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Allusions to the body: Jeremy Wafer's Oval Sculptures.

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Chapter 1

The *ovals*

Jeremy Wafer has produced several series of *ovals* over the past 9 years.

These artworks project as tactile and strongly coloured three-dimensional relief objects. They are serial, and presented in groups of three, six and eight, except for the single *Large White Oval* (2004) (Fig.4). They vary in size from 50cm in height to almost 2m. These deceivingly simple sculptural forms are rounded oval mounds, formally refined and symmetrical with various surface markings like cuts, holes, pockmarks, tears and scratches. These are geometrically organised, either symmetrically or asymmetrically. The relationship of motif to surface is classical, restrained and balanced. The series are made unique by subtle shiftings of surfaces, textures and edges. The surface articulation is sensual; a carefully textured, saturated 'skin' using intense, mostly monochromatic pigments in black, white and earthy reds, or applying no pigment at all, leaving the innate process material exposed. 'Relationships between motifs, (…), become a delightful play of black severity, red abundance and white delicacy.'[10]

The history of relief sculpture after Rodin's *Gates of Hell* is very limited – probably because of its narrative tradition. Wafer contributes strongly to the return of a great art form undeniably neglected.

At first glance, the *ovals* appear to be the same, but upon severe scrutiny and contemplation, which slowly reveal the minute subtleties and planned alterations, one is rewarded with a new world of considerable changes. One cannot help but think of aspects of order and geometry: a careful placing of distilled elements so as to erase the unnecessary and superfluous, perhaps to arrive at something essential and pure. All excess is stringently erased to achieve an almost classical purity. The forms are at the same time closed and inaccessible, like pods, eggs or bombs that could reveal, upon breaking open or detonation, an explosion of energy and life. This explosion remains of

[10] Frost, 2001, p.24

course in the imagination of the viewer, as the tangible state of the sculptures is the contained and closed form and not the exploded form. Yet besides being so portentous, they have an eternal, worn quality. The works are subtle, complex and powerful. Wafer's objects have a compelling presence, seeking out what he terms ‘fundamental forms’ and ‘non-unique objects’. Their scale is mostly domestic, which creates a sense of intimacy. They are exhibited in a neutral space –a silent, unobtrusive environment, scholarly (particularly a gallery, museum or collection), which may refer to a display of African art or masks, precious pieces with a history that is perhaps not obvious, displayed dramatically yet out of their original context. The lighting accentuates shadow, surface and texture artificially, and the effect is dramatically and silently theatrical.

Red Mounds: Scratched, Pocked and Imped **(1995)** (Fig. 1a-c)

Jeremy Wafer started producing the *Mounds: Scratched, Pocked and Imped* in 1995. This set of large oval mounds protruding from the wall as reliefs are now part of the South African National Galleries’ collection in Cape Town. They are about 1200mm high, 500mm wide and 100mm deep. Their forms seem to be more organic and mound-like, slightly less precise that the next series of ovals.

These ‘mounds’ are produced out of Plaster-of-Paris, and universally pigmented in a warm, earthy red colour. This red is achieved through the use of a red earth pigment, which Jeremy Wafer bought from a Traditional African Medicine (Muti) shop in Durban. This is a pigment commonly used among the Zulu, and its possible role in influencing the meaning or interpretation of these sculptures will be discussed at a later stage.

The *Mounds: Scratched, Pocked and Imped* are marked with regular, symmetrical and repetitive motifs, of so-called African inspiration. ‘Pocked’ refers to a grid of perfectly rounded bumps stretched across the form. ‘Imped’ refers to a series of circular indentations, reverse nodules or voids, slightly smaller in circumference than the pocks or bumps, set in a regular grid

pattern. Because they are smaller, there are several more. (The word ‘imped’ comes from the old English, and means ‘young shoot’. It is perhaps not quite appropriate, as it neither a common English word nor did Wafer use it to describe the particular work.) ‘Scratched’ refers to regular thin lines or striations following the length of the sculpture vertically, reminding one perhaps of the raked stones of a Zen pebbled garden. There is a meditative quality in the process of making the regular bumps, indentations and scratches, and also a meditative quality in contemplating them.

