

Simulacra: Constructing Narrative in the Studio Tableau

**by
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Errata

- p5 paragraph 4: line 8; 'as' should appear between 'well' and 'those'
- p7 footnote 1; *Star Wars* should be italicised
- p16 second last paragraph; Barthes should have an apostrophe
- p29 the date for *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* should be 1919, not 1920
- p31 paragraph 2: line 11; 'Whitkin' should read 'Witkin'

Documentation and commentary on the body of practical work submitted to meet the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Art, at the University of Cape Town, 2002

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Stephen Ingg, my supervisor, for all the enthusiasm and excellent advice.

I wish to express my gratitude to the following bursars for their invaluable support over the last two years: the University Scholarships Committee, the MacIver Scholarship, the Jules Kramer Music and Fine Art Scholarship, and the Harry Crossley Foundation.

I am very grateful to Henrietta Rose-Innes – an excellent editor, and a very dear friend.

I would like to thank everyone at the Scan Shop for their assistance and expertise.

I am very appreciative of the assistance I received from the technical staff at Michaelis, especially Godfrey Koff.

I am fortunate to have Tariq Toffa as my ally: one who always expects the highest standards from me.

I am very lucky to have had an amazing family, who provided the inspiration for this project.

Finally, I would like to express my love and gratitude to my mother and sister, Veronica and Catherine Buckingham, who encouraged me to start afresh, and who believe in me unfailingly.

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PREFACE

The content and form of the work completed for this degree is intended as a narrative. This narrative is constructed to tell stories of my family, and of myself, in a way that openly stresses the playful, mythical, and fictional nature of such narratives in the family and in history. These narratives are not always easily recognisable, believable, or unified, and are read through an arrangement of details.

Initially, I intended my tableaux to function as 'emblematic' portraits. In other words, I intended to describe the members of my family by distilling their essential characteristics into a descriptive arrangement of symbolic objects. Although I became aware of the limitations of symbolism, and became more interested in narrative and display, the content of my work has remained personal and descriptive, even though I have emphasised the fictional over the elegiac.

My family is not really one of collectors – my grandmother tore up and burnt many of our family photographs when my grandfather died, before she went into an old-age home. She wanted to 'travel light'. What we have left are the stories, the anecdotes and the proverbs: an oral history, or a 'postmemory'. These inherited tales are told through the snapshots that did survive, as they are in all families who take pictures. I have retold and reconstructed my own narratives, because this is the nature of the family romance for everyone – it resides in a world of images, incidental details, and surfaces.

INTRODUCTION

Simulacrum: Something having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance or proper qualities.

A mere image, a specious imitation or likeness of something.
(www.oed.com)

The concept of the simulacrum is central to the history of art – particularly art in the European mould, where imitation of the real has occupied an often contentious place in relation to the ‘real’ itself. In the postmodern world, where virtual reality is an accepted concept, it seems that the clearly unreal now occupies a central position in the world of the visual – and beyond. Each of my works is a work of art and artifice, built to exist only on display in the specially formulated world of the art gallery. It is composed of a collage of fabricated, simulated, bought and painted objects, arranged against a descriptive backdrop, lit, photographed and finally digitally printed on canvas as an image: a simulacrum.

The works are displayed in a gallery, and presented as pictorial narratives. The content of the artwork is a description of family and biography, achieved through an arrangement of images, props and objects. By reading at the surface of the image, narrative is contained in these descriptive details. But this narrative is open to interpretation, and the clearly artificial, sometimes confusing appearance of the printed image will undermine too easy and familiar a reading or recognition of the tableau, and its apparently recognisable subject matter.

The first section of this dissertation outlines the theoretical underpinnings of my work. A discussion of the concept of the simulacrum, particularly as theorised by Jean Baudrillard, is the focus of the first chapter. The second chapter broadly outlines some of the issues pertaining to the interpretation and iconography of objects – especially when used in representations of material culture. I have included brief outlines of various interpretive positions held by theorists such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. This discussion includes references to concepts of aura, symbolism and iconography in both images and displays.

The third chapter defines what I mean by narrative in the traditional sense, as well as contemporary narrative approaches favoured by theorists such as

Mieke Bal, Norman Bryson and Svetlana Alpers. In addition, this chapter mentions some of the differences between iconology and iconography, as defined by Erwin Panofsky. The notion of readerly images, as well as those of description, theatricality and detail are explored. This approach to the construction of narrative through detail and artifice is fundamental to an understanding of my work. The final part of this section focuses on the construction of myth in the ‘picturing’ of the family, particularly evident in the photographic mode of representation.

The second part of the dissertation concerns the forms and techniques of simulation and display, particularly of the modern age – the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first chapter in this section centres on the conventions and functions of the object in the Italian narrative and Dutch descriptive painting traditions. Art historians Svetlana Alpers and Norman Bryson have devoted a considerable body of research to the investigation of these two models of post-Renaissance painting, and I have briefly outlined some of their perspectives. Many of these conventions appear in my images, although in altered form.

The second chapter in this section describes some of the conventions, such as the painted backdrop, peculiar to the nineteenth-century studio photographic portrait tradition. These conventions are apparent in contemporary photographic portraits in countries like Ghana, and have also been reinterpreted in my images. The third chapter focuses on the history of the diorama, tracing its links to early photography as well as painting, through the innovations of the theatrical designer Louis Daguerre. The diorama evolved into museum and commercial display forms, such as the habitat display and the twentieth-century shop window. Dioramic forms of display are usually characterised by their convincing yet artificial appearance. As such they are simulacra that have no basis in the ‘real’, and employ a vocabulary of fakery or illusion.

The final chapter in this section describes the forms and conventions of theatre in the Western and Japanese traditions, the filmic *mise en scène*, and the virtual space of computer reality. The language of staging is central to my work, particularly forms of theatre that are openly stylised and artificial, and the theatrical and constructed nature of my sets belongs within this tradition.

The third section describes contemporary influences on the methodology and content of my

practical work. This methodology includes notions of the staged photograph, the constructed installation, and the collaged artwork, and locates the two former – distinctly post-modern – phenomena in the tradition of pictorial narrative, and the construction of alternate forms of reality. I cite a range of artists, from Claes Oldenburg to Christian Boltanski, who all feature some form of self-awareness, staging, or construction in their work. In addition, their work conforms in some respects to my definition of the image or artwork as simulacrum.

The fourth section of the dissertation details the technical, stylistic, and pictorial strategies that I have employed in the body of practical work. It also discusses the art historical, filmic, theatrical, and photographic foundations underlying the form and content of each work; and the meaning of the above references and forms in relation to the narrative constructed in the works. This description of the work will take into account the earlier discussion

concerning the limitations of deep interpretation, as well as the possibilities for engagement at the surface of the image, in appearance and detail.

The final section documents the body of practical work, presented as large digitally printed images on canvas.

This dissertation is an attempt to locate my practical work within a tradition of artifice, and of the simulacrum in art and display. Apart from making reference to the vocabulary of these languages or models of display by borrowing elements like backdrops and props, my work also depends on a conceptual link with these forms of display. A public display of narrative, no matter how clearly artificial, implies legitimacy and authority. In other words, displays represent ideology and the romances of culture and nature, as well as public and personal history. Thus a narrative display seems a perfect vehicle for constructing, and hence undermining, a similar romantic fiction of the familial.

SECTION 1: SIMULACRA – IMAGES, OBJECTS AND NARRATIVES

1.1 SIMULACRA

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1993), a simulacrum is a ‘material image... a thing having the appearance but not the substance... a deceptive imitation... a pretence’. In other definitions, words like ‘copy’, or ‘likeness’ are used to describe the simulacrum; always, it is held in comparison with a model of the ‘real’.

‘Real’ is defined in the same dictionary as that which ‘is actually and truly such... genuine; natural, not artificial or depicted... actually existing... having a foundation in fact... sincere, straightforward, honest... free from pretence’. In addition, under ‘realism’, words like ‘fidelity’ and ‘truth’ appear, implying a value judgement that favours authenticity and the real over the artificial, no matter how artful. The dictionary goes even further to say that ‘reality’ is what underlies ‘appearances’. This seems to suggest that reality actually exists, perhaps as an essential quality in all things.

Reality and the simulacrum, particularly in art, have existed together in an often uncomfortable alliance throughout history, with the question of which is the dominant partner surfacing frequently. Recently, notions of reality have been questioned and subverted, not only in theoretical terms, but also through the appearance of new technology – particularly in the fields of virtual reality, computer graphics and cyberspace.

Jean Baudrillard has devoted much discussion to the concept of the simulacrum. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he asserts that we live in a modern world of the ‘hyperreal’ (1994: 1), where everything is a simulacrum – a copy without an original. This interpretation of the term is significant in relation to my work, where the digitally reproduced *image* is constructed as – and from – an arrangement of simulacra: images without a model or a ‘truth’ (and thus a ‘real’). In other words, in my work, the image is a simulacrum: a self-consciously artful and artificial creation – not a simulation.

Baudrillard refers to a line from a science fiction novel by Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, where humanoid ‘replicants’ are

constructed to be ‘more real than real’, and thus surpass their human models. Baudrillard writes: ‘More real than real, that is how the real is abolished’ (ibid: 81). In his book, Baudrillard describes a world of reproduction – an ‘electronic media culture’, where there is nothing left but endless repetitions of recycled signs. In this particular world there is no perceivable difference between the fake and the real, the factual and the imaginary. Not only does the existence of simulacra provoke questioning about the real, but it threatens the very existence of the real (ibid: 3).

Simulacra thus signal the ‘death’ of reference, and of the real model. Baudrillard argues that in the age of history, which coincided with the ‘age of the novel’ (ibid: 47), artists were aware of the simulacrum, and actively acknowledged its workings. There was no obsession with the hyperreal as there is today – especially evident in modern cinema, with its computer-generated effects.¹ Early cinema openly employed the vocabulary of the dramatic. There was, as Baudrillard puts it, a ‘healthy relationship with the imaginary’ (ibid).

Cinema remains the perfect simulacrum: it is projected as an image – albeit a moving one; it uses actors playing parts; and it involves scenery, scene-changes, props and costumes. Its vocabulary is one of ‘remakes’, ‘reshoots’, and ‘reworkings’: endless repetitions and illusions (ibid). It is all appearance and no reality. Baudrillard suggests that the essence of the modern simulacrum is that it is a ‘hyperresemblance’, and thus resembles nothing. It is a simulation and hence an ‘empty form of representation’ (ibid: 44).

Baudrillard goes even further and says that there is a total ‘neutralization of content’ in the modern simulacrum. A sheer mass of information has led to a loss of meaning (ibid: 79), and the form, or ‘staging’ that the medium takes, as well as all its glorious technicality, take the place of the meaning it might have had. This lost meaning has been replaced by nostalgia for an authentic past: ‘signs of reality’, and ‘myths of origin’ (ibid: 6) – not to mention reality TV. Typically, the simulacrum used in this way presents a real that is more authentic and positive than the original (ibid: 11).

Baudrillard seems to be mourning the loss of a world in touch with its mythology and its fictions. He describes the modern culture as one that chooses ‘... to bury itself in order to definitively escape its

1. Films like *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* are so seamlessly ‘computer generated’, they appear completely fake. (See Caravaggio.)

own shadow, to bury its seductions and its artifices as if it were already consecrating them to another world' (ibid: 94). In this respect I agree with Baudrillard; my work acknowledges its artifice, and might be called nostalgic in this respect.

On the subject of painting as a form of simulacrum, Baudrillard mentions the iconoclasts. He says that '... their existential despair came from the idea that the image didn't conceal anything at all... these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination' (ibid: 5). In other words, the simulacrum stands on its own, and has its own value or right to be worshipped.

Representation in painting stems from an 'equivalence of the sign and the real (even if this equivalence is Utopian...)' (ibid: 6). European, especially Italian Renaissance, painting used an 'order' of simulacra that were '... natural, naturalist, founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit, that [were] harmonious, optimistic, and that aim[ed] for the restitution or the ideal institution of nature in God's image...' (ibid: 121). There are rules in this type of representation: even a highly illusionistic form such as trompe-l'oeil follows laws of appearances, and alludes to 'presence' (ibid: 106) – presence being the real. The hyperreal in forms such as these seem more 'real' than the real ever was, and thus destroy the 'order of truth' (ibid: 108). In other words, signs of the real have been substituted for the real.

Although Baudrillard's usage of terms like 'real' and 'truth' are debatable, he makes many interesting points about the accepted existence of the imaginary in previous times. This open acceptance of, and emphasis on, artifice in a world dominated by the hyperreal is central to my work.

The concept of the simulacrum is also alluded to by Michel Foucault in *This is not a Pipe*. In this paper he asserts that language creates a simulacrum by mimicking through description. The notion of 'similitude' is an important principle running through much Renaissance to Enlightenment thought (Harkness 1983: 7). This principle links words with things, and this link is almost religious. Through resemblance, things were modelled on a 'sovereign presence'; this resemblance always dictated the dependence of the simulacrum on the model, and necessitated systems like perspective and modelling to properly 'flatter' and 'identify' with the 'inspirational' original (ibid: 8).

According to Foucault, 'convincing resemblance' thus carries a 'burden of affirmation' (1983: 43). Resemblance always has an original model that it is supposedly 'inferior' to, whereas the similar 'propagate themselves from small differences among small differences', and develop in a series, without beginning or end (ibid: 44). 'Resemblance serves representation, which rules over it; similitude serves repetition, which ranges across it' (ibid).

This statement echoes Baudrillard's concerning the repetition and reproducibility of the simulacrum in the postmodern age. Foucault goes on to say that resemblance always returns to the model it must 'reveal', whereas similitude 'circulates the simulacrum as an indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar' (ibid). Hence, there is no real, no model, and no affirmation of the real in the simulacrum.

The term 'simulacrum' is also used to describe an object that is manufactured to stand for a missing component of a museum display – usually an item of material culture that cannot be located in actuality. In a manner reminiscent of the TV series *Star Trek* (where the particulars of an object are keyed into a 'replicator' – a computer that creates a 'real', three-dimensional object out of a set of descriptive parameters), the museum professionals 'craft' together the elusive artefact to complete the display or the collection, out of a described and documented set of particulars (Rose 2001: 176). In this context, the simulacrum maintains the convincing 'truthfulness' of the museum display, and thus its authority and accuracy. However the simulacrum in this context is clearly part of an obvious illusion, so its apparent reality is also denied (ibid: 177). This is a paradox of museum display.

In a different light, simulacra or 'eidola' are described in atomistic theory as being 'material emanations from objects, subtle but nevertheless substantial images propagated by objects and forcibly impressing themselves on our senses' (Mitchell 1986: 11). Walter Benjamin seems to echo this notion of emanation, particularly by the ritual and art object, which possess 'aura' and 'mystique'. But Benjamin names reproductivity (an intrinsic part of simulation, and the simulacrum) as the factor that dilutes the aura of the 'original' object; the 'singular quality of the here and now' (cited in Baudrillard 1994: 99). This perception of aura, or even uniqueness, is debatable, especially when one takes into account our 'roots of reference' – the forces that

give rise to our perceptions and sense of the aesthetic (Mitchell 1986: 153).

Susan Sontag cites the photograph – often perceived as a trace of the real – as the embodiment of ‘pseudo-presence’ (1973: 16). The photograph provides an imaginary past for insecure modern communities, who need the information contained in them to sustain the fictions of their origins. By taking photographs, one is involved in the ‘antiquing’ of reality, and the recycling of substitutes for firsthand experience (ibid: 153).

Clichés, recycled, become metaclichés... photographic recycling makes cliché out of unique objects, distinctive and vivid artefacts out of clichés. Images of real things are interlayered with images of images. (ibid: 175)

Sontag goes on to say that painting, although also a simulacrum, is not as powerful as the photographic image in constructing reality: it always appears an interpretation, whereas the photograph appears to contain an ‘emanation’ of the real (ibid: 154). It is this interpretive appearance of the painting that makes it effective as a simulacrum from my point of view, and the fact that its very construction undermines the appearance of reality.

Art is constantly engaged in the process of simulation, as well as the making of simulacra. The deliberation and manufacture evident in the work of art, whether an imitation of the ‘natural’ or not, testifies to its existence as an image and thus a simulacrum, which in relation to my work is well-described by the following:

There is no more hope for meaning. And without a doubt this is a good thing: meaning is mortal. But that on which it has imposed its ephemeral reign, what it hoped to liquidate that is, appearances, they, are immortal, invulnerable to the nihilism of meaning or of non-meaning itself. This is where seduction begins. (Baudrillard 1994: 164)

1.2 INTERPRETATION, AND THE ICONOGRAPHY OF OBJECTS

Interpret: ... to explain the meaning of... understand... represent...
(Oxford English Dictionary: 1993)

Artefact: The work of art... the creative plan... the imposition of that plan on certain matter, through skill or craft... the transformation of pre-existing material...
(Levy 1961: 16)

Interpretation and making meaning are often assumed to be fundamental to the reading of both art and display. Interpretation implies that there is depth to the work, and that meaning is contained in the arrangement of elements like composition, subject matter, painterly effects, and so on. In museum displays, artefacts are arranged to ‘tell stories’ of history, origins, and science, and are thus cloaked in an aura of authenticity, truth, and fact. They are thus a simulacrum of the ‘real’; artificial but convincing at the same time.

