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The Metaphysics of Space  
*Painting a Body of Light*

EXEGESIS SUBMITTED IN PART FULFILMENT FOR THE  
DEGREE OF THE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY OF  
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## **Declaration of Originality**

I, **E. G. Whateley** ..... hereby declare  
that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project  
undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless  
otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas,  
references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.

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The Metaphysics of Space:  
*Painting a Body of Light*

**ABSTRACT**

This investigation explores an invitation to the metaphysical—to the spiritual—through the visual language of painting. As an abstract painter and a person of faith, abstraction affords me a contemporary, non-prescriptive language for my thesis; above all it offers me the potential to explore space and light as both subject and medium in this project.

This research builds on the tradition of Western religious painting—where three-dimensional space is interpreted into two-dimensional space for the purposes of inspiring the viewer to imagine and engage with the metaphysical. My encounters with historic sacred paintings and with the liturgical cycle whilst on monastic retreat, directed my investigations to two approaches towards luminosity in paint: materialising light through the materials used and painting the changing natural light experienced. This is a reflection of two identified intentions underpinning historic sacred works of art: the devotional purpose and the narrative didactic objective. These experiences of light and space in the company of religious paintings and in sacred environments gave me the conceptual and methodological framework of affect with which to structure my enquiry.

My intention is to create a body of paintings that offers new opportunities of experiencing the metaphysical—based on historic imaginings of the metaphysical—by stimulating the viewer’s intuitive sense of interior and exterior space experienced through the body. This research takes the form of a series of painted investigations into the nature of light and space, in which I use both interactive materials and colour interactions as facilitative devices for exploring the spiritual potential of the two-dimensional image.



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## Introduction

Western religious painting has been a site of exploration for imagining and interpreting the metaphysical and sacred for thousands of years. Painters have long shared a common preoccupation: how to translate three-dimensional space into two-dimensional form, to be understood as metaphysical space. As an abstract painter and a person of faith, I remain captivated by the same question. In my practice, abstraction offers me a contemporary, non-prescriptive language with which to communicate. I am drawn to the potential of abstract painting to communicate light and space in my quest for engendering a metaphysical encounter through painting.<sup>1</sup>

My painting offers an invitation to the metaphysical—and more particularly to the spiritual—through an examination of and contribution to the visual language of painting. The overall doctoral project takes the form of an exegesis that supports the work—a body of paintings—made between 2007 and 2015. The exegesis traces the journey to the final body of work, *The Metaphysics of Space: Painting a Body of Light*, exhibited in 2015. Using a methodology of deconstruction pertinent to reductive abstraction: it follows the evolution of my practice through a repeating process of hypothesis and visual interpretation, contemplation and assessment. It introduces and elaborates on theory underpinning the body of works and traces my development of an experimental methodology of practice based on the conscious use of *affect*: the facilitation of particular psychological and/or bodily responses in the viewer through the manipulation of visual perception. It revisits and reinterprets the intentions and methods of affect found in Western religious art, and in particular found in the viewer/believer's sensory experience and sensual apprehension, (the aesthesis and synesthesia), of the Medieval icon; “a synesthetic experience in which the whole body is engaged” when encountered in facilitative space.<sup>2</sup>

### Affect

The study of affect is a relatively new field of research within the social sciences and particularly within art theory. Through philosophical and psychological enquiry it seeks

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk Varnedoe in *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art since Pollock*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 47, discusses the definition and genealogy of the meaning and legacy of abstraction and abstract art. I am referencing the original meaning of abstraction as “abstractus,” to “draw away from,” using a reductive process to distil elements from historic sacred paintings, whilst acknowledging my Post-Modern hybridised position in contemporary art.

<sup>2</sup> Bissera V. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon” in *The Art Bulletin*, 88: no.4, (U.S.A.: Routledge, 2006), 631.

to explore bodily experience as more than conscious thought or defined emotional response. Philosopher Brian Massumi's definition of affect in his translation of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Deleuze and Guattari, states,

L'affect, (Spinoza's *affectus*), is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of a body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body to act. L'affection, (Spinoza's *affection*), is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting body...<sup>3</sup>

Massumi separates affect from emotion and feeling, defining affect as “unformed and unstructured,” maintaining that it remains outside conscious awareness;<sup>4</sup> but approaching affect from the field of psychology, art theorist Susan Best provides another viewpoint. In her pioneering work *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde*, Best draws on key thinkers from the fields of philosophy and art history, as well as from psychoanalysis—such as Sigmund Freud, André Green, and Silvan Tomkins—to add interpretive breadth for exploration of the manifestation of affect in different forms of art practice, applying the concept of affect to analyse various contemporary artists. Best prefers the position offered by Ruth Stein who defines affect as,

...a more comprehensive term including all the thinkable components belonging to this domain, and emotion as the complex mixture of affect and our previous experience with an affect, as a strongly felt feeling, or as just a feeling.<sup>5</sup>

According to Best the lack of a consideration of feeling, (or *affect*), has been the result of: a denial of aesthetics and aesthetic concerns within the discipline of art history; the promotion of an “anaesthetic” attitude found in such movements as minimalism;<sup>6</sup> and,

...a methodological blindspot—the dominant social historical or semiological/poststructural approaches to art do not consider the communicative function of feeling.<sup>7</sup>

In this project I have drawn considerable inspiration from Best's work, and like Best I prefer to follow the more generalist definition of affect given by Stein. However, it is

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Massumi, “Translator's Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum Books, 2004) xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement Affect, Sensation*, (Durham, U.S.A: Duke University Press, 2002), 260.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Stein, “Psychoanalytic Theories of Affect (1991)” in *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-garde*, Susan Best (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Best, *Visualizing Feeling*, 30.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

important to note that this is not a thesis about the theory of affect. As such I will not be offering an extensive literature review of the intellectual genealogy of the concept. Rather I provide an exegesis on how I have interpreted the term as a means of understanding my own experience of sacred works and my own practice as an artist. While Best applies the concept of affect through analysis of diverse artists who use various media, in my research I have interpreted affect solely in relation to the genre of Western sacred painting; culminating in *The Metaphysics of Space: Painting a Body of Light* (2015), in which I apply the theory of affect to the medium of abstract painting.

## Genesis

The genesis of my exploration of *affect* in painting began during the early stages of my doctoral studies in the School of Art at the Australian National University. As part of my candidature I embarked on a field trip to Europe. This encounter with sacred works by significant artists sharing my metaphysical preoccupations, was catalytic for me. It was not until I experienced these historic European paintings in situ—asking my research question: how might I offer an invitation to the metaphysical<sup>8</sup>, to the spiritual<sup>9</sup>, through the language of abstract painting?—that I identified the conceptual framework of affect pertinent to the research. Paintings by early Renaissance artists such as Fra Angelico and twentieth century works by Mark Rothko gave me multidimensional experiences that at the time of encounter I best described as *affective*. When in the company of *The Coronation of the Virgin* (figs. 0.2 & 2.1), I experienced the ambiguous composition and light-performative surface as a space for my imagination and intellect to roam, my spirit to hover, and my body to feel present. Rather than being confused by the compositional contradictions, I experienced sustained engagement by them. *Affect* seemed to be the only term that implied the breadth of such experiences for me and I realised that this motivation to affect the viewer/believer, must have been integral to the imperative of Western religious painting.

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<sup>8</sup> In “Metaphysics”, *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/N095> (accessed June 6, 2013); Craig defines metaphysics as the broad area of philosophical enquiry concerned with the nature of existence and the investigation of what is real. It is close to the ontological question, what is being and what types of things exist? Metaphysical is used as a general theoretical and conceptual framework within which spiritual is a particularised form.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term “spiritual” to mean, of the spirit, understood as the incorporeal nature of humankind, in contrast with the corporeal nature. Dualistic thinking, which separated form (or essence) from matter, was theorised by Plato and developed by Aristotle in the 4th century BCE. This Greek philosophical tradition was applied to Catholic theology and the teaching of the Church as a means of conceptualising spirit and matter as separate, and privileging the former over the latter. A contemporary theology of the spirit can be found in Tom Wright’s book, *Surprised by Hope*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007), 100-103, 165-176.



On my return to Australia, I discovered art theorist Susan Best's work on the *affective* dimensions of art. Prior to the trip I had been attempting to explore material mystery through the metaphor of ambiguous spaces, working objectively from my position as painter. However, my encounters with the sacred works were multifarious and multidimensional. I had interacted with these paintings from independent yet overlapping viewpoints: I had engaged with the works objectively, as a *researching artist* and I had engaged with them subjectively as a *viewer* and as a *person of faith*.<sup>10</sup> I was interpreting the works intellectually, physiologically and spiritually.



**Fig. 0.1.** *Viewing The Angels in Adoration by Fra Angelico at Musée du Louvre, (2009)*

For example, in relation to the use of gold leaf (fig. 0.1), when analysing how the material functioned for me as an *artist*, I was aware of its qualities as a compositional material on the painting's surface, as a *viewer* I was intrigued by the play of reflected light in my personal space, and as a *person of faith* I was simultaneously conscious of the symbolism of light and of feeling a sense of my interior spirit lifting within my body. I could interpret the symbolism of light through the research lens of art history,<sup>11</sup> through my body's responses or through the lens of faith. This offered me a compelling challenge, if my work was to build on the heritage of Western religious painting, I needed to consider

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<sup>10</sup> The generic term "person of faith" is used to avoid the suggestion that one religion is being promoted over another; according to Martin Palmer in *World Religions*, ed. Martin Palmer (London: Harper Collins, 2002), 237, whilst faith may vary in significance within a religion it is a common term understood to mean "an attitude of trust ... relating the worshipper to his or her God or religion."

<sup>11</sup> David Summers in *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, (London: Phaidon, 2003), 467-485, offers an historical and art historical account of light as a theme.

their original affective intentions. I began to ask—how might I offer the viewer an *affective invitation* to the metaphysical, to the spiritual, through the language of abstraction?

The formal elements of the paintings were integral to the affects I received and I analysed the spatial mechanics of these European works in conjunction with reading the *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting* by George Kaftal. I identified two forms within historic Christian painting, each with its own dominant *intention to affect* that presented me with two lines of enquiry.<sup>12</sup> The first form of religious image, the icon, was created to aid worship and assist believers in their interactions with saintly inhabitants in metaphysical space.<sup>13</sup> To facilitate the affect of *devotion*, icons needed to stimulate both the imagination and the emotions of the viewer. For me this affect was facilitated by the luminosity of the work. Whether through the reflective nature of the gold leaf, the surface patterning or its vibrating colour interactions, I experienced light vivifying the encounter, activating the work and the space between the painting and myself the viewer. This affect was facilitated by the sacred environment in which the work was placed but this original devotional intention did not remain neatly within the form of the icon alone, for a period it intersected with the second form of Christian painting, the *narrative* form of image.

In *Icon and Idea*, Herbert Read describes the evolution of abstract space in early religious paintings as a place where metaphysical consciousness and spiritual beings could be imagined to reside.<sup>14</sup> As the narrative form of religious imagery developed, spatial structures changed.<sup>15</sup> Saints and sinners alike were painted interacting in extensions of a real-world space. Discovered in the early fifteenth century, Albertian perspective was a mathematical system that employed a central vanishing point to draw the viewer's eye behind the surface of the painting, as through a window.<sup>16</sup> This pictorial system supplied the idea of unified space, with the compositional objects presented as though frozen in time within the measured scene. As part of the cohesive recessional system of Renaissance perspective, linear perspective matured to become the dominant spatial device in Western European painting.<sup>17</sup> Reading an image as a mimesis of real-world space has become unconscious practice in contemporary society but the original religious

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<sup>12</sup> George Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting*, (Florence: Sansoni, 1952), XVIII.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Read, *Icon and Idea: The Function of Art in the Development of Human Consciousness* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 53-72.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 87-106.

<sup>16</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 27-31.

<sup>17</sup> William Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 35-54, 55-68.

intention of the narrative form of image was *didactic*.<sup>18</sup> In contrast with the Medieval tradition of suggesting supernatural light through interactive materials, the narrative image described natural light. Whether this was implied natural light through modelling or the embodiment of light through colour and tone, this was real-world luminosity.<sup>19</sup>



**Fig. 0.2.** Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*, (1434)

*The Coronation of the Virgin* executed by Fra Angelico in 1434 (fig. 0.2 and fig. 2.1) sits on the cusp of these two spatial and material traditions.<sup>20</sup> This altarpiece, which includes its predella, embodies both religious intentions: the devotional and the narrative didactic. Its

<sup>18</sup> Summers, *Real Spaces*, 298-300.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 477-485.

<sup>20</sup> Fig 0.2 shows the image professionally photographed by the Musée du Louvre; for comparison my photograph of this work, (fig 2.1), shows the way the work performs in real life. In this exegesis my photographs of works illustrate particular affects of light, vantage point and scale; all these photographs have been taken in situ, with the available light and without the use of flashlight.

compositional elements are consequently ambiguous. It was precisely my experience of being *comfortably discomfited*<sup>21</sup>—held in the thrall of these equivocal, disjunctive spaces with all their luminous material engagement, unable to fully resolve either the space, the light or the stories—that provided the genesis for this research and prompting the methodologies of affect and reductive abstraction.

### **Structure of Exegesis**

In this study I approach affecting metaphysical encounters from two vantages: firstly the religious paintings created for devotional purposes, (in Part I), and secondly the religious paintings created as narratives, (in Part II). Using the language of *abstraction* I have investigated both forms through the lens of materialised light, with each section informed by an affective, seminal field trip. Chapter One describes the initial period of research exploring material mystery through contemplating the incarnation of Christ; I investigate materialising metaphor through figure and ground relations. The first field trip, recounted in Chapter Two, describes my affective encounters with sacred in situ paintings in Italy, and seminal works in Paris and London. Chapter Three interprets the European field trip and develops *affect* as a conceptual framework for progressing the research process; I introduce a series of paintings made to investigate disjunctive space through an exploration of the combination of three spatial areas. Chapter Four locates the significance of light sensitive materials within the context of early religious imagery, particularly the icon; the metaphoric significance of light is discussed and two series of interactive works are introduced: *Timescape: Communicants 1* and *Communicants 2*. I contextualise the approach of Part I through my encounters with sacred works of the early Renaissance and with works by the twentieth century painter Mark Rothko, all experienced during my first field trip; I also include two contemporary painters who are both involved in the hybridised sacred.

I begin Part II with the second field trip; a diarised account of my experience of light and liturgy, whilst on retreat at a Benedictine monastery. Based on *The Liturgy of the Hours*,<sup>22</sup> Chapter Five outlines my second, narrative approach to painting light, tracing a twenty-four hour progression of changing light using the repeated construct of a portal.

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<sup>21</sup> A personal account of being comfortably discomfited by *The Coronation of the Virgin* can be found in Chapter Two; and a different experience of spatial disjuncture from encountering Caspar David Friedrich's *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*, can be found in Chapter Eight.

<sup>22</sup> For an explanation of *The Liturgy of the Hours* and the Benedictine form see: Maxwell E. Johnson, ed., *Benedictine Daily Prayer: A Short Breviary*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), vi-xviii.

Chapter Six outlines the abstraction of the portal to a more ambiguous compositional solution: using stripes with specific orientation and a palette of warm and cool duality; a response to this work by peer group review is then discussed. Chapter Seven covers the final body of work, *The Metaphysics of Space: Painting a Body of Light*, which comprises two compositions with two orientations. This chapter discusses how luminosity is created in painting as it relates to the colour and value of light. I contextualise the approach taken in Part II by describing my experience of light within the monastic liturgical tradition and through encounter with certain artworks: these include the nineteenth century work of Caspar David Friedrich and contemporary artists, Bill Viola and Rosslynd Piggott.

### **Writing Technique**

One of the challenges I have faced in composing this exegesis has been combining the affective and analytic dimensions of the research. Practice-led research is by nature personal, but by introducing the consideration of *affect* I have added further subjective complexity, one that is integral to the development of my practice. To better explain the affects I have been influenced by, I employ a stylistic device that is consistent with the employment of an objective viewpoint and a subjective viewpoint. When I am discussing my process and an analytical engagement with the works, I use the past tense and this regular font, justified. *When I am discussing an experiential engagement with a work of art or with affective encounters, I use the present tense, the first person and this italic font, ranged left, this signposts the change in viewpoint. Both field trips, the first to Europe in Chapter Two and the second to The Abbey in Chapter Five, are affective accounts of light and space; each field trip introduces the bodies of work that they influence, working chronologically within the progress of the research. Inserted into the chapters are shorter accounts that serve to contextualise my work; they offer examples of affects that support the progress of the work described in the chapter they appear within. With the exception of the Peer Review ending Chapter Seven, these short experiential accounts do not work chronologically in their chapter and can be read separately.*

### **Conclusion**

Referencing the conceptual framework of affect that acknowledges the capacity of art to engender a felt experience, this research draws on the tradition of historic sacred art and the arousal of affects that it has purposed to deliver. Whilst I have not intended to create paintings that inspire religious devotion or offer didactic instruction, through reductive abstraction I have sought to retain elements from the traditional mechanisms used to

those ends. By using certain formal elements without any accompanying figuration, it has been my intention to create ambiguous spaces that can encourage the viewer to a contemplation of the metaphysical. As Kirk Varnedoe states,

‘Abstraction...has a lot to do with ideas... One of the valuable things it does more fiercely than a lot of other art is make us think...The less there is to look at, the more important it is we look at it closely and carefully.’<sup>23</sup>

Varnedoe continues:

Abstract art has been with us in one form or another for almost a century now, and has proved to be not only a long-standing crux of cultural debate, but a self-renewing, vital tradition of creativity.<sup>24</sup>

Contemporary abstraction offers me a substantive yet subtle mechanism for exploring my thesis. With abstraction overarching various art movements and active from Modernism to post-Modernism, it remains a significant language that as Nickas states “...can trigger associations with those that came before and yet are not merely unconscious repetitions.”<sup>25</sup> In accord with a form of abstraction as a reductive process, I have used a repeating process of deconstruction, both from the original sacred works sourced and from my own interpretations of them, to distil and refine for further contemplation, assessment and for experiencing: “This is one of abstraction’s singular qualities, the form of enrichment and alteration of experience denied to the fixed mimesis of known things.”<sup>26</sup> Abstraction has enabled me to filter out particular religious traditions, denominations or other prescriptive readings that might promote a political agenda, whilst retaining enough information to imply a relationship to a metaphysical heritage.<sup>27</sup> In my research question I have used the term *invitation* because I would like these paintings to be open, inclusive spaces that encourage meditation. I am excited by the potential of abstraction to provide new possibilities in my quest to do this.

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<sup>23</sup> Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Bob Nickas, *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*, (London: Phaidon, 2009), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> In *Pictures of Nothing*, Varnedoe offers a history of abstract art and abstraction interpreted through its development from two contradictory camps: the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock, and the new realism realised in the pop art of Jasper John. Weaving a course through Modernism to Post-Modernism, he establishes the legitimacy of its place in, and continued relevance to, contemporary art.

## **PART I Chapter One: Space as Metaphor for Metaphysical Enquiry**

**Painting goes straight to the heart of the matter, that is, of the mystery.  
It does not remove or resolve this mystery, nor does it make it an object of belief;  
rather it implants itself within it...<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses works from the project's earliest stages prior to the European field trip described in Chapter Two. In this chapter I will identify the initial research concerns, highlighting key elements that have continued throughout the research journey. These constituents include a preoccupation with pictorial space, the use of structural elements to develop equivocal spaces and my experimentation with the materiality of paint. I introduce an early version of my research question establishing pictorial space as a metaphoric site for spiritual enquiry and look at the ambiguity between figure and ground as a way of exploring this metaphoric space. I introduce the work of artist Savanhday Vongpoothorn as a contemporary exponent of ambiguous surface/ground relations in the service of the hybridised sacred. Referencing an experience with a viewer, I develop an under-ground latex grid as an enactment of paradox, and I discuss its success in my search for facilitative spatial ambiguity.

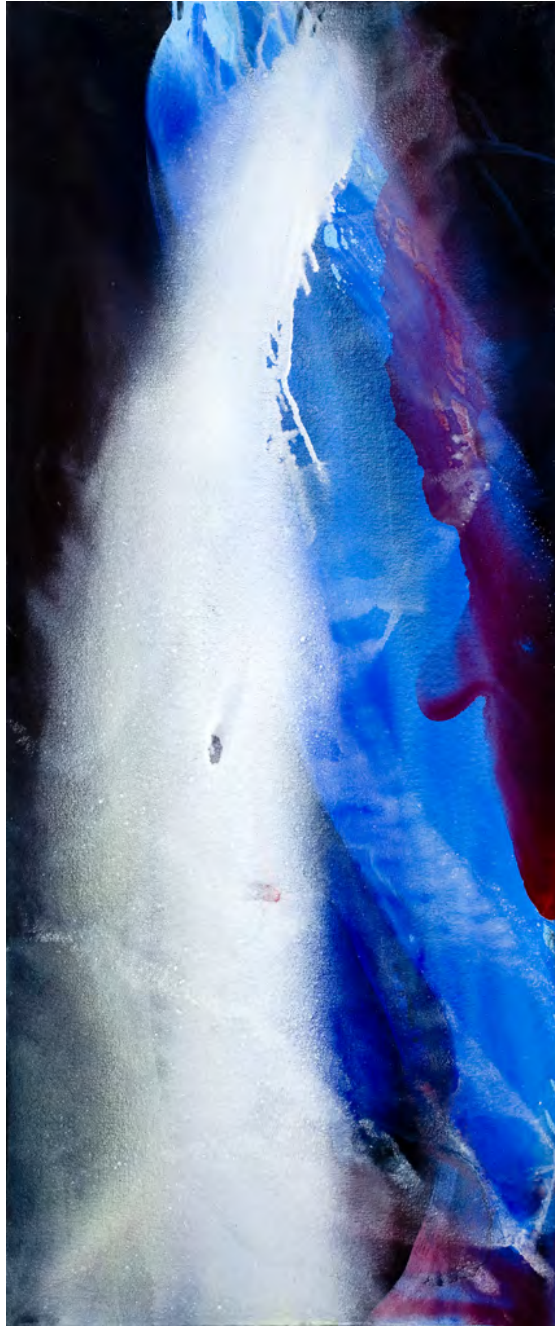
### **Imagining the Incarnation of Christ: Materialising Mystery**

I began this project asking—how can pictorial space act as a metaphor for metaphysical enquiry? Approaching this question through my Western religious art heritage I began looking at how the materiality of paint is manipulated in the service of the immaterial. A locus of this materialisation can be found in the incarnation of Christ, but I particularised this enquiry by using the resurrected Christ, the subsequent ascension of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit, as points of reference. It is a mysterious period when the resurrected Christ reportedly walked the earth but when His body, although materially present enough to eat, appeared materially different from His pre-crucifixion body.<sup>2</sup> In Acts, Chapter 1 verses 9 and 10, it is reported that Christ ascended bodily into heaven, prompting the Holy Spirit's dissemination of the presence of God at Pentecost.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (U.S.A: Fordham University Press, 2005), 111.

<sup>2</sup> Various New Testament accounts suggest that Christ's resurrected body may have been different from his pre-resurrection body: for example, his appearance inside a locked room that the disciples were hiding in, yet simultaneously inviting touch to prove the authenticity of his material flesh, John 20: 26-27.



**Fig. 1.1.** *Ascending/Descending*, (2008)

Enjoying the interpretations through dramatic directional movement in the portrayal of ascensions by painters such as Giotto, Tintoretto and video artist Bill Viola in *Tristan's Ascension*, I abstracted the interpretation to include directional mark-making for my initial paintings. I poured layers of paint using strong vertical or diagonal movements, moving wet paint around when the canvas lay on the floor (fig. 1.1).

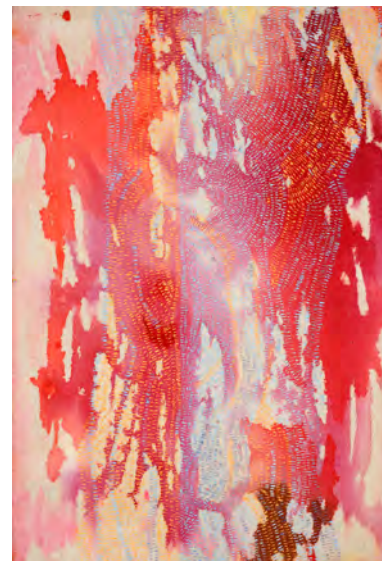


Wanting the works to appear “continuous in all directions”<sup>3</sup> to disengage their innate coordinates from any sense of a solid plane, I found this poured method did not offer me the breadth that I wanted. Wondering what the metaphor for spiritual enquiry would look like if the language of abstraction were more fully explored, I decided on a broader approach. For me this meant developing a more ambiguous relationship between figure and ground with diverse spatial relations performing as metaphor. As well as suggesting movement vertically on the picture plane, I also wanted to play with movement *through* the picture plane and decided to introduce surface structure as counterpoint to pouring. The theology that I was referencing suggested a form of ambiguity that resonated with Kandinsky’s discussions in *Concerning the Spiritual In Art* in which he articulated a dualistic interpretation of form that encompasses the practical concrete and the abstract:

Form... is the boundary between one surface and another: that is external meaning. But it also has an internal significance... form is the external expression of inner meaning.<sup>4</sup>



**Fig. 1.2.** *Ascending/Descending 5*, (2008)



**Fig. 1.3.** *Ascending, 6*, (2008-9)

I made a series of small paintings to explore ambiguous boundaries by contrasting expansive poured areas with small structural marks, (fig. 1.2). Conforming to the definition of atmospheric perspective, the soft-edged poured paint would create a sense

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<sup>3</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. trans. Michael Sadleir (New York: George Wittenborn, 1970), 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

of distance and the small, focused marks would suggest detail.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on “amorphous shapes” of the colour field painting of Frankenthaler,<sup>6</sup> I made soft-edged areas by pouring paint onto raw wet canvas and separated the surface of the work from the canvas with layers of wax on which I then painted a network of fine directional lines (fig. 1.2). Making works on primed, painted surfaces allowed me to work with the effects of flocculation, a form of granulation that occurs when “pigments do not dry with even spacing...”<sup>7</sup> Suggesting ambiguity, flocculation can imply both the macroscopic, reminiscent of the cosmological, such as a lunar landscape, and the microscopic, reminiscent of the biological, such as a dermatological surface. Beginning with larger more conformist lines, I also painted areas of small marks, but I discovered that they added to the play of randomness and created areas of optical colour mixing which amalgamated the poured layers and did not separate from them as I intended (fig. 1.3).

### **The Introduction of the Grid**

In my investigations into separating the ground from the surface, the introduction of the grid seemed a natural progression. Historically the grid has been used as a tool to define the visual plane that it is drawn upon, but through the twentieth century it became analogous with abstraction being a “geometric format that was non-hierarchical and non-referential.”<sup>8</sup> It has subsequently become a multi-faceted device, a tool and a subject in its own right.<sup>9</sup> Painters, such as Agnes Martin (fig. 1.4), developed the grid to function as both subject and compositional device. By using a grid drawn with a lightness of touch on a surface painted with layers of very high (or very low) value paint, Martin positioned her work in a space that both inhabits and questions the nature of materiality and incorporeality.<sup>10</sup> Embodying temporal tension between the permanent and the fleeting,

Martin’s work exists between understanding the materiality of the work and the psychological space that surrounds the realisation and perception of her paintings.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space*, 46.

<sup>6</sup> Izalia Roncallo, "Helen Frankenthaler" in *Burning Ambulance* (Daily Archives, 2011). <http://burningambulance.com/2011/12/31/helen-frankenthaler/> (accessed May 2015).

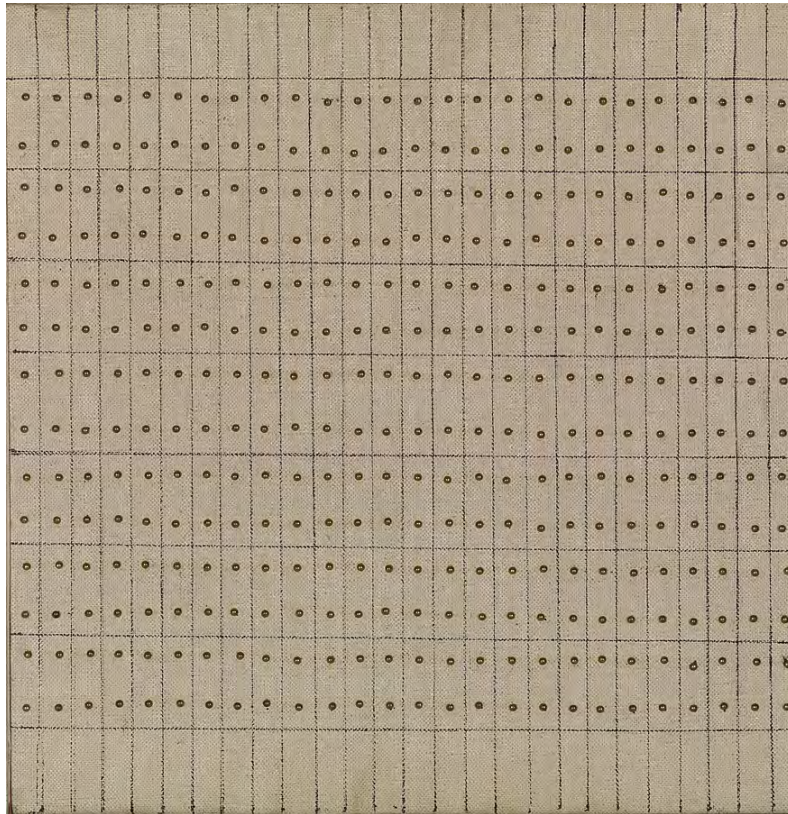
<sup>7</sup> [http://www.jacksonsart.com/Art\\_Departments-A-Z\\_All\\_Departments-Watercolour\\_Painting/c2129\\_2128\\_2364/index.html](http://www.jacksonsart.com/Art_Departments-A-Z_All_Departments-Watercolour_Painting/c2129_2128_2364/index.html), (accessed April 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Haskell, “Agnes Martin: the Awareness of Perfection” in *Agnes Martin*, ed. Barbara Haskell (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 107.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Hackett, *Fine Art and Perceptual Neuroscience: Field of Vision and the Painted Grid* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58-66.

<sup>10</sup> Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing*, 241-4.

<sup>11</sup> Hackett, *Fine Art and Perceptual Neuroscience*, 71-2.



