



The Sublime Network; Painterly Passage and Materiality in the Post Internet Era

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy.

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed. I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship and the Australian Postgraduate Award

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Thank you

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Abstract

This practice-led research project investigates painting in the Post Internet era. In the vast database of the Internet, paintings both historical and contemporary are distanced from their makers and contexts. Their diachronic position in a once considered “linear” historical model has been disrupted. The Internet fractures historical narratives, identities and oeuvres and makes them miscellaneous. Through painting I aim to communicate the paradoxical disparity and conflation that occurs between artworks, oeuvres and artistic identities online.

Within the rhizomatous space of the Internet, I source and montage various digital examples of Romantic landscape painting into new mashed Romantic images that become source material for my paintings. Here I find synergy between the Post Enlightenment definition of the *sublime* and a contemporary fascination in the *digital sublime* - of which the Internet is champion.

The project interrogates the Internet in a new and promiscuous way.

I use the Internet to identify and disseminate what was once only trusted to the canonical archives of printed literature – the narrative of history.

The *Picturesque* Project



Plate 1

Newey S. (2016)

Versions of Now

Oil on canvas

350 x 550 mm



Plate 2

Newey S. (2016)

Native Tongue

Oil on canvas

900 x 1150 mm



Plate 3

Newey S. (2016)

Rest on the Flight to Windsor

Oil on canvas

900 x 1150 mm



Plate 4

Newey S. (2016)

St Jerome Discovers Scientology and it Changes Everything

Oil on canvas

900 x 1150 mm



Plate 5

Newey S. (2016)

The Reluctant Bay Hunter

Oil on canvas

1000 x 2500 mm

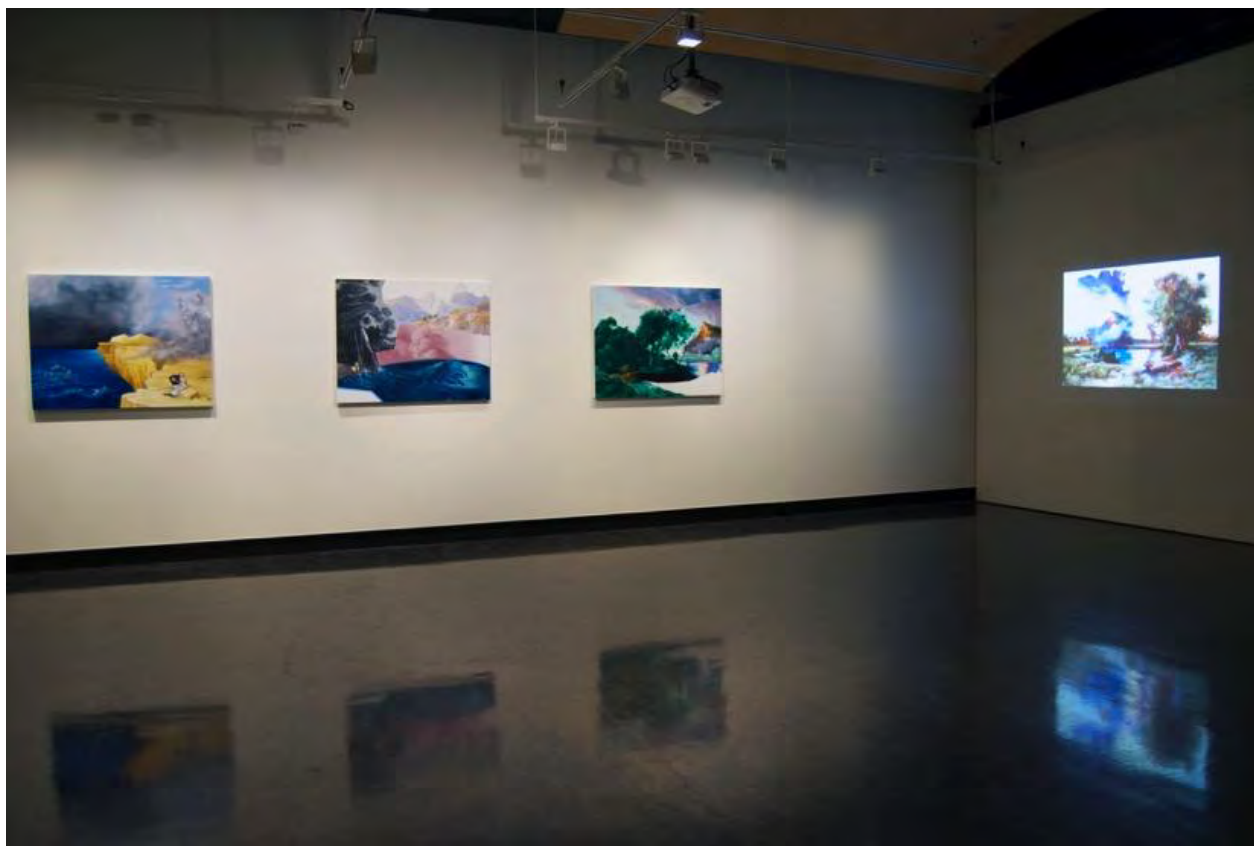


Plate 6

Newey S. (2016)

Installation of Picturesque 01

Counihan Gallery



Plate 7

Newey S. (2016)

Installation of Picturesque 02

Counihan Gallery

The Cloud Project

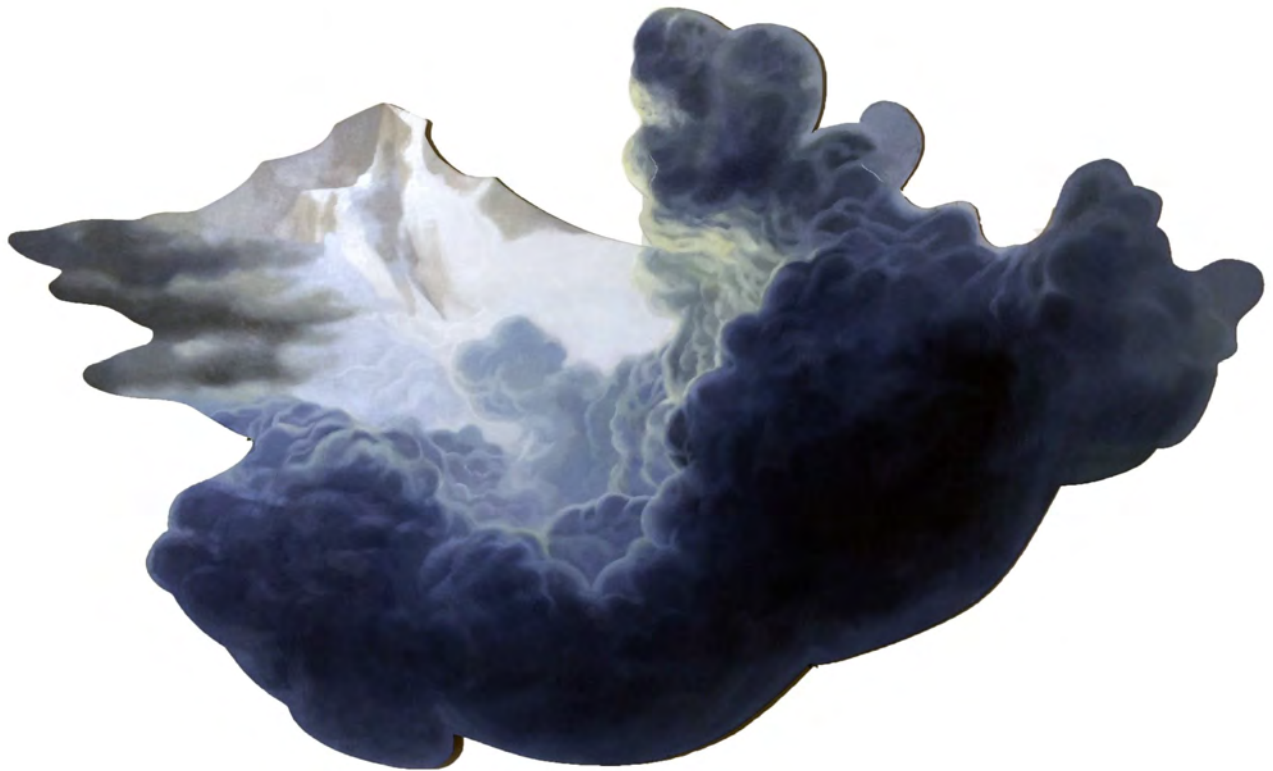


Plate 8a

Newey S. (2018)

Cloud (after Bierstadt)

Oil on panel

600 x 900mm



Plate 8b

Newey S. (2018)

Cloud (after Bierstadt) Detail

Oil on panel

600 x 900mm



Plate 9a
Newey S. (2018)
Cloud (after Güde)
Oil on panel
600 x 900mm



Plate 9b

Newey S. (2018)

Cloud (after Güde) Detail

Oil on panel

600 x 900mm



Plate 10a

Newey S. (2019)

Horse (after Stubbs)

Oil on panel

470 x 690mm



Plate 10b

Newey S. (2019)

Horse (after Stubbs) Detail

Oil on panel

470 x 690mm



Plate 11

Newey S. (2019)

The Cloud

Test installation at SITE EIGHT, RMIT

Introduction PART 1

Practice-led research

The enquiry inherent to this project is both haptic and academic and one which tests the formal, historical boundaries and genres of painting. The studio has been the elementary platform for the ideas that foreground my research. Culminating in a body of paintings and still image projections, my project is the product of experimental and iterative methodologies. Through making I have arrived at new knowledge and created paths for further artistic enquiry. In this text I reflect upon this iterative art practice, the artworks themselves, their conception and draw synergies with other contemporary painters, theorists, historians and philosophers.

The title, *The Sublime Network*, refers to the methodology behind the project. I will describe later in detail the process - as an iterative one - in which each artwork is partly sourced from that of another artist or several. The cumulative result of these linking sources is itself, a *network*. This reflexive conversation between paintings from the present to the past, by my own hand to another's has a discursive momentum. Each artwork always has an indexical relationship to another. My project creates a web between artistic ideas but also highlights the networks that already exist between paintings. This web or network is what American theorist, David Joselit, describes as painterly *passage*:

I can think of no better term to capture the status of objects within networks – which are defined by their circulation from place to place and their subsequent translations into new contexts – than this notion of passage. (Joselit 2009)

What has become most evident in my practice and research is the profound impact of new media and the Internet upon painting and the documentation of the latter's history. Indeed, the Internet is a network par excellence and serves as most worthy descriptor of how passage performs in contemporary painting. The world-wide-web enables passage between works to a degree that I believe is unprecedented. Since the late 1990s we witness an exponential cross-pollination of artistic currents, which takes the postmodern era to a new level of contemporaneity.

Contemporaneity is another term being used in the philosophical discourse around contemporary art and research and so I have made reference to it throughout this document. It well defines the networked culture that we now inhabit: of global connectedness as well as virtual and “real time” communication. It is arguably replacing “Postmodernism” as a title for current art trends.

