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## **Summary**

This paper is a study of the processes that have informed my work over the past fifteen years. It is an investigation into my artistic background, my techniques, my yoga practice, my dreams, and my ongoing interest in myth and archetype. By exploring these influences I hope to come to an understanding of the nameless void (referred to in this paper as the 'gap') from which my creative process derives its momentum.

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### Statement

I state that this work has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other institution.

Melissa Coote

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## Introduction

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This paper is an investigation into the creative processes that bring my paintings into form. I investigate the unseen underlying impetus to the realised paintings. I attempt to illuminate the ways in which I am able to access and unleash my inspirations, and to understand and interpret more fully the images, techniques and materials that I use. Ultimately, I hope to embody a greater understanding of my art by carrying out this study.

Investigation of the creative drive behind my process is for me a little like looking at a tapestry with missing fragments. The yarns appear to be steeped in primal urges such as the desire to create, and to communicate through myth, archetype and art. The pattern as a whole is difficult to follow due to the disrepair of individual threads. The 'weaver' (myself the artist) must repair the fabric by adding new colours and materials, in order to make some sense of the unknown images and stories in the pattern.

I have the sense that the meaning behind the images in the pattern, even though ancient, is of relevance to the contemporary and to my own images and practice. Traces of timeless meaning are there for me to incorporate into my work as I experiment with ways of restoring the underlying fabric of the tapestry. As I proceed, I weave images of my own, arising out of my personal history and the demands of my artistic practice. As the tapestry progresses, I draw up the threads of the old patterns and make them my own.

I attempt to write about, or at least point to, what cannot be easily described in words because I am dealing with the unconscious realm of instincts and archetypes. By investigating various aspects of my work, I hope to gain an understanding of the previously 'unspeakable' in it.

An outside observer may suggest that I move back from the tapestry in order to see the story or pattern more fully. I propose instead to get as close as possible in order to examine the minutiae of colour and texture, the microscopic forms that hold the intimate workings of history, layering and processes I uncover when making a work.

This paper cannot be definitive. I have attempted to bring to the writing some of the sensibilities of the work itself. I resist objectifying the experience of 'reading' the finished artwork as outside oneself. Instead my reflections ask the reader of this paper and viewer of my artworks to look inward to their own interpretations for the meaning of the work as I do.

## PREPARING THE LOOM

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I dream that I am on a beach, diving into the shallows where rocks and rips unfold. As I enter the water I am sucked into a rock tunnel. I don't fight the pull, but allow my body and mind to soften and be drawn through all the different currents. I am no longer in the surf; I am now in a 'Borgelt' painting. I am travelling through layers, colours, luminous curves, dark holes and changing rhythms. Eventually the current becomes one complex rhythm reminding me of a timeless Indian raga.

My dreams are my myths.<sup>1</sup> The visions of my dreams are intrinsically linked to my creativity, allowing me to process things in the wordless dimension. In one of the Upanishads there is a saying: "We go into that Brahman world every night, but, alas, we are asleep."<sup>2</sup> Rimbaud speaks of "that region from whence my sleep and my slightest motions come", in reference to the "transcended place" he insists on creating from.<sup>3</sup>

Marion Borgelt was my drawing teacher at College Of Fine Arts during my Bachelor of Arts. In her classes I came to see promise in the marks that came naturally to me and saw strength in work that was worked and reworked until the marks took on their own life. This was a very exciting period for me, as I would draw for hours, needing no external impetus. Time would disappear. I was working in a way that was raw and immediate which prevented me from making contrived or stylized marks.

The drawing would reflect my internal state and I could sense something of myself in the work. This kind of drawing process was only absorbing to me if I allowed the marks to flow intuitively, like an internal rhythm. Up until then I had not been an interested or attentive drawing student and therefore had not yet learnt the rules or techniques that may have inhibited me at such an early stage. Looking back I can see how important it was at these initial stages to work from feeling and raw instinct in order to draw out the abilities of an 'unconditioned mind'.<sup>4</sup>

In compulsory drawing class I had a subject, the model, to draw from. I simply drew, without 'trying', as I had the idea that drawing wasn't important to me because I was a 'photographer'. To my amazement the response was good; from Marion, other students and even the model. This gave me a lot of confidence, so I kept drawing in this 'easy' way. Like many beginning students, I had a preconception that what was required was a formal system of drawing imposed on the artist. I regarded this as drawing the 'difficult' way. By the end of semester I exhibited a wall of huge staring faces that revealed aspects of myself I'd felt but had never seen or made manifest before.

After college, I shared a studio with Marion and was introduced to her work. I had never been able to fully understand or appreciate abstract paintings, and had not yet been interested in exploring them. When I saw Borgelt's work every day in the studio, I had reason to try to appreciate its abstraction. She gave me a catalogue of one of her recent shows, which I took home and read thoroughly. The words themselves made no sense to me and even when I stared at the

Self Portrait, pastel on paper,  
115 x 70 cm Sydney 1989



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<sup>1</sup> The following quote defines 'myth' as I see appropriate in the context of this paper: "Myth is a true story because it is a sacred story, not only by virtue of its content but because of the concrete sacral forces which it sets to work. The recital of myths of the beginning of things is part and parcel of cult, because it is cult itself and helps to gain the ends for which cult is carried on, namely, the preservation and increase of life." R. Pettazzoni, *Miti and Leggende*, vol. I, p.x., *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 16, Chicago, London Toronto: William Benton Pub., 1961, p. 54

<sup>2</sup> Clement, Catherine, and Kristeva, Julia, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, New York: Palgrave Press, 2001, p. 73

<sup>3</sup> Clement, Catherine, and Kristeva, Julia, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, New York: Palgrave Press, 2001, p. 72

<sup>4</sup> I use the Buddhist term 'unconditioned mind' to mean that I was not yet under pressure to fulfil the expectations and conditions around traditional rules of painting

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images they were still quite foreign. I was 'trying'. It was like listening to a Tibetan lama speak; being confident that the words that he spoke in his language were words of wisdom, but not really having any idea about what he was saying.

That night I had the 'current' dream of being pulled into one of Marion's paintings. It was this dream that taught me to 'feel' and sense abstract art. After this particular experience I would spend many restful breaks in our studio lying on the couch in front of the paintings, returning to and continuing my dream.



Torsos, studio shot, pastel on paper, 210 x 133 cm each, 1989

Later I enrolled in the New York Studio School. I still wasn't ready for the 'discipline' of art, and spent most of my time drawing furiously with my own instinctive rhythm. I would spend hours at the Museum of Modern Art, mainly in the room of Pollock, Kline and Reinhardt, noticing how my pulse raced with each flush of emotion as I viewed the paintings. My immediate reaction to the paintings did not involve thinking; it was simply an emotional response, which in turn led to reflective thoughts about the work.

After New York I moved to France where I no longer had the security of the structure of a school. I had to rely on my own willingness to keep learning and committing myself to the practice. In France I learnt to exercise my eyes differently, to look and to absorb in a way which was totally new to me.

The fusion of French and Australian culture has a challenging potential from which I have benefited. Each culture is strong in some areas crucial to an artist while lacking in another. By bridging the two I have had the opportunity to optimize the positive qualities of both.

In France, I was introduced to a sophisticated aesthetic sensibility developed by a long condensed layering of human cultural history. Art is, and always has been, a central element in French culture. Living in this culture enabled me to experience the luxury of being appreciated as an artist- having a place in society as an artist, for the first time.

To be an Australian artist in Paris was a very interesting and an almost privileged place to work from. As an 'outsider' I was able to bring something to the culture that was not inherent to it. At the same time I was inspired by the sophisticated sensibilities of French art and culture.

It was in France that I was able to learn about the refinement of materials from the artisans in the courtyard where I lived. Their understanding and knowledge of materials is based on their tradition of craft, a tradition which goes back for centuries and often has been passed down through generations of a single family. I was inspired by French artists such as Loic Le Gromellic, Jean Charles Blais and Vincente Pimentel, all of whom master the technique of mixing painterly mediums on paper, a deeply explored aspect of contemporary French painting. There is a strong fascination with the 'matiere', the

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'plastique'; words which express so well the play of materials that exists in French painting, yet don't have adequate translations in the English language.