Texture here can be used as a symbolic adjective - worn, used, worthy, earthy and functional. Their large scale, texture and earthy red colour - transformational red earth or *ibomvu* - may refer to a grave mound on the earth, or the spherical shell of a shield. This integrates the utopian logic with forms that begin to allude to body and identity which is conceived as inclusive and reshaped, even as it is somewhat idealized.

These *ovals* apparently reflect a vision of a united South Africa. They were made shortly after the 1994 elections that heralded a new era of freedom for the country. Wafer mentions how he felt a utopian sense of integration at the time of South Africa’s political transition after 1994. These three ovals are seen to be symbols of that transition: an apparent visual combination of cultures to form tactile works that speak of unification in a land that was marked by its separations. They combine an essential African-ness (red pigments and African motifs), with the European notions of traditional sculpture. They are decorative, powerful and rock-like. They are shields, referring to protection, but a body ‘mask’ rather than a facial mask: used for safety, secrecy, and hiding, be it in war or in celebration.

The seriality, regularity and play of light and shade may indirectly be an allusion to ritual or initiation ceremony: Moleleki Frank Ledimo, in his essay *Rites of Passage: Refiguring initiation*[11] draws a parallel between the traditional rite of passage between boyhood to manhood and the transition

[11] Ledimo as cited in Bedford, 2004, p.130

from apartheid to democracy in South Africa, specifically referring to Wafer's *Red Mounds*.

***African Forms i-viii* (1996)** (Fig. 2a-h)

In 1996, Jeremy Wafer served as a visiting lecturer at Cheltenham and Gloucester College in the U.K. During this time he produced the second series of *ovals*.

These consist of a series of eight ovals, flatter and more rounded than the next series and also protruding from the wall as reliefs. They are about 500mm high, and are displayed in a horizontal and level configuration. Wafer sculpted the original oval form in Plaster-of-Paris and produced a mould. Plaster casts were then reproduced and treated to a variety of finishes. Various series of these sculptures exist, with different surface finishes, including a red earth (Fig.2h) and a yellow-pigmented series. I shall be discussing the series that was purchased by the Smithsonian Institute, which is now at the National Museum of African Art in London. The surfaces of these *ovals* have all been treated with a dark sculptor's wax, except for *African Form iii* (Fig. 2c).

The dark wax-covered pieces at the National Museum of African Art are polished and gleam softly, yet they are more forbidding, aggressive and impenetrable, whereas the red ones have a matt texture and are more organic and absorbent in appearance. They appear to be passive, but on scrutiny they become loaded messages.

These forms are different to the previous series in that they are less shield-like and more pod-like, the top and bottom curves slightly more rounded, the three-dimensionality of the oval is also more pronounced. The order in which I discuss them is not necessarily the order that they will be or are displayed.

African Form i (Fig. 2a) is covered in symmetrical even-sized dome-shaped nodules that are ordered in a regular, offset grid pattern. The cluster of nodules makes the oval appear busy.

African Form ii (Fig. 2b) is covered in shapes that look like inverted cuts or scars, sharp and shield-like and ordered in an offset grid pattern. Once again, the form's surface is covered in wax and pigment.

African Form iii (Fig. 2c) is a white plaster oval sparsely covered in reddish teardrop shapes, which are similar in size, but are not placed in a regular or geometrical configuration/pattern. This piece differs from the others in the series: it is lighter and its surface is less symmetrical. In this sense this sculpture differs from the others within the series in its lightness and being less symmetrical in surface treatment. The plaster has been polished to an off-white, marble-like texture, thus the earthy red teardrops stand in stark contrast to the white background. This oval seems more delicate, referring perhaps less to an African context than to the European Catholic sculptures of the Madonna with a red teardrop on her white face, or of Jesus with red drops of blood on his forehead from the thorny crown.

African Form iv (Fig. 2d) is tightly packed with pyramid-shaped nodules, similar to those found on Zulu pots. They form an aggressive, protective shell with a bristling energy in a decorative grid arrangement. The surface treatment is yet again with a dark wax and pigment.

African Form v (Fig. 2e) has sparse symmetrical incisions in an offset grid pattern. Together with the dark wax patina, this sculpture has an introverted, smooth and silent quality about it.

