The Materiality of Text and Body in Painting

and Darkroom Processes:

An Investigation through Practice

by

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This research study employs practice-based strategies through which material processes might be opened to new meaning in relation to the feminine. The purpose of the written research component is to track the material processes constituting a significant part of the research findings.

Beginning with historical research into artistic and critical responses to Helen Frankenthaler's painting, *Mountains and Sea*, I argue that unacknowledged male desire distorted and consequently marginalised reception of her work. I then work with the painting processes innovated by Frankenthaler and relate these to a range of feminist ideas relating to the corporeal, especially those with origins in Irigaray's writings of the 1980s.

The research involves three discrete bodies of work. The first, *Inscriptions*, explores the relation between visual processes and textual ideas. The second, *Screen / Paintings*, is a re-enactment of formalist decisions that attempts to recover the body in the work. The third, *Photoworks*, is an attempt to 'jam' vision whilst redirecting process through the unconscious and touch.

Each body of work gave rise to a practice text. In these texts, ideas that informed or were triggered by making are unearthed. Material processes are understood as a reiteration of themes (or issues) in relation to the feminine. These include: the relation between text and the visual, corporeality in making, the interplay between conscious and unconscious processes, and control / uncontrol. These ideas are reformulated in each body of made work. My approach maps out a method of working that is non-predictive and deliberately situated on the margins of control.

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Shapter's End, 17 June 2003

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

Relevant seminars and conferences on art, art theory, and feminism, were regularly attended at which work was often presented (see below); art exhibitions were visited for the purposes of both art historical research and an awareness of contemporary development in art practice. Several papers were prepared for public presentation and/or publication and artwork was regularly exhibited.

Exhibitions

1998, June: One person show, *Work in Progress,* Customs House, Exmouth.

1998, September: *Identity Texts,* Two-person show alongside The Relationship of Making to Writing Conference, Look Gallery, Exeter.

1998, October: *Inscriptions* included in a group show, *Exmouth Documenta,* The Clifford Fishwick Gallery, University of Plymouth, Exeter.

1999, May: *Chiasmatic States* (experimental work leading to *Screen / Paintings)* included in a group show, *Mixed Bag,* Art Haven, Exeter.

1999, July: *Inscriptions* included in *Matrix 4 Research,* group exhibition, Central St. Martins College of Art, London.

2000, September: *Screen / Paintings* included in *Littoral,* curated group show, Art Haven, Exeter [recorded discussion about *Screen / Paintings* with artist Chris Cook].

2000, September: *Photoworks, The Latent Image,* One-person show, Art Haven, Exeter [presentation given].

2001, February: *Photoworks* and *Screen / Paintings* included in *Littoral,* curated group show, Stade, Germany [talk given].

Publications

2000, Artist's Statement "Inscriptions" in *Differential Aesthetics,* eds. Florence, P. and Foster, N., Ashgate, Burlington.

2002, Artist's Statement "Inscriptions" in *Journal of Visual Art Practice,* 2002, Volume 2, Numbers 1 & 2, (Special Issue - *The Enactment of Thinking* eds. Macleod, K, and Holdridge, L.) Intellect, Bristol.

Seminars

1998, June: First Regional Research Seminar, Falmouth [paper given].
1998, November: Second Regional Research Seminar, Plymouth University [presentation given].

1999, March: Art and Design Research Day, Queen Street, Exeter [presentation given].

1999, May: Theorama: Third Regional Research Seminar, Falmouth College or Art, Cornwall [presentation given].

1999, May: Post-Graduate Research Seminar, University of Wales, Cardiff [presentation given].

1999, June: Department of Visual Culture, University of the West of England, Bristol [presentation given].

2000, March: Postgraduate Colloquium, Plymouth University, Exeter [presentation given].

2001, May: Two-day post-graduate research seminar, Art and Design Department, University of Plymouth, Exeter [presentation given].

2001, June: Women's Research Network Seminar, Exeter University, Exeter [presentation given].

2002, February: Art History Seminar, University of Plymouth 2001, June, Women's Research Network Seminar, Exeter University, Exeter [presentation given].

2003, March: Art and Design Research Seminar, University of Plymouth, Exeter [presentation given].

Conferences

1998, September: *The Relationship of Making to Writing Conference,* University of Plymouth, Exeter.

1998, November: *Slow burn: Meaning and Vision in Contemporary British Abstract Painting,* Mead Gallery, Warwick.

1999, May: *Search: Work in Progress,* Royal College of Art, London.

1999, July: *Matrix 4 Research,* Central St. Martins College of Art, London [paper given].

1999, July: *Intertextual Interrogations,* School of English, Exeter University, Exeter [paper given].

1999, October: *Stretching the Limits,* Abstract Painting Symposium, Spacex Gallery, Exeter [on panel].

1999, November: HCI Research Seminar, University of Plymouth, Exeter [presentation given].

2003, March: Art and Design Research Seminar, University of Plymouth, Exeter [presentation given].

2000, February: *Complexity Conference* Dartington College of Arts, Dartington.

2000, March: Ar*guing with Derrida,* Symposium, Queen Mary and Westfield College, London.

2000, April: *Art and Psychoanalysis,* Symposium, Spacex Gallery, Exeter.

2000, November: *Locality, Regeneration and Divers[c]ities,* University of Plymouth, Exeter.

2001, June: *International, Intercultural, Intergenerational Dialogues about the Works of and with Luce Irigaray,* Leeds City Art Gallery, Leeds.

2001, July: *The Enactment of Thinking: Creative Practice Research Degrees,* University of Plymouth, Exeter [paper given].

Visit

2002, February: Visit to New York to view *Mountains and Sea* and other works by Helen Frankenthaler.

Signed: Deborah Robinson

Date: 19th December 2003

Prefatory Note

This thesis is divided into two parts: Part I introduces historical and theoretical ideas relevant to an exploration of the feminine through practice. Part II attempts, through the writing of practice texts, to chart the thinking that was generated through material processes while I was engaged in making.

Plates showing finished artworks are incorporated at the beginning of each of the practice chapters in Part II. In the texts that follow, however, I have not referred to these plates individually. This restriction is based on a theoretical tenet: that hierarchical relations, in which artworks are looked upon individually as salient illustrations of theory, can be fruitfully avoided. In preparing this Ph.D. I have tried to adhere to, and explore, this tenet.

PART I

AN EXPLORATION OF THE FEMININE THROUGH PRACTICE:

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL INVESTIGATION

.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION:

SELF, MEDIUM, THEORY, PRACTICE

For a woman it is not a question of installing herself within this lack, this negative even by denouncing it, nor of reversing the economy of sameness by turning the feminine into the standard for 'sexual difference'; *it is a question of trying to practice this difference.*

Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One,* p.159.

1. How my Artwork and the Written Component of the Research Relate

The written component of my Ph.D. accompanies three discrete bodies of artwork. Ideally, the reader would have an opportunity to respond to my artwork before reading the text. I would like him or her to spend as much time as needed to perceive their response without an obligation to put this into words. I realise that this would be problematic given that the artwork is being presented in a research context in which words tend to dominate reception. But it is important, given my aim. This aim is to discover, at the level of the material and the sensory, ways of responding to the materials that I use as an artist which relate to my embodied experience as a woman. The text, which attempts to unravel the issues that are bound up in the materiality of the completed artwork, would then follow. It is not intended to explain or interpret the content of the artwork, although I hope that it may cast light on this.

It may be helpful for the viewer / reader to know something about the construction of the text, and how this relates to the processes used to create the artwork. The written part of this research was generated out of what I have termed 'practice texts'. These texts were central to my method of working, because they mediate between material processes and theoretical ideas. Each of the three bodies of work was accompanied by writing that attempts to record the ideas that underpinned the work during the process of making. Shaded in grey, the practice texts are included in Chapters Four, Five and Six. At a later date I trawled each practice text in order to discover theoretical issues raised by the work. I then researched and developed these.

Initially, through working in this way, I produced a repetitive text in which, although the theoretical ideas and practice findings were intertwined as I had wished, the relation between the two was unclear. This reflected, I think, an

uncertainty of intent. Should my contribution be to a theoretical body of knowledge, or rather, did I wish to say something about practice itself? I had originally intended the latter, although this aim had become obscured along the way. I decided to edit the text sharply in order to reveal my practice-based findings and give them more emphasis. Finally, having been almost totally absorbed in highly subjective processes — in connection with both making and writing — I gave more thought to the reader / viewer. I decided that it would be helpful to bring to the foreground an explanation of my personal motivation for undertaking this research project.

At this point I saw that this would require an explanatory account of the historical problem that I sought to address in my early work. I present this account in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, I move on to introduce the feminist theoretical ideas that enabled me to instigate change in my practice. Following this, in Chapter Four (*Inscriptions*), Chapter Five (*Screen / Paintings*), and Chapter Six (*Photoworks*), I chart the re-positioning of my practice through the making of three discrete bodies of artwork. It is worth emphasising here that because the artwork was made before the written text, I have placed illustrations at the *beginning* of each chapter to reflect this order. I decided against integrating the images into the text because this tended to set them up in such a way that they became illustrations of written points. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I attempt to draw some conclusions from the theoretical and practical components of my work.

2. Rethinking the Relation between Self and the Medium

The research presented here was motivated by a desire to find ways of responding to the medium of painting that would enable me to draw on the complex interrelationship of body and mind that stemmed from my lived experience of

inhabiting a female body. To accomplish this aim I needed to negotiate my way through a fundamental shift in the way in which I engaged with the painterly processes of abstraction — to acquiesce in and explore new terms of engagement.

Before embarking on this project (during the period 1985-1995) I had made extensive use of expressionistic working methods originating in the work of Helen Frankenthaler, particularly that of soaked-in stain, because these seemed to accommodate highly personal experience. For example, the emergent materiality of the surfaces created through staining seemed very often to release sensations, visceral and physical, that were grounded in my 'lived' body and thus felt rather than seen. Maternal experience also, I think, strongly influenced my self-perception. During this period my two sons were born in quick succession. As a consequence, life seemed to be founded on indeterminate boundaries (and attempts to establish these), and on a rare physical communication that emphasised touch and skin as opposed to language. Fully occupied with painting and childcare, I left my studio and home quite rarely, and this relative isolation allowed me to construct a personal set of beliefs around my materials and their meaning.

I was, however, to find that this approach was unsustainable in the public arena of the gallery — a problem that was highlighted when I attempted to find language to describe the work for catalogues. At the same time, I became increasingly aware that the interactions between self and the medium that I had thought spontaneous seemed to be 'scripted' in accord with meanings other than those I intended. In retrospect this can, of course, be easily explained: through modelling how I worked so very closely on Frankenthaler's practice I had, in a sense, 'imported' a historical theoretical framework alongside my materials and working methods.

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3. The Historical Problem: Gender Bias in Response to the Medium of Painting

In Chapter Two I argue that Frankenthaler's innovative use of the medium developed during the making of her painting *Mountains and Sea* attracted a response from the critics that reflected values in accord with a culturally specific male position. Until recently, Frankenthaler's paintings have been overlooked in the canon.[1] In 1952 she invented a technique known as soaked-in stain during the making of *Mountains and Sea*. Interpretations of this work, and its subsequent art-historical positioning, have been limited by formalism, the dominant mode of criticism during the high modernist period. This is a view that centres fixedly on the demands of the medium, and as a result emphasis has been given to the technical aspect of Frankenthaler's innovation rather than the specific qualities of space she created through her use of materials. Her art-historical positioning is largely obscured through readings which consider the working methods she used to create *Mountains and Sea* as providing a basis for future developments in painting rather than responding to the work in its own right.

Generally, *Mountains and Sea* is regarded as germinal. It is looked upon as a bridge between Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field painting. This positioning can, in part, be attributed to the critic Clement Greenberg, whose theories, alongside those of Harold Rosenberg, provided the theoretical framework for Abstract Expressionism. Greenberg's formalist view of painting is one that goes against both the sensory and expressive dimension of painting, concentrating instead on the pure physical properties of the medium. It was this approach that led him to pare down painting and remove all aspects of the medium that he considered extraneous to the pictorial issues that were its rightful concern. At a later date Greenberg's stance was closely associated with Colour Field painting and the work of Jules Olitsky, Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, and Larry Poons, a group

of artists who are generally considered to have come closest to realising the criterion for modernist painting set out by Greenberg. In order to form the objective judgements that Greenberg attempted to promote, the viewer needed to engage in a purely visual experience that, in practical terms, would be most effectively carried out from a fixed position by a viewer at some distance from the work. I suggest that Frankenthaler, through her particular approach to materials and techniques, created pictorial surfaces characterised by instability and transience. These required the viewer to engage in a very different visual response to that implied by formalism.

My investigation into the reception of Frankenthaler's painting gave me an insight into gender bias and how this limited the interpretation of abstract painting by women; however, I did not pursue historical research. The reason for this was that I had formed the conviction that the painterly processes innovated by Frankenthaler had unexplored potential relevant to the exploration of female subjectivity and bodies. My aim was to investigate this hypothesis through my practice. I believed this could be used as a means of gaining insight into the problems that accompanied interpretation of Frankenthaler's work whilst simultaneously attempting to open these to new meanings.

4. Feminist Perspectives

I therefore began to search for ideas that would allow me to rediscover materiality in painting in relation to the feminine. In Chapter Three, I introduce the feminist philosophical and psychoanalytic theories I turned to in order to construct an alternative conceptual framework for practice. For example, intrigued by recent feminist inquiry into the sexualisation of matter, I believed that some of these

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ideas might be used to positively rethink interactions between myself (as a woman) and the medium used.

A number of theorists have contributed to this field, including Judith Butler,[2] Moira Gatens,[3] Vicki Kirby,[4] and Julia Kristeva.[5] It was, however, the ideas and methods of Luce Irigaray that were to become of central importance to my project. I have therefore included an overview of the application of her ideas to my practice in Chapter Three. There, I also briefly introduce the notion of a 'corporeal framework'. This is a concept that is developed and elucidated further through experimental practice in the ensuing chapters relating to practice. Finally, I introduce the work of three artists: Ross Bleckner, Moira Dryer, and Maria Chevska. Each has subjected the processes of modernist abstraction to unsparing but also, perhaps, affectionate interrogation. Through a combination of the intellectual and poetic, of wit and subversion, these are artists who have each developed an approach to painting I have found inspirational. This is because, through rethinking (and as a result destabilising) processes and meaning that underpin making abstract work, Chevska, Bleckner and Dryer have opened out the act of making abstract painting in such a way that complex, contemporary, and above all corporeal issues might form grounds for experimentation.

5. Theoretical Issues that Arose through an Investigation of the Medium in Relation to the Feminine

In the initial stages of my research, the approach I adopted was not dissimilar to Greenberg's. Like him, I focused on the potential of the techniques innovated by Frankenthaler, although I was, of course, well aware that Greenberg's formulation of formalism limited the interpretation of these processes. My reason for doing this was that, as a practising artist, I was aware that the structural, relational and technical aspects of making — in other words formal decisions — are always

crucial. These mediate the material form of the artwork. I had begun to question whether it might be possible to rethink formalist concepts, *whilst making*, in such a way that they would be divorced from history, ideology and rationalism. With hindsight, my preoccupation with Greenberg's theories was, I now think, obsessive, although this does perhaps explain why I went about self-consciously deconstructing the processes that I engaged with in the first two bodies of work, *Inscriptions* and *Screen / Paintings*.

In the remainder of this section, the discussion is divided into six parts: *Inscriptions*; *Screen / Paintings*; *Theory / Forms*; *Photoworks*; *The Mediation of Subjectivity Through Liquidity and Darkness*, and *Audience*. This is intended to give the reader an overview of the development of the research issues that arose from practice.

Inscriptions (May-August 1998)

I began this project by immersing myself in techniques and processes that originated with Frankenthaler. The resulting body of work, *Inscriptions*, explores two related aspects of Frankenthaler's work: the act of pouring liquid onto the picture plane and the property of recessive space in painting. As I made this work, I tried to relate my use of the medium to fragments of text that explored a female relation with the material world in an experimental, innovative and positive way. The texts I worked were by Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger[6] and Luce Irigaray.[7] The artwork was generated out of the juxtaposition of ideas taken from the two opposing paradigms of modernism and feminism. After finishing the series of works making up *Inscriptions* I wrote a practice text that reflected on the issues in the work. At this point, these issues seemed to be quite disparate.

Following this, I began to set up a theoretical context for some of these issues. I addressed, for example, the interplay of control and 'uncontrol' during the

application of the medium. I also reflected on the importance of fluidity (as opposed to solids) in the creation of a type of pictorial space that appears to recede behind the frame. And I attempted to clarify the way in which the qualities of this space implicate the mobile and lived body in the act of viewing. I describe and attempt to assess these endeavours in Chapter Four.

Screen / Paintings (April-September 1999)

In Chapter Five, I discuss *Screen / Paintings*. This was the body of work that I made in response to issues that arose out of *Inscriptions*. Here, I continued to explore the interrelationship between recessive or (as I now began to term this) 'liminal' space in painting. My interest in this type of space stemmed from the material and spatial connotations of surface, discernible in the works of Frankenthaler, that I had initially explored in *Inscriptions*. Following experimentation[8] that focused on the specific material qualities of surface which, through similarity or resonance, connected with the female body, I began to experiment with various materials — including wax, tracing paper and interference colour — to find ways of creating a semi-transparent and tactile surface.

In the work I made at this stage, I attempted to place painting in a destabilised context, on an unreliable border between two subjects. These are works that can be seen either within the tradition of *painting* or, if they are responded to as *screens*, within a psychoanalytic context. The first, abstract painting, which has at its centre a concern with matter, reads as a trajectory of modernism. As a result, the materiality of the work comes to the fore. Alternatively, if the works are conceptualised as a series of screens, this will then, if the thinking of Jacques Lacan is drawn in, deny the materiality of the surface, which instead will become representative of 'absence' or 'lack'.[9] It is at this unstable juncture, representative of a split between matter and the unconscious mind, that feminist psychoanalytic theory has much to offer. Thus the thinking of feminists like Irigaray can be used

to open the concept of screen (a dual-sided, semi-see-through painting) and to raise issues of subjectivity, invisibility and the feminine.

Looking back, I now think that, in making *Screen / Paintings*, I was attempting to retrace or re-enact the stages of formal decision-making. At each stage of construction, I tried to rethink my relation with the medium through reference to ideas taken from feminist theory. For example, in the practice text *Anatomy / Painting*, I describe a series of analogies between my body and the work. In writing this, I attempted to do two things. The first was to consider the process of materialisation in painting in relation to the structure of the human body. Painting and the body are alike in that the form of each can be understood, at a basic level, as the materialisation of matter. Secondly, through the process of writing, I began to understand that the very literal and even plodding approach I had taken to excavating the presence of the body in the work could be a useful strategy. Deliberately, at this stage of the research, I had moved away from the idea of expressive painting. This allowed me to create a reflective space within which I could consider in more depth the structuring of interactions between a woman artist and her material. In turn, this train of thought led me to look again at some of Harold Rosenberg's ideas (briefly described in Chapter Two) which I came to compare with the later feminist practice of 'writing the body'.

Theory / Forms (April-September 1999)
The application of dripped liquid wax to the surfaces of *Screen / Paintings* involved repeated bodily movements. I attempted to infiltrate these with theoretical ideas that were related to the spatial and tactile qualities I wanted to work with as a painter.[10] To do so, I made several objects I call *Theory / Forms*. This involved taking sections of text and, having first pre-selected certain words, crumpling the sheets of paper. These were then scattered on the studio floor. As I interacted with the medium, while making each of the *Screen / Paintings*, I would move back and

forth past these objects. The idea here was that, through the movement of my body in space, I would glimpse dislocated strings of words. Depending on the position of the body, some were in focus and others were not. As the light changed, words would fall into shadow or become invisible as a result of the glare. Meaning derived from a mobile and bodily relation with text would, I hoped, filter into the materiality of the artwork through gesture.

With hindsight, I think that the *Theory / Forms* were an attempt to deconstruct text through haptic processes. The benefit of working in this way is that it may circumvent metaphorical structures in written language. Metaphor tends to replicate what is already known and valued in language and culture. Noticing this, Irigaray has argued that metaphors that privilege sight at the expense of the other senses create a pathway that continually deflects from the maternal / feminine, preventing its representation in the social order.[11] Irigaray argues that knowledge, or *logos*, is materially conceived, but that in the history of metaphysics all contributions that stem from the maternal experience are rendered invisible and are thus immaterial and without texture or form.[12]

The status of the *Theory / Forms* has a certain ambivalence. For example, I have been asked a number of times whether these are 'artworks'. Given my recurring interest in the interchange that occurs where borders between subjects or contexts are destabilised, I think it is productive to leave the categorisation of these works open.

Through exhibiting *Screen / Paintings* I became aware of an important aspect of process that I had overlooked. I realised that my interactions with the medium had been influenced, not only by text, as I intended, but also by the light and space of the studio. At this point I began to question whether the specific qualities of light and space associated with the traditional painter's studio might be imprinted with

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cultural values that would in turn negate the feminine. This theme is picked up and developed in Chapter Six.

Photoworks (February-July 2000)

In making the third body of work, *Photoworks,* I decided to let go of what had become a rather *conscious* use of theory. I realised that my use of deconstructive strategies had been functioning effectively as a 'prop'. This use had created a shift in how I responded to the materials I used. However, I had reached a point at which I felt a need to return to spontaneity. Beyond the decision to transfer the processes I used as a painter into the wet darkroom, I had no preconceived idea of what I would then do. The final work emerged out of the interchange between a range of elements — body, text, liquids, light and fire — which were brought together in darkness.

The Mediation of Subjectivity Through Liquidity and Darkness

In the final body of work, *Photoworks,* I explored 'alternative darkroom processes'. My decision to work in this way was linked with my interest in Irigaray's claim that the suppressed experience of the maternal / feminine is constituted out of darkness and tactility. For example, in her re-reading of one of Merleau-Ponty's last works,[13] Irigaray argues that he has, like many male philosophers, overlooked — or perhaps, more accurately, erased — the contribution to knowledge that stems from the materiality of female reproduction. Imagery associated with pre-birth sensations mediated through darkness, fluids and sound, is a source of feminine only identity. However, in Irigaray's view, when we are born into light, and develop the ability to see, eyesight (which is, in Irigaray's view, integral to theories generated by men) overlays our previous tactile or bodily mapping of the world.

At this point, Irigaray suggests that the visual is superimposed on the tactile and therefore subordinates other forms of perception to its own exigencies. A powerful

idea that emerges from Irigaray's writing — for example, in *Speculum of the Other Woman* — is of the power of self-discovery that may take place through a return to darkness. This requires moving beyond the flat reflective surface of theory into a fluid space that exists beyond. Irigaray has, although not unproblematically, suggested that it may be productive for women to speak from a position *outside* theory. In Chapter Six, I suggest that alternative darkroom processes, because they have not been colonised by theories that have developed in response to lens-based media, may provide such a space. Further to this, this space is a location from which the beginnings of a richly creative female relation with the processes of abstraction can be constructed.

I worked in the darkroom with sections of Irigaray's text that had been photocopied on to acetate and then reformed through burning. The thickly carbonised surfaces of these miniature, buckled forms were then scratched into and painted on. Dust and small dead insects that I found in the corners of the darkroom were smeared onto the developing surfaces. These shapes were then projected onto large sheets of photographic paper, approximately 6ft by 4ft — and I found, as a result, that the materiality of text and the materiality of the artwork became inseparable.

Certain issues arose from acting upon text through burning. For example, it seemed to me that what I had termed 'creative or nurturing burning' was in fact tinged with underlying violence, and that this was an energy that I utilised to form the work. This led me to question whether my use of destruction as a source of creativity could be differentiated from the violence against matter that, as I saw it (see Chapter Two), underlies Abstract Expressionism.

The wet darkroom provided a space within which I became lost in a creative process, helped by a sense of freedom that comes from being 'out of view' and to

some degree set apart from the 'cultural gaze'. Working in near darkness seemed to 'jam' sight as a means of orchestrating the emerging image. I also found that working in very little light enforced a more continuously sensory, and tactile, engagement with the medium. For example, in the darkroom it is not always possible to see one's own hand. The edges of the body become apparent only when they are brought into contact with the textures of things such as liquid, paper and so on. Intuitive artwork made in these conditions forms in relation to the body of the maker, whose sense is of being, intermittently, merged or subsumed into darkness. This engenders a fluid interchange on a material level of artist, materials and theory.

Engagement in artistic processes in the darkroom may allow fragmented thought, and this may permit sensations and emotions derived from the unconscious to emerge. The scene that is set — a low level of light and isolation — functions somewhat similarly to the traditional setting, in that it serves to dissociate the artist from language and visual objectivity. My practice text in Chapter Six compares the two disciplines in order to explore my own use of alternative darkroom processes. In making *Photoworks*, I channelled unfamiliar perceptions of space and body into a material form. The artwork grew out of an unfolding relation between my body, Irigaray's text, liquids and burning. I had intended to enter into a process of formal decision-making that was deliberately squeezed towards an alliance with the body, gesture and touch. This would be different to, for example, Greenberg's version of formalism, because he had favoured sight. I wanted to discover whether formal decisions could perhaps operate as a topology that bore reference to the body of the maker. Here, suppression of the specular gaze was necessary as a means of 'unfixing' or dislocating the feminine. Traces of the feminine associated with women's specific corporeality are, as I attempt to show in Chapter Five, generally subsumed into material processes at an invisible and structural level. I suggest that the use of alternative processes in the isolation of

the darkroom may enable the maker to come into contact with the feminine. The artwork produced might then, in part, be representative of sexed subjectivity.

Audience

Finally, I would like to comment on the role of the viewer in this research. Having made *Inscriptions*, the first body of work, I carried out interviews with an audience in an attempt to gauge response.[14] However, I decided that this, as a form of 'testing' for the feminine, was antithetical to the possible qualities that it might be associated with. For example, it may be that the feminine, as a quality in an artwork, is extremely close to the masculine, perhaps definable only through minute or barely perceptible sensory shifts. Its perception may depend on the variable factors of mood, time, space and light. (I would certainly like to think that these fluid and transient qualities play a part in the reception of my own work.) And these, it must also be noted, were precisely the qualities that emerged in Frankenthaler's painting and that then worked to her disadvantage.[15] Initially, my practice was closely bound up with Frankenthaler's working methods. Unlike her, however, I drew on text as a means of revealing and re-framing these issues as I engaged with process. I have also, of course, had the advantage of producing a text to accompany my work. This has given me the opportunity to explain how I negotiated some of these issues during the process of making. As the practice progressed, I focused increasingly on process, as opposed to identification of the feminine in the finished artwork. I tried to develop strategies and methods that would create the possibility (however fleeting) that the lived experience of inhabiting a female body might filter into the work.

Notes to Chapter One

1 Rowley, *Notes on the Case of Mountains and Sea*.

2 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

3 Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*.

4 Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*.

5 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

6 Lichtenberg Ettinger, 'Inside the Visible'.

7 Irigaray, *Marine Lover*.

8 See Appendix D for examples of this work.

9 Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus', pp.281-291.

10 The texts that I experimented with included: Merleau-Ponty, 'The Intertwining- the Chiasm' in *The Visible and the Invisible*; Lichtenberg Ettinger, 'The With-In-Visible Screen' in *Inside the Visible*; and a transcript that I made from a tape of an unpublished paper given by Irigaray at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1996, entitled 'The Breath of Women'.

11 For example, Irigaray has stated that "In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations". Quoted in Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p.493, originally from an interview in *Les Femmes, la Pornographie et L'erotisme*, eds. Hans, M. and Lapouge, G., Paris 1978.

12 Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse' in *This Sex Which is Not One*, P.75.

13 Irigaray, 'The Invisible of the Flesh' in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

14 See Appendix C for selected extracts of these interviews.

15 For example, Parker and Pollock have pointed out the problems caused by resorting to feminine stereotypes in the discussion of Frankenthaler's work: "The critics' discourse on Frankenthaler not only oozes notions of femininity from every pore, but effectively removes her from her precise historical context. Her art becomes as timeless as nature, inexplicably reverting to the eighteenth century even in the midst of the important upsurge in national American art in the 1950s". See Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, p.134.

Chapter Two

PRACTICE, HELEN FRANKENTHALER, THE FEMININE

Plate 1   Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea*, 1952. Oil on canvas (86 x 117 inches).

1. Introduction

In this chapter I will develop the relationship between my practice and that of Helen Frankenthaler specifically in relation to what might be constituted as the feminine. During the period leading up to this project I had been interested in working methods innovated by Frankenthaler whose painting I believed to be a successful exploration of the language of abstraction in relation to female embodied experience. As my own work moved toward an exploration of the feminine in practice her significance increased. Through, for example, my experimentation with soaked-in stain, a technique which was innovated by Frankenthaler, I believed that pictorial surface created by such methods had specific qualities with which I could, in some sense, identify as a woman. A description of my use of staining is included in Section 2 of Chapter Three. [1]

However, I had also become uncomfortably aware that, within the patriarchal tradition of painting, the values that operate both at the level of process and also in the reception of the artwork occlude reception of the feminine. In the light of this I began to search for ways in which I could examine and extend processes developed by Frankenthaler; these have, until recently, been overlooked. My experience as a practitioner led me to believe that it was as she worked that Frankenthaler activated (or brought into play) the feminine. Importantly, Frankenthaler's methods centre upon a highly individual response to the medium. In this she differed significantly from her male colleagues. My aim, in this chapter, is to begin to map out these differences at the level of process so that they might then provide the grounds for my own exploration and theorisation of the feminine through practice.

Provisionally, I take the feminine to be the sum of that which has been repressed through the masculine discourses that frame process based abstraction in painting, both in terms of theory and studio vocabulary. For me, it is important that the recovery of the 'overlooked' feminine in painting is approached first and foremost through practice - theorisation will then follow on

from this. Deliberately, I do not, at this stage, align the feminine with a particular theoretical position. This is because to do so, would, I think, limit what I am attempting to research through practice. The advantage of practice is that it allows me to privilege corporeal / material experience that is derived through the physical act of making as opposed to a more conceptual approach. I explain why I consider this approach productive in Chapter Three.

2. Marginalisation of *Mountains and Sea*

During the making of her work *Mountains and Sea* the painter Helen Frankenthaler innovated a technique that became known as 'soaked-in stain'. As I have already mentioned, the art-historical positioning of this painting has been linked to Clement Greenberg's formalist agenda for Modernist painting. It is held to be a 'seminal' work that provides a bridge between Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field painting.

As Colour Field painting emerged in New York during the early 1960s, *Mountains and Sea* became legendary as its status as an 'influence' grew. The source of the 'legend' was a trip made by two Washington artists, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, who, on the advice of Greenberg, visited Frankenthaler's studio in order to view the painting *Mountains and Sea*. It proved to be a work that stunned both of them. Noland recalled that "it showed us a way to think about and use colour",[2] whilst Louis is remembered as proclaiming *Mountains and Sea* a "revelation".[3] Noland later observed the effect of the picture on his companion: "it was as if Morris had been waiting all his life for (this) information".[4]

After seeing *Mountains and Sea* Louis changed his direction abruptly and in so doing, it has been frequently stated, changed the course of painting. It appears, then, that Frankenthaler's contribution to art history has been recognised only when interpreted by other (male) artists. It is also significant that this 'legend' serves to position her in the traditional role of artist's

muse - that is, as a woman who inspires a man to creative genius. This is demonstrated in the following, curious, statement by Geldzahler:

> Her influence was picked up, and the direction of the painting of the 1960s was changed, not so much by what Helen did herself as by the way other people saw what she was doing.[5]

In the above, Geldzahler has rendered Frankenthaler powerless and without intellectual responsibility for the direction of her work, the meaning of which, it was inferred, remained in some way opaque to her. Her contribution was recognised only when seen and then re-deployed by other male artists.

In the following I attempt to extricate *Mountains and Sea* from this historical position because this has led to a very limited interpretation of soaked-in stain as a technical breakthrough, relevant only in that it furthers formalism. Instead, I suggest it is productive to relate the processes innovated by Frankenthaler to the theoretical frameworks of Abstract Expressionism. The advantage of this departure from the orthodox view is that it enables a shift toward recognition of the interactions between the body of the painter and the medium. In this context it becomes possible to take into account what Frankenthaler herself said about materials; that is, how she used these and the reasoning behind decisions taken. The eloquent statements made by Frankenthaler relating to how she made *Mountains and Sea* give an insight into the complex development of the relation between (her) self and the medium used. Here, her practice may be seen to make a clear contribution to the theoretical debates of the time. In addition, and crucially, within the specific remit of this project, this positioning will allow me to examine a trajectory in which Frankenthaler's working methods are recognised as an important contribution to contemporary painting concerned with issues of female embodiment.

3. Space Behind the Frame / The Feminine

Helen Frankenthaler's educational background and early career leading to the making of *Mountains and Sea* supports the view that Frankenthaler, from a perspective that combines theory together with her experience as a practising artist, was in a valid position to evaluate issues associated with Abstract Expressionism.[6] *Mountains and Sea* was made after Frankenthaler returned from a trip to Nova Scotia and Cape Breton where she had made paintings of the landscape with folding easel equipment. Shortly afterwards she painted *Mountains and Sea* in her New York studio which she shared with the painter Friedel Dzubas. The imagery of *Mountains and Sea* is obviously connected with the landscape of its title. Frankenthaler has recalled: "I came back and did the *Mountains and Sea* painting and I know that the landscapes were in my arms as I did it".[7] Memories of the trip are to be seen in the painting which contains their essence: there is a greyish looming mass at the centre suggestive of mountainous peaks and adjacent is a horizontal passage of blue representative of sea.

Charcoal lines act as 'guideposts' to the structure of the painting. These are the remnants of cubism, but they have a very different quality to the line used to denote structure in Cubist easel painting. This is because the work is large and was made by laying the whole canvas flat against the studio floorboards. The line has therefore become bold, looping and expressive. Its function is not purely to delineate form. This can be seen on the right side of the painting: an area of thin green paint is in part bounded by line, but also the line cuts across the green in a fresh and unexpected manner. The pale tones of the palette may be seen as an extension of the European tradition, in that these follow on from the late watercolours of Paul Cézanne. Other critics have stressed the landscape connection in the work[8] as does Frankenthaler herself in the above statement. Certain problems concerning the relation between gender and agency arise out of the association between landscape and women's bodies within the context of abstraction. I will return to a discussion of these in the final section. However, the art-

historical positioning of her work is more usually premised on a technical innovation known as 'soaked-in stain' that she developed as she made this painting.

Although the work was initially sketched out in charcoal, as she began to apply colour Frankenthaler acknowledged that these marks were gradually abandoned: "... the charcoal lines were original guideposts that eventually became unnecessary".[9] Paint, previously thinned with large amounts of turpentine to a creamy liquid consistency, was then poured onto the raw, unsized, unprimed, cotton canvas. One has a sense that, as the painting progressed, Frankenthaler relinquished control over the liquid medium allowing it instead to find its own forms which are floating, open and without defined contours. The sensation of fluidity and movement these suggest is reinforced by the sense that in certain areas there is an ambivalent figure and ground relation. Pigment was absorbed into the surface through capillary action: "My paint, because of the turpentine mixed with the pigment, soaked into the woof and weave of the surface of the canvas and became one with it".[10] The effect of this was to reveal the technical ground of painting as a porous textural surface whilst simultaneously appearing to suggest a space behind the frame. In so doing Frankenthaler created a pictorial space that required the viewer to step outside the certainties implied by modernism.

The sensation of space behind the frame is contingent upon a highly specific use of materials. The methods developed by Frankenthaler as she made *Mountains and Sea* resulted in a surface in which the often binarised, and therefore hierarchical relation, between the physical and psychological aspects of painting are shown to be in a state of complex mutual dependency. These states, the one material and the other mental / perceptual do not resolve into a fixed / stabilised entity. Through the use of the soaked-in stain technique the liquidity of the paint is absorbed into the canvas and the effect of this sunken paint is to suggest a potential space in painting beyond the physical barrier of the surface. This space is, I believe, connected to the feminine.[11] As I have already mentioned, the space beyond the frame cannot, in a literal sense, be 'seen'. Should a probing, inquisitorial eye, distant and immobile

(such as that promoted in Greenberg's version of formalism) be the tool that is used to investigate this space, then its potential will be denied.