In Australia, my experience as an artist is entirely different. "White Australians are often constructed as brazenly and gloriously secular, full of disbelief, cynicism and blasphemy." <sup>5</sup> This is certainly not the aspect of Australian culture that I am drawn to. Although I recognize it, I think my repulsion for it has led me to find refuge in the inspiration embedded in the landscape.

"In Australia, landscape carries our experience of the sacred other. For two hundred years the majority of Australians have shielded themselves against the land, huddling together in European cities, pretending we are not in or part of Australia. But the landscape obtrudes, and often insinuates itself against our very will, as so much Australian writing testifies. The landscape in Australia is a mysteriously charged and magnificently alive archetypal presence. As Judith Wright puts it: 'In Australian writing the landscape seems to have its own life. Sometimes it takes up an immense amount of room; sometimes it is so firmly pushed away that its very absence haunts us as uncomfortably as its presence could'. Although experienced by some as dull, flat, and uneventful, the Australian landscape is in fact a most exciting archetypal field. The land is, or seems to be, the sacred, which bursts in upon our lives, which demands to be recognized and valued. As George Johnston wrote, 'nothing human has yet happened in Australia which stands out above the continent itself'." <sup>6</sup>

It was this space, the unique space of Australia that found an echo in my psyche. My experience of the ancient Australian landscape opened up a realm of emotion in me: a capacity to respond which might otherwise have been buried by the accumulated European culture. Living in an 'old' culture like the culture of France, I found my link to the 'newness' of Australia helped me to breathe the present, to feel my emotions, rather than to rationalise them. For me the Australian landscape provides a connection to the 'sacred', which I believe, is a crucial part of human existence. Mercia Eliade calls for a 'new humanism' that is not based on rational materialism, but assumes the sacred is a basic category of human experience, and recognises that the human cannot be separated from the non- human and the archetypal. According to Eliade, "humanity is and will always remain homo religiosus and human nature can only know and fulfil itself in relationship to a transcended other." <sup>7</sup>



Profile Heads, pastel on paper, 230 x 133cm each, Paris, 1990

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<sup>5</sup> Tacey, David J., *Edge of the Sacred*, Melbourne: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995, p. 8

<sup>6</sup> Tacey, David J., *Edge of the Sacred*, Melbourne: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995, p. 6

<sup>7</sup> Tacey, David J., *Edge of the Sacred*, Melbourne: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995, p. 4

## THE GAP

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"Where you are when you don't know where you are is one of the most precious spots offered by improvisation. It is a place from which more directions are possible than anywhere else. I call this place the "Gap". The more I improvise, the more I'm convinced that it is through the medium of these gaps- this momentary suspension of reference point- that comes the much sought after 'original' material. It is 'original' because its' origin is the current moment and because it comes from outside our usual frame of reference." <sup>8</sup>

In a tapestry it is the 'gap', the space between the threads of the warp, which allows the weft to enter and thus enable new form, the tapestry. Through my research and study I have been exploring the particular gaps or 'spaces' of Petit Mal, mindfulness, and improvisation.

Between warp and woof, these are both spaces and displacements. For form to appear, there must also be absence, the retreat of form. With many modern and contemporary artists, I am interested in the role of this 'between', or 'in between': can we ever become conscious of our own 'gaps' or absences? Do we ever know how much discontinuity is at work in what feels like a 'continuous' existence? But the idea of the 'gap' is not just important to identify. It is, I believe, fundamental to art, especially my artwork. When considering the aspect of the 'gap' in my work, it is appropriate to look at this concept in relation to my personal development.

### Petit Mal

Joseph Campbell speaks of visiting a guru in India, "He gave me a little meditation: "Where are you between thoughts?" That is to say, you are thinking all the time, and you have an image of yourself. Well, where are you between thoughts? Do you ever have a glimpse beyond your thinking of that which transcends anything you can think about yourself? That's the source field out of which all your energies are coming." <sup>9</sup>

Throughout my life I have learnt to focus my mind in a certain way due to a disorder called 'Petit Mal', a mild form of epilepsy. At times my brain has been unable to sustain a coherent train of thoughts due to a fraction of a second when the neural transmitters have failed to fire. This created a pattern in my early teens of dreaming a lot and having an aversion to communicating with words. I appeared normal and intelligent, as I was becoming adept at disguising the 'missing bits'. The blackouts were (and still are) so minute that they are not readily apparent to others.

I am grateful to have had this condition, as painful emotionally as it may have been, as it forced me to access expression from a transcended self at an early age. I had no choice, as the conceptual layer of consciousness was not working for me in a normal sense. I needed to listen hard to my intuition to understand what was going on. This became habitual, and the world of art and music and dance were the natural areas of study for me to pursue.

I discovered that these activities gave me relief from the blackouts and that through them I was able to achieve a stillness of mind. Due to my condition, I was able, at an early age to notice and appreciate the importance and the beauty of being in such a peaceful space, as opposed to a space of confusion,

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<sup>8</sup>Stark Smith, Nancy, 'Taking No For An Answer', *Contact Quarterly*, Vol 12 No 2, Spring/ Summer 1987, p. 3

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, Joseph, *Reflections on the Art of Living*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991, p. 189



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isolation and disconnection, which is how I felt if I forced my mind to speed up in order to compensate for what I had missed during my blackouts. I soon found out that it was in these gaps between thoughts that I was in fact 'somewhere else'. I don't know where, but I do know that when I fought these episodes, they became stronger. It was when I accepted my mind, and let it do what it did, that I began to embrace the dreamer in myself and found that the creative imagination flowed easily for me. This 'stillness of mind' therefore became very important to me, a contributing factor in my pursuit of the creative arts.

### Improvisation

" Listening  
To myself, and  
To my surroundings,  
To the song that rises from this moment  
in which I am contained –  
These dances rise up inside me  
and spin out beneath me,  
And it's as if I stand back, inside myself  
and observe .....  
Available to constant flow and change,  
I can balance  
at the edge of the unknown,  
and experience fearlessness." <sup>10</sup>

Dance has had a strong impact on my education as an artist, and I was exposed to its 'formal' influence at a very young age. It was only later in my years in Paris that I studied dance improvisation, which links strongly to my early drawing education, where I learnt not to 'try' or be forceful but to work more intuitively.

"We improvise the moment we cease to know what is going to happen." <sup>11</sup>

"Setting the mind loose from the ongoingness  
of everyday life  
to find what lies at the edge,  
behind our thinking, seeing." <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Tufnell, Miranda and Crickmay, Chris, *Body Space Image*, London: Virago Press, 1990, p. 48

<sup>11</sup> Tufnell, Miranda and Crickmay, Chris, *Body Space Image*, London: Virago Press, 1990, p. 46

<sup>12</sup> Tufnell, Miranda and Crickmay, Chris, *Body Space Image*, London: Virago Press, 1990, p. 46

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Any creative process is to an extent improvised, in the sense that it involves states of not knowing what comes next. For my purposes improvisation is important as a source of creativity and as a way of opening the imagination.

"Letting the mind float to find another order, another story." <sup>13</sup>

"Improvisation provides us with a means to excavating layers of experience, sensation, character, feeling that we normally rush through or suppress – to travel deeper and deeper into an ever enlarging and changing moment." <sup>14</sup>

Living forms are never totally contained but paradoxically they are porous. They embody combinations of predictability and chance that make them open to change and response to the environment. Often these structures are not manifested obviously in terms of external shape. The structures may exist internally, as rhythm or inner consistency, and are able to be intuitively comprehended in full, while being impossible to fully describe or plan. The way a person walks, their rhythms of speech, and handwriting, are examples of structures of this kind; so too are the structures within improvisation.

"Improvisations require different styles of thought at different moments in their evolution. A dialogue is needed between wildness and order – between setting the mind loose and measuring objectively." <sup>15</sup>

In my work I balance the proportions of preplanned, to open and improvised material. Formal decisions are raised to the level of broad strategy (in my case choice of materials, choice of slide image, space, scale...). The set form is found intuitively, and is open to change, which in turn creates room for improvisation.

## Mindfulness

I dream I am a snake sliding through the cracks of a huge 'skull' painting. The cracks are the lines that I drill into the paint and I feel a sense of balance, a relaxed alertness and stillness of mind as I slide smoothly through the openings before me. I can hear and feel the vibration of the drill, and it is perfect. It becomes a heartbeat, then everything changes. I see images of clothes, the drill suddenly slips and my passage is blocked so that I bump my head.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche calls mindfulness "the fortress of the mind", and "the friend of wisdom". <sup>16</sup>

Buddha taught that "the root of all our suffering is ignorance, but the root of ignorance itself is our mind's habitual tendency to distraction" <sup>17</sup>

Mindfulness is a Buddhist term to describe a discipline for focussing the mind away from distractive thought. Underlying the process of my painting practice is a commitment to an attitude of mindfulness. Practicing mindfulness helps me to escape the tyranny of overactive thought and feeling that makes me lose contact with the place of creativity (the Gap).