Greenblatt has coined an effective term, ‘resonance and wonder’, to pinpoint this ‘museum effect’, particular to the museum display and institution:

Museums function ... as monuments to the fragility of cultures, to the fall of sustaining institutions and noble houses, the collapse of rituals, the evacuation of myths, the destructive effects of warfare, neglect, and corrosive doubt. (1991: 44)

This effect mirrors what Stewart calls ‘longing’ (1993), and is largely based on an attitude towards the past, and a generalised nostalgia for the ‘real’. Objects in this system become what Stewart calls ‘objects of desire’ (1994). They have no ‘intrinsic’ quality, but instead acquire meaning when utilised in a system that orders and organises their readability – according to a prewritten metalanguage (ibid: 255).

Resonance and wonder are central to the mystique and, most importantly, the perception of objects or artefacts in the museum display, in terms of their housing within the limitations and context of the display. In a manner similar to the display of objects in a shop environment, wonder is ‘bound up with acquisition and possession’ of the object (Greenblatt 1991: 49). In the museum display, the object is out of reach and behind glass, which increases its desirability, and removed from its display, the object will lose its meaning (ibid: 55).

The resonance of the object is found in a different perception, that of the ‘culturally and historically contingent construction of art objects’, where the viewer is aware of the entire process of representation and creation in the display (ibid: 45). Hence, the making of the authentic is acknowledged along with

the authentic end product. This is the paradox contained in the museum simulacrum, and with respect to this clear artifice, the museum display has much in common with much of art-making in all of its forms.

Museums rely on the 'interpretability' of their displays of artefacts to sustain and validate their existence as institutions. Their displays function as what Foucault terms 'utopias', which offer 'consolation' to the viewer: visions of a 'fantastic, untroubled region' (1983: 4). They use objects to create narratives (or metanarratives), and meaning, by placing them in authenticating display environments. In these environments, objects appear to narrate an 'essential truth', and it is herein that their wonder lies (Marcus 2000: 230). In the West, 'visualism' – also called 'ocularcentricism' (Jenks cited in Hallam 2000: 261) – is promoted as the dominant form of knowledge. It is assumed that seeing is believing or knowing; that sight is the primary sense, and that all sight-related activities, like observation, contribute to objective knowledge through 'disengaged vision' (ibid: 262).

According to Shelton, objects in displays of material culture have an:

... iconic and a material symbolic value which are redolent with past meanings and associations that are never totally disclaimed. This sedimentary symbolic valency always guarantees an object's potentiality, latent or actual, to create unexpected or unintentional associations either through engendering relations between signifiers or between signifiers and signifieds. (2000: 155)

Shelton goes on to say that objects also 'encourage the contemplation of meaning'; that they have a 'sensory' character that provokes interpretation; and that they trigger associations, like memory. However, he also states that objects are *not* 'static embodiments of discrete meanings', but instead signs that 'exert meaning' as artefacts, and as 'performative tools that are endlessly connotative' (2000: 185).

Despite a critical and self-aware approach to collecting, curating and displaying, museum professionals seem to depend on this view of the 'potentiality', and hence the power, of the object/artefact, as well as the viewer's need to interpret. Shelton sees this interpretive power as working like narrative, with objects communicating knowledge like language does (ibid: 185). This

narrative creates meaning in the sequencing and arranging of objects in the display. So while they have no meaning of their own, they are given one by the organisation of the overriding narrative of the display.

In relation to my work, I find Shelton's discussion around association and narrative sequencing useful. While one might debate the sensory potential of an object, or the knowledge contained in it, I do feel that meaning is directed and mediated in displayed arrangements.

In all forms of exhibition, display spaces 'physically relegate' the viewer's responses, and promote a curatorial position (Harding 1997: 7). Interpretation is furthermore made 'easy' through various devices, such as the selection and display of the 'typical' rather than the specific. The typical or the generalised is recognisable, and appears true because it is typical and recognisable. This notion of recognisability is significant when representing institutions like the family, which are traditionally described in images and language riddled with cliché and sentimentality. Theatricality comes into play, along with the exaggeration and stylisation present in the typical. Thus the most 'faithful' reconstruction is still artificial (Underwood 1993: 379). And as with much that is easily recognisable, convention and the utopian ideal rear their heads. As such, the past is represented and recreated as an appearance.

Any 'thing' can be turned into an artefact, when it is given value by being placed in the context of display (Pearce 1994: 10). Pearce describes the potentiality of the artefact as the 'power of the real thing'. She describes the souvenir used as a historical artefact as 'nostalgic, backward-looking and bittersweet' (much like Stewart's 'longing'), with a quality that 'moves and excites us' (ibid: 20). As a personal memento, the artefact has no real interest to anyone – it is too familiar; but in a display of history or culture, it acquires a sort of value as a narrative 'message-bearing entity'. It is at the same time an 'intrinsic sign' and a 'metaphorical symbol' (ibid: 21). As a sign the object stands for the 'whole', of which it suggests a 'part'. As a symbol, the object suggests a range of arbitrary associations with unrelated elements: metaphoric, 'human associations' (ibid: 26). According to Pearce, meaning is created at the intersection between the viewer's response to the content of the display, and her or his own experiences. Thus interpretation is 'dynamic', and extends 'far beyond the mere perception of what the

object is'. The object on display, and this includes in my work, 'activates creative activity' in the viewer, which lends the object a 'virtual dimension', and a 'present reality' (ibid).

Another element of museum display that describes the relationship of the sign (object) to the whole, is the 'in situ' approach to storytelling. This form of display traditionally utilises the 'panoptic mode', where the typical is observed voyeuristically (fig 1), as a slice of life (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991: 413). In these displays, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes that the sheer mimetic effect of the mode of display tends to 'subvert curatorial efforts to focus the viewer's attention on particular ideas or objects'. Thus, there is the danger that 'theatrical spectacle will displace scientific seriousness, that the artifice of the installation will overwhelm' (ibid: 390). The spectacular and clearly artificial nature of all exhibitions of material culture, ethnographic and historical, end up drawing attention to the fictional and constructed nature of their own museum effect, and situate themselves instead in the realm of art and simulacrum.



Fig 1: 'Die Bruidskamer' in the Bo-Kaap Museum: a display of 'typical', everyday Cape Malay life in the last century.

According to Pearce, objects function like written narratives. This is clear from object analysis, where terms like 'text', 'cypher' and 'code' occur (1994: 27). This narrative is programmed, and all displays 'speak' to their 'culturally conditioned observers and participants' (Tilley 1994: 69). The implication here is that there is 'no meaning outside the text' (ibid: 74).

According to theorists like Panofsky, understanding iconography creates meaning in art and culture. In other words, signs and symbols can be understood within a 'historically specific intertextuality' (Rose 2001: 144). However, this understanding can only occur where there is a shared vocabulary – as in the Western figurative painting tradition, where artists, patrons, and public might have all been familiar with the same language of symbolism and allegory (ibid: 145). This shared language can be called an 'interpretative repertoire', which Potter defines as:

... a systematically related set of terms that are often used with stylistic and grammatical coherence and often organized around one or more central metaphors. They develop historically and make up an important part of the 'common sense' of a culture, although some are specific to institutional domains. (cited in Rose 2001: 156)

Different schools of thought regard interpretation differently. Structuralists, like Levi-Strauss, focus on the structural character of social systems and phenomena, including the making of myth. In this theoretical system, based largely on structural linguistics, societies and their products are interpreted according to the notion that language creates and contains the signs and symbols that 'underlie the observable' (Tilley 1990: 5). Culture is thus structured like language. Meaning is only completely possible within a system of collective myth-making; an individual myth is like a 'word' in an overall 'language' (ibid: 10). There are no original myths, because they arise from one another in this language. 'Repeated acts of bricolage' – defined as the adaptation and association of existing fragments – create meaning, and interpretation occurs through the ordering of these fragments (ibid: 27). This model of interpretation depends largely on an assumption of presence, truth and essence, found only in natural, unspoilt, and simple societies.

Hermeneuticists focus on interpretation, or finding 'deep' meaning, as their primary goal. They approach the text as the subject that links humans to their

world and their history, and like the text, the human 'self' is also a subject awaiting reading or interpretation (ibid: 94).

Clifford Geertz focuses on literary theory as an interpretive model for understanding culture. He refers to 'cultural texts', which contain symbols and metaphors of all cultural activities – 'ritualized' as well as 'mundane' (cited in Kline Silverman 1990: 135). Geertz defines symbols as:

... any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol's 'meaning'... tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings, or beliefs... as public as marriage, and as observable as agriculture. (ibid: 125)

The problem with interpretation is that it assumes and depends on there being reality and truth beneath the surface of the object, image or 'text'. To have meaning, there must be more than mere appearance. A simulacrum cannot thus possess *deep* meaning, as its meaning, if any, is contained *at* the surface, and in its appearance. Post-structuralists, like Barthes and Foucault, query these assumptions of reality and meaning, as well as the language used to make meaning. Barthes challenges symbolism by stating that the 'text' is paradoxical, and cannot be read through hermeneutic investigation, but rather according to 'disconnections, overlappings, variations', with a plurality and 'dissemination' of meaning (Barthes 1977: 158). The text consists of a 'weave' of signifiers, and there can be no easy, unified reading of it, but instead one which is 'woven with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages' which contribute to its vast 'intertextuality' (ibid: 160).

Hermeneutical readings encourage an enigmatic narrative, whereas a reading that takes into account 'difference', and which 'dismantles' the 'smooth, readerly' and 'natural' surface of the text, will instead acknowledge its fragmentation. By highlighting this 'polyvalence' of texts, as opposed to the unified, linear narrative text with a single meaning, Barthes offers us the following:

... a superimposed construction of skins (of layers, of levels, of systems) whose volume contains, finally, no heart, no core, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing but the very infinity of its envelopes – which envelop nothing other than the totality of its surfaces. (cited in Olsen 1990: 187)

For Foucault, underneath the surface, 'everything is already an interpretation' (cited in Tilley 1990: 308). Truth and meaning *are* important, but 'dispersed' at the surface of things, not 'hidden in their interiority' (ibid). When images or objects look real, it is because they have been described that way – this is another property of the simulacrum as language. Foucault sees description as being more significant an activity than interpretation (ibid: 296). A concern for meaning means a concern with truth, which would inhibit 'possibilities for pure description' (ibid: 300). Objects are thus formed through language, and through the texts that describe them. The object only exists through its description, and its existence is mediated; thus 'meaning' is found in the text, not in the material object (ibid: 332).

But there is, according to Foucault in *This is Not a Pipe*, a gap between words and the things they describe. Words have 'conceptual', 'syntactical' and 'phonetic' signification, but they do not relate to the physical reality of the object they describe (1983: 5). Throughout history, there has existed the idea that words and things shared a bond, and that language was a certain, transparent sign for things, 'because it resembled them' (ibid: 6).

Magritte's pipe denies the recognisability of the too-easily recognised object, because 'nowhere is there a pipe' – not in the text, nor in the image (ibid: 29). The simulacrum has been disengaged from the object, and by placing linguistic signs, or letters, into the image, Magritte has introduced a 'disorder' into what would have traditionally been resemblance. He has revealed it to be a mere surface, beneath which there is nothing (ibid: 41). Magritte 'collapses discourse' in his painting of the pipe, and calls the identity of the image into question. As in my work, the image is revealed to be a simulacrum and an appearance: perhaps recognisable, but not real.

Much of Foucault's notion of surface, and his view of interpretation, echoes Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum. According to Tilley:

... a belief in deep, essential, coherent, and non-dispersed meaning might be described as a Western cultural malaise... when looked at (interpreted) in the right way meaning is visible on the surface in small concrete details... (1990: 308)

Japanese approaches to representation show a concern with this notion of surface. Although one might think that a concern with surface denotes superficiality, generalisation, or 'empiricism' (the

reduction of the object to surface details), in fact surfaces contain specific, descriptive detail and 'density' (ibid: 334). Even in contemporary Japan, form is generally still more important than content. The style, or the manner of production of the cultural form contains the most eloquence in 'a culture which denies transcendence and celebrates the surface, the signifiers.' In the Japanese practise of elaborate gift-wrapping, it is not the contents of the parcel which counts, but the form of the wrapping, and the ritual of unwrapping (Olsen 1990: 175).

Japanese society seems comfortable with the existence of the simulacrum in its own right. In Japan this is called 'mitate', a principle of citation, where an object or reference is taken to symbolise another 'time, place, or meaning' (Yamaguchi 1991: 57). Objects are not just simple elements of the material world; they also possess a mythical dimension. This quality is understood by all participants in a cultural activity through 'shared cultural knowledge' (ibid: 58). Thus ordinary objects are associated with 'mythological or classical images familiar to all literate people.' The image of the object is thus 'extended', and given 'hidden and mysterious dimensions' by the manner of its display:

All exhibitions suffer from the condition of being fake. However they acquire the status of the authentic when they are placed into a theatrical context... representation in Japanese tradition shows this process of theatricalization clearly... (ibid: 67)

Oscar Wilde said: 'the whole of Japan is pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people' (cited in Karp and Krantz 2000: 194). When one concentrates interpretation at the *surface* of openly theatrical works – such as mine – one becomes aware of the density of the objects and their detail, which disrupt a unified, smooth, and easily recognisable narrative. An image with a multiplicity of 'inventions' thus allows for a reading of extended, textual dimensions.

1.3 READING THE IMAGE – ICONOLOGY AND NARRATIVE

Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language... fixed or moving images...present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella,

epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting... cinema, comics... under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age... it is simply there, like life itself.
(Barthes 1977: 79)

On a very simplistic level, describing one's work as narrative indicates that it will possess certain characteristics: it will be largely fictive, tell a story, operate temporally, and so on. Traditionally, narrative was perceived as obeying certain prescribed conventions, and it is only with recent approaches to narratology that alternative approaches to interpreting specifically narrative *images* have emerged. These include the detailed, process-orientated, and descriptive characteristics of painted images, which were previously regarded by many art historians as being fundamentally *opposed* to narrative.

Some contemporary narratology proposes that images can be read as texts; not in a manner subordinate to literature, but as its equal. In fact, there is much about the image that suggests the written, as there is much about the written that operates visually. By concentrating on a reading of the details present on the surface, and in the composition of the image, the spectator/reader will be able, as an empowered agent in the production of meaning, to unfold a narrative. This narrative will not be the same as a traditional narrative: it will be flexible and intertextual, and contain multiple opportunities for 'events' of meaning-making, or interpretation.

Traditionally, looking particularly at what historians like Svetlana Alpers term the Italian model of painting, narrative appears fairly straightforward, or natural. Firstly, paintings are still, which would imply a lack of narrative. As such, certain techniques, such as Vasarian perspective and the 'pregnant moment' (Lessing cited in Aumont 1997: 174), have been necessary to activate the dramatic potential of the image, as well as create the appearance of motion and time. A tendency to focus the viewer's attention on a highlighted event or form, and an underplaying of 'noisy' and distracting detail and description, is especially evident in most Italian Renaissance-influenced painting. The details that are present are there to convince the viewer of the realness of what is depicted. This is called an effect of the real, or 'verisimilitude' (Genette cited in Bal 1991: 12).

The assumption in this model is that the viewer is a passive recipient of a directed and unified image, as if he or she were sitting in a darkened theatre. Hence,

this is also called the 'theatrical' mode, or even the Baroque model, by art historians like Michael Fried (cited in Bryson 2001: 7). Theatricality is characterised by the outward thrust of the narrative to the spectator – a direct address by the characters playing out the image – whereas a more 'absorptive' model contains a set of actors that are unaware of the spectator. This model has more voyeuristic implications, as opposed to the former's more didactic or rhetorical ones. The theatrical painting uses the 'semantically coded' (Lessing cited in Aumont: 174) gestures and physical actions of its characters to give an image to the 'concept' behind the work (Bal 1991: 48).

These types of narrative paintings work as myths do, because they operate as removed from time, and appear universal and mythical (ibid: 97). But their main success is dependent on the viewer being able to recognise, as well as understand, the language and forms employed in the image. This recognition depends largely on iconography.

The theorist most responsible for developing a highly clinical, and often criticised, analysis of iconography, as well as iconology, was Erwin Panofsky. He defined iconography as being the pictorial representation of a subject through a range of symbolic motifs. Iconology, on the other hand, is the interpretation of the 'entire symbolic horizon of an image'; in other words, a discourse of images (cited in Mitchell 1986: 2). The problem with Panofsky's approach was its logical and essentialist bent, thus implying 'logocentricism'. But this aside, his notions of the interpretability of the image have influenced generations of art historians. Apart from describing various forms and levels of meaning – primary, secondary, and intrinsic – Panofsky emphasised that images are read or interpreted according to conventional and textual knowledge, as well as at the level of basic denotation and description (Aumont 1997: 190). At the iconological level, images are interpreted according to a synthesis of all principles condensed into the final work, including period, class, personality, religion, and so on. As such, the intrinsic meaning of the work is eventually disclosed at the end of such an interpretation (Armstrong 1998: 455).