My practice has been used as a means of exploring the potential of the space behind the frame in relation to the feminine. For example, the body of work *Inscriptions* was arrived at through experimentation with materials that would reveal the underside of painting to the viewer. In *Inscriptions* I used muslin as opposed to canvas as a support and this enables the viewer to see the space behind the frame. In this work I also experimented with placing mirrors behind the stretchers; these reflected back to the viewer the underside of the work allowing the front and back of the work to be viewed simultaneously. In addition, the viewer could catch sight of him / her self as a part of the painting and this, to a degree, worked to mar the usually clear distinction (certainly within formalism) between the viewing subject / painterly object. Although it cannot be assumed that a less certain / stable relation between viewer and viewed in painting will, in itself, constitute the feminine, this does, however, perhaps represent a move away from masculine values in the aesthetic appreciation of painting.

Moving on from *Inscriptions* I made *Screen / Paintings*, a series of work in which I continued to focus on and develop strategies that would enable the recovery of female embodied experience during making (see Chapter Five). Through these methods my intention was to make work in which the surface of the painterly object would further destabilise the viewer/viewed relationship. *Screen / Paintings*, as large scale, semi-transparent works, operated as very quiet painterly interventions into space. In fact, at points it seemed that the space, and especially light, acted as an intervention into the painting. The pictorial space in these works was most effectively activated (for the viewer) through movement and also changeable lighting conditions.

My practice-led experimentation drew me to consider the viewing conditions that are set up for painting in conventional gallery spaces and how these serve to reinforce values associated with modernism. For example, in 2000 I visited New York to view *Mountains and Sea* then on

display at the Whitney Museum. Caught beneath glass (and bringing to mind a scientific specimen), artificial light was directed unsparingly onto the image; this reduced delicate pigmentation to a corpselike pallor. As a result, I think that the experience connected with the feminine that I believed to be inherent in *Mountains and Sea*, and which is generated out of an intriguing interplay between physicality, light, and space, was blocked.

Through experimentation with the siting of my own work *Inscriptions* and *Screen / Paintings*, I realised that quality of light is crucial to the recovery of the latent feminine in the artwork. This is because light mediates the relation between the sexed body of the viewer and the 'body' that is in the work. For example, unlike the 'scientific' and unsparing light of the gallery, a diffuse light will interweave with the fabric passing through the myriad of minute holes in canvas, revealing its interstices. I suspect that, were the permeable surfaces attained through staining by Frankenthaler to be brought to visibility in this way, then it might become apparent just how deeply her work refutes flatness. Flatness,[12] the quality believed by Greenberg to be at the conceptual heart of painting is, I suggest, in line with a reductive, post-positivist view of the world that promotes culturally specific masculine values.

I found, through siting *Screen / Paintings,* that a non-static light, varying in intensity and hue - light that is, in a sense, textured - will engender the 'unfolding' of a corporeal relation between the sexed viewer and art work. If the experience that I describe is indeed, 'of the feminine', then I do not think that this can be thought of as a solid, continuous presence. Rather, (in my experience) the feminine is intermittent and fleeting, dependent on the coming together of partial glimpses / sensations that are not foreseen.

3. Activating the Feminine: Re-thinking Control / Uncontrol in Relation to Liquidity

In part, Frankenthaler developed the technique of soaked-in stain out of a creative analysis of working methods used by Pollock; unlike other artists of the time she looked at how he painted and not the finished work. She has stated that: "Of all the work of the New York

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School that I was exposed to, Pollock's work really made me want to investigate his work and his methods".[13] Frankenthaler's analysis of how Pollock worked was important because within this framework she was able to re-think the interactions between the artist and the emergent form of the artwork. These, based on the interplay between control and uncontrol are, in Frankenthaler's case, altered, even set apart from the masculine norm of Abstract Expressionism, through her exploratory use of very fluid pigments.

Frankenthaler elected to work with very liquid paint knowing that this could not be subjected to control in the manner that a thicker mix could. In this she differed markedly from Pollock who characteristically applied enamel using either a stick or brush, and over which he was able, in the view of Frank O'Hara, to maintain dazzling control: "There has never been enough said about Pollock's draftsmanship, that amazing ability to quicken a line by thinning it, to slow it by flooding, to elaborate that simplest of elements, the line ..."[14] In comparison, Frankenthaler chose to use paint of a different viscosity giving the following reasons:

> The method I used departed essentially from Pollock. I did use his technique of putting canvas on the floor. But in method and material, Pollock's enamel rested on the surface as a skin that sat on top of the canvas. My paint, because of the turpentine mixed with the pigment, soaked into the woof and weave of the canvas and became one with it.' [15]

The liquidity of the medium and its tendency to 'flow', 'leak', 'flood', 'seep', and 'ooze', gave rise to unpredictable and ephemeral forms. These, very often formed on the edges of control on the part of the artist, were crucial for Frankenthaler. She did not necessarily seek to utilise these shapes as a springboard toward the realisation of more 'complete' forms as the surrealists did - in fact she has tended to distance herself from Surrealism.[16] Nor does it appear to have been her intention to impose stylistic control over the medium. Instead, the locus of creativity, during the making of *Mountains and Sea*, seems for her to have stemmed from an interest in fluidity both in, and of, itself.

The Body of the (Woman) Painter: the Body in the Work

The working methods used by Frankenthaler brought the body and the medium into direct

relation with one another. She not only experimented with the use of very liquid paint, but in

addition she stopped using a tool, either stick or brush, to apply it. Barbara Rose argues that

the importance of Frankenthaler's working methods hinges upon this fact:

> Frankenthaler was able to change the facture and surface of painterly painting by
> dissociating for the first time the painterly from the loaded brush.[17]

However, it is not the rejection of the tool per se that has had important repercussions for

female expression in painting, but rather a technique that brought the entire body into the act

of making including hands and fingers. In John Elderfield's view Frankenthaler was able "to

carry emotional felicity straight from the body to the canvas".[18] The direct transmission

Elderfield assumes between the body/mind of the maker and the canvas, mediated, it is

implied, through liquid paint, is highly problematic. This is especially the case where it is sexed

subjectivity that is at stake, a point I will return to, but first I think it will be helpful to explain

the implications of what I think are the crucial differences between Pollock and Frankenthaler.

Both artists worked on large sheets of canvas that had been laid out horizontally and fixed

against the studio floorboards; in this Frankenthaler followed Pollock's example. However, to

apply paint Pollock, notoriously, used a stick or a brush and he did not allow the tool to touch

the canvas, preferring instead to utilise the force of gravity through 'dripping' paint. The

following is an excerpt from a hand written note found in Pollock's files in which he attaches

importance to the pursuit of physical freedom to move around the canvas; for him it seemed

that unrestrained bodily movement would enable 'self' expression.

> Most of the paint I use is liquid, flowing... the brushes are used more as sticks and do
> not touch the surface... I'm able to be more free... and move about... with greater
> ease...[19]

However, for Frankenthaler, it is not the movement of the body that provides a focus, so much as a fascination with the ambiguous forms that are brought into being through a bodily contact with the medium of paint.

> I didn't want to take a stick and dip it in a can of enamel. I needed something more liquid, watery, thinner. All my life, I have been drawn to water and translucency. I love the water; I love to swim, to watch changing seascapes.[20]

What Frankenthaler has described in the above is the desire to find a relation with very liquid paint that derives from experience of fluids in the material world. She speaks of being drawn toward the ocean, conveying, I think, a need to relive, or perhaps return to, the elemental experience of birth premised on immersion and emergence. Although both men and women do, of course, experience birth, the maternal space of the womb is unique to the female body within the human race. Feminist theorists of sexual difference such as Lichtenberg Ettinger, argue that signifiers relating to maternal experience struggle for recognition within language based structures including visual language.[21] However, if I think about Frankenthaler's particular use of liquids in painting and relate this to my own experience of making work in this way, it seems to me that these are methods that release something of the repressed experience of the maternal during making. The trace of the feminine is then captured in the materiality of the painting itself.

In order to think about how Frankenthaler recovers / activates the feminine in practice it is helpful to look more closely at the activities that Frankenthaler cites as influential. Here, I would like to focus, for the moment, on Frankenthaler's love of swimming and consider how this influences her approach to materials. Whilst swimming (and thus immersed in water) there can be no objectification of the experience through distance. Swimming is an activity in which the sensation of the medium (water) is through the body - primarily the skin. This will cause a shift in perception of the material world away from the eye, a fixed viewpoint will become impossible, and consequently, it would be inappropriate to map this experience in accord with the rules of perspective. This, it seems to me, is a part of what Frankenthaler

discovered as she moved away from the rules of perspectival space during the making of *Mountains and Sea*.

My practice based research picked up on this strand of inquiry which led me to produce work in the darkroom through the use of alternative darkroom processes involving liquids and light. These techniques allowed me to produce work in which the rules of perspectival space were evaded on several levels (see Chapter Six). As a result the boundaries between the maker and the object made become increasingly blurred, at times a flow or unfolding between matter: the body, liquids, light and space.

Frankenthaler has spoken not only of being in the ocean, but, in addition, she describes the pleasure she finds in watching changing seascapes. Watching does, of course, involve a different physical positioning of the subject premised on distance, and therefore implies separation from, the ocean. However, I think that the way Frankenthaler responds through the eye to liquid form provides the grounds of a visuality that is set apart from the ocularcentrism that dominated modernism. It has been argued by a number of theorists engaging with feminist issues that there are links between ocularcentrism and masculine identity.[22]

It is useful to consider in more depth how Frankenthaler looks. This, I think, is the key to the visuality of the work she then produces. The following quotation, like those above, is taken from a discussion of the development of the soaked-in stain technique:

> One of my favourite childhood games was to fill a sink with water and then put nail polish into it to see what happened when the colours burst upon the surface, merging into each other as floating changing shapes.[23]

If I imagine the young Frankenthaler, I see her totally absorbed in the act of watching liquids, becoming, in a sense, lost within the changing world of fluids and colour. It seems likely that, in such a situation, the centrality of the subject (as viewer) would be displaced. And to some extent the perception of (her) self would be in relation to watery forms that are in a state of flux. It was, I believe, this de-centred subject position that Frankenthaler accessed as she

painted. She was able, through re-tracing pathways of experience connected with fluids in the

material world, to then draw on this experiential knowledge that is a continued return to

earliest childhood in order to develop the soaked-in stain technique.

Therefore, although *Mountains and Sea* was informed by the debates that provided an

underpinning for Abstract Expressionism, Frankenthaler, quite deliberately, did not allow these

opposing, and fairly limited theories, to entirely determine her interactions with the medium.

Instead, what she appears to do is to recover moments of what may, I think, be described as

'bodily resonance' with fluids. These experiences then seem to become, for Frankenthaler, the

foundation for re-thinking her response to the medium.

As a result of the working methods innovated by Frankenthaler, the forms she produced

tended toward ambiguity. Here, it is interesting that, far from wishing to categorise these

forms (that is to control or contain the ambiguity of fluid within any specialist knowledge base)

Frankenthaler expresses an interest in ambiguity itself.[24] That is, the stained mark as, in a

sense, the pre-form of form.

It is at this level, and as an integral part of her painting process that Frankenthaler becomes

caught in what might be described as a (corporeal) empathetic state with fluids. At this point

(and here my speculative account draws upon my own experience of working in a similar

manner) multiple memories locked within the body (overlapping and not in chronological

order) may be brought into being through the senses, most especially touch. The evocation of

bodily memory, although it is initially stimulated through the eye, will become the 'felt'

remembrance of an ambivalent and somatic state of suspension in amniotic fluids. I do not

think that this is a state that is so much 'triggered' (in the manner of cause and effect)

through a visual cue; rather it is an emergence of a latent ontology. This latency (which may

be connected with the feminine) can be thought of as an underlying form that is, in itself

unformed, somewhat fuzzy. It is more like a sound or vibration - this criss-crosses visual

pathways.

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In this project I have tried to avoid idealising the state described above (although I do realise that the language used does have a romantic tone - this seems to be unavoidable). Neither have I wanted to conceptualise (or theorise) response on this level. This is because to do so would be to speed up the inevitable moment at which the ambivalence of the stained form will become incorporated as a part of (masculine) language based structures of thinking and understanding. It is the energy derived out of a 'state that is in flux', and that is forged through a corporeal set of relations to the feminine, that I have found to be significant and useful to my involvement in artistic processes as a woman.

Section 5. Mobilisation of Women's Sexed Subjectivity Through Artistic Processes

Through focussing on aspects of Frankenthaler's approach to the medium (negated by masculine theoretical frameworks), I have tried to locate the basis for the exploration of the feminine in praxis. I will now attempt to bring to light some of the masculine values that distort perception of these interactions. It is helpful here to consider Action Painting, a theory of art outlined by Rosenberg, and in which emphasis is given to the performative element in making large scale painting. Rosenberg provides a point from which to begin to think about painterly practices in which interactions between the body and medium are primary; indeed, it is, I believe, more productive to think of Frankenthaler's painting *Mountains and Sea* in this context (as opposed to Greenberg's formalism). However, to do so will rapidly expose that this theory is biased in support of culturally and historically constituted male subjectivity. Finally, through introducing the more recent ideas of feminist theorist Judith Butler relating to the sexed subject, I will highlight the difficulties that I think still apply where women engage with highly subjective and bodily processes in the patriarchal tradition of painting.

Mediation of sexed subjectivity through process

During the process of making, the emergent art 'object' is complexly linked to the subjectivity of the maker. In this research project I understand subjectivity as an unfixed state (generated

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out of interactions between body and mind), and which, through the physical act of making, continually undergoes reformation.

Interactions between the body of the maker and the medium are mediated through interplay between control and uncontrol. As I have tried to show, although Jackson Pollock appears to have made work that is abandoned and free, in reality, there is also a strong degree of control in what he does. On the other hand Frankenthaler introduced an element of uncontrol into the process of painting the importance of which has gone unheeded. The critic Harold Rosenberg, in whose opinion Frankenthaler failed to perform as an Action Painter, deemed her approach non-assertive. Developing this line of criticism in relation to Frankenthaler's work, Rosenberg described Frankenthaler as 'the medium of her medium'.[25] This comment was not intended to be complimentary; however, I would like to use this phrase positively to further understanding of issues of female embodiment in painting.

Frankenthaler: Medium of her medium

In the above, I take Rosenberg to imply that the act of painting is, for Frankenthaler, one in which the self seems to have become a substance into which the physical qualities and sensory impressions emitted by the medium (liquid paint) might be transmitted. This is a curious inversion of Romanticism in which it is assumed that the omnipotent, creative self of the (inevitably male) artist may be transposed into a physical substance thus giving it form. In Romanticism the medium is assumed to be subservient to the needs of the artist. It is without material characteristics that signify complexly in the wider world.

Frankenthaler's method of working, however, creates the potential for an interchange, or flow, between the body / mind of the maker and the medium as a part of the process by which form is arrived at. It is the qualities of fluids in the material world and her response to these that influence Frankenthaler's response to the medium. However, Frankenthaler, rather than seeking to differentiate herself from the material world and nature (this exists outside of the elevated world of painting), instead draws on her own interactions with matter (liquids

especially) to inform her painting. As a result interpretation of Frankenthaler's painting has been fraught with difficulty, possibly because, as Irigaray, amongst many other feminists has argued, women are not differentiated from the natural world and remain outside of culture.[26] Instead, within a patriarchal society they are treated as a natural resource whose purpose is to sustain (male) culture. This difficulty may explain the difficulties that accompany interpretation of Frankenthaler's painterly processes both within the context of landscape and of the body.

(Male) Violence and the Subjugation of Materials

During the process of making the emergent materiality of the artwork may substitute for the imagined 'other' against which, simultaneously, creativity is conceived of as an act of subjugation. For example, the art-historian Linda Nead has cited many examples where creativity is inextricably linked to male sexuality and from this she concludes:

> Surface texture is thus charged with significance; the marks on the canvas are essential traces of agency, evidence of art and also signs of masculine virility.[27]

An analogy can be made to the way in which the formation of the materiality of women is understood. Judith Butler has raised questions concerning a certain sense of mystery and idealism that exists around the notion of the materiality of women amongst some feminists:

> What does it mean to have recourse to materiality, since it is clear from the start that matter has a history (indeed more than one) and that the history of matter is in part determined by the negotiation of sexual difference?[28]

Importantly, Butler (who is speaking of the body) points out that materiality is not constituted out of matter as a range of pure substances that await the imprint of meaning, but that the very opposite is true. This is also certainly the case in painting where the materials used signify meanings prior to their formation that are complex and unstable (Greenberg tried to stabilise or fix these in his quest for excellence whereas Rosenberg overrode them giving precedence instead to the body of the artist). Frankenthaler manages to use her materials to make meaning both inside and outside of the tradition of painting. Butler asserts that the cultural and historical meanings that can be attributed to matter are steeped in sexuality:

> We may seek to return to matter as prior to discourse to ground our claims about sexual difference only to discover that matter is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality that prefigure and constrain the use to which that term can be put. Moreover, we may seek recourse to matter in order to ground or to verify a set of injuries or violations only to find that matter itself is founded through a set of violations, ones which are unwittingly repeated in the contemporary invocation.[29]

Butler's remarks have important repercussions for the conceptualisation of artistic process as performative. If it is the case that interactions between matter, that is the body of the artist and the material form of the artwork, are as Butler suggests 'founded through a set of violations' (and Rosenberg's comments support this view), violence and control are at issue for women during the most intimate moments of engagement with materials whilst involved in making work. I suggest that the way to move beyond this is to adopt strategies and interventions that can be carried out (not necessarily consciously) whilst involved in making.

6. Conclusion

In the above I have tried to show how Frankenthaler's working methods were formulated, to a significant degree, outside of male theoretical constructs. It is consideration of these aspects of the development of her work - and these tend to have been overlooked in formalist / Greenbergian accounts - that Frankenthaler's contribution to painting 'in the feminine' can be best understood. Frankenthaler has an abiding fascination with the transient and ambiguous nature of liquid forms that are in a state of continuous flux; however, the physical constraints of the medium she uses render it compulsory to 'fix' these. I believe that it is Frankenthaler's approach to her materials whilst these are in a state of becoming, that is neither one thing nor the other, that marks out a difference between Frankenthaler and her contemporaries. To a far greater degree than, for example, Pollock, she allowed liquid to operate in accord with physical forces, choosing not to overly control it. Thus, the solid support of the canvas bore the traces of the actions of fluid as fluid itself whilst simultaneously evoking a kind of visceral or bodily memory.

My research into Frankenthaler's painting raise a number of issues that affect my practice. There are several intertwined strands of inquiry that will be taken up in Chapters Four, Five and Six. The first is the suggestion of space behind the frame and how this might be linked to the feminine. I am also interested in the interplay between control / uncontrol during the process of making and how this affects the relation between the body of the (female) maker and the medium used. I would like to investigate this further as a means to explore issues of female embodiment in painting. I am also interested in finding a way to destabilise the relation between the body of the maker, colour, liquids and light during the process of making. I think that to do so would then create a space in which strategies to recover the feminine in making could be introduced.

Notes to Chapter 2

1 It is worth noting here that this chapter, originally written during the early stages of the research, was then re-written following the completion of the project. Originally I had focussed on the critical reception of Frankenthaler's painting *Mountains and Sea* with the intention of giving the reader an understanding of how critical discourses limited reception of the 'potential feminine' in Frankenthaler's painting. Whilst re-writing I was, of course, able to draw on knowledge gained through my own practice based exploration of the feminine. This then raised a question about where the chapter should be positioned within the overall thesis. I have placed it near to the beginning of the thesis where I believe that it will be of most use to the reader. The issues raised, however, run in parallel with Chapters Four, Five, and Six, in which an account of my practice based investigation is given. The historical / theoretical background to the making of *Mountains and Sea* is given in Appendix A.

2 Carmean, 'Celebrating the Birth of Stain Painting', p.B7.

3 Carmean, 'Celebrating the Birth of Stain Painting', p.B7.

4 Carmean, 'Celebrating the Birth of Stain Painting', p.B7.

5 De Antonio and Tuchman, *Painter's Painting,* p.79.

6 This is a brief summary of Frankenthaler's biographical details leading up to *Mountains and Sea.* Born on 12 December 1928 into a privileged Park Avenue Jewish family, Frankenthaler was identified from an early age as being creative. Her interests evolved around both painting and writing: her parents encouraged her to develop her interests and prepare for a career. It

was this support, combined with her own ability and drive, that engendered a sense of personal security which enabled her to make decisions about work that set her apart from the tight knit, mostly male, groups of artists who were her contemporaries. In 1946, aged eighteen, she attended Bennington, an enlightened liberal arts college, where her teachers included the critic Kenneth Burke and the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. Her main influence was Paul Freely, an American Cubist, whose approach combined rigorous analysis with practical work. As a result, Frankenthaler came to have a profound understanding of Cubism and its position in European art. After graduating from Bennington in 1949, Frankenthaler returned to New York City where she studied briefly with Meyer Shapiro at Columbia University, but after one semester she returned to painting full-time. At this point, aged twenty-two, Frankenthaler was introduced to the critic Clement Greenberg and to many of the artists working in New York. From this time onwards she became increasingly engaged with the evolving theoretical debates that accompanied Modernist painting. Made by Frankenthaler in 1952 at the young age of twenty-four, *Mountains and Sea* was a painting that derived from her individual response to these theories.

7 Geldzahler, 'An Interview with Helen Frankenthaler', *Artforum* (October 1965), p.36.

8 For further discussion of the landscape connection in Frankenthaler's painting see, for example, Goosen, 'Helen Frankenthaler', *Art International,* p.13, or Carmean, 'Celebrating the Birth of Stain Painting', *The Washington Post,* p.B7.

9 Baro, 'The Achievement of Helen Frankenthaler', *Art International,* p.36.

10 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (catalogue), *After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1965-1959* (New York, 1968), p.39.

11 I differentiate between my use of the term 'potential space' in painting and that of the art critic Peter Fuller. Fuller attempts to analyse his response to the painting *Reveries of a Lapsed Narcissist* by the American artist Robert Natkin within a psychoanalytic framework through drawing on the concept of potential space in the work of D.W. Winnicot (see Fuller, 'Abstraction and "The Potential Space"' in *Art and Psychoanalysis*). However, as Betterton points out, although Fuller has attempted to merge boundaries between the body of the viewer and body in the work from a position that is gender free, he does, in fact, reveal, that transcendence depends upon an "unacknowledged, relation between painting and masculine embodiment." (see Betterton, *Intimate Distance,* P.80 - 84)

12 Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p.86.

13 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (catalogue), *After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956-1959* (New York, 1998), p.39.

14 Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (catalogue), *Jackson Pollock: Drawing Into Painting* (Oxford, 1979), p.26.

15 Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation (catalogue), *After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956-1959* (New York, 1998), p.39.

16 For example, see Frankenthaler's written comments to Gene Baro quoted in Elderfield, *Frankenthaler,* P.80.

17 Rose, *Frankenthaler,* 57.

18 Elderfield, *Frankenthaler,* p.75.

19 This was part of a hand written note in Jackson Pollock's files cited in Museum of Modern Art Oxford (catalogue), p.26.

20 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (catalogue), *After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956-1959* (New York, 1998), p.39.

21 Lichtenberg Ettinger, *The Matrixial Gaze.*

22 A very useful account of the links between ocularcentrism and masculine identity is given in Jay, *Downcast Eyes,* p. 493 - 592.

23 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (catalogue), *After Mountains and Sea: Frankenthaler 1956-1959* (New York, 1998), p.39.

24 Frankenthaler was fascinated by the concept of ambiguity in painting and especially in the ideas of William Empson put forward in his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity.*

25 This was a comment made by Frank O'Hara which Rosenberg modified. See Elderfield, *Frankenthaler* (unreferenced quote), p.82.

26 Irigaray, 'The Language of Man', p.232 - 234.

27 Nead, *The Female Nude,* p.58.

28 Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* p.29.
29 Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* p.29.

Chapter Three

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES:

TOWARD CORPOREAL THEORY

Plate 2   Deborah Robinson, *Umbilical*, 1993. Acrylic on canvas (98 x 68 inches).
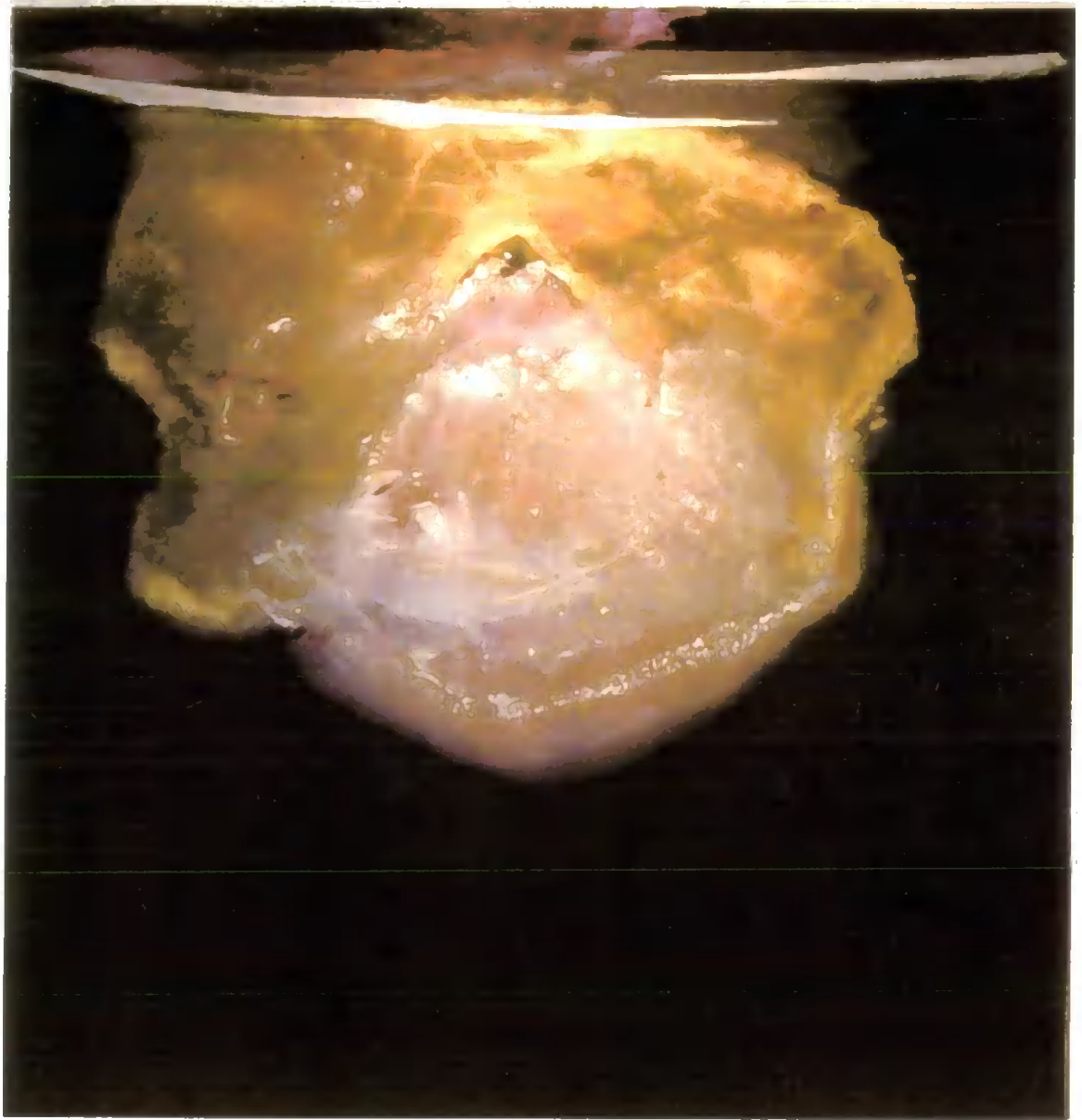
Plate 3   Deborah Robinson, Amorphous, 1994. Acrylic on canvas (65 x 82 inches).

1. Introduction

My investigation of issues that arose from Frankenthaler's painterly processes led me to turn to ideas outside of the patriarchal tradition of painting. Here I became intrigued by ideas generated out of feminism especially those that enquired into the sexualisation of the material world and, importantly, also begin to reconceptualise matter in relation to the feminine. In this chapter I briefly outline how these theories enabled me to construct an alternative framework for practice within which I could investigate and develop processes innovated by Frankenthaler.

I begin by describing the working methods I used prior to this project and here it will quickly become evident that these were greatly influenced by Frankenthaler. I then introduce the concept of deconstruction as a method for practice. I experimented with the use of this to dislocate the processes derived from Frankenthaler from their Modernist historical context whilst, simultaneously, opening them to new meanings in relation to the feminine. Following this, I introduce the feminist concept of 'corporeal theory' and explain some of the ways that this may be positively related to the processes of abstract painting. One of the foremost theorists to have devised strategies that enable the (re)-discovery of the sexed specificity of the women's bodies, and to raise issues in relation to this, is Luce Irigaray. As my research progressed, I found that I became increasingly focused on Irigaray's writing and methods. I have therefore included an overview of how I consider her theories can be applied to practice. Finally, I introduce the work of three artists, Ross Bleckner, Moira Dryer, and Maria Chevska. Each has an individual approach to abstract painting that influenced me.

2. The Development of Practice-Based Methods to Recover Materiality in Relation to the Feminine

Working Methods: The Influence of Frankenthaler

The work that I made before I began the research was closely related to the way in which Frankenthaler worked. My training as a painter during the late 1970s was based on observation. However, I had increasingly turned toward a more personal and expressive approach to painting. This was carried out on a small scale, but I then began to experiment with the processes of large-scale abstraction. For some years I found working in this way exhilarating, but by the mid-1990s an element of disquiet had crept in. I began to have the sense that the work I made was 'scripted', rather than, as I had thought, directly expressive of my personal experience.

My painting, *Untitled*, is an example of the large-scale work made prior to this research project. I have included this to demonstrate how I made use of Abstract Expressionist techniques, especially those of Frankenthaler. In preparation I first stapled a large piece of canvas to the studio floor, taking care to make the surface as taut as possible. This surface was then gently sponged with warm water to remove the resistance caused by glue size, since this technique requires the material to be as absorbent as possible. Next, I mixed paint in large containers, usually buckets or cans, and then poured or sponged this into the weave of the canvas as I moved around it.

Working in this way allowed me to respond to the developing image from a variety of positions and incorporated, through gesture, the whole body into the process. After applying each layer I would wait as the paint either bled into the permeable surface of the canvas much like a chromatogram, or alternatively remained unabsorbed in pools. At this stage I would be looking for a point at which I

perceived the liquid had found, or seeped into, what appeared to be ownership of its own form. I would then capture this moment through using industrial heaters to dry out the painting as quickly as possible thus fixing the movement of the liquids.

Technically, this approach required a high degree of control at precise moments. For example, if a painting is left in a very wet state, it may after a few hours or days become a grey mass where colours have continued to bleed into one another. It is a technique that bears similarities to those used in the darkroom where the latent image is revealed in the areas where the developer has run across the surface of light sensitive paper: the French for developer is *révélateur*. This material connection between disciplines was later to become of interest as I made work that explored alternative darkroom processes.

The control over the medium that I have described, and which I suggest is somewhat similar to Frankenthaler's approach, differs markedly from that employed by Jackson Pollock. His notes imply continuous control over process: "I deny the accident... I have a general notion of what I'm about and what the image will be..."[1] In comparison, after having poured liquid paint I left this to act freely within the space of the rectangle. I did not necessarily wish to impose form, but would watch over its emergence with fascination, intervening at points where I wished to capture, as in a snapshot, the way these liquids behaved.

I thought of this process as a parallel to the act of mothering. My young children, as they moved toward independence, thrived where safe spaces were set up in which they could be watched over and experiment with behaving on their own terms with interventions made as needed. The artist Marion Milner suggests that art can provide an experience that can be likened to a state of active stillness of waiting and watching that includes a state of inner and outer unity and which also, crucially recognises these dimensions are separate.[2] My paintings were made over

fairly long periods of time through allowing a complex 'vocabulary' of liquids to emerge. I perceived this to be a dialogue, or a speaking between, the layers.

In the above I have described the interactions that typically, for me, gave rise to the final form of the completed painting in the period immediately before I began this research. As a way of working this can be compared to Abstract Expressionism. Here, devices such as accident, speed, and the interplay between control and 'uncontrol' were, very often, a forceful, even violent, means of jamming or diverting rational or conscious response and creating fissures or gaps through which the artist might enter the supposed realms of the unconscious. This was, I think, different from my own attempt (which follows on from Frankenthaler) to put intermittently created spaces where response to the medium was outside of conscious control. My perception of the medium seemed to oscillate between two states. In the first, I felt so close an affinity with the physical presence of the material, I could barely distinguish between myself and my materials. In the other, I perceived the medium as radically 'other' to myself.

A Vocabulary for Practice

I cast around for a means of discovering a language for my practice that would accommodate my subjectivity as a woman. From a feminist perspective a serious engagement with what painting in relation to sexed subjectivity might be, and the development of theoretical discourses that could sustain such a project, are as yet in the early stages.

For example, in Britain, to paint as a woman during the 1970s and 1980s was for many an isolated and unsupported activity in relation to the mainstream and also to feminism. This was a period that saw a growth of interest in scripto-visual work by feminist artists and in comparison painting appeared retrograde, non-political

and entrenched in Modernist values. It has frequently been assumed that large-scale abstraction, because it is rooted in Modernism, is synonymous with formalism and as a result, it has proved difficult to build upon and depart from. In my project, Shirley Kaneda has stated not only that abstract painting was the: "most resistant and decisive discourse within Modernism", but that, further to this, "Modernism is a dialogue of objects, not producers, and its normative voice has drowned out the feminine".[3]

How then might the feminine in relation to abstract processes be (re)discovered? Here, the situation summarised by Katy Deepwell is most useful:

> The challenge to late Modernist painting and its mythologies from feminism remains. How to produce an effective set of feminist possibilities in painting without re-instating the purity of painting or re-investing again in its overblown status remains the issue.[4]

These are important points and both might be addressed if the processes of painting are opened to question through the thinking generated by other disciplines. To gain a changed perspective on painting, one in which it is removed from its elevated and insular status, deconstructive strategies have much to offer.

Deconstruction as a Method for Practice

Through the use of deconstructive methods it is possible to destabilise the visual vocabulary, which is constituted through culture and history, and open the medium to new possibilities of meaning. The advantage of this method is, as Gayatri Spivak has noted, that: "deconstruction does not aim at praxis or theoretical practice but lives in the persistent unease of the moment of its *techne* or crafting".[5] Potentially, then, a deconstructive approach makes it possible to continue to engage with the processes of abstraction but to simultaneously open its elements to reinterpretation whilst making.

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To apply deconstructive strategies to painting requires that, as a tradition, this would be regarded as analogous to a master narrative such as philosophy. From here, following the thinking of Lacan, language is only able to express the position of the unified male subject in the world. Although able to speak, women are unable to speak *consciously* from their specific subject position. In his view this difficulty arises because language (the symbolic), as a cultural construct, reflects (or images) male desire. For Lacan, any structured network can be read as a language. If verbal language and visual language are seen to correspond, it is then possible to argue that for a woman, communication through a visual vocabulary is problematic for similar reasons.

From the perspective of practice there were, however, difficulties associated with contextualising the problem of gender and painting through bringing in Lacan. For him, language operates as the filter for experience. As a consequence, I needed to bear in mind that the framework created would possibly run counter to my aims as a practice-based researcher. These were to generate creativity through the juxtaposition of practice and theory, but I needed also to ensure that the findings of practice were not wholly subjected to the exigencies of language, a difficulty that has continued throughout my research.

