

2004

## Clutch

Claire Canham  
*Edith Cowan University*

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# Edith Cowan University

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## Clutch

vb. to seize with or as if with hands or claws, to grasp or hold firmly, to attempt to get hold or possession of, a firm grasp, a hand or claw in the act of clutching, power or control. Also: clutch bag, a handbag without handles, a nest of eggs laid at the same time, a brood of chickens.

By

Claire Canham

BA Visual Art (Hons)

## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## Abstract

The research encompasses an analysis of paradigms of practice, material as content, historical precedents, social and political conditions relative to the project themes and corresponding theoretical discourse. It reflects issues of domesticity and familial relationships, memory, narrative and the use of specific materials and methods sympathetic to these concerns. Aspects of the practices of Eva Hesse and Marcel Duchamp have been considered to contextualise and differentiate the creative work. The research also attempts to define and position the artworks through relative critical evaluation of contemporary art practices.

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education: and that to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

.....

Date 2/12/04 .....

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Janien Schwarz, Simon Blond and Dr Dean Chan for their support and guidance. I thank my peers and the SOCA department for the opportunity to work in and contribute to a positive learning environment. I extend great appreciation to my family for their encouragement and inspiration.

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## Introduction.

“Life doesn't last, art doesn't last, it doesn't matter”

Eva Hesse (cited in Wagstaff, (2003), p. 9).

This exegesis identifies key theoretical ideas that underpin my research and creative practice and contextualises it within historical precedents and contemporary arts practice. The main points of research relate to the genre of the everyday, namely the domestic, and the practice of using/manipulating found objects and detritus. My use of this methodology relates to exploring familial relationships and culturally prescribed roles, representations, and experiences associated with the home. My research includes the use of process based techniques in contemporary art that are drawn from traditionally feminine domestic values and chores and the use of specific materials, such as glass, latex and a variety of domestic objects, intended to add layers of meaning and context. Key philosophies of Eva Hesse and Marcel Duchamp and their approach to practice is examined as are some texts by Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, Walter Benjamin and other theorists, who examine concepts of disruption, as well as Surrealism and Dada.

Just as memory is rhizomic and remembered events can be lost, layered or reinterpreted, this non-linear constitution embodies the concepts present in my project and intentions as a visual arts practitioner.

My praxis<sup>1</sup> stems from an analysis of familial relationships, quotidian experiences and an affinity with untold stories and meanings that are present in everyday objects and associated routines. These explorations and subsequent works oscillate between an urgency of meaning, childlike deconstruction of materials and laborious processes. The aim of the research and corresponding body of work has been to contextualise conceptual concerns, working methods and outcomes. Exploration of cross-disciplinary practice, negotiating conflicting theories and technical concerns to achieve desired outcomes has been at the heart of this project. My intention to explore numerous facets of my research topic through unconventional integration of materials and techniques, suggests that at any one time I am 'sewing with several threads'. This multi-faceted approach has resulted in parallel projects that possibly exist symbiotically.

Stylistically, the work of Eva Hesse and Marcel Duchamp could be said to be worlds apart, although both had links to Dada and Surrealism, practiced experimentally, and critiqued the dominant ideologies and institutional norms of the time. In addition, both artists questioned traditional approaches to art making and materials. Their work and interest in the disparity between materials, concepts, and processes, in addition to the disruption of meaning and break with tradition has resonance in a post-modern context.

The long lasting influence of these ideas combined with the notion of the collector, which is often fuelled by sentimentality and desire for mnemonic experience, coupled with investigations into chance, construction of identity and familial relationships are critical to this project and are evident in my research and body of work.

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<sup>1</sup> This term is identified in the Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory as the Greek word for doing and is widely used as a synonym for purposeful human activity. I use this term to describe the relationship between theoretical discourse and working practices and creative practice.

This is manifest in the use of glass and latex in their complex and varied associations. These materials are coupled with discarded objects that exhibit a worn aesthetic to explore inherited values and domestic ideologies. Creating narratives and allegories through the manipulation of distinctive materials and local constructs is ambiguous in a search for truth through the absurd, abject, humorous and ironic.

**I love you today, more than yesterday but not as much as tomorrow.**

I am a collector of discarded/unloved objects that have little economic value. What follows here is a description of an occurrence that characterises incidents that inform my practice, an absurd chance encounter with an object of particular and personal aesthetic value. The fact that one could attempt to explain these happenings adds to the absurdity. The accompanying text, although private in origin and not from my era, embodies everyday concerns and social and cultural ideals. I personally identify with these concepts in regard to inherited values and my own experiences of everyday life and as such this is at the heart of the formation of my arts practice.

*Sometime in January*

On an outing to a suburban Sunday market I acquired several items of personal interest. One of these came into my possession through an exchange with a gentleman at one particular stall. I was drawn to the many old papers and in particular a worn, thin material covered book. I saw that it was for sale for a small amount and this pleased me further because, as a collector of curiosities, I do like to find a bargain. I picked it up and inside were many delicate loose sheets of yellowed paper with beautiful faded cursive handwriting. I quickly closed the cover in my excitement of finding this treasure and hurriedly purchased it. For the rest of the day I contemplated my possession of this book. Who's was it, what was it and why was it now mine?

