

https://dspace.org/

The relationship between repetition and originality : selected paintings of Robert Hodgins

Cohen, Robyn Yael

1990

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/22849

Cohen, Yael (1990) The relationship between repetition and originality : selected paintings of Robert Hodgins, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/22849>

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REPETITION AND ORIGINALITY: SELECTED PAINTINGS OF ROBERT HODGINS

Robyn Yael Cohen

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, for the Degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts.

Johannesburg 1990

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being 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 degree or examination in any other university.

_____

Robyn Yael Cohen

_____ day of _____, 1990.

Abstract

This dissertation investigates a particular use of repetition (and 'quotation') in the artistic method of Robert Hodgins, and the pedagogical significance of this method for the author.

Chapter 1 constitutes a loosely 'phenomenological' exploration of various aspects of 'repetition', as employed by Hodgins. Analogous uses of repetition by other South African artists are passingly introduced.

Chapter 2 discusses a selection of works, submitted by the author as a component of this degree, in which artistic preoccupations parallel to those discussed apropos Hodgins, and reflective of his seminal influence, are outlined.

It is argued that repetition and quotation, as employed by Hodgins (and the author), are not to be understood as merely secondary forms of mediation, in which the artist's own (existing vocabulary of) images, or motifs by other artists, are passively repeated or appropriated.

Instead 'repetition' in the expanded sense proposed here, occurs when an artist self-consciously compounds, in a web-like fashion, multiple cross references - visual, literary, autobiographical, and historical, to such a degree that no causally 'primary' or 'secondary' status can be afforded to any of his/her sources. 'Repetition' becomes 'originality'.

I would like to acknowledge my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Cyril Coetzee, for his valuable advice and criticism regarding this dissertation; and Penelope Siopis for her supervision of the practical component of this degree.

My sincere thanks are extended to members of the Fine Art and History of Art Departments, in particular Professor Elizabeth Rankin for her encouragement and support, and to Robert Hodgins as a teacher, a critic and as a friend.

The financial assistance rendered to me by the Human Sciences Research Council, and the University of the Witwatersrand (in the form of a Senior Bursary) is also gratefully acknowledged.

Finally I would like to thank Greg, Hessie and Brenda for their belief in me, and for all their encouragement.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REPETITION AND ORIGINALITY: SELECTED PAINTINGS OF ROBERT HODGINS

Contents

I List of illustrating plates i

II Preface

A glossary and note on the use of typographical symbols and annotations used in the text 1

III Introduction

1. A short note on my approach to the topic 5
2. The position of the writer in relation to the web 10
3. Notes to the Introduction 15

IV Chapter 1: Robert Hodgins

1. Hodgins speaks: a starting point 18
2. Hodgins talks about theory 21
3. Hodgins: self conscious mediator of history.. 33
4. Hodgins: a web of contradictions 47
5. Repetition and Originality: the repeated image becomes the original 65
6. Golden Lads and Girls: a reincarnation in 1990 87
7. Notes to Chapter 1 94

V Chapter 2: Robyn Cohen

1. Tell me another story: the same but different 105

2. Origins and sources: exploring my own backyard 112

3. Backtracking for a moment: prams, pinks and play objects 124

4. Collecting and gathering: new images into my backyard 129

5. Metamorphosis: repetitions and transformations 134

6. The repeated image becomes my own 162

7. Notes to Chapter 2 167

VI Conclusions

1. Repetitions and origins 173

2. Notes to the Conclusion 184

VII Appendix A: A biography of Robert Hodgins

1. Robert Hodgins: a biographical sketch 185

2. Notes to the biographical sketch 191

VIII Appendix B: Robert Hodgins on Robert Hodgins

1. Interviewing Hodgins: pleasures and pitfalls 192

2. Abbreviations used 194

3. Robyn Cohen interviews Robert Hodgins:-

a. New Works, May 1986 196

b. Recent Works, November 1987..... 223

c. New Work, April 1990 243

4. Transcribed audio visual lecture:-

Two-Way Traffic, April 1987 278

5. Notes to Appendix B 290

IX Selected Bibliography

Robert Hodgins

Interviews, articles, critiques, essays 293

Books, selected exhibition catalogues 294

Robyn Cohen

Books, critiques, exhibition catalogues, textual sources 297

General Theory and Ideas

Books 297

Journals 300

/I List of illustrating plates ...

List of illustrating plates

* Dimensions are given in centimetres and indicate sizes of unframed works. Horizontal measurements are given before vertical measurements.

CHAPTER 1: ROBERT HODGINS

PLATES PAGE 1

1. Mindless Youth
[c.1990, acrylic and oil on canvas, approx. 1.53 x 1.07]
Collection: Mrs Finger.

2. An Ill-assorted Couple
[1976-86, Images C4, acrylic and oil on canvas and masonite, 110.3 x 87.5]
Collection: Mr R. Van Wyk.

PLATES PAGE 2

3. News out of Weimar
[1985, oil and acrylic on canvas, 127 x 122]
Collection: UNISA.

4. La Lamballe
[1986-87, oil on board, 29 x 127]
Collection: The Artist.

PLATES PAGE 3

5. History may say alas ...
[1985-86, Images C30, acrylic and oil on reinforced blanket, oil on canvas, 155 x 33 (top and bottom panels), 112.5 x 23 (centre panel)]
Collection: The Market Gallery.

PLATES PAGE 4

6. The Lineaments of Gratified Desire
[1985, Images C14, acrylic and oil on canvas, 116 x 76]
Collection: Private Collection in America.

7. Police File
[1986-87, oil on canvas, 75 x 54]
Collection: The Artist.

PLATES PAGE 5

8. Parade
[1984, Images A59, acrylic and oil on canvas. Three canvassee. Left and right canvas: 200 x 80. Centre canvas: 90 x 60]
Collection: S.A. National Gallery.

9. Night Panics
[1987, acrylic and oil on canvas, 231.5 X 201]
Collection: University of the Witwatersrand.

PLATES PAGE

10. Portrait of the Poet Max Herrmann-Neisse
[1962-86, Images C8, oil on masonite, 44.5 x 61.1]
Collection: The Artist.

PLATES PAGE 7

11. A Beast Slouches
[1986, Images C32, oil on canvas, 170 x 117.5]
Collection: University of Witwatersrand.

12. W. Blake's, Nebuchadnezzar
[1795, 45 X 61.5]
Collection: The Tate Gallery, London,

PLATES PAGE 8

13. The Cell
[1985, oil on board, 27 x 42]
Collection: Mr N. Dundas.

14. Man alone in an empty room
[c.1990, painted, glazed, ceramic plate, diameter: approx. 40cm]
Collection: Mrs Finger.

PLATES PAGE 9

15. Five Rude Gestures
[1985, Images C22, acrylic, oil and enamel on canvas 234.6 x 136.3]
Collection: Averil and John Maskew.

PLATES PAGE 10

16. Married Love
[1990, oil on canvas, dimensions unavailable]
Collection: The Artist.

17. Family, Radio & T.V.
[1990, oil on canvas, dimensions unavailable]
Collection: SASOL.

PLATES PAGE 11

18. A Female Nude
[1990, oil on masonite, dimensions unavailable]
Collection: Mrs M. Slack.

19. A Naked Man
[1990, oil on masonite, dimensions unavailable]
Collection: Mrs M. Slack.

PLATES PAGE 12

20. The Nude Warrior
[1958, Images A10, acrylic and oil on masonite, 46 x 84]
Collection: S.A. National Gallery, Cape Town.

21. Dame aux Camelias
[1958, Images A9, oil on masonite, 60.2 x 76]
Collection: P. and M. van Eiljon.

PLATES PAGE 13

22. Golden Lads & Girls
[1985, Images C24, acrylic and oil on canvas, 152 x 75.2]
Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery.

PLATES PAGE 14

23. Ubu's Adolescence
[1983-86, oil and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150]
Collection: Mr J. Cohen.

24. Desire
Central panel of The Triple Gates of Hell
[1985-86, Images C31, acrylic and oil on canvas, dimensions of all three panels - 147.2 x 197.8]
Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery.

PLATES PAGE 15

25. Ubu and the Black Politician
[Large version, 1983, Images B17, tempera on canvas, 122 x 91]
Collection: Tatham Gallery, Pietermaritzburg.

26. Oh Oh Oh She Cried with a Cracked Voice,
[1983-84, Images C10, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 214].
Collection: The Artist.

PLATES PAGE 16

27. Durban Apollo
[c.1970, Images A28, oil on masonite, 61.5 x 90.5]
Collection: The Artist.

28. Beach Scene
[c.1990, mixed media on paper, dimensions unavailable]
Collection: The Artist.

PLATES PAGE 17

29. Assassin from Tennessee
[1990, oil on canvas, dimensions unavailable]
Collection: Mrs M. Slack.

CHAPTER 2: ROBYN COHEN

* More than sixty works were submitted for this degree. The following are merely a selection of these:

PLATES PAGE 18

30. 1984: Robyn working on Robyn's World.
[1984, oil and acrylic on canvas, 70 x 160]
Collection: The Artist.

31. 1988: Robyn's studio at the "Wedge", Wits or "Still life with Diet Coke and porcelain doll heads".

PLATES PAGE 19

32. Radio Days
[1988, oil on canvas, 152 x 90.5]
Collection: The Artist.

PLATES PAGE 20

33. Encore for the Pink Lady
[1986-89, oil and mixed media (charcoal, crayon, pastel) on canvas, 59.5 x 89.5]
Collection: The Artist.

34. Forgotten charms in the Magical Garden
[1988, charcoal, pencil, pen and ink on paper, 99 x 70]
Collection: Ms I. Glazer.

PLATES PAGE 21

35. Robyn with red pram
1966: age about three years old.

36. The Day the Pram went into the Veld
[1985, oil on canvas, 299.3 x 152.6]
Collection: Mr G. Cook.

PLATES PAGE 22

37. Photographic source material
Documentation of pram and other objects.

PLATES PAGE 23

38. Still crazy, climbing walls
[1986-88, oil and mixed media (charcoal, pencil, crayon, pastel) on canvas, 118 x 88]
Collection: Mrs J. Hodges.

39. Photographic source material
Documentation of a polystyrene insect specimen tray, used as source material.

PLATES PAGE 24

40. Scattered Dreams
[1988, oil on canvas, 75.5 x 100]
Collection: Ms B. Maraney.

41. Ring a Ring a Rosies
A pocket full of Posies
Hush! Hush!
We all fall down
[1988, oil on canvas, [illegible].5 x 95]
Collection: Mr and Mrs M. Fine.

PLATES PAGE 25

42. Gregor the Pink Gogga
[1986-88, oil on canvas, 75.1 x 59.5]
Collection: The Artist.

43. Photographic source material
Documentation of some insect specimens, used as source material.

PLATES PAGE 26

44. Landscape with Pink Cork Tree
[1986-88, oil on canvas, 120 x 88.5]
Collection: Mrs D. Nayman (Australia).

45. One Sunday under the Cork Tree
[1987-88, oil on canvas, 49 x 59]
Collection: Mr S. Bales.

PLATES PAGE 27

46. Photographic source material.
Documentation of cork tree in Robyn's mothers garden, together with other textual sources.

47. Hide and Seek in the Junk-Yard
[1988, mixed media (pen and ink, watercolour, oil) on canvas, 120 x 59]
Collection: Mr D. Myerson (London).

PLATES PAGE 28

48. Itsy Bitsy Spider had a great fall
[1986-88, oil and mixed media (charcoal drawn into oil gel) on canvas, 48.8 x 100.5]
Collection: First National Bank.

PLATES PAGE 29

49. A Gogga in the Kitchen
[1988, oil on canvas, 35.3 x 56]
Collection: The Artist.

PLATES PAGE 30

50. Gregor the Actor
[1986-88, oil on canvas, 45 x 53.3]
Collection: Mrs J. Hodes.

PLATES PAGE 31

51. Gregor Lounging under Piero's Tent
[1986-88, oil on canvas, 45 x 53.3]
Collection: Mrs J. Hodes.

52. Constantine's Dream from Arezzo Basilica di S. Francesco by Piero Della Francesca.
[c. 1452-1459, fresco, 329 x 190]
Source material for Gregor Lounging under Piero's Tent [fig. 51]. Photo: Scala Francesco. Printed in Italy.

PLATES PAGE 32

53. Gregor at the Funfair
[1986-88, oil and mixed media on canvas, 50.5 x 59.5]
Collection: Private Collection.

54. Gregor in his Living Room
[1986-88, oil and mixed media on canvas, 50.5 x 59.5]
Collection: Private Collection.

PLATES PAGE 33

55. Documentation of Jelutong wood objects
(carved by Robyn) and used as source material.

PLATES PAGE 34

56. A Bittere Geleete (A Bitter Joke)
[1986-87, oil and mixed media (oil pastels, charcoal drawn into oil painting gel, 286 x 120) on canvas]
Collection: Mrs H. Cohen.

PLATES PAGE 35

57. After the Party
[1987-88, charcoal, conte, pencil on Fabriano paper, 69.5 x 49.5]
Collection: Mr and Mrs S. Zinn.

58. Mr Toby's Laughing Garden
[1987-88, charcoal, conte, pencil, pen and ink on Fabriano paper, 99 x 69.5]
Collection: First National Bank.

PLATES PAGE 36

59. Thursday Night at the Sculpture Studio
[1985, oil on canvas, 121.5 x 121.5]
Collection: the Artist.

60. Scenes from a Romantic Comedy
[1986-88, oil and mixed media (oil pastel and crayon drawn into oil paint gels on canvas, 200.5 x 130]
Collection: The Artist.

/III Introduction ...

II Preface

A glossary and note on the use of typographical symbols and annotations used in the text

The use of brackets

A substantial amount of material has been generated from three interviews with Robert Hodgins and from a transcribed audio visual lecture given jointly by Hodgins and Ivor Powell in 1987 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. The transcripts of these interviews and the audio visual lecture are appended in Appendix B.

In the preface to Appendix B, I have explained the use of brackets in the transcribed interviews, which by necessity have had to be used differently from the way in which they have been used in the text of the dissertation.

Within the text of this dissertation brief references to the interviews, are included in square brackets [ ].

In a few instances, I have had no option but to use square brackets around particular words in the text and interviews where the tense has been changed, so as to ensure that the quote or sentence makes sense.

More lengthy discussion and references which would interrupt the flow of text are contained in the notes to each chapter. Where possible I have provided specific page references to passages in the interviews. However, it is recommended that the reader reads these passages in the context of the interview as a whole.

Interview references

Interview references are to the transcripts of the three interviews I conducted with Hodgins and the transcribed audio visual lecture, which comprise Appendix B.

The references are included in the text as follows:

[_New Works_, 1986 followed by the page number]
[_Recent Works_, 1987 followed by the page number]
[_New Work_, 1990 followed by the page number]
[_Two-Way Traffic_, 1987 followed by the page number]

References to the Images catalogue and exhibition

Images refers to the catalogue accompanying Hodgins' 1986-1987 retrospective exhibition, of the same name. _Images_, 1986 refers to the exhibition.

There are three essays in the catalogue. Rankin, _Images_, denotes Elizabeth Rankin's "Biographical notes: based on reminiscences of the artist", which appears in

the catalogue, Powell, Images and Arnold, Images refers to the essays authored by Ivor Powell and Marion Arnold in the catalogue. Unfortunately this work is unpaginated and I am unable to furnish page numbers when sourcing from this document.

The number following Images, for example Images B12, or Images C4, indicates the catalogue number of a particular painting.

Execution dates of paintings are appended in brackets only on the first occasion that a painting is cited in each section. If there is an Images catalogue number it will appear after the execution date (again at the first mention of the work in each chapter subsection or interview).

Images catalogue numbers are indicated in the interviews, and next to the illustration plates. For more detailed information, the reader is referred to the list of plates.

The bibliography gives references to where paintings not included in the Images catalogue may be found.

Symbols

The symbol '#', is used to indicate that a work under discussion is illustrated in a plate in this dissertation.

Double quotes " " are used to indicate a quotation from Hodgins, or any other source. Single ' ' quotes are used to indicate problematic phraseology or the circumspect use of a word.

/III Introduction ...

III Introduction

1. A short note on my approach to the topic

Our relationships to paintings are often mysterious *1* and very rarely straight-forward. We engage with certain works and not with others. Yet it is often difficult to verbally articulate why one responds to some works, why some images engage attention, and others do not. *2*

In this dissertation an attempt is made, from a painter's point of view, to deal with selected phenomena of art and art making. It is an approach which takes its cue wherever possible from the material rather than from pre-conceived categories and theories *3*.

My method is based on the recognition that a whole vocabulary plus unexpected levels and threads of meaning only suggest themselves in the process of experiencing and describing the material and its evidence.

With this 'phenomenological' approach, structure is allowed to assert and reveal itself through the descriptive process, allowing simultaneous immersion within and detachment from the unfolding phenomena *4*.

Although it is recognized that analysis must at a given moment necessarily arrest and isolate elements from the flux and, thus, by implication, falsify the whole, an attempt is made here to retain cognizance that life is

organic for both artist and spectator and that the processes involved in making and observing art are not fixed, but in constant motion *5*. Experientially everything is in flux, breaking up and reconstituting in different ways - a process that informs the spectator's relationship with the painting no less than it does artistic activity itself.

Metaphorically, one may view the relationships between artist, viewer and critic and paintings/images as a web-like construction composed of many threads criss-crossing and intersecting one another. Significantly, the Latin word for web is **textum** *6*. My project is to unravel and disentangle constituent threads of text in given paintings, and in the intertextuality of paintings in the greater context of experiential relationships in which they are embedded. *7*

As will become apparent, 'telling the story' of given paintings by Hodgins and myself becomes a critical factor in this process *8*. My position in this discourse is organic. I am sometimes in the position of artist, sometimes in the position of critic/viewer, *9* and often in many positions concurrently. My approach must be understood as "a way of proceeding" *10* rather than the application of a theoretical model. I see art making and art criticism as intertwining parts. It as a kind of journey *11* in which anything may happen, in

which unexpected, unplanned material may or may not be discovered which may alter one's direction, so that a fresh path may be embarked on. If there is a target, it is a moving one, ensuring that a destination can never wholly be predetermined.

My approach entails an acknowledgement that the repetition and transformation of images, in Hodgins' artistic oeuvre, does not follow the easily discernible pattern of a linear progression.

The connective tissue of Hodgins' output over time is an organic, rather than a mechanistic or systematic sequence, and hence subject to those 'epistemic breaks' and unpredictable 'paradigm leaps' that must appropriately be seen as a form of 'metamorphic recursion', rather than as a simple 'serial recurrence'. The importance which I give to 'series', or to the 'sequences' of recurrence in the use of images, must be understood against this richer background of connotations.

Hodgins' 'metamorphic recursion' - his extensive use of repeated images is usually not based on the viewer's knowledge of those sources - or the origins of those images - or so he insists *12*. He says that he has often arrived at quotation of images unintentionally *13* in the process of image making. That he often chooses to keep something which has happened

unintentionally is besides the point. He does not expect the viewer to be cognisant with those original sources. The origins of his paintings are important to him because they indicate his processes of transformation of making those paintings but the origins are less important than the transformed image and how it may be ultimately perceived by the viewer.

Umberto Eco, discussing quotation (in film) in his article "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics" *14* notes that the viewer, in order to " ... enjoy the allusion, must know the original topoi " *15*.

Hodgins' work does not rely on the viewer's recognition of the sources. Undoubtedly a knowledge of those sources may enrich one's experience of his images, but one's knowledge of an original source is not the key to engagement with a particular image. Often, however, knowledge of the original source can provide clues to Hodgins' process.

Ultimately, by exhuming the sources and origins of Hodgins' art making process, one gains an added dimension to his art.

Originality in the narrow sense is not then a concern in this paper. In the narrow sense originality has

implications of a starting point, alternatively it is that element of a work which sets it apart from all other artistic works, something 'fresh' and 'unusual', not 'copied' or 'new'. There is sense that originality is considered as the pre-requisite for artistic value. In this view anything which is the repeat of the 'original' is considered less worthy, less valuable.

In this work I am not interested in debating the moral quotients of the original versus the repeated work. I am not concerned with originality and repetition as words, as literary measures of artistic value and merit. Rather I am concerned with repetition and originality as processes of Hoggins' and my own art making.

Originality will not be considered as the pre-requisite for artistic value but as an integral part of the process of repetition. Clearly one cannot have repetition without some form of base, source of knowledge, images and ideas. I am interested in originality in this paper from the point of view of describing the links between the sources (origins) or the base of ideas from which an artist draws, and the repeated image, and how the viewer may or may not require a knowledge of those origins to engage the final image.

An 'original' source may be a new or fresh idea (not used by the artist before) or it may be an 'old' image which becomes fresh and original through its painterly transformation. I am concerned with image making and possible processes of image transfusion and transformation - the germination and genesis of a work of art. Repetition and originality encapsulate for me both the source and growth phases of image making. In line with post modern aesthetics, Eco points out it is:

> the 'infinity' of the process that gives a new sense to the device of variation. What must be enjoyed - suggests the post-modern aesthetics - is the fact that a series of possible variations is potentially infinite. *15*

With Hodgins' work and my own there is a sense that the organic nature of the processes (of making the art) suggests numerous possibilities in the critical analysis of the works.

2. The position of the writer in relation to the web

My own relationship with Hodgins also has to be acknowledged.

To start with, I have only known Hodgins for eight years. However, he has been painting for more than thirty five years. There is so much about Hodgins and

his work that I will never know, and to that extent, this dissertation is a snapshot of the man and his work. I have not undertaken to comprehensively survey and document his work. I am more interested in unravelling some threads of his work, and his use of repetition and originality as they present now, than with tracing his use of repetition over the past thirty five years.

On the other hand, Hodgins has been my teacher and mentor, and my relationship to Hodgins is not without emotional content. I admire him and his work intensely. I may lack the critical distance which another person may have, but at the same time I have had privileged information and access to his work, and what he says about it.

My position also differs for instance, from that of art historians. I am an artist. What is more I am an artist whose most seminal influence has been Hodgins. My artistic position, influenced as it is by Hodgins, informs my selection of material to a great extent.

My own artistic interest, as well as my relationship to Hodgins (with the corresponding wealth of available information) were important factors in my selection of his paintings which I have chosen to discuss in this dissertation. My choice was not because these paintings were necessarily 'better', more canonical or more mature

(or sanctioned by other critics), but overwhelmingly because they are more engaging and interesting from my point of view as a painter.

My approach in this paper is therefore one of a painter, interested primarily in painting, in particular, the painting of a former teacher. Implicit in this examination is also how the paintings and teachings of Robert Hodgins have impacted on my own painting. My criticism of Hodgins' work does not only go in one direction: the critic in relation to the artist. Rather, there is more of an osmotic flow of ideas. What I write about Hodgins is as much about Hodgins' work as it is about my own relationship to painting. In my role as critic of Hodgins' work I am also constantly re-evaluating and questioning aspects of my own work.

There existed also a symbiotic relationship between Hodgins and myself while he was teaching me. Sometimes I would get ideas from him and he from me. In New Works, 1987 Hodgins makes reference to a painting technique which we were working on together *17*. Often he would come into the studio and ask me how I had arrived at a certain painting technique, and I would try to show him. I, in turn, would ask him how he attained certain finishes, such as glazing and he would do his best to share his discoveries with me. The flow of ideas went in two directions, as it must, I think, when

two painters come together who are interested in the sharing and exchanging of ideas.

As a painter, I like Hodgins, do not work under the auspices of any particular theoretical persuasion: there is no agenda as such. A linear theoretical method of enquiry proved as ineffectual as an investigative tool in relation to my own painting as it did to Hodgins'.

When I began this project, I intended to present my ideas in two separate sections. The first dealing with theory and Robert Hodgins, and the second dealing with some of my paintings submitted for this degree. There was a clear distinction between 'theoretical investigation' and 'practical investigation' (through my own work). However, I increasingly found that my ideas of theory and practice, fused into one continuum.

The result is that the chapter on my own work will show the degree to which I have come to understand aspects of my own working process as quite similar to Hodgins'.

In the light of the above it shall become clear that in the process of unravelling threads in the web of Hodgins' work, I simultaneously reveal much about my own methods as a painter. The concept of theory and practice are no longer distinguishable. An example of this in the in the appended interviews, where I ask what

Hodgins himself calls "painter's questions" [New Work, 1990, p. 273]. To me, my line of questioning in these interviews shows my concerns at exploring both practical and theoretical issues in Hodgins' paintings and in my own.

Exploring the web must in my view involve a theoretical and practical investigation. It requires an understanding of the process of how the construction of the web (consciously and subconsciously) took place. Sources have to be understood, both practical and theoretical. This involves a knowledge in turn of practical issues, such as medium, working surfaces, and the theoretical grounding which might be deliberately or unintentionally brought to bear on that process.

/3. Notes to the Introduction ...

3. Notes to the Introduction

1. Being **interested** in and fascinated by mystery is different from being merely mystified and incapable of making any sense of that mystery.

David Sylvester puts it very nicely when he remarks that it seems to him that as Bacon gets older, he "seems more perplexed by the mystery of art", and yet "clearer in his definition of himself, [as an artist]". See: preface (unpaginated) to Interviews with Francis Bacon, Thames and Hudson, 1980.

2. See Marion Milner: On not being able to paint (Heinmann, 1950). In this book Milner, through her own attempts at painting, tries to find for herself the logic behind the impenetrable mystery that she initially perceives behind painting. She starts off her study with a bias that logic and mystery are irreconcilable poles which somehow need to be justified and explained. In an effort to demystify her own response to art she eventually arrives at an understanding of logic and mystery as different and necessary facets of art. Art is is imbued with that which we understand and that which mystifies us.

However, at the same time, she attempts to come to an understanding of the mysterious parts of painting as she sees it. She argues that by evading and ignoring the inaccessible (i.e. the mysterious) we run the risk of limiting our appreciation and understanding of image making.

3. Arguably everything is pre-conceived. As the Popperian Ernst Gombrich has argued in Art and Illusion: to think is to project provisional schemas. Perception must be understood not so much as a container ('bucket') which passively receives a content from out of itself, but is rather (as Karl Popper suggests) a searchlight, cast onto experience. Research is a continuous process of exchange between shifting schemas (hypotheses) and the 'corrective' influence of new data. See: "Introduction: psychology and the riddle of style", Art and Illusion, National Gallery of Art, 1960, pp. 28-29.

4. Artistic phenomena may only be experienced and described, never fully explained in the sense that to explain something, is to arrive at finality.

5. If artistic phenomena are in constant motion, (which is the view I hold) then it follows that our understanding of such phenomena should be subject to constant modification.

This I call my 'what if?' problem: what if I did not know one piece of evidence, would I react differently to a particular image? What if I were not a privileged white but a black South African without the same opportunities, how would I react to art around me?

This kind of enquiry can often open up exciting paths of investigation but may also have a paralyzing effect. It is easy to get totally involved in such questions, so that eventually nothing can be committed to paper. Everything dissolves into endless permutations of 'what ifs'. A choice and decision has to be made to start somewhere - even if it is with the tiniest fragment.

6. In his essay "The Image of Proust", Walter Benjamin compares Proust's texts to complex webs and draws the reader's attention to the etymology of the word web. Paintings are as much complex texts as are written texts. See: Illuminations, edited by Hannah Arendt, Jonathan Cape, 1970, p. 204.

7. Paintings (and painting!) that engages me most is analogous to a web, to a tapestry. Both are made up of threads, fibres, material being spun or woven. In a painting sense, material, (which could include media as well as images, sources and ideas) is processed to constitute the very fabric or text of a painting.

8. By the expression 'telling the story' I mean sharing with the reader/viewer ideas and experience in art and art making.

9. All objects occupy their own positions like co-ordinates on a map, relative to each other in a particular content in time and space. This relativity allows for my organic approach to the discourse.

10. Steven Rendell, "In Disjointed Parts/Par articles decousus", in Fragments incompletion and discontinuity, Kritzman, (editor), New York Literary Forum, 1981, p. 81.

11. Robert Hodgins has used this analogy of art making as a journey, many times, most recently in my last interview with him, New Work, 1990, p. 248.

12. New Works, 1986 pp. 206-8.

13. Ibid., the reader is also referred to the discussion in subsection 3, "Hodgins: a web of contradictions", pp. 36-8.

14. Umberto Eco "Innovation and Repetition: between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics", in Daedalus, Fall 1985, pp. 161-184, at p. 170.

15. Ibid., p. 170.

16. Ibid. , p. 179.

17. Recent Works, 1987, p. 238.



/IV Chapter 1: Robert Hodgin: ...

IV Chapter 1: Robert Hodgins

1. Hodgins speaks: a starting point

Hodgins has always talked a great deal about his painting. He is something of a raconteur. Running commentary, juxtaposition of the verbal with the visual, has very much to do with how his paintings are conceived and perceived. This is evident in articles and critiques on Hodgins in which much space is taken up with his own words. *1*

It is difficult to be critical with Hodgins because he is such a powerful storyteller *2*. In a sense he is constantly re-making his material, 're-writing' his own history even as one attempts to formulate a view of it *3*. His speaking about his art, is, for him, part of the painting process. The most 'liquid' moment of his work is that in which he reflects on his working method. What he has to say about his own works is therefore an obvious place to begin.

Walter Benjamin suggests that a storyteller has the ability to **exchange** experiences (my emphasis) *4*. Hodgins' dialogue in this sense is "communicable experience" *5* providing a rich source of first-hand material in which he verbally shares (rather than 'explains') aspects of his experiences of painting. For Benjamin, every "... real story ... contains, openly or

covertly, something useful..." *6*. It may be a moral, a piece of practical advice or perhaps some general information. Hodgins, as storyteller, almost always provides something useful for the viewer and additional levels of meaning and extended ways of perceiving his paintings.

Although I cannot 'move with' Hodgins' paintings in the making, I can 'move with' his process of re-evaluating and re-formulating his work. That, in a sense, is the bridge from his work back into his history, and also into his future. Hodgins has made his words as important as his works. Insight into Hodgins' history perhaps makes manageable his 'web'. The continuum of his own history subsumes within it his works and words. In order to get deeper into the sub-text of Hodgins' work it is advisable to consider his words in relation to his works.

As will be seen later in this chapter, Hodgins' words, and Hodgins as storyteller, can be infuriatingly mercurial. His assertion of his right to speak his mind 'in the moment' *7*, and to 'change the story' *8* has one danger - at what point does one cast a sceptic eye on the picture being painted?

From an academic point of view, I acknowledge the argument that where Hodgins may be inconsistent in the

interviews, the interviews could be regarded by some as worthless. Taken to its extreme, such an analysis of Hodgins' own words could lead to the reader simply tossing this manuscript in the air and saying: "I give up, Hodging is just rambling, and I don't think I can learn anything from what he says".

I have no easy answer to this difficulty. I do however alert the reader to the fact that I have accepted Hodgins' statements and worked with them. I do not believe that Hodgins is trying to be deliberately evasive as to his 'position'. His changing stories are integral to his working process, and are very much part of his fear of being boring. On the other hand where I have been concerned about something he has said, I have dealt with my doubts in a note.

/2. Hodgins talks about theory ...

2. Hodgins talks about theory

Before directly focusing on the principle theme of this investigation, the issue of 'repetition and originality, and how Hodgins' work links in with the principle theme, it is helpful first to consider Hodgins' views on theory. These views readily provide a conceptual foundation for the point of view from which I will proceed to discuss Hodgins' use of the repeated image in subsequent sub-sections of this chapter.

Hodgins has repeatedly remarked that painting is:

> ... a mad thing to be doing...
> [New Works, 1986, p. 208]

But, he says:

> ... it [painting] does give you a means to search for personal significance through your painting ...
>
> ... you say to yourself "I know what I am doing, up to a point. I will wait for anything extraneous to happen. If it fits in with what I feel to be the character of this painting then I am willing to let it happen. Even though it happens by 'accident' ... [His quotes, New Works, 1986, p. 208]
>
> ... If you're lucky with painting ... it's so easy [for painting] to open your mind so lots of things flow out and get into the painting ... [New Works, 1986, p. 209]
>
> ... one wants to keep all the options open until one can finally say - right, at this moment for me, this is what this particular picture is about. [Arnold, Images]

The prospect of the unexpected happening in every fresh canvas, free from the restraints of 'hard theory' *9*, is always an exciting challenge for Robert Hodgins, and he affirms this position in almost every conversation about painting. And yet in most conversations his thoughts about painting, and art in general, are also peppered by art historical and contemporary references to theories.

Theory, he says, can kill so much in painting. For instance, he finds the work of Kenneth Noland and Ellsworth Kelly *10* or, as he terms them, "those Sixties Boys" [New Works, 1986, p. 201], largely decorative and ultimately stale. This he suggests has a lot to do with their dependence on theory:

> The problem about a theory is, once you know how a theory works, what do you do with it next? If it's a good enough theory to balance the whole of your art on then it means that nothing fresh can happen to you. And there is nothing worse in art for an artist having nothing fresh happening to him. [New Works, 1986, p. 269]

In the same breath he inadvertently affirms both positions. He is saying he is anti-theory, he also, in a more covert manner, taking up a theoretical position in relation to Kelly and Noland. Whilst he is not agreeing with their rather rigid use of theory, he is nevertheless, to some degree implicitly theorizing

about the use of theory in their art. In order to have entered into this debate about their use of theory, he must be familiar and conversant with the theory he is commenting on. Hodgins, while rejecting a particular kind of theory-derived painting, shows his interest in and fascination with paintings which are theory centered.

Is he contradicting himself? Is he unable to make up his mind? Is he not sure? Is he deliberately attempting to confuse the interviewer (and perhaps himself), in saying one thing and meaning another? The answer to all these questions is both 'yes' and 'no'.

As Marion Arnold suggests, Hodgins' dual concern is both for the intellectual and the emotional, for reason and passion. Both aspects are important to him, as may be seen from the following kind of remarks where Hodgins says to Marion Arnold:

> ... you know, what's fascinating about Rembrandt or Daumier is to see the enormous passion being put into drawing or painting, but also being aware of the organising intelligence that is working at full blast as well. And it's this combination of the two that always has fascinated me. The really passionate painter is using his brain like it's part of the passion. That, to me, is marvellous. [Arnold, Images]

From such remarks it is apparent that Hodgins wants to be in both, or perhaps many positions, simultaneously. He wants to use his intellect and access aspects of theory (and structure), but also make use of less-

structured, more organic approaches to painting, which 'just happen', as it were.

Yet in a 1984 conversation with Barbara Luckman *11*, Hodgins insisted that before 1982 when he embarked on his painting series, 'Ubu' *12* he was "grounding away" making paintings; that "interesting things happened" but that he was not "what the French would call engagé" *13*. In 1982 with the discovery of Ubu, his painting "took off" *14*. He insists he had produced canvasses in "a dutiful way" but Ubu allowed him to bring all the techniques of colour, line, "all the painting things... to life by mixing in social comment and experience" *15*.

A general dictionary defines engagé as: "committed to a point of view, or to social or political action *16*." Hodgins is committed to his painting, but he is rarely, by his own admission *17* committed to one point of view, or alone to social or political action. Can an artist who usually dismisses theory as 'bunk' *18*, then suddenly, proclaim himself engagé, with the 'discovery' of a literary character? Is Ubu, by implication, responsible for this miraculous and remarkable transfiguration of Hodgins?

What then is the significance of such remarks which serve to contradict and undermine the prevailing impression of Hodgins' position as an anti-theorist?

everyone thought they had seen an end to, after the horrors and devastation of the Second World War. In addition to Weimar Germany Hodgins uses images from a variety of conflict situations in history, such as the French Revolution. In his paintings which contain references to Weimar, Hodgins, as artist, takes on, as Powell says, "a kind of responsibility for memory" *34*, by integrating the past into the future.

About #News out of Weimar (1985), Hodgins says the following:

> ... [the painting was] essentially 'threaded' through and connected to a very important magazine which ran only to a few issues in Berlin ... called "Everyman his own Football" ("Jedermann sein Eigner Fussball"). [Two-Way Traffic, p. 288]

The French Revolution inspired #La Lamballe (1986-87). Hodgins' painting is of the Princess de Lamballe's bloody head, on a pole being paraded in front of Marie Antoinette, her best friend. In #La Lamballe and #News out of Weimar, Hodgins makes deliberate visual and narrative connections with actual documented historical events.

The specificity of the titles further spells out and contextualizes these paintings unambiguously as paintings about specific historical events. Titles, Hodgins says, illustrate something about the mind of the

Hodgins often says that there is nothing worse than for an artist to become boring and bored *19*. This constant self contradiction of his theoretical position is, I feel, yet another complexity in Hodgins' process of making things more interesting and engaging for himself and therefore for the listener/viewer. The listener has to grapple with a whole range of conflicting remarks. Hodgins makes listeners or viewers work very hard at unravelling threads of information *20*. It is hard even for him to fathom the mystery of painting, and why should he make it easier for us by carefully manicuring his comments?

Hodgins, in contradicting himself, acknowledges that he can only know and be certain of so much. He has conscious intention and control over many aspects of his painting. But there are many aspects of the mystery of painting which perplex him and about which he cannot (and will not) make up his mind. He often remarks that painting is a "strange thing ... [Painting] is like life" *21*, and no-one, including the artist, can totally understand it. Likewise, when verbalizing his thoughts about painting, he can never understand, in verbal terms, all the aspects of his painting. In fact he insists that it is impossible to write about everything in painting [New Work, 1990, pp. 258-9, p. 272].

Hodgins was rather amused when I recently put it to him that he usually contradicts himself [New Work, 1990, p. 245]. Even when I have quoted his own words verbatim, from a taped transcript he denied having said what I quoted. He was quick however to admit that he often denies things [New Work, 1990, p. 245], and related this interchange a couple of days later to a group of people who were listening to him talk about his exhibition *22*. Hodgins gaily pointed to me and told them of my 'accusations'. He suggested to the group in all probability, if they were to ask him to talk about the same paintings in a year, he may well contradict himself. So, he told them, it was quite possible that there was much more in the paintings being discussed, which he perhaps was not yet aware of.

There is a sense of bravado in such a performance which is part of Hodgins the storyteller, who embellishes and replenishes the story with each successive telling. But more important, it is the refusal on Hodgins' part to make up his mind once and for all about his painting that is significant. Because he is realistic concerning the limits of the human mind to "consciously conceive" everything about painting, Hodgins is only prepared to commit himself at one given moment, about one given painting [New Work, 1990, p. 250]. He may however change his mind within a matter of hours. Hodgins' constantly metamorphosing dialogue is tempered by his

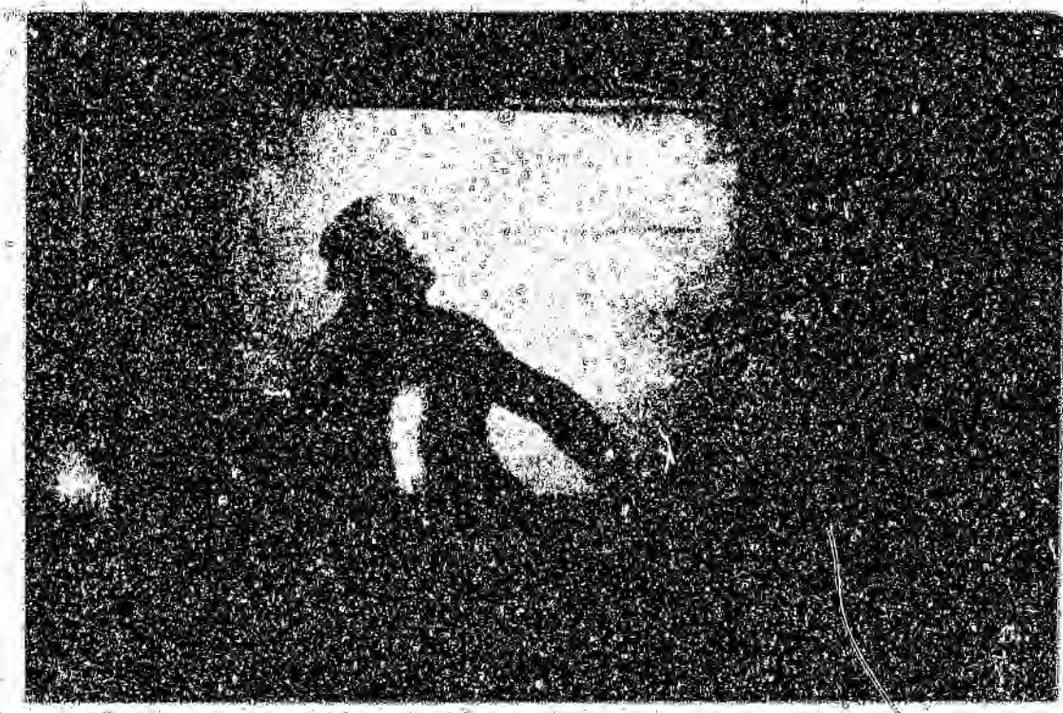


FIGURE 1 : Mindless Youth (c. 1990)
Robert Hodgins.

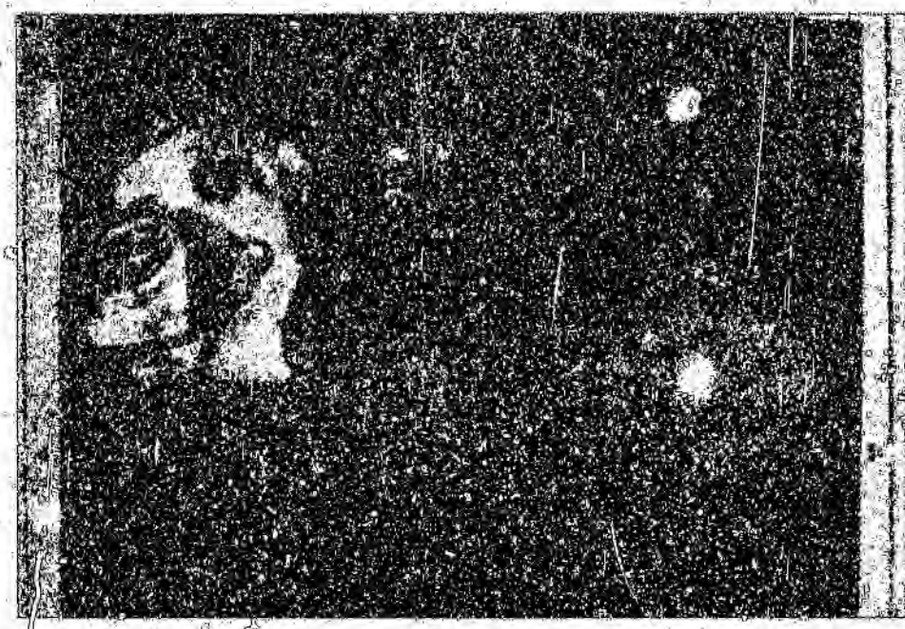


FIGURE 2 : An Ill-assorted Couple (1976-86)
Robert Hodgins.

willingness to admit vulnerability. With each successive telling, he exercises the privilege to change his mind and thus to continually re-make his own history.

Although Hodgins makes remarks which may at first appear contradictory, but on closer examination they may emerge as different facets, components which are differently valid and true - which make perfect sense, having their own logic in relation to his painting.

The idea of 'meaningful accident' is one instance. The co-existence and co-habitation of two seemingly opposite and irreconcilable forces in Hodgins' work is demonstrated beautifully in the following story of #Mindless Youth (c.1990). #Mindless Youth is a painting which Hodgins says "grew out of pure accident plus a lot of history" [New Work, 1990, p. 249].

Hodgins relates how one Saturday morning he went out to buy white acrylic paint. In the afternoon he discovered he had bought a tube of green acrylic paint by mistake. He either had to wait for the shops to open on Monday, to exchange the tube for white paint, or he could use the green paint. He covered his fresh canvas with the pigment and it suddenly dawned on him that the green paint, (terre verde), was exactly the colour the Renaissance painters used as underpainting when painting (the colour of) flesh.

#Mindless Youth grew out this green canvas which was for Hodgins almost an equivalent of a sheet of flesh, as it were.

> Gradually, he turned into one of these South African, bully boy, mindless rugby playing, beer swilling chaps; but he could have equally turned into a beautiful girl.
>
> ... it [Mindless Youth grew organically from a whole lot of things I've thought about, a whole lot of things I have done - but its initial 'thing' was pure accident.
> [New Work, 1990, p. 249]

Here the knowledge and use of a Renaissance theoretical practice for making flesh appear 'real' transforms the 'accident' into a fleshy 'mindless youth'. #Mindless Youth could not have happened without the amalgamation of accident with a snippet of 'real' history and theory. It appears that what is really important is the process that Hodgins himself went through to make this image. The 'pure accident', the purchase of the wrong paint, is given structure and direction by Hodgins drawing on his considerable knowledge of an approach.

In an analogous way, Francis Bacon, in the David Sylvester interviews *23*, often talks about how he uses and almost willfully courts accident and chance as part of the painting process. Bacon could independently be making a similar comment to Hodgins' remarks when he (Bacon) says:

> You know in my case all painting - and the older I get, the more it becomes so - is an accident. I foresee it and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint. I don't in fact know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things which are very much better than I could make it do. Perhaps one could say it's not an accident, because it becomes a selective process what part of the accident he chooses to preserve ... *24*

Emerging from Hodgins' remarks is the perspective which he has of his work having many levels of meaning, which may often be connected and constituted in different ways and he assumes also that the viewer will make further connections). No one perspective can possibly do justice to, or accommodate all these levels of meaning, the sub-texts of which even the artist can't consciously conceive. As Hodgins says:-

> ... I think how complex the 'buzz' is when I am making a painting. I don't think I have a hope of sorting it out into neat strands and layers. [New Work, 1990, p. 274]

Out of 'old' paintings, new insights and opportunities emerge, and Hodgins consciously makes use of discoveries he has gained from past experiences of painting. Although, as he says, he has no means of gently, sorting out the "complex buzz", he would have it no other way. Painting must always 'buzz' for Hodgins. A painting is a part of an exciting continuum - not merely an isolated object.

Hodgins says:-

> The extraordinary thing about painting is that every painting you have done makes you feel you want to do the next one and makes you know something about where you are going to start the next one (not where you will finish but where you will start with it). So you are always driven, because you have been making a painting [in order] to make another one ...
> [New Work, 1990, p. 252]

and:-

> ... [painting is] terribly satisfying to do, and half the the excitement is the next painting you go on to knowing you'll do a better one. *25*

In a recent painting exercise, Hodgins set himself a time limit in which to make some paintings. In 1990, he made some ceramics and attempted to carry through this experience of the ceramic medium in which things had gone very "quickly" [New Work, 1990, p. 252]. He did some paintings in which he limited his time on each canvas, to not more than thirty minutes. In discussing these paintings, Hodgins does not dwell on the theoretical implications of 'quick' paintings but focuses instead on their significance for his work in his future and says:

> I am more interested in this discussion and the fact that it's not just a flourish of the past, it also has an element of the future. It's not as if one practiced a step like a tap dancer - even in those twenty minute paintings there is a sense of adding to the future ...
> [New Work, 1990, p. 253]

Even when Hodgins is adopting his most vehement anti-theorist stance he often locates himself in relation to his painting by something he has learnt from the past.

As is already evident from some of the preceding discussions, Hodgins quotes and repeats images and ideas from his own past paintings as well as from a multitude of favourite literary and theatrical sources. Hodgins says he loves quotation, as it is a means of re-establishing the present in relation to the past.

Like quotation, the fragmented use of assorted theoretical principles may be seen as a bridge which Hodgins uses covertly to connect himself, as an artist working at this moment in time, with the past - in this instance an aspect of Renaissance history. This is very different from an artist who sets out to pay tribute to, or quote another artist, in the 'art about art' *26* manner, for instance. Images become subsumed within the structure of Hodgins' own history. Hodgins takes the process of 'source gathering' beyond mere appropriation by infusing it constantly with his personal idiom.

In the interviews, Hodgins continuously locates his remarks in terms of history *27*. Having rejected the efficacy of traditional theoretical models Hodgins frames the history: the actual process of making those

paintings. Although he cannot say why he flicked a piece of crimson paint across the surface, he can talk about many other things such as how he began a painting. For instance he can talk about the fact that his painting #An Ill-assorted Couple (1976-86, Images C4) grew out of "... the blobs of a painting"; discarded by a student who no longer wanted the painting [New Works, 1986, p. 211].

Theory becomes part of the conscious continuum of image making, like anything else Hodgins may consider during the process of painting.

3. Hodgins: self conscious mediator of history

The organism of Hodgins' work is a peculiar animal. History *28* provides both the structure and framework of Hodgins' work, as well as the substance, matter, material (images and paint) contained within that shell.

Attention is given by Hodgins to the history of his own art and life as well as to the empirical world, with Hodgins "recontextualising them in a floating moral space" *29*. In this way, "memory and immediacy" become fused *30*. Art making becomes like "Last night's dream on canvas" *31*. Talking about a dream one has had is of course often a very difficult process, with the images and memories, sounds and senses re-surfacing in a less than logical (linear) and comprehensible manner.

But, I am suggesting, it is possible to talk with coherence about aspects of the web of Hodgins' work, by examining threads of history (in the form of an idea or theme) which run consistently through his work - often pushed into prominence by Hodgins himself.

The Weimar *32* era fascinates Hodgins and he sees parallels, in many ways, with contemporary South African society - and indeed the world in general. In 1986, he spoke about the horrors of "judicial torture" *33* which was (is) so much part of contemporary history, which

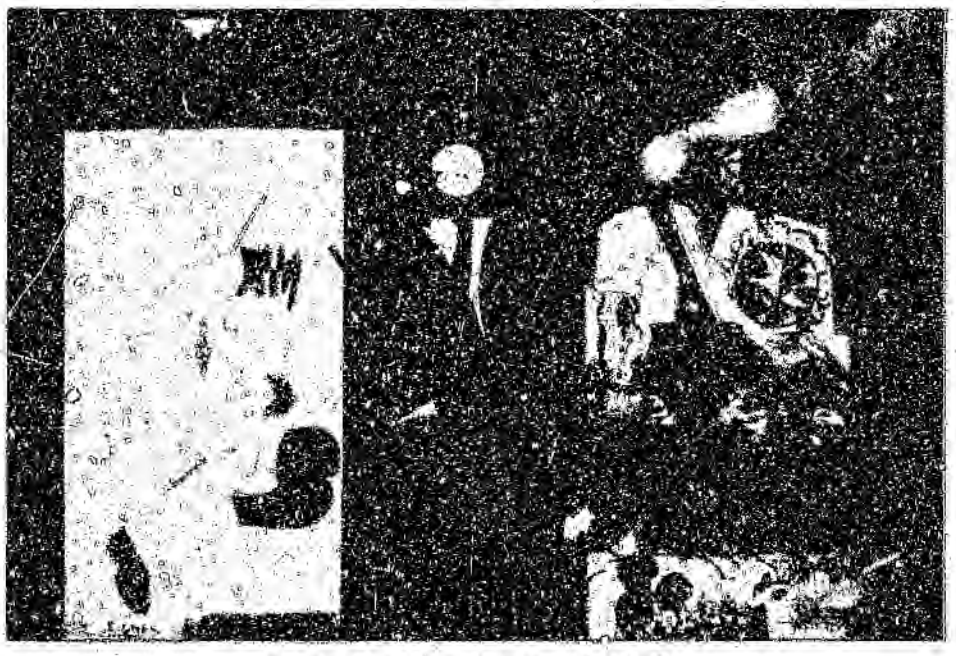


FIGURE 3 : News out of Weimar (1985)
Robert Hodgins.



FIGURE 4 : La Lamballe (198?-87)
Robert Hodgins.

person who made the painting [New Works, 1986, p. 204]. Titles such as #La Lamballe do imply that Hodgins would like the viewer to contemplate these paintings with this in mind - that the artist cares enough about these historical events to make paintings derived from such events. There are lessons to be learnt from such images of heads jammed onto poles and the social conditions precipitating such horror. But, lest we take Hodgins too seriously, he quips about La Lamballe's decapitated head: "... I quite enjoy painting blood as an exercise for painting blood." [Recent Works, 1987, p. 223].

History is selected as mu[illegible]ssibilities as for its sociological s[illegible]dgins never loses sight of the fact that h[illegible]d foremost making a painting. Even an image repeated from a history book has got to excite him visually. Images are selected o much for visual opportunities as for psychological and historical allusions.

Although the title #History may say alas ... (1985-86, Images C30), suggests that the painting has something to do with history, the allusion is more cryptic and fragmented than in the two previous 'history paintings' (#La Lamballe and #News out of Weimar) which unashamedly invite the viewer to make the direct connections to the historical events from which they spring.

carefully mixed red, black and yellow pigment sits like a second skin in the central canvas, in a marked contrast of various materials.