“The concept of contemporaneity refers to temporal complexity on many different scales, ranging from the individual to the collective, from the local and microcosmic to the global and the planetary.” (Cox and Lund 2016)

Contemporaneity also reconsiders the shape of time and our perception of history. The Oxford Dictionary breaks the word down from the Latin: con- ‘together with’ + temporaneous (from tempus, tempor- ‘time’) + -ous.” In other words; “together in time”. (Fowler, Fowler and Thompson, 2000)

Being an artist who sources, homages and mashes paintings from the Enlightenment period, to colonial Australian art to contemporary painting and even fantasy art, I myself, am bringing artworks “together in time” or creating contemporaneous hybrids. In my work the notion of “artistic periods” or “eras” is interchangeable and malleable.

Going a step beyond our understanding of Postmodernism and the “post-medium” era, Contemporaneity draws our attention to the network in which artworks exist together. The term describes an era that theorist David Joselit refers to as “after art”.

[He] shifts focus from the production and exhibition of artworks to the life and circulation of works outside of the closed context of art. This is a shift from discrete individual art objects and unique works to their effects in the networks of circulating images that are working, or at work, in the world. (Cox and Lund 2016)

All paintings exist inside a network. This text reflects how paintings are informed by and also reflect the network in which they live. This network consists of many other artworks both past and present. The connections or relationships between paintings; their passage, is what’s central to my studio enquiry. My project consists of two bodies of work: *Picturesque* and *The Cloud*. In the following I shall discuss the methodology behind *Picturesque* as an iterative process. I will reveal how the iteration that occurs between each artwork is, in essence, a methodological exploration of “passage”.

Over the course of my candidature I have amassed a broad range of sources that address the profound influence on painting that the world-wide-web has affected. It is at once exciting and overwhelming to be researching a subject so topical as the development of the early Internet. I am repeatedly reminded of the subject’s indisputable currency. Since the latter part of the 20th Century, seeing an underground collective working in “Net Art”, the “scene” has progressively lost its niche status and become a veritable contemporary genre. During the course of my candidature I have witnessed an exponential rise in publications about Internet theory, contemporaneity and a new proliferation of visual artists, globally, working within the net art canon to use a somewhat outdated descriptor of this movement in contemporary painting. To traverse the broad field of this ever-expanding body of publication and production I have necessarily needed to reign in the boundaries of my research focus. In the following I will outline how:

Despite the revelatory new forays into technology, virtuality, digitisation and communication that the world-wide-web has afforded artists, I limit my discussion to the impact the Internet has had upon painting, past and present. Virtual communication has been transformative to art and culture – it is the stuff of early sci-fi fantasy and I acknowledge the wonder of its influence. Artists have utilised this disembodied mode of transference to one another to convey much about the fragmentation and atomisation of contemporary life. In addition, to see the achievement of “teleported” information (email, Skype, VR, telecommunication) as exists today, in one’s own lifetime is awe-inspiring, a new brand of “sublime”. As a topic the online space has continuous immanence. By this I refer to the Internet’s continuing expansion, reinvention and new-ness.

Throughout this dissertation I shall at times refer to a most prescient text on the subject of networks: Jean Baudrillard’s *The ecstasy of communication*. Written in 1983 the text pre-dates the Internet as it is known and experienced today. In the text, Baudrillard premises his speculation on the ubiquitous influence of the television screen in contemporary culture:

With the television image-the television being the ultimate and perfect object for this new era-our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen. (Baudrillard 1983)

The essay foreshadows a world in which our lives are portalised to a network of communication, an over-saturated and obscene arbiter of information where spectacle is replaced by indifference.

[For man it is] the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparency of the world which traverses him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence. (Baudrillard 1983)

So then, how does painting, arguably the oldest visual art form we know, communicate in the world-wide-web's massive cultural shadow, how does painting respond to this new contemporary condition?

Painting's status as a devoutly material and haptic practice is not limited to its creation and its materiality. Painting absorbs everything. Like the Internet, painting is itself a network that consumes and reflects the cultures around it. In Chapters 3 and 4 I expand upon this theme of "networks" – what the term has come to mean today - and how they exist within and around paintings.

It's worth pausing to consider how difficult it is to visualize networks, which in their incomprehensible scale, ranging from the impossibly small microchip, to the impossibly vast global Internet, truly embody the contemporary sublime. (Joselit 2009)

In Chapter 3 *Plural Texts; the network and the narrative*, I consider the shape of the grand database that is the Internet – its synergies, cyphers and black holes and how this conflicts with our traditional perception of how painting's history performs – as a narrative, as a chronology and as an archive. I consider how we may reconsider the shape of art-historical narrative and ways in which my paintings interrogate this space. References to contemporary historian-theorists are made in this chapter with regard to their position of history as an imaginative space and the corruption of historical linearity. I will here outline what Cox and Lund refer to as the "periodization" of history and the limitations of creating a linear historical model that is divided into neat eras. The authors I cite in this chapter have enlightened me to a more multifaceted and tiered concept of historical narrative and how it necessarily defies the idea of a "timeline" in favour of time "networks". The de-linearisation of the art historical narrative represents a fertile ground for new directions in my practice. The element of chance is more potent in this model of making and this is demonstrated in *Picturesque*.

My newfound fascination, as is demonstrated by this research, in the online space and its discursive legacies in contemporary painting, was not born of any online activity on my part. Hitherto the inception of the project, for me, painting and the Internet existed in mutually exclusive domains. This project began brush in hand, in the studio.

As will unfold in the following, this course of candidature has evolved via experimentation, questioning and tangential shifting. Such is the nature of project-led research in the studio. Making has provided a means to find content rather than the more illustrative alternative of working to a theme. In being so, the project has culminated in various forms, including collage experiments in paper and in Photoshop, paintings on canvas, cut-out paintings on panel and digital projections. All outcomes are products of “painting thinking”, a consideration of materiality, studio play, possibility and trial. In this case, “studio” refers to working with traditional painting media, printed media as well as computer software and the Internet.

On Style

Having been a painter of 25 plus years, who works in a dominantly mimetic¹ fashion from photographic reference, I have developed a hand that is precise in gesture. Oil on canvas is a staple that dominated my artistic practice throughout the earlier years as I honed the techniques of Photorealism. Over the years I studied methodologies of artists that have great virtuosity with the medium – from Vermeer and the Dutch Baroque being key to contemporary masters of verisimilitude like Gerhard Richter and Marilyn Minter. It is important to note however that skilful mastery, powerful as it is, is not all that these consecrated painters manifest. All of the aforementioned capture a transparency in their aesthetic as a means to another end; to suspend our disbelief and ultimately create

¹ “Mimeticism” is a theory or practice of representation based on imitation (Fowler, Fowler and Thompson, 2000)

passage. So do I, in this research project, utilise technique as a means to influence the viewer's optical interpretation of the image before them. "Realism" in my practice had originally emerged out of a fascination between the influence of painting on photography and vice versa. Lenses, as a way of seeing and a visual epistemology were central to my concerns in making paintings. How do humans simulate machine (in this case camera) work and how were the machines originally conceived to mimic our vision? Thus was my inquiry, not dissimilar to that of Vermeer some 400 years earlier, which stimulated further endeavours to achieve a higher realism.

In this project, mimeticism features as a technique in my aesthetic to facilitate affinities with other works of art and references to art history. Prior to the commencement of this higher degree I engaged in a calculated methodology that rarely strayed from my original intentions. In terms of haptic activity my paintings prior to 2014, engaging as they may be, were mostly guided by formality - that is to say, faithful to a method and a source.

A departure has now occurred as the role of chance dominates my studio methodology. It will unfold later that I have, perhaps paradoxically, constructed a means by which my artworks are conceived rather adventitiously. It is a new method of enquiry that hearkens a radical change in approach to the highly ritualised practice I maintained before undertaking this research candidature – that being to photograph scenes from the urban landscape and copying them in oils. The following passage will describe the *fin de siècle* that foregrounded a turning point in my project.

A New Romantic

In 2006, Melbourne curator, Simon Gregg invited my participation in an exhibition entitled *Neue Romantics* with five other artists to mark the opening of MARS Gallery, Port Melbourne. *Neue Romantics* reconsidered the Enlightenment definition of the sublime into a contemporary, local context, with a wry nod to the music genre of the 1980s sharing the same name. The exhibition travelled and culminated in 2010 as a published book by Gregg

entitled *New Romantics; Darkness and Light in Australian Art*, published by Australian Scholarly Press. Gregg had sought out artists who found transcending beauty or awe in the banal. At the time my paintings focussed on the nocturne as a theme, which resulted in a MFA on the topic. The featured paintings were, all nocturnes, set upon the badlands of suburbia as a motif – railways, the foreshore scrub, abandoned cars and empty yards. Despite never having identified as such, this induction as “Romantic” painter resonated. A continuing, overarching concern with the Sublime features in this research project visually and metaphorically. The project at once considers the awe inherent in the Enlightenment definition, of nature, science, history, vision and experience and time-travels to a new digital sublime that finds its core in contemporary digital and online space.

At the commencement of this research project however, my attentions were firmly centred on the historical Romantic model.

Early investigations and supporting artworks

Sullied Sublime

In 2014 at the beginning of my candidature I was busy researching landscapes of the Australian Romantic period – when artists such as Eugene Von Guérard (1811-1901) and Louis Buvelot (1814-1888) would set a new path for a visual Australian Identity, of sorts. Faithful as they were to the unique Australian foliage, light and colour of the landscape their paintings glaringly omit historical facts – most notably the frontier war with Australia’s Indigenous people. I took it upon myself to visually reclaim this historical narrative in the medium of painting. Using techniques of appropriation I recreated paintings by the aforementioned “fathers of Australian landscape” and doctored the scenes to create alternative pastoral memoirs. I would not be the first anglo-Australian painter to assign myself such a task. The appropriation of Australian landscape painting has been adopted and often with satirical overtones by artists such as Juan Davila, Paul Ryan, Sharon West and Danie Mellor not to mention others outside of the painterly medium. Although my

contribution to the theme was noteworthy, resulting in an exhibition entitled *Sullied Sublime* (see Appendix) - a body of 9 paintings exhibited at MARS Gallery in October 2014, I felt that the project was limited. I was reluctant to brand myself with this theme. It also sat uneasily with me to speak for or about the struggle of indigenous people whose narrative and culture I deeply respect but from which I am not born. *Appendix 1* includes a precis of the exhibition's themes and methodology as well as plates for each featured artwork.

The Immediate Past and Menagerie

During this course of candidature I have enacted many experiments, trials and even finished artworks that are not included in my final exhibition. I have however, had the opportunity to exhibit such works on two occasions at Jan Manton Art, Brisbane. The gallery has been most supportive of this project and the "auxiliary" artwork outcomes which have not been chosen as *finals* in the submission. Despite this, their creation has impacted greatly upon my ideas and direction as well as instilling confidence in the project's merits. Exhibiting these works has been an invaluable opportunity to scope public reception of the work. The two exhibitions *The Immediate Past* (2016) and *Menagerie* (2017) foreshadow some of the key ideas and themes depicted in *The Cloud*, which was mostly completed in 2018. *Appendix 2* provides an artist's statement for each show as well as images pertaining to each.

What did emanate from these earlier, experimental bodies of work, was a new studio research method using the Internet. Printed images available by my two artists were often old, discoloured or entirely black and white. Apart from a few artworks I was able to see in person at the NGV and at Bendigo Gallery, the Internet provided a more immediate way to source images by these two canonised painters. Examples of their paintings proliferated online, to the point where one questioned both their provenance and authenticity. Indeed, a search for von Guérard would also offer up thumbnail images by his unidentified contemporaries, further complicating the task of sourcing a "true" example. It was therefore

happenstance that my enquiry shifted quite tangentially away from the topic (of von Guérard and Buvelot) and onto the source itself – Google.