### Monday 14<sup>th</sup> May

Another lovely Melbourne day, rained all day long and was bitter cold. About 11am we set off and looked up some seats for future nights, then had a nice grilled dinner, looked around a few shops, then on up to the Museum, but only saw a small portion of it, when the bell rang to come out, so we then had just tea and sandwiches and came home to the hotel, where we changed out of our wet things, had a nice warm bath, put on more warm dry clothes and then went to a picture show, at the State Theatre where we saw Gary Cooper, Ingrid Bergin in "For Whom the Bells Toll". A very lovely picture and marvellously acted. After the show we had a lovely supper and then came on home to a nice warm bed and my God! Isn't it cold!!!

### Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> May

Started off from the hotel at 11.15am, in a slightly average day. Cold – very cold – cloudy but not raining – so far??!! Turned out to be a beautiful day. First we had a cup of tea and tomato sandwiches, then we went up and looked over the rest of the Museum. Had our lunch at a very nice dining room, under the Museum building. After lunch we came back to the hotel, had a bath, got dressed, Doug went out to the S.T.D to pick up some cigarettes, and I saw the new Melbourne hospital, then we went out to Kath's place for dinner. Don didn't come home until 8.30pm and had to leave about 9.30pm. Kath's brother Ken and his young lady came to dinner, after which we sat by the fire. Listened to the wireless and talked. Came home about eleven o'clock. Had a lovely day and am feeling very well, Doug also.

### Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> May

Left the hotel about lunch time. Had a nice grill at a café, then caught the train to Port Melbourne, had a look at the Port and a few big ships, caught the train back to Flinders Street, then caught another train to Williams Beach. Had a

look around the beach, a light afternoon tea, then back to the hotel where we washed and dressed and then went up to the A.B.C night into the studio and listened to one of the loveliest musical sessions I have ever heard in my life. Then we went on down to the town hall and heard a beautiful concert given in aid of the blind. I was absolutely dazed at the height of the town hall and we heard the beautiful big organ, saw aunty Edna on the way out. Had a nice supper at Cobbs and then home to bed.

#### Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> May

Left the hotel about 12.15pm in a beautiful, cool, Sunny day, had a cup of tea and toast, at a small café and then caught the train to the Zoo. The Zoo was very beautiful, cages well constructed and it was all very clean. Thoroughly enjoyed our roam around. Caught the train back to town, did a little bit of shopping, came home and had a bath and got dressed up nicely and went and had dinner at "Everetties", a very exclusive restaurant, where they played a band during dinner and everybody could dance if they wished. It was all very nice and clean and the service was excellent. There we met Ivy and George and went to see "The Desert Song" a musical play, which was very beautiful, extravagant, and wonderfully acted. The singing was marvellous too, also the beautiful orchestra, After the show we all had supper at "Cobbs" and Ivy and George went home to Carnegie, and we came back to the hotel. Had a wonderful day.

#### Friday 18<sup>th</sup> May

Didn't get up until 12.15, had lunch at the hotel dining rooms. Wrote mum a letter while Doug went over to see if I could get home on the train, but not having a possibility we went up to the transport board and tried there, but had no hope whatever. So then we caught the train out to see Uncle Stughie and Aunty Maud, Aunty Aggie came while we were there so we saw her too. After having dinner with them we left for the picture show at the Majestic and saw Bud Abbott and Lou Costello in "Hit the Ice." A very funny show and we enjoyed a good laugh. After the show we had a cup of coffee and sandwiches,

*and then we went and listened to the dance Orchestra at the Lesser Hall in the big Town Hall after which we came home and went to bed Today had been a beautiful warm sunny day.<sup>2</sup>*

When later I reflected more deeply about the diary, it increasingly gave me a great sense of sadness. I thought about the forgotten lady who had penned those pages decades ago and who now was inadvertently sharing her personal and rather unremarkable experiences with me, a stranger. Her vivid memories capture an era, an individual, who she identified with and what her values were. Yet for all the insight it provided I was left with a profound sense of loss. Because when I am with my grandmother, who is now 95, and I am listening to her stories or even about her afternoon at the bingo, I wonder what will happen to all her things and the memories of her and her experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the snippets of experiences carried forth across time in the diary are a reminder of the warmth that comes from recounting everyday events of life with others through storytelling. In essence, storytelling is at the heart of my work and is exemplified through the collective experiences of handling domestic objects, everyday routines, sharing sentimental, social or cultural values and remarking on the absurdity of life. This is extended through my use of irony and marrying traditionally disparate objects and materials to form, inform or disrupt narrative.

### *Beginning in February*

At the commencement of this body of work, I found an old children's educational jigsaw comprised of large pieces and set about casting each individually in glass. The end result being a complete transparent jigsaw that

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<sup>2</sup> This is a transcript of the diary acquired and as such is true to the original as much as possible.

<sup>3</sup> This is my paternal grandmother. As such she is the matriarch of this side of our rather extended family and is still fully independent. Despite her age and many quirks she holds this position with authority.

could not be reassembled. One of the advantages of using glass as a casting material is its molten nature. It was my intention for the puzzle to remain unsolved and the maverick nature of this material was conducive to such an approach. The glass puzzle has elements of irony and transience and communicates concepts that relate to childhood and memory for an adult audience.