The colours in the central panel just happen to be the colours of he Spanish flag *37*. Hodgins did not intend this, but once he was aware of the connection, he "didn't bother to change it" [New Works, 1986, p. 207]. He has said that it does not matter if the viewer is aware of this "unintentional" quotation [New Works, 1986, p. 208] of the flag. There are other levels of meaning, which are more accessible, for the viewer. There does however seem little doubt that despite Hodgins' disclaimer, knowledge of the connection with the Spanish flag, no matter how obscure, consolidates the status of this painting even further as a 'history painting'.

#History may say alas... although connected with a 'real' historical event, is not as transparent and immediately accessible as in #La Lamballe and #News out of Weimar. The personal history associated with an object (the blanket) and the use of materials are as vital, if not more so, to the physical and emotional impact of the painting. In a similar way to Powell's point that the past becomes integrated in the present, so personal history becomes woven into 'real' history. In a sense, through this juxtaposition of different

kinds of history (personal and the Spanish Civil War/French Revolution) there is a sense of responsibility shown on Hodgins' part, to locate himself, through memory, as an protagonist, rather than just a passive reader of history.

This is perhaps why, when Hodgins makes references to art history, they tend often to creep into his works, as fragments or clues, too obscure perhaps for the average viewer to comprehend. For instance, the nude reclining figures in #The Lineaments of Gratified Desire (1985, Images C14) and #Police File (1986-87), are derived from various sources including some of Picasso's post-1940 reclining figures *38*. The central figure in Hodgins' #Parade (1984, Images A59) is based on a Kienholz figure, Solly. Interestingly, Hodgins has 'allowed' the paint

> ... on the actual figure in #Parade to crack, and so it has within it a sense of decay ... The actual paint is beginning to feel the weight of its years, as it were. [Two-Way Traffic, p. 282]

The decaying paint becomes an equivalent for decaying flesh; flesh which is no longer supple. The paint was once fresh and smooth like young flesh is. The history of the paint, as well as the history of the old man, in #Parade, are therefore communicated through this crumbling paint. Hodgins could well have 'fixed up' the cracked paint by scraping off and re-doing it. The fact

that he chose to keep it, indicates once again, a willingness to acknowledge the natural ravages of history, of time, without white-washing the imperfections away.

These examples demonstrate how Hodgins, in varying degrees, uses aspects of history (which includes art, literary and other types of documented history) as material, as subject matter and, in short, as preoccupation. On both more immediately accessible and more subterranean *39* levels, Hodgins' work is replete with 'information', encompassing a vast network of contextual and historical references. But, as may be seen from the above discussion, it is generally interwoven with autobiographical history. At the centre of this history is Hodgins, the individual, who is "aware of human beings as small, defenseless, creatures *40*.

Hodgins says:

I paint human beings...

> What stimulates me to produce images are four things. How human beings look. How they behave. How they behaved in history. And the visual and literary arts they have produced.
>
> ... a very odd species. *41*

This quote is atypical of Hodgins in that he very rarely outlines, in point form, what his paintings are about, or what specifically stimulates him to paint.

The quote is interesting in that it highlights Hodgins' fascination, and concern as a painter, with human beings, both as products and producers of history, and, by implication, the history of art. In this quote, which is worthy of some analysis, one notes how Hodgins first locates his fascination with the external: how humans look in outward appearance; fleshy pinks of an aging Apollo, beady little eyes of an 'Ubu'. Such physical attributes never cease to intrigue Hodgins *42*. Then Hodgins goes further and says he is interested in their more abstract qualities: their emotions and how they behave. Hodgins then takes a step backwards, conflating the first two propositions (outward physical appearance and behaviour), and places them in a context of history. Finally he expands upon this to include the products and deeds which are, by implication, a result of their behaviour. There is a progression from the human being as an object with form and shape, an 'easily' readable and definable 'text' to the history of the human being, and all the sub-texts that reverberate.

Hodgins' sense of himself, as a "defenseless little creature", who self-consciously presents his own history, ensures that his painting becomes much more than a mere checklist of sources. Hodgins shows a

and will not, forget that other time and place, when beautiful reproductions were not so abundant, and taken for granted, as they are today. An image in an art book is not just a quote of, say, Piero, but is layered, for Hodgins, in terms of its history as a reproduction, having many connotations.

History is, then, both internal and external to Hodgins work. It shapes his painting, and at the same time contains his painting. Personal history is not only a source of images for Hodgins, but also provides a sense of time as a frame of reference for Hodgins and the viewer, in which different threads can be unravelled or connected.

As is evident from the preceding discussion, in Hodgins' web of crisscrossing themes, many histories, both of a personal and more traditional kind are fused so that it is difficult to say where the one begins and the other ends.

In this regard, Hodgins' notion of history, unlike a traditional Western conception of history as a written authoritative document, which finally records past events, is the ongoing, not yet complete, "cumulative history of the human spirit" (to borrow Ivor Powell's phrase) *44*. We all share with each other many kinds of history: a past (whether it be the immediate or

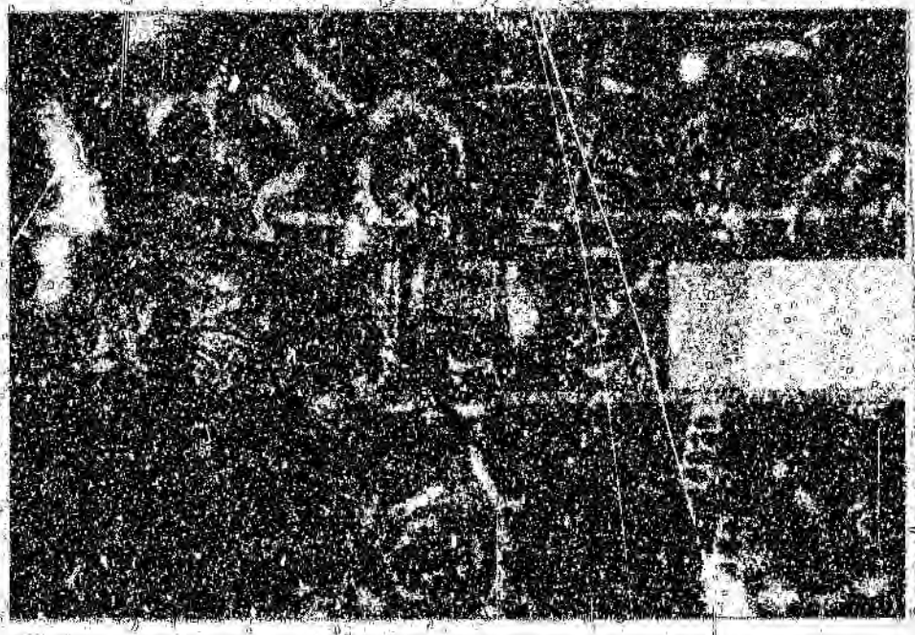


FIGURE 5 : History may say alas ... (1985-86)
Robert Hodgins.

The words "History may say alas..." is a line from a poem, Spain 1937, written by W.H. Auden in 1937 after the Spanish Civil War:

.....
The stars are dead; the animals will not look;
We are left alone with our day, and the time is short and
History to the defeated
May say Alas but cannot help or pardon. *35*

Hodgins says that Auden eventually said these lines were nonsense and would not allow them to be published because in his view history cannot say anything to anyone [New Works, 1986, p. 205]. Hodgins was intrigued that almost in spite of the poet's wishes these lines are often quoted because they are about the Spanish Civil War [New Works, 1986, p. 205]. Hodgins, in actually scrawling these lines from the poem in child-like scraffito lettering on the timber frame of History may say alas ..., seems to be alluding to the history of these words as well as to the actual history which inspired these sentiments. His process is then informed both by the historical event as well as how that event has been mediated through poetry.

The Auden lines are not, for Hodgins, "just a piece of poetry" [New Works, 1986, p. 206]. The lines echo Hodgins' perception of the futility and greyness of the world today. The coarse fabric of the grey blanket

which forms the top and bottom panels of the painting is a metaphor which further communicates Hodgins' bleak perception of the world.

Hodgins insists he had always wanted to paint on this cheap coarse blanket which had lain on his bed for years: "I always knew that it [the old blanket] would somehow connect up with those [Auden] lines" [New Works, 1986, p. 205]. The physical connection for Hodgins was a smooth luxurious canvas panel (the most expensive canvas *36* he could find at the time) sandwiched between the top and bottom panels. This canvas physically connects the outer blanket panels, at the same time as it separates out the Auden quotation on the frame of the outer panels.

Visually, the contrasting surfaces of the materials illicit a range of responses from the viewer, who must react to their obvious material differences. The textures of this painting evoke an almost tactile response - one wants to touch and so physically connect with the surfaces in the painting.

This combination of visual and tactile is emphasised in the use of colour. The colour used in the top and bottom blanket panels is black and white and almost brutally applied, clogging up the coarse blanket fibres. Blanket fibres interact with painterly lines, and the paint becomes part of the weave of the fabric. Smooth,

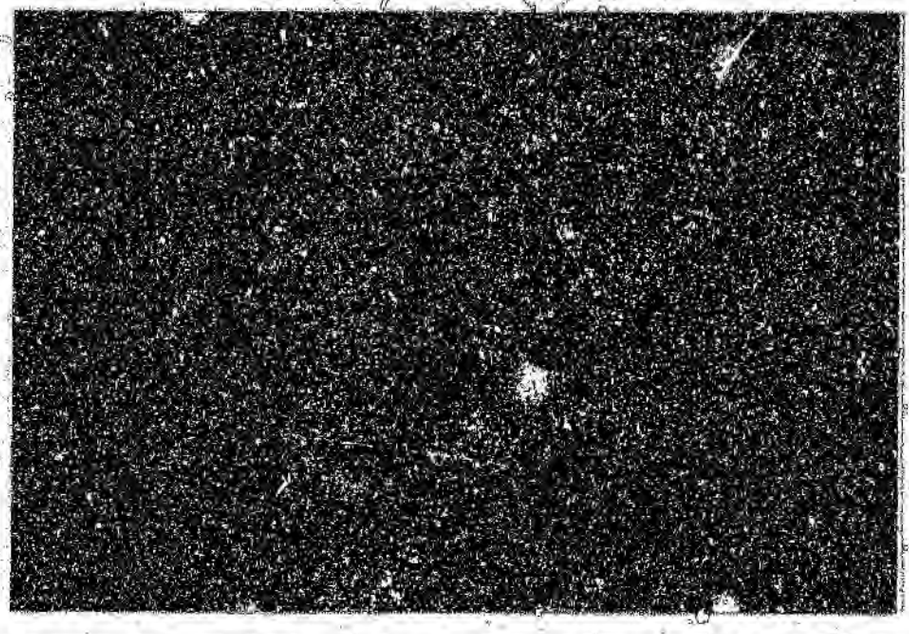


FIGURE 6 : The Lineaments of Gratified Desire (1985)
Robert Hodgins.

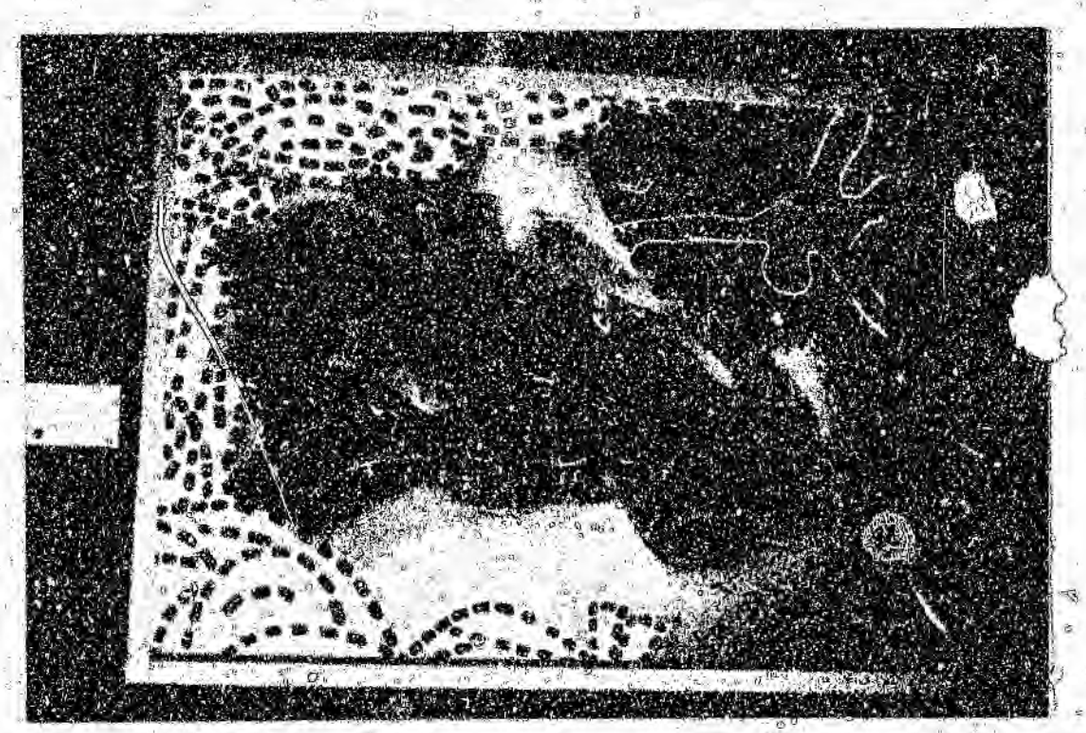


FIGURE 7 : Police File (1986-87)
Robert Hodgins.

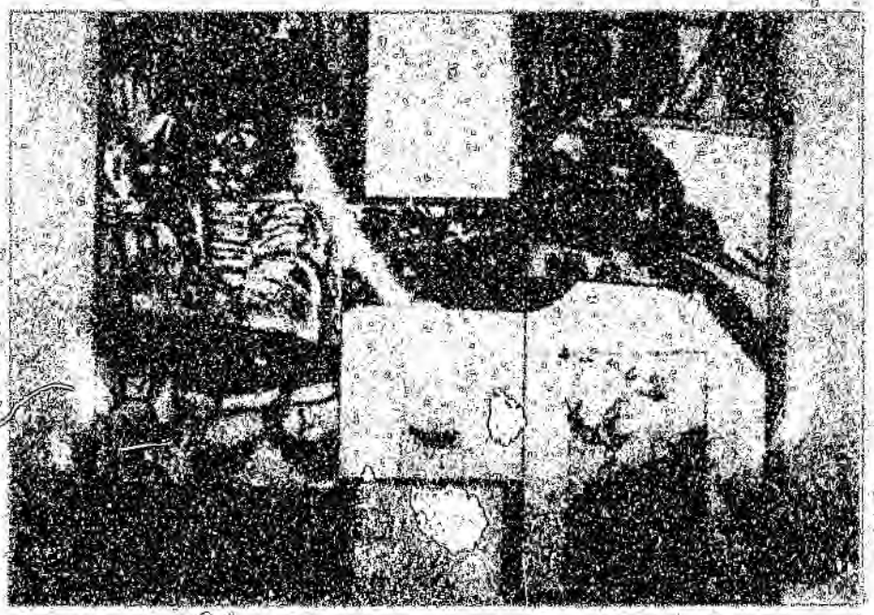


FIGURE 8 : Parade (1984)
Robert Hodgins.

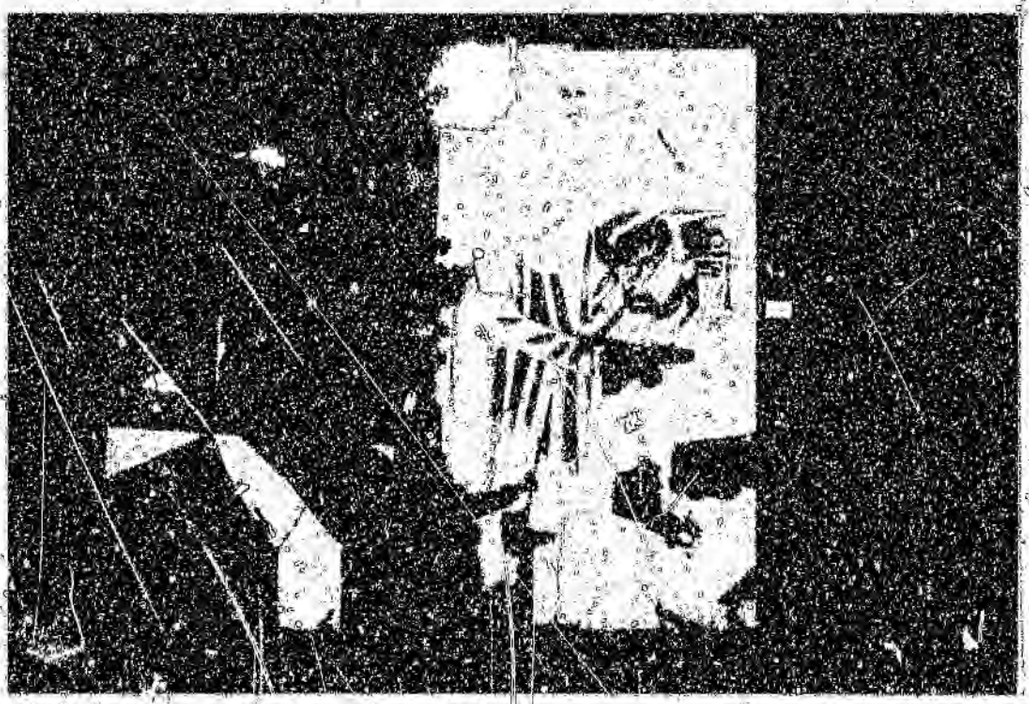


FIGURE 9 : Night Panics (1987)
Robert Hodgins.

conscious responsibility for his use of information and knowledge and an intention to use it in a 'meaningful' way:

> I am quoting contemporary painting, old painting, my own painting, other painting. I am quoting it knowing that it is one of the legitimate contrivances of continuity ...
>
> One is entitled to it [to quote] ... [With quotation of one's work] there is an alertness to that 'inward thing' of one's own work... One is still at this stage of the game, at least of mine and most modern artists I'd say still working with oneself. Therefore there is something very odd about saying to yourself, "I know the source of that. I chose the source of that" and the modern reverberations that get set up. [New Works, 1986, p. 200, my emphasis]

Hodgins actively selects his sources and material. (This may include images which happen by 'accident', but the fact is he chooses to keep those accidental images, instead of obliterating them.) It is not so much what he uses (although that is important) but how he uses his sources. How he uses his sources is connected to the way in which he came into contact with those images: by thinking, dreaming, or perhaps by reading books.

As an art student in Post War England in 1953, decent art reproductions were very scarce. One of Hodgins' tutors had a book on Piero della Francesca. Hodgins remembers how he sat with the other students revelling in the beautifully printed images *43*. Those 1953 memories come "flooding back", even today, informing his perception of glossy images in art books. He cannot,

distant past), and the potential of a future. Hodgins consciously mediates, in his images, the idea that we are what we are, to a large extent, because of our past experiences. We have a certain amount of control, as artists, to make our future paintings richer, by learning from our past works.

The viewer then becomes part of the continuous past and present of Hodgins' work. Hodgins so often remarks that he himself becomes a viewer of his paintings in the exhibition context, discovering and re-seeing his paintings *45*. That experience is as much part of his process of making paintings - such knowledge may inform the making of future paintings.

In Hodgins' work, objects (such as a gun, photograph or chair) do not just operate as isolated 'things'. Objects also have histories and may conjure up a whole range of associations and responses, as a direct result of that history - that past. As Nietzsche has pointed out, man/woman is the only animal with a history *46*. An inanimate object, such as a chair, has no way of 'knowing' about its own history. So while there is a common and shared past, the paradox is that most of the objects (animate and inanimate) cannot contemplate that past which is their history. The artist who uses history as material, must to do so with responsibility.

Hodgins use of history, is history in a Post-modern use. Powell says it is a kind of

> ... palimpsest, a layering of insights, perceptions, configurations in experience, sensibilities ... one is both haunted and guided by the past as it constitutes itself in the present. [Powell, Images]

A palimpsest is a very old manuscript in which writing has been rubbed out or scraped off and the page used over and over again. Traces of old writing became entangled with, and hence often indistinguishable from new writing.

The identity, the very form which the new writing took, was linked to the presence of those foundation layers of script. A Medieval scribe worked physically on vellum parchment. This new medieval script made use of the traces (bumps, protuberances in the parchment) of previous writing. It was not simply the physical trace of previous writings, but the associated experiential aura, which was subsumed within subsequent writing. The past was a bridge into the future, imposing itself, unavoidably in one sense, and regenerating itself in new forms - which is what Hodgins does in his paintings.

For Hodgins, the past is like a palimpsest. All we have is the phenomenal trace of what the human spirit collectively, for better or worse conjures up. Hodgins'

use, for example, of layers of transparent white (oil) paint, in paintings such as The Triple Gates of Hell (1985-86, Images C31), and #Night Panics (1987) which reveal glimpses of ghostlike figuration, is not unlike a palimpsest manuscript.

Hodgins, as a personality, is always explicitly, or implicitly, present in the web of connecting layers and threads of imagery, mediating this history in the making.

In Hodgins' paintings there is so much historical information, but each image goes far beyond being history of a merely documentary sort; a mere index to social, cultural, and political issues. By the same token, it is easy to hinge on to his consistent use of history and see it as mere 'social comment'. Once again, this is only part of what he is doing with history, not all of it.

4. Hodgins: a web of contradictions

From the preceding sections it becomes clear that Robert Hodgins is not an artist who may easily be talked about. Although his painting is theoretically informed, it is not theory centered.

Hodgins has no one style. And yet he says in a somewhat surprised tone that:

> Everyone recognises a Hodgins and I don't, you know. That's the interesting thing. I always think I have no style and yet they [exhibition visitors] say they can spy a Hodgins a mile off, which is odd to me.
> [New Work, 1990, p. 254]

One would like to say that Hodgins employs a conglomoration of 'styles' but a conglomerate style is at least arguably a style in itself. If people recognise 'a Hodgins', they are recognising aspects of his style.

Hal Foster one of my favourite writers on Post Modernism wrote in 1985, in Recodings - Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics that:

> Art today exists in a state of pluralism: no style or mode of art is dominant and no critical position is also an alibi. *47*

Hodgins by refusing to align himself with a critical position is not in my view being purposely evasive, hiding behind the mantle of an alibi of non-commitment. He is in the spirit of the Post Modernist (which he would never admit to) exercising his pluralistic right not to choose one specific style or position.

Hodgins takes up many positions in relation to painting and conflates them. He keeps shifting, adding or subtracting information in the process of painting and the discourse of painting in general. His painting and the conflicting comments he makes about it may, as suggested in the introduction, be likened to a web, with many threads criss-crossing and intersecting one another.

Aspects of this web are relatively easy to observe. In many respects Hodgins readily offers the viewer information, revealing the source or origins of an image. Carefully considered titles often give specific information about a painting. It is as if Hodgins is inviting the viewer into the work, giving that viewer assistance in approaching and discovering the sources of that work.

On one level then, it would appear that Hodgins, an artist whose work is rich in terms of visual



FIGURE 10 : Portrait of the Poet Max Herrmann - Neisse (1982-86) Robert Hodgins.

vocabulary, may simply be understood in terms of recurrence and the simple repetition of images; that he indeed leads the viewer along in an easy decoding of those sources. Repetition, particularly in the form of quotations of images from art history (including contemporary references) is an important facet of Hodgins' work.

An example of Hodgins conscious use of 'external' repetition (repetition, outside of his immediate frame of reference) is: #Portrait of the Poet Max Herrmann-Neisse (1982-86, Images C8). Hodgins says that Herrmann-Neisse was "a great habitue of Weimar circles" *48*, a historical period which fascinates him and with which Hodgins closely identifies.

Parts of The Second Comind, a 1921 poem by W.B. Yeats inspired Hodgins' painting: #A Beast Slouches, (1986, Images C32) with the words which Hodgins quotes;

> .....
> somewhere in the sands of the desert A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, Is moving its slow thighs. ...
>
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? *49*

Hodgins says simply that he put the Beast amongst:

> ... those sand dunes ... surrounded by traffic. [New Works, 1986, p. 216] *50*

spring-board for Hodgins from which to make 'new' paintings *51*. In #Golden Lads & Girls (1985, Images C24), images from paintings of his youth, of "golden boys and girls" *52* are subverted and re-used to make a new painting.

Alfred Jarry's Ubu provided Hodgins with the impetus for a series of paintings which are derived from, and centre around, this literary figure (for example, Ubu: The Official Portrait (1981, Images B2) and Ubu's Ancestor (1982, Images B1). Ubu, as is evident from my earlier discussion of Hodgins on the subject of theory, is credited by the artist as the prime catalyst for his reputation as engage. He often gives credit to a newly discovered theme or image, as something which has the effect of 'jolting' him out of a 'routine'.

Such motives for using images consciously derived from such varied historical, literary and personal sources, would, on the surface, seem very straightforward. For instance, Hodgins explains about Herrmann-Neisse that:

> ... if you bother to quote someone you admire them... If you pay a tribute, then obviously you admire whatever you are paying tribute to in the first place. [New Works, 1986, p. 196]

This all sounds very logical, straightforward and uncomplicated, but then Hodgins says that his portrait of the poet was derived, in part, from a Grosz painting of the same name. He says:

> Now, I admire that painting [Grosz's painting] very much. I think it's a fine painting. It's very odd in that it endorses how I feel about Grosz. [New Works, 1986, p. 196]

Hodgins' Herrmann-Neisse is more than merely an appropriated image. What does Hodgins feel about Grosz? There are many nuances of complexity in Hodgins' initially straight-forward seeming explanation for his treatment of Herrmann-Neisse.

Herrmann-Neisse is a rather shadowy figure from Weimar, and Hodgins claims that he "knows nothing about him [New Works, 1986, p. 197]." The books *53* I have consulted do not give any information about him aside from a couple of details like the fact that he was an intellectual, and active in literary circles in the Weimar context. Herrmann-Neisse is, then, for Hodgins, a "heraldic figure ... part of the mythology of Weimar" [New Works, 1986, p. 197]. Grosz' portrait of Herrmann-Neisse has, on one level, filled in details of that myth for Hodgins (such as what Herrmann-Neisse looked like) and, on another level, contributed to that myth. Grosz

lived in the same Weimar period as did the poet, and Herrmann-Neisse is himself not only part of, but contributes to, the aura of the period.

Hodgins' portrait of Herrmann-Neisse not only endorses the admiration he feels for Grosz [New Works, 1986, pp. 196-7] as an artist who lived in turbulent times; more particularly it shows Hodgins' admiration for Grosz's unusual compassion in having chosen to paint, "this little dwarf" of a poet who, although well known to people, was not exactly a 'star' of Weimar [New Works, 1986, p. 196].

Hodgins is not simply taking Grosz' image of Herrmann-Neisse and lampooning it, or embellishing it in his own image; he is borrowing the idea of a peripheral, rather mysterious, deformed character, the loner. By squashing the image of this grey figure into the confines of a cadmium orange, framed canvas, he makes it very much his own.

Hodgins' painting does pay tribute to Grosz, to Weimar, to Herrmann-Neisse, but it also has to do with the process of making a painting. Hodgins, verbally relating his painterly transformation of the Herrmann-Neisse theme, almost brushes aside the historical data concerning Weimar. He focuses instead on his own history of making the image, concerning the way it started out as an old painting. He relates how this

grey little figure slowly emerge out of an old 'grey' painting, asserted his persona, independently of Hodgins, as it were *54*. Formal considerations, such as the fact that this misshapen figure is almost contorted into the canvas space or the thick, scumbled, yet sensual oil paint which is made to caress his deformed body, provide the visual point of entry for the viewer. And, after all, that is what the painting medium primarily facilitates.

Hodgins' quotational use of many images, like the Grosz painting of Herrmann-Neisse, goes much further than the simple appropriation, processing or regurgitation of an image for 'arts sake'. Hodgins does not simply take an image for instance like an Andy Warhol can of Campbell soup and use it because it is an object of mass production, because he likes the flat graphic patterns on the label and because he wants to evoke a sense of this repetition in his art.

Hodgins seems constantly to acknowledge material outside the purely fine art category as part of his working process. His particular kind of quotation differs from the work of other artists. His use of repetition is very different for instance from Manet's Olympia (1863), a re-working of Titian's Venus of Urbino (1538) *55*. Further examples are: Manet's Le Dejeuner sur L'herbe (1863, The Louvre) a kind of parodic collage

in which Manet used specific images from Giorgione's Pastoral Concert (1510, The Louvre) and from Raimondi's engraving (c.1520) after Raphael's Last Judgement of Paris. Rene Magritte's Le Balcon de Manet (1950) suggests by title and image that it is a further parody of Manet's Le Balcon which in turn appears to be a parody of Goya's Majas on a Balcony (c. 1811). *56*

The above examples fall very much into the category of so-called 'art about art'. There are many more examples, many of which are included in various studies, such as Linda Hutcheon's comprehensive work on parody *57*. And although I do not wish to explore parody in too much detail as it is really beyond the scope of this work, it does appear that a concern with parody, on the part of an artist, involves targeting a text so as to say something about that text as such.

The emphasis in such a case would appear to rest less on an artist's own expressional statement and more with the target text, as it were. The effect is often an intellectual exercise on the artist's part. Unfortunately once the sources have been decoded, the viewer is often left with a very unsatisfactory feeling. The viewer can see how clever the artist is in taking a famous painting and parodying it, but then so what? Often, as a result of this, the target text

becomes more rich in association but the work of appropriation is in its own right soon forgotten.

Hodgins' paintings are informed by source gathering, but very rarely can they be explained in terms of sources on a one-to-one *58* basis. The connections with images are mostly multifarious, and often vague, tenuous, and in name or thought only. And yet, there is no doubt, that the secondary 'information' informing his work is an important adjunct, and should not be ignored: the accretive process of source repetition is very much part of how his paintings are conceived and evolve.

Clearly, Hodgins does not scorn appropriation of artistic 'texts'. Knowledge of previous art is important, and a valuable source of visual 'grammar'. As artists, we all appropriate texts, often as part of a learning exercise, as a practical means of assimilating information about images, and art making in general. Hodgins is no exception, but he uses quotation and appropriation in a very individual way which ultimately has little do with an 'art about art' concern in the narrow sense.

Lipman and Marshall in their preface to Art about Art, write:

> Artists, because of their obvious interest in, and knowledge of art, draw on this knowledge and

familiarity as readily as they draw on other experience. *59*

They go further to say that an artist may use images because they are "available and suitable". *60*

We know full well that in contemporary American society, art images are readily available, in what Peter Fuller terms the "Mega-Visual Tradition" *61*. There is a proliferation of images, both in the form of reproductions and in physical form in galleries, and these images are very much part of an industry from which the artist, particularly a university trained artist, cannot remain immune. And, it would appear, that artists are encouraged to make 'art about art' their subject.

In South Africa there is also a media bombardment, often of fragmentary images. Fine Art reproductions have often to share and compete for space, for instance with 'real', 'news-worthy', photographic and other journalistic documentation of societal turmoil. I would suggest that in South African society in the eighties and nineties, 'intelligent' artists would not dare to make images which rest primarily on a base of 'art about art'. While, in the American context, Robert Motherwell could say:

> Every intelligent painter carries the whole culture of modern painting in his head. It is his real subject, of which everything he paints is both a homage and a critique. *62*

Motherwell's contention that modern painting is every intelligent painter's real subject is absurd in the South African context. Motherwell's response is a typically (university trained) American attempt to intellectually prescribe artistic practice in relation to contemporary society. South African society is complex and fragmented. Hodgins' art is, in part, the physical container of his response to the peculiar complexity of that society. His painting does not comply with an easy pre-conception of 'art about art' *63*.

It is not Hodgins alone who has to be understood in these terms, but also other South African artists who quote 'art' images in their work - whose work also defies reduction to 'art about art'.

For instance, in Penny Siopis', Patience on a Monument-A History Painting (1988) *64*, there is a grand inversion of the heroic tradition of history painting. Patience, a black 'Liberty' is shown, seated on a heap of "natural waste" and thus "leading the people" *65*. But engagement with the work does not rely on the viewer's familiarity with the Anton van Wouw bronze bust (1907) from which the figure of Patience is derived *66*. In

order to de-code the work, there are ample visual clues provided through the inclusion in the image of photocopied history textbook illustrations of black warriors and white missionaries, the implication of which the average white South African would be familiar. Siopis' painting, thus, does not simply derive its 'meaning' from the van Wouw quotation, but is interwoven with other images which taken together, evoke a complexity of meanings. Similarly, a representation of the classical Greek sculpture The Venus de Milo (c. 100 B.C.) appears in a number of Siopis' paintings including Still Life with water-melon and other things (1985) *67*. Once again, knowledge of the classical quotation enriches, and adds to, the complexity of the painting but is not a necessary prerequisite for engagement with the painting.

Just as Hodgins' Herrmann-Neisse is derived from the Grosz painting, so William Kentridge's triptych The Boating Party (1985) is based on Renoir's painting of the same name *68*. As in Herrmann-Neisse, where the image operates as an autonomous text, so in Kentridge's work, engagement with the "languid" diners *69* is not dependent on the knowledge of the Renoir painting.

Hodgins (as do these other South African artists cited) incorporates quotation of other art within the greater

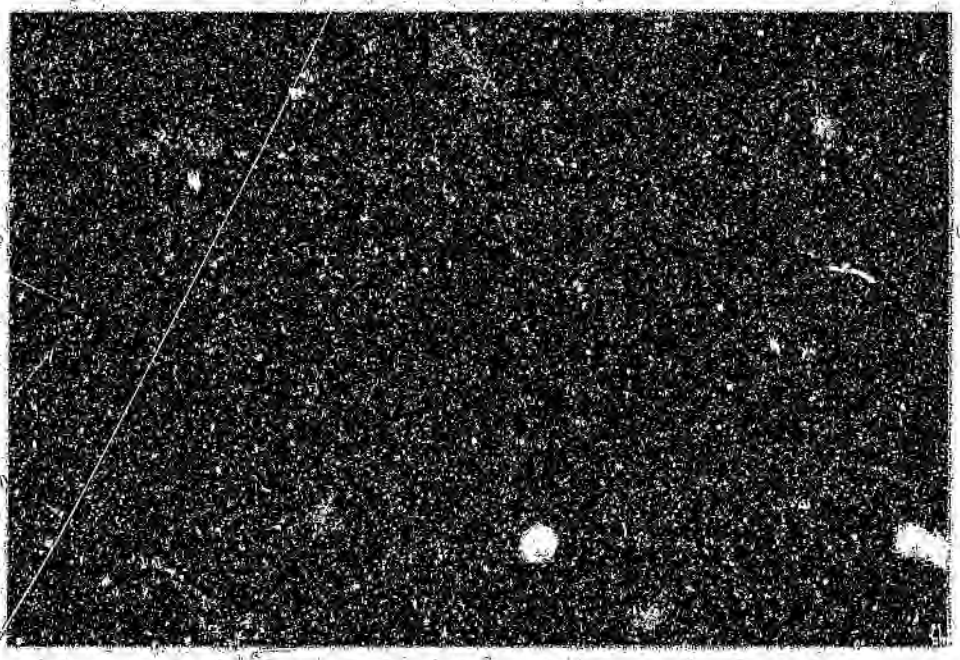


FIGURE 11 : A Beast Slouches (1986)
Robert Hodgins.

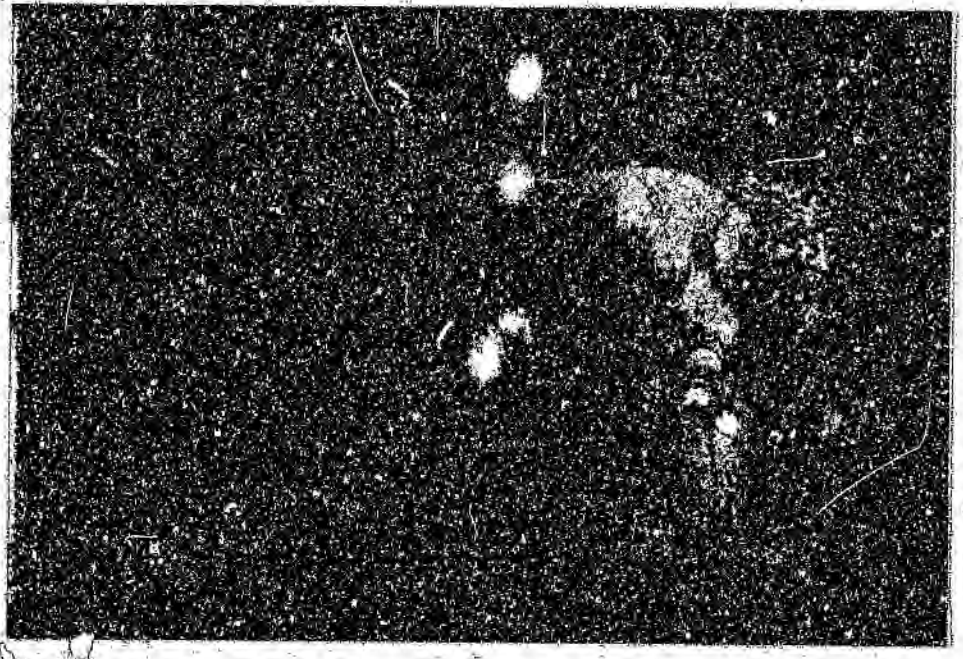


FIGURE 12 : Nebuchadnezzar (1795)
W. Blake.

scheme of his work. Hodgins and these artists digest sources into their work rather than incorporate them as overtly referential fragments of other works of art.

If Hodgins' art did rest merely on the 'art about art' basis, how would one account for the many instances in his painting (where images have emerged) which bear remarkable similarities with specific art images, but which Hodgins says he did not intend or set out to do? And indeed Hodgins has himself often not been aware of these associations until someone has pointed them out to him. In Two-Way Traffic, Powell, placed a slide of Hodgins' #A Beast Slouches in juxtaposition with a slide of Blake's #Nebuchadnezzar (1795). There are strong visual connections between the two images. Hodgins, commenting on the relationship between the two (which looks, in its specificity, to be 'deliberate') says that the visual connections between the two are "totally new" to him [Two-Way Traffic, p. 283]. He says that it was not until a friend of Powell's displayed it to him that he knew he'd been carrying it around in his head for thirty years, "without thinking very hard about it." At a suitable moment, "out it came" [Two Way-Traffic, p. 283].

Hodgins is interested in 'levels of meaning over and above what he is conscious of. In that sense he has links with Surrealism and 'Stream of Consciousness' *70*

rather than with Modernism. It is this sub-text of Hodgins, rather than the primary text which he consciously constructs, which is of interest; those levels of meaning outside the artist's surface consciousness.

As an artist, Hodgins may be a citizen of the so-called post-modern world, but, physically and emotionally he is very much part of contemporary South Africa - a fact which he constantly acknowledges, and talks about. So while there is a vast dissemination of information 'about art', to which he is receptive, he is also influenced by so many other things which are "available and suitable" *71*, which may have very little to do with art, especially art which is defined as fine art.

Hodgins, who has had a formal art school training, and taught in establishments where art history, has been an important curricular requirement, has always recognised the place of art historical precedents in his work. Many of his images have been directly derived from works by artists like Bacon or Kienholz *72*.

This 'itinerant' process of making art, and the resultant complexities it produces must be seen in terms of the web metaphor which I have already discussed in the introduction.

Hodgins' paintings are, in my view, texts in the true sense of the word as understood from its etymological source. It is possible to experience constituent threads of Hodgins' paintings from diverse, and not necessarily consistent points of view. The works seem constructed to facilitate this plurality of response. The works reveal the web - the 'textum'.

Expanding on the metaphor of the web, there is the interpretative possibility that a couple of threads may haphazardly be pulled out. But it is necessary to be cautious of treating Hodgins' painting as a 'lucky-dip', lacking any necessary coherence. It is important to discern the 'web' of often not readily visible patterns in what is often an apparently arbitrary nexus.

Powell, also using the web metaphor in his essay in the Images catalogue, made the appropriate discursive decision to essay "broad insight, not rigorous analysis." Powell notes that there is a "tangle of issues" and implied that he could only therefore discuss a few of these issues *73*.

Significantly, Rankin and Arnold also make references to Hodgins and his work as a web. Rankin *74* talks about the "complex web of meaning" and Arnold makes more covert reference to a web when she writes that "Hodgins'

paintings are complex and ... one can only go so far... in unravelling meaning of metaphors or symbols." *75*

Powell's point, in particular, is an important one. At best, it is only possible to observe a few threads of any web. Hodgins web of paintings, images, sources is no exception. And indeed, Hodgins himself gives unsolicited credence to the web metaphor and to "tangles of issues", in saying that the "sources of any painter are multifarious" and that "they can be disentangled often to the surprise of the artist himself" [My emphasis - Two-Way Traffic, p. 299].

My difficulty lies in what one does with this proposition of the 'web' - where does it lead to? Writers cited in these pages have not sufficiently taken this into account. They have attempted to address this complexity (in Hodgins' work) but have not sufficiently, in my opinion, dealt with the wider context or sub-text of 'process' that actually informs that web.

A wider historical dimension has, I am suggesting, to be integrated into any discussion of the 'web' of Hodgins' work. But this is the difficult part: it has to be done without levelling the organic complexity of that web.

Many attempts to address this greater context result in confusion. Often interesting threads of themes are pulled out, and sources observed. It is all

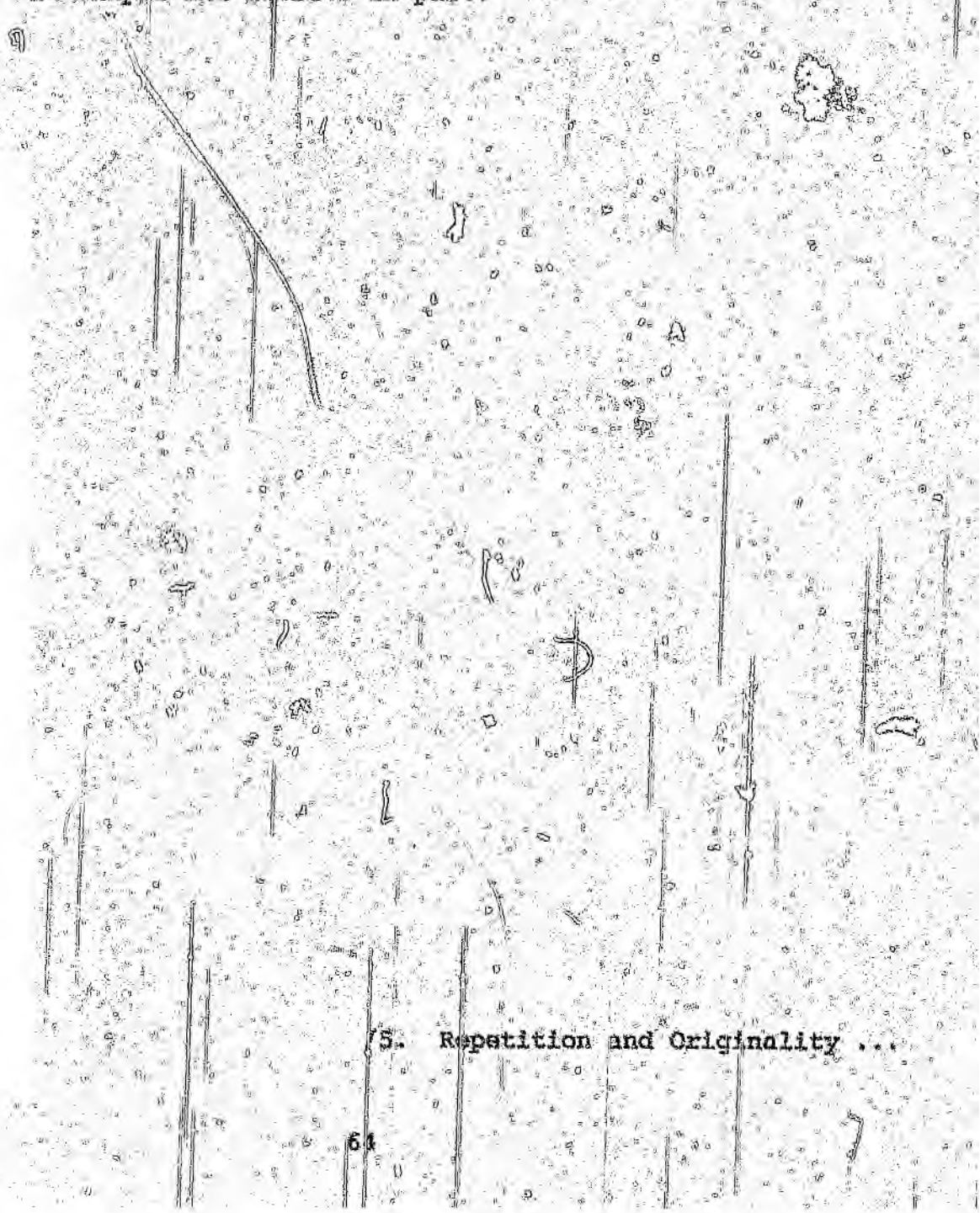
historically of great interest but the historical aspect is often not sufficiently integrated with the artistic aspect of Hodgins' work.

Hodgins' text, though organic, is not incoate. There is an order which can be decoded. It is just not an order which is easy to decode in terms of one-to-one relationships of meaning.

This conception of a web allows the interpretive possibility of disentangling many threads inherent in Hodgins' work, while at the same time retaining a semblance of their organic inter-relationships. It is possible, for instance, to observe certain themes recurrent in Hodgins' formal concern with repetition, but the conception allows for consideration of other pre-occupations (conscious and subconscious) in his paintings.

As is evident, Hodgins' 'process' of making paintings is rich in history. His fascination lies both with history in a wider sense, and in a personal autobiographical sense (the consciousness of the historical process of his painting). Various aspects of Hodgins' particular use of quotational forms of art (including repetition and originality) may be considered as a sub-set within his organic conception of history. History provides the context, for the web. It is within this historical framework, and the distance that it

provides, that Hodgins' process of making repeated images may be understood. The concept of 'repeating' implies, and is reliant on, a conception of continuity and precedent. Because history is a constant in a web of contradictions, it may be used as a means of travelling through the peculiar logic of the web, which it shapes and defines in part.



/5. Repetition and Originality ...

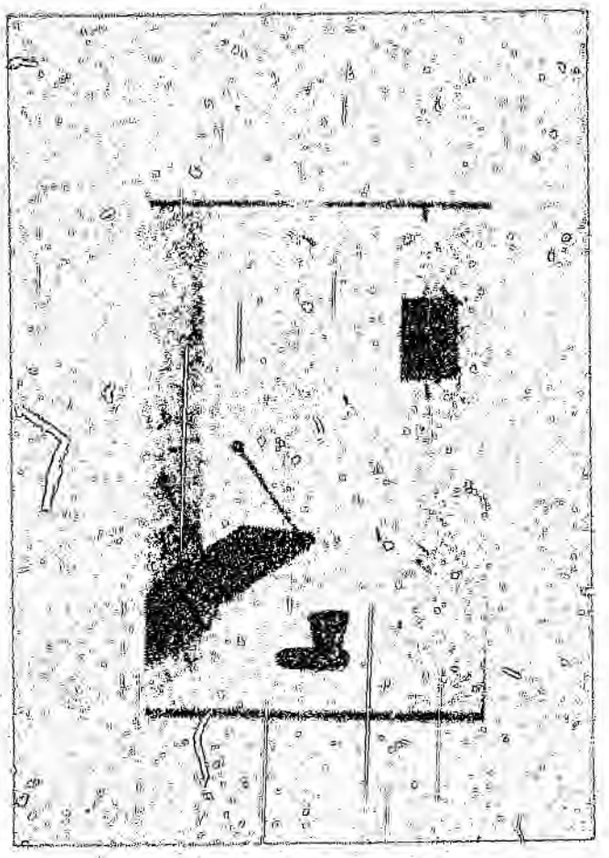


FIGURE 13 : **The Cell** (1985)
Robert Hodgins.

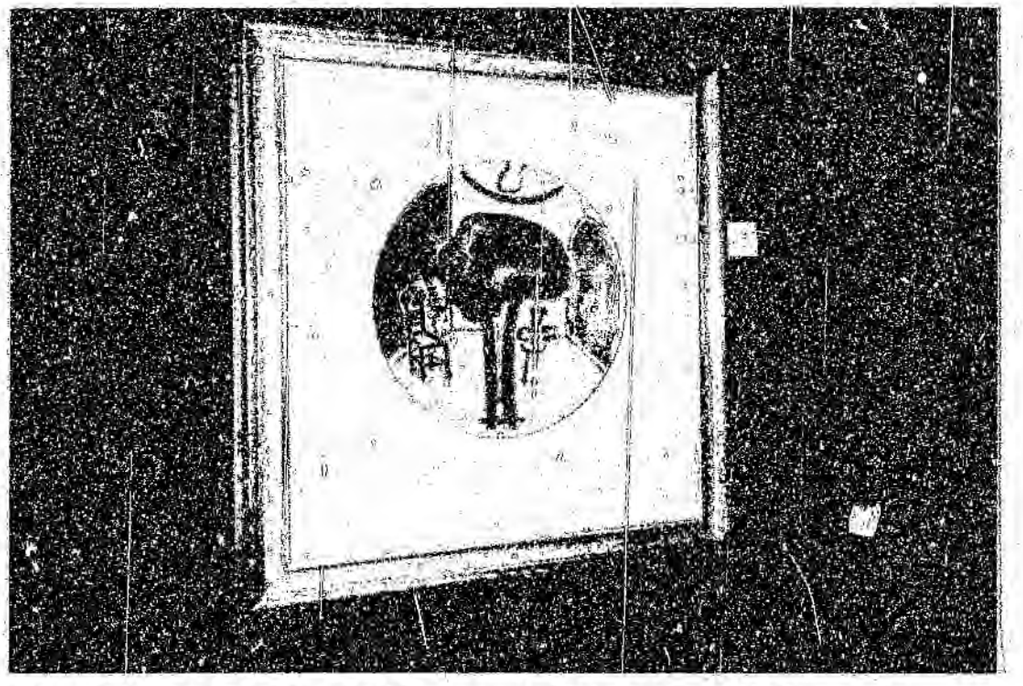


FIGURE 14 : **Man alone in an empty room** (c. 1990)
Robert Hodgins.

5. Repetition and Originality: the repeated image becomes the original

The contemporary historical event, history which is happening, as it were, as Hodgins paints, is of a more immediate import than a fragment of the history of, for example, the French Revolution. Contemporary events lack the distance of the documented history of what occurred fifty years ago. With the past (history) there is always a sense of removal from one's personal locus. The immediacy of history in the making is far more complex, and Hodgins is not always successful with regard to his treatment of it, as shall be seen in the following comparison of two of Hodgins' works.

Hodgins' painting, entitled #The Cell (1986), initially appears very similar to his recent ceramic plate, entitled #Man alone in an empty room (c.1990). The figure of a man, represented in the ceramic plate, inhabits a similar stark cell space to that shown in #The Cell, empty but for a chair, and a stark light bulb. #The Cell is devoid of any human figuration.

The only clue to the possibility of human habitation in the represented cell is a pail which casts a dark shadow on the ground. Both images are, as Hodgins says:

> ... the simplest way of making an empty space ... two perspective lines and the base line ... five lines is the easiest way of making a space. [New Work, 1990, p. 254]

These spaces are not unlike the rudimentary perspective sketches that we tend to doodle while on the telephone - simple almost diagrammatic approximations of what rooms may be like. A cell is a room which has been stripped of the nurturing functions usually associated with a space to live in. Hodgins, by simplifying the drawing of the cell, seems to be alerting our attention to the fact that it is a mere space, rather than a 'room', in the fuller sense.

It is worth noting that #The Cell was exhibited on 100 Artists against Apartheid, organised by the "Detainees Parents Support Committee" *76*. Undeniably, the context of this kind of show must inform the viewers' perception of such an image. On this type of exhibition (as with any exhibition) one is not just seeing one isolated picture, one is seeing that image, in the associative context of other works charged with specific resonances. The effect of seeing #The Cell on a 'political' show is very removed from this discussion, where #The Cell has been stripped of that specific context. My interest here is not specifically in the 'political associations', but rather in the way that the 'cell' is used as a repeated image, deriving from the prototype in the earlier Hodgins painting.