African Form vi (Fig. 2f) is similar to *Scratched* from the first series of ovals, yet the use of the dark wax on the surface evokes a more ominous ambience like bars on a prison cell, and less like the patterned gravel of a Zen garden, without losing its contemplative effect. Lead strips were pasted length-wise onto the oval form, creating symmetrical grooves.

African Form vii (Fig. 2g) has regular small holes arranged in a grid structure. It appears mechanical, akin to a rounded pin-board. The use of the dark wax is smoother in this work than on *African Form i* and *African Form iv.*

African Form viii (Fig. 2h) is marked by one large central, circular penetrating hole or void, like a navel, gourd, pothole or pot hole. The dark wax surface is less shiny, and the hole becomes a darkly negative and mysterious void.

This series seems heavier, darker and more impenetrable than the other *oval* series. The dark wax surfaces and the red clay create an intrinsic texture, a coagulating brew that is tactile and skin-like. Wafer varied the surface colour to include the polarities of black and white and its references to life and death, good and evil, seen and unseen. He extends the symbolic range of symmetrical markings to meditations on the blood of Christ (small dark red drops on a smooth white surface) or the suffering of Christ (in the depictions of stigmata or incisions on a rough black surface, like Matthias Gruenewald's *Isenheimer Altar*) in *African Form iii* (Fig. 2c). The works become Africanised icons, and can be compared to Kasimir Malevich's use of the black square, a Byzantine icon. Interestingly, Malevich wrote that he had deliberately relinquished the objective representation of his surroundings in order to reach the summit of the true 'unmasked' art.[12]

African sculpture, be it masks, shields or pots, has certainly influenced these pieces. The surface markings on the sculptures are a direct reference to surface markings on Zulu pottery. At that time Jeremy Wafer had a very strong political sense of where South Africa was historically: a kind of utopian frame or state of mind, a positive outflow of energy. In England at a time of positive political changes in South Africa, the sculptures became a kind of essentialisation and distillation of what was enfolding in the homeland. The *Africa 95* exhibition in London also inspired the African elements in these works.

[12] Gregory, 1986, p.2576

***Red Ovals* (second series, 1998)**

In his 1998 exhibition at the Goodman Gallery, the third series of ovals, comprising pocked, pitted and bumped ovoid sculptures, was displayed against a stark black background. This series was polished with red floor polish, but later casts are also textured with the red clay earth and pigments, including a set of three in a yellow ochre colour. These pieces are more elongated and slightly flatter than those of the previous series.

Red Oval 1 (Fig. 3a) is covered in symmetrical round nodules arranged in an offset grid pattern, similar to *African Form i*. *Red Oval 2* (Fig. 3b) has symmetrical shield-like inverted cuts, similar but less dense than in *African Form ii* (Fig. 2b), also in an offset grid arrangement. *Red Oval 3* (Fig. 3c) is covered in small densely regular round nodules, whereas *Red Oval 4* (Fig. 3d) has large swollen nodules, and closely arranged in an offset grid. Two large round holes or navels bottom left and top right penetrate *Red Oval 5* (Fig. 3e). *Red Oval 6* (Fig. 3f) has seven asymmetrical, large, swollen nodules, like boils or pockmarks. This asymmetry evokes a symptom of sickness manifested through the skin. The symmetrical, precise and accurate markings of the other pieces create a sense of order and ritual.

There is tension in juxtaposing the void vs. the bump, swelling vs. emptiness. The forms seem to have a multiplicity and interdependency.

The red surface treatment is *Ibomvu*, a traditional Zulu medicine, used by the Zulu women as sunscreen on their faces. This series has also been executed in colours other than red: Wafer has finished a series of four in an ochre colour, which he also purchased at a Muti shop in Durban.

These forms metaphorically stand for a series of substitutions: ritual marking and scarification, pots, vessels, pregnant bodies, fecundity, an archetypal anima. The horizontal display, size and drama of the *ovals*, emphasizing the idea of fiction, play, substitution, identity and ritual, also recall African masks.

***Large White Oval* (2004)** (Fig.4)

In this work, the oval form has been significantly enlarged to almost 2 x 1.2 x 1.2m. It is the only *oval* that is presented horizontally and grounded as a large and tumescent egg-shaped mound. The sculpture was originally produced in Plaster-of-Paris, and a mould was subsequently taken. It was then cast in a white Polymer, which was left in its raw untreated state and polished with clear floor polish.