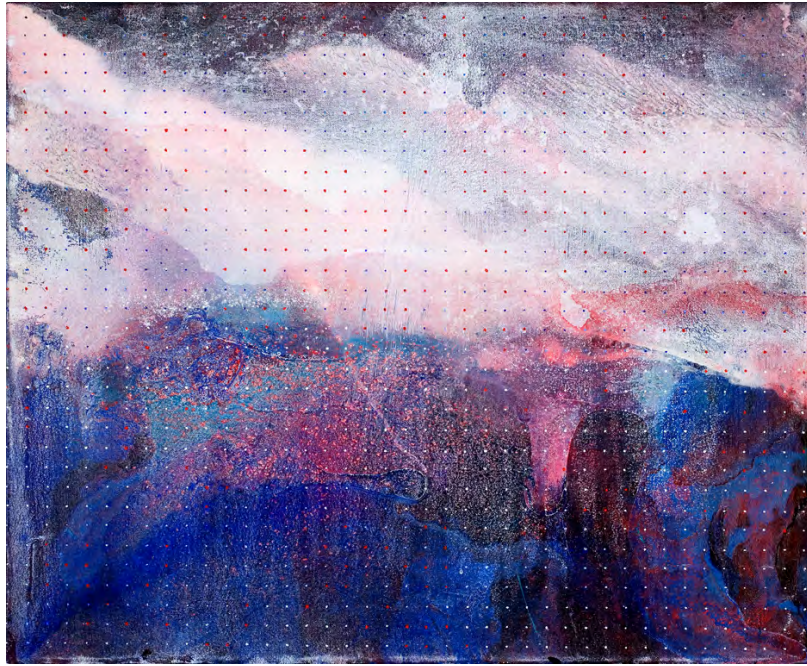
**Fig. 1.4.** Agnes Martin, *Little Sister*, (1962)

The grid offered me the opportunity to create greater spatial complexity by destabilising the figure and ground relationship by drawing attention to the surface of the work. Initially I cut up the large poured canvases using a vertical rectangular grid. This gave me the capacity to constantly reconfigure the tessellated panels and I hoped might facilitate the sense of ambiguity that I wanted, but I found that the cut grid lines dominated the picture plane and inhibited the movement between figure and ground.

Another interpretation of the grid was to develop the fine surface lines I had been exploring to become grid dots that “delineated the extent of the visual field.”<sup>12</sup> Dot marking the intersection points of a Cartesian grid, after the surface had been painted, I made a work where the colour and value of the dots changed in relation to the poured ground. Sometimes the colour and tone of the dot was painted to blend in with the ground and sometimes to stand out from it. To stimulate spatial play, I wanted the tonal and colour shifts to create the effect of falling in and out of the painting (fig. 1.5).

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 58



**Fig. 1.5.** *Ascending-Pentecost*, (2008-9)

Krauss interprets the grid within a Modernist context.<sup>13</sup> She explains the concept of figure/ground relationship when the ground was no longer theorised (or utilised) as secondary to the figure. This change promoted the perception of ground and figure as simultaneously interchangeable. Krauss articulates the fundamentals of figure/ground visual perception as that of the figure in contrast to the ground but also of the perception of the not-figure in contrast with the not-ground.<sup>14</sup> Because paintings can occupy and facilitate a space of slippage, these concepts made sense when put into practice. Through paintings' representational history and the twentieth century assertion of the painting as object in its own right, they can exist both as real and as symbolic. I have applied Krauss' concept of visual perception by thinking in terms of absence and presence. Within Modernist painting Krauss states that ground is figure transformed. I have approached this theory by painting as though the ground (historically absent) can be transformed into presence. Using a presence/absence model, which David Summers has discussed through the concept of the "real metaphor,"<sup>15</sup> I have translated the perception of figure and ground such that one is implied as present in relation to the other as absent, whilst also maintaining the Modernist conception of them as both concurrently present or both concurrently absent.

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<sup>13</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985), 9-10.

<sup>14</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994), 13-15.

<sup>15</sup> Summers, *Real Spaces*, 257-258.

### **Savanhdary Vongpoothorn: Martin Browne Gallery, Sydney**

This is an account of my experience with a contemporary painting that achieves figure/ground complexity in the service of the hybridised sacred; an active component in the construction of this complexity is the use of the grid.

*Over chatter from the well-dressed clientele, I hear the soft musical sounds of a water sculpture. I am standing in front of a painting by Savanhdary Vongpoothorn in a gallery in Sydney. I have seen it before in her studio, then it was accompanied by the music of the shakuhatchi.*



**Fig. 1.6.** Savanhdary Vongpoothorn, *Incantation 2005*, (2005)

*I feel a sense of weightlessness from the figure/ground complexity of *Incantation 2005* (fig. 1.6). Moving in and out of viewing distances, I make sure that I am far enough away (about five feet) from this three metre wide painting to allow the variations in value to become more prominent. Organic vertical forms play before my eyes then evaporate like smoke. The shapes weave behind the large horizontal stripes that appear alternately present and absent to me. Bands of colour, egg yellow, interact with the red calligraphic “khaathaa” script inscribed on the canvas surface.<sup>16</sup> They appear to change size but it is hard to tell because this work is acting on my focused vision, my peripheral vision and my parafoveal vision; they move in a sea of warmth.*

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<sup>16</sup> A khaathaa is an incantation, “a phonetic transcript of Pali words into Thai script” that monks ritualistically perform: Savanhdary Vongpoothorn and Ashley Carruthers, *Savanhdary Vongpoothorn: Incantation*, (Sydney: Martin Browne Fine Art, 2005), 4.

*As I enjoy what presents as texture, I know that this painting has its canvas ground punctured from behind. There is a closely-knit grid of sizeable holes burnt through the canvas surface with residual material remaining, but the grid does not overpower the effect of the lyrical marks. When I step closer I see the fluid script but I cannot grasp the whole of this work at once: it is both three-dimensional and two-dimensional.*

*I am aware of a complex relationship between the woven structure of the Lao textiles that inspire Vongpoothorn and the grid that underpins the work. I warm to the idea posited by Carruthers that the loom was the first modernist grid.<sup>17</sup> I understand that this cultural hybridity causes it to sit in a “third space” all of its own.<sup>18</sup> I experience this painting occupying both a metaphoric and materially perceived third space; it is interpreting the sacred for the secular.*

*Leaving the gallery I seek out the painting from the doorway, from a distance the horizontal bars draw my attention and I enjoy the “sequences of illusions of textures that change as viewing distance changes.”<sup>19</sup>*

### **The Development of the Grid**

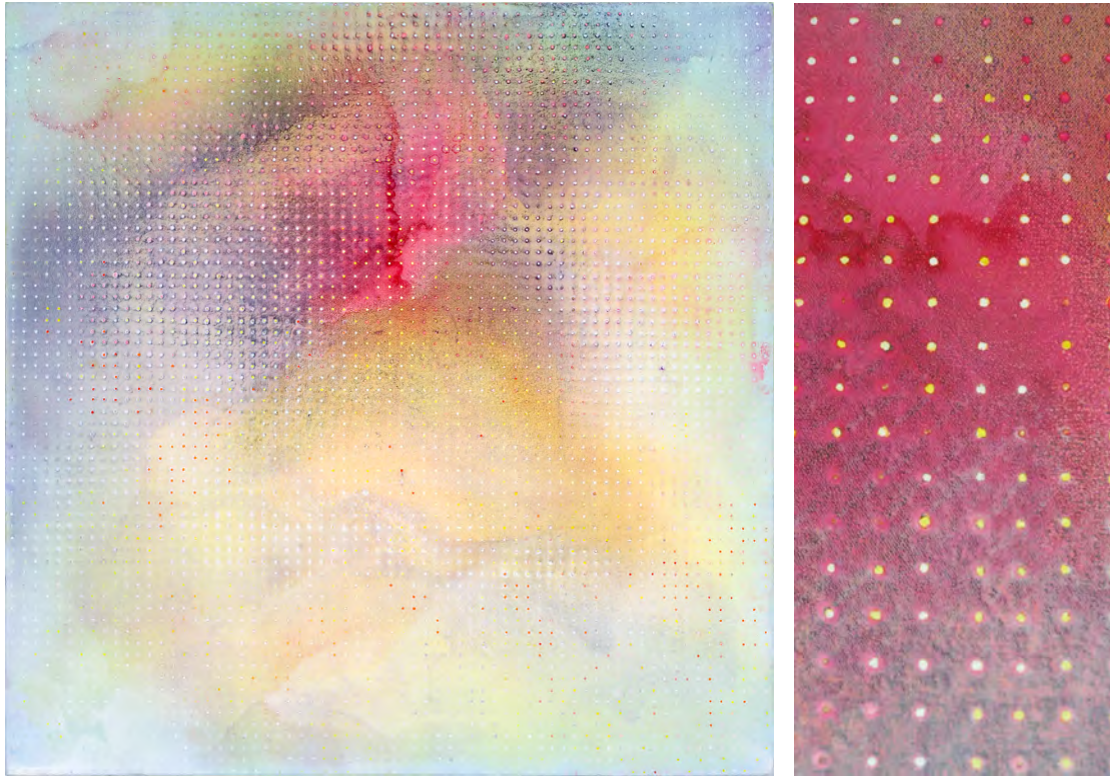
Considering how to develop the grid as structural element and place of spatial slippage, I recalled an encounter I had had with a viewer during an exhibition of my work. I was exhibiting a painting with layers of poured red and pink paint on a ground of ruddy-brown. Onto the textured surface I had painted dots of a complimentary green that optically vibrated when seen close-up. A viewer, who had found the dots, asserted to me that the green dots were not the top layer, but were located underneath the red paint. Explaining the ordering of my process I was intrigued to find that I was powerless to convince her otherwise. I pondered the nature of this spatial ambiguity and decided to explore enacting this paradox by creating a grid that actually was underneath the ground; a grid that I could expose after the skin of the ground was finished. Thus the figure of the grid could become the ground, and the ground of the work could become the figure. I wondered if this enacted paradox might better facilitate spatial slippage and ambiguity?

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<sup>17</sup> Ashley Carruthers in *Savandbary Vongpoothorn: bindi dot tartan zen* (Richmond: Niagara, 2002), 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Rosalind Krauss “The /Cloud/,” in *Agnes Martin* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 158.



**Fig. 1.7.** *Ascending*, with detail, right, (2009)

On a white canvas I mapped out a square grid in pencil, placing latex dots at the intersections of the perpendicular lines. I then painted the colour that was to be the ground of the painting over the whole surface and continued with my process of building up layers of poured paint, (fig. 1.7). Initially I experimented with exposing some of the dots each time I poured a layer, breaking the skin of the ground to make tiny wells for the paint to collect in as I poured another colour. The square grid was comprised of small units that, despite considerable colour and value variance, maintained a net-like unity across the surface (fig. 1.7 detail, right), but I found this uniform grid of small square units, whilst offering stimulating surface detail, created a barrier to my entry into the space.

I wondered—how far could I deconstruct the grid to better facilitate spatial ambiguity, and suggest some structure whilst not creating a barrier to entry?



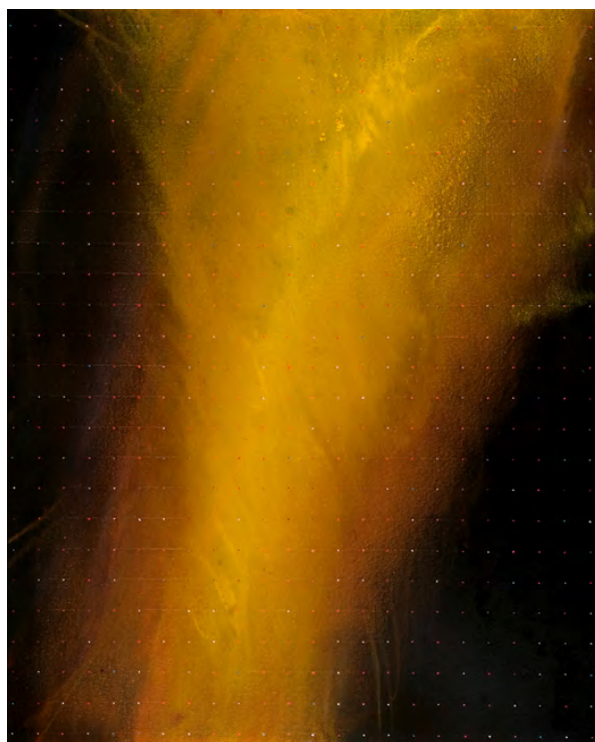
**Fig. 1.8.** *The Gathering: Ascending/Descending 3*, (2009)

### **The *Ascending* grid series**

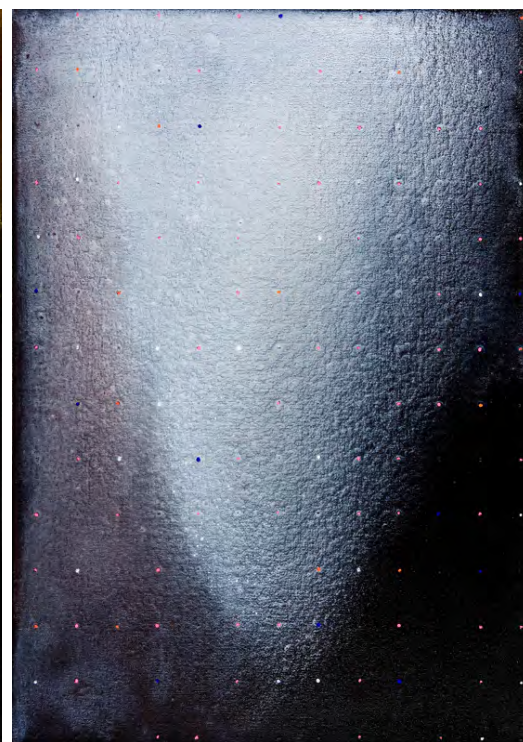
In 2008 I made four 900 x 1200 mm paintings for a group show, *The Gathering*. On each work I had drawn up a rectilinear grid on a ground of fluorescent paint, painting latex dots at the intersection points. Using fluorescent paint for the dots, I hoped that the



exposed dots would appear as points of light, shifting their position in space from the optical surface and the (under)-ground to simultaneously projecting into the viewer's space. I wanted to invite entry into the spaces that the poured paint created. In three of the four works I mixed various warm blue pigments and poured layers of them onto a dark grey ground. In the first painting I used a grid with a small unit size and exposed all the underlying dots. In the second painting, I increased the unit size, and exposed fewer dots; but in *The Gathering: Ascending/Descending 3*, (fig. 1.8), I enlarged the grid's unit size in the central area and reduced it as it progressed to the outer edges, I substantially reduced the amount of dots I exposed, leaving the raised latex dots to be seen only when close-up. The value range within the colour palettes was wide and the organic poured shapes in all three works appeared dynamic, but the grid still remained too dominant to my eye.



**Fig. 1.9.** *The Gathering: Ascending/Descending 4*, (2009)



**Fig. 1.10.** *Ascending-on Reflection 2*, (2009)

On a dark ground in *The Gathering: Ascending/Descending 4* (fig. 1.9), I poured layers of paint beginning with red and working through to brilliant yellows. This work has a small unit grid, most dots were exposed but some were over-painted with white or blue. Within the poured flocculating paint texture, the subtle indentations from lines under the ground left an imprint of the original drawn grid. I attempted to undermine the grid as a spatial barrier through a variety of ways: by using a colour for the dots that was

fluorescent and did not sit on the surface, by only removing some of the dots and leaving areas appearing un-gridded, by interrupting the grid's uniformity through changing the colour and tone of some of the dots, and by increasing and changing the uniformity of the size of the grid. Despite these changes, I found the symmetrical grid so dominant that it was a barrier to easy entry; I had not yet engineered sufficient spatial slippage.

In early 2009, I made three small works, 450 x 600 mm (fig. 1.10), with fluorescent yellow as the colour used for the grid dots and poured silver paint onto the dark ground. To obscure some of its reflectivity I added thin layers of white and poured thin layers of purple and indigo on the outer edges to create a sense of volume. Exposing much fewer dots, I also painted some dots non-fluorescent dark blue and a few mid-tone fluorescent. This combination of the wider value range of the poured paints, the reduced amount of exposed fluorescent dots (that were tonally higher in value and closer in tone to the highlights of the ground) and the texture and reflectivity of the flocculating silver, I found worked more successfully to create ambiguity and spatial slippage.

## Conclusion

This chapter introduced an early version of my research question—how can pictorial space act as a metaphor for metaphysical enquiry? I made a series of abstract paintings that explored ambiguity between figure and ground as a means of interpreting this question and located this ambiguity in a period of material mystery within Christian theology. Beginning with poured paint on tonally varied backgrounds, I then introduced the grid as a means of generating “systematically controlled space”<sup>20</sup> on the surface of the canvas to act as counter point to the directional pourings. The Cartesian grid remains a consistent component within this research and was contextualised in this chapter by discussing the work of Agnes Martin and Savanhdary Vongpoothorn. I explained how the grid evolved during this early period of my work to become an enactment of paradox. My intention with these poured, gridded works had been to experiment with spatial slippage. With spatial-play acting as a metaphor for metaphysical enquiry, I used methods that both explored these areas whilst simultaneously attempted to undermine the mechanisms. Aware there was much more to this exploration, I wondered—what could historic paintings with metaphysical intention teach me?

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<sup>20</sup> Christianna Bonin, “Between Wall and Paper: Rethinking LeWitt’s Wall Drawings” in *The Well-Tempered Grid*, ed. Charles W. Haxthausen (Williamstown: Williams College Museum of Art, 2012), 37.

**PART I Chapter Two: The First Field Trip to Europe,  
Paris, Assisi, Florence, London**



**Fig 2.1.** Fra Angelico, *The Coronation Of The Virgin*, (1430-2)

**Introduction**

This chapter introduces my encounters with significant sacred paintings during my European field trip of April 2009. Whilst offering some formal analysis and art historical background, the information describes the affective dimensions of this research. I begin with my experience of interactive light and disjunctive spaces whilst in the presence of Fra Angelico's *The Coronation of The Virgin* in the Musée du Louvre, Paris. I then give an account of experiencing the Giotto's frescoes that narrate the life of St. Francis in the Upper Basilica of St. Francis, in Assisi, Italy; this introduces the way Giotto treats the figure and ground on massive scale. I then share my experiences of two

of the San Marco frescoes in Florence, drawing attention to Fra Angelico's use of natural light, the formal elements and the materials he used to promote the symbolic nature of his spiritual subject matter through narrative. I end this chapter with my experience of Mark Rothko's *Seagram Murals* in London, and with my bodily understanding of interiority and exteriority through my immersion into deep colour.

### **Musée du Louvre, Paris**

*I stand transfixed caught in the low-beam headlights of a work of art. Responding to a compelling invitation from across the gallery floor, I am looking up at a painting that is all about light and space. Above it is a window, the painting is responding to the indirect light by glowing. The first light I receive is from the gold leaf that populates the surface; I catch the scattered light from the abundance of thick gold circles so plentiful that their symmetry is obscured by the repeated intersections. There are characters inhabiting these haloes all oriented towards the plethora of light, upwards to the two central figures at the top of the work. I recognise the face of St Dominic, he points me towards The Coronation of the Virgin (fig. 2.1). My eyes skate across the surface, from reflective light to luminous colour interactions. I pause as I recognise lapis lazuli blue playing over the entire work, reaching from the base hem of a robe to the implied atrium at the top of the composition. This warm blue is interacting with the vivid reds, deep greens and rose pinks; I witness the colours playfully jostling with each other. I am attracted to the proliferation of pattern, drawn to the activity created by the fabric decoration, the tile patterns on the sloping floor, the multi-coloured marble stairs, and finally I notice the punched and pitted surface itself (fig. 2.2). No area has escaped the hand of the artist.*

*Despite this game of spatial hide and seek, I am conscious of being pulled into the composition of the painting. There are strong formal structures at work. Once my eyes become accustomed to the play of light and colour, I perceive its two-tiered pyramidal structure drawing me up to the seated king crowning a kneeling queen. I see this Christ and his ageless mother, floating in an ethereal space, whilst also advancing towards me. I am reminded of Didi-Huberman's description of Fra Angelico's Mary as "the material cause of the incarnation of the Word."<sup>1</sup> This Mary, "the locus in the sense that one speaks of the places of memory," appears to me in this painting as a strange space. She is painted as both ground and figure yet is neither ground nor figure. She is the pinnacle of both the formal structure of the painting and the symbolic structure of the work; I find her to be in an in-between space, material and yet immaterial.*

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance & Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 68.



**Fig. 2.2.** Fra Angelico, *The Coronation of the Virgin (detail)*, (1430-2)

*I am uncomfortable yet enlivened by this ambiguous use of space. I return to areas repeatedly, unable to resolve the space or story. I am attracted to the light, the colour, the materials, & to the characters. Contemplating its meaning and its method, I ask myself—how can I make an abstract painting that offers such an affective experience that poses questions by offering unresolved solutions? If there were a pictorial language of religious space, might this painting help me find it?*

*Beneath this mystical space devoted to the adoration of Mary, I drop my gaze to the predella, to seven narrative scenes of St Dominic's life (fig. 3.6). I read them from left to right entering them one at a time. Each implies a recessive space centred around an architectural structure, and I realise that these are to be understood as the physical places that St. Dominic inhabited.*

### **Upper Basilica of St Francis of Assisi, Italy.**

*Getting to the Basilica of St Francis of Assisi seems part of the process of revelation. The church and adjoining friary sit atop a sizeable hill. Arriving in Assisi by train, I take a slow bus up the steep, serpentine road to the village and ascend the last part on foot. There are three levels to the Basilica and I enter the upper church through large double doors, in front of the wide, pale stone piazza. Inside it is dark. The lofty space is lit only by the stained glass windows and by a few ineffectual electric lights centred high up in the vaulted ceiling (fig. 2.3). My eyes take time to adjust to the dim interior light.*



Fig. 2.3. The Upper Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, (2009)

*Since arriving in Assisi I have been ascending; now in the Upper Basilica, with my chin still tilted upwards I encounter the Giotto frescoes. Above my head I experience the cycle of narrated scenes playing cinematically to me, as “visible speech.”<sup>2</sup> Before the trip I had seen images of the frescoes in books, evenly lit and digestible in their presentation, but this is not my experience. Standing below them surrounded by crowds of tourists, I have to concentrate. I need to enter each scene to get a sense of the narrative but this is possible because the frescoes have presence; they are larger than life. The painted structures come alive here, and I see that they are not supposed to represent real space and time, they are signifiers of them. As I walk around the frescoes, the improbable orthogonals are colluding with this raised and foreshortened viewing. Replacing the icon’s shimmering gold ground, Giotto has used bold patterning with dramatic colour combinations to sustain my attention within this massive construct (fig.2.4). The disjunctive spatial devices and vibrating colour interactions facilitates each story. Despite spatial*

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<sup>2</sup> Norbert Wolf, *Giotto*, trans. Karen Williams (Cologne: Taschen, 2006), 15.

disjuncture, I engage with the characters themselves, their bodies are modelled as “solid and voluminous” forms,<sup>3</sup> though they cast no shadows. I marvel that despite holding impossible positions in space, I am convinced of their humanity; I would like to meet this Francis.



**Fig. 2.4.** Giotto, *St. Francis Preaching before Honorius III*, (1296-1304)



**Fig. 2.5.** Giotto, *Confirmation of the Rule* (detail showing three-dimensional halo), (1296-1304)

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

*I am intrigued by Giotto's use of the halo as a repeated signifier of the immaterial and on closer inspection I see that each halo is in relief with its radial lines gouged out of the fabric of the wall. Unlike the bodies, it is the haloes that cast shadows (fig.2.5). They are a physical realisation of paradox and I thrill at the feeling that this material paradox gives me. I ask—how might I use spatial disjuncture to facilitate such an engaging invitation to the metaphysical?*

### **Convent of San Marco, Florence**

*The Convent of San Marco opens its doors to me early in the morning. As I climb the stairs to the first floor I am unprepared for the affective sight I am about to have; not far up the stairwell I catch sight of the fresco, The Annunciation, painted high on the wall, set back but centred on the stairs. Climbing, I realise that my body is in the implied position of worshipper.*



**Fig. 2.6.** Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, (1438-50)

*Even at the top of the stairs I remain at the feet of this painting (fig. 2.6). To the left I notice a very large window. The sun is shining and light is falling across the work. I watch as real light illuminates the image; it is acting with the symbolic light that is describing the exact moment when the archangel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is to conceive Jesus. And I realise how carefully Fra Angelico selected this site. The fresco reflects the architecture of San Marco. For this all-male enclave, Mary is presented as a young girl, simply dressed and contemplative. She*



is symbolically accessible and yet is just out of physical reach. It is the archangel who displays shimmering, multi-coloured and patterned wings; he is hinting at an interactive form of light and colour at play in another space but who here and now is enacting the light of the message and the message of light.<sup>4</sup>



**Fig. 2.7.** Fra Angelico, *Noli Me Tangere*, (1438-50)

As I head down the cloister to the monks' tiny cells, all the doors are open. None of the cells have ceilings and I can see the vaulted roof of the monastery above. On each cell wall Fra Angelico has painted a small scene from the gospels, each painting reflects the size and character of the window beside it and is within size & reach of human hand. The painting materialises a view to another space and time but Fra Angelico presents it as a normalised

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<sup>4</sup> John 8:12, *Life Application Study Bible: New International Version*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2005), 1757.

narrative akin to a view through the open window. I notice that although naturalistic there is a repetition of mark and an economy of colour suggesting a “frontality”<sup>5</sup> that implies that it is also a signifier. In this painting, *Noli Me Tangere* (fig. 2.7), I see a man walking in a flowering garden and a woman reaching for him. I know it is Jesus; he has the marks of the crucifixion on his body and these blood red marks are repeated on the surrounding flower heads.<sup>6</sup> The flowers are painted with the repeated pattern of the stigmata and equally the stigmata are flowering. Jesus appears materially, imprinted on the fabric of the world, and the physical fabric of the world appears imprinted onto him (fig. 2.8).<sup>7</sup> Up close the paint appears dry, and I notice later that this colour of dried blood is used repeatedly to outline the enfleshed bodies of the other figures in the fresco series. I realise that although there is residual gold leaf on the haloes of *The Annunciation*, the haloes here are represented with yellow paint. Unlike the bodies themselves, it is the haloes that have painted shadows. They appear material, obeying the laws of form in natural light. In the diffused light from the (real) window I see sparkling flecks from the marble dust used in the frescoes’ lime mix; they quietly enliven the surface of the works. It reminds me of the symbolism of light, but it is a world away from *The Coronation of the Virgin* in the Louvre. This is an invitation to a different metaphysical space.



**Fig. 2.8.** Fra Angelico, *Noli Me Tangere*, detail, (1440-2)

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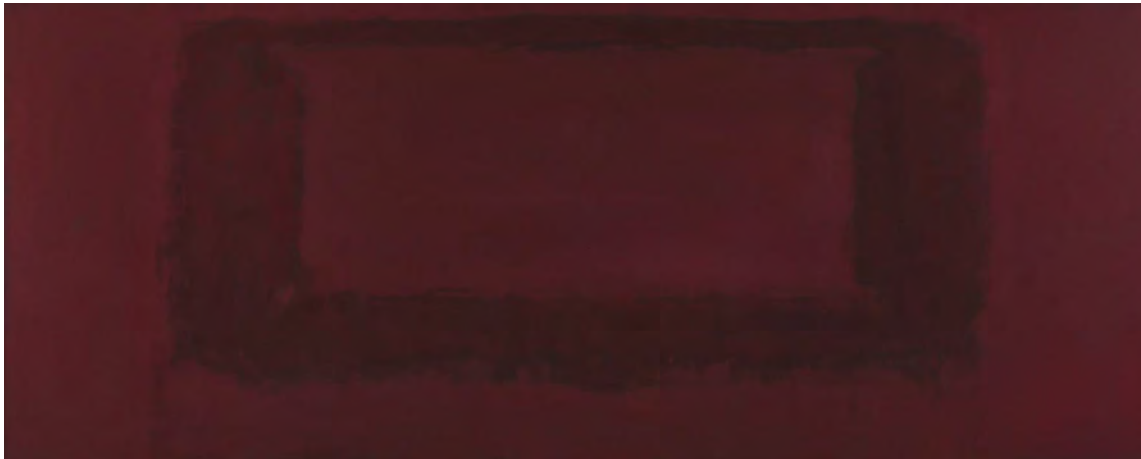
<sup>5</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

### **Tate Modern, London**

*Centred in a main gallery I see a doorway; I feel excited approaching the Rothko room and yet I am conscious of low-grade anxiety. This is to be my first experience of The Seagram Murals in the controlled environment of the Tate Modern, I do not like enclosed dark spaces.*



**Fig. 2.9.** Mark Rothko, *Red on Maroon*, (1959)

*Inside the air is dark and warm. The ceiling is much higher than I anticipated & thankfully I do not feel claustrophobic. Surrounding me is a community of paintings, deep red, purple, brown and black in colour; I don't know which work to look at first. I walk to the end of the room and stand in front of two huge, crimson horizontal paintings, one hangs above the other. I am standing as close to the canvas as I am allowed to. I centre my body on these two canvases; they extend well beyond my peripheral vision, way above my head and almost to my feet. My eyes are level with the centre of the lower work (fig. 2.9), the crimson of the ground is soft like a stain; the surface appears slippery and yet paradoxically dry and solid in its profound depth.*

*I am looking up at the skin of the world from the inside, I am looking at "inner light."<sup>8</sup>*

*I am looking at my body from the outside. I am looking at others' bodies; I am in company.*

*Reaching to the edges of each canvas are darker brushstrokes, complex, like colours of a bruise. They mark a loose rectangular shape on each canvas. The upper shape is smaller, (or is it just appearing to recede?); with the uneven marks of a human hand, these shapes mimic the shape of a window. The soft edges appear complex in their layering. These paintings are luminous in the half-light, and I remember that Rothko admired Turner and Rembrandt, that he would have*

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<sup>8</sup> John Gage, "Rothko: Color as Subject" in *Mark Rothko*, ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1998), 251.

been conversant with analytical descriptions of Titian's glazes of strong colours, their analogous colour relations and "breath-like thinness;" I see evidence of that mastery here & the heritage of the warm brown palette of Rembrandt.<sup>9</sup> These colours are not static. Each colour and each tone takes it in turn to advance towards me then recede. The internal rectangles appear lighter; the light confounds constraint, leaking out of the corners of the work.



Fig. 2.10. Mark Rothko, *Black on Maroon*, (1958)

To my left is a smaller work (fig. 2.10), it is a painting of contrast with two light red vertical areas and broader, blacker marks that contain them; soft edged shapes that feather out to the crimson edges. These sombre borders appear like smoke; however hard I try, I cannot bring them into focus. I am swallowed up in the embrace of this portal. And just at the moment of experiencing another place, I feel my feet on the present ground. I ask myself—how are space and light performing in these abstract paintings to facilitate an invitation to the metaphysical?

## Conclusion

In Chapter One I discussed initial works made before the European field trip, and introduced abstraction as a methodology for investigating ambiguous pictorial space, a methodology that has persisted during the research. In this chapter, I introduced my field

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

trip to Europe and the historical precedents for this project, sharing seminal encounters with sacred works. I wanted to consider how other artists, who have shared my metaphysical preoccupations, have addressed similar questions. I intended to identify significant formal elements to then filter through my chosen language of abstraction.

Each encounter has informed my research, through different manifestations of light and space: *The Coronation of The Virgin* by Fra Angelico enacting both the devotional and narrative forms of religious painting, remains a key work for me; its facilitative light has continued to sustain my engagement, as has its ambiguously disjunctive spaces. Giotto's large scale frescoes, which create luminosity through breadth of colour and pattern, remain highly instructive; the San Marco frescoes by Fra Angelico, incorporating natural light and sparkling materials into the narrative based scenes, offer me intimate interpretations of spiritual subject matter; and it has been the Rothko's capacity to invoke metaphysical encounter through large scale luminosity in community, that remains highly informative to this research.