Another work which was on the same exhibition was an untitled sculpture by Jane Alexander made in 1985. Sue Williamson points out that, "Alexander's, untitled plaster, bone and oil paint figure of a man sitting on a wooden chair was seen by many "to be a comment on death in detention", whereas it was actually based on the death of a crippled man who worked in Alexander's apartment building *77*. Alexander says:

> I have not compromised my work. Much as I might like to make a powerful statement about detention, I don't know any detainees. I don't want to try to pretend a suffering I haven't had some contact with, or undergone my self. My work is from my own experience. *78*

Alexander's representation of a naked man, belt around his neck, imprisoned (almost poured) into the confines of the chair, is a person whose very spirit, as well as his physical body has been squashed, his whole freedom of being has been curtailed. The heavy, block-like body mass evokes humiliation, nakedness and the vulnerability of being in such a position. Detention-without-trial strips humans, and leaves them as vulnerable as Alexander's man. It makes perfect sense that people, in a society where detention has been a fact of life for so long, may well perceive this image as a comment about detention.

The image is given its potency, because, although Alexander does not have any personal experience of how a detainee, as such, may suffer, she may well know what it means to be confined, in a wider sense. The image, infused with more universal connotations of loneliness and despair, evokes the multiple connotations of being a detainee, pensioner, or an individual, isolated in some way or other. The detention context is simply a special case of the universally accessible experience of alienation in its extreme form.

How many of us know what the experience of being alone in Hodgins' #The Cell must be like? This is perhaps why #The Cell is for me almost like a bland illustration accompanying an article discussing the plight of detention. It is indeed graphic, and immediately accessible in terms of its reference, but fails to render much more than a superficial illustration of suffering in a small space. Hodgins' lack of experiential knowledge concerning detention, foregrounds itself. Hodgins knows about suffering; but he does not know about the specific suffering of a detainee.

The later version of the image, on a ceramic plate, is not specifically about a cell, but about as its title says, "a man alone in an empty room" - which may well be a cell. The sense of being alone, isolated in the confines of a small room is far more engaging and rich

than the earlier image which is so obviously and unequivocably a cell.

In addition, the ceramic material used in the later image blurs the sharp line in #The Cell, eroding the perfectly considered graphic lines of that image. On the one side of the ceramic plate the perspective lines are straight, and, on the other side, curved, "following out the shape of [that] bowl" New Work, 1990, p. 254]. Once again this softens the preciseness of the schema of the painted cell, making a far more interesting and ambiguous image.

Hodgins, in quoting his 'cell', infuses the repeated image with a whole range of implications, and the impact is then far richer than that of the 'original' image. While formally the second image is a repetition of the first, the repetition has been transformed through the change of materials, and the alteration of perspective lines, into an image which is the 'true original' of the two works.

Although Hodgins formulates new images, his paintings are informed, as it were, by earlier images. Repeated images, such as #The Cell and #Man alone in an empty room, are not just repetitions on a theme, but a fresh dialogue set up with previous images.

Images of guns proliferate in contemporary South African society, as may be seen from reproductions in Williamson's 1990 book Resistance Art in South Africa. Hodgins does not merely use the gun in the obvious, superficial sense (typical of so many images in Williamson's book), and which would carry far to hackneyed connotations in the contemporary context. Instead, Hodgins embellishes the gun with more subtle complexities, to which he refers in conversation [New Works, 1986 p. 212].

One lazy Sunday afternoon, for want of anything better to do, he happened to be paging through a gun manual with friends. The gun-image derives in part from this experience. It is not that the gun as an object in its own right does not have any socio-political significance, but the manner in which Hodgins came to employ that image is given a specific anecdotal context by Hodgins, which contributes to its richness *79*.

In Hodgins' #Five Rude Gestures (1985, Images C22) the gun is almost playfully targeted at the red heart of a white linear diagram of a man. The words "preferred target areas" are inscribed on the side of the figure on the yellow canvas. The gun is part of a game, perhaps a game of chance, perhaps a game of cold blooded war, or a game involving Benito Mussolini as protagonist ("Duce Duce Duce", in the bottom right hand panel). A

penile tongue is pulled out, making faces. Fingers gesture rudely. Areas of flat red and yellow paint contribute to a sense that the panels of the canvas are like shapes on a board game, such as Monopoly.

Memory, like history which depends on memory, is not a fixed or concrete phenomena. So much may be lost, as much through the distortions of time, as through an individual's desire deliberately to make his/her history over, if not to invent the past, then to embellish it. Just as we tend to alter things in life through memory, so through the medium of painting, the artist shapes the phenomena of the world around him/her. In the act of painting, the painter is always in the present, and, as such, the 'reality' of that moment of making any given painting is unique and original.

Kawin asks why it is that we do not find so much in life which centres around repetition, such as sexual intercourse, "repetitive" and boring *80*. He says it is because it is "interesting to us: it proceeds from our basic needs, it is urgent and pleasant and present. It is outside time, and therefore outside futility" *81*.

So too Hodgins' painting, although drawing on time sequences, as understood within a particular conception of history, proceeds outside the imposed limits of

linear clock-time. Kawin discusses why clock-time is an illusion:

> ... the decision to apprehend the present by splitting it into instants, forever separates art from the continuity of the real; unity is outside time. *82*

Hodgins' attitude to time is not utilitarian, because he paints out of his immersion in time *83* not from a consciousness of it. As such, he always moves with the present, making his paintings according to ongoing contextual demands. One of these is the reflection of the demands "of varying conceptions of time [in a work" *84*. Hodgins shows a heightened sensitivity concerning the way in which our perception of time may affect our processing of images. He says of #News out of Weimar (1985) that:

> ... it is [his emphasis] a 'rehashing' of so many memories of my reading about Weimar, looking at Weimar (not quite old enough to have been there) but at the same time I wanted to make a painting which was of the eighties. So the material is strictly sixty years old but the painting, I hope is not. [Two-Way Traffic, p. 288]

> ... if "your heart lights up when you see those forms of Giotto ... If you quote them as experience [of responding to them as images] they won't come out as grotesque but as your 'own'. [New Works, 1986 p. 202]

Unlike Hodgins, most people are not so 'in-tune', as it were, with time. Josopovici suggests:

> Although we are completely subject to time, we are completely unaware of time ... On the one hand part of us wants to keep at bay the recognition of time passing, since that would entail a recognition of our own eventual death ... *85*

Josopovici suggests that activities, such as reading, writing, "looking at pictures or listening to music" help us fill our days.

> These activities follow one another in time but also help us to pass the time - help us that is, to ignore time ... *86*

In #News out of Weimar, Hodgins' bridges the time-gap, existing between his own experience of contemporary South African history events and Weimar, through the lens of an image contextually rooted in Weimar. This is really a situation of history 'repeating itself' through the painting medium. Or perhaps Hodgins is seeing and experiencing Weimar through the lens of his own turbulent times? The connective links go in more than one direction. Although, in #News out of Weimar, Hodgins is repeating images derived from Weimar artists such as Grosz and Beckmann, which were originally responses to their period, he repeats these images and re-makes them as his 'own', in relation to his own times and experiences. He verbally stresses the importance of these sources in the genesis and germination of images, such as #News out of Weimar, even

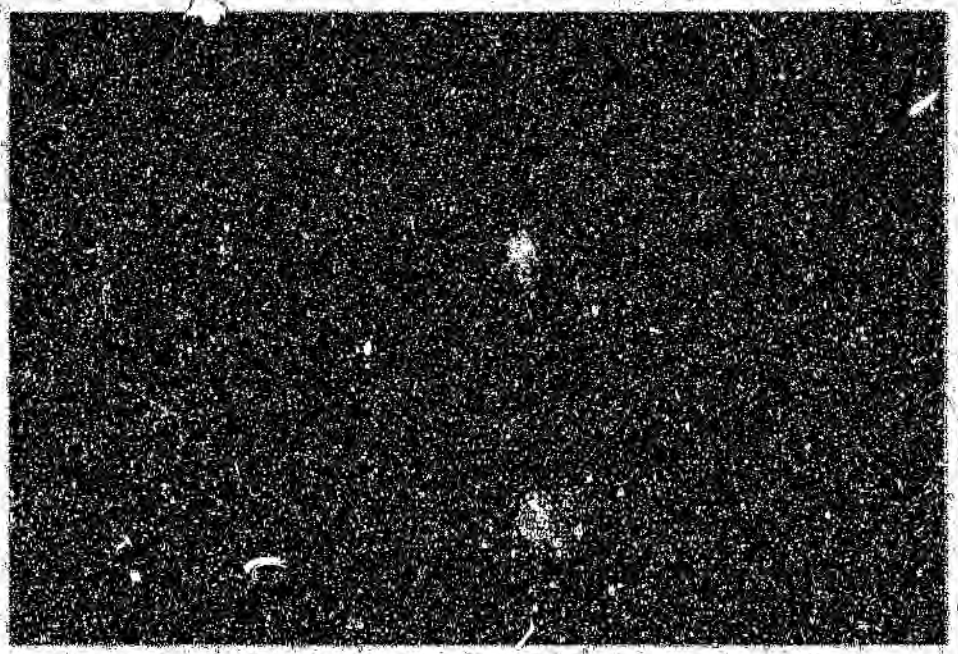


FIGURE 15 : Five Rude Gestures (1985)
Robert Hodgins.

if these influences have become woven into the textual fabric of the work.

Memory is a 'filter' mediating images through time rather than in time *87*, so that the repetition transcends a specific time and place, becoming ensconced in the present, in a given painting. His selection, even of a gun, is transformed and transfigured through memory in #Five Rude Gestures, a painting which ultimately has very little to do with that specific afternoon spent with the gun manual. The 'original' idea has become subsumed within the greater context of the painting. It is more likely that the viewer will make connections between the gun and other images of guns which exist in books and magazines.

In fact, it is interesting to note at this point how rich Hodgins' images are in evoking other images which he may not have made. In Two-Way Traffic, the range of images which Powell selected, which in juxtaposition to Hodgins' paintings looked like 'obvious' sources for Hodgins' works, was astonishing. As far as Hodgins was concerned, he had not been 'aware' or 'conscious' of certain images when he made his paintings. At the same time, what was also apparent from the images as they flashed simultaneously onto twin screens, was how 'original' Hodgins' paintings looked - despite the

similarities between Hodgins' images and the other sources. What is interesting is that the repeated image, in Hodgins' work, becomes an image which is ultimately a very personal and original one - at once recognizable as a familiar object, like a gun, and yet at the same time like no other gun we have ever seen before.

Kawin in his own definition of repetition says that it proceeds from a basic need, in that repetition "has rhythmic sympathy with the way we function" *88* and, because of this, it is not "exhaustible" *89*. Novelty, on the other hand, "is exhaustible" and "the search for novelty leads to boredom" *90*. Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, noted that "Novelty is always the condition of enjoyment" *91*. Yet he observes that children will demand to hear the same story over and over again, or to play the same game repeatedly *92*. "Repetition" which Freud calls, "the re-experiencing of something identical", is according to him "clearly, in itself, a "source of pleasure" *93*.

Hodgins does not search for novelty, in fact he repeatedly embraces the same kinds of images and sources. Because he loves quotation, loves knowing the sources of images, and because of the enjoyment of the process of continuity he repeats and re-establishes them in his paintings in ever new contexts. Repetition is a source of pleasure for him. Hodgins uses repetition ala

Kawin "to punctuate, create or transfigure time" rather than "to negate time" *94*.

The same kind of bureaucratic Civil Servants *95* or slightly comical villains, in various guises (as Ubu, as politicians, as wicked man, as gap toothed assassins *96*) appears over and over again. Hodgins repeatedly employs human types, often comic and tragic, both victims and oppressors (like #La Lamballe and the Ubu series). Hodgins never tires of the ubiquitous little grey man who pops up so often in his paintings wearing a little necktie and pens in the pocket, the figure of civil servant, the interrogator or the paid assassin. In each new rendition of such images he seems afresh to be intrigued by the comic aspect of the little creatures who inhabit this world. In fact the 'ordinary-ness' of many of his images, because they are not novel, gives them their potency.

Something which is repeated continuously, like a religious chant, often loses its specific terms of reference *97*. By drawing images over and over again, Hodgins has often transcended many of the specific contextual references with which these objects are usually associated. Also, when the overt associations of images become attenuated through repetition, they lose their accessibility as language. Certain instances

of repetition in Hodgins' painting evoke what may only be described (I borrow from Josopovici) as a "silence" *98*.

This 'silence' is impossible verbally to describe, just as it is impossible to express why a religious chant, or piece of music may move us, even if the contextual aspect of meaning is unknown to us. The mystery and magic of repetition as a ritual is often felt in Hodgins' repeated images, which defy merely literal interpretation.

What I have chosen to refer to as the 'silence of his painting', is what Hodgins calls the "stuff" that cannot be seen, but the presence of which may be 'felt' or sensed. This links back to his love of palimpsest. The thoughts, the foundational probings which have either entirely been painted out, or which are there only as faint tracings, contribute to its 'aura'. Repetition can never be a "pure repetition" *99*, unmodified by subsequent events. We cannot simply "utter it" again but we can "utter around it" *100*.

Repetition in this sense is, for Hodgins, part of the magical ritual of painting, giving it ineffable dimensions which he himself cannot entirely fathom.

Hodgins loves serialism, for example the serial repetition of a similar image, often in a horizontal format, or as in paintings such as Civil Servants, the heads of the "little grey men" have almost lost their literal reference to workers *101*. They have become transformed through the painting process, not dissimilar to the way in which they have probably become mutated through, and by, the society that shapes them. In Hodgins' painting they become akin to a piece of rhyming poetry, in that their impact is no longer dependent on who they are. The repeated shapes of their strange little bodies, the line of their funny little ties, sets up a visual structure which is almost autonomous, in that it is the regularity and similarity of the shapes which become engaging, rather than their references to external context.

Hodgins has used many analogies about the 'right-ness' of a painting. He says that what he is trying to do in his painting is like lichen on a rock. Lichen, occurring naturally on a rock in the veld, looks 'right'. Lichen which has been scraped off and applied to a brick does not look 'right'. [Recent [illegible] 1987, p. 229]

Some of his most engaging paintings are those which are a re-hashing and repeating of a whole lot of images and ideas which he has used in many previous works. These

images are anything but exhaustible. When all the sources and influences have been assimilated the painting must be 'right'.

Experiences of reading and dreaming, even remote historical events, may be as intense an experience as actually being physically witness to them. Images are not only repeated in paintings, but are re-worked through Hodgins' experiences of memory or of dreaming:

> [One is always] ... visually experiencing 'time'. The only time you're not is, when you're sleeping and not dreaming, which is not very often. In dreams visions come up which are deeply experienced and useful.
> [New Works, 1986, p. 202]

I suggest that Hodgins extends the visual into the verbal, as a means, not only of integrating present with past but also as a means of affirming his role as self conscious historical mediator, in the wider sense discussed previously. For an 'historical mediator', the repetition of an 'original' idea is transformed and re-experienced in a fresh context. Images are thus processed twice: once through history, in the wider sense, and again through repetition by Hodgins' in the painting process.

Quite apart from intentionality, because an artist's experience is unconsciously embodied in the substance of

art, painting is always a kind of portrait of the artist. When one is looking at a Rauschenberg painting, Hodgins says, one is saying:

> "... look, these things - street signs, pictures of Kennedy, the Sistine Chapel, all these things exist in this one painting because they exist in one man's head. In a way the things which exist in one man's head are that man himself." When you're looking at that painting, you're really looking at a portrait of Rauschenberg and from that you can deduce whether the man and mind is interesting enough for you to be interested enough in further aspects of that painting. [New Works, 1986, p. 203]

Engagement with a painting is also an engagement with the time period during which the artist worked on it. If paintings are portraits, they are also 'portraits' in some degree of the artist's temporal content. But, portraits in the tradicional sense of the word are often attempts at simulating 'reality', and as such may become 'repetitive' and even boring *102*. As Kawin says:

> Repetition without insight or excitement creates ennui, takes the life out of living, and cannot cause us pain. *103*

In this sense, Hodgins' use of repetition is definitely one that can cause us, as they cause him, pain. He does not insulate his images within the secure frame of reference of the familiar. His paintings, as portraits, are not just a transfiguration of ideas, but also the the re-living and re-experiencing of those ideas in the

Hodgins believes that Dali, whom Hodgins does not admire very much, said one important thing: that whatever we, as artists do, or think, we cannot escape the fact that we are of our time, are very much a product of, in this instance, the twentieth Century *104*. Matisse took a similar view: " ... whether we want to or not, we belong to our time, and we share in its opinions, preferences, and delusions ." *105*

Hodgins, talking about art in general, and his art in particular, always seems to re-affirm this position. He is always standing with a certain amount of uneasiness in the face of his time: at once a product and also an opponent of that time. He has to follow time to an extent, because he is trapped like everyone else, within it. Kawin says that the fact -

> That we are always dying is the tyranny of the present tense. Personal memory does not, any more than art of children, keep us alive. The answer time offers us, and the gift of the present tense, is that we are always living. It is entirely up to us whether our time is always ending or always beginning. *106*

Hodgins' time, as mediated in his paintings, is always fresh, always beginning and exciting, even if the idea or motivating history is 'old'.

Hodgins is haunted by the contradictions of the world. He says he is unable to enjoy the smell of lime trees, without also seeing a beggar with sores on his feet [Powell, Weekly Mail, May-June 1986, p. 21]. The Eighties were, for him, a perpetual source of mystery, and he finds it increasingly difficult to accept the fact that there are things like roses, alongside all the murder and massacre which takes place universally *107*. How, he asks, "can the same species that produced Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and [Picasso's] Guernica" also "produce the concentration camps"? *108*. It is all "a mystery" to him, which, he says he does not "know how to get past" *109*. But he concedes it is this very mystery and complexity, that is partly his subject matter, and that he has an "applied compassion for man." *110*

His own sense is one of being at once repelled and attracted, compelled and repulsed by images around him, feeling at once familiar, close, and yet alien and mystified by everything, is transmitted to the viewer, who is buffeted between these dialectical poles. Just when the roses are foregrounded, and images are comfortable and pleasant, a leper leaps out at one. Hodgins, like Bacon, is so fond of doing, of making use of beautiful sensuous oil paint, almost caressing it onto surfaces which deal with horror and violence. #Married Love (1990), which is about the potential

brutality of relationships, paradoxically contains som
of the most 'beautiful' pieces of painting: lasciou
fleshy pink which to borrow from Max Kozlov writin
about Bacon, "alienates by its freakish narcissism
111. Hodgins' joy of taking a brush loaded wit
paint, and go ily flicking it across the surface ca
almost be re-experienced by the viewer, and yet th
viewer remains aware of the brutality of the figure
involved in physical and emotional combat. The fleshy
beautiful paint in #Married Love adds to the puzzle (o
the painting) instead of providing a clue to it
meaning. [New Work, 1990, p. 269]. The immediacy of th
oil paint, lovingly applied, conflicts with the growin
sense of horror of the images. And yet as th
physicality of the paint repeatedly asserts: it is onl
a painting.

Hodgins in his most recent exhibition, New Work, 1990
exhibited, as he put it; "a very beautiful pair o
nudes" [New Work, 1990, pp. 267-8 (#A Female Nude an
#A Naked Man both 1990)]. He had not originally set ou
to make these "beautiful paintings" [New Works, 1990
pp. 267-9], which are about sensuous flesh communicate
through a subtle palette of fleshy pinks. Hodgins almos
sounds as if he feels guilty at having produced such
'indulgent' paintings *112*. He seems almost to b
appalled by and uneasy at the sheer beauty of th
medium, which as it were, 'took over'.

process of making works: the struggle of the moment of making a given painterly mark, in relation to all other marks on the canvas.

Time is much more than a merely linear experience for Hodgins. The experience of time is replete with 'insight', which imbues the paintings borne out of it. Thus the works never have a merely routine impact. As Powell remarked:

> Hodgins remains a 'difficult' artist. Little concession is made to the viewer's expectations and habits of mind and of style ... Indeed it is often as though Hodgins goes out of his way to chase off all but the most serious of viewers. [Weekly Mail, 1990. p. 21]

Hodgins is aware that the artist's circumstances are always changing, and as such, paintings, even if they are derived from previous images, will always be original in their moment, and must be contemplated by the viewer as new, fresh images. Just because an image is repeated, does not mean that one's engagement with the painting as a viewer is easier. In fact, often the viewer expects a newly encountered Hodgins image to be an 'easy' engagement, but finds instead that Hodgins has made an image with a range of fresh associations, and reverberations. There is in Hodgins' work, the implicit recognition that one can only be of a given moment, even given the debt of that moment to past experience.

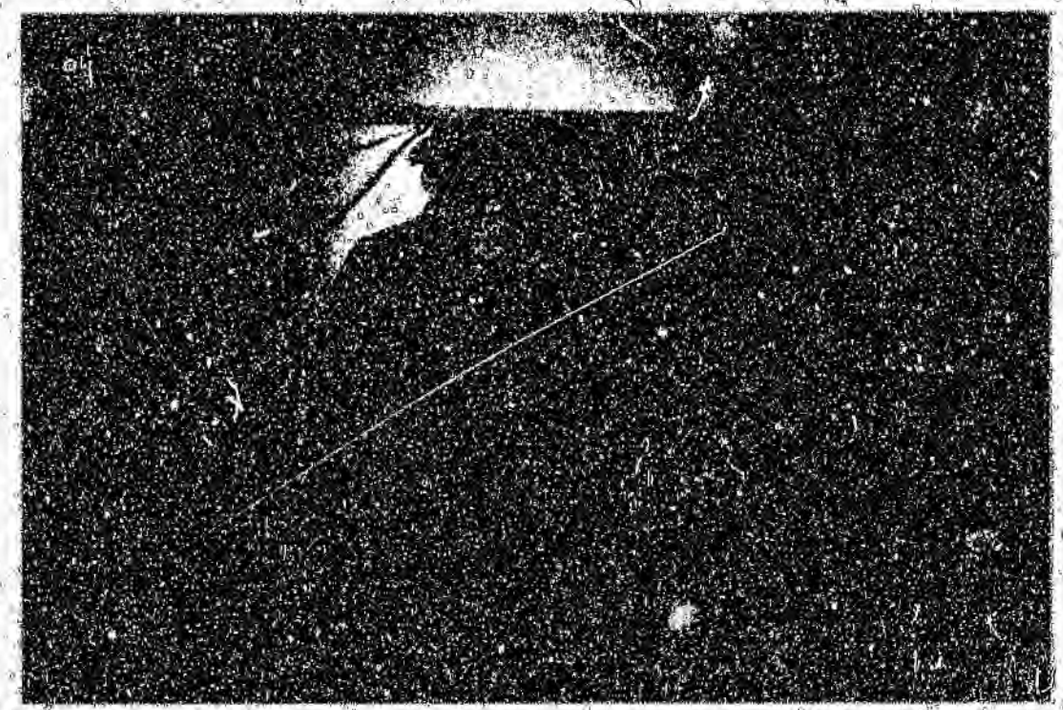


FIGURE 16 : Married Love (1990)
Robert Hodgins.



FIGURE 17 : Family, Radio & T.V. (1990)
Robert Hodgins.

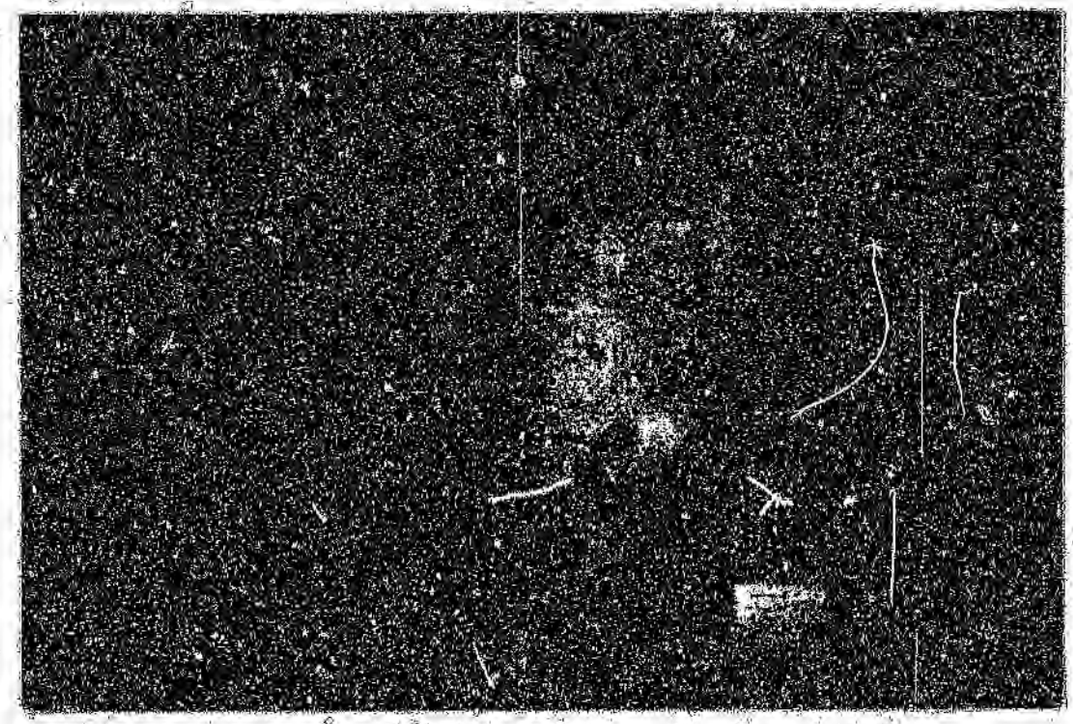


FIGURE 18 : A Female Nude (1990)
Robert Hodgins.

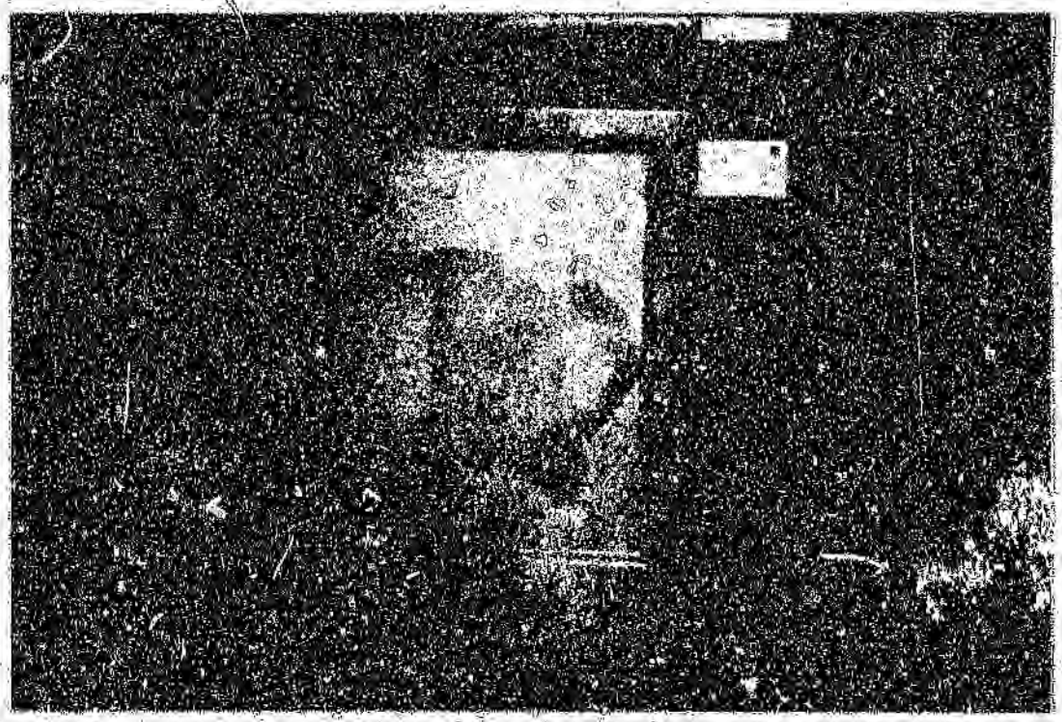


FIGURE 19 : A Naked Man (1990)
Robert Hodgins.

Similarly in #Family, Radio & T.V. (1990), a fat, rather shapeless lady in her fluffy orange "pantoffels" (fluffy slippers), is huddled together with an equally shapeless, nondescript man, together with their little boy who "somehow got into a business suit" [New Work, 1990, p. 256]. The mass of shapeless and thought-less bodies is "gazing at this mad kind of space" of the television set [New Work, 1990, p. 255]. In this evocation of the 'emptiness' of the vacant mind of the family, who stares blankly at the box, the colour is richly evocative through an enormous, glowing, range from "raw burnt siennas to crimson" and emerald green [New Work, 1990, p. 256]. The velvety application of the paint conjures up a sense of a glorious sunset, where colours become magical and glowing in the changing light conditions which are neither day or night, but a combination of both.

Hodgins, discussing Family, Radio & T.V., and A Female Nude and A Naked man [New Work, 1990, pp. 267-9], is at once intrigued by the beauty of the painting medium which he loves so much, and yet also uneasy - distrusting his own enjoyment of, and pleasure in the medium, particularly when discussing the 'beautiful nudes'.

The 'beautiful nudes' began as two very simple, almost featureless figures, not unlike some of Hodgins' early

1950's crude wire and string figures - figures almost without an identity. In one sense the figures in Hodgins' recent paintings (in Family, Radio and in the 'beautiful nudes') also bear traces of Hodgins' early 1950's lump-like figures. The figured of the 1990's are then formal 'repeat images' of earlier images. Their origins are contained and may be traced in early Hodgins works but through the use of the paint medium (by a 1990's Hodgins) they have been transformed into something totally new. Some further examination of this thread in his work can now be undertaken.

/6. Golden Lads and Girls ..



FIGURE 20 : The Nude Warrior (1958)
Robert Hodgins.

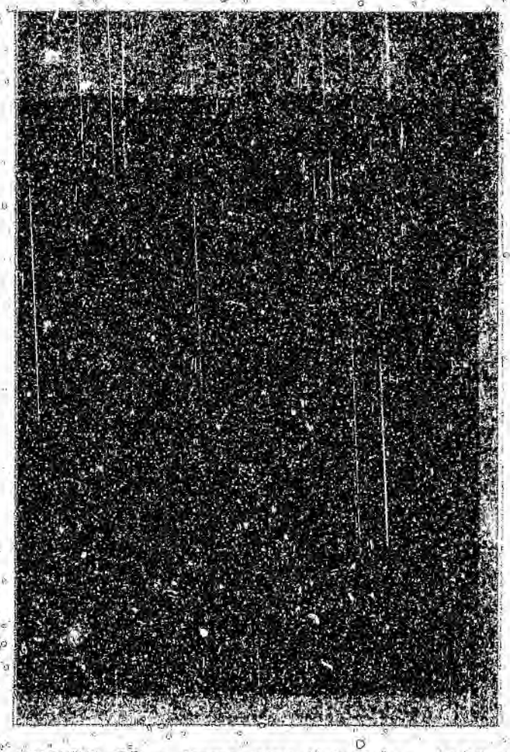


FIGURE 21 : Dame aux Camelias (1958)
Robert Hodgins.

6. Golden Lads and Girls: a reincarnation in 1990

In the 'beautiful nudes' of Hodgins' 1990 exhibition, the artist has returned, in what Josopovici might describe as a spiral-like *113* motion (rather than full-circle) to images of idealised, golden youths, whose bodies are shown as beautiful, and classically formal, in early paintings such as #The Nude Warrior (1958, Images A10), Torso (1960, Images A16) and #Dame aux Camelias (1958, Images A9).

In #The Golden Lads & Girls (1985, Images C24), Hodgins has, he claims, quoted himself as the young painter who once painted beautiful, classically balanced torsos, and nude warriors. In the 1950's and 1960's he had painted for the hedonists. By 1985, he could no longer do so, because he was no longer the young, naive painter who thought life was about beautiful women [New Works, 1986, pp. 213, 222; New Work, 1990, p. 243; Two-Way Traffic, p. 279]. The lepers with sores have invaded the garden of roses. Beauty could no longer exist as 'pure beauty' in his paintings.

In #The Golden Lads & Girls, two groups of girls and lads sit facing the viewer:- except that these girls and boys are no longer young, and nor is the rather decrepit, sleazy amusement arcade they sit in.

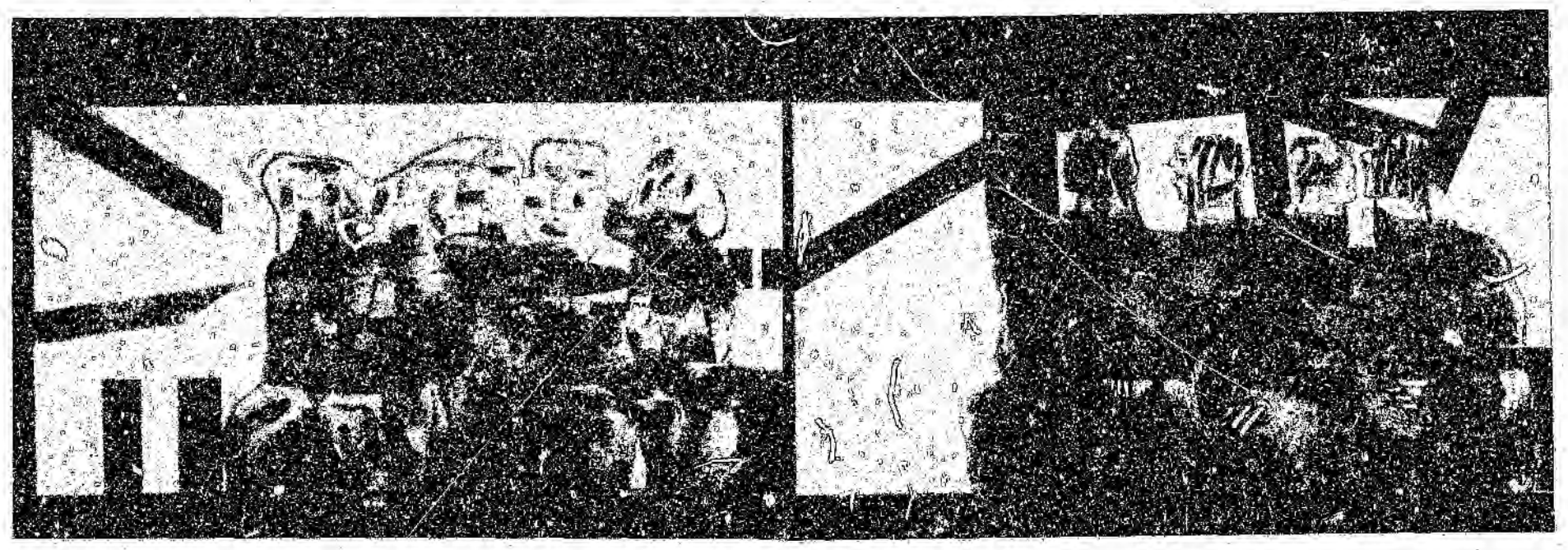


FIGURE 22 : **Golden Lads & Girls** (1985)
Robert Hodgins.

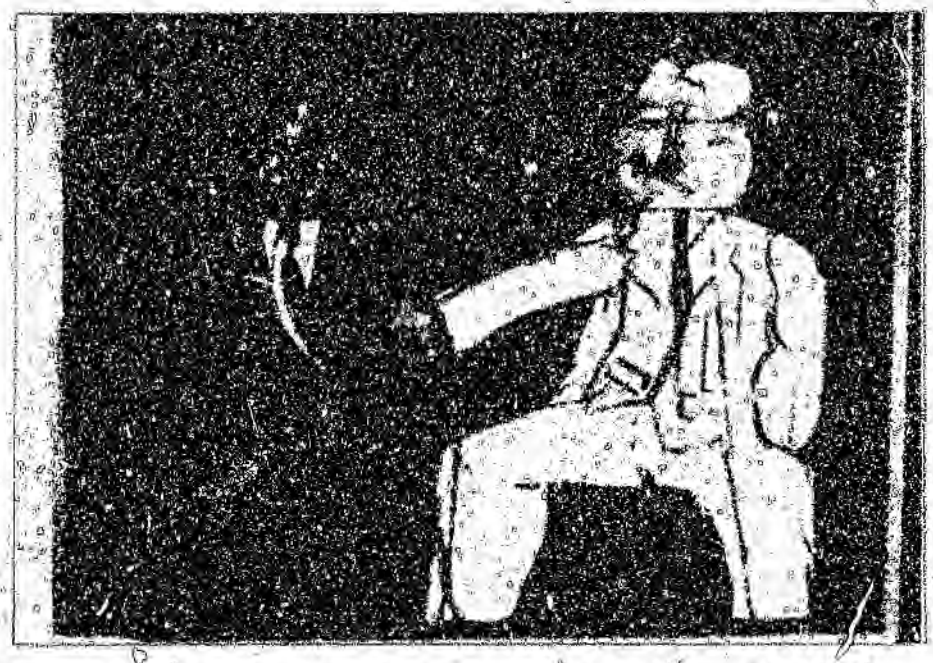


FIGURE 25 : Ubu and the Black Politician (1983)
Robert Hodgins.



FIGURE 26 : Oh Oh Oh She Cried With a Cracked Voice (1983-84)
Robert Hodgins.

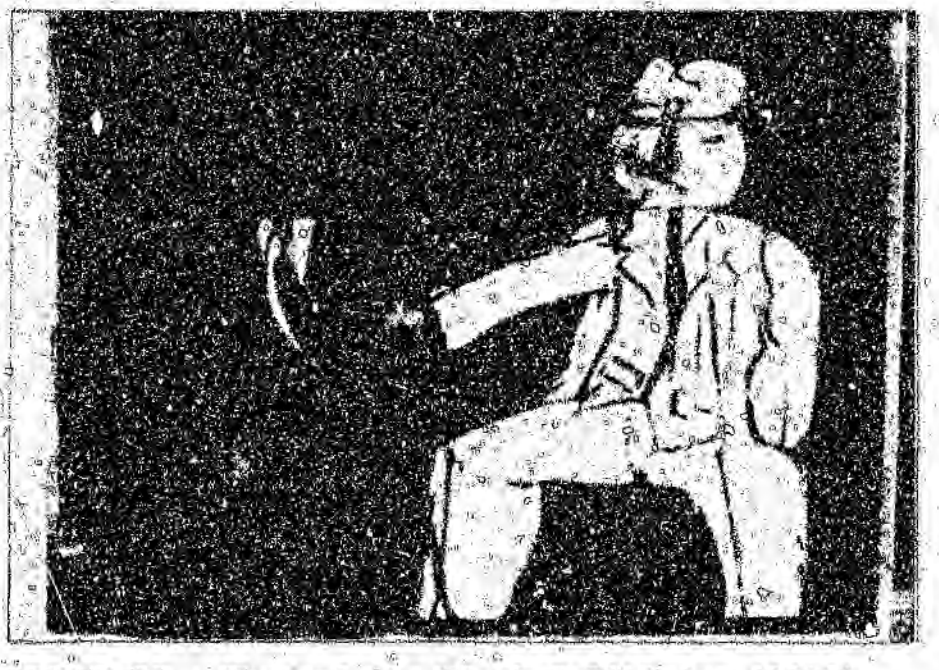


FIGURE 25 : Ubu and the Black Politician (1983)
Robert Hodgins.

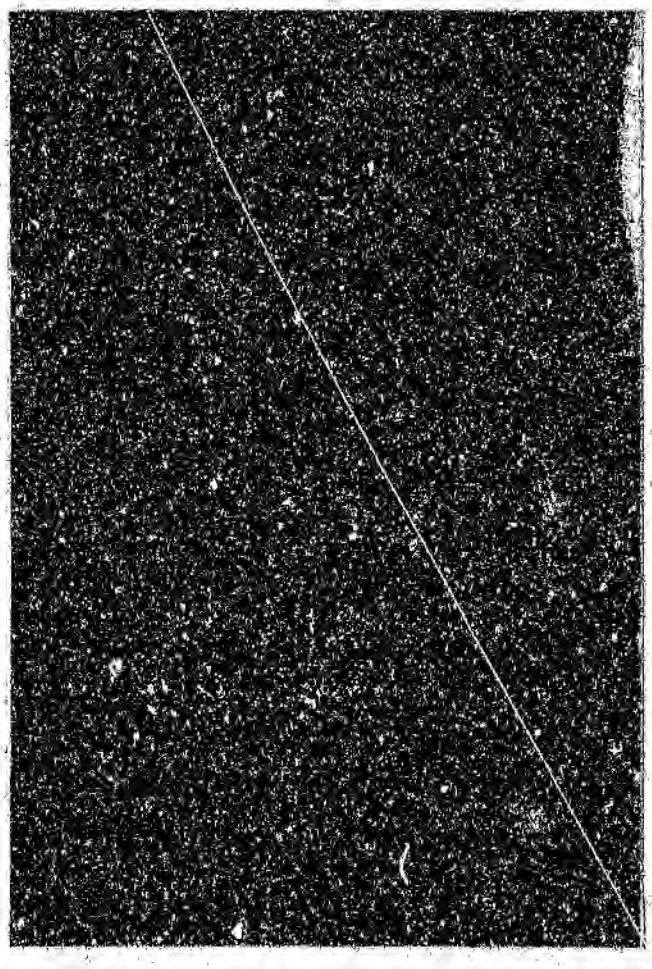


FIGURE 26 : Oh Oh Oh She Cried With a Cracked Voice (1983-84)
Robert Hodgins.

maimed, and neither fully human nor completely animal: a terrifying evocation of a being trapped in a barren, urban landscape, punctuated only by a few removal vans and mine dumps. Hodgins often bandages hands of figures. Fingers are left missing from hands, indicating that they have been dismembered or amputated. Limbs in various paintings, such as Ubu's hand in #Ubu and the Black Politician (both versions, 1981-83), end in an amputee's stump. These figures' bodies have become fragmented, perhaps through war or violence in the street, as in #Oh Oh Oh she Cried a Cracked Voice (1983-84, Images C10), and Downtown (1990).

The knowledge of Hodgins' early 'beautiful nudes', who existed as 'whole', carefully proportioned, figures, unravaged by time or the passage of tory, enriches the viewer's experience of such paint . as #The Golden Lads & Girls. The works are concerned not only with ageing flesh, but also with commenting on Hodgins' original concern with with tradicional and idealised art school nudes.

The works, #Durban Apollo (c.1970, Images A26) and #Beach Scene (1990) make further mocking or parodying reference to Hodgins' earlier young, virile, posture perfect, contraposto figures of his 1950's paintings. The #Durban Apollo, with his sagging flesh, is no longer

the young boy he must once have been. The drooping bodies of the old men in #Beach Scene, are almost crudely compressed within the confines of the picture format like squashed effigies.

Whereas the context of the 'lads and girls' is a sleazy arcade, the emphasis of the 'beautiful nudes', on Hodgins' most recent show, is the bodies of the figures. Hodgins is once again, 'allowing' himself to make paintings which foreground the enjoyment of paint, the putting down of fleshy pinks on a canvas. He insists that he does not know how these fleshy pink paintings came about [New Work, 1990, p. 267-9]. He himself, is perplexed and even 'apalled' at their re-emergence. [New Work, 1990, p. 268]

For me, these 'beautiful nudes' are significant, in that they indicate Hodgins' on-going love of the process of painting, which sometimes does manifest itself in images which are 'about' paint, more than anything else. These fleshy nude figures make 'delicious' shapes against the creamy emerald ground. They exist as forms in a space, interacting with the context of the canvas.

The context of these works, on exhibition, hanging as they did next to an evil looking, gap toothed #Assassin from Tennessee (1990), ensured that they were not perceived merely as beautiful objects. The 'assassin',

These once 'golden lads and girls' have become flaccid and fleshy. Their body contours merge into one another. Limits of form have been largely disregarded by Hodgins. It is difficult to discern which head belongs to which body. Limbs do not necessarily match up 'correctly'. Forms liquidly become other shapes even as the viewer attempts to perceive them. The faces of the 'girls' are like fishbowls containing little fish-like eyes which swim around. The heads of the 'boys' are helmet-like contraptions concealing their features. Hodgins' use of helmets and skulls is similarly ubiquitous. Skulls *114*, he says "are heads without being heads. They have expressions without having expressions" [Recent Works, 1987, p. 236]. The heads of the 'golden boys' are heads without being 'real' heads. These helmet-like contraptions conceal features of the human skull becoming cages, buttressing and containing the heads. The 'original' faces have become transformed by Hodgins into very personal, invented images which bear little semblance to 'real' heads and yet remain readable as head-like appendages.

The fragmentation *115* of the forms in this painting, is not unlike that which occurs in #Uba's Adolescence (1983-86), where the "bottom female figure turns into a bowl of fruit" or "an assembly of disused parts" which

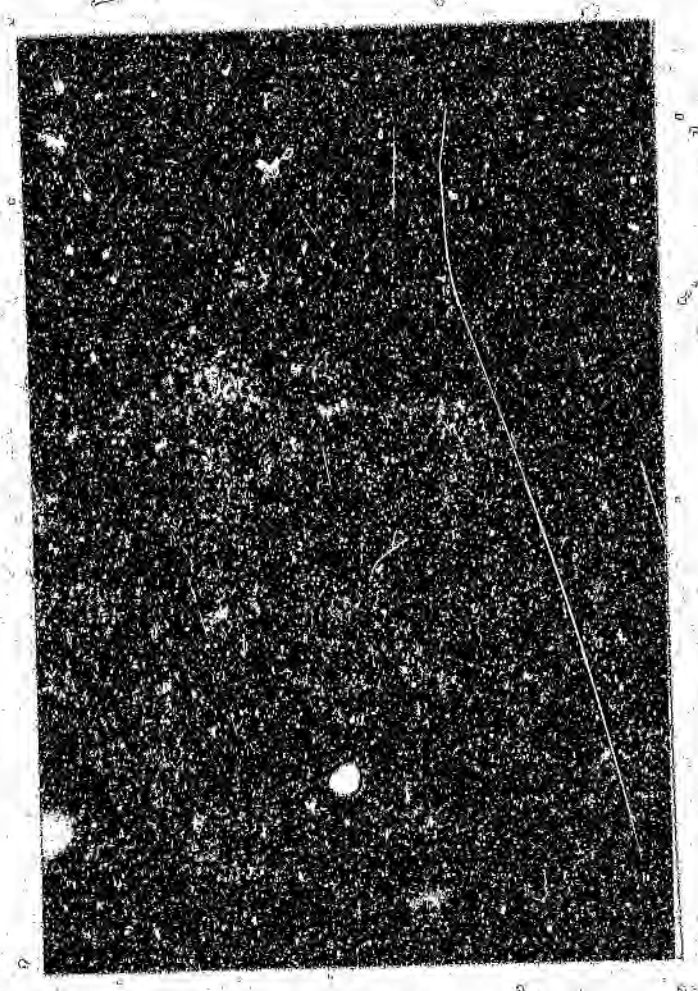


FIGURE 23 : Ubu's Adolescence
(1983-86)
Robert Hodgins.

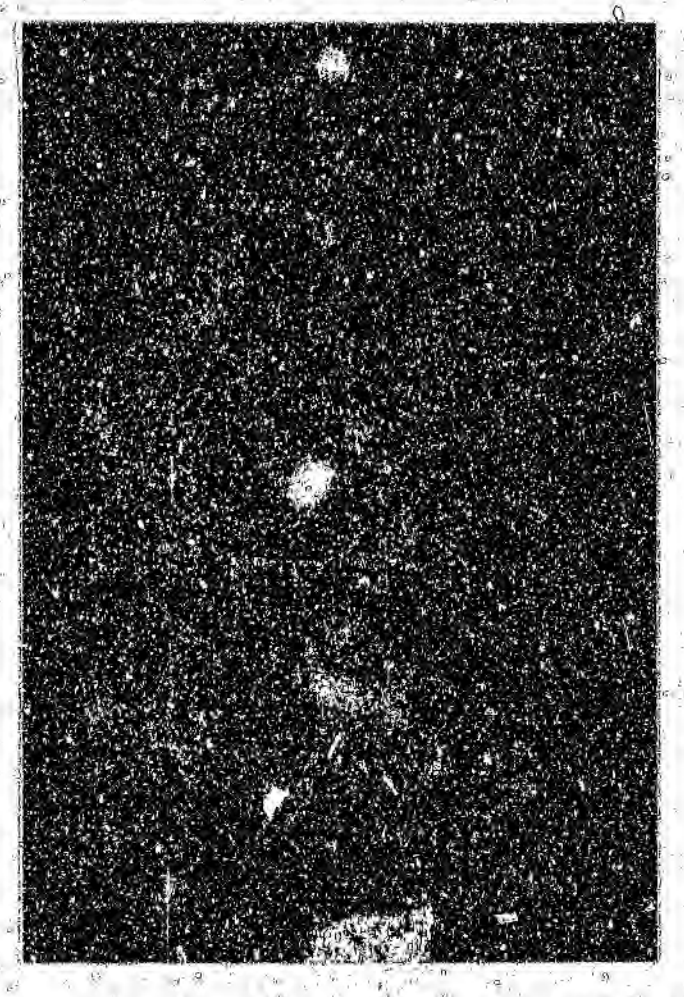


FIGURE 24 : Desire - Central Panel of The Triple Gates of Hell
(1985-86)
Robert Hodgins.

bear little semblance to an Ingres reclining nude, on which it is, in part, based (Two-Way Traffic, p. 285-6).

Jasper Johns says that when one is faced with a

> ... broken representation of the human physique... it's upsetting or provokes reactions that one can't quite account for. *116*

Ones' image of one's own body is disturbed by such mutilation and fragmentation. Critics such as Peter Fuller, in Art and Psychoanalysis *117*, contend that because we share a "common physical condition" with the (ancient) Greeks for example, we may engage with remnants of their sculptures because we access these fragments through "potentialities of human experience" *118*.

Certainly, the uneasy sense evoked by Hodgins' 'golden lads and girls', is partly to do with our relationship with our own bodies, a common frame of reference which must be disturbed by Hodgins' treatment of these aging beach bums. Similarly, in the central panel of the The Triple Gates of Hell (1985-86, Images C31), the ageing figure of #Desire is propped up by a crutch. She can no longer physically support her decaying body, even with the help of her cosmetics which are reflected in the mirror behind her, in a dazzling reference to early Miro. The Beast in #The Beast Slouches, has a prosthetic leg. Another limb is wounded and bandaged *119*. He is



FIGURE 27 : Durban Apollo (c. 1970)
Robert Hodgins.

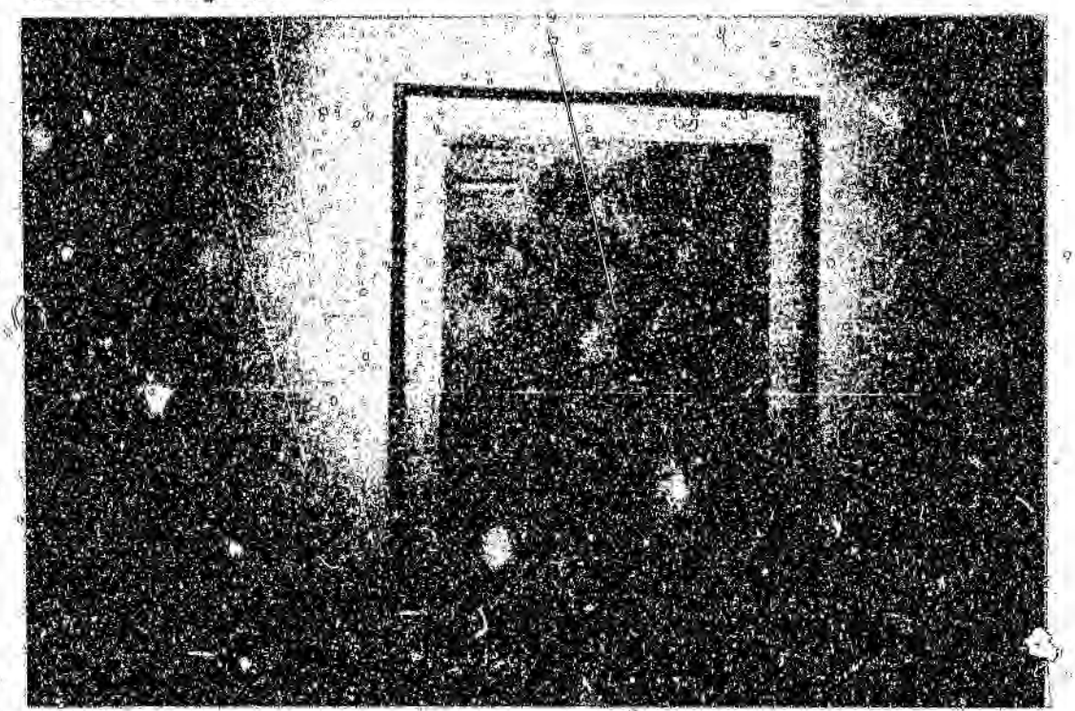


FIGURE 28 : Beach Scene (c. 1990)
Robert Hodgins.