The *Large White Oval* appears as a contained form and has a sense of bursting wholeness. It has a protruding nodule on the one side, and a hollow or navel on the other, the one the inversion of the other. These round shapes are about 20cm in diameter. The nodule and navel elevate the work from being a 'dinosaur egg', to signifying something else, something significant yet mysterious.

Like most of Wafer's work, it invites tactility: to be touched and stroked, as if being alive, some large animal like a whale. It thus induces the notion to physically interact with it, to straddle it and hold on by the nodule, using the navel as a footrest.

Elements

Process

'The process starts with making decisions about size and proportion, measuring and calculation curves, marking these out on templates, shaping the original form which will generate the series, making a mould, casting…rubbing and then applying surfaces.'[13]

The notion of process forms an intrinsic aspect of Wafer's working method, but it is based more within the conceptualising of the work rather than in the production of 'ephemeral objects'. Wafer appears to use materials unpretentiously. But as straightforward and uncomplicated they seem, the

[13] Wafer as cited in Perryer, 2005.

sculptures are very carefully planned and conceptualised. It is rather an understated use of material, in which the material fuses with the form; the form with the colour and the content is intrinsic to all three. There is a complete synthesis of material, process, form, surface and content.
The sculptures are produced using the additive sculptural method, then moulded and cast. This is a repetitive process, not only when making the originals, but also in casting multiple pieces and making each one unique by altering the surface and texture by either adding or subtracting. He often leaves the material in it's raw, natural or true state. The result of this is that the surface texture and colour appear integrated with the whole, instead of superficially applied.

The oval

In Wafer's early work *The Power Station Series* (1987), one can see his interest in the oval form evolving. But whereas in this series the oval remains two-dimensional, in the sculptural *oval* series, the forms protrude as three-dimensional objects.

The ovoid pieces display a formal interest in ellipses, which is about 'an intrapolation of the form itself and the system that produced it'[14] - Wafer relates how fascinated he was to discover that medieval craftsmen drew a variety of differently shaped ovals with the aid of a notched rod, whose markings served as a template for predictable theme and variation. These rods are an analogy for open, dynamic yet utterly predictable systems, and it is precisely the predictability of Wafer's grammar that makes his very nuanced works legible. The shape of the oval is thus regulated by measure and generated by systems.

The oval is an egg-shaped form, also described as ovoid, ovate, oviform, elliptical, and in botany: obovate. This form could be described as being archetypal, reminiscent of things universal, like the human belly, or of the oval face, a mask, a pupae or an egg. Wafer chose an anonymous form that

[14] Frost, 2001, p.18

denotes nothing specific, but is highly suggestive to any viewer from any background. The oval may also imply gestation – a slowly growing living organism – like an embryo. It thus alludes symbolically to fecundity and growth. It can also be seen as a cameo, precious and with a distilled amount of visual information. But it could also simply allude to the elliptical shape seen in perspective and thus suggesting depth.

The scale of the ovals corresponds to the size of the human belly: it is of 'human size'. The large white oval perhaps is 'nature (or god) size'. This seemingly swollen and large sculpture could also allude to a burial mound for the whole body, whereas the smaller ovals are part of the body. David Bunn likens Wafer's rounded ovals to tumuli, an old Latin word meaning a heap or mound, also used in classical writings in the secondary sense of a grave.[15]

Surface markings

There is a contrast between the pebble-like smoothness of the sculptures' rounded surfaces and their markings - the added nodules, holes, incisions, textures and colour. The tension thus created suggests meaning: an organic shape, yet more. The patterning derives from Wafer's need to measure, mark out and stabilise, the more illusive/allusive feelings associated with the material. The surface markings become pointers that give clues to the viewer about the possibilities and potential of interpretation. The viewer is perhaps presented with a series of questions: are these altered surfaces man-made or machine-made, do they refer to nature or to the human body or to some hybrid, or are they cultural symbols? These questions do not need to be answered, but they call for contemplation. The rhythmic and repetitive nature of the surface markings is both meditative and deliberate, giving the forms a purpose beyond the obvious. They become universal and archetypal. Their frequent illegibility and closed-ness becomes part of the 'secrecy' of these works.