The Influence of Rosalind Krauss

My own attempt to find ways to excavate the potential of the feminine in my own practice and also to discover a vocabulary for this, was, in part, influenced by the work of the art historian Rosalind Krauss.[6] Krauss has subjected formalism, as the dominant interpretative framework of Modernism, to an analysis through semiotics and psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic theory, unlike other theories, takes the unconscious as its central organisational concept. Her thinking was of particular

use in showing a way to move beyond the closure of the Modernist thinking that accompanied abstraction during the early part of my project.

In 1997 I heard Krauss explain the thinking processes that she and Yve-Alain Bois developed in selecting the work shown at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in an exhibition which provided the basis of *Formless: A User's Guide,* co-authored with Yves-Alain Bois.[7] This innovative work was an attempt to excavate an alternative history of Modernist art through analysis of forms that tended toward formlessness rather than solidity. An alternative charting of Modernism emerged premised on the exposure of sublimated desire at work within these alternative arrangements of matter. Thus, connections that are orientated toward the visceral and the fluid and are outside of culture serve to unhinge the grand narratives that are seen to have sustained Modernism.

Krauss and Bois were able to de-centre or, to use their words, "to pick apart certain categories that had seemed to us increasingly useless — even as they had become increasingly contentious — namely 'form' and 'content'".[8] Like a number of other practitioners, I felt that this approach freed a new potential to work out of material starting points closely aligned to the body, both physical and fantasised. The conceptual gridlock, one that operated with exceptional strength in the practice of abstract painting, of a contested relation between form and content, is dispersed. Thus the binary division that echoes, for example, the Cartesian division between mind and body, no longer operates to determine meaning. Instead a new space has appeared through which the notion of corporeal affinity between self and medium can be rethought. Although Krauss and Bois do not themselves focus on the implications of their work has for the sexed subjectivity, they have, however, provided the groundwork for an exploration of this.

3. The Application of Feminist Psychoanalytic / Philosophic Ideas to Support a Corporeal Framework for Practice

The interpretative framework for Abstract Expressionism was influenced by Surrealist explorations of the unconscious and Freudian ideas. However, within the rationale of a formalist framework set up by Greenberg the role of the unconscious in the formation of the work was repressed. In my research project, recourse to feminist psychoanalytic theory has allowed me to pick up on the Surrealist strand that fed into Abstract Expressionism and from here it is possible to trace a trajectory that exposes the highly problematic relation between women and the theorised unconscious. Beginning with Freud this follows through, via Lacan, to the recent work of feminist theorists such as Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger,[9] Luce Irigaray[10] and Julia Kristeva.[11] I have experimented with the relation between artistic processes and the writing of Lichtenberg Ettinger and Irigaray.

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger is an Israeli born artist and psychoanalytic theorist who works in Paris and Tel Aviv. I chose to work with her writing which theorises a matrixial space because her ideas led to a different conception of pictorial space to that which has been framed within Modernism. Importantly, Lichtenberg Ettinger's theoretical stance is informed through her daily practice as an artist, which deals with her personal legacy of being the child of a survivor of the Holocaust.

Working very much within traditional psychoanalytic frameworks and in response to Lacan's theory, Lichtenberg Ettinger has explored a kind of spatial substratum (ethereal, barely tangible) that underlies the visual. This suggestively opens new terrain within the visual arts from which it may be possible to become immersed in artistic processes that engage with what she has termed the "feminine archaic origin".[12] Lichtenberg Ettinger has tried to find a way of imagining a symbolic order that contains more than the one signifier. This is different to Lacan, where all

possibilities of expression are determined in relation to the (non-corporeal) signifier that is the phallus.[13] Lacan's position, which is extreme, raises the difficulty of how it might be possible to even begin to imagine another symbol that would not simply be caught in a binary relation of assimilation versus rejection. Lichtenberg Ettinger proposes the symbol of the matrix which takes as its model late pregnancy, a state in which two partial subjectivities coexist. Potentially, the matrix would allow women recognition of bodily invisibility and fantasy that has been negated through Lacanian theory.

Luce Irigaray has employed innovative strategies that aim to recover or excavate experience that is specific to the corporeality of women. Her body of writing provides a basis from which she has encouraged women to develop imaginative and creative understandings of themselves as sexed subjects. Potentially, Irigaray's thought opens the way toward a radical re-conception of the interrelationship between women and the material world they inhabit. Irigaray's ideas are especially relevant to the exploration of female subjectivity in painting. I shall outline why I think this in the following section. However, before doing so, I would like to make a few more general comments about how recent ideas taken from feminist thinking in the field of psychoanalysis and philosophy relate to the practice of painting.

The act of painting may be considered, at its most basic, as the orchestration of matter into the solid form of an object carried out by the painter (as a subject). As an activity, the traditional subject / object division between painter and artwork may be viewed as a microcosm of the wider world. It has been argued by feminist theorists such as Irigaray,[14] Butler,[15] Grosz,[16] Kirby,[17] and Gatens[18] that the materialisation of matter is sexualised, at a deep level, in accord with the formation of male subjectivity. Within this framework, the problems of reception encountered by Frankenthaler cannot be considered as the result of gender values

and thus confined to history. Rather there is a continuum that operates at the level of making on a material level.

Interactions between the sexed body of the painter and the medium may be positively re-thought through drawing on feminist ideas concerning corporeality and the formation of subjectivity. Here, the specific characteristics of the sexed body are argued to be complexly intertwined with, and to play an important part in, the formation of subjectivity. For example, Elizabeth Grosz, in her intriguing and extensively researched *Volatile Bodies*, sets out to demonstrate that corporeality could be used as a framework which might effectively displace or invert the centrality of mind in conceptions of the subject through the reconfiguration of the body. The effect of what Grosz has termed "an experiment in inversion" is that subjectivity may then be thought:

> ... in terms quite other than those implied by various dualisms. Dualism is the belief that there are two mutually exclusive types of 'thing', physical and mental, body and mind, that compose the universe in general and subjectivity in particular.[19]

This line of thought, if applied to painting, would allow the interactions between subject (as painter) and object (as artwork) to be rethought at the level of process. The subjectivity of the painter within this new framework can then be understood as in the process of continuous reformation through a relation to matter which is similarly under construction. Ideally, the interactions at the heart of painting would be unimpeded by binary thinking that will then create hierarchical relations between things.

A group of feminist theorists and artists working in the field of aesthetics, art practice and critical theory have, as is noted by Marsha Meskimmon, directed

interest toward what she terms "corporeal theory".[20] Meskimmon states that this theory offers the following advantages:

> Corporeal theory argues against universal, disembodied paradigms of thought which separate 'subjects' from 'objects' they 'know'. The separation of 'pure' thought from action, articulation or location within the frame of the world places 'theory' above 'practice' and reiterates a binary logic of the same.[21]

In 'Feminism and Art Theory' Meskimmon explains that the move toward a type of knowledge located in relation to bodily engagements with objects originates from the phenomenological work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty the mind or consciousness is incarnated within the body. The body, he argues, can be understood as a perceptual field that is interleaved with the material world.[22]

The ideas put forward by Merleau-Ponty do, as is well recognised by feminists, tend to take men's experiences for human ones. He does not, in general, address the question of sexual difference. In fact, there has been relatively little discussion by feminists of Merleau-Ponty's later work. An exception here is Luce Irigaray who has made an exceptionally close reading of one of Merleau-Ponty's last works, 'The Intertwining — The Chiasm', in which she reveals the debt his thinking regarding the concept of 'flesh' owes to maternity.[23] This text has, I believe, rich implications where painting from the embodied experience of being a woman is concerned.

Through experimental working methods I have attempted to construct a corporeal framework for my practice. This is charted in the following chapters, which relate to practice. Within this structure the interchange between self and the elements I use during the process of making art are supported by a substratum of relationships, both tangible and theoretical, that reference female bodies.

The Female Sexed Body

I attempted to ground my practice in the 'felt' or tangible experience of inhabiting

a woman's body. In addition, as part of a material process, I have drawn on

feminist theory that explores issues in relation to the sexed female body. For me,

during the course of this research, theory was a vital aspect of moving toward a

different understanding of my self as a creator — the repositioning of my practice

represents a personal journey. Details of the texts that influenced this process are

given in the following chapters that discuss practice.

However, the subjective experience of 'being' in the world may well appear to be

very different from the conceptualisation of the body constituted through language

and theory. For example, Judith Butler has pointed out, using as her example post-

structuralist theory, that the relation between this and the body has suggested to

many an uneasy and sometimes antagonistic relation between the two:

> One hears warnings like the following: If everything is discourse, what
> happens to the body? If everything is a text, what about violence and bodily
> injury? Does anything *matter* in or for post-structuralism?[24]

But need one approach necessarily preclude the other? Butler, importantly, has

drawn attention in the above to experience derived from matter. Arguably, this is

an integral aspect of the understanding of the body; in relation to this, academic

text is presented as a medium that has all but de-materialised. As such, how can

theory touch upon or intersect with the complexity of corporeal experience?

In my research, as I tried to find ways to allow my bodily experience as a woman

to permeate the processes of making, it became vital to find a means of creating

an interchange between the physical self and relevant textual ideas. Having

selected texts I believed had the potential to engender the emergence of the

feminine aspect in the materiality of the artwork, I then worked (drawing on a

visual arts training) with the written words. To close what I believed to be a primarily conceptual gap created through reading, I tried to establish a bodily relation with theory in the form of text through responding to this as a material object. The texts were 'unformed' and then reformed through a series of physical actions — for example, cutting and spiralling, crumpling and tearing, and finally burning. I began to see this as a working method that slanted the deconstruction and reconstruction of useful theoretical ideas toward subjective corporeal experience. During this process I absorbed the insights of feminist thinking on a level that was orientated toward the physical rather than the visual or conceptual. As the project progressed I attempted to shift perception of a broad range of elements that were brought together during making toward their materiality. For example, the first body of work, *Inscriptions*, focuses the body of the maker, the medium and text. Later work produced in the wet darkroom (see Chapter Six) also takes into account specific qualities of light and space in which I worked.

4. Luce Irigaray

Luce Irigaray, born in Belgium during the 1930s, holds doctorates in both linguistics and philosophy. Her reputation, which has grown now that more of her work has been translated into English, is that of a pre-eminent theorist of sexual difference. This is a term that she would prefer to 'feminist', a term which, historically, has been associated with sexual equality. Irigaray has emphasised instead the need to recognise what it is that differentiates women from men. It is her belief that through discovering positions that are in accord with the sexed subjectivity it will be possible to establish a productive and creative dialogue between the sexes.

The influences on Irigaray are wide-ranging and reflect an interdisciplinary foundation. Lacan, although never explicitly mentioned, is re-read in *Speculum of the Other Woman*,[25] which was Irigaray's second doctoral thesis. Broadly, her work can be divided into three periods. These were described by Irigaray in an interview with E. Hirsh and G. Olson in 1994 as the following.[26] The first is characterised by the way in which the masculine subject has been constructed and interpreted in the world according to a single perspective. Examples of such work include *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) and *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985). Building on this, she moved toward the definition of a 'second subject' in work such as *Sexes and Genealogies* (1987). The third phase is one in which she began to construct an intersubjectivity premised on sexual difference, and this includes *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference* (1990).

Irigaray, alongside Julia Kristeva, is very often known as one of the 'French feminists', a group that includes also Hélène Cixous and Michèle Le DoeuffIn comparison with Anglo-American feminists, who have focused on 'sexist language' — that is, the investigation of words, grammatical structure and syntax at what is perhaps a more functional level — the work of the French theorists explores the deeper relation between language and the formation of subjectivity. For them, the implications of language go beyond naming and labelling and operate instead to define the limits of possible meaning and value. This extends to the unconscious itself.

However, although there are similarities, the label 'French feminists' also serves to obscure the differences among the theorists. Kristeva and Irigaray, for example, have each closely read and rethought issues that arise from both Freud and Lacan However, Kristeva has broadly kept intact the overarching theories of psychoanalysis which provide a frame of reference for her work, whereas Irigaray,

although she makes use of the tools of psychoanalysis, casts their presuppositions into doubt. [27]

Sexualisation of the Materiality of Women / Painting

Recurrently, Irigaray has opened to question the complex relation between the sexed subject and the material elements of the world. In the case of women, this relation has been repressed in order to generate philosophy as a system of thinking that underpins society. In *This Sex Which is Not One* Irigaray argues that the material world has been used as a commodity by men, and that women and nature are alike in providing essential sustenance for the theoretical ideas generated by them.[28] Women are in this respect like envelopes, a containing form. Women give birth and are most likely to provide primary care and nurture to the child during the early years. However, their input is rendered invisible in culture.

In her reading of the Western canon, Irigaray has posited that at the centre of each thinker's text are fundamental matricide and the suppression of sexual difference. Consequently, women have been positioned outside of the social order in a state of 'dereliction'— a term Irigaray intends to convey the powerful and negative sense of being abandoned entirely. This theoretical line of thought does, I think, provide an insight into the reasons for which, at a deep level, there has been difficulty in attributing agency to women artists and is especially relevant where Abstract Expressionism is concerned. Although the paradigms of Modernist painting were theoretically those that would offer equal possibilities to all painters irrespective of gender, class or race, female artists were systematically excluded. Women, like the medium they used, were relegated to the position of an 'invisible other' alongside the work they produced.

Different Logics: Theory / Visual

Much of Irigaray's work deliberately employs an elliptical style that is intended to avoid easy summary and thus becoming absorbed as part of the genre of male theory; and because of this, it is generally agreed that her texts are very difficult to write about. This is a difficulty that also extends to art practice. Here I have likewise found that it is difficult to make work that is either rationally or consciously about (and therefore an illustration of) Irigaray's thinking. Instead, I have found it far more productive, through practice, to privilege response that is channelled at an unconscious and physical level. To do so I have worked with the more poetic of Irigaray's texts including *Elemental Passions*[29] and *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*.[30] These texts form part of what was envisaged by Irigaray as a tetralogy that would interrogate the thought of male philosophers from the position of the feminine, the 'underside' associated with repressed material elements:

> To begin with, I wanted to do a sort of tetralogy, tackling the problem of the four elements: water, air, fire, earth, applied to the philosophers nearer our own time, and at the same time, interrogate the philosophical tradition, particularly from the side of the feminine.[31]

Irigaray has described these works as artistic creations, and as such they are constructed in accord with what Hirsh and Olson term a "different logic"[32] to that which formed the basis of earlier works such as *Speculum*. Asked to comment on the principles of their composition, Irigaray gave the following reply:

> I can say first, I hope *artistically*. That is, for me a book is also an art object, thus I compose my books and I'm not at all content to have an editor change my composition. In general I refuse changes. For example, when I received the proofs to *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* all the blanks had been suppressed and I had to recompose the whole thing.[33]

For Irigaray, the mechanisms of the academic, the conventions of publication, and the concerns of the translator, followed a different trajectory to the one she intended. Despite this, *Elemental Passions* and *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*

not only demonstrate how theory and artistic practice might creatively intersect, but are also strongly indicative of an 'artistic' way forward. Irigaray leaves plenty of creative gaps in her writing, as pointed out by Robinson[34] although it must be added that the examples she cites are all conceptual. As a practitioner involved in material processes, I found the blanks in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* tantalising; they operate at a visual, conceptual and rhythmic level, but clearly stop short in terms of physicality and tactility.

Writing and painting are the subject of several direct comparisons by Irigaray in her essay *Flesh Colours*. With an end in mind, that is to achieve a dynamic interchange between the psychic / corporeal self and the perception of the material world as vibrant, full of difference, Irigaray draws comparisons between painting and writing. Here, she seems to suggest, the physical characteristics of painting and its specific spatio-temporal characteristics, may give rise to a more potent expression of sexed subjectivity than writing which is more subject to formal codes.

> Writing has difficulty in translating colours, sounds, bodily identity, the chromo-soma... All the civilizations that give priority to non-figurative writing, arbitrary forms, and formal codes, move away from colour and from tonality as qualities of flesh, gender, genealogy. They express these as numbers. Mastery and abstraction of the living being.[35]

What is perhaps lacking in this analysis is an awareness of the cultural specificity of meaning in abstraction and there is the sense that Irigaray is romanticising the medium. The materials of painting, like the material body, already bear meaning prior to use. This is especially true in the practice of abstraction where set formal and historical meaning has led to codified styles — the very difficulty that Irigaray has sought to dismantle and reframe in text. However, from a different perspective, what Irigaray may be doing here is to set up painting as a less defined counterpoise to writing which she obviously is far more informed about. To move

into another discipline is to be uninhibited by its history and complex debates and this may allow a more open-ended response.

5. My Use of Irigaray

Retrospectively, I think that the importance of Irigaray in respect of my own art practice can be divided into five related strands.

Deconstructive Strategies and Methods Applied to Practice
Irigaray has used deconstructive methods and strategies to engender, for her reader, a new understanding of a number of major philosophical texts. Grosz has concluded, of Kristeva, Irigaray and Le Doeuff, that their work is "not *on* or *about* women". If anything this work is "'about' male dominated knowledges". In summary, she continues:

> [they]... do not proclaim a new female language, nor new non-patriarchal knowledges: instead they rupture the apparent self-evidence of prevailing models in order to make new modes of knowing and writing possible.[36]

Margaret Whitford has suggested of Irigaray's writing that: "In its enactment of the tension, it does not provide the answers; rather it appeals to the reader to begin to invent the next step(s)".[37] This tension is, in Whitford's view, created through writing that manages simultaneously to be a critique of patriarchy but is also able to suggest a vision of a different future. In painting, or visual artworks generally, tension is very often created through the juxtaposing of disparate elements. If, as I believed, the 'visual vocabulary' of abstraction serves to reinforce a patriarchal world view, I wanted to find a way to reveal this, but also to use it as a basis of creative tension.

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Theory as catalyst

Theory acted as a catalyst as I set about deconstructing and reconstructing my painting practice. Each discrete body of work I made was generated through experimentation with the relation between text and material processes. This approach picks up on Irigaray's suggestion that her readers should engage her work on their own terms, and here she particularly emphasises creative response:

> The only reply that can be given to the meaning in the text is: read, perceive, feel ... Who are you? Would be a more pertinent question, provided it does not collapse into a demand for an identity card or an autobiographical anecdote.[38]

However, I have found that to engage with Irigaray in this manner is far from straightforward, although it is challenging. Very often, it seems to set in motion a response that replicates that which is subject to criticism. For example, Irigaray's writing seemed an invitation, incitement even, to act upon impulses hitherto contained; cutting, crumpling, burning, these are all ways in which I have acted upon the text in order to make meaning for myself. I deliberately worked in this way, finally using the isolation of the darkroom to cultivate a subjective response, one that lacked the boundaries instigated through a more objective academic reading. I pursued a tactile, haptic response. This privileged actions, the body and the unconscious, rather than ideas filtered through sight. Increasingly, I became aware that my creative exchange was one-sided, the projection onto the site of the text. Fascinated, at times spellbound, I made no attempt to 'correct' this unbalance — I could, of course, have halted the process and attempted to frame it theoretically, but my aim was to extend beyond this.

The Potential of Darkness

Several of Irigaray's texts carry the suggestion that darkness may be a potential space within which women can become involved in creative (and sometimes

ecstatic) self-discovery. For example, in *Speculum of the Other Woman,* the break with the material contact of the inside of the mother's body (which is, of course, dark) is referenced, because it is unsymbolised in culture, as the cause of an "insatiable hunger" or lack.[39]

Again, Irigaray draws out the forgotten debt to maternity, and the role of darkness in the formation of the subject, in her reading of Merleau-Ponty. His recommendation, to turn to the lived body as a source of critical understanding, is developed by her in the following:

> This operation is absolutely necessary in order to bring the maternal-feminine into language: at the level of theme, motif, subject, articulation, syntax, and so on. Which requires passage through the night, a light that remains in obscurity.[40]

Irigaray suggests that the beginnings of a rich creative, female Imaginary might be constructed beyond the specular projections of theory (where light and sight are always implied) through a journey in memory and darkness, wherein a kind of recovery of the corporeal / sexual self may occur.

Retrospectively, I think that my decision to work in the isolation of the wet darkroom picked up on this aspect of Irigaray's writing. This did in a sense provide the opportunity to work out of view and felt less subject to restraint. Here I felt compelled to go further with my experiments upon the text. What I found, however, was that violence and nurture seemed to co-exist at this material level. This discovery was problematic because it suggested to me that I may well have been replicating the notions of subjugation, desire and damage that underlie the practice of Abstract Expressionism.

Materiality: the Potential of Fluids

Irigaray has argued that theory imparts value to solidity — it is equated with reason and logic. Identity, acquired through language, Irigaray has suggested, is based on orientation toward solid form:

> Discourse, the *logos,* bear witness to the necessity of man from mother-nature. This separation, constitutive of man as man, requires that he erect himself as a solid entity out of an undifferentiated *subjectum.*[41]

Solids and liquids are the stuff out of which paintings are constructed. There are the 'hard elements' — the stretcher, and the cloth which, when drawn across the stretcher frame, acquires a sort of rigidity. The paint, which is applied in liquid form, has many degrees of viscosity. If thickened, it can hold its own form, whereas when of a more liquid consistency it is less easily contained. But the processes through which form in painting are mediated are premised (via Greenberg) on 'fixture' — a drive towards solidity, stasis. Would it be possible, through the use of Irigaray's thinking, to rethink painting in relation to the feminine in terms of flux, fluidity, flow?

Intuitive abstract painting is a process that allows the artist to make an exploration from a self that is open to change, a non-fixed subjectivity. This draws upon the experiential: memories of maternal experience and perhaps other archaic sensations of the earliest moments of being. More pragmatically this will also include learned responses and techniques of painting derived from a tradition. Intermittently, states may occur in which a heightened awareness of the intense physicality of the materials is inseparable from the sensations of the tangible, inhabited body. The shift between conscious and unconscious thought processes is very often ambiguous. Intuitive painting is founded on flux — on fantasy, sensations, thoughts and feelings that emerge somewhat chaotically and are organised provisionally through the formal and technical aspects of making.

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Irigaray has drawn attention to the potential, as yet unexplored, of the concepts of randomness and flow. The creation of a new symbolic order that allows for the presence of the sexed body to permeate discourse would be premised on fluid and metonymic relationships rather then the metaphoric structures that she believes characterise male discourse.

> These random connections or interferences escape him, and their relation to a dynamics of flux, deploying itself beyond the control of reason, still remains to be thought.[43]

Response to fluids and how these relate to the body of the painter are important where the exploration of sexed subjectivity is at stake.

Material Contiguity: Towards a Recovery of the Feminine in Material / Visual Process

Irigaray has pointed to a break with what she describes as "material contiguity".[44] The bodily or biological experience of women, sexual and reproductive / maternal creates a relation with the material world that is essentially different to that experienced by men. Irigaray has argued that "Women do not obey the same sexual economy as men" and as a consequence:

> [Their]... relationships to fluids and solids, to matter and form, to the sense of touch through the skin and mucous membrane, to symmetry and repetition are all different.[45]

However, this difference, which is grounded in different perceptual modes, especially the tactile, is not symbolised within language. Consequently, philosophic discourses have, in Irigaray's view, been generated by men through a process of auto-genesis, rather than representing ideas that are a product of an exchange between two sexes. Thus male theoretical thought is produced out of a kind of sensory deprivation that elevates eyesight as the privileged sensory mode. As a

result the disturbance or readjustment of the world view that an alternative mapping of the world in accord with the tactile, would bring about, is repressed. Theory, in the view of Irigaray, privileges sight, and it is this model that is projected onto the world of matter, seemingly insisting on a form of visual coherence that reflects male bodies and sexuality. Irigaray argues that the theoretical or "specular gaze" cannot actually "see" women as different; they will instead appear to be defective men. As a result she considers that "we have to point out how the break with material contiguity is made, how the system is put together, how the specular economy works".[46]

Painting, like philosophy, has been subjected to a break with material contiguity. I think that here, Abstract Expressionism provides a pertinent example. The emergence of this movement brought intuition, the unconscious, and the body, into a tactile and sensory relation with the medium. However the formalist theory that developed in response to, and as an interpretation of, Modernist painting, subjected painting to what Irigaray might term a 'specular' economy. For example, in order to be judged in public or cultural terms, painting is elevated to the wall of the gallery. If Greenberg's approach to forming aesthetic judgements that value "presence" are followed, then distance, immobility and a controlling eye will cause a rupture with mapping or ordering of the world in accord with the tactile and sensory.

Referring to philosophical discourses, as a means to redress the problem of matter in relation to the feminine, Irigaray suggests a course, at once persuasive and intriguing:

> Thus they have to be re-enacted, in each figure of discourse, in order to shake the discourse away from its mooring in the value of "presence."[47]

The suggestion that Irigaray makes here has, I think, terrific potential for painting as a means to begin to rethink the material relation between the body of the artist and the "body in the work". As I made the body of work *Screen / Paintings* I attempted to break with what I had absorbed of the formalist tradition of decision making in painting through trying to think about different kinds of relations between the body and the stages of making.

6. The Influence of Three Artists: Ross Bleckner, Moira Dryer and Maria Chevska

Before turning to my practice, I will briefly introduce the work of three artists whose work loosely can be seen as a deconstruction of the visual languages of Modernist abstraction. These are Ross Bleckner, Moira Dryer and Maria Chevska.

Ross Bleckner (B. 1949)

The painting of American artist Ross Bleckner first came to prominence in New York during the 1980s. Through his poetic deconstruction of Modernist painting, Bleckner has created surfaces that refer too, or set up sensations of, the body. I was intrigued by how Bleckner, who had set out to destabilise historical meaning in relation to visual conventions, had managed to achieve this through the juxtaposition of what would have appeared to be mutually exclusive traditions in painting: Op Art and the tradition of the Sublime.

Op Art was a hard-edged style of painting which emerged briefly during the 1960s, a distillation of the Western classical tradition where the purely optical was privileged. The Sublime is associated with the Romantic tradition, and, in painting, the use of large-scale, dark and amorphous imagery as an expression of the profound mystery of being and the fear of death. Bleckner, a gay artist working in

New York during the 1980s, has experienced the death of many friends and he has often spoken of his works as memorials.[48]

In 1979 Bleckner outlined his theory of painting in an article entitled 'Transcendent Anti-Fetishism'.[49] For him, this required a rejection of the discourses of phenomenology that had dominated the reception of the minimalist object. Instead, Bleckner favoured an engagement with minimalism that favoured its psychological aspect. The minimalist object was, in his view, an "affirmation" whereas the psychological object, (and here he was influenced by Freud) a "negation".[50] More importantly, Bleckner proposed that the psychological object becomes transcendent through artistic process by which it becomes anti-fetish. By this, he implies, something of the individual (both psychological and bodily), will filter into the materiality of the artwork as the artist works to restate and reorder the internal psychological object through the symbolic structure of language and image.

Moira Dryer (1957 - 1992)

Moira Dryer had only a short career but her work had already begun to attract critical acclaim when she died of breast cancer at the young age of thirty-four. Like Bleckner, with whom she had a close friendship, she worked throughout the 1980s at the height of an interest in 'appropriation'. Superficially, her extensive use of the dripped mark might easily be explained as that of a stylist: the lifting of a mannerism from the past which could then be emptied of meaning and used freely. Her work, although described as 'playful', 'wayward' and 'theatrical'[51] does not, I think, fit entirely within an ironic frame. In Bleckner's view, Dryer opened something new in painting through the relocation of something that was already there. He notes that the practice of abstraction has been historically "overwrought with ideology". Dryer, Bleckner continues, was able to represent: "....the processes

of the body, its movements, its memories and decay, and the fragility of these processes..."[52]

Robert Storr has suggested, like a number of other critics, that Dryer's painting is intimately connected with the work of Colour Field artists:

> The visual richness and variety of her tinctured washes and her substitution of plywood for cotton duck with plywood's very different absorbency, textures and luminosity add an unanticipated, contrarian, but in painterly terms quite marvellous, last chapter to the long-stalled development of stain-painting. In this respect Dryer's use and creative abuse of tradition — her beautiful pollution of Modernist purity — are inseparably linked to the advantage of that very tradition.[53]

However, Storr positions Dryer's work as a closure to painterly practices that emerged in the1960s. It is both more accurate and productive to consider her contribution as David Moos does: "(Dryer) staked out a position in painting that recoded historical precedent for contemporary uses".[54]

In my view Dryer re-opened the terrain introduced by Frankenthaler, revealing this to be a ground saturated with references to the female. Dryer has made work through pouring thin viscous mixes of acrylic pigment that includes interference colour over the surface of plywood previously drilled with holes as in works such as *Revenge* (1991) and *Damage and Desire, Damage and Desire* (1991). The influence of her subtle creation of dripped surfaces in works such as *Stiff Sentence* (1991) is to be found in my series of works on paper (see Appendix Three) and later developed in my *Screen / Paintings* (see Chapter Four). In addition, I was intrigued by the holes that Dryer positioned across painterly surfaces. These not only made it possible to see the walls against which the paintings were sited but have also been likened to the bodily damage that the artist experienced in the last years of her life.

Maria Chevska (b. 1949)

I first saw the work of the British artist Maria Chevska in 1992 at the Anderson O'Day Gallery, and, having formed a deep interest in the work, shortly afterwards met Chevska in Oxford. Her work, whilst clearly (and with coolness) referencing the visual vocabulary of Modernist abstraction, manages simultaneously to raise questions regarding the meaning of matter in painting through association with the female body. For example, in *As Long As Possible* (1992) Chevska used, not canvas, but taffeta: this revealed the pictorial surface of canvas as empty ground, but also, and more importantly, as a signifying surface that is already imbued with meaning. Greg Hilty, in a catalogue essay, stated that cloth might be regarded as: "the eternally feminine bearer of the image. As such it is for Chevska both the receptacle and subject".[55] The ground of painting is recognised as having meaning that extends outside the tradition of painting, and this in turn contradicts its apparently 'neutral' position, that is, that of a surface awaiting inscription. From such a position, a more complex dialogue between painter and materials may develop.

This approach to painting, where association is forged between the feminine and the medium, does run the risk of being subsumed into discourses that mirror male desire. Chevska is, however, able to circumvent this potential difficulty through mobilising and stimulating the interconnections between matter with meaning based on metonymic rather than metaphoric association. For example, contamination, and it is assumed relation to blood, is evoked in *Impure* (1992), a deep crimson canvas layered from either side by graphite, blackboard paint and varnish. Situated by the side of this work — that is, outside of the frame — and thus bringing the painting into the wider world, were two white, folded cloths. These, a suggestion of purity (thus very probably a comment on painting itself) had connotations, either religious or domestic. Inside one Chevska had placed

fragments of an ECG, according to Hilty "the irrefutable transcription of the pulse of life".[56]

Chevska does not sever the flow between painting and its processes and the everyday world. Indeed, in her earlier work she chose to work with materials that made reference to the feminine invoking concepts of impurity and transgression. Here, she deliberately extended painting beyond the confines of the frame whilst maintaining its presence as integral to the critique of painting that her work invites. Chevska's use of materials that had connotations in relation to the feminine — for example, her use of muslin — influenced the choice of materials in my earlier work. At a later date I was intrigued by her exploration of the underside of painting (see Chapter 4).

I have been interested by the work of many artists during the course of this research. However, I have selected and introduced the work of three painters, each of whom has, on his or her own terms, shifted the ground of Modernist abstraction. The questioning of the ideology of abstraction carried out by Bleckner, Dryer and Chevska was especially influential during the early stages of the research as I tried to make sense of what I wanted to achieve in my own work and attempted to instigate change.

7. Conclusion

Chapter Two details my preoccupations during the early stages of the research. This was to *consciously* seek mechanisms of change through practice. In my search to find tools that would create a fundamental shift in how I perceived the medium, feminist perspectives combined with deconstructive methods provided a creative and challenging method that I could then use to promote change. I have

introduced three artists, Bleckner, Dryer, and Chevska, whose working methods exploit precisely this possibility and act as a model for what I intend to do in my own practice.

I have also explained that I have a reservation regarding the use of deconstruction. As a method that originated through philosophy and literature to interrogate language-based structures, a deconstructive understanding of the art object may become oriented towards language and theory rather than perceptual response to matter as I intend. This raises the question of whether the tension that exists between two disciplines, one expressed in text and the other in material form, may be used to generate creativity and, if so, how? In the following chapters written from practice I explore this possibility.

Finally, writing this chapter has highlighted for me the conflicting relation between conscious and unconscious processes that arises when creative practice is carried out within an academic framework. For me, the unconscious is a vital aspect of creativity and much of what I do as a practitioner is as a result of influences, thoughts and perceptions that I am not consciously aware of — these inform and direct the form of the work. In the introduction I said that I would attempt to retrace the threads of thought to give insight into the work. In my attempt to do this, I shall experiment with forms of writing that relate to the process of making.

Notes to Chapter Three

[1] Museum of Modern Art Oxford (catalogue), *Jackson Pollock*, p.26.

[2] Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, p.93.

[3] Kaneda, 'Painting and Its Others'.

[4] Deepwell, *Feminism and Art Theory*, p.392.

[5] Chakravorty Spivak, *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, p.206.

[6] See, for example, Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*.

[7] This exhibition ran between 21 May and 26 August 1996 and was accompanied by a catalogue 'L'Informe: Mode d'emploi' later published as *Formless: A User's Guide*.

[8] Krauss and Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide*, p.9.

[9] See, for example, Lichtenberg Ettinger, *The Matrixial Gaze*, 'The With-in-Visible Screen', 'The Feminine / Prenatal Weaving' in *Matrixial Subjectivity-as-Encounter'*, and also *Matrixial Gaze and Borderspace* (forthcoming).

[10] See, for example, Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman, This Sex Which is Not One, An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, and *Je, Tu, Nous. Toward a Culture of Difference*.

[11] See, for example, Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, Tales of Love, Black Sun*.

[12] Lichtenberg Ettinger, *The Matrixial Gaze*, p.25.

[13] Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus' in *Ecrits: A Selection*.

[14] Irigaray, 'The Invisible of the Flesh' in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

[15] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

[16] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*.

[17] Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*.

[18] Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*.

[19] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. vii.

[20] A collection of current work by artists and philosophers in the field of feminist aesthetics is Florence, P . and Foster, N. (editors), *Differential Aesthetics*.

[21] Meskimmon, 'Feminism and Art Theory' in *A Companion to Art Theory*, p.391.

[22] Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

[23] Irigaray, *The Invisible of the Flesh*.

[24] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p.28.

[25] Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman.*

[26] Hirsh and Olson, 'Je-Luce Irigaray: A meeting with Luce Irigaray', p.3.

[27] Irigaray, 'The Poverty of Psychoanalysis', pp.79-104.

[28] Irigaray, 'Women on the Market' in *This Sex Which is Not One.*

[29] Irigaray, *Elemental Passions.*

[30] Irigaray, *Marine Lover.*

[31] Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, p.7.

[32] Hirsh and Olson, 'Je-Luce Irigaray: A meeting with Luce Irigaray', p.6.

[33] Hirsh and Olson, 'Je-Luce Irigaray: A meeting with Luce Irigaray', p.6.

[34] Robinson, 'Irigaray's Imaginings', p.23.

[35] Irigaray, 'Flesh Colours' in *Sexes and Genealogies.*

[36] Grosz, *Sexual Subversions,* p.234.

[37] Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, p.13.

[38] Irigaray, *Sexes et Parentes,* p 191.

[39] Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman,* p.40.

[40] Irigaray, 'The Invisible of the Flesh', in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference,* p. 152.

[41] Irigaray, 'The Language of Man' in *To Speak is Never Neutral*, p.233

[42] Irigaray, 'The Language of Man' in *To Speak is Never Neutral*, p.233

[43] Irigaray, 'The Language of Man' in *To Speak is Never Neutral*, p.233

[44] Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse', in *This Sex Which is Not One,* p.75.