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<sup>13</sup> Tufnell, Miranda and Crickmay, Chris, *Body Space Image*, London: Virago Press, 1990, p. 46

<sup>14</sup> Tufnell, Miranda and Crickmay, Chris, *Body Space Image*, London: Virago Press, 1990, p. 46

<sup>15</sup> Tufnell, Miranda and Crickmay, Chris, *Body Space Image*, London, Virago Press, 1990, Introduction

<sup>16</sup> Tart, Charles T., *Living the Mindful Life*, Boston and London: Shambala, 1994, p.1

<sup>17</sup> Tart, Charles T., *Living the Mindful Life*, Boston and London: Shambala, 1994, p.1

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In yoga one is confronted with the difficulty of dealing with a mind that is inclined towards distraction away from the experience of each moment. Instead of staying with the body, thoughts steer our attention away from the body. Are these thoughts driven by fear perhaps, fear of discomfort, of uncertainty, of inadequacy, of failure? I believe that this is one of the major reasons for allowing distractions to occur. Unchecked, the result is a disconnection from, a discontinuity in, the creative process. This is what I observe in my work process in my studio. Striving for mindfulness can be confronting and demands a rigorous commitment and honesty to the self.

We can choose to face our difficulties with compassion, in the direction of change. In my yoga practice I am able to witness the pain which comes up in my body and mind in each asana. The weaknesses, the imbalances in the body, are all a reflection of my mind-state. Confronting these realisations is the same with the rest of my life. It is in the yoga that the patterns are more tangible to work with. The untrained mind will not stand still, and yoga is the intentional stopping of this movement. The body can be used as an instrument in becoming mindful. The objective in yoga is awareness of each moment. The body is anchored in the here and now. The body doesn't think about being present; the body is present. For example, simply bringing concentration to feeling the sensations present in the right shin, or listening and bringing attention to fully hearing the sounds in the environment, or looking at things in a way that really looks, rather than idly gazing; are all actions which bring the mind to the present.

Developing an understanding of pain is valuable in relation to my creative process. In facing pain, the first step is to acknowledge it, then to endure it with an internal softness and allowing it to exist, so that it can transform. The body and the pain that it carries signals in an identifiable language the condition that the mind is in.

The equivalent of 'pain' in my painting practice is a lack of inspiration, a blockage, in the same way that pain in the body signals a need for attention.

"Hardening in the body, hardening the brain, holding tension, -----results in an inability to absorb inspiration; the life-force; a paralysis." <sup>18</sup>

"The mind doesn't know fully until it feels fully in the body. Without experiencing in the body, the 'truth', our 'truth', is not known." <sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Thomson, Yoga class, Bali, April, 2001

<sup>19</sup> Peter Thomson, Glebe Yoga School, Sydney, Sept., 2000

## THE IMAGE

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### ARCHETYPES

"Jung has called an "archetypal image": a psychological symbol, spontaneously produced, which appears universally, both in dreams and in myths and rites." <sup>20</sup>

The archetype has always been important to me. Instinctively in my choice of subjects I have always looked for the potential to extract or reveal an essence or an archetype through an intensive and deconstructive work process. These archetypal images are nonspecific and unfixed. The image reflects the viewer's experience, which is in a state of flux. Potentially they show a moment of pause and stability, within the unfixed flux.

I think that all art has a life in immediate experience, as well as a life in the imagination. Archetypes arise when the immediate and instinctive is raised to a more complete and universal form. The images in the slides that I use have precisely this quality: they do not belong to any particular or organized tradition. They are personal, even accidental, yet they resonate beyond the person: they touch polarities of life and death, the immediate and the transcendent, the visible and the invisible. What characterizes the archetypal image is that it seems to change in front of our eyes, just as the sound produced by a musical instrument 'moves' along a path of notes.

"In the subconscious of contemporary man, mythology is still buoyant. It belongs to a higher spiritual plane than his conscious life. The most superficial being is crowded with symbols and the most logical person lives through images. Symbols never disappear from the field of reality; they can change their guise, but their role remains unchanged.

Music or smell, a thoughtful pause, a casual word, a landscape, can release nostalgic images and dreams. They always express much more than the person who experiences them can in turn convey in words.

Most people do not know how to verbalize such mental experiences, not from lack of intelligence, but because they cannot give sufficient weight to analytical language. It seems to me that these images can bring people closer more effectively and in a more fundamental way than analytical language.

Contemporary man may make light of these mental images, which does not alter the fact that he lives with them and through them. They are a real and undeniable part of human nature – they constitute the imagination.

To have imagination and to be aware of it is to benefit from possessing an inner richness and a spontaneous and endless flood of images. It means to see the world in its entirety, since the point of the images is to show all that which escapes conceptualization." <sup>21</sup>

### The Large Hands

In an early stage the Hand paintings appear to be a super realist style since at this stage the hands have

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<sup>20</sup> Campbell, Joseph, *Reflections on the Art of Living*, "Mythological Themes In Creative Literature and Art" op. Cit., p157, New York, Harper Collins Publishers, 1991, p. 279

<sup>21</sup> Magdalena Abakanowicz, 1974, Jacob, Mary Jane, *Abakanowicz*, Chicago, Abeville, 1974, p. 152

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yet to undergo what I call a 'mystifying process' (the final stage of spraying resin and smothering the hands with white pastel). At this initial stage the work seems to be a painting of a hand almost photographic in detail. The final stage of veiling the work allows the form beneath to breathe in its ambiguity. This quality reminds me of the metaphor of the iceberg – a mysterious undercurrent, a more expansive reality waiting beneath the surface, which aligns with something that is alive.

As they move from representational exactitude to something more elusive and ambiguous, the 'hand' paintings hover between the personal and the impersonal. They force us to look again at the hand, at the human body, so often used, so unreflectively experienced. Hands are our most expressive 'tools', more so even than eyes or tongues, yet these 'hand' paintings are not really about hands; they respond to something more elemental within the mind. I portray the hand as something fluid, in a dropped or hanging gesture. It is familiar, yet it is not an image we immediately attach meaning to in our conscious mind (such as other gestures like a 'thumbs up' or a 'victory' sign.) The dropped hands are reminders of an experience commonly felt: something outside the moment when the hand acts or works or even touches and moves. In this form they signify our unreflective relation to our bodies, to our physical reality. This work touches on an idea I have already mentioned - that of particular 'forms' which permeate human history in a subliminal way. I will call this the 'archetype', a common Jungian term.

"At stake in this work is something like a deliberate regression, both refined and cultivated, a return to the primordial sources and themes of art. Her recent works confirm such a movement. At the moment Melissa Coote is painting vast and obscure forms, no longer faces but bones from the skulls of giant animals – whales and wombats. It is nature and evolution, which is here also at its primordial stage. As far as colour, the artist is always sparing. She seems to want to banish everything to do with spectacle and effect, so that we are left face to face with "plastique" objects, which are at the same time objects of meditation. It is not a matter of simulating some cult now long gone or vanished into the distance, but rather, a question of summoning back the links between art and cult, art and ritual, reviving the power of works of art to absorb and bewitch us. What is bizarre, is that without there being a secret hidden, everything here is elusive and held back." <sup>22</sup>

## THE WARP

### Sacrifice <sup>23</sup>

I dream that I am in front of a huge mansion, my house. I am kneeling on the grass molding a sculpture with my hands as well as my whole body. It is in two pieces, like tree stumps. The core of the tree is like bronze or petrified wood yet at the same time quite malleable. During this very physical process I am watching the façade of the house crumble. As it is crumbling I am crying, and as I work with my hands more intensely and watch what is happening before me, my cries become wails and I surprise myself at how the wails reach deeper and deeper into myself towards an almost infinite depth.