## PART 1 Chapter Three: Creating Affect through Disjunctive Spaces

My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed for me in art work which is wordless and silent.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the evolution of the research question as a result of affective encounters with sacred paintings on my European field trip. I will discuss two lines of enquiry, the devotional form and the narrative scenic form identified within historic religious painting. I begin by sharing my experience of operative light in a French chapel, as a precursor to my experiments with light-sensitive materials. I will offer definitions of metaphysics, spirit and dualism pertinent to this research and progress to a psychoanalytic interpretation of affect. After giving the theoretical background for impelling negative and positive affect, I will explain affect as the conceptual and methodological framework for my work. Locating my experience of disjunctive space as the primary site of reference, I will then describe the series of small works made to investigate the intersection of three spatial areas in painting: recessive space, projective space and the surface plane. I will discuss the use of interactive materials as a primary means of exploring light and space in my continuing search for a visual language that will invite metaphysical encounter.

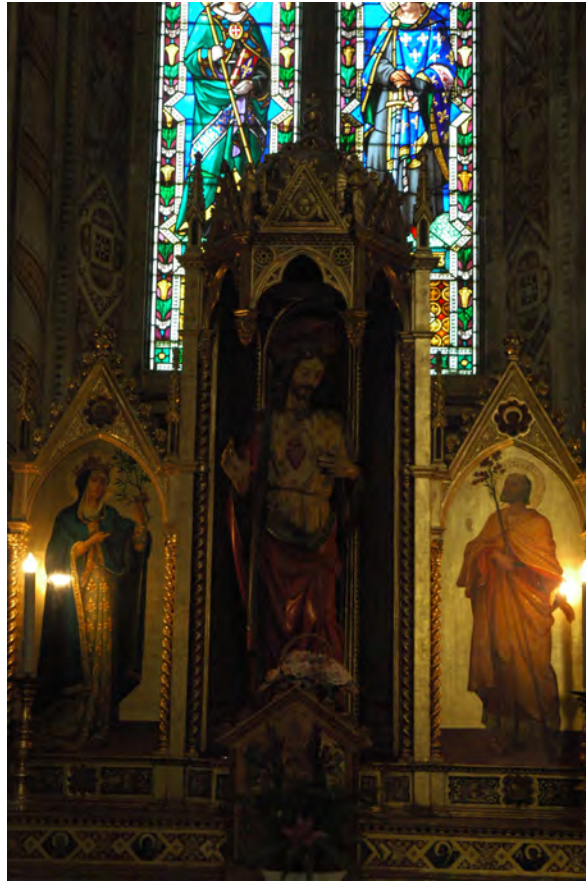
### **Santa Croce, Florence**

This is an account of my experiences of two forms of candlelight in two chapels, the first in Santa Croce, Florence in 2009 and the second in Reims Cathedral, France in 2007.

*I am roaming the dimly lit interior of the church of Santa Croce in Florence, trying to find the Giotto frescoes in the Bardi chapel. This has meant entering each chapel I find and peering into the gloom. In another side chapel I see an altar with an altarpiece covered in gold leaf. Two tall candles are placed symmetrically either side of the triptych each offering a little light. As I wonder who these Saints are, I grow conscious that the candlelight is static, that the Saints appear immobile. I see that each flame is an electric globe that does not flicker and the light appears self-contained (fig. 3.1). I feel my heart sinking, and I wonder—why do I feel so disappointed with the static nature of my encounter with this painting?*

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<sup>1</sup>Agnes Martin, “The Still and Silent in Art” in *Agnes Martin: The Nineties and Beyond* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Menil Collection in Association with Hatje Cantz, 2002), 25.



**Fig. 3.1** *A chapel in Santa Croce, Florence, (2009)*

*I recall visiting Reims Cathedral two years earlier, when my young son and I entered a side chapel alive with incandescent light. There was a pile of tapers, a box to put coins in & a stand holding a sizeable collection. In front of the altar was an abundance of lit candles randomly placed on the stand, emitting aroma & an evocative light. They were all burning at different heights, indicating to me different times of lighting and each implying a prayer offered; I felt the presence of those who had gone before me. Significantly, as my son and I each lit a candle, I noticed that the flames were responding to our breath and the movement of our bodies, and that these gentle dancing lights enlivened the gold leaf surrounding the represented Saints in the space around us. The light was creating an active space between the characters on the surface of the paintings and us. Though my rational mind told me it was illogical, through this perceived vivification, I felt a positive affect from the understanding that these Saints were supposed to be interceding for us; I was experiencing this living light enacting belief in, and accompaniment with, this active community of Saints. This icon, this “real metaphor,”<sup>2</sup> was “making the powers (of the saints) present in a new unity”<sup>3</sup> and I felt my spirit lift and an undercurrent of joy.*

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<sup>2</sup> Summers, *Real Spaces*, 259-260.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 285.

## Effecting Affect through Metaphysics

Viewing sacred paintings in Europe, I realised the significance of these affective encounters. Having previously approached my research question objectively, I now wanted to develop my research subjectively. As a painter and a practising Christian, I had viewed the sacred works as both a painter and a person of faith.<sup>4</sup> Whilst not denying myself as artist, I wanted to shift the weight to the reception of the work, to privileging the viewer. Susan Best analysing Barthes essay *The Death of the Author*, articulates the significance of the viewer thus:

The spectator is built into the work: space, light and objects only become a work of art when the spectator's field of vision is added.<sup>5</sup>

My research question developed to become—how might I offer an affective invitation to the metaphysical—to the spiritual—through the language of abstract painting?

Anthony Kenny states that ontology, “the study of Being,” is the principal concern of metaphysics; the Greek derived meaning of ontology implies considerable breadth to the concept Being: not only does it include the totality of all individual beings, but also, “All that there is, all that exists, is included in Being.”<sup>6</sup> In this research I prefer to use the concept *metaphysical* because it offers an open theoretical framework for contemplating existence—Being—but I also use the term *spiritual*, at times interchangeably with metaphysical,<sup>7</sup> because it is particular to the traditions I reference and my own experience. As this research is filtered through various dualistic forms, whilst I do not offer a comprehensive history of the philosophy of mind or theology of spirit (and body), I offer an understanding of dualism to bring clarity to my interpretation within this research. The mind-body puzzlement, the preoccupation of the philosophy of mind, has its roots in Descartes’ solution to the issue: “a psycho-physical dualism in which body and mind are considered distinct and autonomous substances.”<sup>8</sup> In Aristotelian dualism the mind is defined as immaterial rationality, but in Cartesian dualism the

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<sup>4</sup> The term “person of faith” is intended as an inclusive term with faith relevant to most religions. I acknowledge that my approach to an invitation to the metaphysical is through my practice as a non-denominationally explicit Christian. A definition of religion akin to my position, can be found in William James’ second lecture: William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/j/james/william/varieties/chapter2.html> (accessed July 2015), the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men, in their solitude, in so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the Divine.

<sup>5</sup> Best, *Visualizing Feeling*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 160-1.

<sup>7</sup> Acknowledging the history of philosophical thought, I am using mind interchangeably with spirit and I am using spirit interchangeably with consciousness/mindedness.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Burwood, “Philosophy of Mind” in *Fundamentals of Philosophy*, ed. John Shand (London, Routledge, 2003), 236.



concept of the mind is extended to include the sensate and: “every form of human experience, according to Descartes, included an element that was spiritual rather than material.”<sup>9</sup> Christian theology developed a concept of spirit in opposition to the body that is indebted more to Greek philosophy’s Aristotelian dualism than to the Jewish origins of the created order and the incarnation; and for centuries it has been common practice to privilege that which is understood to be of the spirit (and Spirit), over the flesh.<sup>10</sup> In my approach to this research I conceptualize mind-body duality loosely, as a function of my experience of my inner body and my outer body.<sup>11</sup> I use a broad psychological definition of affect that acknowledges my internal, sensate experiences within which I locate what I think of as my spirit.<sup>12</sup> I prefer a broad interpretation of dualism as offered by Nikolai Berdiaev, a twentieth century Christian philosopher; he posits a definition of spirit (both divine and human) to be “the realm of freedom, personality and creative activity,” as against nature as the forum of objects and routine.<sup>13</sup>

I use the term affect because it offers the closest equivalent to my experience and to my intention. This psychoanalytic theory is proving a vital new contribution to contemporary art theory. Within psychoanalysis concepts of affect, emotion and feelings have been described as similar in meaning and interchangeable in definition. Susan Best prefers the breadth of the term affective cited by psychoanalyst Ruth Stein who makes,

... little effort to distinguish among feelings as awareness of affect, affect as a more comprehensive term including all the thinkable components belonging to this domain, and emotion as the complex mixture of affect and our previous experience with an affect, as a strongly felt feeling, or as just a feeling.<sup>14</sup>

Also preferring this definition, I explore embodied navigational orientation and its relationship with a sense of the metaphysical by using two “thinkable components,” that may present to a viewer as an emotion or as some other sensation, such as vertigo. I aim to make work that I describe as *comfortably discomfited* by connecting the body’s navigational faculties, used for negotiating the real world, with its internal spatial

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<sup>9</sup> Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, 659-60.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology* (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>11</sup> For a description of internalism see Burwood, “Philosophy of Mind” in *Fundamentals of Philosophy*, 239.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion on subjectivity and the capacity to think a feeling see: Burwood, “Philosophy of Mind” in *Fundamentals of Philosophy*, 238.

<sup>13</sup> James. P. Scanlan, “Metaphysics, Berdiaev, Nikolai Aleksandrovich” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/berdiaev-nikolai-aleksandrovich-1874-1948/metaphysics-51831> (accessed July 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Stein, “Psychoanalytic Theories of Affect (1991)” in *Visualizing Feeling*, 6.

faculties, used for negotiating its imagined spaces. I experience a sense of *discomfort* in the spatial ambiguity generated in sacred paintings, while at the same time I experience *comfort* in the positive feelings gained from managing the encounter. Long serving as a form of devotional aid and/or narrative didactics, Western religious art is well placed to facilitate these dual qualities, representing three-dimensional space in two-dimensional form, interpreting both worldly space, for example in the predella scenes, and imagined or visionary space, as seen in representations of heaven. I speculate as to whether abstract painting could challenge the viewer's perception of her body in real space, to contemplate her internal body and its relationship to an-*other* place.

According to Freud it is the negative affects that carry impelling potency because of their origins in primeval survival responses.<sup>15</sup> I equate strong spatial ambiguity with a form of negative affect because of the body's primal need to navigate space safely. Through sight and touch our sensory neurons convert external environmental stimuli into internal information enabling us to safely navigate space. Lakoff and Johnson have written about the primacy of essential spatial concepts (up/down, near/far, etc) that arise from having and using a body.<sup>16</sup> These orientational metaphors, unlike other metaphors that structure concepts in relation to other concepts, exist in relation only to each other and have priority over all other spatial structuring systems. They are concepts "that we live by in the most fundamental way."<sup>17</sup> Humans conceptualise the non-physical through the understanding of the physical with the body as reference point.

According to psychoanalyst Sylvania Tomkins, "interest-excitement"<sup>18</sup> is at the root of positive affect. Susan Best, in her analysis of the affective dimension of installation art, describes a form of pleasurable corporeal engagement,

The body quite literally moves ... to the shape of the work when interest is ignited...

It is this corporeal engagement that suggests the impelling operation of positive affect.<sup>19</sup>

I experience internal movement from my encounters with two-dimensional works of art and positive *interest-excitement* through the management of my responses to their spatial

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<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id (1923)" in "What Is Affect? Considering the Affective Dimension of Contemporary Installation" Susan Best, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, Volume 2/3, Issue 2/1, 2002. (<<http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=597230662571981;res=IELLCC>> ISSN: 1443-4318 (accessed July 2015), 207-208.

<sup>16</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 15, 57-58.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> Best, *Visualizing Feeling*, 88.

<sup>19</sup> Best, "What Is Affect?" 209-210.

ambiguity. I find if I can slow the affect down, by moving in and out of the encounter perhaps, then the affect feels positive and not dangerous.<sup>20</sup> If this interest-excitement is sustained, I experience a variety of affects: of interior/exterior slippage, a loss of the sense of linear time, a sense of spiritual accompaniment, or feeling wholly present. These affects can offer me a feeling of joy, not unlike my experience in meditative prayer when I can feel my spirit lifting within me. According to Best, affect is a signifier from our “corporeal bedrock of meaning.”<sup>21</sup> It rises to consciousness as a feeling by traversing essential reactions, such as excitement. For Kandinsky an artwork consists of,

...the inner and the outer. The inner is the emotion in the soul of the artist; this emotion has the capacity to evoke a similar emotion in the observer. Being connected to the body, the soul is affected through the medium of the senses- the felt.<sup>22</sup>

These are some of the ways that paintings are able to mediate and facilitate affect.



**Fig. 3.2.** Cimabue, *The Madonna & Child in Majesty Surrounded by Angels*, (1280)

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<sup>20</sup> An account of the affect generated by a Caspar David Friedrich painting can be found in Chapter Seven of this exegesis.

<sup>21</sup> Best, “What Is Affect?”, 220.

<sup>22</sup> Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 23.

## Disjunctive Spaces: Exercises in Space, Light & Time Travel

I identified two forms of religious painting within the late Medieval and Renaissance periods: the first to inspire devotion and the second to offer didactic instruction through narrative scenes.<sup>23</sup> Icons of intercessory saints were intended to help Christians with their prayers.<sup>24</sup> Manifesting in its treatment of pictorial space, the icon acted as a portal, facilitating supernatural power between Saint and believer; gold leaf signified the sacred and, through the reflective action of light, the icon performed as votive expression.<sup>25</sup> The space between the picture plane and viewer became active and the place of prayer appeared to be inhabited by the viewer and the interceding Saint: I encountered this affective interactivity of sacred works through the action of light in sacred spaces.

In Cimabue's *The Madonna & Child in Majesty Surrounded by Angels* (fig. 3.2), I experienced a disjuncture between the gold leaf and the volumetric forms rendered with egg tempera. Illusions of volume imply a spatial depth receding back from the picture plane, while the reflective surface draws us forward into the space in front of the work, or to the picture surface itself. The pitted panel surface, described by gold, increases its reflectivity. With these materials and pictorial devices combined, my eye cannot see the composition as a uniform entity. As art historian William Dunning states,

If all the parts of one object fail to maintain visually the same spatial distance, then certainly a multiplicity of objects cannot be coaxed to occupy a visual stable spatial placement within this shifting depth.<sup>26</sup>

This picture space is not conceived of as a cohesive whole and my experience of the conflicting spatial effects, particularly through the action of reflected light, facilitated a quality of mystery; I sensed the devotional intention of the work. I also observed spatial play in the varied figure proportions, the converging orthogonals and the oblique projections of the compositional structures. This treatment of space is in contrast with Florentine Renaissance orthodoxy whereby Albertian perspective delivers a unity of space and time within a measurable picture space. Inspired by these experiences, I worked to create disjunctive spaces that were interactive for the viewer through conflicting spatial devices and through the effects of the materials I used.

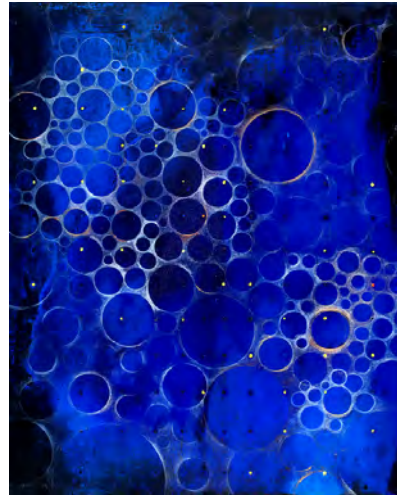
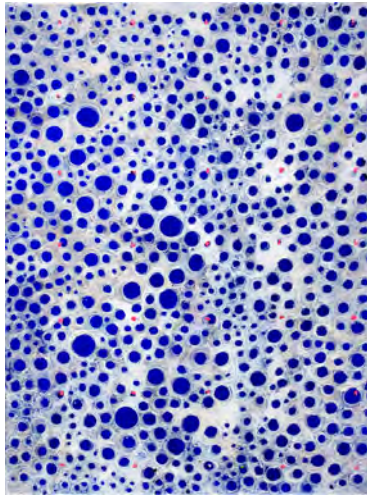
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<sup>23</sup> R. A. Markus, *From Augustine to Gregory the Great: History and Christianity in Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1983), 156.

<sup>24</sup> Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting*, XVIII.

<sup>25</sup> Bissera V. Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon" in *The Art Bulletin*, 88: 4 (U.S.A.: Routledge, 2006), 631-2.

<sup>26</sup> Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space*, 19.



**Fig. 3.3.** (far left)  
*Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel 9,*  
(2010)

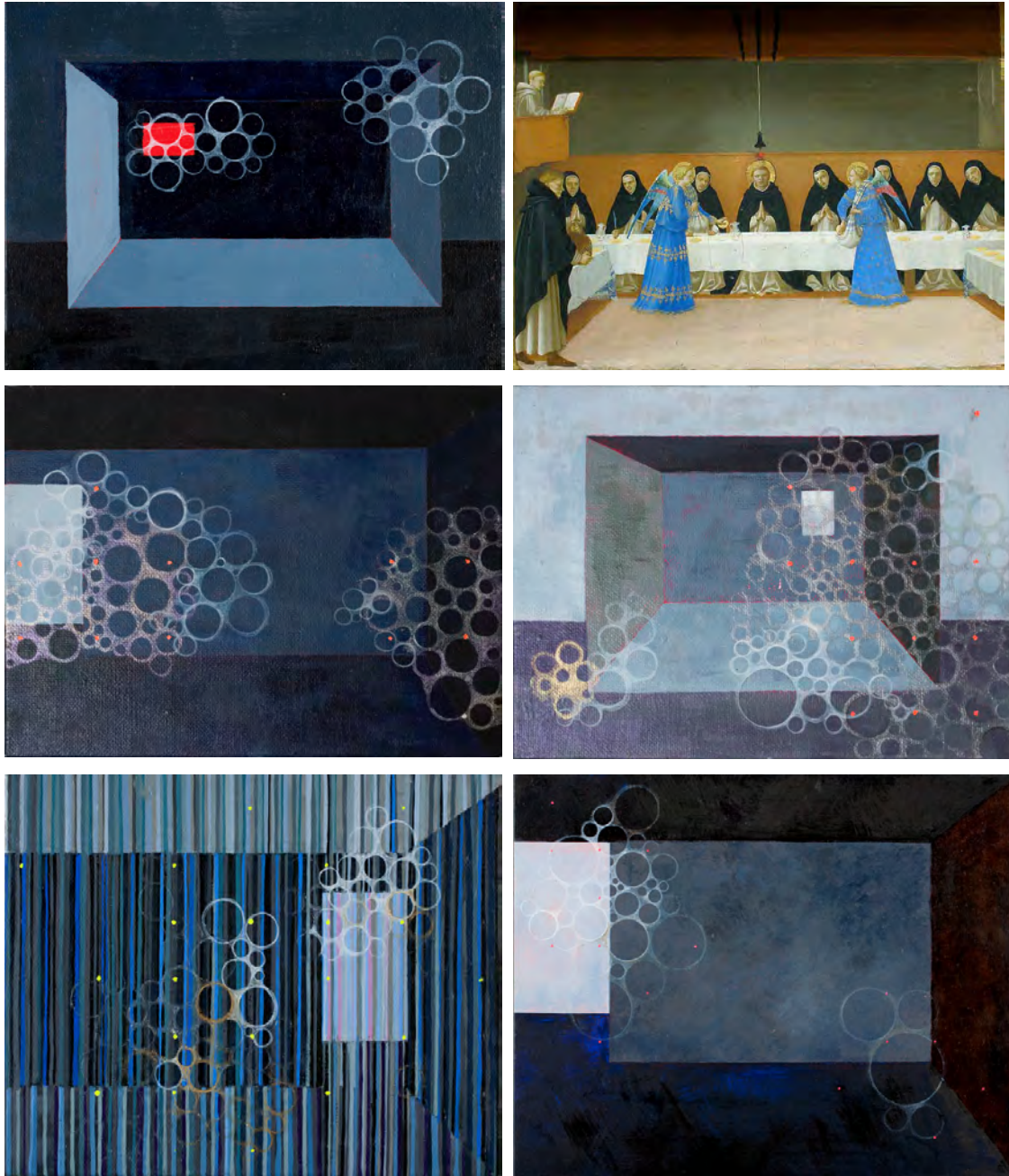
**Fig. 3.4.** (left)  
*Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel 11,* (2010)

Intrigued by the behaviour of the reflective paints in the *Ascending-on Reflection* series (fig. 1.10), I began to play with the halo and ground as an interactive area that mimicked the sense of community suggested in Medieval paintings. I used interactive mediums, such as interference and fluorescent pigments and new reflective paints on poured grounds (fig. 3.3 and fig. 3.4). On small canvas boards I painted loose interpretations of *The Coronation of the Virgin* (fig. 3.6), combining aspects of both the main painting and the predella scenes. I referenced the three spatial areas and treatments observed: illusory space to suggest an implied area behind the surface of the work, projective space that extends out from the picture plane and into the viewer's space, and the surface of the painting, the picture plane. I began to play with the effects of disjuncture through the interaction of all three of these spatial areas.

Drawing on the *narrative* tradition found in the predella scenes, I composed recessive structures to draw the viewer into ambiguous spaces. Using a monochrome palette with a wide tonal range to accentuate the recession, I used a fluorescent dot grid under the main ground. Interpreting the *devotional* intention of the “cloud of witnesses”<sup>27</sup> from the main image of *The Coronation of the Virgin*, I painted areas of connecting circles in layers of interactive paints, on top of these monochrome portals, to suggest haloes (figs. 3.5 and fig. 3.7). I found that the interference pigments would only display their bright colours in certain conditions. With the halo clouds painted, I removed a small amount of the latex dots to expose some fluorescent points in the areas of most complexity; I wanted the painted reflective haloes to jostle for precedence with the projective fluorescents dots, and have the recessive tonal structure draw the eye behind the surface of the work in the

<sup>27</sup> Hebrews 12:1, *Life Application Study Bible*, 2084.

opposite direction to the haloes. Although I wanted active tension, I was also seeking a balance between the conflicting spatial devices and I discovered that it did not take many fluorescent dots to imply the whole grid, and then spatial slippage would be hampered.



**Fig. 3.5.** (top left) *Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel 1*, (2010)

**Fig. 3.6.** (top right) Fra Angelico, *St Dominic & his Companions Fed by Angels*, predella scene (1434).

**Fig. 3.7.** (centre left) *Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel 3*, (2010)

**Fig. 3.8.** (centre right) *Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel 2*, (2010)

**Fig. 3.9.** (bottom left) *Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel 4*, (2010-11)

**Fig. 3.10.** (bottom right) *Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel 18*, (2010)

I gradually reduced the amount of haloes to accentuate figure/ground slippage and layered other circles in gold or transparent white oil paint (fig. 3.7 and fig. 3.8). I then began to abstract the portal structures, enlarging them into flatter rectangular areas to encourage greater ambiguity (fig. 3.10).

I discovered spatial slippage could also occur by building a sense of depth through layering. Continuing with the idea of recessive space, projective space and surface detail, I made other small works using small repetitive marks and a wide tonal range: high value, transparent marks on a low value saturated ground. This references the work of indigenous bark painters from Arnhem Land such as John Mawurndjul where small high value marks are built up using cross-hatching referred to as *rrark*.<sup>28</sup> Building up depth through small, layered marks, has also been developed by non-indigenous Australian painters such as Sue Lovegrove (fig. 6.1) and Savanhdary Vongpoothorn (fig. 1.6).



**Fig. 3.11.** *Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel 13*, (2011)



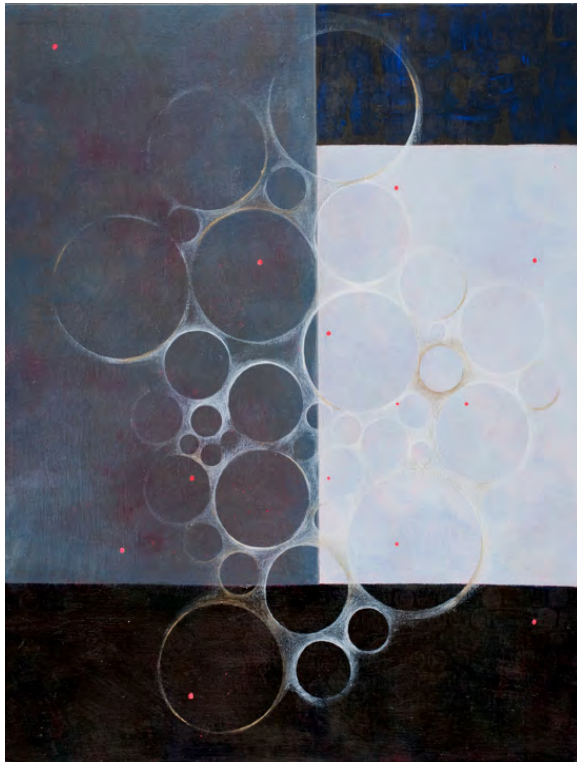
**Fig. 3.12.** *Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel 15*, (2011)

In *Exercise in Space, Light and Time Travel 13* (fig. 3.11), I created a sense of recessive space through the organic layering of small light marks on a dark blue ground. Overlapping halos were then built up with small irregular dots of reflective silver paint. These worked

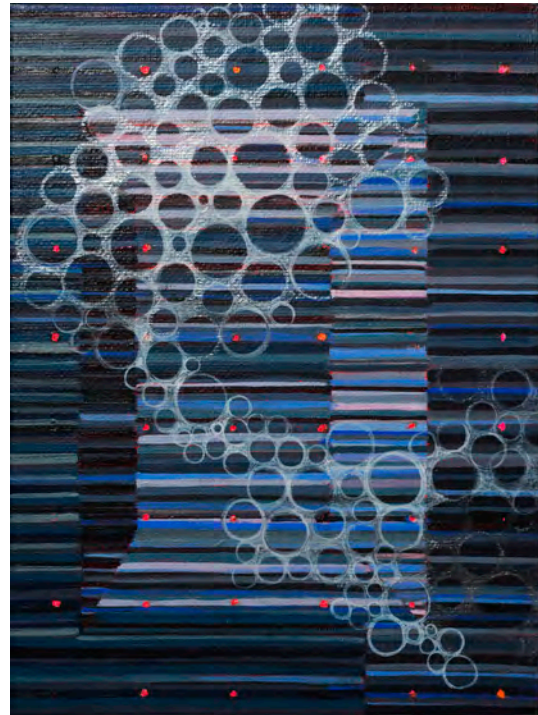
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<sup>28</sup> Jennifer Isaacs, "John Mawurndjul: Modern Master" in *Australian Art Collector* Issue 35, (2006), 77-79. [http://www.artcollector.net.au/Assets/575/1/35\\_marwurndjul.pdf](http://www.artcollector.net.au/Assets/575/1/35_marwurndjul.pdf) (accessed February 2015).

in contrast with the fluorescent dots geometrically aligned on a Cartesian grid and with the lines of flat white gouache. It is only possible to differentiate between the dotted haloes and the layers of white lines in certain lights. The breadth and subtlety of interactive materials in these works, from grounds that included glitter and combinations of interference colours, reflective paints and transparent glazes meant that the layers are slow to access, consequently I refer to these as *slow works* (fig. 3.11 and fig. 3.12).



**Fig. 3.13.** *Exercise in Space, Light & Time*  
*Travel 5*, (2010-11)



**Fig. 3.14.** *Exercise in Space, Light & Time*  
*Travel 17*, (2010)

Returning to the scenic predella-derived structures I began to play at disjuncture by breaking up the flat areas of the portals with the use of stripes (fig. 3.9 and fig. 3.14). This further complexity also added texture and directionality to the work. I found that the striations could also impact on the sense of depth when new colours and tones were created through optical mixing. The texture created by the striped areas, which complicated the colour on the surface of the work, demanded that the eye stay active within the unresolved space, and I found that it could also slow down the sense of spatial recession, increasing the sense of spatial ambiguity (fig. 3.14). The introduction of



striations as a formal device to interfere with spatial play and promote directionality was to develop as the research project was to progress.<sup>29</sup>

From these and other small exploratory works on canvas board, I made a series of reductive abstractions enlarged onto plywood. The first works used perpendicular intersections from the original portals which I abstracted through enlargement until the portal was unrecognisable; I then finished the process by painting thin layers of variously sized floating haloes and exposing dots of projective light (fig. 3.13). During the making of this series I abstracted the work further by abandoning painting circles altogether. Instead I implied the halo, or its material nature, with light-sensitive pigments poured onto the work's surface (fig. 3.15 and fig. 3.16).



**Fig. 3.15.** *Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel* 22, (2011)



**Fig. 3.16.** *Exercise in Space, Light & Time Travel* 23, (2011)

## Conclusion

My encounters with sacred European paintings were so moving that I modified my research question to ask—how might I offer an affective invitation to the metaphysical, to the spiritual, through the contemporary language of abstract painting?

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<sup>29</sup> An account of the introduction of the stripe can be found in Chapter Five and an account of the compositional function of the stripe can be found in Chapter Six.

In this chapter I discussed my route to affect as the conceptual methodology of the project. Realising that painters such as Fra Angelico intended that their paintings work *affectively* I identified two intentions within Western religious paintings: the *devotional*, to inspire communion with God through the saints, and the *didactic*, narrative instruction in Christian virtue. To engage with the idea of offering a metaphysical invitation to the viewer, I identified how the metaphysical affect I experienced was facilitated by the connection between my body's capacity to navigate actual space with my body's sense of internal space. I described two contradictory affects held in tension: the negative affect of spatial disorientation and the positive affect of managing that disorientation.

Medieval and early Renaissance paintings that prompted this affect for me appeared to do so through a strong sense of spatial disjuncture. Gold leaf projected light into the viewer's space, while rendered forms and orthogonal lines created spatial recession. Consequently I developed a series of small works based on the disjunctive spaces of the devotional and narrative forms found in *The Coronation of the Virgin*, a work that overarches these two traditions. This was a process of deconstruction and abstraction; I filtered out figurative narrative elements but retained devices suggesting metaphysical space, such as reflective paint. I explored layering as a means of balancing positive and negative affect and investigating contradictory spatial effects. In assessing the *Exercise* series, I felt that I had not achieved the right balance between the three spatial areas, one spatial area always seemed to dominate and inhibit the spatial slippage I sought to create. Consequently I decided to simplify my approach and explore the two forms of religious painting, the devotional and the narrative form, separately.

## Part I, Chapter Four: Materialising Light through Interactive Materials

The image... is a 'real presence'... a sacred intimacy that a fragment of matter gives to be taken in and absorbed. It is a real presence because it is a contagious presence...communicating and communicated in the distinction of its intimacy.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Chapter Four concerns the legacy and interpretation of the devotional image. In this chapter I will explain the history of the icon, and the heritage of interactive materials as a means of symbolising the sacred. I will introduce the idea that the significance of the contemporary image lies in the history of the image as icon, and in the theological justification of the validation of the invisible embedded within the visible. I introduce Mondzain's concept of a phenomenological interpretation performed within the space between viewer and sacred (icon) and between sacred (icon) and viewer, and explain the basis of light as metaphor for truth, and metaphysics as the foundation for metaphor, situating Christian symbolism within this tradition. The development of abstract space and its relationship with metaphysical consciousness is then situated within metaphoric meaning. To contextualising my work, I will discuss the New Zealand painter Tony Lane as an affective influence on this research. I introduce the body of work, *Timescape: Communicants* and the use of interactive pigments to explore metaphysical space based on the tradition of the halo. Introducing the second field trip to the Abbey, I relay seminal conversations with two nuns who speak of the intention of spiritual accompaniment within their monastic practice. Exploring disjunctive space further, the second body of work *Communicants 2* will be described, and my decision to reintroduce recessive spatial mechanisms to combine with the interactive materials used in *Timescape: Communicants*.