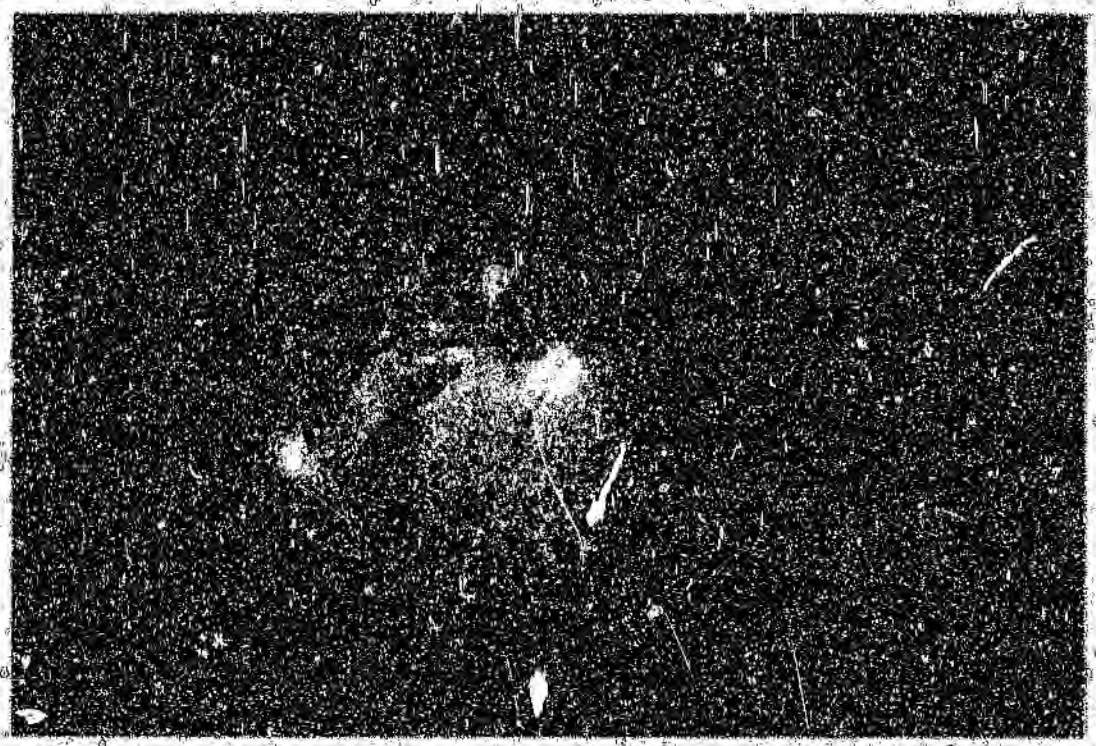


FIGURE 29 : Assassin from Tennessee (1990)
Robert Hodgins.

on the exhibition seemed almost to be leering and lusting after these (beautiful nude) images. The exhibition context thus informed the way in which those images were to be read, and in effect fused the traditional boundaries between object and viewer: the viewer does not merely confront a painting - viewer and painting become participants in a shared journey.

What Josopovici wrote in The Lessons of Modernism about writers, could equally be applied to painting and painters. Josopovici writes:

> The motion of the spiral implies the recognition by the writer of the importance of his [her] life and in the life of the work of the process of creation itself. The act and the time of writing are no longer hidden or repressed, but allowed out into the open, made part of the substance of the work. As a result the traditional relations between form and content, background and foreground, word and object, disappear, and the act of reading, like the act of writing, becomes an adventure, part quest, part prayer. *120*

Hodgins' 1990 exhibition reveals Hodgins (to borrow again from Josopovici) as 'gymnast' *121*, contorting himself in many directions at once, through his web of paintings. He is scavenger, recalling and repeating old images, finding new images, connecting and threading all sorts of things together. History, in the form of

painterly, beautiful nudes, is allowed to repeat itself as naturally as assassins are allowed to leer over them.

For Hodgins' 'repetition' is Janus-faced #122* - both a revealer and concealer, both immediate and distant, not 'mere' repetition, but also 'original'.

/7. Notes to Chapter 1 ...

7. Notes to Chapter 1: Robert Hodgins

Subsection 1:- Hodgins speaks: a starting point

1. The extent to which consideration should be given to an artist's own thoughts about his/her art making is debatable. After all, so the formalist argument goes, it is the painting before you which is of interest and not what the artist thinks which is important. I do not subscribe to a formalist view.

2. Critical essays often end up as mouth-pieces for Hodgins. He is so articulate and interesting that he can almost mesmerise and strip away the listener's critical faculties by luring him/her into his web of wonderful stories. It is easy with Hodgins to end up writing what Hodgins thinks and not what one may think of Hodgins' paintings or thoughts about his painting.

3. An example of Hodgins' way of 're-writing his story' is when he speaks of making things up. Ivor Powell in his article on Hodgins, "Last night's dream on canvas", relates how when he "first mooted the idea of an interview, Hodgins' immediate response was to suggest", that he, [Powell] should just make up Hodgins' parts and let him [Hodgins] "get on with framing his pictures for the exhibition" (My emph. sis). See: Weekly Mail, May 30 to June 5, 1986, p. 21.

4. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller - Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov", in Illuminations, Arendt (ed.), Jonathan Cape, 1970, pp. 83-4.

5. Ibid., p. 86.

6. Ibid.

7. New Work, 1990, pp. 258, 260.

8. New Work, 1990, pp. 261, 267-9, 273.

Subsection 2 :- Hodgins talks about theory

9. New Works, 1985, pp. 199, 209.

10. Noland (b. 1924) and Kelly (b. 1923) are contemporaries of Hodgins.

11. Barbara Tudman, "Ubu: the heart of his art", Rand Daily Mail, October 20, 1984, p. 9.

12. Hodgins' Ubu was derived from Alfred Jarry's literary invention of the same name. Jarry published the first of his three plays with Ubu as protagonist in 1906. The three plays in the series are: Ubu Rex, Ubu Cuckolded and Ubu Enchained.

Hodgins says that Jarry wrote the first Ubu play when he (Jarry) was still a schoolboy. According to Hodgins, Jarry hated his science master and modelled Ubu on him.

According to Hodgins, Jarry's Ubu is a character with the capacity to do tremendous evil and yet this is often concealed by his comical and physical guise. Hodgins is fascinated by a modern equivalent of Ubu in the figure of Idi Amin, who was such a comical, absurd figure, draped in medals, a feature of his character which in a sense distracted the viewer's attention from the man's evil nature."

Some specific references where Hodgins discusses Ubu are: New Works, 1986, pp. 218, 220, 221; Two-Way Traffic pp. 280, 282, 285-8; Ludman, "Ubu: the heart of his art", Rand Daily Mail October 20, 1984, p. 9; and in Powell's, Rankin's and Arnold's essays in Images catalogue.

Most of Hodgins' Ubu paintings are listed in the Images catalogue under Section B, Ubu Series.

It is interesting to note from the Images catalogue that there are two Hodgins works both titled General Ubu and both apparently made in 1960. They are marked A18 and A21. Hodgins apparently only gave these two works their titles when mounting his 1986 Images exhibition. It is significant that although these works bear the name Ubu they are not included in Section B listing the Ubu series. The 1960 Ubu works are quite different to General Ubu of 1983 (Images B16).

13. Barbara Ludman, "Ubu: the heart of his art", Rand Daily Mail, October 20, 1984, p. 9.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Chambers 20th Century Dictionary (New Edition), edited by E. M. Kirkpatrick, Great Britain: The Chaucer Press, 1983, p. 415.

17. New Work, 1990, p. 273.

18. Private conversations with Hodgins.

19. Recent Works, 1987, p. 209; New Work, 1990, pp. 253-4, 259, 260, 261.

20. New Work, 1990, pp. 245-6, 250.

21. New Works, 1986, p. 272.

22. This was Hodgins' April 1990 New Work exhibition held at the Goodman Gallery, Hyde Park, Johannesburg.

23. Interviews with Francis Bacon: 1962-1979, Thames and Hudson, 1980.

24. Excerpts from an interview with David Sylvester, taken from the Sunday Times Magazine, 14 July 1963, pp. 13-18; quoted in Chipp (ed.) Theories of Modern Art: A source book of Artists and Critics, University of California Press, 1968, Section IX - Contemporary Art, p.621.

25. Barbara Ludman, "Ubu: the heart of his art", Rand Daily Mail, October 20, 1984, p. 9.

26. Lipman and Marshall's book Art about Art, Dutton, 1978 was written to accompany a 1978 exhibition of the same name held in America. They define 'art about art' as a theme used particularly by post 1945 American artists who make the subject of art central to their work.

Marshall and Lipman make a distinction between these contemporary American artists and other artists throughout history who have always borrowed from other art in some form. The American artist borrowings are much more obvious: "a recognisable, unblatant, element, of the composition" (preface, p.7). It is in this sense that I refer to 'art about art'.

27. New Works, 1986, pp. 199, 205; New Work, 1990, pp. 245, 247, 249, 258, 277.

Subsection 3:- Hodgins: self conscious mediator of history

28. By this I mean Hodgins' personal history as well as the branch of knowledge that records and analyses past events.

29. Ivor Powell, 'Last night's dream on canvas', Weekly Mail, May 30 to June 5, 1986, p. 21.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. The Weimar period signifies the years between the end of the First World War in 1918 and Hitler's coming to power in 1933. The Weimar Republic was the German Republic founded in 1919 by a constitutional assembly and dissolved in 1933.

33. New Works, 1986, p. 206.

34. Ivor Powell, Images.

35. The English Auden, edited by Edward Mendelson, London, Faber and Faber, 1977, p. 212.

Hodgins has used some poetic license and misquoted Auden in New Works, 1986, p. 205.

36. New Works, 1986, p. 206.

37. New Works, 1986, pp. 206-7.

38. In Two-Way Traffic p. 285, Hodgins and Powell used Picasso's Aubade (1942, Museum of Modern Art, Paris) as a comparison with the reclining figure in Hodgins' Lineaments of Gratified Desire (1985, Images C14).

39. In Two-Way Traffic (p. 279), Hodgins remarked that the manner in which he and Powell's went about selecting slide-images for the lecture was comparable to "exhumation" -

> A lot of this is exhumation. It is digging up the picture, digging up references. In one astonishing example, it wasn't until Ivor pointed it out to me that I realised I had retained an image for years and years, and quite forgotten about the 'original' image. So that, although this looks fairly rational and organised, there is a great deal to be added (which one cannot add in the lecture).

In Hodgins' work, there are not just sub-texts or secondary levels of meaning. Hodgins constantly 'invites' the viewer to actively dig deeper, and seek additional textual levels.

40. Barbara Ludman, "Ubu: the heart of his art", Rand Daily Mail, October 20, 1984, p. 9.

41. I have quoted Hodgins' words as they are set out in 4 Johannesburg Painters, a catalogue produced for an 1984-1985 travelling exhibition of the same name in

which Hodgins exhibited with Ilona Anderson, Ricky Burnett and Jo Smail. This exhibition was shown at venues in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria, Grahamstown and Bloemfontein.

There are numerous other instances of similar remarks, from Hodgins such as:

> There [is] the richness of being a human being - a member of an extraordinary species on this planet. But, you pump it in [to a painting]; you let it in. You don't bar things! [New Work, 1990, p. 257]

42. The titles of paintings such as A Wicked Man Sumptuously Attired, (1986-87) and The Hangman with the Hare Lip, (1985-86, Images C26) evoke some of Hodgins' fascination with the peculiarities and eccentricities of human physiognomy.

43. This is related by Marion Arnold in the Images catalogue.

44. Ivor Powell, "Last night's dream on canvas", Weekly Mail, May 30 to June 5, 1986, p. 21.

45. New Work, 1990, pp. 247-8, 271.

46. Quoted by Josopovici in "Linearity and Fragmentation" in The Lessons of Modernism, Macmillan, 1977, p. 125.

Subsection 4:- Hodgins: a web of contradictions

47. Hal Foster "Signs and Symptoms" in Recodings- Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics, Bay Press,1985, p.13.

48. New Works, 1986, p. 196.

49. The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, 2nd edition, London, Macmillan, 1978, p. 211.

Hodgins quoted fragments of the poem in New Works, 1986, p. 216.

50. Hodgins is referring here to mine-dumps (sand dunes). These yellow mountain-like dumps punctuated the landscape of Johannesburg, at the time when Hodgins made his painting: A Beast Slouches (1986, Images C32). Most of these previously ubiquitous yellow 'koppies' (mountains) have been razed due to renewed mining

efforts (made possible by improved technology) retrieving any mineral residues.

51. New Works, 1986, pp. 200, 211, 221; Recent Works, 1987, pp. 224, 229, 234, 242.

52. New Works, 1986, p. 213.

53. In the discussion in New Works, 1986, p. 196-7, Hodgins talks about Herrmann-Neisse being a shadowy character. The books I have consulted on Weimar, endorse Hodgins' remarks regarding the scarcity of information on Herrmann-Neisse. For instance John Willett in the New Sobriety - Art and Politics in the Weimar Period,1917-33 (Thames and Hudson, 1982) makes cursory reference to Herrmann-Neisse on four different occasions (pp. 28, 102, 114 and on p. 115, Grosz' 1925 portrait of Herrmann-Neisse is illustrated) but does not give the reader any more information aside from the fact that Herrmann-Neisse was a poet, a participant and contributor to contemporary journals, and a hunchback. It seems from Willett's writing and others that Herrmann-Neisse's claim to fame was having his portrait painted by Grosz! Similarly Hans Hess in his monograph George Grosz (1985, Yale University Press) talks about Herrmann-Neisse as a portrait subject for Grosz and not about Herrmann-Neisse the man (p. 145). Herrmann-Neisse remains a shadowy incognito amongst the other Weimar 'stars'.

54. New Works, 1986, p. 196.

55. Bruce Allister Barber in his fascinating article "Appropriation/Expropriation: Convention or Invention", 1983-4, in Parachute, no. 33, pp. 29-34, says on p. 31 that "it took some fifty years for the connection we take so much for granted" between the Manet and Titian to be made.

56. Linda Hutcheon A Theory of Parody: the Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms, Methuen, 1985, pp. 15-16, 36-37, 47.

57. Linda Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody: the teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms, Methuen, 1985.

58. By one-to-one I mean that the source is recognisably attributable to a particular event, character, statement or image.

59. Preface, Art about Art, Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall, Dutton, 1978, p. 6.

60. Ibid., p. 7.

61. Peter Fuller, "The Venus and 'Internal Objects'", Art and Psychoanalysis, Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1980, p. 100 en passim.

62. New York Times, June 19, 1977, cited in Preface, Art about Art, Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall, Dutton, 1978, p. 7.

63. South Africa is a particularly divided society. Although American society is also complex and fragmented, it is a very different complexity from that of South Africa.

64. Oil and collage, William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley, visual reference in Sue Williamson, Resistance Art in South Africa, David Philip, 1989, p. 21.

65. Ibid., p. 20.

66. This image has also been used by Siopis in other paintings.

67. Visual reference in Cape Town Triennial, 1985 catalogue, fig. 79.

68. Charcoal and pastel on paper. Visual reference in Sue Williamson, Resistance Art in South Africa, David Philip, 1989, p. 30.

69. Ibid., p. 30.

70. I use 'stream of consciousness' in a general sense:

> ... The conscious experience of an individual regarded as a continuous rather than a discrete series of events.

The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language (International Edition), published by American Heritage Co, U.S.A., 1973, p. 1274.

71. Preface, Art about Art, Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall, Dutton, 1978, p.7.

72. For example, the light bulb in the central panel of Hodgins' The Triple Gates of Hell (1985-86, Images C31), quotes Francis Bacon's use of this image in many of his paintings for instance his Triptych - May-June 1973. (Visual reference in David Sylvester's Interviews with Francis Bacon: 1962-1979, Thames and Hudson, 1980, p. 94). Also see: New Works, 1986, p. 218.

Hodgins' partially clothed man in #Parade (1984, Images A59) is derived from Ed Kienholz' Solly (1979-80, mixed

media environment, discussed by Hodgins in Two-Way Traffic, p. 282).

Ubu and the Art School Nude (1984, Images B20) which shows Ubu leering at a painting of a nude, is a quotation of 'typical nudes' which result often from 'life drawing' sessions in art schools worldwide. This is a mocking parody on what is often defined as 'art' in that context. Perhaps it is also a self-parody, since Hodgins himself is a product of that system.

73. Ivor Powell, Images.

74. Elizabeth Rankin, Images.

75. Marion Arnold, Images.

Subsection 5:- Repetition and Originality: the repeated image becomes the original

76. Detention-without-Trial: a Hundred Artists Protest, curated by Gail Behrmann, took place at the Market Theatre Gallery, Newtown, Johannesburg. The exhibition was to run from 31 January to 5 March 1988 but the "Detainees Parents Support Committee", who were hosting the exhibition, were "harassed" by the Security Branch of the South African Police (The South African Report, vol. 4, no.1, pp. 4-8). With the threat of prosecution, the show was disbanded a few days before its scheduled run was due to end. For further documentation, see, "A Hundred Artists against Detention", edited by a collective (including Gail Behrmann and Barbara Buntman) in The South African Report, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 4-8.

77. Sue Williamson, "A Mutant Society", in Resistance Art in South Africa, David Philip, 1989, p. 44.

78. Ibid.

79. One may question why Hodgins chose a gun manual in the first place. After all, if it was simply by chance that he picked up that manual, he could have picked any manual or book. He may well also have looked through other books, which he may be choosing not to talk about. He may well be "making it up" - inventing a story.

80. Bruce F. Kawin, "Introduction", Telling it Again and Again, Cornell University Press, 1972, p. 2.

81. Ibid., Kawin points out that we never tire of a sunset, which occurs, in much the same way, over and over again. Similarly, in painting, the range of marks and technical permutations is limited. In essence, an artist 'repeats' marks over and over again. And yet we

do not find this 'repetition' through the painting medium, boring, but (like a daily sunset), always a fresh engagement.

82. Ibid., Chapter 5: "Jam Today", p. 175.

83. Ibid., "Introduction", p. 3. Kawin explains:

> Our utilitarian attitude to time, that it ought not to be wasted, is ignorant of the nature of time. Time cannot be wasted any more than it can be invested; we do things not with it, but in it.

84. Ibid., "Introduction", p. 9.

85. Gabriel Josopovici, "Linearity and Fragmentation", The Lessons of Modernism, Macmillan Press, 1977, p. 125.

86. Ibid.

87. Kawin, "Introduction", Telling it Again and Again, 1972, p. 3.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid.

91. Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Hogarth Press, 1950, p. 45.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid., p. 46.

94. Kawin, "Eternity in an Hour", Telling it Again and Again, 1972, p. 104.

95. See Vita Art Now (1986) catalogue (details in Bibliography), for colour reproduction of The Civil Servants.

96. Hodgins' New Work, 1990 exhibition is brimming with assassins and villains. However, he confounds possible expectations that the viewer may hold, in expecting these characters to conform to contextual South African prototypes. Instead, his villains assume many nationalities, such as the painted, glazed, ceramic figure, South American Assassin (1990).

97. Kawin, "Destructive Repetition", Telling it Again and Again, 1972, p. 30.

98. Josopovici, "The Lessons of Modernism" in The Lessons of Modernism , 1977, p. 1.

99. Kawin, "Introduction", Telling it Again and Again, p. 7.

100. Ibid., p. 8.

101. One of Hodgins' favourite thematic preoccupations has been with the theme of 'workers', for instance The Worker (1950, Images A12).

102. Kawin, "Introduction", Telling it Again and Again, 1972, p. 4.

103. Kawin, "Destructive Repetition", Telling it Again and Again, 1972, p. 20.

104. New Works, 1986, p. 218; New Work, 1990, p. 265.

105. Quoted in Chipp, "Fauvism", in Theories of Modern Art, University of California Press, 1968, p. 136.

106. Kawin, "Destructive Repetition", Telling it Again and Again, 1972, p. 33.

107. Arnold, Images.

108. Ibid.

109. Ibid.

110. Ibid.

111. Max Kozloff,"Francis Bacon" in Renderings, Studio Vista, 1970, p. 159.

112. The reader is referred to the discussion in New Work, 1990, pp. 267-9.

Subsection 6:- Golden Lads and Girls: a reincarnation in 1990

113. Gabriel Josopovici, "Linearity and Fragmentation", The Lessons of Modernism, Macmillan Press, 1977, p. 136.

114. Hodgins has used skulls in many paintings such as in #Night Panics (1987) and Days of Miracle and Wonder (1987).

115. In Hodgins' brothel scene Hamburg (1985, Images C25), the human forms have fragmented to such a degree,

that they may be assembled (by the viewer) in a number of ways, not unlike, the way components of a hinged plastic model set may be put together. Hodgins has commented how he used to fascinated by the little cellophane packets found in cereal boxes containing cheaply mass-produced plastic bits and pieces which could be held together by flimsy hooks. Often a few pieces had fallen off the plastic holder so what was left was a few fragments but it did not really matter because most of the components seemed to be mere repetitions of each other.

116. "An interview with Jasper Johns: The Fragment", by Roberta Bernstein, Fragments: incompletion & discontinuity, New York Literary Forum, 1981; Part 7, p. 282.

117. Peter Fuller, "The Venus and 'Internal Objects'", Art and Psychoanalysis, Writers and Readers Cooperative, 1980, p. 104 and passim.

118. Ibid., p. 128.

119. Hodgins has often referred to Bacon's use of bandaged, bird-like figures in many of his (Bacon's) 'Crucifixion' paintings.

120. Josopovici, "Linearity and Fragmentation", The Lessons of Modernism, 1977, p. 136. 121. Ibid.

122. Ibid., p. 126. Josopovici uses the Janus-face analogy in connection with Freud and Nietzsche. Civilisation is (he says) for them, Janus-faced: "it reveals and conceals. It reveals as it conceals."

/V Chapter 2: Robyn Cohen ...

V Chapter 2: Robyn Yael Cohen

1. Tell me another story: the same but different

A man has a dream. In this dream he finds treasure. To get to the treasure he has to cross over three bridges. One bridge is made of wood, one is made of rope and one is undefined. He then has to arrive at a crossroads where there is a tree with a star engraved in it. He passes the tree and comes to a spring. And so it goes, until he eventually finds his treasure.

So he wakes up and thinks: "I've dreamt this. It must be. I must go and find this treasure". Off he goes, and he searches for the signs in the dream. He finds the bridges - all three. The tree is there as the dream predicted and finally he arrives at the spot where the treasure appeared in the dream.

He searches for days and days - digs and digs but there is nothing - no treasure. So what can he do? Well, he decides that it is all futile and that he better go back home. It's been months and months that he's been searching and his treasure has not materialised.

So off he goes - back home. He's been home a few weeks and realises that because he has been away so long his house and garden is in a terrible state of disrepair. He takes a shovel and decides to start by clearing away the weeds in his backyard.

Lo and behold, his shovel hits at something tinny and it turns out to be the treasure!

So the moral of the story is that one can seek out all sorts of treasure in all sorts of seemingly exotic places, but the treasure might well turn out to be in your own backyard. *1*

Walter Benjamin wrote that "Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a story properly" *2*. The reason Benjamin says, is that

experience, the source from which storytellers draw, has fallen in value *3* and "... the communicability of experience is decreasing" *4*. For a variety of reasons fewer and fewer people take the time to exchange and share experiences, as they once did in many spheres of communal and family life.

All around us, the erosion of the tradition of story-telling continues. I am not suggesting by this statement anything more than my own observations, but it seems to me that the drive towards literacy and urbanisation has had a significant impact on the black cultures/folklores in rural Southern Africa where it appears that the oral tradition is dying.

I find it very sad that we do not talk to each other and share our experiences the way previous generations must have done. However, I am a painter and I realise that the opportunities to talk to people about my experiences and my paintings is to some extent limited. My story-telling must therefore be partially mediated through my paintings, and so it is that in my painting, I want to share and exchange my experiences with the viewer.

I embarked on this degree to explore and document some of my ideas of repetition and originality in Hodgins' work and my own.

My painting, and my approach to painting, is so much like the story above. The treasures in my work are the people, events and objects around me, or which may have been around me in the past.

I come from a traditional Jewish background, in which stories like these proliferated *5*. Many such stories -whether they be mystical or more prosaic arose out of the need to address 'life' - to get away from dogma and back to 'simple truths'.

As a child I loved this story. As an adult and artist I continue to be captivated by it. There is a sense of immediacy and accessibility, containing as it does such a simple philosophy of life - how we can sometimes exhaust energies on a search to uncover something which is close at hand. With each telling (whether I am the storyteller or someone else is) stories like the one I have related above, seem to take on even more magical nuances and transformations.

Intellectually, I know the story. I have heard it hundreds of times before. And yet I wait in anticipation for the outcome - as if I had never heard it before - even if I am the teller and therefore have the power to invent or change the outcome. There is always a simultaneous sense of recognition as well as a sense of mystery and magic for me.

Like Hodgins' painting my work tends to grow and develop organically, very much in a web-like fashion. When asked to discuss my work, I usually find it difficult to do so. Expressing some of the nuances of my art-making verbally is not something I find easy to do.

By consciously developing and using the the story medium I have acquired a means of helping me to articulate some of the things which have happened or may be happening in my painting.

Story telling is a verbal means of demystifying and mediating my ideas of painting both for myself and the viewer. Each re-telling may turn out to be a further discovery of what may have occurred in the painting process. It is a kind of forced confrontation in which I can focus on some of the things which have occurred in my paintings. Also perhaps additional paths - journeys which I did not see before - become apparent to me. The viewer becomes a participant in my re-living of that journey (of painting) and as such may contribute some insight of their own. I have learnt much from the input of others in my story-time situation - whether they be teachers, or viewers.

I also relate stories which emanate out of my personal experience. For example, when I am trying to re-assure a timid viewer that I am interested in their ideas about

my painting, I always tell them that perception is dependent on experience.

On one of the student group exhibitions I participated in I had one of my 'pram' paintings on show. (The pram has for some time been a central image in my works, as is more fully discussed below). It was a very dark, difficult painting, which is no longer in existence and was not titled.

The picture space was a roughly split in two by a wavy horizon line. In this dark blue landscape a lady doll sat in a pram, brooding her life away. There were a great deal of fragmented forms (limbs, pieces of paint) flying around her.

The painting was full of thick painterly lines - I dragged tubes of paint across the surface and by easing and applying pressure made lines, or strings of paint across the surface. These lines were, for me, like pieces of string, floating in the landscape, which had the capacity to magically transform themselves into strange objects. Their connection to the lady was that they populated this strange landscape she found herself in. There was also a connotation that her bodily form could unravel into a piece of string.

At the opening of the exhibition, I noticed three medical students, who stood and stared at the painting for about half an hour. Then they came over to me and proceeded to 'show' me how the pieces of paint line were umbilical cords, connecting the lady to the pram, to her young in the pram, and to the earth. Furthermore the tinges of red in the painting was the blood of the birthing process. They went on to show me all these aspects which had never consciously occurred to me in this painting.

The point is that they could locate and substantiate whatever they were saying very plausibly in the actual images in the painting. It was all there in my painting - quite vividly. I just had not 'seen' these implications because I had no direct experience of the birth process. Although their interpretation initially appeared to be contrary to my ideas, I soon saw that their input was most important. These medical students were telling me their 'story' - their experiences. I told them mine. Together, through the painting on the wall we enriched our experiences by sharing (and exchanging ideas) in the story-telling process.

My process of telling stories is not unlike my process of painting. In painting I tend to use the same objects as sources repeatedly over and over again. Similarly, the stories I tell are essentially the same stories told

over and over again. It is how the different ele
are assembled in each telling which makes
successive story/painting a new, 'original' concep
And at the same time, each sto y/painting is
influenced by 'new' images and experiences, whic
effect the story/painting, or in certain instanc
integrated into my stories or paintings.

In the following sections, I will tell the stor
rather a selection of stories) of the paintings I
chosen as examples of my exploration of my ide
repetition and originality and how my working pr
has developed in recent years.

/2. Origins and sourc

2. Origins and sources: exploring my own backyard

Franz Kafka's short story Metamorphosis *6* was the initial stimulus for the painting component of this degree. Before dealing with my exploration of repetition and originality in my own work in relation to Metamorphosis, it is necessary to provide a short background on my approach to image appropriation.

Beside deriving my sources from stories and books (such as Metamorphosis) I also appropriate images from objects around me. My awareness of my immediate surroundings and the objects has grown and sharpened as I have developed as a painter. When I exhibited at the Market Gallery in 1986, I wrote in the gallery hand-out, accompanying the show:

> Objects and images in our immediate, 'ordinary' surroundings (such as brooms, ladders, spots on the floor), and objects of a more personal nature (such as ornaments, dolls, prams, nostalgia) are an endless source of fascination and obsession.
>
> My paintings are concerned with how 'things' exist and relate to one another and how they reflect the 'real' and 'fictive' world around us. *7*

The importance of 'self' is something Hodgins has always stressed in his teaching - of being true to yourself and your painting. Hodgins was always less impressed



FIGURE 30 : 1984: Robyn working on **Robyn's World**. (1984, oil and acrylic on canvas.) Robyn Cohen.

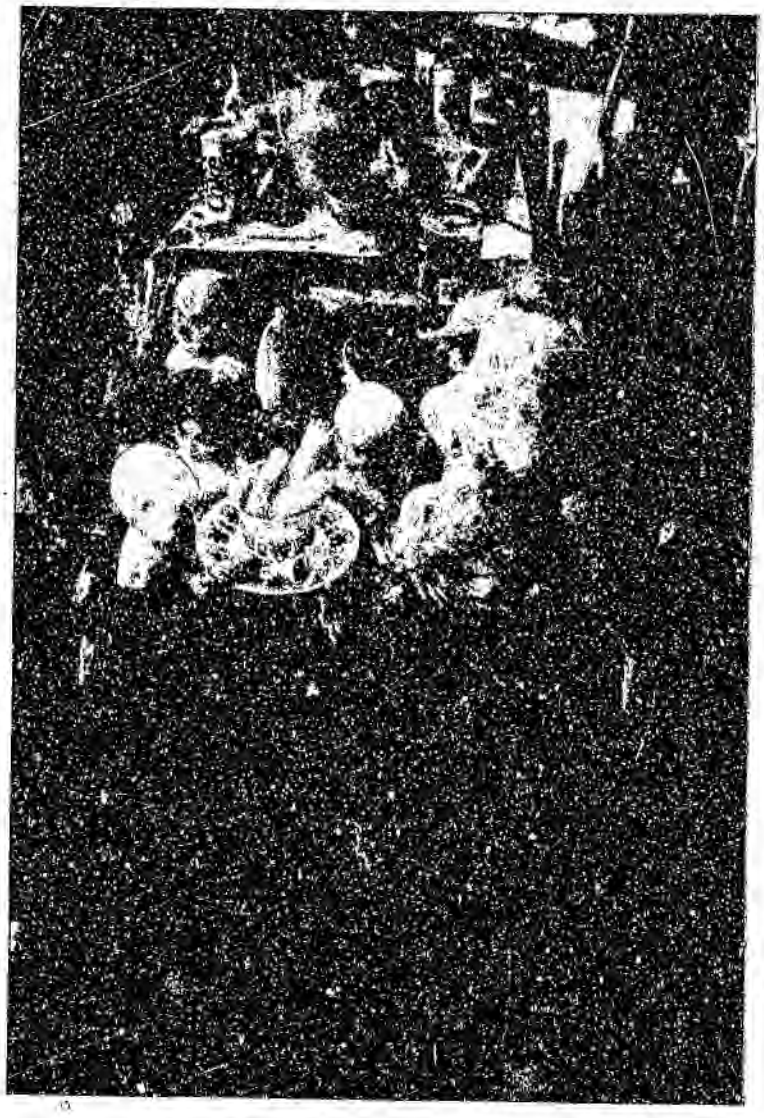


FIGURE 31 : 19
Robyn's studio
the "Wedge", W
or "Still life
Diet Coke and
porcelain doll
Robyn Cohen.

with the 'grand' subjects that his students painstakingl articulated than with the 'stuff' that came from inside the person, that which was 'felt' rather than just superficially 'used'.

At university there always seemed to be a mad fervour amongst students to find a 'subject' - something to paint about. I paint objects - of my internal and external landscape - from my childhood, memories, history, everyday life. It is important to me that I attempt to locate and connect myself to objects in my paintings in some way. It may be real in that I own an object and have a shared history with it. For instance my pram which I played with as a child. It may be a perceived or invented connection.

When I decide to use objects for the first time I use various media in an effort to make the object into an image of my 'own'. I may photograph or draw an object. Where possible, whenever I am painting and when my objects are light enough I hold them in my left hand or cradle them in my arm or prop them on the easel so that I am physically connected to them - I can touch and see their shapes and forms.

Objects such as photographs become transformed and altered by the vicissitudes of my studio space. (See: #Plates Page 18 - figs. 30 and 31).) Photographic

images, pinned on screens, torn when they are ripped off those screens often become more interesting to me than they were originally *8*.

Francis Bacon in discussing his love of photographs as source material says that obviously photographic reproductions of Rembrandt's are a convenient way of having a Rembrandt in the studio if you're not lucky enough to own one and have it in the studio *9*. Sylvester then says that he suspects that Bacon prefers "photographs to to original because they're less explicit, more suggestive" *10*. Bacon's response to this is:

> Well, my photographs are very damaged by people walking over them and crumpling them and everything else, and this does add other implications to an image of Rembrandt's, for instance, which are not Rembrandt's. *11*

Like Bacon I use and refer to photographic images which have been taken from various textual sources such as the print media (newspapers, magazines) and postcards. Periodically I also take documentary photographs of objects - as a visual record of some of the sources and origins of paintings. (For example, see: #Plates Page 22 - fig. 37 and #Plates Page 23 - fig. 39.)

Objects are often taken out of my studio context and photographed elsewhere in an attempt to re-contextualise my objects in a space different to the studio.

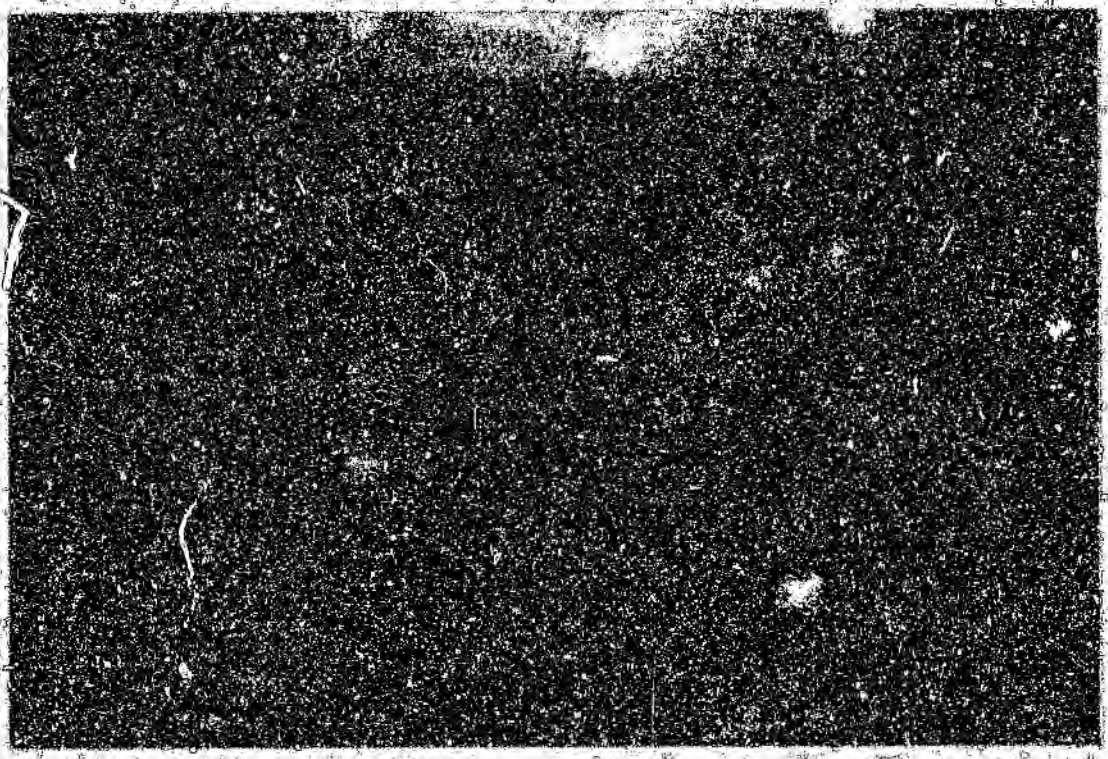


FIGURE 32 : Radio Days (1988)
Robyn Cohen.

I find that placing a familiar object in a different context gives me a 'new' perception of that object. If I integrate that object into my visual vocabulary and use it in my paintings, repeatedly, the repeated image can take on 'new' or different connotations, and meanings dependent to some extent on the different environments from which I may have sourced the image of that object.

Often the boundaries between the photograph intended as a documentary image and the photograph intended as a source fuse. The two become interchangeable according to the needs arising in and out of each context. I have learnt to hoard my negatives because I know that a printed image will inevitably become so altered by the working space and the interaction of the painting and drawing process that it may eventually bear very little resemblance to its original form. If I want images as documentation I have to have another set printed. Now, when I see an art postcard at an exhibition I try and buy two copies - one for my documentary file of sources and one to actively use and change in my studio space.

All notions of images as precious objects with value (or even alluding to the valuable art works of which they are reproductions) are destroyed by them being dumped with all the other paraphernalia of my studio - intermixed with paint tubes, mixing trays and the

various other things that end up in my studio. They become like the rest of the junk in my space - ordinary and also special, my treasure in their ordinariness.

An example of how I have painted images of my world is Robyn's World (1984) *12* depicting various images derived from the world of my studio, and my backyard. (See: #Plates Page 18 - fig. 30.) Objects such as my grandfather's radio, toys, dolls, prams, my childhood swing, are all interwoven with fragments of easels, paint brushes and ladders, aluminum sinks and the staircase in my studio at the university. The title is deliberately specific.

A more recent example is #Radio Days (1988) in which my radio sits on a wooden platform - a display box used in the studio upon which the model posing for life drawing sat, or upon which objects for the class to work from, were placed. A patterned curtain (derived from my mother's kitchen) frames most of the top half of the horizontal format of the painting. A tiny pink 'agitated' pram emerges, jumping out from the shadow (like an animal) from behind the curtain. This portion of curtain is rendered in tonal washes of muted white and grey in a transparent manner - so that objects from behind the curtain are partially visible. The curtains both reveals and conceals the pram and other objects behind it.

In the front right corner of the painting a flattish carpet of space tilted up towards the picture plane - towards the viewer, is a plateau containing a jungle of objects - a tea cup, ladders leading up to a house on stilts which is one of my interpretations of an imaginary house of the central character in Metamorphosis, Gregor the Insect. Writhing insects and pieces of coloured lines form strange shapes and objects of non-specific identities. In this space the predominantly strident Indian Yellow, crimson and Windsor Orange palette (generally not mixed with white pigment) is a deliberate contrast to the rest of the painting where a more muted palette (mixed with a great deal of white pigment) predominates.

In the upper right right corner of the painting there is a faintly rendered glimpse of the cork tree (from #One Sunday under the Cork Tree (1987-88), to be discussed below), complete with a pile of insects playing beneath it.

The title of #Radio Days is a reference to film maker Woody Allen's (1986) movie of the same name, in which Allen strings together various vignettes and memories of his childhood, against a backdrop of his memories of his favourite radio serials, game and quiz shows. The radio was the almost constant witness (and influence on) to the daily existence of Allen and his family. Many of

his reminiscences are seen and projected through the images which were transmitted by the stories on the radio into his imagination.

When painting I usually work with music in my studio. The radio is of course a medium for story-telling. The medium often involves and indeed invites imaginative participation in many instances, because it is audio only. Our perception of objects is not only informed by visual stimuli, but also by aural stimuli. As a child (in pre-television South Africa) listening to stories (the 'play-house' series) I used to sometimes lie with my eyes closed, listening and magically forming my own images *13*.

I have always loved radio, and the radio is almost always next to me in my studio, in a sense providing companionship, as well as a source of music, news broadcasts and current affairs which I obsessively tune into. The radio, tea cups, objects from my domestic existence are constant 'companions' in my studio and backyard and it is therefore natural and consistent that they are given and 'claim' their rightful spaces, as players scattered and fragmented in my painting.

Some of these objects are explicitly present and obvious as images in my work. In other paintings (and drawings) they are concealed and hidden beneath a build up of



FIGURE 33 : Encore for the Pink Lady (1986-89)
Robyn Cohen.

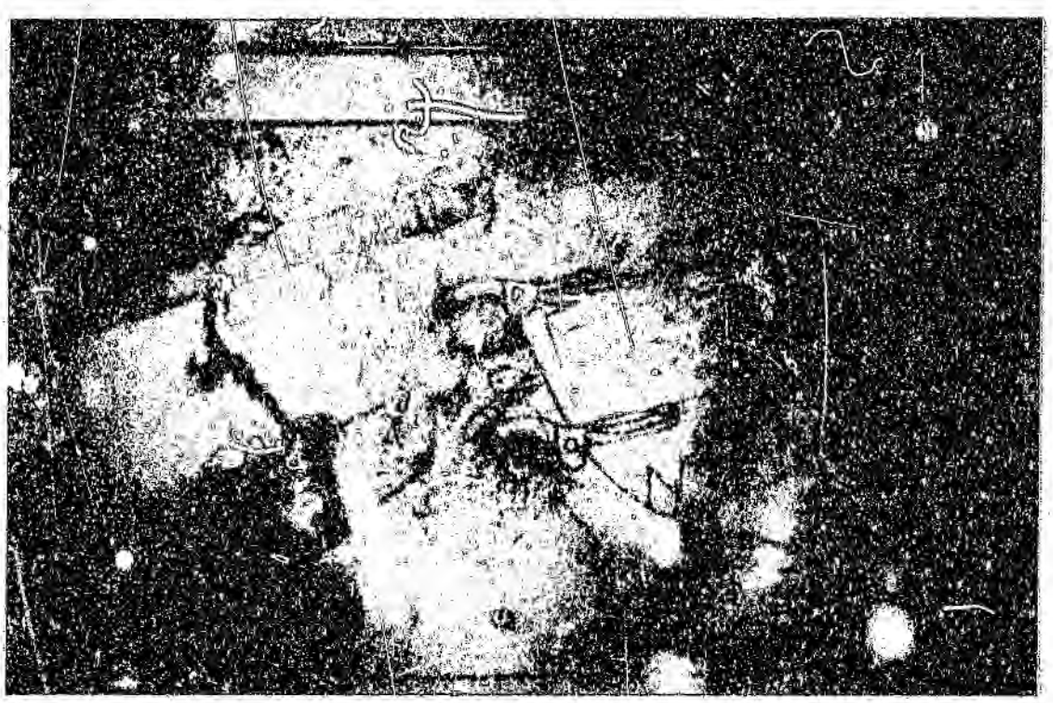


FIGURE 34 : Forgotten charms in the Magical Garden (1988)
Robyn Cohen.

layers of glaze or layers of impasto. They are there and yet not there - exerting an almost ghost like presence. The lady doll images in #Encore for the Pink Lady (1986-89) and in #Forgotten Charms in the Magical Garden (1988) are two examples.

In #Encore for the Pink Lady the pink, almost congealed features of the bodiless head, dissolve/ like an apparition into a haze of Indian Yellow light, glaring from the opening between the stage curtains behind the lady. One is not sure if she is real- a doll's head or a lady, or a vision or a dream. (Similarly the image of the man vase/jug in #A Bittere Gelegte (1986-87) is purposefully ambiguous. He was derived from a Royal Doulton Toby jug and in this painting he is both animate and inanimate - a precious piece of china as well as a real man.)

In #Forgotten Charms in the Magical Garden the outline of the same lady doll is barely visible. She was a 'mistake'. I drew her and did not like her placement on the paper. With the lady in #Forgotten Charms when I began to erase her effigy with my putty rubber, I found that I liked the ghost-like implications that the semi-erased image left in the grain of the paper.

I left this semi-erased image of the lady and built up an area of soft shadow using conte, pencil and charcoal;

covering her partially, almost as if she were no longer there (at all) on the paper. By leaving the palimpsest remnants of the original drawing I recognise the history of the metamorphosis of the drawing process as well as arriving at a drawing which is visually enriched as a direct consequence of the traces of original drawing marks which inform the completed work.

With dolls and other objects I will often pull them apart and see how they fit. In the act of physically attacking them and putting them together I may assemble them in a new way - in my own way. Some time ago I had some plastic dolls, still relics of my childhood, which started to lose limbs because the joints had worn out. It fascinated me to see how these limbs were joined inside the cavity of the doll. Knowledge of the inner structure of the doll provided me with further implications in drawing that image. I could draw and paint the fragments of the body in different ways, and re-contextualise those fragments as I chose.

The dynamics of my studio space is that nothing comes in without being effected in some way. Objects almost have to undergo a physical change before I am able to work with them.

When I started this degree I managed to obtain boxes of insect specimens. (See: #Plates Page 23 - fig. 39.) These insects (beetles, flies, cockroaches) lay neatly

pinned and labelled in classifying rows and divisions on polystyrene sheets, staring at me! It was paradoxically only after the neat arrangements was disturbed by being knocked over in the studio space and re-arranged that I found that I could work with them.

By accident, some Permanent Rose glaze I had mixed dripped on to some plastic flies I had purchased from an amusement shop, and then suddenly I was able to use them, whereas before I did not know how to start using them. I had purchased the flies because I liked the image, but they had to be 'transformed' or 'personalised' before I could really start painting them.

When I began the series of paintings for this degree, in addition to the Kafka imagery, I began using some porcelain doll parts (fragments). (See: Plates Page 18 - fig. 31.) I acquired these doll parts in Cape Town. These decapitated heads, hands and feet had fascinated me. I wanted to bring some 'adult' doll images, to supplement the 'baby' dolls I had been using for a long time. It was only after the new dolls' beautiful pink surfaces become grubby from oil paint and charcoal rubbing off onto them, that I was able to begin painting them.

This is not to say that I am unable to paint an object as soon as I bring it into my studio. I can, but it is usually some time before I will be satisfied with working with that image. I need to work with the object/image by drawing it and painting it repeatedly, or spilling paint on it, or in some other way reworking the object/image. In so doing I absorb the image into the web of my visual vocabulary.

If objects are too clean and perfect, they don't look and feel 'right'. In the process of drawing new objects I often hitch on to a piece of dirt, a label or something which seems to make the object more ordinary.

My treasure is found and actively looked for in our everyday surroundings - the objects, for instance, chairs, tables, stains on the studio floor, which I have seen over and over again and will see over and over again. I am aware that I inhabit the same spaces and yet often remain unaware of those spaces. My paintings are partly a way of exploring these spaces and objects and I find that I am becoming more and more aware of this as I develop as a painter. This, in conjunction with my use of personal history, is probably the most central issues of my painterly ethic at the moment.

My studio is a microcosm, a container, for all the junk I bring in from my backyard. The two interface. In a

sense the studio is my backyard and my backyard is my studio. They both contain structural frameworks as well a web-like field of sources and images.

This notion of the backyard - a space with its own present and past history - fits in with my view of repetition and originality. I continuously repeat things around me - images from my own history, contemporary history, and anything else that may interest me. And yet each painting becomes a exciting new journey in which anything may happen because of the influence of ideas and objects I may stumble upon or deliberately choose to use on the way which spark further interest in 'old' sources.



/3. Backtracking for a moment ...

sense the studio is my backyard and my backyard is my studio. They both contain structural frameworks as well a web-like field of sources and images.

This notion of the backyard - a space with its own present and past history - fits in with my view of repetition and originality. I continuously repeat things around me - images from my own history, contemporary history, and anything else that may interest me. And yet each painting becomes a exciting new journey in which anything may happen because of the influence of ideas and objects I may stumble upon or deliberately choose to use on the way which spark further interest in 'old' sources.

/3. Backtracking for a moment ...



FIGURE 35 : Robyn with red pram
1966: age about three years old.



FIGURE 36 : The Day the Pram went into the Veld
(1985)
Robyn Cohen.

3. Backtracking for a moment: prams, pinks and play objects

My visual vocabulary prior to commencing this degree had been dominated for some time by images of a little red pram, and of dismembered and fragmented dolls. The pram image was based on my original childhood play object. (See: #Plates Page 21 - fig. 35.)

In the Women's Festival of Arts catalogue (1985), I documented how the pram was initiated into my visual vocabulary:

> It was during the second half of my [undergraduate] art studies that I began to be aware of a 'feminine' quality in my work. Previously I had adamantly maintained and staunchly upheld that males and females make and create the same Art, one could not isolate so-called male tenets and female tenets. Such manifestations were a lot of sexist bull.
>
> After all, I asserted, we are all the same and to say that certain traits are sexually bound and exclusive to one group is just plain narrow. It was a false way of thinking etched into our personalities by our education, or society and our parents. Take the archetypal example: little girls are dressed in pinks and little boys in blue. So what was my reaction? Well, I steered clear of using pink in my work. Pink was too pretty and sweet for me. I wasn't going to succumb to such frivolity.
>
> Then last year, I fished out my old pram I used to play with, and pink started to creep in [to my paintings]. And then I really started thinking about the image, the symbol, the metaphor inherent in the object. The pram and its obvious connotations of motherhood, life etc. And perhaps most salient is the pram as 'feminine' object. I started consciously to use

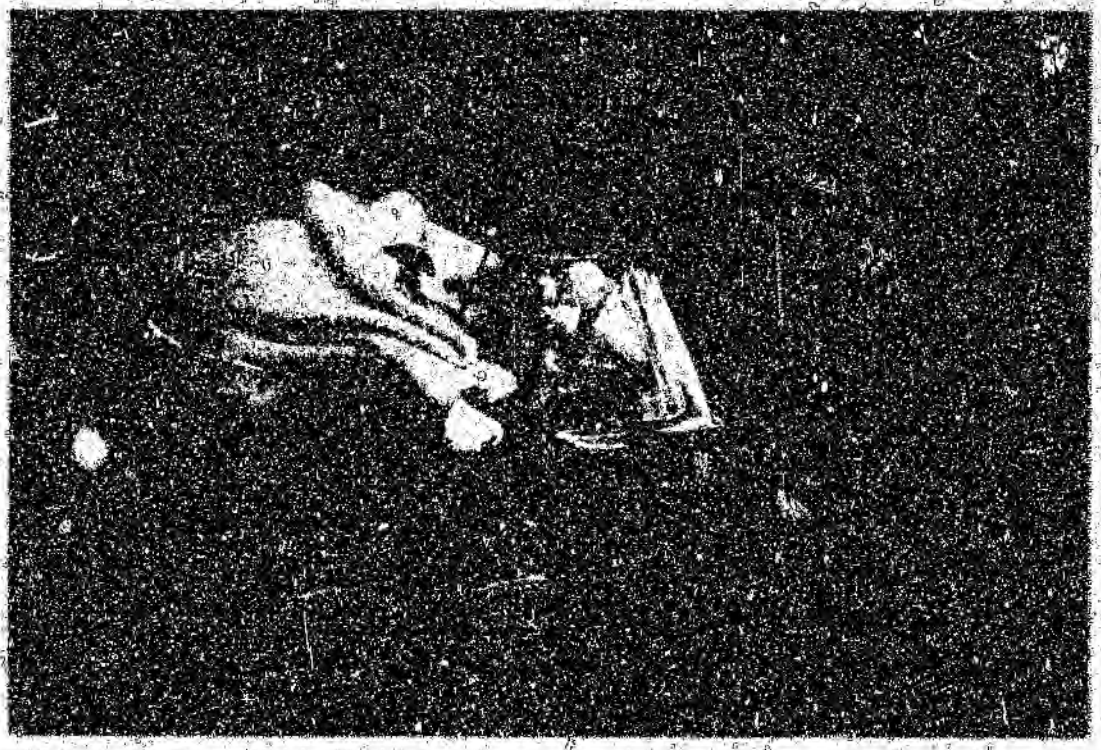


FIGURE 37 : Photographic source material
Documentation of pram and other objects.
Robyn Cohen.

> pink. Pink is flesh, blood, passion. I also became increasingly aware of the "feminine" quality of my work. That is, I felt that my paintings were a woman's paintings and not a man's.
>
> What this quality is, I don't know. Okay, one can go for Jung with his Anima/Animus trip, one can go for any theory. In the end one is left with a pile of semantics which doesn't explain anything at all. All I do know is: I am very excited that I started with my prams and pinks because it has added a whole new dimension to my work and therefore to my life. *14*

The pram as an object and image first interested me as a physical trigger of childhood associations. My memories of using the pram as a container, filling it with dolls, and other toys, tipping it out and 'chucking' *15* things around, were the initial impetus for many paintings in which the pram became an object with multiple associations of life and nurturing. These associations were explored in paintings now no longer in existence.

