Section Two: The Context of the Work

Introduction

This section of the exegesis provides the contextual background to my practice. Included within it are both contemporary and historical materials elucidating issues relevant to my project of picturing female subjectivity. Topics are primarily discussed through the work of art practitioners. Of specific note are the French Neo-classical artist Ingres; the Photorealist painter, Richard Estes; the Modernist painter Georgia O'Keefe; and the Feminist art of Laura Godfrey-Issacs, Rosa Lee, Eve Muske, Jenny Saville, Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle and Linda Sproul. Apart from my direct appreciation of their art, these artists have been selected for inclusion because conceptual and formal aspects of their work elucidate principal research concerns underlying practical work undertaken within this project. Thus, for example, I have examined detail and illusionism as attributes within the art of Ingres, Estes and O'Keefe. I have discussed these features in order to show how highly detailed illusionism creates readings of significance in both their, and my own, art. The paintings of Godfrey-Issacs, Lee, Muske and Saville have been included for both their formal and conceptual approaches to picturing female subjectivity. The video and performance work of Schneemann, Sprinkle and others are discussed principally to explicate conceptual issues faced by feminist artists seeking new possibilities for representing subjectivity. The inclusion of artists has been determined by the common thread that each has through their practice, intentionally or not, undermined the organising principles of perspectivalism, the system of representation that has provided a durable
paradigm in western cultural practice.\textsuperscript{21}

The chapter is divided into five parts with each part addressing individual areas of contextual interest. Although each part is treated discretely points discussed under a particular heading may overlap or parallel concerns considered elsewhere. It is important to note that context material has had different degrees of significance upon the practical research, some areas having less relevance to the final outcome of the project than others.\textsuperscript{22} All material considered throughout the project, however, has been included in some form; it both records the breadth of readings undertaken in correspondence with practical work, and illuminates conceptual and formal issues relevant to the development of that work. The order of parts does not reflect a chronology of investigations but rather an organisation that brings a fluid interaction between one part and the next. The wide-ranging approach taken within this chapter reflects within it the multi-faceted nature of art practice.

I have been fortunate throughout the course of my studies to be able to view first hand many art works of relevance to this project. Although not all included for discussion within this chapter the following works and exhibitions are of note: \textit{Cindy Sherman Retrospective}, MCA, Sydney (1998); \textit{The Body}, AGNSW, Sydney (1997); \textit{The Portraits of Ingres}, Metropolitan Museum and Art Gallery, New York (1999); \textit{Kiki Smith}, Pace

\textsuperscript{21} Svetlana Alpers has argued that since the Renaissance perspectivalism has proved to be an influential and enduring model for artists, theoreticians and art historians alike. She writes: "To a remarkable extent, the study of art and its history has been determined by the art of Italy ... Italian art and the rhetorical evocation of it has not only defined the practice of the central tradition of Western artists, it has also determined the study of these works ... Since the institutionalisation of art history as an academic tradition, the major analytic strategies by which we have been taught to look at art or to interpret images ... were developed in reference to the Italian tradition." Alpers, Svetlana, \textit{Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century}, London: Penguin Books, 1989 ppix-xx.

\textsuperscript{22} For example the part on gender and painting has less direct bearing on the final outcome of the work in the media of digital prints.
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1. The Politics of the Particular and the Particularity of Perspectivalism

"I have a taste for the detail"²³ the forgotten, the overlooked.²⁴

I have always sought out particulars and details within pictures. My enthusiasm for these fragments extends equally to my appreciation of art reproductions and my contemplation of paintings through first-hand viewing. Consuming the pattern of lace in a cuff, I find myself myopically peering into minute passages of overlooked details; inspecting the glint of light in the pearls of a necklace, determining the means of a microscopic reflection in a metallic vase or probing the intricacies of a wrinkled silk stocking. Isolating details in such a manner can bring to them a range of impressions and connections that may have little in common with the symbolic significance of the total image.

In aesthetic terms, ‘particularity’ often has pejorative implications.

²³ Roland Barthes is said to have confessed: “I have a taste for the detail ....” quoted by Sehorn, Naomi, Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine, New York N.Y.: Methuen N.Y., 1987 p³.

²⁴ My interest in exploring the aesthetics of detail was further fuelled by a passing comment made to me by a male friend as we sat drawing the landscape on an excursion to Waterfall Bay in south east Tasmania. As I contemplated and drew a range of detailed studies of objects and fragments lying close around me my friend sketched an image of the distant cliffs, sky and horizon. His comment: “women always draw the particular whilst men the bigger picture” fuelled speculation on my behalf as to whether, as it seemed, this generalisation may contain an element of truth.
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‘Particularity’ is associated with words like *embellishment*, *flourish*, *superficial*, *garish*, *gaudiness*, *gilt*, *trimming*, *impure*, *overloaded* and *vulgar*25 and certainly, within modernist aesthetics, has come to represent a debased form of aesthetic experience. Furthermore, details are not only viewed negatively but particularity, through its association with decoration and ornamentation, has in recent centuries, also come to be associated with femininity. Preliminary contextual inquiries were fuelled by the desire to discern why certain forms of pictorial representations had come to be considered as more negligible than others, and why there existed a correlation with gender, because my understanding was that these ideas had not always existed within Western cultural tradition. My readings revealed two points of concern for this exegesis. The first is that the perspectival model of describing the world gives vision a privileged role in the comprehension of that world; secondly, a hierarchical system of values arising from the Enlightenment period defined what was fundamental to aesthetic concerns over ensuing centuries. Although at first glance there seems little parity between the above two developments, occurring several centuries apart, what connects the two is the belief in vision as the primary way of knowing the phenomena of the world. The emphasis perspectivalism placed on vision, as the primary way of describing the world was reinforced by the Enlightenment project that confirmed sight as the most objective, and therefore the most capable of the

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senses for revealing innate truths. Of relevance is that, as the Western world became increasingly dependent on vision, information and impressions gained through the tactile senses of touch, taste and smell came to be considered as less determinable and therefore less valid than that gained through vision.

In association with these developments the idea evolved that particularity obscured the authentic visual experience of things and this translated within art to the development of an hierarchy of aesthetic ideals that valued clarity of form above detail and ornamentation. In time, as public life became increasingly separated from private life and gender roles became more defined within social life, femininity came to be associated with ornateness and particularity; a correlation that has since come to bear the mark of biological fact. If we scratch the surface of these so-labelled idiosyncrasies of gender, what is revealed is a move to distinguish the cultural output of the sexes in order to endorse the hierarchical division of aesthetics along gender lines.

The Primacy of Vision

The belief in vision as the prime sense for understanding the world has been entrenched since the Renaissance when modes of perception underwent a


27 There were of course many factors that led to this division but of note was the increasing social separation between the public world of work (men) and the private domestic sphere (of women). The relationship of femininity to the decorative remains a common belief even today. In the late 1960s and early 1970s artists sought to assert the decorative along with other 'female arts and crafts' as a primary subject for art, a development that occurred as part of a broader reaction to the male dominated world of modernist pure abstraction. In reality the promotion of the 'female arts' only reconfirmed the association by affirming the decorative as inherent to female sensibility. The relationship of femininity and particularity finds its alternative in the 'marriage' of masculinity with abstraction, simplicity and certitude.
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profound shift from the haptic to the optic.\(^{28}\) Underlying this change was
the philosophical conviction that vision would provide the impartiality
necessary for the accurate recording of phenomena and the disclosure of
worldly 'truths.' Parallel developments in mathematics and geometry
provided necessary confirmation of the equation of sight with 'truth.' These
'tools' provided the means by which man could objectively record and map
the physical and spatial world from a detached and impartial viewpoint.\(^{29}\)

In art, the search for objective visual truth found its equivalence in the
invention of perspective. Leon Battista Alberti formulated a system based

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\(^{28}\) In her article 'Kama and Eroticism: The five senses in the work of Francesco
Clemente and Pierre Klossowski' Jill Bennett discusses the haptic (tactile) appreciation
of art as a prominent feature of late medieval Italian painting. (Bennett 1997 in Bond,
Anthony, (Ed and Curator) Body, exhibition catalogue AGNSW Australia: Schwartz
Publishers, 1997 pp129-139.) During this period the appreciation of an image
operated through the principle of metonymy. So for example in the appreciation of a
painting depicting the passion of Christ the viewer was confronted by an image that
sought "not to engage the eye at a distance" but rather "to bring the spectator into
the proximity of the body of the holy figure depicted." (Bennett 1997 p130.) Bennett
describes the relationship between medieval imagery and the spectator as 'ballistic'.
The viewer's comprehension of such imagery came through a mix of experience and
imagination; that is, he/she was to feel the spirit of Christ's passion, rather than making
sense of it through an interpretation of a specific narrative. Walter Ong argues that this
movement from the haptic to the optic was one of the most momentous developments in
Western intellectual history. (Ong Walter, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of
the Word, London and New York: Methuen, 1982 p117.) Ong traces the developments
that brought about this shift, citing as of central significance the invention of the
printing press. He reasons that with the invention of the printing press, knowledge
became less ephemeral because it was literally possible to 'see' knowledge from an
objective position. However, while Ong pinpoints the Renaissance as the point at which
this shift occurred, others, such as Jay, have argued that sight as the absolute sense
has been central to Western societies since the early Greeks. (Jay 1994.)

\(^{29}\) This all-seeing external viewpoint marked a crucial shift from the medieval conception
of man embedded within the landscape, a shift that was reinforced by a marked growth in
exploration and trade. As man began to explore the broader dimensions of the world,
more accurate mapping techniques recorded oceans and territories that had previously
been conceived as barriers. Through their visual mapping onto two-dimensional surfaces
these previous boundaries came to be regarded as 'knowable' space. Ervin Panovosky
wrote that the vanishing point in perspective is relative to a 'shift in worldview from the
concept of a closed universe to an infinite expanse, a never-ending recession and
expansion of space, endlessly purveyable (s) by an enterprising, colonising and
capitalising subject/gaze". (Panovosky paraphrased by Schneider, Rebeeca, The Explicit
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Fig 2. Luciano Laurana, *Architectural Perspective*, c1575

on geometry that delineated solid objects upon a surface so that the drawing produced the same impression of apparent relative positions, magnitudes and distance, as did actual objects when viewed from a particular point. The receding parallel lines underlining the basis of perspective meet at the vanishing point in exact proportion to the point of the viewing eye and this was thought to accurately reflect the way we see.\(^{30}\) As the means of correctly recording perception, Alberti's method was flawed because it was formulated on the principle of a single (monocular) viewpoint. The single viewpoint locates the viewer in a static position some distance outside the field of vision; a positioning that discounts the moving eyes of actual binocular vision. Alberti's method, however, came to be conventionalised as a legitimate representation of the way we see. Furthermore, his system endorsed the disembodied 'gaze', over other more participatory and inclusive embodied modes of comprehension, as the definitive sense.\(^{31}\)

\(^{30}\) Alberti’s treatise described a visual system based on exact measurements. Pictures were organised in three distinct layers (foreground, middle distance and background) placed parallel to the picture plane. Objects were organized around a clear and centrally positioned vanishing point with the axis running from the viewer’s eye back into the space of the painting. This axis created visual continuity between the space in the painting and the space outside it.

\(^{31}\) Although many modern social commentators have recognised vision as being part of a more complex visual system, the continual emphasis on ocular-centric comprehension has meant that the other senses have come to be considered secondary in our interaction
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The objectivity, predicated by a detached viewpoint, separates subject from object and presupposes there is no connection between the viewer and the object of his gaze - the seen does not see back. In viewing of the 'grand historical themes' of Western art this may be fine, but with respect to representations of the female nude such detachment is highly problematic. What is implicated within the tradition of the nude, established on the convention of the male creator with a female as the object of his creation, is


32 Rebecca Schneider writes "Perspective ... is reproduction of the 'actual', but it is also construction of that real - a delineation, through representation, of the defining characteristics of 'actuality' as relative to and marked by distance - distance as marked from an unremarked, unseen viewer". (Schneider 1997 p62.)
that vision is typically a male prerogative. He, the artist, has the vision whilst she, the female model, is the vision.\textsuperscript{33} The objective positioning of perspectivalism promotes the spectator as voyeur; his gaze simultaneously denies the individuality of the naked subject, and, diminishes her to the status of desired object.\textsuperscript{34}

**Perspectivalism and the Visual Ideal**

Over the ensuing centuries the belief in vision as the ultimate sense of knowing became increasingly entrenched. Its value to intellectual life was further endorsed by the rationalism of the Enlightenment era when sight became fully established as a central metaphor for the revealing of truth. It was believed that the enigmas of the world would be laid open through systematic visual and intellectual abstraction; a process requiring the paring back of all detail and complexity because particularity obscured the essential nature of things.\textsuperscript{35} In art the value placed on abstraction led to the development of a hierarchy of standards that defined what were the primary aesthetic values over the ensuing centuries. As a model these standards embodied both the visual ideal and the formal means of achieving it. Upheld as fundamental to ‘high’ art were abstraction, sublimity, simplicity and unity; qualities through which the artist could best express the

\textsuperscript{33} Schneider 1997 p67.