In mid March there was a flood in my mother's garage where I had been storing all my work in plastic covered rolls before moving them to my new studio. I had a call from my mother that night, telling me to come over because my ten years of work was swimming in the garage. Most of the work was

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<sup>22</sup> Michaud, Yves, Panchout, Catherine, *Ateliers Au Feminin*, (translated from French by Lisabeth During, 2000) Paris: Au Meme Titre Editions, 1999, pp. 149-150

<sup>23</sup> 'Sacrifice': "A procedure whereby communication is established between the sacred and profane spheres by a victim, that is to say by an object destroyed in the course of the ceremony. It is the removal of impurity conferring sacredness." M.M Hubert and Mauss, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 19, 1961: Chicago, New York, Toronto, William Benton Pub., p.802

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damaged, and only a few were irreparable. At that moment of seeing the rolls bobbing up and down in the one metre deep water I realized their impermanent nature. I felt grief at this time, but I remember knowing I just had to stay present and appreciate that the inspiration for creating new work had not been taken away from me.

"When we emerge from nothing, when everything emerges from nothing, we see it all as a fresh new creation. This is non-attachment." <sup>24</sup>

The process of moving studios has also come to represent a sacrificial act of sorts. The ritual of packing and unpacking the past, letting go of one space for another, and bringing what is left into the present can be seen as another metaphor for my work.

These experiences are a reminder of the importance of regeneration in my work and process. It relates to my process of the scraping back, and of eliminating the unnecessary in order to reveal the life within.

The techniques that I employ with the work are regenerative. It is only through reduction that I can add more material, and this usually leads to further reduction and then to addition. I repeat this exercise until I feel an 'essence' emerging from the drawing. In this sense the work involves sacrifice, a reduction of unnecessary detail, which may paradoxically create more detail. This detail, arises out of a complex layered process, and builds a palpable 'pulse' of form and space in each work.

I have for a long time had a deep fascination with the myth of the cycle of life and death where the buried body is transformed through some type of resurrection. This myth, the cycle of rebirth, relates directly to my process and my artworks - the scraping back and the sacrifice of the redundant in order to reveal the 'essence', the life within.

## THE WEFT

### The Feminine

My work is also strongly influenced by an archetypal notion of the sacred feminine. Freud said that the feminine is more inaccessible (than the masculine) for both men and women because it is "before the beginning". <sup>25</sup> In one sense, Freud's description of the feminine as a timeless, wordless phenomenon, seems to me, very accurate. However I feel strongly that his understanding of it being more inaccessible is only appropriate to minds that are more oriented and ruled by reason and thought (as he seemed to be). In my experience this 'feminine' dimension is less tangible as it is subliminal yet just as accessible. It is this 'protospace', non-place, timelessness, the 'gap', that I choose to access in my work.

Through writing the paper, I can now see that my practice and my choice of images directly relate to some classic archetypal symbols of the female cycle - the moon and the snake.

The moon is prevalent in all my work but it most obviously appears in the 'Marsupial Skull Series 6-10'. (See photo) This suite of paintings is a strong reminder of the lunar cycles, even though they were not

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<sup>24</sup> Suzuki, Shunru, *Zen Mind Beginners Mind*, New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 2000, p. 67

<sup>25</sup> Clement, Catherine, and Kristeva, Julia, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, New York: Palgrave Press, 2001 p. 73

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originally intended to be. Although they are drawn from still lifes of wombat skulls seen from rotated angles; as finished paintings they remind most viewers more of the moon at its various monthly cycles. One is also reminded of the moon by the paintings' crusty surfaces suggesting a lunar landscape. My treatment of tonality may also suggest the light reflected on the moon, engulfed in darkness.

The moon makes its presence felt at night, governing darkness, that which cannot easily be seen, whereas the sun governs the external daily experience of life. A different experience of awareness can be experienced through the moon with its mysterious luminous beauty, which has the ability to draw us towards it, just as it has the power to draw the tides of the ocean, the most 'feminine' of the natural elements.

"The slim crescent of the new moon hangs delicately in the evening sky, and then she grows, like a pregnant belly, into the fullness of herself- an expression of abundance and fertility. Reaching a peak of roundness, lighting up the night sky almost eerily with her vibrant glow, the fullness completes itself and she begins to wane.

Slowly, slowly she dwindles to nothing, and there is complete darkness in the sky. And then out of the empty darkness, the sliver of crystal clear new light can be seen, and she is reborn. This is a mirror of a literal process that takes place within the body and the psyche of every woman every month, as well as for the living and dying process of which we are all a part." <sup>26</sup>

The snake, a more recent theme in my work, has in many cultures been viewed with reverence as a metaphor for the cycles of birth, life and death due to its cyclical shedding of the skin. That the snake lives on in a new and purified form after the skin has been shed has been universally used as a metaphor for the power of change, renewal and transformation, and also a symbol of everlasting life- the 'permanent'. <sup>27</sup>

Women and snakes share this pattern of cyclical shedding. The snake sheds its skin and the woman the lining of the womb during menstruation. In my painting technique, the stripping back, sanding, erasing, drilling are all part of the deconstructing process necessary to allow the essence/ new life to reveal itself.

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<sup>26</sup> Lara, Owen, *Honoring Menstruation*, The Crossing Press Freedom: California, 2000, p. 21

<sup>27</sup> Lara, Owen, *Honoring Menstruation*, The Crossing Press Freedom: California, 2000, p. 23

## THE FABRIC

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### Individuation

"In the last analysis, every life is the realization of a whole, that is of a self, for which reason this realization can be called 'individuation.' All life is bound to individual carriers who realize it, and it is simply inconceivable without them. But every carrier is charged with an individual destiny and destination, and the realization of this alone makes sense of life."<sup>28</sup>

I dream I am a jellyfish. I feel light shining through me. The different types of light affect my mood as I allow myself to be impregnated by it. The bright, piercing light makes me sad and a boiling sensation runs through me. Then there is a dark Prussian blue, which cools my brain and allows me to feel rested. I hear muffled sounds, which echo through me then feel myself sink into the sand. The soft, transparent jelly of my body becomes a multi-coloured diamond that changes with each different light.

I feel solid but clear and have now become part of a huge cliff that breaks off and comes smashing down to the rocks below. I start rolling and laughing and enjoy the crustiness of my rocky skin, which is slowly wearing away. The dry sun shines through me and I am now spinning through air and snow, quickly collecting enough white covering to make a snowball. I can feel both the chill of the ice and the warmth of the sun and as I notice this, the snow melts.

"The beauty of the colours in the dream was only a repetition of something seen in my memory."<sup>29</sup>

In order to create to my full potential from my own expression, I try to see myself as a transparent jewel, rather than a rigid identity. Firstly I must listen to and develop a trust in my own intuition. Then I can come from a stable inner place enabling me to be inspired by outside sources. Influences that are not absorbed from this stable place of intuition are not inspired, but are just 'ideas' and merely an intellectual pursuit.

"The most difficult of all possible tasks is to come to understand one's own mind."<sup>30</sup>

"Work from the tissue rather than the externals",<sup>31</sup>

"There is a vitality, a life force that is translated through you into action. And because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique, and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost."<sup>32</sup>

### Inspiration/ Intuition

"Intuitions come out of the silent mind; imagination is conceptual. There's a vast difference. That's why the development of insight does not come from thinking about things, it comes from the development of a silence of mind in which a clear vision, a seeing, can happen. The whole progress of insight, the

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<sup>28</sup> Jung Psychology and Alchemy, *The Collected Works of CG Jung*, vol. 12 NY: Bollingen Foundation 1953, p. 222

<sup>29</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* Oxford edition 99

<sup>30</sup> Goldstein, Joseph, *The Experience of Insight*, Boston and London: Shambala, 1987, p. 34

<sup>31</sup> Thomson, Peter, yoga class, Bali, April, 2001

<sup>32</sup> Quote by Martha Graham, Tufnell, Miranda and Crickmay, Chris, *Body Space Image*, London: Virago Press, 1990, p. 48



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whole development of understanding, comes at times when the mind is quiet. Then a sudden, "Aha, that's how things are!" In the Zen teachings of Huang Po, it talks about insight as being a sudden, wordless understanding. That kind of intuition has a certainty about it because it's not the product of some thought or image but rather a sudden clear perception of how things are."<sup>33</sup>

I understand inspiration and moments of awareness of perfection as being alike, the difference being that inspirations are often directives to action.