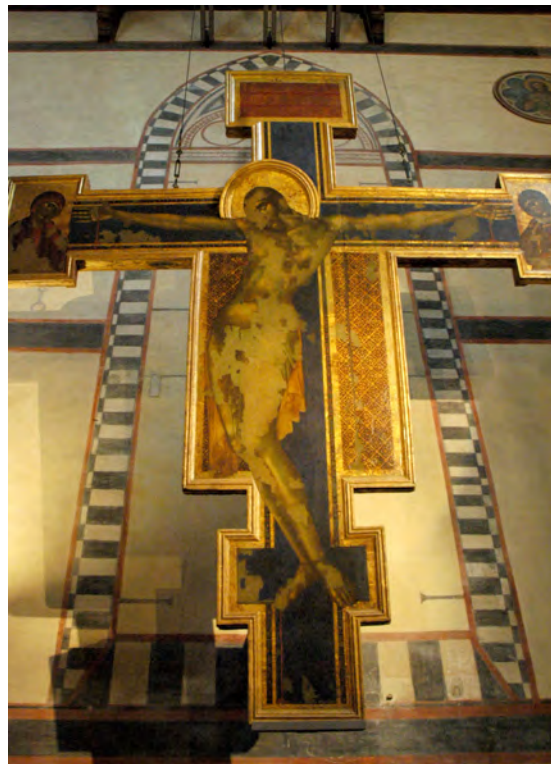
### Materialising Light

I was intrigued to explore disjunctive space through the combination and form of different spatial devices. In particular I was interested in experimenting with interactive materials as the main device for making facilitative paintings about light. Beginning in the sixth century and continuing until the Renaissance, there has been a tradition of using light-sensitive materials in religious works; the Byzantine icon was "perceived as matter

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 11.

imbued with ‘charis’, or divine grace.”<sup>2</sup> The first known icons used gold leaf as the ground and also to represent the saints’ haloes. Gold leaf was hardwearing and visually arresting. With surface patterning and the addition of sparkle, whether from jewels or other materials such as marble dust, a painting’s reflectivity enhanced its attraction and suggested religious symbolism.<sup>3</sup> Gold leaf, the halo and reflective materials became symbolic of the sacred, “to express a celestial, eternal ambiance.”<sup>4</sup> With the changing light from their sacred locations, the paintings’ reflective qualities appear to be an enactment of intercessory communication between the Saint and the worshipper.



**Fig. 4.1.** Cimabue, *Crucifix*, Santa Croce Museum, (1288)

In *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* Mondzain proposes that the power of the every-day image, termed the contemporary imaginary, has its roots in the religious heritage of the icon, post Byzantine iconoclasm.<sup>5</sup> The icon (and image) survived two centuries of violent destruction, theologically defended through the “radically abstract theory of iconic appearance;” because it was understood to be

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<sup>2</sup> Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” in *The Art Bulletin*, 631.

<sup>3</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman gives an account of the historic significance of sparkle found in the frescoes of Fra Angelico at San Marco Convent in Florence in *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, 187.

<sup>4</sup> Heather Galbraith, *Tony Lane: Practical Meta-physics* (Wellington: City Gallery Wellington, 2006), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 176-181.

“imaginarily true,” it was a relational symbol of the truth not an idolatrous mimesis.<sup>6</sup> It is this fundamental association between the image and the imagination—the abstract theory of the invisible contemplated within the visible<sup>7</sup>—that is claimed to underpin contemporary understanding of the nature of images. Mondzain extends this religious space by stating that the gaze between viewer and image can be conceptualised phenomenologically within the unresolved circularity of the exchange between image and viewer; the image opens up a portal, an abstract space, that offers an invitation to meditation that facilitates not only the gaze that the viewer enacts, but “God’s imagined gaze that is cast upon humans.”<sup>8</sup> It is the circularity of this communication in a contemplative space, that it was my experience, the constitutive materials of the icon facilitated. Consequently it was the icon’s theological and material heritage that I became interested in exploring, and contemporising through abstract painting. I wondered—could this heritage be so embedded in the Western psyche that the metaphysical heritage remains as a trace in the image, even when *image* appears in an abstracted form?

### **Tony Lane: The Branch**

This is an account of an interaction with a large painting by Tony Lane that hangs in my house. It reveals how reflective materials function in natural lighting and how a contemporary painter interprets historic sacred subject matter, such as the halo.

*The sun is streaming through the glass door and into my hall; the huge gilt frame catches the light and thrusts it into my path. As I pass this painting, I pause to consider why I feel this way. I am in love with The Branch (fig. 4.2); it is not an inanimate object, it is a friend with real bodily presence;<sup>9</sup> I agree with Galbraith who calls Lane’s brushstrokes “smooth and tender,”<sup>10</sup> the surface of the painting reminds me of skin. The materiality of this work never fails to attract me: the surface, constantly reflective, is never still, the gloss varnish shines on top of the oil paint, the gleam of the metallic leaf beneath the paint is carefully worked to reflect light.*

*The branch is both the subject of the work, as well as (dis)appearing ground.*

*Each of the four unique rectangles constituting the portal, has its own halo which separates it them from the openings; but these dark panes of chequered schlagmetal leaf draw me into the work. The gold leaf frame also demands to be subject. Over time I have come to realise that*

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of Christ as “the image of the invisible God,” is described in Colossians, Chapter 1 verse 15, *Life Application Study Bible*, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 176.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Galbraith, *Tony Lane*, 11.

this too is a halo. Defying the lightness implied by the light it reflects, and studded with what appear to be large round nails, it feels thick and heavy. It reminds me of Cimabue's Santa Croce Crucifix, of the weight of that geometric frame which appears so very substantial by comparison to the fragile curvilinear Christ it supports (fig. 4.1). Accentuating the shape of the intersecting cross are four eccentric ovals. They appear to be metallic haloes ringed by soft-edged paint; and I enjoy the fact that each halo has a halo. And I cannot fail to (smile when I) notice that Lane has enshrined his own initials in an oval.



Fig. 4.2. Tony Lane, *The Branch*, (1995)

Everything appears to have a halo, but each halo is unique. The painted branch is as imperfect as the windfall I picked up for kindling yesterday; and I am reminded again of the words of Galbraith, that Lane paints things from ordinary life but imbues them with symbolism;<sup>11</sup> and I enjoy afresh the slippage of meaning from the many allegorical and cultural interpretations that I could pin to this (in)significant branch. I consider how Lane is painting the big subjects playfully and the small, domestic things reverentially, amused by the disparate connection between my

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

*kindling and the prophetic words found in the book of Isaiah.<sup>12</sup> I savour this seemingly irreverent veneration; it makes me feel both elated and contemplative.*

*Living in the presence of The Branch I experience being between worlds: the world of historic symbolic language and the contemporary world of shifting spaces with shifting meaning.*

### **The Metaphoric Significance of Light**

My paintings are concerned with materialising light to suggest metaphysical spaces. In the history of Western thought the character of light and human existence are inextricably interwoven. Light, although itself un-seeable, has been evolving as a metaphor for illuminating the unknown, for centuries. Within Greek philosophy and the metaphysical tradition, light is positioned as a metaphor for truth. In the Platonic tradition light remains invisible itself and only takes any knowable form, such as an idea, in that which it is helping to make visible. Light by this understanding, is the mechanism for describing the nature of truth. Vasseleu, writing on the history of the metaphor of light, discusses Hans Blumenberg's study of light in the Western metaphysical tradition, and examines the evolution of the significance and understanding of light. Within modern enlightenment thinking, light becomes the objective itself. Truth is no longer believed to be revealed metaphorically through light, but is revealed in light's ideal nature.<sup>13</sup>

Jacques Derrida describes the essential language of philosophy as based on metaphor:

the metaphor of darkness and light, (of self-revelation and self-concealment), (is) the founding metaphor of Western philosophy as metaphysics. The founding metaphor not only because it is a photological one—and in this respect the entire history of our philosophy is a photology, the name given to a history of... light—but because it is a metaphor.

Metaphor in general... is the essential weight which anchors discourse in metaphysics,<sup>14</sup>

With philosophy posited as a complicated interconnection of concept-metaphors, metaphors of light remain at the centre of metaphysical truth: "light is the concept-metaphor by means of which truth can appear present to consciousness."<sup>15</sup> According to Derrida, metaphor is fundamental to making "sensible" the nature of human

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<sup>12</sup> The Christ is prophetically referred to as a branch in various places in the Bible, notably Isaiah 11:1, 4:2 and Jeremiah 23:5.

<sup>13</sup> Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1998), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Vasseleu, *Textures of Light*, 5.

comprehension as both a mechanism for understanding the sensorial and a means of understanding the abstract.<sup>16</sup> This position is supported by Lakoff and Johnson, whose research asserts the significance of metaphor in everyday life; they maintain metaphor is not just part of language but is intrinsic in all human thought and behavior. They claim that the ordinary conceptual system is “fundamentally metaphorical in nature.”<sup>17</sup>

Within the Christian tradition, Christ names Himself as the light of the world:

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life’<sup>18</sup>

With the roots of Christian thinking in the Greek philosophical tradition and the biblical writings of the Old and New Testaments supporting this thinking, images relating to Christian doctrine maintain light as a foundational symbol.

### **The Concept of Abstract Space**

Herbert Read, writing on the relationship between icon and idea, maintains that within the history of the development of human consciousness, the idea is always preceded by the image.<sup>19</sup> As “transcendental consciousness” developed within Christianity, so too did the idea of transcendental spatiality.<sup>20</sup> The transcendent awareness of space was initially of an *indefinite* entity that then developed into space as an *infinite* entity; but before invisible spiritual beings could be conceived of as conscious agents in human life, a space had to be imagined where they existed after their death. This space was manifested within the icon,

The whole notion of transcendence, which reaches its purest form in...  
the Middle Ages, is conditioned by the aesthetic awareness of space.<sup>21</sup>

Read identifies spatial relations in humans developing on two levels: the sensorimotor (perceptual) level offering the “sense” of space and the representational (intellectual) level offering the “idea” of space.<sup>22</sup> The former is a product of haptic development and the latter, a development of symbolic activity through speech and image representation.

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), footnote 209.

<sup>17</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), <http://www.textosenlinea.com.ar/libros/Lakoff%20y%20Johnson%20-%20Metaphors%20We%20Live%20By%20-%201980.pdf> (accessed June 2013), 4.

<sup>18</sup> John 8:12, *Life Application Study Bible*, 1757.

<sup>19</sup> Read, *Icon and Idea*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 61, 64.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 59-60, 64.



Through the evolution of the imagination's capacity to make and retain images, and to create a symbolic system to order them, the concept of abstract space was born.<sup>23</sup>

mysticism... demands a separation of spirit and matter; spirit...is placed in a realm beyond our normal experience, and is reached by a special faculty, the *intuitus* of the Scholastics. Communication with this realm is only obtained...by supernatural agencies. We may symbolize such agencies, as when we give haloes to saints... but only to emphasise the feeling of distance.<sup>24</sup>

In the icon, canonised saints inhabit this distant abstract space and yet are available to act transitively through the intercessory prayer and faith of the believer. I have come to understand that the Saint of the icon can be imagined as object,<sup>25</sup> subject and verb. Where the space that they inhabit is both the empty, (absent) abstract space of the portal imagined by Mondzain, and the occupied space that the saints indwell through communication (present). With the gold halo a separate entity to the Saint's body, positioned as part of the gold leaf of the ground, it is understandable how the halo became a symbol of an *other*, and gold leaf became a symbol of *another* space. I experience the interactivity of the materials performing and promoting the interactivity of subjects (both physical and metaphysical) in prayer and devotion.

### ***Timescape: Communicants, light body***

In the *Exercises*, combining non-reflective paints with interactive materials, I had explored painting affective spaces by juxtaposing disjunctive formal elements. Whilst aware that the halo was symbolic, I realised that my field trip experiences of the reflective halo and ground was of an almost indexical encounter of the sacred through its sensitivity to environmental light. In some of the *Exercises*, I had left empty the spaces that the saints' heads would have occupied to portray a sacred, absent presence, but I wanting a facilitative spatial disjuncture that was compositionally simpler. I was intrigued to see if a painting of a simultaneously present and absent subject, could offer a contemporary invitation to the metaphysical through the action of its materials alone. Consequently I made a body of paintings that poured interactive pigments on to non-reactive paint. I abandoned the previous references to recessive space, (such as the portal), but used a radial pattern comprised of concentric circles to suggest a central vanishing point for the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>25</sup> A discussion on the objective nature of the visible immaterial can be found in Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 239, 185-243: an explication of John of Dasamcus' three orations in defense of the icon.

fluorescent grid; I drew straight lines from the central point of the grid through the coaxial circles to create regular intersection points on which I painted the latex dots. I used a square canvas, 1020 mm x 1020 mm that implied a perfect, geometric shape rather than the asymmetry of the human body.<sup>26</sup>



**Fig 4.3.** *Timescape: Communicant Grey*, shown here photographed in two different lights, (2011)

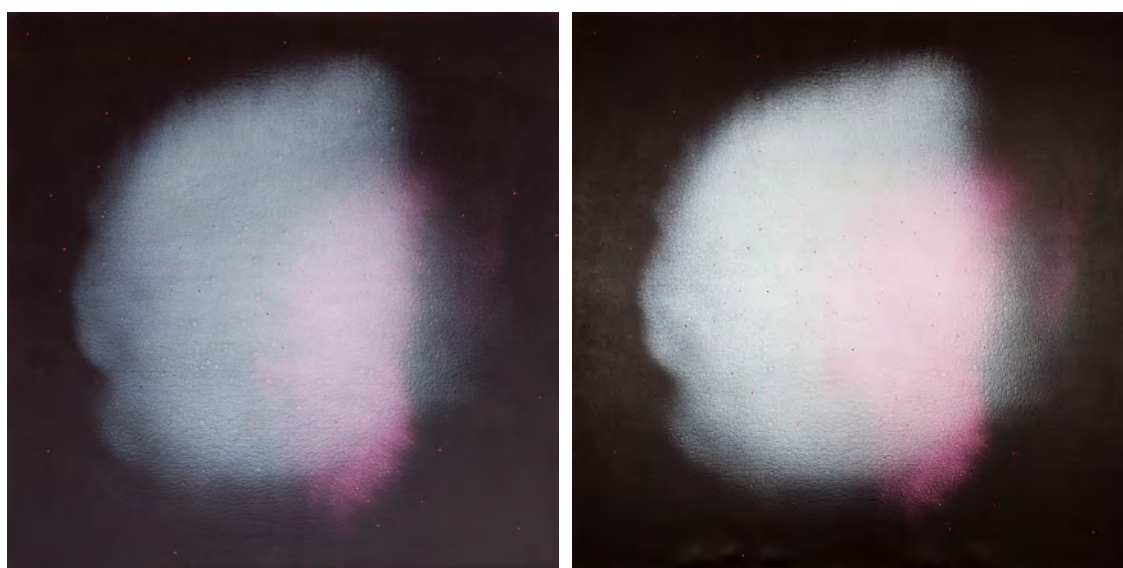
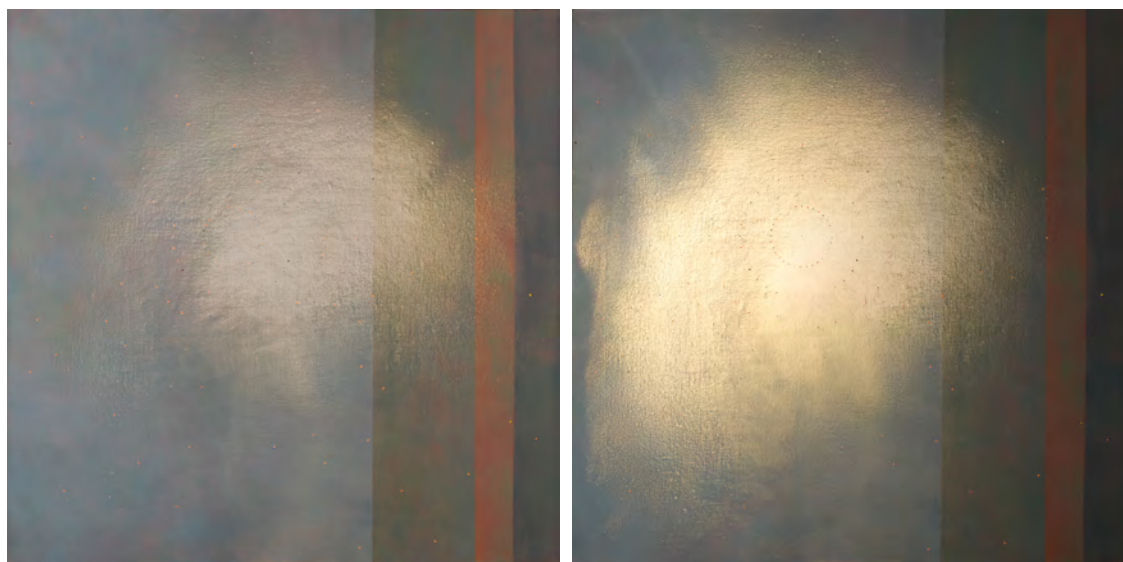
I wanted to play with a subtle suggestion of recessive space through the relationship between figure and ground, and develop projective spaces through the use of light and materiality. I therefore treated the tonality of the ground in three ways, painting light, mid tone and dark grounds on which to pour the reactive pigments. I painted the light ground a pale grey that was dark enough to offer contrast to the figure but light enough to change places with it and offer the potential for spatial slippage. I painted some canvases with a mid tone colour and some with colours layered comprehensively enough to appear black. Matte paint was used for all the grounds, but although some were tonally flat, some grounds were textured or striped through the layering of transparent paint on a warm colour beneath the ground.

*Timescape: Communicant Grey* (fig. 4.3), has the palest ground with three poured interactive pigments. The first is an interference red pigment, the second is a flocculating reflective silver paint and the third is an interference turquoise. The interference pigments behave like fish scales in water creating iridescent colours that only appear in certain light and

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<sup>26</sup> For Martin's position on perfection in geometry see: Ned Rifkin, *Agnes Martin: The Nineties and Beyond* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Menil Collection in Association with Hatje Cantz, 2002), 25-26.

depending on the angle of illumination. Some of the radial latex dots have been removed to expose fluorescent yellow. The reduced value range between all the colours accentuates the interactive capacity of this work and helps promote the sense of slippage, but this is a shy work that performs quietly and erratically.



**Fig. 4.4.** (top, left & right), *Communicant Gold*, photographed in two different lights, (2011)

**Fig. 4.5.** (bottom), *Timescape: Communicant Red*, photographed in two different lights, (2011)

The second painting, *Timescape: Communicant Gold*, (fig. 4.4), uses a mid-tone grey ground with orange painted underneath it which has been allowed to show through in various degrees; consequently these vertical stripes occupy different spaces because of their changing value. Because the ground is complex by comparison to the other canvases, I poured only one layer of interactive mica/gold pigment onto the work. Although mica

has a less complex refractive nature than other interference pigments, it can appear silver, intense gold or can disappear completely depending on the light and viewer movement.

The third painting, *Timescape: Communicant Red*, has layers of dark purple to build up a ground that appears black (fig. 4.5). Just two pourings were made on this surface: an interference red pigment and a reflective silver paint. Both colours flocculated on the surface giving it a grainy texture that suggests surface detail but also, through the wide value range, can suggest distance.<sup>27</sup> Very few of the pink dots have been exposed. The colours perform as though dancing with each other; sometimes the interference red will rise to the surface and sometimes the reflective silver will take precedence.

Whilst drawing on the devotional tradition of religious art, I attempted to explore space and light by using interactive materials to imply the symbolic relationship with the sacred and numinous. I was using natural and artificial light to accentuate the interactive properties of the materials and to suggest the possibility of “virtual light.”<sup>28</sup> I was also experimenting with suggesting depth subtly through the change in the ground’s value relations. I had hoped that the concentric grid pattern might suggest recessive space through an implied central vanishing point but it remained successful only as surface patterning. After exhibiting eight works in this series, I found that the interactive materials performed too erratically to remain as the dominant spatial mechanism; they did not offer me enough spatial play. I wondered—how might I introduce alternative spatial mechanisms to balance and complement interactive spatial mechanisms?

### ***The Abbey, Jamberoo Part 2***

This account is taken from notes made from conversations with two nuns during retreats at The Abbey. It explains the vocation of accompaniment that this Benedictine community has, and a concept of community explored in subsequent bodies of work. This account precedes my diarised account of the second field in Chapter Five.

*I am staring at lines of spines in the bookstore of The Abbey. I enjoy thumbing through the many books on offer, but I realise that as a Protestant I do not understand the significance of these Catholic nuns practice; I had no idea of the magnitude of the monastic traditions that are stretched out before me. I remember being here before, the nun behind the counter looked so*

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<sup>27</sup> Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space*, 46-47.

<sup>28</sup> Summers, *Real Spaces*, 469.

*approachable that I asked her about the significance of what I had been experiencing during the Liturgy of the Hours; I was disarmed by what she told me. I recall elements of the conversations and the intention of accompaniment that was implied:* <sup>29</sup>

*Here at Jamberoo, as we pray whilst watching the sun coming up, we are thinking of those who feel so bad, they do not know how they are going to make it through the day.*

*We are praying for them, they are not alone.*

*And at midday, we are thinking of those who look back, dreading where they have come from, but do not know how to move forward; the day is too long for them.*

*We are praying for those people at this time.*

*And when the light is dying, as we sing and pray, we are thinking of those who are overwhelmed with dread at the prospect of the onset of darkness. And in the darkness of the night when we pray and sing, we are thinking of those in distress who cannot sleep, who cannot imagine how they are going to get through the night.*

*We are praying for them, they are not alone.*<sup>30</sup>

*And then I see it, instead of these nuns being removed from real life, I see that they are at the centre of it; I have been one of those people the nuns are accompanying through prayer and I find myself daring to believe that what she is saying is true. I wonder—is a component of the metaphysical invitation I seek to offer the viewer embodied in the concept of accompaniment?*

### ***Communicants 2, dark body of light***

I went to The Abbey between making the two bodies of work, *Timescape: Communicants* and *Communicants 2*. The retreat became the second seminal experience to inform my research. Consequently in considering the nature of painting serial works I wondered how not only cyclic time might be embedded in my paintings but also the meaning of communion and the implication of concepts such as accompaniment, community and communication. It is common practice to call a collection of paintings, “a body of work,”<sup>31</sup> and exhibited paintings are often discussed as being *in dialogue* with each other. I began to imagine the next body of paintings as a physical community of entities in dialogue with the viewer as well in consensus with each other.

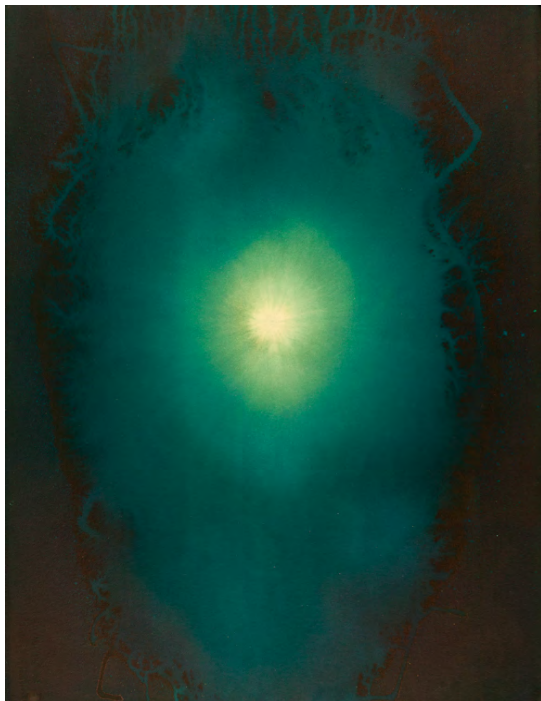
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<sup>29</sup> I have been on retreat to The Abbey three times. The conversations described took place on during two visits, (the first in 2012 and the second in 2015). This account is adapted from my notes.

<sup>30</sup> For an account of the vocation of this Benedictine community of prayer at the Abbey, Jamberoo, see: <http://www.jamberooabbey.org.au/about/dsp-default.cfm?loadref=127> (accessed July 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Neil. C. M. Brown, *Artexpes: Beyond the Single Work* (Sydney: Board of Studies NSW, 2002), no pagination.

By using relatively passive grounds in the *Timescape: Communicants* series, I had been exploring how far I could condense and expand the experience of light and space through the relationship between interactive and non-reactive materials. These paintings worked slowly because they would only show the breadth of their potential in certain light conditions. The works employing the greatest tonal range offered me the most potential for spatial ambiguity and metaphysical space but the grid of concentric circles remained flat and I found its geometric symmetry obstructed access to the space behind the picture plane. I therefore returned to the idea of exploring disjunctive spaces through a combination of projective and recessive devices.



**Fig. 4.6.** *Communicant: composure*, (2012)



**Fig. 4.7.** *Communicant: faithfulness*, (2012)

I decided to introduce a tonally recessive spatial mechanism to balance the projective interactive materials and experiment with the qualities of portrait-sized papers, and to use minimal surface patterning and a dark ink ground to complement the interactive materials. The paper and ink would not accommodate the grid as previously made, so the lead pencil drawing became the surface patterning and I pierced the paper to create dot points. Working with damp paper, 550 x 770 mm, I applied multiple layers of water-soluble inks. The inks used are dyes designed to flow well and dry quickly by absorbing into the paper, but I found the component colours would separate when solvents and water were added. Interestingly as the ground was being painted certain constituent

colours would appear to be absorbed, (sometimes reappearing later depending on the liquids added), and another would appear on the surface. I chose two grounds, a rich dark brown and a dark blue/brown. Whilst returning to the idea of an absent presence, I preferred the shape of the oval as subject.<sup>32</sup> On some of the paper, I drew graphite surface patterns using circles or hexagons (reminiscent of a Giotto fresco, fig. 2.4), however, not wanting to block entry to the recessive light centre, I decided to keep the patterning very subtle (fig. 4.8 and fig. 4.9).



**Fig. 4.8.** *Communicant: gentleness*, (2012)



**Fig. 4.9.** *Communicant: gladness*, (2012)

In the first of eleven works, I laid down blue-black ink usually when the cold pressed paper was damp, I added a solvent and water to extend its reach. As the liquids interacted with the ink the chemical reaction produced other colours. I found the first work (fig. 4.6), so engaging that I did not add any other elements. I was drawn into the absent space created through the small area of radial light, as into a “focus of energy,”<sup>33</sup> which equally appeared as a presence when I experienced it pulsing outwards towards me; this effect created spatial ambiguity for me by simultaneously facilitating and

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<sup>32</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 91.

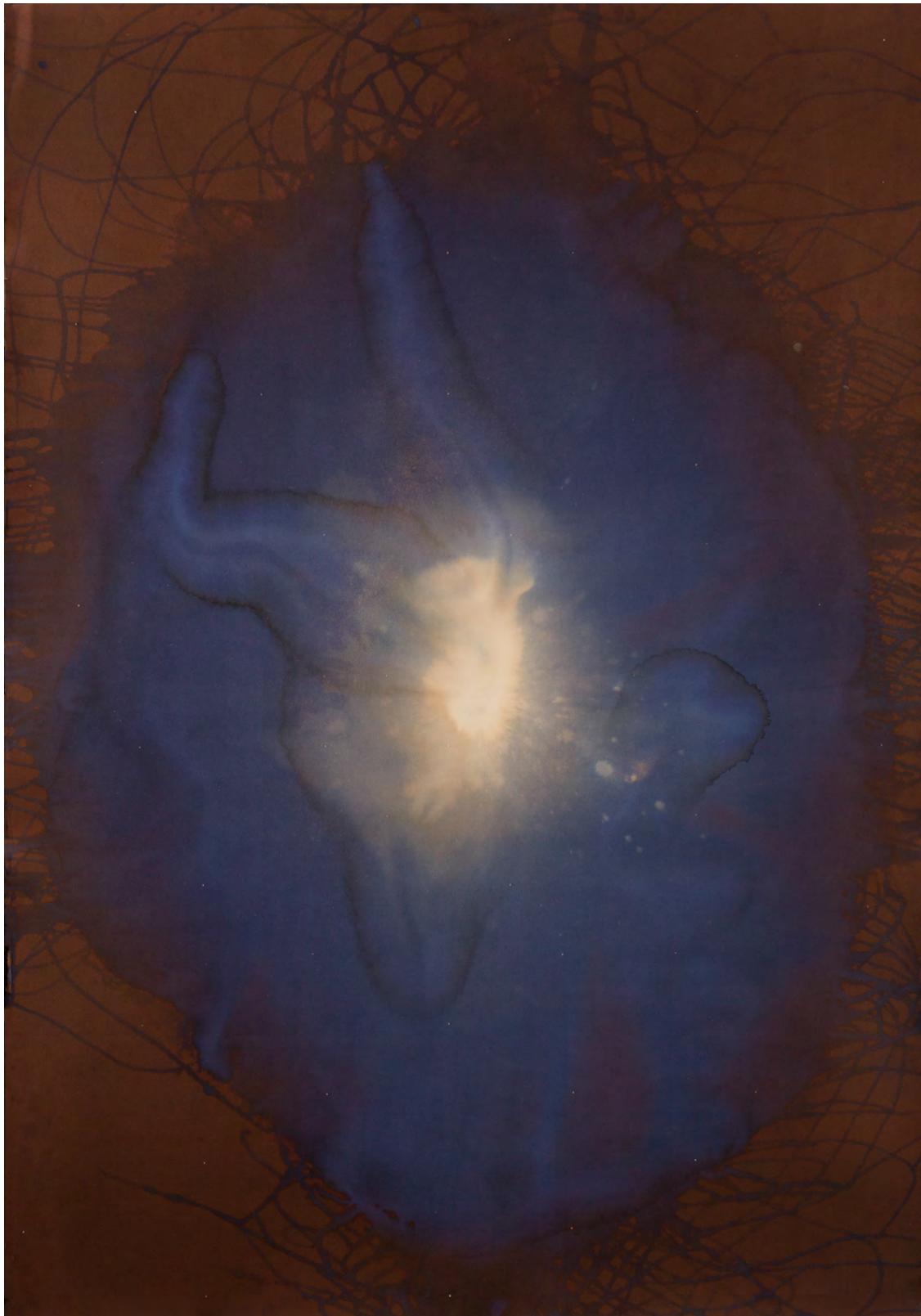
<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

confounding the sense of recessive space. In a few works I used just ink, in some I added interactive materials (fig. 4.7), some have surface patterning and some works combine all the spatial devices. A variety of approaches meant that I could compare the spatial treatments once the works were completed. *Communicant: gladness* (fig. 4.9), has a surface pattern of circles intersecting on the diagonal axis, I then painted the ground using brown-black ink and added the diluted solvent. I poured layers of interference red pigment and thinned silver paint on top. These light-sensitive materials are only visible in certain lights. I also punctured the work sparingly at the end of the process filling the tiny holes with fluorescent enamel paint. The pattern of running ink added another layer of complexity. The type of paper affected the absorbency of the liquids and also affected the characteristics of the marks. The cold pressed paper used in this work is rougher in texture and highly absorbent; its texture impacted markedly on the way the inks dried.