Maintaining the transparency of the glass and considering the presentation and context of the piece was intended as a metaphor for the human condition; manifesting solidity and strength through scale, yet delicate and fragile in the use of glass. The immediate desire to assemble the 'picture', which will reflect wherever the work lies due to its pellucidity, speaks of constant change and again brings to mind the nature of memory. To assemble the jigsaw would produce an image that contains what is on the other side of it (the background surface) and reflects its immediate environment (light, viewer, architecture).

This alludes to constant change yet also to an ailment of our contemporary condition, to take much on face value in haste in order to move on to the next big thing. In addition to this it is worth mentioning that the pieces are of a generic nature and the work is able to expand or contract in scale, to become inconsequential or infinite, as it is possible to (reduce or) produce an endless quantity of pieces.



Figure 1: *Untitled* (glass jigsaw puzzle), 2004. Dimensions variable.



Figure 2: *Untitled* (glass jigsaw puzzle), 2004. Detail.



Within the research proposal two artists were researched whose practices embrace similar ideas to my own approach to materials, irony, nostalgia and female identity. These two artists, Susan Schelle and Mary Brogger, were examined with regard to one particular exhibition; *A Sense of Place* in 1993. They use objects recognisable by their utilitarian or traditional value, such as Queen Anne footstools, and intervene in subtle ways. Susan Schelle employs stitch and old imagery to question traditional representations of women. Mary Brogger recreates period furniture pieces and domestic furnishings in unconventional materials such as steel and ice, investigating issues related to time, our perception of the past, understanding of the present and construction of the future.

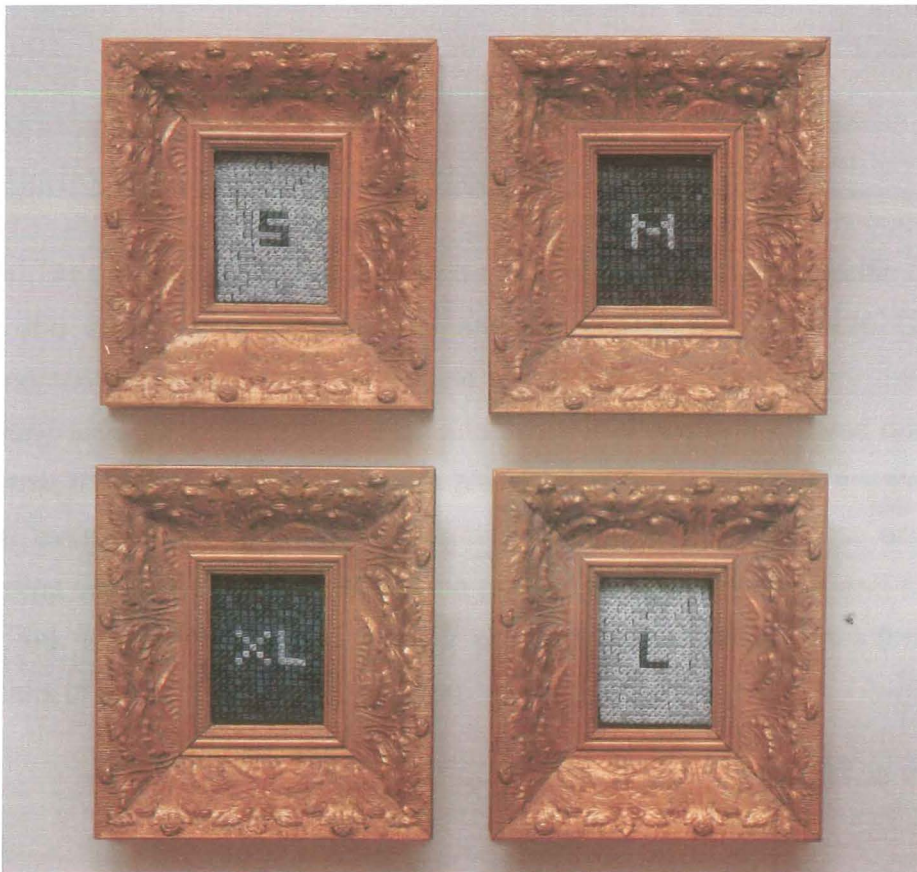


Figure 3: Susan Schelle, *SMLXL*, 1991. Gold leaf frame, dice beads.



Figure 4: Mary Brogger, *Untitled (settee)*, 1991. Pierced sheet steel.

At the heart of my interest in the everyday and use of specific objects are the concepts of wear, trace and mark making by people like my grandmother. Though there are people sitting in every house on my street and beyond who can recite stories from and about their family and loved ones, my interest diverges. I am drawn to sun bleached blinds, marks that are traces of past events and daily routines, as well as the absurdity of life and time passing us by. This is evidence of the past lives of these objects and spaces, our link to collective memory. How we treat and process this information speaks of our contemporary condition.



It is this powerful nostalgic feeling evoked from ordinary domestic objects and spaces that I align with and that are reflected in the considerations of Kim Grant.