Seeking works by these Romantic heroes of the landscape - online - led me down rabbit holes and labyrinths that rewrote the history of the Australian landscape far more than any paintings I had made on the topic. Indeed I had set upon a minefield of mistaken identity and a conflation of histories and narratives that informed the new and current premise for my project. My adoption of Romantic motifs in this project has two origins: Firstly, Romantic homage and landscape, the optical devices that proliferated during this movement and the potential for narrative within the landscape genre. Secondly I consider how digital screens and the Internet inform a new brand of landscape – one that is not derived from a plein air setting but alternatively sourced from digital archives and online searches. Here I began to consider the sublime in both an Enlightenment context and contemporary one also.

The conflation of these two concerns; en plein air painting and its digital representation are evident in my paintings. The very gestures that sit upon my canvases have a digitised or flattened affect quite distinctly different to their original - material referents, the latter being made mostly from observation and preliminary sketching. In Chapter 2, *The Opaque Mirror; The Digital Screen, its Precursors and Influence on Contemporary Painting*, I will discuss, with examples, how I have honed a gesture in my painterly work, which is smoother and closer to a digital print than an original Romantic painting by Louis Buvelot, for example. I describe how I have been able to thinly suggest an impasto mark without applying as much paint onto the support as Buvelot so deftly gestured. If placed side by side – an original Buvelot would appear vastly different to my own copy of his painting. This is due to the fact that I paint from screen reference – digitised, Internet jpegs of his (and other) paintings.

As much as the online space is immersive, so is the practice of painting. The latter is often an instinctive and often unknowable process in which serendipitous moments of virtuosity or indeed, “happy accidents” can change the course of the work entirely. Even working

mimetically, with little room for interpretation or artistic licence, the outcome is still in the fickle hands of a human. The ontology of the painter is highly influential upon the work. The process of painting in this sense is a kind of sublime activity – it is unquantifiable and unknowable. This is true not only for the making of a painting but the observation of one also. One can not pin criteria so easily and empirically on what makes a painting “right”.

...in his “Notes 1964-65” Richter puts art on a par with religion, not as a substitute for religion but as a line going back to the things that are neither accessible via knowledge or reason. (Elger 2012)

In contrast, the online space renders the viewer as an entirely disembodied observer.

[The] notion of the virtual as somehow being separate from the “real” and directly explores the mind/body split between the conscious and unconscious in relation to a “disembodied” realm of communication. (Bulajić 2010)

Painting from a digital source is a curious disruption to these binary states of “immersion” and “detachment” – a new occupation of the zone between physical and digital. It is at once a disembodied engagement with a real painting and the experience of re-enacting a virtual one. Something occurs in the translation from a digital form to a physical one – a kind of “hyper embodiment” (Bulajić 2010). Through this digital portal I re-enact or at least imagine myself in the space of the artist I homage, tracing their marks and assuming their gaze.

Devices

Upon reflection it is apparent that throughout my practice, prior to the research project and up to the present, there has been a preoccupation with devices – from the optical (lenses, cameras) to the digital (software, digital screens and the Internet). I attribute this fixation on devices to a search for visual truth and the many versions of “transparency” this may

manifest. In Chapter 2 *The Opaque Mirror; The Digital Screen, its Precursors and Influence on Contemporary Painting*, I discuss this further with reference to Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (1990). Crary's text investigates historical ways of seeing in a most poignant way. The author conjectures that the various designs for historical optical devices are reflective of their Romantic (1790-1880) zeitgeist. My practice as a whole contends to this argument in a contemporary context. From the early 1990s to the present I have maintained (perhaps unconsciously) an urge to see beyond the capabilities of my own eyes - to find a truth beyond the ontologically viewable. I purport that today digital screens replace human visual experience and knowledge to an extent that is unprecedented. Artificial imaging devices and their resultant pictures are indeed fascinating to me but so is their haptic, painterly translation. Observing, visualising and making images are all a form of knowledge production. My painterly practice surveys and synthesises various optical models into one ritualised process, by hand. In the following passage regarding methodology I will unpack this mysterious activity of looking, and mark making with more detail.

Introduction Part 2 *Methodology* will detail the processes inherent in the *Picturesque* project. I aim to inform the reader of the project's inception and scope before building a more philosophical and theoretical framework around it in the subsequent chapters.

Introduction PART 2

Methodology

Here I will describe what was for me a new methodology - in which one painting becomes catalyst for the next. This methodology culminated in a group of artworks that I described earlier as a “network”. I have included a visual illustration of this network in the following text. The exhibition consists of two bodies of work: *Picturesque* and *The Cloud*. I will describe in the following the inception and methodology of *Picturesque* and its evolution into a series of panel paintings, collectively entitled, *The Cloud*.

Picturesque was created using an iterative process that was largely led by chance. There was no overarching curatorial strategy, nor did I imagine a body of work that looked like this. As discussed earlier, it is an entirely different studio method than the one I had previously exercised. That is not to say that I made no interventions or changes to the artworks as they developed. Naturally in the activity of making a painting there are problems, sometimes solutions and decisions are made on the fly. What was largely out of my hands was the content for the paintings which, as will unfold later, placed me at the mercy of the Google search engine.

At its completion the project, *Picturesque*, culminated in the production of five paintings that now exist purely as digital image projections. The project was first exhibited at Moreland’s

public Counihan Gallery in May, 2016, in order to test the project's narrative potential and to gauge public reception. *Picturesque* marked a considerable tangential shift from my research interests prior to its conception. As will unfold in the following, the project took its new direction after the creation of one painting entitled *Versions of Now* (Plate 1). From here I will tell the story of *Picturesque* and how each picture was born of the last. We will discover that its narrative is conversely linear and abstract in equal measure.



PLATE 1

Newey, S. (2016)

Versions of now

Oil on canvas

35 x 55 cm

Picturesque

I painted the image *Versions of Now* (Plate 1), during the initial, experimental stage of the studio enquiry when I was busy enacting my perceived role as “New (Australian) Romantic”. It features an appropriation of Louis Buvelot’s famous work *Waterpool at Coleraine, Sunset* (1875), (Fig. 1), and “mashes” it with part of the American, Thomas Cole’s (1801-1848, England) *The Savage State, Course of Empire* (1833), (Fig. 2). The reason the two artworks are combined together is because I found synergies in their historical interests: Cole, painting during the same Romantic period as Buvelot, was likewise scoping out a cultural identity for America, some 70 years after the Declaration of Independence. Cole’s work was part of a series entitled *The Course of Empire* (1833-6), proffering an intriguing counterpart to the Australian “settlement story” with which I had been preoccupied. Cole’s was however, a dystopian, moral parable; a series of five paintings, that foreshadowed a civilisation falling victim to its own growing hubris and greed.



Fig. 1

Buvelot, L. (1869)

Waterpool near Coleraine (Sunset)



Fig. 2

Cole, T. (1836)

Course of Empire, Savage State

The motif of a rocky mountain reappears across all five paintings in *The Course of Empire* and I have included it in my homage/appropriation. It was via this “mashed landscape” that I discovered a new path.

Having used Google’s Image Search tool for some time as a source for Romantic paintings I discovered a new function – *Reverse Image Search*. It was a utility developed in 2011 that had undergone some refinement in subsequent years. It allows the user to create a web search using an image instead of text.

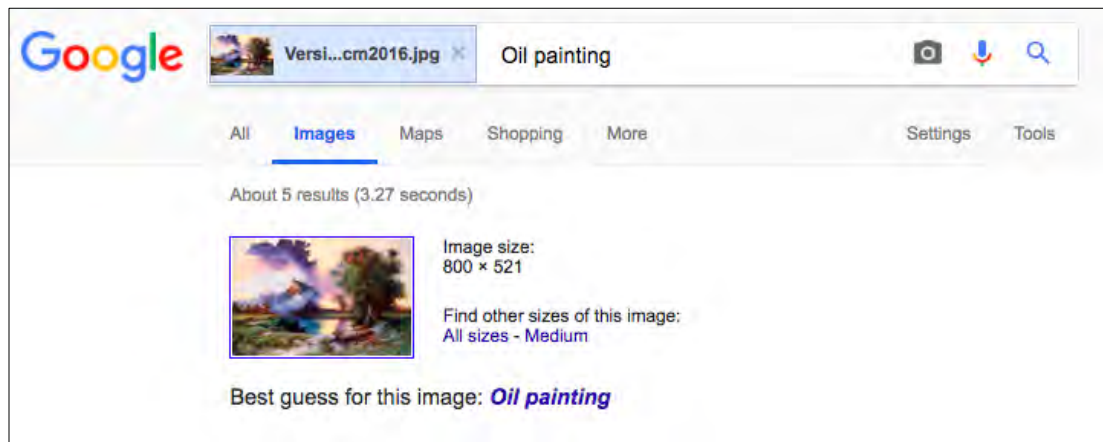


Fig. 3

Google.com.au (2015)

To satisfy a narcissistic impulse, I uploaded a jpeg of my painting to see if Google would (or could) identify it as either “a Buvelot” or “a Cole”. The results offered neither artists’ work but a strange array of other paintings, stock photographs and to my horror, even examples of digital fantasy art!

After conducting some research I discovered that Google’s Reverse Image Search employs advanced pattern matching algorithms to recognize images and identify similar ones. In this analysis, patterns, shapes, colour depth and spectrum, contrast, brightness and a lot of other factors are taken into consideration to analyse the image.² Without the aid of text or a title, Google cannot decipher the image’s artistic origin or referent and does not possess the “intelligence” to contextualize the image historically, let alone, materially, as a painting. Hence the inclusion of all manner of “matched” files.

² Reverse image search is a content-based image retrieval (CBIR) query technique that involves providing the CBIR system with a sample image that it will then base its search upon; in terms of information retrieval, the sample image is what formulates a search query. In particular, reverse image search is characterized by a lack of search terms. This effectively removes the need for a user to guess at keywords or terms that may or may not return a correct result. Reverse image search also allows users to discover content that is related to a specific sample image, the popularity of an image, and discover manipulated versions and derivative works. (Google 2015)



Image size:
1530 × 971

No other sizes of this image found.

Tip: Try entering a descriptive word in the search box.

