to the green haze across her face and the traces of blue on her belly, she looks like an alien, definitely 'not from here'" (Van den Boogerd, 2009: 68). Such an equivocal situating of the depicted subject may further strengthen a viewer's resolve in reading *The Painter* as Dumas' self-portrait – as a young girl.

Furthermore, the little child's hands strengthen this sense in that they are depicted as stained up to the wrist – remarkably in red and blue, more precisely, in "arterial red" and "venous blue" (Watt, 2004: n.p.) – so that "you cannot be sure whether she has spent the previous few minutes finger painting in the playroom or dousing her hands in blood" (Solomon, 2008: n.p.).

"Hey, what is it with the girl with the blood on her hands?" one collector asked

[37] Butler also comments that "Dumas' titles are often playful or oblique and along with her paint handling frequently radically alters, even obliterates, her subjects' identities" (Butler, 2008: 55)

after seeing *The Painter*. The collector was told that this is Dumas' daughter covered in smudges of paint (Hendrikse, 2009: n.p.). The ambiguity of blood and paint is evident and undeniable. Whether it is Dumas' intention or not, such conflation of blood and paint defends the girl against an immediately objectifying viewing. This is a kind of self-defence or defiant self-awareness of the female painter that acts in resisting the male gaze,[38] i.e. it obstructs the interrogative viewing of the female body for sexual pleasure[39] (ibid). Dumas deliberately plays on this aspect of gendered viewing in order to resist it by offering the blood stained hands of a nude little girl – her daughter Helena. This is in fact a "re-imaged" little nude girl and as Rosemary Betterton puts it: "women's painting […] offer[s] us ways in which the female body has been re-imagined" Betterton (1996: 9).

The Painter as an instance of Dumas' autobiography offers a situation where she can simultaneously play a role of mother and daughter in one image of herself; or a chance to be a mother who can protect her daughter and be a daughter who is/was protected by her mother.[40] In this context Betterton comments on how the feminist writer/critic Luce Irigaray[41] "connects the *bodily encounter* specifically to women's experience of the maternal relationship as daughter and as mother" (Betterton, 1996: 16). What is thus implied is a relationship between mother and daughter – a daughter who is separated from the mother's body but carrying her mother's vestige. In this sense, *The Painter*,

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[38] The term "male gaze" is used here in a non-psychoanalytic manner, Lacan's notion of "the gaze" is cited only as the source. This is to say that "to look is an assumption of power, and therefore to occupy a male or masculine social position" (Hatt and Klonk 2006: 191).

[39] Mary-Rose Hendrikse asks more directly: "Can an image of nakedness, even if it is that of an 'innocent girl,' be made without evoking a sexually covetous attitude" (Hendrikse, 2009: n.p.) http://www.unisa.ac.za/Default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=7233

[40] Mothers can also impose their own desires or fears onto their children. As Mark notes: "[T]he potential inter-changeability of identities serves to highlight certain narcissistic aspects of motherhood, the ability of mothers to project their own identities (desires, fears, aspirations, insecurities, etc.) upon their children" (Mark, 2008: 214).

[41] Luce Irigaray (1932) is a French author and is recognized as "a leading feminist theorist and continental philosopher (http://www.iep.utm.edu/irigaray/). Her best known works, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), as well as some subsequent texts "provide a comprehensive analysis and critique of the exclusion of women from the history of philosophy, psychoanalytic theory and structural linguistics" (ibid). She thus earned her honour as "an interdisciplinary thinker who works between philosophy, psychoanalysis, and linguistics" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luce_Irigaray).

as a self-portrait, shows how Dumas struggles to meet the demands of motherhood while practicing her vocation as an artist (as mentioned above, in *The Painter* Dumas deliberately plays on this aspect of gendered viewing in order to resist it by offering the blood stained hands of a nude little girl-her daughter or herself). The artist's/painter's vocation could be traced back to her childhood. As Deborah Solomon mentions, "from the time she was 8, she [Dumas] loved drawing cartoon girls, curvy, bikini-clad models of the sort she saw in comics" (Solomon, 2008: n.p.). In Dumas' own words: "When I was a child I drew bikini girls for male guests on the back of their cigarette packs. Now I am a mother and I live in another place" (Watt, 2004: n.p.).

The Painter could therefore be regarded as a self-portrait and a form of autobiography of Dumas. To quote Cheney: "Artists have a pipeline open to their childhood and create from their associations of the past (the early life), often from subconscious sources" (Cheney, 2000: 191). *The Painter* seems to bear this out. What is represented in the painting is not only Dumas' daughter, Helena, but also her autobiographical self.

2.2.2 The Conflictual/Dialogical Self in Het Kwaad is Banaal (Evil Is Banal) and Genetiese Heimwee

> *"My work is a record of all these people in my life."*
>
> --- --- *Marlene Dumas (2009: 17)*

> *"I have painted him in my own likeness, so you have a picture of myself and at the same time a portrait of all of us, poor victims of society."*
>
> --- --- *Paul Gauguin (Mittelstadt, 1968: 5)*

Het Kwaad is Banaal (Evil Is Banal) (1984*)* (oil on canvas, 125cm x 105cm)[42] is quite clearly a self-portrait of Marlene Dumas. In this portrait Dumas depicts

[42] An image of this painting can be found in *W Magazine* on following website: http://www.wmagazine.com/artdesign/2008/06/marlene_dumas

herself in black, sitting in a chair and turning around to look over her shoulder, as if to look back at where she has come from. Her fair skin and flame-coloured hair contrasts with the daubed, black colour that suggests the jacket and the back of a chair. A startling feature in this portrait is the dark grey colouring of both her right cheek and her hand. Her dark grey hand juts into the foreground, contrasting with her fair skin and one cannot help but take note of its strangeness in relation to the face. It looks very much like a black person's hand.

Although the colour appears to be haphazardly painted by not seeming to follow lines or be bounded by the definition of forms, the portrait does carry a likeness. It is not difficult to recognize the character of Dumas' face and there is no doubt that this is a Marlene Dumas self-portrait. But the title, *Evil is Banal*, is a disturbing aspect to one's reading of the artist's self-portrait.

According to Bedford this title derives from Hannah Arendt's reports on Nazi bureaucracy, which raises questions about "the chilling ordinariness of power and evil" (Bedford, 2008: 36). She continues: "Dumas' intention is clearly to draw comparisons between Nazi and apartheid policies and practices and to reflect on the tragic consequences of discrimination on the grounds of perceived ethnic difference" (ibid). However, in my view Bedford's interpretation is somewhat misguided in understanding this self-portrait to be a direct commentary on South Africa's social reality. Bedford points out that "[…] [h]er fair skin and flame-colored hair mark her as one who would have been classified 'White' in apartheid's racial taxonomy, but the apparently haphazard placement of colour […] points to the arbitrariness of skin colours as a means of differentiating, and thereby discriminating against, groups of people" (ibid). However, what then does her dark hand mean? Can one suggest that this hand of a darker skin tone marks her as a being classified "black" in apartheid's racial taxonomy?

In my view such random colour doesn't so much challenge the dichotomizing system of black and white as to represent the symptom of an inner conflict between the self-fascination (of a young blond female) and the self-abhorrence (of a "whiteness" in apartheid South Africa). In the accompanying poem to *Evil Is Banal* Dumas writes:

I have not come
to propagate freedom.
I have come to show the disease symptoms
of my time.
I am a good example of everything
that is wrong with my time. (ibid).

To me her words "my time" identify her with the apartheid era, of which she is abashed and carries a sense of an inbuilt guilt – her being white in apartheid South Africa. In the 1992 documentary film *Miss Interpreted*, critic Selma Klein Essink says: "As a very young white in South Africa, Marlene was already aware that she was one of the oppressors. Even as a child she had evil inside her" (Watt, 2004: n.p.). Dumas herself says: "I was not the victim of the bad system. I was part of the wrong system" and there was nothing worse than "your whiteness" in South Africa during that time (Bedford, 2008: 33).

In this sense this portrait is used by Dumas to try to comprehend and reflect on her awareness of self/origin through a process of rigorous self-scrutiny that is based on the sensibility of skin colour. Such a process of self-scrutiny is in fact an inner dialogue between herself (an original innocent white girl) and her other self (a represented "inbuilt-guilty" girl). As examined in section 1.1.2, both Peirce's semiotic conception of self and Lacan's theory of "mirror stage" suggest a notion of a dialogical self. In the case of the mirror stage it means that the origin might have a conversation with its other self/its specular image

during the process of identifying that the reflected image is his/her own. This is to say, Dumas stands before the canvas just like a child in front of the mirror. The process of making her self-portrait is the process of identifying that the portrait is herself, and it is also the process of communicating with herself as the *other*. Such communication thus contains both her narcissism and her enmity to herself. This is an inner conflict happening in her inner world that is reflected in the canvas/her self-portrait. The random-looking brush strokes/colours/shapes are not there by pure chance. They are like signs/symptoms emerging from the artist's inner life much like the instance of skin which "[…] not only covers but reveals what is behind it [and] has a basis in the autonomic behavior of the body, in which forces of the interior move into visibility under certain conditions – illness, emotional stress, or pain – as well as over time" (Scala, 2009: 1).

The Dumas reflected on the canvas with the dark grey cheek and hand is not the one who is sick, rather it is a sign that stands for the one (the artist/Dumas) who is "sick." The "illness, emotional stress, or pain" does not "move into visibility" on Dumas' skin but rather on her portrait's "skin." The self-portrait here bears out some of the artist's interior problems, and as Dumas says: "I have come to show the disease symptoms" (Bedford, 2008: 36), the symptoms of a "sick" political system – "apartheid" and also the symptoms of Dumas' inner conflict as a "white" in apartheid South Africa. In my view this choice of colour doesn't so much challenge the dichotomizing system of black and white as to represent the symptom of an inner conflict between the self-fascination (of a young blond female) and the self-abhorrence (of "whiteness" in apartheid South Africa).

Such a conflictual/dialogical self can also be detected in another portrait

painting titled *Genetiese Heimwee* (1984) (oil on canvas, 130cm x 110cm)[43] that was painted in the same year as *Evil is Banal*. The Afrikaans title, *Genetiese Heimwee*, according to Bedford (2008: 37), can be interpreted as "genetic longing" or "genetic homesickness" which "alludes to the artist's displacement in her adopted country and to her longing for familial or relational connectedness" Bedford (2008: 37).

In this painting Dumas depicts a female sitting behind a table, facing the viewer but with her eyes averted to the right as if trying to avoid the viewer's gaze or else shifting her attention to something to the right of her. Her crossed hands lie on the table while her hair falls vertically along the right side of her cheek. The most striking feature of the portrait is the flaming red and yellow colour of her hands and arms, while her face is painted in dark blue-grey around which unmixed red is daubed from forehead to neck. The random colouring of the face, the hands and the skin is also a visualized symptom of *the painter's /Dumas'* (*not* the girl's) inner conflict of origin – as "whiteness" in a "black country," i.e. as reflected in *Evil is Banal*. Both paintings present not only a facial analogue but also a psychic/emotional one.