[45] Irigaray, 'An Ethics of Sexual Difference', p.235.

[46] Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse' in *This Sex Which is Not One,* p.75.

[47] Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse' in *This Sex Which is Not One,* p.75.

[48] Chua, 'Ross Bleckner' in *Flash Art International,* p.125.

[49] Bleckner, 'Transcendent Anti-Fetishism', pp.50-55.

[50] Bleckner, 'Transcendent Anti-Fetishism', p.52.

[51] York University Art Gallery, *Moira Dryer: Paintings 1989-1992* (2000), p.11.

[52] York University Art Gallery, *Moira Dryer: Paintings 1989-1992* (2000), p.12.

[53] York University Art Gallery, *Moira Dryer: Paintings 1989-1992* (2000), p.55.

[54] York University Art Gallery, *Moira Dryer: Paintings 1989-1992* (2000), p.59.

[55] Anderson O'Day Gallery, *Maria Chevska* (unpaginated), (1992).

[56] Anderson O'Day Gallery, *Maria Chevska* (unpaginated), (1992).

PART II

MATERIAL PROCESSES AND PRACTICE TEXTS

Chapter Four

INSCRIPTIONS

Description of Work

I made the series of work, *Inscriptions*, between May and September 1999. This series incorporates six paintings, each of which is 28 x 32 inches. Muslin has been stretched onto light wooden stretchers creating a taut semi-transparent surface. Spirals of coloured text are arranged in lines, five by five, across the rectangle. Each of these forms has then been filled with liquid wax to which interference colour had been added. The texts used were *Inscriptions from Inside the Shell*, by the artist and psychoanalytic theorist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, and *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, by Luce Irigaray.

Plate 4 *Meditation on Optics,* 1997. Tracing paper, wax, resin, interference colour, text (30 by 18 inches).

Plate 5 *Under the Microscope,* 1997. Tracing paper, wax, resin, interference colour, text (24 by 18 inches).

Plate 6 Chora, 1997. Tracing paper, wax, resin, interference colour, text (24 by 18 inches).

Plate 7   *Inscriptions 1*, 1998. Muslin, wax, interference colour and text (28 x 32 inches).

Plate 8   *Inscriptions 2*, (detail) 1998. Muslin, wax, interference colour and text (28 x 32 inches).

Plate 9   *Inscriptions 3*, (detail), 1998. Muslin, wax, interference colour and text (28 x 32 inches).
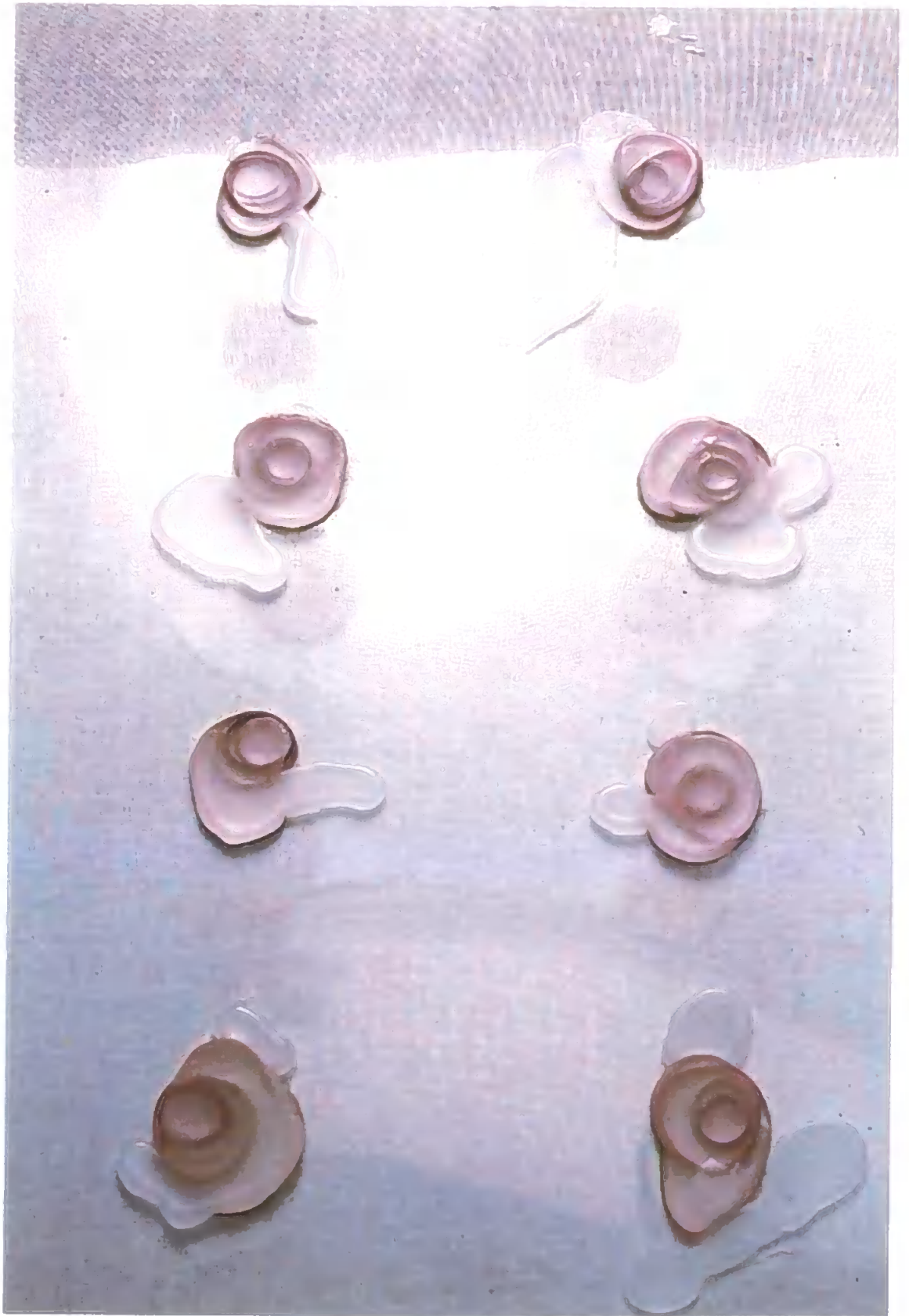
Plate 10 *Inscriptions 2*, (detail), 1998. Muslin, wax , interference colour and text (28 x 32 inches).

Plate 11 *Inscriptions 3*, (detail) 1998. Muslin, wax, interference colour and text (28 x 32 inches).

Plate 12   *Inscriptions 4.* (detail), 1998. Muslin, wax, interference and text (28 x 32 inches).

1. Introduction

Inscriptions began as an investigation into the tradition from which my own work stemmed. To do this I immersed myself in the processes and techniques that originated with Frankenthaler. Frankenthaler's working methods were, as I have already argued, marginalised by the canon whose values reflected a gender bias in favour of male creativity. As a woman painter I believed that these ideologies still had the power to determine how I responded to the medium of paint. I therefore applied a 'deconstructive' method to practice as an attempt to unearth the remnants of a historical framework that, to some degree, determines how the medium is conceptualised. The work I made was produced out of the tension of bringing together ideas taken from opposing paradigms, Modernism and feminism. The Modernist ideas were located in the medium itself, whereas feminist ideas taken from psychoanalytic and philosophic theory were accessed in textual form which was, during the process of making, responded to as a medium.

Practice Texts

Having made *Inscriptions*, I wrote what I have termed 'practice texts'. Constructed from studio notes, these texts describe thoughts and ideas that underpinned, and were also generated by, the processes I engaged whilst forming the artwork. They do, I think, come closer to the patterns of thinking through which an art object is structured as opposed to those that are usual in an academic context. With this in mind I have chosen not to provide references for the ideas that are touched upon in the text, because this would imply a certainty (or mastery) of a subject. Such a position works against the speculative and imaginative approach that I have found generates creativity. The practice texts are reproduced below, shaded in grey, in the two sections following this one. Of these, Section Two gives an insight into the ideas that fed into the experimental work leading to *Inscriptions*, while Section Three relates to *Inscriptions*.

Following on from this, in Section Four, I have researched and developed some of the ideas taken from the practice text. In this section, I bring together historical and theoretical issues, and discuss these through a perspective that has been gleaned from the experience of making *Inscriptions*. In this section, my notes are grouped under the following thematic headings: *Flatness, Control / Uncontrol, Colour, The 'Space Behind the Frame', Perspective / Subjectivity* and *Stain / Lacan: the Repressed Underside of Vision*.

External Influences

Whilst making *Inscriptions* I regularly visited the seashore both in Brittany and, nearer home, at Exmouth. I felt it necessary to mention these experiences which played a part in the formation of the work lest it appear that the work was purely theoretical and dislocated from physical experience in the world. During this period I was fascinated by the interchange between land and sea — of what was apparently solid (the sand), and shifting tidal waters. The formative power of the liquid to re-arrange the sands in accord with its rhythm. And then there was the experience of swimming in the deep clear waters and of emerging cold but energetic; of peering into the greenish depths of rock pools with the children and our growing collection of discarded shells, some broken, revealing the spiralled interior form.[1] Each midday, a sea mist would creep inland from across the sea enveloping us in quietness. Boundaries of self became lost in the glowing, opalescent droplets of water. These mists were tinged with the palest of colour, sometimes tinged with gold, or violet.

2. Practice Texts Reflecting on Experimental Work Leading to *Inscriptions*

Examples of the work I made prior to *Inscriptions* are reproduced at the beginning of this chapter.

Plate 4: *Meditation on Optics*

In this work I first created a surface through smearing clear PVA gel to a sheet of tracing paper and then working into this surface (almost scarification — I wanted to build up a texture with the richness of skin). Over this I poured in a series of rhythmic layers, using what was to hand, white inks, interference colour and resin.

The wave-like layering of very liquid pigment relates to time spent on the seashore, a liminal space where the meeting of sand and sea are bound through the rhythmic motion of the tides, and the whole often bathed in a refracted light. In such an environment it is possible to sense a fluid relation between self and the world, a loss of the edges of the body, amalgamation through light.

Plate 5: *Under the Microscope*

I placed a horizontal line of 'text / objects' at 'eye level'. My aim was to locate the viewer in relation to the amorphous surface. I photocopied text taken from sections of *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Next, I experimented with the size of the font, minuscule to large. I then cut rounds and overlaid these with simple moulds into which I poured liquid wax. Different depths varied the clarity with which the text could be read. I wanted these shapes to suggest a microscope, drawing in the viewer who would then peer at the text as small circular section. This would require close proximity to the work, rather than assimilating from a distance and categorising.

Plate 6: *Chora*

I was fascinated by the concept of *Chora* when I made this work. This space though will be perhaps misunderstood, subsumed, if seen from front on. I put text taken from *Inscriptions from Inside the Shell* in the least likely place. It is in the centre-split of the egg-like wax form. I think that this work was an attempt to

symbolise, even heal or repair, the relation I had to one of my sons who had a great deal of anxiety in separating from me. I used language in this work to provide a physical boundary for the anxious and free-floating form.

3. A Practice Text Reflecting on the Processes I Engaged with in Making *Inscriptions*

The following text was written in February 2000.

Initially I was drawn to Ettinger's writing in that it seemed to connect with, and release, a series of thoughts and feelings, which were deeply personal. However, a desire to immerse myself in an intimate relation to text was intermittently interrupted by confrontation with my own lack of theoretical understanding — the knowledge that certain words and meanings were closed / distant. At that point there seemed to be a choice between developing an academic understanding of Ettinger's theoretical position through either further reading or practice.

I decided to make some work and therefore what follows is an attempt to trace the way in which a dialectical reading of text influenced the process of making. First, I want to describe the lure of the written word, the sense of complete uninterrupted moments of connectedness to images evoked through text. To have this relation with the text it was necessary to glance at words, avoiding being caught in their logical structure. Responded to in this way, the text released images or sensations, which never become entirely focused or complete, but were nonetheless intense. Whilst making the work, I attempted to amplify, give form to, partial images released by words — these were not necessarily visual, but seated in bodily sensations. This could be the way in which the tongue experiences the mouth, the vulnerability of liquid, or being muffled within a coil. These are images that shift

into series of other images. I am wary that exposing these fleeting sensations to the process of describing through words will fix them in a way that is not what they are. During the process of making work, there is a chance element of finding some physical quality in the medium that has an association which images released by the text. What I have described appears to be an experience of being pulled under, being caught in some deep current of subjective response. It also carries sexual connotations. I have found, however, it is not possible to become wholly immersed in this way with this particular text. There is another response, a reaction that interferes almost all of the time. At that same moment of subjective response, the words seem to exist in some distant arid space. It is therefore beyond my ability to make rational sense of what is written. The text is, in part, closed. I cannot respond to this reflection of myself as non-comprehending with neutrality. Irritability and frustration seem the basis of that part of my relationship to text, paralleling other patterns of unresolved relationships in which there is compelling tendency to be caught up in a boundary-less way for example in parenting. I am trying to explain something that is quite obsessive, a continued returning to the text / object with unclear purpose. This returning to is 'acted out' in the systematic method of working employed in these paintings.

Irritation and frustration resulted in my first tearing at, fragmenting, the text in order to extricate that part of it which I needed. Fragmentation perhaps suggests breaking or even shattering of the object / text and is therefore not entirely accurate. Even at the early stages of working, order was important — the way in which I tore the words, creating strips of paper following the lines of the text, involved a consideration of the formal order of the text. This process became gradually more systematic, even a ritualised process whereby text could be read / related to and then incorporated into the paintings. I began to use scissors to cut quantities of text, the act of cutting became the act of reading. Many incidental views of words were gleaned, the progress through the text slowed down. Steadied

by cutting along each line I could see the words from a variety of viewpoints. This multiplicity of viewpoints, continuous contact with text at unplanned moments is a way of understanding its meaning, both in a subjective and rational sense.

In this series of work I have used colour-photocopied text. The origin of this method of working was accidental. I took a copy of the text *Inscriptions from Inside the Shell* on a machine previously set by another user. Rather than the black and white copy I expected, what emerged were white words against an incredibly beautiful rich background, deep dull green with what seemed to be a shadow across part. The words were embedded in background colour that was shifting and watery. Reading is sometimes a confrontation with the harsh positive / negative relation of black to white. There was a way in which the coloured text allowed me to be spatially behind the words, that the act of reading was like breaking the surface after diving. I made the first of this series of paintings from this particular text which seemed mysterious in that, despite many experiments, I have never managed to repeat this particular effect.

This is what I remember of making the first painting. I cut the text quite carefully into thin strips and formed one into a spiral. Then I placed this text / form against the palm of my hand. In this position I could examine text in a new, vulnerable form. I felt it as a small animal moving slightly. It also felt a little like a Japanese fortune telling fish, the paper would quite suddenly move, flip or uncoil. As a three-dimensional form, coloured text revealed the whiteness of its underside. In order to connect the two sides a colour highlighter was used to fill in the white with a luminous pink. The double-sided colours related and pink had nearly the right association with inner / body shell like forms that were suggested by the text. I positioned the spirals of text across the surface of my paintings, in lines of five and positioned by eye, each was held by transparent glue. This presented a problem, they looked 'stuck on', and it was necessary to establish a figure / ground

relationship within the picture surface. The solution was to pour liquid wax into each coil. After several experiments I found that by doing this I could forge a connection between the flat pictorial surface and the three dimensional text.

At this point, I perceived the text as line upon line of holes, each plugged by wax. Words within the centre of each spiral were totally covered, muffled, gagged, lost to view. The luminous pink interior became dispersed, crystalline.

The act of pouring the liquid wax required a studied balance of control and uncontrol. I noticed that the wax flowed outwards from the spiral shapes holding its own liquid form against the surface of the muslin. (This could only be achieved when the wax was close to setting. If too hot, it seeped through the material.) The pouring of the wax became a systematic act involving a high degree of artifice. By this I mean that, in order to make what look like accidental effects, a high degree of technical control is necessary. This is in line with abstract expressionist working methods where what appears to be accident is very knowingly arrived at. I wanted an appearance of flow, liquid freely finding its form, but in reality this was achieved by tight technical control whilst carrying out a systematic repetitious task.

Whilst looking again at the work this afternoon I noticed that initially the words were positioned with small regard for the reader / viewer. Some of the first spirals were upside down. However, as the work progressed the text was placed with more care so that strings of words were visible. These words are only accessible to the viewer from a crouching position beneath the work; it is necessary to be close and looking upwards. If the work were sited horizontally, rather than against the wall, it would obviously make reading the text easier. However, I shall wall hang the work because I want the work to be read within the context of painting as, simultaneously, the text 'jams' an experiential reading.

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4. Historical and Theoretical Issues Arising from Practice

In this section, the findings of my practice-based investigation which were elicited through writing the above text have been drawn upon in a discussion that is intended to highlight the potential of Frankenthaler's processes and techniques. Feminist ideas have been used as a means of shedding light on historical issues that limited reception of her work and also opening what she did to reinterpretation. The issues I have introduced are fairly disparate at this point; in the following chapter these become more focused.

Flatness

Did the techniques developed by Frankenthaler create a figure / ground relation in painting that related specifically to the feminine at some level? Her very individual utilisation of the extremely fluid qualities of the paint she chose to work with, did, I think, deeply contravene Greenberg's concept of 'flatness' as the essence of painting. In fact, Greenberg's formalist criteria for quality in painting would, if taken to an extreme, more or less preclude the use of the medium of paint and its viscous and richly textural qualities. When questioned, Greenberg had even admitted — flatness ever in mind! — that an empty canvas would suffice, although he did add to this the proviso that it "would not necessarily be a good painting".[2] If Greenberg's theories are taken to the extreme they obviously invite, I suggest that his thinking did not solely privilege flatness but that solidity is also implied. A flat surface is one which is level and without indentations or raised areas; solidity likewise implies not only a firm, stable shape, but one whose substance is dense and does not have spaces or gaps. Canvas, when stretched, has stability and is made level, however, characteristically, its surface is knobbly and also permeable as a result of the regular small gaps created through weaving.

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Frankenthaler developed the use of liquid paint in such a way that she fully utilised liquids and the power these have to transform the material that they come into contact with through permeation, seepage and flow. Liquids have, for example, an extraordinary mobility, they can flow around objects, or when applied to canvas they may drench, soak or spill onto the cloth. Through Frankenthaler's use, the solid structure of the canvas support became integrated with the liquid pigment; in her work, solids and liquids co-exist. Furthermore, there is a sense in which the textural qualities of the surface (and thus highlighting the lack of stability / solidity of the pictorial surface) are made more evident through the effects of staining.

In certain feminist arguments, matter is considered to be imbued with values that positively reinforce/reflect the subjectivity of men. Irigaray, for example, considers that 'fluids' are partly analogous with female bodies and expression, and that 'solids' are analogous with the dry self-consistency of male logic, including the logic at work in the practice of psychoanalysis:

> The object of desire itself, and for psychoanalysts, would be the transformation of fluid to solid. Which seals — this is well worth repeating — the triumph of rationality.[3]

For Lacan the crucial event through which subjectivity evolves is the 'mirror stage'[4] and is crucial in the formation of subjectivity. Irigaray has drawn attention to the physical characteristics that underlay Lacan's description of the mirror stage - these include flatness, rigidity and solidity. [5]

Control / Uncontrol

Unlike solids, liquids do not easily hold form and are less easily subjected to control. As a result, solid objects are fixed in space and time in a way that fluids are not.[6] Characterised by instability and also moving against containment, fluids

transgress the borders set in place by discourses dependent on the conception of interior and exterior relations. Fluids move between the two.

Highly aware of the potential of fluids, Frankenthaler worked precisely with these attributes. In so doing she set up as the basis for her relation with the medium values that differed from those of her colleagues. She did not employ continuous control over the paint. Instead, through relinquishing control, the forms she created were often ambiguous; they tended toward formlessness or lack of contour. And as a result there has been a negative identification of Frankenthaler (as a woman) with certain material characteristics of her work. For example, the complex relation between women and fluids is demonstrated by how menstruation, a biologically determined process, is regarded. In general it is regarded as messy, ungovernable — transgressive even.

> For the girl, menstruation, associated as it is with the flow of blood, with injury and the wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks, uncontrollably, not in sleep, in dreams, but wherever it occurs, indicates the beginning of an out-of-control status that she was led to believe ends with childhood.[7]

Elizabeth Grosz describes, in the above passage, how this sign of maturation may appear to be regressive, linking the young woman with the kind of lack of control or mastery associated with a much younger child. It is possible that Frankenthaler encountered a problematic reception by, for example, Harold Rosenberg, because she identified with the medium so closely (see Chapter Two).

Colour

The palette of *Mountains and Sea* is pale and almost ghostlike. These colours, sometimes referred to as pastel, have been unfavourably classed as 'feminine' the implication here is that the 'feminine' is simply a fading away of, or weaker and inferior version of the masculine. In *Inscriptions* I have taken 'paleness' which I

thought of as colour at the threshold, or liminal colour, and explored this through the use of interference pigment. What is fascinating about interference colour is that each has a dual reading — for example, violet / green and blue / gold. I experimented with the use of these pigments through mixing them into hot liquid wax which could then be poured onto a surface. The perception of interference colour changes according to the direction of the light and also varies with the position of the viewer. These pigments evade the all encompassing attempt of theorists to 'fix' colour, through optical systems (including use of complementary relationships). Colour is, of course, inherently transgressive. Even when delimited within hard-edged or abstract systems, it always seems to transcend boundaries or edges.

The 'Space Behind the Frame'

As I have already mentioned, the act of pouring liquid paint onto raw canvas creates the suggestion of pictorial space behind the frame. In making *Inscriptions* I used muslin — a material with more open weave than canvas, as a surface that would more fully open out this space to the viewer. This approach led to the following reflections.

Staining creates a pictorial surface that requires the viewer to be not only aware of, but to participate in, through the locomotion of the body, the instability that exists between surface texture and the suggestion of a space 'behind the frame'. Modernist abstract painting, dominated by Greenberg's formalism and the pursuit of visual purity, was inflexible and thus unable to respond to a surface that required the viewer to move freely between interchangeable boundaries premised, not on the distant and controlling eye, but on integration within a mobile, lived body.

The soaked-in stain technique creates a surface that suggests a spatial depth behind the frame, but it also foregrounds the texture of the surface of the canvas. These two aspects of the work cannot be seen simultaneously. The recessive space behind the frame is best experienced through being at a distance from the picture plane and the eye slightly out of focus, whereas the textural surface of the artwork requires proximity and repeated refocusing on the part of the viewer. These, however, are not mutually exclusive viewing positions: in my view they are integrated, because each incorporates the body into the viewing process, although on different terms.

Texture may, for example, be perceived through an eye that is in focus, and as a consequence the way in which the body is perceived will be altered. As one leans in close to inspect the surface, the overall impression of the painting as an image is lost and consequently the eye level ceases to function as a determinant of the relation between viewer and viewed. The tactile qualities of the weave of the cloth are registered as the eye continually moves and refocuses. The body will follow these movements, small shifts of position are synchronised with the eye as it moves unevenly across the surface of the painting. Attending to the texture of the surface, the viewer and the art object are brought into close proximity.

However, a similar attempt to verify the existence of recessive space in painting through a similar concentration of focus will cause the sense of it to disappear. Operating at the threshold of perception, the experience of liminal space located behind the frame may be accessed by standing back from the painting, and, following this, a relaxation or slackening of focus. The eye, as the gaze softens, is no longer privileged over the other senses. It seems at this point to recede, and in so doing becomes integrated with the body. This, in turn, releases the body into the visual field, an amorphous, corporeal, non-bounded form that touches, or projects into, the act of looking. At this point, where the border between self and

artwork has become less distinct, the experience of the alterity of the painting as a entity that is both radically different from, and at the same time at a material level somewhat similar to, the tangible experience of inhabiting a body, may make itself felt.

The body / mind sensations that permeate this particular pictorial space are very possibly connected with the experience of the feminine. This line of thinking can be explicated further through the thinking of Lichtenberg Ettinger whose theory draws on the experience gleaned from her practice. She suggests that it is possible to move beyond the limitations of sight that are implied through Lacanian thinking as 'presence' or certainty as opposed to absence and loss. Here, in what she terms a matrixial space, it is possible to recognise the non-symbolised traces or fragments of the archaic maternal body that lie at the very cusp of the sensory / visual.[8]

From my own experience of making work, I have realised that any shift toward an excessively conscious application of sight in relation to the emergent visual form will cause the sensations described above to disappear — their existence is fragile in the extreme. The practical problem this raises is how to be involved, as a woman, in a primarily visual activity and yet avoid the point at which the gaze, in effect, obliterates the female subject from the visual field. 'Metramorphosis' is the term used by Ettinger to describe the subtle changes that need to occur in how process is perceived in order not only to access an alternative logic, but also to allow it to acquire meaning in the symbolic.

> Metramorphosis is the process of change in borderlines and thresholds between being and absence, memory and oblivion, I and non-I, a process of transgression and fading away. The metramorphic consciousness has no centre, cannot hold a fixed gaze — or, if it has a centre, this constantly slides to the borderline, to the margins.[9]

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Perspective / Subjectivity

Martin Jay has traced evolution of perspective during the Enlightenment and the

effect of this on the body of the viewer.

> If the viewer was now the privileged centre of perspectival vision, it is
> important to underline that his view*point* was just that: a monocular,
> unblinking fixed eye (or more precisely, abstract point), rather than the two
> active, stereoscopic eyes of embodied actual vision, which give us the
> experience of depth perception. This assumption led to the visual practice in
> which the living bodies of both the painter and the viewer were bracketed,
> at least tendentially, in favour of an eternal eye above temporal duration.[10]

Although American Modernist painting attempted to overturn the use of

perspectival space, Greenberg nevertheless replicated and reinforced some of the

certainties associated with the Enlightenment through imposing viewing conditions

that indirectly curtailed movements of the viewer. For example, he recommended

'at onceness',[11] a pure moment of interaction with the painting. Practically, to

achieve this, it is necessary to be in a position that is central / still and at a

distance of at least six feet from the painting.[12]

The qualities of Frankenthaler's painting required a kind of visual experience

located in the lived and mobile body. Her work developed out of a deep study of

Cubist space and this had, of course, already destabilised the position of the

viewer. However, the construction of cubist images does depend on contours and

complex geometry, and thus, whilst overturning fixed-point perspective, they are

very much in reference to this system.

Frankenthaler moved away from Cubist composition, instead using these structures

as a kind of 'ghosting' rather than an overtly compositional device. She replaced

what was generally registered as directly present in painting with ambiguous,

contourless forms, and this had the effect of causing a kind of erasure of

'appearance'. For example, indeterminate forms like those used by Frankenthaler,

such as clouds, cannot be analysed through the lucid geometry of linear perspective.

Hubert Damisch points out that perspective will accentuate only what it is most able to represent. This would include, for example, orthogonals, flagstones, walls and the structures of architectonic space. This, Damisch notes, "makes perspective appear as a series of exclusions whose coherence is founded on a set of refusals that nonetheless must take place... for the very thing it excludes from its order".[13] Norman Bryson develops this point in asking the following:

> Was it only the cloud's imprecise boundary that so challenged the central observer? Or did this difficulty point to a deeper reason for the exclusion: that the cloud is a form that proposes no particular viewpoint as 'correct?'[14]

Bryson, using the example set out by Hubert Damisch, suggests that: "Linear perspective was keyed to the outline and the edge, not at all to the problem of *informe* (*sic*) that the cloud presented".[15] Thus the objectification and mastery of the image realised through perspective which will register contours first and foremost is overturned, but it is not entirely done away with. In Frankenthaler's painting geometric structure persists: it is not obliterated and is important to the construction of the image. However, such structures, it seems to me, are secondary to the materiality of surface created in Frankenthaler's painting where formless and open volume shapes float into the visual field as if from the underside of the surface.

Stain / Lacan: the Repressed Underside of Vision
The technique of staining may produce an especially ambiguous shape, often with a kind of halo, or watermark around it. Its form, which has somehow grown out of the 'unforeseen', hovers on the cusp of recognition. A partially realised form / image, the stain does, I think, mediate between the conscious world of objects

with contours, names and uses, and the shadowy recesses of the irrational world of the unconscious in which connotations of the body might intervene. Lacan seems to suggest that the stain is the dark underside of the gaze, and that it eludes self-consciousness. Therefore, it undermines the self-assurance connected with the sense of being a coherent subject whose world is premised on conscious rational thought. Subjectivity is based on the exclusion of anomalies that threaten the stability of the subject. Instead, the perceptual stain, he suggests, permits seepage between the conscious mind and the irrational working of the unconscious.

> If the function of the stain is recognised in its autonomy and identified with that of the gaze, we can seek its track, its thread, its trace, at every stage of the constitution of the world, in the scopic field. We will then recognise that the function of the stain and of the gaze is both that which governs the gaze most secretly and that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness.[16]

Lacan's link between the underside of the gaze and the stain, for me, conjures up the experience that led me to paint. Aged sixteen I visited the Tate Gallery where Rothko's Seagram paintings were being shown. In front of the floating layers of deep reds and hazy edged forms time seemed to rewind and memories flooded unchecked. I remembered how very aware I was, as a child, of the glorious sensation of shutting my eyes against daylight. Staring into such a space which, unlike painting, is without discernible boundaries, either lateral or of depth, I would become caught in the remarkable mass of varied red: brown reds, violet reds, orange reds tinged with a complementary green.

It is not possible to position oneself as a viewer in this space - it is the viewer that is the viewed. The eye looks both outward and inwards simultaneously. Neither perspective nor focus can function - these have no reference point in such close proximity to a subject. What is seen is the inside of the body illuminated through

light as it filters through the thin skin of the eyelid and is diffused through a web of tissues and blood.

The experience that I have described was set in motion by a corporeal response to painting. For me, this transcended the subject / object division that in general constitutes the relation between viewer and artwork in painting. Does the peculiar reality that is seeing the underside of flesh (engendered through response to artwork) in some sense undercut the certainties of the subject position that is posited by Lacan? Battersby has stated that within the Lacanian schema "woman is merely a part of that *Otherness* against which male identity and Western civilisation are secured. There can be no 'female' or 'feminine' reversal of perspective; *no other of the other".[17]* Following this Battersby notes that an alternative female optics is put forward by Irigaray.[18] In Battersby's view Irigaray proposes a 'jamming' operation that would intervene in the sciences of optics and topography and which is premised on a fundamentally different space / time relation to that put forward by Lacan. This would be in opposition to an "optics that privileges straight lines, particles and clean-cut identities. [Irigaray] proffers a morphology of the female body, structured by gradation, shadows, flows and intensive magnitudes".[19]

5. Conclusion

In *Inscriptions* I experimented with siting the work in various different ways. For example, the work could be placed against windows, thus enabling the viewer to be aware of the pictorial surface and the space of the 'real world' that lay behind the picture plane. When the work was shown like this, the blots seemed to be free-floating in space across the field of vision. I also experimented with placing mirrors behind the frames. Interestingly, this allowed the viewer to be aware of the space

behind them (the viewers) as they looked at the work — the light surface picked up fleeting images of activity in the gallery in a manner that was almost filmic. I found that the effect of the mirrors was to enable the viewer, when close into the work, to see the underside of the pictorial surface. This fascinated me, and I continue to explore this idea in the following chapter. Finally, I discovered that mirrors gave the work a more austere and minimal reading. In the setting of a gallery, this then orientated the work firmly toward a painting context.

Notes to Chapter Four

1 Interestingly, the composition of *Mountains and Sea* is very much founded on the spiral form found inside shells — a pattern of radial symmetry.

2 This remark, made by Greenberg in relation to minimalist work produced by Robert Rauschenberg in 1962, is quoted in De Duve, T., *Clement Greenberg: Reading Between the Lines*, p.72.

3 Irigaray, 'The Mechanics of Fluids'. p.113.

4 Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', in *Écrits*, pp.1-7.

5 Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage', in *Écrits*, p.4.

6 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, P.2.

7 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p.203.

8 Lichtenberg Ettinger, 'The With-In-Visible Screen', in *Inside the Visible*, p.101.

9 Lichtenberg Ettinger, 'The With-In-Visible Screen', in *Inside the Visible*, p.101.

10 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p.55.

11 Greenberg, 'The Case for Abstract Art', p. 81.

12 I found this to be my own experience when I viewed *Mountains and Sea* at the Whitney Museum in February 2000.

13 Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, p.444.

14 Bal, *Looking in*, P.25.

15 Bal, Looking in, P.25.

16 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p.74.

17 Battersby, 'Just Jamming', p.131.

18 Battersby, 'Just Jamming', p.131.

19 Battersby, 'Just Jamming', p.131.

Chapter Five

SCREEN / PAINTINGS

Description of Work

Theory / Forms are copies of theoretical text copied in colour onto A4 paper. Certain words (or strings of words) were pre-selected intuitively. The paper was then crumpled in such a way that these were exposed to view. Some words were given emphasis through cutting.