Visually similar images

[Report images](#)

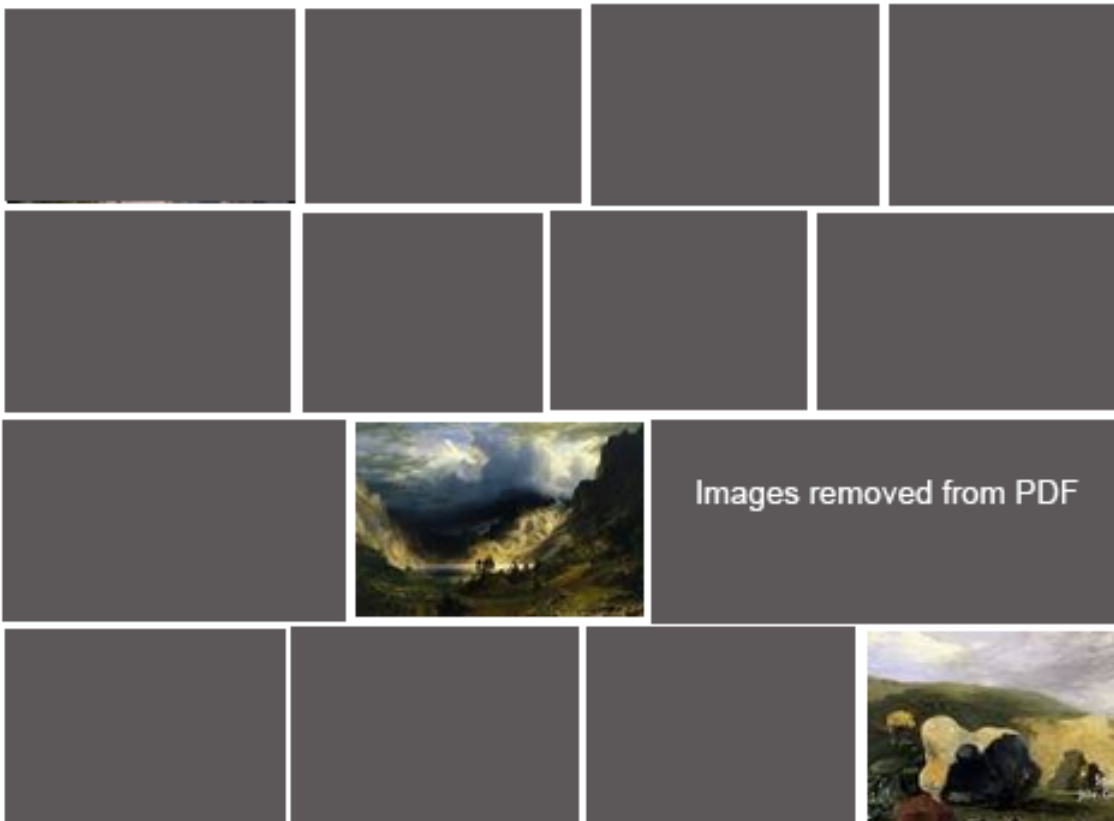


Fig. 4 Google.com.au (2015)

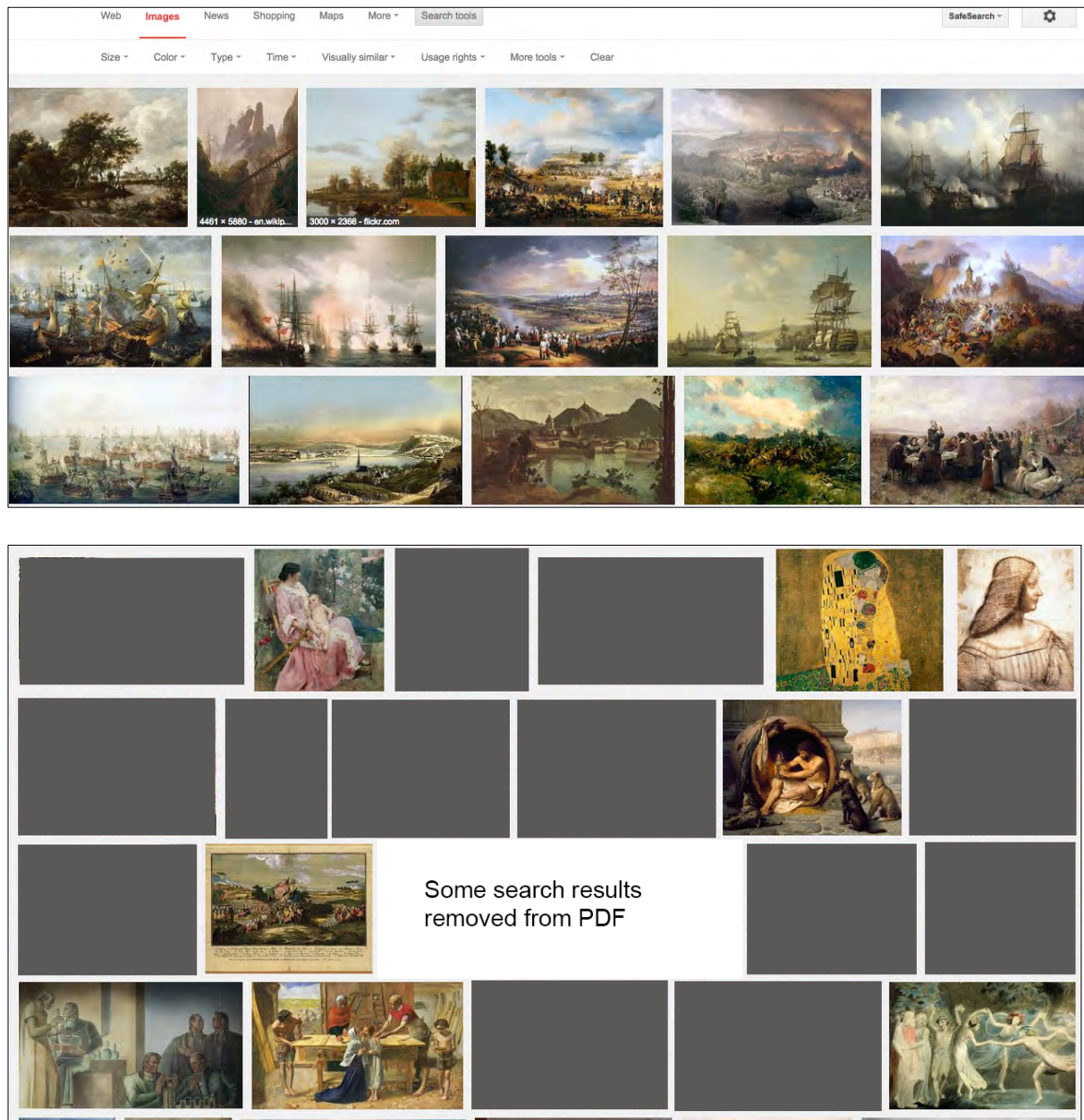


Fig. 5 Google.com.au (2015)

This dislodgement of context was affronting to some degree – that a painterly Romantic homage could be associated with but *some* examples of Romantic mastery yet mostly lowbrow, outsider art and stock photographic imagery. All of a sudden I was faced with a stark assessment of taste, kitsch, mastery and history all bundled into an awkward new

reflection of myself. How could the Internet possibly compare Thomas Cole's tempest with a stock photo? I was unaware at this stage that the Internet's system of categorisation was entirely different to the one I had been trained to use – by my education in art history, its genres and tropes and, no less, the Dewey decimal system.

Perhaps naively I had fathomed the Internet as a pansophical archive, with its God-like, capital "I" – able to process and contextualize all information, from all of history. Alas, no – the Internet is more akin to Borges's *Library of Babel* (I expand upon this analogy in Chapter 3). The Internet is an infinitely rambling rhizome of data, with no fixed beginning and no clear exit point. It is here again, that I draw parallel between the Romantic Sublime and the Internet – the digital sublime.

Fascinated by the odd similarities in Google's matches to my painting, I put my apprehensions aside and embraced the novelty they presented – I would never usually work across this spectrum of styles and taste. I printed some of the search result images and studied them closely. I imagined how I could use them to make new paintings or indeed a hybrid painting with *Versions of now* (Fig.1). I had already combined Cole and Buvelot and now their identities were to be mashed again with artists I had not even heard of. It felt like an insolent crime against art history but the temptation prevailed. The possibilities were very exciting and so this became my *modus operandi*. I began the process by literally cutting out the pictorial conventions of background, middle ground, foreground and sky. I embraced the potential for interchangeability between these compositional motifs and experimented with disrupting their formality.



Fig. 6

Newey, S. (2016)

Collage experiment. Digital print



Fig. 7

Newey, S. (2016)

Collage experiment. Digital print



+

Plate 1



+

Fig. 8a

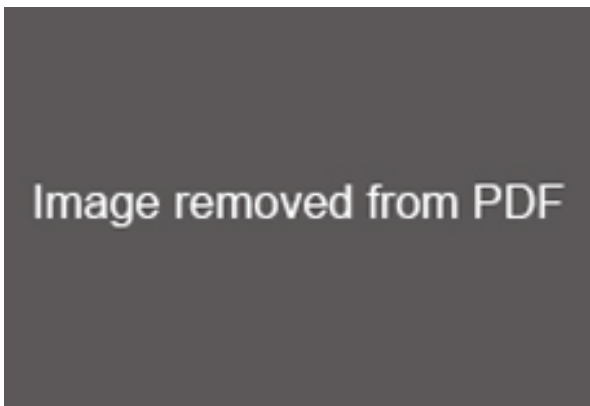


Fig. 8b

Plate 1

Newey, S. (2016)

Versions of Now

Oil on canvas

350 x 550 mm

Fig. 8a

Hobbema, M. (c. 1664 - 1665)

Landscape with Anglers and a Distant Town. Los Angeles County

Fig. 8b

Unnamed (undated)

Stock image of a sunset



Fig 9,
Newey, S.
Digital Collage experiment in Photoshop

After some experimentation in Photoshop the collage presented its potential as reference for a new painting – *Native Tongue* (Plate 2).



Plate 2

Newey, S. (2016)

Native Tongue

Oil on canvas

900 x1150 cm

Chapter 1 *The Burden of Originality: Painterly Materiality and the Copy* surveys the qualities that an original artwork possesses in comparison with the reproduction and copy. The Internet image brings into question the idea of materiality more so than ever, in its

proliferation of copies and “versions” of artworks. *Picturesque* is as much a material investigation as an interrogation of historical narrative. I intend for the work to challenge the binary notion of material/temporal, original/copy by exploring their mutability and interchangeability. It was in analysis of these real and virtual relationships that prompted the idea of including projected images of the paintings, instead of material-original paintings, in the final exhibition at SITE EIGHT Gallery, RMIT.

In the creation of *Native Tongue* (Plate 2) there exist traces of the original hand-generated collage. The juxtaposition of layers and shapes in the painting alludes to the process of selection and recontextualisation that took place in the cut-and-paste. *Native Tongue* possesses areas of flat, desaturated colour and hyper-coloured screen luminescence. In this confluence of referents, the painting features areas of gestural mark-making and impasto, aside brush-less blurs and flat blacks. Via this variation in technique, I reveal the painting’s passage or internal networks. It is at once Romantic, digital, homage and self-reflexive. In Chapter 4 *Transitive Gestures: The Networks within a Painting*, a comprehensive analysis takes place regarding the notion of painterly networks – how paintings exist in a contemporaneous relationship and how they possess an inherent network within their own materiality. I look at ways in which *Picturesque* further operates as a network and how new ideas and methodology may arise out of this investigation.

The process at hand in the project is somewhat curatorial – it engages in sourcing the work of other artists and juxtaposing them together. One distinct difference to the typical curatorial method is that I do not select the artworks I appropriate - they are instead the product of a serendipitous, algorithmic coincidence. In a curatorial debut, artist Tacita Dean used “chance” as a method in creating the exhibition, *An Aside*, at the Hayward Gallery, London in 2005. In her catalogue essay Dean speaks about her curatorial “selections”. She modelled her curatorial process on the Rhine project by Lothar Baumgarten in which the artist meandered along the banks of the river, collecting detritus, making strange totemic objects and photographing the scenery. Each artwork and photograph would appear as

part of, or inform the next. A practice that eventually “fermented” into an artwork. (Dean 2005)

Lothar gave me form for the exhibition: an experimental journey where one work would guide me to the next. (Dean 2005)

Native Tongue presented to me the opportunity for an ongoing studio investigation, one that employed Google as my conversant collaborator. The potential for this chance-led project to continue its own procreation came about as I uploaded *Native Tongue* to Google’s Reverse Image Search. Alas, a new selection of “visually similar images” was offered up - and so the project continued. *Picturesque* was exhibited in 2016 but I do not consider the project completely finite. Each image search reveals new potential strategies – for example, what happens when I desaturate the file, what happens when I add text, or add hyperlinks... the results of such interventions are ever intriguing, setting the conditions for latent methodologies and ideas to emerge.