A self-portrait made using a mirror is also one's self-image that is literally speaking an opposite view of one's self, i.e. as it is reflected in a mirror. As examined in section 1.1.1, the self's specular image could be regarded as the *other*. Inversely, I may suggest that the *other* could also be regarded as the self's specular image. For example, in *Genetiese Heimwee* the girl who sits face to face to Dumas could be regarded as Dumas' "reflected" image/self-image or Dumas' *other* self. As examined in section 1.1.1, the subject gains identity in the Other's gaze. The symbolic Other "can be embodied in other subjects such as the mother or father that may represent it"

[43] An image of this painting can be found on: http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_0r9KVfDbP4E/S1SQa85lY1I/AAAAAAAAE-s/FP5z2sn9Yew/s1600-h/genetiese+heimwee+1984,+marl%C3%A8ne+dumas.jpg

(Ashcroft, 1998: 170). This is to say that the self of Dumas can be embodied in other subjects – the opposite girl here – that may represent it. What Dumas found about that girl thus might be what Dumas found about herself or something she lacked. To paint that girl's portrait is to identify both Dumas and girl's facial or emotional or behavioral character and therefore is to have a dialogue with both Dumas herself and the girl. Dumas writes: "She was actually very much the opposite of me. I found her very beautiful. She never spoke much" (Bedford, 2008: 66). Through this opposing view of herself Dumas may have found her own image reflected as a mirroring of her self-awareness – the self-awareness of "very beautiful" and "never spoke much" or not "very beautiful" and spoke too much.

Such communication between Dumas and the opposite girl is in fact an inner dialogue between Dumas and her *other* self. As Lacan puts it: "Even though two partners are on stage, their communication reveals not a conflict between two persons but a conflict within each subject" (Barzilai, 1999: 102). As Bloom suggests: "[T]hat's what one wants most to do: to have access somehow to someone else's way of seeing the world" (Dumas, 2009: 17). In this case, Dumas may somehow want to have access to the opposite girl's way of seeing herself – Dumas.

2.2.3 The Split Self in Self-portrait at Noon

> *"In contemporary women's self-portraits, ideals of beauty have been deconstructed in favor of representations of inner truth, which have often been chaotic and threatening. There is a cost, but also a promise – in their self-portraits, women painters have revealed their inner psyche as well as outer image."*
>
> --- --- *Liana De Girolami Cheney (2000: 206)*

Dumas' more recent self-portrait, *Self-portrait at Noon* (2008) (oil on canvas,

90cm x 100cm)[44], exemplifies a sense of a split or a gap built into one's self as Lacan's "mirror stage" suggests. In contrast to her earlier self-portrait, *Evil is Banal*, she paints this one in a very unflattering way as she depicts herself as an overweight, middle-aged woman as opposed to a blond, fair skinned girl. In *Self-portrait at Noon*, Dumas' face is presented on the canvas much as it would appear in the mirror, but this "mirror" becomes a kind of "self-critical" scrutinizing medium through which the self-portrait represented by Dumas is articulated through a figurative and abstractive process of searching that renders it somewhat blurred. It looks as if the face has melted into the surface of the canvas as it cannot be fully distinguished from the background. The brush strokes and the mixed "dirty" colours seem to ravage Dumas' facial features and the supposedly feminine, tender skin. In Ilaria Bonacossa's words: "There is nothing celebratory in this portrait; instead, it is as if Dumas is bent on self-destruction, doing everything possible to ruin her own image" (Bonacossa, 2009: 206).

By destroying the self-fascination of her own beautiful/ideal appearance,[45] such an intentionally unflattering and aged imaging of herself with an intensified "ugliness" in the artist's face represents a very genuine and honest attempt to investigate her inner life. Dumas' herself comments: "I'm probably more honest in my work" (Dumas, 2009: 14). Furthermore, such "self-destruction" enables Dumas to go beyond "an obvious play on the exhibitionism of women and the voyeurism of men" (Mulvey, 1989: 7), and subverts "the determining male gaze [which] projects its fantasy onto the female figure"[46] (ibid: 19). Dumas seems to succeed in this sense, for most

[44] An image of this painting can be found on the website of *The New York Times* at: http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/12/12/arts/1212-DUMA_index.html

[45] In Griselda Pollock's view, woman's beautiful face in painting is produced for man's gaze. Pollock argues that, "[I]n the production of a signified woman as beautiful face, a newly defined order of sexual difference was being inscribed" (Pollock, 1988: 123).

[46] Laura Mulvey (1941) is a British feminist art critic especially focusing on film study and criticism. In her widely influential essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey suggests two distinct modes of the male gaze – "voyeuristic" (seeing women as "whores") and "fetishistic" (seeing women as "madonnas") (Mulvey, 1989: 14-26).

anti-Dumas critics are male while, on the other hand, she is generally acclaimed by female viewers, artists and critics.

Critical response to her work has been divided. For an anti-Dumas critic her work is “more pedantic than passionate, more spectacle than substance, more didactic than revealing substantial depth” (Dubin, 2009: 74). On the contrary, pro-Dumas reviewers, Eisenman, for example, admire that “her work can easily hold its own beside the best male painters of her generation” (Solomon, 2008: n.p.). An art-world blog, *Anaba*, has taken to listing the names of Dumas supporters and detractors in 2005 and found that all of the anti-Dumas critics are in fact men (ibid). Peter Schjeldahl, the art critic at *The New Yorker*, says without remorse: “She is a good second-rate artist. I just don’t think it has much that other people don’t have. There is a certain glamour of sexual perversity, but it seems a little thin to me” (ibid). And South African critic Ivor Powell (2005: 24) also asks: “Is the Cape Town-born artist really that good or that important” (Powell, 2005: 24).

The comments from these male critics may reveal Dumas’ self-explorative awareness of being both a female artist whose womanhood is on display – somewhat uncomfortably – for consumption by men and a fierce resister to such consumption. In the conversation with Bloom, Dumas expressed her averseness to being classified as a so-called *woman painter*. Bloom responds: “Part of the mistake that people can make with you is that, because you’re a blonde and moreover a foreigner, they think you’re stupid. This makes it easier for them to like your work, like they discovered you have no idea what you’re doing and they can tell you what you are doing. So they can be arrogant, as if you’re some kind of idiot savant” (Bloom, 2009: 15).

Dumas’ awareness of her gender as female artist intentionally and instinctively refuses to produce the female image for man’s visual exploitation/consumption

and the only way to do so is to destroy the female artist's "beautiful face." As Gill Perry points out, the resulting surface of the painting "seems to help to establish a distance between the spectator and [the face], removing any sense of available female sexuality usually associated with [the] subject" (Perry, 1999: 210). In this sense Dumas has reworked "a male gaze, removing some of the erotic pleasure involved in the part of the viewing subject" (ibid: 211).

Dumas' "self-destruction" in this painting in fact implies Lacan's notion of separation in the study of self which exists not only between Dumas and her own image/self-portrait but also between *a Dumas* as a socially/conventionally defined "female artist" and *another Dumas* as a resister of such identification. Lacan's notion of separation also indicates *a want* to separate, which means Dumas wants to separate herself from such socially and often sexually discriminated conceptions/imaginations of the "female artist."

What Dumas destroyed in the *Self-portrait at Noon* is not actually her own face/image but an anticipated or a supposed-to-be female artist's "beautiful" face/image. But this unsentimental self-criticism might also be a somewhat disguised coolness that simultaneously reveals and conceals her inner dread of the lapse of time and her resulting ageing face and body. As Dumas says: "The feeling that you don't have enough time, I think that is the biggest problem in life. Whether you have the attention or not, you feel you're running out of time" (Kino, 2005: n.p.).

2.2.4 Facing Death in Martha: My Ouma

> *"Medusa dead is immortal: her horror exercises death, her power after death is her presence. To be Medusa is to deny death, and also to be nothing other than death."*
>
> --- --- *Pascal Bonafoux (1985: 38)*

"I've done lots of self-portraits, it's true, because the people around me have died off like flies and there was no one else left to paint except myself [...]Every day in the mirror I see death at work, [...]"

--- --- *Francis Bacon (Bonafoux, 1985: 139)*

… …

The older I get

the more I look like her.

Give me a little more time

and you can call this work:

A self-portrait

… … (Dumas in Bedford, 2008: 56).

As Dumas points out in the above-mentioned text which accompanies her grandmother's portrait *Martha: My Ouma* (1984) (oil on canvas, 130cm x 110 cm)[47], this painting can also be considered as her self-portrait because, as she comments, "[t]he older I get, the more I look like her." The portrait is frontally posed with the outline of the face being close to square in shape. The nose is centrally placed and the eyebrows, eyes, mouth and even wrinkles are symmetrically arranged. Such a static arrangement of facial features occurs very seldom in Dumas' portraits but can frequently be found in self-portraits by other artist's, such as Albrecht Dürer's *Self-portrait* (1500), Samuel Palmer's *Self-Portrait as Christ* (1833), Paul Gauguin's *Head of Christ (Self-portrait?)* (1901), and Francisco Goya's *Beethoven Self-portrait* (1795-7).

When Dumas painted this portrait her grandmother had already died. As she wrote in the poem accompanying this painting: "Ten years later I painted her again, [b]ut then that was after her death. I imagined her as if in heaven

[47] An image of this painting can be seen on the website of Frieze Magazine at: http://www.frieze.com/shows/review/marlene_dumas/

somehow" (Bedford, 2008: 56). She held onto her grandmother in her memories and, as such, this painting looks like it is based on a memory rather than a photographic image. The mixture of grey-blue backgrounds and the similarly coloured hair, cloth and face dispels the feeling of time, space and incidental surroundings and seems to show Dumas' grandmother as being in a perpetuated or monumentalized moment. Different to other portraits painted by Dumas, this old woman's face has a pair of very blank looking eyes. One cannot see the eyeballs and therefore cannot deduce anything from the eyes. Dumas' grandmother or what might-be herself seem to refuse to look back at the viewer and therefore refuse any form of communication with viewers. The image isolates her within her own world. It is very quiet and calm. The face, the eyes, the mouth, even the colours are so cool and dispassionate that one cannot help envisioning death. It is true that Dumas painted her grandmother after she had died, but the expressive/passionate brush strokes reveal the painter's inner undulant/unquiet/fluctuating mood. It suggests to me the question: "Who is able to be really quiet when in the face of death?"

Dumas' painting of her grandmother is also, in a sense, a painting of her future self. To paint one's eventually aged self is to paint death. As Pascal Bonafoux puts it: "To paint oneself is to paint the portrait of a man who is going to die" (Bonafoux, 1985: 139), but Bonafoux continues:

> To paint oneself is, in the first place and even beyond any credo, the wish to deny death […] The central and unending theme is man himself and the portrait of the painter by himself is a metaphor of any work of art, is the will to leave behind an imperishable trace of one's ephemeral self […] And the first aim of the self-portrait is to achieve immortality. The history of the self-portrait – and this is a hackneyed paradox – is the motionless history of immortality. (ibid: 140).