The horror explicit in the Odessa Steps sequence *16* from Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film, Battleship Potemkin, of a screaming nurse who, thrice in succession loses her grip of a baby carriage as it careers down the stairs, was evoked in paintings such as [illegible] Pram went into the Veld (1985).

The warmth and security (usually) associated with the pram was in sharp contrast with its location in a contemporary South African landscape which took on

connotations of the fragmentation and shattering of traditional standards of morality and social order, typically associated with South African society.

The pram, which should contain and protect the young, is a container instead for writhing fleshy forms which bear little resemblance to the human form as we know it. In this painting a huge expanse of white is a foil to the upper section of the painting fragmented and shattered into tiny pieces. The pram dominates the canvas space, perched on the line (perhaps a horizon line) where the upper fragmented space and lower white homogenous space meet. It seemed, almost like a little animal *17* with wheels, poised, about to jump up and into the veld, discarding and scattering its contents. A baby, or perhaps a doll, with one arm up, either in greeting or as a sign of helplessness, is hemmed in by the horizon line, watching the pram in which it should be safe and secure.

Viewers, most often, responded strongly to these images. Bettie Lamprecht with whom I have never spoken, wrote *18* about the #<u>The Day the Pram went into the Veld</u>:

> .... stel Cohen titel en beeld in 'n spanningsverhouding. Die storie-element, aangekondig deur die titel en verder gevoer in die motiewe, word verlaag deur die verwronge vorm en die intuitiewe, lukrake plasing van die motiewe.' *19*

Roughly translated:

> ... Cohen places title and image in a state of tension. The story element, introduced through the title and taken further in the images (motifs), are blurred through the unidentified form and the intuitive, random placement of the images.

And Lambrecht goes further, saying:

> Die kinderwereld vorm deel van die storie-element. In die hande van die volwasse vrou word hulle herinneringsbeelde, vewysingspunte waaruit nuwe, meer verwikkelde ervarings groei. *20*

Roughly translated:

> The world of the child forms part of the story. In the hands of the adult woman these memories become reference/departure points from which new and more developed experience grows.

The pram allowed me, in such paintings, to communicate how I felt about my place as a white woman in the societal 'landscape', while also integrating ideas of feminism *21*, post-modernism and the quotation of Eisenstein. The pram thus became an object infused with dynamism, which could be both container of, and catalyst to, other things which I may have wanted to include in a given work. As an immediately recognizable image with so many associations for people to identify with, the pram was a useful device. In paintings where other forms, such as agitated 'abstract-expressionist' *22* painterly marks, bore very little semblance to

an object through the use of oil paint was an exciting prospect for me to explore. I was interested, particularly, in using the paint medium to make a pictorial equivalent for an insect, while also retaining nuances of the insect's former human structure.

I also became particularly aware of the relationship of the insect and the human being - the relationship between what he was and what he became. The original shape and new form really excited me. The transfiguration of Gregor and his relationship to everyday objects and life seemed to reflect what I was intent on painting. The idea that objects so familiar on an everyday basis could become quite different when viewed from a different perspective, seemed to reflect the idea of the original dimensions being changed through a metamorphosis. In my case I could metamorphose objects I see and use everyday into something new - for me. I could, what is more, give the viewer an insight into the process of that metamorphosis, of the origins of my images, by repeatedly referring to the source object, and I could reveal strands of the web I consciously (and subconsciously) was creating.

Gregor is terrified by the changes that occur, and his sense of displacement (a 'dangling man' image *29*) comes through strongly. He retains only a fragmented

of the paper and these became equivalents for the "small white spots" (p. 10) on Gregor the Insect. Most of these early drawings were discarded as they did not go beyond exercises in exploring the physical dimensions of the objects.

My painting #Still crazy, climbing walls (1986-88) bears many references to these exploratory drawings. In this painting, in a series of box like enclosures drawing media as discussed above were combined with oil painting medium. In a sense this painting was a bridge work - both a drawing with reverberation of early fumblings and scavengings for forms and also a 'completed' painting in which objects have their own identity and form. I shall discuss this painting below.

Metamorphosis provided an opportunity for me to open up and expand my visual vocabulary, making use of aspects of the narrative episodes of the story. For instance there are many descriptions in the story relating to the physical metamorphosis of Gregor. The insect is talked about as having "little legs" (p. 13) which were very different to the form he previously had had in his former status as Gregor Samsa the commercial traveller. His little legs become sticky (p. 20). His jaws become strong (p.20). A brown fluid begins to issue from his mouth (p.20). The possibility for the transformation of



FIGURE 40 : Scattered Dreams (1988)
Robyn Cohen.

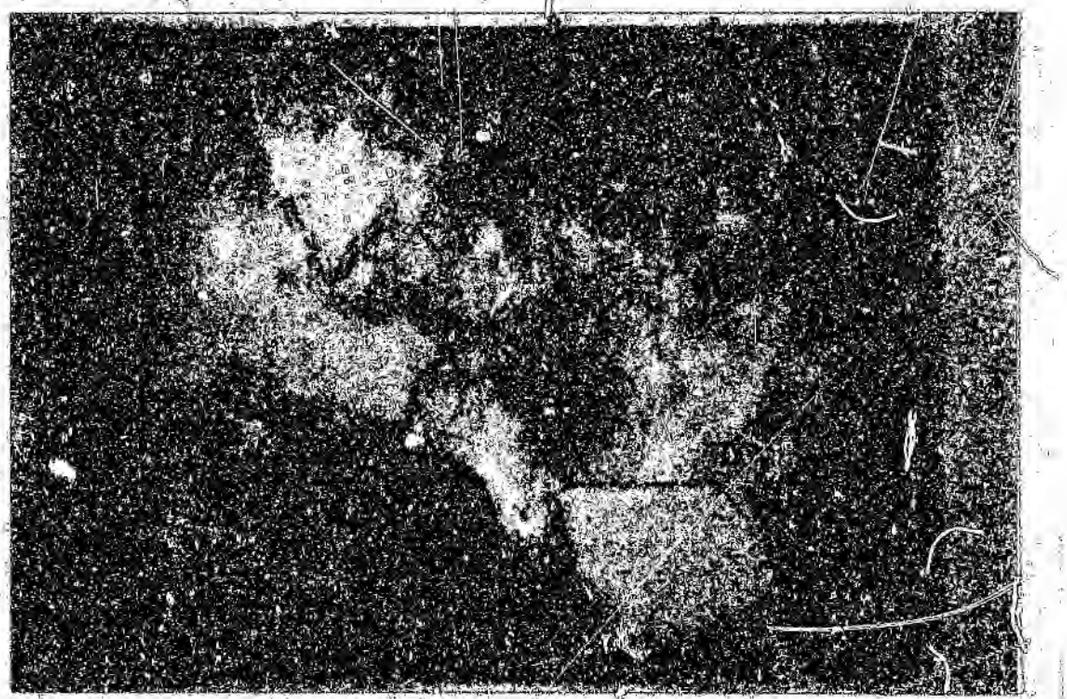


FIGURE 41 : Ring a Ring a Rosies, A pocket full of Posies, Husha! Husha! We all fall down (1988)
Robyn Cohen.

empirically observed things, the pram was an accessible clue, an invitation to the viewer to contemplate the other stranger things.

All of my images relating to prams however, could only be taken so far. For the purposes of this degree I wanted a specific reference point from which to work. Metamorphosis provided the ideal platform, without requiring me to abandon the pram image.

/4. Collecting and gathering ...

4. Collecting and gathering: new images into my backyard

When I began the paintings intended for submission towards this degree, I decided that I had reached a point where the pram was restrictive. Its domineering presence (which had seemed so 'right' in paintings like the #The Day The Pram went to the Veld, 1985) was precluding me from introducing anything new into my work. The challenge and excitement of painting was diminished because this image had become too 'easy'. The pram is such a rich image and almost has its own life and power, but no longer needed further input on my part. At this juncture in my painting I sensed the need to give less prominence to this particular image. I knew I had also severely to reduce the scale (and implied importance) of the pram in my new paintings, in order to open my work up to a fresh input of ideas.

The Kafka story, Metamorphosis had long fascinated me and I had wanted for some years somehow to use it in my work, but had been unable to find a suitable opening in the pram paintings.

I chose Metamorphosis as a springboard: a means of exploring and possibly expanding my existent visual vocabulary. However, while I was excited about many of the specific images inherent in Kafka's text, there was never a 'grand plan' to execute paintings which would

illustrate that text per se'. I wrote in my research proposal that:

> ... the transition from a literary to a painting medium raises a number of problems. The painter does not have use of literary conventions, such as quotation marks or footnotes at his/her disposal. Short of attaching a label and a title next to the painting, the painter has no obvious way of identifying 'quoted' sources. *23*

I went on to say that quotes from the Kafka text would be used, according to the dictates of the work in progress, to generate autonomous paintings, which would not necessarily relate to images derived from Metamorphosis.

As explained in the previous section, the nature of my working process involves the strategy of periodically adopting something 'new' - an image I have not previously used in my work. In the process of observing, researching and drawing the new objects, I often discover fresh connections to earlier images. The idea of generating fresh images and possibilities from previous paintings, as well as making new images catalyzed by responses to texts *24* such as Kafka's, is always an exciting challenge for me.

My attitude to source gathering was particularly influenced by Robert Hodgins' painting series of Ubu. I was intrigued at how Hodgins used Ubu as a marker - an

actor of sorts. Hodgins employed Ubu almost as a chameleon, placing him in many different contexts. Ubu became all sorts of things, and his existence, his presence, gave meaning to the various contexts. Ubu placed in an art school *25*, could express Hodgins' interest in a type of 'still-life' nude, typical of art school life drawing sessions. Ubu could become Herman Goering or Idi Amin *26*, little dictators having the capacity to be both absurdly funny and at the same time terrifyingly evil.

Ubu became a malleable prop which gave locus or 'meaning' to many of Hodgins' diverse ideas and images. Although Hodgins' Ubu paintings make many comments about society, these comments are contained within the skin of Ubu and are offered as sub-text rather than a main text. The figure of Ubu gave medial coherence to images which otherwise may not have 'made sense' if haphazardly included in a painting.

Kafka's Gregor, the man who over-night metamorphoses into Gregor the giant insect, contained a number of narrative implications and provided me with my own medial structure with which to explore my ideas of recurring yet changing images.

Here is the story of an individual who awakes from "... uneasy dreams ..." (p. 9) to find himself transformed into a "gigantic insect" (p. 9). Everything has

changed. Everything is so familiar and yet so different. He begins to live a perceptual nightmare. But what has really happened to him, because as he thinks "... it was no dream ..." (p. 3). *27*

The visual potentialities inherent in the story invited exciting painterly explorations: For instance the opportunity to exploit scale (of Gregor in relation to his surroundings and objects) as well as the range of physical descriptions of his metamorphosis - from human being to giant insect, and to his eventual state where his body becomes "completely flat and dry" (p. 60) and he dies.

His physical transformations are dramatic. For me, this visual imagery of everything being the same and yet different is very powerful. The emotional changes that occur are similarly dramatic, and effect his perception of the world. Eventually his world shrinks. Eventually he dies.

It seems to me that we live in an everchanging world and all too often the changes that occur are beyond our power and control. Our perception has to change if we are to cope with such changes and the challenge is to continuously adapt and metamorphose in relation to those changes.

The story is all about changes (real and imagined) and perceptions. I liked this theme in that in my world the

same images and objects can be repeated and thereby 'changed', as a matter of perception. I wanted to explore the idea of shifting my own perception of objects around me and to examine the effect of making such changes in my paintings.

/5. Metamorphosis: repetitions ...

5. Metamorphosis: repetitions and transformations

When I decided to use Metamorphosis I did not attempt to predict or prescribe as to how my paintings for this degree would develop. I said in my proposal that it was my intention for an open-endedness and flexibility to characterise my work while at the same time I wanted if possible to try and retain some of the specific imagery of the narrative *28*.

I carried through my proposed aim of initially exploring the visual possibilities of the insects - which were mostly new to me. I had never really drawn or painted insects or creepy crawly things of any nature since I had felt quite alienated and repulsed by them.

I was particularly interested in the material of the insects I had at my disposal - the idea that they look fragile but are actually quite tough if you touch or try and pull them apart. And yet they start to decompose and then suddenly their forms crumble and disintegrate into a heap of dust.

Drawing materials of charcoal, conte, wax crayon, pastel and ink seemed an ideal way of tracing contour, at the same time trying to build up a sense of the physical bulk contained within the insect frame. I also drew into the soft ground of wax crayon with a sharp tool and

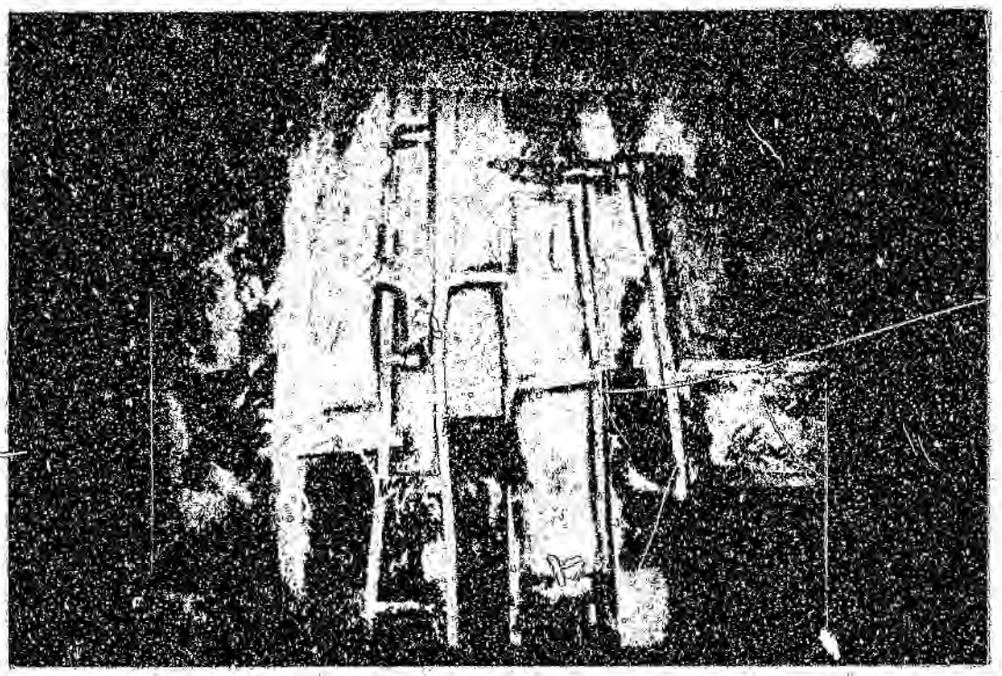


FIGURE 38 : Still crazy, climbing walls
(1986-88)
Robyn Cohen.



FIGURE 39 : Photographic source material
Documentation of a polystyrene insect specimen tray, used as source material.
Robyn Cohen.

even the metal nib of a pen. I used a technique of building up successive layers of colours and then carefully covering the layers of colour all with a thick layer of black wax crayon. With sharp instruments (a stick, pen or finger nail!) I then drew into the black, revealing the colours underneath. One gets a quality of line which is imbued by the colours underneath. This was a simple technique which I had forgotten about but loved as a child at nursery school. It was an ideal way of setting up linear equivalents of the forms of these strange insects. The layer of black pigment provided me with a ground to draw into, engraving linear contours, revealing the rainbow-like hues beneath the black. At this stage my drawings were centered around capturing the very basic forms of the insects and the use of a coloured line was very helpful. Some of remnants of this exercise were carried through into the images of walls in #Gregor the Actor (1985-88) and #A Bittere Gelaete (1986-87), where I dug deep into and through the oil paint, exposing layers of underpainting which gave the new images additional implications.

Pen and ink dragged across the surface of textured papers was an ideal way of simulating the trails that some insects make as they move across a surface. Some emit fluid as they move - evidence of their journey. Pastel and charcoal rubbed into the textured grain of handmade paper, left the pigments trapped in the pores

history and memory of himself as a person. Some of these images of Gregor's fragmentation are expressed in my painting together with my own sense of displacement in the contemporary historical space. I too have felt a sense of dislocation - floating and dangling in an uncertain social sphere. By scattering objects across a predominantly white format (canvas or paper), without defining a specific space for them is one of the ways by which I express and mediate my own sense of place.

This scattering of objects across the canvas space is something which developed during the second year of my undergraduate studies. This scattering is carried through in the paintings [illegible] this degree in 1988 paintings such as in #[illegible] #Radio Days and in #Circle of Charms and #[illegible] a Posies, A Pocket full of Posies, Hushal Hushal We all fall down.

In paintings such as #Scattered Dreams, tiny porcelain hands are 'flung' off a tilted table, into the surrounding unknown space. One hand hovers somewhere on the right hand edge of the format. It is almost as if it has been thrown with tremendous force off the unstable table and now it dangles ambiguously in limbo looking for a place to come to rest. It appears at once attached to the edge of the format and also separate - cut off by the canvas edge. Once again the painterly treatment of this image - almost tentatively rendered

theme I had never considered before in my painting. Underneath the old massive branches, babies in prams had been parked, childhood games and fantasies played out. That tree had been witness to my childhood and my 'growing up'. At the same time it had been witness to a whole 'history' which I may only imagine, such as the lives of creatures hidden in the ground. The tree, which I used in a number of paintings such as in #One Sunday under the Cork Tree (1987-88) *32*, and more implicitly in Party-Games in the Enchanted Gardens (1988) became, like the pram had before, a physical point of connection with a means of mediating both 'real' and imaginary memories of childhood and particularly the play-aspects of childhood.

This notion of 'playing' is carried through in #Hide and Seek in the Junk-Yard (1988), where hundreds of little objects are scattered across the picture space, involved in a game of revealing and concealing, as the title suggests. Here there is a further mixed-media exploration of little insect-like creatures, changing and shifting into other forms. Piled high in this horizontal format, these little creatures erode a pile of junk, composed of little animal necklace charms, ladders, radios, chairs and countless other images, which are derived from previous paintings such as

"a regular human bedroom, only rather too small" (p. 1), which I had used in some of my earlier paintings, such as #Gregor the Pink Gogga. The painting is dominated by this enormous luscious pink insect in a "human bedroom" (p. 9) having a floral patterned bedspread, and selection of chairs and carpets in the background.

Gregor as the "Pink Gogga" is a 'pretty' insect, composed of creamy pinks of thick impasto which are like layers of cake icing into which one might almost wish to dip ones finger and lick it. This appetizing association undercuts a commonly held view that insects are repulsive, and once again invites and invites the viewer into the painting.

In the #Gregor the Pink Gogga, Gregor is obviously too large for such a small interior space, and yet at the same time shows no effort to find a way out - to push out of the space. There is a suggested sense of the 'wholeness' of Gregor who, in spite of his altered form, wants still to hold onto his connection with his human existence. The objects in the room are his last remaining links with that life. Once he lets go of those, he becomes yet another discarded piece of rubbish, assigned to the junk heap. However, the title of Treasure-Hunting in the Junk-Yard (1987-89), implies that there is, even in a junk-yard, the promise of

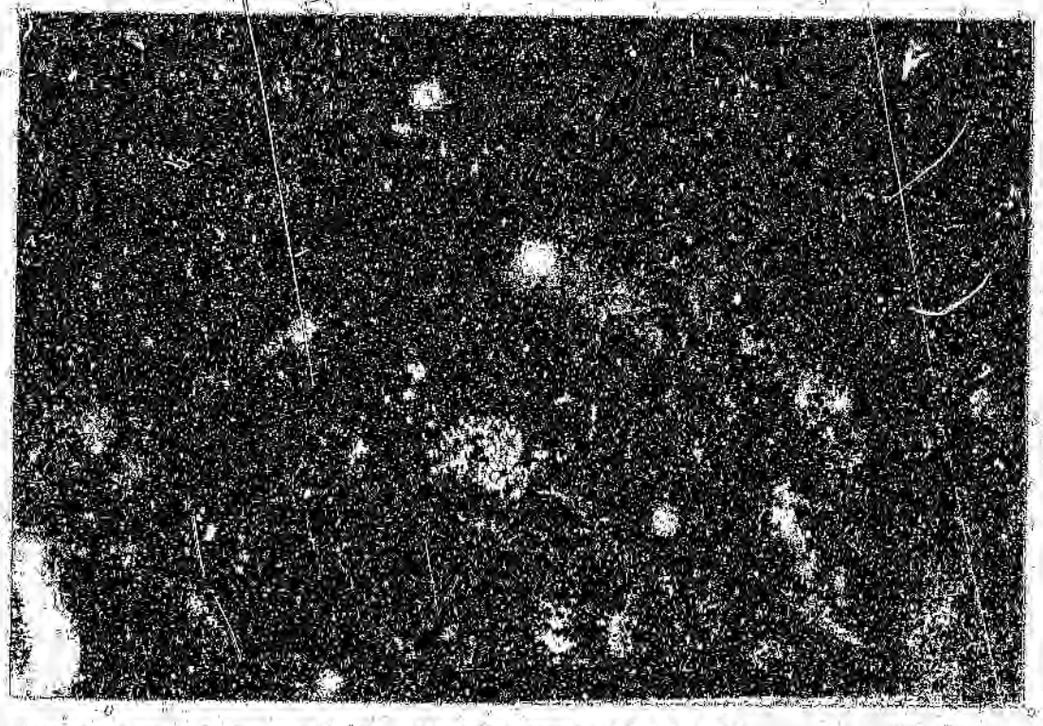


FIGURE 42 : Gregor the Pink Goqya (1986-88)
Robyn Cohen.

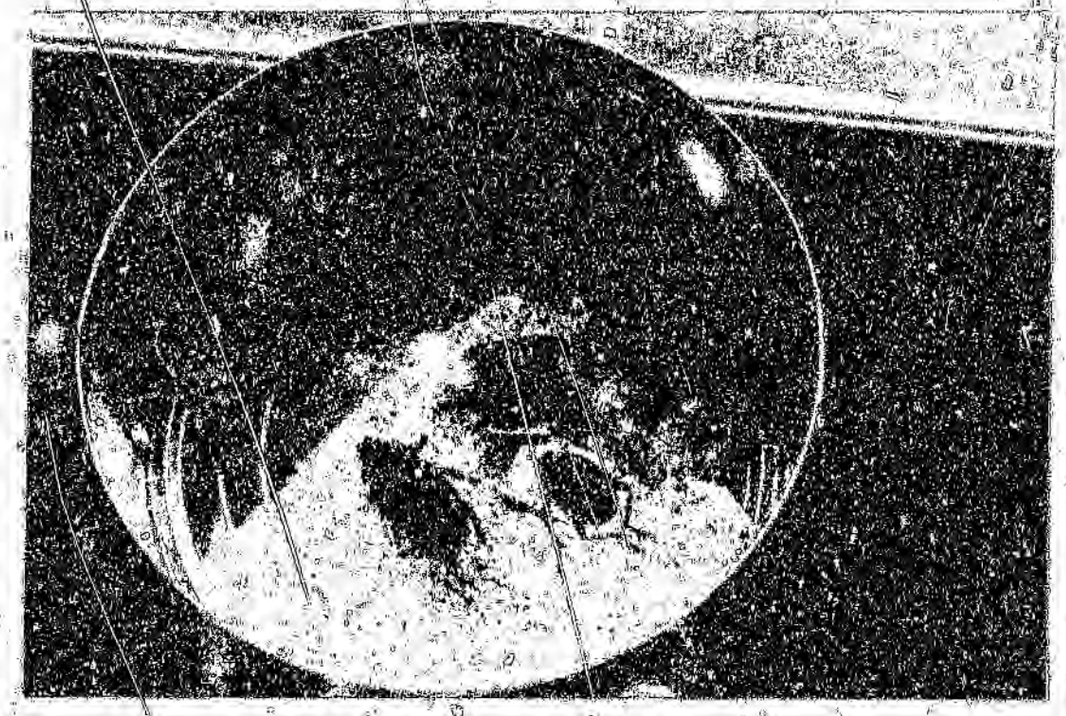


FIGURE 43 : Photographic source material
Documentation of some insect specimens, used as source material.
Robyn Cohen.

through soft marks of a palette of neutral greys and pinks makes it appear real, and yet not real. Tiny insects are scattered through this space, punctuating it with a flurry of activity and motion which is ambiguous in that they could be insects or perhaps fragmented, non-specific strands of paint flying through the space.

White oil pigments in #Scattered Dreams, #Circle of Charms and #Ring a Ring a Rosies are used to fragment and and visually scatter objects such as the insects, hands and chairs by fading and blurring aspects of the images, concealing them behind white washes and thus almost making them appear ethereal. Their original identities are altered through the process of scattering them compositionally across the format as well as the process of breaking them up and concealing them through the medium.

In various paintings I have built up layers of thick and textured oil paint. Visually objects such as a tree or Gregor the Insect are anchored firmly in the picture space by the physicality of the thick oil paint.

In #Gregor the Pink Gogga (1986-88) the identity of Gregor, a specific individual comes through. He is protagonist and physically dominant. The human world has shrunk -- been pushed back -- and he looms large in the domestic landscape of his bedroom.

Very thick, impasto paint in #Gregor the Pink Gogga evoke a sense of (human) flesh *30*. So, while the insect clearly does not have a human form, its fleshiness (which suggests human skin) imbues it with some 'human' qualities. The theme of physical transformation, through painting (and drawing) media, was explored in many works, such as in #Still crazy, climbing walls.

In this painting, I enjoyed experimenting with charcoal and oil pastel drawn into oil painting gel as a means for tracing pictorial equivalents for the physical transformation of Gregor. Gregor is shown in various compartments which are not unlike the divisions of an insect specimen tray (@Plates Page 23 - fig. 39), on which structural analogy this painting is formally composed. Traces of ink form a trail around the boxes; an equivalent of the "horrid blotches [which] stained the white door" as a result of Gregor's attempt at mobility (p. 25). Pieces of thick paint make drips, again an allusion to the traces Gregor "... left behind him of the sticky stuff on his soles wherever he crawled" (p. 37). The surface scratchings of the nib of the ink pen on the canvas evoked a feeling, similar to that associated with an insect scratching and scavenging in a cavity *31*. In a sense, like Gregor in the story, who moves around, trying to make sense of his new physical form, I moved in a parallel way, with inks and

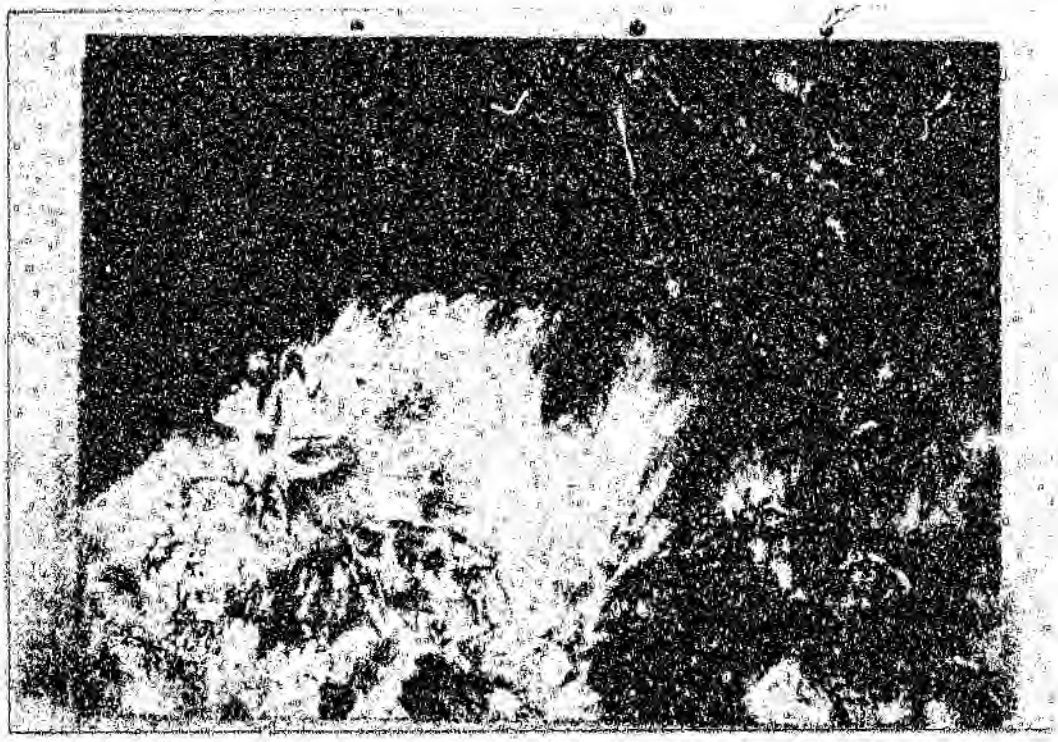


FIGURE 44 : **Landscape with Pink Cork Tree** (1986-88)
Robyn Cohen.

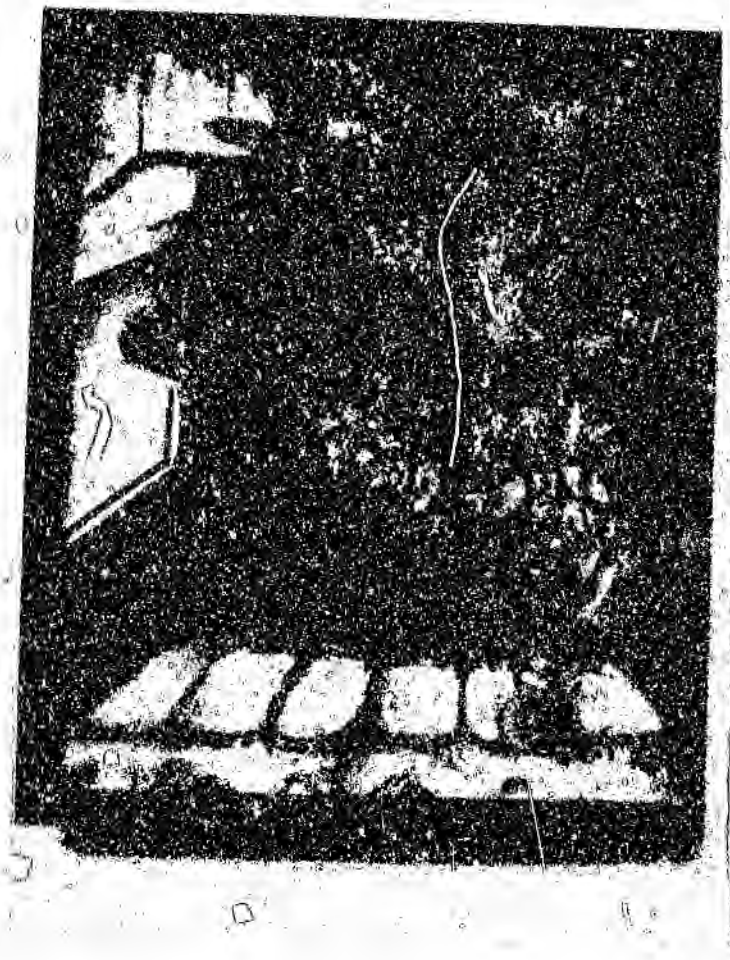


FIGURE 45 :
One Sunday under the Cork Tree (1987-88)
Robyn Cohen.

paint across my space, trying to find out about the form of my new objects.

Oil paint washes, thinly applied, enabled me to retain the 'underpainting', the tracings of various stages which this painting went through. Physical evidence of Gregor's transformations are implied by the vestiges of 'old painting' not fully concealed by new paint. There is thus an analogy implied between the history of the painting and the history of Gregor's metamorphosis.

In #Landscape with Pink Cork Tree (1986-88) transparent layers of white oil paint envelop the landscape with a mysterious mist, concealing much of the 'undergrowth'. Old, discarded dolls, footballs, a pram, stairs and little insects are jumbled together. These layers contain evidence of the struggle involved in making a space which is at once interior domestic living room (as evidenced by the light fitting and curtains) and at the same time exterior garden landscape (as evidenced by the tree, insects and undergrowth). It is intentionally an uneasy space, which does not quite make sense when looked at according to traditional empirical criteria. The space is an imagined one, which could not exist in the 'real' world. And yet the sheer immediacy of the pink tree anchors the painting very much in the temporal world. Such a prosaic landscape element as the tree is a means again (like the pram) of allowing the viewer

into this otherwise strange landscape. It provides a familiar point of access to the work, freeing me to explore elsewhere the more obscure elements.

The pink tree is bright and dominant and appears untouched by this turmoil around it. The thick, almost three dimensional, oil paint adds to its physicality in juxtaposition with the surrounding etherial white. The actual paint is like layers of cork which have been scratched into with sharp implements: inscriptions, lovers' hearts with arrows through them are the incised emblems. Although the paint is textured and similar to the real cork bark of a tree, it is simultaneously paint for its own sake. The pink colour of the paint firmly differentiates it from an illusionistic rendering of a tree. Although the paint textures are informed by an awareness of what old tree trunks may look like, there is no attempt merely to simulate a tree in simple terms. The pink is a piece of painterly license employed to evoke the idea that this is a 'spacial' tree.

The tree from which this image is derived is a huge old cork tree in my mother's garden (#Plates Page 27 - fig. 46). In 1987 and 1988 I used one of the rooms in her house as a studio. I was painting, and looking around my new studio space, as I had done so often in various other studios at Wits, when suddenly I noticed this tree, and thought about its place in my childhood - a

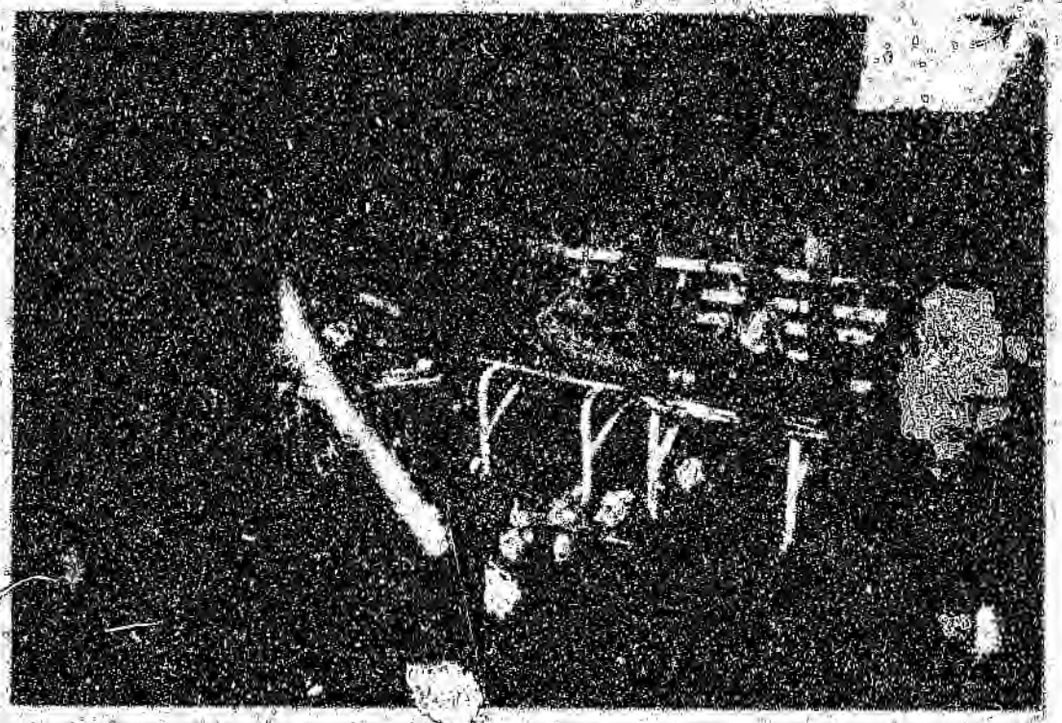


FIGURE 46 : Photographic source material
Documentation of cork tree in Robyn's mother's garden, together with other textual sources.
Robyn Cohen.

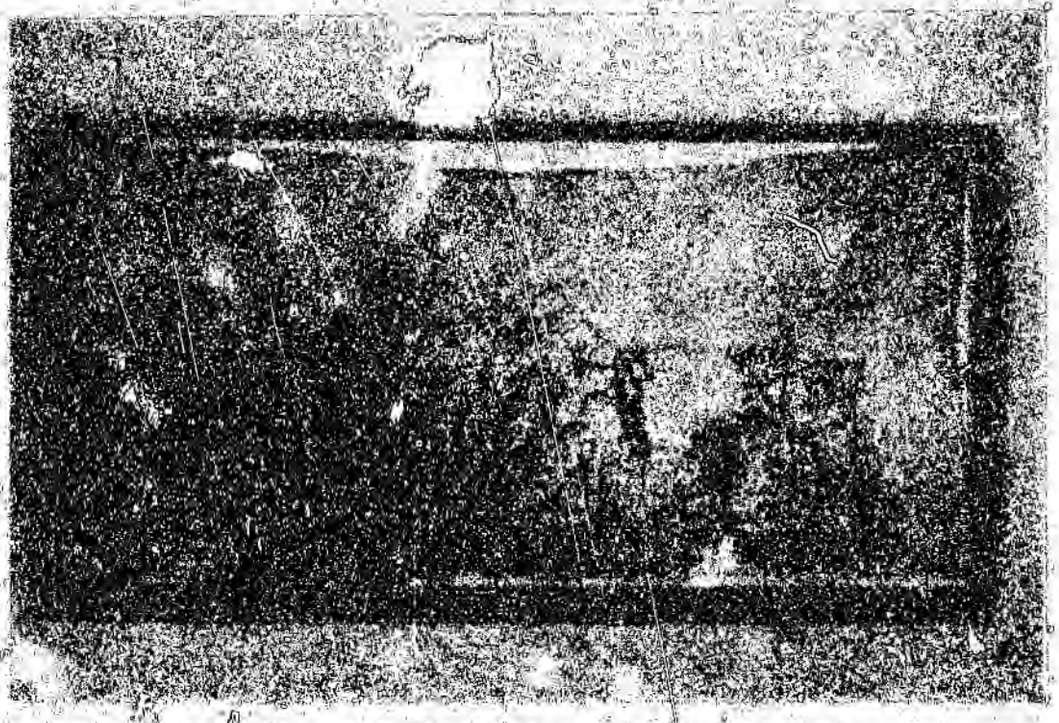


FIGURE 47 : Hide and Seek in the Junk-Yard (1988)
Robyn Cohen.

In My Mother's Kitchen (1985) and Landscape with Hyper-Active Radio (1985).

Gregor has now been reduced to a tiny writhing insect - part of a mass of character-less insects. There is very little connection between insect and human form. The insect has perpetuated and repeated itself and overridden the human form that was apparent in #Gregor the Pink Gogga.

In #Hide and Seek in the Junk-Yard a little pram perches on a stitched line - a seam which connects two pieces of fabric together, to form one canvas. The two pieces of canvas were sewn together because I did not have a large enough piece of canvas, at the time, to accommodate this long horizontal format.

Tiny fragmented dolls' limbs (a quotation from #The Day The Pram went into the Veld, 1985) fly about, colliding with the tiny insects. These insects were taken from carefully illustrated encyclopedia articles on insects. Great care in their drawing is evident, which is in sharp contrast with the 'messy' line with which some of the other images are rendered. Gregor, in this painting, has lost all semblance of his former life. He is 'just' a piece of junk, vermin on the rubbish heap: a frightening prospect which underlies the loss of his identity as a human being. In this painting I have discarded references to Gregor's bedroom, in the text:



FIGURE 48 : Itsy Bitsy Spider had a great fall (1986-88)
Robyn Cohen.

adventure in a new space - something very different from the domestic interior of Gregor's bedroom.

A junk-yard of writhing, fleshy forms is contained by a boxed enclosure in #Itsy Bitsy Spider had a great fall (1985-88). Objects such as broken chairs, obsolete telephones, drinking vessels, dolls' limbs, flowers and insects are jumbled together. The spider protagonist is suspended from a thin (painterly) thread which extends from a hovering stage-like contraption, perhaps about to land on the sand-pit. On the stage is a tiny pram (perhaps the spider's). It is ambiguous whether the spider wishes to fall into (as the title suggests) the sand-pit, return to the stage platform, or dangle where he is. The spider's body is formed out of 'nervous' tentatively painterly dots, indicating the uncertainty of his spatial orientation.

We can never really know what a *given* new space will afford us until we actually inhabit it. Gregor Samsa, the human, could never conceive what it would be like to be a giant beetle. Once he found himself in that state, he couldn't even be sure if he was dreaming, or really experiencing such a physically dramatic change. In painting, I may transform my objects through the material of paint into any form I wish, subject only to technical limitations. It is through the paint medium and the painterly transformation of a series of domestic



FIGURE 42 : A Gogga in the Kitchen (1988)
Robyn Cohen.

spaces that I may follow through Gregor's transformations of various spaces and contexts, not necessarily to do with Gregor's transformation.

For example Gregor becomes #A Gogga in the Kitchen (1988). Here Gregor, seen from a high viewpoint, perches rather menacingly, like your average 'Parktown Prawn' *33*, on a curved kitchen counter top. A bottle of wine and glasses roll about in spilt liquid (probably wine). The counter is like a platform and Gregor is centre stage, the actor of this play. This image was inspired by an actual Parktown Prawn which invaded my kitchen.

I would like to discuss four paintings in which Gregor the insect is foregrounded as protagonist. These paintings begun in 1986 and completed in 1988 are: #Gregor the Actor, #Gregor Lounging under Piero's tent, #Gregor at the Funfair and #Gregor in his Living Room. All four paintings are small (no larger than 50cm x 60cm) and were painted together as a series. In these paintings I wanted to explore the idea of Gregor as a character in a story - playing out different roles. In this regard I was influenced by Hodgins' comments about his painting Ubu-the Browning Version (1984-86, Images C13). Hodgins said by drawing arrows on the stage the two Ubu's in the painting were fighting upon he was alluding to the arrows often chalked onto a stage,

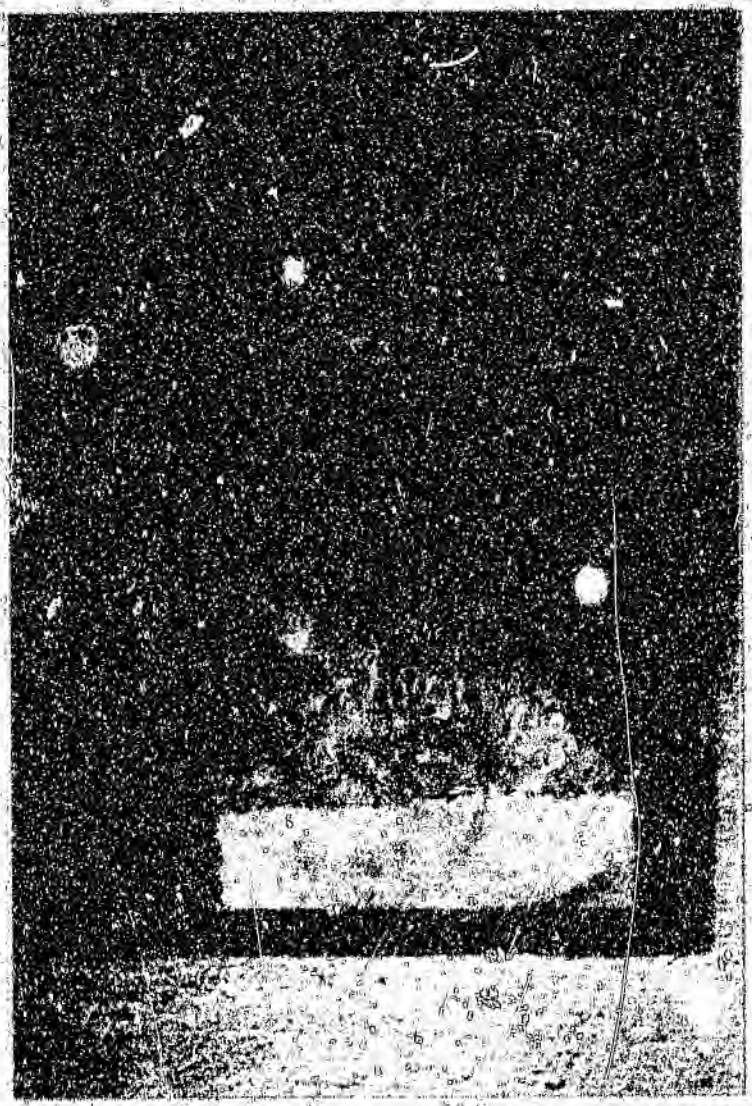


FIGURE 50 : *Gregor the Actor* (1986-88) Robyn Cohen.

giving actors instructions on where to move. The arrows in Hodgins' painting besides being something "quite nice to look at" [New Work, 1986 p. 221] also refer to the fact that "Ubu is in fact a play". [New Works, 1985 p. 221]

#Gregor the Actor (1986-88) alludes specifically to his status as a literary creation of Kafka. The theatrical metaphor underlies and adds to the idea of 'play', that my painting is 'just' a ainting - it is not 'real' life. References to story-time, hide and seek and nursery rhymes, in other titles, often reinforce this notion of painting as 'just another game' - not to be taken too seriously.

In #Gregor the Actor Gregor perches on a spotted high stool (the stool I had in my studio). The spindly legs of the stool stand almost tentatively on a platform-like box (a reference to the art studio platforms on which objects are placed). The stool becomes itself like a nervous animal, poised for flight off the platform. In a similar way, the pram often becomes like a little animal, activating the space around it; here Gregor and the stool become animated, charged with energy by the 'pointillist' *31* application of paint, particularly in the stool cushion.

The backdrop, framing the throne-like construction on which the stool is mounted, is a long horizontal stage set. It too contains images which seem nervous, about to jump out, and onto Gregor's stage. These 'set-elements' were derived from postcard reproductions of Medieval Italian frescoes, which I saw first-hand in 1985 in Italy. I wanted to use specific images of half-human, half-animal, winged beasts, in my work, as I found them magical and mythical. The idea of an object, or being, reading as many things at the same time, composed simultaneously of various physical dimensions, was an exiting visual prospect.

Their initial use, in the painting (#Gregor the Actor), as decoration on a stage set, gave way to their becoming highly attenuated and animated. It is almost as if they are in conversation with the central protagonist, Gregor. They have ceased to be stage decoration, and have actively entered, as protagonists, into the realm of the play. This transformation had much to do with the fact that they looked like 'flat' appendages on the wall, which made little sense in relation to the painting as a whole. Visually they did not 'work' in the painting, despite the fact that I had wanted them to function only as pattern on a wall. The painting in the course of its progress altered my 'original' plan and forced me to re-think the function of these images

The backdrop, framing the throne-like construction on which the stool is mounted, is a long horizontal stage set. It too contains images which seem nervous, about to jump out, and onto Gregor's stage. These 'set-elements' were derived from postcard reproductions of Medieval Italian frescoes, which I saw first-hand in 1985 in Italy. I wanted to use specific images of half-human, half-animal, winged beasts, in my work, as I found them magical and mythical. The idea of an object, or being, reading as many things at the same time, composed simultaneously of various physical dimensions, was an exiting visual prospect.

Their initial use, in the painting (#Gregor the Actor), as decoration on a stage set, gave way to their becoming highly attenuated and animated. It is almost as if they are in conversation with the central protagonist, Gregor. They have ceased to be stage decoration, and have actively entered, as protagonists, into the realm of the play. This transformation had much to do with the fact that they looked like 'flat' appendages on the wall, which made little sense in relation to the painting as a whole. Visually they did not 'work' in the painting, despite the fact that I had wanted them to function only as pattern on a wall. The painting in the course of its progress altered my 'original' plan and forced me to re-think the function of these images



FIGURE 51 : Gregor Lounging under Piero's Tent (1986-88) Robyn Cohen.



FIGURE 52 : Constantine's Dream from Arezzo Basilica di S. Francesco (c. 1452-59) Piero Della Francesca.

within the whole. Although they are 'repetitions', they bear little resemblance to the 'original' prototypes.

In #Gregor Lounging under Piero's Tent (1986-88) the image of Gregor the insect under a red, curtain-like canopy is taken from a postcard image of the scene, Constantine's Dream from Piero della Francesca's Arezzo frescoes (c. 1452-1459) which I also saw when I was in Italy. (See: #Plates page 31 - fig. 45.) *35*

In my painting the relationship between the original source, the Piero reproduction (which is of course a photographic repeat image of the original fresco) and the repeated image has many implications.

Compositionally I have retained the pointed curtained tent (from Piero's fresco) but have placed a pink Gregor with a mantle composed of a ladybird pattern of circles, wearing an orange hat. He hovers over a mat which was the actual mat I was standing on and painting on in my studio. In the pediment of my tent I have placed an image of the broom I was constantly using to sweep all the dust around me. It has no specific meaning other than it seemed absurd to place this prosaic object in the pinnacle of the triangle of the tent.

The bowl of apples is a reference to the " ... small red apples ..." (p. 44) that Gregor's father threw at

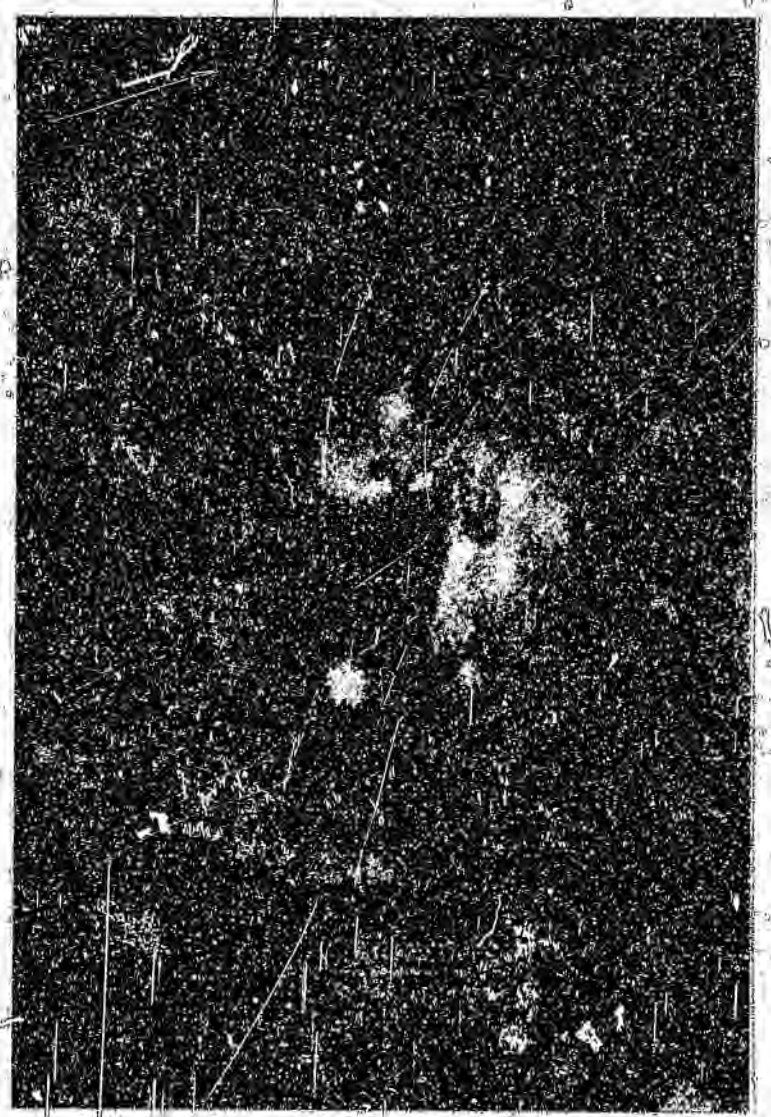


FIGURE 53 : Gregor at the Funfair
(1986-88)
Robyn Cohen.