\textsuperscript{34} The positioning of the artist as voyeur has meant that conventional depictions of the nude are usually referred to as ‘keyhole’ nudes.

\textsuperscript{35} The writings of the seventeenth century philosophers Descartes and Locke embodied the belief in the abstracting methodologies as the primary means of ordering and controlling every aspect of intellectual and practical activity. In Descartian philosophy mental judgement and understanding are prevented, or interfered with, by excessive detail because such particularity keeps the mind from grasping larger outlines and wholes within the descriptive field. (Brooks 1987 p102.) Of interest was the increased attempt to master the body in systematic discourses principally founded on visual inspection. Michel Foucault in particular has traced the rise of the ‘medical gaze’ at the end of the eighteenth century. The clinic he demonstrates is a space for examining, comparing and classifying, practices that led to the development of a number of popular pseudo-scientific discourses claiming authority in “reading” the body: physiognomy, animal magnetism and phrenology. (Brooks 1987 p221.)
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... it is impossible for a picture composed of so many parts to have that effect so indispensably necessary to grandeur ... many little things will not make a great one. The Sublime impresses the mind at once with one great idea; it is a single blow ...

Reynolds' judgement on art that sanctioned 'lesser' qualities was simple; it was to be excluded from the domain of 'great' art. Dismissal on these grounds condemned the sumptuous style of Rococo art as 'laxest' and 'sophistic'; Dutch art for its inability to abstract itself from details; and

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37 Reynolds quoted by Schor 1987 p146. Reynolds views were not isolated, most cultural commentators of the time sustained similar ideals.
39 See Alpers 1989. Alpers claims that the appreciation of Dutch art of the 17th century has been subordinated to the hegemonic Cartesian model. She argues that the
the Venetian School of Italian painting for its ‘sensual indulgences’. Their exclusion however lay deeper than mere distaste for their formal frivolities, for what they all held in common was variation from the ideals upheld by Cartesian rationalism and perspectival clarity. Furthermore their exclusion on the basis of terminology such as ‘laxest’, ‘sophistic’, ‘particular’ and ‘sensual’ is also revealing. When compared to descriptions of the sublime as ‘vulgar,’ ‘powerful,’ ‘manly’ and ‘dignified’, clearly other distinctions are at work.  What was considered ‘great’ art was evidently decided along gender

Cartesian model that privileges conceptual over perceptual looking fails to embrace the strategies of Dutch art. Rather than a monocular view that emphasizes a gaze from afar, particular to perspective-based art, Alpers suggests that Dutch painting is an art of describing that requires scanning and close viewing. (Jay 1988 p.25.) Rejecting the privileged role of the monocular subject, it emphasizes instead a world of objects depicted on the flat canvas, indifferent to the beholder’s position in front of it as the image is not contained entirely within the frame of the Albertian window but extends beyond it. (Jay 1988 p.12.) The nonmathematical impulse of this tradition accords well with the indifference to hierarchy and proportion characteristic of perspectivalism. Instead it is concerned with descriptions of the fragmentary, detailed, and richly articulated surface of a world. Dutch art savours the discrete particularity of visual experience and resists the temptation to allegorise or explain what it sees. (Jay 1988 p.13.) It is frequently remarked of Dutch paintings of this era, that there is nothing to be said about such pictures. The picture, it is argued, “shows exactly all that can be named; it brings all the names to the surface and its whole ‘substance’ seems to consist in that showy articulation of its surface or, more precisely, of the level of representation”. (Marin, Louis, ‘In Praise of Appearance’, (trans Miller, Richard) p108 in October 37, Summer 1986, MIT Press, pp99-112.)

40 The Venetian school of Italian painting (Titian, Veronese) was distinguished from its more ‘serious’ counterpart in Rome (Raphael, Michelangelo). Reynolds formed this distinction on the basis that the Venetian School privileged sensuality over reason, dazzle over affect, colour over line, ornament over severity. (Sebor 1987 p.19.)

41 Reynolds uses the following words to describe the Sublime in art “rugged, strong, vast and powerful” whilst lesser forms of art are described as “small, smooth, ornamental, graceful and tender.” The art literature of the period is littered with similar terminology. The following remark by Michelangelo is also interesting for the (gender) distinctions it makes between Dutch and Italian painting: “Flemish painting will please the devout better than any painting of Italy. It will appeal to women, especially the very old and the very young and also to monks and nuns and to certain noblemen who have no sense of harmony. In Flanders they paint with a view to external exactness or such things as may cheer you and of which you cannot speak ill ... this, though it pleases some persons, is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skillful choice or boldness and, finally, without substance or vigour ... It is practically only the work done in Italy we can call true painting, and that is why we call good painting Italian.” (Michelangelo quoted by Sebor 1987 p.20.)
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lines for the terminology employed by Reynolds, and others, can equally be taken to be censure of the art of women. The transparent and arguable arbitrary division, between the serious domain of 'high' art (male) and the frivolities of ornamentation (female), has over time conventionalised the correlation between particularity and femininity as fact.42

The Persistence of Perspectivalism

As a model for revealing the world, the anti-sensual and ocular-centrism of Cartesianism, with its beginnings in perspectivalism, continued throughout

42 These ideas were sustained through functionalist and formalist rhetoric of modernist discourse. In his widely quoted tract Ornament and Crime (1908) Adolf Loos argues that details disfigure the structural essence of true form. Particularities, he wrote, made art objects formally useless with such detailing indicating wasted labour and squandered material. He has been recorded as saying that anyone who would disfigure form with detail was culpable of performing "a crime against the national economy" because in fashioning ornaments "human labour, money, and material should thereby be ruined. The most unesthetic decorated objects are those ... that demand hours of work." (Adolf Loos quoted by Schor 1987 p54.) Underlying the repeated link he makes between prolific ornamental detail and mass-produced objects lies the desire to maintain the separation between 'high' art objects and the artefacts of popular culture. Loos believed that through their endless reproduction and prodigious circulation mass-produced objects stood for all that classical ideals in art opposed. (Schor 1987 pp57-58) Loos' sentiments re-surfaced some decades later in the writings of influential late modernist critic Clement Greenberg who defined the aims of Modernism as the purification of each art - which is that "the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognised." In 1939 Greenberg also wrote of the need to defend avant-garde culture against the onslaught of the feminised and synthetic, kitsch culture which capitalism served up. (Greenberg quoted by Pollock, Grisolda, 'Painting, Feminism, History' in Barrett Michèle and Anne Phillips (eds), p142, Destabilising Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates, Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers, 1992 pp138-176.) In his article entitled 'Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other', Andreas Huyssen argues that despite the new pluralised surface of post modernism, the historical endorsement of a hierarchical set of aesthetic standards determined along gender lines still resides as a powerful model within contemporary discourse. (Huyssen's article is discussed by Pollock in Barrett and Phillips 1992 p152.) He demonstrates the consistency with which recent critical aesthetic theory sustains the cultural division of the sexes through justifications based on a desire to preserve "true art against the diluting threat posed by popular art." (Huyssen quoted by Pollock in Barrett and Phillips 1992 p152.) Popular culture is referred to through 'feminine' terminology such as engulfs, dangerous, trivial, easy, while using 'masculine' terminology when referring to authentic or high culture. (Huyssen quoted by Pollock in Barrett and Phillips 1992 p152.)
Modernism and persists now. Many have argued otherwise, proclaiming that
the objective and disembodied all-knowing eye of the Enlightenment was
transfigured in early Modernism to an embodied subjective one. Although
this shift has been widely taken up as indicating a break in perspectivalism,
Jonathan Crary, amongst others, advises caution that this automatically
indicates an absolute rupture with precedent models.\(^43\) He argues instead
for a re-configuration of vision that maintains the continuity of
perspectivalism’s fundamental tenet of the detached observer:

> the detachment, disembodiment, and objective distance of the early
> modern observer transfigured into the subjectification and ultimate
dislocation of the nineteenth-century observer when vision became not
>a privileged form of knowing but itself “an object of knowledge, of
>observation”. Nineteenth-century science explored the biological
>properties of sight, reattaching the biological body to the viewer and
>reattaching the viewing eye to the field of vision. But such science
>simultaneously rendered that eye dislocated (if not detached) from that
>which it sees by virtue of the viewer’s own mind, interpreting that which
>falls upon his retina. The eye could no longer claim access to a “real
>world” through perception. Vision became a ... phantasmic projection
>of the viewer’s mind, dislocated from ‘reality’, composed of mechanised
>formal elements subject to the terms of the viewer’s always already
>subjective perspective. This shift from disembodied, transcendental ...
detachment to embodied subjective dislocation maintains a partial
continuity with perspectivalism - a shift rather than an end.\(^44\)

Within art, there have been many attempts to locate the demise of
perspectivalism. Commentators have traced a seeming break in the reign of
perspectival realism through the modernist painters’ abstraction of the visual
field. Again Crary suggests that abstraction in the arts is not such a radical
break with the drive to realism as might be presumed. He argues: “some of
the most pervasive means of producing ‘realistic’ effects in mass visual
culture, such as the stereoscope, were in fact based on a radical abstraction

\(^{43}\) Martin Jay also argues that, although perspectivalism has been vigorously contested in
both philosophy and the visual arts, it would be foolish to say it has been driven from
the field. (Jay 1988 p18.)

\(^{44}\) Schneider paraphrasing Crary. (Schneider 1997 p69.)
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and reconstruction of optical experience."\textsuperscript{45} The process of abstraction of optical experience that inspired Modernist painters links "abstraction more with the positivist tenets of naturalism than with its demise."\textsuperscript{46}

The shift that occurred in Modernism, that bought recognition to the subjective nature of vision, meant that the eye could no longer claim to reveal a 'real' world through objective and impartial observation. However, while it is possible to argue that the eye is embodied, in essence this transformation further dislocates the viewer from the visual field, rather than bringing him into close contact with it, because the scene is but a projection of the viewer's mind. This dislocation of the viewer from the viewed maintains continuity with perspectivalism and this has enduring implications for the representation of women's bodies. If dislocation has remained intact, the viewer remains uninvolved and "un(re)marked by the scene before him"\textsuperscript{47} and:

'Woman', wherever we recognise her signs, rebounds with the cultural construction of desire as insatiable, a narrative linked to the feminization of the scopic field as open for possession.\textsuperscript{48}

2. Representation: Factuality and Fiction

As previously discussed, in aesthetic terms detail is most frequently aligned with particularity; and particularity is most often associated with realistic pictorial representation. In searching for a definition of representation I came across Hal Foster's proposition that divides representation into two basic models: images that are attached to referents or real things in the

\textsuperscript{45} Crary quoted by Schneider 1997 p193.

\textsuperscript{46} Schneider 1997 p193.

\textsuperscript{47} Schneider 1997 p70.

\textsuperscript{48} Schneider 1997 p68.
world and those images that represent other images. By way of examples, Foster places the former within late nineteenth century Realist painters’ portrayals of everyday life; and the latter within the ‘appropriated’ images frequently utilised by the 1960s Pop artists. I was interested in Foster’s differentiation between forms of representation, because I had been considering the stylistic differences between the various media I employed in the construction of my images. Initially within my paintings, and later through digital processes, I had been attempting to create an ambiguity between photographic, digital, and painted forms of representation, melding all within imagery but fully adopting none. I had been thinking about how the mimetic capacity of photography is at variance with the fabricated visual space of both digitally constructed and painted images; and Foster’s differentiation between referential and so-called ‘simulacral’ images seemed analogous to these variations. Photography makes reference back to the actual world, but digital and painted images reflect traces of other images instead. By combining ‘signage’ of all three forms of representation I was attempting to create within my imagery a pictorial tension between factuality and fiction, mimesis and artifice. I felt that within this stylistic ambiguity lay the possibility of constructing representational pictures at variance with conventional pictorial arrangements.

To understand variations within realistic tendencies in painting, I read broadly. Initially at the centre of my curiosities were the highly illusionistic pictures of the seventeenth century Dutch Still Life painters; the portraits of the sixteenth-century Mannerist painter Bronzino; and the detailed and jewel-like paintings of Jan van Eyck. These works, however, proved of less direct interest to practical research than the pictures of two other painters working a century apart - the nineteenth century French painter Ingres and the 1960s Photo-Realist virtuoso, Richard Estes. The pictures of these two

artists revealed commonalities in that both artists employed a high degree of artifice within an over-riding structure of realism. This brings to their pictures readings that counter the principles of perspectivalism. I discuss Ingres’ portraits paintings in detail in part three of this section. Estes’ paintings are considered later in this part.