"The miracle of existence is that we are able to recognize perfection in beauty."<sup>34</sup>

It is possible to see 'perfect' images in the mind's eye simply because of their intangible and ethereal nature. Therefore the artist can 'see' perfectly but cannot 'do' perfectly as the physical artwork is only a vehicle for the mind's inspiration. Yet it contains perfection; it is a link between the concrete and transcendent.

There is a delicate balance between inspiration gained and lost with age. I feel I had more openness to inspiration as a child. A child has less of the entrenched conditions, has the space to dream and the physical energy to allow the mind to be more alive. With age comes recognition of this inspiration and sensibility, an ability to structure a lifestyle that supports this, and more independence.

My childhood allowed me a lot of space to be able to dream. My parents were able to make sure I had the opportunity to be with nature, and I feel fortunate in this respect. We spent most holidays on a farm, which consisted mainly of native bush. I spent my time walking and exploring the land, swimming in the creek and riding over the property on horses. These experiences had an affect on me as a person because I was happy and therefore able to absorb the tremendous spirit of the land. When a child is able to be open to such a strong force the impressions are held in that person's memory. This has allowed me to sustain a connection to the spirit of nature; similar to the openness a child may gain from the comforts of a loving parent or siblings. Children, however, are not developed in their ability to communicate to others as is required for an artist. It is only with maturity as an art practitioner that the creative process has enabled me to find a medium for expressing such early inspirations.

Inspiration can also come through other means. It can come from psychoactive drugs, or even just caffeine. It can come as the result of crisis situations such as illness, or extreme stress. It can also come from sexual energy, or simply space and a carefree life. All of these are strong experiences, which create big changes, but none of them are constant and ongoing and therefore dangerous for the artist to rely upon. An alternative way that I have found for accessing inspiration is to consciously strive for mindfulness either through meditation or focused awareness. This doesn't mean avoiding uncomfortable situations in life, but it also doesn't require an active search for extreme sensations. Once again I am referring to the 'stripping back' process, the theme of my work and practice.

'A heavy gypsy with an untamed beard and sparrow hands, who introduced himself as Melquiades, put on a bold public demonstration of what he himself called the eighth wonder of the learned alchemists of Macedonia. He went from house to house dragging two metal ingots and everybody was amazed to see pots, pans, tongs, and braziers tumble down from their places and beams creak from the desperation of nails and screws trying to emerge, and even objects that had been lost for a long time appeared from where they had been searched for most and went dragging along in turbulent confusion behind Melquiades' magical irons. 'Things have a life of' their own,' the gypsy proclaimed

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<sup>33</sup> Goldstein, Joseph, *The Experience of Insight*, Boston and London: Shambala, 1987, p. 68

<sup>34</sup> Haskell, Barbara, *Agnes Martin*, New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994, p. 10

<sup>35</sup> Tufnell, Miranda and Crickmay, Chris, *Body Space Image*, (from 'One Hundred Years of Solitude', Gabriel Marquez, Penguin, 1972 P115), London: 1990, Virago Press, p. 119

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with a harsh accent. 'It's simply a matter of waking up their souls.'<sup>35</sup>

## Intellect / Words

"It is quite commonly thought that the intellect is responsible for everything that is made and done. It is commonly thought that everything that is can be put into words. But there is a wide range of emotional response that we make that cannot be put into words."<sup>36</sup>

In Buddhism the intellect is the thinking and conceptual level of the mind. It can be trained, developed and used, or it can be a hindrance. In understanding my creative process I think that it is important to be aware of the various mind functions and the intellect is certainly a part of this. If there is a clear understanding of it's nature, then it will not be a hindrance. The confusion comes when we mistake the thoughts about things for the things themselves, confusing concept with reality. Thinking can hinder the awareness of perfection.

"My favourite piece is the one we hear all the time if we are quiet."<sup>37</sup>

Language, although powerful, is for Buddhism and many other philosophies, irrelevant in comparison to the experience of silent awareness. Such scepticism towards language is widespread in the mystical traditions of many cultures. If I have learned about the significance of silence and have begun to use it more fruitfully in my work, it is largely due to my study and practice of yoga. But my day to day work in the studio also teaches me the difficulty and the necessity of silence- the escape from the word. What is most important in my practice is the experience of the 'truth' within myself, which is free of ideas and opinions. Spontaneity (a manifestation of this 'truth' within myself) comes when the mind is silent, when the mind is on the intuitive level clearly noticing each moment.

"For Giacometti, seeing reality meant looking at the world as if it had just appeared for the first time. It meant inventing a new way of looking freed from the conventions which substitute concept for sensation and knowledge for vision."<sup>38</sup>

A good analogy for creating art is the transformation from a sitting meditation, to standing up. When I am in a place of nothing, I do not even realize what I am, I just sit. When I stand up I am 'there'. Similarly, when I create from the inner self, it is from a place beyond intellectual understanding, a wordless place of nothingness. When I make marks, I bring a taste of my inner self to the physical conscious world.

"At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards, at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.  
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.  
I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Haskell, Barbara, *Agnes Martin*, New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994, p. 10

<sup>37</sup> A Quote by John Cage, Tufnell, Miranda and Crickmay, Chris, *Body Space Image*, London: Virago Press, p. 186

<sup>38</sup> Juliet, Charles, *Giacometti*, London: 1986, Art Data, p. 20

<sup>39</sup> A poem, 'Burnt Norton', Quartet 3, by T.S. Eliot, from *Poetry Speaks*, Illinois: 2001, Sourcebook Inc., p.111

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## Nonverbal Communication

I dream that I am in a cave on the South Coast of N.S.W. It is a sandstone cave, and I have carved into the stone the faces that I've been painting in Paris – the Muses. They are a washy ochre and umber in colour, and they become three-dimensional and begin communicating with one another with gestures almost like rubbing heads and faces. Voices are coming out of them like the groan of a bear, or the call of a whale. It sounds like they are under water, perhaps the same as we would hear sounds from the womb before the understanding of words.



Muse Series 19-23, pastel on paper, 185 x 115cm each, Grand Palais, Paris 1993

It is fundamental to my work as an artist that I am able to communicate the emotional sphere, this experience of silence and active contemplation. Art contains wordless and silent meanings and is able to stimulate awareness of emotions otherwise screened. It seems appropriate here to compare human skills of communicating the wordless emotional spheres with other species.

"In humans, communication is made largely through either verbal abstraction or visual imagery. The former is basically spoken and written language, as we know it. Visual images however frequently transmit Gestalt impressions and provide our most meaningful intra species' emotional link: the curl of the lip, the tear, the turn of the eyes. Vision of course is also our major stereo tactic sense and our functions of recognition and location.

Imaging in the Cetacean world is primarily in the acoustic metaphor. Therein lies an incredible difference between human and cetacean communication. Echolocation is three-dimensional. For example one dolphin scanning another dolphin does not just receive an echo from the others' skin but from the interior body as well. In fact, far stronger echoes are raised from air-filled cavities and from bone within the animal. Furthermore the echoes from the many soft organs and surfaces within the animal are about as strong as the skin echo."<sup>40</sup>

In relation to my work, my interest in cetacean communication abilities inspires me to see the vast possibilities that are available when working from a different level of consciousness. Instead of being overwhelmed by the discipline involved, I feel it is important to remind myself of how exciting this unknown realm is. Questions are raised, such as what an instant communication of feelings or emotions would be like, and how human interaction would be affected if we too had access to non-verbal communication.

I have always enjoyed having my whole body under water, whether in the bath, the sea, a dam or a creek. It is the excitement of not being able to see clearly and the skin being cocooned from the usual outside world and the hearing being directed inwards, so that I can hear inside myself. I see a strong parallel here in the experience I am now striving for in my art.

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<sup>40</sup> Sutphen, John, *Mind in the Waters*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, p. 69

## THE DYES

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### My Technique

I dream that I am about to leave the family farm to fly back to France. Suddenly I realise I have forgotten the wombat skull that I had planned to take to Paris, so I go to get it from the verandah. As I pick it up it feels fragile and I panic as the skull crumbles and falls to the ground in a heap of ash. I hold onto the remaining piece in my right hand, my working hand. It is a core piece of bone that is still solid but black from fire.

There is a consistent sequence I follow in my methods of work- in my choice of subject and materials. As I have argued, many of the subjects come from the realm of elemental nature- both the human body and non human nature. Once I have made a slide of my chosen subject I then make a series of works from this singular slide. In each drawing I use a combination of organic pigments, pastels, gum resin and glue, which is layered and finished by sanding, drilling and polishing. I begin with an initial background of dripping and layering home brewed paints. The technique becomes relatively complex, but I am guided throughout by the materials' unique properties. At the same time that I manipulate the materials into the forms that I want, I am forced to allow the materials to manifest their own processes.