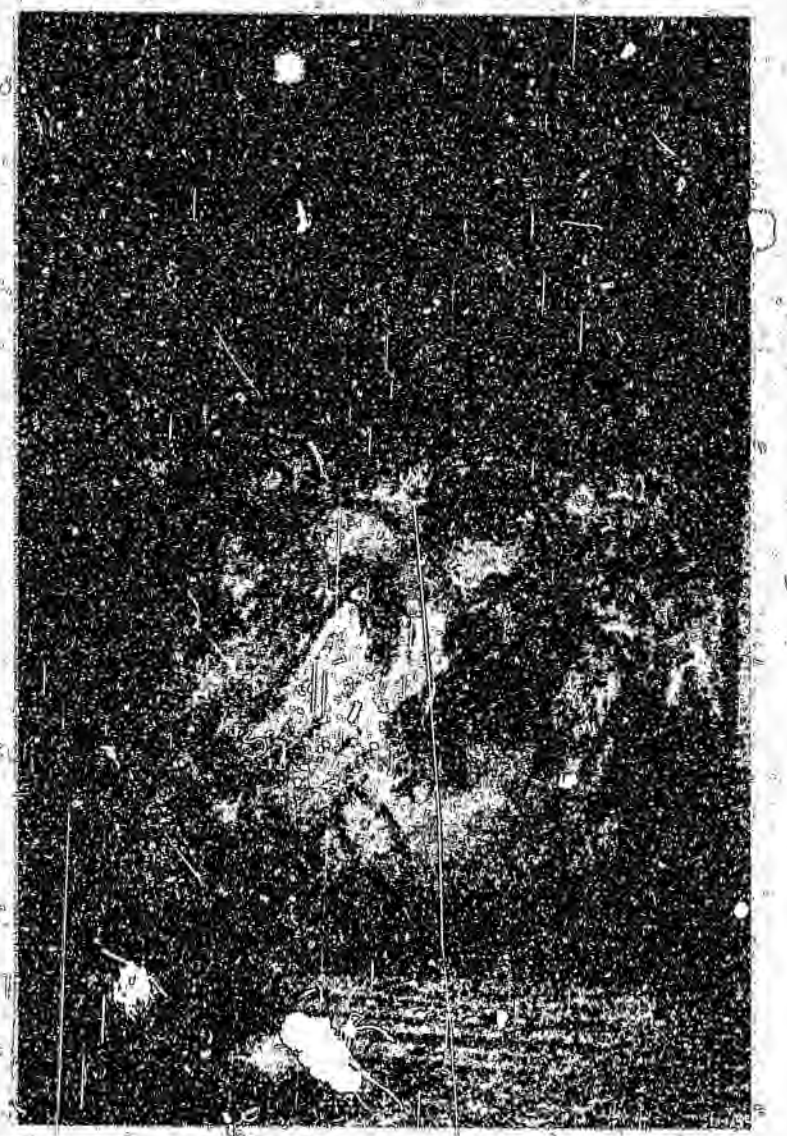


FIGURE 54 : Gregor in his Living Room
(1986-88)
Robyn Cohen.

him. The injuries caused by the apples hitting him led to Gregor death (p. 44, 58). The image of the bowl on the mat containing fish was a direct result of a lyric from a Pink Floyd song "... We're just two goldfish, swimming in a fishbowl, year after year..." from their album, Wish You Were Here. While painting, I was singing along with the tape of this album and on impulse I took my brush which was loaded with painted and drew a fishbowl. This was totally un-planned or pre-meditated. Indeed I reacted to the stimulus of the song.

The references in this painting are a mix of 'made-up' elements like the fishbowl) and quotation of composition (Piero's centrally placed tent) as well as references to objects in my studio (broom and shoes). While it is possible to show the origins of the painting as it is narratively and compositionally derived from the Piero and Kafka story, the painting may also be accessed without a knowledge of these sources.

In #Gregor at the Funfair, the Piero curtains are repeated. (This curtain image was also repeated in other paintings such as #A Bittere Gelegte and #Encore for the Pink Lady, 1986-89.) Before painting #Gregor at the Funfair, I carved some miniature curtains, columns and other 'props' out of jelatong wood (#Plates Page 33 - fig. 55), with the intention of having a visual, three dimensional object to source some of the theatrical



FIGURE 55 : Documentation of jelatong wood objects (carved by Robyn) and used as source material.
Robyn Cohen.

implications I wished to impart in the painting. In this painting Gregor dangles from a string of celebratory triangular flags. These were a reference to some of the pomp surrounding the Johannesburg Centenary celebrations and decorations strung up in the city at the time I started the painting.

On the stage there is a doll's pram, limbs, broken dolls minus arms, shards of shrapnel and debris, bottles and wine glasses left over from a party. In the midst of all this sits a baby on the right hand side of the canvas, apparently oblivious of all the goings on - all the 'fun'. There are balloons coming out of amphora vases on the 'badly drawn' columns on either side of the stage (an intentional reference to badly drawn 'wonky' amateur props so common in school productions). Gregor presides over all this, as a mythical witness to the contemporary landscape, watching me, surveying my space around me. It has all become a mad funfair and in spite of the gaiety of the balloons and 'sweet' and 'pretty' turquoise, orange and blue palette, there is no joy in this scene.

The joy-less landscape is taken further in #Gregor in his Living Room, where Gregor seems glued onto a yellow, tongue shaped shadow. In this domestic space the uneasiness of the previous work is carried thro h -



FIGURE 56 : A Bitteré Geleqte (A Bitter Joke)
((1986-87)
Robyn Cohen.

nothing is static. The plate of fruit behind Gregor appears to spray painterly dots. The plants look like they are about to evaporate into a mass of paint threads. The broom in the foreground is madly 'brushing' away the green paint in the foreground. Much of the underpainting shows through the images - contradicting and altering their physical boundaries. Their parameters are not clear because of the intrusion of marks through the layers of glaze and impasto.

Hodgins' notion of retaining traces of underlying paint, as a means of foregrounding the process of painting, had much to do with the retention of the successive layers of texture on the stage set wall in #Gregor the Actor. The 'wall' allowed me to exploit the oil paint medium in building up a rich palimpsest not unlike that found on some very old walls in Johannesburg areas, such as Yeoville *38*, where I was living at the time.

The notion of Johannesburg suburbia as a 'walled city', where so many inhabitants barricade themselves up behind high walls, further enriched my use of the wall theme in #Gregor the Actor as well as in #A Bittere Gelegte In the latter painting the wall becomes a monumental stabilizing structure in a very large horizontal format where nearly everything else is unstable: about to fall, break off or come apart.

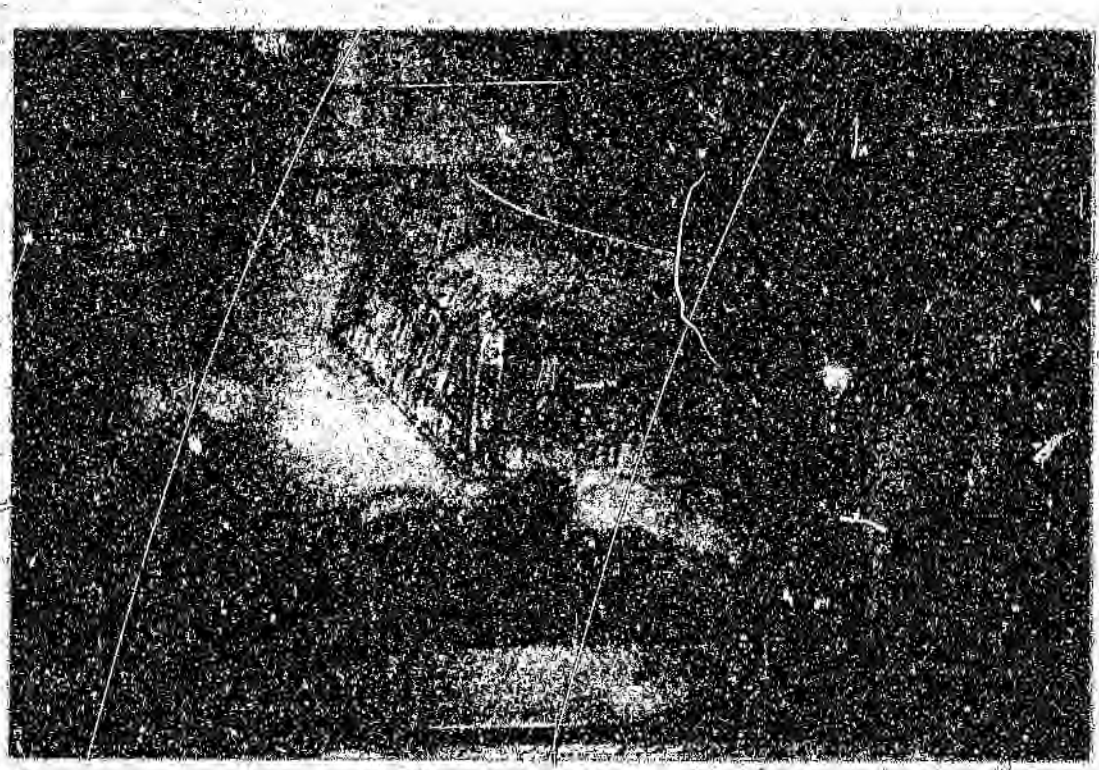


FIGURE 57 : After the Party (1987-88)
Robyn Cohen.

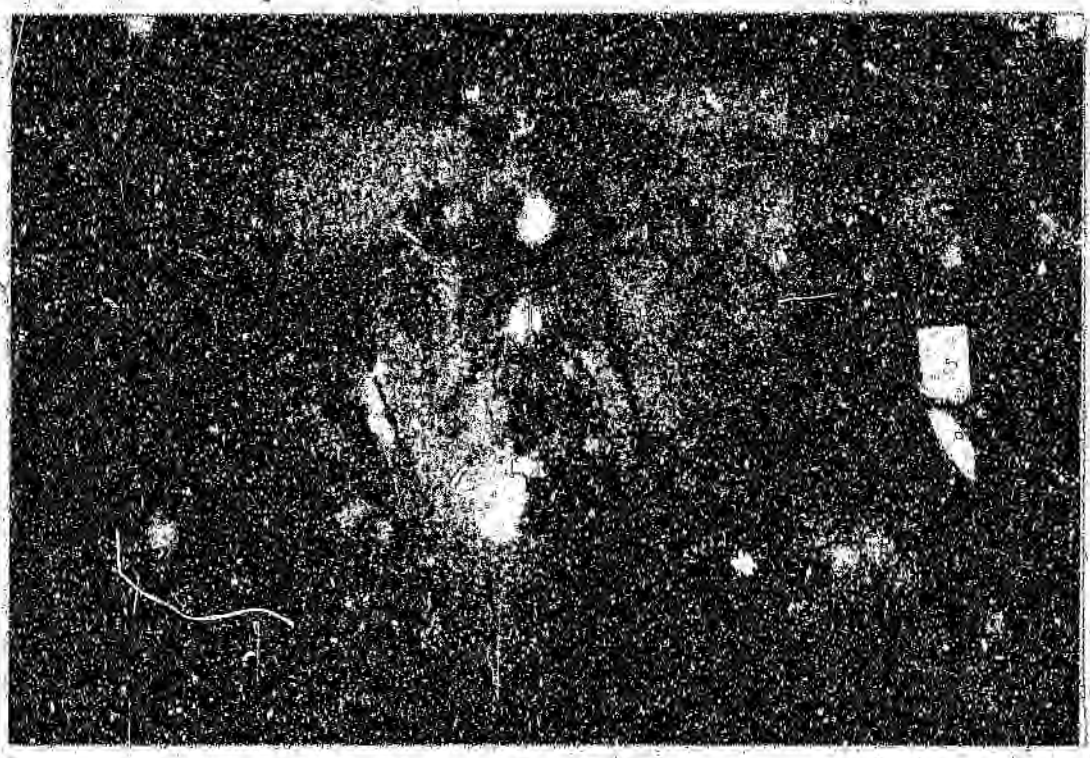


FIGURE 58 : Mr Toby's Laughing Garden
(1987-88)
Robyn Cohen.

Plastic fences taken from a child's zoological play-set were used in various drawings: #After the Party (1987-88), Hop-scotch in the Zoological Gardens (1988) and The Mad-Hatters Tea Party (1987-88). In all these drawings the fences define and balance spaces in relation to each other. The fenced off areas contain the movement of pencil and charcoal marks as they burst out of the confines of the objects which they define. The fences are made use of both as a means of keeping in objects, as well as of keeping activity out. One is not always quite sure where the limits described by the fences are. For instance, in #Mr Toby's Laughing Garden (1987-88), the fences have become a kind of transparent ground cover. The diamond shapes of this fence form a net-like structure which stretches across the surface. Thus the fence both encloses and 'traps' the contents of the garden.

The ambiguity of the spaces in these works is actually compounded by the inclusion of fences which should present clear barriers, confining things where they belong. Visually, these fences, like the walls in #Gregor the Actor, and #A Bittere Gelegte, are useful formal devices which may be used as stabilizers, spatially containing 'busy' areas from quieter areas in the canvas.

Walls are space dividers, barriers separating one space from another. Walls may, as a protagonist in a Robert Frost poem declares, make "good neighbours". Walls may also, in the context of a contemporary suburban Johannesburg, provide paranoid owners with a sense of security.

In the art school studio in which I first worked as a undergraduate, huge screens walled off one painting area from another. These mobile screens defined each student's work space. Space was always at a premium, and screens were the physical containers, and barriers, which, in no uncertain terms, made visible exactly where the divisions were (unless someone moved them surreptitiously at night).

If there were not enough screens, stools, easels and platform-like boxes (the type used for posing life models) were often employed to demarcate perimeters. These studio objects did not just exist for me as inanimate objects. Especially when I was working late, they became all sorts of strange and wonderful things in the altered light. They took on a variety of connotations in my minds eye, becoming, at times strange little creatures, holding together and shaping the studio space. At other times the studio became a wondrous landscape, a playground, a Coppelia-like ballet, in which strange things could take place. A

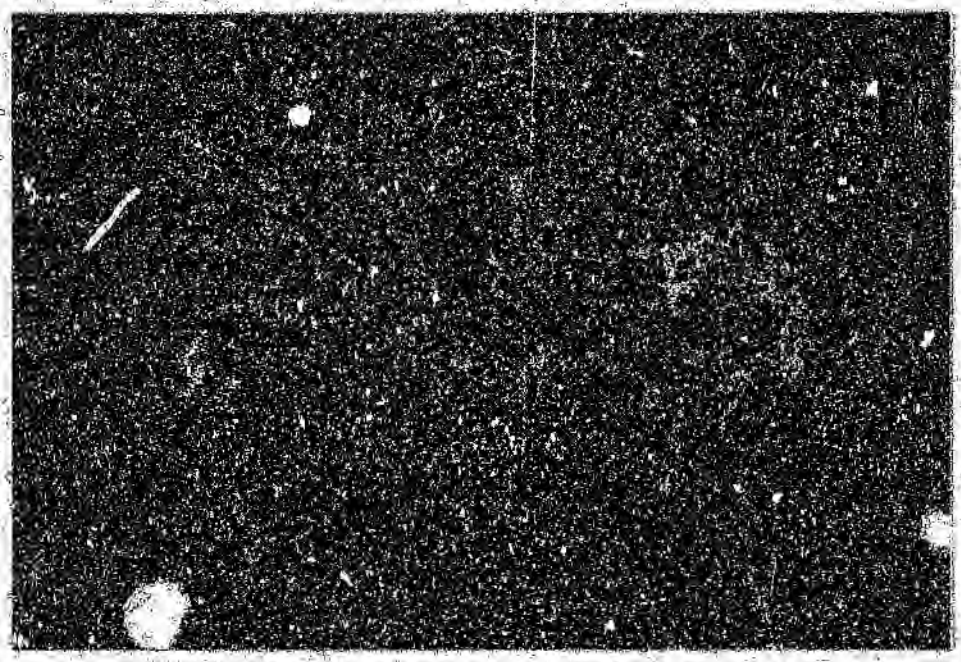


FIGURE 59 : Thursday Night at the Sculpture Studio (1985)
Robyn Cohen.



FIGURE 60 : Scenes from a Romantic Comedy (1986-88)
Robyn Cohen.

paint stain on the floor might for example become a wonderful, mythical beast. The discarded silver paper of a chocolate might transform itself into a space ship hurtling through the studio. Many of these connotations were assimilated through the painting process.

Screens have thus been a naturally extended image and a device in my own paintings; a means of making and defining spaces, as it were for various objects. The Kafka narrative also lends itself to screens which demarcate the series of narrative episodes. The stool and the stage set wall become part of my 'reading' of the Kafka st[illegible] as well as part of a setting which Gregor could inhabit in a 'theatrical' adaptation of the story. All this follows from the recognition that Gregor is only a fictive character - 'made up' by Kafka and now further transformed in various spaces and contexts through my paintings.

The stool, screens, and studio objects make reference to previous iconography in my paintings where such objects became infused with a life of their own. #Thursday Night at the Sculpture Studio (1985) was frantically painted in one long stretch on a Thursday evening in a Wits basement sculpture studio (at the "Wedge"). I was keeping vigil at the kiln firing of a mold for my bronze casting project. In this painting, long trestle tables, heaped with covered clay

sculptures, wire constructions, forgotten items of clothing and shoes, became the setting for a magical play. Tables jump into the air, and almost out of the canvas. Easels somersault from platforms; bursts of Indian yellow flare up like flames from linear contours of floor space. The solid masses of smoke chimneys fragment and dissolve into blobs and dotted, painterly marks.

Perceived from one vantage point the sculpture studio was a grimy, grey space, devoid of much colour, in a basement with little natural light. The original source was then transmuted through my painterly imagination and processed into a magical landscape.

In the act of repeating aspects from this context I have re-assembled and reinvented these objects. In the painting there remain definite and identifiable references to some of the objects in the studio space such as the contraption (the kiln) on the lower left corner of the canvas and the trestle tables. However their referential roles as objects in a sculpture studio with a function - as tables for students to work on, as an oven for moulds from the bronze casting process, have been dissipated and become blurred. They take on anthropomorphic qualities through their formal placement and painterly treatment of dots, blobs and other marks.

This idea of an animated landscape is carried through and developed in #Scenes from a Romantic Comedy (1986-88) where objects like tea cups, ladders, insect/human shapes and a radio all frolic about in a dramatic blue-purple space. A green and yellow stage and two wobbly columns set this scene, affirming the idea that life is one big play in which we are all actors, and from which we may indeed wake and find ourselves turned into mammoth beetles.

The stage is dominated by an image derived from a large, round, porcelain, blue and white Wedgewood container (which I use to store my earrings). The container is tilted up towards the spectator, its lid next to it, and a double headed white rose 'grows' out of the container, diagonally cutting through the space and into the surrounding 'drama'.

In my studio space, there were plastic roses on a stool in front of the canvas. These roses formed an arc, similar to one now evident in the painting. The rose looked as if it belonged in this mad landscape because the painting looked 'empty' when I moved it away. Once again an object in the studio, which was not intended originally to be part of the painting, has ended up ingratiating itself into the painting. The metamorphosis of the painting, then, has much to do with the way the

environment, the studio space, informs the painting space.

Insect/humans are relegated to the environs surrounding the stage. These strange creatures swing around in this space on pieces of line, which are almost like pieces of string, pulled through the air. The slightly raised, spaghetti-like, paint lines defining the columns remind one of multi-coloured streamers, left over from a party. These lines are pulled into the surrounding space and there is perhaps a sense that, at any second, they may unravel. If this were to happen, the columns would cease to exist because they would have lost their definitive form. Painterly mark, describing form, thus itself becomes an object. Edges of objects (such as the tea cup, and the Wedgewood container) dissolve into a rich series of marks which also become little objects in their own right. These little pieces of paint take on their own form and shape as objects.

Here, stringy, ribbon-like line has been informed by, and is a repeat of a a memory of 'string pictures' which I made at nursery school. Coloured pieces of string were glued onto a sheet of paper, either coloured or white. The fact that the lines of string could be moved and shifted around (at least until the glue dried) provided one with a sense of freedom in which to experiment and make a shape which seemed 'just

right. It could also be rather terrifying because until one had glued the string properly down, the whole thing could unravel, and one would have to start all over again. String pictures were fun and full of adventure, but also required concentration and control to fix the shape one wanted.

Painterly mark in #Scenes from a Romantic Comedy sometimes contains form (as in left hand column) and sometimes splays out from the form (as in the right hand column), almost as if there were glue holding down the paint which has suddenly dried. There was a great sense of playing with the edges, the very limits of these objects, and thereby reducing them to line on a canvas. Their preciousness, as specific objects, gives way to their importance first as paint marks on canvas. The painting process is thus reduced to mark-making on a canvas, which undercuts the idea of the painting as 'grand theatre'. It is all a game which comes down to the process of putting paint on to the canvas: making marks.

This painting was useful in focusing my attention on objects as forms in a space, as distinct from specific objects having particular reference to, for instance a Kafka text. Although textual sources such as Metamorphosis are important to me, the painting must ultimately operate as an autonomous object. In the

process of drawing I periodically concentrate on the shapes and contours of my objects, in an attempt never to lose sight of their physical dimensions, which is what eventually gives painting its richness. It is all very well if the sources are interesting and various, but if the painting is not visually engaging and exciting, it becomes a mere appendage to some literary text and does not stand in its own right as a painting.

Conversely, I do not want the source (the repeated image) to overwhelm the painting. There is a delicate balance to be struck, a fine line to draw, between the origins and sources which I may want to inform the viewer of, (or which I do subconsciously inform the viewer) and the new image being of a nature which is engaging in itself.

Only in the process of of making the repeated image into my own everyday environment and all of its influences on the canvas on which I am working, does it become possible to tease the work, to spin the web, that will be the 'completed' work.

/6. The repeated image . . .

6. The repeated image becomes my own

It is impossible to assess and review my paintings made for this degree in a linear manner. Themes, ideas and images and the art making process criss-cross and interact in a web-like pattern. When I exhibited these paintings for assessment I grouped them according to repeated image and theme (where possible) rather than date of completion.

I tend to work on paintings in clusters over a period of time - sometimes a few days and often months or years. This does not mean that I work on a painting every day for a period of a year. I may work periodically, adding a dab of colour or adding a layer of glaze or sharpen up an area of colour. I often take colour which was mixed for another painting and left over and use some of this paint to heighten colour in paintings which have been put to one side. This means that paintings are often catalogued as having been made over a period of time (say 1986-88). There are a number of possibilities in this. The painting may have been started in 1986 with minor alterations in 1988. It may have been started and discarded until 1988 and then re-worked and worked on vigorously for a few months. The 1988 painting may (and may not) bear traces of the initial explorations and ideas mooted in 1986.

I cannot therefore say that the metamorphosis started off at one point and finished at another. The paintings started concurrently at a number of points and the completed works 'ended' up at a number of equally numerous points.

My initial explorations of source material (plastic insects, specimens) as derived from the Kafka text and my efforts to research and draw and repeat my new objects over and over again led me to foreground Gregor as protagonist in a number of paintings, such as in #Gregor the Pink Gogga and #Gregor the Actor, #Gregor in his Living Room, #Gregor Lounging under Piero's tent and #Gregor at the Funfair (all 1986-88). In these paintings there was a concern with some of the narrative implications of the story together with the objects and images described in the story.

As Gregor became literally transformed in paint in a few works, so in other works his identity as Kafka's creation was eroded and he was dehumanised. He became a tiny fragmented creepy crawly, scribbled in pen and ink or tentatively rendered in blobs of oil paint (as in #Itsy Bitsy Spider had a great fall, 1986-88). He becomes one of many 'similar' creatures who inhabit the earth. Gregor becomes pure line - as in the pen and ink drawings on paper and on canvas. He becomes part of the

junk of my backyard. He is no longer special but part of my everyday landscape.

Right through the paintings there is a push and pull between images from my own visual vocabulary and history (prams, dolls, radios etc.) and their interaction and juxtaposition with the imagery from Metamorphosis. The imagery from the story shifts, often close to the original literary source and often aping the junk of the backyard imagery. Sometimes my visual vocabulary dominates over the Kafka imagery and other times it is the other way round. At times both are given promine ce.

Images such as the pram, dolls, brooms, chairs, radios, appear in different realms - sometimes as objects in Gregor's domestic interiors, sometimes as images from my own backyard and sometimes in an ambiguous space, left open for the viewer to decide.

In the various paintings where the format and painterly treatment is different (for instance in the use of expanses of white), I found that by repeating similar images like the curtain, wall, radio and insects in canvasses with differing dimensions and compositional elements, the implications of those objects shifted.

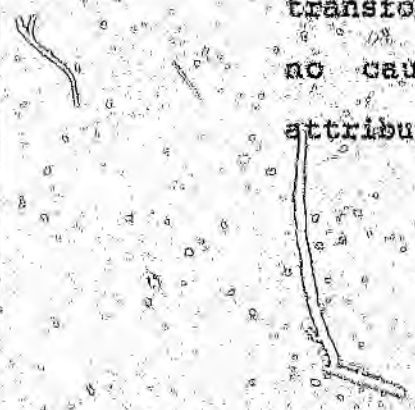
Manipulating the images in this manner was more than just an exercise of variation of scale and compositional elements. By deliberately fragmenting the image, and re-

constituting the image, the viewer is invited to engage with a far wider range of threads of the web of my imagery.

Certain aspects derived from the Kafka 'original' have become an extension and part of my own visual language as the the works have evolved. Kafka's narrative transformed through my adaptation of his images into my work. The connections with the original textual sources are not vital for the paintings to be de-coded. As pointed out in the preceding discussion of particular examples, the paintings contain a number of familiar objects such as a pram or tree which provide points of access to the viewer, ensuring that the paintings do not remain overly reliant on the literary source.

The element of repetition in these works is intrinsic to my process of image making. Through the process of repeating the original textual images from Metamorphosis I have sought gradually to erode the rift between those images and the textuality of my own painting and drawings. At the same time, I have chosen to pay tribute to the Kafka text in my choice of titles. The viewer may well connect some of the paintings titles to the narrative, but these connections are an enrichment and not a vital pre-requisite for interpretive engagement of these works.

The viewer who is interested in Kafka and the story of Metamorphosis, may be interested in following through certain images in the paintings, parallel to a reading of the narrative. But ultimately, the repetition has transformed itself through the paint, to the degree that no causally primary or secondary status can be attributed to the sources of my works.



/7. Notes to Chapter 2 ...

7. Notes to Chapter 2: Robyn Yael Cohen

Subsection 1:- Tell me another story: the same but different

1. This particular story was originally told to me by my Rabbi, the late Isaac Goss. I have never come across it in printed form.

2. Walter Benjamin "The Storyteller - Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov", in Illuminations, edited by Hannah Arendt, Jonathan Cape, 1970, p. 83.

3. Ibid., p. 84.

4. Ibid., p. 86.

5. Many of the other stories I like to relate originate from Chassidic folklore. The Chassidic movement encompasses various Jewish, ultra-religious, often mystical sects which were founded in Poland around 1750. Chassidism is still very much in evidence today. Although I do not necessarily adhere to all their teachings I have been influenced by their love of the story and their often mystical approach to life. The name of the current spiritual leader in New York of the Lubavitch movement (a branch of the Chassidic movement) is Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson. My maternal grandmother's parents were cousins both with the family name of Schnefer (a variation of Schneerson). They were both born in the village of Lubavitch in Latvia, the village in which the Lubavitch movement originated.

My use of stories with Chassidic origins also connects me to the history of my family who came from this little town.

Subsection 2:- Origins and sources: exploring my own backyard

6. First published in 1916 as Die Verwandlung. Pages referred to here correspond to the 1973 Penguin edition Metamorphosis and other stories, translated by Willa and Edwin Muir.

7. Market Theatre Gallery, Newtown, Johannesburg, May-June 1986. I exhibited with the late Lulu Davis and Lea Henerain.

8. In Sylvester's Interviews with Francis Bacon: 1962-1979 (Thames and Hudson, 1980) there is a great deal of discussion centering around Bacon's love of and use of photographs as source material. Some of the photographs Bacon has used and derived images from have been reproduced in the book. Two examples are fig. 37 (p. 39) and fig. 39 (p. 41). These photographs show the evidence of being folded and crumpled (of having being used). The lines made by the folds and cracks add implications to the features of the faces. The cracks almost become like added lines to the faces. They are for me, far more interesting than 'beautifully' printed, unblemished glossy photos, fresh out of the printing room.

I first became familiar with some of Bacon's torn pictures through the medium of slides during an art theory lecture during in my second year of undergraduate study at Wits given by Hodgins and Paul Stopforth. I saw that by allowing 'things' to happen to his photographs Bacon was undercutting their preciousness. He was making them into everyday objects which do not occupy a pedestal, or remain safely mounted in an album.

There is a recognition that even photographs are not fixed. They wrinkle and bear the ravages of the passage of time the same way as we do.

This is something that Hodgins has always been almost painfully aware of and made me as his student, painfully aware of. We are subject to time and change physically and emotionally as we get older and as a result of our experiences. In Two-Way Traffic, p. 282, Hodgins discusses how the oil paint in the figure in Parade (1984, Images A59) has been allowed to crack and decay, as a recognition of skin which wrinkles and sags as a result of the ageing process.

9. David Sylvester, Interviews with Francis Bacon: 1962-1971, Thames and Hudson, 1980, p. 38.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Robyn's World (1984, oil and acrylic on canvas) was exhibited on the "Impressions 84'" National Student Art Exhibition during May-June 1984, held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Joubert Park, Johannesburg. I was awarded a merit award. The dimensions of this painting are: 170cm (w) x 160cm (h) (with the panels closed). See p. 10 of the catalogue (unillustrated).

The map-like, diagrammatic representation in the inner and outer panels in this painting were a reference from Jim Dine's Three Panel Study for Child's Bedroom (1962).

For visual reference, see: Edward Lucie-Smith's Art Today, Phaidon Press, U.K., 1977, p. 195, fig. 151.

13. Contrast my 'noisy' working/creative environment to the traditional art gallery environment, where the works may eventually be seen, where silence is golden. Viewers tend to tip-toe around, afraid of making a noise.

In that environment the emphasis tends to be on the visual senses. I often wish I could have a radio playing in the gallery, to bridge that gap.

Subsection 3:- Backtracking for a moment: prams, pinks and play objects

14. The Women's Festival of Arts was a 1985 festival in which there were over the months of May and June theatre and fine art programmes at many different venues in and around Johannesburg. One of my paintings One Mad Day in the Pink Veld (1985) was exhibited at the Fuba Gallery in Newtown, Johannesburg on an exhibition entitled "Statements by 28 artists".

15. I have always used the word 'chucking', to express the action of throwing out the contents of the pram. It is a colloquialism, of a particularly South African flavour, more forceful than, 'tipping out' or 'getting rid of'. It seems to me that I favour this word, because of a connotation of violence and crudeness which other words for 'throwing out' do not express. As a child, I did not simply 'empty' the pram, but forcefully spewed out its contents.

16. Bruce Kawin, "Emphasising, Building, and Complicating", Telling it Again and Again, Cornell University Press, 1972, p. 47, talks about the "expansion of space and time" in the Odessa sequence. The effect of the repeated falling motion of the carriage, before it finally comes to a stop, enlarges one's experience of time by initiating the sense of action again and again.

This motion of the pram was evident in Brian De Palma's (1987) film, The Untouchables which quotes Eisenstein's Odessa sequence. The film re-kindled, to a degree my interest in the pram in the contextual setting of a staircase, and influenced directly various paintings such as Stairway to Heaven (1986-88, oil on canvas, 60.9cm (w) x 122cm (h). In this painting, a tiny pram is poised on the first step of a huge, seemingly infinite stairway; about to start its long climb/fall across the stairs.

27. Robert Hodgins (private conversations), as well other viewers, have often remarked that my pram image reminds them of a little animal, who is about to scurry off, or to jump out of the canvas.

18. Bettie Lambrecht "Menslike spieelbeeld" in Beeld, 2 June 1986.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. I was studying feminism as part of an art criticism course, a curriculum component of the Fine Arts Degree, at the time. My reading of feminist texts, undoubtedly facilitated a heightened perception to the usage, and development of the pram and dolls in these paintings.

22. Marilyn Martin, "Juxtaposing the nice and the nasty", Weekly Mail, 30 May to 5 June, 1986, puts it well when she says, that the "distorted imagery" of dolls' limbs form "abstract-expressionist passages".

Subsection 4:- Collecting and gathering: new images into my backyard

23. Research proposal submitted for this degree, "The Relationship between Repetition and Originality", (1986).

24. Ibid.

25. In Two-Way Traffic, Powell follows the theme of the "decay of the art school nude" in Hodgins' work. For example, Ubu and the Art School Nude (1984, Images 820), shows Ubu leering over a painting of a rather crudely painted, Art School Nude, propped on an easel. See: Two-Way Traffic, pp. 286-7.

26. Barbara Ludman, "Ubu: the heart of his art", Rand Daily Mail, October 20, 1984, p. 9, and in various interviews.

27. These page numbers are from the text of the Penguin, 1973 edition of Metamorphosis. See note 6, above. Does Hodgins intuitively reflect Gregor's state of mind in 'Last night's dream' on canvas?

Subsection 5:- Metamorphosis: repetitions and transformations

28. Research proposal submitted for this degree, "The Relationship between Repetition and Originality", (1986).

29. This is a reference to Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow's Dangling Man, first published in 1944, in New York by Vanguard Press.

30. A 'Gogga' is a colloquialism (of Afrikaans origin) for an insect.

31. I was working at the time in a long, disused Wits building, full of decaying timber floor boards. Insects made these pieces of wood their home and provided me with direct textual material.

32. In my painting One Sunday under the Cork Tree I have engraved a lovers' heart with arrows into the oil paint. As far as I can remember, the real tree never had such a heart engraved in its cork. Fact and fiction intertwine in my paintings. I liked the layering of paint that I had built up in the image of the tree and wanted to dig into the impasto paint, to reveal some of the underlying paint.

33. A 'Parktown Prawn' is the popular nickname for a type of King Cricket, belonging to the family of, Stenopelmatidae.

34. Pointillism (also known as Divisionism and Neo-Impressionism) is a colour theory and technique which Seurat is credited with developing in the 1880's. Seurat built images composed of hundreds of small brush strokes (or even dots) of (generally) complementary colours. The idea is that close up the image will appear as a pattern of coloured dots. The objects, when viewed from a distance are supposed to come into focus as they are optically mixed by the viewer. Information from: H.H. Arnason A History of Modern Art, Thames and Hudson, London, 1979, p. 44 and from A Dictionary of Art and Artists, Peter and Linda Murray, third edition, Penguin, U.K., 1972, p. 300.

When I refer to pointillist dots in my paintings I do not mean that I have constructed my images according to this theory of optical mixing. It is the medium aspect and prospect of using hundreds of small painterly marks and dots to attentuate my objects such as Gregor the Insect and the stool, so that he is composed of dots rather than 'outline'. He has no definite outer physical definition.

35. I visited Italy in January and February 1986, having been awarded the Giovanni Milner Scholarship in my final year of undergraduate studies. Prior to leaving for Italy, Hodgins gave me a list of art destinations I had to get to. Piero's Fresco cycle in the church of San Francesco in Arezzo was such a place. The church was undergoing renovations and I had to bribe my way in!

The stories illustrated by Piero (b. between 1415 and 1420) in the church were based on stories drawn from a thirteen century text by Jacopo de Voragines called The Golden Legend. This text "recounts the miraculous story" of the Christian cross. See: Alessandro Angelini's monograph: Piero della Francesca, Scala, Italy, 1985, p. 21.

36. Graffiti, particularly of a 'political' nature was often white-washed daily (by the owners or local authorities, such as the council). The result was that there was a process of perpetual transformation and renewal of images and slogans. My painting of walls, also underwent parallel changes and transformations.

/VI Conclusions ...

VI Conclusions

1. Repetitions and origins

I have offered in this paper a phenomenological approach focussing on process rather than a pre-set list of criteria with which to evaluate the use of the repeated image in Hodgins' work and in my own. By tracing some of the origins of selected images of Hodgins' and my own paintings, and the painterly processes through which those images have metamorphosed, I have shown that the web in many instances can be followed, according to its own peculiar logic.

The formulation of the 'phenomenological' approach which I adopted in this study arose from my struggling to find a theoretical framework in which to anchor this project.

In my initial proposal for this dissertation, I suggested that Robert Hodgins consistently employs "repetition of images and ideas" *1* and that the logic of his paintings could be clarified through the application of a theoretical model to his artistic method. I put forward various models concerning parody, satire and other forms of quotational art (all various forms of repetition) in an effort to explain Hodgins' painting in a fairly linear manner and in academic terms.

As the project developed over the past years, my knowledge and understanding of the theory and practice of art making evolved, requiring significant shifts in approach.

Hodgins' work is not linear. His use of repetition is ambiguous and organic. The implications of his images (even 'old' images) are always changing. He splinters and shatters images into many pieces, making it difficult to isolate and define an image or artistic process from which it has evolved.

Why does Hodgins do this? Josopovici in his essay "Linearity and Fragmentation" says that fragmented works are a response to the human need to escape 'linearity' - routine, the obvious, boring, the conventional form and shape of a work *2*.

Hodgins is terrified of being boring as an artist *3*. His repetition is fragmented and full of gaps rather than smooth and easy. Something is always added to or missing from the repeated image. Instead of cutting out an image neatly with a pair of scissors, Hodgins tears it (or a fragment) out of its context and [illegible]ents it in a new context. He processes the image by fragmenting it - pulling it apart, and then he may assemble some of the components in a different way. This process of assembling and making images is crucial to his whole

dialectic of the repeated image versus the original.

Hodgins' paintings were initially of interest to me as objects, as physical products. The actual process of making those images was initially of little interest. I came to realise however that the process of making art is as important to Hodgins as the completed object.

My initial proposal thus expanded to give more attention to those recurring transformations in theme, idea and image integral to the process of his art making.

When an artist like Hodgins self-consciously compounds ideas from so vast a variety of sources that no causally 'primary' or 'secondary' status can be afforded to any of his/her sources, easy Cartesian distinctions between 'originality and repetition' become impossible to establish.

Hodgins uses repetition both 'internally' (repeating images and ideas from his own work), and 'externally' (repeating images from the work of other artists and other sources). His repetitions may be strictly 'artistic', or they may also be repetitions in the wider sense of recurrent literary or historical allusions. But, although Hodgins self-consciously employs repetition, he does not work with a theory or model of repetition as such *4*. I am now of the view that

Hodgins' work is not merely 'about' repetition, a view which would take a very limited aspect of his work into account. Although the repetition of images and ideas through a series of paintings is an important structural element in Hodgins' work, his work has many other thematic pre-occupations, which inform this process. The complex phenomenology of Hodgins' image transformation appeared more and more to be part and parcel of his awareness of the still more complex phenomenology of historical transformation.

This further shift in my perception as a researcher compelled me therefore to locate Hodgins' use of repetition/originality as a sub-set of Hodgins' wider interest in the history of image making, and in the history of his own image making.

Hodgins' work is 'web-like' in its complexity, and although I have traced some of the repeated ideas and images in his work in this dissertation, I have also tried to contextualise those threads as parts of the greater historical-set of his work.

In both chapters I have offered information as to how the reader/viewer can focus on strands and threads in a work. Hodgins and I, in our paintings and story-telling, deliberately present the reader/viewer with a wide range of entry points to the web.

(this was the days still of shirts with detachable collars.) I remember my collecting cigarette coupons to get the latest hits on records (those "Little White Lies" on wind-up gramophone). Most of all I suppose I resented Ma, and, in my turn, I, went out to work (I started at ten shillings a week, working from seven in the morning till half past five) .... Crazy days, baby, crazy days. But the depression I can't say I felt: after all, among us we were all in the same boat, exploited, insecure, boozy and sex-ridden for relief, shrimps, winkles, Southend on the steamer, cigs at fourpence for ten, sixpence if you wanted to be posh, records about a bob each, condoms at Clapham Station from a machine (half a crown if you had the nerve). You could go to a flick for fourpence in the afternoon. Hoo boy.*11*

After two years as a newspaper seller, he found better employment as a clerk in a building materials business, but he was soon bored. In 1938 at the suggestion of an uncle living in South Africa, who sent him finance, he "escaped to South Africa". The implication is that he saw an opportunity to get away from the clutches of his mother as well as the dreary working class future which she envisaged for him. Of his uncle, he says :

... My uncle: Well, actually my great uncle, my grandmother's and aunt (i.e. really great aunt) Emma's brother. He was a sailor. He jumped ship in Cape Town to come to the Reef, just then opening. ("Then we had wooden ships and iron men. Now ... we have iron ships and wooden men". You know?) Anyway he rose in the reef and became big in the Jo'burg Electricity Department. But he was a radical and came out (unnecessarily) with the men in the 1922 strikes. So he lost much of his prosperity. In 1937 he came to visit in the U.K. and met me. Within twenty minutes he asked me whether I didn't want to come to South Africa. I jumped at the chance but had no money. A year later he sent me thirty three pounds, which got me an outside cabin on the "Edinburgh Castle", two new pairs of shoes (one for uncle) and a forty shilling suit. I landed in Cape Town with sixpence over. He ran the Harbour Cafe in the Cape Town docks and we... lived over it.*12*

In Cape Town he worked as an insurance clerk. His uncle insisted that he continued with his formal education:

He bullied me into Matric (including Afrikaans II), was a great gun, loved me like I was a

Possible entry could be textual sources such as Jarry's Ubu and Kafka's Gregor. A viewer familiar with those literary texts may recognise elements in a painting as originating from the literary source. The initial engagement may thus arise out of the fact that the painting title is similar or reminiscent of a character from a literary text, thus enabling the viewer to access his or her own data bank of information gained from prior experience of these literary texts, bringing this past experience to bear on their engagement with the paintings which are in some way making use of or reference to the quoted texts. Access is thus provided by the artist, at the same time allowing the artist to quote or perhaps pay tribute to an artist, as Hodgins does with his quotation of Grosz, an artist he admires very much *5*.

A viewer's familiarity and knowledge of documented history such as Weimar Germany, the French Revolution and contemporary history such as a detainee's prison cell provide further access points. Although Hodgins' paintings are not dependent on the recognition of these fragments, nevertheless in the act of the primary viewing of a painting, there is a sense of familiarity and comfort in being able to say: "Yes, I know that image of a head on a pike. I've seen it before -

somewhere. I don't know what else is going on in this painting but I know that image and I feel like I want to explore this work."

With my own paintings the pram and insect is often used as a marker - a point of access for the viewer and myself. There may be all sorts of strange things going on in the painting but one recognises the pram or insect or doll. These images have very definite identities and associations. I am therefore not only repeating from my own paintings but from objects such as insects, chairs and tables which we see every day. My own experiences of these objects are then interfaced with the viewer's experience of these objects - which may or may not correlate with mine. The medical students who viewed my pram painting constructed and contextualised that painting according to their own very personal experiences of birth in a clinical situation.

Subliminal memory (based on experience) of the viewer can also play an important role in the process of interaction with images. I repeated the pram image (which I had initially taken from Eisenstein's Odessa steps sequence) in a whole series of paintings with the release of Brian de Palma's Untouchables, a film which quotes the Odessa scene. I made some references to this in the title of some of the paintings but otherwise it was not a point I pushed. The viewer may have had a

slight recognition of knowing the image and not knowing it. Similarly with Hodgins' paintings there are clues and snippets which one half recognises and is often not conscious of. Hodgins' use of the oil medium, particularly palimpsest, with its layering of pigment, revealing and concealing a whole history of images, almost 'underneath' the imagery adds to the sense of access.

Hodgins often attaches very simple titles which provide access. For instance his #Portrait of the Poet Max Herrmann-Neisse (1982-6, Images C8) alerts the viewer to the possibility to the painting being a study of a real or fictional personage. However in other paintings paintings, particularly his Weimar series, Hodgins attaches seemingly obscure titles to his paintings, which unless viewers are Weimar scholars, they are not going to be able to really gain additional information - unless they ask Hodgins, of course. Many viewers do ask him about his titles and this then signals a start for him to tell the stories behind the titles.

Hodgins almost seems to deliberately paint images which by their apparent obscurity of source, cause the viewer's subliminal memory/experience to surface, and draw the viewer into the work. Hodgins can never know

the specific memories and experiences of a viewer but he draws from universal experiences, such as growing old (#Golden Lads and Girls, 1985, Images C24); of being trapped in a small enclosure (#The Cell, 1986); and our fascination with ubiquitous mad/evil bureaucrats who often make our lives a misery (Ubu). He uses these images and themes over and over again, intertwined and woven into broader intricate stories of Weimar, of history, of poetry.

His paintings work so well, because they are at once stories of growing old, being young, laughing, crying, loving, and yet on another level they are paintings which have very real, traceable origins and sources. Memory and personal history enables the viewer to force his or her own link with the more obscure aspects of Hodgins' work, and Hodgins, I suggest, wants the viewer to actively participate in the process of image engagement.

A painting may start off as a memory or as a result of buying the wrong tube of paint (Hodgins' #Mindless Youth c. 1990). It may start off with Hodgins using an old blanket (#History may say alas ... , 1985-86, Images C30). For me the significance of these personal stories is not so much that they are part of the sources, the process of making art, but they provide a rich accompaniment of story-telling. These stories are then

related for the viewer and although the viewer does not need the story to access the paintings, the stories add to the experience of the paintings, bridging the distance between the viewer and the images.

Hodgins and I may not commit ourselves to what the painting is 'about' but we will usually (and eagerly) relate how we came to work with an object - where it came from - why we picked it up, why we repeated the image over and over again.

From a critical analysis of my own work, while working on this dissertation it became increasingly apparent that Hodgins' use of repetition transcends its prosaic use as access point, although that was also important. I began to realise that the strands of history that the repeated image sets up in relation to the original sources, interfacing with the personal history of the viewer and his/her stories became crucial in contextualising my responses to his images.

Before this degree and before the journey of having to critically delve into the web of my painting - why I make paintings, what constitutes the fabric of my painterly landscapes, I had viewed Hodgins' work in compartments. The paradox was that although I was intimately aware of many of his sources and the origins of many of his paintings I had failed to grasp what held

the web together. Initially in the absence of set criteria in which to navigate my way through his work I could only talk about sources and their origins and the metamorphosis of these images. It was only after I realised how crucial the element of story-telling and history was in my own work, as a thematic and structural thread that I realised it could be used in a critical manner to talk about many aspects of Hodgins' paintings, and I have tried as far as possible to share this analysis with the reader.

Ultimately in my view it does not matter how the viewer accesses the image, because once the viewer has engaged in the image, the threads of the repeated other images may reveal themselves. Central to Hodgins' and my approach to the use or the repeated image is image appropriation itself, defined according to our peculiar dictates. Hodgins appropriates images from his own particular sources, and repeats and compounds his references in a different way to the way I do. In both instances, through the process of working those sources repeatedly, a new image is formed and becomes the 'original' in that it stands ultimately on its own.

The repeated image, defined in a specific way in relation to Hodgins' and my own work therefore provides both the structural framework and content which gives

shape and meaning to the web. The interaction of personal and the 'external' (documented) history which Hodgins and I interweave, defines the context in which the web is located and in so doing provides further structure and content to our work.

/2. Notes to the Conclusion ...

2. Notes to the conclusion

1. Research Proposal, 1986, The Relationship between Repetition and Originality, submitted to the University of Witwatersrand.

2. Josopovici, "Linearity and Fragmentation" in The Lessons of Modernism, Macmillan Press, 1977, p. 124.

3. New Works, 1986, p. 209, New Work, 1990, pp. 254, 259, 260, 261.

4. Hodgins defies the use of a theory of repetition. New Works, 1986, pp. 196-205, New Work, 1990, pp. 254, 259, 260-61 en passim. He has however 'internalised' the concept, and I had to correspondingly reconsider the use of a formalised concept of repetition in my approach to the topic. Some lateral thinking was necessary.

In this respect, I am indebted to Kawin who explores repetition not only as an "aesthetic device", but also as a "state of mind". See: "Introduction", Telling It Again and Again, Cornell University Press, 1972, p. 5. Kawin's more flexible approach dovetails with Hodgins' aesthetic.

5. New Works, 1986, p. 196.

/VII Appendix A ...

VII Appendix A

Robert Griffith Hodgins: a biographical sketch

Hodgins was born in London in 1920. His mother Emma Edith Hodgins was a waitress and unable to care for Hodgins because she had to work. As a child Hodgins grew up in a series of foster homes in the countryside of England. He had limited contact with his family in these years. In response to my questions about his mother and her family he wrote *1*:

> ... She was the daughter of a woman, my grandmother, Mrs. Hodgins whose first names I don't know/remember. My grandmother had 21 children, at least, so she told me. The only survivors in the London of the late 19th century, were a boy who died at 10, and my mother. She (my grandmother) had a spinster sister, Aunt Emmie (to me), after whom my mother was named and this aunt I met and loved.

At the age of 14, as soon as it was legal to do so, his mother took him from school and brought him to London where she worked. Hodgins cynically says:

> ... She hauled me back from education, Bishops Stortford and adoption when I was 10 (1930). She then scuppered higher education for me again in 1932 - wouldn't let me swot for exams. Also insisted against pleas from my teachers that I leave school on the dot, on my 14th birthday, i.e. 27 June 1934. It was legal then. In short didn't realise she had a bright boy, or, more likely didn't care, wanted to keep me glued to her and her class.*2*

Rankin suggests *3* that the difficulty of making a transition from a relatively insular country existence to the big tough city of London may still be reflected in certain of Hodgins' aggressive street scene paintings of the 1930's. Indeed Hodgins hints at the frightened little boy he was when he says about his mother who needed and expected the love of her child and at the same time unrealistically -

> expected a frightened little country boy of ten, new to the horrors of lower London, to give it to her in competition [to her lovers]. Natch, it didn't work. Her great folly was not to realise that I had potential above her scan.*4*

Even without support from his mother Hodgins was an extremely capable pupil at school, but claims his experience of art was not very significant during this period. With the exception of a few teachers, for instance a Mr. Kirk *5* who taught him to shade drawings, "methodically downwards from right to left", art making did not seem important. What does emerge from these school reminisces is Hodgins' love of reading. He chose Shakespeare's Complete Works when, at the age of twelve, he won an award for the best essay in the school *6*.

His voracious reading continued after leaving school and when he worked as a newspaper seller. He says that he had read H.G. Wells, Somerset Maugham, Thackery, Dickens and even War And Peace by the age of fifteen *7*. He also attended plays and concerts at Covent Garden and at the Old Vic. He says that all this "culture" seemed "to represent an enviable way of life, an escape from the dreariness of his own class" *8*. One has the sense of Hodgins as a scavenger, foraging for knowledge and information.

He relates all his intellectual accomplishments with a mixture of glee on the one hand, and on the other, disbelief, that he, the "working class boy" *9*, managed to master these 'grand' literary texts.

As a fourteen year old boy, he started visiting London public art galleries. But, he says his visits to the Tate and National Gallery were motivated by the need for a warm dry place - an escape from wet, cold London during the depression *10*. He was a working class boy who was earning his bread. He says:

> Living in the depression? Hoo boy! Well: the thing is that I always had this romantic idea of me as a deprived boy owing to the depression. Found out that there's a line you draw from (I think) Bristol to Hull. South-east of that line, no-one really suffers: north-west of that line they suffer all the time. So in London it wasn't all that bad, though I remember a period with one meal of fish and chips a day, augmented with whatever stale pastries Ma brought home from her working place, the Devonshire Dairies. I remember wet feet because of inferior shoes. I remember my form master asking me, puzzled, why I alone of all the boys didn't wear a collar.

second son. We wrote while I was away at the war and he died, either during or shortly after, of cancer of the stomach. His name was William Griffiths, known always as Uncle Billy. I like the thought that he'd have been prouder of me than all my other blood - or near blood - relations. God oughter love him,*13*

He completes his matriculation examinations, with first class passes in all his subjects except Afrikaans, which he nonetheless managed to pass *14*. Again, in spite of his (said) distrust for intellectualism he relates his considerable intellectual accomplishments with a great deal of pride.

The Second World War had by now started. Hodgins volunteered and served in Egypt. In the army he came into contact with many interesting (cultured) people such as Georges de Menasce, an Austrian baron, who lived in a villa in Alexandria *15*. The baron owned extensive art collections, a fine library and the villa was the scene of regular musical recitals. There was a an almost overwhelming banquet of "culture" for Hodgins, the "working class boy" who relished every moment of it! *16*

In 1944, he was transferred to England. During his free time he spent time visiting galleries. This is the first point in his reminiscences that Hodgins actually admits to really being interested in art for its own sake and not as a diversion from poverty or an escape from boredom *17*.

It was during this period that he made contact with his mother again:

> ... I saw her again in 1945 when I left the South African army in England, but eventually got free. We parted on reasonable terms in 1953 when I came back to S.A.. The relationship then, mainly due to my neglect and resentments, faded. I last heard from her in 1958. She is now presumedly dead: by my calculations she'd now be 94 ... *18*

In England after the war, he chose not to go back to the boredom of clerical work so he studied to be a teacher under a scheme sponsored by the army. Again, there is a sense of Hodgins studying to be a teacher because it was economically expedient, rather than intellectually inviting *19*.