The future self of Dumas in this portrait of her Ouma (grandmother) could be seen as trying to achieve immortality in this sense. Such an attempt at attaining immortality or denying death may lend such a portrait a somewhat divine aura. It might be Dumas' intention to sublimate the mimetic/represented face of people to be in "the image of God" or the trace left by God. As she puts it in her poem accompanying this painting:

> *……*
> *God cannot be painted*
> *And He isn't a man*
> *But if He had been a woman.*
> *He would have looked like this sometimes.* (Dumas in Bedford, 2008: 56).

Edward Lucie-Smith notes that "the contemporary self-portrait often seems to […] reaffirm the artist's right to link his [her] own work to that of the great masters of the past" (Kelly and Lucie-Smith, 1987: 24) and the message in Dumas' poem above compels one to compare this painting with Dürer's well-known Imitatio Christi *Self-portrait* (1500)[48] which was purposely painted to be in the image of Christ. In discussing Dürer's self-portrait West notes that Dürer's frontal pose makes a direct reference to images of Christ and he reads this painting as a sign of the artist's status as artist/creator and as an approach to self-portraiture that may be seen to raise the artist's status as being "a superior being" (West, 2004: 168).[49] Bonafoux says it even more directly: "To be a painter is to be in the image of God; it is a life that imitates that of Jesus […] To paint oneself as a great lord is not vainglorious; to paint oneself as

[48] For an image of this painting, see West, Shearer (2004), p168, **Oxford History of Art: Portraiture**, (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[49] In Thomas Kempis' view, Christ counsels man "to follow His life," and "[W]hoever desires to understand and take delight in the words of Christ must strive to conform his whole life to Him" (Kempis, 1952: 27). On the website for *Imitatio Christi* it says: "[A]ll that followers of Christ are to be and do rightly flows from God's intentions for human life together, and the fullest revelation of that comes via the life of Christ. The call to imitate Christ is an expression of this reality" (http://imitatiochristi.blogs.com/).

Christ is to paint oneself as a painter" (Bonafoux, 1985: 27).

As examined above, *Martha: My Ouma* has a similarly divine aura about it that Dumas' other paintings do not have. While *The Painter* shows an anxious side of motherhood – to instinctively protect her daughter (also herself) from exploitation/consumption, *Evil is Banal* and *Genetiese Heimwee* show a predicament/conflict between self-fascination and self-abhorrence – an awareness of the artist's origin (specifically the artist being white in apartheid South Africa) and *Self-portrait at Noon* shows an unsentimental attitude towards the artist's aged/unbeautifully rendered face; *Martha: My Ouma* reflects a peaceful/calm face – "a representation not just of the artist [or artist's grandmother in this case] but of all humanity," through which "she [the future self of the artist/Dumas in the portrait] welcomes the call of death" (Cheney, 2000: 173).

<u>Part II</u>: The Practical Component

"God created man in His Image and Likeness. Because of Original Sin, man lost the likeness and only retained the image."

--- --- St. Bernard of Clairvaux (Bonafoux 1985: 36)

Chapter Three — The Face of Self/Other: Modes of Painting in My Practical Work

This chapter contains three sections titled *The Impression of My Chinese Background in My Works, The Self in My Self-portrait Paintings* and *Subject Matter and The Painterly Surface in My Other Paintings* respectively. These subdivisions underscore the link to concerns discussed in the previous chapters such as the notion of self, the relationship between subject matter, and painterly surface. How these theories affect or relate to my practical works is considered in the following analyses accompanying individual works.

The tone, style or method of writing in the analysis of my own works (which takes up the main parts of section 3.2 and section 3.3) is somewhat different to that of Part I – *The Theoretical Component*. I use a relatively personal and more informal language here as opposed to the more rigorous and cogitative language required in previous chapters. It is somewhat strange for me to analyze my own work and the distinction in tone is related to my attempt at reflecting on my own work as best as possible. A more informal approach in discussing my work feels appropriate and could also offer useful information which could inform the production of my work.

3.1 My Chinese Background in My Practical Works

"Language is the voice of the mind; calligraphy the painting of the mind."
--- --- Yang (Jenyns, 1935: 95)

The impression a viewer will gain from my painting has to obviously be informed by my Chinese background. My undergraduate study in art was completed in China (from 1995 to 1999) where I received a strict academic training in traditional Chinese painting. In 2001 I completed an Advanced Diploma in Fine Arts at Wits University during which I first discovered the work of Marlene Dumas. Her approach to painting seemed to me to come very close to the tradition of Chinese ink painting methods in which ink and wash is used as primary medium. As already pointed out in section 2.1.3, in the tradition of Chinese ink painting the imitation of the resemblance of an object is abandoned in favor of the enjoyment of applying the brush as one pleases. But abstract painting has never been produced in traditional Chinese painting. Rather, such Chinese painting stands between the capturing of representational likeness and exploring expressive painterly surface.[50] My practical work follows this tradition but in the medium of oil on canvas.

Furthermore, as pointed out in section 2.1.3, in Chinese ink painting there are occasionally certain contingent textures that result on paper through the process of painting and these are appreciated as "the work of heaven and of the first cause" in this tradition (Speiser, 1960: 18). By following this tradition, I prefer to make a painting by chance rather than trying to *design* a painting. I would like to think of myself as a brush rather than as an artist/creator. In my view, the artist, in this sense, functions like ink, oil pigment, brush or brushwork to make the painting and to carry out the meaning of the painting rather than acting as the "creator" of the painting or the "creator" of the meaning of the

[50] The reason why there is no abstract painting in ancient China, in my view, is because Chinese calligraphy plays a role as a form of abstract painting. In Chinese culture, calligraphy could be regarded as "a constructive art,""an expressive art" (Deng 1999: 1).

painting. The only creator, for painting or art here, might be God; the artist might only be the agent of the creator/God. This is to say, the artist would like to be the brush of God. In Steven Leuthold's words: "[T]he Zen-influenced artist seeks to establish a unity with his or her materials rather than to strictly control them"[51] (Leuthold, 2011: 259).

The appreciation of such contingent textures in Chinese ink painting is impacted strongly by Chinese calligraphy that has been said to be "the soul of Chinese fine arts" (Deng, 1999: 1). Soame Jenyns also notes:

> To the Chinese writing is very much more than a vehicle of expression; it has the pictorial brevity associated with painting, and the same appeal to the imagination, and so there has come about in China the closest relationship between painting and writing. The same materials, ink (Chinese pictures were almost invariably outlined in ink), paper and silk were used for both. Calligraphy is mounted and exhibited in the same way. Every Chinese had to learn to write well before he could paint. The linear qualities of Chinese paintings are the direct result of this calligraphic training. (Jenyns, 1935: 91-92).

The important role that calligraphy plays in Chinese ink painting is not only indicated by the fact that the same materials are employed in both disciplines but also in that they share the same aesthetic value.[52] In Jenyns' words, "[c]alligraphy is the structure on which Chinese painting is built […] When a Chinese critic says a picture 'has strength' he refers to the calligraphic vigour

[51] As discussed a bit later, Chinese art is influenced by the spirit of Zen. Leuthold states:"[T]he Zen-influenced artist seeks to establish a unity with his or her materials rather than to strictly control them. […] One goal of this extended period of learning and practice is the unity of the subject and object (of the self and the word); the artist achieves oneness with matter – and with the materials of his or her art. […] In Zen, art liberates the self" (Leuthold, 2011: 259). In my art practice I follow this as can be seen in the modes of painting that I adopt.

[52] In the tradition of Chinese fine arts, calligraphy was considered as an "elite's" art. When it is mentioned together with painting, "calligraphy always comes before painting" (Deng 1999: 2). And: "calligraphy manifests the basic characteristics" of Chinese painting (ibid).

of the brush stroke" (ibid: 93).

Furthermore, by again considering Peirce's notion of the *indexical* sign, the calligraphic mark could be regarded as an indexical sign, for it stands for its object – the writer – by way of physical affect rather than by resemblance, i.e. it offers the proof of the existence of the writer. Such an assumption is indeed exemplified by ancient Chinese artists in their own words, as Jenyns suggests:

> The Chinese say that calligraphy is a portrait of the mind […] ink tones are but the external manifestations of the mind, and there must be a coincidence between the mind and its external manifestations. This relation is something like that which exists between the seal and its impression […] Paintings and writings are seals, for the sentiments and feelings of their authors can be traced in them […] Painting is fundamentally the same as calligraphy. (ibid: 94-95).

This is the reason why many ancient Chinese artists would like to say they *write* pictures rather than *draw* pictures. My training in such a tradition is a crucial element to my practical work created towards this research. Most of my paintings are executed in oil but my method of using oil pigment does not necessarily adhere to Western conventional methods.[53] Rather, I use it more like I would use ink and wash on paper. In using this method an uncertain balance between control and letting go is explored. The autonomy of the painting will thus be encouraged through an un-projected process of brush strokes on canvas and the result is therefore unforeseen. It is in fact a consequence of interaction between the artist and the property of materials/medium he/she handles, just as it was for Chinese old masters who

[53] As already mentioned earlier, the so-called *conventional oil painting* in Western terms may be defined in Dürer's words: "Painting is the ability to represent on a flat surface an object, any one you choose, from among all the visible objects in existence" (Bonafoux 1985: 82). This is to say, in conventional oil painting, the materials – the oil pigments and brush are used as a vehicle to carry the representation of the object, rather than a means to express the artist's feelings or emotions. However, such conventions are overturned by most contemporary artists.

used a brush as “the extension of their fingers” (Deng, 1999: 1).

Another important link to Chinese ink painting is the imbuement of the spirit of *Tao* or the spirit of *Zen*,[54] which assumes an “unadorned simplicity, artlessness, objectiveness and purity; a feeling for unforced naturalness, forceful directness and a deep respect for nature” (Brinker, 1987: 21). Such an impression of *Tao* or *Zen* makes Chinese ink painting appear quiet, calm and other-worldly. This is what Chinese old masters pursued and in fact, in ancient China, “the majority of Chinese painters were not professionals, even up to the nineteenth century. They were high officials, military dignitaries, poets, philosophers or scholars, and they were at least as much esteemed for their calligraphy as for their painting. The Chinese obviously puts a higher value upon the total personality than upon specifically artistic achievement” (Cohn, 1948: 12).

The ancient Chinese painter’s non-professional situation[55] created a so-called “ink-centred scholar painting” (Clunas 1997: 160) and led it towards adopting certain metaphorical and allegorical effects. So-called scholarly Chinese artists are better at concealing their emotions, feelings or inner struggles than expressing them directly via their paintings. They prefer to use plant or landscape paintings through which to symbolize their emotions, their character or their life philosophy, for example, bamboo is usually painted to signify the character of rectitude and straightness.

My painting has unavoidably been affected by my Chinese cultural background. I would say that it has led my work to a kind of “*in-between*” position in the sense that it avoids extremes, i.e. it avoids being an abstract painting or a

[54] Zen is a Japanese word which in Chinese is called Chan. Chan Zong is a southern school of Buddhism in China and its roots lie deep in Chinese local religion – Taoism. But since the early 8th century, Zen or Chan had more of an impact on Chinese ink painting than Taoism.