Studio, Paris 1995, working on Skull 1,  
pastel, pigment and resin on paper

When I initially became interested in drawing the skulls of whales and wombats my fascination was purely an attraction to their shape and form. The skulls seemed to reference the female anatomy- pubis, uterus, womb, ovaries. I was also attracted to the whiteness of the skull bones in their dry and brittle state. As I studied these inanimate bones I had an urge to make paintings that would infuse them with life again.

When I projected slides of the first skull images in my small Paris studio they became greatly enlarged. I used a wide-angle lens to achieve the scale and found it physically impossible to stand at any great distance from the works. This allowed me to be totally immersed in their presence, an experience I came to enjoy immensely and repeated.

As the series progressed, I discovered that I could achieve a bone like quality in the white paint when it was sanded, covered in black pastel, sanded repetitively, blackened repetitively then polished. Black pastel was then rubbed into black paint, then rubbed again and sanded back. The rubbing back is repeated as the surface becomes deeper and deeper. In these processes I explored the differences in the depth of blackness as light emerged through the layering.

Responding to these particular techniques I began to make my own black pastels, comparing the different effects of adding blue, red or green to the black pigment. I began making my own pigment: here I collected the stones of summer fruits, cooking them over a long period of time until they left black soot on the interior of the lid of the casserole dish. This pigment was blacker than any prepared pigment I could buy.

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I also mixed various gum resins (red, yellow, black, and clear) with alcohol, which I sprayed and rubbed onto the work to allow a deeper black to appear. By accident I discovered that different dilutions and different quantities of sprayed resin could create different effects on the paintings. I found I could polish and crack <sup>41</sup> the layers of paint, then later create a 'veil' between the form and the surface, finishing it by rubbing white pigment over the resin.

One of the thrills in working with my technique is watching the uniqueness of each final surface in relation to the other finished works. I discovered that each step from beginning to end has an effect on the luminosity or depth of the image. My organic approach to the materiality (the variable mixing of glues, resin, pigments) and the haphazard application of these materials produces a unique and unrepeatable drawing.

The use of bones brings into play associations with death and also with spirit. Just as the bones surviving after the death of the body suggests the tension between permanence and impermanence, so the process performed in the development of the technique and its material effects also evokes the movement between the permanent and the vanishing, the visible and the invisible. The material and the content respond to each other, as they all relate to this 'stripping back process'. By 'stripping back' I mean the shedding of the old, the process, which allows new form to arise in the same way that the snake sheds its skin in order to grow.

Each of my works feeds off the preceding one morphologically. At the same time, the concentration required involves a high degree of intuitive thought and awareness in the moment, making the work in the studio particularly demanding. Upon reflection, I have come to realise that the constraints of my technique enable the free play of intuition, which in turn enables me to allow the materials to express themselves. The slow processes of layering and de-layering in my techniques allow this seemingly contradictory process to occur. In addition, I need concentrated periods of time with the work to recognise the correlated shifts that occur in my psyche.



Studio, Paris, 1998

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<sup>41</sup> The cracking was achieved by exposing the painting to direct sunlight in summer or extreme heat of the fire in winter, resulting from different coefficients of expansion.

## THE WEAVER AND HER THREADS

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"I do, I undo, I redo" <sup>42</sup>

Although I work from slides of still lifes, I have no interest in refiguring the visible world. My aim is to use these images as a base, which then allows a new process to come into being. Louise Bourgeois has been a great inspiration for me with her ability to translate elements of her personal history into a symbolic language of the body. Bourgeois's work "taken over its remarkable duration- over half this century- performs a vigorous, even savage act of restoration and renovation on the tired humanist language of the body." <sup>43</sup>

### Recent Work

More recently I have been interested in snake spines, a subject that has taken my process one step further. Instead of finding bones of wombats and whales I now have to begin with the snake in the flesh, as the skeleton is too fragile to find unattached by flesh. This has led me to the fascinating procedure of breeding enough dermestored beetles to delicately savage the snakes thus revealing the spine.

I watch new beetles appear and the short lived ones die as their life cycle is fast. They feed off dry meat so I have had to skin and gut the dead snakes and dry them. This process of breeding the beetles and then the stripping back of the snakes' flesh is similar to what I then do in my painting. I build up the layers of paint so that I can then start stripping them back. The creative act of stripping back is finally carried out by the viewer of the completed work whose eyes look through the veiled surface to their interpretation of what lies underneath.

The snake skeleton when separated from its flesh becomes extremely fragile. I will document the skeleton but it is certain that it will eventually perish like all material things in life. The paintings I make are also ephemeral, but there will hopefully be some aspect of this whole process that is permanent. The permanent quality comes from the visual experience of seeing the work and the effect on the viewer's memory sense. A shift of consciousness and ignition of the 'unseen', coming from the 'seen', leads to the permanent. It is not the recognition that is permanent; it is the movement of the life force in the viewer, which is permanent.

The Vagina paintings present what is underneath the visible. Like the 'iceberg' metaphor, it is the interiority, that which can not be seen which holds the fundamental underlying force of the painting. The folds of the labia suggest the peeling back, or contrarily the masking/ veiling of the place which is unfamiliar yet familiar. The vagina is the familiar place we once came through, it is sexually felt by both sexes, yet it is also unfamiliar in that it is hidden, unseen. These works are a continuation of the constant search I have towards the unseen. As long as the body is kept intact, all that can be seen through this opening (as too in the Eye paintings, which I have also begun working on) is a dark void. These aspects of the void are a metaphor of my creative work process of looking inwards to find the silence the 'gap' the emptiness which gives me space to create from.

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<sup>42</sup> Written by Louise Bourgeois, 2000, quoted in: Warner, Marina, *Louise Bourgeois*, Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd, 2000, London

<sup>43</sup> Warner, Marina, *Louise Bourgeois*, Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd, 2000, London



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## Contradictory Phenomena

I have an interest in what I call contradictory phenomena. I work with the opposition of light with dark, as I erase back the black pigment to reveal the underlying white paint. The intention behind this treatment of tone is to create a glowing effect, an effect of the form expanding. Yet at the same time the black surrounding the form (intentionally made blackest close to the form) suggests the contradictory movement of contraction embracing the expansion. The Skull paintings and the Vagina paintings both portray qualities of forms that mask or shield, yet at the same time have fissures which allow an opening.

The black paintings although black have a polished surface, which picks up light. As the viewer walks around the painting it will change from a deep matte black to a changing sinewy, brilliant surface. This is achieved by rubbing black pigment into the rough resin surface.

As I have already mentioned, my treatment of materials allows a form of chaos within a pre-set order. Also my technique holds the paradox of layering the surface with stripping back, by rubbing and scrubbing and drilling. I then rebuild the form, and veil it with resin and pigment. This final veiling contrarily directs the viewer to partake in the stripping back procedure only this time with the eyes (reading the image beneath the veils).

The normally macabre subject of a sliced cadaver is contradicted by an approach to the form, which is in my interpretation uplifting (the slide has been vertically stretched, digitally). I enjoy this contradiction of the morbid with the 'beautiful'. There is also the contradictory theme of life and death. The images I choose to work with are linked to death (except for the Hands), stripped back of life, which allows me to infuse new life into them.

I do feel that opposites need not be thought of as mutually exclusive; rather that they may encompass one another as part of the same structure.

"Chaos can be structure as non-chaos. That we know from Jackson Pollock." <sup>44</sup>

## The Ephemeral and the Permanent

I would not associate my choice of using ephemeral materials with the 'anti-form' and 'process' movements of the 1960's <sup>45</sup> - the work of artists such as Nauman, Morris, Serra, Smithson. While these artists challenged the institutionalization of art especially the conventions of the gallery, the orientation towards display and the eye of a privileged viewer, I am less interested in subverting the forms and practices of traditional art. But I do share with them the interest in the materials and the relation to a (non- art) environment, a 'deeper' ecology, even though for me this is a personal move rather than a political one. My interest is in the juxtaposition of the permanent and the ephemeral.