[15] Bunn, 2002, p.1

Jeremy Wafer grew up on a farm in Kwa-Zulu Natal, and the influence of Zulu culture is pervasive in these works, especially when comparing their form and surface patterning to decorated Zulu pots (Fig. 5).

Nodules

Wafer's *ovals* present an earthiness and immediacy similar to that of Zulu pottery. The surfaces are altered/covered by nodules or raised pellets, rounded or elliptical bosses, or sometimes by the simplified less labour intensive version of these motifs consisting of squares etched into the surface in low relief (Fig. 1a, 2a, 2d, 2i, 3a, 3c, 3d). On several of the ovals, these nodules refer directly to Zulu pottery and the beer pot's so-called *amasumpa* markings (Fig. 6).

Decorations on the pots were usually made either by scratching or scraping relief patterns onto the surface with a sharp instrument, or by adding either groups of clay pellets or additional decorated panels of clay. The add-on decorations usually included defined groups or patterns of small pellets of clay that resembled warts or protruding mammillae, *amasumpa*. These appendages were applied either in squares, circles or continuous bands across the upper parts of the pots, with each type of decoration having a descriptive name. There has been considerable discussion relating to the origins and significance of this form of decoration, but the *amasumpa* decorations have been referred to as the royal or traditional pattern originating from the Valley of Kings or 'Emakhosini' region of Zululand.

Amasumpa is also the branding of cattle, and was first seen on Shaka's royal herd in the 19th century, a custom later adopted by the rich bourgeois of Africa. Cattle were the economic basis of North Nguni societies and provided a spiritual link with the ancestors. The cattle kraal was sacred, and cattle sacrifices, meat and milk are all connected to living with the spirits. Consequently a*masumpa* patterns underscore the cattle symbolism. This motif appears on headrests, meat plates (*izingqoko*), milk pails (*amatunga*), clay pots like beer jars (*izinkhamba*) and even a few figurative carvings dating back to the 19th and 20th centuries. It was also used to decorate many of the

large brass armbands that were reserved for the king as well as important office holders and some women attached to the *isigodlo*, the enclosure for women at royal homesteads. This persisted until the destruction of the Zulu kingdom by the British in 1879.

The motif may also have served to identify artefacts produced for a number of groups related to the Zulu royal house. In practice this pattern probably functioned above all as a symbol of royal patronage and power.

The *amasumpa* motif may even symbolise hut roofs of a traditional kraal. Yet whatever the symbolism, they provide grip, remind one of the great kings and presumably, together with the effects of the beer, allow one to enjoy a feeling of well-being resulting from being associated with the wealth, spirits and tradition of the nation. The patterns obviously gave additional grip to the pots but were also considered to be purely decorative as the beer pot was a social utensil, and aesthetics were important to both man and his ancestors.

At first, all Zulu beer fermentation jars seem stylistically similar, but in fact they differ by maker and by user. Meat plates (Fig. 7) and milk pails (Fig. 8) with *amasumpa* designs were commissioned by the heads of homesteads. This was because they were used for foods obtained from cattle and it is generally believed that the patrilinial ancestors, who are closely associated with the heads of homesteads, communicate with the living through these animals. In contrast, headrests with *amasumpa* designs formed part of a woman's dowry. The *amasumpa* or 'herd of cattle' motif is also commonly found on aprons worn by pregnant Zulu women. The markings on the Zulu beer pot thus draw on the procreative powers associated with women to express desire or gratitude for a plentiful yield of a good beer. The Zulu regard the quality and quantity of beer as an indicator of status and wealth, and beer pots are essential in weddings, funerals, birth ceremonies, ancestral rituals and offerings.

In Zulu pottery, this surface patterning is simply not superficial. So-called ornamentation is not an addition or an afterthought, but an indivisible

component of completion and fulfilment. Perhaps if one conceptualises the surface as skin one could convey the essentialness of these marks. Skin is indispensable to life, the central mediator between our internal nature and the external natural environment. Treatments to each vessel's skin are integral to these forms. Even when symbolically unfathomable, these skins are reminiscent of body markings, woodcarvings, textiles, braided ropes, and animate creatures.