**Realism as Philistinism**

When Maurice Denis proclaimed in 1890 that a painting was essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order before it was a representation of anything, he echoed the belief that pictorial realism lay outside the primary concerns of art. Realism, in the sense of creating detailed and recognisable representations of visual experience, fought a losing battle for inclusion within the ranks of the avant-garde and historically has been relegated to the limbo of philistinism.50 Distaste for detailed realism is exemplified in the slight regard commonly held for the Trompe L’oeil School, seventeenth century Dutch Painting and nineteenth century Realism.51 Traditionally these styles have been considered as regressive because, with their penchant for detail, they are seen to refer back to the infancy of painting based in illusionistic mimicry; a beginning from which all ‘progressive’ art has long since endeavoured to remove itself.52 The basis of this belief, as discussed previously, arises principally from the idea that to ‘know’ the world was to pare back details to reveal the essential


51 Until relatively recently these schools have not been given the same scholarly attention awarded other historical developments within art.

52 Linda Nochlin writes that Realism has often been relegated to “the limbo of philistinism ... it would seem that realism is indeed aside from the point, retardoarte (s), or, at the very least, sentimentally revisionist.” (Nochlin, Linda, ‘Realism Now’, in Batcock 1975 p113.) The comment back to the infancy of painting refers to the often quoted anecdote of the story of Zeuxis who, to the eternal embarrassment of art history, asked to have the curtain painted by Parrhasius lifted. (See Schor 1987 pp13-14.)
nature of the object under scrutiny. Painterly depictions of the particulars of ordinary life, as found in the pictures of Gustave Courbet and other nineteenth century Realists, epitomised, within their time, artless painting and the unmistakable sign of cultural disintegration of the sacred edifices of the ideal.\textsuperscript{53}

The invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century was further to seal abstraction as of primary value within avant-garde circles. Relieved of any pretension to mimesis by the photographic image (be that an idealised imitation), artists abandoned any obligation to representation and concentrated on the aesthetic and formal qualities particular to the medium itself.\textsuperscript{54} In the hundred years that followed, artists pushed art further and

\textsuperscript{53} The desire to expunge ugly details even effected the pictorialism of the new photographic imagery. The characteristic of film to record all details was seen as an undesirable attribute by those involved in the widespread popularisation of photographic portraiture. Its increased use was paralleled by techniques of idealisation through retouching and erasing unsightly physiognomic blemishes. (Schor 1987 p49.)

\textsuperscript{54} Modernism did in fact produce another stream of artistic practice that embraced
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Further away from realism. The desire to separate 'high' art from that of popular culture, which became increasingly tied to the photographic or reproduced image, led ultimately to the total reductionism of 1960s Formalist and Minimalist painting.\textsuperscript{55} Like their nineteenth century forebears, these late modernist artists denigrated details as impurities that obscured the nature of true form. Illusionism was the antithesis of the belief in form as content, and only as content with no reference to the world beyond the painted surface.\textsuperscript{56} The artist unconstrained by the need to assert anything in particular engaged only with the artistic self and with the processes and procedures of painting. Any semiotic references to the world were subsumed by the gestures created through the 'body' of the artist.\textsuperscript{57}

Illusionism and Photorealism

In the face of the reductive tendencies of high formalism a group of artists, somewhat eccentrically, reintroduced representational subject matter. At the time the extraordinarily exacting illusionism of this art was startling; the

rather than denounced photography. Beginning with Picasso, through Dada, Futurism and Russian constructivism these artists incorporated found imagery within their pictures with increasing inventiveness. More concerned with concepts than with expressive painterly means they explored new pictorial forms through techniques such as collage and montage. However the aim of these artists was to raise fundamental questions about the uniqueness of the art object and the increasing mechanisation of everyday life. They were not concerned with representation as illusionism even though much of the found material was of photographic origin.

\textsuperscript{55} Out of the desire to separate the concerns of art from popular culture has grown the legacy that using photographs as aids to art was somehow cheating or against the 'rules,' a prejudice that I still come across amongst students of art today.

\textsuperscript{56} The concern of painting lay in the flat surface, the shape of the support and the properties of pigment. Clement Greenberg was one of the main players in the push for total reductionism.

\textsuperscript{57} It needs to be noted that the abstract painters aimed to rid their painting of pictorial conventions such as left to right readings and illusionary space features particular to conventional pictorial representations. (Refer for example to Frank Stella's use of bilateral symmetry.) However, in their desire to reduce subject matter to the essential and universal, modernist painters continued to privilege abstraction as the ideal and as 'truth' whilst denigrating detail and ornament as impurities.
impartiality with which artists methodically recorded the external world seemed to fly in the face of the unique gesture paramount to expressionism. Like the paintings of Courbet and other nineteenth-century Realists, the pictures were considered by many within the art-world to indicate an aesthetic relapse and a repudiation of everything valued by art.

The paintings of the Photo-Realists, as these new painters came to be called, were seen to be antithetical to art, because, not only did artists work directly from photographs, but they also pictured everything the camera recorded in its visual field. This was contrary to art because these artists neither ordered objects within a hierarchical pictorial space, nor did they abstract essentials by eliminating details and particulars. The Photo-Realist painters, in fact, seemed to revel in surface detail, and in painting each object with the same degree of clarity regardless of its positioning within the visual field. Moreover the methodologies developed by painters further indicated that this was their immediate intention. Many worked directly from photographs divided into grids, painting each part individually, section by section. Others worked systematically from projected slides, starting in one corner and progressively moving across the canvas. Both methods allowed artists to reproduce each part in isolation without reference to the context of the total image; a process that resulted in pictures of all-over clarity.

The methodologies developed by the Photo-Realists indicate that they were unconcerned with the structures of perspectival space or, as evidenced by the fact that they pictured the distortions produced by the camera lens, with recording the way we actually see. The framework of realism they adopted was simply that – a framework through which they could explore illusionism.

58 Karp, Ivan, 'Rent is the Only Reality, or the Hotel Instead of the Hymns' p27 in Battecock 1975 pp21-35.
Section Two: The Context of the Work

as surface - a painting as a picture, and nothing else.\textsuperscript{60} That these pictures are aesthetic statements about appearance is further evidenced by the fact that despite all pretensions to depth illusionism, most Photo-Realist paintings are notably flat. Frequently the greatest sense of pictorial depth appears in the foreground through reflections on planes of glass, mirrors, shiny metal, stainless steel and chrome. Reflections are more likely to record what is beyond the picture than adding to the sense of pictorial depth.\textsuperscript{61} This form of 'inverted' pictorial space compelled Louis Meisel to comment: "The recurrent emphasis on reflective surface reveals a desire to make paintings so flat that they are, in a way, inside out."\textsuperscript{62}

The Paintings of Richard Estes

Of the artists working within Photo-Realism, Richard Estes stands apart for his paramount virtuosity. I am particularly drawn to his paintings of reflections in shop-front windows. The pictorial illusionism in these paintings appears, at first glance, extraordinarily convincing. Closer inspection, however, reveals that these depictions have little to do with real seeing. The more we try to make logical sense of them the more perplexing they become. Objects in the background, mid-ground and foreground intersect with reflections of objects not actually in the picture's frame.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{60} Ironically, in their desire for their pictures to be paintings and nothing else, the Photo-realists paralleled the Formalists belief in form as content. So in many ways their aims could be considered as similar, rather than totally subversive, to that of their peers.

\textsuperscript{61} This spatial organisation is subversive to conventional illusionism because the greatest sense of pictorial depth occurs within the foreground. Perspectivalism works from the principle of all objects receding from the front of the picture plane.

\textsuperscript{62} Meisel 1981 p11.

\textsuperscript{63} Estes added more glass and polished reflective surfaces to his paintings than could be found in the slide from which he worked. Pictorial depth not only relies on visual organisation but also on the principle that as objects recede in space they loose texture, detail and intensity of colour, a phenomenon recorded by Leonardo da Vinci as atmospheric perspective.
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Pictorial depth dissolves as the visual clutter merges into one impenetrable surface lying parallel to the front of the picture plane. Our look can not penetrate behind this pictorial mélange.

The copious detail, within Estes’ paintings, not only affects the spatial information necessary to make sense of these pictures, but its excess brings to his paintings a hyper-reality that also has little to do with actual seeing. It introduces to his paintings what Susan Stewart has described as “the unreal effect of the real.” Stewart explains that: “to describe more than is necessary” is to “describe in a way that interrupts the everyday hierarchical organisation of actual vision.” The excess of information, and the all-over equal treatment of parts, in Estes’ pictures, brings to them an intense crispness that has little to do with either real seeing or the organising principles essential to perspectivalism.

Despite the artist’s transparent and methodical approach, and the cool impartiality suggested by his pictures, these paintings are not simply


65 Stewart 1993 p27.

66 Human vision works through a selective focus that excludes as unnecessary, those details of unconcern for the comprehension of what is perceived.
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considered with picturing or mimicking the 'real' world. The expectations they set up by our initial register of them as factual representations are overturned by their visual inconsistencies. Their intricate pictorialism brings to the fore complex questions about the relationship between representation, illusionism and artifice. The tension between artifice and realism, and the dissolving of depth allusion into pure surface, are of interest to my project. It is these features that I also find intriguing within the painter Ingres. However, whereas visual discrepancies between artifice and realism and two and three dimensions within Estes' pictures, may make us think about illusionism, similar features within Ingres' paintings bring them a strangeness that is emotionally both fascinating and unsettling. Ingres, no doubt, was very much a product of his era, yet his portraits of society women suggest that for these pictures he worked outside the conventions of his time. It is to him that I now turn.

3. Contradiction: The Portrait Paintings of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres

My first encounter with a painting by Ingres\(^67\) was in the Louvre, Paris in 1990. My wanderings were brought to a halt by a picture of a naked figure

\(^{67}\) Born 1785; died 1867.
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her back stretching the length of the picture plane. The quiet formal reticence of the painting distinguished it from others surrounding it. I had seen it in books, of course, but the aura emanating from the image caught me by surprise. The reproduced image imparted nothing of the hypnotic and captivating presence that drew me towards and into this painting. My seduction stemmed from conflicting emotions that flowed within me. The flesh of the naked bather, for the painting was Ingres’ Bather of Valpinçon, (1808), was alluring in its polished porcelain-like, finish; yet it was somewhat chilly in its glassy perfection and bluish tinge, and the figure, although seductive in her nakedness, was self-absorbed and unavailable. The alluring silence that had initially captivated me felt brittle and tense as I moved into close proximity.

The peculiar and contrary presence of this picture instilled within me a passion for Ingres’ art. Although his odalisque, bather and harem paintings initially captivated me, it was his portraits of nineteenth-century French society women that subsequently became the source of a long-term fascination. Not only do these pictures possess a similar compelling oscillation between sensuality and detachment but, with their rich surface patterns and meticulous registration of textural variation, they also satiate my appetite for detail.

My enchantment with Ingres’ portraits of women, however, has not come unencumbered: it is tempered by the peculiarity of his figures. They are strangely distorted in the interests of sensuality, and this makes them highly questionable to my feminist leanings. For, as Carol Ockman has elucidated in her impressive dissertation, equally compelling as the relation between distortion and pleasure, is the affinity between distortion and horror.68

68 Ockman, Carol, Ingres Eroticised Bodies, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995 p3. Ockman has documented the way in which Ingres’ pictures of women, whether as subject for portraiture, as nude bather or odalisque, assume the passive submissiveness of the eroticised female body. Ockman deals specifically with the issues of sexual discourses that have always paralleled the reception of the serpentine line in Ingres work.
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Ingres’ lonely and pliant figures reduced to the sensual are offensive and distasteful to women. The disparity I experience between my seduction by these pictures and the distasteful assumptions encapsulated within them increased my desire to understand them more fully. I felt that within the complex formal structure of Ingres’ pictures lay possibilities for my own explorations into picturing subjectivity.

Detail, Spatial Compression and Distortion

For most writers, Ingres’ paintings seem to be caught midway between two ostensibly antagonistic aesthetic convictions - the ideals of Romanticism and the moral imperatives of Neo-classicism. That his painting can reflect these opposing styles in equal measure indicates only one of many discrepancies that exist within his art. Disparate readings of artifice and realism, realism and distortion, detail and abstraction, sensuality and detachment, elicit simultaneous responses of pleasure and disgust, enjoyment and horror, and fascination and repulsion. Such incongruous readings elicit acclaim and dislike in equal measure.\(^6^9\)

Added to the contrary nature of his art was the devotion Ingres felt within himself to history painting and his practice, by necessity, of portraiture. He considered portraiture as lesser subject matter than the grand but well-rehearsed historical themes.\(^7^0\) Yet despite this Ingres brought to his

\(^6^9\) Artists and critics alike have deplored his lack of spontaneity and his carefully rendered style that makes so apparent his love of surfaces, details, and “the curiosities and minutiae of modern life.” (Ribeiro, Aileen, Ingres in Fashion: Representations of Dress and Appearance in Ingres’ Images of Women, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999 p2.) Correspondingly there are many others who have admired Ingres’ abilities in rendering, his obsession with surface, his use of decorative colour and his “appreciation of the sensual.” (Ribeiro 1999 p2.)