Empires rise and fall, but ordinary human life endures, accompanied by the objects that sustain it on a daily level. They attend us from birth to death, mute witnesses to the dramas of our existence... ...Even the simplest utilitarian objects. The most humble and undecorated, retain the imprint of their owners and seem to hold a secret truth about the lives with which they were once associated. (Grant, 2004, p. 4)



As I sit quietly at my grandmothers and drink my tea, waiting for the conclusion of the day's episode of *The Bold and The Beautiful*, my mind wanders. I look around me and take in the china cabinets packed four layers deep on each shelf with ornaments, trinkets, photographs and toothpicks. I recognise some of the faces staring back at me and I smile as I recall the stories attached to the dolls and such that I can identify in the jumble of porcelain, lace and glass. I vividly recall as a child peering through the glass at all of the treasures within and mischievously wondering where the key's hiding place might be. More recently this memory is layered with the experience of cleaning my niece's fingermarks from the glass doors, knowing she is now sharing these memories.

My domestic space is a museum of collections; orderly arrangements are juxtaposed with rescued odds and ends that probably really belong in the rubbish. I often acquire things without understanding why, I just can't bear to pass them by, whatever they may be. I have a propensity to leave with said items under my arm so that each day, I am able to listen to and create stories, admire flaking texture, grubby finger marks, faded covers and breathe in that worn leather smell from the objects new home on my bookshelf.

The 'rendezvous' experience that Golding speaks of is evident in my work. It has become a routine frequenting places, such as thrift stores, markets and car boot sales, and to forage with other 'collectors' to encounter objects that have, as Walter Benjamin puts it, "the ability to look at us in return." (Cited in Indyk, 2000, p.1).

Once found, these objects may become part of a work. They may be manipulated in some way, dismantled, recreated in several new materials therefore taking on new associations and lives. The item may become a mould to create a new object or process.



Figure 5: *Untitled*, 2004. Blown glass, metal, wax.

I have further extended my work with glass by creating hinged moulds from cheese graters to produce blown glass forms. In addition to this I have tested the boundaries of both glass and found objects by immersing metal objects such as irons, knives and forks in glass while it is still in liquid form. (See fig 20).

The objects that, are chosen or choose me for numerous reasons, and the several specific materials I use (glass and latex), often dictate the end result.

"...research was undertaken to understand Hesse's intentions for these works, and to determine the extent of her belief that the material conditions of works over time – their ephemerality and/or degradation – might be part of the story the objects have to tell." (Sussman, 2002, p.18)

There is an identifiable trend in this experimentation with materials and found objects. Chance and a determination to combine materials that should not really go appear in the work. For example glass and the metal implements used are not compatible. The result being that some crack, fracture or the metals melt but many survive the annealing process and enhance the tension the exists between the strength and fragility of these materials. Much of this experimentation and research has been trial and error as this is a non-traditional approach to glass work and chance plays a role in this process.



Figure 6: Walter Zimmerman. *RSCD/4U*. Hand blown glass and mixed media. 1999



Figure 7: Walter Zimmerman. *Unidentified*. Hand blown glass and mixed media 1995



Figure 8: Walter Zimmerman. *Urban Unit #3 (Red)*. Hand blown glass and mixed media, 1999



Figure 9: Walter Zimmerman. *Safety Yellow* (detail). Hand blown glass and mixed media, 1996



Walter Zimmerman's use of glass and conceptual concerns are similar to those of my project and pieces in the body of work share a comparable form to his. Zimmerman creates beautiful blown glass forms and combines them with found items and detritus to create new objects that are quite abject in appearance. The glasswork in my project however differs from Zimmerman's in that it is grounded in the domestic and I combine glass and latex. The use of latex is my reference to the physical body. In addition to this the glass objects produced are formed by using domestic items as moulds and carry the identifiable marks of these. By using the actual object it has enabled the work produced to present both the inside and outside of the object by turning the mould 'inside out'. This draws links to familial dichotomies, such as seen and unseen, told and unspoken and connotations of public and private.

In her review of Zimmerman's work Roberta Lord talks of how he "allows neither himself or his viewers the luxury of....(this)... remote perspective." It is the ambiguity of the work, its abject organic nature combined with industrial and medical looking materials that does not allow the viewer to have a fixed position. Reference to the body and bodily fluids, that we would prefer not to contemplate, both draw and repel the audience and the appearance of a haphazard 'repair job' to combine pieces provokes sympathy. In addition to these qualities the hand blown glass adds another layer. Glass is seen in our everyday lives as a functional material appearing as vessels (drinking glasses, vases) or boundaries (Windows, shower/wind screens) and similar ideas apply here yet evoke alternative interpretations and responses. These vessels are crafted with an intimate bodily connection as they have literally had life breathed into them. The sensual, tactile qualities of glass enhance our desire to come close and fondle; yet we also know that it can be a fragile and dangerous material.

These concepts are embraced in the project yet to different aesthetic ends. The process and materials used to create my pieces are more minimal than Zimmerman's and play more on the female body and associated domestic connotations. This is achieved by joining the glass forms with

bandage wrapped cord that is coated in latex. Latex has immediate links to skin in its colour, properties and the way it ages, eventually becoming brittle and disintegrating. These blown glass forms that bear the marks of a cheese grater appear to be joined by a brown 'umbilical cord' that references the idea of the domestic as the realm of the mother. The piece also acts as a skipping rope extending the feminine connotations and yet again speaking of history and memory.



Figure 10: Photo Documentation. *Untitled*, 2004.





Figure 11: Photo Documentation. *Untitled*, 2004.

By combining glass and latex the relationship between the blown objects has successfully captured the ideas and concerns relating to trace, childhood and domesticity but ambiguity and an element of humour is present allowing for possibilities and the viewer to bring potential to the work.