There is a Zulu proverb saying *Itunga selidumela emasumpeni.* It is an expression of hope shortly to be realized, 'what we have long hoped for we shall soon get'. The *amasumpa* are the small knobs that form the handles or grip of the milk bucket. The sound made by the milking is different when it reaches the *amasumpa* from what it is at the bottom of the bucket when milking has begun. The *itunga* (bucket) is then nearly full.

From this Zulu proverb, it is perhaps interesting to deduce that the hope expressed could be similar to the utopian vision for an undivided South Africa, a positive unification of cultures that Wafer referred to when producing the second series of ovals in 1996. Wafer may be quoting, mediating or indeed even be appropriating a Zulu vocabulary, but he does so in a spirit of integration which is part of his vision and which was also germane to the new consciousness in South Africa.

Besides referring to the *amasumpa* marks on Zulu pottery, the nodules could also refer to scarification: healed wounds that are purposefully inflicted to change the surface (ritual, beauty, medicinal), mechanical, regular, forming a three-dimensional pattern. (Fig. 9)

Small pieces of dung are inserted under the skin so as to cause an infection and a scar. The careful and geometric arrangements of these wounds on bodies then produces a patterned and scarified skin, which in turn reflects certain social hierarchies and belief systems in Zulu culture. A girl's scarification marks her transitions into womanhood as the scarification designs serve as visual markers and the realization of her reproductive nature. A boy's scarification would symbolise his transition to manhood. The

mimicry of scarification marks on pottery thus emphasises a transition from a temporal to a spiritual realm.

Cuts

The incised forms in Wafer's sculpture *African Form v* (Fig. 2e) are like stylised bloodless wounds. They are simplified, regular and shield-like, surgical incisions, penetrating the mound's surface yet not revealing what is on the inside. Their scale, similar to the *amasumpa* nodules, appears to be made by human hand. They thus invoke the hand making and shaping the regular incisions with something like a sharp knife, slicing through the skin or surface of the form first from the one side and then the other to leave a precise obovate indentation.

On *African Form ii* (Fig. 2b) and *Red Oval 2* (Fig. 3b) these become inverted cuts: shield-like ovoid protrusions, with sharp ends and an acute raised sharp ridge. They could refer to the process of scarification or scarified patterns and the scars left by a purposeful and regular incision into the skin to leave a raised scar. Like scarification on the human skin and body, it is patterned and regular and evokes the pain and the ritual that had to be experienced by the initiate to be able to wear the emblematic scarifications proudly and symbolically.

Hollows/navels/voids

The idea of the void has been something Wafer has worked on previously, as in the prints *Austerville* (1993). In *Austerville*, the empty, dark interiors of the stark buildings have a sense of unease and social deprivation. In *The Power Station Series* (1987), the voids become an analogy for breathing out and in.

In the *ovals*, the hollow is used repetitively and is shallow like fingerprints in *Red Oval 'Imped'* (1995) (Fig.1b), repetitively and deeply, almost mechanically in *African Form vii* (1996) (Fig. g), sparsely in *Red Oval 5* (1998) (Fig. 3e) or as a single impression in *African Form viii* (1995) (Fig.2 h) and *Large White Oval* (2004) (Fig. 4).

The void alludes to emptiness, and emptiness to silence, the opposite of being whole, alive and filled with sound. The void is waiting to be filled, a description of negative space. It may be an entrance or an exit or both. It becomes a meaningful void, where emptiness and silence is the content. The black hole is the ineffable, ultimately unknowable secret. The viewer experiences the urge to probe the hole, to feel what is inside and what the inside feels like.

The hole can also refer to the human 'holes', the spaces on the body where the inside meets the outside: eye sockets, nostrils, mouth, ears, navel, anus, urethra and vagina. These are also the sites of intense physical experiences: sight, sound, taste, feeling and even more so the sites of the basics of human life: breathing, eating, procreating and expelling waste. Most humans have a fascination from early age with these orifices into the body.

'The navel of the earth is a world-wide symbol of centering for cities and civilizations.'[16] The naval is considered the symbolic centre of the universe – the *omphalos*. Holed stones or 'Men-an-tol' are associated with healing and may be the remnants of "portholed" [17] entrances to tombs, thereby associated with the birth passage and rebirth rites.