The materiality of my work is paradoxically ephemeral. The unfixed, ephemeral quality of the pigment

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<sup>44</sup> Written by Eva Hesse, 1966, quoted by Bill Barrette in: *Eva Hesse Sculpture*, New York, Timken Publishers, P 17

<sup>45</sup> These movements correspond to Arte Povera in Europe, consisting of installations of random pilings and informal accumulations of industrial materials.

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surface is vital, because if some one touches it they are marked. Although I prefer the work not to be touched too much in fear of it being ruined, I enjoy the realization that human contact can affect both the painting and the person. The work is alive, organic, impermanent: just as it is when viewed from a distance as a finished painting.

The resin (usually mastic) however gives the work protection where it is applied heavily. Mastic is one of the strongest, long lasting organic sealers available; and was used on the still remaining frescos of Classical Greek time (400 BC). I like the idea that perhaps in one hundred years time, because of this choice of contradicting materials- the combination of ephemeral and protective, there will remain a partial image, holding a timeless presence. This reminds me of the inspiring Greek and Gothic heads, which I feel express so much more in their reduced form than they would have originally in their complete form. In a sense I am not only using a technique of layering and scraping back and veiling to reveal the unseen, the essence, the underlying force. I am also looking forward in time for the work; hoping that the materials themselves will continue this cycle of change where the disintegration of materials allows another life to be seen. This new life reveals that which remains and has 'stood the tests of time'- the elastic and abiding essence.



## THE SPIRAL

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I dream that I am starting my first class at a dance academy in New York. It is in a building of a similar design to the uptown Guggenheim Museum, but much taller. The class is on the highest floor and it is exhausting climbing the spiral staircase to the top, but I have a lot of energy. I am about to start dancing when one of the older students comes up to me and says 'Have you taken the two drugs?' I say no, and he replies 'Here, this one is for the flow, it keeps you fluid; the other is to keep your mind sharp.' I realise I need tap water from downstairs to take them so I go back down the long spiral staircase and notice for the first time a whole series of paintings and drawings presented on the floor so that they can only be seen on descent. They are large scaled drawings of fish, black and heavily worked with charcoal. The more I look at them the more peaceful I feel. They seem to pull me towards them and sharpen my mind as I descend the stairs. When I finally reach the tap I realise I don't want to take the drugs anymore or return to the dance class.

I see a parallel in the 'spinning of the thread' - the initial and vital strengthening of the fibre of the tapestry, to a repetitive theme in my dreams, the 'spiral'. The spiral could be seen as a metaphor for my 'spiralling' artistic development, in its repetition and circling. My search for the 'source', a 'truth', is first and foremost a movement away from the exclusively linear <sup>46</sup> view of life, that which proceeds in one direction only, the future. The movement to the centre of the spiral alludes to the place I strive for in practising mindfulness, yoga, improvisation meditation and painting- being present. Instead of searching for, 'out there', in the future, the 'out there' changes to a search within and begins at the exact spot where I stand, that is in the present. This present, to which I return in the spiral contains a promise of renewal and of change. There is the paradox in which passing time is also a return to the source, offering cyclic renewal.

The spiral route shows not only the properties of a progression of linear time but circulates sharing the characteristics of a graded development, one that leads to different levels of understanding. It moves from the outer level of the material to the level of the inner psyche.

The delineating spiral movement thus incorporates the return to familiar experiences, which however change their meaning and purpose every time a new round of the spiral is completed. I see a parallel here in relation to my work, in that my technique repetitively returns to the same materials and subject yet no painting is ever the same in its completed form.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope worked on the shroud of her father-in-law by day, and by night would unpick the web, hoping that this would help to resist her unwanted suitors.

"The philosopher Adriana Cavarero comments on this female work of repair: 'Penelope, famous for her extraordinary act of unweaving, turns into an emblem of the opposite act. She weaves together soul and body, she reties the threads of a thick fabric where embodiedness is knotted to the soul, and most of all to thought, the part of the soul that (male) philosophers wish to untie from the body more than anything else. Penelope tangles and holds together what philosophy wants to separate. She brings back the act of thinking to a life marked by birth and death. She intertwines and holds together the elements of the living world, the only real world, allowing the philosophers to persist in their desire to inhabit the world above...'

Penelope is indeed a weaver.'"<sup>47</sup>

I dream I am spiralling inwards, spiralling my own body into its central axis. As I continue the spiral, my body diminishes into this central spot and I go further and further into the micro. The dream changes and I spin around the other way, spiraling outwards this time. I notice I have become a spider and I can

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<sup>46</sup> 'Linear', from past to future

<sup>47</sup> Warner, Marina, Louise Bourgeois, Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd, 2000, London; in reference to Cavarero, Adriana, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. Serena Anderlini D'Onofrio and Aine O'Healy, Cambridge 1995, pp. 28- 29.

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hear this murmuring voice repeating "embeiria" .<sup>48</sup> It starts off very fast and at first it sounds like the vibration of an engine. Then as the spiral expands the sound becomes more defined and becomes a long repetitive " e m b e i r i a ". I soon notice I am weaving over and under the threads of the web. By the end of the dream, the web coming out of me is now one long snake. When I see this, I cut the snake, which has been attached to me, and I see the severed cross-section. It looks like an eye- the edge is the lid; the layers of skin are the white; the guts are the iris, colourful and sinewy green, red, blue, yellow; and the spine and its marrow is the void of the black pupil.

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<sup>48</sup> 'Embeiria' is a Greek word which means 'knowledge gained'.

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## JOURNALS

### April 1

Having finished the triptych of longitudinal slices of the human torso I have now begun working from a new slide. It shows torso perspectives sliced from the left to the right of the body. I have stretched them on the computer, making them taller so that they once again have the quality of tree trunks.

The slices, as opposed to the contained forms (skulls, heads, hands), reveal the interior form rather than the exterior form. They are a glimpse of a mystery that the skin normally veils and protects. They have currents of light circulating through them. The flesh (white) acts as a 'container' in the composition. Some of the forms, especially around the pubic area seem to have pressure and magnetic tendencies of energy. The constant interior play, energetically and physically, between weight and lightness, creates a sense of upliftment.

I plan to make them all very different tonally, some darker than others, yet they will all have currents of light circulating through them. The black and white quality accentuates a certain rhythm or pattern which reminds me of chakra circulations.

In yoga class Peter Thomson has been discussing 'asanas' in relation to different chakras - open postures, high chakras, high tone- inverted postures, low chakras, low tone. I see the patterning in the torso painting as having the same relationship.

They look like they'll be excruciatingly time consuming to paint with so much detail and linear work, which will be drilled. At this point I can only go ahead with painting and follow the materials' process to see the outcome, what direction to take, especially with the first one.

### April 6

When looking at my work I would like the viewer to notice, as I do, that it is not pointing to something other than what it is. Unlike strictly representational art, my art does not point to or mirror 'reality'. I would like my work to be seen through a direct experience, about the non-conceptual moment of seeing. The experience is somatic, and when it is successful, there is no need to think in words.

"It is interesting that concepts remain fixed while reality is always in flux." <sup>49</sup>

### April 8

The work is not intended to be representative or even conceptual; the image or representational figure almost disappears. The painting is intended as a vehicle for the viewer to access a less mediated moment of subjective experience.

### April 12

Conceptual art seems to become problematic to me only when the intellect becomes the 'whole' at the expense of the 'being', or when the concepts are used to protect the artist, enabling him/her to walk away from having to labour with emotional challenges.

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<sup>49</sup> Goldstein, Joseph, *The Experience of Insight*, Boston and London: 1987, Shambhala Pub., p. 33

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**April 15**

In living and creating I ask myself what it is like to live in a world and to work a process attentively, not blinded by convention nor rushed into response by a need to perform. As my practice explores these moments, subjectivity does not mean being imprisoned by the personal. I do not wish to control the viewer or the image with meanings but to allow the painting, an object, an idea, a work to become a bridge, a way of perhaps passing out of the ordinary to another state of awareness. In western culture these meditative moments are treated as extraordinary, exceptional, for an elite. Through these paintings I ask myself and hopefully others what are our expectations of what is ordinary.

**April 30**

Having completed the frontal torso I can now say - yes - it was excruciatingly time-consuming. There is something about it being frontal that emphasises the somatic experience, perhaps more so for a woman as I can feel the organs portrayed in the painting and this is a very emotional experience for me. It may be to do with the scale (two metres tall). Being frontal also allows a more instantaneous reaction because of the balance of left and right symmetry: the same relationship in the positioning of the brain's left and right hemispheres. The centrality placement of the slice pulls my experience into the core of the subject.