Of course images are not easy to ascribe intrinsic meaning to. Part of their difficulty lies in the fact that they are ideological, and apparently convincing. Perspectival illusionism helped to deny the artificiality of mimetic and apparently truthful forms

of representation, which could easily claim to dictate not only how things were to appear, but how they really 'were' (Mitchell 1986: 37). In service of this model, the imitation of the natural world, combined with strict ideals of beauty and proportion, as well as perspective, all contributed to the existence of the painting as a sign:

... that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification. (ibid: 8)

The narrative model of painting depends on the concept of showing and telling (Bal 2001: 152), which in turn depends on a suspension of disbelief by the audience, through the convincing believability of the mimetic image (Aumont 1997: 150). This model is also linked with allegory, which is defined as being:

... a combination of personifications and/or symbols that, in more or less conventional arrangements and on the basis of a consistency between image and concept, represents complex abstract notions. (groveart.com.2002)

Allegory is thus a literary model, like narrative, which employs 'extended narrativity' (Eco cited in Payne 1992: 16). A symbol, on the other hand, is usually an object that, through defined convention, is recognised as indicating an idea (groveart.com.2002). Both allegory and symbolism contribute to the interpretation of images. In other terms, abstract concepts are given concrete and recognisable form through their naturalistic depiction. This is evident in seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings, where obsessive imitations of reality also served to signify a more 'instructional' and moral level (ibid). Svetlana Alpers disagreed with this notion of the narrative iconographic reading of Dutch art. Her interest lay more in its existence as a descriptive entity, in fact opposed to the Italian narrative, allegorical model of painting.

Bialostocki, in his review of Alpers' *The Art of Describing*, disagrees with her separation of these two models and traditions (1985). He also takes exception to her use of the word 'describing', which he notes as having a 'residuum' of literature (ibid: 525), wherein narrative and descriptiveness stand in opposition to one another. However, in a 'painterly' artwork – which I define as one wherein the process

and materiality of its making is in evidence – narrative and description need not be opposed. It is in Bal's writing on the narrative particular to the art image that one finds the answer to the unease between narration and detailed description. This tension is resolved by reading the image as a text, through its 'navel', its 'punctum' (Barthes), or its details. The image contains a narrative, told through what Bal calls 'focalisers' (2001), and is finally interpreted by the enabled and active spectator, who has made use of the many dense and complex, but finite, opportunities for the making of meaning.

This 'reading' stands in contrast to those offered by the traditional narrative image. Unity has been replaced by diversity and detail, which is no longer there to create a convincing 'effect of the real'. A newly empowered reader will enter the image through multiple points – focussing on the nail in Vermeer's wall, or Caravaggio's wound (Bal 2001) (fig 2). The 'navel painting' is thus one where the subject matter is 'overruled' by the details, which 'invite speculation' and interaction, or reading by the viewer. These details take over the previously 'coherent', natural representation and appearance of the image (ibid: 176).



Fig 2: Caravaggio, 'The Incredulity of Saint Thomas' (1601-2), detail. An example of a 'navel' painting.

Bal also speaks of 'Baroque narrativity', where the subject matter of the painting is evident in 'erotic' detail and 'fascination' with surface, in combination with spectacle (ibid: 221). The surface thus contains the narrative 'event' (ibid: 224). Bal's narratology proposes an analysis of images beyond their 'medium essentialism', in a manner 'akin to language', not in opposition to it (ibid: 265). The narrative, or 'fabula', of an image, is also narrated in the labour or process of the artist, evident in the material quality of the surface, where painterly marks tell of the time and action of their making (ibid: 215). The mark of the artist's hand also moves the narrator of the image from the Renaissance-favoured third-person, to the first.

By reading an artwork, the viewer gives it narrativity (Bal 1991: 19). This reading is an action, and enables the previously still surface of the image (ibid: 4). Interpretation is important in this reading of images, and occurs according to flexible but finite codes or events (ibid: 15). The reading during the sign-event creates a 'mobile' interpretation because the viewer 'textualises' the image on his or her own terms, through visual detail (ibid: 21). These details can behave iconographically, if read as icons. This means that nothing in the work is a mere descriptive detail, and that it depends on recognition. The problem with this recognition is that meaning is ascribed to the whole image, symbolic limitations are imposed, and narrative possibilities are limited (ibid: 187).

Bal proposes a narrative decoding of the artwork, as opposed to an iconographic one. Narrative contains rich, specific detail, whereas iconography implies myth and recognisability (ibid: 209). By interpreting the purely visual aspects of narrative representation, such as the specific details and structures typical to *only* the image, the reader is allowed to go beyond mere recognition. Focalisation is the term that Bal uses to describe the creation of points of view that stage or create the *mise en scène* of the image (ibid: 159). Because focalisers are dynamic and unfixed in visual images, so too is meaning and narrative (ibid: 161).

Visuality thus produces a very particular discourse of its own. When a viewer becomes aware of the narrative strategy, and the focalisation inherent in the image, they will also become aware of the manipulative nature of representation (ibid: 250). Bal also suggests other strategies for undermining the effect of the real. By adopting a narrative, textual,

and constructed mode of reading rather than a realistic, iconographic, and recognition-based one, the viewer will engage in more meaningful and critical interpretation of the visual work (ibid: 247).

With this notion of narrative in mind, it seems possible that I can construct a narrative in a dense, detailed, and unrealistic image containing an arrangement of often unconvincing objects. The manufacture, material quality, and ‘painterliness’ of the object, as well as the *mise en scène* in such an image helps to narrate the story of its making. The ‘manipulative nature’ and ‘effect of the real’ is thus undermined, and the descriptive details allow instead for a wide and flexible range of readings – not hasty recognitions. The viewer does not have to be party to a symbolic vocabulary to read narrative in such an image: the very appearance and arrangement of the image *is* the narrative event.

1.4 CONSTRUCTING THE FAMILY MYTH

Myth: A traditional story, either wholly or partly fictitious... a misconception... an exaggerated or idealised conception... a widely held (esp. untrue or discredited popular) story or belief...
(Oxford English Dictionary 1993)

... a ‘collective representation’... something socially determined, a ‘reflection’... overturning culture into nature... What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being a ‘matter of course’; under the effect... the quite contingent foundations of the utterance become Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion, in short the doxa (which is the secular figure of the Origin).
(Barthes 1977: 165)

Family is often assumed to be the most ‘natural’ and essential structure that exists. It resists even the most critical attempts to refuse its ‘romance’, and within the family, the smallest object or incident takes on meaning and significance. Constructing images of family is made difficult by the sheer weight of the family myth, and the multiplicity of associations connected to it.

Even Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, found it hard to resist this familial ‘burden of recognition’, and the lure of its most significant emblem – the family photograph. Barthes describes looking through photographs of his dead mother – but with ‘no hope of finding her’ (2000: 63), because of his separation

from both her and the images due to history (ibid: 64). He refers to this looking as ‘fugitive’, and he is not sure whether he ever really recognised his mother in her image, or simulacrum (ibid: 66). He struggled to locate any essence of her identity – only proof of her existence. The only sentiment that the photograph provided was remembrance, not accuracy or presence. As such, not only is the photograph a simulacrum, but also the person or thing in the photograph:

... it is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I would like to call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to “spectacle” and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead. (ibid: 9)

The amateur snapshot or family photo is not only about recalling or resurrecting the dead; it also serves to construct a narrative through its inclusion in albums (Stotesbury 1999: 1). This display, in the form of the album, acts as an aid to ‘subsequent individual and collective narrativisation of familial memory’ (ibid: 2). In the same way that a three-dimensional museum or shop display would order objects to communicate messages, so in turn does the album-compiler edit, highlight, position and choose meaning when she or he constructs the album (ibid). Like all narrative processes that follow this form of structuring, a single, unified image (or simulacrum) is presented (like Barthes’ ‘spectacle’) – in this case, a generalised, essential notion of family.

These albums, in their sheer ubiquitous existence in most middle-class families, do not only transmit the fictions and myths of this microcommunity, but also broader social meaning (ibid: 3). Although they seem private, commonplace, and thus inaccessible to viewers outside of the narrative, the album or snapshot also communicates a ‘partially concealed visual discourse’ (ibid: 4). In other words, the images chosen to emblematised a family, as well as the details observable in the most incidental snapshot, all serve to narrate an ideology of family, and of the broader society. Stotesbury refers to the example of an album he bought which shows an ordinary white, English-speaking farming family in South Africa in the 1920s and 1930s. The album provides information about these people and cements their identities, although in a ‘condensed’ manner (ibid: 2), but also indicates gender roles, colonial stance, presence and absence,

and so on. It contains a narrative and a familial fiction that could be compared to an Olive Schreiner or Pauline Smith novel of the same period (ibid: 3).

Like all portraits, snapshots are involved in the construction and transmission of 'an identity that is clear and fixed and exudes self-importance' (Halle 1987: 222). Due to the alienation and fragmentation of modern existence, this illusion becomes more important to maintain, and photos are usually, as a result, displayed in clusters and albums – precisely to further this 'effect' of 'the closeness of the nuclear family' (ibid). This is a myth which becomes hard to sustain, particularly in the current age of diaspora and globalisation.

Marianne Hirsch has formulated much discussion around the construction of the family myth, particularly through the photograph. Photographs encourage 'looks' of recognition within the family, and between all who belong to families. These photographs become family 'objects', and are only recognised within this 'circle of looks' (1997:2). This process is helped by, and depends on, the fact that all photos of this type look the same, and portray a 'generalised sentiment'. She calls this phenomenon the 'domestic façade', which is 'impenetrable and opaque', despite appearing transparent, accessible, natural and comforting (a utopia) (1997: 3). Apart from a generalised, 'safe' recognition on these terms, the photograph does possess a body of cultural information, which can be read like narrative. This narrative is the family 'romance' – the ultimate fiction (ibid: 4).

Hirsch goes on to describe photographs as relics and signs of the past, or 'sites of nostalgia', rather than carriers of any actual, or factual, historical information (ibid: 5). In this discussion she refers to Barthes and his 'punctum' and 'studium' in some length, but queries the photo's existence as a 'literal emanation' of the referent; or as a material trace of the past (ibid: 6). Because photographs appear 'real', they:

... have the effect of naturalizing cultural practises and of distinguishing their stereotyped and coded characteristics... they sustain imaginary cohesion... (ibid: 7)

Artists struggle to work with images of the family precisely because of the seductiveness of this familial look. The inherently sentimental and conservative nature of the family photograph (because of the natural, normalising, and universalising fantasy contained in the Western bourgeois familial gaze)

makes it all but impossible to 'resist' its apparent transparency (ibid: 150).

As to the stories that photographs attest to in the family, Hirsch defines their primary site as 'postmemory':

... a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment or creation... characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation... (Hirsch 1997: 22)

It is in postmemory that the myths reside, and out of which the romance is constructed. By constructing narratives of my family I am contributing to this process of postmemory through the imaginative creation of new stories. One claims the stories of one's history, in the same way that one does the literal and mental images of the past. This is, according to Hirsch, 'an act of adoption and an act of faith determined by an idea, an image of family: it is not an act of recognition. It is fundamentally an interpretive and a narrative gesture, a fabrication out of available pieces' (ibid: 83). By concentrating on the fantastical, fragmentary, opaque and constructed nature of the family and its images, I position myself in a group of contemporary artists who attempt to resist the ease of recognition that halts critical complexity. The only universal truth that is contained in the family circle of looks is the fact that all cultures have different ideals or gazes, that the gaze is always mediated, and that we are all subject to the ideological power and the framing of the conventional family gaze (ibid: 11-12).

Susan Sontag also discusses the 'romantic' nature of family photography. In the photograph, the past is made 'consumable' (1973: 68). From 'detritus' and 'junk', like this instant photographic version of history, human consciousness is constructed (ibid: 69). She sees the photograph as an 'artefact' and a found object: an art of an 'affluent, wasteful, restless' society (ibid). The photographer 'antiques reality', and turns the past into a digestible object of 'tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgements by the generalized pathos of looking at time past' (ibid: 71).

The photograph is thus the simulacrum of the past, an 'artificial ruin' or an effect, created to 'deepen the

historical character of a landscape', and to invite viewers to linger and regard details contained at the surface (ibid: 80). As such the photograph is always 'suggestive' (ibid), and it is this quality that I find particularly useful in the construction of my work, where I have used photographs to act as details, as well as provide an effect or feeling of family in more general terms.

Barthes echoes this theme of artifice when he says that photography is linked to art, not so much by painting, but by the theatre. He reminds us that Daguerre was running a dioramic theatre when he 'took over' the invention of photography, and that the 'camera obscura' was at the root of perspective painting, photography, and the diorama: three 'arts of the stage' (2000: 31). But photography's real connection to the theatre, according to Barthes, lies 'by way of Death' (ibid). The photograph is

always of the dead, or the absent, or the apparently lifelike, and it is a 'kind of primitive theatre, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead' (ibid: 32).

The family photograph is thus a simulacrum of many things, and on many levels: family, image, history, sentiment; the list is potentially limitless. By emphasising its theatrical, constructed, and artful elements – rather than its transparent and apparently real qualities – I can use the family photograph in my work to describe a more critical, or at least more complex, narrative. In addition, I base much of my work on the narratives already contained in my collection of images, and by literally *constructing* my family and its postmemory narratives, I am mirroring the construction of the family romance in broader ideological terms.

SECTION 2: THE HISTORICAL AND STYLISTIC FOUNDATIONS UNDERLYING THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PRACTICAL WORK

2.1 NARRATIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE PAINTING

The paintings of Western art history contain a vocabulary of artifice, narrative, and description that shares much with the notion of the theatre, and the concept of the simulacrum in more general terms. Without outlining an entire range of pictorial influences, I can focus on the appearance and functioning of two features of painting that appear in my work: the descriptive object and the narrative detail. With Mieke Bal's discussion of the functioning of narrative through the details or 'navels' of an image in mind, it is possible to locate narrative in an image that is not necessarily a 'history' painting.

History painting, which includes biblical and mythical subject matter, has come to stand for much of the 'high' art first produced during the Quattrocento of the Italian Renaissance. This pervasive tradition was largely based on a revival of the principles of antiquity, and was propelled by massive economic and social improvements, as well as the spread of doctrines emphasising humanism, investigation, scientific enquiry, and mathematical rigour in all aspects of life. Biblical depictions, characterised by high levels of stylisation during the Middle Ages, were among the first images to exhibit these new approaches: apart from an adoption of a classical and naturalistic style, the most humble subject matter was elevated to mythical dimensions, as a theatrical illustration and affirmation of a new ideology (Alpers 1995).

The Italian model (as historians like Alpers term it) is based on narrative. This broadly implies a focussing of attention, a spectatorial outlook, a convincing structure (using Albertian perspective), arresting and dramatic human forms as 'actors', and an elimination of detailed, descriptive elements. Where these do appear, they are either emblematic and used in the creation of allegory, or merely contribute to the 'effect of the real' employed by the artist to make the image more convincing.

Norman Bryson terms this form of art 'megalography' – the art of the unique and exceptional individual; dramas depicting greatness (1990: 15). Narrative painting is theatrical because it depicts an event; and thus requires a spectator. It is outwardly thrusting and engages the viewer. The painting projects, the viewer looks – it is about presentation, not representation (ibid: 86).

Presentation depends on the viewer accepting what he or she sees. This is achieved through imitation of nature, in combination with the effect of the real. Spatial imitation of nature is the most convincing illusion employed during the Renaissance, and was taken into theatre as well. This was achieved by treating the flat image as a window onto a convincingly 'life-like' scene, with linear and aerial perspective cementing the illusion.

Mere imitation of nature was secondary to the intellectual and spiritual significance of the illusionistic image: the 'window of Italian painting opens effortlessly onto sacred spaces and transcendental truth' (ibid: 150). The epic painter had to use his imagination and intellect to compose the image, and each work of this type was 'steeped' in learning and text (Alpers 1995: 89). The painting had to appeal to the mind of the spectator, rather than his eye (ibid: 93). Thus any observation of the real was subject to an ordering and idealising of that reality according to strict conventions – of a mathematical as well as a spiritual nature.

The human figure was central to the Italian model of heroic painting, whereas in the Northern tradition, a different approach to depicting the physical world was favoured. Svetlana Alpers participated in a debate in the 1980s around the meaning of Dutch paintings in relation to the Italian model. Bryson calls the two camps the 'Pan-Allegorists' and the 'Anti-Allegorists', with Alpers belonging to the latter group. Alpers distinguishes between descriptiveness and narrative in painting, and separated the two models into Dutch versus Italian approaches. She argued for an understanding of Dutch art without 'coding' and allegory, or as a 'semantically neutral act of description' (Bryson 1990: 120). Bearing in mind Bal's description of the story told by the detail as well as in the application of paint, it is still possible to agree to a certain extent with a separation of the two approaches: I will call them 'forms of narrative'.

Alpers stresses the strong scientific, visual tradition in the Netherlands as being central to the

mimetic depiction of still-life objects. The exact, deceptive recording of nature is evident in a long tradition of *trompe-l'oeil* painting, where marvellous illusionism was paramount. The dominance of Renaissance Neoplatonic thought meant that physical reality was subordinate to the 'idea'; or that ideal reality was recreated by the artist from a selection and ordering of nature's 'best' parts (Wheelock 1991:184-5).

But exact observation of 'the variety and beauty' of 'God's creations', particularly in the Northern tradition, did allow for the rise of the still-life painting as a genre in its own right (ibid: 188). Wheelock takes the view that still-life painting was largely allegorical, in that it made commentary on '...the bounty of God's creations, the need for moderation and restraint, the vanity of worldly possessions, the transience of life, or the lasting power of artistic creation' (ibid: 189).