The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation: through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale. All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external

world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his [or her] contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists. (Sanouillet & Peterson, 1975, p.139)

My alchemical creations have been fashioned following several practical investigations and research relating to various forms of glasswork and production methods. It has encompassed blown pieces, slug and kiln casting, hot pouring, sand casting and cold working with the majority of work occurring in the hot shop<sup>4</sup>.



Figure12: Working with Holly Grace in Hayline Glass Studio 2004.

The transparency of glass was important to Duchamp, with regard to his work *Large Glass* (1915-23) (see fig 13) just as it is to this project. My glasswork is not coloured and the only method used to treat the surface with is sandblasting to finish pieces or include text or pattern, such as lace.

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<sup>4</sup> The hot shop is the glass studio where the furnace, glory hole (for reheating blown forms to shape them) and kilns are housed and where most glasswork takes place. The furnace runs at between 1110 – 1200 degrees depending on the process required, i.e. blowing or casting, and kilns run at between 400 to 900 degrees again varying for annealing requirements. Annealing reduces the stress on the glass to prevent breakage and can take anywhere between 24hrs and weeks depending on the size of the work. Some pieces may require cold working such as grinding or sandblasting and these can often be laborious processes.





*Untitled*, 2004. Sandblasted glass, latex, metal.

Though Duchamp painted the panels of *Large Glass* the ability for the viewer to see through the work and incorporate the details of the surroundings in the image is an integral aspect of the work. This concept is important to my glasswork also. Duchamp's use of such a material in this manner could be attributed to his reaction to the 'physical' side of painting. By using glass the traditionally private, pictorial space of the painting was denied.

In addition to this the space and positioning of the piece was a consideration and as such what was subsequently included in the picture pane could be seen as adhering to Duchamp's trademark of chance. This also highlights some of the uses and perceptions of glass as an architectural material that surrounds us in our everyday activities.

The question of shop windows

To undergo the interrogation of shop windows

The exigency of the shop window

The shop window proof of the existence of the outside world

When one undergoes the examination of the shop window, one also pronounces one's own sentence. In fact, one's choice is "round trip."

From the demands of the shop windows, from the inevitable response to shop windows, my choice is determined. No obstinacy, ad absurdum, of hiding the coition through a glass pane with one or many objects of the shop window. The penalty consists in cutting the pane and in feeling regret as soon as possession is consummated. Q.E.D.

(Sanouillet & Peterson, 1975, p.74)



Figure13: Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* 1961/1986 (reconstruction).

### Around June time

"If I can Name the content. Then...it's the total absurdity of life... Absurdity is the keyword. It has to do with contradictions and oppositions" Eva Hesse (cited in Wagstaff, 2003, p. 4).

Both the life and work of Eva Hesse could be described as tragic, sorrowful, joyous and urgent. Her life cut short at 34 Hesse had many personal struggles yet her work continues to resonate and her practice is, and has been, influential on many artists, both established and emerging.

Since late last year my grandmother and I have been collecting spent tea bags, drying them out and ferreting them away. Consequently I now have a collection of sweet smelling brown squares rescued from an unpleasant fate with all the other by-products of suburban daily life.

Briony Fer describes the salvaging nature of Eva Hesse " ...but [this] logic also becomes structural to the work: the constant drive to recuperate that which otherwise would be lost. This is a retrieval and repetition of the would-be-lost rather than the ready-made." (Fer & Sussman et al. 2002, p. 87.) Elements of these habits and curiosities are reflected in the work where domestic, found objects and materials are frequently used. Fer is also referring to Hesse's use materials and less specifically to the found readymade object. This still applies and highlights the interlinking of methods and ideas to form this body of work. The work initially connects strongly with that of Hesse in the extent that latex is used and it is the concept of utilising such a materials to be the work itself as opposed to the casting medium that is its orthodox function, to be used and discarded as part of a process rather than the focus being on the material itself.

I find the work of Eva Hesse exciting. Her choice and use of materials, personal perspective and approach to art making is provocative. Her work reflects a free spirit and her determination and experimentation with materials is inspiring. I identify with Hesse's work on several levels but initially with

regard to the fact that we have both shared an intimate relationship with latex and (semi) industrial materials. Hesse brought together many non-traditional forms and items in her artwork and I see parallels between some of these ideas and those of my own. I recall being advised over a year ago, that latex and glass were two materials that did not go together particularly well. I could understand this point with regard to the discussion at the time however they had become my two great loves and I was determined for them to relate to each other as strongly as I related to them.

“The artwork is amorphous and strangely beautiful as it hovers between something and nothing, on the borderline of not coming together.....Hesse’s primary means of attaining her artistic goal was an extraordinary sensitivity to the diverse, and often untraditional, materials with which she worked...” (Sussman, 2002, p.17)