Looking at this piece I can now understand my desire to artificially stretch the image. Stretching it creates an experience that I can more easily relate to, as the subject becomes closer to my own body shape and posture. Looking at the finished work it speaks to me as an existential self- portrait, revealing the internal psychological realm of 'me' rather than the exterior personality.

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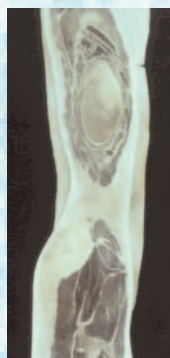
An MA (Hons) Thesis  
The University Of Western Sydney Nepean

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by Melissa Coote

Februrary 2002

Supervisor: Joan Grounds





'Hand A', pastel, pigment and resin on paper 230x133 cm, Sydney, 2001



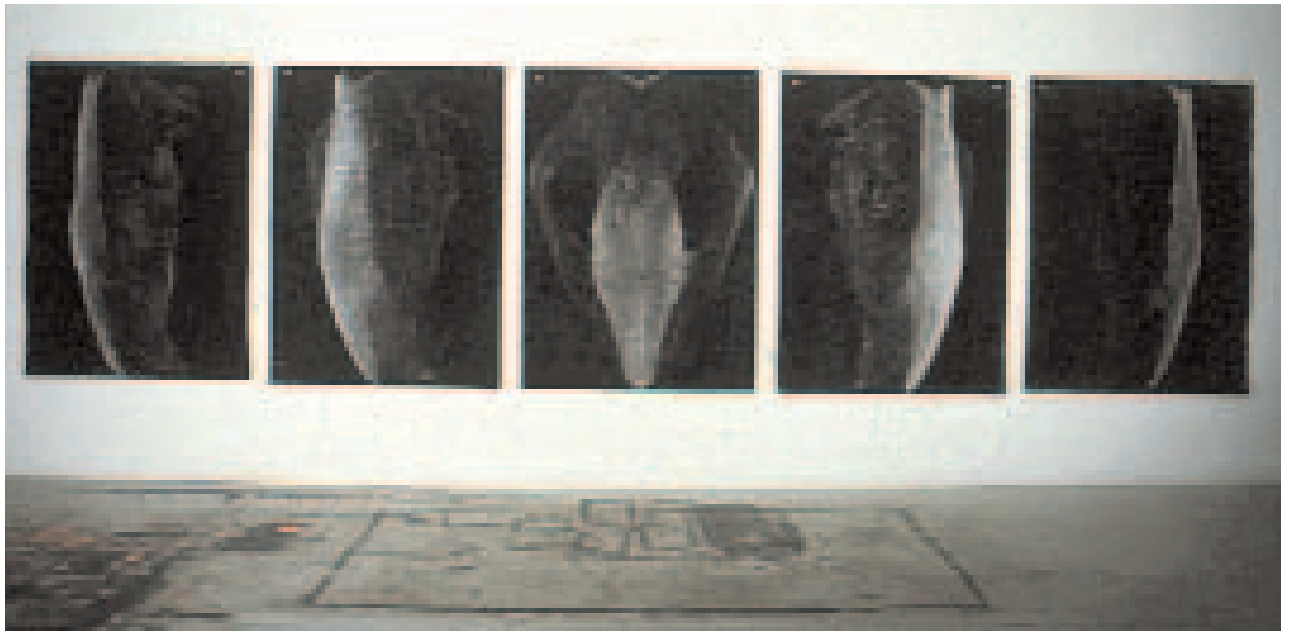


'Pressing', pastel, pigment and resin on paper 230x133 cm, Paris, 1999





'Muse 25', pastel, pigment and resin on paper, 195x130 cm, Paris, 1997



'Marsupial Skull Series 6 - 10', pastel, pigment and resin on paper each 153x102 cm Paris studio, 1996



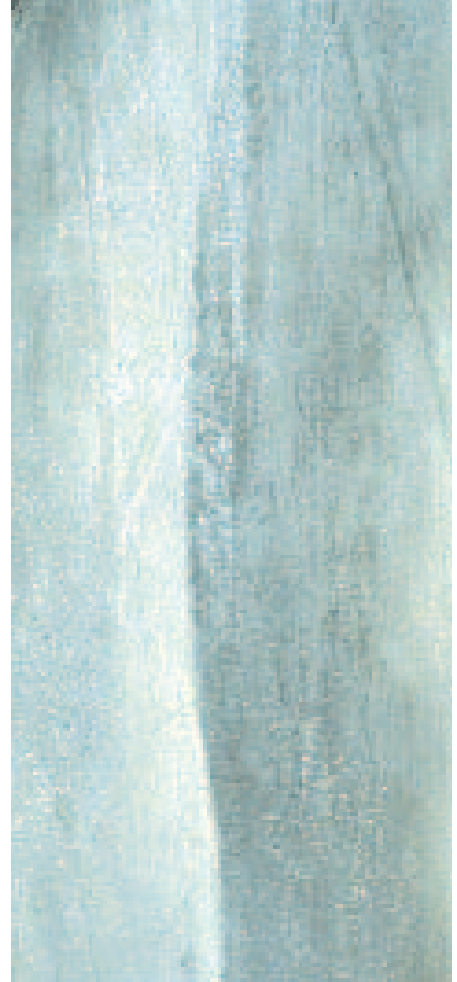
'Torso 1', pastel, pigment and resin on paper, 235x115 cm, Sydney, 2000



Installation shot of 'Torsos 1, 2, 3', Mori Gallery, Sydney, 2000



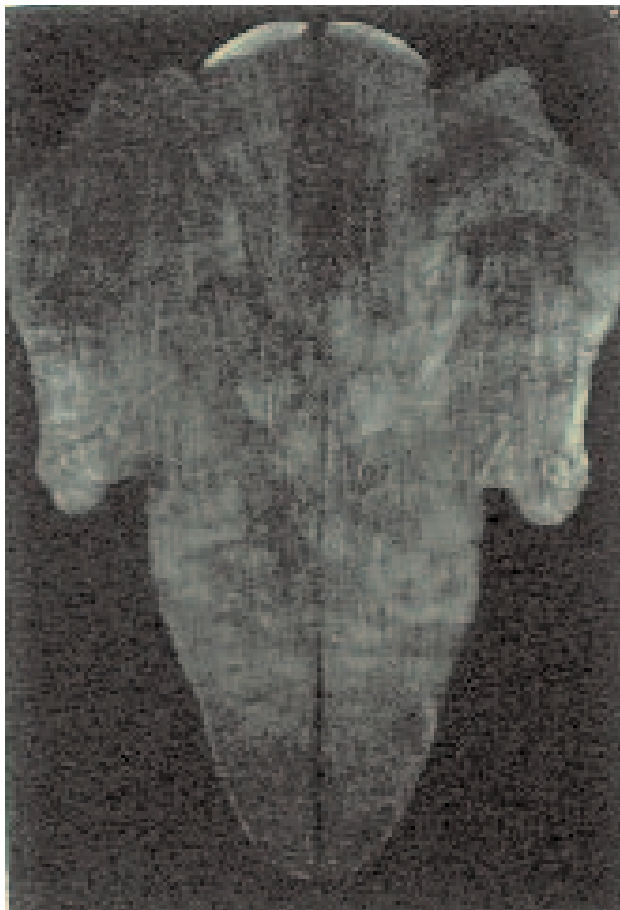
'Whale Skull E', pastel, pigment and resin on paper 192x133 cm Paris, 1998



Details of 'Torso 3', pastel, pigment and resin on paper, 50x30 cm



'Marsupial Profile 3', pastel, pigment and resin on paper 115x56 cm, Paris, 1999



'Whale Skulls A, B', pastel, pigment and resin on paper 190x133 cm Paris, 1997





'Untitled 2', pastel, pigment and resin on paper 235x114 cm, Sydney, 2001



'Torso A', pastel, pigment and resin on paper, 230x133 cm, Sydney, 2001



Installation shot of 'Hands 1, 2, A', Mori Gallery, Sydney, 2001

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Sydney, 2000

Details of Torso 3  
pastel, pigment and resin on paper  
50x30 cm

Torso A  
pastel, pigment and resin on paper  
230x133 cm  
Sydney, 2001