[55] It could also be said that “most of the great masters first distinguished themselves as officials, scholars, or poets, and many were expert calligraphers, before they turned to painting” (Sze, 1956: 5).

realistic painting, and tends towards exploring metaphorical or symbolizing effects. However, it is important to point out that it is not my intention to limit myself to modes of traditional Chinese ink painting. Rather, it is my *Chinese culture* and having grown up in a Chinese background that gives my oil painting a somewhat "Eastern-style" visual or emotional effect.[56]

[56] This is, of course, also true of some other Chinese artist's paintings, for example, in discussing Yan Pei-Ming's portrait paintings, Charlotte Mullins notes: "Many of Pei-Ming's works are painted only using one colour – black or red – mixed with white, a reductionist technique that concentrates attention on his brushstrokes, which seem to have beaten the paint into a likeness. The resulting physicality of Pei-Ming's works is countered by a late smattering of paint flicks that denies the painting an illusion of three-dimensionality and pins the image on to the surface, as your eye races over it" (Mullins, 2010: 47).

3.2 The Self in My Self-portrait Paintings

> *"To paint himself, the painter proceeds through this mirror, which is a metaphor of painting. So to paint oneself is to paint painting itself; it is to paint both what is required and what is defined."*
>
> --- --- *Pascal Bonafoux (1985: 19)*

My research in both the theoretical and the practical components for this degree started from the study of the notion of *self*. As pointed out in Chapter One, the self-portrait could be regarded as a way for an artist to explore his/her inner world. It goes without saying that my interest in self-portraiture is in fact an interest in exploring my inner world or inner life, which includes the dilemma of my identity, my origin as well as my past and future.

However, I do not propose to try to solve such dilemmas or problems via the practice of self-portraiture. It would be presumptuous to think that self-portraiture could solve any of the artist's inner problems. Further, it is even impossible to really/truly get into or explore the artist's inner world via self-portraiture. Self-portraiture can only really offer a trace/clue or a sign/symbol that may reflect some features of the artist's inner life.[57]

In this section I will discuss six of my self-portrait paintings in relation to the theory of self and self-portraiture that I examined in Chapter One. These paintings are: *Self-portrait as a Passenger* (2010), *Self-portrait as Fragments* (2010), *Self-portrait: My Cement Head* (2010), *Self-portrait: My Shadows* (2010), *Self-portrait: My ID Photos* (2010), *Self-portrait: Identification* (2011).

[57] The word "inner world" here should not to be understood as any *concrete* "world" or any noumenal conception of "world" as the earth or the society we live. In my view, the so-called "inner world" is in fact a suppositional or fictitious "world" which is constructed socially and conventionally rather than natural.

3.2.1 Self-portrait as a Passenger (Oil on Canvas, 52cm x 112cm, 2010)

Fig.1, *Self-portraiture as a Passenger*

Fig.2, *Self-portraiture as a Passenger* (Detail)

Fig.3, *Self-portrait as a Passenger* (as exhibited on the Absa L'Atelier Competition, Johannesburg, 2011)

Fig.4, *Self-portrait as a Passenger* (as exhibited on the Absa L'Atelier Competition, Johannesburg, 2011)

Self-portrait as a Passenger (Fig.1-4) is an oil painting consisting of two separate images presented side by side in one frame. The painting is based on snapshots[58] taken by myself in 2009 when I used a cell phone to take images of Prof. Colin Richards' work on display on his solo exhibition at the Gallery *Art on Paper* in Johannesburg (Prof. Richards was at the time one of the staff members in the Fine Arts division at Wits). When I had these photographs printed I found my own face reflected in the glass of Richards' framed paintings. Among these images I found some to be interesting in having been created by the overlapping of Richards' painting and my reflected head. This was especially the case when I saw my reflected head overlapping Richards' painting of an African Grey parrot.[59] I found the relationship between the two icons, the bird and my head, very intriguing. In this image it seems as if my reflected face is looking outward through the image of the parrot. My face looks as if it exists behind the painting rather than in front of it (at one of the regular critical seminar sessions for MA students' practical work, Prof. Karel Nel pointed out that the icon of the parrot seemed to project in front of the head). The image of a bird features frequently in my works and signifies a certain restlessness, vulnerability and displacement. The flight and migratory characteristics of birds link to my concerns around Chinese immigrant or diaspora experience.

The colour of the painting is grey with some touches of light blue and brown[60] and the brush strokes are restrained but alive in still being readable on the surface. The tone of the painting is calm. The content of both images is the same but also differs slightly – the head in the right image moves a little to the left of the bird. Thus the set of two paintings looks a bit like two freeze-frame

[58] Ernst Gombrich comments: "the reason why so many snapshots look to us unconvincing is precisely that they seem to represent not us, or a person we know; they look alien and unfamiliar" (Gombrich, 1998: 2). This is also the reason why I prefer to use snapshots as the reference/source for my painting.

[59] For an image of Prof. Colin Richards' original painting of the parrot in his solo exhibition held at the *Art on Paper* gallery 2009 see:
http://www.artonpaper.co.za/view.asp?ItemID=34&tname=tblComponent1&oname=Exhibitions&pg=front

[60] In fact, the grey-blue and brown are two basic colours commonly used in traditional Chinese ink painting.

clips from a film sequence. It presents the *person* – my reflected image as a passenger – as someone who is in the process of passing by the painting, i.e. that which (a person and a person's identity) is regarded as having perpetuity or some eternal value appears briefly as a fleeting/passing image.

Taking into account my immigrant background, the metaphor of the work is obvious – I am a passenger who is always on the way and does not belong to any specific place. The foremost diaspora or exile experience, for me, lies in the uncertainty of continuous movement. I have been in South Africa for about 12 years and I have moved from one place to another more than 20 times. Such an "on-the-way" experience makes me always think of myself as a passenger for whom the suitcase and its contents are the only owned property. I passed the city/the town. I passed the building. I passed the gallery. And, one day I passed the *parrot*.

3.2.2 Self-portrait: My Shadows (Oil on Canvas, 101cm x 76cm x 2, 2010)

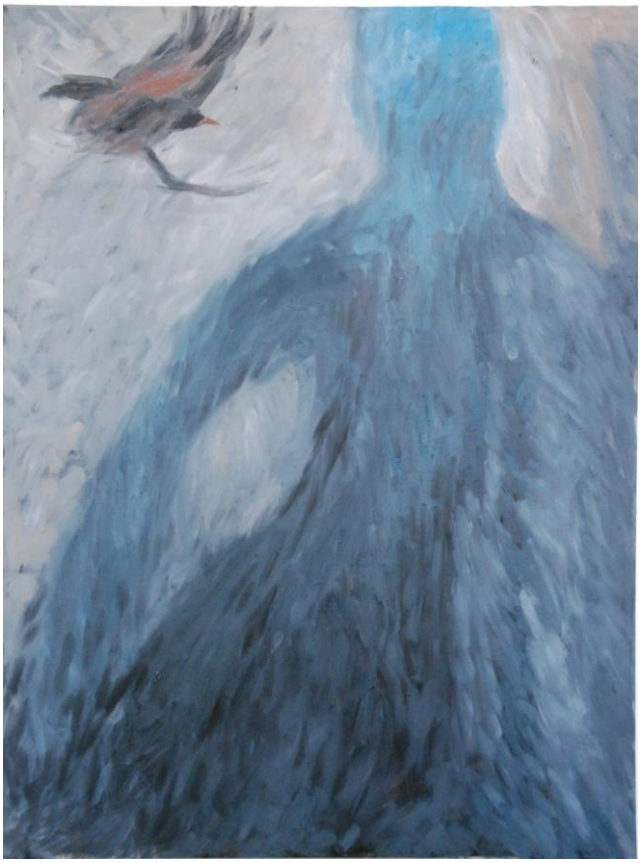

Fig.5, *Self-portrait: My Shadows*

Fig.6, *Self-portrait: My Shadows*

Self-portrait: My Shadows (Fig. 5-6) is also based on a snapshot taken by cell phone. While sitting behind a window I saw my shadow reflected on the floor. I then clicked the cell phone to take an image. While observing the shadow, it seemed to be looking back at me. It solidified when I froze. It moved when I moved. It followed me and made me aware that I could never run away from its following. One's shadow can never be separated from one's self, whether it is strongly defined or light, clear or blurred. The shadow can only disappear or vanish completely when one is in an absolutely dark room, but then one's somatic body can also not be seen in darkness.[61]

The shadow is in a sense my self-portrait, not created by my hand but by my body. My shadow is an indexical sign of my body created by light. It is in this sense "attached" to my body as the indexical sign is evidence of the object's existence.[62] My shadow is thus evidence of the existence of my body. Painting my shadow is to paint my body's indexical sign and is to paint the existence of myself. My shadow is also an indexical sign of the light, for it is physically "attached" by way of light. The light is the *co-producer* of the image. In a dark room, when one's shadow disappears, one's image also vanishes. One's body or image cannot be seen at that moment, it exists only in thought like the flight of a bird.

[61] In an exhibition of Andy Warhol's works, Julian Schnabel comments on some of Warhol's works of shadows: "[T]here is almost nothing on them. Yet they seem to be pictures of something" (Cooke, 2004: 87).
[62] For a more detailed explanation of the indexical sign see section 2.1.1 – *Subject Matter and The Painterly Surface in Peirce's Sign System*.

3.2.3 Self-portrait: My Cement Head (Oil on Board, 35.5cm x 45.5cm, 2010)

Fig.7, *Self-portrait: My Cement Head*

Self-portrait: My Cement Head (Fig.7): While I was studying towards the Advanced Diploma in Fine Arts at Wits in 2001, I had the opportunity to model my self-portrait head in clay and then to cast it in cement. This is a self-portrait painted in oil based on a photograph taken of that sculpture. I recall using a small mirror as reference in modeling this self-portrait sculpture from my features. The sculpture does capture some of my facial features, but while making an oil painting of the head on board, some interesting questions arose. I could not help asking myself: Am I painting my self-portrait or merely a cement head? Is that cement block my head? How can I capture the so-called inner truth or inner self or inner life[63] through a lifeless cement object? Am I making a self-portrait painting or merely a still-life painting in painting this head? There is no answer to these questions. I can only see the cement head lying on the floor. My head lies on the floor. The shadow reflects off the cement object. The shadow reflects off my head.

[63] In both conventional Western and Eastern portrait paintings, one of most important tasks/challenges for the artist is to capture or represent the sitter's emotional or inner life's features. As Cynthia Freeland puts it, "[P]ortraits aim to show a person who is a subject – an autonomous individual with inner states, and not a mere object or thing" (Freeland, 2010: 196). In other words, "[t]he portrait should allow something of someone's personal interior life to be made available in public, and this purpose – to bring out hidden information – should be important to both artist and the eventual viewing public" (Nairne and Howgate, 2006: 7).