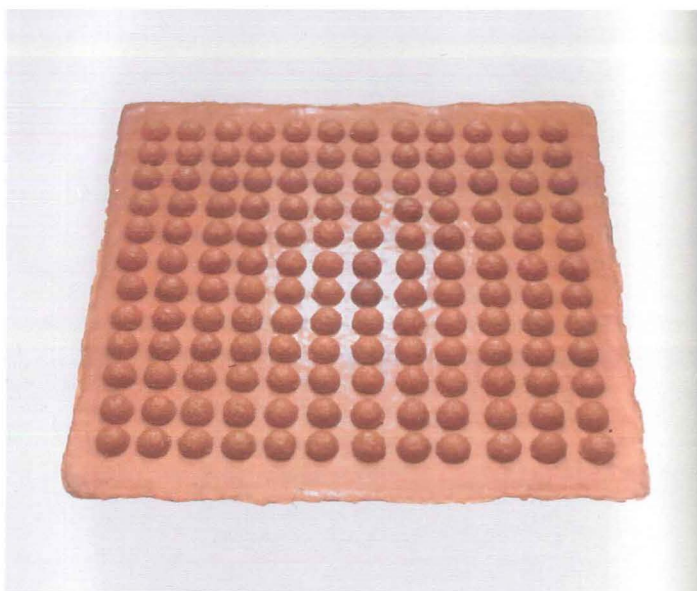


Figure 14: Eva Hesse, *Schema*, 1967-68. Latex (3.8x106.7x106.7cm)





Figure 15: Eva Hesse, *Augment*, 1968 (detail). Latex and filler over canvas.



Figure 16: Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, 1967-68. Mixed media in a glass and metal case. (37.1x26x26cm)

Within my project and prior practice I have alluded to the body by utilising latex. By combining these substances, sincerity in my conceptual concerns and negotiating form I have achieved unusual yet effective metamorphoses.

One of the objects I have created is a skipping rope created from hand blown glass vessels and latex covered rope (see figs 10 & 11). The two glass forms that are the handles are elongated eggplant shapes and bear the marks of the inside of a cheese grater. Where this process would normally be executed by making a plaster & silica mould, quite a lengthy process, these pieces were created by blowing directly into the hinged metal object and stretched to form the correct shape while hot. This allows more freedom to manipulate the neck of the work and maintain clarity of the glass. Alternative methods require release agents that may stain the outer layer or mean that the object must become solid as opposed to a hollow blown piece. The procedure described here does have restrictions in that metal objects that can be used as moulds in this way are limited. This breaks down to two main points, which are the form of the object, its ability to be cut and hinged and compatibility of the metal. Through these investigations it has been established that stainless steel is one of the few, and best, metals to be used in this way.

This approach to making embodies ideas of urgency and fearless experimentation that can be likened to that of Eva Hesse. It highlights sensitivity to materials and my desire to maintain the integrity of these materials and my ideas. This in part explains why I have maintained the use of clear glass. There is a lifetime of possibilities in these materials in their 'natural' form that can be pursued with regard to the outlined conceptual concerns. It is the maverick qualities of these materials that I enjoy and that I see correspond with Hesse's ideas on absurdity.



Latex changes depending on what you apply it to. It may be stained from the surface and be different in colour and texture depending on what and how it is applied. It slowly changes colour and darkens as it ages in reaction to exposure to light.

It is a joy to always be making new discoveries of a material. The same applies to glass and its nature as a super cooled liquid. This means it must be treated with care yet it is surprisingly durable and its boundaries can be pushed to invigorating extremes. This is an important aspect of my work and I see that it relates to why Duchamp used it in *Large Glass* (see fig 13). To be able to see through, into and beyond, enhances the pieces. There are various ways that this act could be interpreted. This action may be seen as a desire to include the surroundings in the piece through its transparency. It could be viewed as highlighting the uselessness of this object in its new state (glass) invoking feelings of preciousness, loss or humour in its irony.

By combining various materials and processes I have attempted to explore similar ideas when creating my work. This can be related to my use of latex also. I have experimented with pigmentation of liquid latex however I did not pursue this line of inquiry. I prefer to use it in its original state. My initial reaction to this substance was delight in its liquid to solid qualities and the uncanny likeness it has to skin. In the abovementioned Skipping rope work I have used latex as the connector between the glass 'handles'. In this state it resembles an umbilical cord or some tube that may deliver a substance from one vessel to the other. For me this evokes feelings of childhood, though this is not a child's toy as it would be dangerous, and this elevates it to 'top shelf status'<sup>5</sup>. The marks on the glass handles are identifiable as details from a domestic grater and link the item to the home. Connotations of domestic roles make me think of the innocence of youth playing house with my best friend. There is also a personification through the sense of connectedness via the

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<sup>5</sup> I use this term as a way to reference the things one was not allowed to touch as a child and also those things we treasure as ornaments and items that act as memory markers.

fact that these forms, that are unique objects in themselves, are joined by a long skin like latex cord.

My relationship with the work of Eva Hesse and ideas with regard to truth to materials are identifiable in a piece that has extended ideas from a previous work. In the initial project proposal I intended to create an installation by coating furniture from a domestic space in latex, peel away the skins and recreate the room elsewhere. This process had previously been used to create an installation with the skins of many domestic objects however the scale was much smaller as items such as shoes, books, dishes etc were used. Creating a dining chair tested the larger scale idea, however the initial outcome was not as successful as anticipated. However this material and concept could not be abandoned as it was now under my skin (pardon the pun) and I wished to find a way to solve my working problems and continue pursuing the idea. Where there is a will there is a way and a way was found to make the dream of the initial inspiration possible, to paint a whole room in latex, peel away the skin and install it in various spaces as a 'room within a room'. This was a big, smelly and expensive job and the intention to do a room of my own or a family members home was not feasible. The site chosen was an installation space, Black Box White Box, on the Mt. Lawley Edith Cowan University campus, and so there now exists a portable gallery space! This latex project was ambitious and successful, yet aspects of it were tests, and the aim is to pursue the concept and process further.