The Cloud

The Picturesque project involved a collage-based process in which pieces of paintings were dissected and rearranged with others. Towards the end of making the series I had collected a vast array of clippings that featured mostly horses, figures, trees, clouds, waves and boats. Having sourced all of this content online, I designed a directory of folders on my laptop entitled respectively “horses”, “figures”, “trees” and so forth. These detached painterly elements represented tropes of the Romantic movement that intrigued me. They were interchangeable between compositions - for example, when it came to choosing a cloud for a painting, I could try out a range of suitable candidates - from Gude’s majestic *Fra Hardanger* (1847) to a late 17th C van Ruisdael. The pieces performed like “characters” in a play and, as its director, I would “audition” a selection for each new layout.

Some of these pieces were cut from printed images in various sizes and colours. In my studio I kept a large polystyrene panel upon which I could easily pin arrangements of the pieces to try out new compositions (Fig. 10). Some of the left over cuttings adorned my studio wall and it was from this odd menagerie of horses, cows, figures and clouds that *The Cloud* emerged.

The miscellaneity of these cutouts upon the wall was the edifying feature of this series. Collectively, a Güde cloud, circa 19th C alongside a digitally illustrated serpent and one of Stubbs's horses represented the same curious array of random results as Google's search engine. It was as if I was looking into a cloud of data. An allusion to the Internet *Cloud* was wryly intended in the title of my series and further bridges the relationship between the Romantic and digital sublimes.



Fig. 10

Newey, S. (2016)

Collage experiment. Digital print, polystyrene panel, pins

After the completion of *The Picturesque* paintings and my decision to digitise their presence in the exhibition as projections I set about the creation of *The Cloud* images. What compelled me was the fact that the pieces were frameless. They floated as liberated forms without backgrounds, which, I found most beguiling. The problem of how to do this took some consideration. I did not want to paint directly on the wall because this stunted the “interchangeability” of the pieces that I had so enjoyed. This led to various material investigations, which evolved into the project as it is today; oil paintings on hand-cut MDF panels. Scaling the images up bestowed the pieces with a “prop” like quality that I found

both playful and beguiling. Being closer to human scale affords the viewer a closer affinity with the painted motifs. Separating these “characters” from their backgrounds makes heroes of them and acts as a signifier to the original artworks, now absent. In Chapter 4 *Transitive Gestures; the Networks in and around Paintings* I will discuss the process of creating *The Cloud* in more detail and discuss ways in which the project further exemplifies my interrogation into networks.

Picturesque and *The Cloud* as projects are respectively “immaterial” and “material” but as will become apparent in Chapter 1 and beyond, this distinction is not always so clear. Their coexistence and confluence in this project heralds my discussion around the way painting is perceived in the context of the online database. I shall discuss the following (in order) throughout the following chapters:

In Chapter 1 I explore the manifold effects of viewing artwork digitally-versus-materially and the way reproductions affect the perception of original works of art. Chapter 2 considers the devices that influence the creation and reception of a painting and some of the original devices that foreshadow the digital screen. Chapter 3 *Plural Texts*; identifies the networks inside and around paintings and how the very shape of information and history have transformed. Finally, in Chapter 4 I consider the networks that exist on a more micro level within discrete paintings. My project will be framed in this dissertation by supporting literature and examples of painting, contemporary and historical, that align with the investigations I have delineated above.

Chapter 1

The Burden of Originality: Painterly Materiality and the Copy

In this chapter I consider the physical space that paintings inhabit and the material transformations that occur in their reproduction.

Materiality is, according to The Oxford history of western art “The quality of being composed of matter.” (Kemp 2002) My use of the term however, aligns more closely with its use in Modern philosophical literature. This research acknowledges a vast discourse on materiality that includes the work of Kant to McLuhan and beyond. It is beyond the limitations of this dissertation however, to precis their contributions to a contemporary conception of materiality, nor would credence be duly paid. I do however accede to a prevailing thesis among the literature I have read, that materiality describes more than *physical* matter; indeed the latter’s confluence with other non-physical matter creates alternative “materialities”. My use of the term materiality in this context seeks meaning in the “original artwork” - it interrogates its material translation, transformation and interpretation via other media.

From early on in my studio enquiry I pondered the following question: Does the digital image possess a materiality? Indeed, can light itself be considered matter? Being a topic well beyond my field of artistic enquiry and more embedded in the realm of physics, I consulted a scientist friend who was most helpful. He directed me to a useful scholarly

article; *QED: The Strange Theory of Light and Matter* (Narodny and Feynman, 1991). This paper is an adaptation for the general reader, of four lectures, on quantum electrodynamics published in 1985 by American physicist and Nobel laureate, Richard Feynman. The question whether light possesses “matter” is abstract, considering light’s ephemeral status and thus I did not expect a clear answer. The following quote however, attests that light is, in fact, composed of particles.

Newton thought that light was made up of particles - he called them “corpuscles” - and he was right (but the reasoning he used to come to that decision was erroneous). We know that light is made of particles because we can take a very sensitive instrument [a photomultiplier] that makes clicks when light shines on it...light is something like raindrops - each little lump of light is called a photon - and if the light is all one colour, all the “raindrops” are the same size. (Narodny and Feynman 1991)

Despite this scientific hypothesis it seems inconceivable to afford light the same material-status as a painting. For how are we to compare the two - light can not possess *value* in the way a painting does, how is one to consider “originality”, the “gestural mark”, nor ownership of something so abstract and fleeting as light? What about context and history? All of these concepts, which I shall address in this chapter are aligned with the material, tangible and touchable qualities of a painting. I have discovered however, during my project’s iterations and supportive reading, that it is not possible to create a simplistic opposition between *light* and *object* with regards to materiality. The two have become fundamental ideas to my project, and as such, are discursive and complicated. The transition from “hard-copy” to “soft-copy” impacts the work in multifarious ways and this is something I shall tease apart in the following and further on throughout this dissertation.

Jonathan Crary, in his text *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), purports that human vision, itself, has an inherent material quality.

Vision, rather than a privileged form of knowing, becomes itself an object of knowledge, of observation. From the beginning of the nineteenth century a science of vision will tend to mean increasingly an interrogation of the makeup of the human subject, rather than the mechanics of light and optical transmission. It is a moment when the visible escapes from the timeless incorporeal order of the camera obscura and becomes lodged in another apparatus, within the unstable physiology and temporality of the human body. (Crary 1990)

For Crary, perception is not a passive experience but rather an *act* of observation. It incorporates the physical, biological and ocular operation of *looking* and combines it with our memories, preconceptions and specific vantage to form an observation that has material and immaterial properties. I find Crary's argument fascinating as it reflects quite poignantly the idea that images are themselves transient and contingent upon who is observing them. The human viewer is subjective and so images are perceived thusly. My own perception of the projected paintings in *Picturesque* is entirely different from another's. I have the memory of their creation in mind, the physical touch that generated their specific forms and the image of their former referents. Mine is a type of looking that has embedded within it lineages of the painting's creation - a closer encounter. To another observer, details may be inconsequential or indeed invisible. To employ Crary's theory to this analogy, the respective ocular encounters (mine and another viewer's) of the projected image provide two separate material accounts (observations) of the same image.

The mind does not reflect truth but rather extracts it from an ongoing process involving the collision and merging of ideas. (Crary 1990)

The original painting in this artwork is absent except for its existence in my memory. Its place is nonetheless powerful. I shall touch upon Crary again in Chapter 2 in a discussion

of devices that impact our perception. For now however I continue my investigation of the material relationships and their effects, between the original artwork and the copy.

In consideration of materiality we encounter the phenomenon of the original artwork, that which identifies it as such and the values that it inherits as being the perceived one and only. (Benjamin 2008) The status bestowed upon the original artwork can be readily equated in fiscal terms. A Marxist consideration of painterly materiality would concern the production of the original painting and its commodity value. I submit to this notion however I assert that the spiritual and cultural value of the original has equal, if not more, weight. I argue in the following that this “weight” is at once an honour and a burden.

Following this investigation into the material-original artwork I consider it’s arguable counterpart – the reproduction or copy. How does replication affect the original image and in its new title as referent? How do we then situate the original? How is the identity of the original, physical, painted image altered when it is shunted from its site (of creation, exhibition or storage) and replaced by, sometimes, countless copies and representations online? These questions exist because painting now inhabits both physical and ephemeral spaces.

The scope of this research allows for a discussion of contemporary painting’s material agency and investigates whether its presence as an online entity renders it “immaterial”. As this topic unfolds it will become clear that the material and immaterial share a discursive relationship online and that the neat binary of physical/digital is somewhat more complicated in the context of painting in the Internet era.

The fall of matter and materialism does not lead to the immaterial pure and simple; rather, it branches into the immaterial and its material "sites" or "supports" (French "supports"). Instead of substantial objects and their meanings, we get information overload and a new hardness of "supporting" materials, a new "performativity" of things and bodies. (Hong, 2003)

References to my projects *Picturesque* and *The Cloud*, which respectively inhabit ephemeral and material spaces, will feature throughout my discussion with visual examples.

The original gesture

In his pivotal 1935 text, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin identifies an “aura” that accompanies a hand-generated artwork. In using this term Benjamin was referring to the ritual aspects of spiritual worship in which painting has historically played a central role, from cave walls to cathedrals. I would like to extend this definition of “aura” to encompass a recognition of the artwork’s materiality. In consideration of painterly materiality one can identify “aura” most poignantly in the qualities of its *mark-making*.

In the study of the painterly mark or gesture, throughout history, there exists great reverence, from as far back as the sumi-e masters in the 14th Century, through to Rembrandt’s Baroque, and Modernist abstraction. Throughout pre-modern history (and in some more contemporary contexts) *the mark* has been considered to be, and fetishised as a trope of great artisanship. The many tiers of technique, requiring decades of training and apprenticeship to achieve masterful virtuosity are well documented. Alternatively, from Modernism onwards, the gesture is often a conduit through which the artist creates discordant emotion, dissonance and challenges formal conventions.

In the contemporary discourse around painting however, the emphasis is often shifted toward the indexicality of the medium; and a formal analysis of mark-making is often minimal. I contest the opinion of Andre Rottman, who claims the materiality that once defined painting has been somewhat abated in order to find credence in today's post-medium arena.

It must still be conceded that the medium incessantly belies all claims for irrelevance in today's expanded field of contemporary art...Paradoxically, the medium, in this process, appears to have dispelled its once-contested material basis: at the cost of its survival, in other words, it ultimately has become bereft of its former substance. (Rottman in Graw 2014)

The formal traditions of painting are ever shifting, responding and absorbing the new art forms and technology that populate our times. The materiality of painting reflects the complexity of contemporary media and communication, which I will discuss with examples shortly.