Screen / Paintings were made between April and September 1999. These are three large-scale works each of which is 84 x 32 inches. Voile, a fine meshed synthetic material was stretched onto tall narrow wooden frames in order to provide a semi-transparent surface. This was divided into eight more or less identical panels arranged symmetrically, four either side of a narrow centre strip. Having demarcated each individual rectangle with masking tape, I then positioned the work vertically and systematically applied liquid wax to each rectangular section using sweeping horizontal brushstrokes that deliberately encouraged the wax to run into rivulets. On the left-hand side of each *Screen / Painting* the wax has been applied from the front, and on the right, from the back. The centre strip of voile was left clear.
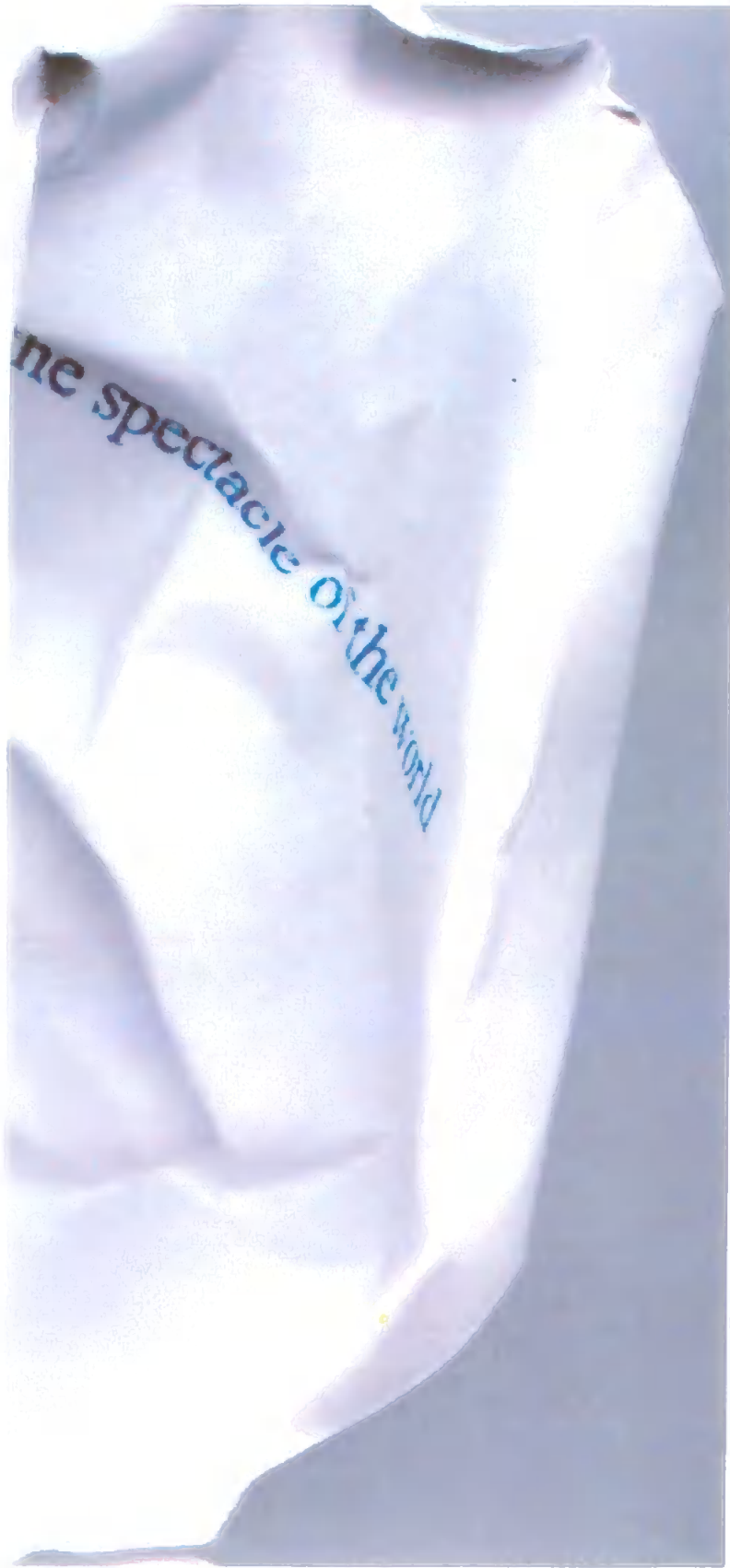
Plate 13   *Theory/Form*, (detail) 1999. A4 paper.
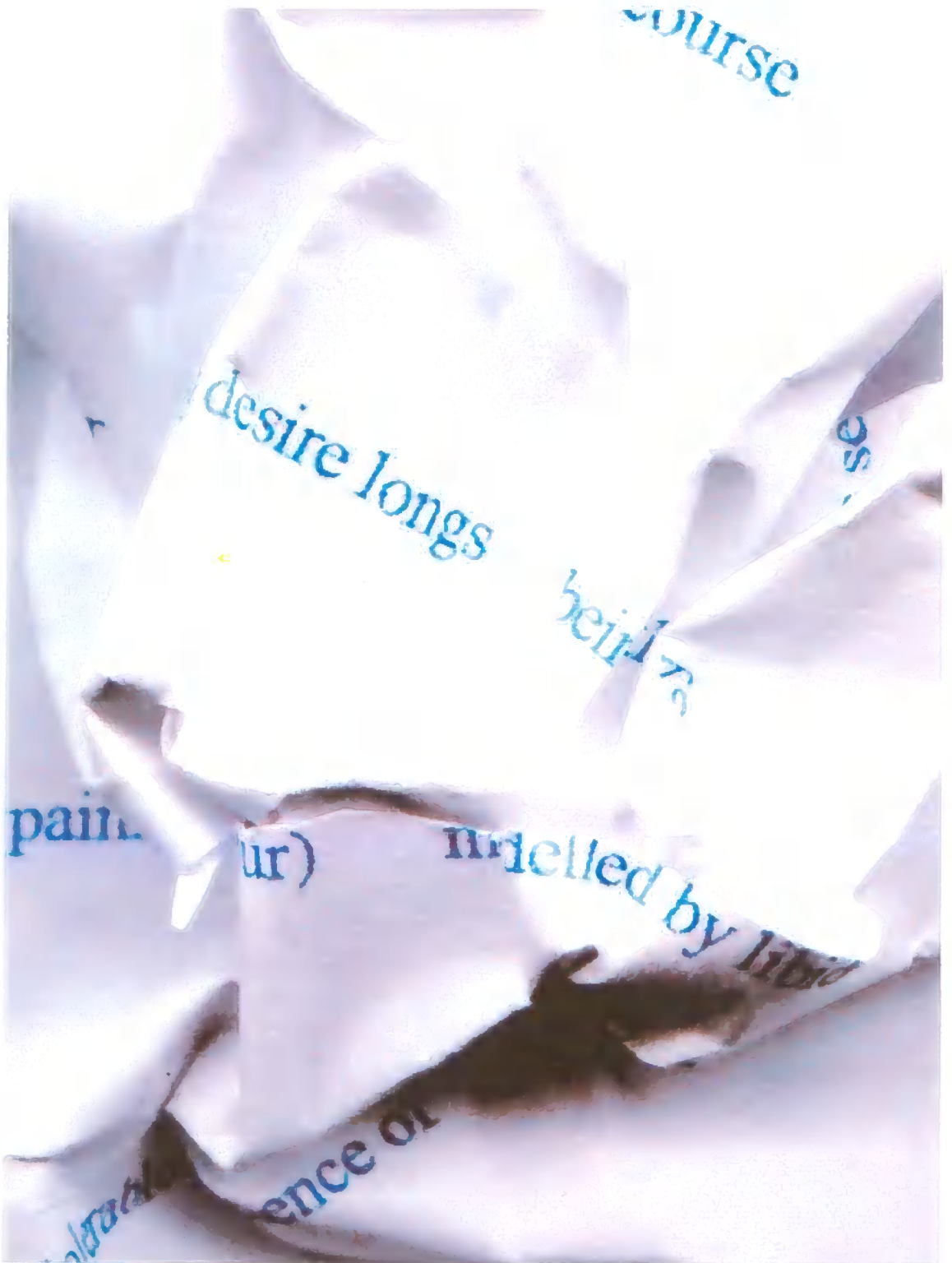
Plate 14 *Theory/Form.* (detail) 1999. A4 paper.

Plate 15   *Theory/ Form*, (detail), 1999. A4 paper.

Plate 16   Screen / Paintings (installation shots) 1999. Voile, wax, interference colour (84 by 32 inches).

Plate 17   *Screen/Painting*, 1999. Voile, wax, interference colour (84 x 32 inches).

Plate 18   *Screen/Painting*, 1999. Voile, wax, interfernce colour (84 x 32 inches).

Plate 19   *Screeen/Painting.* (detail) 1999. Voile, wax, interference colour (84 x 32 inches).

1. Introduction

Context: Material / Psychological

The *Screen / Paintings*, as their title suggests, have a dual context. As 'paintings' the works can be seen as rooted in the Modernist tradition of formal abstraction, thus inviting a discourse in relation to the specific qualities of the object. This, however, privileges sight to the exclusion of the other senses. Alternatively, if these works are perceived as 'screens' they then open onto a psychological / psychoanalytic line of enquiry. If the psychoanalytic trajectory is related to Lacan's ideas, the sense of *Screen / Paintings* as physical objects with a kind of internal construction peculiar to themselves is lost to a theorisation that is 'blind' to matter where it is derived from, or symbolic of, the feminine.

In Lacan's view, desire is formulated through lack. The first lost object of desire "generates a potentially infinite chain of (only) partially satisfactory objects".[1] If Lacan's thinking with regard to metaphor is applied to painting, then it may be assumed that material qualities in the art work, where these are related to the feminine, will be rendered invisible. The pictorial surface created through the use of soaked-in stain may well provide such an example. Ethereal ambiguous forms seem especially prone, when interpreted through language, to becoming caught within a metaphorical chain of substitutions that reflect male desire.

Lacan's theories repress the corporeality of the signifiers set in train. As a woman artist, this presents profound problems where the search is to find ways to forge connections between the woman's corporeal and psychic experience and the medium within the patriarchal tradition of painting which is constituted in, through, and also, by, language. My aim in making and writing about *Screen / Paintings* has been to deliberately destabilise response to the artwork (both for the viewer and myself).

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I began this work with the intention of extending my understanding of liminal space in painting and this led me to consider in more depth how this might be defined. Was it, for example, a chiefly physical phenomenon — it did after all derive from very specific material qualities — or should it be perhaps envisaged as a more psychological space? And finally, through couching my questions in this way, was I not simply reinforcing the form / content (matter and mind) divide that traditionally categorises abstract painting? The concept of the liminal is currently very broadly used. However, I found the psychological context for the term most useful. Here it is taken to mean 'at the threshold of perception'. This definition does, I think, come close to describing the barely perceptible suggestion of 'recessive space' which, as I have previously suggested in Chapter Three, will vanish under scrutiny and the penetration of the direct gaze.

Liminal or Latent in Relation to the Feminine

I then began to consider whether the term latency might come closer to providing an accurate description of the qualities of pictorial space that I had become so fascinated by. This, the sense of something hidden, or undeveloped, was also relevant to the precise use of the medium in *Screen / Paintings*. I was able to 'feel' as well as to see the qualities of this space — the materiality of the artwork was similar to or resonated with the experience of female corporeality. I was unsure about how it might be possible to move beyond the state of what might be dismissed as a kind of 'empathetic union'; after all what can be clearly 'seen' is linked to claims of 'illusory truth' that are arguably characteristic of a more traditional 'masculine stance'. I decided it was necessary here to work with and take seriously what was a sensation or felt, rather than clearly seen. Materiality in an artwork, if connected with women's bodies on a physical / psychic level, may ·remain locked within the medium, caught within frame upon frame of meaning. In the view of Irigaray, the bodily experience that is specific to women and through which their subjectivity is formed as different to men is not symbolised within

culture. She has asserted that the metaphorical displacement of the maternal-feminine as a source of origin in language has led to (the trope) 'of woman as an endless deferral of identity independent of any material referent'.[2] It is her view that corporeal experience, where it is associated with women's bodies, has been entirely erased within culture. Within psychoanalysis, a practice that seeks to bring into language the hidden or repressed history of the body, the movement between the manifest and the latent is crucial. This passage between what is seen, and what is repressed or concealed, is worked though metaphor. In an artwork it is the substitution of one image for another. As the research progressed I used the term latency more often, intrigued by how it could reveal, at least on a theoretical level, how the matter of painting encrypts the female body.

Section Two charts my moves toward 'haptic deconstruction'. *Screen / Paintings* are a continuation of the investigation into the relation between the body of the artist and the 'body in the work'. I focus on the concept of liminal space. To open issues that relate to the perception of this space I have again used feminist text as part of visual / material process, however, unlike the previous work, *Inscriptions*, this is not physically incorporated into the paintings. Instead, I have created what I termed *Theory / Forms*. These were placed in the studio where they were visible whilst I was involved in making. During this period I moved away from the notion of self-expression as I attempted to find ways of allowing the meaning of the texts to filter into the medium via the systematic movements of the body.

Section Three is a text based on studio notes that outline a series of analogies between body and the body in the work as a strategic attempt to recover the 'feminine' relation to the medium whilst the work was in progress. Here, I was interested in the idea that it is possible, through analogy, to 'jam' the conventions that allow an artwork to mirror male subjectivity and bodies. From this I have produced a text that is a kind of 're-enactment', or retracing, of formal decision

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making where at each stage I have tried to work out how medium related to the sexed body.[3] As I now see it, this strategy was an attempt to halt the trains of metaphorical imagery that inevitably led away from what the surface actually is, instead allowing it to become a screen onto which (male) desire is projected.

2. Haptic Deconstruction

The Figure / Ground Relation in Painting and Text

In making *Screen / Paintings* I continued to work with and develop ideas concerning the figure / ground relation in painting. I continued to perceive what I was doing as an extended inquiry into the implications (theoretical and practical) of pictorial space innovated by Frankenthaler. My interest in the figure / ground relation also, I realised, extended to an interest in how this relationship operated in text. Here, I tried to draw upon my experience as a painter. I also struggled with the deeper problem of the relation between visual / material forms and language. As a painter I became increasingly aware that for me it was impossible to unravel the complex intersection between the two.

Pictorial space in each of the *Screen / Paintings* is created through bringing together both sides of the picture plane, whereas, within Modernism, the logic of the figure / ground relation depends upon the constant reassertion of the flat, one-sided plane. Traditionally, the underside of a painting is invisible; it is physically distanced from its front — it is an either / or viewing choice.

During the period of high Modernism the structural relation between the written word and painting became extremely close in terms of formal organisation; for example, both regularly used geometrical arrangements within a rectangle. In painting the form of the grid became emblematic. Krauss writes of the grid:

"Flattened, geometricized, ordered; it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature.[4]

In making *Screen / Paintings* I used a geometric composition. Four rectangles were arranged symmetrically either side of a central divide. The material form of painting, however, was generated through a dynamic encounter between the actions of the body and the medium — a counterpoise to the abstract and hard-edged arrangement of the shapes within the painting. Academic text, reproduced according to conventions and mechanical means, invariably lacks an inherent material dynamism. This 'lack' of what I perceived to be an inherent energy in the text led me to explore text as a material object alongside that of painting. I wondered whether it might be possible to release the energy that was trapped within a text that I saw as a repressed form of matter.

I began to question whether it might be possible to form a body / body relation to text through acts which repeatedly returned it to a state prior to visual coherence / ordering? Would this allow the permeation, the motility of the body to intervene, and the possibility of an alternative / partial bodily recognition of self in the text?

If text were to be considered as a painting, then Op art would most readily come to mind. The hard-edged geometric designs produced by Op artists such as Bridget Riley explored the effect of 'optical flicker'. This gave the viewer an experience of a shimmering light that hovered across the picture plane. Op art, a late manifestation of Modernist abstraction, exemplifies its positivist ideology and values. The artist Peter Halley has commented:

> Op Art was the embodiment of the (Modernist Aesthetic) strategy. Ignoring history, ignoring traditional artistic craft, Op depicted the pulsating, almost electrical energy with which the markets of the industrial world were supposed to function.[5]

The visual immediacy of text can be likened to Op Art; geometric arrangements of black words have a tendency to shimmer, or quiver on the page, behind each letter appears a yellowish glow, or halos, sometimes there can be a partial fragmentation of whole strings of words. Op art evoked an intense and purely retinal stimulus that has been described by the American artist Ross Bleckner as 'a momentary schizophrenia where there was a perceptual rupture'.[6] He is referring to an effect that will engage and over stimulate the eye to such a degree that it will become divorced from perceptions of, for example, depth and tactility, that are mediated through the other senses.

Optic / Haptic Vision

I experimented with the form of theoretical text as I made *Screen / Paintings*. The texts used were fragments of 'The Breath of Women',[7] 'With-in-Visible Screen',[8] and 'The Intertwining - The Chiasm'.[9]

I began by crouching beneath *Inscriptions* and then transcribing the words I was able to see from this oblique angle. Intrigued by the word formations that resulted I then experimented further with the positioning of words and the gaps between. I was trying to respond to the rhythm sensed in the text and to bring this into visual form. I also experimented with colour. Finally, having first pre-selected words (intuitively), I began to crumple the text into forms. In the illustration at the beginning of the chapter you will see that I have sometimes cut or torn a particular word I wanted to emphasise.[10]

In an attempt to understand the implications these actions I want now to briefly turn to ideas put forward by Claude Gandelman whose fascinating research into the eye-touch concept may be applied to both painting and text.[11] Gandelman has developed a theory that builds on that which originated with the art historian Alois Riegl. Riegl argued that there are two opposing types of vision — either optic or

haptic. Optical vision is based on the scanning of objects according to their outlines whereas haptic vision "focuses on surfaces and emphasises the values of the superficies of the objects".[12] (*Haptikos* is from the Greek and means 'capable of touching.) This theory has been given more weight by recent research into the scanning movements of the eye whilst the subject is looking at either a picture or text. Optical vision is characterised by series of jumps between two points of fixation (saccades). However, Gandelman suggests that these diagrams also reveal the haptical element of the gaze. Here, he describes the blob like marks that appear during the scanning of an image by Paul Klee:

> These points are rather like large blots, and the extension of the black surfaces is due to the in-depth fixation of the observer's gaze as it was being printed on magnetic tape during the recording of the scanning path left by the fovea. These pools of darkness are the imprints of the touch of the eye when it ceased to jump with the linear saccades and remained fixed on specific spots, as if boring through canvas or paper. They are the indices of the haptical element in the observer's gaze.[13]

Gandelman extends the argument to suggest that the optical scanning links to metaphoric meaning, in which semantic leaps cross connect one word and another, whereas a separate haptic axis fixes on texture and colour and the non semantic elements of the text and relates to metonymic structures.

In retrospect I think my crumpled text pieces were an attempt to deconstruct text across a double axis. On one level, I attempted to allow the unconscious to come into play as I selected and revealed certain words, a process that in some way prised (condensed) metaphoric meaning from the text. However, at another level, the physical actions carried out on the text in response to colour, gaps, forms, were, I think, a haptic deconstruction of the text. The latter introduced depth and touch into textual response.

The text objects were placed on the studio floor and my aim was that I would glimpse strings of words as I moved back and forth systematically applying dripped wax to the surfaces of the *Screen / Paintings.* The lived, mobile body would be engaged in the making and absorbing of words simultaneously. Several views of *Theory / Forms* are shown at the beginning of this chapter.

Iteration / Reiteration

I used the idea of repetitious movement as a means of filtering ideas concerning the 'feminine' into the artwork at the level of making. The surfaces of *Screen /* *Paintings* are created through heating small pearls of wax plus interference colour on a double burner and then moving back and forth between the artwork, the medium and the *Theory / Forms* in order to apply the wax systematically. I had distanced myself from self-expression and these actions now verged on boredom, or simply being. This was a state in which I became a part of the visual field and not separate from it. At the time I experienced a heightened awareness of the vitality and reality of the surfaces I was creating.

A Move Away from the Concept of Self-Expression

I deliberately rejected the concept of self-expression as I made *Screen / Paintings.* Simply to be a woman does not necessarily lead to directly either speaking or painting as a woman. For example, Christine Battersby, in *Gender and Genius* (1989), and for whom the painter Jackson Pollock is one of many examples,[14] has argued that although the major figures within the Romantic tradition are invariably male, many have appropriated processes associated with the feminine.

During the early 1970s the practice of *écriture féminine* emerged. This is a term used to describe writing claimed to arise out of women's bodies and sexual experience. Whilst 'phallocentric' culture is argued to be dependent on the visible,

singular and specific form of male genitalia and sexual experience, female genitalia are multiple and contiguous. Hence the sexual experience of women tends to have less definite beginnings and endings, correspondingly, *écriture féminine* is said to be heterogeneous, process-orientated and fluid. Renée Lorraine notes the following characteristics: growth and development are continuous, and boundaries are unclear. There are frequent repetitions, and phrases are rephrased or conjoined. There is a resistance to the definitive, the highly structured, to closure, hierarchies, and the dialectical process.[15]

Écriture féminine can be viewed as similar to action painting in that it appears to echo some of the basic tenets of Romanticism, for example, the transposition of the self into the medium. To think of Irigaray's writing in this way is misleading — early readings of her work have tended to classify her as an essentialist who assumed an unproblematic relation between women's bodies and women's true selves.

Irigaray's view, expressed in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, is summarised by Rosalind Minsky: "Men speak from what Irigaray sees as the phallic 'feminine' from a male body, whereas women speak the 'feminine' from a woman's body which is habitually silenced or unheard."[16] In Irigaray's view, men who speak from what they believe to be the 'repressed feminine' are in fact appropriating 'femininity', they are able to adopt this position from the secure base of the male Imaginary that underlies the Western tradition.[17] For this reason Irigaray prefers to emphasise women as potential subjects in the Symbolic and society rather then as participants in the practice of *écriture féminine*.

Caroline Burke has pointed out that that Irigaray has not assumed a flow between the geography and sexuality of women's bodies and language: "Rather, Irigaray has suggested that female writing may be produced in analogy with the body and

that her awareness does not simply flow from it".[18] Burke views Irigaray's writing

as the attempt to create "an ideological space beyond the psychic economy of

patriarchy".[19] Coming from the basis of practice, I am not at all sure that this

space should be thought of entirely as ideological and thus dematerialised — if so it

would run the risk that accompanies any ideology, and would tend toward

becoming a static framework. My personal sense of the textual space opened by

Irigaray is that it is not purely conceptual but is visceral / physical. What interested

me was to discover and work within and through the material qualities of a

different space. Where would this be found? What would it look like, feel like?

3. Notes and Experimental Work made Prior to *Screen / Paintings*

The following is a description of experimental work I made before *Screen/Paintings*

and it is included because it gives insight into the ideas that underlie this body of

work.

I first became aware of the quality of dripped liquid on a surface after seeing a

retrospective exhibition of work by the artists Ed and Nancy Kienholtz in M.O.M.A.

Los Angeles in 1997. A strong response to their sculpture was overlaid with what

was initially irritation. That is, in recalling the work immediately after the show I

remembered the resin, a gooey and viscous mixture which was smeared over most

pieces of the sculpture, more strongly than the objects themselves. A week or so

after the exhibition the transparent drips remained strongly imprinted across my

vision — they had an extraordinary visual persistence. It seemed that these semi-

transparent drips operated across perception somewhat like a screen.

Initially I began to work on tracing paper. I chose this surface rather than

traditional canvas which would, I felt, have slanted the working process toward a

prescribed set of decision making derived from my training as a painter. At this stage I wanted to avoid any painterly marks that might spring out unconsidered from that tradition.

The semi-transparent tracing paper had wonderful inherent qualities that were in contrast to those of cartridge paper. Tracing paper seems to envelop light, taking light into itself, whereas cartridge paper is often a harder and colder white that deflects light. Surface and light are divided.

I discovered that if resin were applied to the surface of tracing paper that this would render it transparent. I began to apply resin drips to vertical screens, droplets that meandered stickily downwards, leaving transparent marks like snail trails. And I was reminded of the experience that I encountered each morning. In a semi-wakeful state, I would see that the large window above the bed had become opaque with condensation. At certain moments, small droplets of water would form and roll slowly downwards; these small rivulets of water opened a fragmented and blurry view into the sky and treetops of the exterior world. Being in this subliminal space of semi-wakefulness, looking into a reality that was constructed only partially, the window glowing and softly opalescent like the inside of a shell, reflected back to me a curious imaginative space. As I worked I attempted the recreation of these spatial qualities.

The drips of resin gave visual access to the space beyond the picture plane, and I overlaid this with dripped layers of interference colour and gel. The effect of this was that the surface became softened, opalescent. In certain lights it had a slightly pinkish hue, reminding me of the unique quality of skin, particularly that of children, how it blushes and glows when charged with feeling.

At this point of making, the surface felt a little too ambiguous, shifting to a degree where physical contact was lost. I dipped my fingers into opaque white paint then pressed them against the surface — I needed to locate myself in the work, to find a point of balance. The experience was a little like receiving a shiatsu massage, fingers press into points of the body, a reminder that knowledge stemming from the physical body is only one aspect of being, there are constructions of light and energy that exist beyond the boundaries of the haptic.

As I worked I was interested to find that the double sheets of tracing paper had melded at the edges each forming an envelope and into each of these I inserted a disc made of wax and interference colour embedded with hibiscus flowers. These objects had the right kind of ambiguity, their form remained indeterminate, slightly below the surface. And to find out what they were, the viewer had to touch them, to press the semi-transparent paper against the object in order to see through its surface. This was exactly what I wanted to happen, that curiosity would lead the viewer to want to explore the object, but that 'seeing' could only be arrived at through first touching. In this way the primacy of the eye in making formal judgements could be subverted.

I began to experiment with first muslin and then voile, on stretchers, each material was, like tracing paper, semi-transparent. I went back to working on stretchers because, at this point, I wanted to use the tradition of painting as a springboard, as a way of contriving meaning.

4. *Screen / Paintings*: Notes from Practice

At a certain point I began to apply paint from both sides of the surface, on the left from the front and on the right hand side from the underside of the work. Having

masked out each individual rectangle I would then apply wax. This was first heated on a double burner until liquid, interference colour in the form of dry pigment was added to this. Next, I would take a large quantity of the mixture on a brush and using sweeping horizontal brush strokes work freely from side to side of each individual rectangle. Gravity caused the liquid pigment to break rivulets running freely downwards. The wax would set rapidly and I would quickly return to the pot to reload the brush. It proved to be a utilitarian activity that required attention to materials at a continual level, but not an in depth attention.

From the front the viewer will see raised marks against the surface on the left hand side and the underside of the marks against semi-see-through voile are seen on the right. Viewed from behind this relationship is reversed. The work depended on both the changeable quality of light and the movements of the viewer to reveal its textured surface. For example, when light filters through from the 'back' of the work the painting appeared a murky subterranean green, but when light fell directly across the front of the painting it had registered as a fresh shell pink or violet. Natural light is mobile and changes throughout the day and this brought the surface to life in a chameleon like manner. As it grew dark the surface changed under artificial lights. I experimented with the work in front of water the shimmer of its surface could be seen through the 'screens' — this further destabilised the surface.

Corporeal Frameworks
I tried to find ways in which I could relate the medium to (my) female experience of inhabiting a body. I continued to draw on feminist thinking that argues that female subjectivity is formed in relation to, or mediated through, women's bodies as sexed.[20] In the case of the work I produced this raised difficult questions concerning not only who would judge whether this had been achieved, and how. But also, in visual terms, to imagine what feminine might look like is fraught with

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difficulty because there is a slender line between female stereotypes, largely generated through what men imagine women to be, and the unknown qualities of the potential feminine subject, that Irigaray invents strategies to release.

The Body of the Artist / The Body in the Work

In making *Screen / Paintings* I attempted to recover the body in the work and to do so, at some levels, the structure of the work paralleled the human form. I pursued this anthropomorphic association as a strategy that would, in the short term, provide a means of orientating myself as a practitioner within what has become a complex theoretical field. Further to this, I wanted to discover whether it would be possible to open individual elements of making to a revised meaning in relation to the feminine.

My own enhanced sense of bodily awareness acts as a focus for the elements, both material and conceptual, brought together in *Screen / Paintings*. Interactions between self and medium are structured through the experience of their being sometimes similar to, and sometimes different from myself. In referring to the medium of painting I include not only paint as a substance, but also the surface it is applied to and its support. It is the integrated structure that exists between these combined elements that produces the materiality of the work and this bears a complex relation to the body, or materiality, of the artist.

Medium and Meaning

In making *Screen / Paintings* I considered the stretcher as the point of inception in painting, not, as is generally assumed, the canvas. It is fairly common to hear the term 'virgin' canvas; this, apart from its obviously problematic connotations for the female painter, sets up the expectation that the canvas and support are only important in that they provide a surface awaiting inscription.[21] This brings them close to writing. In truth, the situation is quite different. The materiality associated

with pictorial surface depends on the precise relations between support, canvas and paint. Paintings are dynamic structures, whose layering of materials is inextricably entwined with cultural and historical conventions. These may be expressive of, or resonate with, the experience of being human and inhabiting a body; conversely, the organisation of materials may be in conflict with, or perhaps a denial of the physicality of the artist.

The following draws on some of my practice based findings in order to reflect on how the medium and body relate.

Stretcher / Skeleton

The stretchers were designed as tall rectangular shapes that would reflect the vertical bounded plane of the human figure. Each wooden frame was narrow on the face but deeper than is usual for a stretcher, a configuration that emphasised the internal structural / skeletal form of the artwork as a container with both interior and exterior surfaces.

The stretcher is an internal frame that, although hidden, registers its presence clearly in the quality of the taut flat canvas surface it gives support to. It is generally regarded as a purely functional necessity. However, this device (like the frame) does contribute to a specific visual aesthetic. Since the Renaissance the use of stretched canvas has been commonly used as a support for painting.[22] During Abstract Expressionism it became common practice to stretch large paintings onto a frame after their completion rather than beforehand. This allowed the painters to develop work out of interactions that were spontaneous and sensory, in the knowledge that the formal aspects of composition could be dealt with afterwards. Through what generally became known as 'cropping', relationships between the elements of line, colour, tone and so on could be enhanced or 'pulled out'. For example, the precise positioning of the straight edges of the rectangle in relation to

an image that is amorphous and loosely formed will draw out the dynamic interplay of the formal components of the image. Additionally, pulling a canvas taut across a frame will create a tense, flat surface and this also reveals the interlocking spatial relations within the image.[23]

Mountains and Sea is stretched exceptionally taut across its frame and the effect of this is to create what I felt to be an unsettling and uncomfortable relation between viewer and artwork on a physical level. This sensation may be interpreted through recourse to Lacan's thinking with regard to the formation of self-identity.   A child first begins to form an image of itself through identification with its erect, vertical and thus, it is argued by Lacan, phallic, image in the mirror. I suggest that the sensation of tension achieved through taut stretched canvas implicitly will signify the phallus.

The processes used in making large scale intuitive abstract painting can be crudely divided into two. First, interactions between painter and materials integrate touch and sight (hearing also may also be inferred here — the gestural movements of the artist are rhythmic). The relation between the senses is shifting and uneven, but tactility is very important and in this respect, I suggest that the sense of touch is a precondition of the visual during making. Secondly, the artist enters into a new set of decisions relating to the presentation of the work. At this point, the stretcher whose purpose is bound to the heightening (or exaltation even) of the formal relationships across the picture plane is vital although it remains invisible, midway between wall and pictorial surface. It perpetuates a formalist aesthetic based on judgements made through the eye.

Asked, in an interview with Emilio de Antonio, what happened to his painting after it has been made, the artist Larry Poons replied: "Well, I take it off the floor and roll it up and take it upstairs and put it on a wall and shape it." De Antonio

continued: "How do you determine where you're going to crop it when you take it upstairs?" and Poons answered: "By my eyes. You know, how it feels."[24]

If one stands back in order to make a visual judgement about painting, the sensory acts that fed into the painting are suppressed. The entire visual field is read in relation to the figure. Eyesight, privileged and set apart from the other senses, results in distanced and more purely visual pleasure.

Rosalind Krauss relates the dynamic set in train through elevating a painting which is horizontally produced to the vertical plane to Freud's theory of sublimation. In psychoanalytic terms, to sublimate is to convert or modify an instinctual (often sexually derived) impulse into a culturally or socially acceptable activity. Krauss takes as her example Jackson Pollock's practice of working instinctively at ground level, and this, she suggests, corresponds with what Freud describes as "sniffing and pawing", the animal senses in close proximity with the genitals and sexual excitation. In this position sexual desire is inextricably bound to the senses of touching, seeing and smelling. However, Pollock's work is exhibited, not on the floor as it was made, but on a wall in a gallery and it is thus elevated to culture. Krauss forges a similarity of effect between the reorientation from a horizontal to a vertical plane in painting and Freud's theory of the transition of man from 'all fours' to an erect posture. As the result of such a move, Freud argues, sight will become dominant: displaced from its integration with the other senses it is, instead, projected onto the overall shape of the body.[25]

Front / Back

In *Screen / Paintings* I have applied paint from the front as well as the back of the painting. If the painting is turned over, the opposite side of the canvas can be seen in relation to the depth of the stretcher bars as forming a shallow receptacle. This is the back of the work. However, if the painting is envisioned as a surrogate for

the human body, rather than as a functional structure, these terms are then reversed. The human back is fairly flat, protective, a rigid structure of bone that encases the viscera; the reproductive organs (either visible or invisible) are also found at the front of the body. As such it bears marked structural similarities to the tense, stretched surface of canvas that is shaped around the stretcher bars, where as the shallow contained shape on the underside of the painting corresponds more closely to the vulnerable open form of the front of the human body.[26] Envisaging shape in painting through a resemblance to the human body led me to reverse the manner in which I conceptualised the front and back of the work. Traditionally paintings are hung against the wall and so this aspect of the work is rarely seen.

Frankenthaler produced images that hinted at their reverse side; for example, the paleness of *Mountains and Sea* (1952) appeared very much like the imagery that appears on the underside of a stain painting.[27] She herself noted: "Since the canvas was on the floor, and the paint was of a creamy liquid consistency, it formed pools and bled into the canvas and onto the floor.[28] In her painting *The Maud* (1963), Frankenthaler utilised the unexpected effects that appeared on the back of the canvas through turning this over and working back into this surface.

More recently the painter Maria Chevska has explored the application of paint from the underside, and this, as has been noted by the critic Michael Archer, brings the viewer into relation with an image that appears, initially, at least, to be the reverse of what was intended by the artist:

> Firstly, it becomes clear that the right hand 'canvases' have been largely painted from the rear, and that what is visible is the pigment that has seeped through the material from its other side. That is, we are looking behind an image as much as at it. What we can see is to some degree the reverse of what was intended.[29]

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However, the image that materialises from the underside is not simply a paler mirror version of the artist's intended image. To work from the back of the material support will cause the artist to relinquish visual control over the emergent visual image. What are the implications of working 'blind' in this manner? For Chevska, I suspect that this would mean highly focused concentration as words are dislocated from familiar form and traced in reverse, each reformulated through memory, gesture and touch. And then, as through this process, the words appear on the flat frontal plane of the painting, each is distorted through the behaviour of fluids; these seep beyond outline or edge (of each letter). Traces of paint are in places so delicate as to barely register, in other areas thick sticky pools of pigment congeal. Liquidity operates as a kind of screening that mediates language in accord with its own rules.

For Archer, the forms that have appeared on the front of the picture appear to struggle toward recognition as words:

> Secondly, the semblance of chaos is almost immediately undermined by the sense that some marks wish to be read as letter forms. And indeed this is true. Although made in a manner similar to the left hand panels, by dribbling paint, these images have been written rather than painted. Chevska has in each case written three words, some of which can be deciphered, others of which remain obscured either by inadequate penetration of the material, or by the obliterating spread of excess paint.[30]

Liquidity is posited as the antithesis of language by Yve-Alain Bois; he notes that: "Language is a hierarchical combination of bits. Liquid, on the contrary, (except on a molecular level), is indivisible...."[31] However, what is of interest in Chevska's use of language is that her painterly words are permanently suspended between form and non/form. They are caught in a mid space between language (whose resolved materiality is embedded culturally), and what passes for the visual (although in this case the visual is paradoxically rendered through non-sight). Potentially,

Chevska's paintings hover on the borders of the dissolution of the word / matter dichotomy that is remarked by Irigaray:

> Fluid – like that other, inside/outside of philosophical discourse – is, by nature, unstable. Unless it is subordinated to geometrism, or (?) idealised.[32]

Finally, I want to come back to the possibility created through working processes that are carried out from the underside of the canvas. I have suggested that, in the case of both Chevska and Frankenthaler, this was to forego conscious control over the image, and as a result to produce an image that is mediated through the behaviour of liquids. Additionally, in Chevska's painting, the effect was to overturn the conventional structure of the relation between viewer and image — this 'jams' the mirroring function of painting. In looking at an abstract painting, the viewer will identify with the movements (made in real time) by the painter. However, in the case of Chevska's painting, the viewer here must introduce into the act of viewing an imagined space (an alterity), a performance that is orchestrated from a space that is unseen.

Provisionally, this is a space that can be considered to be outside of culture — the back of a painting is traditionally turned to the wall (banished). This is quite unlike the front, which is designed to be seen. It reinforces certainty, cohesion, mirrors the abstracted image of the male within the symbolic order. Fluidity, in its emergence from the underside, its skewing of the language of solids seems to open a potential space for an alternative Imaginary.

Skin

In *Screen / Paintings* I became interested in the relation between pictorial surface and skin and I tried to create a surface that explores different states of permeability and would be read as a kind of bodily interface between viewer and external world. The painterly surfaces created by Ross Bleckner have often been

described in terms of skin.[33] For example, he described the pictorial surfaces of his

Dot paintings through analogy with the body: "I thought of painting as skin, in a

sense holding things back, 'in place,' existing tensely over that which it

represses".[34] Bleckner implies that beyond the physical, skin represents an uneasy

and fragile border between the social / cultural domain and the inner world of the

subject that is visceral, psychological and libidinal.