Within my practice I have also been influenced by the work of Rachael Whiteread and she has been an ongoing influence. With particular relevance is *Untitled (House)* 1993. It could be noted that there is a link between Hesse and Whiteread and my own practice with regard to some Minimalist concepts. This relates to use of industrial materials and aesthetic issues as well as Hesse's relationships with key artists from this movement. These issues will not be pursued in depth in this paper however I continue to follow Whiteread's work, admire her integrity in pursuing her ideas and acknowledge this Minimalist connection.



Figure 17: *When I grow up...* 2004. Latex and mixed media installation.



Figure 18: *When I grow up...* 2004. (Detail)

“Those ‘Dust breedings’ and “standard stoppages’ open the door for us to the astonishing poetry of nothingness, to the sense of the senseless, and to a world hidden in the microcosm of every object” (Sanouillet, (1975) p. 11)

### Looking towards August

Duchamp delighted in shocking and confronting viewers with unconventional, ideas, materials, artworks and titles. He focused more on conceptual concerns as opposed to traditional representations. He stated:

I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was much more interested in recreating ideas in painting. For me the title was very important. I was interested in making painting serve my purpose, and in getting away from the physicality of painting...I was interested in ideas – not merely in visual products. I wanted to once again put painting at the service of the mind. (Sanouillet & Peterson, 1975, p. 125)

The old adage 'there is no such thing as bad publicity' highlights the point that a critical or base/gut response can be a powerful tool in achieving the desired outcome. The earliest example of this is Duchamp's infamous piece *Fountain* of 1917. He submitted a white porcelain urinal to the exhibition organised by the Society of Independent Artists of which he was a director.

The work was submitted under a pseudonym. Under the declaration of the organisers the piece should have been accepted to the show. This would have been in adherence to the democratic spirit of the venture as the only condition for entrance was to pay the submission fee. The work was not exhibited however Duchamp defended the work, in the magazine *Blindman*, as identity of the creator still remained unknown.

Duchamp's intention was to change the meaning of an object through a change of context and caused a rethinking of what is, and can be, art? As a result of these and subsequent actions Marcel Duchamp is recognised as the pioneer of the readymade. As John Golding states:

The ready-made can perhaps be best described as an object in the material, external world, most often a manufactured object, which the artist by virtue of the attention he turns upon it elevates to the symbolic status of a work of art. Its selection is obviously not a random affair and Duchamp has described his coming together with these objects as a 'kind of rendezvous'. Duchamp realised that for the ready-made to retain its power to force upon the recipient or viewer a reappraisal of intellectual and aesthetic values it must retain a quality of rarity and he deliberately limited his output. (Golding, (1973) p, 55.)



Figure 19: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* 1917.

When speaking of Duchamp we can talk of his use and acceptance of chance. However the choice of his ready-mades was a carefully considered activity. As he states he specifically chose objects "based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste...in fact a complete anaesthesia." (Sanouillet & Peterson, 1975, p. 141). He also deliberately limited the number and production of these works as he

wished for them to avoid the vice of taste<sup>6</sup>. This may be ironic yet many contemporary artists employ this technique.

And my painting was, of course, at once regarded as "intellectual", "literary" painting. It was true I was endeavouring to establish myself as far as possible from "pleasing" and "attractive" physical paintings. That extreme was seen as literary. My *King and Queen* was a chess king and queen. (Sanouillet & Peterson, 1975, p125)?

I have used the work *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* or *Large Glass* (1915-23) as an example, to define several aspects of Duchamp's praxis that relate to my own. This piece has been mentioned earlier in discussion of Duchamp's disruption of narrative in his titles. It is also significant due to its glass components, the fracturing of the work and Duchamp's response to this. His acceptance of the incident and explanation that this incident corresponded with his ideas of chance. I see his use of glass sitting both with his interest in the readymade, his ideas on painting and parody of scientific method or reference. The scientific and the mechanical aspects of Duchamp's are employed to different ends to my own yet a dialogue does occur. As previously mentioned my experimentation with glass and found objects embraces chance and also relates to the sciences in the chemical makeup of the materials and their reaction to one another. It is not my main intention to parody scientific method but the conceptual basis for the work and aesthetic of the finished pieces implies parallels.

The Green Box was produced by Duchamp to chronicle the creation of the work *Large Glass*. It consisted of notes and drawings that related to the lengthy process of the creation of the work and the end result could be said to cloud the issue rather than clarify it.

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<sup>6</sup> Salt seller p133-134. In an interview conducted in 1956 between James John Sweeney and Marcel Duchamp they discuss the issue of taste. Sweeney speaks of an incident where Duchamp was described as 'always careful to find a way of contradicting himself'. This point was clarified as a method of avoiding repetition so as to avoid 'habit' and taste, whether it be good or bad. Though I myself often embrace the idea of routines in my work I liken this idea to that of Lyotard in his call for use of disruptive methods and I am influenced by these ideas also.