3.2.4 Self-portraiture: My ID Photos (Oil on Canvas, 101cm x 76cm, 2010)

Fig.8, *Self-portrait: My ID Photos*

Self-portraiture: My ID Photos (Fig.8) is an oil painting. Many viewers seem not to recognize it as an oil painting and have asked me what material I used to paint it with. I have to convince them that it is indeed an oil painting in which I used a lot of turpentine to dilute the oil pigment so that it would aid me in painting rapidly. I did not want to produce a highly naturalistic painting and preferred to see how the brush marks together with the fluid pigments could form the face in a more direct and spontaneous way. The reference images are my ID photographs that I scanned from my driver's license, student card, ID book, old and new passports. These photographs were taken at different times (the earliest one was taken 18 years ago when I was a student in high school in China). By seeing them together I can see how my face has changed over time.

According to Peirce's theory of signs, my face may be regarded as an indexical sign of my inner life, for it is physically affected by my inner life. My face may be regarded as an indexical sign of my identity, for it is physically affected by my identity – my DNA. My face may be an indexical sign of my family, for it is physically affected by my family. My face may be regarded as an indexical sign of the external social realities, for it is physically affected by my social environment. My face may be an indexical sign of Chinese immigrants, for it is physically affected by the Chinese community in South Africa.[64] My face may be an indexical sign of my country, for it is physically affected by my Chinese background – having grown-up in China, having been educated in China, having been *produced* in China.

[64] The Chinese community in South Africa is very important to me for it is where I live in. The interactions with other Chinese immigrants inevitably affects my behaviors, emotions and thoughts. In this sense, my face could be regarded as an indexical sign of Chinese immigrants in South Africa, for my face could be seen as a manifestation of my inner life and my lived experience, which is physically affected by Chinese community in South Africa. For me, I can say this portrait painting is my self-portrait; for other viewers it might just be a portrait of a *Chinese*; but for some South African local viewers, it can be seen as a portrait of Chinese immigrants in South Africa, because most of them have never been to China. The only Chinese they may ever see maybe Chinese immigrants living in South Africa.

My ID photo is an iconic sign of my face, for it stands for my facial features by way of resemblance. My ID photo is an iconic sign of a Chinese face, for it stands for “Chinese” by way of resemblance. My ID photo is an iconic sign of Chinese immigrants in South Africa, for it stands for Chinese immigrants by way of resemblance (myself being one of them). What can one gather from this self-portrait painting? One sees a young man, a middle-aged man (the one in the middle-right) and an old man (the one to the top-middle). One sees a Chinese man. It is my self-portrait. It is also a *Chinese* self-portrait.

3.2.5 Self-portrait as Fragments (Oil on Canvas, 76cm x 76cm, 2010)

Fig.9, *Self-portraiture as Fragments*

Self-portrait as Fragments (Fig.9): Lacan's theory of the *mirror stage* suggests that an infant does not have any real sense of his/her own boundaries until he/she sees him/herself in a mirror and is aware of his/herself as a complete image. One can only see one's self as a complete image when standing in front of a mirror, but the complete *self-image* in the mirror is in fact the *other.*[65] It is not my will to paint the *other* or the misrecognized self or "the carbon copy of the self" (Barzilai, 1999: 103). I want to paint myself relying on my own observation of my real body (not a specular image of the body).

I started this painting – *Self-portrait as Fragments* from directly observing through my glasses what was in front of me. Through the glasses I saw my right hand holding a brush. I painted my right hand. I saw the cement floor beyond my right hand. I painted the cement floor. Looking up from the floor I saw my right leg. My eyes moved from right to left. Then I saw my left hand on my left leg. Following my left arm, I saw my shoulder, my chest and the left side of my nose. Then I saw my glasses again, my right hand again, my right leg and the cement floor again.

When my eyes move, my body moves. I cannot see my own face, my eyes and my whole body. Not only is it impossible to achieve a completed self-image, but it is also impossible to achieve an immobile or still self-image. I painted all of what I saw. As an exercise in self-perception I painted a fragmented self-portrait. The loose brush work and patchy arrangement of detail on the canvas resulting from the immediacy of my notation contributes to this sense of fragmentation.

[65] Lacan's *mirror stage* and how a specular self could be regarded as *other* is discussed in section 1.1.1 – *The Split Self in Lacan's Mirror Stage*.

3.2.6 Self-portrait: Identification (Oil on Canvas, 39.7cm x 29.7cm x 4, 2011)

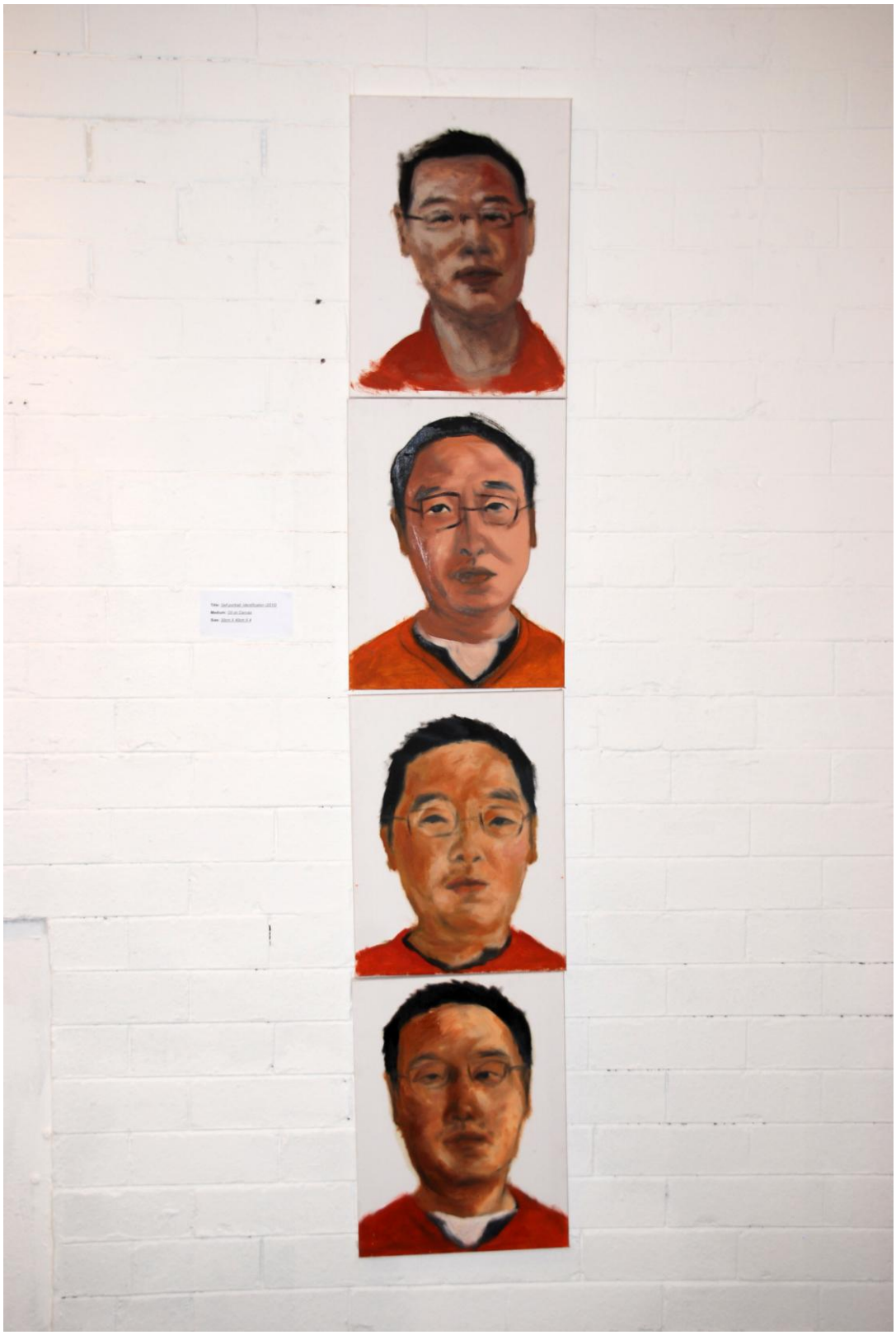

Fig.10, *Self-portrait: Identification*

Self-portrait: Identification (Fig.10): As pointed out in section 1.3.2, while painting the self-portrait, the artist stands before the canvas much like the child may stand before the mirror. The canvas is the mirror for the artist here. The process of making a self-portrait is the process of identifying one's self; to identify the face is to identify one's own face. The process of identifying oneself is the process of speaking with oneself. The dialogue exists not only between the artist and his/her painted self-image, but also between his/her past self and future self.

I painted these four self-portraits from looking at a most recent ID photo. It was my intention to capture a likeness but I didn't try hard to make a realistic or naturalistic self-portrait. Rather, I painted at will. I want to see who or what I could come up with. I looked at the blank canvas. I painted an outline of a face, possibly my own face but I could not identify it as my own face or someone else's face yet. Then, I painted the hair, nose, eyes and ears. I could see some features of my face emerging, but I didn't want to produce a naturalistically rendered painting. I didn't want to amend mistakes. I left them as they happened. I wanted to see what was going on. What face would occur on the canvas? I was curious to see the face appearing on the canvas, much like I was curious to see what would appear in the mirror when I was a child.

The first portrait was done in an hour. Is that my face? Do I look like this? I cannot identify it! I started to paint the second one. It was done after another 60 minutes. There was no surprise in finding that it didn't look like me at all. But strangely, it looked like one of my close friends. I made the third and fourth one. I put all of them together to see similarities and differences between them, to see the link between them, to see their independence. Finally, I compared them with the reference – my ID photograph. Arranging them one above each other in a vertical format on the wall the images may recall sequential ID photo strips (as, for example, commonly obtained in having one's picture taken in a

photo booth). The scale of these individual paintings corresponds more or less to life-size.

If I wouldn’t have had the ID photograph, if I had never had a photograph taken of myself, if I had never been in front of a mirror, could I identify a face as being my face? I might be a lucky man, for I saw myself in a mirror, I saw my photos many times. I therefore believe I have the ability to identify myself. I think I have a conceptual vision or a visual conception of myself in my mind. I identify my face or my self’s image based on such vision or conception which is the result of accumulated images, descriptions about me and other’s responses to me in my history of growing up.

3.3 Subject Matter and the Painterly Surface in My Other Works

"I think everyone should be like everyone else."
--- --- *Andy Warhol (Freeland, 2010: 254)*

My other portrait paintings, besides the self-portraits, are mainly based on photographs which I have taken myself, but I also use other image sources such as cuttings from newspapers, magazines or imagery downloaded from the internet. While working as a journalist for *Overseas Chinese Gazette* and *China News South Africa* over the past eight years, I have taken a great deal of photographs of Chinese immigrants in South Africa which have enhanced the body of source material to be used for my paintings.