Lacan, like Freud, promotes ocularcentrism in the construction of the ego and in

both cases it is the phallic, virile, male body that is privileged. However, Freud's

account remains essentially realist; for example, in 'The Ego and the Id' Freud

represents the emergence of the ego "through a gradual process of differentiation

initiated through the organism's confrontation with reality".[35] Bleckner has found

within Freud a fruitful basis for his own theorisation of painting outlined in the

essay 'Transcendent Anti-Fetishism'. In Lacan's account of the Mirror stage the

visual is not only primary, but it has become dissociated from the sensory and

corporeal body, although it is not, as Grosz has pointed out "the only kind of

perceptual identification possible".[36] As an example, Grosz gives the congenitally

blind, a group who have, of course, egos and a conception of space, although

interactions between the two will be perceptually different:

> The body's felt orientation, its position in space, the ways it takes up that
> space, the relations between the body's positions and that of others, the
> subject's capacity to identify with other subjects, must be perceptually
> different in the blind.[37]

Importantly, Grosz also draws attention to widely differing experiences of the body

which she points out will also vary greatly for sighted subjects. I think it possible

that the bodily differences, (and this will include of course those through race and

gender) may be more fully able to emerge if the processes of differentiation are

interpreted through a model that privileges touch and bodily mapping. Here, I

think that Anzieu's concept of the 'skin ego' can be positively brought to bear on the conceptualisation of the interactions between the artist and his / her materials. Anzieu, building on Freud's concept of the homunculus, argues for the recognition of the role of skin as a part of the construction of the ego. This he suggests can be conceived of as a sensorimotor projection of the surface of the body. The framework suggested by Anzieu for the understanding of the relation between self and other is based on tactility that relates to emerging and fading sensations of volume and surface. This is very different from Lacan's Mirror stage where the ego is dependant on the formation of a distinct outline and this, in turn, causes a severance between figure and ground that will obliterate corporeality as it becomes privileged in the formation of vision.

The skin is more essential to life than, for example, sight. One can survive if blind but if as much as one seventh of the skin's surface is destroyed this will cause death. It is through the complexity of skin that the infant learns to perceive the world; if all is well, its earliest experiences will be the beginning of a positive differentiation:

> The infant comes to perceive its skin as a surface as it experiences the contact of its body with that of the mother, and within the framework of a secure relation of attachment to her. Thus it arrives not only at the notion of a boundary between the exterior and interior but also at the confidence for progressively mastering the orifices, for it cannot feel confident as to their functioning unless it also possesses a basic feeling that guarantees the integrity of its bodily envelope.[38]

The skin forms a permeable / impermeable boundary between the felt inner self — bodily sensations such as fullness, pleasure and fear, are all mediated through touch. As a result both the corporeal and the psychic may be related and productively explored through the skin without their being binarised. Touch and intuition are privileged by Anzieu towards the building of a strong 'skin ego'.

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Breath

I left the centre strip in each of the *Screen / Paintings* bare. I had made the work

to be placed in front of water — its shifting, shimmering surface could be glimpsed,

although only ever as a partial view, through movement on the part of the viewer.

The 'real' or natural world that exists beyond the artwork. I also thought of these

gaps as gills, a breathing space in the image. Breathing / seeing. I did not

differentiate. A 'breathing eye' is different to a purely 'seeing eye'.

The artist Maria Chevska utilises breath as criterion for visual decision making.

> In one painting from 1992 I sewed a paragraph of writing (Hélène Cixous)
> on to a piece of taffeta, which I then reversed on the stretcher to expose
> the reverse side of frayed and rhythmic writing. This allowed the form to
> 'breathe' visually, one panel within several panels.[39]

Irigaray has pointed out that breathing is an experience we all share, common to

all and democratic, it is fundamental to life in a way that vision can never be. The

mediation of seeing through breathing may be another way of recovering the

physical body in the artwork. I experimented with overlaying the *Screen / Paintings*

with X-ray images of lungs. This helped me think through the issues in the work

but did not work on a visual level. I also experimented with making video

recordings of *Screen / Paintings* through holding the camera against my body so

that the movement of the body, as I breathed, became a part of the work.

The Siting of Screen / Paintings

Screen / Paintings pushed the dependency between painting and its surround to an

extreme I had not ventured in previous work. I found, for example, that if the

Screen / Paintings were placed against a wall their surfaces lost all animation, they

actually appeared to mimic or become an extension of that plane and thus the

gallery. If the works were to be animated, then, they needed to be free standing

and here there were several possibilities. For example, if, as I had intended, *Screen / Paintings* were positioned in front of water, their surfaces would capture the movement and shimmer of water, another transparent surface and thus be destabilised. I was able to show the work in front of water at Littoral, The Art Haven Gallery, in Exeter. During this period I also tried placing the work in a lounging, casual position against the pillars in the gallery. These informal poses fascinated me. The work became as if part of a crowd, the viewer could then engage in an unfolding relation with the work. The work was also exhibited at Littoral, Stade, Germany; in this case the hanging of the work was largely handled by technicians who suspended each *Screen / Painting* side by side at about a foot above the floor. This was done with great precision and emphasised the formal aspect of the work. Finally, I found that a raking light most effectively revealed the difference in surface qualities either side of the picture plane. On the underside of the work, the textural qualities of the materials were not only more evident, but these also gave the impression of being formed less self-consciously. This side bore the evidence of process, wax pooled in the internal space against the stretcher frame and overall it felt less finished. The interference colour changed throughout the day in accord with the play of natural light.

5. Conclusion

I found that to temporarily distance myself from the concept of self-expression was extremely productive as a strategy. I was able to use the reflective space opened through analogy to find alternative ways to think about the relation between the body and the medium. I had also attempted to empty the work of subjective content so that the 'mirroring' aspect of the work was exposed and this allowed me to think through some of the issues of identification with art work in a Lacanian context.

I found it was possible to bring the back (or underside) of the painting in to the process on both a theoretical and practical level. Theoretically, I think that this aspect of painting raises interesting questions and opens rich new territory that could be further explored. In the first place I equated the back of the artwork with the feminine; this could be seen, like women, if argued through Irigaray, to be an aspect rendered invisible within culture. Furthermore, I associated the back of the painting with the unconscious. However, my intention was not to reinforce dichotomous thinking that would then see speaking from the underside as a politicised intervention into the front of the artwork (symbolising culture). What I believe to have been important here was the discovery that it was possible to bring the front and back of the pictorial surface into close proximity — both sides could be seen from either side simultaneously. There was, in effect, a 'speaking between' the two.

For the viewer I believe the qualities of this surface opened a reflective space. Audiences at Littoral (Germany) and Art Haven (Exeter) tended to move around the work, surfaces were examined and quite often touched, I observed that people would crouch down and look carefully at the back of the work, especially where the wax had pooled inside the frame. The gallery talk I gave with Chris Cook seemed to elicit a great deal of interest from female members of the audience.

However, it was at this point that I decided that attempts to 'prove' that my work displayed material qualities that were specifically feminine through using the exhibiting space as a 'testing' space were not productive given the aims of my research. What I was attempting to do was to find ways of relating to my materials from my sexually specific position as a woman. However, to follow Irigaray's thinking, the feminine is not recognised within the symbolic order; what we do recognise are 'feminine stereotypes'; these, it can be assumed, are men's

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perceptions of the feminine, and are not true to the experience of women. I decided from this point to focus concentration on process alone.

Additionally, through making *Theory / Forms* I also discovered that the material form of text could be brought, through pursuing a haptic reading, closer to the body. If a kind of haptic deconstruction that operates through response to and opening up of texture, gaps, and so on, is followed through, then the meaning of the text could be redirected in accord with the lived or tangible body. This is quite different to an optical reading, which would be chiefly contrived through metaphorical association. Through making *Theory / Forms* I explored the notion of haptic deconstruction. The scattered *Theory / Forms* set up interactions between body and textual meaning that derived from a reiterative relation with the text. Textual meaning was absorbed through my body as I moved back and forth in the act of applying the medium. Peripheral vision, random focus and the glimpses of words were important.

Finally, and unexpectedly, I discovered that the light in the space in which the work was made strongly influenced interactions between self and materials and thus determined the final form of the artwork. I will explain this in more depth in Chapter Six.

Notes to Chapter Five

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1 Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction,* p.100.

2 Vasseleu, *Textures of Light,* p.10.

3 This is quite different from the concept of 'phenomenal formalism' put forward in *Art and Objecthood* by Fried. Fried, whose essay extends some of Greenberg's

ideas, attempts to ground metaphysical thinking concerning the concept of 'presence' in the material facticity of painting. For him, the painting is a self-contained object that will ideally transcend the viewer. My aim in *Screen/Paintings* is quite different. I have tried to set up the conditions for a slow unravelling of the relation between the materiality of the artwork and body of the viewer. The artwork does not 'script' this event. *Screen/Paintings* are envisaged as a quiet intervention into the space between the viewer and the exterior world. See Fried, *Art and Objecthood.*

4 Krauss, 'Grids' in the *Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths.* P.9.

5 Halley, 'Painting at the End of History', p.132.

6 Siegal, 'Geometry Resurfacing', p.28.

7 Irigaray, 'The Breath of Women'.

8 Lichtenberg Ettinger, 'With-in-Visible Screen'.

9 Merleau-Ponty, 'The Intertwining - The Chiasm'.

10 A very similar experiment was carried out by Lyotard: see Krauss and Alain-Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide,* p.103.

11 Gandelman, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts,* pp.5-11.

12 Gandelman, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts,* p.5.

13 Gandelman, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts,* p.8.

14 Battersby, *Gender and Genius,* pp.40-41.

15 Lorraine, 'Feminist Criticism'. p.150.

16 Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender,* p.196.

17 Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One,* p.157.

18 Burke, 'Irigaray Through the Looking Glass', p.51.

19 Burke, 'Irigaray Through the Looking Glass', p.45.

20 For detailed explication of these arguments see the following: Grosz, *Volatile Bodies,* Gatens, *A Critique of the Sex Gender Distinction*, Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* and Kirby, *Telling Flesh: the Substance of the Corporeal.*

21 Gubar, '"The Blank Page" and Issues of Female Creativity'.

22 Through discussion with Peter Hartley, painting restorer at Manchester Museum and Art Gallery, I discovered that the first use of canvas on a wooden frame is attributed to Bellini in 1425. The practice of using stretcher keys to tauten the canvas developed much later in the eighteenth century.

23 The procedure for stretching a canvas onto a wooden frame is generally as follows. If the canvas is large it is preferably laid face down on a clean floor and

the stretcher then carefully positioned on top of the material. The canvas is wrapped around the stretcher bar and fixed in place with a staple gun. The best results are achieved through working evenly from the mid-point on one side to its opposite — this avoids a distortion in the warp and weft of the cotton. The canvas should be taut, but not overly so, because subsequent changes in temperature, for example, warm conditions of a gallery after the cool damp of a studio, can result in the canvas contracting thus causing the stretcher to bow. The aim is to create a flat canvas surface of the correct tension across the face of the stretcher.

24 De Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters Painting*, p.49.

25 Freud, 'Civilisation and its Discontents', pp.99-100.

26 I am fascinated by the way in which the body is perceived in the practice of shiatsu massage. The following is an explanation of the relation between front and back of the body by shiatsu practitioner Gill Cooke: "The body is something like a shallow rectangle in that it has a top and a bottom, is long and narrow and it also has sides. The back is more yang, it is protective, shell like and has a dynamic energy. The front is more vulnerable, it houses the more vulnerable visceral organs. The energy associated with the front is slower and quite different to that at the back. However, the relation between the two sides is not so clearly divided as this suggests — there is a continual interchange of movement from front to back and vice versa" (personal conversation, 1999).

27 The painter James Brooks made work that utilised the verso of the canvas. Following experimentation with gluing paper onto canvas he became fascinated with the shapes formed on the verso and worked back into these to form images. Brooks and Frankenthaler met in the winter of 1948-9.

28 De Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters Painting,* p.70.

29 Angel Row Gallery (catalogue, unpaginated), *Perpetua* (1995).

30 Angel Row Gallery (catalogue, unpaginated), *Perpetua* (1995).

31 Krauss and Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide,* p.124.

32 Irigaray, 'The Mechanics of Fluids', p.112.

33 See for example, Dennison, 'Ross Bleckner: Painter of Light', p.31; and Crow, 'Surface Tension: Ross Bleckner and the Conditions of Painting's Reincarnation', p.101.

34 Dennison, 'Ross Bleckner: Painter of Light', p.35.

35 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies,* p.36.

36 Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, p.39.

37 Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction,* p.39.

38 Anzieu, *The Skin Envelope,* p.30.

39 Unpublished correspondence between author and Maria Chevska, July 2002.

Chapter Six

PHOTOWORKS

Description of Work

Following a number of experiments using alternative processes in the darkroom I produced a series of large-scale photoworks. These were made through projecting acetate *Text / Forms* onto photosensitive paper. The acetate was first transformed through burning into buckled forms; the carbonised surfaces were then worked into through scratching, painting and the adhesion of dust, dead insects and cobwebs. Each image has been produced twice, the right way up and then in reverse. These are then joined on a central strip to give the effect of symmetry, although on closer inspection it will become apparent that the two sides are not identical. The work, which was made using Forte Polywarmtone paper, ranges in scale from 48 x 108 inches to approximately 40 x 72 inches.

Plate 21 *Photowork 1*, (detail), 2000. Silver gelatin print (108 x 44 inches).

Plate 22   *Photowork 1*, (detail), 2000. Silver Gelatin print (108 x 44 inches).

Plate 23 *Photowork 1* (detail), 2000. Silver Gelatin print (108 x 44 inches).

Plate 24   *Photowork 2*, 2000. Silver Gelatin print (80 x 48 inches).
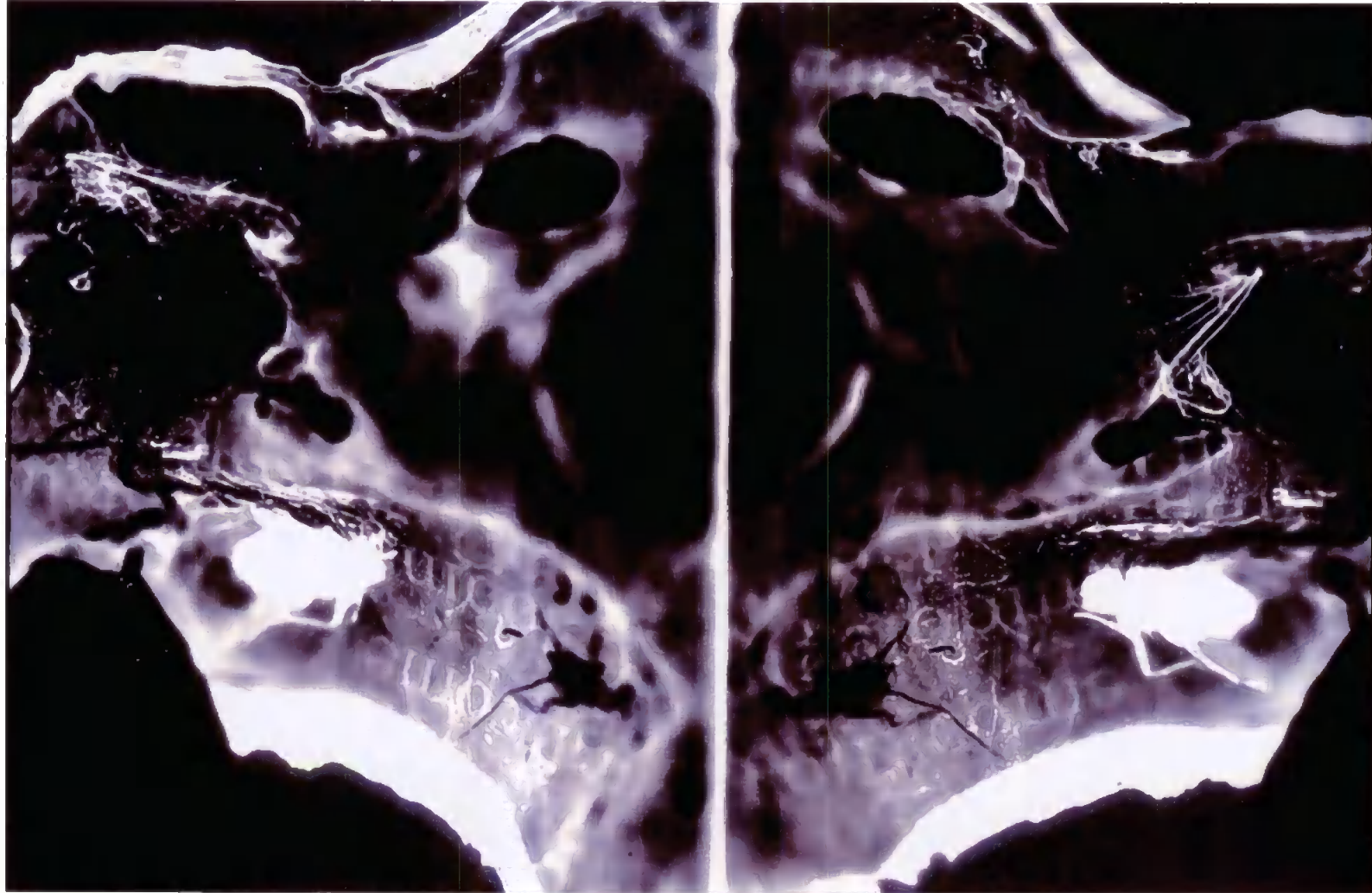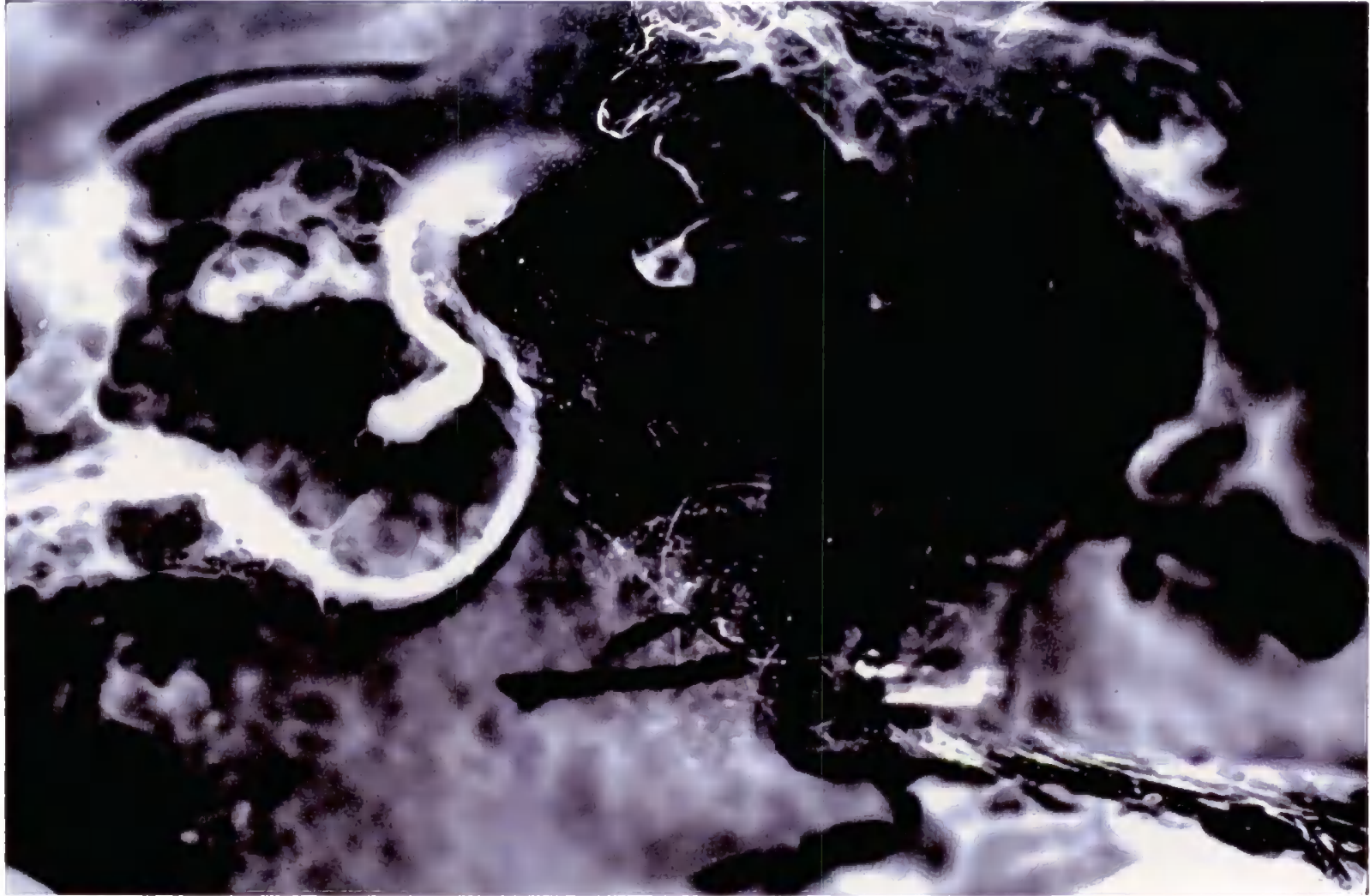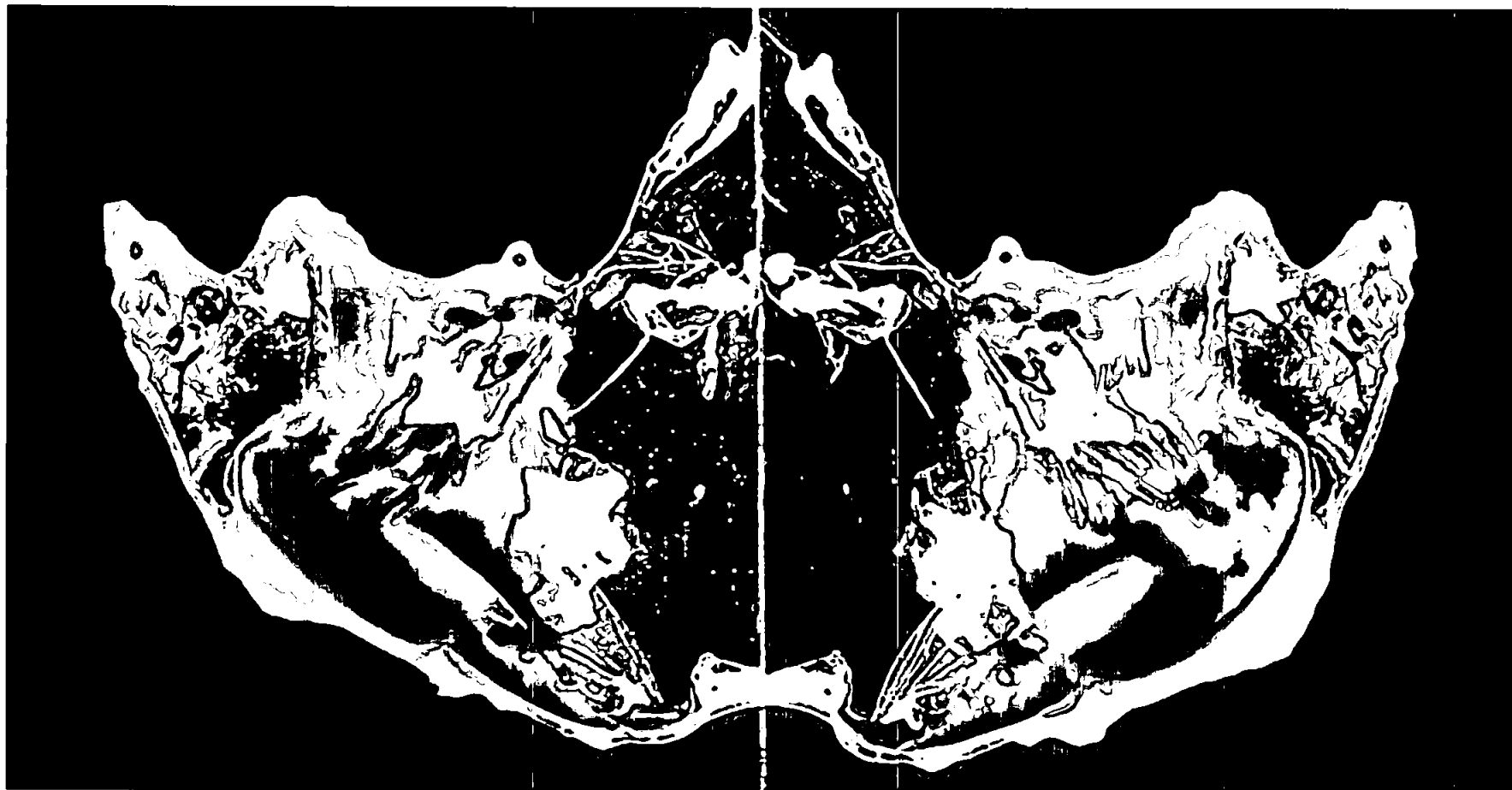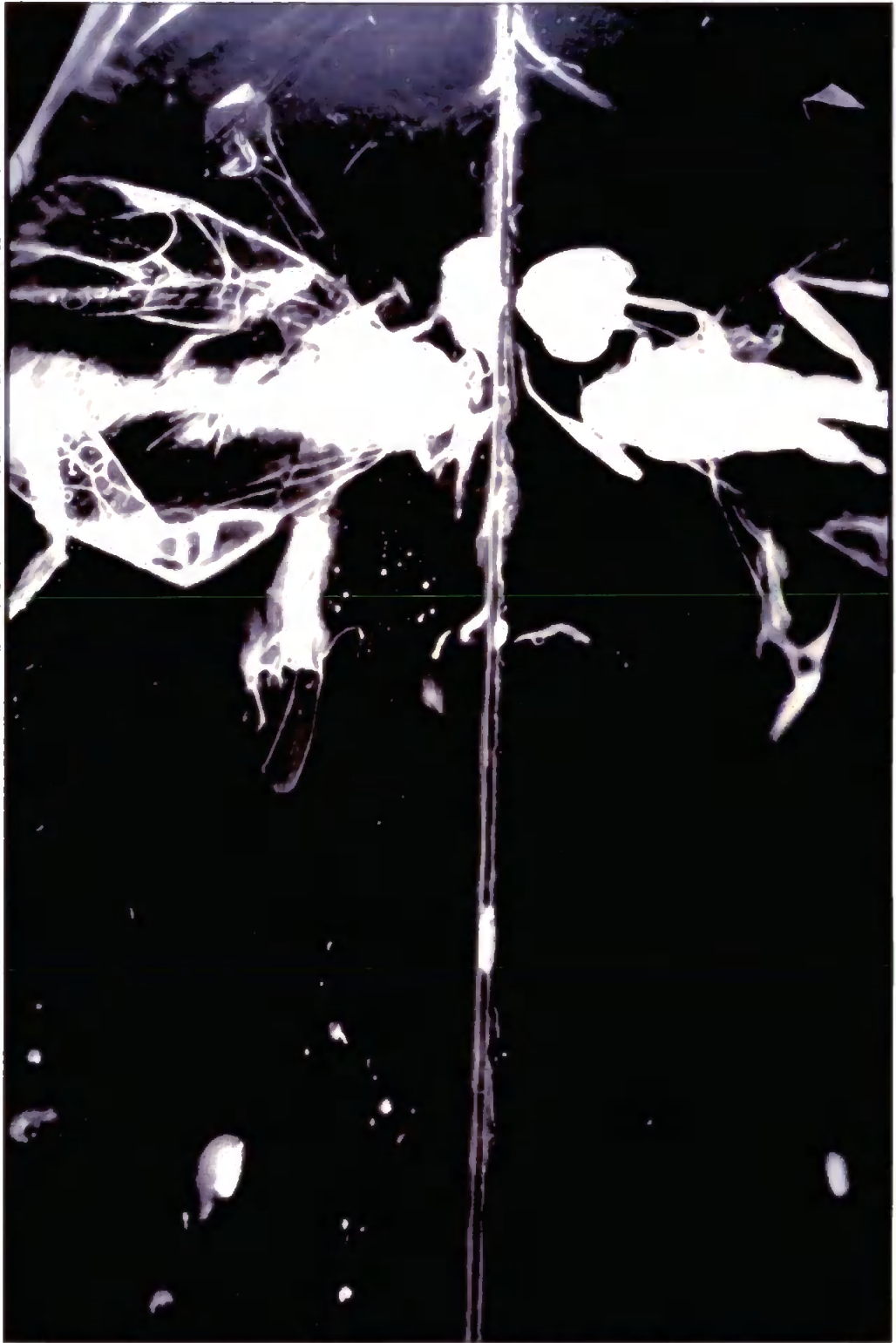
Plate 25. *Photowork 2*, (detail), 2000. Silver Gelatin print (80 x 48 inches).
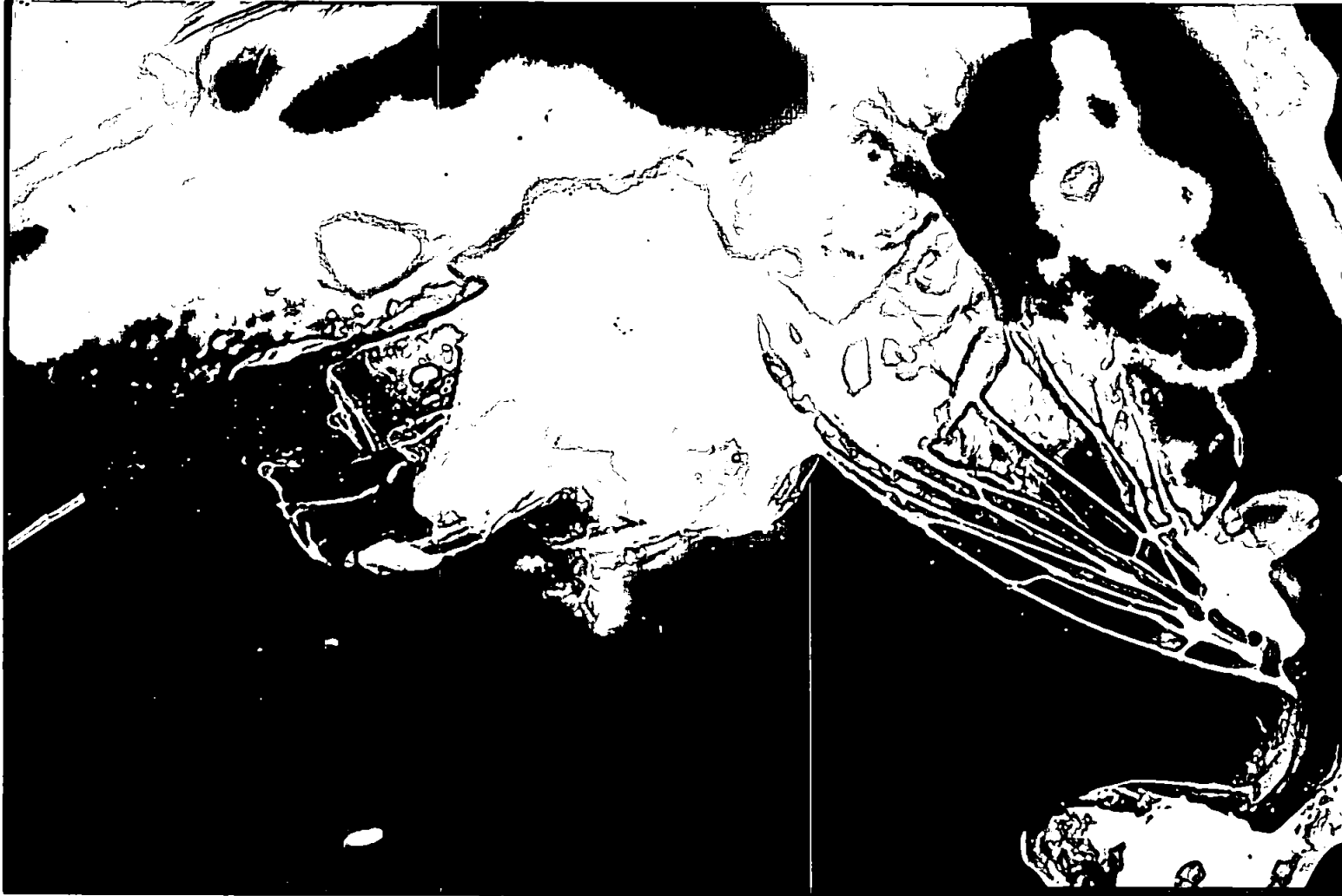
Plate 26 *Photowork 2*, (detail), 2000. Silver Gelatin print (80 x 48 inches).

1. Introduction

After making *Screen / Paintings* I realised that the final form of the work had been influenced by the studio as a space of production. This factor had been overlooked because I had focused, up to this point, on the relation between self, text and medium. Below, in Section Two, I draw on my experience as a painter as I consider the way in which space and light in the studio serve to reinforce a subject / object division in painting that privileges sight as a basis of aesthetic value. From here, aware of the importance of light in structuring the relation between the artist and the medium, I decided to transfer the processes I used into the darkroom. This, I believed, would circumvent 'pure seeing' as a part of the process of making. Thus, in low level light, interactions with liquids, light and text would shift toward the body and the unconscious.

At this juncture in the research, my approach to making changed abruptly. I now found the deconstructive methods and strategies I had previously put in place restricting and far too *self-conscious*. And although I did recognise that these had been highly effective in exposing the complex intersection between the material, psychological, sexual, I now riled against this approach. This was an irrational response — one, perhaps, striking out at the institutional framework that my work then referenced. I returned to a more spontaneous method of working, one in which the unconscious, however problematic as a concept, could play a part. The contents of the unconscious may be communicated by either linguistic or visual means. Visual imagery, arguably, can more accurately reflect the illogical structures of the unconscious than the generally linear form of text. My intention, however, was to break down the division between text and visual imagery: this led me to respond to the written word as a visual / material entity albeit in a highly repressed form. However, the media through which ideas are conveyed (whether text or visual) is likely to be in accord with male subjectivity. How then, during

making, could I set in train modes of subverting, redirecting, thoughts, feelings and forms, as these emerged through applying theory, but avoid this becoming a rationalising overlay? There are several ways in which I set out to do this, not the least of which was to employ the seditious act of burning and reforming text. My aim was to bring the materiality of the text closer to the body, as a form no longer flat but buckled, charred and organic, and with traces of decay and scarification. Section Three is a practice text written in the darkroom. This describes thoughts and feelings that fed into artwork. Finally, in Section Four I have produced a text that relates my own ideas (revealed through writing the practice text) to historical and theoretical issues. What I have attempted to do is establish the beginnings of a practice-led theorisation of alternative darkroom processes. I have tried to do this through questioning implicit values that underlie different aspects of process with an aim that is to create a potential space for women's subjectivity in making. I have organised these ideas under the following four headings: Light, Liquids, the Unconscious and Touch.

2. Studio Light and a Subject / Object Division in Painting that Privileges Sight

Traditionally painters have favoured a northerly light. My own studio is no exception. It is organised to achieve a quality of light that is cool and evenly diffused. The walls and ceiling have been covered in a pure white emulsion and this, through reflection, maximises the light that filters through a frosted skylight set in the roof. The side-window has been covered with muslin to subdue direct sunlight — this may create changing shadows that fall across the image in progress creating a separate visual order from that intended (and controlled by) the artist. On a bright day, light is dissembled, and there is a sense of being enclosed within an opalescent interior which, like the inside of a shell, screens out exterior reality.

The studio arrangement I have described is a common arrangement amongst painters working today and is part of a tradition. Leonardo de Vinci's notes include the following advice: "small rooms or dwellings discipline the mind, large ones distract it. Light should come from the north in order that it may not vary. If you have it from the south, keep the window screened with a cloth".[1] Painting, as a practice, has undergone radical change since Leonardo's time, not least in a shift from the representation of religious ideas toward modernist abstraction and a concern with the formal components of making. However, the arrangement of the studio has remained remarkably consistent and has not reflected these developments.

From a feminist perspective, it has been argued that the studio, which has traditionally facilitated individual male creativity, is a problematic space for women.[2] Although in agreement with this basic premise, rather than to reject hermetic working spaces my aim was to attempt a deeper analysis of the relation between self, the medium and space of production.[3] Here, solitary immersion in a series of interactions with the medium formed an integral part of my project.