The descriptive function of the object in its emblematic form can be seen in the Western painted portrait. The appearance of coded objects provided details and recognisable social characteristics of the sitter. Apart from the pose, gestures and attitudes enacted for the viewer, the public portrait used a coded variety of emblems to narrate certain details: the drape, the classical column, the devoted pet, the apple, the mirror, the sword, the globe, the book, the view of the landscape; all communicated clear information to the viewer (*fig 3*). In this way, the desirable qualities of the sitter were emphasised and described in forms other than his or her physical appearance. These 'signs' expressed the central idea of the portrait, where nature's 'irregularities' were suppressed in favour of man's 'spiritual' appearance (Schneider 1994: 18). His place in the social fabric as well as his spiritual nature, were readable in the arrangement of these emblematic elements. This emblematic description, particularly in the form of objects, forms the basis for the creation of narrative in my work, and is also part of the link between my work and the painting tradition.

The still life is the genre most devoted to the object: here it becomes the 'subject', given priority over human presence (Lowenthal 1996). In the seventeenth century, the Dutch term 'still-leven' came to describe paintings of 'motionless models' (ibid: 6); but before this general classification of the form as an independent entity, the object appeared throughout the history of painting as what Pliny the Elder termed a 'minor style' (cited in ibid: 7), in the form of

manuscript details, as effects of the real, and as emblematic information in the periphery of history paintings and portraits.



Fig 3: Hans Holbein the Younger, 'The Ambassadors' (1533), detail showing encoded objects.

Bryson describes the still-life genre as being 'at the farthest remove from narrative' (1990: 9). Its meaning lies in its existence in a constantly intertextual convention that moves in a sideways, rather than linear, fashion through history (ibid: 11). From Pompeian 'xenia' to Cubism, the object in the still life exists as a simulacrum. In other words, figurative or realistic representation occurs when the objects depicted in the image 'stand for' their counterparts in reality. In contrast, the still life features the 'opposite of figuration', and in it, 'irrealisation, artifice, the simulacrum' occur (ibid: 58-9). The simulacrum also occurs in other genres of the hyperreal – like *trompe-l'oeil* – where painting moves beyond representation to presentation, and where the image seems 'more radiant' and more 'real' than the observable real. As such, the painting almost 'dispenses' with the original, or real, altogether (ibid: 81). Dutch banquet scenes, for example, are fascinating because they are too sumptuous, and seem fantastical. Bryson outlines the problem with easy recognisability – the fact that the viewer tends to overlook the familiar, because perception 'screens out' the familiar and the real. By making this 'lazy' visual field unfamiliar – by heightening its artifice or hyperreality – the viewer will be forced to pay 'hyper-attention' to the painting in this more theatrical mode of looking (ibid: 88-9).

Apart from any visual ideology, moral lesson, symbolism, allegory, or ocularcentric descriptiveness contained in European still-life paintings, particularly of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, it is the narrative contained in their surface descriptiveness (and labour), and the painterly detail of each object, that tells the story of their value as well as their production (ibid:134).

In contrast with the masculine Italian model, Bryson calls the still life a feminine space – that of the ‘domestic round’, characterised by an absence of individual uniqueness and distinction – or a ‘rhopographic’ space (ibid: 15). Alpers likens the still life to the mirror, or the map of the world, in contrast to the Italian window (1988: 23). Whereas the still life, especially the Dutch one, is known for its surfaces, narrative paintings are about story (ibid: 21). Such stories are best told in a theatrical fashion, demonstrated in the frozen, superficial, heightened gestures, costumes, and tableau-like poses recognisable from antiquity, and in the dramatic compositions of the traditional history painting. In the Renaissance, acting was seen to possess a poetic dimension when it conformed to codes of ‘striking’, ‘moving’ or ‘noble’ poses and gestures; many of these conventions appear in examples of such theatrical painting (ibid: 38).

Highly theatrical Baroque painters, like Caravaggio and Rubens, utilised these conventions to produce truly spectatorial and mythic paintings. But what is most significant about them, particularly from my point of view, is the visible artifice evident in each work. Caravaggio’s still lifes are so hyperreal and sensuous that they seem to have transcended observation and reality altogether, and the obsessive details seem almost repulsive. Rubens was criticised for his use of highly artificial, sensual and ‘populist’ colours, in contrast with the restrained and sober hues favoured by more classical artists (ibid: 77). His brushmarks – in contrast with Caravaggio’s lack thereof – emphasise the artificial nature of the highly constructed image. Neither artist ‘fools the eye’; even Caravaggio’s excessive mimesis displaces the real, and convincing the viewer is beside the point.

Through an unselfconscious presentation of their art (as art), painters like Rubens and Caravaggio invented and elevated the most ordinary subject to the extraordinary and fantastical. It is evident that the apparently natural and the easily recognisable are made less familiar when displayed in an artificial and theatrical manner. As a result, the narrative contained

in such an image becomes more fragmented and complex, which provokes a more hyper-attentive reading.

Although my images are not paintings, they utilise much of the vocabulary of narrative and object painting, as well its artifice. With representations of the hyperreal, as well as the painterly and expressive, my work attempts to disrupt easy reading, and combines the public and theatrical with the ‘rhopographic’ and private.

2.2 THE STUDIO PHOTOGRAPH

At its inception, the studio photograph attempted to mimic the picturesque quality, as well as the social value, of the painted portrait. This positions the early studio photograph as a simulacrum or a copy of the painting-model, but with qualities that distinguish it as a separate and more ‘real’ form; one that was believed to contain an actual trace of human presence. As such, the photographic image seems to capture as well as give new life.

This mimicry of painting did not die out in the twentieth century, as one might suppose: the staged portrait remains one of the most accessible means of signalling middle-class aspirations. The posed studio photograph does not merely mimic the European painting, but the entire notion of European class and high culture. So as much as the portrait aspires to the painterly and unique, so too does the individual in the portrait aspire to socially greater things. The form and content of the studio photograph – particularly the nineteenth-century portrait – clearly signals many of the traditions of representation in the painted portrait.

The subjects in these early photographs are usually posed in a frontal manner, wearing their best or professional clothes, in a setting furnished with clear and encoded emblems signalling their uniqueness and importance. As in the traditional painted portrait, drapery is usually evident, as are ‘classical’ and regal or authoritative signifiers, like columns, busts, pedestals and architectural features (fig 4). There is usually a picturesque backdrop, painted in the illusionistic manner, showing vistas, houses, views from windows, hazy natural scenes: land that looks like it could be ‘owned’.

The most popular and realistic form of early photograph was the daguerreotype, often regarded as magical, and characterised by a laborious and technical process:



Fig 4: Studio photographic portrait of 'Uncle Billy' and 'Aunt Sally' of Plympton, mid 19th century.

A flickering image on mirrored metal, encased like a jewel in a decorated box, the daguerreotype seemed a simulacrum of the real: too real to be understood as just another kind of copy of the world, too immediately compelling to seem only a likeness. (Trachtenberg 1992: 175)

The first two mass-produced forms of photography were the stereographic card and the *carte-de-visite*. The latter enabled the middle classes to obtain multiple prints of their studio portraits, and leave them as calling cards when visiting (Pultz 1995: 17). In this way a 'collective portrait' of the bourgeoisie came about – soon to be developed into the photographic album, an innovation that was given a boost by the invention of the Kodak print. These collections of 'people' became particularly significant in Europe and America in the nineteenth century – societies being transformed by industrialisation, immigration and war (ibid: 18). Due to the realism of these images, they could replace the experience of actual people, often far away. Similarly, the use of the early portrait after death was one of its most popular applications.

These photographs contain in their surfaces details of daily life that imply human presence, and create a generalised essence of history and family – compelling and nostalgic. Although the family photograph did leave the studio as a mass memento of the middle classes, the studio portrait remains an important 'occasion' (like a painted portrait might have been), or the only means of self-representation for many families who can not afford cameras – especially in Africa. Photographic portraits, to this day, prove and record the existence of the middle-class family and its members, performing the same function that painted portraits did for aristocratic families in the past.

The first studio photographic portraits in African countries, like South Africa, emerged primarily during the colonial era. According to Santu Mofokeng, black working- and middle-class families coveted studio images; they became emblems of people at moments of 'self-contemplation and self-dramatization' (1998: 70). These portraits were not merely a trivial mimicking of the ideal lives of the colonists, but also an assertion of identity, aspiration and humanity on the part of a people classified as 'fauna and flora' (ibid). Basically, like studio portraits all over the world, these images proclaimed how the subjects 'saw or wanted themselves to be seen' (ibid: 69).

Like the European model, the studios provided an environment based on a Victorian pictorial style, characterised by the photographer's range of props and backdrops, as well as clothing. The subjects were posed amidst this fictionalised setting, adopting an appearance and a vocabulary that was not their own, but to which they aspired (ibid).

In the Ivory Coast, the painted backdrop was a popular and essential component of the studio portrait. (Even today, in Joubert Park in Johannesburg, backdrops for portrait photographs are used because they are easily transportable, and provide a cheap and accessible instant location, in front of which the subjects may pose.) Although backdrops in the Ivory Coast were initially based on a European model, they now include large colour prints of exotic locales. Basically, the backdrop in all of its contexts has the same function: it suggests an illusion of being 'somewhere – or someone else' (Werner 1998: 96). Original double-sided painted backdrops included romantic vistas, colonial mansions, wrought-iron balconies, plush staircases, and technological props like telephones. Clients were



Fig 5: A contemporary Ghanaian studio photograph, featuring subjects posed in an 'interactive' room-divider set

dressed up in appropriate clothing – which again emphasises the fact that playing a role and creating a fantasy image, a self-image, was at the root of the system (ibid).

Ghana exhibits the most evolved backdrop-dependant popular studio portrait system in contemporary Africa. In Ghanaian society, image is crucial to the self-worth of the ordinary citizen. As a colony, Ghana had levels of strict social order, and early studio photographs followed the formal Victorian model. One of the ways in which bureaucrats in the colonial administration system demonstrated their all-important social standing was by having portraits taken in their ceremonial uniforms (Wendl 1998: 144). The essence of these portraits was their clear demonstration of the fact that in Ghana, one's social position totally outweighed one's individual identity.

In Ghanaian society, the photographic portrait has 'life'. It exists as tangible evidence of relationships, status, luck, ritual, and identity. It is literally a symbolic 'double' that can be sent away to relatives instead of the person; it can return the subject to health, or in the wrong hands be used in a 'malefic ritual'. As such it has importance in a culture where 'ritualized representation of the individual was an integral part – and art – of daily life' (ibid). These portraits can then hardly be called domestic images: their function is largely public, and easily

interpretable, because all elements of the photograph are arranged as uniform details that the viewer is familiar with, and able to read.

Of these elements, the backdrops contain the clearest signals. The contemporary Ghanaian backdrop tolerates high levels of artifice and stylisation, in accordance with this shared symbolic language (fig 5). The most typical themes are those featuring modernity in all of its forms: airports, electricity, pylons and cityscapes dominate, as well as ideal homes, rooms (mainly kitchens and living rooms – the most public areas), and the most popular: the room-divider.

The popularity of the room-divider backdrop rests in its capacity to illustrate all the mod-cons necessary for survival in the modern home. Its popularity also reflects the consumerist ideal which dominates emergent and aspirant Ghanaian society post-independence (ibid: 153). These items are depicted realistically enough to signal desire, and often form an illusionistic 'interpenetration of real with unreal'; in other words, the subject can use props to seemingly interact with the backdrop – for example, take a Coke from the well-stocked fridge. Proverbs and truisms about existence appear in the image, like helpful captions for life. These symbolic statements, or quotes from chiefs and significant members of society, form an integral and accepted part of the logic of the photographic image (ibid: 154).

Ghanaian studio photographs are examples of the simulacrum in use: in Akan, the word 'nokwar', which means 'reality', also refers to objects that are invisible (ibid: 154). As such, every surface detail contains levels of meaning that go beyond appearance, or imitation of reality. The final image exists on many different levels, in every respect more than a copy of the 'real'.

In Ghana, photography is not about mirroring reality. It is instead a language of fantasy and personal metamorphosis, where one's self-image can be manipulated in the symbolic arena of the studio (ibid: 150). Here, the hyperreal mixes with the surreal and the apparently real to produce an image that is much more than what meets the eye:

... ambiguities, paradoxes, illusions and multiple facets of existence are accepted as a basic fact of life... mirrored in much of the language of daily life, rich in proverbs whose meaning and interpretation are also multiple. (ibid: 155)

Of course, like all symbolic systems, this codified language is almost impossible to interpret outside of the Ghanaian understanding of reality. What these images have in common with European studio photographs – apart from basic conventions of foreground, props, and backdrop – is their existence as simulacra. However, Ghanaian photographs employ a more self-conscious and independent language of artifice, which describes an image rich in arranged details that fracture assumptions of the real. Although my images are not studio photographs, they are similarly artful arrangements, which can be read even by a viewer unfamiliar with the language of the image. This narrative is not beneath, but at the surface of the image, contained in its form and appearance.

2.3 DIORAMAS AND RELATED DISPLAY FORMS

Dioramas provide the root form for many of the methods of display particular to public institutions. I am attracted to the diorama because of the wonder and the paradox it contains: the coexistence of the artificial and the mimetic, often in the same space. By arranging even the most intimate and subjective objects in such a display, even if it is located in a studio art space, the personal is given authority and dramatic 'thrust'. The most introspective form ceases to be personal, and the artwork is instead spectatorial,

and engages narrative reading.

Daguerre's dioramas were simulations of nature, made more 'real' through an artful manipulation of lights and perspectival illusion on a painted surface. This simulation of the real confused and attracted a public desperate to 'experience' the modern and the fantastical. The mass entertainment offered by the display shows of the day – including the panorama and the diorama – were the precursors of the modern mall complex.

Daguerre was not only responsible for the diorama; he went on to develop the daguerreotype – the 'ultimate consumable experience' (Oetermann 1997: 79). It is interesting to note that Daguerre was originally an acclaimed stage designer. His background in the inner workings of the theatre exposes the artful and entertainment-based roots of the dioramic display. Thus, serious and educational display forms, like the museum habitat display, are similarly based on the principles of audience, commerce and theatre. Bearing this in mind, it becomes impossible to separate art from display, and theatre itself is essentially a well-managed large-scale spectacle.

Daguerre was apprenticed to an architect, and then to the chief designer for the Paris opera. He also assisted a panorama painter, and eventually became an opera and theatrical set designer in his own right (Gernsheim 1968). These experiences clearly equipped the experimentally-minded Daguerre with a sound understanding of the vocabularies of display, illusionistic effects, technical construction, audience manipulation, and public taste.

Daguerre opened the first diorama in 1822. He collaborated in its construction with the architectural painter, Charles Bouton. Bouton was the more recognised painter, and so Daguerre's contribution to the partnership largely took the form of 'effects' knowledge. The diorama space was situated within an area of Paris known for its theatres, and so the expectations of the public were initially placed well within this existing form. Technically speaking, the early diorama operated according to simple principles, and its effects owed more to its construction than to the quality of its painting. However, many were convinced that the nature depicted in the diorama was an improvement on the real: 'a new conquest, a happy application of optics and catoptrics to the effects of painting. The results justify the naïve expression of a child who exclaimed that "it was more beautiful than nature!"' (La Quotidienne 1822, as quoted: 18).

This simulation of the real was achieved through a combination of naturalistic detail and observation in the paintings themselves, perfect perspective and an illusion of depth, and a convincing imitation of natural phenomena. In combination, the overall effect 'confounded' the spectator (ibid: 19).

The diorama was viewed in a theatrical manner: the audience was seated in rows of seats, positioned in such a way that the maximum illusion of depth was created. The ostentatious and dramatic effect of the entire experience was heightened by the decoration of the auditorium: drapery, ornamental crests and shields bearing the names of respected artists of the day, and a heavy curtain in front of the image all gave the entertainment a grand and serious, yet also theatrical aura. The sense of depth and 'real space' was achieved by situating the painting about thirteen meters back from the carefully placed front row, and by forming a virtual tunnel of screens through which the image was viewed by the seated audience. In addition, the edges of the image were concealed, thereby creating an illusion of depth in the dim room (ibid: 20).

Owing to Daguerre's theatrical background, it makes sense that these diorama entertainments featured many aspects gleaned from the opera and stage in general; but the emphasis in all of these displays was on the technological, the modern, the fantastic, the picturesque and the exotic. Although the diorama caught on and expanded to 'fashionable' London and to other parts of Europe; it was always being eclipsed by the 'latest thing' – including Daguerre's own photographic developments. Its creators were thus under constant pressure to add new fantastical elements, or 'attractions', to their displays. In the 1930s Daguerre attempted to improve the novelty value of the entertainment by further blurring the distinctions between the real and the illusory. He placed real objects, such as goats, people performing tasks, buildings, and so on, in front of the convincingly rendered backdrop – with contextually appropriate music playing in the background (Gernsheim 1968: 30). It is this blending of the actual with the simulacrum, and the fabricated language of its creation, that really interests me about the diorama in relation to my work, even though I have borrowed many of its other forms.

Dioramas were transformed into stage designs as well as commercial exhibitions, and objects on display in a variety of contexts typically began to be placed in front of a convincing replica of their place of origin. The panorama, scaled down and combined

with the more diorama-sized display, began to evolve into what became the museum diorama or habitat display of the twentieth century. Wax figures, dressed in appropriate and informative costumes, started appearing in front of these explanatory backdrops, along with exhibitions of 'interesting cultures' and artefacts, taxidermied animals and ethnographic 'specimens' (like Saartjie Baartman). Entertainment had transformed into pure 'science', and the model diorama became an instructional tool (Oettermann 1997: 97). It was of course really still entertainment: the similarity between the ethnographic curiosity display and the circus peepshow or funfair freak show is clear in retrospect.