In this section I examine modes of painting in my studies of portraits which include those of well-known people such as – *Portrait of Coetzee* (2010); portraits of innominate people – *Born in South Africa* (2010) and *Non-subjected* (2011); as well as portraits of my friends and other Chinese immigrants to South Africa, such as *Mr. Chen in Chinese Aged Home, Johannesburg* (2010), *Market Street* (2010), *We are in South Africa I-III* (2010) and *ID-photos: Faces from East (2011)*.

Via these portrait paintings I wanted to investigate how to use portrait painting to reflect/represent a certain dilemma, namely the experiences that Chinese immigrants (including myself) are confronting in living in South Africa. I explore this by asking how a life-changing journey from one cultural context to another affects life experiences and how I can represent/reflect such life experiences through a portrait painting. Through addressing the concerns of Chinese immigrants' diaspora experiences in South Africa I felt that I could perhaps examine the possibilities and limitations of painting portrait studies.

In this section I also include a painting of an animal – *Live Like a Bird Indoors* (2010), which clearly links to my diaspora experience in South Africa by way of the bird image, as mentioned earlier. Some of my other works, such as *Specimen – Faces from East* (2010), *The Murder of Si-wen* (2011) and *Head in Bottles* (2011) do not fit neatly into a conventional portrait category but are nevertheless related to my explorations in portraiture and in painting.

3.3.1 Live Like a Bird Indoors (Oil on Board, 20cm x 20cm x 16, 2010)

Fsig.11, *Live Like a Bird Indoors*

Fig.12, *Live Like a Bird Indoors* (Details)

Fig.13, *Live Like a Bird Indoors* (Details)

Fig.14, *Live Like a Bird Indoors*, (as exhibited on the Thami Mnyele Fine Arts Award exhibition, Johannesburg, 2011)

Live Like a Bird Indoors (Fig.11-14): This oil painting framed in three parts explores the relationship between subject matter and painterly surface. The relationship between the two seems reversed as the painting here does not serve so much as a vehicle to convey the representation of the image of a bird, but rather, the bird seems to be there for the sake of the painterliness of the work.[66] The shape and the shadow of the bird offered me an opportunity to explore the relationship between colour and shape, subject and background. I used my brush freely and left the traces of the painterly process on the board. An instability and tension is set up between the "anxious" surface of the painting and the nervous subject of the bird. It appears as a metaphor alluding to my inner unrest – the dislocation from my origin, the diaspora experience of a life – changing journey from China to South Africa. The nervous energy of the bird is captured in favour of focusing on detail of the bird. I painted the bird much like I would use Chinese brush and ink to paint bamboo on paper. The description of the subject is less foregrounded than the enjoyment of applying brush and paint/ink to the surface of board/paper. The interaction between myself and the materials I handle leaves its trace on the board. The rhythm and strength of the resulting image created by such an interaction addresses my moods and feelings. Some viewers will see the likeness of the bird, others will see the emotions of the artist, but for me the painting exists *in-between*.[67]

[66] I do not want to give the impression that subject matter is not important to my works. In fact the subject matter, whether the notion of self or the problems of Chinese immigrants, is always the main concern in my works, but I choose the subject/image, whether a face or a bird, based on how it can support my painterly surface. If I feel that images will not contribute to effective paintings, I rather abandon them.

[67] Why and how some viewers are attracted to subject matter while others focus on painterly surface were explored in Wollheim's theory of "seeing-in" in section 2.1.2.

3.3.2 *Portrait of Coetzee* (Oil on Canvas, 101cm x 76cm, 2010)

Fig.15, *Portrait of Coetzee*

Fig.16, *Portrait of Coetzee* (Detail)

Fig.17 *Crazy Face*, (Oil on Canvas, 150cm x 100cm, 2011)

Portrait of Coetzee (Fig.15-16) is based on a photograph downloaded from the internet. John Maxwell Coetzee is a well-respected South African novelist who won the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature. I used Google to search his name and then found some photographs of him.

As a Chinese immigrant to South Africa I also appreciate his work and his reflections on the complexities of this country and its past. When I choose certain images as source material I find that some photographs arrest my eyes in some particular way and hold something for me that I then feel could be captured well in painting. This photo was such an instance. I think other artists, such as Marlene Dumas, also choose photographic images according to their criterion or particular interest and this may have to do with the artist's particular concerns or preoccupations at the time.

My admiration of the tradition of Western oil portrait painting compelled me to create an oil painting in this tradition, much like Rembrandt or Lucian Freud have done. But I have never succeeded in painting *a Chinese face* in this manner. I tried to paint a portrait titled *Crazy Face* (Fig.17) in this regard but still feel that I failed. In attempting to paint this portrait (*Portrait of Coetzee*) I thought that it might be a case of Western people's faces that are appropriate to the tradition of Western oil portrait painting whereas Chinese faces demand their own particular way of painting portraits. In my own view as a Chinese, the photograph of J M Coetzee already looks like an oil painting, but I have never found an image of a Chinese face that appears to me in this way. This is perhaps because Chinese people generally do not express their emotions intensely, rather they are more reserved in displaying their passions. As Rowley comments: "The moods of Chinese figures are neither gay nor sad, neither frivolous nor stern; they observe a mean. They may not know happiness which is the reward of struggle but they are full of a most satisfying contentment" (Rowley, 1947: 17).

The portrait of Coetzee is rendered in a style reminiscent of naturalistic Western portrait painting. A single light source strongly illuminates the portrait from the top left, leaving two-thirds of the painting in gloom. I included a bird in the top register as a metaphor implying his thoughts “flying” from his mind.

I am still quite happy with this portrait because I don’t feel compelled to paint a Chinese portrait in the way that Rembrandt or Lucian Freud have painted their sitters. The interesting thing I found is that not only does the manner of painting that the artist employed *rebuilt* the subject, but also the particular features of the subject may determine the way in which the painting will be produced.[68] For example, I often use a planar approach to portraying the features of a *Chinese face* rather than chiaroscuro to build the third dimension of the face, for the *Chinese face* has a more flat appearance to me than Western peoples’ faces. Thus, I use my own particular method in painting portraits of Chinese individuals that I practiced in the following portrait paintings.

[68] This is an interesting topic that could be extended but lies beyond scope of this study.

3.3.3 We are in South Africa I-III (Oil on Canvas, 76cm x 101cm x 3, 2010)

Fig.18, *We are in South Africa I,* (as exhibited on the *Process This*, Michaelis Galleries, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2011)

Fig.19, *We are in South Africa II,* (as exhibited on the *Process This*, Michaelis Galleries, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2011)

Fig.20, *We are in South Africa III*

We are in South Africa I-III (Fig.18-20): These are paintings of three Chinese couples who live in South Africa. The first is of my friend Benny and his wife, the second is of myself and Sarah Lee and the third is of a South Africa-born Chinese, Mr. Zhao and his wife. These three paintings are based on photographs.

I chose the title *We are in South Africa* to relate the paintings to issues concerning the Chinese diaspora and exile experiences. Sometimes a title may not immediately reflect the intention of an artist and it may even mislead the viewer in assuming an intention on behalf of an artist. Dumas' paintings often have intriguing titles such as *Evil Is Banal* for a portrait of herself and *Genetiese Heimwee* (genetic homesickness) for her friend's portrait.[69]

In these three paintings of mine there is no other element besides the title that refers to Chinese immigrants in South Africa. If I had given them a different title, for example *Couples I-III,* could we still read them in relation to Chinese exile experiences? In choosing the title *We are in South Africa* it is therefore my intention to link it to the subject matter of the Chinese diaspora life. Titles are an important element in the interpreting of painting or artworks in contemporary art practice and often function as a clue to the deeper subject matter of the painting or the concerns of the artist at the time.

The colour I employed in these paintings is of a conservative range and tenderly applied rather than dramatic in its use as in my *Portrait of Coetzee*. The couple's faces appear a bit blurred rather than distinctly defined. I intentionally ignored some of the detail in the facial features to avoid the portraits from becoming overworked and lifeless. In this sense the portraits look more like they might be emanating from one's memory. I painted all of them from photographs which in themselves function as recordings of

[69] For further examination of these two paintings and their titles see section 2.2.2.

memories of certain situations.

There are no particular stories attached to these three paintings. Sometimes I just want to paint, to paint myself and my friends, to paint their faces and to paint them as partners in relationships. They are intimate portraits and represent a form of documentation of relationships.[70]

[70] The notion of the "intimate," for Marlene Dumas, refers not only to relationships between people but also to questions of painting. She describes painting as something that "is about the skin of a surface" and says that "the scale and space of a portrait […] is personal and intimate" (Bedford, 2008: 33).

3.3.4 Born in South Africa (Oil on Canvas, 76cm x 101cm, 2010)

Fig.21, *Born in South Africa*

Born in South Africa (Fig.21): This is a painting of a Chinese baby born in South Africa. Quite a few Chinese babies are born in South Africa every year. The baby is crying – “the first signs of life in the newborn” (Jacobson, 1964: 9). Every baby cries when it is born into this world. The baby is struggling. The new life is a struggle. The pigments, the colour, the brush strokes all contribute in conveying something about this struggle. The paint was daubed on the surface of the canvas giving the painting the appearance of being dirty, soiled. The child is not in a hospital, not at home. The blue background looks like the sea and the baby looks exposed and vulnerable. The white sheet that the child lies on looks like a boat or a flying carpet. Whether it is a boat or flying carpet, it brings him to a new place. This place we call South Africa.

3.3.5 ID-Photos: Wanted (Oil on Canvas, 76cm x 101cm, 2010)

Fig.22, *ID-Photos: Wanted*

ID-Photos: Wanted (Fig.22): Wanted people may be dangerous. Can we identify an underlying danger in someone's face? Can we identify wanted people from the masses according to ID photographs issued? There is no intention to refer in this painting to any political issues. I just wanted to capture the facial features of different people and to put them together to emphasize the differences between them. Using a grid format these portraits may also remind one of police file mug-shots, i.e. a classification or grouping of wanted criminals. Their faces reflect a hardness and stare glaringly back at the viewer. My handling of the paint in this group of portraits is bold and decisive, capturing facial detail and hair in quick strokes.

3.3.6 Mr. Chen in Chinese Old Age Home, Johannesburg (Oil on Canvas, 101cm x 76cm, 2010)

Fig.23, *Mr. Chen in Chinese Old Age Home, Johannesburg*

Mr. Chen in Chinese Aged Home, Johannesburg (Fig.23): An aged man sits in the old age home. It is an old age home for Chinese who were born in South Africa. They may never have been to China – the country their fathers or grandfathers came from.[71] They were born here and they will most likely die here. What are they thinking when they are getting old and staying in this special old age home, the only old age home for South African Chinese in Johannesburg? Do they still think they are Chinese? They cannot speak mandarin Chinese but they can still speak Cantonese (one of the Chinese local languages). Do they miss their original country? Do they want to visit it? Are they happy to see the new Chinese immigrants coming to South Africa? Could Mr. Chen ever have been a handsome man? What weathered his face so much? Is it time and his experiences? His personal history? His immediate social environment? To me his face is an indexical sign of the history of Chinese immigrants in South Africa, i.e. I painted his face as if to paint the history of Chinese immigration to South Africa. Here I am not only painting a portrait but also a history. Perhaps we cannot gather much from a face but the face is a sign affected by both the external and internal world. Compared to the previous work, *Wanted*, this work reflects pathos in depicting an old and weary looking man. I depicted him from various viewpoints in describing his features and the loose handling of paint captures some of the marks of time on his face. His eyes do not stare back at us as the eyes of the wanted do, they look fallen and tired.