From my experience of making large-scale painting, I think that it can be divided into two separate modes of interaction. On the one hand, there is a tactile and sensory engagement with materials, and in this case painting can be viewed as an act that stems from the lived body and is concerned with spatiality and temporality. In my experience, it sometimes happens that whilst painting in this way there is a sense that the boundary between self and materials dissolves. The materials feel like a part of me and I cannot distance myself. I lose the sensation of inhabiting a body that is contained. These are periods where there is a kind of fragmentation or confusion between the form that the medium takes and how I experience myself as without outline or edge. At these points, images (that are

less than fully formed) flow between myself and the materials, prior to their translation into either words or complete visual concepts. They are glimpses of something felt rather than seen. On the other hand, when one is standing back from the work in order to judge emergent formal relationships, when the artwork is viewed in its entirety, conscious aesthetic decisions involve the eye to the detriment of the other senses. This is more obviously 'cultural' seeing; whilst considering the work in this way, references to, and comparisons with, many other examples of painting are made.

I am suggesting that the process of painting is based on a shift between dislocated states: the one comes through the eye and is more strongly marked by culture, the other seems less mediated, more intuitive, more connected to the body. I am aware that my use of a binary description of the processes of painting is obviously problematic as it may lead to the perpetration of mutually exclusive categories. This was not my intention, but I did find it helpful in the short term to clarify this division.

In the painting studio, light precipitates a subject / object divide. Cool, even and controlled light (much as is found in a gallery) directs the undivided attention of the painter onto the painting, and the painting is in turn seen as pure and quite separate from its surroundings. The viewing position becomes centred on the internal relationship between the formal elements across the surface of the image and is not disturbed by, for example, the flickering play of sunlight. This subject / object division is similarly replicated and reinforced during the process of academic reading that is usually carried out at a desk. The (immobile) reader ideally will control light so that it will evenly and effectively expose the horizontal text on the page. Painting and text each, it seems, require a reader / viewer to take an ideological stance premised on control and distance, and this blocks the flow or interchange between the corporeality of the artist / viewer / reader and the

materiality of the artwork or text. I began to question whether studio light did, in some way, obliterate the female subject whilst she was involved in painting.

3. Practice Text / Photoworks

My use of materials in the darkroom stemmed from my training as an abstract painter. The photoworks were worked on for long periods of time, maybe three to four hours. I worked back and forth amongst the fluids, timing very little, sometimes re-exposing the images to light and working back into them. The trays of liquids became increasingly contaminated, this resulted in the creation of accidental effects across the surfaces of the work, although I was unable to see this until after the image was completed and brought out into the light.

Through working in the darkroom I attempted to prolong the sensory, tactile input in the work. The darkroom is lit only through the soft glow of reddish safe lights, and in this lighting it is not possible to clearly see the image; close tonal ranges are lost in the half-light. As a painter, I am used to light revealing subtle modalities of tone and I found this was, at first, highly frustrating. It felt like an impediment. Later I began to view this lack of being able to see clearly as constructive in that it supported intuition, remembered effects, guesswork, in a melancholy space. I began to work more confidently through touch, remembering the order of the chemistry and where I had put the materials I worked with — a mapping through the bodily co-ordinates. The work began to form in relation to the tactile.

I made these camera-less photoworks in a wet darkroom located within an institution (Plymouth University). If a building is equated with the form of a body, then to enter the wet darkroom is a visceral experience. Situated in the inner recesses of the building, it has no exterior walls or windows. The door is heavy and

closes softly, perfectly fitting its frame, allowing no light to filter through. Sound is muffled. The rhythm of the day is conveyed through the soft rise and fall of voices as people pass by outside; towards evening, this sound subsides. Other sounds that mark time in the darkroom are interwoven: constantly running water, the regular drip of a tap, the ticking of the clock. Sometimes I am aware of my own heartbeat.

Once the overhead lights are off, as they must be when work is in progress, processes are carried out under the soft reddish glow of the safe lights. Architectural edges become blurred. It is a little like a cell, biological rather than architectural. It is scotopic — a space of regression.

The darkroom dislocates the body in both time and space. It seems to open a pathway back into imagery associated with mind and body. Immersion in the imagery and the Imaginary? On reflection, the term imagery is inaccurate. It emphasises vision, and vision, or at least a particular formulation of seeing — one that, in Irigaray's view, attempts to organise itself around the appropriation of the maternal experience — will cause what is tangible or felt to vanish. I think that what I probably have experienced are better described as perceptions; these sensations are on the cusp of being realised through visual form, they may even seem to project that form. Sometimes I try to let materials behave as they seem to suggest, in accord with their physical properties, and then attempt to capture what I feel to be the potential sense of form suggested by the physicality of both my body and materials. It is at this level, prior to using speech that what I think of as 'channelling' takes place. This is a movement between the body and the medium used and includes text, liquids and light. This is not necessarily a free flow between entities because materials and mind all have different physical consistencies and are also mediated through different histories. Ideas (perhaps

stemming from the unconscious) and matter can be set in motion, but they do not always transmute effortlessly.

The work was made on the darkroom floor where the red-tinged darkness pooled and gathered. As I felt for the edges of the light-sensitive paper I worked with, or reached for scissors, masking tape or other *tools* in the textured darkness, I had the uncanny experience of losing sight of my hand. The shift away from sight resulted in an intense awareness of my body as merging into the space; the sense of a body without clearly defined edges. There was a sense of dislocation from the external world, and of disorientation — of knowing the edges of body, not through sight but through physical contact, through touching liquids and light.

I had taken pages of acetate text into the darkroom. Motivated by a desire to liberate meaning trapped within the text as hard copy, I attempted to transform it. First, I decided to subvert the uneasy figure / ground relation — black words against the glare of a white page. Initially this was done through photocopying pages of text on to acetate. Black words, previously differentiated from their smooth white background through an extreme of tone, were now marked out from their transparent support by opacity. The words had 'body' or substance against acetate that was almost invisible, a translucent surface glistening under the safe lights. In the low level lighting of the darkroom reading now became something more like scrying.

It was at this point that I began to set fire to my acetate sheets of text. Although I am not able to remember exactly how this burning began, it may have been as a result of holding a candle up to the text in order to read. I do remember how compelling it was to watch the flame run along the side of the rectangle of the text, etching into its edges, the heat causing the text to twist and buckle in my hand. But although I burned, my intent was not to destroy knowledge. Flames felt

close to liquids, control and uncontrol could be used in a similar way. It seemed to me that through semi-controlled burning it might be possible to release or reveal some part of its content previously locked within its accepted conventional form. Once set in motion, the process of burning, in itself, largely determined the new textual form. Twisting the text around provided a limited control over the pathway of the flame, and as in the practice of abstract painting, it was an oscillation between accident and control that enabled the medium to find its form. Throughout my research I have explored text as a medium — that is, as a substance through which sensory impressions are transmitted. As a middle-state between author and reader, the page seems highly resistant in its visual purity.

Out of the many text / forms made in this way, few had the qualities I sought. Each piece was extremely small, and I would put it into the cover of the enlarger, which was then taken to its greatest height, and project the image onto the floor. As a result the image of the text was greatly enlarged and its surface detail revealed. The text was then flipped over and projected in reverse. The two halves were then put together to create a form. These images appear to be symmetrical, but in fact the two sides do not mirror one-on-one.

The text forms were projected, and the scale increased dramatically. It became possible to see all manner of complex surface detail. For example, the flame had released thick acrid smoke. This had gathered on the surface of the text. I discovered I could draw into this carbonised layer with the end of a compass, much as an etcher will scratch into the smoked surface of a metal plate, and in projecting light through the smoke covered text, allow light to pour through the scratched marks creating dark inky lines.[4]

I then worked against the surface of the text forms. I smeared these with Vaseline — something which, I found, would leave a wide soft brush like mark when

projected. Dust and dirt adhered to its sticky texture. I also applied debris found in the corner of my studio. Each time I projected the image new details emerged. Cobwebs became transformed into dynamic painterly marks. Small wings seemed to echo the newly found forms of the text.

The act of burning opened an unstable ground between the text and myself. As a result of being burned, Irigaray's text gained a volume and robustness that it had previously lacked and became transmuted into a form with an internal dynamic structure.

4. The Wet Darkroom: the Mediation of Subjectivity in Artistic Processes through Liquidity, Light, Touch and the Unconscious

During the final stages of my research I became interested in the darkroom as a space of making. It seemed to me to be located on the margins of theory and language. As I have mentioned, my decision to make work in the darkroom was, at some level, generated through exposure to Irigaray's texts — certain of these carry the suggestion that the feminine might be discovered from a position outside of theory (see Chapter Three). Irigaray suggests that the beginning of a female Imaginary may be discovered and created through entering into the strangeness of the fluid space that is beyond the flat plane of the mirror:

> ... what resists infinite reflection: the mystery (hysteria?) that will always remain modestly behind every mirror, and that will spark the desire to see and know more about it.[5]

The darkrooms I used were both located in the University of Plymouth. Each had a clandestine presence within the institution. Whereas one can peer into busy seminar rooms, catch glimpses of banks of computers and easily find signs to the

library, the darkroom is more difficult to find. In an old building, it is frequently the cellar that has been converted for use — darkness is a prerequisite for the production of the photographic image. I found it quite inspiring that such a dream-like and hermetic space should be encapsulated within an institution. Maybe it houses the unconscious within what appears to be a site of rational thought and decision making? The darkroom is a largely invisible space which, I suggest, is largely untheorised.

Generally, the purpose of the darkroom is to service the production of lens-based images. However, there is also a history of painters[6] who have used alternative darkroom processes. Raoul Hausmann, a member of the Berlin Dada group who has been described as "a practising theorist of perception",[7] observed that the use of painterly processes in the darkroom has created "a technical form similar to abstract painting that belongs only conditionally to the field of photographic vision".[8] Experimental work using alternative darkroom processes occupies an ambiguous position on the borders between two disciplines. As such, this type of work has been overlooked by theory.

There are similarities between the hidden 'underside' of photography, liminal space in painting, and the spatial position that Irigaray attempts to speak from in her text *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche.* All are rendered outside of visual or optical structures, however necessary each may be to the construction of that logic. These are spatial / non-theorised positions that could be regarded as, in some sense, representative of the repressed materiality and also the unconscious of each discipline.

In *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche,* Irigaray attempted to interrogate the philosopher from the perspective of fluids, the element she considered the philosopher to fear most. Carolyn Burke has suggested that:

> It is as if she were speaking from another territory — the ocean, or the other side of the looking glass — where familiar rules of logic have been reversed, deconstructed, and subjected to sea change.[9]

Burke has drawn attention to the search in Irigaray's writing to find an ideological space from which it is possible to speak as a woman. My sense of the space that Irigaray creates is that it is a visceral, physical space that in some way disorientates and relocates the reader momentarily in a place that is on the 'underside' of what is known, this is outside of the structures of theory.

> Because in relation to the working of theory, the/a woman fulfils a twofold function — as the mute outside that sustains all systematicity; as the maternal and still silent ground that nourishes all foundations — she does not have to conform to the codes that theory has set up for itself.[10]

In the above Irigaray seems to suggest that there is a certain freedom to be had from speaking from outside of the conventions or codes that are designated by theory.

My work in the darkroom was a practical experiment in speaking / making from a position that was both literally and symbolically the 'underside'. As a woman, this attempt was steeped in difficulty. I wanted to be open to the experience that the space engendered. At times this would mean that I became very nearly subsumed into the space I was, at times, unable to differentiate between self and the elements with which I worked. This highly subjective position is, I think, reflected in the practice text. However, I was also concerned to find a way to begin to map out an alternative theorisation of the process. To do this, I have taken ideas from the practice text and organised these under the following headings: light, liquid, the unconscious and touch.

Light

By and large, photography and its discourses are concerned with the concept of image capture as it comes in through the lens. This leads to the production of, to use Charles Hagen's description, "the forthright, declarative pictures produced by conventional photography".[11] In comparison, he observes:

> Photograms (camera-less photoworks) are like photography's bad twin, the dark side of nineteenth-century faith in description that is implicit in the medium.[12]

This evocative description suggests that there is an invisible underside to photography that is defined, not through the discourses that accompany lens-based imagery, but rather in relation to the materiality of the work.

Photography, as we now know it, grew out of the possibility of making projected images permanent. This seems to suggest that it is print or hard copy itself, rather than an 'image capture' that is ultimately definitive of a photograph. For example, Rosalind Krauss has observed that "the photogram only forces, or makes explicit, what is the case of all photography".[13] Throughout the history of photography, work produced without use of a camera has formed a persistent but relatively unnoticed undercurrent.

The following statement by the Constructivist artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy gives an insight into the intriguing potential of non-lens-based photographic processes to create spatial effects that seem to exist beyond the confines of perspective:

> The photogram, or camera-less record of forms produced by light, which embodies the unique nature of the photographic process, is the real key to photography. It allows us to capture the patterned interplay of light on a sheet of sensitised paper without recourse to any apparatus. The photogram opens up perspectives of a hitherto wholly unknown morphosis governed by optical laws peculiar to itself.[14]

Hagen has noted that the amorphous forms and spatial effects of the photogram lie beyond the rational constructs of perspectival space. Here he identifies a "primal photographic quality":

> Like fish that live in the deepest part of the ocean, the strange and beautiful forms found in photograms appear to have eluded the logical net with which perspective ensnares the world of things.[15]

Hagen and Moholy-Nagy both suggest that alternative darkroom processes are key to moving beyond the constraints of perspective reinforced by the camera lens. This mimics the mechanical function of the eye and therefore image capture using a lens is linked to a visual organisation of the world founded on the perspectival or rationalised space of the Enlightenment. This produces an objective and distancing view of the world, one in which sight is divorced from the body. Jay describes such vision as "monocular as that of the peephole," and, as a result, he continues, this "produced a frozen, disincarnated gaze on a scene completely external to itself."[16]

I think that Moholy-Nagy does, in the above, come close to describing a relation between seeing and light that would almost seem a precursor to Irigaray's ideas. Irigaray has spoken of eye movements as embodied — this is quite different to a machine like model:

> With regard to the movements of my eyes, they do not take place uniquely within the visible universe: they also happen in the living crypt of my body and my flesh.[17]

For Moholy-Nagy the photogram is a way of capturing the mobility of light — in effect its 'morphosis' — a tracking of the fluctuating and liquid patterns of light. These traces, embodied in the materiality of the photogram, would perhaps touch

upon or remind one of an alternative memories of light that are freed from the purpose of categorisation of the material world.

Liquids

The darkroom provides the necessary conditions for the development of photographic images. The entire process must be carried out in near darkness under safe lights. The image, made on light-sensitive paper, is arrived at through the use of projected light, the greater the exposure to light the darker the image will be. Here, liquids are crucial as a means of developing the latent photographic image. The technical term for this aspect of process is 'chemistry'.

Light and chemistry, the materials of the dark room, have a rigid order imposed upon them. The exact measurement of both time and chemicals are normally essential to the development of an image from the negative. First, a developer is used to bring out the image. The paper is next rinsed, and then immersed in fixative. The strength of the chemical, and the exact time spent immersed in it, is crucial. The final image is rinsed for a fairly long period in running water to remove all trace of chemicals. Developing fluid and fixative must be mixed precisely with water, and the immersion of the image at each stage of the process is exactly timed.

Linearity and timings connected with photographic chemistry inculcate values associated with the wider social order and modernism. (It is not only the camera in photography that connects the discipline with sight and rationality.) Therefore, whilst I have suggested that the darkroom encourages regression and may release the unconscious through the body, this is not the whole story. To engage with the technology and developing fluids is to absorb values that are connected with separation, purity and non-contamination. Linearity also. odily interactions with

the medium in time and space are modulated through control, order, non-contamination.

Systems of control that ensure non-contamination are connected to a wider social order. In *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas has argued that there is nothing inherently dirty about dirt:

> Dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread or holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order.[18]

Dirt is a substance that is found in a place where we consider it should not be; consequently, it threatens to upset or muddle the order of the system in place. Traditionally, camera-based photography requires a high degree of control to produce an image out of a negative. Generally, each stage is timed to the exact second. (It is common practice to make notes concerning timing that allow for adjustments to the image to be made and to also repeat production.) Each image is washed thoroughly between immersion in chemicals to ensure that one mix does not contaminate another. In the view of Elizabeth Grosz,[19] Douglas makes it clear that at the centre of the desire to master, or control, substances that are believed to defile is an anxiety that turns on the need to establish the female body as bounded — as a container that does not leak, or transgress boundaries through seepage, fluids:

> ... explicit here the notion that the body can and does function to represent, to symbolise, social and collective fantasies and obsessions: its orifices and surfaces can represent sites of cultural marginality, places of social entry and exit, regions of confrontation or compromise. Rituals and practices designed to cleanse or purify the body may serve as metaphors for processes of cultural homogeneity.[20]

Darkroom processes are carried out in restricted light and sight can no longer dominate the process directly. It seems to me that to compensate for this 'lack of seeing' extreme kinds of control are applied to the liquids used for developing images through the developing process come into operation. Photographic developing processes also reveal considerable anxiety and control over what may be seen as a drive toward entropy. The photographic image is always at risk of collapse where the differentiation between light and dark tones may become lost.[21]

The Unconscious

Hagen has noted the rich psychological implications of work made using alternative darkroom processes and observes that these give rise to "anarchic freedom, the conscious mind gone on holiday." [22] Indeed, the darkness and isolation that are necessary to make work using these processes cause disorientation, or at least disconnect the subject from the present moment. Here there is a parallel with the setting that was traditionally used for the practice of psychoanalysis. This was originally designed to disconnect the patient from the present moment and was achieved by preventing verbal exchange that was located in, and would make sense of, the present. Instead, the patient, supposedly secure in a private and confidential space, would lose the logic of day to day exchange, immersing him/herself in remembered events that (bypassing the rational) would reveal, increasingly, memories and events stored previously frozen in the subconscious mind. Irigaray explains this process in the following:

> Moreover the patient cannot send a *message* which is meaningful in the present either, because the identities of the speaker, the listener, the world — or, in other terms, of the subject, the addressee, the object — are not fixed. The economy of discourse and communication is thus disturbed.[23]

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The purpose of psychoanalysis is, however, different to art practice. Although in my practice I have set up situations where I can explore making from unfixed subjective states, this process does not aim to be therapeutic. Its focus is to interrogate the formalist influenced infrastructure that mediates the material / psychological form of the artwork.

Touch

In my practice text there is a strong suggestion that the various physical characteristics of the darkroom are very like those of an intra-uterine space. My reason now for highlighting this analogy is to mobilise a different set of references for the understanding of the space in which artistic activity takes place.

In making *Photoworks* I attempted to respond to the cryptic nature of the darkroom. I have tried to set up connections between my experience of the relation between self / other. In this case the 'other' I have in mind is something like a soup of material elements — liquid, light, the tangible / fragmented experience of my own body whilst making, snatches of textual matter. As the process unfolds, my response to these 'ingredients' takes place in near darkness through gesture and touch.

The physical characteristics of the darkroom space can be compared with an imagined return to prenatal space. However, it must also be kept in mind that the darkroom is purpose-built to house the technology and chemistry used in the production of photographic imagery. It is thus the substructure that sustains the discourses and production of lens-based work. However, it may be possible to trace an alternative interpretation of this space that gives emphasis to touch (formulated in darkness) in relation to maternal experience.

Formative experiences that take place prior to the acquisition of language — for example, maternity and the effect of this on both mother and child — may be interred within the maternal body (a kind of buried history of matter within matter). These experiences of corporeal origin, are, in Irigaray's view, systematically suppressed. They provide an unacknowledged ground for the formation of male identity, and for the systems of knowledge and logic these are ensconced within.

Irigaray suggests that sensory experience connected with the maternal may be constituted through darkness and touch. The darkness of the womb supports or engenders tangible experience. However, when we are born into light and become able to see, eyesight then overlays our previous tactile mapping of the world.

Irigaray suggests that if experience associated with the pre-birth state (by both mother and child) were to be symbolised creatively in language (and therefore consciousness), this would mediate the understanding of the relation between the lived body and the world through criteria that are different to those currently in place.

Irigaray has suggested, in agreement with Merleau-Ponty, that our understanding of ourselves in the present moment, and how we function in the world of matter, could be enriched by re-tracking "living references" and finding out how these have been expressed in language. In her reading of his last work, 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm',[24] Irigaray in the first place agrees with Merleau-Ponty:

> If we could rediscover within the exercise of seeing and speaking some of the living references that assign themselves such a destiny in a language, perhaps they would teach us how to form our new instruments, and first of all to understand our research, our interrogation themselves.[25]

Irigaray understands by this that by 'living reference', Merleau-Ponty is referring to inter-uterine life, although she remarks that this is not made explicit in the text. Suspension in amniotic fluid, in darkness, is the very first experience that a child will have whilst in the womb and it is shared by all human beings. At this stage of development tactile sensations and rhythm give nurture to the child. When a child is born it learns to see, but this vision is preconditioned through darkness and tactility. From here Irigaray argues that the tactile is not synonymous with the visual, and that each sense functions according to a different logic and rhythm. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty believes the two senses to be entwined in an egalitarian relationship:

> Every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space. There is a double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable.[26]

However, although Irigaray clearly perceives there to be some interchange between the senses, in her view they do not have a relation of reciprocal or mutual dependence. Instead, she argues the visual is superimposed on the tactile and thus it subordinates other forms of perception to its own exigencies. Irigaray denies that the visible can be situated in the tangible or that the tangible is situated through the visible.

5. Conclusion

Work produced in the darkroom does, in a way that bears some similarities to the intra-uterine space, mobilise relations between the body of the maker and the medium of liquids and light that is structured through touch. Sight, in this context,

was at the edge of my day to day accepted use of this sense. On occasion seeing

felt close to clairvoyance. Images of artwork that I could not, in the literal sense,

'see' (to an extent) guided the work. The darkroom space gives reign to the

unconscious. As I worked I had a heightened awareness of structural decisions and

how these connected with my body. The processes I engaged with in the darkroom

seemed, at times, to be on the margins of control.

Notes to Chapter Six

1 Bellony-Rewald and Peppiat, M., *Imagination's Chamber*, p.12 (no original source given).

2 Pollock, 'Painting, Feminism, History', pp.138-175.

3 Alice Jardine has argued, alongside many other feminist academics, that institutions are defined through rational male thought. She has suggested that psychoanalysis might offer a means of theorising and rethinking institutional spaces and procedures: see Jardine, 'Notes for Analysis', p.74. The darkrooms I have experienced in institutions have been hidden from sight and do, I think, occupy an interesting position from which to think about issues relating to the feminine.

4 The cliché-verre, in which a blackened glass plate with an etched drawing was copied onto photosensitive paper, could also be counted as a photogram. In the nineteenth century, artists such as Corot and Delacroix used this to duplicate their drawings in a new way.

5 Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p.103.

6 For example, the American painter Robert Rauschenberg experimented photograms to record images of the body. More recently the German painter Sigmar Polke (an important influence for the artist Maria Chevska), has produced large numbers of highly experimental photo images that explore X-rays, multiple exposures, and multiple prints as well as photograms.

7 Denver Art Museum (catalogue), *Experimental Vision*, p.12.

8 Denver Art Museum (catalogue), *Experimental Vision*, p.13.

9 Burke, 'Irigaray Through the Looking Glass', p.39.

10 This quote, from the end of *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray, is taken from *The Irigaray Reader*, (editor) Whitford, pp.8-9.

11 Denver Art Museum (catalogue), *Experimental Vision*, p.55.

12 Denver Art Museum (catalogue), *Experimental Vision*, p.55.

13 Krauss, 'Notes from the Index', p.203.

14 Denver Art Museum (catalogue), *Experimental Vision*, p.40.

15 Denver Art Museum (catalogue), *Experimental Vision*, p.55.

[16] Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p.165.

17 Irigaray, 'The Invisible of the Flesh', p.165.

18 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p.2.

19 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p.193.

20 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p.193.

21 This material aspect of process is very similar to that encountered in using liquid paint on unprimed canvas. As a painterly process, this also runs the risk of becoming an indeterminate mass of grey tones.

22 Denver Art Museum (catalogue), *Experimental Vision*, P.55.

23 Irigaray, 'Gesture and Psychoanalysis', p.128.

24 Irigaray, like other feminist theorists such as Grosz, suggests that whilst Merleau-Ponty's theories have been productive for feminism, (and I would add painting) these do not explicitly address sexual difference. Generalisations regarding subjectivity tend to take men's experiences as human ones. Merleau-Ponty departs from the Cartesian assumptions of a split between mind / body, the interior and exterior self, physical, psychological etc., working instead from the presupposition that information of and from the world is assimilated through the body. Irigaray, however, points out that Merleau-Ponty failed to recognise the implications of using a language saturated with metaphors of sight; these cause a schism in expression of his theory. Thus he is unable to move away from a conception of sight that is fundamentally not only divided from the tactile, pre-verbal matrix formulated in darkness, but through remaining dominant continues to act as a model for the senses.

25 Merleau-Ponty, 'The Visible and The Invisible', p.130.

26 Merleau-Ponty, 'The Visible and The Invisible', p.134.

Chapter Seven

CONCLUSION

In bringing this project to a close I have the opportunity to look back over the course that my research has taken. The field of practice-based Ph.D. research in fine art is relatively open and new in the academic world. Indeed, at the outset of this project very little was predetermined. This gave me the freedom to be experimental in my approach as I made work. Following on from this the written component of the research has been an attempt to trace the interweaving of various parts — physical, psychological, and theoretical — which provide the matrix, or substrata, out of which the completed artworks have been formed. Therefore, the purpose of the conclusion is not a goal for a linear narrative, but rather a reflection on recurring issues raised by the making of the work.

My aim has been to discover strategies that would potentially allow the feminine to come into play as I made work. To do this I turned to feminism and then tried to find ways to relate material processes to textual ideas. From this beginning, I have tried to maintain my praxis. This has led to difficulty, at times, in maintaining contact with the complex outcomes that result from the interactions between disciplines, each of which is conveyed through a different set of conventions and media. For example, there were times where interactions with materials used seemed to fuse with subconscious thoughts; this then redirected the practice at a tangent to where theory had pointed. At the points at which my practice departed from theory, I tried to reinstate the centrality of practice and let this generate alternatives.[1] In the following, it is my intention to discuss ideas that arose from this process in such a way that they will remain open as the basis of further creative research.

For the purpose of the conclusion four provisional strands of investigation have been identified. These were often carried out simultaneously; thus the issues raised inevitably overlap. An iterative and reiterative practice based research method enables the discussion of these from four different positions. The first

section discusses the relation between text and material processes. Here I found that through incorporating feminist texts into visual / material processes it became possible to open these to new meanings. In addition, I found that the experimental material processes associated with painting provide a productive basis from which to interrogate theoretical precepts. The second section reflects on the role of unconscious processes in making and the consequent problems that arise from the attempt to articulate these within a more rational (male) academic framework. In the third section I look at formal decision making in relation to the feminine. In my project I have made a sustained attempt to mobilise a feminine aesthetic within material / visual processes. The difficulty here is that aesthetic values in painting are inextricably linked to formal / structural decisions that are integral to the formation of the artwork. These, in turn, are caught within formalism — in the case of large scale painterly abstraction, the link with Greenberg's version of formalism is still apparent. This is culturally and historically biased toward the reflection of male subjectivity and bodies. In this project my aim was to find strategies that would enable me to shift formal / structural decisions taken whilst making toward a charting of sexed bodily difference. In the fourth and final section, I comment on the non-predictive practice based method that evolved during the research. This gravitated finally toward artistic processes that operated on the margins of control but that simultaneously, I believe, may mobilise the feminine during making.

1. The Relation between Theoretical Texts and Material Processes

Repeatedly, the issues that arose in this practice-based project have been related back to an academic framework. There is a sense in which the findings of practice may be perceived as an intervention into the theoretical ideas that have sustained the development of the project. Although it may appear convoluted, this procedure has been positive, given my aim — which was to discover strategies that would

allow the feminine to become present during the act of making work. Here, my practice does, I think, pick up on, and explore, a theoretical position argued by Irigaray.

Irigaray's Theory as Catalyst to the Feminine

Irigaray has suggested that theory — chiefly philosophical and psychoanalytic — acts as a mirror for the male subject. As I have already mentioned, in Irigaray's view, theory reproduces a view of the world that bears no reference to women's thinking or experience. This problem can be directly located within language. The structural forms of language prevent the development and recognition of imagery, metaphor and symbols that relate specifically to women's experience. Irigaray suggests that the development of women as sexed subjects ideally would be complexly mediated through their bodies. However, it is precisely this experience, relating to women's specific corporeality, which is negated through language. Irigaray's argument leads to an impasse; theoretical ideas are developed and disseminated through language (especially academic language). Language itself is deeply problematic where the aim is to recover the repressed feminine. Irigaray has developed many innovative strategies (discussed in Chapter Three) that attempt to move beyond these limitations. Importantly, she has opened to question the relation between painting and writing at a material level (also discussed in Chapter Three).

Using the work of Frankenthaler as an initiatory moment in my own project of practical theorisation, I have argued that material processes involving body, gesture, the unconscious and also a sensory engagement with materials offer experiential insight into the feminine that is not available though language. This is because artistic processes are mediated through the physicality of materials — these have a spatial and temporal logic that is different from that of writing. However, this is not to romanticise painting; nor to set it apart from writing by

suggesting it is in some way more purely connected with elemental / bodily experience. The medium of painting and interactions with this are freighted with meanings that stem from a patriarchal tradition.

Within my project I have developed strategies to recover the repressed feminine in artistic processes. To do this I have deliberately accessed unfixed subjective states as a basis of interactions with the medium and here the use of feminist theory in the form of text was extremely important: I found that this fostered the vulnerable position I had chosen to adopt. The texts I worked with acted as a powerful tool that could both 'jam' and also reveal the ideologies at work in the materials I used.

During the early stages of the research, I believed that the shift in how I perceived the medium could be achieved through the application of theoretical ideas. However, soon after making *Inscriptions* (Chapter Four), the first body of work, it became apparent that material processes could effectively be used to cast light on issues raised by theory. From this point onwards it became productive to envisage text as a medium through which sensory impressions are conveyed. This led to an interrogation of the material qualities of text.

Physical actions provided the basis of a response to text during the process of making work, for example, through cutting and spiralling in making *Inscriptions,* crumpling and tearing to make *Theory / Forms,* and finally, experimentation with burning to make *Photoworks.* These were attempts to filter textual ideas via gesture into the material form of the artwork.

Moving on from *Inscriptions* I developed *Theory / Forms* and *Screen / Paintings* simultaneously (discussed in Chapter Five). At this point I began to think of the physical interactions between text and medium as 'haptic deconstruction'. This strategy was a means of unearthing a subjective response to text via the body

through the transformation of printed matter into states prior to their intended

complete or resolved form (as is usual within the conventions of the academic).

The form of the art work was engendered through a mobile, fluctuating, mode of

exchange with words and ideas — in other words, a relation with text that was

orientated toward the lived body.

During this research project theory has acted as the catalyst, as it is

simultaneously undone and then reformed on a material level during the process of

making. This allows me to make work that stems from the body (felt / tangible /

experiential) but also to absorb feminist theoretical thinking concerning identity

and corporeality.

There is no definitive 'test' for the success of these corporeal methods. However,

the practice texts – in that these explore states / ideas inherent in making – do, I

believe, pick up on ideas that have been transposed from text to medium through

the body.

My Own Writing: A Tool to Extricate the Latent Feminine in Visual / Material

Processes

Whilst making artwork writing was used primarily as a tool to extricate latent

feelings, issues and ideas experienced whilst engaged in material processes. The

writing of practice texts proved to be especially productive; these allowed, to some

extent, the recovery of the subjective thoughts that informed the work. In

structural terms these texts, where subjective and objective boundaries are

blurred, come closer to practice than to academic writing. Referencing has been

avoided in the practice texts — these were not intended to demonstrate 'mastery'

of a subject but are instead intended to be more speculative. The findings that

emerge in the writing are not subject to the usual verification expected in academic

discourse. This is because, for me, creativity is generated through fragile and

sometimes esoteric belief structures that I attempt to keep intact as I make the work. These thoughts would very possibly be erased if they were subjected to the exigencies of written language — a problem exacerbated within the more rational requirements of an academic framework.

The Maternal / Feminine: Frankenthaler, my Practice, Irigarary

I brought Irigaray's theoretical text together with material processes in an attempt to extricate the latent feminine that I had originally believed to be inherent in the materiality of Frankenthaler's painting. My investigation led me finally to make work in the darkroom. Here, it was as if the darkroom itself had become a physical manifestation of the space behind the frame, an aspect of Frankenthaler's work that had so intrigued me during the early stages of the research. Both spaces are, I believe, potent sites of the repressed maternal / feminine.

To make the *Photoworks* I reformed Irigaray's text through burning. I think of burning, in my own work, as an extension of Frankenthaler's use of fluids — in making *Mountains and Sea* she had allowed these to operate on the borders of control. In so doing she created a surface in which fluids and support became as one. In the case of my own work I found that the flames operated very much like fluids and resulted in the materiality of the text and that of the artwork becoming as one.

Destruction / Creativity: A Problematic Relation to the Feminine?

Having made *Photoworks* I recognised that my actions had been tinged with an underlying violence. Text was transformed through the interplay between creativity and destruction and there was a desire to damage the text. At this juncture it may appear that I moved apart from Frankenthaler's influence — there is no indication of violence to be found in Frankenthaler's discussion of her early work. I will return to this point to establish a connection.

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However, before doing so I would like to briefly comment on two issues raised by my research at this point. The first concerns the relation between theory and practice. Having made *Photoworks,* were the procedure previously set in train to be followed, I would have turned to theory as a means of interpreting or providing insight into my actions. Instead, however, I chose to pause and consider instead what might happen if the artwork were divorced from theory. The limitation of theory is that it almost always recycles and absorbs 'real' or corporeal experience. I wanted to discover whether work which was generated through the tension of bringing together text and material processes might be responded to as 'embodied theory' — this, in all probability, will not follow the accepted pathways of language based theorisation.

The second issue provides an interesting basis for further investigation. As I have explained, I became increasingly interested in transformational actions and these culminated in burning. Burning is of particular interest because it is situated on the margins of control. Once instigated, this process takes its own course and is able to transform text as a base material. This action comes close to destruction although it may be subjected to control before this point.[2] It is possible that these actions may be the key to moving beyond the constraints of language and theory in a masculine context. Alternatively, it may be the case that these replicate creativity that takes as its model male sexuality and subjectivity.

The second point raises complex problems that need to be addressed if this strand of research is to be followed through. Desire and damage are often assumed to underlie the male creative drive that produced the historical practices of Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism. Looking back I now question whether I have been too ready to accept that the link between violence and desire characterise male sexuality and subjectivity. Most certainly, in my attempt to dislocate myself from

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rational thought and access the unconscious, I was disconcerted to discover that my own ensuing work derived from the pleasurable interplay between nurture and violence.

I now recognise that underlying my project there was, at work, an expectation that the feminine aspect of practice would be identifiable, that it could be in some sense *known.* My exploration of the feminine began with the identification of what I believed to be the feminine (both in method and materiality) of work produced by Frankenthaler. Through praxis I investigated processes innovated by Frankenthaler and related these to Irigaray's writing. As a result I moved away from studio based painting and into the realm of darkness. I had taken my attempt to discover strategies to recover the feminine beyond the parameters I had originally set out. Through generating work in this way I discovered that the feminine, if it were indeed unleashed, was unfamiliar.

Frankenthaler had made work both in relation to theory and also deliberately outside of (male) theorisation. Issues that arose from Frankenthaler's work, i.e. control / 'uncontrol', liquidity, the body, and light, provide the grounds for the maternal / feminine in practice. I explored these issues through praxis but, as previously mentioned, found that toward the end of my project I seemed to break away from the influence of Frankenthaler. However, looking back over the research process, I now think methods used in the darkroom (a deliberately destabilised subject position, touch and intuition, the exploration of 'uncontrol', and the utilisation of liquids and light through contact with the body) can be traced to a key concept in Frankenthaler's work. This is ambiguity – the non-differentiation between alternatives, a powerful ambivalent state that generates creative energy.