Daguerre's dioramas provided a prototype, and soon anything with a light – even simply an illuminated painting – were soon called 'diorama' (ibid: 173). These types of 'see-through' displays favoured voyeuristic styles of viewing, and implied an observation of things 'as they really are' – undisturbed. Hence the development of the habitat display, or diorama, as the most popular and convincing method of didactic display in the museum context. Here, the combination of 'real' objects (like Daguerre's goat) with simulacra, as well as the illusionistic, descriptive painted backdrop, offered the public the perfect opportunity for a detailed and true observation of the real, the exotic and the magical (ibid: 211) (*fig 6*).

If museums exhibit a 'culture of spectacle' (Barker 1999: 8), then the adaption of the diorama to the commercial or shop window display also fulfilled a similar, but perhaps more honest demand for spectacle in the newly modern and acquisitive public. Shop windows only really reached their 'golden age' towards the latter part of the nineteenth century, and they typically evoked the 'gilded age of Victorian opulence' (Wood 1982: 13). Their early themes mimicked those of museums and exhibitions around Europe at the time, namely exploration, the exotic and the antique (ibid: 14). The display of live animals, wax figures, curiosities and theatrical performances in these commercial displays also echoed the 'infotainment' of the more 'serious' and educational exhibitions. Although shop displays changed and adopted a more frank language of desire, wonder and fantasy in the twentieth century, often referring to the art styles of the era (such as Surrealism and Pop), on the whole they tended to operate as social barometers, reflecting the desires and interests of the broader public.



Fig 6: *S A Museum, contemporary Cape Mammal habitat display.*

Andy Warhol said, ‘All department stores will become museums and all museums will become department stores’ (cited in Portas 1999: 14). This is because, like museums, they reflect images of culture, rely on the interpretation of a receptive audience, evoke a similar aura of magic, juxtapose the real alongside the simulacrum, inhabit a similar depth of space behind glass, and use objects as props which direct the interpretation of the product (ibid: 53) (fig 7). So, just like museum displays, shop windows sell aspirations, or promote ‘model worlds’

(ibid: 123). Even in today’s mall culture, these displays continue to ‘obey and construct society’s image of itself’ (Maleuvre 1999: 12).

Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* describes some of the early appearances in Paris of the forerunners of the mall and the shop-window display. ‘Les Passages’ were nineteenth-century shopping arcades that contained a vision of a ‘dream city’, and an image of an epoch (1995). For the newly modern consumer in a large city, these arcades provided a constant and wondrous exhibition of exotic, magical and useful items from around the new world. Panoramas and the like were also included in these display-streets, and the separation between shop and museum was often hard to discern.

These ‘passages’ evolved in the 1850s into proper department stores, which became typical of the modern city. These stores provided almost religious experiences: according to Baudelaire, they were ‘temples’ to this new ‘intoxication’ (cited ibid: 61). Objects in a display usually take on an iconic significance or resonance – further enhanced when plate glass was invented in the early twentieth century, and the scope of the shop window widened. Although the original diorama was overtaken by the more convincing photograph, it evolved comfortably into other forms of public display. The term ‘diorama’ is now ‘... a multi-purpose label for a variety of simulated environments’ (Kamps 2000: 6),



Fig 7: *Shop window, Eaton Company, Toronto; commemorating the end of World War I, 1918.*

including the staged tableau in contemporary art practice. My works, although not really imitative of reality, employ many of the conventions that characterise the diorama and shop-window display: the enactment of the descriptive tableau in a similarly demarcated space; the informative painted backdrop; and the juxtaposition of the artificial and manufactured alongside actual objects. In addition, by displaying an arrangement of props and objects in this form, I hope to give my work the same kind of resonance and fantasy apparent in these other traditions of display.

2.4 STAGING – THEATRE, FILM AND VIRTUAL REALITY

Mise en scène: Originally a theatre term meaning 'staging', it crossed over to signify the film production practices involved in the framing of shots... first it connotes setting, costume and lighting, second, movement within the frame.
(Hayward 1996: 220)

In the history and traditions of the stage – both Western and Eastern – as well as early film in the twentieth century, the notion of the theatrical was given much significance. Even when theatre was at its most classical, it employed a vocabulary based on a clear understanding between the audience and those in the production: that the form of the theatrical event existed on a level beyond and apart from reality.

As such, until dominant Western fashions changed towards realism and naturalism in the nineteenth century, theatre wore its artifice and its stylisation on its sleeve. Like the simulacrum, its existence was not one of subordination to the real, but of marvellous invention.

The notion of staging, and the creation of the *mise en scène*, is central to the production of a theatrical event – be it dramatic or painterly. In fact, history shows that developments in Renaissance painting led directly to rapid advances in theatre design, with artists like Da Vinci and Michelangelo often contributing to productions. Perspectival theory certainly made its presence felt the most strongly after the Quattrocento, particularly in the painted backdrop. But even with perspective, the theatre at this time was never completely illusionistic, opting instead for the over-the-top and amazing.

The set as we know it was developed during Classical times. The Greek 'theatron' or 'seeing

place', with its changing room or 'skene', was first recorded in about 534 BC. Productions were ritualistic – honouring the god Dionysus – which echoes much of the highly stylised Japanese theatrical tradition. Because an identical, formalised backdrop sufficed for all productions, the audience gained their cues from spoken 'scenery' (Brockett 1988: 66). Mechanical devices, like 'machina' – cranes for lifting 'gods' – were visible to the audience at all times. Other devices that helped along this recognisability included standardised costume – large attached phalluses on costumes indicated fertility, and so on (ibid: 82).

Roman theatre was based to a large extent on Greek forms, but with more of an entertainment or sporting focus. The Romans developed a somewhat longer 'stage', with a façade or 'scaenae fons' with doors and multiple stories (ibid: 85). Again, characters were 'types', broadly and immediately recognisable due to symbolic costume, masks, and mimed actions.

Medieval theatre was mostly of a liturgical nature, and travelling players transported morality plays from town to town. Similarly, no real attempt at illusion or realism was made, except for the scenes of hell – which had to be particularly convincing for didactic purposes (ibid: 98). In fact, heaven and hell were shown on the stage at the same time, and the progression of the actors from one area to the other signified a perfectly accepted and understood temporal and spatial passage between the two heavenly spheres. Any earthly or real properties were unnecessary in the staging, because all concerned knew that 'ultimate reality' only existed in the eternal – in heaven. As such, historicity, place and time were largely ignored. Details did not have to convince, because all that happened, on and off the stage, was 'God's will' (ibid).

There were two parts to most of the more permanent stages: the 'mansion', which was a small structure representing basic scenic details; and the 'platea', which was an undemarcated stage space on which the actors moved around (ibid: 100). The overall set represented the universe, and had no framing devices. The mansion and platea were however valuable structures. They were adapted for use in Renaissance theatre, and evolved into many of the forms we know today.

Theatrical illusion, or 'theatre à l'italienne', came about slowly over period of roughly three hundred years, starting in about the sixteenth century. This

illusion was a product of advances in painting, particularly perspective, as well as the 'framing' provided by the newly developed proscenium arch and the curtain drop (Aumont 1997: 171). In addition, machinery – adapted from the Greek style – was used to change scenes as frequently as the production demanded. The Italian theatrical tradition after about 1550 was formed primarily to 'show off':

The mechanics of the marvellous – elaborate plots, fabulous costumes, exotic animals ... automata that moved or played music, elaborate pageant wagons, stage sets that changed their form in the middle of a performance, and flying machines and traps by which figures entered the stage from heaven or the underworld – were more important than any meaning conveyed. (Weil 1991: 160)

Such obvious fictions were accepted as reality, because they were staged in this wondrous manner (ibid: 162). The technical virtuosity and spectacle displayed in these ropes, pulleys, flying chariots and moving clouds constituted the main Italian legacy to theatre, and were even employed in more serious French productions, to suit different aims and ideologies (ibid: 165).

The concept of 'scenography' evolved through an overt link between the theatrical and the painterly. At first it indicated the perspectival painting of stage décor in the Italian style, and then evolved into the design of the set in general, including objects placed on the stage. Finally, it came to mean the representation of place in general, across different media (Aumont 1997: 173). Some historians take the term to describe the manner of representation employed in an Italian sixteenth-century painting. Others see it as referring to the *mise en scène* and its spatial organisation, in painting and in theatre (ibid).

The most deliberate, ritualised, and considered example of staging is easily found in the Japanese theatrical tradition. As in the early Western tradition, it is entirely dependent on the viewer's understanding of what occurs on the stage, as well as a total ease and familiarity with the meaning behind a series of 'gestures' or forms completely committed to principles of aesthetics and spirituality.

The Japanese aesthetic is evident not only in art forms like Noh theatre, Bunraku and Kabuki, but also in diverse everyday activities such as the tea ceremony, gardening and cooking. Even in the highly industrialised Japan of manga, salarymen and

bosozoku motorcycle gangs; ceremony and aestheticism affect every aspect of daily life. This is because daily life is thought to contain 'rewarding aesthetic experiences', evident when performed in a 'ritualised event' (Saito 1998: 545).

Noh theatre had its roots in Buddhism, and was an early didactic form. The stories are unchanged and well known, although this is hardly mass theatre. Everything in the set is minimal: limited numbers of actors who have grown up playing the same, often inherited role; visible singers; sparse sets with symbolic numbers of bamboo trees on the backdrop. This set is virtually unchanged over the centuries: its stylisation and form is its content. There is nothing naturalistic about the words or actions of the players, and appearance contains great depth, for all its simplicity and lack of detail.

There is often not much real narrative – the point of the staging is the creation of an attitude, not a story. Actors speak of themselves in the third person, and specific hand gestures tell most of what is recognisable (ibid: 114). As in Medieval drama, time and place are compressed and another reality is portrayed. Bunraku, or puppet theatre, also obeys strict conventions. The handlers, the puppets, and the musicians who 'narrate' the story are at all times visible to the audience, who accept the alternate reality of the form (ibid: 119). As in Italian theatre, the very complexity and form of the staging becomes highly significant. Barthes describes Bunraku as a 'concrete abstraction' rather than mere simulation; an art of 'nuance... subtlety... of "the soul"', and without 'falsehood' (1977: 172).

The regulated and ritualised forms of Japanese theatrical practice represent a concern with the depth visible in appearance, and an appreciation for detail at the surface – the poetry of the object is contained in its form (Saito 1998: 548). Most significantly, this is a 'contrived' and 'fabricated' aesthetic (Norinaga cited ibid: 549), designed to stimulate the imagination, and to create a new order of 'thusness' or reality (ibid).

Unlike theatre, the modern motion picture, or film, carries the burden of the hyperreal. Although watched in a darkened space, from a point of view – perspectively speaking – much like that of the theatre, the film narrates convincingly due to montage and motion. Projected onto a flat, canvas-like screen, the filmic image is the most convincing, and thus dangerous, simulacrum. But before virtual reality and computer-generated imaging, film had claims to being more cinematic, or more artful.



Fig 8: *'The Cabinet of Dr Caligari'* (1920), directed by Robert Weine, is an example of an early film that features deliberately 'artful' and expressive sets.

It is in the art film or the silent movie era that we find films most self-conscious about their form, for example *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919), which is a reference for one of my images (fig 8). Even though contemporary filmmakers are open about the technicalities of their craft, the worlds they create are convincing illusions, even if not strictly of the real. According to Hayward (1996), film narrative is about 'storytelling, not description' (249). Thus, as in the Italian Renaissance painting, the detail is underplayed to emphasise the action. The auteur/director organises a *mise en scène* around this concept, using conventions and codes, like lighting and sets, to convey the dramatic moment. Moments are convincingly joined by means of montage, which moves the story along towards a conclusion. Films are staged, even when clearly fantastical, around making the audience identify with the story (ibid). This is why sets have had to become increasingly 'realistic' and convincing in recent times. Gerard Genette would call this form of narrative set-up 'diegesis' (cited in Hayward: 250): in other words, the visual staging of the narrative, and the projection of the story as an image on a screen. In film, although the sets might be authentic-looking and full of perfectly realised detail, the realism of the film is really achieved in the editing suite, after shooting (Katz 1994: 1235). As such, the

form of the production is not as important as the finished product, unlike the other forms of staging previously described: before editing, the film is staging.

Eric Rohmer (cited in Aumont 1997: 173) describes three different kinds of space that the film contains: pictorial space – which describes a world cinematographically; architectural space; and most significantly, filmic space, which is a virtual space created in the viewer's mind from visual cues. Unlike this imaginative filmic space, virtual reality is a constructed, artificial reality that actually 'exists' in the realm of computer reality. William Gibson, ironically a technophobe who did not own a computer, coined the term 'cyberspace' in the 1980s to describe this concept of a 'real' world existing beyond the concrete real. The notion of a 'matrix' is part of this construct. Gibson stated that computer 'geeks' believe that 'there's some kind of *actual space* behind the screen, someplace you can't see but you know is there' (cited in Highham 2001: 159). This might be a virtual space, but it is real nonetheless: a virtual reality. Here the user can enter cyberspace as a 'simulacrum of oneself... users are not constrained by real-world limitations' (ibid: 161). In this space, there is no space and no time, as on the Medieval stage, and the 'real ceases to be a referent'. It is 'abandoned for the simulated world of the totality of the Internet' (ibid: 162). Living becomes a completely textual activity; identity is always fictional and constructed, and simulacra interact with each other, a community of simulated selves (ibid: 164).

In this way, the world of virtual space acts like the ritualised stage, the silent film, or the 1940s musical in that it uses a language of total fabrication. Its depth lies at its surface, as it does on the cinema screen. It is a framed image – whether the frame be a curtain, or the edges of a monitor. And like all such conventions of display, its users see it for what it is. My work is located in such a tradition of framing and 'composition':

The tableau (pictorial, theatrical, literary) is a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view... they are scenes which are *laid out*... (Barthes 1977: 70)

Barthes locates this notion of the framing tableau specifically in the discourse of theatre, where he says every scene offers a perfect tableau, arranged in succession (like my images on the gallery wall). He cites Diderot on the definition of composition:

... a well-composed picture [tableau] is a whole contained under a single point of view, in which the parts work together to one end and form by their mutual correspondence... (cited *ibid*: 71)

In my view, framing, composition, and the importance of the presented, whole form are the most significant features shared by the non-naturalistic theatrical tradition, the Japanese theatrical and aesthetic tradition, the filmic *mise en scène*, and virtual cyberspace.

SECTION 3: CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES ON THE PRACTICAL METHODOLOGY

3.1 SETS AND SIMULATIONS – CONTEMPORARY CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'REALITY'

A considerable number of artists have produced work that has led me towards this project. This work is characterised by concerns including construction, the *mise en scène*, the everyday, the altar, the blatantly artificial, identity, the filmic, set-making, tableaux, the staged and theatrical, and forms of display – particularly the diorama. Many of these works are presented as photographs; some as three-dimensional installations, digital prints, or videos.

Artists like Richard Ross and Hiroshi Sugimoto take photographs in museums, and use this process to transform the already surreal and theatrical, into even more artificial and disturbing commentaries on the lifeless nature of these displays and dioramas. Artists like Mariko Mori, Yasumasa Morimura and Cindy Sherman transform themselves and their environments. They construct new identities and new images from old ones: a constant recycling of simulacra often found in film and mass media. Joel Peter Witkin constructs and parodies studio photographs and paintings, forms laden with associations – but the ease of recognition is abruptly halted by his choice of 'unacceptable' subject matter (Townsend 1998: 47). The perverseness evident in images like *The Collector of Fluids* (1982) undermines the easy acceptance of the definitions of identity and form offered by the Victorian studio or painted portrait.

Jeff Wall constructs totally convincing images of the hyperreal, using conjoined digital montages of different images. This painstaking construction process suggests the creation of the 'event' in history painting. Although images like *The Flooded Grave* (2001) and *The Destroyed Room* (1978) are apparently convincing, the people are actors, the objects are props, and the most everyday elements seem allegorical, and laden with intertextual clues that provoke interpretation (Tumlrir 2001):

What complicates the interpretation of any work by Jeff Wall is the fact that the narrative structure one is tempted to devise proves by definition to be arbitrary and inadequate. It even obscures the work's emblematic subtext, the precise reading of which could be crucial. (Van Winkel 1996: 16)

What interests me about Wall is precisely this obscuring of easy narrative readability. What is assumed to be apparent is soon revealed to be an appearance of the natural and historical, with no basis in the actual whatsoever: an image and a simulacrum (fig 9). Wall's work appears seamless, whereas processes like collage accent the tactile materiality of their production.



Fig 9: Jeff Wall: a detail from 'Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)', 1992: an example of the staged hyperreal.

From Cubists like Gris to Neo-Dadaists like Rauschenberg, collage implies the creation of new images from a layering of fragmented sources, usually found materials and objects from the media and everyday life. These new, clearly constructed images often comment on the process of their creation, on the manufacture of images in general, and on the society that produced the found material in

the first place. Collage is a simulacrum, wherein images of images are endlessly and obviously recycled, and the very concept of the original is denied altogether. The notion of collage is continued in the filmic montage, as well as in digital 'cutting and pasting', but these processes tend to conceal the marks of their making. Collage can also describe the three-dimensional assemblages of artists like Joseph Cornell, who arranges 'found' objects as a means of constructing historical narratives. These sentimental collections reveal narrative in their museum-like display of romantic, lost, and ephemeral fragments – often from old films (McShine 1999: 58-9).