\(^7^0\) In this belief Ingres reflected the conventional rhetoric of the period with its commitment to the hierarchy of genres. Ingres has been recorded as saying of one of his female subjects “How I suffer painting this dressed up-monkey.” (T. Silvestre quoted in Ribeiro 1999 p22.) But the consistently high quality of his portraits suggests that he could not have despised them anywhere near as much as he claimed.

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portraits a psychologically complex intensity rarely seen and certainly seldom surpassed within the genre.\textsuperscript{71} Free from academic constraints of official styles, Ingres was able within his portraits to fully express his autonomy and originality as an artist.\textsuperscript{72}

A distinguishing and central characteristic of Ingres' portrait paintings is his passion for detail. But widespread distaste for particularity within art meant it was for this that the artist was most frequently denounced.\textsuperscript{73} Ingres' aspiration "to account for the entire visual domain"\textsuperscript{74} through the intricacies of surface pattern was considered contrary to the ideals of high classical painting. His preoccupation with externals, clothing and accessories was considered contrary to the soul and intellect of painting. Baudelaire decried Ingres' emphasis on detail, suggesting that

\textsuperscript{71} The portraits of the Italian Mannerist painter Bronzino are amongst the very few that rival the intensity of those painted by Ingres. In their complex structure and technical accomplishment Bronzino's portraits display a controlled and unsettling realism similar to that found in the work of Ingres.

\textsuperscript{72} This was at variance with his approach to history painting. In depicting the grand historical themes Ingres followed the academic line that demanded abstention from painterly pleasure and the "suppression of everything that might be threatening to the rigorous demands of being modern and at the edge of time." (Huyssen quoted by Pollock in Barrett and Phillips 1992 p152.)

\textsuperscript{73} Ingres' pupil Amaury-Duval wrote of this in his article in 'L'Artiste' from 1856. (Ribeiro 1999 p16.)

\textsuperscript{74} Schor 1987 p42.
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such concentration came at the expense of the harmonious whole\textsuperscript{75} and Silvestre denounced what he called the "tyranny"\textsuperscript{76} of Ingres' obsession with details. Thus, while more recently some have written that detail brought to the painter's pictures a "magical intensity,"\textsuperscript{77} the majority of his peers objected to the exaggerated precision with which he painted "each hair ... each thread of silk ... each brooch and bracelet."\textsuperscript{78} While it may be construed that Ingres' love of particularity indicated aspirations to reproduce the 'real', its visual profusion counters the effect of 'realism. Ingres' obsession for recording every detail, no matter how insignificant, brings to his portraits the same sense of heightened reality - the unreal effect of the real - as we find in Richard Estes' paintings, which also set out to account for the entire visual domain.\textsuperscript{79} With their enhanced surface effects, Ingres' pictures are more indicative of statements about appearance than accurate representations of reality.

Ingres' portraits indicate that the artist was more concerned with surface effects and appearance than with recording accurately what is in front of

\textsuperscript{75} Baudelaire was one of Ingres most persistent critics. His writings on Ingres make clear his distaste for the artist's detailed style and distorted anatomy. However Baudelaire contradicted himself on occasion and assailed those who thought Ingres painting ordinary. With reference to several portraits exhibited at the Bazar Bonne Nouvelle in 1846, Baudelaire wrote: "Open your eyes, you nation of boobies, and tell us if you ever saw such dazzling, eye-catching painting, or even a greater elaboration of colour." These paintings he went on to say were "real portraits ..." (Quoted in Ribeiro 1999 p18.)

\textsuperscript{76} Silvestre quoted by Ribeiro 1999 p25.


\textsuperscript{78} Silvestre quoted by Ribeiro 1999 p25.

\textsuperscript{79} Ingres' highly detailed style also brings to mind the descriptive but artificial realism of early Flemish paintings and the portraits of the Italian Mannerist painter Bronzino. Van Eyck's descriptions of hair, heavily woven oriental carpets, crisp folds of satin brocades and translucent glass have a mesmerising clarity about them. In Bronzino's paintings we observe forms conceived wholly for their surface effect - its illusionism is so excessive that the painting often appear unnatural. Of interest is that the paintings of both artists compel the viewer to oscillate between a distant position and many positions close their surfaces.
him. His attention to detail means that all objects, regardless of their positioning within the pictorial space, are rendered with the same degree of clarity. Visually this creates a flattening effect. As forms swell to gain visual prominence within an equal field, the space surrounding them seems to be forced out and figure and ground become almost inseparable. As distinction between two and three dimensions becomes confused, the illusion of realism breaks down.\textsuperscript{80} Our gaze can penetrate no further than the shallows of the rich exterior surface pattern, a surface that seems to arrest his subjects, pressing them against the picture plane so they appear unable to move let alone breathe.\textsuperscript{81} We are incapable of achieving the clarity

\textsuperscript{80} I also looked at this effect in the drawings of Klossowski. In his works the figures also seem to be caught between two and three dimensions. They indicate form but are flattened, lack volume, and are located in strangely ambiguous spaces. To increase the effect of a flattened pictorial space, and contracted forms, Klossowski often employs a low and close-up viewpoint that pushes his figures closer to the front of the picture plane. With little sense of depth the viewer is left instead to read the picture through its surface patterns, details and linear arabesques.

\textsuperscript{81} We can observe this effect within the standing portrait of Mme Moitessier (1851). In
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necessary to readings of realism, our gaze repelled by the impenetrable and claustrophobic space.82

The prominence of surface pattern is accentuated by Ingres' infamous serpentine line that winds sinuously and independently across the picture plane. Its visual persistence over-rides spatial indicators of light, space and modelled form - its autonomy fashioning limbs, hands, necks and breasts into distortions that are amongst the most famous in the history of art.83

the picture she stands erect against a magenta damask wall. The contracted space between the front of the picture and the wall behind almost denies her corporeality. And the intensity of her black lace dress silhouetted against the wall further reinforces this two-dimensional effect. The constriction of the space seems so great that even the modelling of her shoulders becomes heraldic.

82 This effect reaches its height within Ingres' three mirror portraits — those of Vicomtesse de Senonnes (1816), Comtesse d'Haussonville (1845), and Madame Moitessier (seated, 1856). Norman Bryson proposes that Ingres included a mirror in these pictures to deliberately disrupt the synthesis of two and three dimensions vital to the cohesion of perspectival space. (Bryson 1984 p 166.) He bases his argument on the fact that the reflections in the mirrors provide the viewer with conflicting versions of the external image. For example in the picture of the Vicomtesse the head of his sitter looks out and slightly up whilst the reflected image tilts forward and down. Likewise in the portrait of Comtesse d'Haussonville the mirrored image seems to reflect a different person, of different height and with a different hairstyle. Further fractures are evident in certain objects that seem unable to reflect (the central jardiniere and the binoculars in the portrait of the Comtesse) while other objects seem to exist only in their reflection (the white tulip in the same portrait). (Bryson 1984 p 167.) The discrepancy between the real and reflected image is most notable in the portrait of Mme Moitessier. The fingers of her hand are open whilst in the reflection we observe her hand as a clenched fist and the angle of her head in no way resembles that shown in the mirror. As viewers we need to occupy at least two positions (at eye level with her and facing her and to the far right) to try and make sense of the picture. (Bryson 1984 p 174.) Neither the two-dimensional virtual image nor the three-dimensionality of the subject can adequately account for the painting's space.

83 That their creation is deliberate is evident in the frequency with which they occur. Many art historians have searched for reasons why Ingres employed such overt distortions. Their recurrence provides a powerful contradiction to Ingres' desire for perfection. Marjorie Cohn has explored Ingres' need for perfection through his repeated revision of canvases through copying and tracing. Ingres showed himself willing upon the completion of a particular work to straight away start on another version of the same composition. In her essay Cohn argues that Ingres' self-repetition cannot be treated either as an aberration having no real connection with his work, or as a symptom of artistic decline. She proposes that Ingres' obsession with repetition must be seen as a meaningful activity - that is the pursuit of perfection. (Cohn, Marjorie B. 'In Pursuit of Perfection', in Edelstein, Debra, (ed) In Pursuit of Perfection: The Art of
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Writings on Ingres remain incomplete without references to pliant boneless flesh and attenuated anatomies of tapered necks, limbs and fingers. While most frequently discussed in relation to the extra vertebra and impossible leg of *Le Grande Odalisque*, (1814), the anatomical incongruities of Ingres' portraits are also conspicuous. The artist's willingness to deform his subjects in the interests of an aesthetic advantage repeats itself time and again. His subjects succumb to the most astonishing distortions in order that they might conform to the demands of the flattened pictorial space and the abstract contours that inscribe its surface.

Sensuality and Detachment

Ingres’ serpentine line is of interest to most writers for its links to sensuality; central to its discussion are the words soft, fleshy, pliant and melting. But repeated deliberation on the quality of line as a key indicator of sensuality has meant that the equally seductive tactility suggested through his attention to surfaces is often overlooked. The same heightened lucidity that conveys a sense of hyper-reality also brings life to silk, plush, velvet, fur and feathers. As these erotic fabrics brush against polished flesh they record and intensify

*J-A-D Ingres, Kentucky: J.B. Speed Art Museum Publication in association with Indiana University Press, 1983 pp10-33.*) Of his repetitions Ingres himself wrote: "The great number of those works, which I love because of their subject, have, it has seemed to me, been worth my while making better either by re-doing them or by retouching them. When through his love of art or through hard work an artist may hope to leave his name to posterity, he can never do enough to make his paintings more beautiful or less perfect (s)." (Delaborde, Henri, quoted in Wollheim, Richard, *Painting as an Art*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987 p250). Given that Ingres strove for perfection it would seem most likely that he employed distortions for both sensual and aesthetic purposes although Ingres himself has been recorded as saying that he used distortions as a means of 'correcting nature on her own terms'.

54 As examples see the neck and bust of *Madame Panchoucke* (1811); the excessive length of the left arm of *Madame Devaucay* (1807); the gaucheness of the folded arm of *Comtesse d'Haussonville*; the awkward shoulder joint of *Madame Rivière* (1806); bizarre body of *Vicomtesse de Senones*; and the hands of *Madame Moïessier* (1856) whose boneless fingers echo the infamous sub-aquatic hand of Ingres’ painting of Thetis.

55 Rosenblum 1967 p70.
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the sense of touch; their tactility augmented by the sense of sound. One can almost hear the whispering of materials as the sitter stirs - the susurration of silk, the muffle of velvet and the crispness of satin.\(^{86}\) However, while some have lauded his sensuality, there are equally those who have found his art passionless. In combination, the painter’s precise style and palette of cool, mercurial tones of silvery grays and chilly blues that “congeals the blush of real flesh,”\(^{87}\) has made generations of observers describe his paintings as indifferent and inaccessible. Félix Nadar and Charles Baudelaire were both moved to write that Ingres’ art was so ‘cold’ it reminded them of death.\(^{88}\) Charles Laborieu labelled Ingres “the artist

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\(^{86}\) Ribeiro 1999 p132. For a detailed semiotic reading of the senses in Ingres’ art see Connolly, John L. Jr. ‘The Erotic Intellect’, in Hess, Thomas B. and Linda Nochlin, (eds) Woman as Sex Object, London: Allen Lane 1973, pp 17-31. Ingres’ interest in conveying the senses through detail reflects much literature of the period. Many authors revelled in describing their subjects in great detail paying particular attention to sound, smell and taste. For example, in Flaubert’s novel A Sentimental Education the hero Frédéric Moreau records his obsession with an unattainable love by noting the details of her dress and appearance. He loved the swishing noise made by her dress as she passed through a doorway, or the slight slapping sound made by the flounces of her skirt brushing against his legs as he walked arm-in-arm with her. He is obsessed by the scent of her handkerchief, and “for him her comb, her gloves, her rings were something utterly special, as remarkable as any work of art, possessing a personality of their own that was almost human.” Flaubert G. A Sentimental Education, London, 1989 pp61-75 quoted in Ribeiro 1999 p175.

\(^{87}\) Rosenblum 1967 p54.

\(^{88}\) Quoted by Ockman 1995 p85.
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gravedigger" remarking that his odalisques "all smelled like corpses," and C. Pierre likewise described the flesh of Ingres' figures as "of a purplish-blue ivory colour; neither veins, arteries, nor nervous system lies beneath." The pervasive sense of death is reiterated in comments that record distaste for the formlessness of Ingres' subjects. Baudelaire felt that their amorphous fluidity made them only half-human. His allusion echoed in comments that describe Ingres' figures as "white bloodsuckers" and as "light air-balloons," "blown up by some soft, inanimate substance, foreign to the human organism." Together these comments suggest Ingres' art "was a deadly art comprised of monstrous bodies."