2. Conscious and Unconscious Processes

The research process has highlighted conflicting relationships between conscious and unconscious processes that arise when creative practice is carried out within an academic framework. Arguably, even at the level of what may be the unconscious, the thoughts and feelings of women are determined through male models. It is, of course, not possible to move entirely outside social / cultural constraints — within the Romantic tradition this is seen as the pathway of madness or death. Here, the (invariably male) artist is seen to risk transgression of this border in order to create. Through praxis my attempt to find a pathway into the potential space of the feminine led toward working in a creative space that bore disturbing similarities to that favoured within the Romantic tradition.

This raises the possibility that creativity (nurture) and destruction go hand in hand for both men and women. Women may suppress the violent and out-of-control aspect of themselves (or perhaps internalise this) to accommodate social expectations within patriarchy. Irigaray has, for example, suggested that women function in the male Imaginary to deflect the death drives of men.[3] There is need for further practice based research in this area.

Comments on the Comparative Usefulness of Lichtenberg Ettinger and Irigaray to the Research Project

As a practitioner, I harness feelings, thoughts and perceptions that seem to float beneath language. These enable identification of the substrata of fragile ideas that underlie my practice in relation to what Lichtenberg Ettinger terms the matrixial gaze.[4] Lichtenberg Ettinger's theories have encouraged me to believe that, although ethereal, difficult to grasp, or indeed to locate as tangible, these were valid experiences related to the feminine that should be recognised as influential in

arriving at the material form of the work. I do, however, also have some reservations regarding Lichtenberg Ettinger's theory.

Ettinger has a great deal to offer on a theoretical level. However, as a practitioner my approach is grounded in matter and its interrelation with the unconscious. Finally I departed from Lichtenberg Ettinger's theory because it did not tally with what is, in my view, a crucial aspect of making: that is, the unruly, unpredictable nature of materials and the complexity of readings these spark and which always seems, in a fascinating manner, to re-direct the work. Lichtenberg Ettinger's work, although advanced theoretically, is perhaps naïve in its references to current developments in art.

In comparison with Ettinger, I have found Irigaray's writing intensely evocative of the body and its multifaceted physicality. Far from seamless, her writing creates an almost disorientating perspective that seems to me close to lived experience. As I have worked with her texts I have found that these release air, light and darkness — all are redolent with texture and meaning. Filled with halting moments and challenges, she seems to encourage women to enter a space that is outside of the male view / theory.

3. Formal Decisions and the Feminine
My attempt to mobilise a feminine aesthetic within material / visual processes has required a fundamental shift at the heart of how I operate as an artist. As a trained painter I absorbed at a deep level a set of criteria I applied to the form of the artwork as it developed. These structural / formal decisions are, as I have mentioned, enmeshed within formalism, and thus do reflect (or support) male subjectivity and bodies. The connection between formal decisions taken and masculine values is exceptionally difficult to unravel. In Chapter Five under the section *Medium and Meaning*, I attempt to cast light on this issue through a series

of direct analogies between the body and the structural stages moved through

whilst the art work is in the process of formation. However, although useful as a

means of understanding issues related to female embodiment, this approach was

limited in that it was unable to provide a creative way forward for practice.

My practice has been a sustained attempt to shift response to the medium toward

the feminine. To do this I tried to re-map interactions with the medium in relation

to the female body. This involved a shift toward touch (as opposed to 'pure'

seeing), working in a dark space, and the use of theoretical feminist text at a

physical / material / bodily level. All proved productive in the destabilisation of the

masculine aesthetic which is, to a large extent, founded on formal values that

operate at the heart of artistic processes.

4. An Iterative / Reiterative Method for Practice (in the Feminine)

The attempt to discover the feminine in art practice led to the development of a

non-predictive method. In her recent work, the feminist philosopher Christine

Battersby has proposed that models of identity are structured out of a relation to

the way in which the female body might be potentially understood, not as a

container, but in terms of potentiality:

> We need to think individuality differently, allowing for the potentiality for
> otherness to exist within it as well as alongside it. We need to theorise
> agency in terms of potentiality and flow. Our body-boundaries do not
> contain the self; they are the embodied self.[5]

The interchange between materialities and conscious and unconscious thought

processes in this project has not been directed toward the concept of embodiment

as, for example, in Romanticism. Here the contents of mind are assumed to flow

into and give form to matter. The working method developed is a far more random process with many variables. During the process of making, it is matter itself that reforms other matter — each with a separate history and in a variety of unforeseen configurations.

For example, in making *Photoworks* I found that the darkroom engendered a gestural (and not necessarily rational) relation with words that was played out through a mobile, glimpsed, fluctuating, mode of exchange with words. This made it possible to draw on the experience of the 'felt' or 'tangible' self. Whilst working complex, experiential memories seemed to permeate material processes. These may have derived from maternal experience, and perhaps from archaic sensations connected with the earliest moments of being. But equally, the thoughts and feelings may have been of a far more recent origin. More pragmatically, the body houses learned responses and techniques of painting derived from a tradition. Intermittently, states may occur in which a heightened awareness of the intense physicality of the materials is inseparable from the sensations of the tangible / inhabited body. The shift between conscious and unconscious thought processes is not always differentiated. Intuitive painting is founded on flux — fantasy, sensations, thoughts and feelings that emerge somewhat chaotically and are organised provisionally through the formal and technical aspects of making. The circumvention of sight seemed to create moments which opened out into a kind of subterranean flow through physical / psychical points during making. Darkness and isolation, I found, facilitated the channelling of 'formal' decisions involving liquid and light through touch via body.

I do not think that a single, or fixed, working method can be used to activate the feminine in art processes. In fact, I found that if I began to contrive or explain a method for practice this would also mark the moment it was rendered obsolete (de-energised).

Practice does, I think, provide a base from which written theory may be interrogated. However, it is difficult to chart this position because practice does not operate according to the same rules and conventions as theory. I did not want to provide a theory that would account for practice during the course of writing up this research. Rather, I have tried to mobilise a relation between theory and practice within which the feminine might come into being. I have tried to find a way to articulate this relation that resorts to neither description nor simple reportage of the finished artwork. I have found that practice and theory can be brought together whilst making work in such a way that this generates creativity. But I have also found that, within this relationship, practice is not obedient to academic conventions, and that it does in fact bring pressure to bear on theory.

Notes to Chapter Seven

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[1] Other work in this field includes a recent collaborative project involving three women artist / theorists in the exploration of matter, materiality, and materialisation, as a means of moving toward a feminine aesthetics in practice. An essay by Marsha Meskimmon outlining the development of the project appears in *Differential Aesthetics*, (eds) Florence and Foster, pp. 301-312.

[2] The reader may find the research of Mari Krappala of interest: see Krappala, *Burning (of) Ethics of the Passions*.

[3] See, for example, Irigaray, 'The Blind Spot in an Old Dream of Symmetry' and 'Plato's *Hysteria*'.

[4] Lichtenberg Ettinger, *The Matrixial Gaze*.

[5] Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, p.57.

Appendix A

Mountains and Sea: Historical and Theoretical Frameworks

Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism is a generic term which refers to the diverse practices of a group of artists working in New York between 1945-1955, including among others Willem De Kooning, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock. Several women were also linked to this group including Grace Hartington, Lee Krasner and Helen Frankenthaler; their work is less well known. The identity of Abstract Expressionism became apparent in the spring of 1945 when the Art of this Century Gallery mounted a show called 'A Problem for Critics,' challenging the art press to respond. It was the direction of this art, bringing together influences including the Surrealist interest in the unconscious mind with American pragmatism and the formal vocabulary of European Modernism, which for the first time placed American art at the forefront of the avant-garde.

The interpretative framework of Abstract Expressionism grew out of opposing theories developed by the critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, both of whom were in close studio contact with the New York painters. Their theories reflected the rift in twentieth century art that saw form and content as mutually exclusive. Greenberg, following the tradition of British critics such as Clive Bell and Roger Fry, centred on the idea that form was itself content; and he rejected as inessential not only the representation of nature but also the psychology of the artist. Rosenberg, whose thinking was located in the Surrealist tradition, centred on the means by which the unconscious mind could be released as content.

Formalism

Clement Greenberg (1909-94) was the main proponent of formalism. His attempt

to found a programmatic interpretation of Modernist progressive painting began

with the publication of earlier essays such as 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939) and

'Towards a Newer Laocoon' (1940) and culminated in 'Modernist Painting' (1960).

This period saw a shift in power, as the centre of the art world moved from Paris to

New York. Greenberg sought to position American painting as the continuation of

the Western Classical tradition through the distillation of this to its essential

elements. As an influential critic who lived in New York, he was closely involved

with the work of certain artists, whose studios he regularly visited. He attempted

to found a theory of art that would establish rigorous standards of excellence in

painting and that could be objectively applied. For in his view, American Modernist

painting required a new set of criteria to measure its success.

Through comparison with the work of the Old Masters, whose images were tied to

the depiction of spatial depth as a determinant quality, Greenberg decided that the

classical criteria could be replaced by attending to the inner workings and

construction of the image. From here his thinking, which, in following a reductive

logic, attempted to distil the Western Classical tradition, gravitated toward the

discovery of the 'essence' of painting. If pure essence were to be isolated, then

quality in progressive Modern painting could be judged against this. He reasoned

that what was fundamental to painting, or any other art form, was to be found in

the physical characteristics that were unique to the medium, and that this could be

arrived at through the elimination of "any effects that might conceivably have been

borrowed from another art form":

> Thus would each art be rendered 'pure', and in its 'purity' find the
> guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. 'Purity'
> meant self definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became
> one of self-definition with a vengeance.[1]

Greenberg's thinking had radical implications for the positioning of the medium. Historically, this had been held to be subservient to the wider purpose of creating the illusion of deep space in an image. However, in modernist painting Greenberg elevated the role of the medium to the extent that its physical exploration became the primary motivation for artists. Greenberg's compulsion to unearth what was essential to painting effectively placed severe restrictions on the scope of painting, which should be focused, in his view, on an exploration of the pure physicality of its means.

Flatness, it appeared to Greenberg, lay at the conceptual heart of painting.[2] Unlike colour, an element shared by painting and sculpture, and the rectangle, a device it had in common with theatre, flatness was unique to painting alone and was thus the self-defining characteristic of the medium. There is obviously something amiss in the selection of flatness as a criteria, as is noted by Crowther: "The flatness of drawing and prints (even the printed page) are clear counter examples to Greenberg's assertion."[3] Greenberg's line of thought led ultimately to a specific figure / ground relation in painting, where colour functioned solely on an optical level, its role limited to the emphasis it gave to the irrefutable flatness of the support. In foregrounding the structural elements of the painting, Greenberg attempted to break from the work of the Old Masters through the reversal of the terms through which painting was viewed. In such work, he asserted, the depiction of deep space provided the initial impact of the work. Following this, a more considered response would reveal that the illusion was only possible because it was made as a contradiction of a flat plane that lay beneath. In Greenberg's opinion:

> Whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before one sees the picture itself, one sees a Modernist picture first. This is, of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture, Old Master or Modernist, but Modernism imposes it as the only and necessary way, and Modernism's success in doing so is a success of self criticism.[4]

Colour, in the work of the Old Masters, was modelled in order to create depth, but in Modernist painting the way in which the medium was arranged to draw attention to the flatness of the underlying support was registered prior to representation. This approach creates a hierarchical relation between the individual elements of painting where colour is relegated to a supporting role. In effect, within Greenberg's schema, colour had to be applied in flat areas; here, he cited Manet and the Impressionists as the origin of this approach.[5] Consequently, colour could be related laterally but not in depth. This led to a very shallow space where colour appears to hover very slightly in front of, and is therefore slightly dislocated from, the picture plane.

Colour Field

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the historical position of *Mountains and Sea* has, until fairly recently, been caught within Greenberg's formalist project which was the attempt to establish standards of quality in progressive Modern painting. This reading is based on soaked-in stain as a technical breakthrough, one that provided a bridge between Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field (sometimes referred to as Post Painterly Abstraction).

As a movement, Colour Field painting was largely brought into being by Greenberg. It is generally agreed that his criteria were finally achieved through the work of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitsky, Larry Poons and Morris Louis. Building on the centrality of flatness, and the achievements of Manet and his colleagues, this, then, was for Greenberg the point at which the drive toward the creation of a purely optical surface concluded:

> With Manet and the Impressionists the question stopped being defined as one of colour versus drawing, and became one of purely optical experience against optical experience as revised or modified by tactile associations.[6]

The Colour Field artists produced painterly surfaces that were, in Greenberg's view, devoid of any significant concept of expression. Judgement of the work became orientated toward sustaining the illusion of a purely optical ideal that would be registered through the eye in isolation from the other senses. It should be noted that, although this is not explicitly acknowledged by Greenberg, the quashing of any sensation of tactility would require the viewer to be at a distance of around six feet and directly centred on the painting. His theories imply distance and immobility on the part of the viewer.

Through focusing exploration on the physicality of the medium to the exclusion of all else, Greenberg was unable to account for the human dimension of making. Greenberg, whose course of thinking may well have subverted the historical tenets of the Enlightenment as he intended, was unable to expose the ideologies that masqueraded as reason and fact during his own times. Potentially, his thinking positioned the medium as radically 'other' to the painter, demanding its own response, yet he failed to recognise that materials could not inhabit a post-positivist space where response was both logical and neutral. In reality response to the medium could not be separated from the subjectivity of the painter, and Greenberg's own interpretation of painting was sexualised, its materiality a site of projection and fantasy. This is demonstrated in Greenberg's critique of the painter Jackson Pollock.

Greenberg's Critique of Pollock

Jackson Pollock (1912-56) was an artist whose work exemplified Abstract Expressionist practice for both Rosenberg and Greenberg. His mythical status as an artist derives from the inextricable link between his driven, intense and troubled

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outlook on life, and the paintings he produced. These were seen to be uncompromising even to the point that he would risk instability to create. His brief career, plagued by alcoholism, ended at the age of forty-four in a car crash in which he and a female passenger died.

In the following statement Greenberg, who professed objectivity, attempts to explain the greatness of Pollock's painting:

> Pollock's superiority to his contemporaries in this country lies in his ability to create a genuinely violent and extravagant art without losing stylistic control. His emotion starts out pictorially; it does not have to be castrated and translated in order to put it into the picture.[7]

The very obvious subtext of the above statement is around construction of specifically male identity and can be linked to anxiety in relation to Freudian fears of castration. The resolution of the Oedipal crisis is the touchstone of Freud's theory of the formation of gendered identity. It is an event that marks the point at which the small girl or boy, wrapped in a fantasy of passionate love for their mother, breaks away in order to become established within culture as an autonomous human being. Culture here seems to be founded on the rejection of the potent physicality of the mother's body.

Freud himself recognised that this theory more convincingly accounted for a boy's development: he was less able to provide a satisfactory equivalent for a girl. Using the case study of little Hans, 1909, [8] Freud, in a late version of his theory, describes how the small boy, having attempted an infantile seduction of his mother, is threatened with castration. The all consuming anxiety that he will lose his penis is triggered by two factors. First, his recognition of sexual difference: the mother appears to him castrated. Second, his guilty and aggressive feelings toward his father, who is now perceived as a rival, lead him to renounce sexual desire for the mother. As a result a change of allegiance occurs. The boy now identifies first

and foremost with his father, but in so doing must acknowledge fear of symbolic castration by him.

Greenberg not only represents painting as an act that takes place outside of culture, a view that runs counter to his overarching theoretical framework for Modernist painting, but within this realm he suggests that creativity (equated with primal desire in Pollock's work), is untamed. It therefore exists without having been translated into the form required by culture. Desire, signified by the phallus, Greenberg seems to suggest, favours excess, violence, extravagance and also control. For Greenberg the repression of male sexuality and desire, although unacknowledged by him, distort his intended objectivity in the judgement of the physical characteristics of the art object.[9]

The Influence of Surrealism

The Abstract Expressionists were painters for whom, quite unlike their pre-Modernist predecessors, the means of representation was of greater importance than representation of a subject. Their work, which was generally large-scale and expressive, centred on an exploration of the lived act of painting which privileged intuition and immediacy. During the early stages of the movement, prior to 1945, the pursuit of a radical individualism led several artists, including Pollock, Motherwell, Rothko and Gottlieb to experiment with automatism. This was a working method that originated with the Surrealists and that was intended to suspend rational response in order to access the unconscious as a source of subject matter. Working in the wake of Freud, they understood the unconscious as the repository of events and emotions connected with desire and loss. These, accumulated from early childhood, remained locked within the unconscious mind until released through language. In extreme cases Freud believed that the repression of socially unacceptable feelings would give rise to symptoms of mental illness. Following experiments with hypnosis, he developed the "talking cure": [10]

through the use of free association the patient was encouraged to explore and

reveal the contents of his or her unconscious. Juliet Mitchell has described this

technique as "the action or the language of the body squeezed into words". [11]

In the first *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924, André Breton defined Surrealism as

> pure psychic automatism by which one intends to express verbally, in
> writing or by other method, the real functioning of the mind. Dictation by
> thought, in the absence of control exercised by reason, and beyond
> aesthetic or moral preoccupation.[12]

The Surrealists maintained an experimental distance from their work. Their use of

automatism was analysed after the event through free association and the image

was then developed in relation to this.

Although they were indebted to the Surrealists who had helped to legitimate use of

the unconscious in this way, American Modernist painters developed a different use

of psychic automatism. For example, as early as 1942 Pollock stopped using it as a

springboard to the unconscious; rather he attempted to record the spontaneity of

thought as it unravelled. This process brought together the mind and body of the

artist which were intermittently experienced as unified. At this point direct or

conscious consideration of the viewer disappeared. The privileging of interactions

between artist and materials in this manner generated a critical framework that

gave emphasis to process rather than the finished object.

Harold Rosenberg: American Action Painters

Surrealist ideas were developed as the basis of a theorisation of Abstract

Expressionism put forward by the critic Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978). In his well

known essay entitled 'American Action Painters' (1952), Rosenberg famously

noted: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter

after another as an arena in which to act".[13] The new position of the picture plane,

horizontal and at floor level, was envisaged as the site of an event where an encounter between the creator and his or her materials took place.

In Rosenberg's view, within such a scenario, the whole bodily gesture of the artist was inextricably connected to the subconscious mind and thus able to act as a conduit for its outpourings. Here, the paint itself was seen to provide the trace of the painter's actions. Rational or conscious decisions played no part in how the medium was placed.

Rosenberg pays only cursory attention to the qualities of the paint itself; it is not given credence as a substance that can engender response due to its specific nature. In effect, the medium is deposed and the implication here is that the aesthetic framework is re-located. Rather than focus on the individual elements of composition and how these relate, Rosenberg pointed to the need to establish a radical new aesthetics of the body: "In its passage on the canvas each such line can establish the actual movement of the artist's body as an esthetic statement".[14] Rosenberg saw the work of the artist as a heroic and profound exploration of issues of personal identity in relation to the larger questions of the human condition. However, he did not address the question of the differences of race, ability / disability, and gender. It is logical to assume these issues would emerge out of so narrow a painterly inquiry that was both highly subjective and located in the lived body. Rosenberg, in fact, abruptly closed down what he termed 'psychological criticism' that would "'read' a painting for clues of the artist's sexual preferences or debilities."[15]

Notes to Appendix A

1 Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p.86.

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2 Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p.86.

3 Crowther, *The Language of Art,* p.24.

4 Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p.86.

5 Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p.86.

6 Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', p.86.

7 Greenberg, 'Review of Exhibitions of the American Abstract Artists, Jacques Lipchitz, and Jackson Pollock', p.75.

8 Freud., 'Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old-Boy', pp.1-149.

9 For insight into Greenberg's personal views on life, see Van Horne, *The Harold Letters 1928-1943.*

10 Bertha Pappenheim, a patient of Freud's, invented this term (see Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 3. p.83).

11 Mitchell, *The Selected Melanie Klein,* p.11.

12 Breton, 'Manifeste du Surrealisme', p.121.

13 Rosenberg, H. 'The American Action Painters', p.25.

14 Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', p.27.

15 Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', p.27.

APPENDIX B

Selected Excerpts of Interviews on *Inscriptions*

I asked four colleagues from the University of Plymouth to respond to *Inscriptions* whilst the work was on show at the Clifford Fishwick Gallery:

Sam Smiles – Professor of Art History, University of Plymouth

Jeff Collins – Senior Lecturer in Art History and Critical Studies, University of Plymouth

Liz Prettejohn – Professor of Modern Art, University of Plymouth

Chris Cook – painter, and Reader in Art and Design, University of Plymouth

Excerpts taken from recordings of these interviews are reproduced below and have been lightly edited. I have included these to give an insight into the issues raised by the bringing together of text and material process at this early stage of the research.

Initial responses

The initial response to the work was in all cases along modernist lines – I was surprised at the consistency here. For example, everyone made reference to the number of wax forms across the surface of the work. There was a general tendency to first count the number of forms – every one attended to how these were ordered and their relation to the frame. Following this the viewers generally moved in close and began to explore the relation between text and the visual.

CC But here it looks more like a text which reads from top to bottom. I don't know whether it's an accident but some of the forms appear to be like oriental characters as well. As you work downwards there is a sort of calligraphic quality that seems to be attempting to say something - attempting to speak. By the time you reach the bottom the introduction of those catalysts – they seem to be full stops, or maybe they're in parenthesis, footnotes to something that's happened. And that was the overriding sense I had about it, that they were attempting to be lines from a text. Occasionally, you would expect that patterning, where you have a line that finishes before the natural column end, and this gives the sense that there is the end of a phrase, or the end of a paragraph within the work. There is some sense of something else going on in the work and that really strengthens it for me.

CC It's almost haiku like. Not just because this one is reminiscent of cherry blossom, but in the sense that it appears to sample, not privileging one form over another. It has a sort of elegance to it also, in the way that Haiku would seek to present nature in as economical and plain a way as possible, but from that plainness comes poetry. It's almost like washing away the I, that of the beholder, to both see nature plainly and directly and at that point it becomes beautiful again. It is odd how things like blossom, the mountain, mimosa, all those sorts of things that are acknowledged as being poetic crop up time and time again. And this work seems to recall it.

CC I remember saying to you before that one of my reservations about it might be that the materials themselves might be a bit too self-consciously beautiful, for want of a better word – or aesthetic maybe. Wax on muslin stretched over wood, now with silver backing - it could seem extremely oriental in that way. In its intentions, on one level extremely elegant. It's also knowledgeable in terms of how

wax has been used in the West, especially by a whole generation of female painters, wax has given skin to painting and body also. In this one the pink is actually blending into the wax.

Well, the pink in this case seems to really emphasise a particular reading of the forms so that these could be read as a series of nipples and bellybuttons. It makes a kind of archetypal cross-reference that I can enjoy. But I also find it a bit dodgy - and so although this is immediately the most attractive image - and also the most sure of itself, I turn to the others for a sense of there being another enterprise than the purely aesthetic one. I do, however, think it is the one I prefer because it is the painting I respond to most. But it is the one that gives me the most doubts about the object itself – why it's been made and so on.

SS In medieval times there was the idea that the word of God was made incarnate and so you are literally carnalising it by using calligraphy and decorations. It's a very physical way of reading. I quite like the idea of text coming rolling out of stuff and then disappearing back into it because it's a kind of metaphor for text being grounded in experience.

SS You would expect text to be non-sensuous. You don't think of text as a sensuous thing and you've actually sensualised it - it seems to me - quite deliberately across these canvases. I thought this was interesting and also how you'd balanced it. Its as if the richer the blobs the sparer the text gets, so they're not fighting against one another.

SS I think that as a read object, the material is prioritised over the text, but then again texts don't have to be read. This goes back to one of my hobbyhorses, that is when you think about the medieval or the dark-age production of bibles, they were displayed on the alter, open, but to catch light, to look glorious, not to be

used. They were display objects, but because the text contained the word you would make the container for the word as glorious as possible. It wasn't functioning as something you had to turn over the page to read – you had all that in your head anyway. There is a point with the Book of Kells where the book is almost unusable. The text has become almost a huge symbol above and beyond what it is actually saying.

LP I see it as the form as encircling the word. Although it's true that you can see the words around the edges here because the forms are coiled, and the way I think about them are a kind of delving into a shell. It feels as if the words are getting encompassed, enveloped and made into a part of the matter also.

LP The text does make you walk toward and read. Then it makes you question your response about that. There must be a play on the text as the activity of the critic and making the work as the maker's activity involving a more intuitive process. There's a gendered element to that too.

LP Well, I suppose that both making and writing are gendered male in our culture, in quite serious ways. In this context it does come across as the masculine logos, word, element of it having got wrapped round these rather feminine forms, hemmed in and then it's made part of the substance. It's made part of the substance, rather than allowed to speak about it- do you see what I mean?

JC I didn't realise that you were taking on in such a formalised way this collision of paradigms – that of the Kantian aesthetic and then completely different ways of doing things that derives from feminism. But I think that this only becomes apparent when you come close up to the work. I had a close look this morning and found that I was looking at the work at both levels. I did experience the uncomfortable struggle between two competing paradigms. I have your original

notes, but it's now become much clearer from the explanation you've just given. You've obviously got text in the work - which is Lacanian - and I didn't really know whether I was meant to read all around them, okay, but then I thought no, that is not intended. My quick solution was to conclude that they were not to be read as a script, as a text to be comprehended, because I could only see two or three words at a time. It seemed to be more a case of having textualisation (of some type) in some Lacanian frame. You've got that, of course, but then the whole work seemed skewed. I picked up on words that suggested a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, phallus for example, then we're into a difficult oeuvre and I wasn't given a clue, not even a title.

Space in Inscriptions

SS Then I started thinking about the level of reflection and whatnot and I did pick up on the idea of screens and layering of the flesh and I quite liked the fact that you do get this depth. Then it occurred to me why haven't you as an experiment done it the other way round, in other words having wax on the obverse of the weave. It just struck me though in as far as there is porous membrane with a reflection beyond, the idea of surfaces and depths and things, it would be quite interesting to see what would happen if you did it the other way round. It wouldn't be possible to read the text at all then which would be rather irritating.

SS Yes. So you've got the idea of a kind of liminal space, which is neither surface nor depth, do you see what I mean? I suppose that the reason I was thinking this was that I had just been engaged with late 1830 early 1900 discussions about water and refraction and the theorisation of this. I think that this was first noticed by Roger Bacon actually back in the middle ages. There was an interest in how

water reflects when seen at a shallow angle and its transparency at acute angles of sight. This was thought to be interesting – that idea that water could reveal and conceal according to the positionality of the spectator.

SS Roger Bacon starts musing about this in around the 13th century. There's a big discussion about Piero's baptism which is in the National Gallery as to whether or not there is any water there. If you think about it he's got little wavelets lapping round his ankles but it looks like a dry river bed behind. The answer is that it's probably Piero fiddling around with this idea of refracted indices or transparencies in water. As you can imagine my head was full of this at that moment and so I was looking at these very much in that way with the transparent, almost translucent sheen on the reflected surface behind. It did seem to offer what you might call virtual depths which aren't simply a matter of the physical materials used.

LP I'm just thinking that obviously as you move around the works you get either more or less conscious of how they're reflecting through the screen. If you're standing right in front of them that's not really a very prominent relation to the work but you catch it out of the corner of your eye.

JC My first thought about this was, apart from the question of whether you were finding metaphors for subjectivity, was that you were setting up something that could, quite precisely, destabilise the initial object. Rather like one would talk about the self-deceptions of the bourgeois subject, or indeed any subject, and misrecognition.

The concept of misrecognition comes out of the mirror phase writings of Lacan. The subject had in some way to consider itself centred, indeed whole, homogeneous, and therefore it was grounded. So there is a play off between this necessary impossibility of basic assumptions and signification of the phallus. But in all that

stuff, we take it congenitally to be saying something about instabilities in the subject. I thought you might be after, in these constructions something that evoked a sense of the instability. For example the use of the reflective surface, which is a mirror, but not really a mirror. I had to look two or three times before deciding that it was a mirror, it reflects, but it does so quite imperfectly in terms of mirrors.

APPENDIX C

Summary of Research Activities

Here I have included a summary of research activities. These will give the reader a sense of how the research period was organised.

Artwork

Each body of work was preceded by a great deal of experimental work. The process of making work was ongoing throughout the first three years of the project. Examples of experimental work are shown in Appendix 3.

1998, May–August: Worked to produce *Inscriptions* (six paintings).

1998, October – 1999, March: Produced experimental work that led to *Screen / Paintings*. (See Appendix C for examples).

1999, April–September: Worked to produce *Screen / Paintings* (three paintings) and *Text / Objects* (experimental work with text).

2000, February-July: Worked to produce *Photoworks* (four large photographic works and numerous experimental pieces).

Visit

2002, February: Visit to New York to view *Mountains and Sea* and other works by Helen Frankenthaler.

Exhibitions

1998, June: One person show, *Work in Progress,* Customs House, Exmouth.

1998, September: *Identity Texts,* Two-person show alongside The Relationship of Making to Writing Conference, Look Gallery, Exeter.

1998, October: *Inscriptions* included in a group show, *Exmouth Documenta,* The Clifford Fishwick Gallery, University of Plymouth, Exeter.

1999, May: *Chiasmatic States* (experimental work leading to *Screen / Paintings)* included in a group show, *Mixed Bag,* Art Haven, Exeter.

1999, July: *Inscriptions* included in *Matrix 4 Research,* group exhibition, Central St. Martins College of Art, London.

2000, September: *Screen / Paintings* included in *Littoral,* curated group show, Art Haven, Exeter [recorded discussion about *Screen / Paintings* with artist Chris Cook].

2000, September: *Photoworks, The Latent Image,* One-person show, Art Haven, Exeter [presentation given].

2001, February: *Photoworks* and *Screen / Paintings* included in *Littoral,* curated group show, Stada, Germany [talk given].

Publications

2000, Artist's Statement "Inscriptions" in *Differential Aesthetics*, eds. Florence, P. and Foster, N., Ashgate, Burlington.

2002, Artist's Statement "Inscriptions" in *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2002, Volume 2, Numbers 1 & 2, (Special Issue — *The Enactment of Thinking* eds. Macleod, K, and Holdridge, L.) Intellect, Bristol.

Audience Response

1998, October: interviews with colleagues at University of Plymouth carried out in front of *Inscriptions* whilst this work was being shown in the institution (see Appendix B for selected extracts).

Seminars

1998, June: First Regional Research Seminar, Falmouth [paper given].

1998, November: Second Regional Research Seminar, Plymouth University [presentation given].

1999, March: Art and Design Research Day, Queen Street, Exeter [presentation given].

1999, May: Theorama: Third Regional Research Seminar, Falmouth College or Art, Cornwall [presentation given].

1999, May: Post-Graduate Research Seminar, University of Wales, Cardiff [presentation given].

1999, June: Department of Visual Culture, University of the West of England, Bristol [presentation given].

2000, March: Postgraduate Colloquium, Plymouth University, Exeter [presentation given].

2001, May: Two-day post-graduate research seminar, Art and Design Department, University of Plymouth, Exeter [presentation given].

2001, June: Women's Research Network Seminar, Exeter University, Exeter [presentation given].

2002, February: Art History Seminar, University of Plymouth [presentation given].

2001, June, Women's Research Network Seminar, Exeter University, Exeter [presentation given].

2003, March: Art and Design Research Seminar, University of Plymouth, Exeter [presentation given].

Conferences

1998, September: *The Relationship of Making to Writing Conference,* University of Plymouth, Exeter.

1998, November: *Slow burn: Meaning and Vision in Contemporary British Abstract Painting,* Mead Gallery, Warwick.

1999, May: *Search: Work in Progress,* Royal College of Art, London.

1999, July: *Matrix 4 Research,* Central St. Martins College of Art, London [paper given].

1999, July: *Intertextual Interrogations,* School of English, Exeter University, Exeter [paper given].

1999, October: *Stretching the Limits,* Abstract Painting Symposium, Spacex Gallery, Exeter [on panel].

1999, November: HCI Research Seminar, University of Plymouth, Exeter [presentation given].

2003, March: Art and Design Research Seminar, University of Plymouth, Exeter [presentation given].

2000, February: *Complexity Conference,* Dartington College of Arts, Dartington.

2000, March: *Arguing with Derrida,* Symposium, Queen Mary and Westfield College, London.

2000, April: *Art and Psychoanalysis,* Symposium, Spacex Gallery, Exeter.

2000, November: *Locality, Regeneration and Divers[c]ities,* University of Plymouth, Exeter.

2001, June: *International, Intercultural, Intergenerational Dialogues about the Works of and with Luce Irigaray,* Leeds City Art Gallery, Leeds.

2001, July: *The Enactment of Thinking: Creative Practice Research Degrees,* University of Plymouth, Exeter [paper given].

APPENDIX D

Experimental Work Leading to Screen / Paintings

This appendix incorporates examples of experimental work using voile, wax, resins and interference colour that were made in the period between October 1998 and March 1999. Each work is 60 x 32 inches.
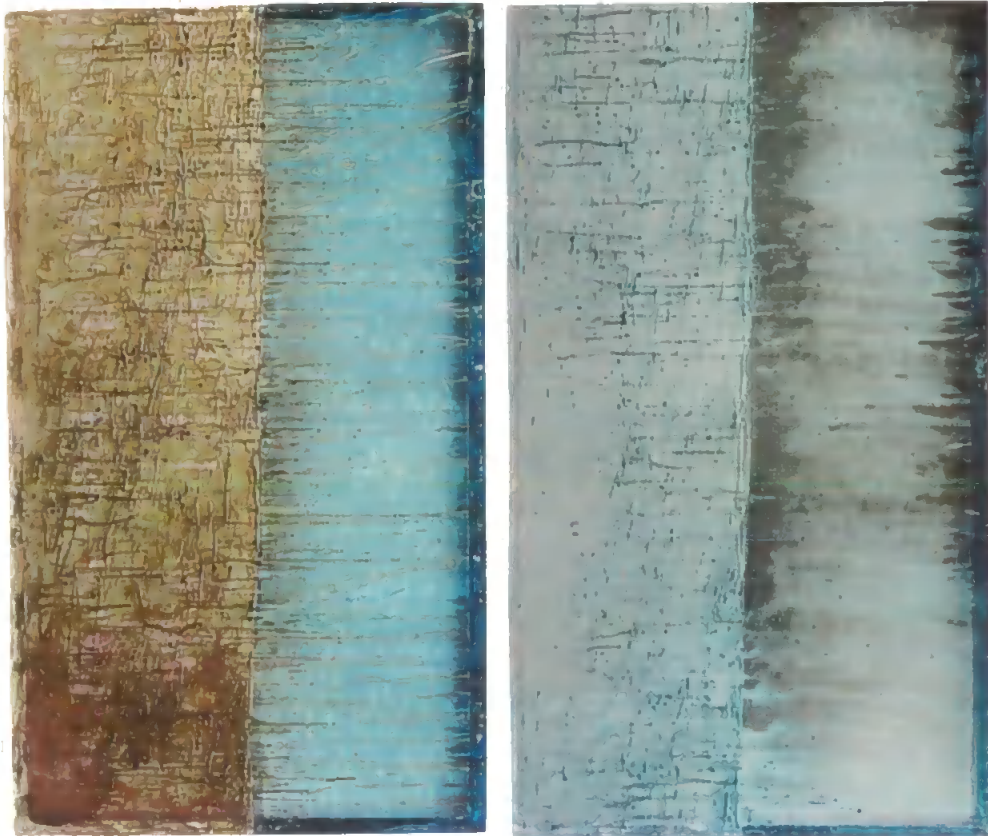
Plate 27   *Untitled 1,* 1999. Wax, voile, interference colour, acrylic, resin (60 x 32 inches).

Plate 28   *Untitled 2,* 1999. Wax, voile, interference colour, acrylic, resin (60 x 32 inches).

Plate 29   *Untitled 1*, 1999. Wax, voile, interference colour, acrylic, resin (60 x 32 inches).

Plate 30   *Untitled 2*, 1999. Wax, voile, interference colour, acrylic, resin (60 x 32 inches).

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