Tears

Red teardrop forms only appear on the white *African Form iii* (1996) (Fig. 2c), a work Wafer produced whilst in England which stands in stark contrast to the rest of the *African Forms* series.

Tears are naturally pre-empted by the symbolism of washing, yet they not only purify, cleanse and bathe the eyes, but also usually signify extreme emotion. Tears are like rivers of moving water. They are not related to the bodily functions of digestion or procreation. They are a phenomenon, a bodily

[16] Lippard, 1983, p.57
[17] Lippard, 1983, p.188

enigma that is 'both the mark of physical passion, of the prelogical flow of corporeal fluid, and a monument to God's silence…' [18]

Wafer's use of red teardrop shapes in *African Form iii* probably do not refer to tears of joy. Red drops are carefully placed on a stark white oval form, so that their apparent symbolism cannot be denied. Of all the ovals, this one has the most direct reference to the Western European sculptural tradition and especially in interpreting a Christian and Catholic iconography and Russian orthodoxy and Byzantium. While travelling in Europe, Wafer, being Catholic himself, was exposed to the figurines of Mother Mary, with tears on her face, the visual manifestation of Christ's martyrdom, of the pain and suffering associated with his mutilated, bleeding body. The blood seems to seep from the oval form as stigmata, symbols of extreme religious devotion and heightened emotion. Yet at the same time the *African Form iii* is ambiguously calm and whole.

Vertical incisions/lines/striations

Red Oval 'Scratched' (1995) (Fig. 1c), and *African Form vi* (1996) (Fig. 2f), both have regular thin lines or striations following the length of the sculpture vertically, reminiscent of the raked stones of a Zen pebbled garden. The *Red Oval 'Scratched'* may also refer to ploughed red earth. Yet at the same time as having a repetitive and thus meditative quality, they seem to be more closed or inaccessible than any of the other *ovals*, as the striations become like the bars of a prison cell, especially in *African Form vi*.

Use of colour, scale and repetition

'Although I have worked in a number of media, my basic sensibility is sculptural. Because of this I tend to use colour and material together. Colour is not a separated quality but is bound up with the specifics of the material--- the earthly red of the balls of ibomvu clay sold by traditional healers, the blue

[18] Gallop, 1988, p.14

of stamp pad ink, the yellow of the piles of sulphur spilt on Durban's Maydon Wharf, the milky green of the Star Café windows...' Jeremy Wafer, 2002[19]

Wafer is guided and controlled by an absolute synthesis between form and colour, and colour is a symbolic reference that is not merely retinal. A wonderful attribute of colour is that it is completely non-verbal. It has a direct route to the symbolic, in some ways to the proto - the before - words, the before thought, the thing in your gut, the visceral. Wafer uses a colour triad of white, black and red. The significance of this choice will be discussed in chapter 4.
Colour is often deeply impregnated into the malleable substance, unlike surface painting, yet at the same time the red colour is also applied like a barrier cream onto the skin like the Zulu women who use the red *ibomvu* clay on their faces as protection from the sun.

The smoothed yet subtly marked surfaces of the *ovals*, especially the black series from 1996, once again refer to Zulu pots. In the pots, the high-gloss black finish was deemed necessary to ensure spiritual approval and protection. Larger pots were rougher and red clay was used. The *ovals* thus become a reflection on an ancient practice and ritual.

Michael Fried quotes Robert Morris: 'the awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one's body size, and the object. Space between the subject and the object is implied in such a comparison.'[20] The scale of the *ovals* is critical in its relationship with/to the human body: it reflects the oval of the mask or the mound of the belly. The sculptures have the intimacy of a wall, of a room, a gallery, and an exhibition. They are of a tangible scale, yet, because of their symmetry and regularity have something forbidding about them: closed and quiet to the viewer, their enigma can only be comprehended through cerebral involvement, which is beyond the merely physical. The *Large White Oval* (Fig. 4) is the only one of the series that has an exterior, public scale, in contrast to the interior, intimate scale of the others.

[19] http://www.nmafa.si.edu/exhibits/insights/wafer-artist.html
[20] Fried, 1967, p.153

Even the surface articulations correlate in size with the human body's orifices like eyes, noses, lips, navels, etc. and scarification marks on the skin, both intimate and public.