Abjection within the Painting of Ingres

That his art can evoke such passionate responses, whether in delight of its sensuality or in derision of its coldness, suggests that the power of his works lies within the dual readings of sensuality and death, beauty and disgust. While most writers on his art discuss these features in contrary terms, Carol Oekman's proposal of their interconnectedness offers the most interesting and relevant thesis for my project. Through an analysis of sensuality and death within the painter's art, she argues for the mutual relationship between pleasure and horror. She proposes that it is within this coupling that we can locate the physical dimensions of the abject. She argues that like

89 Oekman 1995 p85.
90 Oekman 1995 p96.
91 Oekman 1995 p96.
92 Sand, George quoted by Oekman 1995 p98.
93 Mantz, Paul quoted by Oekman 1995 p97.
94 Baudelaire quoted by Oekman 1995 p98.
95 Oekman 1995 p97.
96 Oekman draws upon Julia Kristeva's conception of abjection as a crucial text for understanding the powerful evocations of pleasure and horror informing the criticism of Ingres' paintings. (Oekman 1995 p101.)
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abjection itself, Ingres’ pictures elicit both repulsion and seduction through their associations with “the sensual, the soft, the formless, and the feminine.”\(^{97}\) Underlying Ockman’s thesis is the implication that it is the physical nature of these bodies that is at issue. With their intensely material presence, Ingres’ bodies fail to conform to the specific kind of ideal female body that convention required. The parallel experiences of horror and pleasure entangle the viewer within an intricate sensory relationship. The viewer experiences the extremes of fear and reassurance in parallel with each other rather than successively. This creates a profound physical anxiety, because although sensual in their formal demands, in their “all-too-fluid boundaries distinguishing the ideal from the sensual, life from death”,\(^{98}\) Ingres’ bodies come perilously close to having a power that emasculates.\(^{99}\)

It is unlikely that the destabilisation of the ideal beauty, for which he and his contemporaries strove, was deliberate or intentional on Ingres’ part. That his pictures created the responses that they did suggests that his art functioned transgressively within its time and it is this point that makes his work of interest to practitioners today. Ockman proposes that the abject is useful to contemporary practitioners concerned with picturing sexual difference, suggesting that fluidity has the potential to destabilise when seen,

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\(^{98}\) Ockman 1995 p110. Perceived as a threat to identity itself, abjection is described by Kristeva as that which the symbolic must either discard or control. “Not only does it beckon the subject ever closer to its edge, the abject also insists on the subject’s necessary relation to death, corporeality, animality, and materiality, concepts intolerable to consciousness and reason.” (Ockman 1995 p87.) For Kristeva the corpse represents the “utmost of abjection” for “it is death infecting life.” (Kristeva quoted by Ockman 1995 p98.)

\(^{99}\) Ockman 1995 p97. Responses of disgust applied equally to female and male, heroic and mythological bodies. At issue was the profound crisis of confidence concerning the representation of the male body, an anxiety promoted by bodies no matter what their sex. Ingres’ bodies - either too muscled or too soft - violated notions of both the feminine and the masculine. (Ockman 1995 p108.)
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not as formlessness but as form that threatens to defy boundaries.\textsuperscript{100} In her articulation of the abject as a possible avenue through which to picture sexual difference, Ockman recapitulates various transgressive strategies that, throughout the past decade, have been adopted and developed as languages through which women can explore issues of subjectivity. Ockman’s proposition is important to my project in that it offers an approach to representing female subjectivity at variance to conventional depictions of the female nude. I am interested in the tactile quality and palpable intensity conveyed by Ingres’ pictures; these have the potential to disrupt the disembodied viewpoint through the sensory demands they place on the viewer.

4. The Question of Media: Painting and Gender

J. Bedingfield’s painting \textit{Le Modèle s’amuse}, (c1890), depicts a woman touching up the surface of a sculptured bust with a paintbrush. Closer examination reveals that the sculpture is a representation of the woman herself. In looking at her modelled self the woman is locked into a continuous cycle of reflection, a cycle which entirely determines her presence within it. The creator of the painting, a male artist, (as is also, by association, the maker of the sculpture), is outside presentation in a position of voyeur. The woman, his creation, does not represent herself but with the brush only decorates and embellishes her sculptured image. The woman “cannot by this measure be an artist; she can only amuse herself with the replica of herself produced - as the discourse of masculine creativity insists - by the absent male artist.”\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{100} Works by artists referring to the concepts of abjection theories form a large part of contemporary art practice. With representations of the exterior body of concern, artists are seeking other ways of picturing the body through representations of the internal and fluid body.

\textsuperscript{101} Pointon, Marcia, ‘Reading The Body: Historiography and the Case of the Female
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Fig 15. J. Bedinfield, Le Modèle S'Amuse, 1890

This picture reflects the historical positioning of the artist/painter as male. The act and language of painting has conventionally been associated with men. Its script has both served their fantasies and represented their dominance. This precedent, of course, has been challenged in recent decades - it is easier for women today to be taken seriously both as artists and as painters. Yet for women working within painting there are continuing problems because the historical positioning of painting as a male activity remains as a still powerful model within contemporary memory. This has made, and continues to make, it difficult for women to constitute a critical practice within the discipline. For those women artists who wish to explore aspects of female embodiment in paint this problem is further complicated. With the domain of the representation of women also traditionally colonised


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by men there is barely room to manoeuvre within the existing order. Unfortunately, feminism itself has done little to assist with this problem. Feminist theories of the male gaze and a general mistrust in representation,\(^{103}\) has meant that painting historically based in both, has been forsaken by a preference for photo-text and site-specific art, such as performance and installation art. This has left painting out of favour and out on a limb. In recent decades, painting has been one of the most ignored areas for creative expression by women practitioners, and for feminist theoretical discourse alike.

Painting and Gender

What there are now, after feminism’s long march ... are more and more top women sculptors, photographic artists, and artists of installation and performance ... But no truly great painters. Is it biology? The very suggestion seems sexist, but what if it happens to be true? A theory lately in the air holds that male eroticism is concentrated in the sense of sight, whereas for women the erotic is distributed more evenly among the five senses. That would make painting the medium of maximum physical control over the visual, naturally more intense in its pleasures for men than for women.\(^{104}\)

The above statement reveals the continued assertions of painting as a male domain. Its declaration also highlights the enduring connection of painting

\(^{103}\) Feminist deconstruction and psychoanalytic theory made representation highly suspect because representational imagery was considered the primary means through which symbolism could maintain sexual difference and gender stereotypes of patriarchal discourse. Throughout the eighties artists mostly ‘appropriated’ representational imagery as the means of exposing and criticising the mechanisms of representation and its underlying assumptions. (As examples refer to the early photo-texts of Barbara Kruger and the film stills of Cindy Sherman). Representation, along with subjectivity came to be considered to be “bad things.” (Foster 1996 p 127.) In ‘appropriation art’ “its guise of representation ... is not ... troubled by the real nor much altered by the subject (artist and viewer are given little agency in this work).” (Foster 1996 p146.)

\(^{104}\) This comment by Peter Schjeldahl recalls the classical hierarchical organisation that differentiates between particular modes of visual experience based upon gender categorisations. Schjeldahl quoted by Broude Norma and Mary K. Garrard, (eds) The Power of Feminist Art: Emergence, Impact and Triumph of the American Art Movement, London: Thames and Hudson, 1994 p257.
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with masculine erotic gesture and the equation of masculinity with the sense of sight. The analogy of the canvas as the empty but receptive surface, inscribed and given phallic meaning by the (male) artist is one of the founding metaphors of modern painting.\textsuperscript{105} It would appear from the above statement made in 1990, decades after the decline of Modernism, that the capacity for painting to break free from its history as a privileged medium of masculinity remains limited. Schjeldahl's comment confirms the continuing belief of the link between high art, painting, men, sexuality, bodily gesture, sight and truth.

The problem for women entering the domain of painting lies within this historical positioning. Pressures, relating to how their works have been received, have ensured that very few women make a name for themselves within the field. The historical exclusion of women from painting stretches from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when women were excluded from the academies on the grounds of their femininity, through Modernism and into recent decades.\textsuperscript{106} After their early exclusion from the art academies, the twentieth century seemingly offered to women increasing independence and an apparent liberation to join the ranks of the want-

\textsuperscript{105} For example accounts by the critic Peter Fuller describe a painting by the artist Robert Natkin as: "... undeniably saturated with a vibrant sensuality: it is attractive almost in a sexual sense. As you look, you are aware of the apparent unity of this seemingly seamless skin of light. You are compelled to confront it as a whole; your eyes caress and explore it horizontally and vertically almost like hands moving across another's body." (Fuller quoted in Betterton, Rosemary, \textit{An Intimate Distance, Women Artists and the Body}, London and New York: Routledge 1996, p80.) The allusions Fuller makes between the skin of the canvas and the female body are further echoed in other stereotypical feminine phrases employed in his article: "shamelessly beguiling ... the intimately sensual pinkness of white flesh ... alluring, suspended cloth ... seamless skin" and "infinite recessive interior space." (Betterton 1996 p80.) Underlying Fuller's comments is the implication that, for the critic, the painting is metaphorically female and a substitution for the artist's, and by extension, his own, sexual desire.

\textsuperscript{106} The swing back to painting that occurred in the mid-eighties, after its 'banishment' in the preceding decade, once again saw painting dominated by a bevy of all male artists. Susan Rothenburg, Terese Oulton and Ida Applebroog were amongst the relatively few women whose work was exhibited alongside their male peers.
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garde. Yet it was a doubtful victory because obliquely, through its institutions and critical discourses, Modernism defended the boundaries of masculine hegemony and in reality only further served to re-inscribe that gender’s privilege. What was offered to women was participation in Modernism on the condition that they erased their gender particularity. To have access to the profession women were expected to deny their gender by becoming ‘one of the boys’. Any hint of sexual difference in her work meant the artist was condemned for those very same aspects because being a woman meant that aesthetically the work was discussed solely in terms of the ‘feminine’ qualities it revealed, not for its contributions to art.

The difficulty women face in gaining serious critical acclaim for their painting is exemplified in reviews of a retrospective exhibition of the paintings of Georgia O’Keefe. As with reviews written about her work when it was initially exhibited in the early 1920s, commentary arising from her retrospective wove the imagery of her paintings together with her sexuality. It was observations of this kind that caused O’Keefe to


108 Under this arrangement many women artists either signed their art with their initials only, or de-feminised their names such as in the case of the artist Lee Krasner.

109 In her book The Art of Reflection, Marsha Meskimmon wrote “For women artists, most of the avant-garde groups of the twentieth century have been difficult to infiltrate in any significant way. The groups were decidedly masculine asserting their powerful cultural marginality (s) through sexually dominating postures of maleness and concepts of artistic creativity to which women could not subscribe. For the most part, women artists attained only limited roles in such artists’ groups; they were the models, lovers, students, muses and supporters of the male artists.” Meskimmon 1996 p39.

110 Hayward Gallery, London 1993. Eva Hesse, Meret Oppenheim and Louise Bourgeois are further examples of artists whose works have frequently been discussed in terms of their feminine symbolism. Their contributions to the broader developments of modernist art remain obscured. The omission of Helen Frankenthaler’s contributions to Modernism is of note as one of the pioneers of colour field painting her innovations are rarely acknowledged. Her explorations into staining unprimed canvas (certainly known about but unacknowledged by Greenberg) preceded the works of Morris Louis and others, yet the development of the technique is attributed, by Greenberg, to Louis. (See Pollock p162 in Barrett and Phillips 1992.)

111 The assessment of O’Keefe’s work has in the main come from male critics.
withdraw from public life and undergo a total re-assessment of the direction of her art in the mid 1920s. The dramatic change in the content of her imagery from this period can be directly attributed to O'Keefe's desire to rid her paintings of the feminised readings, that critics, habitually applied to her semi-abstract flower paintings. As with other women artists of her era, O'Keefe felt the need to down play all references to sexuality in order that her work would be evaluated on the same grounds as that of her male peers. Unfortunately, however, O'Keefe's desire that her paintings be reviewed for their wider contributions to art has never come to pass. On the one hand, her flower pictures have been discussed almost exclusively in feminised terms, and on the other her landscapes have invariably been dismissed outright, as commercial. If mentioned at all, the highly rendered and controlled 'photographic' style of her later works is discarded as prosaic.

112 Specifically it was the identification of her paintings with female orgasm that incited O'Keefe's famous denial of sexual content in her pictures and her subsequent withdrawal from the public eye. (Betterton 1996 p87.)