Isabelle Graw considers Rottman's claims against the material agency of contemporary painting and responds by suggesting that "...painting, as highly personalized semiotic activity, has several advantages – it is less restrictive, allowing us to see how a painting is at work in other forms as well, and it is able to capture what is specific about a painting's codes, gestures and materiality." Graw "...seeks to ground painting's residual specificity in the semiotic activity of mark making". (Graw 2014) Indeed, it is within the analysis of contemporary painting, within all of its reflexivity and remediation, that exists the most immediate of semiotic communications – the gesture.

The ambiguous smears of a Cecily Brown (b. 1969, UK) are at first glance, abstract, yet between swathes of fleshy oil paint there are vague inferences to figures in orgiastic union (Fig. 11). Brown's use of gesture to conceal and reveal her subject is testament to the

power of painterly *mark*. Brown's painterly pareidolia³ taps into the censored, the unseen and makes voyeurs of us. The image conjures fetish and fantasy. It alludes to, but does not depict clearly, a cacophony of lustful consumerism. It is however, beyond our literal or figurative interpretation.

³ Pareidolia definition: "The perception of apparently significant patterns of recognizable images, especially faces, in random or accidental arrangements of shapes and lines." (Kemp 2002)

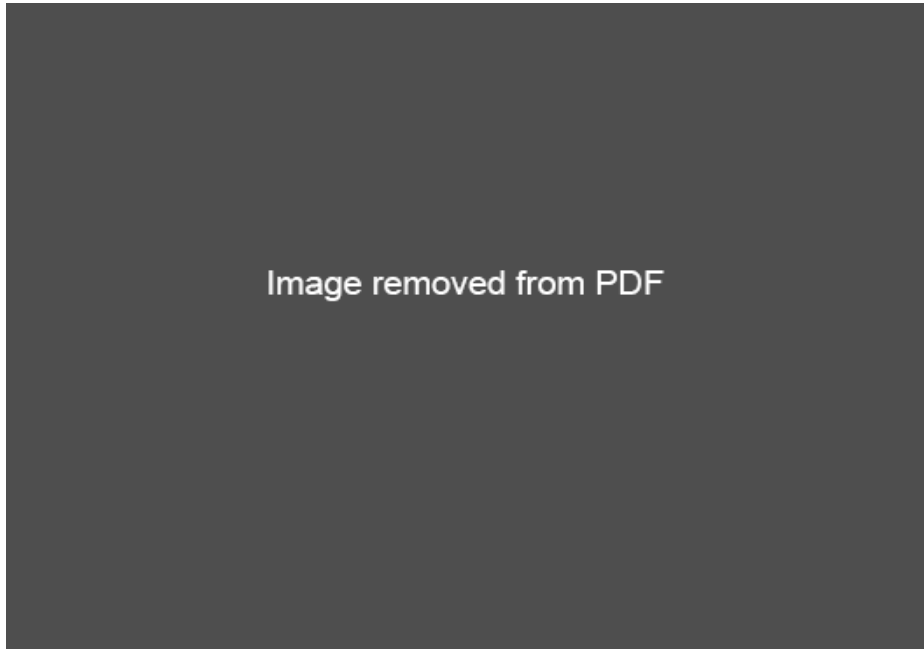


Fig 11.
Brown, C. (1998)
High Society



Fig 12.
Sasnal, W. (2013)
The Partisan

To contrast, the laconic brush-marks of a Wilhelm Sasnal (B. Poland, 1974), coolly hint at the referent of screen-based media. And yet the oily massing of colour around his subject reminds us that the artist has doctored the facts. Sasnal's image making (Fig. 12) confuses a documentary aesthetic with haptic play and in doing so highlights the blurred lines between fact and fiction.

In both contemporary examples, gestural materiality can be interpreted indexically. Unlike its self-referential predecessor, Modernism, contemporary painting is self-reflexive; it points to its *own* painterliness. It absorbs the legacy of the modernist gesture and critically engages it in an expanded field. This *self awareness* that exists within contemporary paintings is evident in *Rest on the Flight to Windsor* (Plate 3). A composite of four painterly references, the artwork self-consciously creates union between sources that are literally centuries apart. The sources themselves can be identified to some extent by examining the gestural applications of paint throughout the image. Visible in the foreground is a tidal lake inhabited by two other-worldly aquatic creatures. The colour of the water and its beastly occupants is an emerald-blue hue, hyper-saturated to reflect the digital source from which it came. Here I have applied the paint using a generous amounts of glazing medium so that the surface appears slick and smooth, emulating the effect of digital painting software. Counter to this technique, the foliage in the upper left corner borrows its gestural application from the 17th C Flemish tradition.

In homage to Lucas van Uden (b. Antwerp, 1595 –1672) the layers of leafy canopy are applied more thickly, in quick repetitive gestures, resulting in a soft abundant plumage. The tree is stylised in a fashion that foreshadows the high frivolity of the Rococo. Its final iteration in this project, as a data projection, softens the subtle nuances of gesture. Indeed, it is a *soft-copy* of the material original painting. The light that emanates from the projector does however, enhance and oversaturate the colours originally applied to the canvas, giving the image a presence that is, I argue, on par with the material. Like a glowing beacon on the wall, the projection is a captivating and transfixing. Although it is not touchable like a painting, it takes possession of our senses in another way. Like firelight

can do, the projection of light draws the spectator in. I will further discuss this painting's network of references, later in the chapter.



Plate 3

Newey, S. (2016)

Rest on the Flight to Windsor

Oil on Canvas

900 x 1150 mm

On Value

In addition to the semiotic cues inherent in painterly application, there are other ways that the artist's mark, the gesture, may affect our reception of a painting – quite notably, in the values imposed upon the material-original painting.

Painting is able to suggest a strong bond between the product and the absent person of its maker... Painting's capacity to appear particularly saturated with the lifetime of its author makes it the ideal candidate for value production. (Graw 2014)

When evidence of the painterly performance survives in the finished artwork - its materiality reveals a perceived authenticity. Its object-hood is imbued with what could be considered evidence of its creation and the fingerprint of its creator. It may indeed seem impossible to separate the painting, in this sense, from the identity of its maker; because the signature gesture of the originator appears to be so materially ingrained within its structure. One may consider the painterly *mark* as inextricable from its status of *hallmark*. The original artwork is inseparable from the value systems that render it untouchable.

Today the cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden. Certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level. (Benjamin 2008)

In the case of historically and culturally revered paintings there exists a burden of originality that increases with age. So coveted is the material-original that it is rendered untouchable. It is as if the artwork possesses the very DNA of its composer. One can only imagine the artwork's original creation and composition; and the viewer is not privy to this performance. In this sense the artwork survives as ghost of its own creation. The original artwork represents a vanishing connectedness with the past – it is a ruin of sorts.

A ruin embraces the absence of the original act. We have only the remains of that act what was not consumed by the moment. (Klein, Bulajić Ed. 2010)

This is one reason for the vigilant preservation of art and cultural artifacts. It is as if the artwork had a corporeal presence on par with human life. Terms associated with art conservation are remarkably similar to the phrases we normally associate with modern medicine: *prevention, examination, maintenance, intervention, research, treatment, and education*. This field is closely allied with conservation science, curators and registrars. Like health, the fiscal debt to conservation can be very high. In April 2016, the administration of Matteo Renzi, Italian prime minister, announced plans to spend over one billion euros on restoring museums and monuments in the biggest cultural heritage investment to date. This includes a 40 million dollar investment in the restoration of all the artworks at the Uffizi museum, Florence, alone. (Squires, 2016)

The tangible object-status of an artwork adds to its commodity value (more so than a digital artwork for example), not only because of its exclusivity but also because of its vulnerability. Its being-in-the-world makes an artwork susceptible to the likelihood of decay, vandalism and loss. A painting possesses a mortality factor that echoes that of its maker. The risks faced by the material body of the artwork afford it commercial value. Anthropology tends to regard artworks as equivalents to people. A material-original artwork, like a human being, is irreplaceable and non-replicable.

In the project's first iteration of *Picturesque* at Counihan Gallery in 2016 I was approached with a variety of questions and comments regarding the projected form: One visitor

insightfully commented that “the artwork had returned to its original state - as a jpeg.” Another visitor asked me how I planned to sell a digitised, projected painting. This very question had also been vexing my (then) agent (who was less approving of this phase in my practice).

...acquiring a work of art means getting a hold on the artist's labour capacity and therefore owning a slice of her life. Buying artworks indeed comes close to buying people – and this is especially true for painting. (Graw 2014)

Post Internet painting has a more ambiguous commercial value. This is largely dependent upon the materiality, or perceived lack of, inherent in the “painting” itself. Despite the complexity of a digital painting or indeed a digitised reproduction of a painting - with its layers of algorithmic code and its power of online omnipresence, it is infinitely less valuable. The object-status of an original painting grants it collectability in a way that pixels cannot tender. The ownership of the painting-object is an addition to one's *real* estate. Originality, the painting's bespoke one-ness, is the key factor to its equity potential. Pixels, on the other hand, are infinitely reproducible. Code can be copied and manipulated which ultimately confuses authorship, stripping the artwork of the artist's *fingerprint*. In *Picturesque* the Internet plays a vital role in the narrative and aesthetic of its imagery. The resultant paintings however, possess the haptic evidence of my physical participation in their creation. Being informed by but not limited to the Internet, their existence is aligned with the *Post Internet* genre. Returning the paintings to the perceived immateriality and ephemerality of light further complicates this:

In regards to the art market, Net Art's ephemeral existence posed many challenges...

In contrast, the evolution of Post-Internet art has sought to exist both on the Internet and also in the real world. The real world location speaks critically to the

role of the digital in today's art world and – perhaps to a fault – plays into the traditional hierarchy of art as commodity in the white cube. (Gens 2014)

The material-original artwork is born from a categorical site of origin and in the case of historical paintings this is more than just archivally important. This site provides us with a link to a time and place that informs our perception of history. The vanishing connectedness with the past, discussed earlier, is restored by the original artwork and reconstitutes the narrative of not just the painting's origin but of its broader cultural situation. In 1979, French artist and philosopher Hervé Fischer proclaimed that our linear concept of historical progression was now over, a change that affected both a popular understanding of time and activities like art that were dependent on it. Now, he claimed, art, like history was dead and we were in the age of "meta art". (Vaughan 2005). I wonder - could the material-original work of art be considered an antidote to the end of history? Could it perform as a time – document? In my utopian counterpoint to Fischer's argument, the artwork's materiality reassures us, in the Heideggerian sense, that it is "revealing of the world and the happening of truth". (Moisey and Heidegger 2017)

The value bestowed upon the original-material painting is manifold. Since it's earliest examples it has performed as a site for spiritual ritual. In modern and postmodern contexts it stands as a material reflection of its zeitgeist; painting inherits the legacy of history's narrative, it is the doyenne of the commercial art world and prevails as the surviving *memento mori* of its maker.

The Representation and the Copy

The relationship between an original painting and its representation is transformative. What the "copy" has bestowed upon the original artwork is no less than a mythological status. The transformations that take place are manifold and are rooted in scientific, political, philosophical and historical contexts. In consideration of the copy or representation I

address questions of value, authorship, the rules of appropriation, association and distribution and, of course, the issue of taste.

Since the invention of Gutenberg's printing press (c.1540-50), there has been a prevailing discourse around representation and reproduction. It continues with growing complexity through the milestones of lens technology, camera obscura, the photograph, moving image and now the digital image. Indeed its influence does not only reflect upon original artworks alone, but culture at large.