These artists are significant because they use images to create new ones: images of culture – usually from art history or the media – create images of history and identity. Their work shows a concern with appearances and details, as well as a replacement of the real. But I would like to focus more on artists who use construction and artifice to create sets and tableaux without living subjects – as I have done.

The notion of art that openly stresses the processes of its making, as well as its artificial status, is particularly common to the postmodern era, although artifice has occurred throughout art history, as I have shown in previous sections. It has been a postmodern strategy – some would even call it a cliché – to exploit or quote earlier styles and forms, often in very deliberate and recognisable ways. In addition, it has proved an effective critical tool to use clearly low-art, art historical and media forms to comment on the ideologies they contain.

The 1980s also saw a move into the world of computer technology, and the ascendance of the notion of virtual reality. Art has kept abreast of technology, and has been involved in questioning and constructing alternate forms of reality through the use of these forms of contemporary media. For instance, the work of Laurie Anderson demonstrates a balance between the use of technology and the intimate. In her musical performances, with their elaborate stage sets, projections and voice synthesisers, as well as in her most recent CD-rom 'installations', technology is used to tell stories of her family, her dreams, and ordinary people.

The staged installation or tableau is a low-tech example of a 'virtual' reality. Although not presented as an image, this type of work is framed by the viewing parameters of its exhibition space. Early examples of highly, and obviously, constructed installations can be seen in Claes Oldenburg's

Bedroom Ensemble (1962) and *Mouse Museum* (1977), Edward Kienholz's *The Beanery* (1965), and George Segal's *The Diner* (1964-66). These installations and assemblages are characterised by the melding together of the 'real' object with the constructed, in a manner often confusing to the viewer. I find the *Mouse Museum* particularly interesting because it uses the notion of the museum, with its 'idealizing format' (Rugoff 2000: 14) as well as its theatricality, to display a range of low-culture, altered, and unaltered or found objects in a display format that directs a very unhierarchical viewing. Without a domineering human presence, Oldenburg's objects preserve their individuality and their importance (McShine 1999).

A more contemporary artist like Thomas Hirschhorn creates public memorials. In works like the *Mondrian Altar* of 1997, what is usually private is put on display in a street: an emblematic portrait made out of an arrangement, or 'bricolage', of 'banal mnemonic objects' (Buchloh 2001: 47). Generally speaking, altars are a form of public display undefined by frame and exhibition 'value'. They invite interaction and are temporally limited (ibid: 49). Like the altars used in 'Santeria' worship, Hirschhorn's are also intimate and devotional: the private is on show and enshrined.

Pepon Osorio creates scenes out of combinations of real and unreal, often kitsch, objects, or cultural 'artefacts' suggestive of the Puerto Rican community in the United States. These scenes are seemingly typical domestic environments, like 1993's *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)*. However, violence is evident in the mannequin-victim and the police tape surrounding the scene. Instead of using real actors, Osorio only allows access to the 'Latino body' through the identifiable family bric-a-brac that describes the home (Indych 2001: 79). Presented like a habitat display, and lit like a film or stage set, the artificial and theatrical nature of the scene is emphasised, questioning both the representation and perception of the Latino people (ibid).

African-American artist David Hammons also uses cultural artefacts, mannequins, and actual objects in his installations, like *The Fan* (1989). In this work, the white 'woman' listens to Malcolm X on the television, but does nothing (she is disembodied). A funeral wreath testifies to the sadness and futility of the scene. It is made more moving by the simple, yet detailed domestic setting. The objects, in this careful arrangement, narrate a complex story (Waldman 1992: 322).

Penny Siopis has made much use of the notion of the simulacrum in her late 1990s work. Even in her paintings, like 1989's *Piling Wreckage Upon Wreckage*, the objects arranged in a tableau (reminiscent of the Dutch 'banquet piece' of the seventeenth century) can be likened to props used to narrate a story, often with allegorical dimensions (Law 1999: 97). In mixed media works like *Charmed Lives* (1998), Siopis arranges a public narrative out of private objects. But she stresses these are simulacra, mass-produced kitsch, copies, and facsimiles (ibid: 96). By revealing their status as props and simulacra, Siopis believes that the image can be 'disentangled' from history. It will thus be freed to engage its 'revolutionary' potential (ibid). Easily recognisable and romantic objects 'flash' their 'naked signification' (ibid), but when placed in dream-like, strangely juxtaposed and obviously staged contexts, meaning is changed, and the representative is shown to be a simulacrum, or a mere representation (ibid: 98).

Siopis is not afraid to expose the fictional and sentimental nature of her history and origins as a white South African. In installations like *My Lovely Day* (1997), she combines the mystery and romance of the family object, the stage, and the silent film, in one setting. The autobiographical video is screened in a darkened theatrical space, plush seats and all: the personal and ephemeral are transformed and given material 'presence' when 'grafted together' and displayed in this manner (ibid: 105-6). The personal has become political.

The French artist Christian Boltanski interests me, because in works like *Photograph Album of the Family* (1970) he memorialises a fictional family, and invents 'truth' using simulacra – found objects and recycled images – in a way similar to Siopis's representations of her own family history during apartheid. The work tells a story of the holocaust, recognisable and familiar – and apparently real. Of course, the emotional resonance of the installation makes it real, and the realness of the loss the viewer recognises is further provoked by the illumination of the images, and other directorial devices (Waldman 1992: 306).

In *Storehouse* (1988), Boltanski arranges 'signifiers' of the Holocaust – like old cloth, blurred photographs, and rusted tins – into narratives of a historical, yet also private, disaster. Memory is displayed for what it is, but this display is also shown to be no less real for its mediated, suggested and manipulated qualities (Darcie Alexander 2000: 526). From the beginning of his career, Boltanski has demonstrated a concern with:

...uncoupling any uncomplicated connection between photography and 'truth'... images that are rephotographed, altered, and replaced with others, thus losing their purported credibility... Boltanski uses this myth of credibility... to establish as 'true' situations he invents, such as his elaborate 'record' of a bicycle accident he never had, or the use of images of anonymous children to 'document' his own childhood. (Hirsch 1997: 257)

Boltanski's monuments work on a basic principle of recognition (*fig 10*). Like the effect of the real, he relies on an effect of memory, of absence and presence, to provoke this recognition. And in turn, this recognition makes the work appear real.



Fig 10: Christian Boltanski, 'Reserves: The Purim Holiday' (1989).

These artists stage alternate, and often critical, public displays of personal reality. These works occupy 'real', three-dimensional space, although the objects they contain might be simulacra. Other artists take this process one step further by presenting the three-dimensional arrangement as a photographed and printed image.

The staged photograph, where 'taking' has changed to 'making' pictures, has come to dominate the field in recent times (Kohler 1995: 15). In this process, the photographer acts like a director or a commercial photographer, as well as a stylist, props sourcer and manufacturer, sculptor, carpenter, painter, and set dresser. The finished image has often been digitally manipulated and otherwise altered, undermining any claim to 'truthfulness' that the photograph might have

had. The image is generally made in front of a large format camera in the studio, not in an everyday setting. When lit and 'framed' by the lens, the entire process resembles a film set or stage. Sometimes the artist hires 'help' in the form of costumers and make-up artists, and even cameramen/women (ibid).

In this artificial environment, objects and people – or surrogates for people – are carefully arranged in a manner that usually narrates a story. In this form of display, the set-up and theatrical nature of the tableau is usually emphasised, along with the appropriation of various forms of display, media, and art practise. This is due to the fact that such art exists to undermine 'straight' photography's claims to realism and objectivity, and its resulting deceptiveness (ibid: 19). Of course, early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, like Dada and Surrealism, also undermined these 'effects of the real' through techniques like collage, photomontage, double exposure, negative manipulations and so on (ibid: 21). But these photographic forms were outside accepted art and photographic practise. In contemporary times, the very notion of the existence of original and real experience has been completely undermined by the replacement of 'reality' in the visual media with convincing simulations of the real (ibid: 22).

According to Kohler, constructed photographs fall into fairly straightforward categories: self-presentation (where the artist changes roles and identities), narrative tableaux (where actors or surrogates 'play out' scenes and fictions), miniature stages (tableaux in miniature with dolls and toys as protagonists), still lifes (compositions of arranged objects), and photo-installations or sculptures (large-scale, staged scenes containing objects) (1995: 34). This categorisation seems a little prescriptive; artists – myself included – often blur these boundaries and construct hybrid arrangements. (I favour the term 'tableau', which implies drama and frozen, theatrical action, even without living actors.)

Many of these photoworks draw on the tradition of painting to make meaning. This is evident in their size and format, compositional structuring, framing, and gallery installation. Framing, for example, imparts a unique character to a printed or reproduced artwork (ibid: 36). For example, in my work, by printing the image on canvas and stretching it, I have attempted to give it some sense of the 'aura' that Benjamin believes is particular to an original, crafted artwork or artefact.

Narrative is a central concept in these photoworks: narratives not of deceptive reality, but of construction and deconstruction. In these images, clues are provided as to their artifice. Artists like James Casabere² create photographs that reflect their clearly fabricated identity. In the 1990s Casabere constructed sets, or miniature interior spaces, out of styrofoam, cardboard and other simple and deliberately low-tech materials. These spaces feature architectural elements and objects, and references to film sets and genres – like the Western. The tableaux are executed in stark black and white, giving a film-like impact to their artifice (Darcie Alexander 2000).

In contrast, artists like Gregory Crewdson fashion hyperreal but similarly incongruous environments in his studio, on a platform. Like the wound in Caravaggio's painting, the details contain the disconcerting narrative, in the precise recreation of an intensely described reality. The familiar becomes horribly fantastical upon close observation of these surface details, and an alternate reality is presented. The still or filmic image is an effective means of constructing and picturing narrative. According to Barthes, the still 'scorns logical time' and thus encourages scrutiny (1977: 68), much like a history painting does. The fabrication of narrative in such an image can be likened to the manufacture and picturing of myth in the pictorial tradition. Through simulation, the photographed and reproduced image lends 'ultimately unreal constellations of objects the appearance of reality' (Kohler 1995: 44). As such, the most artificial, cut-out, constructed and mannered image is given a life-like dimension:

... illusion is accomplished through the use of simulacra, doubled objects, which root themselves in ambiguity and thus exploit the potential to represent more than one thing, meaning, or experience simultaneously. The familiar is thus made foreign, the boundary between the real and the imaginary blurred, and the viewer induced to paranoia. (Law 1999: 100)

Although my work is not photographic as such, and stands in opposition to the simulation of the life-like, these artists have influenced the development of my own language of fabrication, and my construction of imaginative spaces and alternate realities within this contemporary framework.

2. Although I have made mention of photographers like Casabere and Crewdson, I have preferred to focus my discussion on artists from other areas of practice. Even though these two artists are trained in photography, I have included them due to their fabrication of set-like structures, and their directorial stance.

SECTION 4: AN EXPLANATION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PICTORIAL METHODOLOGY IN THE BODY OF PRACTICAL WORK

4.1 GENERAL METHODOLOGY

4.1.1 INTERTEXTUALITY

Quotation is seen as a particularly post-modern system of appropriation, and is often regarded in a negative light due to its occasionally uncritical borrowing of forms from very particular and different contexts, usually in the past. By borrowing and recontextualising, artists risk ignoring the specificity, history and thus the meaning of form in its new usage and context. In contrast with this rather lazy practise, intertextuality allows for the creation of new and more critical forms. Barthes describes this term as one that means a system of interwoven references in an artwork (1977), that embodies layering and plurality, and that encourages complex and multiple interpretations on the part of the viewer. Most significantly, an intertextual work is one where the fragmentation of the natural or absolute representation occurs.

A narrative image such as mine contains much that is similar to the textual, but Bal has shown that the image utilises a series of texts all its own.

I have constructed hybrid tableaux from forms drawn from a selection of various related forms of display – be they painterly, photographic, theatrical or filmic. My work is about displaying narrative. By displaying the quotidian as well as the epic, the display form itself contains a metalanguage that legitimises the object on display, lends it an aura in the context of the display, and creates an ‘effect’ that simulates the real – although my work deals emphatically with fabrication and fantasy.

By displaying and narrating the personal and the anecdotal in this way, I am presenting it in a form akin to the history painting – with a similar aura that the viewer can recognise as being particular to narrative and artefact, because of the vocabulary of display that promotes such recognition. This aura conveys a notion or generalised effect of history and of family, and constructs a myth of ‘family-ness’. It is important to realise that it is not only the objects,

snapshots or scenic details that contain or transmit this aura, but the display form itself. By highlighting the constructed, cut-out, staged and surface-orientated nature of my work, I have attempted to undermine the familiarity, assumption, and aura that is tied to the usual depictions and narratives of family.

In this respect the theatre is an important source. There is collusion in the theatrical production between the actors, designers, directors and audience. Everyone involved knows it is false – and there is very little need for simulation (except in naturalistic and realistic traditions). The stylised and artificial nature of this world of sets and props is the very point of its existence as an art form.

I have made stylistic reference to various forms of display and picture-making that self-consciously employ obviously artificial, simulated, hyperreal and constructed forms of representation (even though they may present the end product as reality or convincing illusion). The word *composition* is appropriate in this context, as it suggests a composite of parts, and a making-up of disparate elements. These elements range from autobiographical detail (including snapshots or copies thereof) to formal detail (curtaining, backdrops and various forms of props). All of these details refer back to a model, but one that is itself ‘merely’ a form of simulation. As such there is no ‘original’ history, model or reality at the root of this work, and this concept lies at the heart of my work. Images, history, narrative and families are simulations, ideals, romances and constructions; and this form of display seems to be the most rich manner of describing and depicting them.

4.1.2 THE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

Generally speaking, the overall construction of my works is based most closely on the studio photograph, the stage, and the museum diorama. This is evident in the painted backdrop, that in some way joins with, or forms part of, a relatively shallow stage-like space, or foreground. Although this arrangement shares much with the theatre proper, the scale and performance aspect of this form of display is of course different.

The seamless or illusionistic blending of back- and foreground is typical of those early studio portraits that attempted to ape the effects of epic painting, and the picturesque in general. Similarly,

the museum diorama combined the picturesque with the didactic, in order to simulate a 'real' habitat which would best contextualise a display of fauna, flora, or human culture. Both of these forms suit the content of my work. Firstly, each piece contains clear references to the photographic (an obvious simulation of the real); and secondly, I have created descriptive spaces that 'tell stories' – through simulated and arranged objects, like museum displays – of postmemory (an equally constructed arrangement).

The stage and the studio photograph are also referred to in the presence, in some of the works, of drapery that provides a 'frame' for the scenic backdrop. I used this reference more in the pieces relating to the older members of my family, as a signifier of the props that were 'of' their era. (Temporal considerations are an important part of constructing narrative, and social history displays in museums rely on examples of the typical to represent the general.) That is not to say that drapes do not play a role in the painting tradition. The text attached to the wall of the S.A National Gallery, next to monumental portraits of colonial dignitaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, states that drapes were a recognised symbol, at that time, of impressive authority, 'grave repose' and formality, used when displaying characters – and thus characteristics – of aristocratic dignity. Drapes signified history and the classics, as well as cultural 'refinement'. They were most common in portraits, and were an attempt to elevate the portrait to the level of the history painting, which was not a mere 'copy' of the real, but a reality in itself.

The art-historical drape holds relevance for me in that it suggests, particularly within this vocabulary of portraiture, an elevation of the ordinary to the level of narrative painting; the use of canvas as a substrate in my work is a nod to this as well. The drape in the theatre and the early photographic studio, as well as in front of the panorama and the early diorama, all attempted to make the same grand association with the dominant pictorial tradition that lingered on in the visual world. (Grand moments are still 'framed' by drapes, even today.)

If the backdrop is descriptive of content, biography, or social and cultural aspiration, the foreground, like the stage, is the focus of activity. In the museum diorama, this is where the taxidermied fauna or the arranged artefacts are located. In my

works, the foreground is where the lights are focussed and the narrative unfolds – particularly the theme (or metanarrative). It provides a platform for objects that function as, or that are, props and sets. Some of these are actual objects – in the same way that museum curators create simulacra of missing elements to complete the narrative theme of a display – bought, found, borrowed, and sourced according to the demands of the determining narrative structure. Others are literal simulations: painted cardboard cut-outs and papier mâché. Arranged side by side as parts of an overall composition, it is sometimes unclear which is which, and reality is called into question.

By flattening the three-dimensional onto a two-dimensional surface, I am attempting to heighten the blatantly pictorial nature of the composition, and its construction. Construction apes the material process of painting, and the flat image on canvas pays homage, at least on a superficial level, to the processes of materiality, artifice, and illusionism that some forms of painting entail.

Also, by altering the three-dimensional 'real', I am engaging with the transformative nature of the theatrical world. In this world, everything is surface, unless the audience happens to perceive meaning in what they see. The staged production openly mediates this process of viewing, within the prescribed theatrical space. (Similarly, in the art gallery, the visitor knows that he or she is seeing art; it is a language shared by a select society.) This notion of surface is central to my work; it is even constructed, like an image visually constructed by a stylist, through the viewfinder of the camera – or at least with the borders of the flattened image in mind. (One sees the surface-emphasised, or the flat, differently from the three-dimensional. The flat can be nothing more than an image, while the spatial can pretend to be real.) On a formal level, the textural, tonal and hued quality of the compositional elements are emphasised as being artificial, hand-made, or even unconvincing. This 'painterly' emphasis also serves to concentrate attention on the fact that this is an image – specifically a constructed one – and of the unreal, as opposed to the real.