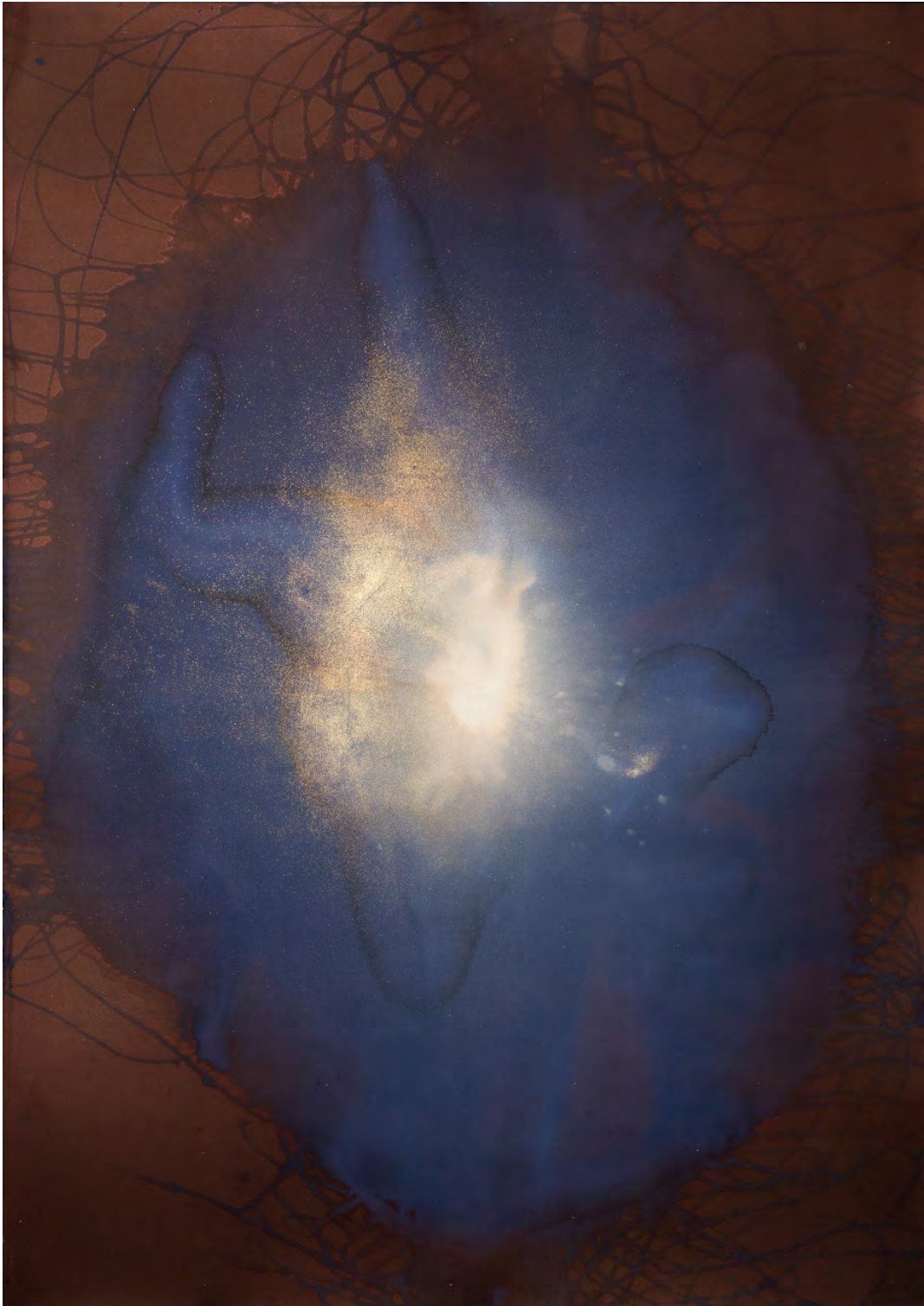
Since I felt relatively in control when making these small works, I was curious to see what significantly enlarging the work, would effect. On hot-pressed paper 1060 x 1500 mm, I drew up a grid on the back of two of the four sheets of Lana paper, then painted large amounts of brown-black ink on the front until the surface was saturated, I then poured water and diluted solvent onto the central area of the dark ground. The scale of the work meant that it was difficult to control the liquids and the drying process, and consequently it produced different marks. In the work's centre I floated a fine gold pigment that flocculated on drying and, using the grid on the reverse side, I punctured the work sparingly at the grid's intersections, filling the holes with fluorescent orange enamel. These tiny dots are visible when viewed up close. This work, *Communicant: grace* conceals the interactive pigment well (fig. 4.10a), but the effect is dramatically projective when it does appear (fig. 4.10b). As the viewer moves around them, the performing light in these paintings suggest a form of dialogue; as a body of work, they appear to perform communally with each other, as well as individually with the viewer.

*Communicant: love* (fig. 4.11), has blue-black ink as the ground; I used the same chemical process but employed no grid dots. Again the large scale of the work and less absorbent nature of the hot-pressed paper slowed the drying time and consequently produced textures like salt-stains; but the small amount of gold pigment in the heart of the area of highest value, because of its pigment concentration, is present in most lighting environments. All of these works have strong presence because of their wide value range.





**Fig. 4.10a.** *Communicant: grace*, photographed in two different lights, (2012)

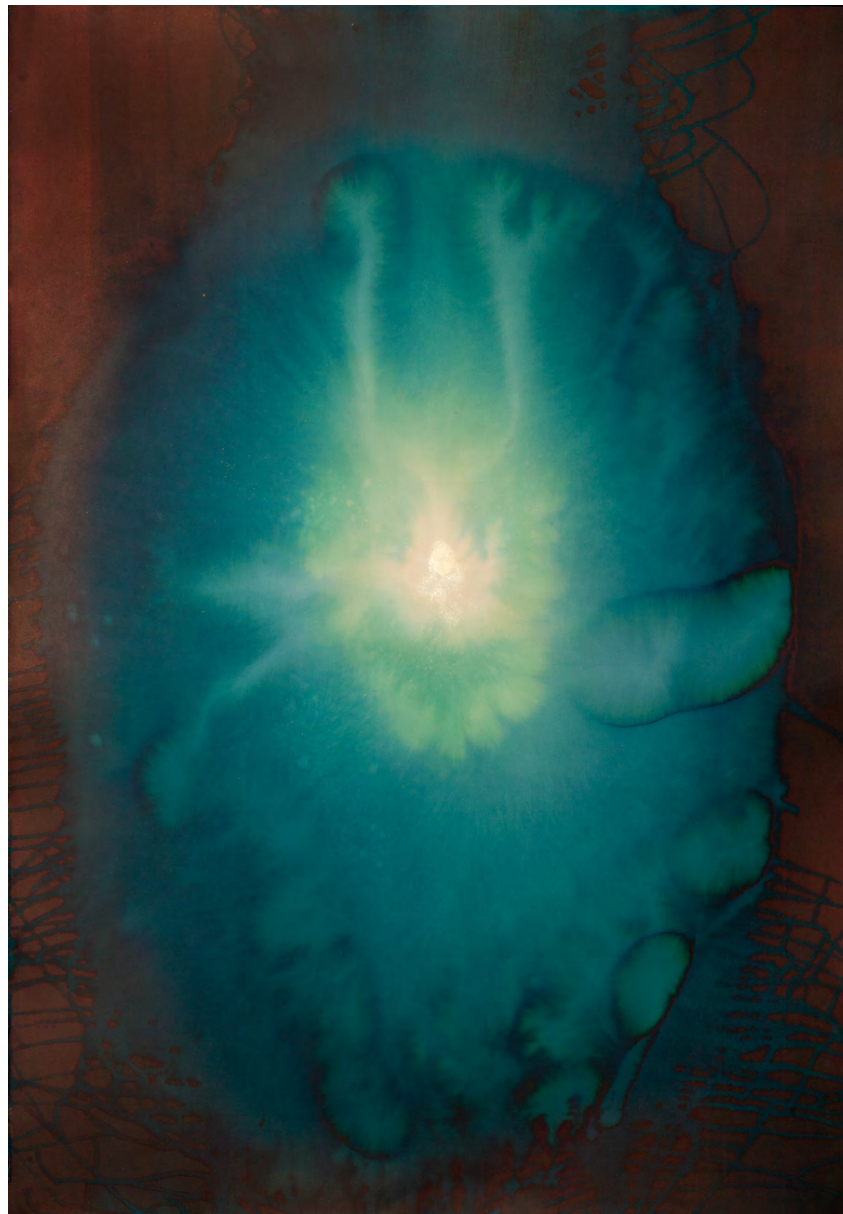


**Fig. 4.10b.** *Communicant: grace*, photographed in two different lights (2012)

### **Conclusion and Summary of Part I**

In concluding Chapter Four I offer not just a reprise of the chapter itself but of the focus of Part I as a whole. The overarching conceptual question of this research remains—how can contemporary abstract painting offer an affective invitation for the viewer?

Drawing on the history of Western religious art, my research has been concerned with the treatment of space and light as the means of exploring this possibility.



**Fig. 4.11.** *Communicant: love*, (2012)

In Part I, my focus has been on the early *devotional* heritage of Christian image making. The icon was made to inspire the viewer to worship God and commune with the Saints, an intention explored historically through imagining metaphysical space and forms in a two-dimensional format. This devotional motivation is something I experienced and interpreted in my work because it was a facilitative encounter that for me supplied the type of invitation that I then sought to offer the viewer. During my encounters with sacred paintings in Europe, I became conscious of the parts played by all forms of

manifested light. I began by exploring disjunctive space, interpreting the manifestations of light witnessed in the paintings from the intersection of two religious traditions, the *devotional* and the *narrative*. My investigations produced a series of small works, *Exercises in Space, Light & Time Travel* in which I employed abstracted spatial mechanisms analysed in *The Coronation of the Virgin*.

Chapter Four is the culmination of my investigation into the legacy of *devotional* religious art through the use of light reactive materials. I gave a description of the development of abstract space in painting and discussed the metaphoric significance of light. In exploring the history of the image, I then considered the significance of the icon, particularly as it relates to the idea of the contemporary imaginary,<sup>34</sup> a concept that I draw on to consider if the Western religious heritage remains imprinted in the nature of the image, as a trace.<sup>35</sup> The first body of work described, *Timescape: Communicants*, concentrated on investigating the projective potential of contemporary versions of gold leaf, combined in ways that maximise spatial ambiguity. The second body of work, *Communicants 2*, uses interactive materials in conjunction with the recessive spaces created by the strong tonal variation of the ink grounds. I explained how these works have presence both individually and communally when exhibited as a body of works. The paintings create affective spaces through their wide tonal range: the recessive ovals draw the eye into the centre of the work in opposition to the action of the projective interactive pigments. However, because of the spasmodic nature of the interactive materials, the work was problematic as a long-term research solution and I wondered if there was another solution that might offer a more reliable, sustained invitation to the metaphysical.

The *Exercise* series, described in Chapter Three, has fed two lines of enquiry into metaphysical invitation: the first, in Part I, interprets the devotional heritage in Western painting, and the second, in Part II, will investigate the *narrative* tradition by exploring the light of real space and the colour relations revealed through changing natural light.

I will be asking—how can I make a body of abstract works that explores materialising light in the service of an affective invitation to the metaphysical, that is connected to the body in real space and time, within a greater community?

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<sup>34</sup> Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 176.

<sup>35</sup> An explanation of the nature of trace, pertinent to this work, can be found in David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, 255-256.

## Part II Chapter Five: Painting the Passage of Time

Paintings can be endlessly analysed and reproduced, and yet they exist primarily to be experienced—and experience is always changing from one person and one moment, to the next.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Part II of this exegesis charts my exploration into the *narrative* branch of Western religious art. This chapter begins with my second seminal field trip: a winter retreat to The Abbey, a monastery in New South Wales. This follows on from an account in Chapter Four of impromptu conversations with two Benedictine nuns, in which their vocation of accompaniment is discussed. My encounters with cyclic liturgy, enacted over twenty-four hours, introduce another interpretation of light as an invitation to the spiritual. This new approach to painting light draws on the second, narrative tradition of sacred painting, the representational method of painting light; this approach is developed in chapters six and seven. Referencing *The Liturgy of the Hours*, I develop luminosity in painting as an interpretation of my experience in the monastery chapel. I refer to Bill Viola's video work *Catherine's Room* (fig. 5.2), as a means of investigating time within a portrayal of the cycle of life. Returning to ideas from my earlier canvas boards, I develop the composition of a recessive structure, the portal, to be repeated across the series. I discuss translating the light experienced during five cyclic liturgies into a series of palettes that I apply to the repeated structure of the portal. I describe continuous narrative painting of the quattrocento, as a means of conceptualising fluid time and encouraging an active process of devotion through attributing meaning to the multiple moments portrayed in the one scene and I consider the implication of these synchronous structures on my work.

### **The Second Field Trip: A Retreat to The Abbey, Jamberoo Part I**

This is my diarised account of a retreat at The Abbey experienced in 2012. Observing the changing light in the chapel whilst taking part in *The Liturgy of the Hours* signalled a change of direction in my exploration of an invitation to metaphysical encounter. From this affective experience I turned to the narrative tradition in religious art, choosing to experiment with interpreting real-world light through the cycle of linear time.

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<sup>1</sup> Nickas, *Painting Abstraction*, 10.

**A Benedictine Monastery: 5pm July 2012, Part I**

*Perched on the end of the bed, I am staring at my feet looking at the pattern of the slate floor of my cell. It is early evening in Kangaroo Valley and I am here at the Abbey again. The light is just beginning to fade and the winter air is cooling quickly.*

*I am on retreat.*

*I have taken the wooden medallion off the hook by the door and hung it around my neck, a sign to everyone I meet that I intend to remain silent.*

*I pray to my Father.*

*As I walk up the lane to the monastery at the top of the rise, I can hear birds roll calling for the evening. I am remembering the joy of walking on this country lane before, I re-enter this open space and expand to fill the breadth of the laneway. I allow my memory to go before me in anticipation.*

*As I enter the chapel through the covered cloister, the single chime of a bell is ringing. I sit down in one of the pews placed at the side of the chapel perpendicular to the large wooden altar in front of me.*

*I quieten myself,*

*I am finding this difficult, though my body is here, I am still travelling;*

*I make a space, a chink of light inside myself, then I widen my inner eye and I start watching with my heart,*

*Peace is coming.*

*I can see inside and outside the chapel, (inside and outside my body), I see the landscape through the curved glass window behind the altar. The light is beginning to fade but the grass is phosphorescing on the horizon line.*

*Nuns file in silently, their sturdy shoes barely touching the floor, they splinter off and take their positions somewhere in the semi-circles of pews facing the altar; and suddenly Vespers begins.*

*Though a practising Christian, I am not a Roman Catholic. The monastic tradition of this Liturgy Of The Hours is quite new to me.*

*Jamberoo Abbey is a community of Benedictine nuns that celebrates Mass daily and practises The Liturgy Of The Hours up to seven times a day and night. It is a weekly cycle. The Opus Dei, this work of God,<sup>2</sup> is believed to be the primary work of the community. It is a ministry of prayer and worship. Hospitality is also an important part of the Benedictine tradition; space has been made for a few of us to stay in the grounds and an open invitation to take part in most of the liturgies performed.*

*At Jamberoo, singing seems central to the service, I am listening tonight as two of the nuns sing a psalm, softly; each is incredibly careful to complement and not over power the other.*

*I listen,*

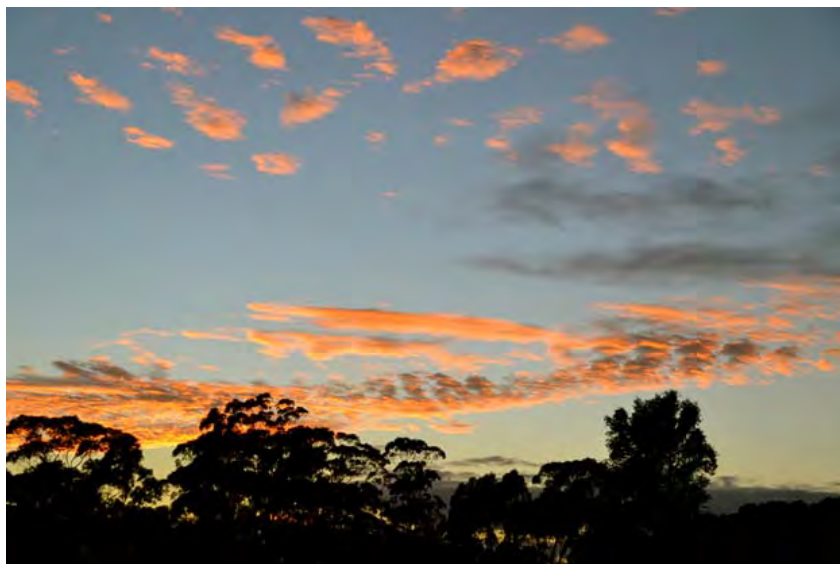
*I hear:*

*“What are we that You should keep us in mind,*

*Men and women that you care for us.”<sup>3</sup>*

*I find that instead of listening to the words I am trying to work out who is singing, in the dying light they are becoming disembodied voices, floating in the rafters above us;*

*My attention moves again and settles on the still fading light collecting on the horizon line. The window curves behind an enormous crucifix that seems to hover behind the altar, I am unused to this tradition; I am uncomfortable at first but it passes,*



**Fig. 5.1.** David Starr, *The Abbey, Jamberoo*, (2015)

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<sup>2</sup> *The Macquarie Dictionary*, 2nd Revision (Australia: Macquarie Library, 1990), 1198-9.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, ed., *Benedictine Daily Prayer*, 1253.

*I watch, as though for the first time I can really see the sky changing colour.  
The colours appear unnatural, the pinks are too pink, there is an orange that if I were to try to  
paint it, it would look ludicrous (fig.5.1),  
bruise-dark clouds drift past.*

*My eyes have moved back inside and when I join them I notice that,  
as suddenly as the daylight has faded, there is a flame. The buoyant liturgical candle is  
becoming the dominant light in this interior space,*

*how could I not have noticed that it was lit before?  
the significance of the candlelight becomes louder than the bell that guided me to the chapel;*

*in the dark, one of the nuns walks up to the lectern to read from the Bible using this candlelight,  
I realise that the symbolism of light, integral to the Christian tradition, is a lived reality in this  
community;*

#### **4.am**

*A noise is sounding in my dream, it is outside my body.  
I realise as I drag myself to consciousness that it is an alarm. I turn it off remembering that I  
am at The Abbey. It is four o'clock in the morning and I raise all the excuses I can think before  
God, (I often think I can hear Him laughing)...*

*But I pull on warm clothes and begin the walk up the laneway, this time in the dark.  
I am astonished by the space of this cold night. The rich blue-black darkness is pressing in on  
me from all sides, sucking me out of myself. My skin is on high alert. The sky requires my  
presence. And I find I am much taller than during the day.*

*There is no bell chiming. I lift the latch on the chapel and all appears dark and silent inside, I  
can smell the wood. The liturgical candle appears still alight. It has centre stage now.  
(Has it been awake all the time I have been sleeping?)*

*Quietly I hear the sound of the latch, someone else is slipping in behind me,*

*I begin to understand the shape of the chapel in the rich brown darkness, I find the altar  
window behind the altar is blackened.*



*Nuns file in and I am conscious of the sound that their thick full-length robes make as they move. They each have a tiny torch that they use if they need to, but light is used very economically.*

*The liturgical candle flickers with the atmospheric movement.*

*I had not noticed the organ music before. Now because of the darkness, everything sensorial appears luminous. The organ precedes the singing and a simple tune is played. A solo voice begins the antiphon and the uncomplicated pattern of this psalm repeats.*

*I notice small bright lights,  
the organist has the tiniest of lights to read her music,  
the nuns, whose tiny lights hang long from the rafters, turn them on only occasionally,  
silently.*

*The space is illuminated by the sound of the human voices and the halo-like flame;*

*A nun appears beside the candle and, like a Medieval icon, she appears to embody the light as she reads the Word. I recognise a favourite reading from Isaiah, I listen with my heart.*

*As formal prayers are offered, I find I am staring out of the window into the blueing-black sky outside, I am searching for the horizon line trying to catch the possibility of approaching light with my peripheral vision.*

*I realise that the liturgy is over and I have not been consistently present here inside the chapel.  
Perhaps next time,*

*Concentrating on each sensory experience I have encountered time and space as open ended.*

*As I walk back along the wide dark lane to my cell, I sense the surreality of this place in space;  
I feel as close to the stars as to the small creatures that are singing to me.*

### **Exercises in Light: The Hours**

I had come back from The Abbey with my mind full of the way in which the light, experienced through the passing of time, was integral to the nuns' daily devotional life. My time on retreat integrated my interest in painted space and light with a lived experience of a monastic practice that is both symbolic and tangible. Until this point I had been working with a concept of a metaphysical light that is in service to the supernatural, referencing the paintings that I had seen on my European field trip. In all

of the early Renaissance works the light was primarily used symbolically because the subject matter was deemed symbolic or miraculous, a belief which translated into an attempt to have the Saint or Jesus emanating light. However as painting developed, whether to inspire or offer religious instruction, so too did the way in which light was conceived of and used in religious paintings. Modelling the subjects gave them a semblance of form, and it was not long, once the subjects became volumetric, before the natural light implied by such modelling began to appear in the scenes themselves. Sunlight generates shadows and so the volumetric forms began to be painted with shadows rooting them on the ground. Skies, instead of being gold leaf, were painted with naturalistic colours and the sun was implied through colour and directional light references such as highlights and shading.

### **Bill Viola: Catherine's Room**

This is a reflection on my experience of a serial artwork by the video artist Bill Viola. This work is a modern interpretation of a Medieval sequential predella on the life of St Catherine of Siena. Viola's use of changing light suggests an interpretation of spirituality that resonates with my experience at The Abbey. Considering this work, in the context of my retreat, I imagine making paintings about changing light that are concerned with real time and place whilst alluding to symbolic time and space.

*As I consider the experience of daily liturgies at the Abbey, I am transported back to viewing Bill Viola's video work Catherine's Room (fig. 5.2),<sup>4</sup> exhibited at The Passions, National Gallery of Australia, 2005. It is an intimate work; there are five, small sequential videos showing a solitary woman in a small room who is employed in various daily rituals. The minimal architectural detail and the size of the room indicate that it is the same space in each video, but through the changing light each screen indicates a different time of day, from morning, through to afternoon, to sunset, then twilight and night. The furniture in each video changes as the needs of that time of day prompt the woman's actions: a little table is provided for her to wash at, a small desk is there for her to work at, etc. The repeating loop of each video exaggerates the simplicity and purposeful nature of her actions. The recurrent nature of her performance and the actions themselves, including praying and lighting candles, imply ritual.*

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<sup>4</sup> Viola's work references a predella series by the Sieneese artist Andrea di Bartolo, (1390s). An account of the painting *Saint Catherine of Siena and Four Mantellate* can be found in Holly Flora, "Order, Gender, and Image: Art for Dominican and Franciscan Women" in *Sanctity Pictured*, ed. Trinita Kennedy (Nashville: Frist Centre for the Visual Arts, 2014), 78-79.



**Fig. 5.2.** Bill Viola, *Catherine's Room*, (2001)

*There is one small window in the room that reveals the outside world and through it I see the branches of a tree. As I progress across the five screens it becomes obvious from this window that, not only is the cycle of day and night being explored, but a broader view of life is also evident through seasonal changes. I realise that references to time are embedded in this work through the repeated format and screen size, the cinematic loop, as well as through the cycle of natural and artificial light and references to the seasons. I notice that this work is based on the format of the predella. As I walk, I read them from left to right, and I am reminded of the small narrative paintings describing the life of St Dominic which run along the bottom of Fra Angelico's altarpiece in the Louvre. I enjoy imagining that it is Catherine in this video work; I place myself in this artwork too, as I am placed within The Abbey chapel.*

### **A New Approach to Light and the Introduction of the Stripe**

Referring back to the *Exercise* series, I resolved to make a significant change in my depiction of light, instead of following the devotional model in which supernatural light indicates metaphysical presence, I decided to paint my interpretation of the religious narrative tradition, interpreting the changing light that I had experienced at the monastery. I had been hoping to suggest the spiritual by attempting to materialise symbolic light, but at The Abbey my experience had been of the relationship between the liturgy and real light, with the symbolic embedded in their daily rituals and witnessed through the day's changing light. Although every liturgy presented as timeless performance, each liturgy equally felt grounded and normal. I wondered—was the apparent paradox I perceived linked to the repetitive nature of the nuns' practices and to the inherent cycle of light and darkness?



**Fig. 5.3.** Fra Angelico,  
*The Dream of Innocent III*, (1434)

**Fig. 5.4 & Fig. 5.5** *Exercises in Space, Light & Time*  
*Travel 2*, left and *17*, right, (2010-11)

The main painting from *The Coronation of the Virgin* (fig. 0.2), is intended to arouse devotion to the Virgin Mary. She is portrayed in mystical space, but the predella, running beneath the main painting, portrays a series of narrative scenes from the life of St Dominic which are intended to be read like a story. Predella scenes tell significant stories from the lives of Catholic Saints to establish the Saint's authority as intercessor. *Alberti*, writing in *De Pictura*, drew a parallel between the narrative picture and an open window.<sup>5</sup> This was applicable to my experience of the light centred around the chapel window, and I drew up a series of asymmetrical portals on boards, 300 x 370 mm. The composition, in an off-centred border, consisted of four trapezoids surrounding a central rectangle. An illusion of three-dimensional space relies on the viewer drawing a connection between the compositional construct and the way light describes a structure in the real world.<sup>6</sup> I therefore constructed the portal using linear perspective and employed light and shade.

The overriding sense from my monastic experience was of the relationship between liturgy and light and I decided to follow the progress of light that I had experienced during *The Liturgy of the Hours*, applying it to a series of portals called *The Hours*. In the canvas boards, I had been playing with creating disjunctive space through the combination of spatial mechanisms: I had used an underlying fluorescent grid to create a surface pattern and project light into the viewer's space, I had suggested recessive space by referencing the composite system of Renaissance perspective,<sup>7</sup> and I had been painting with light-sensitive pigments to activate the space between the picture plane and the viewer. Prior to *The Hours*, I had been focusing on effects from light-sensitive

<sup>5</sup> Lew Andrews, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art: The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>6</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Phaidon, 1972), 37-39.

<sup>7</sup> Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space*, 35-54.

materials to suggest metaphysical space, with projective devices dominating. In *The Hours*, with the emphasis on linear time, recessive devices were to be given precedence.

*The Liturgy of the Hours* is a Roman Catholic tradition that at The Abbey comprises five to seven services over a twenty-four hour period. This liturgical series is also part of a weekly cycle. My three-day retreat at this all-female monastery was in winter when the days were at their shortest. In considering my series, I began by aligning my experience of the changing light inside and outside the chapel with the cycle of liturgies that I had attended. *Lauds* is at half past seven in the morning; on most days there is also *Mass* at nine O'clock, though on Sundays, *Lauds* and *Mass* are combined. In winter, going early to chapel, I would experience the new light of dawn and the maturation of the light as the service progressed. *Middle Hour*, at one o'clock in the afternoon, offered me the flattest light but usually the bluest skies. Daily *Vespers* is at five o'clock in the afternoon and I would observe the light beginning to die during this liturgy. On the weekend *Compline* was added to the programme at seven o'clock in the evening. During early evening, I would watch the brightening colours of the dusk skies then observe them fading during twilight. This was the time when incandescent light would assert its dominance. *Vigils* describes a service at half past four in the morning when, but for the stars and moon outside and minimal light inside, the sky appears richly black.

I was intrigued by the idea of making a sequential series to interpret extreme light through to extreme darkness, and vibrant coloured skies to the almost colourless; all these phenomena I had observed and had been affected by. Wanting to translate these observations into varied palettes, I was interested in adding different colour and tonal relations into the mix to observe my responses to hue and value changes. Considering the palettes within the pertinent composition of a portal, and with Dunning's colour theory in mind, I decided to interpret the light using a warm and cool colour duality as a way of accentuating depth and separating out the colours.<sup>8</sup> In the *Exercise* series I had introduced striations as a layering device to enhance spatial ambiguity. I had found that stripes could break up the compositional areas (fig. 5.4 and fig. 5.5), by suggesting texture that depending on their value and colour, could create visual interest like that of mosaic

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<sup>8</sup> An explanation of colour perspective, (sourced from *Changing Images of Pictorial Space*, 47-54), can be found in Chapter Six of this exegesis in "An Exploration of Warm and Cool Duality."

tiles.<sup>9</sup> New colours could be suggested by optical mixing when stripes are placed side-by-side. This could create unexpected shifts of hue and tone that would have the effect of keeping the eye active because an area could not be easily resolved. I surmised that this active engagement had the potential to slow down optical assimilation of the spatial areas and promote an affect of active contemplation; this was consistent with my intention to make *slow work*. Consequently I decided to use striations to lay down combinations of colours and explore their value relations within the portal composition. Whilst conscious of differentiating between the three methods of spatial treatment, I also wanted to subtly undermine each device. Using stripes, I could describe the recessive structure through the trapezoids' tonal relations, but also destabilise it by accentuating the surface through patterning and confound its boundaries by running the stripes across more than one area of the composition. Undermining the structure's boundaries with stripes could aid spatial slippage, and breaking up the planes of colour with stripes would build texture and suggest surface movement through patterning.<sup>10</sup>

### **Morning Paintings: *Lauds* and *Middle Hour***

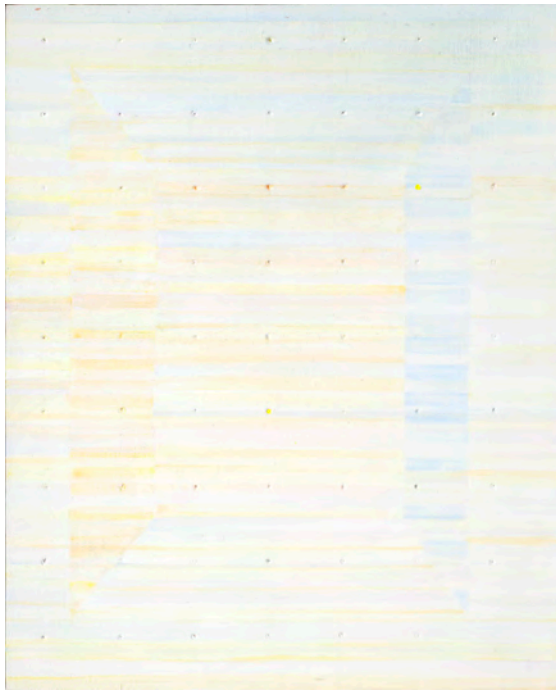
Maintaining consistent tonal relationships between the structural areas of the portal across the series allowed me to focus on the value and colour relations of each palette: the lightest of the quadrilaterals was intended to be the widest vertical trapezoid which sat opposite the darkest, narrowest trapezoid; the central rectangle was to be the second lightest area in the composition. I also decided to maintain the fluorescent grid underneath the ground and pour light sensitive pigments on top of some of the works.

I began by painting the morning works describing time passing by increasing the tonal range and increasing the colour variety. In *Lauds 1* (fig. 5.6), I attempted to keep the warm and cool divide mostly intact within their designated sections: the yellowing warmth of new sunlight is separated from the darker cooler shadows, but I used simultaneous contrast and complementary colour to suggest movement by adding minimal stripes of cool colours into the pale yellow sections. By running stripes of the same colour across section boundaries, I was also hoping to challenge the sense of recession, to create spatial ambiguity.