[71] In discussing problems around exile in cultural studies, Edward Said says that there is a kind of "unhealable rift forced […] between the self and its true home" (Mercer, 2008: 8). Where is Mr. Chen's true home? Is it China or South Africa?

3.3.7 Market Steet, (Oil on Canvas, 101cm x 76cm, 2010)

Fig.24, *Market Street*

Market Street (Fig.24): I am so familiar with this crossroad which I have passed hundreds of times. The sign with a white arrow against a red background points to a specific building in Johannesburg – the Department of Home Affairs. Many illegal immigrants have been arrested here, including some Chinese illegal immigrants. I came here many times to help them with translation in communicating with immigrant officers, for most of them cannot speak English. The three people depicted at the top of the painting are alleged illegal immigrants from China. They don't have any legal documents on them. Then, who are they? If a person has lost his/her ID book, does he lose his identity? One could be in trouble without any ID documents to hand which can verify who you are. The painting conveys a sense of helplessness in its depiction of the street scene with the stark sign of the pointing arrow. Being new in a foreign country where one does not understand the local language is a very alienating experience, especially when having to confront the bureaucracy of obtaining identity documents. The arrow is an understandable sign to all but there is a harshness about the way in which it silently directs people without further explanation. The painting thus speaks of a sense of displacement and anxiety both in subject matter and the style.

3.3.8 Specimen – Faces from East (Mixed Media, 36cm x 58cm x 36cm, 2010)

Fig.25, *Speciman – Faces from East*

Fig.26, *Speciman – Faces from East* (as exhibited on the Absa L'Atelier Competition, Johannesburg, 2011)

Fig.27, *Speciman – Faces from East* (as exhibited on the Absa L'Atelier Competition, Johannesburg, 2011)

Specimen – Faces from East (Fig.25-27) may be defined as a sculptural work, but in my view it is very much about painting – portrait painting. I painted 30 small portrait paintings, each of them 15cm x 10cm. I then put them in transparent containers and arranged these containers in neat rows inside a glass box. I thereby changed the way of displaying a portrait painting as it is conventionally viewed, i.e. as displayed on a wall. I also changed the way of looking at portrait painting – one has to stoop down to get close to the faces. However, I changed not only the way of displaying and seeing the portrait painting but also the way of displaying and seeing the face/the man/the person. Can you communicate with a man who is presented as a specimen in a bottle? Can you speak to a specimen? However, the portrait painting is not a specimen. The faces on the canvas still look alive. They are looking at you from the bottle. A specimen is a part, object or individual belonging to a group or a classification and thus typifies the nature of that particular group as an example. It thereby also carries associations of generalization and stereotyping. Specimen, in a medical sense, refers to a sample, for example blood, used in examination towards identifying an underlying condition or ailment. The portraits in glass containers clearly reference such associations.

3.3.9 The Murder of Si-Wen (Mixed Media, 58cm x 29cm x 12cm, 2011)

Fig.28, *The Murder of Si-Wen* (Front) (as exhibited on the *Process This*, Michaelis Galleries, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2011)

Fig.29, *The Murder of Si-Wen* (Back) (as exhibited on the *Process This*, Michaelis Galleries, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2011)

The Murder of Si-Wen (Fig.28-29): This work comprises 5 bottles with different materials separately sealed up in them. The collected materials in these bottles are linked to an account of a murder of a 23 years old Chinese woman named Si-Wen. The published article tells a horrible story of how this pretty, young Chinese girl was killed and chopped up. I collected pork ribs and vertebraes to stand in for the remains of Si-Wen. The ink portrait painting and the printed image represent the pretty smile of Si-Wen. The juxtaposition of the text, image and the physical bones may arouse the viewer's imagination in viewing the murder case from different perspectives. It may also raise questions about differences between the representation of text, image and physical material. We may want to ask some questions: where does Si-Wen exist? Does she exist in the story of the text, or in the photographic image, or in the portrait painting, or in her remains – two ribs and 9 vertebraes? Using the grid to compartmentalize the article on the traumatic event, the remains and the portrait of Si-Wen, I wanted to create a sealed unit similar to that of *Specimens* which would carry clinical and forensic associations. Such features have a distancing effect in cutting out the emotive dimensions from the trauma. I wanted to set up a contrast between this cold, investigative feature and the tragic and personal side of this person's life.

3.3.10 Non-subjected (Oil on Canvas, 150cm x 180cm, 2011)

Fig.30, *Non-subjected*

Non-subjected (Fig.30) is a large oil painting, 180cm x 150cm. This painting is somewhat unusual in relation to my other paintings both in its imagery and approach. We live in a media-saturated world surrounded by images in newspapers, magazines, on the internet and television. In Elliott's words, "the self becomes a mere spectator, watching the endless images of mass culture with a mixture of delight and disdain" (Elliott, 2001: 141). In this canvas I painted a black youth standing to the left of the canvas and a fighter plane tilted down towards the bottom. In the middle of the painting the dark shape of an eagle with outstretched wings appears to fly away. Ruins of a house or castle occupy the top right corner in the background of the painting. The topmost part of the composition is occupied by blue sky. The various images don't seem to add up or don't reveal an immediate connection amongst them but they are also not just randomly selected. The primary concern with this image was its shape and colour that needed to be suitable for the composition of the painting. Possible meanings that could arise from the image are also considered.

I chose to use the title of *Non-subjected* rather than "Untitled" to indicate that a title is withheld, as even "Untitled" is a title in itself. The problem in this work is not about allocating a title but rather about the subject. There is no immediate "subject" to this painting as such. It is not a portrait painting in any clear sense, not a painting about war, not a painting about a dream, not a painting about Africa, not a painting about exile, not a painting about man and animal. It is a painting constructed for the purpose of painting and executed for the selected images, but the images do not necessarily carry any specific meaning. It is a painting crowded with images that come from various sources.

The image of the boy is taken from a photograph I took when visiting Melmoth – a small town in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The fighter plane image comes from the internet when I was searching for an image of an eagle. When an image is

peeled from its original context, can it create another context? In this painting I declined to give a title. I chose to put images together that appealed to my desire to combine them in a painting. There is no story to the painting but the viewer may create his/her own story for the painting.[72]

I started the work by painting a local youth and then decided on what should come next. I may not always realize that I sometimes still consider myself as a visitor who is curious about the foreign country and its novelties, such as its local peoples and the landscape and animals. But at the same time I also consider myself as part of here. For example, I felt a sense of pride for J M Coetzee when I heard that he had won the Nobel Prize as a South African author and this was also an important reason for wanting to paint his portrait.

The ambivalences I feel as both an *outsider* and *insider* are thus reflected in a painting such as this. On the one hand I painted an impression of Africa, such as a figure of one of its local people, an eagle and a landscape – from an outsider's view; on the other hand I resist impressions of Africa as presented by a tourist agenda which serves mass consumption – from an insider's view. I included the fighter plane and the "castle" in the painting as a disruption to the picturesque elements in the painting and they may connect in some ways to its tribulated, colonized history. But I also resisted creating a so-called 'traumatic narrative" about Africa or South African history in the painting because I myself have not experienced such things in this country. I am only an immigrant who lives in this country but possess another country's history.

I painted a pure blue sky and a sparkling fighter plane rather than a grey scene

[72] I am very interested in Western historical paintings, like those done by Peter Paul Ruben's, but I do not attempt to make any *narrative* paintings in my work. One of reasons why I choose to focus on portraits is because portraiture is not immediately a narrative form of art. As Freeland notes:"[A]rt historians tend to draw a broad distinction between portraits and narrative pictures. The latter term is used to describe scenes with narrative content, deriving typically from biblical or ancient history or mythology. Narrative pictures are considered to fall into two broad categories, history paintings and genre paintings. Portraits are paradigms of non-narrative art" (Freeland, 2010: 166).

with a damaged battle plane in order to off-set any *peace-war* narrative to the painting. The title *Non-subjected* could also be read as a defiant or a resistant stance in the sense of “not allowing oneself to be subjected,” a position adopted not only by myself (the artist) but also by the boy in the painting who may be a substitute for the artist’s ambivalent situation.

3.3.11 Heads in Bottles (Mixed Media, 28cm x 15cm x 5, 2011)

Fig.31, *Heads in Bottles*

Fig.32, *Heads in Bottles*

Fig.33, *Heads in Bottles* (Detail)

Head in Bottles (Fig.31-33): is a follow-on work in the series of specimen works such as *Specimen: Faces from East*. I painted the portraits in this work more carefully and they look more vivid in relation to the former ones. I wanted the viewer to read the portrait as closely as possible to a real face and the round glass of the bottles adds a further dimension to the reading of the faces. The background and surroundings of the painting distinguish the portrait from the real face, also the stillness, flatness and croppedness. In fact, the frame of the painting, the display of the painting plays an important role in the definition of painting. I see such an alternative way of displaying as an explorative extension of the possibilities of portrait painting. Such a mode of display may allow both the face represented and the painting itself to be viewed as a specimen. This work thus could also be seen as a reflection of the portrait as having “become a dead genre in twentieth-century art” (Van Alphen 1997: 254), i.e. the portrait painting could still exist in some particular or un-conventional ways. Here it is seen as a “specimen” in a bottle.