Somewhat flippantly, he says he chose art as one of his two teaching subjects because he was persuaded by a

lecturer that an art class would present fewer disciplinary problems than a maths class would *20*. As Rankin says, this is a rather feeble explanation by Hodgins because "his interest in art had clearly been developing through the war years" *21*. Indeed, in conversation with Hodgins, he has often made pointed reference to this post 1945 period, recalling with joy his experience of exhibitions of work by Matisse and Picasso and other artists.

After attaining his teacher's diploma, he taught at an East End London school where he began to take part-time courses at Goldsmiths College, as was required for further specialization in one of his teaching courses. In 1950, when he had saved enough money, he left teaching and enrolled full-time at Goldsmiths where he received his National Diploma of Design three years later *22*.

At Goldsmiths Hodgins studied a range of subjects: including drawing, painting, sculpture, calligraphy, perspective, anatomy, architecture, and history of costume and design *23*. Between studies he was working four evenings a week at the London Telephone Exchange to support himself. He only had [illegible] canvasses, one was "being assessed, one being [illegible] one in use" *24*. In addition, to develop [illegible] images he visited the Tate or National [illegible] supplement the two evenings of Art History [illegible] *25*.

Hodgins (at Goldsmiths), initially [illegible] tion as a major subject but after a week he "[illegible] pencil very firmly ..." *26* and told the principal [illegible] wanted to be a painter. He was told to go and paint the model *27*. Painting entailed oil paint. Not only did he have to recycle his canvasses, he also had to make do with a select group of oil paint pigments which were cheap and affordable. This group of cheap pigments still predominate as a "rock spine" *28* in his palette. Although he found the new medium difficult and swore he would never learn "to cope with [that] awful material" *29*, he did master it. Hodgins had little choice in the matter since he had to fulfill the requirements of a three hour technical examination on the methods and techniques of painting.

His paintings of that time are dismissed by him as paintings of a "hedonist". He says as a hedonist [in the 1950's and 1960's] who painted for other hedonists, he was concerned with beautifully placed figures in beautifully textured spaces *30*.

He shrugs off these early forays into painting at Goldsmiths, insisting in conversation with Rankin *31*, that he learnt more from "Art History) and from his

RYC: And the man, the subject? [Herrmann-Neisse]

RGH: I know nothing about him. It's extraordinarily difficult ... I would hazard a guess, that he went into exile - he was obviously, from the portrait [by Grosz, of Herrmann-Neisse], slightly crippled, dwarfed and deformed. He was Jewish. He was very far left. He would have either been sent to the camps, or gone into exile. He is not one of the **big** German poets of the time. He did write quite an interesting poem about Grosz which I have seen quoted. But more than this, I don't know about him. In a kind of way, that's nice you see, because he then becomes a heraldic figure almost, from Weimar. Do you see what I mean? ... a character of Weimar. For me, Max Herrmann-Neisse is part of the mythology of Weimar.

RYC: So you like the painting very much? [Hodgins' own painting.]

RGH: Oh, I like the painting enormously. This dwarfish thing, the big ear and the hand holding the book. Yes they connect up but it is more ... it is an interesting feature rather than a heavy part ... well it's like when you look at those paintings Picasso did of Las Meninas [Diego Velasquez (1599-1660),1656, Prado], in which he [Picasso] makes reference to a dwarf in Velasquez's painting. It's interesting to know Velasquez's painting is being quoted, you know ... but the draperies are more like his [Picasso's] version of Cranach [Lucas Cranach the Elder 1472-1553]... so we're looking at a painting in which [Picasso] quotes Velasquez as well as Cranach.

RYC: And if you do not know that?

RGH: If you don't know, it's still an interesting strong Picasso of the 70's. I think it's very dangerous when art rests on quotation. One of the interesting things about quotation of the classical world by the early Renaissance boys - (you know how dotty they all were) - was with the sculpture, architecture all being dug up. They didn't have much to know about, so they either quoted 'freely' or inaccurately. But they couldn't get bogged down into a kind of scholastic-ism (quote). Now we can. We have an enormous range of information and knowledge.

RYC: Will you elaborate on the difference, which you have discussed so often with me, between levels of knowledge then [Renaissance times] and now?

RGH: Well first of all, they were obviously quoting something (they found) different from their immediate past. They were quoting classical civilization,

RGH: Hogarth is quoting Baroque. Baroque is essentially an art of ecstasy but has an appliance to street scenes. He [Hogarth] sometimes does and sometimes doesn't quote consciously ... I think there is a problem. At any given point in history, even if it may not seem so, there is an innovator of style. This is unavoidable because people have much the same ... emotional reactions to certain things and events.

If you look at the 1960's for instance, you would think that hard-edged and Pop have nothing to do with each other. But one gets the feeling of the precision of both Pop and hard-edged. The two have nothing to do with each other subject-wise, but they are part of the high angst of the 1960's - I'm sure twenty years from now, thirty years certainly from now, it will become more and more apparent.

Now, when you give into that, are you quoting? (when you give into the style and thoughts of your peers). No, you are not. Whereas, people like Donatello and Masaccio [4* (Donatello, particularly)] and Velasquez and late Fra Angelico were consciously quoting, simply 'other' than their own times. They didn't realise what they were doing, was a sign of their own times or situation ... They were saying: "We're young and gay because we're not doing Medieval painting or sculpture. We're doing things founded on the virtues of the greater classics."

Now, the interesting thing about this, is that nowadays we would say that Roman sculpture is almost terribly imitative of Greek sculpture. For one or two political reasons, they [Donatello, Masaccio etc.] could almost certainly have never seen a Greek sculpture. So what they're doing is - they're not quoting Greek sculpture, they're quoting Roman copies of Greek sculpture which had been buried and battered about and which they [the artists] didn't take to instantly ... so they didn't have a [rigid] model which ground'd them down.

So when they quoted, it really was a case of to be or not to be - you have to take bits and pieces and make a play founded on those fragments. The result is - you can make your own poem. If you copy the whole thing it will turn out a bad imitation of Shakespeare.

RYC: Let's talk a bit about imitation - if you quote something you are repeating it.

RGH: I think 'quote' is very good because the very fact of quotation means you are taking a fragment out of context. You don't quote the whole of Shakespeare or the whole of Hamlet.

graphics tutors than in painting classes." But in conversation with Arnold he admits that it was after all "art history for artists" *32*. For instance, his lecturer made "drawings of the interior of San Vitale and a whole series of build-ups of the technical processes of El Greco" *33*. Art History then was not taught as a dead subject existing in dusty books (of which there were few in the post-war period) but as a living continuum with a strong visual base. The visual became an extension of the written word. The paucity of decent art reproductions in this post-war period forced students to visualise and stretch their imaginations when learning about art history and theory.

In 1953, on completion of his diploma at Goldsmiths, he sold all his possessions to pay for his passage back to South Africa. He found a post as a lecturer at the Pretoria College of Art, where he joined Thelma van Schalkwyk, the then college head. Here he was expected to teach in various disciplines; "life drawing, design, painting and sculpture" *34*. Once again Hodgins' life was complex and full of many different facets, lots of different subjects to teach and of course he was making his own paintings in between all the teaching.

In 1956, at the age of thirty two he had his first exhibition at the Lidchi Gallery in Johannesburg. In 1962, he left the Pretoria College of Art for a position as a journalist on an art journal called Newscheck *35*. He was by this time an established artist who had held one person shows and also participated in group exhibitions, one of which was a South African show in Brussels in 1961 *36*.

In 1966, after four years at the journal - after four years of not painting - he became a part-time lecturer in drawing at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits). In 1968 he was offered, by Professor Heather Martienssen, Head of the Art Department, a full time position as a lecturer. Hodgins' duties also included teaching courses in Art Criticism where he had to read about and research artists who previously had not interested him *37*. At Wits, Hodgins also started to paint again.

Hodgins remained at Wits from 1968 until 1983, when he retired from teaching to become a full-time artist.

/2. Notes ...

2. Notes: Robert Griffith Hodgins: A Biographical Sketch

1. Letter from Hodgins to Robyn Cohen, dated 17 May 1990.
2. Ibid.
3. Rankin, Images.
4. Letter from Hodgins to Robyn Cohen, dated 17 May 1990.
5. Rankin, Images.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., and Barbara Ludman, Rand Daily Mail, October 20, 1984, p.9.
8. Ludman, Rand Daily Mail, October 20, 1984, p.9. and private conversations.
9. Ibid.
10. Rankin, Images.
11. Letter from Hodgins to Robyn Cohen, dated 17 May 1990.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid. and Rankin, Images.
15. Rankin, Images.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Letter from Hodgins to Robyn Cohen, dated 17 May 1990.
19. Rankin, Images.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Rankin, Images.
23. Ibid.
24. Arnold, Images.
25. Ibid.
26. Arnold, Images.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Rankin, Images.
32. Arnold, Images.
33. Ibid.
34. Rankin, Images.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Rankin, Images.

/VIII Appendix B ...

VIII Appendix B: Robert Hodgins on Robert Hodgins

1. Interviewing Hodgins: Pleasures and pitfalls

All three interviews took place within a gallery context. In this way, the works discussed were experienced as part of a complete exhibition, rather than as discrete incomplete works in the studio.

Many things come about as a result of the actual process of hanging an exhibition: placement, co-ordination of the paintings in relation to the available hanging space, and a whole host of variables which often effect how the images are eventually perceived. For instance, Hodgins has, on many occasions, remarked how particular pigments have been altered by gallery lighting; or how the surface of a gallery wall has 'altered', as it were, a painting composition. Hodgins does not hang his own exhibitions. He says he is often surprised by the visual connections resulting from their placement: connections, perhaps perceived by the person(s) who have hung the show, not necessarily intended by Hodgins.

An interview with Hodgins in a gallery context always contains this element of surprise, with Hodgins almost re-seeing his paintings afresh, as he says, like any other viewer. Within the interview medium, he periodically discovers sub-texts of his work which, he says, he either was not aware of or had forgotten about.

Whilst there are many advantages to interviews in the context of a gallery, there are also disadvantages. Parts of the audio cassettes of these particular interviews were inaudible due in part to visitors to the gallery, either interrupting Hodgins with question, or raising the noise level by talking amongst themselves, which resulted in sections of the transcribed interviews appearing disjointed and fragmented.

However, it must be pointed out that the tape transcription does not actually falsify Hodgins' dialogue. Hodgins, when he is talking about his painting, often comes across in a disjointed and jumbled manner. He does not generally follow a linear progression through set topics. He often appears to go off at tangents, jumping around, rattling off sources, dazzling the listener with lines of poetry, spewing off ideas, going "berserk", in the words of

Michael Godby in his book Hogarth in Johannesburg, p. 16 (1990, University of Witwatersrand Press).

Godby, discussing Hodgins' Rakes Progress etching series comments about the "neurotic quality" with Hodgins', "scattering [of] headings, bold print and images...", such as "meaningless arrows and traffic signs" throughout the plates. Godby goes on to say, that "if the world", Hodgins has created is "chaotically amoral, the map Hodgins provides is appropriately **berserk**." (All references p. 16.)

Hodgins' dialogue is to a degree a map, with information, clues, riddles, often ambiguous, sometimes precise. Verbally, directions are, in a sense, mapped out for the viewer to journey into Hodgins' work - but it is a berserk, neurotic, frantic map. It is not a linear, clearly defined map. If (to take Godby's proposition further) Hodgins may be seen as a cartographer; he is a mad cartographer, who enjoys his craft immensely. He has great fun.

This, sense of enjoyment is, I think, evident in these interviews. Great care has been taken to transcribe Hodgins' words, so as to be as faithful to the original dialogue, as the medium of writing renders it possible.

David Sylvester in his preface to Interviews with Francis Bacon: 1972-1979 (1980) cautions about the "crushing authority of the tape or transcript", in recording all the words which were used in an interview, "precisely", no matter how imprecisely they were used or 'meant'.

Hodgins' words in my interviews with him should not be treated as 'holy writ' but should be read critically. Some of what he says has more import than other things which tend to glibness. Often he talks about an idea in more than one place, clarifying the previous comment, even if it was in a previous interview. In this respect, Hodgins shows an awareness of the moment: what we say in a given moment is not always close enough to what we actually **mean**. Our thoughts, in any case, are changing from moment to moment. Hodgins has often remarked: "I hadn't really thought that through well enough before"; or "I've been thinking about what I said before and now I think the following". He himself is not in awe of the power of the written word, which often may imply closure and finality, and nor should we be, as readers.

In addition, the presentation of the three interviews which span a period from 1986 to 1990 provides a context for the reader to perhaps weigh up, critically, Hodgins' comments at a given point in relation to his previous earlier remarks.

Because the three interviews were private sessions, with no significant time limitations or prescribed lecture topic, Hodgins was able to backtrack and 're-think' his thoughts. Thus, in each interview there are loose areas of focus, on ideas and themes which I was interested in exploring with Hodgins. For instance in the first interview, much of the discussion centers around theory. Source gathering was a focal point in the second interview, and in the third, the nature of the painting medium as opposed to other media such as writing, was explored.

Two-Way Traffic was a public lecture, where themes and ideas were followed by Powell and Hodgins in a more controlled and tighter fashion than in the interviews.

The lecture is a valuable document in many respects - one of the most interesting in what it reveals as to Hodgins' sources. These are noted in the text, and in the notes at the end of the lecture.

Quite a number of Hodgins' paintings have been exhibited more than once - for instance, almost the entire New Works, 1986 exhibition at the Gertrude Posel Gallery was included on the Images exhibition. This is why some paintings are discussed in more than one interview. Generally, paintings are discussed in the interview which relates to the first exhibition the painting was shown on.

2. Abbreviations used

As a storyteller, Hodgins' frenetic manner of talking, use of gesture, pause, voice inflection and modulation has much to with the 'meaning' of his words. I have tried with bold and underlining type faces to indicate emphasis, to try and alert the reader to changes in the flow of dialogue.

Manuals on correct format for quoting and transcribing interviews have been consulted. Kate L. Turabian's, A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations (Fourth Edition, 1973, University of Chicago Press) has been the most valuable in respect. My usage of abbreviations in transcribing the interviews as well as the lecture are based on her recommendations.

RGH: = Robert Hodgins
RYC: = Robyn Cohen
IP: = Ivor Powell

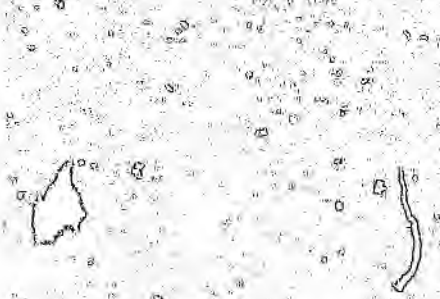
(.) = comments made by the speakers which relate to their own remarks but which would disrupt the flow of the text.

[ ] = interpolations: information not included in interview, such as sources, dates, catalogue numbers as well as additional comments, generally for clarification of aspects of the text.

... = three ellipsis points indicate parts (up to two lines) which are inaudible and are therefore omitted from the transcribed text; indicates redundant use of 'yes', 'it' and 'no'. (In the main body of my paper three ellipsis points are also used to indicate when only portions of the interview texts are being quoted.)

. ... = four ellipsis points indicate where two or more lines have been omitted from the text either because the tape is inaudible or because of asides which are purely incidental, having nothing to do with the interview - for instance a comment made by Hodgins about a visitor to the gallery; biographical and personal asides which Hodgins has requested not to be published.

Note: Unless otherwise stated, paintings cited are by Robert Hodgins.



/a. New Works, 1986 ...

3. Robyn Cohen interviews Robert Hodgins:-

a. New Works, May 1986, Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

RGH: ... Okay let's start with Portrait of the Poet Max Herrmann-Neisse [1982-86, Images C8]. Now, I quote that title from a painting by George Grosz (1893-1959) *1*. He calls his painting (at least in the books I have), "A Portrait of the Poet Herrmann-Neisse". Originally my painting wasn't a portrait of Herrmann-Neisse at all. (I worked on the painting for a long time.) But gradually as I worked [on the canvas], this yellow and grey figure began to emerge. I realised this figure was becoming very much like Max Herrmann-Neisse - this little dwarf, hunched-up figure with this enormous ear. Now, that enormous ear is important because Herrmann-Neisse was a great habitue of Weimar circles and obviously known to a lot of people ... [with the implication that Herrmann-Neisse's rather unusual physiognomy was familiar to the public].

In addition to Grosz's oil painting (portrait) of him [Herrmann-Neisse] there is also a watercolour by him [Grosz]. (It was on that German show at the Royal Academy last year - 1985) ... rather grotesque. He [Herrmann- Neisse] was some kind of little dwarf.

Now, because one is quoting somebody one knows and admires [Grosz] and because of the play that one is involved in, it starts gradually overpowering [everything else]. This grey disgrace [of a face] is thrown against that brilliant orange. And [...], that cadmium orange of the frame heightens this feeling of tenseness, the tenseness of the period. Well, it's a tribute to Grosz and Max Herrmann-Neisse.

It also interests me that what reads as a cigarette is actually a book. A lot of people have seen it as a lit cigarette.

RYC: Can you tell me a bit more of the relationship between 'quote' and 'tribute'?

RGH: Obviously, if you bother to quote someone you admire them ... (this is why I dispute your thing of parody; if you parody someone, you're doing it, either to cut them down to size, or to show how clever you are). If you pay a tribute, then obviously you admire whatever you are paying tribute to in the first place.

Now, I admire that painting very much. I think it's a fine painting. It's very odd in that it endorses how I feel about Grosz.

artefacts and art as they knew it, which couldn't be more different from Medieval Art. They were quoting it [classical civilization], partly as an escape from Medieval Art.

I think the person to look at here would be Fra Angelico *2* who starts off totally Medieval. He couldn't be more Medieval if he tried. Gradually he gets overcome by the younger generation. So, by the end, he does those frescoes at St. Marco (I think it is). They're set in classical situations: classical ordering; classical balance; central figure; one figure on the one side and on the other [side]. Now, the interesting thing about that is, he (Fra Angelico) has obviously benefited from the enormous interest of these [younger] guys who had felt their way out of what they got stuck with [by looking at all the classical discoveries] ...

These [younger] guys looked at the Romans, which no one had been looking at. [The Romans used to build palaces and churches.] And at first, they don't have really enough to balance all this quotation on so they have to, as it were, invent their quotation.

It's almost as if they came across a text in which great lines are missing, so then they put in the lines, and then say, (that) it is Virgil, or whatever.

Another person to look at is Donatello, who quoted classical architecture and classical sculpture as against Mantegna, later *3*. Now, Mantegna is much more reinforced as a scholar. By this time, twenty or thirty years have gone by, much more research has been done - many more things have been dug up ... Much more has been cherished - so many more things to look at. He [Mantegna] was, I think, in contact with a classical scholar who was very rigid and crabbed in the more precise understanding of what Roman architecture was about. This [influence] is present in Mantegna as it isn't in Donatello. Donatello is much more a free inventor of classical forms than a quoter of classical forms.

RYC: Can you elaborate on 'inventing' versus 'quoting', with reference to 'now', our own times?

RGH: Well, I think it's different now because, first we're much more spry. We do know what we're quoting; how far we're not quoting entirely ... we're doing it consciously ...

RYC: But what about people like Hogarth, weren't they conscious of their quoting?

RYC: But, in visual art you don't have the quotation marks which you may make use of in literature.

RGH: But, even when you quote in a thesis for example, already, to some extent there is a falsification [of the quoted text] because you are taking it out of a whole body of expression. And you are taking out that bit ... either to subvert or convert or substantiate your own argument. One has seen a great number of theses, to take an example, to know that a great deal of quotation can be subtly falsified - using something else for the sake of the quotation ... to create something else ...

RYC: To reveal and not conceal.

RGH: Exactly, now this is how the classical quotation in Donatello and early Renaissance worked. They said: "We're substantiating our case of 'great art' by quoting parts of what we consider to be 'great art'."

RYC: You're talking very much about quoting in the past - what of quoting today, in our own times ..?

RGH: Firstly, we're a much more self-conscious period than the Renaissance was ... There's a whole difference about saying: "I am quoting ancient, classical architecture and sculpture, therefore I am good because I am going back to the roots of greatness" (which was basically what a lot of the people thought then); and, "I am quoting contemporary painting, old painting, my own painting, other painting. I am quoting it **knowing** that it is one of the legitimate contrivances of continuity."

One is entitled to it [to quote] ... [with quotation of one's own work] there is an alertness to that 'inward thing' of one's own work ... One is still at this stage of the game, at least of mine and most modern artists I'd say still working with oneself. Therefore, there is something very odd about saying to yourself, "I know the source of that. I **chose** the source of that", and the modern reverberations that get set up.

I think I haven't really thought this through enough - look, I think the difference is this: those Renaissance people were quoting something which they thought was very grand and important and which was outside (and very removed) from themselves. It, [the art they were quoting] had all happened five - six hundred years, even a thousand years before. Fair enough.

Today, when we quote we say, "I'm quoting part of my [own] experience as strongly as Rembrandt was quoting his experience when he looked at himself for the 66th time and started painting himself"? I think the answer

to your question is: when one quotes in the 1980's one says, "I'm quoting my experience and my experience is not merely physical, intellectual, visual, or literary or any of those things. They are all part of my experience."

... (When I'm quoting myself) - I'm actually saying; "Look that was part of my life and I painted that [part of my life], intensely. That was an intense experience. I could quote that twenty five times from now, just as I could quote my love life, my sex life, my intellectual reading and intellectual thinking - all those things."

RYC: And when you quote your own work?

RGH: Then, I think one is quoting a past experience which is after all very intensely done ... And again, with all quotation you have a choice why do you quote that? ... The Renaissance people simply didn't have the knowledge we do [today]. They knew very little of art outside their own times.

RYC: Art, any kind of art, was also not as accessible as it is today - good quality colour reproductions, slides, movies.

RGH: No, it wasn't accessible. They couldn't really travel. They weren't even being told about it. They were dependent on the most immediate works of art - Medieval Art... No, the thing that interests me is since about the 1960's with the sudden surge of Americana and the fact that all those Sixties boys were university trained. One thing the universities do insist on is an art history learning - with a result nowadays anyone with a 'normal' art training, comes with a head stuffed with images right from Paleolithic art right up to present times.

RYC: Many images of so-called masterpieces are for us, at least in South Africa, 'flat' reproductions in a book.

RGH: They are flat in a book, as they are sheer light in slides. That's quite interesting because certain kinds of art, for instance stained glass and fresco, actually look better [colour wise] and 'truer' on slides than in books - the one [reproductions in books] is done by fairly opaque oil and the other by transparent chemical ...

So as we were saying, in a way, your mind is stuffed with images, but they are 'false' images ... Yes, the Sistine Chapel is reduced to the size of a large book. This is an absurdity in itself. It doesn't seem to me possible that however moribund one is, one is sitting

just soaking up all these images. If you are yourself a painter, a sculptor, something of those [images] must impress you. You can't look at say 3 000 images over three years and none will bounce off ...

Now, these experiences [of images] are part of your deep experience of life. After all, life does go on inside a university ... One hears students (at other universities, not Wits) saying, "the only thing I can work from is the last two years." But here they've sat for three years looking at an enormous range of art - not only European/Western but they've looked at African art and some Chinese and Japanese and it's all been bounced around in their heads. And it's all to be thrown out? I don't believe that. I think that is a gross kind of starvation to inflict upon yourself ...

But, you're not quoting [images] as seeing, seeing. You should be quoting them as experience and **experienced**. If your heart lights up when you see those forms of Giotto - if you quote them as experience they won't come out grotesque but as your 'own'.

RYC: You invent them in your own way ...

RGH: Re-invent them. All art is a language.

RYC: How is the Giotto different from a Take-Away sign?

RGH: In no way. It's not superior. It's also not inferior. Now, the old attitude was that Giotto was obviously more important than a street sign. The new attitude is that a street sign is more important than Giotto. To me, if neither of them is important to you then don't bother to quote or use it in any way - then find something that is (important) ...

RYC: Everything is relevant so far as it is all part of experience ...?

RGH: One is always visually experiencing 'time'. The only time you're not, is when you're sleeping and not dreaming, which is not very often. In dreams visions come up which are deeply experienced and useful.

RYC: Do you remember we were talking the other day about the miniature orange tree outside the Italian restaurant? We were discussing when the tree is a quote, and when it's just a source, and if there is any real difference between the two. All art is a form of reperition, isn't it, so is there any real difference?

RGH: I suppose the answer to that is, first: it's a quote if you're fairly convinced of even know for sure that your audience recognise the source. So if you

quote Fast-Food, you know that you have an audience throughout Americanised civilization and you know the 'trails' of association that makes.

RYC: And if they don't know -

RGH: Well, if you present it [Fast-Food], to a Polynesian 'savage', it means nothing to him. It doesn't even mean 'words'. Similarly, if you present it to a communist in Russia. They don't have fast-foods and certainly no fast food signs *5*. But, again a Russian would recognise that this is a sign with words on it. That itself is a very reduced quotation, but still alludes to quotation.

RYC: And what if you've transformed and reinvented it?
RGH: Yes, but the person who is interested in art is waiting to see you do it ... Rauschenberg is a great one for this - for instance he takes a street sign saying 5th Avenue North, and he'll put that into a painting. Now, immediately a whole lot of things happen. First, you know it's a silkscreen. Secondly, you know it's a street sign. Thirdly, you know it is in New York or a very big American Metropolitan City. Then he bolsters that with other images, sometimes denying that idea [of the 'big American City']. He uses an image of Kennedy, with Kennedy gesturing with his finger. The Sistine Chapel is in the lower bottom corner.

Now what does that set up? I think when you quote as widely as Rauschenberg does, I would say what you're doing, is setting up a kind of puzzle. You're saying: "Look, these things - street signs, pictures of Kennedy, the Sistine Chapel, all these things exist in this one painting, because they exist in this one man's head." In a way the things which exist in one man's head are that man himself. When you're looking at that painting, you're really looking at a portrait of Rauschenberg, and from that you can deduce whether the man and his mind is interesting enough for you to be interested in further aspects of that painting. Why is Kennedy bigger than the Sistine Chapel? One finds oneself looking at those kinds of questions ...

That is partly why you don't end up with an essay which is all quotes and no substance: a bit like the Surrealist technique of picking quotes out of a paper hat and just putting them down, one after another. That kind of haphazard art making makes some kind of sense, but it is your interpretation of that sense ... It can get pretty loose. It is difficult to define why Rauschenberg brings it off. Perhaps he brings it off because he is a formalist. He chooses the nuances of colour and composition and placing, with enormous tact and skill.

We get back to the fact that quotation is part of the subject or content of the painting. But, you have to take other things into account when you are discussing quotation ... A crude way of putting it would be: if you are reading a book and suddenly they were quoting [using] Gothic capitals - you could still read it [the text]. And even if you did not know the source of the quote, the very fact that the type [face] has changed from a very ordinary Roman type that we usually read by, to this Gothic lettering would do something to the quote, over and above the fact that you recognise the quotation. Even if it made you say: "The man is a fool, why did he do it?" - at least you have a new insight as to what that use of quotation may actually mean. Now I think in painting, that can be very useful.

RYC: Of course, that example would give you many clues ...?

RGH: Would it give you clues, or would it add to the puzzle?

RYC: It would both give you a clue and add to the puzzle. If you didn't know where it was from [the source] you would know it was quote because of the use of different type face.

RGH: Supposing you did? [know where it was from]. Supposing you have a pack of cards and suddenly you find a card from a tarot packet. And now, what do you think about that? And you know that it's been put there deliberately. You know that your card and the tarot are both playing cards, but the tarot is special ... It's a kind of 'form' quotation (a quotation of form). Now these are the kind of things which are very interesting about quotation.

RYC: What about title? How important are titles when making a deliberate quote, for instance, in the Portrait of the Poet Max Herrmann-Neisse?

RGH: Titles sometimes come early, sometimes later, and in this painting [Portrait of the Poet Max Herrmann-Neisse], the figure became Herrmann-Neisse quite late in 'his' life. I think titles are important in illustrating something about the mind of the person who made the painting. Look, a painting does (particularly if you are any kind of 'realistic painter' or rather you refer to reality), .., it does seem the painting has a persona - almost a separate character. Why shouldn't it have a name? It is the commonest way of dealing with things that have a particular personality. One can't keep on going around saying: "That thing I stir my tea with." Eventually, you have to talk about a spoon.

Similarly, with a painting it is difficult to continue saying, "That orange painting with the grey and white figure."

RYC: And (title) in terms of a quote ...?

RGH: Sometimes it's very strongly a quote. Now if we look at what everyone calls the blanket picture [History may say alas..., 1985-86, Images C30], the quality of that cloth [blanket] is so nasty and coarse ... and then there is that nice good piece of canvas sandwiched between the blanket ...

There's the very strong quotation [actual words on the painting] from W.H. Auden:

> .....
> The stars are dead; the animals will not look;
> We are left alone with our day, and the time is short and
> History to the defeated May say Alas
> but cannot help or pardon.
>
> [The English Auden, edited by Edward Mendelson, London, Faber and Faber, 1977, p.212]

The painting is called, of course, History May Say Alas... Now, in itself, the [Auden] quotation is a very interesting one. To start off, the actual source is very interesting, because they are the final lines of a poem called Spain 1937, by W.H. Auden who wrote it in 1938, I think when the Spanish Republican cause was already doomed. Afterwards he cancelled those lines. He would not let them be republished. He said it's absolute nonsense because history cannot say anything to anyone. Now the interesting thing about that is, nevertheless, they are lines which are very much remembered. They are often quoted, despite the fact that the Poet himself said they were rubbish. They have a kind of reverberation ... they are often quoted because they are about the Spanish Civil War.

Now, I always knew I wanted to paint on this blanket - as I told you it was a blanket that used to hang over my bed, and it is a very coarse blanket. It's very cheap. It had to be stretched in a special way so that it wouldn't actually tear the blanket apart. I always knew that it [the old blanket] would somehow connect up with those [Auden] lines. I didn't know how I was going to do it ...

RYC: Why did you feel that [connection]? Did it have anything to do with the colour, the coarseness?

RGH: Well, I feel so strongly that we're living in many ways, in a 30's era where there is a lot of pessimism about and people take great extravagant means to achieve their ends. There is a lot of brutality around. A great deal of the hope of the last ten years has been blown apart. I am not only talking about South Africa. I'm talking about all over the world. Things we were sure weren't going to happen, all started to happen. Judicial torture is quite an accepted thing in a great many countries - and we thought we had stopped that when we defeated Hitler.

These thoughts, these kind of vague mists 'running' round in one's mind - you can't really say they're thoughts, but they are 'there'... This makes that particular quotation, for me a very real quotation. It's not just a piece of poetry. I know it's something in my heart and not in my head. So somewhere between here and the grey-ness of the blanket, I knew there would be a connection, but I had not the faintest idea what I wanted do.

I decided, as it were, to mediate between the coarseness of the blanket and the 'fineness' of the poem by having a canvas which would be the smoothest, most expensive, most luxurious I could find at the time - which it is.

Things got put together ... switched around - the two big canvasses at the bottom, the thin canva on the side - all kinds of things. Then, the thin canvas was in the centre and so forth. Actually the bottom canvas eventually got turned upside down.

It was a very grey surface - the black on white on that grey [blanket] surface started off in a very limited sense. (I do push this because I wasn't thinking very hard on this at the time) There is a quotation from the Guernica *6* ... Those big, rather strange, animaloid figures. But,it quickly shifted out of that and it gradually developed in a kind of tabloid manner: if you look at it from quite a distance you'll see it has that fumbled appearance of the Daily Mirror or old Sunday Express. Everything is crammed onto that front page - chaotic. It's almost a visual image of what the news can convey, and I liked that.

RYC: The monochrome of the upper and lower canvasses does tie in with the newspaper imagery you are talking about.

RGH: Yes, the outside ones [canvasses] are very monochrome. Or rather, they are tri-chrome - red, black and white on the grey surface and just because of that, the central colours work as very harsh colours. It is a fantastically small detail of quotation ... The colours

in the central panel are strongly red, black and yellow. Red, black and yellow happen to be the colours of the Spanish flag.

RYC: Was that a conscious thing, on your part?

RGH: No, but when I became aware it was happening, I didn't bother to change it - the thing [significance of colours] rested quite happily at that point - almost too nicely. It took me a long time to get it 'right' - I wanted a kind of scraffito lettering - I couldn't get it quite right. I made scraffito lettering - it didn't read, so it was done with a child's crayons. The wood was wiped with white pigment so it would like a dirty fading fence - I sprayed the wood with black. The wood looks scruffy in a few places. All that [scruffiness] was meant [to be].

While we're here, let's look at that painting, Figure, Fist, Face, Wardrobe [1972-85, Images C1]. Now that painting also started off being quite neat and I threw that pink, yellow, and black [diagonal] snake across it [the canvas]. The minute I did that I knew that that was needed in that painting ... and then of course I reduced it.

RYC: That's almost like a quote from the one work to the other [Figure, Fist, Face, Wardrobe and History may say alas...].

RGH: Yes, that is a quote from here to there and quite deliberate.

RYC: Did you hang this exhibition or is it just by chance that these works are hanging so close to one another?

RGH: Yes, that they're near to each other is chance. I don't interfere in hanging of exhibitions ...

RYC: It is interesting that they're placed near one another.

RGH: Well, it was a formal thing, I mean look at that [Figure, Fist, Face, Wardrobe], because of the window and the 1,2,3,4 march across the painting. It's really a fairly horizontal painting and that mad snake [diagonal] element destroys precisely that; that neat comfortable 1,2,3,4 which is again like a newspaper column item: 1, 2,3,4. Now, one of the things I liked about History may say alas..., is the way the snake image destroys the neat layering, or rather undermines it, and this pleases me. It is very important to me that you see these three long statements. And then you chop these horizontal strips diagonally with white, red and black and yellow

and then white and red again. It underlies the feeling that one doesn't just have three easy layers.

RYC: May we talk a little more about the colours of the Spanish flag that you used in the the smooth canvas [of History may say alas...], that wasn't intentional ...

RGH: It wasn't intentional but the intention was beaming[?] ...

RYC: But, would you not say, that my knowledge of this (that is , the parallel of these colours with those of the Spanish flag), as informed by you, adds to my understanding and conception of this particular work; it adds another layer?

RGH: Sure, it's an added layer. But, look when one talks about intention ... What is the intention of an artist when he sits down to make a painting? It is a really interesting question. I think, given the freedom from commission and social intent, he sets out to make an object which in some way, expands something he feels about life, or the reason for making a painting.

I mean it's an absurd thing to do, in a world where you may or may not be able to exchange a living for [it]. It's a mad thing to be doing but it does give you the right to search for a personal significance through your painting ...

I feel this to be very much the 'life enhancement' of the painting; when you're making it, (that) you say to yourself: "I know what I am doing up to a point. I will wait for anything extraneous to happen. If it fits in with what I feel to be the character of this painting, then I am willing to let it happen, even though it happens by 'accident' [sic]." So, yes even if red, black and yellow 'happen' and are very strong in that little panel [of History may say alas...], they [the colours] also happen to be the colours of the Spanish flag. In as much I know the painting is about Spain, I'm willing to leave it. But it's not an intentional thing ...

RYC: But isn't it intentional because you left it?

RGH: Yes. What about things one hasn't kept? They also add another layer but they're not visible, they're not remembered. Now if you look in this central section [History may say alas...], you can see, very faintly, figures; but they've been painted out so strongly in white, there is no record of them. Something that was originally there was or was not trivial to the point of the picture. So what one leaves in [a painting], is intentional too.

See, I don't think the red, yellow and black Spanish flag side [aspect] of this painting is desperately important - sure it adds a dimension. The fact that I know those colours correspond with the flag - that's interesting and important.

RYC: You know that particular art historical investigative approach of; "That floor in the painting is a reference to the Vatican floor; that rose is from such and such a source ..."

RGH: Yes, I think what art history is always trying to do, is to get into the mind of the artist and even into the reasons that he [the artist] at the time, either didn't know or either wasn't terribly occupied with. I didn't think that it was necessarily important [to me] to make much of a blue 'ha-ha' about that [about the symbolism of the Spanish flag].

I think the answer is, if you are lucky in the painting (I am not sure about the heavy manual things like sculpture) - but with painting and drawing and the two dimensional arts it's so easy to use a painting to open your mind, so lots of things flow out and get into the painting. If they ring true - you know those ridiculous words used: "If it works". You don't [in painting] have a puritanical idea: "Well, it shouldn't be allowed in because all I meant to do 'was' ..."

Now, this whole way of thinking is in some ways, totally against late 60's and 70's thinking; that "what you got was what you got"; and that a painting should be a direct straight forward statement. The awful thing about that theory was the early paintings of the time became decoration ... If you look at Noland and Kelly, they're being wonderfully puritanical and the odd thing is the paintings are purely marvelous decoration.

The problem about a theory, once you know how a theory works, what do you do with it next? If it's a good enough theory to balance the whole of your art on, then it means that nothing fresh can happen to you. And there is nothing worse in art for an artist in nothing fresh happening to him.

In other words, in the theoretical arts ... you couldn't really use quotation because quotation essentially means you are taking a part of your past experience or somebody else's past experience and reliving it. [By implication, it is possible to re-live experience through the act of painting.]

That's the difference I think between 'imitation' and 'quotation'; you were asking me about - [with quotation]

you are using that past experience of yourself, or somebody else to establish something new.

RYC: And imitation ?

RGH: Imitation .... you are really reinstating the thing: "yes", you say, "that's true, what else is new?" When you are quoting, you're saying: "Look, this was true once. Now it is true in this way." Or, from that truth something else will come out etc, etc. Quotation is more of a link , an urge for 'returning', a continuum ...

RYC: And parody?

RGH: I think with parody you cannot get away from an element of cruelty. You are either proving you are a smart ass or trying in some way to show how clever you are .. showing someone up ..

RYC: And quoting, using parody?, using satire?

RGH: I suppose you could, yes. Satire is something quite different ... Satire 'essentially' seeks to improve by poking fun ... It intends to lampoon ... parody I think is terribly egocentric ...

RYC: But with satire there is also a target text ...

RGH: Yes, but it does that [target] to improve the immorality of the text, as it does when it pokes politics or whatever to prove those immoralities. Essentially, satire is indignant whereas parody is very egocentric ...

Coming back to quotation: it does seem that quotation is used for something quite different - personally I rarely have a very great notion of what a painting is about. My own experience is one often ends up with something totally different to what one started with.

It interests me, without wanting to theorise too much, the multiple ways that things come about ... and why eventually some paintings do come together and others don't. Why is this? One always starts in some way with oneself. One puts down something that interests you for yourself, what it suggests for its associations ... Maybe you [RYC] take your little pram and you draw it bigger or smaller. And in a way it's not the pram that is important, but what is happening to the rest of the canvas, ... the prem can be scraped off later ... you have this blank piece of canvas and you have to make it interesting and it's got to be interesting to go on with tomorrow, the day after and the day after .... [end of tape side - rest of side inaudible]

RYC: We are talking about An Ill-assorted Couple ... [1976 - 86, Images C4].

RGH: The right hand side was an old painting. In actual fact it was a student's painting, or rather the blobs of a painting. I said to her: "I know what to do with that painting ", and she said, "Well, have it." So I had it and let it lie, and then brought it out again and finally began to like it. It was leaning against this other painting which I had already made. Alan Crump said, "Are those one painting?" and I said "No!" (with great emphasis). And he said, "Are you sure?", and I suddenly began to like the idea of these two absurd paintings being put together. I had to make that little canvas [the space created in the left hand corner between the two canvasses]; and I took that colour over to there and that red to here. Then I had myself a painting of an Ill-Assorted Couple.

He [male of the couple], is a very rigid kind of Calvinist and she for sure is not Calvinist, not with that mouth!

RYC: She looks like a belly dancer ...

RGH: She could be anything, I don't know. Another thing, I had never really painted in yellow. I loved all this shimmer of yellow. Have you ever painted with a colour you've never painted with? I have always dodged yellow and orange ...

RYC: And this painting, Love of Four Generals, [c.1972-86, Images C3]?

RGH: This is a half-hearted quote from a title of a play Ustinov wrote called, Love of the Three Colonels. I wanted a title for this picture so I called it Love of Four Generals. The heads [in the painting] were there and most of the background, not entirely finished, but more or less. I hated the figure under those heads so I reconstructed them with this gaudy, musical comedy type, military uniform. That little soldier almost becomes part of his uniform, which is quite nice. He is almost a quote from Manet's executioner *7*. I like this musical hall thing - very fierce, bright faces and what not.

I will tell you one thing which feeds into my mind about quotation. I don't know whether it's of any use to you from a general point of view. What interests me very much, is the way Picasso always does the most strange things and it always looks like it's the simplest way to do it. I like that [simplicity] more and more, myself.

The result is when I make a quotation, I normally make it expecting it to be seen. And you [RYC] say they are often kind of in-house jokes. Well yes, I am willing to concede those to people I know.

RYC: For instance in the work Tribute to N.G. [1985]?

RGH: Ja, that's very in-house. It does not matter. It's not important. It is for me and N.G. and anyone who knows the incident [behind the work of the same name]. But it's such an obscure quote that it's not important to the picture and you don't stand there worrying about it. If you get quotes in my pictures, they're pretty overtly straightforward or else they're not really to the point. They're not that important, and you don't feel you can't possibly understand something [in a painting], without understanding the quote.

RYC: Otherwise, the viewer may see something and think, "What is it? I don't know what it is" - to this work. That, in itself sets up dialogue with the viewer ...

RGH: Right. [End of tape.]

Tape 2.

RGH: Look at this painting here, Oh Oh Oh She Cried with a Cracked Voice [1983-84, Images C10]. Ivor Powell had done an interview with me and it was printed in [the journal] De Arte. He used parts of this painting (in black and white), as illustration and he used that pair of feet, with three little figures at the base. That looked all wrong in black and white. He said, "Why don't you use those feet again?" And so I did - I put that pair of feet there, and from there on that painting [Five Rude Gestures, 1985, Images C22] started to come together.

If you look at the little man [in Five Rude Gestures], you see the classical figure with the laurel wreath waving a flag, with the thought bubble coming out ... The thought bubble, consists of Oh Oh Oh. His head is a quotation of a verse bubble ...

Beyond that of course, there are no quotes at all, just new editions of thinking, like the gun. I'll tell you where the gun comes from. I was spending a Sunday afternoon at a friend's house and he is very keen on guns. I was lying on a bed, reading about old and new guns and pistols and that sort of thing, and there was this photograph of a guy with a little pistol, holding it [the pistol] with two hands to steady it and I quite liked that. I did some drawings of that and eventually that all got incorporated in [Five Rude Gestures].

RYC: And the medals, are they 'real' or 'imaginary'?

RGH: Imaginary, although I actually got five medals myself in the war, so I know what medals look like. These medals [in Five Rude Gestures] get re-quoted in the figure of Anger in The Triple Gates of Hell, [1985 - 86, Images C31].

Medals interest me - there is the Goering side. He [Goering] was the classical Ubu figure because he was very evil, but he was so absurd with his costumes, his hundreds of medals and his fatness, that he was treated as a joke. Yet, he was just as evil as Goebels or Hitler but no-one quite believed that, because he was funny. Now this is, a very Ubu thing. The whole idea of medals has a great absurd attraction for me - like all those people [with all their medals] on the little painting called Nude Warriors [1985, Images C18].

Now there is an interesting quotation. When I was new to painting, my hopes in painting lay in the direction of a classical reliving of things like Greek Sculpture and heroic figures of Michelangelo and Piero de la Francesca. All the secure things. I painted several nude warriors. One of them as acquired by the Cape Town National Gallery and it is on this show. It is adorned with beautiful colour - all the goodies. Now, these Nude Warriors are a set of rather aged decrepit gentlemen who have got their uniform on, but no trousers. So, along their uniform is a line of militarism. Below the uniforms is a line of pathetic shrivelled genitals which are also kind of medals.

That is an anti-quotation. It is going back to the 'golden boys and girls' *8* of my youth and 're-creating' - as if one wanted to take ones past and recreate it - because one can never be the hopeful young painter who thought that everything lay in beautiful breasts and bodies, and beautiful girls and beautiful hair - beautiful everything. It just isn't possible for me any longer. So I like quoting myself against myself ...

RYC: 'Quoting', is a form of continuing ...

RGH: Yes, with quotation there is very strongly a sense that one's own [new] ideas arise from old ideas - not necessarily to reinforce those ideas, but often to 'undercut' present ideas.

RYC: What about the idea of the 'fragment', we were discussing earlier? You take fragments from your past and re-use and quote them ...

RGH: Well, if they're fragmentary enough, they become a new thing. It is rather like those sculptures you make out of scraps: the cog-wheel. The function of that particular cog-wheel is totally unknown. You don't know whether it comes from a tractor, motor car or toy. But it becomes a new thing as you play with it.

You know building into this, there is something quite interesting. There is a possibility that an artist does create something which is deliberately ambiguous. Now, I'll give you a very good example from Shakespeare, when he talks about "Daffodils that come before Swallows dare and take the March Winds with Beauty" *9*. Now, what does that word 'take', mean? I don't know. And Shakespeare leaves it.

It's a beautiful ambiguity, because it could mean 'take it', like a swarm or ship 'takes' to water. It could be 'take', like a guy 'takes' a girl in a rape. All these ideas are built up in that phrase and Shakespeare doesn't bother to illuminate.

Another example in painting is that very famous painting by Titian of Christ being flagellated. Now he painted this [scene] about three times over in his life. The pictures ranged from a fairly accurate description of a guy being beaten up by rods to a description of a smokey, uncanny, indeterminate atmosphere, but the one thing that remains [in all of the paintings], is that one of Christ's feet trail on the ground in a way which you can only describe as 'badly drawn'. It [the foot] looks like a small piece of forlorn putty. It is so emotionally powerful. You don't know whether Titian is sort of saying, "look, because it is deformed and badly drawn, it is a kind of symbol against the authoritative attitude of the time - of this man's pathos been beaten away ... "You don't really know what it is he is trying to convey."

It becomes very odd in Titian, an artist whose statement of things is usually so abrupt, so clear, [for instance], "that is a nude girl on a bed; that is a guy doing this; that is a hunter doing something else." Somewhere [in the Flagellation] there is this curious foot and he [Titian] uses it. He does it three times. He never 'corrects' it. So you can't say he wasn't very clued up with that fact. He deliberately gives you a funny, squidgy piece of putty.

Now, I think sometimes, with quotation (and this really interests me), it is so ... either far [removed] from the source of the quotation; so improbable, that it is a quotation or it is so 'fragmentary' (to go back to your point) a quotation, that in fact it is a 'willed' ambiguity. You can look at some works (I don't know if

there are actually any on this show), anyway you can look and say, "Is he actually quoting? But if so, why is he quoting? He may be doing it without knowing it himself, or he may be doing it because it is ambiguous and he wants that ambiguity."

One of the things of Post Renaissance art, is this feeling that an artist is willing to not state his case clearly, leaving you [the viewer] to make up your mind.

RYC: Leaving the viewer to as it were, 'complete' it ... This brings us to the notion of 'clues'. I often feel there are a number of cities in your work and one is encouraged to put them together ...

RGH: Yes maybe, but I don't want to compel you to solve anything ... I don't know what answer you would come up with. No [one] answer is intended, that I am sure of - that I am certain of.

RYC: ...a riddles in your work?

RGH: I think the fact that producing a work of art is already a riddle. I mean it's an absurdity. It's really very similar [to a riddle].

RYC: That figure [in, Oh Oh Oh She Cried with a Cracked Voice, 1983-84, Images C101, have I have seen that black figure somewhere? Where is it from?

RGH: No, no, he is waving goodbye. What he is waving goodbye at, I don't know. Now the figures up in the corner, there [in Oh Oh Oh She Cried with a Cracked Voice] were taken from Julia Charlton [a former student of RGH] who was quoting Toulouse Lautrec. Now, I was conscious of that.

I started a little black something [figure] there and gradually .... well that orange is a very Toulouse Lautrec thing.

The mad thing is, the whole of that painting [Oh Oh Oh She Cried with a Cracked Voice] is a quotation, because the first painting that was there, (underneath) was so badly cracked I couldn't get the paint off enough, to not make it important. I had to take that canvas off and re-paint it. I didn't want to alter the [original] composition. And in fact that painting [Oh Oh Oh She Cried With a Cracked Voice] is a quotation of the previous canvas. It is very near to the original. Actually now I'll tell you, (I don't know whether I am bragging or confessing), I was putting the painting on the Nitsch Staff Show [at the Goodman Gallery] - I had struggled to get this painting clear and I couldn't. So 3 o'clock in the afternoon before the show I decided,

"No, this is absurd!". I actually took the canvas off, re-stretched a clean canvas and turned that out in one afternoon and evening. Admittedly I was 'copying' a previous painting. I thought I hadn't copied it that precisely or accurately. But, even Rayda [Becker] who has lived with that painting, didn't recognise it [that it was a copy] until I told her ...

that [painting], really was a quote of a quote of a quote - that was really incestuous. But it was intended to be a quote so close, it was almost a copy. I didn't want to alter it all that much ... In a way, I like it better. I think certain things have improved as a result (very small things) ...

I don't know if we can count this painting [History may say alas ... 1988, Images C30], as a quote. Try and look at this [painting] upside down ... Can you see? Now this frame was originally intended to be upside down ... here is a leg, the torso ... here is a head and a wounded arm ... Now when you come around here, and look at it from another angle it becomes something quite 'other' ... I liked that particular figure with the wounded arm supported on its crutch and was determined to do a painting of it. And so, I made a painting, A Beast Slouches [1986, Images C32]:

> .....
> Somewhere in the sands of the desert
> A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
> Is moving its slow thighs. ...
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
>
> [The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, 2nd edition, London, Macmillan, 1978, p.211]

Now, that is a quotation of part of a poem by Yeats ... I put the beast [into RGH's painting] in, amongst those sand dunes, surrounded by traffic.

RYC: What does FAM on that truck stand for?

RGH: I don't know. No one knows. Is it FAMILY? Is it FAMINE? Is it FAME? What is it?

RYC: You don't know, so why did you do it - what motivated you?

RGH: I wanted to fill up that space so that it would look like a big lorry/van (with big lettering) ... But what it 'is', is another thing. Everyone can think what they like.

RYC: So you want to leave it open ...

RGH: It's very interesting, I always thought it was essentially, FAM - FAMINE - a bit like the four horses of the Apocalypse - but then people started saying [it is] FAME, FAMILY ...

RYC: Words: do you want people to 'read' them (literally)?

RGH: Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. Obviously, I want them to 'read' certain things.

RYC: Those letters could just be shapes.

RGH: Ja, except it's interesting that if they were shapes, you probably wouldn't read it - letters are very important.

RYC: His [the Beast's] one eye, reminds me of the Cyclops.

RGH: Well, this originally was his other hand but then I quite liked that kind of 'pulpy', inflamed look to him, as well as that end of that arm which is almost a naked penis ... This sort of supporting arm was very nice. Ivor [Powell] says, of course, that this body is a kind of parody/quotation of a Michelangelo figure. He says this [The Beast] takes Michelangelo and pulls it apart ... Well, it is possible; Michelangelo is one of those people who do 'float' around in my mind.

RYC: And this, what is this here?

RGH: ... That's a crutch and also a prosthetic leg. It is a rather horrid idea and that [crutch] was also in that other painting of mine [The Triple Gates of Hell, 1985-86, Images C31]. So that it [the crutch], also got incorporated [from The Triple Gates of Hell] ... and so did that falling piece of bandage. The painting didn't come 'right' until I got the sky 'right'. I played around with the sky until I was going barmy! Some of this [painting] came so quickly and some not as quick. The sky was over-glazed with white. It was all wrong. Finally I put some strong blue paint on, and thought, "to hell with it".

Let's look at this painting [The Triple Gates of Hell], in terms of 'quotation'. It is fairly obvious that this painting quotes Africa. I hadn't realised that this tongue [first panel, Anger], is obviously a re-quote, shapewise, of those breasts [in the same panel]. I didn't do that deliberately ...

... [at the time of making the painting] I had been reading D.H. Lawrence's The Prussian Officer. I had also read a biography of the Kaiser von Hellen. The Kaiser von Hellen had a very strange kind of court. There was a Prussian Officer and he danced in front of the Kaiser von Hellen. He [the Prussian officer] had a heart attack and died still in his tutu.

It's a [the painting] 'anti'; so against that whole Prussian militarism, it [all these ideas] was all deeply and wonderfully all tangled up together.

So, I had this vision of this Prussian Officer and his medals. His medals are in full colour here [pointing to the painting], and as drawing here ... These are actually an outline of my own fingers [points to fingers on right hand side of first panel, Anger]. I was pushing my own fingers around [moving the panels around], and I quite liked the idea of my fingers on the canvas. I mean that's a note of Realism!