...[the] Invention of technological tools for representation affects the way the world is seen, how events are interpreted, and the way culture is formed. (Lovejoy 2004)

The reproduction in some ways emancipates the hand-generated artwork from the many "burdens" of originality discussed earlier. The copy can serve as a surrogate to the untouchable original. It allows for distribution to contexts in which the original may never be seen, thereby increasing its exposure and celebrity. It endows the original with a *worthiness* that it may not have previously enjoyed and promotes education and visual literacy to broader communities.

On a daily basis at the Louvre in Paris, hordes of art enthusiasts and tourists crowd before the *Mona Lisa* (da Vinci, 1503), locked as it is, in a plexiglass, bulletproof case (Fig. 13). In the knowledge that it will be barely even "glimpse-able", the crowds, nonetheless, queue for hours, pay their fee, swaddle on a Nikon and persist. Such is the mythological status of the original.

How can we separate the Mona Lisa from its baggage of fame and its much touted financial value in order to see it only for its aesthetic value? (Lovejoy 2004)

One way is to reproduce it. It is however a case of the proverbial chicken and egg – is the painting so magnificent that it is worthy of reproduction? Or is it the multitudes of reproductions that have generated its mythology?



Fig 13.

Crowds before The Mona Lisa at The Louvre Museum, Paris. Google.com (2017)

In her seminal 1977 text, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag speaks of our cultural obsession with photographic reproduction. Her observations were fortuitous in consideration of the role of the ubiquitous photographic image in today's social media; her theories still resonate with astounding clarity and relevance. She talks extensively in the text about how photographs inform our sense of situation.

[Photographs are] a way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir. (Sontag 1977)

No doubt the gift store at the Louvre Museum is well stocked with postcard reproductions of the Mona Lisa, but this does not afford the spectator with quite the same sense of ownership that their own photograph may do. And perhaps paradoxically, Sontag attributes this urge to photograph to a sense of dissatisfaction:

In modern society, a discontent with reality expresses itself forcefully and most hauntingly by the longing to reproduce this one. (Sontag 1977)

It is as if the photograph improves our experience of reality, or at least the memory of it, by reframing and editing it. The same urgency to reproduce the material-original prevails in the digital and online environment, if not perhaps, more so. In 1994, *The Mediamatic Journal*, (Summer issue) was entirely devoted to “The storage mania”. It was as if the world and all of its material data, as we know it, had to be urgently digitally archived. (Wouterloot 1994)

In the 1990s when the new role of the computer as a universal media machine became apparent, already digitized societies went into a digitizing craze. All existing books and videotapes, photographs and audio recordings started to be fed into computers at an ever increasing rate. (Bulajić 2010)

Just as Sontag speaks of the photograph as a way of “certifying experience”, so is the digital image. It appears that culturally there exists a collective fear of disconnectedness and loss, as if a material Armageddon may void us of our memories, histories and identity - lest we reproduce them. In the realm of art history, artworks are archived thusly, in the online environment. The number of online reproductions that represent an original artwork reflect its status as *iconic*. And yet, what does ubiquity mean for an original artwork? The networks in which all paintings operate are proliferated with digital and printed copies. In fact, we are faced with so many versions and representations of paintings that it has somewhat replaced the experience of viewing original artworks. The Internet image joins the cult of the *copy* along with the printed representation and its countless iterations (which may also include unaccredited appropriations and forged copies). Colour variations, saturations, resolutions, details and scale not only vary among the multitudinous reproductions of artworks in books but also in the online archive. Moreover, copies of artworks vastly outweigh their original antecedents. The map has become larger than the territory, so to speak. We can no longer consider the original and the copy in binary opposition.

The fiction of the master and the copy are now so entwined with each other that it is impossible to identify where one begins and the other one ends. (Davis 1995)

Indeed, the original and the reproduction are contingent upon one another. The indexical nature of the copy serves to emphasise the absence of the original. In the copy, indexicality replaces identity and the original becomes mythologized. The material original, as a synchronic, historic certainty, is obfuscated. The copy is a surrogate. The online representation of a painting can only ever be but a phantom of the material entity. In this light, the Internet is a vast database of *memento mori par excellence*. The representation, the phantom image is then copied and re-copied ad infinitum. How then is the real, original to be identified?

...even if we are never able to resolve the opposition between real and fake, copy and model, technical developments now take us into a territory where a parallel reality exists – one that resides within reality – where the perfection of mathematical modeling creates a reality which has been called ‘virtual reality’. (Lovejoy 2004)

The ever-saturated glow of the digital screen arguably compromises more than the patina of an original artwork. A Google search for Picasso’s *Guernica* (Fig. 14), for example, will attest to the myriad of photographic reproductions that have been made over the years (indeed, some of them photographed from books), each differently rendering the artwork. Results vary in pixel dimension, resolution, focus, colour, scale and even title.

The over-reproduction of an artwork is an affront to its integrity as a discreet tangible object. To copy and re-copy is a promiscuous act that adulterates the purity of the original. In *The ecstasy of communication* (1983), Baudrillard purports that this notion of “oversaturation” as a kind of obscenity:

...the promiscuity that reigns over the communication networks is one of superficial saturation, of an incessant solicitation, of an extermination of interstitial and protective spaces. (Baudrillard 1983)

How is one to learn about this painting as an authentic material entity when we are faced with so many iterations?

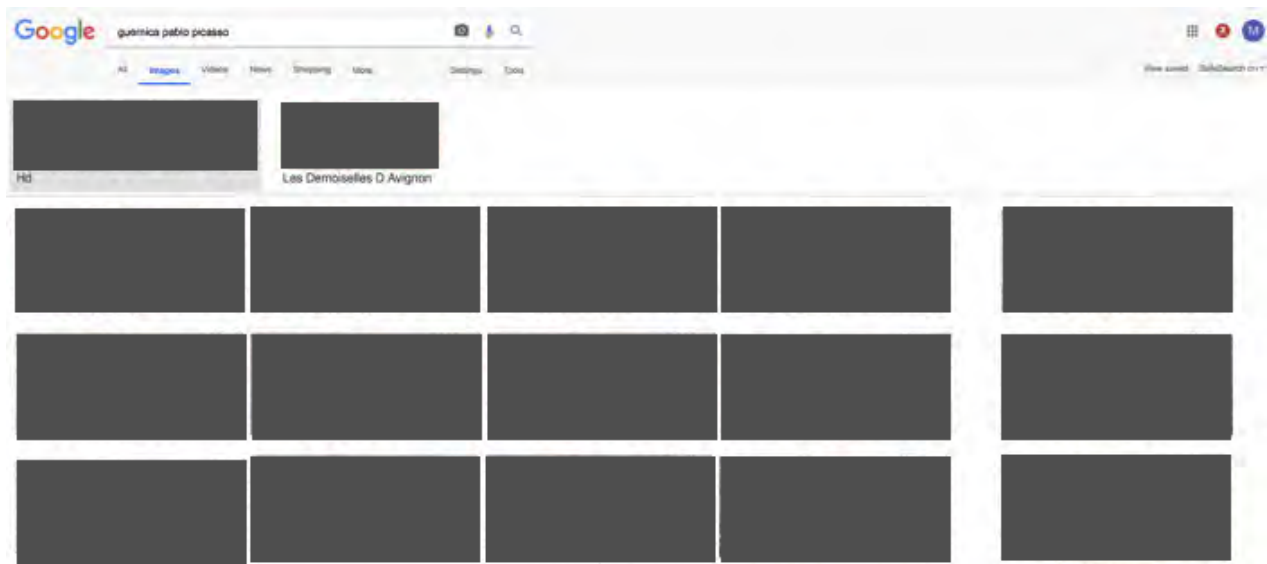


Fig. 14
A Google Image Search for Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1936)
(Google.com 2019)

The screen image can only ever be a version of the original, merely a cipher alluding to the absent. In the text *Database Aesthetics; art in the age of information overflow*, edited by Victoria Vesna Bulajić (2010), the digital reproduction of an artwork is not considered a “version” at all, it is an algorithm, and entirely divorced from the materiality of the original. Fig. 15 represents the algorithmic data for Buvelot's *Waterpool near Coleraine (Sunset)* (1869). The image was sourced from the NGV web archive.

The digital image is not a reproduction in the way that an analogue image is. Rather it is a transformation of an image, a translation from a continuum to a set of discrete units. When displayed on a screen the image is re-performed according to a set of encoded instructions. (Bulajić 2010)

Fig. 15
Algorithmic data (detail) for Buvelot, L. (1869)
Waterpool near Coleraine (Sunset)
(Ngv.vic.gov.au, 2019)

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Ownership, authorship and the copy

The Internet is increasingly used as a forum in which artists display their work. Beyond the artist's own website they may feature photographic, video and audio examples of their artwork on Instagram, Facebook or Pinterest to name but a few examples. Indeed, someone else may “regram” that artists work into an entirely new context or unlawfully use it in their own website/blog/posts. The proliferation of the copy aids in its re-contextualisation. The Internet picture is so perennially available that it appears to belong to whoever seeks it. In January 2017, to my own great annoyance and distaste, two artworks (jpegs) were copied without my permission and downloaded from my website (www.saffronnewey.com). The images (Fig. 16), are two small paintings entitled *The Immediate Past 4* and *The Immediate Past 5* both made in 2016, featuring appropriated, Romantic clouds and sea. The two paintings have been re-contextualised in their new home on www.destinyastrologer.com. After a curt email to the website administrator, the images have been removed. It is a context for the work that positions it firmly in the lowbrow category; but this time without my ironic intention!