...Duchamp placed the collotype notes into each box in an intentionally random sequence, which, for anyone who wanted to read the notes and relate them to the Large Glass, made any attempt at their organisation the responsibility of individual readers. As a result, Duchamp achieved precisely the effect he desired. The notes are clearly understood to be an integral part of the Large Glass, a quick and-ready guide through its labyrinthine narrative, yet their lack of organisation prevents us from "reading" the subject in a logical fashion from start to end. As a result, we are thwarted in our efforts to comprehend the work as a coherent whole, thereby effectively diffusing whatever visual (what he would later call "retinal") appeal the unfinished work might have otherwise possessed. (Naumann, (1999) p. 116)

I am intrigued by this idea and the technique Duchamp employs in many of his titles and inscriptions on his works for example the title *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23). Here Duchamp disrupts the narrative of the title by the insertion of the word Even. As he himself notes "If you interrupt your work, I mean after you have done it, then it becomes, it stays a thing in itself..." (Sanouillet & Peterson, 1975, p.134). This idea demonstrates one of the cornerstones/driving forces of Duchamp's practice and that of Dada. This was a reaction to World War 1 and 'the age of reason'.

Rationalism and empiricism seemed to have collapsed into what the Dadaist Hugo Ball called the 'huge anti-nature' of the war, and it was this that the Zurich Dadaists reacted against with tactics that were both childlike and cynical: a kind of primitivism ('starting again at zero'), a creative anarchy, parodies, masks and jokes. (Ades, (1993) p. 3.)

We could liken Duchamp's Fountain to this 'creative anarchy' when taking into consideration the general traditional and conservative thought of the time. I identify with this description in its juxtaposition of naïve investigation methods and disruptive methods of irony and humour.



The approach of Duchamp with regard to disruption of narrative has resonance in present contemporary society. I see links with ideas of disruption associated with Adorno, Baudrillard and Lyotard who called for continual disruption through the deferral of meaning and expresses a desire to question meaning rather than to provide definition(s).

My own work embraces narrative and I mediate the disparity between this and my interest in Duchamp's ideas of disruption through my use of irony, humour and absurdity. To clarify these ideas I will give an example from my own practice. For example an iron rescued from the rubbish tip has a particular aesthetic value. It is not an iron I would be able to purchase, belonging to a past generation. Once dismantled the outer casing and water tank are pushed into hot glass whilst it is still liquid.

The combination of these materials in this manner is non traditional therefore this process has quite a degree of chance to it. The glass carries associations of preservation and trophy like connotations and the item now embedded in its new home appears as an ornament that should adorn the top shelf, though the object, an old iron is identifiable. The function of it is removed and it is both funny and absurd in its new state.



Figure 20: *Breakfast 2004*. Glass and found object.



In order to understand our present condition and future we must look to the past and create identity through experience of postmodern culture, history and memory. As Catharina Gabrielsson describes "The most important function of memory is to shape identity. Without memory, one is "nobody"; without shared memory nothing collective can exist. It is by comparison between now and then that we come to understand ourselves, "The deciphering of what we are in the light of what we are no longer" (Pierre Nora cited in Gabrielsson, ND, p. 2)

Umberto Eco describes a self-reflexive and pedagogical understanding of modern and post modern.

But the moment comes when the avant-guard (the modern) can go no further, because it has produced a metalanguage that speaks of its impossible texts (conceptual art). The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognising the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the post modern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly", because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence.

As previously mentioned storytelling is a significant area of investigation in my work. Though to present these ideas naively would be insignificant and in the light of Umberto Eco's post-modern perspective I find my middle ground between his ideas that of Walter Benjamin description of storytelling and Calvino's method that is "designed to integrate itself into the

experience of the reader and to claim a place for itself in memory, where it may serve as a model for action." (Cited in Re (1990) p. 159)

There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness [or repetition] which precludes physiological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else, someday, sooner or later. (Benjamin Cited in Re (1990) p. 159)

## **Conclusion.**

### Sometime late in September

I have just spent the last hour and a half scraping spilt wax off my stove, kitchen cupboards and floor with a spoon. The aftermath of a failed casting. As I am slowly scratching away at the thin layer, it twists, curls, and clumps in damp patches. My initial vigour calms and I lean back flustered, feeling frustration start to take over. I see the piles of white curls like snow and think this is apt with the gloomy night outside. I sat for this whole time methodically scraping away, my frustration subdued by the mindlessness of this action, and the thought crosses my mind that I should be filming this act, as my evening is turning into a comedy of errors!

The beauty and banality of this situation reflects the aims for the project and body of work. To analyse aspects of the domestic and its materials with humour, compassion and absurdity. The intention has been to maintain the connections established with regard to memory and familial relationships in prior practice. Rediscovering Surrealism, a first teenage love many years ago has reinforced many ideas in this investigation.

On reflection of a recent conversation regarding social conditions and political climate that influenced the response many of the dada and surrealists had at the time I can draw parallels with the practices, research and outlook within this project. Spending childhood, and up until recently, assisting refugees to settle and build lives here I identify with the need to react against or question life and acknowledge the absurd nature of the way society exists, a life of incongruity and diversity.

"For me intellect is too dry a word, too inexpressive. I like the word belief. I think in general when people say 'I know', they don't know, they believe. I believe that art is the only form of activity in which man shows himself to be a true individual. Only in art is he capable of going beyond the animal state, because art is an outlet towards regions which are not ruled by time and space. To live is to believe; that's my belief, at any rate." (Sanouillet & Peterson, 1975, p137)

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