113 O'Keefe's landscape paintings form a significant part of her later contributions as an artist. Richard Cork wrote that these paintings were reminiscent of 'postcards' and commercial art because they had the quality of 'Technicolor.' (Cork in Betterton 1996 p87.)
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Rosemary Betterton suggests that critical consideration of O’Keeffe’s work remains static because, as a woman painter her pictures raise questions about how the body of the female artist is figured in her work.\textsuperscript{114} The invariable assessment of her works in sexual terms, she proposes, arises strangely enough from the precise painting style employed by the artist. Unlike the bodily traces and painterly gestures effected by her male artist peers, the technically controlled paintwork adopted by O’Keeffe fails to deliver the sensuous promise suggested by her iconography. Paul Rosenfield’s comment that O’Keeffe’s paintings allow the viewer to “see the mysterious parting movement of petals under the rays of sudden fierce heat”;\textsuperscript{115} and Frank Whitford’s description of O’Keeffe’s flowers as images from “which tumescent pistils emerge from moist labia like petals and buds strain against tightly enclosing, sheath like leaves”\textsuperscript{116} are indicative, Betterton suggests, of unfulfilled sexual desire.\textsuperscript{117} The frequent dismissal of O’Keeffe’s abilities as a painter, on the grounds that her works lack spontaneous gesture and textural variation, indicates the frustration her critics experience at not being able to access the female body metaphorically implicit in the artist’s paintings. O’Keeffe’s pictures allude to the female body, but it “is a body held in check and rendered impenetrable by the technical control over the process of painting.”\textsuperscript{118} Betterton’s proposition, as unlikely as it may seem, finds some form of confirmation in a comment the critic William Packer made about O’Keeffe’s paintings:

Rather it is the image that is all – which is another way of saying that the painter is no painter at all. For the true painter is always quite as much engrossed in the stuff of painting as he is in the making, as the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{114} Betterton 1996 p87.
\textsuperscript{115} Rosenfield quoted by Betterton 1996 p87.
\textsuperscript{116} Whitford quoted by Betterton 1996 p87.
\textsuperscript{117} Betterton 1996 p88. Of Whitford’s comment Betterton asks: “precisely who is straining here ...?”
\textsuperscript{118} Betterton 1996 p91.
\end{footnotesize}
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pigment comes of (s) the brush onto the canvas, as he is in the external reference or stimulus.¹¹⁹

Packer’s observation supports the assumption that the painter’s work should reveal the artist’s sexual (phallic) relationship to his subject through the ‘stuff’ of paint - the artist’s paintbrush should ‘come’ without the artist’s conscious control.¹²⁰ With their lack of gestural articulation and tightly painted surfaces O’Keefe’s paintings provide the antithesis of unconscious male expression. The artist’s pictures, as Betterton wrote, “could not be recognised in terms of the masculine body of painterly expression, nor did they offer up the requisite female sexuality.”¹²¹ O’Keefe’s pictures, with their vulgar colour and lack of painterly expression, are considered by many, not to be paintings at all. In the assertion of what is significant and what is prosaic such critical distinctions echo classical ideals that separate great art (male) from the ‘unauthentic’ expression of popular culture (female).

Contemporary Feminist Approaches to Painting the Body

Viewed within the above context it is understandable that the feminist artists of the 1970s and 80s decisively rejected painting as exemplifying the most resistant and demonstrative discourse within Modernism. Painting with its assertion of art as a blank space, on which to deposit meaning through self-affirming gestures, had no place within the register of concrete struggles on and beyond the battlefield of representation.¹²² More concerned to reveal cultural inscriptions of gender and dismantle representational processes, Feminism confirmed art as a form of textual politics rather than as a

¹¹⁹ Packer made this comment in 1993, quoted by Betterton 1996 p87.
¹²⁰ Betterton 1996 p87.
¹²¹ Betterton 1996 p88.
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privatised space of self-generated significance.\textsuperscript{123} The forsaking of painting has meant that although there were many notable women artists who continued to paint, they have done so in relative obscurity.\textsuperscript{124} It is only within recent years that a new generation of women painters has begun to ask whether it is possible to produce different forms and languages for painting. Because this is only a recent development there is, as yet, little published on contemporary women painters, and even less on women practitioners who are specifically exploring the complex set of relations between gender, subjectivity and paint media.

Jenny Saville is amongst the few contemporary women painters, using direct representations of the naked female body, whose work has consistent and regular exposure. Her pictures of larger than life-sized women have no parallels within recent times and their enormous scale has no precedent within the history of the genre of the nude. Pictorially these massive bodies are unsurpassed. The imposing female figures painted from photographs taken of the artist own body, expand and extend beyond the confines of the canvases. The cropping of these grotesquely enlarged figures, together with their further dissection, fragmentation and distortion within the picture’s space, blurs the peripheries of the bodies. In this Saville’s naked subjects run counter to the closed and carefully moulded bodies usual within conventional pictures of female nudes.

These pictures of women are intensely corporeal in nature, their monstrousness is as tactile as it is visible. It is not only the physically large dimensions of these pictures that creates this presence but the method with

\textsuperscript{123} Pollock in Barrett and Phillips 1992 p146.

\textsuperscript{124} The sideling of painting also reflected a general trend in art that occurred in the mid 70s. The traditional discourse of painting, centred on the figure of the male creator, re-emerged with some force in the 80s; its re-emergence coinciding with substantial inroads made by women artists into the art world. Neo-expressionist painting restored to the markets and galleries their prize commodity – the body of the artist (predominantly male) “through the new look and gesture now marketed as style.” (Pollock in Barrett and Phillips 1992 p155.)
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which the artist applies her paint in gestural marks and "brutal slathering of pigment." The viscosity of the paint, with lighter tones breaking open to reveal blood red layers beneath, assaults the eye with its corpulence and materiality. Linda Nochlin writes that it is this tangible quality of Saville’s painting’s that gives them their visual and emotional impact. The "relentless embodiment" of these pictures, Nochlin suggests, brings out "our worst anxieties about our own corporeality." Both the physicality of Saville’s figures, and their monumental scale, give mastery to her female subjects. Their unwillingness to retreat from the viewer’s gaze questions our perceptions of the female body in challenging ways.

Apart from Saville it has been difficult to find examples of contemporary painters engaging directly with iconography of the female body. Of interest though is a group of current practitioners linked by their common aim to investigate painting as a practice that continues to reproduce the structures of sexual difference. I have included below brief discussion of

126 Nochlin 2000 p97.
127 Meskimmon 1996 p125.
128 In her article ‘Painting, Feminism, History’ Pollock focuses on a more general discussion of the issues women face as painters rather than providing specific examples of women painters. (See Pollock in Barrett and Phillips 1992 pp138-176.)
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three of these painters, Eve Muske, Laura Godfrey-Isaacs and Rosa Lee. Although these artists work predominantly in non-representational frameworks, their concerns that lie primarily with highlighting the lack of visual languages through which women can voice issues of subjectivity, make their approaches relevant to my thesis.

As a starting point for her paintings, Muske draws upon symbols and signs typically assigned as female. The context in which she places these ‘signs’ makes it evident that she is employing them as parody rather than re-confirming them as specific to female sensibility. For example, in her installation orange, blue, mirror, skin, grid, (1992), the artist ‘quotes’ femininity through a series of decorative canvases constructed from clothing, mirror and patterned fabric. The panels are displayed with a second series of canvases that ‘quote’ Geometric Abstraction, Minimalist grids and Colour Field painting, styles conventionally associated with men. Because the two distinctly different forms of representation are exhibited together we know the artist is not interested in these styles as expressive signs, but rather because they clearly signify the gendered discourse of Modernism. In this work Muske is questioning painting as a practice that both structures and reproduces the meanings of sexual difference and posits the ‘feminine’ as culturally inferior.

The painter Godfrey-Isaacs has also frequently employed iconography and signs traditionally labelled as feminine. For example in her painting Pink

129 Betterton discusses these and several other women painters in her book An Intimate Distance, Women Artists and the Body. (Betterton 1996.)
130 Betterton 1996 p98.
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Surface, (1992), the paint is used in ways that signify softness and pliability. The artist has employed these painterly signs because as qualities they have traditionally signified the feminine body. But the artist is not using these because she identifies with them as innately feminine qualities, but rather as a form of parody. This is evidenced by the excessive execution of the painting; its extreme scale, sickly acid and intensely pink colour, and sagging and viscous surface. Her approach forces the viewer to recognize the ‘feminine’ signs as constructions of femininity rather than as natural or inherent attributes of femaleness. Like Muske, Godfrey-Isaacs highlights painting as a process that has invested within its discourse, structures promoting sexual difference. Her work points to the difficulties faced by women attempting to find new languages through which to visually express issues of female subjectivity.

In her paintings, Lee combines geometrical structures and rigidly composed numerical systems - signifiers of purity, closure and control - within complex, ornamental patterns and fluid surfaces that dissolve into webs of flowing colour and textural patterning. The artist is interested in bringing together both ‘male’ and ‘female’ symbolic orders in order to reveal these as conventions used to connote gender difference and maintain rigid gender

131 Betterton 1996 p96.
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categorisations. Her frequent use of decorative features and her desire "to make paintings of unnecessary detail", indicates a further interest in the re-evaluation of the inferior place held by 'the decorative' in painting. In works, such as Speculum No.7, 1990, Lee has employed pattern to attempt to convey the elusive nature of female subjectivity. She uses surface ornamentation and tactile qualities to suggest 'femininity', but the reference to Luce Irigarary suggested in the title links the piece to the writer's use of the concave mirror as metaphor for the elusive and reflected nature of female subjectivity.

Through their work, all three artists question conventional scripts intimating femininity. Whilst not attempting to bring new expression to 'the feminine', each is nevertheless concerned with the complex relations of gender, subjectivity and paint media. The difficulty of finding a visual language through which to express aspects of female subjectivity is generally of ongoing concern for many feminist art practitioners. The artists discussed in the final part of this chapter base their practices within this continuing challenge. However, rather than expressing themselves through two-

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132 Paintings I completed in the early nineties evolved from similar intentions. I combined linear geometric structures within decorative grounds. Sexually hybrid body parts, referring to both male and female were entwined within the structures. See works from Tell Me a Story exhibition catalogue.

133 Lee quoted by Betterton 1996 p103.

134 Betterton 1996 p103.

135 See Irigarary's book Speculum of the other woman.

136 Betterton 1996 p103
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dimensional representations, the cited artists find commonality in their direct use of their bodies within video, film and performance media. As such, these approaches have been influential in the conceptual formation of my images rather than its methodology.

5. Feminism, Subjectivity and the Body in Representation

The primary aim of the project, to investigate ways of representing female subjectivity, led to an investigation into issues of self-representation within feminist cultural practice. The problem of self-representation has been at the forefront of feminist discourse since the sixties. This meant that there was a wealth of material to draw upon and it would have been appropriate to include any number of themes from the field of feminist body politics. Given the scope of this exegesis I have selected only a limited number of discrete topics that reflect my particular areas of focus. At the centre of inquiries have been the practices of women who employ their bodies directly as the subject for their art.

Feminist Approaches to Self-Representation

Within the Feminist movement there has never been a cohesive position concerning the female body in representation. Yet despite varying opinions there exists the common recognition of the need to challenge structures that have perpetuated uneven subject and object relations within the visual field. For contemporary feminists, this goal has remained of central concern and it is possible to recognise distinct strategies used to disrupt conventional viewing relations. Of these Hybridisation, Fragmentation, and

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137 One approach to contesting conventional subject/object relations is by complicating the boundaries that define gender difference. In recent practice artists have approached this objective by creating sexually indeterminate and hybrid body forms that undermine the modernist concept of gender as a stable entity. Sexual hybridisation is a feature of the amorphous forms found in the sculptures of Louise Bourgeois. For example in her piece Janus Fleuri, (1968), Bourgeois combines both

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Transgression have been of interest in recent practice. However for this last part of the exegesis, I have focused on the work of artists using transgressive strategies. I have taken this approach not because I want to suggest that my works have the radical edge particular to many of these practices, but rather because artists commonly use their bodies as subject for their art.

Transgression and Censorship

Art practice is considered transgressive when it is seen to threaten values, mores and hierarchies at the very core of any given society. Within contemporary art practice artists have employed transgressive acts primarily

male and female body parts - a rough vulva-like middle surrounded by two smooth penile ends - to create a disturbingly deformed object. Although obviously human in origin the unfamiliarity of this object destabilises the identification processes of traditional viewing relations. It is not sufficiently ‘like us’ to enable identification to proceed. Hybridisation strategies are also evident in recent art practice that responds to increasing interdependence between the human body and technology. The hybrid body forms created by artists interested in this relationship are frequently labelled ‘post-human’. These forms are made in reference to the not ‘purely’ human forms created by medical interventions into the body. An example of this approach to the 'representation' of the 'post-human' body is evidenced in the numerous body and facial reconstructions undertaken by the artist Orlan. The 'post-human' body is also found in cyber-feminist art. The cyber-body orientates the body towards new "affirmative, desiring, quasi-autonomous bodies, which transcend gender and racial differences". (McDonald 2001 p197) This form of art practice assumes that technology has the potential to produce bodies that avoid the imprint of patriarchal gender distinctions and thereby can transcend existent binaries. Linda Demet's interactive work Cyberflesh Girlnemonster from the early 90s is one such example. The interactive consists of parts of women's bodies that are grafted together to form new (and grotesque) creatures. For further discussion on hybridisation in art practice see 'Hybrid ambiguities' in McDonald 2001 pp187-217.