Jeremy Wafer's deliberate use of repetition originates from many places. As he says, it is a theme-and-variation way of working, an interest in rhythmic unfolding and a common motif sourced from Zulu pottery decoration and the Minimalist tradition. Donald Judd spoke about rejecting 'composition' in favour of 'one thing after the other'[21], a non-hierarchic kind of ordering of elements. Repetition also comes of the casting process in which Wafer uses an original mould to produce series of similar or dissimilar casts, also a similar theme-and-variation method of working.

The grid, both as a formal hanging or framing device and as a loaded art historical concept, is a common motif that recurs in his works. The seriality of the works places the objects within a relationship where they appear identical at first, but on closer inspection reveal differences in surface and form with the use of texture and alternative materials. Even though the group of pieces seems to be a 'whole', one feels that the units could be systematically multiplied ad infinitum. The sense of wholeness or completeness of the group is perhaps brought about by the likeness between the units, yet the slight variation in surface treatment of each creates subtle tensions in their interrelationship. The works mostly appear in series of 3, 6 and 8. This establishes a sense of rhythm within an affective, ordered system. The modular display positions the viewer in a contemplative and comparative mode. The viewer's gaze changes from one to the other to identify subtle differences as they 'speak' to each other: minute differences yet providing endless possibilities. Like thumbprints, no two works are exactly alike. A trajectory of viewing the sculptures moves from a distracted awareness of each piece as one presence among many, to an absorbed contemplation of each one individually in partial isolation its their surroundings. The *ovals* become like a mantra, with a rhythmic musicality that, as in the purpose of the mantra, aids one's meditative concentration. Yvonne Rainer said of her

[21] Wafer, interview with the artist, 25 July 2005

choreography: ‘If something is complex, repetition gives people more time to take it in.’[22] They become timeless repeated symbols inducing mental contemplation.

The *ovals* certainly do not slip into being merely repetitive decorative wall pieces, as their meaning is not directly accessible. The viewer is presented with relatively ‘easy’ forms, visually attractive ovals with repetitive patterning. Yet these forms challenge the viewer as their direct accessibility is negated. Repetition becomes a set of symptoms: as the viewer begins to experience the sculptures physically and cerebrally, they may allude to bodies with bumps, swellings, scars, bites or reactions of the skin. Because these are regular, they are deliberate. The skin is thus subjected to this regular patterning and is a testament to a form of transition or change taking place. There is an anomaly between this regularity, and pleasing symmetry, and their allusion to being symptomatic, of hiding something and growth, change and metamorphosis occurring beneath their surface skin.

The active, or formal, element of repetition can be seen as acknowledgement of the need for ritual. Repetition is necessary to ritual, and reflects on the tradition of rite within the passage of life. From an anthropological point of view, ritual recognises the potency of disorder. Disorder is dangerous and powerful. Cultures try to tame it or use it as a creative ground from which order can re-emerge through ritual. Ritual expects to find powers and truths which cannot be reached by a conscious effort. In binding individual elements of the social fabric together within a whole, ritual serves to create a sense of community among its participants, reinforcing those ‘communitarian values’ that bind people together. In an Ndembu ritual context, almost every article used, every gesture employed, every song or prayer, every unit of space and time, by convention stands for something other than itself.

According to Mary Douglas, ‘disorder spoils pattern: it also provides the materials of pattern. Order implies restriction; made from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a

[22] Lippard, 1983, p.160

limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that is has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.'[23]

Repetition was a major component of the work of those artists in the late 1960's who were adapting a 'deadpan' Minimalist style to an often sensually obsessive content. Eva Hesse said she used repetition in her sculpture because it recalled 'the absurdity of life': 'If something is absurd, it's much more exaggerated, more absurd if it's repeated…. Repetition does enlarge or increase or exaggerate an idea or purpose or statement.'[24]

Jeremy Wafer's use of repetition becomes personalised, as opposed to how the Minimalists, especially Donald Judd, use repetition to purvey a sense of anonymity. Wafer's sculptures are universal yet unique objects, which appear to be all-identical but, like eggs, are not.

[23] Douglas, 1966, p.94
[24] Eva Hesse as cited in Harrison, 1992, p. 903