So, while on the one hand I have employed some aspects of the language of illusionism as it appears in the diorama and the studio photograph, my real emphasis is on the unconvincing and the constructed, over the seamless and the realistic.

4.1.3 PHOTOGRAPHING THE WORK

If the image is more self-consciously artificial than the three-dimensional (a simulacrum is after all a 'mere image'), it makes sense to present these narratives as images, rather than actual dioramas, sets, or installations. For me, as simplistic as it sounds, narrative implies a screen, an image, or a text. This is because narrative is clearly linked to fiction, history, myth and fantasy, as well as reading, and watching. The manipulated quality of all of these processes comfortably suggests the *mise en scène* behind the filmed or staged image.

As I have shown in a previous section, much late twentieth-century art has been both staged and fabricated. Although I do not wish to emphasise the photographic nature of my work, especially from a formal point of view, it does fit neatly into this later contemporary tradition of 'jacks-of-all-trades' who often record their staged work in the photographic medium.

The photographic medium provides an effective means of displaying the constructed tableau on a large scale, and most significantly as an image – one that has been filmed: another process of transformation and illusion that changes the actual into the simulacrum. By photographing or filming something, one is making a directorial gesture: ordering reality, mediating the experience of others, and most significantly, utilising the vocabulary of an artificial language.

My work is also about detail. By using a medium-format studio camera, I am able to capture a large amount of surface information, tone, and texture – especially evident because the image is printed on a large scale (the average size is 1.6 x 1.3 meters). This detail is important when it is arranged to transmit a narrative, and echoes the museum or shop window display, where 'boutique lighting' and the ordering of objects and formal elements transmit a theme to the viewer/consumer. However, typical of the narrative tradition in painting, the image does have some sense of a focal point, and a point at which it was shot, or where the camera/photographer stood. This structure emphasises the most significant compositional elements, while at the same time attempting to focus on as much detail as possible (for description). Also towards this descriptive end, the more display-like works are lit very brightly, so as to capture as much detail as possible, whereas the more theatrical and expressive works utilise a more 'deep' and atmospherically lit space.

Some forms of display do not stress a hierarchy of narrative detail in their layout and focus, seeking instead to make the viewer look at everything in the display through an overload of descriptive details (much like a still life). I am interested in an image that is descriptive and readable at the same time. The traditional narrative painting used lighting and depth to simulate actual, natural space, whereas detail has usually resided at the surface of an image. By flattening the space in my work, transforming it from a three-dimensional tableau into a two-dimensional image, I am emphasising its appearance and 'surface' descriptiveness – which contains its narrative.

After arranging, painting, and constructing each tableau, I then photograph it in a variety of lighting situations. The lights are arranged to create an effect that best illuminates the objects in the tableau. The camera is placed roughly at the same height, and from the same perspective for each image; it takes the place of an adult observer at eye level with a three-dimensional display, or a large painting. In essence, the camera mediates the viewing of the tableau, thereby highlighting the nature of the control that orders most viewing of displays, in many different viewing contexts.

Although my work stylistically resembles shop, stage, or museum display rather than cinematic display, the fictionalising workings of the *mise en scène* of the film can be found within. However, my tableaux do not attempt to convince of their authenticity, as films tend to do. That is why the still image is for me the most effective form of capturing, not the illusion of the real, but the evidence of the obviously artful.

4.1.4 REPRODUCTION

After selecting the most effective version of the arrangement of the set from a number of options, I send the image off to be scanned, and then printed digitally onto art-quality canvas. Digital manipulation would be a natural extension of actual, physical collaging, cutting, pasting and arranging; however, digital imaging is often a process of seamless manipulation, transforming images in an attempt to compete with, or better, the real.

In contrast, I have accentuated the hand-made, and the tactile quality of the objects in each tableau. Although some basic Photoshop has been employed in cleaning up, cropping, and improving the

readability of each image, I have preferred to physically position, cut out and stick down each element in the three-dimensional tableau, thereby emphasising their materiality, and the process. Digital manipulation of the final image would have no doubt made it more convincing and realistic, but that would have rendered the project pointless.

The large digital print on canvas has a different surface quality to that of the photographic print. It is tactile, and gives the scene an illusion of depth even though it is merely a surface and an image. This depth is generated by the matt and woven quality of the surface, as well as the heightened, rich tonalities of the print. Most significantly, it does not resemble a photograph in its traditional sense, and is thus allied with a more physical and material, less 'technical' process. Also, the association is implied – perhaps on a simplistic level – between canvas and the material process of paint and painting.

The image is printed on canvas, and then stretched, like a painting; ready to be framed. The image is a print, and will form a part of an edition: reproductive like Baudrillard's simulacrum.

4.1.5 PRESENTATION

Each large-format print is simply hung on the gallery wall, as a painting would be. The works are placed beside each other, and are thematically ordered according to considerations of the era, event or individual described in each image. This sequencing suggests a narrative structuring of the exhibition as a whole, and it does to some extent order viewing of the images – as museum displays do. However, ultimately, the narrative they 'tell' is based on the reading of the body of work by the viewer.

In a manner suggestive of the stage and the cinema, as well as the museum and shop display, the

image is theatrically lit – its mystique and hence its 'desirability' increased. This is a reference to the screening of a film, as well as the display tradition, where objects are boutique- or spotlighted, emphasising their beauty, detail and value.

The event of viewing in a darkened room echoes just about every tradition of display: from the outright entertainment of theatre and cinema, to the more serious 'infotainment' of the museum and gallery.

4.1.6 TITLES

The series of large printed tableaux on canvas are presented as a unified exhibition, but are not named, titled, or labelled in any way. Titling is a form of labelling which assigns an interpretation to a work, and directs the viewer's experience and reading of it. By leaving the pieces undescribed, their meaning is not fixed, and any resulting interpretation will also not be fixed by the label.

Titling sums up the theme of a work, and directs the viewer's expectations. Any text that accompanies or is attached to a work assigns it a new meaning – one that prohibits multiple or plural readings. In this way, the text constitutes a part of the content, and plays a role in the overall narrative presented by the artwork.

The image contains narrative in its composition, and in the arrangement of the objects – and in textual elements. The multiple details contained in each image encourage multiple readings, and multiple narratives within the overall work. Hence there is no primary narrative; at least not for the viewer.

Even though the image contains anecdotal information and descriptive content, it must function primarily on the level of a simulated environment, full of narrative possibility.

4.2 WORKS 1 - 8

Each individual work is constructed with a particular era or historical focus in mind – much like the social history display. By creating simulacra of ‘bygones’ that are associated with history and family, a past era is described and recognised in typical, general terms. The later, more contemporary works display fewer recognisably bygone objects, and more references to media like film and painting. This represents temporal shifts in forms of narrative and display. The present is less accessible, more complex, more fragmented, and a lot harder to naturalise than the past.

4.2.1 WORK 1

This image was initially conceived as an emblematic studio photograph, and it retains many of these characteristics. The backdrop provides narrative information referring to the location of this particular subject. It describes two iconic Cape Town monuments with strong colonialist connotations (Rhodes Memorial, and the Smuts statue in the Gardens). This is a reference to the fact that my ancestors, like those of the majority of whites in this country, were of European origin. In addition, on a purely anecdotal level, my grandparents were frequent visitors to these locations, and I have many photographs of them standing alongside various public monuments. This photographic connection is important, because many of these works are constructed with references to particular snapshots in mind, or contain reproduced and simulated elements borrowed from existing images. (This is using a narrative image to construct another narrative image.)

The backdrop is ‘framed’ by dark drapes; black signifies solemnity, and was the most popular colour in the Victorian age of studio photography – this is also because dark and contrasting tones showed up well in the image. The appearance of my image is intended to suggest a different, older era, primarily through the tonal range of blacks, creams and browns. (I did not want to choose the too-familiar sepia.) The odd objects or photographs placed on the surface of the foreground provide spots of colour that liven up the tones of the display (for example the red shoe), and insert small ‘surprises’ into the reading.

In most of the works the floor serves as the primary display area for the arrangement of props, objects and photographs, which provide narrative or

descriptive information. This echoes the museum display, as well as the commercial display window. The foreground also contains props and sets, as well as such object information. This more theatrical arrangement echoes the diorama, stage and studio portrait. But in all examples, the foreground is the site of focus; the arena of activity and narrative thrust. It is a dramatically loaded space.

In portraiture, painted and photographic, certain props reappear in each, and occasionally in both traditions. The family dog, or pet in general, symbol of devotion; the drape that I have already mentioned; the natural scenery that gives the impression of the bucolic picturesque (in this case the log – a popular device); various household decorative objects such as vases; and symbols of refined dress, such as gloves, hats, walking sticks, and brooches: all of these props suggest the same thing; they are either references to the painterly, or to class, taste and dignity.

Certain elements of the composition are deliberately incongruous. The wedding dress is of a style twenty years too modern for the era, and the event described in the work. The dress is the focus of the image, which suggests a marriage, and as such an entire body of associations. It is assumed that the dress is a precious heirloom – as such objects usually are – which has been carefully preserved in the family trunk, perhaps to be worn at the wedding of a granddaughter. It dictates the perception of the rest of the image, which shouts sentiment. In a context created by the juxtaposition of several laden signs, there is little chance to read alternate narratives into the image. This directed narrative is structured as a reference to the didactic museum display.

So, while the interpretation of the image is mediated by the arrangement of potentially loaded imagery within a descriptive context, the natural, accepted appearance – and interpretation – of the scene is undermined by the fact that, as in the museum display, every object and image used in the composition of the tableau is a simulacrum. As such, it is the opposite of real, and can occasionally transmit incorrect information. (In a museum display, an unconvincing simulacrum would make the entire display appear false – hence untrue – and its authority would be questioned.)

By placing the cardboard cut-out dog alongside an antique sewing machine of a bygone age, I am drawing attention to the properties of illusion and artifice present in the simulacrum – the real beside the fake.

In essence, although the simulacra that arrange the narrative in this piece have been chosen to typify members and events specific to my family, the metanarrative of the series of images is one of family and display, in a more general and ideological sense.

4.2.2 WORK 2

The second image is a composition based on my grandfather's construction of an Easter garden at his parish church – St Mary's, Woodstock. He erected religious displays twice a year, but the Easter garden was an ambitious and artful construction; made out of papier mâché, rocks and sea shells, with an internally lit tomb which housed china figurines of the holy protagonists. His basic structure for the garden remained constant, with occasional modifications. When I went back to the church recently, I found the original garden still there, and in use.

This image is thus the ultimate simulacrum – an image of a display which is an imitation of a display. The type of display most closely referred to in this tableau is the diorama. The backdrop is a painting based on photographs of the Easter garden installation. The foreground is an illusionistic extension of the backdrop, but the constructed and artificial nature of the space is emphasised.

The foreground contains objects, props and set-like elements, like polystyrene rocks, plastic flowers and cardboard ponds. Like the mannequins used in shop and cultural history displays, and more appropriately, like the cut-out paper religious figures common in nativity scenes in some churches and schools, the human presence is represented only as a surrogate – a cardboard, cut-out painting of the man whose surplise is more easily 'recognisable' than he is. Surrogates are typical (especially in the context of the museum display), as are the various props, and especially the clothing that they wear. They provide detail, and function more as carriers of useful information than as 'actors' or 'characters' of any kind in the tableau. They also exist as the 'human', or rather humanising, factor with which the viewer can identify. (Their stiffness and mannequin-discomfort is echoed in early studio photographic portraits, where the real are transformed into simulacra – images of themselves.)

Like the repetition of themes, and props, evident in early photographs, the log appears again in this image – its 'painterly' surface emphasised. The

foreground contains artefact-like objects, and the ever-recognisable collection of family snapshots – this time almost concealed by the descriptive detail of the set, buried amid the soil and the stones.

4.2.3 WORK 3

This image makes reference to the notion of voyage; to the fact that my great-grandparents 'came over' on the boat (as servants and immigrants); and most significantly, to the notion of longing as it is connected to voyages (trips), and perhaps even 'going home'. The image in the painted backdrop is of a mail ship – the kind my family would take trips on to England. The image broadly describes my great-aunt Norah, who helped to bring me up, and who lived with my grandparents. This link with Britain can be perceived in an entire generation of white people, and the kinds of bygones they owned, and in this way the image creates a metaphor for an era.

Great-aunt Norah's surrogate is the starched 'old-lady' dress, perched on the quay (referred to also by way of the buoy, the gravel and the chain). The dark draped curtain refers back to the earlier image, where it signifies portrait photography, as well the representation of dignity. On a more psychological level, the impression is created of a life of unfulfilled longing, suggested by the dark and grainy tones of the image. This was not particular to my great-aunt; women of her time and class 'knew their place' (her mother was a lady's-maid).

Much of the paraphernalia assembled in the foreground of this image can be found in any social history exhibit; it is used to suggest the life and concerns of many typical elderly 'ladies' – making tea, baking, collecting photographs and knitting. But the actual teacups are juxtaposed with papier mâché cakes, and the piled-up mass of the objects displayed serves to disrupt too easy a reading – and therefore a dismissal – of what is depicted.

The structure of this tableau thus draws from two sources: the studio photograph, and the museum artefact display. Displays of the quotidian typify and legitimise the ordinary by describing it in a narrative framework. Furthermore, early cinema is referred to in the grainy and monochromatic appearance of the final image. The film selected, lighting conditions, and the nature of the image when printed (and thus maintained as a mere image) on canvas, all serve to halt the illusion and focus attention on the fictional,

often subjective, and constructed nature of material culture, and of narrative itself. The reference to grainy cinematic film also suggests an artificial language of representation.

4.2.4 WORK 4

This image is a hybrid composition of various forms of display, but most significantly the shop window display. My grandmother and my great-aunt worked in the dressmaking and department-store world. Shop windows are different from 'serious' forms of display because they stress their artfulness over their illusionism. In fact, shop window artists tend to emphasise the parameters and limitations of the space – like set and stage designers do. The display activity within this environment is thus site-specific, and anything but natural. Such displays, particularly in their heyday, were often amazing, but always artful.

The millinery and dressmaking history in my family (among the women) has an important link with the hand-made aspect of my work process. This tableau refers to this tradition and its display in the shallow window space, on the shop mannequin. The mannequins are also surrogates for individuals in the work, and are disguised by the paper human faces they wear. But unlike the manner in which cultural history displays humanise mannequins by using hair and make-up, these surrogates are clearly masked, and not part of any deception or simulation of the real.

They are dressed in typical bathing costumes of the 1950s, and are surrounded by playthings, film annuals, and beach and picnic paraphernalia suggestive of a day at the seaside or the park. These two locations are referred to in the bright green 'grass', the deckchair, beach umbrella, picnic suitcase (my grandfather never used a basket), and sea sand. The location for this tableau was drawn from a series of typical holiday snapshots of the St James and Muizenburg beachfronts. This description of location and era is an important element of narrative and museum display, and forms the subject of the backdrop: a view of the St James bathing boxes, and a set of swings from an old Observatory play-park – somewhat incongruously juxtaposed. This collaging of information is an attempt to introduce different levels of complexity into an easily recognisable image through the apparently surreal.

More temporal information is provided in the

form of cultural 'materials', present as almost-hidden clues within the structure of the tableau. Two examples being: the image from *Photoplay* magazine of Elizabeth Taylor in the late 1950s; and the overall Technicolor appearance of the set – which is a reference to the development in the 1950s of this kind of film. This tableau functions as an anecdote, signifying my adolescent mother and aunt at this time in Cape Town's history. But like the filmic narrative quoted in this work, as well as the artful shop window, the theatrical and arranged nature of the tableau is heightened, thereby excluding any illusion of the real. (Technicolor films did not date well, and their colours are often lurid; but ironically, their initial claim was to represent a more convincing reality.)

4.2.5 WORK 5

This tableau contains very specific references to an early German Expressionist 'art' film – *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919). It is often said to be more an art film than many other silent, black and white films of this period, because of the deliberately distorted and typically Expressionistic set designs.

The film has something of an iconic quality now; it influenced an entire look, especially in relation to the horror and science fiction genre, not to mention a multitude of 'gothic' films and music videos. (The film *Queen of the Damned* (2002) featured a direct recreation of a scene from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*.)

This film is known for its obviously artificial quality. There is no attempt at the creation of a convincing illusion, which suits its content – the dreamlike world of a fairground somnambulist, who we discover is actually an inhabitant of an insane asylum. The style of the film is drawn from an art movement, as well as describing a mental world that is a combination of dream and lunacy. In the film, the pale somnambulist drags himself down cardboard streets, past crooked lampposts and claw-like trees. The cardboard buildings join at odd angles, and all the windows are skew, and consist of painted black frames. The nightmarish quality of the set describes the emotional state of the protagonists.

I based my image on this film for various reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, it 'describes' my sister: she is represented by the surrogate mannequin, who is dressed up to look like Cesare, the film's somnambulist. The mannequin's face is masked, like

the faces in the previous work, but in this case by the convincingly and disturbingly 'real' features of my sister, who has been photographed – and also made up to resemble the somnambulist. In other words, the surrogate is made present through a system of simulacra.