Fragmentation offers another approach to the disruption of conventional subject/object relations. Like the indeterminate subject the fragmented figure counters the mirage of unity important in identification processes. One such example is the photographic installation piece Sculptural, (1984-5), by Hannah Villiger. For this work the artist photographed parts of her body by holding a Polaroid camera in one hand. The positioning of the camera lens within the body's space means that Villiger recorded her body as a series of segmented parts. The contorted and ambiguous fragments that result rebuff identification because the viewer is unable to locate or project an ideal self-image into the picture's space. Thus whilst Villiger employs her naked body as subject matter, its fragmentation into unfamiliar segments halts the conventional voyeuristic gaze. See Curtis, Penelope, 'Introduction' p 7 in Elective Affinities, London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1993 pp6-12.
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to upset stereotypical representations of women and femininity. Feminist art practices considered transgressive are thought so because frequently artists employ their naked bodies in public, in ways that violates social standards. History has demonstrated such unorthodox practices habitually bear the brunt of public concern. Censorship can be a recurring problem because women seem particularly vulnerable to judgments about what is appropriate behaviour.¹³⁹ The censoring of Shigeko Kubota and Carolee Schneemann for using their bodies as art in the sixties finds parallels in recent times in the censoring of the art of Karen Finely, Linda Sproul and Annie Sprinkle. Examples of censorship, of course, extend to male artists, but more often the men’s activities are lauded as avant-garde statements while their female counterparts continue to be condemned for their moral violation, their breaching of social mores bringing to the fore issues about pornography.¹⁴⁰ The image of women, circulating freely in public, recycles the definition of women as body but does not permit them to use their bodies in ways other than those endorsed through predominant representations.

Ironically, a further difficulty faced by women artists using their bodies as subject for their art comes from within the Feminist movement itself. Some feminists argue that women using their bodies as subject for their art come

¹³⁹ Censorship occurs through public desire to make invisible activities seen to be inappropriate and threatening to normal male/female relations and definitions of gender. Uneven social relations have meant that censorship is frequently more pronounced for women. Trans-sexual and male homosexual imagery is also frequently censored. These bodies remain disturbing to social conventions because they are considered threatening to male prowess through confusion of male/female gender roles.

¹⁴⁰ An example of this can be seen in the different public responses to Bruce Nauman’s and Vito Acconci’s engagement in explicit body art compared to that of Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke and Lynda Benglis. Whilst the men’s art was perceived as a valid practice, body art activities by the women were deemed narcissistic or pornographic. A case in point was Schneemann’s Interior Scroll performance from 1976 in which she stood naked and read from a paper scroll that she extracted slowly from her vagina. This act attracted vehement public outrage; no such clamour arose when Acconci attempted a ‘sex change’ by burning the hair from his chest, pulling at the skin to form breasts, tucking his penis between his legs and placing his penis in the mouth of the woman kneeling behind him.
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perilously close to their bodies being assimilated as the very objectification they seek to deconstruct.\textsuperscript{141} This problem has been particularly notable at times when there have been very public debates about the effects of pornography on sexual violence towards women. That the issues are more pronounced at these times suggests that distinctions between pornography and explicit representations made by women artists as cultural commentary have become blurred. These differences in opinion of how women should represent themselves in public have created a split within feminism itself. The \textit{Good Girl} feminists, as the ‘anti-porn’ feminists are labelled, consider activities in which women employ their naked bodies as art mostly inappropriate; the \textit{Bad Girl} feminists support their right to reshape traditional inscriptions of sexual power through overt means. They argue that only by undermining hierarchal relations that define what is seen to be socially appropriate behaviour for women can women truly find ways of speaking for themselves.

Transgressive Practices

Because of the issues outlined above, it is important that artists employing their naked bodies within their art develop ways of undermining prevailing viewing relations. In recent art one approach has been to question fixed definitions of gender, a practice that finds parallels with hybridisation strategies because artists explore subjectivity through multiple forms rather than within singular definitions of male or female. By presenting gender as fluid and as sexually indeterminate artists can subvert gender stereotypes produced and promoted by society, while simultaneously confusing viewing habits.

An example of this approach can be found in the performance piece, \textit{Which Side do you Dress}, (1992), by Linda Sproul. In this work the artist plays two consecutive roles - Victor and Victoria. The obvious characterisation

\textsuperscript{141} Meskimmon 1996 p113.
adopted by Sproul highlights the fact that gender is fabricated through a series of external ‘signs’ indicated by dress, posture, gesture and behaviour. As ‘Victor’, Sproul performed in a transparent chiffon suit, the outfit conveying the idea that gender is constructed on the exterior of the body.\textsuperscript{142} The character’s gestures mimicked the poses and actions of cricket and football umpires. The spectators were able to “see through the acts and surfaces that constituted ‘the man’, to the mocking ‘woman’ who performed those acts and wore those surfaces like a series of costumes.”\textsuperscript{143}

For the second role Sproul discarded the suit and ‘Victoria’, a nightclub stripper, costumed in stilettos, nipple clamps, false blond hair, chains, and a large satin bow around her waist, emerged. ‘Victoria’ walked amongst the audience, suggestively touching them and inviting them to perform pornographic gestures. She then retired to a stage where she carried out a seductive ‘striptease.’ The erotic manner with which she caressed her

\textsuperscript{142} McDonald 2001 p104. 
\textsuperscript{143} McDonald 2001 p105.
body, seemingly unaware of her public situation, placed her audience in a voyeuristic position. The unease and:

embarrassment caused by this obvious fantasy underscored how the enactment of gender involves not only the internal production and dissemination of semiotic codes, but also interaction between bodies at specific times and locations.¹⁴⁴

Sproul’s performance concluded with the artist handing out calling cards printed with the words ‘Ever-remembered’ and ‘Words cannot Express’, these memorial references suggesting that the artist and the audience were gathered together to mourn the death of gender stereotypes.¹⁴⁵

A second way of undermining conventional viewing relations is through the use of reciprocity. By engaging directly with her audience an artist can subvert the detached and singular viewpoint of conventional viewing relations. Because this strategy depends on a direct engagement with an audience, artists who have explored its potential predominantly work within performance and video art.

Feminist Performance Art: Its Beginnings

The extensive social changes that occurred in many Western societies in the 1960s and 70s assisted women to become more prominent in most areas of public life. Supported by the growing Feminist Movement, women, for the

¹⁴⁴ McDonald 2001 p107.
¹⁴⁵ McDonald 2001 p107.
first time, began to play a major part within mainstream art activities. With painting identified by feminists as exemplifying the most decisive discourse of Modernism, women turned to other areas of practice less circumscribed by their male peers. Performance, photography, film and installation were chosen as avenues through which women could distinguish their art from what had gone before. Performance art in particular allowed women to express ‘feminine’ body spaces that had been repressed under patriarchy.\(^{146}\)

Carolee Schneemann was one of the most active artists involved with early Feminist Performance Art. Her installation *Mink Paws’ Turret*, (1963), and her film *Fuses*, (1964), are upheld as the first works in which a female artist directly employed her body as subject for art. The latter work, in which the artist films herself repeatedly making love to her boyfriend, is of particular note because Schneemann breaks with conventional ‘keyhole’ subject/object relations by setting up a reciprocal relationship with her audience. While making love, Schneemann acknowledges the audience’s presence by winking and nodding at them. In her role as both subject and object, and in her affirmation of her pleasure, Schneemann both sees and allows that she is being seen.\(^{147}\) By including the viewer within the work and by making explicit her embodied

\(^{146}\) For example Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* and Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* performances which directly addressed hidden aspects of the maternal body.

\(^{147}\) The artist in her role as both object and subject confuses the issues of who is looking and who is looked at. Schneider writes that Schneemann “not only shows ... (her audience) that she knows—being both subject and object at once—but that she takes pleasure ... in being out about her knowledge. She is not horrified, or apologetic, or shamed. She sees and she admits that she sees.” (Schneider 1997 p74).
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pleasure Schneemann disavows the innocent passivity traditionally ascribed to the female nude in art. Her naked body cannot be 'caught at the keyhole' because she is already that object:

implicated in her own seen (s), even as she is situated as subject. Because she is both subject and object, both seer and seen, Schneemann is explicitly embodied in distinction to the veiled, disembodied or dislocated viewer of classical perspectivalism.¹⁴⁸

Schneemann further disrupts normal viewing relations through formal interventions into the editing processes of the footage. The artist experimented with montage and doubling of images, destroying the seamlessness of the film by overlaying it with scratches and glitches. In addition the chaotic non-linear editing interrupts logical sequencing of narrative essential to the organisation of perspectivalism.

Unfortunately, the 'female agency' that Schneemann sought through her work was troubled by the reception of her film. Because she made her body the literal site of so much of her art, and because she underscored her sexuality as a creative force in her work, Schneemann was often dismissed as self-indulgent by the art establishment.¹⁴⁹ The criticism of her film as narcissistic, by the mostly male establishment, however, somewhat transparently disguises what was of real issue. In filming the penis (of her boyfriend) the artist transgressed the taboo that disallows the exposure of the phallus within the scopic field. As pointed out in the footnotes of the introductory chapter the penis remains inaccessible to representation because patriarchy is the basis of knowledge and power, and the depiction of the phallus is seen to strip men of their empowering veil.¹⁵⁰ Schneemann’s film was also dismissed by many of her peers within the Women’s Movement because it was feared that Schneemann’s exaltation of sensuality too closely

¹⁴⁸ Schneider 1997 p74.
¹⁴⁹ Schneider 1997 p76.
¹⁵⁰ Brooks 1993 p18
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resembled the limitation of woman to her genitalia.¹³¹

Despite the negative reception of her work, Schneemann nevertheless opened the way for other women artists to follow bravely in her steps. Like Schneemann’s art, performances that questioned the venerated boundaries separating female sexuality and artistic authority were invariably denounced by the art establishment. The hypocrisy of these condemnations is highlighted in the example of Shigeko Kubota. When in 1965 the artist performed her Vagina Painting at Fluxfest in New York, a performance in which she squatted on the floor and painted on paper with a brush that extended from her vagina, the work provoked angry responses from her audiences. In direct comparison was the reception of Yves Klein’s performance in which he used nude women as ‘living brushes.’ This work was widely celebrated and hailed as highly progressive.

Perhaps the most notorious Feminist Body art issuing from this decade was the suite of advertisements Lynda Benglis placed in Artforum throughout 1974. Of the series, the most memorable was the image reproduced in the November issue. In this photograph, Benglis stood defiantly naked wearing sunglasses and clutching an extraordinarily large dildo that extended from her crotch. The gesture was an intentionally outrageous provocation of the male art establishment. Benglis sought to make prominent the insincere and hypocritical attitude of the art world towards women artists. But, artistically, the photograph was more significant. Benglis’ undeviating gaze

¹³¹ Schneider 1997 p76.
demanded direct contact with her audience making impossible the passivity particular to prevailing viewing relations. In its defiance of both convention and the art establishment, the ad offended almost everybody. Benglis was accused of everything from narcissism to pornography and penis envy. Five of the magazine's editors published a letter denouncing the ad as an extremely vulgar act, adding that it made a mockery of feminism. The reception of Benglis' photograph again made evident the different treatment of male and female artists. Benglis' photograph according to one critic was not to be confused with Vito Acconci's sexual performances in which he 'became a woman.' The critic wrote:

superficially, Benglis' work reveals the tasteful, the glossy, and the narcissistic, while Acconci's secret sexual systems are more populist, and tend toward the squalid, the exorcistic (s) and the puritanical. Although bold and subversive these statements by women remain marginal in the pages of art history. While new freedoms meant that women for the first time were liberated to proclaim their sexuality and difference through their art, many of the first-generation feminist artists have never been awarded critical legitimisation for their innovative approaches to art, or credited for


their collective and individual contributions. A shifting of emphasis in feminist theory towards an interrogation of gender as a social and cultural construction meant that the significance of early feminist activity was lost in the general cynical condemnation of their belief in gender as biologically innate. A direct consequence of this change in focus was that it became increasingly difficult for women to use their bodies as a subject for their art. With the growing interest in deconstruction theories, women using their naked bodies, were seen to reinforce problematic viewing relations. Griselda Pollock, and other art commentators, encouraged this view, through suggestions that the work of many women using their bodies was open to possible misjudgment and at too great a risk for re-appropriation within the male gaze. Pollock’s recommendation was that the project of producing positive images of women be abandoned:

... within the present organisation, there is no possibility of simply conjuring up and asserting a positive and alternative set of meanings for women. The work to be done is that of deconstruction.\textsuperscript{154}

Her view was generally one supported by the second-generation feminists who openly discouraged women artists from seeking alternative representations of their bodies. Depictions of female nudity effectively disappeared from women’s art practice over the ensuing decade. In is only within recent times that this position has mellowed. The nineties have seen a return to women re-investigating possible alternatives through which to represent female subjectivity. Within these new approaches there is an obvious inheritance from their artistic predecessors. The raw energy and daring of both generations of performance artists work similarly to undermine traditional viewing relations and define new possibilities for marginalised voices. The gender bending and blending, ambiguity and androgyny of the recent years has however added another level to the ongoing task of artists interested in exploring issues of self-representation.