3.3.12 ID-photos: Faces from East (Oil on Canvas, 150cm x 180cm, 2011)

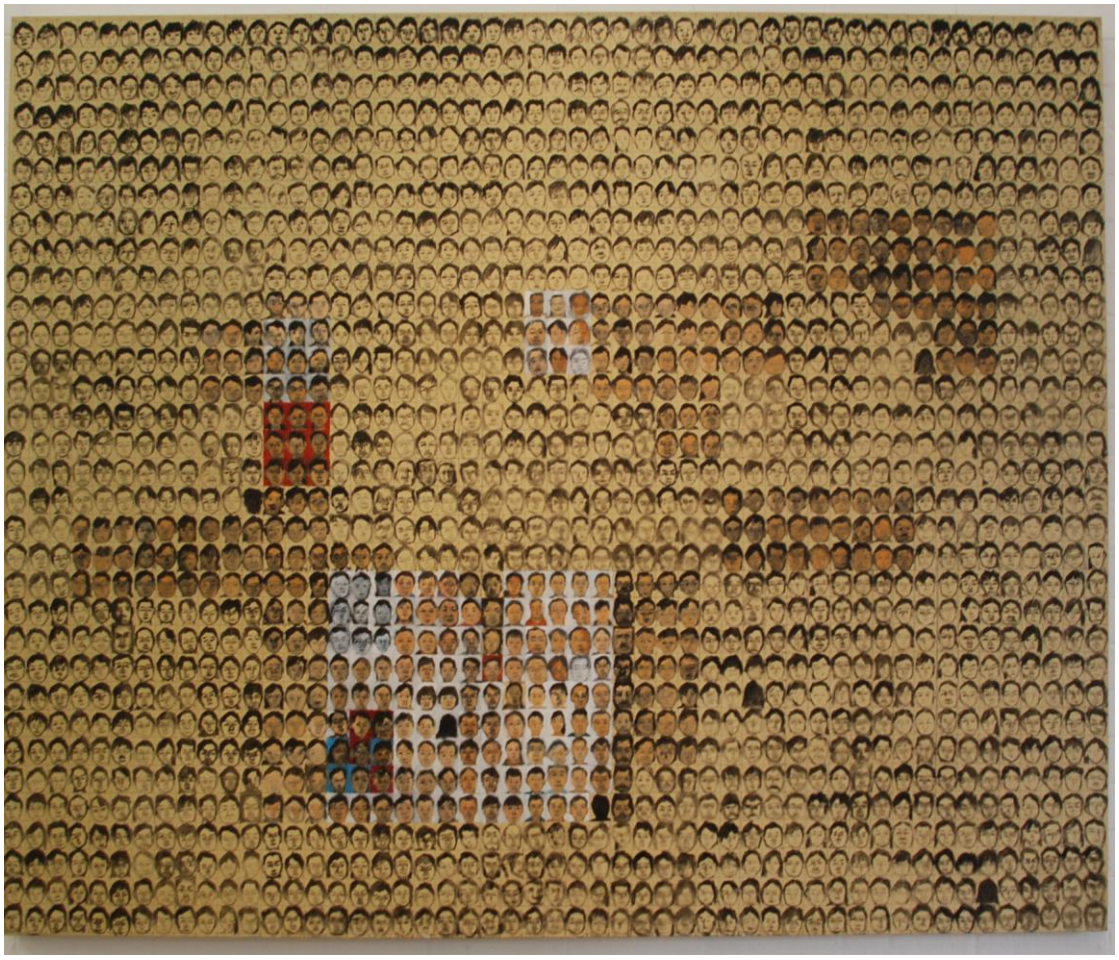

Fig.34, *ID-photos: Faces from East*

Fig.35, *ID-photos: Faces from East (Detail)*

Fig.36, *ID-photos: Faces from East (Detail)*

Fig.37, *ID-photos: Faces from East (Detail)*

ID-photos: Faces from East (Fig.34-37): This is the last work that I made towards the practical component for this research. Using a grid format, it is composed of around 1500 small portrait paintings in actual ID photograph size. When I worked as a journalist for the Chinese community in South Africa, I had the opportunity of collecting Chinese immigrants' ID photographs or copies of their passports. After a few years I found that I had collected hundreds of ID photo images, including those of myself, my family members and my friends. The faces in the photographs look so similar and yet so different at the same time and I wanted to use them together in one work. There are two main reasons for wanting to paint them together in their actual ID photo size. Firstly, I wanted to make it clear that I was painting ID images of people rather than portraits and I wanted the viewer to be aware of this in looking at this work. Secondly, I wanted to put together images of many different faces but all being from the same nation/country. I thereby displayed them as a community – a Chinese community in South Africa in which my friends, my family and I reside. Prof Colin Richards comments on the word *community* as follows: "[W]hat kind of 'imagined' community are we, or do we want to become? The 'we' in this impossible question is already an answer. That 'we' signals a desire for, if not the reality of, some unified identity around which we can rally, undivided" (Richards, 1997: 73). In this work I wanted to address this idea of community whilst also using the images that take on a classificatory role in the process of identity documentation. The collection of difference in sameness as seen in this painting also point to such an understanding of community.

In this painting I did not paint all faces to the same degree of completion. Some of them appear as completed portraits (Fig.35), some of them are in a half-way stage of completion (Fig.36), and others looks still like rough sketches (Fig.37). The completed ID portraits may allude to those Chinese immigrants who have already obtained their ID books in South Africa which means that they already completed the reconstruction of their identity – as South African Chinese, and

their faces therefore appear more distinctly. The half-completed ID portraits may refer to those who are in a half-way stage to getting their South African ID books. In the near future their new identity as South African Chinese will be completed. The roughly sketched drawings may suggest those who are still struggling to obtain their identity documents – they may still go ahead in becoming permanent residents of South Africa but they may also return back to China or go to other countries. They have come to South Africa as passengers who have never before visited or lived in this country, so their faces appear blurred.

Conclusion

Since 1998, when South Africa set up foreign relations with the People's Republic of China, large numbers of Chinese have ceaselessly migrated to South Africa. I am one of these immigrants who moved to South Africa in 1999. The interaction between Chinese immigrants and local people has had a significant impact on each other's communities, not only in terms of their commerce, economy and culture, but also on their mental/psychic and emotional states.

Instead of directly exploring the diaspora/exile experience of *New* Chinese immigrants[73] in South Africa, I chose to examine some my own *inner* state/life issues via the study of the notion of self and self-portraiture as well as the relationship between them, both in my theoretical and my practical research components. This is not unlike Dumas who explores political/racial or sexual/social issues "by starting from her personal history" (Bonacossa, 2006: 9). In fact, the Chinese community in South Africa is very important to my study, not only in that they offer me rich source material to be used towards the research, but because they are who I am. To see them is to see myself. In Alasdair MacIntyre's words: "[T]he story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity" (MacIntyre, 1981: 205; Bull, 1998: 96).

The investigation into the self and self-portraiture reveals that to make a self-portrait is to identify and constitute the artist's *self* which is inherently split and unascertainable rather than united or determinate. It is an impossible mission to find a complete vision of the self or to define an integrated

[73] In the Chinese community in South Africa we normally refer to those who migrated to South Africa after 1998 as New Chinese immigrants in order to distinguish them from the so-called "South African-born Chinese" (Park 2009: 3).

conception of the self. The self-portrait by the artist could be regarded as a journey or a way to the artist's inner world/life, but it cannot solve any inner problems/dilemmas of the artist. The only thing that self-portraiture can do may be to offer some traces/clues or signs/symbols of the artist's inner life/world which is in fact always fictitious and artificial. Such a questionable "inner world" is filled with uncertainty and ambiguity. There are no real/personal problems to be solved there. The only problem that can be addressed is how and to what extent such an elusive/intangible "inner world" affects one's emotion, spirit, mind, behaviour and appearance.[74] My approach to the self-portrait and other portrait paintings and works may only offer a trail, a clue or a sign via which the viewer could create their own journey to the artist's or the subject's "inner world." Rob Van Gerwen's notes on the portrait painter suggest that, "he must present the clues, not the mental life itself. […] Taking the treatment of the material as one's clue for artistic expression and understanding it as a natural expression of the artist, may seem a comprehensible enough next step to take in the case of painting […]" (Van Gerwen, 2001: 140). The search for one's self or the process of constituting one's self will continue alongside with his/her life until he/she dies, whether the self-portrait or the study of the self-portrait is completed or not.

The investigation into the relationship between subject matter and painterly surface via Peirce's theory of the *iconic* and *indexical* sign as well as Wollheim's *"seeing-in"* reveals that the conventional understanding of the painting as a medium serving the image could be reversed. Both in Dumas' art and my own, the image may exist for the painting or painterly expression, or at least the painterly surface plays as important a role as the subject matter. In fact, Dumas' particular or inimitable approach to painting can be said to reform

[74] I do not attempt to provide evidence of such interactional connections between one's appearance and one's "inner world" in this study. But as mentioned in Chapter Three, one's face could be regarded as an indexical sign, for it is directly affected by and is "in dynamical connection with" (Peirce 1940: 107) one's feelings/emotions or psychic state – the so-called *inner* life.

or re-create the subject, which in turn compels the viewer or critic to rethink the subject matter of her art. Such a reciprocal understanding of the relationship between the painting as surface and as image offers another important possibility, namely to understand painting as a performative practice rather than just a representational one.[75] In other words, the painting as a kind of sign with its indexical property could be described as a complex practice that engages with psychic and somatic matters of the artist.

If we regard the indexical sign in the painting as the "proof" of the artist's existence, we can also read all portrait paintings by the artist as his/her self-portraiture which is often regarded as an artist's signature, self-exploration, or a kind of channel to his/her inner life. In fact, as mentioned above, the painting itself could also be regarded as the artist's signature due to the fact that it fully attests to the artist's subjectivity and personality. Gen Doy says in this regard that "the ways in which artworks are made are often read as expressions and traces of the individual subjectivity of the maker" (Doy, 2005: 7).

However, it is important to emphasize that Peirce's theory of semiosis assumes that the inner reality or inner life can only be known via external facts, namely signs. Peirce notes: "[W]e have no power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts […] We have no power of thinking without signs" (Peirce, 1934: 158; Dunning, 1991: 332). Lacan agrees with Peirce when he insists: "I identify myself in Language" (Dunning, 1991: 332). So, it is not that one gains insight into the artist's inner life – just that one reads the signs used by the maker/the artist. Such signs may enlighten or obscure meaning/s which

[75] In Carolyn Wilde's words: "[P]ainting is an activity in which certain brute materials, such as the plastic clays, minerals, and oils, are transformed into a medium and when used as the media of art such different materials have their own distinctive resources for meaning and expression. The process of painting is a process of more or less inventive attention to ways in which painterly or pictorial content can be realized through methods and techniques of handling these materials which manipulate the qualities intrinsic to them" (Wilde, 2001: 121).

is in fact co-constructed by the artist and the viewer.

My approach to the investigation of Dumas' self-portrait paintings is strongly informed by my Chinese background. The ancient Chinese philosophers, especially Confucians, believe that an "inner reality" can only be sought "in a fusion of opposites" rather than "by pursuing each extreme to its end" (Rowley 1947: 4).[76] Such a world-view by ancient Chinese philosophers has had a very deep impact on Chinese art, which has also affected my art practice. As already pointed out in both my theoretical and practical components, the modes of Dumas' and my own paintings exist in an "in-between" position rather than being at the end of any extreme, whether that be realistic or abstract, representational or expressionistic.

The ambiguities, uncertainties or instabilities in Dumas' art and my own are not simply the result of the painterly surface. Rather, some inner dilemma of the artist instinctively impels him/her to choose a particular method/approach to painting, consciously or unconsciously, which in turn results or reflects in such a painted surface. As Schnabel remarks: "I've always said there's no personal language; only a personal selection of language" (Wood, 1993: 233).

However, such an understanding of Dumas' art does not necessarily mean that I have attempted to re-evaluate her art or that I have ascribed new values to her art. Rather, it is my Chinese background and present experience that compels me consciously or unconsciously to interpret her portrait paintings in a particular way or from a particular perspective.

[76] Different to the Western mind which "would set up antagonistic dualisms – matter-spirit, divine-human, ideal-natural, classic-romantic, traditional-progressive, and so forth", the Chinese takes "a mediate position" (Rowley 1947: 4). The Chinese prefers to avoid extremes "in contrast to the western quest for reality by pursuing each extreme to its end" (ibid).

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