It's so mad, really, to introduce 'real' Realism - your own fingers holding the canvas. This panel [Greed, third panel, of The Triple Gates of Hell], of course, quotes Grosz. Grosz is often very keen on the furrows of a pair of trousers. He very often makes them [trousers] transparent and then you see, for example, the profiteer's genitals. But I didn't want to do that. I liked the idea of the trousers, and the crease and the hands. Then, the little cigar became the penis which Grosz would have put under there [showing through the trousers]. So it becomes a quotation of Grosz, but at the same time, not Grosz at all ... And the Lady with the crutch is of course a quote of Dali (who is an artist I by and large despise). But why not? It does make her curiously subtle.

RYC: Is that light bulb, a quote of Bacon?

RGH: Yes, you don't actually see it unless you look very carefully. It's barely there. And that [second panel: middle right side - dressing table area] was influenced by very early Miro - very strident colour ... very little to do with form, more with colour ...

The Lineaments of Gratified Desire [1965, Images C14] is quite interesting in terms of quoting, because there is (or rather, I have been told - I have been unable to find it), a quotation from Coleridge and the quotation runs, "Thus all man, woman doth require\ the Lineaments of Gratified Desire." The interesting about this, is that guy [in RGH's painting] is looking as gratified as the dolly. Who are the Lineaments of Gratified Desire? - not necessarily as the poem says, the woman. ... Maybe the guy is saying: "hang on that was a good screw". That

kind of interplay is quite nice. You mustn't exaggerate in your thesis how important I find it [quotation]. I love it because it re-establishes the present to the past. But I don't beat (going on and on) at it all the time.

RYC: But, it is an interesting aspect, especially when viewed in [the context] such a huge body of work, as this exhibition represents.

RGH: Ja, well look at that figure in the picture Amsterdam [1977-86, Images C5]. I quite like doing paintings of brothels and always call them by the title of the city. There is an interesting early one called Cairo [c.1954-55, Images A5]. And then in Cairo there's an image of a guy with his shirt off and his trousers half way down his back - and it's 1954. And the same guy is in the later painting Amsterdam [1977-86, Images C5]... The figure persists, you see.

RYC: And that noose ?

RGH: Well, that has partly to do with 'reality' because a friend of mine made me a little hanging noose of string. I had it hanging around the studio and I've actually done a painting with just a noose in it [The Hangman with the Hare Lip, 1985-86, Images C26]. I couldn't get it finished in time for this exhibition. The noose is to me, at once horrible and at the same time faintly sexually perverted. There are people who love playing with them [nooses]; hangings, torture, not my scene, but still.

Here, this painting with old men and their genitals. It's called The Nude Warriors [1985, Images C18], and when one thinks what I used to paint, as a 'nude warrior', well it's quite an extraordinary thought.

RYC: It's a very strange colour - reminds me of Alexis Preller.

RGH: Yes, it is odd colour but I don't think it is an Alexis Preller painting, do you! [with great emphasis]

RYC: Well, no!

RGH: This is even more Alexis Preller [Three Actors, 1981-86, Images C7]. This is what happens when you glaze [the colour] Permanent Rose it becomes wonderfully rich and glowing. But you mustn't paint it, you must glaze it on. It took about twenty five glazes to get it to that. It has a certain cheap look, sort of of stained wood, cheap stained wood toys you buy. I quite like that. Look what happens when it goes over all those

colours, like over the yellow, and white and over the red; you get terribly fierce colour.

RYC: This painting #The Cell is a 'funny' and very different colour in the middle of everything.

RGH: It is a quote from an Ubu painting I did, in which you see nothing but Ubu's spectacles and reflected in them was a corner of a little room like this [The Cell] ... I quite like the way it [The Cell] is [hung at an angle]. It almost looks like the door of the cell is open and the light is coming in ...

That painting is called The Fire in the Borgo [1976-86]. Do you remember Raphael painted The Fire in the Borgo - a very big painting?

RYC: So, the title is a quote of his [Raphael's painting].

RGH: Yes, in a way the Cardinal is a quote; a quote from my painting I did twenty six years ago called Pope Alexander VI as Cardinal Borgia [c.1975, Images A42). Interestingly, the earlier painting looks more like Raphael's Fire in the Borgo than this! [RGH's painting of same name.]

Just to get back to brothels: I think it is rather nice to call brothels by the city they are in. It says a lot about what one feels about cities ... I was dealing with Weimar one year, and I was thinking about all those sex pictures and the general German pre-occupation (at the time) with prostitutes. That whole thing that Marx and Freud (who were delving into the German mind), were on about: is a prostitute a [direct] result of economic or psychological forces or both? The prostitute becomes very interesting: economics, sex, libido. I don't know. I've only been to two brothels. So it's 'searching memories', I have ...

I have made paintings [of brothels] of Cairo [1954-55, Images A5]; Amsterdam [1977-86, Images C5]; Hamburg [1985, Images C25]; and Alexandria [1979-86]. I have not done London or Paris yet, but I'll get down to it. I might even do Bloemfontein one day. That would be a lark!

RYC: Now, we are looking at Man Considers his fate, 1985, Images C23].

RGH: It quotes Goya faintly, as much as anything, except for that hot, hot Karoo landscape, that red, red road. Can you imagine a nude man alone in the Karoo? He would be much more lonely than a guy with trousers and a shirt on. There is something about a human being,

naked and abandoned in the Karoo. You start thinking about his sunburn, his thirst, his emptiness. On that long drive from Cape Town [through the Karoo] you see nothing - just stones and bush. Without water you can support nothing.

RYC: And this work here: Three-Actors [1981-86, Images C7] ...

RGH: This is an old painting. They are kind of actors.

RYC: These, [pointing to the canvas] are they Zulu shields ?

RGH: No, they're leaves. They are very much a quotation from Matisse but they didn't come out looking anything like his.

Now the title of this work is, Ubu and the Judgement of Paris [1985, Images C19]. Apart from the fact that they could be goddesses, it's also kind of a 'fringe' brothel. The 'Judgment' then has a double beat: when you choose which girl you are going to screw.

RYC: Does this have any reference to Cezanne?

RGH: No ... actually it is like one of those naughty paintings that Cezanne did isn't it? It did please me the way this floor is not flat and because it is enormous spatially ... Now, this painting here [Ubu - The Browning Version, 1984-86, Images C13]. Now, that's a quotation. Browning wrote a poem about two monks in a monastery garden snarling at each other. (I don't know what the poem is called. I remember it faintly from a long, long way back.) I wanted to do two Ubus fighting and then they turned into these two monks. I was also interested (I don't know if you have ever been involved in the theatre), in the theatre and the moves which are often marked by arrows on the stage to show where you have to move. In a kind of way it refers back to the fact that Ubu is in fact a play. The arrows, apart from being quite nice to look at, do refer to this [that Ubu is a play]. This is a stage setting but it's also a monastery. You have these two Ubu monks fighting - two traditional fat little Ubus with spirals on their heads ...

RYC: It's a very graphic work - It is almost like reading street signs ...

RGH: Yes, I quite like that. I've always loved these arrows on the streets ...

RYC: This is Medea in Middle Age [1985, Images C20] ...

RGH: She was the Greek Cafe owner's wife - that's all about the 'source'. It's quite an interesting painting. I put the resin behind the canvas which gives it a kind of pincushion effect. Look how it swells, at the corners.

This painting here [Eloff, President and Plein, 1985, Images C15] is obviously about Jo'burg [Johannesburg]. I was quite interested in ... the violence and despair [of the city] ...

To go to this painting Golden Lads and Girls [1985, Images, C24]], it doesn't quote anything except my early nudes were Renoir-ish. There's an early painting of mine, Dame aux Camelias [1958, Images A9] and there is Nude Warriors [1985 Images, C18], from the Cape Town National Gallery (you saw it). They have this kind of golden, fresh look as if nothing could ever corrupt them. In Golden Lads and Girls, I am quoting myself ... accepting how I used to be [when RGH made the 'beautiful boys and girls'] ... All that glory and beautiful flesh that was is denied [by age] ...

I was sitting in my bakkie [small van], and stopped at the traffic light. There were some young boys driving a sports car. I looked down and one of them looked exactly like one of them, [RGH, points to a lad from from Golden Lads and Girls]. It was absolutely spooky - the golden hair - the whole bit. Ivor [Powell] said (when he saw the painting), "I know that one [girl]; she works in the O.K. Bazaars [supermarket]". He is so right. It is the kind of girl that works there.

/b. Recent Works, 1987 ...

3. Robyn Cohen interviews Robert Hodgins:-

b. Recent Works, November 1987 - Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg

---

RGH: La Lamballe [1986-87]. She was the Princess de Lamballe and she was a great friend of Mary Antoinette. Mary Antoinette was in prison and she [La Lamballe] was also in prison, in a different prison. In the French Revolution people literally poured into the prison where the La Lamballe was. They took all the people out and literally killed them in the streets. Now La Lamballe actually tore physically apart. They took her head [off]. They put it on a pole and paraded it in front of Marie Antoinette who was her best friend. That is why she [La Lamballe] is wearing the cap of liberty. This is why her head is on a real rough piece of ... something. I invented that rather nasty, (whatever it is), which is shoved into her mouth - it's kind of like a hand grenade, like a rough piece of wood. It has a penile overtone, as does the stick. It 's a perfectly horrid painting but I like it a lot.

The hand is holding the stick. And the label ... has to with that 'contempt' - she's just La Lamballe. French usage should be the Princess de La Lamballe. Now, to reduce [her] to La Lamballe is like saying "Oh Hodgins" as apart from Mr. Hodgins. It's a derogatory way of describing someone. Of course it has something to do with how she has fallen from a very high state, as one of the First Ladies of the last court of ... (was it the Bourbons?), but that's how she ended up. It was a particularly horrid thing ... they actually physically tore her apart.

RYC: It's [the painting] quite bloody.

RGH: Ja, I quite enjoy painting blood as an exercise for painting blood.

RGH: The Arab [1987], started off from a painting a student prepared for me. And all [the paint] lifted off except that central piece and I liked the shape it made - this kind of strange face. I built it up from there. It was all kinds of things and ... finally it became that [Arab]. I quite like that small intestine thing [image] again. Maybe it's because I can't paint drapery. I don't know. But you do see these in Nigeria, particularly, these dark fez suits and these pure white piling of very thin cotton. Very beautiful.

RYC: Dancers in the furnace [1986]. Let's look at the theme of the 'open legged woman', an image which I suggested crops up in your work so often and discussed with you at the Jo'burg Art Gallery. Here it is again - in this painting. It is difficult to really talk about in context of the other paintings because they are not on this exhibition.

RGH: Ja, there's another painting which is not on this exhibition, which was on the Wits show called "The Dancers in the Furnace." I had this idea partly of (and I am not trying to make a heavy political comment) that white people are dancing in the furnace. I am not sure whether it's the 'abandon' of the idea or the false gaiety, or what it is exactly.

The idea of people dancing in a furnace has something very much to do with the three guys in the Old Testament. Daniel went into the furnace and emerged unscathed.

The painting started off with an old board I had. I had some drawing on it. I worked on that board. I quite liked the fact that I had the courage to really do a crude piece of drawing [on the board]. Those stump legs are really crude.

RYC: That crucifix stance of the figure?

RGH: No, that was not intended. No, I was thinking rather of ballet - I was thinking literally, of dancing at the barre - you put your arms out. I can't remember the term for it.

RGH: Man on a Shooting Stick [1987]. Big fat man in a bathing costume with his stomach sticking out. It's slightly cruel in the sense that he is obviously a very uncomfortable guy who has no pants on. His curiously pointy head is - well quite nice.

RYC: The painting reminds me of Poor Old Bugger [1983 Images, C9]. Same kind of old, pathetic man.

RGH: It [Man on a Shooting Stick] started off actually when I went to see Debby Bell [artist]. I was so envious of the way she puts on thick juicy paint. Generally my paintings are fairly flattish - not much texture. So, I started taking white and red [paint] and 'gunging' it about. That little figure grew out of that quite quickly. And because he is sitting he must be supported by something. I quite liked the idea of a nude fat man in a bathing costume sitting on a shooting stick which is normally used for hunting ...

RYC: An Eden [1987]. Why 'an' Eden?

RGH: Well it can't be quite 'The' Garden of Eden. There is a reference there to the title of a very, very early Bacon. Almost the first Bacon that really hit everybody after the War: "Studies for a Crucifixion", not The Crucifixion".

It struck me that this [An Eden] was in a way as remote from The Garden of Eden as traditionally thought of; as Bacon's studies for A Crucifixion are away from The Crucifixion, and I really wanted to use that.

I quite like this thing at the bottom - almost references to paths and fences - so it is a garden. And then these strange Totemic figures. Yes, they are quite fun in a sense of those large trunk figures, the so called African transitional figures people now make. I had that consciously in mind. Like Doctor - what's his name? [Dr. Phutuma Seoka], who takes a stick or root or curiously formed branch and changes it into a human being. I had that also floating around in my mind at the same time. Colin Richards had just published that article, that having little bits of African Art [in art] does not make them African. But it was pleasant, nice to do ... did not know what I thought of it entirely, as a painter.

The background [An Eden] was intended to be in the manner of the still life in the window in the [Goodman] Gallery [A Conservative Still Life, 1986] but it didn't turn out that way. You have got to have the coarse weave of the canvas [as in A Conservative Still-Life] for that bleeding to happen. So, it took another course entirely. But the extraordinary thing is the way, in this light, at quite a distance, those two figures [in An Eden] are stereoscopic. I have never done that before. And when I look at it I wonder, "could I use that again?" If I could 'cook' that thing all the time, how would I use it? I mean look at the bottom down the female figure on the right hand side ... even this close, if you put your finger around that figure ... but could I do it, could I do a Bridget Riley? No, I don't think so. It certainly didn't look like that in the studio.

RYC: Andrew [1987]. 'Andrew', who is he or doesn't it matter?

RGH: It was a painting that I got very involved painting 'wet in wet'; very wet in wet, not like Manet's painting which was really viscous fluid into wet. So, things would bleed and flow and his [Andrew] head built up entirely in that kind of weird way. It happens to

look like a friend of mine, although it wasn't ever intended that way. I arrive at portraits by accident. I almost never can do a portrait from a person. I arrive at things which look like people by accident and this is one of them...

RYC: It has the same feeling of bloatedness, bleeding quality as in Winston in 1985 [1977, Images A46]. Very strange face.

RGH: Yes, that was started by making marks on that board keeping my eyes shut, a long time, so that I didn't know what was happening and didn't see how it was 'bleeding' together. But yes, there is a strong reference between the two [Andrew and Winston].

RGH: Kameraden [1987], started off on one of those small tempera boards and I 'combed' the white surface with the blue figure and when I put the paint on he seemed to be almost a geological head - head consisting of strata. For a long time that was it. Then gradually this sulky young man, (obviously he is a Kamerade) started to emerge in uniform with braid and medals. Well it is much more abstract from the side but you get that sense of epilets and gold lace and high collars and that sort of thing - I suppose it comes ultimately from Grosz and his Prussian Officer. Prussian Officers are always, to me involved in the 'theatre of the story'...

RGH: Police File [1986-87] [compare with The Lineaments of Gratified Desire, 1985, Images, C14 - note from RGH on the tape].

At one point, lying here on the carpet was Jan's [Neethling] black dog, lying like often those dogs do, exposing their genitals, fast asleep. Now it [Police File] was then called "Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming", which is a Victorian song [RGH sings it] - "dreaming the happy hours away." It was a kind of nice joke and then it got thinner and thinner and I couldn't keep it up. I didn't like it and the painting of the dog got feebler and feebler. Very odd. Started off well - every time I polished it up I must have made a worse dog and then I got very impatient and wiped out the dog and started putting these pinks around [him] and then it got too sweet.

I used that van Gogh thing [image of dots used in etching Vince, [1987] strong dots on a white background - The Vince in "Three Pauls and the Vince". Then it all began to come alive and then I quite liked the idea of the carpet folded over. Carpets when folded over are quite interesting. The bottom is not quite the same as the top. I remembered Nikki Clark and then I thought of linen and curtains. Nikki Clark was a student who did a

whole lot of paintings using patterns she pressed on [to] her canvasses]. And among them, very often was this chalk mark figure where the victim had been [lying]. So the figure [black chalk-like figure] which is also an avenging angel was important.

But it certainly had nothing anymore to do with "Come Where my Love Lies Dreaming." So first it became Crime of Passion. Then it became Detective Story. And finally I was thinking what could be more South African, than Police File? The drawings of the criminals always fascinate me so much. I love looking at that programme, because of the detail [of the drawings]. These are Identikit Drawings. I wish I could draw like that, in some way, I could use that kind of drawing.

Yes, that's his [the victims] gun which he has or has not shot, has attempted to shoot his mistress with [the figure lying on the couch in the middle of the canvas].

RYC: But, I still see that central figure as a dog, and not as a human being.

RGH: No, it's very much a female. In fact that face is very like a friend of mine. Again the 'accidental portraits'.

RYC: Perhaps I see the ghost of the dog?

RGH: If I hadn't told you the 'dog story' you might not have said that.

RYC: Interesting point that. It [female/dog/reclining figure] is very Picasso-like.

RGH: It's very Picasso, but quite like what Picasso does with reclining females ... I think what gives that picture its interest is that mad black and white dot - that black and white dot waltzing around the picture. I want to try and find more usage for it somewhere. But it is [the dots] almost crudely a computer-image.

RYC: Night Panics [1987]. Is it the 'Panic' in the night or the night 'Panic-ing'?

RGH: I tell you what it's about. In a kind of strange way, you wake up in the middle of the night, the world is very half lit, so all the familiar forms are there but you can't see them. And you sit there and you worry absurdly about things, which in any case are not great big problems or certainly you can do nothing about them at three O'clock in the morning, and even thinking about them is not going to do you any good. But, you sit there and the world starts to shake and get irregular and become out of proportion, and dreams, fragments come up

into your mind. They don't have the importance of what they are. They have an importance of this atmosphere of incredible worry.

It is very Kafkaesque because you know, what you are thinking isn't really true - doesn't have anything really to do with reality - hence, those two athletes up there; hence the bats [hanging]; hence these obscure figures falling apart.

All these things kind of have nothing to do with any kind of reality. They vaguely refer to athletes, and vaguely refer to some of Michelangelo's figures. But the point about them is their irrelevance. The point about them is the fears of the 'Night Panics'. It's not the objects. It's the way they come at you - worrying things. Of course it's very much reinforced by this rather threatening figure with a gun and the shattering [of the surface] ...

A bit of that [shattering] comes from the The Triple Gates of Hell, [1985-86, Images, C31] in which we have these great bars of white, shattering the canvas surface *10*.

RYC: I see this gun and the shattering of the canvas as scarification ...

RGH: I hadn't really thought about scarification. But, yes it's a point. I think that very early on I did settle on the fact that the only vertical line was going to be that red line; (... well you know that first triangle isn't level with its surface ... there is absolutely no vertical surfaces except a line in the painting) which turns most of the painting inside out. That gives to me that feeling connected with Night Panics, that feeling of unease, disturbance, falling about. That terrible feeling that nothing is quite right and yet you know it's all bullshit, and what are you fussing about. But you're caught in this curious panic that you can't let go of. And the only thing to is to hope you'll fall asleep. In a way it's better to be in a nightmare than in these night 'panics'. At least the nightmare you wake up from and it kind of finishes.

RYC: I have these terrible nights, where I am not sure when I wake up, if I have dreamt these terrible images, or whether I have lain awake the whole night, fully awake with all these things pounding in my mind. I often cannot separate things out ...

RGH: Yes, that's why these figures [at the top of the canvas - the guys falling down] (which are part of my

previous iconography) are falling. The guy falling down has appeared in an old painting. The hollow figure up there as well. But what I wanted to say is they're not important to me as 'images' because in this Night Panics situation quite ordinary things lose their identity and become part of this instability.

And, I've never consciously phrased this, I was talking to one of the women [at his gallery lecture/tour of the exhibition] the other day and I came up with a very good analogy for my paintings as I see them. When you walk through the veld, you see a whole lot of different plants, stones, and so forth and it's extraordinary how quickly you pick up anything which has been altered. If for example, there's a brick and you peel lichen off the rock and put in on the brick you'll know immediately it's forced.

And I look for the things to happen in my painting where the lichen is always on the rock where it belongs. I don't actually sit there and cook all these things up. But the thing has got to be 'right'. Why, it's going to be right and how, it's going to be right I never quite know to the end. So that all the 'goings on about' in this picture sound really calculated. In fact they're not - these white 'goings on' which faintly reflect those shattering bars were done only four weeks ago, about four days before I delivered the painting. I was very worried it would be too wet. And they're [the white bars] are kind of pinched from The Triple Gates of Hell. But of course there they have quite a different function; in this painting, where barely visible they carry this disturbing [canvas] quadrant here.

RYC: This skull-like image [man holding the gun] here . . it's quite helmet like?

RGH: Helmet-like, skull-like ... The interesting thing is that that happened first thing, and I have not touched it since. I liked the drawing of that figure, of that face, so much - a couple of moves of the brush and it determined that I wouldn't want to add it. So, in a kind of way this idea of one vertical becomes the fulcrum round which this painting moves.

RYC: Is this a figure falling in shadow?

RGH: Yes, it is a figure falling in shadow. Up to a point it's quite obviously a shadow coming from behind there. I don't know if you remember a painting from the Wits show called Man posing (which is a very black figure), but I find there's something nice happening when you paint something in terribly strong colours and gradually glaze over in black [as in A Man posing] until

the colour is only buzzing under that black - I quite like that ... In a funny way it doesn't quite kill the colour. I don't know why.

RYC: And the little man in his raincoat...

RGH: Ja, [he is] kind of half Weimar Figure and half Private Detective and half Dirty Old Man. And with these two strange figures in this tunnel. I tell you what works for me there - I am not sure if it doesn't work on a formal level, it works on some other levels. It's a curious piece of white which you at first think is a drop of white paint that has just been left but it glistens and gleams like some very nasty substance (on there). I nourished that. I liked it so much. And I still don't know why ... It doesn't make it quite the obvious tunnel of disaster.

These two almost cut-out faces are reflecting each another. They have no possible reality. And you notice the edges of this painting. It is not quite possible, I think, really to frame it. Besides, I think it would stabilize the painting so that the curious irrational 'goings round' [as well as irregular extremities of the painting] would be disturbed.

RYC: The sharp, shaped canvasses...?

RGH: I tell you what happened: that [canvas] and the strings were going to be one, incredibly long, incredibly irregularly shaped painting - 13ft long and about 7ft high. And I actually put them all together. But, when I put it together it was engineeringly impossible [for all these irregular strips of canvas to hang together] because one part would be flush with one part of the wall and the other would stick out from the other [part of the wall]. It just wouldn't stay flat against any wall.

So, I had these curious pieces [canvasses]. In my usual way, as I've done so often with other paintings, I started playing around [with them] and seeing where I would get. And for a long time that first triangle was flush against the wall... and then the next triangle... and it formed 'teeth' but then I liked the fact that it isn't straight - that edge on the far left hand side - the triangle and the square don't actually line up and that had to do with this one vertical line.

RGH: The other ... potent image (for me) is that spilt handbag which is spilling tomato juice or blood and all kinds of things. And of course the fleeing woman with her outsize shoe. And that dead body.

That box? That was originally two women screaming in fear and the more precise it got, the more it didn't work for the picture, because the point about 'Night Panics' is that they're not necessarily real Panics. They have to be kept or they don't have to be kept, they just 'become' like the tips of ones fingers.

If one thinks of a woman screaming in fear, you don't think of an actual woman. And this piece of painting [the 'box' enclosure] has been so painted over that the original two women have practically vanished. The white [of the canvas] becomes a kind of night - it's a nice inversion. And the night keeps blowing them over.

RYC: They appear to be caught in the window?

RGH: Yes, they were originally caught in the window or rather window/television but again I had to break it because they were too specific. There is not much left which is very specific. ...

RYC: A Wicked Man Sumptuously Attired [1987-Etching]. There is a painting of same title: [1986-87]. The discussion centers around both the etching and painting.]

RGH: You mustn't say "sumptuously", you must say SUMP-TU-OUSLY. It's got that richness, almost that fixe of chocolate meringue. It's fairly easy for me to start an etching. Often I work from a painting. I don't think, except for the dots in the etching Vinca used in Police File, that there's been a return play - the other way round, [ie. working from an etching into a painting].

He [A Wicked Man Sumptuously Attired] started off as a man in armour and he wrestled with me. Now one of the things I hadn't thought of and which has always haunted me, is in one of the smaller Dutch Museums, maybe in the Hague, is a painting by a German guy called Baldum (15th Century).

And he [Sumptuous Man] gradually changed [into a Sumptuous Man]...you don't have that mechanical clanking feeling of armour going through to his head.

Oh, I forgot the Baldum story - it is a beautiful, late 16th, early 17th Century portrait and there's this head and the background is dark flat green. It's a very curious painting because the background has been put on with something called Stand [?] Oil, so when you actually look at the background it sticks up physically, one sixth of an inch in front of the head. So, you have this curious thing that the background is actually physically in the foreground and it's very clear when

you actually look at the painting. I haven't managed to do it but...

RYC: But, there is definitely a fight going on between the edge of the background [in a Sumptuous Man] and the edge of the face.

RGH: Ja, which I quite like.

RYC: That green is wonderful - emerald.

RGH: It is a lovely green. Actually it's two greens. I put a green on and there was a faint breaking in it. So I put a second green and you can faintly see the tiny bits of green from underneath.

The title: A Wicked Man... is vaguely Biblical.

RYC: It is didactic - this is a wicked man, a lazy man - labelling. Does that come over in your Hogarth series at all?

RGH: Yes, well I quite like that [labelling]. I think in the 20th Century it's absurd in a way to paint a 'Wicked Man', let alone 'Sumptuously Attired'.

RYC: Kind of an anachronism...

RGH: Yes, and I like that. It's a bit going over the top which I like very much. I like this thing of doing things which are kind of naughty. And of course I've always been fascinated by the sheer lushness of costume.

RYC: It does have quite a Medieval feeling...

RGH: It's all part of the thing, I've said to you before: Venetian painting particularly is part of my whole being. I haven't just looked at it and thought "that's lekker" and walked away. It's something very much mine and I want to use it. I want to use it in my own way. I don't want to do a Venetian painting.

Look we are terribly sophisticated people as far as knowledge is concerned - packed with goodies. I don't think one must decide "it's anachronistic, I can't do it." I like it, so I'll use it.

RYC: Yes, but it's interesting to look at a particular impact of the work in this sophisticated gallery, hung on these black walls, spotlights and all. And I think what is nice is that in a way I would expect it to have a gold frame, and it doesn't. It just has a simple wooden frame. Now, I know you probably just framed this etching like you did the others, using what was

available, and reasonably priced, but the effect it has, for me, on this image is that it kind of jokes on itself ... as a Sumptuous Man in such a stark, almost naked environment and context. ...

RGH: Nude Bonaparte [1987]. Well, this is Linda's [Givon] title. I called it Worm-head. Well it is very 'wormy'.

RYC: Your intestine [image] thing again...

RGH: Yes, I quite like that - it's in the "Arab", it's in the clothes of "Triple gates of Desire". That's all I can say, I think.

RGH: Girlfriend, Boyfriend [1987] started off, a long time ago, as a painting called "Fuji Punk". Where the girl now is, there was Fuji Yama. And one hated him. So gradually I produced the girlfriend in her mini skirt, in her cheap jewellery and bangles. Ivor [Powell] likes it. He likes the girl's feet - little feet, touching.

RYC: And the ankle chain...

RGH: Yes. The whole thing is very Punk. I was thinking [about the boyfriend] of those Punk hair-do's. I think I painted this [boyfriend] quite some time ago and I haven't altered the face very much. There was a guy who got killed in a motor accident. That was the first time I saw someone with six safety pins in their ear. It was the year before I taught you at Wits. Do you remember? He was the first 'Funky' guy we ever had at Wits and he got killed. And I walked into his studio one afternoon, and there was a guy with six safety pins and that was him. And I thought, "Wow! I mean I've got to use that sometime".

RGH: Warning Medusa [1986]. It started or rather was an old painting called "Prophesying War", I think. There was a collection of various warriors and it was in tempera and it didn't really work.

So it gradually got shifted to these three images - the Medusa who is interesting enough, a hermaphrodite as well - the Private Detective who could be almost any kind of civil vigilante, (if that is the right word) or Lone Ranger and this extraordinary version of these armoured vehicles you see around. It is not a hippo, but rather something like an [armoured] Putco Bus. Every possible space has wire netting on it. And then I thought the tire track was part of that and so it becomes a painting of a mythology of 1986 in South Africa.

I think his head is a very nice piece of painting - very Dick Tracy like.

RYC: Pretoria A 60's Memory [1987]. Why "ELVIS IS BAK"? [Words on the canvas.]

RGH: No, it's not "Elvis is back" but "Elvis is bak" (pronounced buck). Your Afrikaans isn't good enough to know the meaning. It's like saying "shit Artist".

This is, as it is called "A Memory of the Sixties". At the time he [Elvis] was terribly popular. He went off to the army and came back and then there was hysteria by the teenagers. And this "ELVIS IS BAK" appeared on a wall soywhere in Pretoria. And the Pretoria News published it and said "you see they can't spell!"

The painting started off with a painting glazed in this wonderful colour Burnt Umber, which is a grey without being quite grey. And he just developed.

RYC: You see, again I see that scarification image [in his side-burns] ... a ritual connotation perhaps...

RGH: It's interesting because I was thinking more of that very haphazard shading that Hockney and teenagers go for in their drawings. They [teenagers] can't draw a nose sticking out so they put scarification marks as you would call them. And that's a distinctly adolescent thing - they don't do it when they're small children. When they're fifteen or sixteen they start thinking "how do you draw a nose?" They go off with these mad marks... That's what Hockney uses so wonderfully.

RGH: Delphic Boogiewoogie [1982-87]. Well of course it's the Apollo of Delphi again... An old painting which hung around and I picked up and thought well "I like the figure, the rest of it is bullshit." I started playing with the figure ...with those little dots. The shape of the figure is exactly the shape of what it was but the ... Look I said to you once before that whole Apollo Figure which stated a rather naive belief in Apolline virtues way back in the fifties has ... and sixties has gradually declined. And when I look at this figure what strikes me now, most of all, is there is this enormously soppy figure, almost going over into bulge... and the famous left arm, or is it right arm ... somehow one doesn't realise how tiny it is and what that possibly implies. Somehow one doesn't believe in that figure so much anymore.

RYC: And the Mondrian ... [in the title and the allusion to images from Mondrian's Broadway Boogie-Woogie, 1942-43, Oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York.]

RGH: Well, it kind of adds up to Mondrian in the end... He [Mondrian] called them [his paintings] Broadway Boogie-Woogie, Fith Avenue Boogie-Woogie and so on, and it's nice to pin it on to Delphi - Delphi of all places. Imagine Boogie-Woogie in Delphi!

RYC: It is quite interesting how Elvis and Delphi Boogiewoogie are hung next to each other in gallery...

RGH: Sphinx and So Forth [1987]. It's very difficult to talk about this. You get that 'lichen on the rock' rightness about this painting. I don't think I yet realise what all the things going on, are about.

I know historically it started off with that traffic sign and those 'stop' boards one gets on a dangerous curve. The painting was going to be, at one point called Dangerous Curve. And then oddly enough there wasn't really much choice for the two canvasses to be anywhere than this - always the long canvas and pure square canvas. And then the Sphinx ...

Well it's an interesting concept, the Sphinx. The Sphinx is always female. Sometimes she's a vampire. Sometimes she's a victim and sometimes she's something else. But she's always female. I think the female presence in that is important - which is why she has those 'Little Sweet Lady at a Tea-party hands'.

I kept fumbling with images to get this painting right, I know that the guy's jeans and the woman came quite early. The woman [the viewpoint from which she is seen] has that connotation of the very obscene, and adolescent desire to look up a woman's skirt. This is very common with gents at fourteen or fifteen who want to peek up skirts. I think that [image of] combination of leg and skirt is very obscene but in that kind of way of: "I want to look, I want to peek."

RYC: The legs [of the lady] are quite early Miro.

RGH: Ja, I think the concentration was on adolescent sneakiness - desire.

RYC: The 'handbag' thing again...

RGH: The handbag - perhaps the female organ. And then there's a secondary female behind her, also carrying a handbag. There are various things happening in the background -of vague roads, zebra crossings. Then she came, the lady with the big head. The moment she came of course, the whole painting becomes even more unreal because she in a way 'carries' enormous airs.

RYC: The skulls...

RGH: Skulls, as you know are a big thing with me. I love skulls on many, many levels... They are heads without being heads. They have expressions without having expressions. They [the skulls in Sphinx] were quite nice under this row of Daumier/Goya heads. This fragmented female is broken up and distributed like a doll over the surface of the road.

Liz [Rankin] says, and I think she's kind of right, and yet I am not quite sure she's fully right: it is about 'violence in the street', not necessarily the 'violence of Riot' but the 'violence of the street'; of bag snatchers, of being run over, of Pat Senior's death [former director of Jo'burg Art Gallery.]

RYC: What about Sphinx? [the violence of,]

RGH: Ja, what about Sphinx, indeed. I think it's the furtherest I've ever gone in putting enigmatic things together to the point that the enigma is beyond me. I know that he partly comes (because I had the two paintings together on one wall) from "Night Panics" - the threatening figure barging into the thing. But of course he's also to do with the formal thing [of the painting] of this very flat, stable form. And that form charging in, so near to it - that kind of thing... the quality of a static thing and a moving thing very dangerously close together - which is a purely formal thing.

It's a painting about instability. The crouching male figure who was always in my mind - the kind of Oedipus in quotes - the old riddle of the Sphinx. It wouldn't work until I put him [crouching man] into this uneasy frame which denies that very rectangular join [of rectangular canvas joining square canvas]. That rectangular joint becomes a line across that frame and that heavy white 'gunge'. I liked that figure almost immediately [the woman with her hand on her head] - it's very Picasso. I like the sudden emergence of irregular shapes which are so strong that that [image] almost becomes a slipped smile - it's also a shadow... It's a difficult painting and I am sure it means a great deal more than I can see. Somebody picked up some connection between that slipping stocking on the legs - almost as if the knee itself has been crunched.

RYC: Just about everyone except the Sphinx seems to be tired, slouching. The Sphinx and this figure are alert. She's leaning on her hand, he is slouching, they're dispersed.

RGH: He's half asleep -

RYC: She's very heavy and wrinkled.

RGH: - very interesting the guy in the blue jeans.

RYC: Well, you don't know because you're not really sure where he is. Maybe he is hanging.

RGH: No, he is not hanging. His feet are all wrong. Although maybe he could be.

RYC: Like a stiff dummy...

RGH: I think that this is one of my very few paintings that one can claim that something like 75% is formal placing. There is plenty of narrative but it's so obscure. It's a great mystery to me.

RYC: It's also quite voyeuristic. Perhaps there's also a sense of Klu Klux Klan mask [the Sphinx] - two slits in a paperbag, hiding and looking out at us, seeing everything from the safety of a mask.

RGH: I think the content can be interpreted in a thousand which ways. It's a mad painting. I myself am confused. About ten days before I had to have this painting delivered, I was still worried about this little crouching figure. He is kind of important to me. It's the first time I've done shadows in yellow and blue like that. I haven't had the nerve before. It's important to me in that 'triple hand' thing. But for a long time it didn't work. Here is your optical thing, [the figures look stereoscopic]. It doesn't often happen.

RYC: I like your sign [dangerous bend].

RGH: I actually got hold of an actual sign and measured it to get the proportions right. There's a sign near Jan [Neethling] and I took my truck and backed it up and measured it very carefully. So it is a very accurate rendition - even the arrow, I measured where that should be.

RGH: Oh World [1986-87]. Michael Godby says it's a Post Atomic Disaster.

RYC: Have you seen "Where the Wind blows?" [animated movie on the Atomic disaster.]

RGH: No, but I love the guy who draws "Oh World!" - the world becomes a setting sun - vague reference to Nuclear war. I don't know it's a curious painting.

RGH: Chamsa & the Wheel of Fortune [1986-87]. Now, according to Linda Goodman, Chamsa is the Hebrew word for this object - this hand with the eye in it. Now what it does is it averts evil. You see it all over Egypt. That's where I saw it. You can buy it as an ornament, wear it on your wrist, wear it as a necklace. They even have it beaten out in brass on the horses. Well, it [Chamsa] actually came very late [in the painting]. So it's actually unfair to start with that. First there was the scraffito which came straight from the gents lavatory at Wits. Then there was this strange figure who's half mechanised woman.

RYC: What about the Prussian Officer from the The Triple Gates of Hell?

RGH: Possibly. In that case also she [Chamsa] is also hermaphrodite - male face and also female body. Then we had the little fat businessman made into a tank [at the bottom middle of canvas] who is riding over the black figure. Okay - so we're creeping around the edge of this canvas. All right so then I started putting in these heads, which just poke in. ...

There are horrible anonymous people. There is a guy whose tie makes a loop around that lady's head, with her hair hanging down. Then there's a totem pole with a decorated skull on it. And then suddenly it became Albert Einstein in green hair. Then her and all the figures, as you will see - all the figures except that one are pretty ordinary. And I suddenly wanted the idea of a falling man who is split right from his collar bone, right through his body. He is involved with this woman making this gesture. Quite a lot of this is 'our' technique of drawing into that stuff with pencil... *11*

There was this big space and that's where Chamsa came in. I wanted the Wheel of Fortune there, with the two little black feet as a pointer. I think it's a kind of halfhearted reference to all kinds of things going on at the moment. But again it's a painting a bit like "Sphinx" where the images are so enigmatic that virtually anything could be said about it... I think it makes a painting which holds together ... but if you ask me to explain it... I don't know. Well, you know even though I enjoy content very much ...I grew up in Art, at the time that the worst possible thing you could say was that it [painting] was illustration. And then came the whole abstract thing - for twenty or thirty years. Even to have thought an object was bad narrative. ...

RGH: Days of Miracles & Wonders [1986-87]. The genesis of this painting was a drawing I did - with twelve heads and [out] of all those twelve heads that one, the grey and black one survived. And I quite liked white and grey

- it's quite nice - a nice feeling about that white and grey. Everything else superseded that.

Now, what does it all mean? Well first of all [there is] 'Crowd thing' and this hand holding arrows. Except in this one it's burning. (I had this sudden thing about flames). Now this eventually became Palace Athene [Greek goddess of wisdom, born from head of Zeus]. The skull becomes a helmeted Greek head - Athene being the Goddess of wisdom. Her sex is indicated in this little panel with the strange two breasts and the pubic hair. She always carries a shield and all that's left is that. There should be an owl somewhere as she always has an owl. There's another arm and head there and a kind of armoured skull over that side. So you have that kind of balance. This hand degenerated into a crowd - most of the twelve heads were on there - they were so dreadful. They just had to go. So, a lot of things developed, as it were from here.

What do I think about it? I think, essentially it's a colour/black and white, colour/black and white sort of structure - very strong colour. Although [the colours], to a large extent are dominated by the black and white/grey. And then we get this beating, pulsing pink and blue which I like very much... took me a long time with glazing. And then this is more or less colourless. So you do have this kind of 'strip thing' [colour alternating with black-grey etc].

RYC: You've always used strips. You use them a lot.

RGH: I like strips. I tell you why: so often I find I have two bland portions... It's nice to chop that into strips. Then if you take that strip with the black, white and grey head on it - you get this very awkward shape and one doesn't make an exact strip of it. This thing here [heads] was from the drawing. The drawing Ivor Powell has so I can't show you.

RYC: What about the title?

RGH: Well, the thing was I was workin- with Malcom [Christian], somewhere round the tim- s painting, doing graphics. It was the first ti- had heard "Graceland" [Paul Simon's record album]. I like putting on titles, sometimes, which have no more reference to anything [the painting] except the fact that I was listening to the record while I was thinking about the painting. I think that idea of "Days of Miracles and Wonders" is quite nice because it's [the painting] actually "a day of doom and disaster" - the hands that are holding arrows, the burning arrows - heads and skulls. It's not a jolly picture. I quite like the

irony of the title. Although it [the title] doesn't have any very dense meaning.

RYC: A strange thing now happens for me. When I hear the song [by Paul Simon] I 'see' your painting and when I see your painting the song is automatically 'played' in my mind. The one feeds into the other.

RGH: That's nice. Well, I think that's the mythology of art. Well if you take a much grander example: Michelangelo's David. They become such icons of some kind of weird mythology. So, I quite liked the idea where one does a painting where it can actually and does actually feed back through the Spectator's consciousness - own consciousness. And this is one of the sub-benefits of juxtaposing whatever comes from your head, like the "Sphinx" and that woman with those vague obscenities round her genital area [also from "Sphinx"]. I mean the "Sphinx" is essentially sexless - she is just the enigmatic female who knows the secret life that men don't. [Sphinx - monster of Greek Mythology - head of a woman, body of a lioness, proposed riddles of the secret of life to travelers and strangled those who could not answer]. And put that ["Sphinx"] against a woman to whose sexuality you draw attention and what have you got? Well, even if you didn't know me, and you look at that painting you could make that interpretation. So when you interpret the connection with days of "Miracles & Wonder" [Paul Simon's] and this painting [Hodgins] - yes, sure it works.

RYC: It works for me, like a soundtrack - song and the painting. So you get this auditory/verbal and visual thing going.

RGH: That's because it's South Africa too. The connection between that hand holding that arrow, holding that spear ... militant connotation, perhaps.

RYC: Yes, those kind of images are so well known to us - particularly at Wits, from posters, banners pamphlets. That hand, the simplicity of it, the starkness reminds me of some of those pamphlets that are put out hurriedly at night - very crude, often badly drawn.

RGH: Yes, it is such a strong visual element in ones life. One sees it about in a country like this, much more than you see it in say in America. Or though I suppose you see it [these kind of militant images] in Ghettos - like those big buildings with pictures that you see in San Francisco. This 'bad' (and I put in quotes) kind of drawing actually becomes a new style and I often wish I could do it better. I can only use it 'spottily' and intermittently but I do quite like it.

But, yes I do think this painting has something to do with violence and burning and clenched fists. But what it has to do I do not know.

But you know another thing which is interesting, is now I look at it [the painting] with you and therefore I am yet one more observer. This kind of strange little buzz down that panel of orange and pink - that strip of colour. I've done all kind of unusual things for me - on the cheek of this man, pink on the cheek, yellow on yellow has the same kind of faint buzz, this blue against blue, this putting of very close things. Whereas nothing here is close - that blue fires against the red against the black. And I don't know how conscious that was. I don't remember it being conscious. I do know I wanted to build up strong colour...

It all happens at such a speed - you start drawing around - you haven't got a space that's working properly. You haven't got an image. You start drawing, pushing around, building up and extracting and fussing. And then you say "yes that looks like so and so" but one also says "But do I need it?" If it is needed then it starts contributing to the picture. And the way I paint everything new that happens to the picture slightly alters the character of everything - the picture can get a whole new nuance.

Look, there were obviously down that panel, originally three very dreary heads - I think there's some reference to the first head in the top right hand corner. But the baboon head we are talking about actually occupies two head spaces. ... I quite like skidding through a picture like this. Suddenly, you fear "the colour is so dreary, I'll put in a bright yellow" and then the whole painting starts shifting because that yellow. I quite like that. It's almost like a tree puts out a new branch.

MGH: Five Civil Servants [1986-87]. The thing I liked about "Civil Servants" is that the heads are nothing new for me. It started off: I used to have lunch with a guy and he had glasses which gave off very peculiar shadows. I tried to photograph them - with a flash and of course the shadows were not there. So it started off with that [the man] and then I got bored with the whole thing... but what really interests me is where it comes together and then there's this funny jerking along the contours of the shoulders. That irregular line particularly when they both hit the centre. They don't really flow one from the other - kind of gives a neurotic dance/itch effect. I think some of that is more important than some the images of the actual head.

RYC: I like the wiggy bits of hair.

RGH: They are not wispy bits of hair - they were lines. Originally they [the heads] didn't have that Prussian/Blue background. They were sub-divided fairly geometrically and finally got left behind and it came out as little horns and feelers. But, [the question is] are they part of the hair or the background...

RYC: The little pens in the pockets, spotted ties, striped - that's very Civil Servant ...

RGH: Yes, they all wear ties in the Civil Service.

RYC: Did you see Paul Stopforth's work on that recent group exhibition at the Market? He had a painting on called I think The Opposition - a very big painting with three men - grey, very grey acrylic paint and PVA and these three men sitting there, grey and in ties. From a distance each looked exactly alike but when you went close you discovered tiny variations - one weave of a cloth slightly different to the other weave, and one tie had a different to the other ...

RGH: Yes, he has got a way of compressing their [civil servants] faces. They have faces scrunched up, in case they give anything away. I think the black [in his RGH's painting] got there because I needed to compress the heads into themselves and the only way I could do that was to trap them in the background, particularly the very final one on the right hand side. He looks like he is set like a jelly in a jar.

RGH: A Mad Doctor [1987]. I owed a guy at Wits a painting and I did a painting of a bouquet. It was such a dreadful still-life. It was about seven years old. So I turned it upside down and started drawing upside down and before I knew it there was this "Mad Doctor".

/ c. New Work, 1990 ...

3. Robyn Cohen interviews Robert Hodgins:-

c. New Work, April 1990, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg:

RYC: I was reading through the interviews I have done with you over the years. Let me give you a few examples. The one Two Way Traffic wasn't actually an interview *12*, but I transcribed the lecture. Now, I am just going over (briefly) the dominant themes (or some of them). The two of you [Ivor Powell and Hodgins] picked out in your work (that) ideas and images feed into your work. At the same time there are often visual relationships which are set up between your work and other images, (relationships which you often weren't conscious of) ... It interested both of you how the 'Traffic' goes in both directions. You may be influenced by an image and at the same time it almost seems that images in books have almost, as it were, been influenced by you. Things connect up in all sorts of ways ... You spoke a lot about the things you carry around with you for years and suddenly use them out of the blue ... You spoke a lot about the 'transmission' of images into your work. [Refer transcript of Two-Way Traffic, Appendix B, p.??].

And then he [Powell] traced the theme of the classical beautiful youth (in your early paintings) who eventually becomes the aging Durban Apollo [c. 1970, Images A26].

RGH: You, [RYC] found that [image of the Durban Apollo] as the astride figure.

RYC: Oh, you mean the open legged figure. That did come through visually in a lot of examples he [Powell] used. [There was a space made in many of Hodgins figures of the 1970,s where the open legs of an 'astride' figure forms an arch with the bottom of the page forming the base of the arch. I called these, Hodgins' astride figures.]

To get back to the dissolution of the classical theme. You spoke a lot about the fact that you were quoting yourself. That it was the beautiful young girls and boys who have become old and are now lounging on the beach. They have become beach bums.

RGH: They are lounging around the corner - [Hodgins is referring to his recent painting on the same theme on this exhibition: Beach Scene.]

RYC: In the one very large interview *13* I did with you we discussed a great deal about quoting, terminology.

RGH: And parody.

RYC: And parody. Now when I did my initial proposal -

RGH: That was a few years ago. A lot of things I think have shifted.

RYC: Now I was quite hung up on this whole parody idea. Quite desperate to fit your painting and my painting into a term. I wanted to make it sit comfortably. I tried very hard but it just did not work. I re-did the propposal and I gave it quite a loose (frame of) reference, "The Relationship between Repetition and Originality"... I thought it was a less constricting framework or rather it was the loosest thing I could find at the time in order to not restrict myself when talking about your work or my own. I stipulated [in the revised proposal] that I wasn't actually interested in originality as a better or worse state, but as a base. Even if you [RGH] use Picasso's -

RGH: X Y Z.

RYC: Even if you [RGH] use Picasso's X Y Z, who he quoted from A B C, you are starting with that thing ... it is a base which you have used. It's a starting point although it may have been the 'end point' of another artist.

That was a very interesting interview because in that interview we spoke a great deal about your sources: your fascination for instance with the Weimar poet, Max Herrmann-Neisse; that he was a peripheral figure, not much was known about him and how you used him almost unconsciously - you hadn't really wanted to make a painting of him but it just 'happened'. It [Herrmann-Neisse] suggested itself, and this 'grey disgrace' emerged. You spoke how you admired him [Herrmann-Neisse] and you admired Grosz. In a way, because he [Herrmann-Neisse] was not a major figure, (not much is said about him the books) so he became part of the mythology of Weimar - a kind of myth. I would imagine that this gave you a lot of space to make up your own story, in a way - to let your own things feed in.

RGH: Ja, that's right.

RYC: So we spoke a lot about sources; about the Herrmann-Neisses, about the history of certain paintings and how they [the paintings] had come to be what they are. We also spoke a lot of - well at one point we spoke about clues, about information: does it make a difference if you know about sources if you have the information where something comes from? Does it make a

difference if you don't know? We spoke a great deal around that point. I think at points [in the interview] we both said (or conceded), "yes; it does matter" and other times we said , "no it does not matter because a painting must carry itself."

We both contradicted ourselves [laughter from RGH and RYC] - or did we? I think this [contradiction, ambivalence] is actually part of the paintings we are both interested in - sometimes you can actually answer and sometimes you can't. (And maybe it depends on which day you are asked the question.)

One thing (amongst others) that always interests me with you, is that you constantly stretch your mind. I'll give you an example: at one point [in New Works, 1986, pp. 204, 215] you say that you do give clues for the viewer - some of them [clues] you want the viewer to pick up and some you don't. And then at another point in the interview I said to you, "So you give clues..." and you said, "Ja, but maybe it adds to the puzzle" - maybe clues are there to confuse you.

It's an interesting thing - you do this all the time. (I know I do this as well.) You say something and then instead of saying, "yes, I know I said that", you say something else - you are thinking more, further; it's like stretching. Even when I have often quoted 'yourself' (your own words) to you, you have often -

RGH: - denied it. I have denied it.

RYC: In a way denied it and in a way re-thought it - as you are going along. In one of the articles *14* Ivor [Powell] did with you he said you told him that he [Powell] should just leave you alone to paint and he should make up your part [for you]. And sometimes [in the interviews] there is a sense of you making it up as you go along. But when you read [the interviews, reviews and so on] all together there is (surprisingly) a real thread of continuity that goes through.

I know when I did some of these interviews a year or two or three ago (and even when I just spoke to you about your work not in a formal interview situation), I was very confused, a lot of the time - I thought, "what is going on here!". There was just too much. I would come out of an interview which had taken hours. I would come out feeling I had had a history lesson from you. I always run to look things in books after I have spoken to you. There are millions of names I have never heard of and people I don't recognise and I am busy running to look everything up. And I think, "well how does it all sit?"... Then when I was reading through the interviews the one thing I saw was this sense of 'continuity'.

That is the one thing that really goes through everything: obsession with history (including your own history); the consciousness of what you are doing; ... the ... (well I don't know how to put this, I don't want to use repetition as a term like one would use parody), the constant repeating of things - consciously and subconsciously.

It always somehow comes back to Robert. It is almost like you are the centre of everything ... It always comes back to you.

And then, here on this show here. Well I was thinking to myself, in the car here, how you really and truly obfuscate a lot of the time - you won't answer, you won't give a proper answer because you say you don't want to give an answer; there is no answer. And then I was thinking of Titian's Crucifixion that you spoke about in the one interview - where the one foot of Christ was like putty in all three versions -

RGH: Oh no, that was Titian's Flagellation. He did them [Flagellation] over years and always used the same putty foot - such a symbol of pain -

RYC: And you remarked that it was obviously 'badly drawn' (sic) and yet he used it three times so it was obviously very deliberate. Now, you said what you liked about those pictures was that he was so ambiguous. Usually, he [Titian] says, "... this is a man on a chair; this is a women doing her hair". He is blunt, more direct. Whereas those [Flagellations] were not - they were much more ambiguous and you liked that.

So this then takes me back to the thoughts I was entertaining in the car (on the way to the gallery); that you yourself, very rarely will just give an [straight forward] answer. And then I arrive at the gallery and the first thing I see is the painting in the window (one of your Sphinx paintings) and in it there is a [voice] bubble and it says MAN. And I laughed. In fact my first reaction when I went around was pure laughter. There is a lot of humour on this show.

RGH: There is a lot of humour. People get hysterical.

RYC: What I would like to do (although it's not really possible) is to 'sum up', in a way (since this is the final interview for my thesis), although that is not possible because this (summing up) is actually antithetical to what you do - one can't sum you up.

RGH: You can't sum up your own work.

RYC: Yes ... I can only sum you up, up to a point. By