\textsuperscript{154} Pollock quoted by McDonald 2001 pp62-3.
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Bad Girls

Recent feminist performance art differs from that of their seventies forebears in one very significant way. The previous generation sought to express their gender difference; contemporary artists, on the other hand, seek ways of undermining gender categories that define difference. Contemporary practice recognises gender as fluid and definitions of subjectivity as plural. The aequiscence of sexual diversity has freed contemporary artists to explore issues of gender and self-representation beyond the limitations of fixed boundaries. In the nineties there have been a series of major exhibitions entitled *Bad Girls*. Although the artists participating in these shows employ a diverse range of approaches and media, they are united by the desire to redefine stereotypical and accepted definitions of gender. Many focus specifically on the transgressive and obscene sexual body, frequently employing humour as a strategy through which to reclaim their sexual and erotic power. Artists work from a common understanding that women are entitled to make representations of their own sexuality. The following comment by ‘bad girl’ Zoe Leonard in many ways sums up this position:

I’m sick and tired of this constant analysis ... that we’re always objectified, which we are, but we also have our own sexuality.

In the catalogue accompanying the New York exhibition *Bad Girls*, Marcia

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75. The initial *Bad Girls* exhibition opened in New York in January 1994. The sister show in Los Angeles, *Bad Girls West* followed soon after, as did the *Bad Girls* exhibition in London.

76. Leonard quoted by McDonald 2001 p94. Leonard’s retort was a response to questions asked about her installation work in the 1992 Documenta in which only a small number of women artists had been asked to participate. Her piece was installed in a seventeenth century portrait gallery in Neue Galerie, Kassel. She removed the portraits of men leaving behind those of women. In between these portraits she hung her own close-up, black and white photographs of women masturbating. The juxtaposition of her images with, as example a painting of a seventeenth-century lady fondling her “hair and veil in such a way as to reveal her naked breast and shoulder,” revealed the techniques and devices of erotic titillation in the history of European painting. For further comments about this work see McDonald 2201 p94.
Tanner provides her definition of the bad girl as “the slut you are so bent upon becoming.”157 Tanner’s model, a definition with which she suggests many women may identify, is the mirror image of the ‘good girl’ that mothers instruct their daughters to become. Good girls are encouraged to not: “rock the boat... break the rules, question the status quo... behave excessively... do anything embarrassing... or bawdy, raucous or foul-mouthed... or... laugh much in public particularly not loudly or at anything dirty” and certainly never to “talk openly about (their) sexual proclivities and erotic fantasies.”158 Alternatively ‘bad girls’ who “put their needs and wants first (may) be aggressive and impolite... speak before (and while) they’re spoken to... talk about their sexual explorations... and use language that’s vulgar or downright obscene and (they) don’t stop when their mothers threaten to wash their mouths out with soap.”159 Tanner concludes that the good girl image

159 Tucker 1994 p20. Tanner suggests the history of the artist as bad girl, is a long and venerable one. The mother of all ‘bad girls’ she proposes is the Italian baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi, born in 1593, whose work has been ignored by art historians until relatively recently. Her paintings re-envisage images of traditional themes from what today would be considered a feminist viewpoint. Her female characters, invariably famous heroic women like Susanna, Mary Magdalene, Lucretia, Cleopatra, Esther and Judith were depicted engaged in dramatic confrontations with men. In these paintings Gentileschi gave prominence to her female characters, portraying them as powerful, aggressive, vigorous, endowed with courage: and resolve and capable of carrying out premeditated acts of violence to defend themselves. Her accomplishment was so radical for its time that it apparently wasn’t even recognised - the expressive content of her imagery was somehow masked by her technical virtuosity and command of contemporary

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was formulated to "ensure our safe navigation through the perilous waters of the patriarchal sea we swim in."\textsuperscript{160} And although taught to daughters by their mothers they are but "channelling the voices of our fathers, their fathers and their father's fathers, instructing us to be good girls in a man's world."\textsuperscript{161}

The video \textit{No More Nice Girls}, (1989), by Joan Braderman exemplifies the 'bad girl' position. The footage is structured around a series of conversations between four stereotypical 'bad girls'. The women's status is symbolised through their black stiletto heels and heavy make-up and by their overt behaviour and foul language. While drinking heavily and smoking marijuana the women brag about their individual sexual encounters. Through their roles as "aging feminists from hell",\textsuperscript{162} the women violate social mores that dictate that they should be neither disgusting nor loud. In their disregard for these taboos the women indicate both their disrespect for social order and their rejection of hierarchical patterns of domination and submission that are enshrined within it.\textsuperscript{163} Braderman further exaggerates the symbolism of the women's behaviour by formally embellishing the video footage with sickening electric blue tones, candy-coloured pinks and garish greens.

styles. (Tanner \textit{in Tucker} 1994 p53-4)  
\textsuperscript{160} \textit{Tanner \textit{in Tucker} 1994 p49.}  
\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Tanner \textit{in Tucker} 1994 p49.}  
\textsuperscript{162} \textit{Tanner \textit{in Tucker} 1994 p53.}  
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In this exploration of gender stereotypes the artist parodied conventional 'bad girls' to highlight implicit class bias and accompanying definitions of fitting behaviour. Other artists indicate their resistance to fixed gender demarcations through explorations into multiple identities and shifting subject positions. This approach is evident in Annie Sprinkle's performance Post Porn Modernism, (1989). As part of the performance, Sprinkle lies down on a bed, unadorned except for a speculum inserted in her vagina. From this position she invites her spectators to view her cervix. While they wait in line, Sprinkle tells stories of her life, engaging her audience through exchanges and jokes. Her personal stories reflect varied viewpoints of different personalities. The artist moves from one identity to the next with such fluidity that her audience are unable to associate her with any one single persona. Through her adoption of multiple personalities, Sprinkle broadens definitions of gender and resists being classified within a general category representing 'all women'.

There is a second significant aspect to this controversial work. As Rebecca Schneider has convincingly argued, Sprinkle's piece rather than being pornographic, as it is frequently denounced, is extremely acute in its take on the gendered nature of the visual field. Schneider constructs her argument through a comparison of Sprinkle's performance with the high modernist artwork Etant donnés: la chute d'eau; le gaz d'éclairage by Marcel


165 *Post Porn Modernism* has been the focus of heated debates because its explicitness is considered by some to be pornographic. The work has been censored heavily within the United States.

166 This section of her performance is entitled 'Public Cervix Announcement'.

167 Schneider 1997 p60.

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Duchamp. Schneider considers Duchamp’s work to be an overt example “of Western habits of specularity (s): perspectival vision, with woman as vanishing point”; its underlying premise laying “bare that system’s hidden assumptions.” She proposes that the visual correspondence occurring between Duchamp’s naked female figure and that of the figure of Sprinkle reclining on stage is an intentional aping of Duchamp’s gesture by Sprinkle. In Duchamp’s piece, the naked woman’s torso lies on the other side of a hole in the door through which the viewer peers. Her head and arms are missing and the positioning of the body draws the focus directly to the woman’s parted legs and genitals. In ‘Public Cervix Announcement’, Sprinkle’s posture is matching but, rather than a hole through which to view the figure, the audience is faced with a speculum that acts as an eyepiece. However,

This ‘installation’ took Duchamp some twenty years to complete. Its construction took place between 1946 and 1966. Schneider also suggests that Sprinkle’s performance can be read as a ‘take’ on other Western art masterpieces such as Courbet’s Origin of the World – a representation considered in its time to be so ‘real’ that its owner, Jacques Lacan, kept it veiled behind a screen. (Schneider 1997 p 60.)


Schneider 1997 p61.
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unlike the faceless and armless torso of *Etant donnés*, Sprinkle has eyes, mouth and hands, and she is actively involved in seeing, speaking and gesturing. Through her live performance Sprinkle replaces the ‘general’ woman of Duchamp’s work with the particularity of her actual body.

Sprinkle’s actions, Schneider argues, bring the entire visual field into revolt.172 The exchange that occurs through the artist’s acknowledgment of her audience’s presence whilst they peer into her cervix means that rather than external to the visual field, the gaze remains contained within it.173 As Schneider writes: “Sprinkle’s body, unlike Duchamp’s *Etant donnés* ... bears a head and a gaze which complicates the seeming identity between viewpoint and vanishing point.”174 The reciprocal interaction, which the artist sets up, between the audience and herself, subverts the voyeuristic keyhole viewing exemplified by Duchamp’s work. Sprinkle’s performance is of interest to this exegesis, not only because it breaks down fixed definitions of gender but also because it challenges conventional subject/object relations.

The Grotesquity of the Carnival

To conclude this section on feminist approaches to the body in representation, I submit as context a photography/video installation by Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh. The work is significant because it represents women in ways that break with social expectations of them, but it is also important because the female bodies, photographed by Cummins and Walsh, recall the grotesque forms of carnival. In recent years the socially transgressive practices of carnival, and the grotesque and disproportionate body that is part of its landscape, have been recognised by contemporary practitioners as valuable motifs through which to explore alternative forms of representation. In its social manifestation, carnival provides a temporary

172 Schneider 1997 p65.
173 Schneider 1997 p65.
174 Schneider 1997 p65.
liberation from the prevailing prohibitions of the established order; it is a space where suppressed desires can be expressed without reprisal. Artists have exploited the chaotic and incongruous visual symbolism of the carnival, and its practices of role reversal, to investigate issues of identity and social relations. The rebellious space of the carnival is seen to disrupt the ordered conventions of prevailing social relations and established hierarchies.

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have described carnival as “the repeated, periodic celebration of the grotesque body – fattening food, intoxicated drink, sexual promiscuity.” This grotesque and unchecked form is considered as inverse to the balanced and symmetrical ideal body enshrined in the figure of the nude. The classical form gives prominence to the upper portions of the body (the head and intellect); the monstrous body of carnival emphasises the lower body through distortions of the stomach, buttocks, feet, orifices and genitals. The accent on base corporeality and the openings and protuberances of the body is in marked contrast to the importance placed on the opaque and closed ideal body. Mikhail Bakhtin describes the classical body as a sleek and impenetrable façade, a body from which desires and appetites are absent. He writes:

An entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body ... That which protrudes, bulges (s), sprouts, or branches off is eliminated, hidden or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, ... the impenetrable façade. The opaque surface of the body's 'valleys' acquires essential meaning as the border of a

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175 Tucker 1994 p23.


177 Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986 p198. The authors draw extensively upon the theories of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin who first discussed the carnival as a social space that allowed for the temporary liberation from established social order.

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closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world. All attributes of the unfinished world are carefully removed, as well as all signs of its inner life.\textsuperscript{175}

This ideal body has become a symbol of western bourgeois culture and its form represents the organising principles of perspectivalism. Artist have attempted to destabilise its standing, and the norms its symbolises, by adopting the image of the grotesque, hybrid, decentralised, and often humorous bodies of carnival. The multiple, blurred and excessive body of the carnival sits clearly outside the definition of the ‘individual’ as separate and whole and as such is important in contemporary rethinking of the feminine.

Cummins and Walsh have taken up the symbolism of carnival as visual language through which to explore issues of female subjectivity. In their collaborative installation \textit{Sounding the Depths}, (1992), the artists feature the grotesque body in larger than life sized photographs of the female figure. The women’s bodies are ruptured by projections of enormous screaming mouths that run vertically down their torsos. The mouths metaphorically break open the women’s bodies, like large wounds. The soundtrack of screaming and laughing that accompanies the visual material provides the women with a voice that simultaneously registers them as both subject and object. Their pictures can be read as a direct assault against the unity registered by the ideal classic body. The monstrosity of the depicted women’s bodies and their intense physical presence acts in opposition to the sanitised, distant image of femininity as

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found in conventional depictions of naked women. The disturbing imagery, in combination with the raw aural effect, disrupts any expectation the audience may have of visually appropriating these female bodies for their own pleasure.

The task of reinstating corporeality is a fraught and contradictory enterprise for women artists. It has been argued by many that, given the persistence of perspectivalism, it is impossible for women to represent themselves free of its visual bias. This debate has been augmented in recent years by the criticism of the transgressive, grotesque and corporeal imagery of contemporary feminist practice as once more limiting the definition of women to their bodies. Yet to submit to these arguments would be to give in to the belief that definitions of the body are fixed, rather than constantly made anew. The existing representational codes are surely not the only visual language through which women can speak of their embodied experiences and investigate their subjectivity. As an area of investigation, the representation of subjectivity remains an important one.

181 By 'once more' I refer to the second-generation feminists' condemnation of the essentialism of earlier feminism.