Secondly, the tableau refers directly to the filmic process, in both the appearance and the manufacture of the sets. Unlike the other works that I have mentioned so far, this tableau is obviously theatrical, and has no reference to reality on any level. Like expressive art in general, the narrative implied within the form and the detail of the work is accessible only as imagery – which may or may not disturb, or provoke an emotional reaction in the viewer. This is why horror films tend to utilise an easily recognisable vocabulary of images and objects which provoke visual and emotional discomfort. These forms of theatrical display are perhaps easier to mimic because of this existing language of narrative.

The set, which shows references to cardboard sets taken from a selection of scenes in the film, is continued in the backdrop, which shows the most iconic scene in the film – the rooftops of the imaginary town (it only exists in the mind of the insane). Although this tableau does contain objects, like family photographs, they are arranged in an incongruous fashion – sewn into the somnambulist's bed-cover – or positioned in inappropriate places (the goldfish are swimming on the floor). These surreal elements serve to emphasise the disturbing and dream-like nature of the scene, as well as its art-like and constructed quality. The colours and tones of the final printed image mimic the era, and the quality of the film itself. This overall appearance is created to a large extent in the design, construction and lighting of the tableau, and less in the photographing and digital printing process. This low-tech approach, which is echoed in all the other works, is a crucial part of the manual, material, and artificial quality of the film, the process, and the resulting image.

4.2.6 WORK 6

The source for this piece was the painting *The Swing* by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806). The tableau is based on the composition of this painting, including the foreground. The colour range of the painting is, however, darker and less apparently frivolous than that of its source; this creates a more

Baroque appearance in the final work. Basing a tableau on a painting makes sense in the context of my work, due to the similarity of the processes and qualities involved – in both creation and in visual functioning. Narrative paintings, like art films or theatrical productions, are self-consciously artful constructions, even when the model of painting favours idealisation and imitation.

Rococo and Baroque paintings are larger-than-life in many ways: their colours are more vibrant or more intense than those used in classical models, and nature is a wilder and more intense place. This tableau 'describes' my aunt, who collects Baroque music, Baroque and Rococo art, white poodles, and china figurines. It should appear romantic and overblown, but on closer inspection, clues are provided that narrate 'darker' elements – for instance, the choice of this source painting, which narrates an 'indiscretion'. Its protagonists appear carefree, but the implication is that they are also heartless. The putti swear the viewer to silence, and form a complicit alliance with the voyeuristic viewer. Like the painting, this work is also concerned with an appearance; more specifically, it is a simulation of romance and feeling. Like the subtle threads of narrative coyly concealed in the leafy painting, the tableau also suggests alternate narrative possibilities in and among its artificial flowers.

This work does not necessarily describe some unsavoury aspect of my aunt's life; instead it represents an attempt to subvert an easy reading of an apparently familiar scene. Even a viewer unfamiliar with the Rococo style of painting immediately reads romance and frivolity into such an image. By darkening the leafy, floral tones, the image is itself immediately darkened, or provided with a psychological dimension. These representations of mood are merely simulacra, or ways of mediating, and thus imaging, meaning.

4.2.7 WORK 7

This work represents an amalgamation of two forms of display and storytelling. On the one hand, the tableau appears to imitate the structure of the museum diorama. The scenic, almost panoramic landscape backdrop joins illusionistically with a scenic foreground consisting of 'natural' features. On the other hand, the landscape represented is clearly not of this earth, and shows an iconic scene taken

from the science-fiction film *Alien*. So what could, at first glance, be mistaken for real and natural, has no basis in actuality whatsoever; and in fact suggests the most fantastical method of representation possible.

The emphasis on fiction in this work is further emphasised in the clearly fake cardboard and foam features of the landscape. The surreal appearance of the heads projecting out of the cardboard ponds also suspends the familiarity of the image. In addition, the entire 'diorama' or set exhibits a tactile materiality that highlights its constructed quality.

The scene narrates a sense of loss and desolation. There is nothing in it that is easily recognisable as human, and even the surrogate heads are cut-outs and clearly lack depth. As such this work provides a contrast to the comfort and utopianism of the familiar. In fact, the clues provided that do aid recognition, like the abandoned dog's collar and the snapshots buried in the ground, tell a story of absence, not presence.

This tableau describes my mother, much of whose experience has been defined by loss, as opposed to collection, accumulation, and display.

4.2.8 WORK 8

This image functions as a self-portrait. It is intended as the final development in the construction process, where the use of actual objects has become eclipsed by the use of artificial constructions. In other words, this image is the most self-consciously staged; this is evident in the painterly style and the cardboard props.

The theme of this work centres on the notion of appearance versus reality: a common theme in traditional Western theatre. It also utilises symbolism that is a combination of the personal and the arcane. Specifically, I have portrayed myself through cardboard surrogates: the fool or jester, as well as the child. The fool is a reference to a card in the Tarot deck, where the fool is portrayed as a child-like, innocent, and unworldly traveller: a puppet of fate and the world. The child is a modified reference to the painting *Don Manuel Osorio de Manrique Zuniga*, by Francisco Goya (1746-1828) (Fig 11).

This painting is also referred to in the figures of the cats eyeing the bird: in the original work, this part of the image subverts the appearance of childish play, and suggests corruption awaiting the vulnerable and the innocent. The cats were symbolic of evil in Goya's time, and further emphasise the allegory

present in his image. Although I do not uphold the same symbolic interpretation, the presence of these details suggests an allegorical dimension in my narrative as well.



Fig 11: *Francisco Goya, 'Don Manuel Osorio de Manrique Zuniga', (detail).*

The notion of corruption and control underlying the appearance of play and entertainment is continued in the circus-like imagery of the work, particularly the chained dancing bear. The references to circus are significant on two levels: I was conceived in a circus, and the circus is a form of staging that utilises a very open language of spectacle and display with little regard for any effect of the real. But the image suggests stage more than circus in its form; the cut-out curtains are a reference to Magritte's paintings and sculptures of the same image, and refer to both theatre and painting. The stage-like backdrop places the 'figures' in a dream landscape suggestive of the surreal, and what appears busy is also desolate and deserted. The notion of the surreal is important because through juxtaposition, paradox and the dreamlike, any appearance of 'reality' is subverted.

The objects on the floor include elements that recreate a still life, using the existing vocabulary of this form of painting. For instance, the skull and the

femur symbolise vanitas, the fruit temptation, the mirror woman's vanity, and so on. Although these objects are recognisable within the still-life tradition, they are combined with objects of more personal symbolism such as the heart, the snapshots and the toys. All of these objects 'say' something about my concerns, and their arrangement narrates my story. At the very least, even if unrecognisable as symbols, they provide enticing narrative details that provoke a reading of the image.

The overall appearance of this final work makes reference to the process of construction. It is the most obviously artificial and unconvincing tableau; one where any effect of the real is completely undermined, due to the overriding evidence of my painterly style in each of the forms in the set. It is an amalgamation of two overtly theatrical forms of display, the circus and the theatre, as well as a reinterpretation of the still-life tradition, one where descriptive and detailed objects held their own narrative.

Most significantly, this image employs the language of painting, even though it was constructed in three-dimensional form. This painterly language is one of materiality and expression, not mimesis and illusion. It emphasises a new application of narrative painting, and creates a new form out of existing methods of artifice, staging and display.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have attempted to locate my body of work within a tradition of construction, staging and artifice. I have discussed the notion of the simulacrum, especially in relation to my images, which began as three-dimensional constructions and arrangements of simulacra, found objects, and reproduced and altered images.

The content of my work is a family narrative. In each image, stories from the culture of my family are transmitted through the props and objects assembled, arranged and manufactured in my studio. As in a

tableau, except without live characters, a drama is enacted, using the conventions of a range of related display forms. In these tableaux, the props are enabled as narrators, and take the place of any human presence. In such a space, the object becomes active and contains many opportunities for interpretation, at its surface and in its appearance.

I have explored the role of the object as a narrative and interpretive device, as well as the possibilities for narrative in an image which appears to be opposed to unified and clear narrative in its traditional sense. These possibilities are contained in each crafted detail and object in the arranged set, from snapshot to still-life object. As such, description contains narrative, and is not opposed to it – even when clearly manufactured.

I have linked the literal *construction* of my family in the physical space of the studio, with the ideological construction of the family, and its culture, in broader society. Here, family narratives or romances are narrated through images, or simulacra, such as photographs. I have taken this one step further by basing my story-images on photographic 'evidence' provided in the constructed narrative of my family albums. Thus images inform images, in the true spirit of the simulacrum.

I have described the various forms of art and display that have informed the construction of each of my works. These include paintings, studio photographs, dioramas, commercial displays, and staging in general. The most significant reference in my work is to the fabricated, the theatrical and the imaginative over the convincing or the apparently real. This is particularly evident in my final piece, which is dominated by the painterly and obviously staged quality of the tableau and the objects therein.

My images are printed digitally, which locates them alongside the products of reproduction and repetition that characterise the contemporary age. But my work attempts to oppose the simulated hyperreal, by suggesting that the invention of new form *is* possible in a time dominated by appearances, through the constructed, the artful, and the simulacrum.

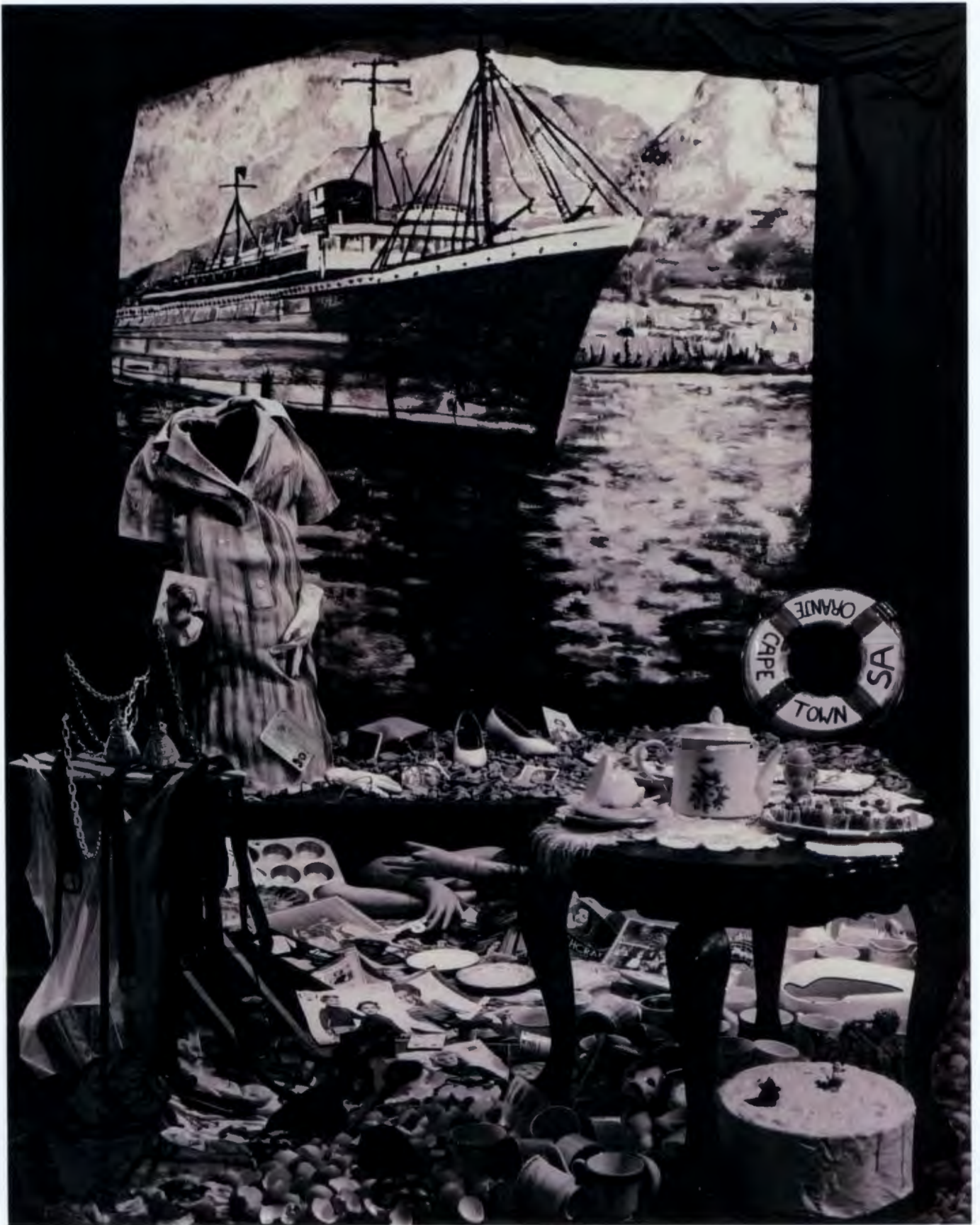
SECTION 5: DOCUMENTATION OF THE PRACTICAL WORK



Work 1. 1600mm x 1320mm. Digital print on canvas.



Work 2. 1680mm x 1350mm. Digital print on canvas.



Work 3. 1680mm x 1350mm. Digital print on canvas.



Work 5. 1650mm x 1350mm. Digital print on canvas.



Work 6. 1600mm x 1350mm. Digital print on canvas.



Work 7. 1360mm x 1350mm. Digital print on canvas.



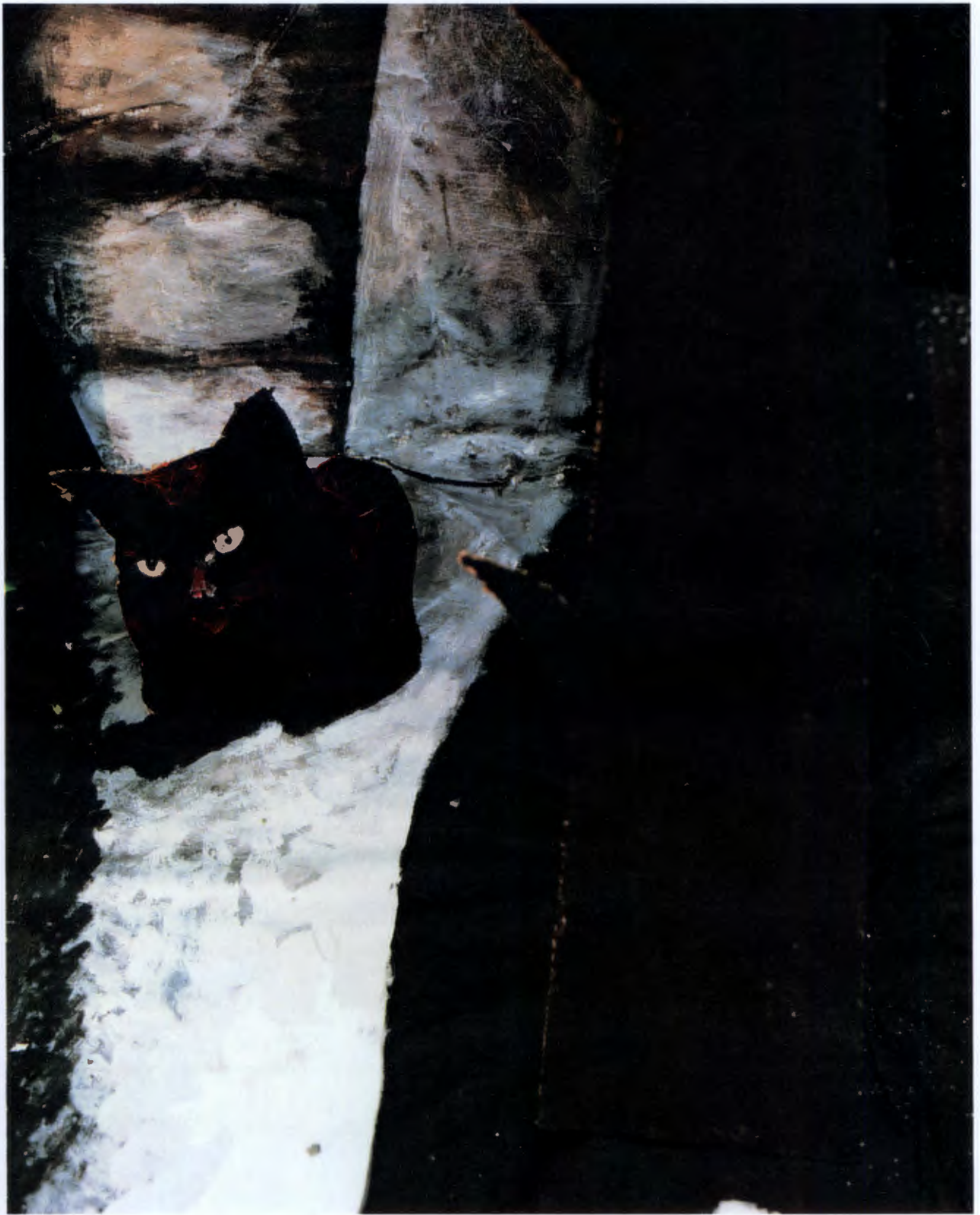
Work 8. 1550mm x 1350mm. Digital print on canvas.



Detail of Work 2.



Detail of Work 3.



Detail of Work 5.



Detail of Work 8.



Work 3, during construction.



Detail of Work 5, during construction.



Detail of Work 6, during construction.



Detail of Work 8, during construction.

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