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Hills, *Venetian Colour: Marble, Mosaic, Painting and Glass 1250-1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 43, 54.

<sup>10</sup> An extended discussion on the stripe can be found in Chapter Six of this exegesis. A history of the stripe and its optical functions, consistent with my explorations, can be found in, Michel Pastoureau, *The Devil's Cloth: A History Of Stripes*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Washington Square Press, 1991).



**Fig. 5.6.** *The Hours: Lands 1*, (2012)



**Fig. 5.7.** *The Hours: Lauds 3*, (2012)

*Lauds 3* has a greater tonal range than the earlier morning works consequently the sense of recession is greater (fig. 5.7). I wanted to see what would happen if I challenged the warm/cool divide by adding more colour variety and tonal diversity into the sections, (pale blue lines run into the light, warm areas and warm stripes run across the cool shadow areas), but on completion I found it hard for my eye to mix these various colours, even viewed from a distance. This painting had an interference pigment floated onto the surface, but with such a light palette, the refractive character of the pigment remained hard to see.

As the sun sits high in the sky so *Middle Hour 1* is a high-key, cool work with little tonal contrast or colour diversity; consequently I found the sparse warm, yellow dots stood out against the pale blues (fig. 6.2).

### **Evening Paintings: *Vespers* to *Compline***

There is a greater sense of recession in all the evening works because I accentuated the warm and cool divide and/or used a strong tonal range. Wanting to play with the intense colours of vibrant sunsets, in *Vespers 1*, I used a wide value span and a pure, well-divided palette. The warm colours, with fluorescents added into the mix, mainly occupy the two

lightest trapezoids and the remaining areas are dominated by robust blues, greys and violets. The poured pale, silver paint on the surface of *Vespers 1* sits well forward from the coloured sections and suggests floating particles in a shaft of light (fig. 5.8).



**Fig. 5.8.** *Vespers 1*, (2012)



**Fig. 5.9.** *Vespers 2*, (2012)



**Fig. 5.10.** *Compline 1*, (2012)

*Vesper 2* reflects the time when sunset hues fade and tonal contrast is beginning to monopolise the sky (fig. 5.9). The two lighter sections of the composition have high value oranges, lilacs, and greys and the darker sections are comprised of tertiary blues, purples and greys; in contrast there is a suggestion of the purer colours of the vivid sunset remaining in a few thin streaks. *Compline 1* is primarily a tonal work but the slivers of sunset orange, laid as a ground in this work, offer complementary relief in the lighter areas (fig. 5.10). This work employs predominantly cool colours within a wide value range and it has a fine layer of gold pigment floated on the surface which, when reflecting light in certain conditions, faintly describes the wooden texture of the board. I found this a successful painting because the tones are well differentiated, the warm dot grid remains present but not dominant and the mica pouring is neither too present, nor too absent.

### **Night Paintings: *Vigils* inside-outside**

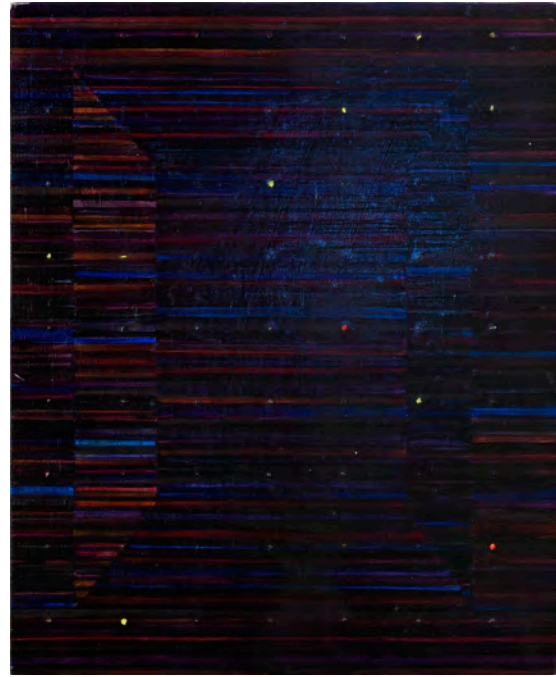
*Vigils 1* has a dominant yellow-brown palette reminiscent of incandescent light (fig. 5.11); recession is created by the wide tonal range. The occasional stripes of grey and blue-violet are in contrast with the tertiary warm colours. *Vigils 3* has a limited and low value palette with a warm, dark brown cast produced by an umber glaze under thin blue/black stripes that present as black from multiple layering (fig. 5.12). Just as it is hard to see shapes in the dark, so it is hard to see the recessive character of this portal at work. The pure



French ultramarine pigment floating on the surface and the fluorescent dots work against the recessive structure. I chose to paint this work using layered glazes because this method suggested to me the height of the vaulted ceiling in the chapel at night and the limitless depth of the night sky with its pressing presence in the chapel lane.



**Fig. 5.11.** *The Hours: Vigils 1*, (2012)



**Fig. 5.12.** *The Hours: Vigils 3*, (2012)

### **The Significance of Reinterpreting Narrative in Painting**

After I had finished the series, I displayed them first in sequence and then in small groupings, to consider their affect. Their spatial complexity relied on their varied colour palettes, particularised through the warm and cool divide, extensive tonal change, material experimentation and surface patterning. I found each palette fostered a different reaction for me, and that I had another response when they were grouped differently.

Whilst pondering how to progress my work, I reconsidered the idea of *narrative* within Renaissance painting and within my experiences on retreat. Taking part in the cycle of *The Liturgy of the Hours*, I had realised how integral time is to this monastic practice. I had encountered time, light and space as a unified reality, but whilst their performance is inextricably linked each is uniquely individual. Although narrative is synonymous with story, in an abstract form the term “narrative” implies the making of meaning through

material that is sequential or consecutive.<sup>11</sup> I wondered how narrative was connected to my experience of monastic community and how I could develop this meaningfully in my work when seeking to offer an open invitation to the metaphysical through abstraction.



**Fig. 5.13.** Rogier van der Weyden, *The Dream of Pope Sergius*, (1440)

For inspiration I looked to Lew Andrews' interpretation of the quattrocento model of continuous-narrative (polyscenic) painting.<sup>12</sup> It is a tradition that sees more than one event concerning the same character embedded in the one painting, an example is Rogier van der Weyden's *The Dream of Pope Sergius* (fig. 5.13). Pope Sergius can be seen in three places: he is asleep inside his bedroom, he can be seen leaving the building and yet also appears in the cathedral, top right. For a period it was a common device in painting that preceded and also ran concurrently with the practice of Renaissance perspective portraying a unified space and a moment in time. Andrews describes the more abstract understanding of pictorial space during this period, as being "not... a literal extension of physical reality, but instead as a... suggestion of such an extension."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "narrative, n." *OED Online*. (Oxford University Press, June 2015)

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125146?rskey=VaNxif&result=1#eid> (accessed February 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Andrews, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art*, 122-126.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

Andrews quotes Jacques Mesnil:

During the period of the development and the flowering of the art of the Renaissance, artists sought to produce not an illusion of the senses, but an illusion of the spirit... their works were creations of artistic imagination.<sup>14</sup>

Narrative art is accused of only being capable of depicting time as either “momentary or timeless.”<sup>15</sup> The portrayal of realistic space has come to mean the representation of a single arrested moment, and the polyscenic representation that suggested fluid time has been lost.<sup>16</sup> Far from intending stasis, quattrocento artists wanted to portray enlivened characters involved in a process of events. This indication of fluid time was intended to imply life, motion, and successiveness. Andrews claims a scene that employed continuous narrative avoided appearing haphazard when each of the pictorial elements retained meaning independently but were also significant in relation to the other. He asserts that the memory is equipped to integrate independent but successive moments into meaningful patterns, claiming that it is from these “synchronously organized structures”<sup>17</sup> that meaning is acquired. The memory organises such temporal information into spatial forms to be reconstituted by the brain when necessary. At the time of making, polyscenic works were devised as memory aides to facilitate recall and encourage meditation. The viewer could enter and move through the fictive space “as an active process, as a kind of devotion.”<sup>18</sup> This visual form of narrative historically required the viewer to assemble sequences from the scenic moments portrayed and to be active in attributing meaning to them. I realised that I aspired to encourage the viewer to enter the space of my compositions as an *active process*, as a kind of devotion, and I considered how I might embody a narrative reading, akin to that imagined in polyscenic work, in my abstract paintings.

Historically this was achieved by suggesting narrative sequencing within the one imagined three-dimensional space of the painting. This encouraged a type of spatial recall that was embodied for the viewer. I began to ask—how might I engage spatial recall that is an active, embodied process to stimulate metaphysical encounter?

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I introduced a contemporary interpretation of the second type of Western religious art: the narrative tradition, which imagines the metaphysical in real-world space, this tradition offered me the opportunity to investigate an interpretation of light that was representational. This was consistent with my experience of the spiritual embedded in monastic life, in which the liturgical cycle appears linked with the natural cycle of light.

Returning to the figurative structure of the portal from the *Exercises in Space, Light and Time Travel* series, Chapter Three, I described the making of a sequence of works, *The Hours*, that interpreted *The Liturgy of the Hours* practised at The Abbey and explained how this allowed me to translate my observations and experiences of light and liturgy into a series made with varied palettes, exploring extreme light through to extreme darkness and vibrant colours through to the almost colourless. I introduced the use of the stripe as a compositional device with the potential to increase spatial ambiguity through increased layering and complexity of colour relations. I discussed how, in making this series, I have become intrigued by the history and meaning of the narrative in painting and have investigated intentions embedded in the concept of polyscenic work for inspiration.

Linear perspective colludes with the other components of Renaissance perspective to create the illusion of unified space by suggesting a central vanishing point extending behind the picture plane. It suggests measured space and momentary time and ideally dictates where the viewer should stand in order to fully participate in the illusion. Through making *The Hours* series, I realised that I did not want to suggest a moment in time nor did I want my paintings to offer spatial rest. As Panofsky observes,

...perspective transforms psychophysiological space into mathematical space. It negates the difference between front and back, between right and left, between bodies and intervening space ("empty space"), so that the sum of all the parts of space and all its contents are absorbed into a single "quantum continuum. It forgets that we see not with a single fixed eye..."<sup>19</sup>

Despite the breadth of value ranges across *The Hours'* palettes and the use of striations, I observed that, across the series, the portal maintained its shape and function as a representational structure. The illusion of three-dimensionality relies on the viewer

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<sup>19</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood. (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 31.

drawing a connection between the compositional construct and the way in which light describes a structure in the real world. I felt that spatial illusion was ultimately too limiting,<sup>20</sup> and despite the potential observed in polyscenic painting of a perspectival structure that accommodates multiple events and times, I decided to abandon the structure to explore simple formal elements that could be open to multiple readings. This felt consistent with progressing towards a series of ambiguous works that were *comfortably discomfoting*.

I wondered—could I abstract these recessive and projective spaces for affect through the use of atmospheric perspective, colour perspective and separation of planes alone, and could I suggest a form of continuous narrative that encouraged the viewer in an active, embodied process of finding and interpreting metaphysical meaning within paintings?

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<sup>20</sup> This chapter by Panofsky, (*Ibid*, 27-36), offers a comprehensive discussion on the perspectival view of space, its extents and limits, relevant to my work.

**Part II Chapter Six:**  
**Deconstructing Space and Time**  
**Warm & Cool Duality**

The basis of colour is instability. Instead of searching for a *firm* foundation, I realised I had one in the *very opposite*. That was solid ground...and by accepting this paradox I could begin to work with the fleeting, the elusive, with those things that disappear...<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

In *The Hours*, I explored a sense of the metaphysical by interpreting the light that I had experienced during the cyclic liturgies. By using the structure of a portal I had painted a suggestion of place in linear time. The works were intended to be spatially complex, but on analysis, I found the relationship to real world space too restrictive. Consequently I decided to deconstruct the composition in an attempt to create a more ambiguous solution. I wanted to make work that was open to interpretation and had the potential to allude to eternal time through particularised time, to suggest a space that was essential yet inviting, and to generate light that felt intimate and personal yet was also profoundly public.

In this chapter I will explain the background and execution of *Inter* and *Passing*: a series of works made for the exhibition *Atmospherics*. These two reductive compositions, using a palette derived from a Jamberoo valley sunset, explore a simple warm and cool duality that has a reduced value range. I will describe perspectival devices—colour theory and atmospheric perspective—which I employed to experiment with receding and advancing spatiality, and I elaborate on the use of striations as a way of managing and developing spatial and temporal complexity. Acknowledging the affect of claustrophobia on my own attitude towards space, I will discuss the peer group review of *Atmospherics*. I pay close attention to orientation and scale as a means of deepening my insights as to how affect is generated by the formal elements I have used, and I discuss the implications of these findings on the final body of work.

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<sup>1</sup> Bridget Riley in conversation with Michael Craig Martin (1995), “Practising Abstraction,” in *Bridget Riley: Dialogues on Art*, ed. Robert Kudielka (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 60.



**Fig. 6.1.** Sue Lovegrove, *Vanishing*, (2006)

I had been informed by the temporal, reflexive nature of Viola's video works, by the human rhythm of Hossein Valamanesh's installation, *The Lover Circles His Own Heart*,<sup>2</sup> and by the slow spatial effects of paintings that employ reduced value and selective colour ranges, such as contemporary works by Rosslynd Piggott, Suzanne Moss, and Sue Lovegrove (fig. 6.1). The approach to palette and the formal elements of composition in the work of twentieth century artist Agnes Martin was also highly informative for this enquiry. I wondered if I could produce a slow spatial affect more essentially by using simple compositional devices derived from perspectival conventions and by applying them through the use of striations and simplified palettes?

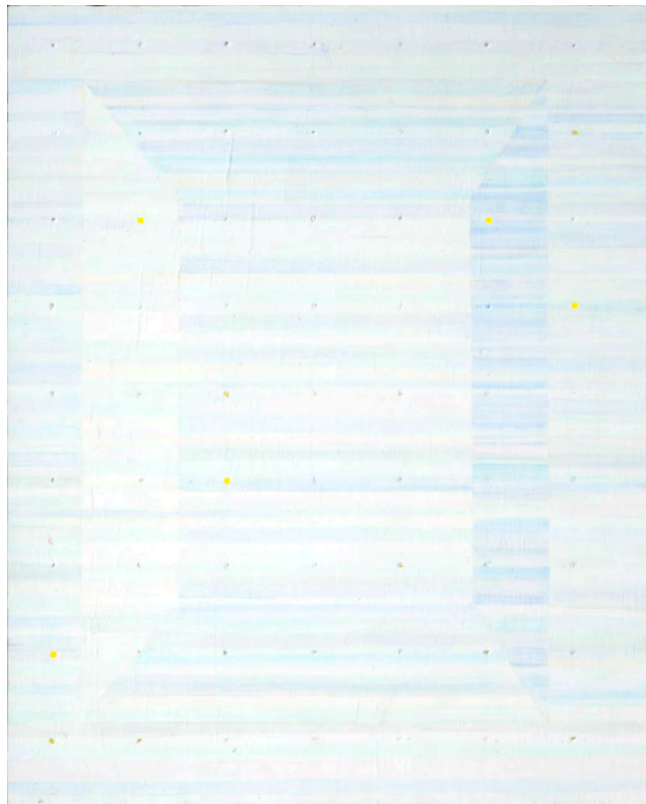
### **An Exploration of Warm and Cool Duality**

I like the light and will avoid entering dark spaces. Knowing that I am claustrophobic I pondered the affect that paintings exploring light and darkness might have on other viewers. I wondered what other viewers might feel about spaces described by dark colours and deep tones? In *The Hours* series I had found that it was the relationship

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<sup>2</sup> Hossein Valamanesh speaking on "The Lover Circles His Own Heart" (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015): <http://www.mca.com.au/play/1c12ec60-cbb2-4878-a509-576d1968e560/> (accessed March 2015).

between the warm and cool colours that enlivened the works, like the few yellow fluorescent dots that sang out within the blue-grey palette of *Middle Hour 1* (fig. 6.2).



**Fig. 6.2.** *The Hours: Middle Hour 1*, (2012)

Colour is not easy to tame. “Every colour is seen only in relationship to another colour”<sup>3</sup> but colour theory does offer some predictability. According to William Dunning, colour perspective, (also called colour theory), and atmospheric perspective are both elements of Renaissance perspective. He identifies it as the effect of the separation of planes caused by warm colours appearing to advance and cool colours appearing to recede. Because the wavelengths of blue light are short, they bend and scatter into the atmosphere, as the distance between the viewer and the observed object increases the bluer the atmosphere and article appear. Dust and moisture in the sky have a greying affect; distant blues will appear grey-blue. By contrast the longer wavelengths of warm colours project straight through the atmosphere and cast a red light onto the earth and its objects. Foreground colours tend to look warm, saturated and bright. The way the eye works also contributes to the separation of warm and cool colours: the lens focuses yellow light-waves directly

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<sup>3</sup> Edith Anderson Feisner, *Colour: How to Use Colour in Art and Design* (London: Laurence King, 2006), 94.



onto the retina, but it focuses red and yellow-red light behind the retina, with blue and blue-purple light waves focused in front of the retina. When the eye focuses for long wavelengths, it must refocus for short wavelengths; the eye cannot see warm and cool light and colours simultaneously. Whilst the common tendency is for warm colours to appear as figure and cool as ground, the eye can also be persuaded to reverse this when a warm blue subject is placed on a dark red ground.<sup>4</sup>

Atmospheric perspective is another component in creating the illusion of depth. It relates to the interaction between focus and tone, and how they affect objects and the surrounding ground:

If an object or figure is sharply focused and contrasts with the value of a blurred ground it appears to advance. If the figure is blurred and remains similar in value to the ground, it tends to recede.<sup>5</sup>

If an object is in the distance it will appear to fade and disintegrate into the background, but if an item is in the foreground it appears to be in focus, separated from the background through broad and intense value contrast. Atmospheric perspective and colour perspective can collude to suggest a sense of depth and create a sense of illusory space. The foreground figure is painted with dominant warm colours against a cool background that loses value and clarity by comparison. I decided to work with simple dualities of warm/ cool, and light/ dark, and with texture in order to play with creating recessive and projective space. This was also consistent with the dominant duality of the nuns' singing, experienced during the Abbey liturgies.

The portals had defined tonal areas that had offered me the opportunity to work across wide colour ranges. With a strongly architectural structure and such varied palettes, it was hard to identify precisely which of the elements had produced the spatial affects that I observed and felt. I wanted to devise simple compositions with a sense of movement that could draw the viewer into the work but did not offer rest. I intended to experiment with changes of scale influencing the viewer's whole body, and I was interested in the effects of orientation and pattern. I resolved to keep using stripes as a way of investigating colour, movement and time but I was keen to remove the reference to an architectural structure from the composition.

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<sup>4</sup> Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space*, 47-54.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

Deconstructing the portal, I decided on two compositions: one that implied a focal area but no vanishing point, and one that had no focal area and was more spatially fluid. Throughout the series I would use one palette with two colours, one warm and one cool, and work within a consistent reduced value range, from a mid-tone to almost white. I selected an orange as the warm colour; a fully saturated orange is very bright and I found that a successful way of maintaining its purity as a tint was to use a mixture of transparent orange and transparent yellow. The cool colour was a mid-tone tint of Payne's grey, a mix of French ultramarine and sienna. A neutral grey can activate simultaneous contrast.<sup>6</sup> It can also be pushed towards a positive colour bias by small additions of another colour, (for example a minute amount of yellow can produce a green accent) or by adding slightly more of one of its component parts such as ultramarine blue. When this is done, paradoxically, I find it manages to function as both an active colour as well as a neutral hue.

### **The Potential of the Stripe**

Using striations in *The Hours* had allowed me to increase colour variety, create texture and suggest a more ambiguous surface that had movement and greater spatial complexity.<sup>7</sup> The character of the stripes could also be used to offset or enhance the recessive character of the portal. But I believed stripes had much more to offer, depending on their hue, saturation, value, proportion and placement, I could develop the striated areas to perform in a more strategic way. Striped areas behave differently depending on the viewing distance. Functioning in a similar way to pointillism, narrow stripes offer the possibility of optical mixing and visual vibration. I wanted to make enlivened works that were slow to read; and by modulating the coloured stripes chromatically and tonally I could establish the rhythmic pace of the graduating colours and tones. I intended to use colour perspective and atmospheric perspective to experiment with generating an ambiguous sense of space, a method which related both to my monastic experience and to the history of Western religious painting.

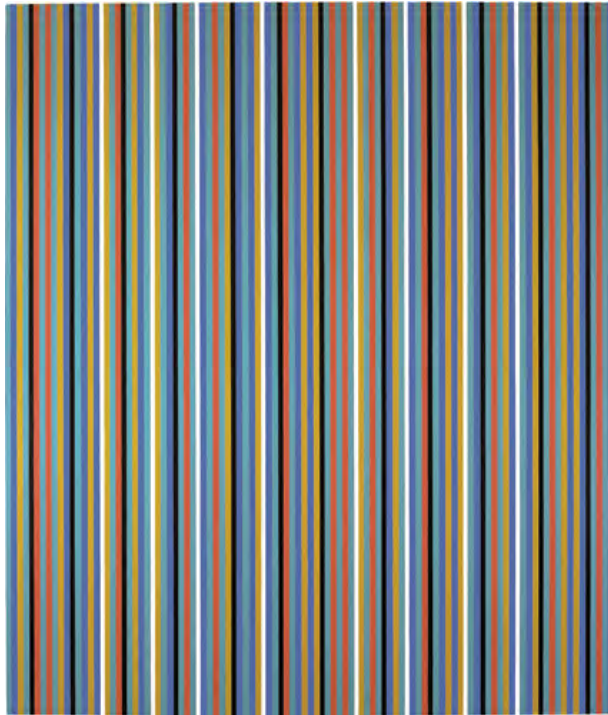
Optical mixing occurs when the eye mixes two colours placed side by side, and usually if the colours are analogous and similar in value, they will blend and create the appearance

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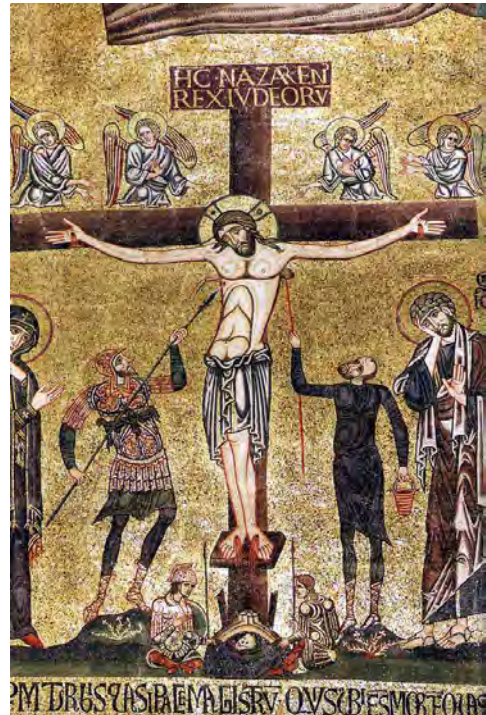
<sup>6</sup> Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Color*, trans. Ernst Van Hagen (New York: John Wiley, 2002) 87.

<sup>7</sup> Pastoreau, *The Devil's Cloth*, 88-91, 119-120.

of another colour with added brightness.<sup>8</sup> When an adjacent colour is neutral grey, simultaneous contrast will occur with the after-imagery of the complementary to the positive colour appearing in the grey area. This generates luminosity and offers a stimulating visual effect. Conversely if neighbouring stripes are complementary in hue, the colours do not merge but each colour will appear to intensify the other and create a visual vibration. I have noticed that when values are in the mid-tone range then the optical effects are increased.



**Fig. 6.3.** Bridget Riley, *Après Midi*, (1981)



**Fig. 6.4.** *Barrel vault crucifixion*, detail, Basilica of San Marco, Venice, (1100s)

Well-defined juxtaposed stripes can suggest texture, and texture creates a sense of space, particularly when juxtaposed with areas of reduced detail. Values that are high in contrast or intensity of hue can also produce texture.<sup>9</sup> Stripes create movement and pattern and extensive patterning can stimulate a broader visual awareness through use of parafoveal vision.<sup>10</sup> Art historian Paul Hills, when discussing the mosaics of San Marco, Venice (fig.6.4), maintains that changes in alignment and scale contribute to changes in perception of texture, and changes in texture indicate a change in tone and therefore in

<sup>8</sup> Anderson Feisner, *Colour*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space*, 46-47.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Hills, *Venetian Colour*, 43.

spatiality. Recent research has indicated that a coarsening of visual information, which can dependent on viewing distance, paradoxically can sharpen visual perception: “If (textural) transitions are too smooth, they fail to register, they lack bite.”<sup>11</sup>

To my mind, stripes had the potential to perform as visual coarsening, to offer the bite I sought, whilst contributing to the mystery that can be generated by colour relations.<sup>12</sup> Bridget Riley (fig. 6.3), discussing her journey with colour, identified that it was colour’s very instability that offered her “solid ground,”<sup>13</sup>

...by accepting this paradox I could begin to work with... those things that disappear when you actually apply your attention hard and fast – and so a whole, huge area of activity, of perception, opened up for me... What you focus upon is *not* what you see, at least not in terms of colour. I realised that what I was working with lay just outside the centre of attention. One looks *here* and colour is *there*.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Atmospherics: A Series on Paper***

Using hot pressed 300gsm paper, 770 x 560 mm, I devised that the two simple compositions would have different orientations relative to the paper that, once finished, I could rotate to investigate the spatial affect of orientation. I decided against employing a grid or pouring pigments onto the work’s surface. Attempting to draw the eye into the work through tonal and colour graduation, the first composition, *Inter*, is symmetrically positioned on the paper. I wanted to investigate the affects of either the highest values of the warm or cool hue in the focal area, or the lowest values. To explore spatiality, I intended that the extent of the tonal values explored, of the mid-tone blue and the fully saturated orange, should be roughly equivalent in all the works. I was intrigued to explore the effects of the value of the two colours working concurrently and in opposition to each other.

I made six versions of this symmetrical composition called *Inter*. This composition achieves balance by using similar dimensions for the areas of the striations, although they run in opposition to each other. The first two paintings have the central area

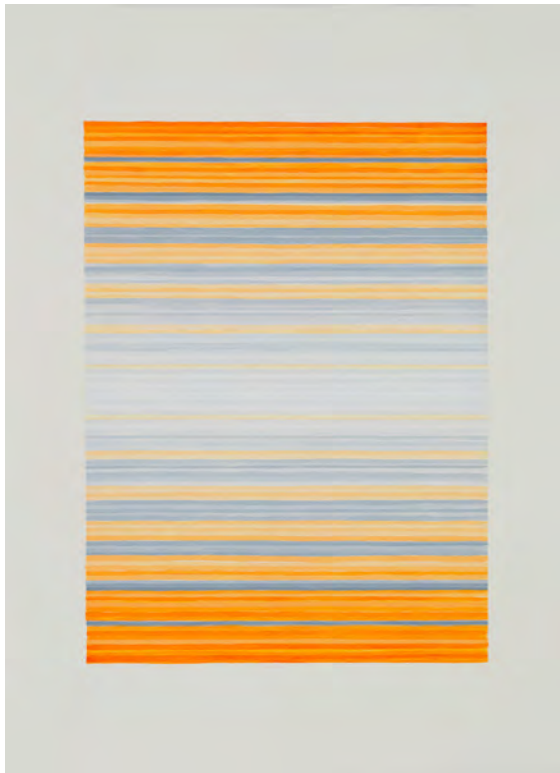
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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> The motif of the stripe has been used in painting throughout Modernism and Post Modernism for various reasons with differing results; for the purposes of this exegesis I offer a particular account of the optical potential of the stripe that is pertinent to my thesis and to the approach I have taken.

<sup>13</sup> Riley, “Practising Abstraction,” in *Bridget Riley*, 60.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.



**Fig. 6.5.** *Atmospherics: Inter 9*, (2013)



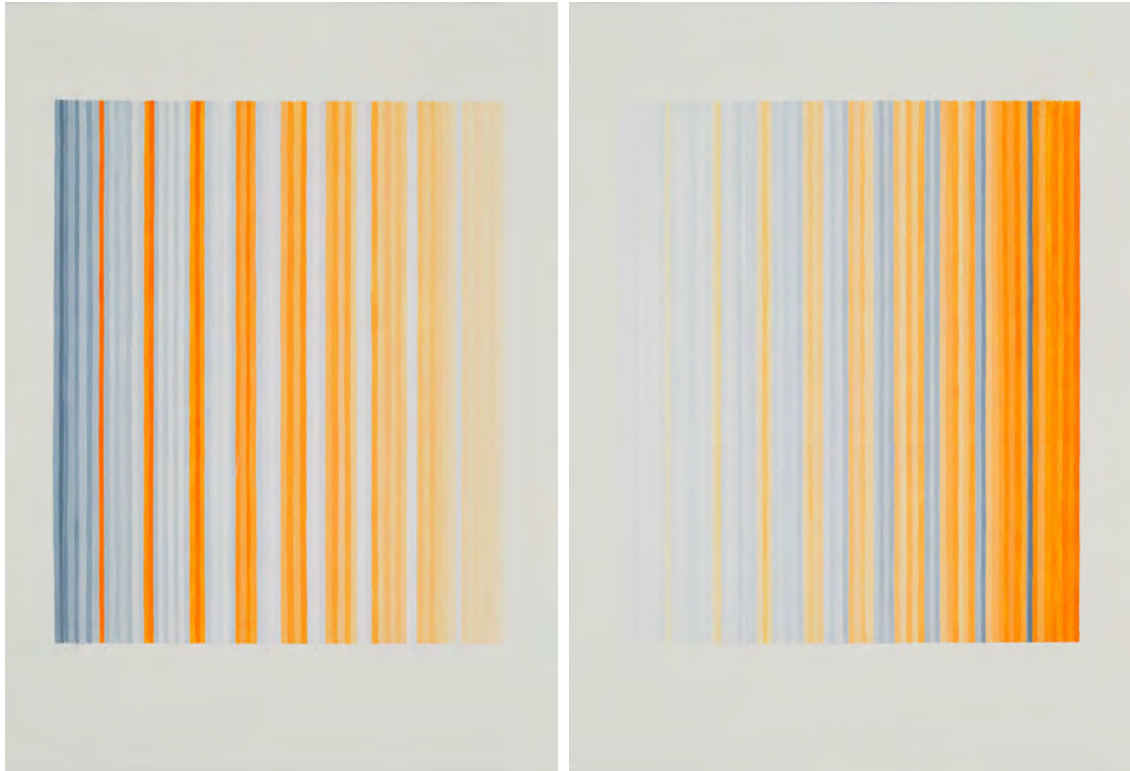
**Fig. 6.6.** *Atmospherics: Inter 7*, (2013)

comprised either of the highest value Paynes grey or the lowest value grey, and the equivalent value of the orange stripes runs concurrently. Both warm and cool palettes either increase in value as they work out to the edge of the composition or decrease synchronously (fig. 6.5 and fig. 6.6).

The second pair of paintings has an orange central area; one centre has the tonally darkest orange and the other employs the lightest tint of orange. Again the cool palette mirrors the value of the warm and so the central areas are either uniformly dark or uniformly light. In the third pair I varied the relationships of the values in the central area; I always found that the work with the palest focal area was the most engaging and also the most ambiguous for me; with *Atmospherics: Inter 9* (fig. 6.5), which had the large expanse of pale blue in the centre, the most inviting of all the series.

The second composition is called *Passing*, though a symmetrical composition, it is without a focal area. The format is comprised of nine areas that gradually reduce in size as they move across the rectangle. On the opposite side of the rectangle the composition mirrors the nine diminishing areas. The passages follow the same progressive dimensions

but they pass each other. At the point in the middle of the composition, the areas of each palette are the same dimension, but I intended that there should be no sense of a centre to the composition. I was hoping that tension, caused by the graduating values, would dominate with no resting place for the eye.



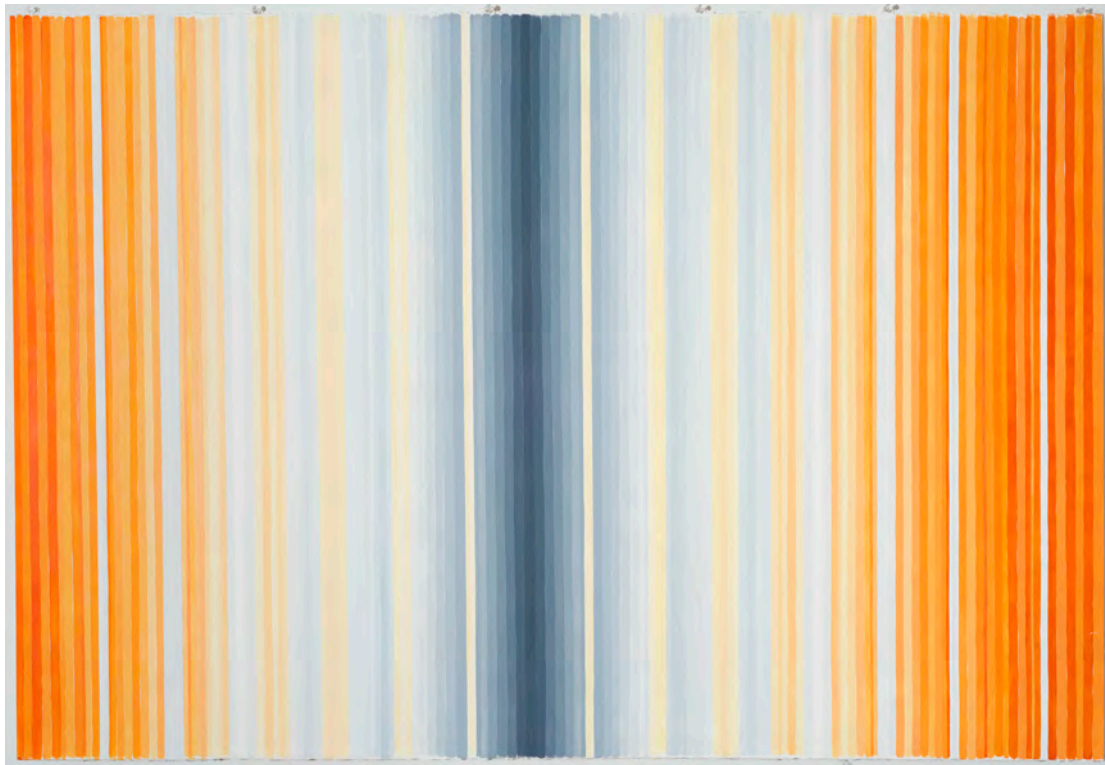
**Fig. 6.7.** *Atmospherics: Passing vertical 13*, (2013)      **Fig. 6.8.** *Atmospherics: Passing vertical 14*, (2013)

I painted three works where the striations run parallel with the longest length of the paper: two where the values of each palette worked concurrently (fig. 6.7 and fig. 6.8), and one where the values were positioned in opposition to each other. The work with opposing values generated a tension and a spatial ambiguity that I found compelling. I made two final *Passing* works with the stripes running parallel to the shorter edges of the paper. After finishing the series, I mounted them on my studio wall with the stripes oriented horizontally and I then turned them ninety degrees so that the lines were oriented vertically. I was affected very differently by each orientation.

As Rothko once commented,

To paint a small picture, is to place yourself outside your experience. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command.<sup>15</sup>

I was intrigued by the different affects from the change in orientation, and I wondered how I could develop these compositions to affect even greater bodily responses. I decided to enlarge three of the smaller compositions to be closer in scale to my body: the *Inter* work with the pale blue centre (fig. 6.11) the *Inter* work with a dark blue/grey centre (fig. 6.9), and a landscape *Passing* composition where the value of the warm/cool palettes are in mirrored opposition (fig. 6.10). I also decided to change the orientation of the two *Inter* works relative to each other, so one would have the stripes following the longer length of the paper, and one would have the stripes aligned with the shorter. I used the largest heavy weight paper I could find, Lana hot pressed paper 1540 x 1060 mm, and placed the compositions with focal areas, off-centre on the paper.



**Fig. 6.9.** *Atmospheric: Inter 7 large*, (2013)

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel Lopez-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 74.



**Fig. 6.10.** *Atmospherics: Passing 15 large*, (2013)

### **Peer Group Review**

The review process is central to practice led research. Taken from my notes, this is an account of a peer group review undertaken in the Painting workshop in August 2013.

It is a summary of key responses to two hangs of the *Atmospherics* works. Interested not only of the affect of the colour, value and compositional elements, in making the works, I became aware that the very orientation of the stripes was affecting me. Being claustrophobic, I was curious to see if the affects I was experiencing, were pertinent to others.

*I am observing the responses of my peers to my work thus far; I hang all the Atmospherics work the first time with the stripes oriented horizontally, and invite peer group reaction:*

*I hear descriptions that imagine the horizontal works in terms of landscape and nature:*

*“the horizontals bring me back down to earth;” says one student;*

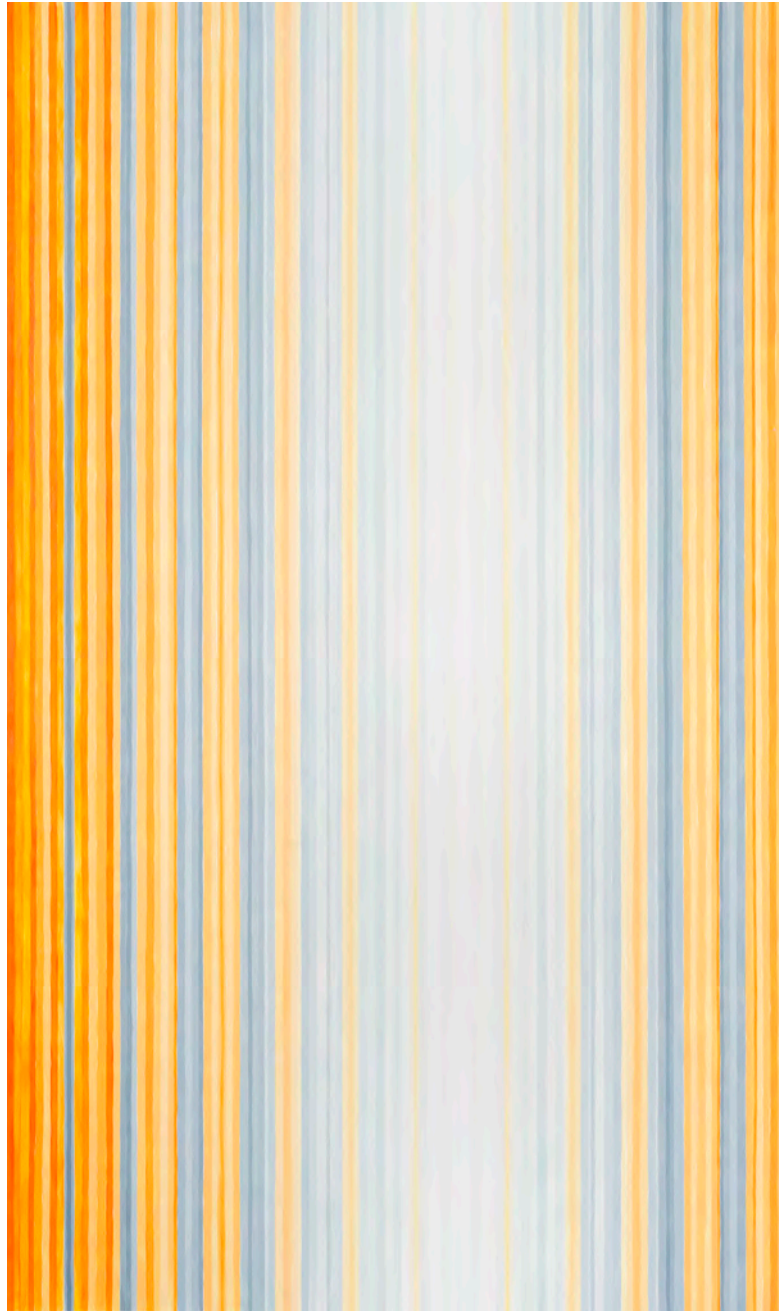
*“I feel a gentle breeze from the grey-blues,” says another.*

*The works with orange horizontal stripes prompt a student to perceive, “a sense of pressure.”*

*Others identify the warm centres with energetic movement and radiant heat,*

*“I am feeling hot but calm!” says another student.*





**Fig. 6.11.** *Atmospherics: Inter 9 large*, (2013)

*I rehang all the works with the stripes oriented vertically, and the group murmurs that this feels “more dynamic.” I hear a relationship being drawn with time; the horizontal orientation is proclaimed, “of the present,” and someone describes the verticals as, “time unfolding.”*

*Within the vertical stripes I hear some students perceive a sense of mystery, a concurrent presence and absence, and even mystical accompaniment:*

*“I think there is nothing... and then I feel there is something...”*

*“I feel as though there is someone just behind the open space, someone in the dissolved light.”*

*I perceive that the terms being used to describe affects from the vertical works rely heavily on the body:*

*“ They don’t feel like stripes, they feel puffy; they are swelling into something organic, (a body?), that I want to touch...”*

*Describing how a vertical work makes her feel, I watch a student get up and demonstrates by using her body; she turns her body sideways and sidesteps towards the centre of the large work with a dark focal area.*

*I listen as the peer group discusses the way they feel about the symmetrical versus the asymmetrical compositions. They agree that the affects from symmetrical, centred compositions feel “static and iconic,” but they feel the asymmetrical works are “active...”*

*“when the composition is asymmetrical, it suggests narrative to me!” says one person.*

*They feel compositions without a focal area are “active and more potent.”*

*I am intrigued that the responses seem to increase in feeling as the works increase in size. I am interested that there appears no uniform affect to colour or value combinations from the group.*

*As my peers describe these embodied affects, I contemplate the bilateral compositions of Caspar David Friedrich and consider the implication of developing this relationship to the body: perhaps I could enlarge the asymmetrical portrait compositions to the parameters of the human form? I listen as there appears some group consensus of a meditative affect from the horizontal lines. I contemplate using the Passing composition; perhaps I could promote spatial ambiguity and activity by enlarging the composition to extend beyond my peripheral vision?*

I was inspired by the reactions given by my peers. Although there was some consensus concerning the horizontal implying landscape and the vertical implying the body, there appeared no right answers for uniform affect. I felt liberated in my use of colour, tone and composition going forward. The responses offered me direction for my final work, indicating to me that although the review responses presented as personal, my invitation to the metaphysical through these abstract compositions—manifesting here for example as mystical accompaniment or embodied engagement—was progressing successfully.

## Conclusion

The intention of this research is to offer compositions that are abstracted enough to be open to multiple interpretations yet are sufficiently connected to pertinent elements to retain meaning in an attempt to offer a non-prescriptive invitation to the metaphysical. This chapter has described the process of deconstructing the compositional elements and the palettes of *The Hours* in search of simpler more ambiguous solutions.

Rejecting the attachment to place and momentary time implied by linear perspective, I have discussed the function and employment of two perspectival devices, atmospheric and colour perspective, as a means of playing with a more open illusion of recession and projection. Conscious of wanting to slow down the spatial affects from my paintings, as a means of stimulating positive-interest affect, I have also discussed investigating time and space not only in the palettes chosen but through the textural and kinetic potential of the stripe. This chapter explores the employment of a palette, derived from a sunset at The Abbey and reduced to a mid-tone warm and cool duality. Using this uniform duality throughout, I describe the development of two compositions, *Inter* and *Passing*. These works were devised to defy offering a point of rest and investigate how atmospheric and colour perspective might encourage spatial ambiguity.

In my quest for a broad affective invitation to the metaphysical, this chapter ends with a peer group review of the *Atmospherics* works in the Painting workshop. This review stimulated issues around orientation and the bifurcated body that had surprisingly arisen for me as I painted the striped works. The next chapter will discuss how these review findings impacted on the final body of work.

## Part II Chapter Seven

### The Metaphysics of Space: Painting a Body of Light

#### Introduction

For my final work, I aimed to create a body of paintings that could offer a metaphysical encounter through my approach to space and light. I drew on the sense of spiritual engagement and community that I experienced during the liturgical cycles at the Abbey, and my subsequent investigation into these affective spaces made through the lens of light. I asked—can I offer the viewer a similar invitation to metaphysical experience by painting abstract spaces that reference experiential light, through the luminosity created within evocative colour relations? The peer group responses, referenced in Chapter Six, had given me greater freedom with composition and colour and my aim became to produce a slow, meditative affect through two simple compositions that were open to interpretation. These were developed from the two compositions that I had devised for *Atmospherics*, and were to be employed on two stretcher sizes. It was my intention that the variables of palette, scale and orientation would be the active components in this exploration. Filtering real-life experiences through the language of reductive abstraction, I hoped to balance repetition and variation to a facilitative end.

#### Navigating Real and Imagined Space

The peer group response to the enlarged works on paper was of an increase of affect; in enlarging the paintings still further I hoped to engage the viewer's whole body through scale and orientation of stripe. "Real space is ultimately defined by the human body;"<sup>1</sup> we understand and navigate exterior space through our bodies, and enter imagined and interior space through our minds. I was hoping to connect these two mechanisms in my work. The body is practised in reading two-dimensional images as imagined spaces. It is common practice to interpret paintings as representations of real space in real time, as well as imagined space in imagined time. This capacity to read and imagine spaces in and through images is embedded in our cultural practice.<sup>2</sup> Referencing the physical body to the body of the painted image, I wanted to give the viewer cues to encourage a spatial affect. I was connecting the spatial reading from the real world to the spatial reading of the interior world, hoping that the spatial languages employed within religious images

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<sup>1</sup> Summers, *Real Spaces*, 36.

<sup>2</sup> A discussion on the power and dominance of the image in contemporary culture is given by Juhani Pallasmaa, in *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 14-17.

would remain as a trace embedded in my abstracted paintings even when the image appears in its most abstract form.<sup>3</sup> Mondzain's assertion that the contemporary imaginary has its roots in the religious icon,<sup>4</sup> is supported by Nancy's position, in relation to the heritage of the religious narrative image. Referring to Pontormo's representational painting, *The Visitation* (1528), Nancy claims,

...because the image, then is above all the there of a beyond. It is not all its "representation," it is a thinking-there, thinking as the effectivity of a place opening itself to presence.<sup>5</sup>

I wonder if the image, as a portal to some *presence*, could continue to resonate within the fabric of contemporary images, through the formal structures that underpin them. I consider this in the context of a contemporary definition of image with the broader meaning of a concept, symbol or memory-aid.<sup>6</sup> Since the twentieth century, the painting has asserted itself as object and subject in its own right, with its own "thingness" and "thereness."<sup>7</sup> I consider—can an *abstract* image offer this "engagement with thereness," occupying a unique space that can open itself to presence for the viewer?

### **The Colour and Value of Light**

I sought to create an affective experience of space through painting the phenomenon of changing light, creating a form of facilitative space through colour and value relations within a simplified composition. *The Liturgy of the Hours* had prompted me to experiment with a wide range of palettes. Interpreted through the warm and cool dualism, I began to explore luminosity through painting light in relation to darkness, and to explore forms of radiance and vibration through chromatic relationships and value ranges. In my experience, when most active, luminous colours appear projective and when less active they create surface activity, I was curious to see how luminous works in series would perform. I was interested in maintaining some experimentation with light-sensitive paint materials and through the materiality of paint itself. I was also interested in creating disjunctive spaces implied by recessive spaces and by the separation of planes. I became curious to see how the ranges of value and colour would affect the works' luminosity and spatiality, and what impact this would have on their potential to affect the viewer.

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<sup>3</sup> Summers, *Real Spaces*, 255-257.

<sup>4</sup> Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 176, 220-225

<sup>5</sup> Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 125.

<sup>6</sup> "image, n.". *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2015).

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91618?rskey=YsAMqH&result=1#eid> (accessed March 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Varndoe, *Pictures of Nothing*, 253.



**Fig. 7.1.** *View from my room, autumn at the Abbey, 7.02a.m. (2015)*

**Fig. 7.2.** *View from my room, autumn at the Abbey, 1.42p.m. (2015)*

Striations offered me a mechanism to experiment with colour interactions. I could observe: the effects of colours of the same value but differing temperatures, the influence of simultaneous contrast or complementarity and the influence of external lighting, in the mix. Referring back to *The Hours*, for the final body of work I decided to interpret the twenty-four hours of light through simple divides of warm and cool, and light and dark. The slow winter sunrise, experienced during Lauds, offered me an experience of light that was high in value. I found the warmth of the light in the sky varied, but the tonal contrast would intensify over time. The Abbey skies at sunrise remained within a limited value range but could vary in brilliance (fig. 7.1). With blue wavelengths dominant in the morning, I found the value range would increase within the cool palette as the day progressed, Middle Hour reflected this (fig. 7.2).<sup>8</sup> From twilight to sunset, Vespers and Compline offered the potential for a wide value and colour range within a warm palette, as red and yellow wavelengths take precedence during this time period.<sup>9</sup> Inside the chapel the incandescent light was localised, limited but intense, but the value range of this light was wide within a narrow area, warm brown in cast and changeable in texture particularly from the candle's flickering motion. Although almost invisible during the day, incandescent lambent light becomes dominant at night. Vigils in the depth of night offered me another limited palette that, though low in value, could be rich and luminous in colour intensity.

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<sup>8</sup> Anderson Feisner, *Colour*, 110.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

## Luminosity in Painting

In analysing how luminosity works in paintings, I have considered what luminosity is, how it is generated and how it functions in relation to spatiality. Luminosity is created pictorially through three methods: the use of materials that react with the atmospheric light surrounding the work, (Fra Angelico: fig. 2.1), the depiction of real light (Turner: fig. 7.3), and colour and value interactions, (Rothko: fig. 2.10).



**Fig. 7.3.** J.M.W.Turner, *Sun Setting Over A Lake*, (1840)

Luminosity is the “ability of light to give a glowing impression.”<sup>10</sup> For the colour interaction to be most effective the colours need to be pure, or tints of a pure colour. It occurs when a colour is surrounded by, or placed beside its complementary. Luminosity appears extremely active when the values of the complementary colours are equal, and particularly if the value is in the mid range (fig. 7.14). The effect is most evident when a pure luminous colour is light and contained, small enough to appear to glow in its darker surroundings. But if the luminous colour is placed within an area of colour that is very strong in tonal contrast, the effect is arrested. If a brilliant, light colour is placed within an area that is dull in colour, then the bright colour will appear to glow. If that external dull colour is grey, it produces the added effect of simultaneous contrast and the grey

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

takes on the complementary colour of the luminous colour; the colours will appear to vibrate.<sup>11</sup> Stripes can produce a sense of radiant luminosity through their graduated tonal relations. Whether vertical or horizontal, striations encourage a sense of movement. With every coloured stripe producing an afterimage, each colour has the capacity to tinge its adjacent stripe and affect the sense of spatiality;<sup>12</sup> I found the bounded nature of stripes and incremental tonal shifts could affect the speed of movement. Using striations offered me the capacity to slow down the delivery of movement within the compositions.

Luminosity from active colour and value interaction has the potential to generate both a sense of presence and absence; vibration from the coloured stripes offers an effect of optical pulsing, when the colours can appear to both advance and recede as they vie for dominance. This sense of vibration can imply both an empty passage of entry and a presence that occupies the space. As these colours appear to move between projection and recession, the vibration can draw attention to a specific area of the painting, to the surface of the work and also to the space behind and in front of it. Although my focused foveal vision is engaged, I am aware of the effect of luminosity through my parafoveal and peripheral vision; this is because the rod dominance in the periphery optic fields is sensitive to tone and movement.<sup>13</sup> As Pallasmaa observes: "Peripheral vision integrates us with space, while focused vision pushes us out of the space..."<sup>14</sup> This sense of spreading light presents as a tangible, present light but appears tantalisingly out of reach. Equally I can perceive this peripheral light as an absent space that I want to enter.<sup>15</sup> This experience of an unresolved space embodies and enacts a form of mystery for me that I equate with spiritual invitation.

### **Painting The Body**

I made twelve portrait stretchers, scaled up to 1300 x 1800 mm, and seven landscape stretchers 2385 x 1300 mm, and stretched them with finely woven Belgian linen. With these enlarged vertical works I was hoping to develop spaces that encouraged viewer entry. The *Atmospherics: Inter* smaller series used a centred composition in which the palettes was symmetrically bilateral on the central axis. This drew the viewer into the work; but, wanting a more ambiguous space, I considered how to destabilise the

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<sup>11</sup> Itten, *The Art of Color*, 86-7.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson Feisner, *Colour*, 66-7, 94-5.

<sup>13</sup> "Foveal, Para-foveal and Peripheral Vision," David M. Keith, (Resodance Publishing), last modified 8 March, 2012, <http://resodance.com/ali/foveal.html> (accessed March 2015).

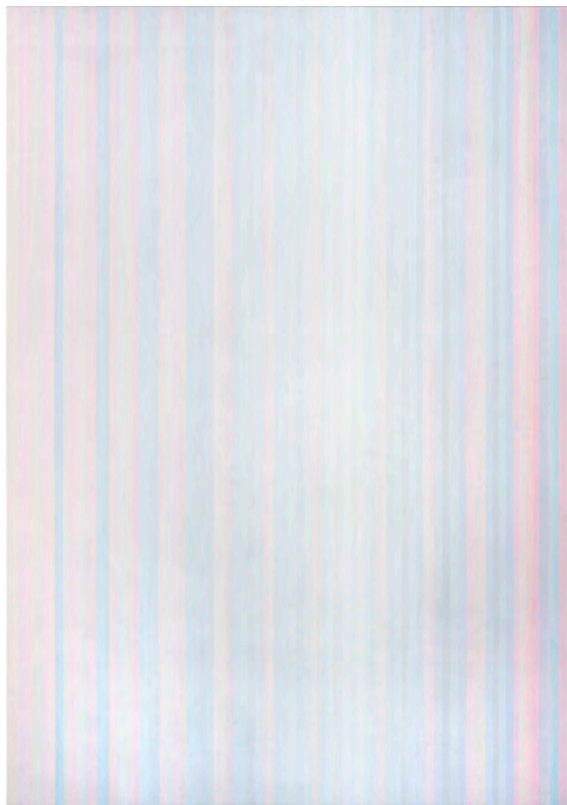
<sup>14</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, (Chichester: John Wiley, 2007), 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 36.



composition and better relate it to the human body. I decided that if I used a symmetrical, centred composition that I could create ambiguity by distributing the graduating colours asymmetrically on the central axis. If, however, the alternating warm and cool striations were positioned asymmetrical within the rectangle, then the colours and tones could graduate with bilateral symmetry. I wanted the paintings to work individually, but also as diptychs and triptychs, as well as one continuous work that covered the twenty-four hours. I wanted to create a body that suggested a greater community with the potential to imply the sense of accompaniment that I had experienced at The Abbey. The portrait compositions were either a version of the bilateral *Inter* or a vertical version of *Passing*. By using graduated colour ranges that referenced specific times of day, I hoped to suggest a narrative reading. For the landscape format I decided to use an even larger version of the horizontal composition, *Atmospherics: Passing (large)*, unbounded by a border. These two formats, vertical stripes within a vertical format and horizontal stripes within a horizontal format, offered me a stable foil for the interpretive changes in light to be explored through colour and tone.

**The *Inter* Series: *Lauds: Inter 1&2* sunrise**



**Fig. 7.4.** *Inter: Lands 1*, (2014-15)



**Fig. 7.5.** *Inter: Lands 2*, (2014-15)

The dawning light experienced during Lauds was gentle and full of hope. Sunrise offered me the highest value potential within a narrow palette range but my experience of this time was of intense luminosity. Fluorescent colours are generally used full strength, but I was curious to see how fluorescent pigments would behave when mixed as tints or combined with non-fluorescent colours. I wondered how fluorescent tints would perform would placed next to other, non-fluorescent colours.

Thinking of Fried analysis of Caspar David Friedrich's asymmetrical bilateral compositions,<sup>16</sup> With in the two *Lauds: Inter* paintings, I positioned the symmetrical composition asymmetrically within the rectangle, with the palette working with bilateral symmetry. One work attempted to draw the viewer into its centre through lightness of tone, and the other through the use of intense warmth. *Lauds: Inter 1* (fig. 7.4) creates a luminous pale blue-grey focal area with the cool passages getting darker and narrower as they work their way to the edges of the painting. Because of the luminous white gesso, I was able to layer the palette of fluorescent pinks and oranges very thinly, creating different shades, colours and intensities depending on the overlap. *Lauds: Inter 1* offers luminosity through its value relations. With the main focal area almost white, the light radiates on the vertical axis spreading outwards. I am drawn to this light, empty focal space but equally experience the area as occupied. As the warm and cool stripes reduce in value, the outer areas are activated; they vibrate through their fluorescent properties and through simultaneous contrast in relation with the grey striations. This work is spatially ambiguous; I am unsure what is *there* and what is *not there* and I find this intriguing.

Wanting to see if subtle colour changes within a reduced value palette could impact on spatial affect, *Lauds: Inter 2* has the wide focal passage with the warmest and lowest value (fig. 7.5). As the Lauds liturgy progressed in the chapel, the sky outside became increasingly golden. This painting interprets this through the yellow bias. I used transparent yellow and transparent orange; as tints they do not become dirty. I alternated these yellow tints with stripes of pale fluorescent orange. The lilac pigment as the dominant cool creates complementary chromatic vibration. The darkest, warmest areas are painted beside the lightest grey-lilac. By the time the warm striations have reached the outer edges of the work they have lost their intensity of colour and the lilacs and blues

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<sup>16</sup> Michael M. Fried, "Orientation in Painting: Caspar David Friedrich" in *Another Light: Jacques-Louis David to Thomas Demand* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) 120-123.

are tonally darkest. I find the cool, low values on the outer edges create an uneasy balance and hold in tension the intense warmth in the focal area. Intriguingly I experience a separation of planes in the main focal area. Whilst the thin lilac stripes aggravate the yellows they also serve to block my entry. I find I can see a space between the cool plane and the warm plane, and then the yellow asserts itself and appears to override the cooler stripes; it is constantly active. I consider which of the two focal areas of *Lauds Inter1* and 2 appear most luminous to me, and if either work offers me into a sense of meditative space.



**Fig. 7.6.** Rosslynd Piggott, *Unfolding Flower-Cloud Space No 2*, (2005-6)

### **Roslynd Piggott: The Influence of High Value Work**

This is a reflection on my encounter with a high value painting by the artist Rosslynd Piggott; the experience offered me insight into the power of reduced tonality in painting.

*I first experienced Unfolding Flower-Cloud Space No 2 at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2008 (fig. 7.6). It is a large work on linen, 3702mm wide by 1856mm, that employs oil paint and reflective palladium leaf. The repetitive, luminous round motif suggests Japanese blossom and the blur of raindrops on glass; they are gridded yet some are randomly placed across the composition. The presence of the painting is gently pulsating. It is a pale pink work, with faint orange tones that, when combined with the subtle greys of the reflective metallic leaf, offer the effect of simultaneous contrast. Its high value range and reduced palette belies the incredible*

sense of depth and detail in the painting. There appear to be many layers built up over the surface and it projects a gentle light into my personal space that I find mesmeric.

Piggott expresses her desire to create:

“space or spaces, where there might occur a quiet awareness of this more subtle or higher part of ourselves and an interconnectedness with all living things.”<sup>17</sup>

The paintings I make using high-value tints, are informed not only by my experience of light during Lauds but also by the affect of translucent radiance from paintings with radically reduced tonality. I am inspired by Agnes Martin and her quiet yet intense works (fig. 1.4), and by contemporary painters Rosslynd Piggott and ANU alumni Sue Lovegrove (fig. 6.1) and Suzanne Moss; interestingly though they use similar visual language, each artist is motivated by different things: Lovegrove, an environmentalist, is inspired by her love of landscape,<sup>18</sup> Moss by her interest in the optical and poetic possibilities found at the intersection between ancient mandalas and geometric abstraction,<sup>19</sup> and Piggott by her love of subtlety and the differing effects of cultural immersion.<sup>20</sup> But all their works offer a lightness of touch and an evocative transparency through sensitive use of colour and value relations; as with a community of friends, I enjoy being in the company of all their paintings.

*Vespers: Inter 1 & 2* sunset

The two *Vespers: Inter* works offered me the broader palette of a dramatic sunset that I explored through purer fluorescents. Centring the compositions symmetrically on the stretchers, I painted the colours with bilateral asymmetry. Whilst each of the works uses similar palettes, the distribution of the warm palette changes in each work but the cool palette does not. *Vespers: Inter 1* (fig. 7.7) has an intense, low-value hot centre and *Vespers: Inter 2* has a high-value radiant centre (fig. 7.8). The light central area of *Vespers: Inter 2* draws me in, but the projective quality of the fluorescent pink stripes can also conversely appear to project; they vibrate chromatically beside the yellow stripes. The vibrancy of the warm striations is offset with a complementary bias in some of the cool colours: one strong stripe of manganese blue appears on each side of both paintings; it is enough.

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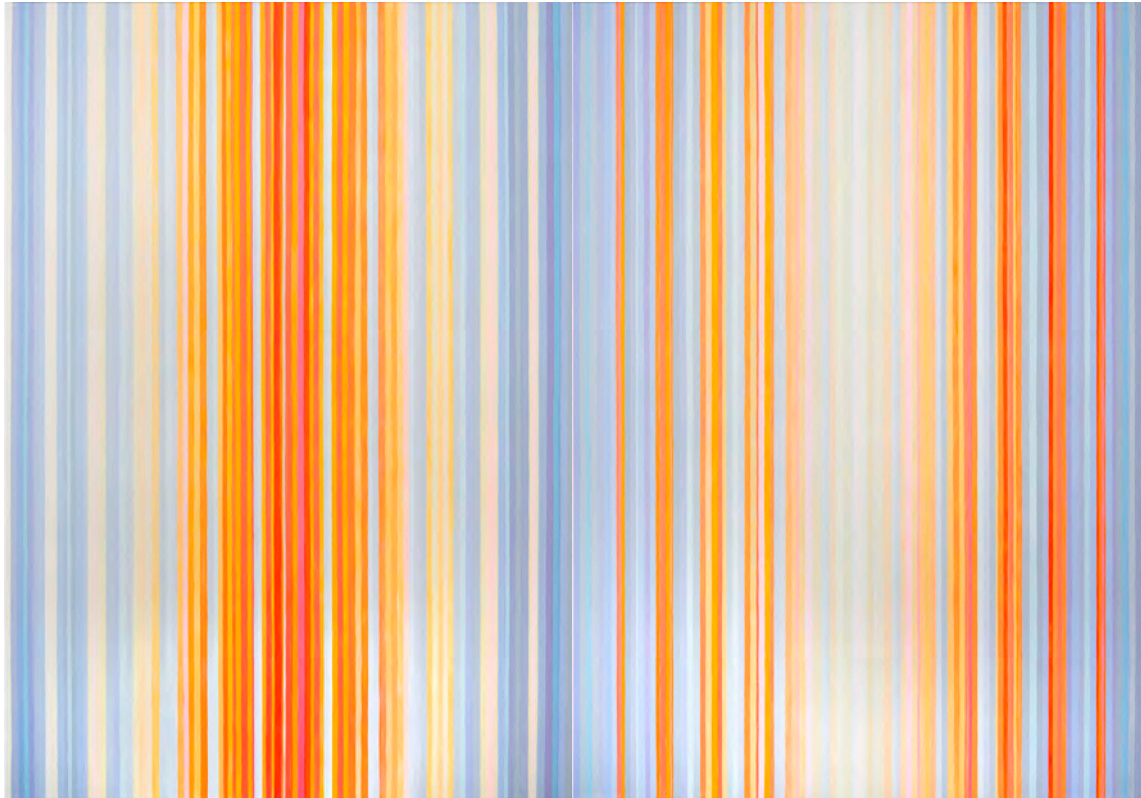
<sup>17</sup> John McPhee, “Rosslynd Piggott: the realm of the senses,” in *Artist Profile*, no. 18 (2012), 16-18.

<sup>18</sup> Sasha Grishin, “Sue Lovegrove's Nest Paintings Turn Gaze Skywards,” in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (June 30, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> “Suzanne Moss.” *Liverpool St Gallery*, last modified 2015.

[http://www.liverpoolstgallery.com.au/public\\_panel/artist\\_profile.php?id\\_ART=38&flag=1](http://www.liverpoolstgallery.com.au/public_panel/artist_profile.php?id_ART=38&flag=1) (accessed January 2105).

<sup>20</sup> McPhee, “Rosslynd Piggott: the realm of the senses,” in *Artist Profile*, 16-18.



**Fig. 7.7.** *Inter: Vespers 1*, (2014-15)

**Fig. 7.8.** *Inter: Vespers 2*, (2014-15)

*Vespers: Inter 2*'s pale focal area, with clashing pale pinks, creates the most luminous affect for me; it operates mostly through atmospheric and colour perspective. The fact that it works on various planes keeps me spatially engaged, and the pale but strong off-centred fluorescent pink stripe affirms my upright body but keeps me spatially *discomforted*.

***Compline-Vespers: Inter*** (dusk to twilight)

Wanting to make an immersive work interpreting the light experienced during Vespers and Compline, I decided to paint a triptych with the central painting interpreting the candlelight, and the outer works reflecting the transition between natural and artificial light. In the two outer paintings I use a vertical form of the *Passing* composition, with the left-hand painting suggesting the diminishing light of sunset outside the chapel, *Compline-Vespers: Inter 1*. The middle work, using the centred *Inter* composition, suggests the incandescent light inside, *Compline-Vespers: Inter 2*; and the light in the right-hand painting passes outside again to the disappearing landscape at twilight, *Compline-Vespers: Inter 3*.

*Compline-Vespers: Inter 1* (fig. 7.9), uses a high value range for the cool passages; in some areas I abandoned striations leaving only the gessoed linen. The warm areas have a wider

value range; I used tints of orange as a ground that I then glazed with purple. I also combined this purple with the ground orange to make a warm brown that appears intermittently across the whole triptych. I broke up the composition by using thin stripes of the cool Paynes Grey in the warm passages. The one thin stripe of a flame-like orange is intended to create a pause in the movement created by the graduated tonal striations.



**Fig. 7.9.** *Compline-Vespers: Inter 1*, (2014-15)

**Fig. 7.10.** *Compline-Vespers: Inter 2*, (2014-15)

**Fig. 7.11.** *Compline-Vespers: Inter 3*, (2014-15)

By comparison, the central work, *Compline-Vespers: Inter 2*, has a strong focal area with a luminous period that jumps abruptly to the highest value off-white from the surrounding yellow ochres and tertiary oranges (fig. 7.10). The quality of incandescent light is suggested, not just through the colours or abrupt value gradation, but also from the character of the brush-marks. To imply the way candlelight flickers in responsive to the atmosphere, I applied a thicker dryer paint so that the colours would appear textured. The warm colours cover a wide value range within a narrow space. Dark grey tints are used throughout the cool passages to create simultaneous contrast. Lilac tints sit beside pale yellow stripes in the centre, accentuating luminosity through complementarity.

The right hand work of *Vespers-Compline: Inter 3* appears to return to the same *Passing* composition as its left-hand counterpart, but the composition begins to disintegrate two thirds of the way across (fig. 7.11). By the time it reaches the right-hand edge, neither the warm/cool colours nor the light/dark duality conform to the *Passing* composition. The value range of the cool passages is greater than its left-hand counter part; it finishes with

the darkness of twilight. Wanting to suggest the disappearing landscape, I introduced dark tertiary greens that were offset by occasional manganese blue and purple stripes.

The light during these liturgies had been intense, thinking of the words of Andrews, “the notion of the flow time is essentially a spatial one;”<sup>21</sup> I ask—how could I make a meditative work that is at once as arresting as the significant solitary candle yet as gentle as the dying light of day? I attempt this by counter balancing the dominant vertical of *Vespers-Compline: Inter 2* with the rolling narrative movement of this horizontal triptych.

### **The *Passing* Series**

The spatial affects of the *Passing* series rest on colour and atmospheric perspective. Both spatial mechanisms can be made to collude to create a sense of distance or they can work in opposition to each other. The *Passing* composition is concerned with balance and orientation; it relies on progressive value change in both palettes that relates to the experience of light during the liturgies. In three of the five works, *Lauds: Passing*, *Vespers: Passing* and *Vespers-Compline: Passing*, the composition relies on an equivalent value change in both warm and cool palettes. The composition sustains a period in the centre where the dimension of the cool colour area, is equal to the dimension of the warm. I wanted the central areas of the three latter *Passing* paintings to appear unstable, with the value of each palette the same, spatial dominance should shift between the two. As philosopher Edward Casey explains, as “implaced beings,”<sup>22</sup> our sense of place is unconscious, it is:

...an a priori of our existence on earth...we do not believe that we have to think about this basic faculty very much. Except when we are disorientated or lost... we presume that the question is settled.<sup>23</sup>

By painting works with ambiguous centres, I hoped to confound the viewer’s sense of her weighted body; but what I was unprepared for was my intuited centre of gravity interfering with my conscious intention to paint the tonal centre of the work in the geometric centre of the composition. I paint standing up, with the painting leaning against my studio wall; I use small blocks to raise or lower the work as needed and turn the painting 180° to work on both palettes progressively. When almost complete I hung *Coming To Compline: Passing*, and observed, to my surprise, that the tonal centre was much too low down in the composition. I realised that I had painted the tonal centre of the

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<sup>21</sup> Andrews, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: a Philosophical History* (California: University of California Press, 1997), X.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

work where I had intuited my centre of mass to be while painting; I had unconsciously painted my body's understanding of its centred-ness as an implaced being on earth. I was so unaware of my body's need to be grounded that I did not know that I had done this until it hung at eye level. I realised that to make paintings that oppose gravity, I would need to better consider my body in the process.

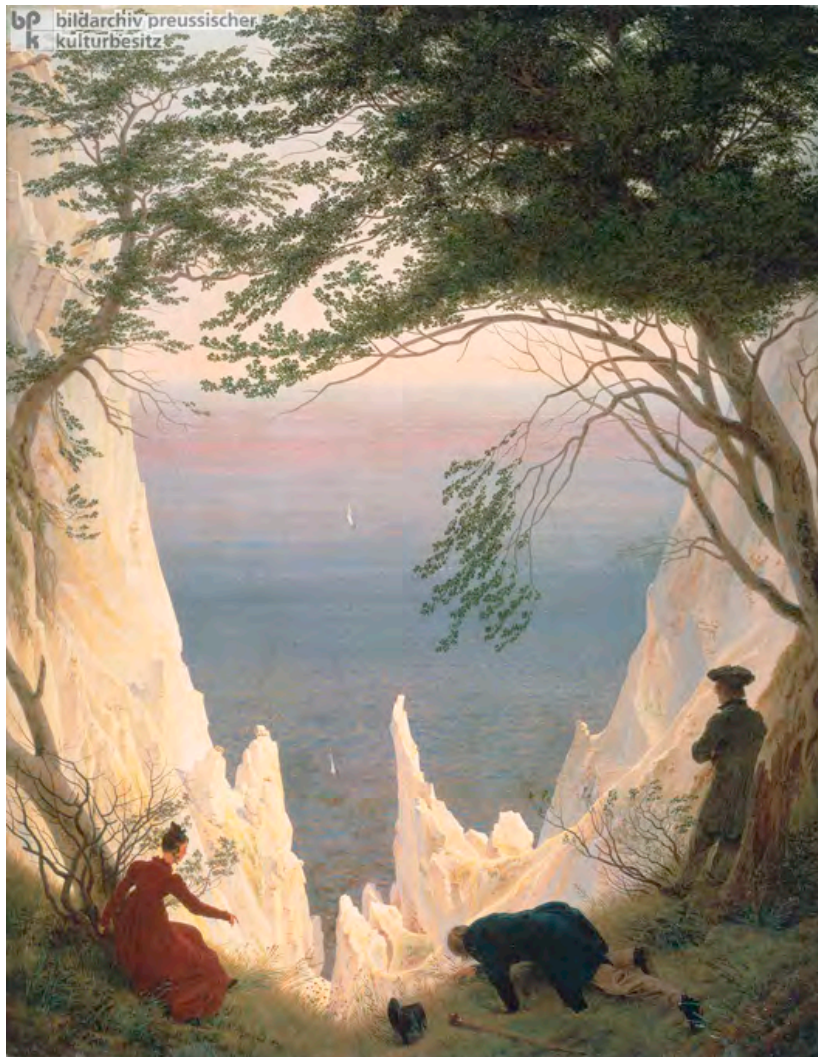


Fig. 7.12. Caspar David Friedrich, *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*, (1818)

### **Caspar David Friedrich: The Matter of Orientation**

As an example of an affect of spatial disjuncture, this section explores an out of body experience that I had had, when confronted with a projected painting in a lecture theatre in 2013.



*I am sitting in a darkened lecture theatre during a talk entitled, Orientation in Viewing: The Art of Caspar David Friedrich.<sup>24</sup> Michael Fried is projecting the painting, The Chalk Cliffs of Rügen high up on to the theatre wall (Fig. 7.12). In reality the painting is quite small, but now it appears enormous. I experience the sudden spatial affect of being sucked up off my chair, I am flying into the painting over the edge of the cliff into the sea; I experience this affect at such speed that I have the sensation of falling to my death.*

*I end this experience as quickly as it involuntarily began; I end it with my mind. I am back in my seat looking up at the painting, feeling safe. I contemplate this type of affect in my work. I had had an experience of my body plummeting without control; my interior body imagining that my exterior body was falling. I realise that I would like to produce a similar affect in my abstract paintings, though one far less frightening for the viewer.*

*In his essay Orientation in Painting: Caspar David Friedrich, Fried discusses the bilateral division within the formal structure of Friedrich's paintings.<sup>25</sup> He draws attention to the compositional geometry in relation to the subjects' bodies that he cites as often "asymmetrical with respect to right and left,"<sup>26</sup> Fried argues that the subject's body is intimately connected to the artist's body, which is also bound to the viewer's body. Fried recounts Kant's theory that this capacity to orient oneself in real space, through feeling the difference between the two sides of the body, can be extended to the capacity to orient oneself "in thinking in general" and from there to the capacity to abandon familiar objects both real and experiential altogether, leaving only "merely space for intuition."<sup>27</sup> I am intrigued by Fried's account of the significance of a primordial orientation through a "felt difference between right and left."<sup>28</sup> Is this what I am experiencing?*

*Within Friedrich's paintings, Fried focuses on the bilateral division of the vertical axis of the body. Whilst concentrating on this left/right movement in the Inter compositions, I experienced the affect of destabilising the bilateral division on the horizontal axis, my sense of the up/down movement and the forward/backward movement. I wonder—could I play with this horizontal axis in the Passing compositions by attempting to lift the viewer up and pivot her forward?*

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<sup>24</sup> "Orientation in Viewing: The Art of Caspar David Friedrich," lecture by Michael M. Fried, Australian National University, Canberra, May 30, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Fried, "Orientation in Painting: Caspar David Friedrich" in *Another Light*, 111-151.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

*On reflection I think this sense of spatial free-fall is achieved by Friedrich's use of compositional diagonals, his employment of proportions and scale in relation to the work's horizon line, through the postures of the Rückenfiguren and through the strong figurative prompts of being on the edge of a cliff; but I continue to consider the cause of this compelling vertiginous affect.*

*Middle Hour: Passing* midday

A nun described the liturgy of Middle Hour as a period suspended, a period when, as a community, they hope to accompany those for whom there is a sense of static tension. I experienced the light of this liturgy as though it were hovering; the sky at midday offered intense blues and luminous warm whites that appeared dense yet transparent. I wondered how to suggest a time and space that is both heavy and also light. Using the *Passing* composition I invert the tonal gradation in this and the *Night Vigils: Passing*; the widest, outer areas are the darkest passages. I use warm and cool blues that vary in value range from mid-tone to the palest of blues. In *Middle Hour: Passing* (fig. 7.13), I continue a preoccupation with texture, conscious of the effect of atmospheric perspective. The breadth of the white's warmth is conveyed by mixing interactive pigments with acrylic white paint and also by using thick white oil paint. And I combed thread-like lines of silver and gold pigment over flat white stripes of matte white acrylic. The dominant warmth is achieved through the recurrent creamy oil paint that is thick enough to appear in relief.



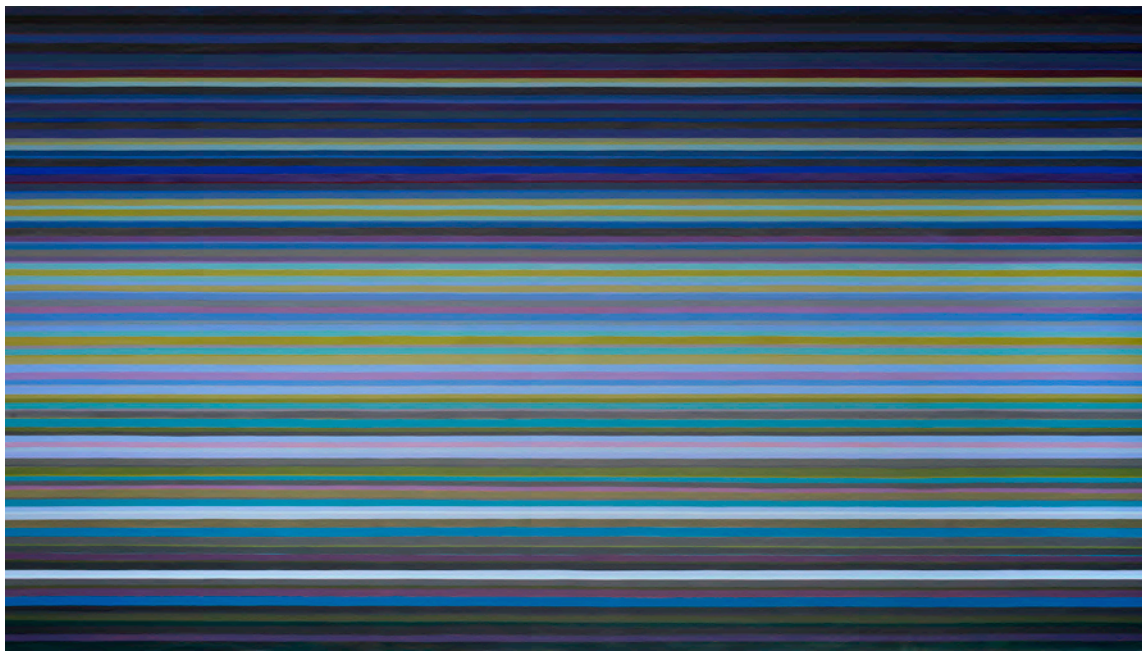
**Fig. 7.13.** *Passing: Middle Hour*, (2014-15)

Deciding that I wanted the weight and tone of the blue and green and violets to sit at the top of the painting to subvert implied gravity and recessive distance, I hoped to promote the affect of hovering for the viewer, an affect that I find meditative. The luminosity in this work is created by the materiality of the paint, from the reflective and interactive pigments and from the subtle value and colour relations. I find the expansive lightness draws me upwards, and yet arches over me at the same time.

*Coming to Compline: Passing* dusk to twilight

As I sat in the chapel noting the dying natural light and the growing candlelight from the beginning of Vespers through to the end of Compline, I remembered Rothko's words:

Often, towards nightfall, there's a feeling in the air of mystery, threat, frustration – all of these at once. I would like my painting to have the quality of such moments.<sup>29</sup>



**Fig. 7.14.** *Passing: Coming to Compline*, (2014-15)

*Coming to Compline: Passing* has a greater value range than the other *Passing* works; working from light blues through to absolute black in the cool areas and lime green to darkest evergreen in the warm (fig. 7.14). The compositional symmetry of the warm/cool passages is deliberately confusing. I have taken liberties with the palettes, inserting warm

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<sup>29</sup> David Sylvester, "The Ugly Duckling" in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*, organised by Michael Auping (New York: Harry N. Abrams in Association with Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1987), 140.

colours into the cool areas and cool colours into the warm. The centre of the work appears to have slipped because the values at this central point of exchange are not consistently equivalent. Since this was not my original intention I worked to counter this effect; interestingly I could not achieve tonal symmetry retrospectively but I find this tonal asymmetry contributes to the work's spatial ambiguity. The central area of this work appears unstable: the colours radiate, merging and bleeding into the passages of opposing temperature to suggest other colours in my peripheral vision. The luminosity in this painting is from the vibrant chromatic relations, and the extensive use of equivalent mid-tone values within the two palettes particularly in the spreading centre. The luminosity and spatial instability generates a positive affect for me. It challenges me spatially and lifts me off my feet.

### **Return of the Naked: Revisiting the Incarnation**

Historically the metaphysical has been imagined as something, and somewhere, other than the physical. Acknowledging that dualistic thinking separates the spirit and mind from matter, in this research I have been concerned with re-imagining the perception of Being through the body's spatial faculties. I have attempted to facilitate an affect of that separation of mind/spirit and body for the viewer through the spatial language of abstract paintings, hoping to stimulate ontological experiences in a contemporary way.

During this practice-led-research I have become progressively more aware of my own body. Working for a year, six days a week, on paintings that are as large as, or larger than, my body—constantly touching, lifting, tending, hanging, turning, & stroking the works—my shoulders have seized up, my back has needed attention and my eyesight has been affected. To challenge the viewer's spatial faculties, I believed that I had devised a simple, geometric abstract composition that removed any overt suggestion of a literal body or a literal space. But I found that in the act of painting I was unconsciously grounding the painting through my intuited body; I have been confronted by the unconscious dominance of my body in this conscious process to describe in paint what I had been imagining as other than physical.

This has caused me to consider the dualistic approach and contemplate the mystery of the incarnation, and its physical resurrection, afresh. I come to this metaphysical invitation from a Protestantism background, which, post Reformation, has promoted the

mind as not only separate but superior to the body, where “salvation has depended on mental, cognitive connection with God and...a distrust of the things of the world.”<sup>30</sup> But if, as standard Christian theology maintains, the divine became human in the man Jesus,<sup>31</sup> I wonder does not this act validate the physical? And I consider—what is the implication for me as a painter of Moltmann-Wendell’s claim that the divine “encounters us in the human body”?<sup>32</sup>

Making *The Metaphysics of Space* has surprised me; it has transpired not to be an expression of the metaphysical versus the physical, but of the spirit as integral to the body. In making these paintings I have experienced that I cannot separate facilitating thinking of spirit, or Spirit, with the grasping of them with my senses. The act of painting has been for me thinking in faith with my body.<sup>33</sup> I find myself asking—how might an integrated concept of *body* quest for ontological expression of Being in abstract painting?

## Conclusion

This final chapter of Part II, describes the development of a body of paintings that explores the phenomenon of changing light. Comprised of two series, one oriented vertically and one oriented horizontally, it employs versions of the two compositions, *Inter* and *Passing*, and the striated method developed in *Atmospherics*. These works are concerned with generating affect through painting light. Using a warm and cool duality, these repetitive compositions allowed me to explore the variety of colour and value relations experienced during *The Liturgy of the Hours*. I was intrigued to see what affect might be achieved by relatively small changes, for example by maintaining the same compositions and the same palettes but by changing the saturation of colours, as shown in *Inter: Lands 1* (fig. 7.4) and *Inter: Vespers 2* (fig. 7.8).

I discussed the significance of my out of body experience when viewing a projected work by Caspar David Friedrich. Achieved through the use of bilateral divisions within the works’ formal structures, where the subjects’ bodies are “asymmetrical with respect to right and left,”<sup>34</sup> I considered the implication of Fried’s argument that the subject’s body

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<sup>30</sup> Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995), 50.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Fried, “Orientation in Painting: Caspar David Friedrich” in *Another Light*,” 122.

is tied to the artist's body which in turn is bound to the viewer's body, and I drew a comparison with these asymmetrical bilateral compositions and my own intention to stimulate an affect through the use of orientation.

In *The Metaphysics of Space*, I made paintings sizeably bigger than their predecessors. As Varnedoe observed, "...the experiential dimensions of abstract art—its scale, materials, methods of fabrication—are crucially important to our understanding of it."<sup>35</sup> It was my experience that the understanding of abstract art is conversely also tied to our experience of it, and more particularly for me, the very experience of making of it. Using the significant and immersive affects that I had experienced on the two field trips as reference, *The Metaphysics of Space: Painting a Body of Light* investigates how to create affects that are connected to the whole body of the viewer. To do this I had intentioned, in dualistic tradition, to separate out the body from the mind and spirit, and to manipulate and manage the one in the service of locating the other. This chapter exposes how, through the subconscious process of painting, I discovered that the two are integrally interconnected; and it has discussed my arrival back to the mystery of the incarnation in my search for the metaphysical—for the spiritual—through abstract painting.

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<sup>35</sup> Varnadoe, *Pictures of Nothing*, 252.

## Conclusion

This project has drawn together two personal impulses: a passion for painting and a search for the metaphysical. My research grew from a quest to explore the spiritual through the contemporary language of painting. Abstraction supplied me with a non-prescriptive vocabulary and a reductive process through which I intentioned to generate specific experiences of affect resonant with spiritual encounter. Excitingly it has provided me with ways of exploring aspects of painting's rich religious heritage through specific formal means. I have communicated these investigations through interpretations of space and light—the focus of this enquiry.

Initially exploring metaphysical space through the metaphor of figure/ground complexity, it was not until I experienced the power of Western sacred paintings in sympathetic environs in Europe, that I considered the conceptual framework of *affect* for my studio practice. Moved by these experiences as the subjective viewer/believer, I developed my thesis to ask—how might I offer an affective invitation to the viewer through the contemporary language of abstract painting? As Susan Best writes,

It is this model (in Tomkins' account of affect) of the embodied, feeling, thinking subject that promises to reach what most people seek or expect from the experience of art.<sup>1</sup>

Referencing my encounters as a viewer in Europe, I used my own experiences of metaphysical space as a guide to making facilitative works. I identified two forms—the *devotional* and the scenic *narrative*<sup>2</sup>—within historic religious paintings and analysed the way each manifested metaphysical space in relation to light and space. I found that the devotional form suggested communication with depicted saints through a mystical form of abstract space and light created by the paintings' interactive materials, whilst the narrative form inspired and instructed through the stories of saints' lives; saints who were portrayed occupying real space. I experienced the devotional form offering me a metaphysical space that felt otherworldly, and the narrative tradition manifesting the spiritual in a form of real-world space.<sup>3</sup> These two interpretations of metaphysical space subsequently became the two arms of my enquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Best, "Rethinking Visual Pleasure: Aesthetics and Affect," in *Theory & Psychology*, Vol.17, no.4, (Sage Publications, 2007), 506.

<sup>2</sup> Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints in Italian Painting*, XVIII.

<sup>3</sup> Summers, in *Real Spaces*, 36-41, gives a comprehensive description of real space, particularly in relation to the condition of the human body in space and time.

*The Coronation of the Virgin* offered me an influential experience of metaphysical space from the affect of spatial disjuncture; I located this in the simultaneous experience of two forms of affect: the negative compulsion of spatial instability, (my interior perception of feeling unsafe), and the positive compulsion of “interest-excitement,”<sup>4</sup> from controlling and savouring the feeling of internal spatially disorientation. I termed this affect, being *comfortably discomforted*; this became the affect I wished to engender and a means of measuring the efficacy in my work. Deconstructing formal components of the sacred works I had been inspired by, I made a series of small abstracted works, *Exercises in Space, Light and Time Travel*, concentrating on the interaction between the three pictorial areas: the space implied behind the surface of the work, the space between the painting’s surface and viewer, and the two-dimensional plane of the painting’s surface. But I found that however much I tried, one pictorial area would dominate, inhibiting the slippage of movement between other areas. I abandoned attempting to manage this balance in favour of concentrating on the *devotional* form of religious work.

Interested in the capacity of the devotional image remaining as a trace within abstract painting through the idea of the contemporary imaginary,<sup>5</sup> I concentrated on generating interactive light through light-sensitive materials as a way of exploring the legacy of the icon. I developed and exhibited two interactive bodies of work *Timescape: Communicants* and *Communicants 2*. In the first body I employed interactive materials as the primary means of communication and in the second I used light-sensitive pigments in conjunction with a strongly recessive space to balance the materials’ interactive effects and increase the potential for disjuncture. Figurative devotional art, interpreted in the work of contemporary artists such as Tony Lane, mediates the interactive light and space through recognisable elements. Whilst the *Communicants* series did promote spatial disjuncture, I found them problematic as a final research solution precisely because the interactive materials performed spasmodically, and I felt I had exhausted this avenue of enquiry.

Looking for a new approach coincided with my second field trip, a retreat within a Benedictine monastic community. I interpreted the immersive experience of real light encountered during the cyclic *Liturgy of the Hours* as a version of the narrative tradition of religious art: at the Abbey I entered metaphysical space within the changing light of linear

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<sup>4</sup> Best, *Visualizing Feeling*, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 176.



time. Referencing real space through the repeated use of a portal also allowed me to consider the serial works I made as a form of community. In *The Hours*, I varied the palettes to express narrative by charting the changing light. However, to better reflect the form of spatial disjuncture I had experienced when moving my consciousness inside and outside my body whilst inside the chapel, I needed a more ambiguous solution to progress from a finite spatio-temporality to a more fluid solution. I deconstructed the portal to work with a warm and cool duality, using only atmospheric and colour perspective as the means of suggesting space;<sup>6</sup> and I developed two simplified compositions, each mediated through the use of stripes which offered me kinetic, orientational, and colour and value opportunities: *Inter* allowed me to play with ambiguous space by creating, yet confounding, the use of a focal space, and *Passing* facilitated ambiguity through continuous movement, having no focal space.

Having been guided to this point by affects experienced within my own body, to canvas a wider audience these works were presented to a peer group for review. The *Inter* and *Passing* series, exhibited later as *Atmospherics*, generated no uniform reactions to colour or value; but the modulated stripes and their orientation appeared to noticeably affect the bodies of viewers, and the larger the works were, the greater the affects presented. For the peer group the stripes oriented horizontally connected to the body in the landscape, and those oriented vertically appealed to the human body in space and suggested a body in relation to other bodies. These findings directly influenced the final body of works.

In *The Metaphysics of Space: Painting a Body of Light*, I used the *Inter* and *Passing* compositions to create two series, one vertical and one horizontal. Referencing the palettes of *The Hours*, I applied them to the two compositions exploring luminosity primarily through the use of colour and value relations to interpret the experience of cyclic liturgy. I increased the scale of the works to challenge the viewer's whole body in space, and to be immersive when presented in series;<sup>7</sup> I drew on Friedrich's use of bilateral compositions<sup>8</sup> to reference the body real through asymmetry and as a means of promoting spatial ambiguity. In these two series I aimed to embody a form of community and the potential for viewer inclusion hitherto unexplored.

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<sup>6</sup> Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space*, 35-54.

<sup>7</sup> Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 11-15.

<sup>8</sup> Fried, "Orientation in Painting: Caspar David Friedrich" in *Another Light*, 123.

Whilst the roots of this project are embedded in my own religious conviction and a specified religious heritage, the determination has been to produce works that offer an invitation to the metaphysical that is non-prescriptive and spiritually inclusive. I have attempted to do this by drawing on various traditions from art history, psychology, philosophy and theology. Using the language of abstract painting, I have worked with optical affects that are consistent with contemporary optical art; building on the work of predecessors such as Frank Stella, Gene Davis and Bridget Riley, I have sought to extend and expand the dialogue engendered by optical painting to mediate the effects of colour and value relations. However, whilst Riley remains interested in optics in the service of psychological effect, it is the metaphoric resonances that have driven this research. Working with the heritage of sacred performative and narrative works, I have sought to develop the visual language of striations to offer a contemporary interpretation of facilitative paintings of metaphysical space. Using light as the subject matter, I have explored modulating both value and colour relations across the striated compositions, to create speculative spaces for sustained viewer engagement. Rather than producing dramatic optical rhythms from strongly contrasting tonal and colour juxtapositions, the formal elements of the works are intended to promote a sense of manageable spatial discomfort through compositional ambiguity. The orientation and scale of the stripes have been refined, alongside the changing palettes, to encourage an embodied response, to gently stimulate and disturb the body's navigation system. In intention and affect, these works also build on and develop the metaphysical explorations of colour field painters such as Mark Rothko,<sup>9</sup> Barnett Newman and Agnes Martin. The move towards developing an embodied affect in this body of work, resonates with Pallasmaa's commentary on and call to the phenomenological potential of architecture and art, in his assertion that:

Profound architecture (and art) makes us experience ourselves as complete embodied and spiritual beings. In fact, this is the function of all meaningful art.<sup>10</sup>

In the company of these slow, immersive painted spaces the viewer is invited to contemplate and encounter mystery.

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<sup>9</sup> Gage, "Rothko: Color as Subject" in *Mark Rothko*, 251.

<sup>10</sup> Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 13.

Using *affect* as a conceptual framework in this project I have drawn on historic Western sacred art and contemporary interpretations of the sacred. Whilst I have not sought to lead the viewer in a devotional direction, I have hoped that, by using the tools of abstraction, I might create an open space for the viewer to contemplate the nature of Being. Abstraction has offered me both a language and a process for attempting this. The dualistic approach taken throughout this project—both conceptually in considering the physical body as other than the metaphysical, and practically in my approach to colour, applying a warm/cool divide to two dualistic compositions—has been challenged by the performance of painting itself. In acknowledging affect in this process, I have found that my body has enacted an integral union between its own interiority and its exteriority which I have called *thinking in faith with my body*.<sup>11</sup> Contemplating the implication of this has brought me back to the significance of the incarnation, I am excited at the potential of contemporary abstract painting to be “a site of revelation,”<sup>12</sup> where affect informed painting contributes to contemporary body theology manifesting a way forward by working *through* the body.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

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