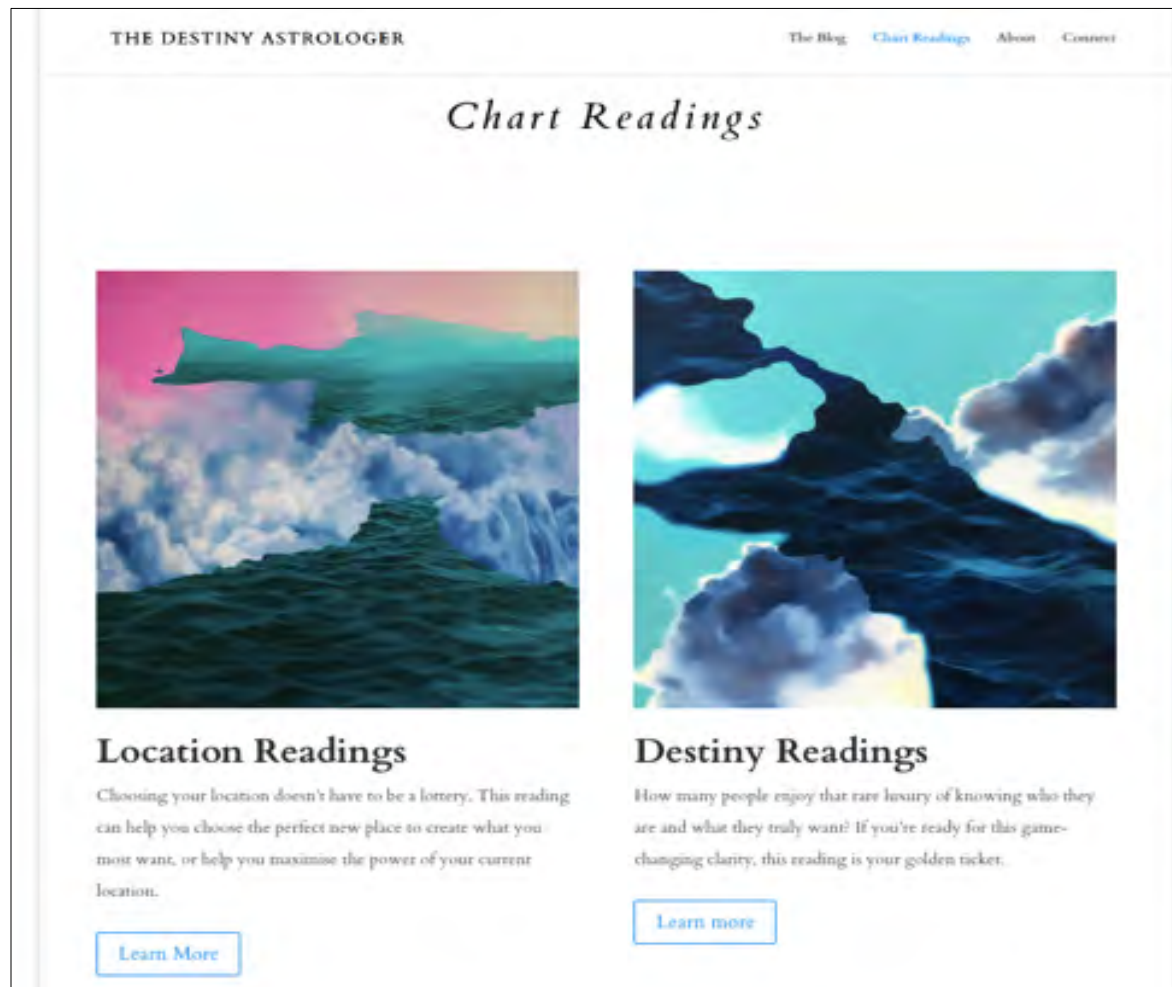


Fig. 16

My paintings used (without permission) on www.destinyastrologer.com

[sourced 05.11.16]

The (modern, fully commercialised) Internet is now 23 years old and the “storage mania” of the mid 1990s has ensured the digitization of seemingly every artwork that has ever been photographed or recorded. It is almost impossible to not find what you may be looking for whether it is a painting by Ingres or the artwork of your classmate. For Picturesque I undertook a basic Google image search to find examples of European and American Romantic paintings. I anticipated Google would supply a range of reproductions with

varying colour-casts and resolutions and those expectations were met, however what was more alarming were the origins of the images offered. In the case of a high profile artwork like *Sea of Ice* (Friedrich, C.D (1823-4)), Google presented an array of “interpretations” by other artists, of whom, not all have credited their referent.

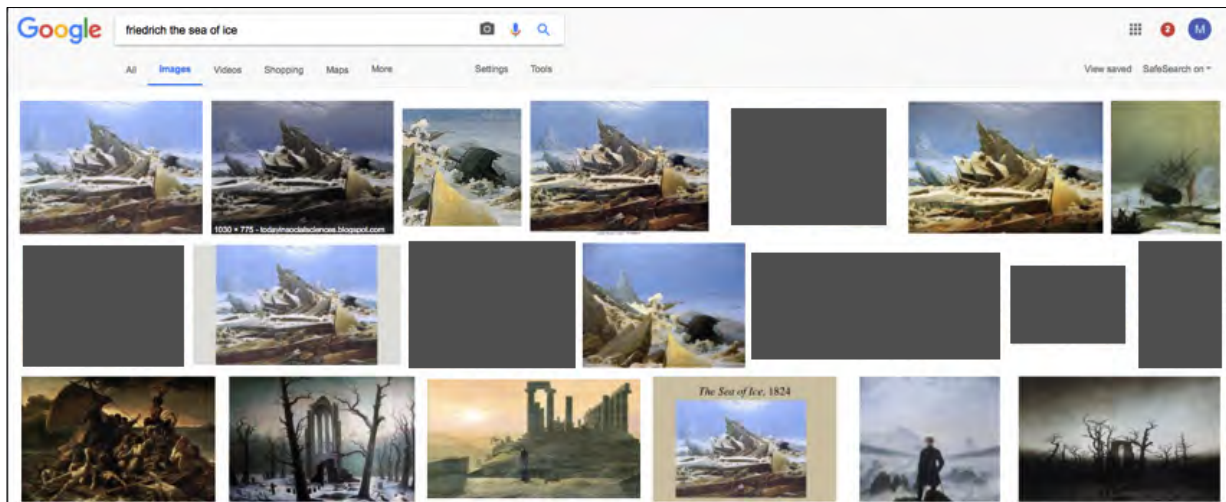


Fig. 17
Google image search for *Sea of Ice* Friedrich, C. D (1823-4)
(Google.com 2016)

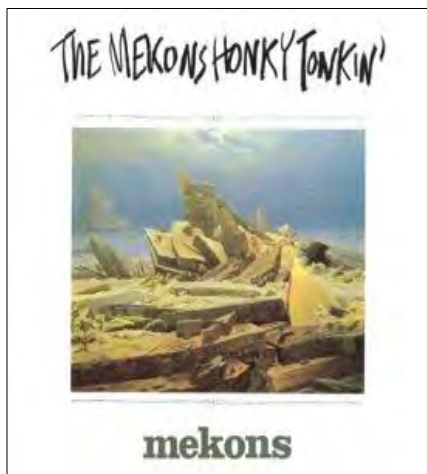


Fig. 18
The Mekons (1986) *Honky Tonkin*, Allmusic

It is possible that Friedrich himself would turn in his grave to note the digital addition of astronauts and spaceships to the *The Sea of Ice*'s masterful sublimity, let alone its appearance on the front cover of The Mekons 1986 album *Honky Tonkin* (Fig. 18). Indeed, the over-use of this painting's image testifies its lasting relevance in pop culture yet the aura of the original painting has been modified, perhaps stolen, by these re-contextualisations. The original painting is part of the collection at Kunsthalle Hamburg in Germany, but despite this, the authorial ownership of this painting is under question.

The translations that represent artworks online are seemingly non-physical entities; they are entirely made of code. It is important not to underestimate the power of these online cyphers over the materially physical artwork. In the right hands, algorithms are very malleable. It is interesting to note that the appropriations of Friedrich's painting that I found on Google were all digital artworks. Their existence now shifts the original narrative of Friedrich's work. The new multiplicity that this painting has assumed creates *slippage* in its historical context, authenticity and material status.

Picturesque embraces this notion of slippage as its premise. I refer to Norman M. Klein's notion that even material-original artworks can contain an algorithmic layer:

There is no digital art or new media object in the broadest sense that does not have a layer of code or algorithms, even if its physical and visual manifestation distracts from this underlying layer. [The artwork has] ultimately been produced by instructions and the software that was used to create or manipulate it. (Klein in Bulajić 2010)

In an example like *Rest on the Flight to Windsor* (Plate 3), discussed earlier, it is clear that I have appropriated the algorithmic nuances of Internet imagery. The painting features 4 different colour-casts and appears to have been digitally montaged together by the kind of "selection tools" one might find in Adobe Photoshop. A seemingly historical, Romantic, sublime landscape appears in the image however there are traces of digital fantasy art with

the inclusion of a sea monster. The paintings that I have appropriated include *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* Van Uden, L. (1654) (Fig. 19), *Windsor castle from the Thames* (J.M.W Turner, 1805) (Fig. 20), An unidentified landscape painting, (signed "A.K. 1861"), (Fig. 21), *A Japanese dragon* (Sandara, year unknown), (Fig. 22).



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Plate 3

Fig. 19

Van Uden, L. (1654)

Landscape with the Flight into Egypt

Fig. 20

Turner, J.M.W. (1805)

Windsor castle from the Thames

Fig. 21

(signed) A.K. (1861)

An unidentified landscape painting,

Figure 22

Sandara (undated)

River dragon

Plate 3

Newey, S. (2016)

Rest on the Flight to Windsor

Oil on Canvas, 900 x 1150 mm

The images referenced here were all the product of a Google image search, which was based purely on colours, pixels and size; *not* title, artist or date. At this point I question - are these digital reproductions of original paintings? Or are they copies of reproductions? It is impossible to discern how many reproductions precede these digital samples. Their integrity is further confused by my own appropriations of the works, which include significant editing: Upon finding the source images I open them in Adobe Photoshop where they are rescaled, colourised and cropped to fit with each other in a new composition. Then later, in the process of painting the images I *summarise* their detail to some extent. This is partly to do with the complexity of the original artwork and my arguable capabilities in their replication but mostly because the images are too low-resolution to see the marks made by the respective artists sampled. These are, after all,

Internet jpegs that have been reproduced any number of times. Their clarity is compromised. From this cycle of sampling, resampling, “Photoshopping”, collaging and ultimately painting, the “originals” could be considered redundant. The result in *Picturesque* is a series of new narratives that belie literal comprehension.

The Cloud

What I have generated in the *Picturesque* series are new hybrid-identities. Their narratives are conflated and multifarious. Alternatively, in *The Cloud* series, the narratives are missing altogether. What remains are only the characters of the play, without the script. The “pieces” that make up *The Cloud* series are cut from their contexts, their respective missing backgrounds feature, for example, magnificent landscapes by Hans Güde, Albert Bierstadt and George Stubbs to name a few. In extracting these pieces, icons of their referents, I have changed their identities. Now, instead of being elements of a pastoral narrative, these cut-out paintings exist as lone ciphers. They float upon the wall, lost and de-contextualised as if exiled from history. Rather like how all paintings are featured on the World Wide Web, they are archived, side by side with other, orphaned images. They have been dehistoricised; displaced from the grand narrative of art history.



Plate 13

Newey, S. (2018)

The Cloud. Digitised test installation at SITE EIGHT Gallery, RMIT

The Cloud pieces are reinterpreted samples from paintings. Their original scale has been modified and they have, in some cases, been colourised in Adobe Photoshop. It is difficult to tell from glancing at the cut-outs paintings on the wall, from where they originate. To further complicate their original identities they have been slightly stretched, stylised and “remodelled” for the convenience of construction.

In so far as reproductions go, these artworks are unique because they have object-status. They, unlike *Picturesque*, possess a materiality that is tangible - in my painterly marks; evidence of my body. They are solid objects that have three dimensions and cast a shadow. These are objects with a potential commercial value that will require storage and

archival protection. And yet, they are but *versions* of another artist's *original* performance. It is clear that the idea of a reproduction is equivocal. As a sign, an index or referent, the reproduction is a shape-shifting entity. It may be solid, man-made and lyrical in its creation. It may conversely appear as "anti-matter", digital and ephemeral. Manifold the forms may be but what prevails about reproductions and copies are the value (or lack of) which we bestow upon them and the identity they assume in our perception of history's narrative.

The *Picturesque* series and *The Cloud* both represent a confluence between the object and digital data which, I attest, results in a new kind of materiality; a multifaceted one that alights questions regarding the surrounding value, provenance, ownership, authorship, the body of the artist and the ephemerality of matter.

What I have explored in this chapter is the multiple of ways we may consider materiality in the Post Internet era, for it is a grey area that resists neat categorisation. It is an ever-changing space that encompasses all notions of representation - realities virtual and experienced, as well as remembered, and in the case of my project, re-imagined. My two projects, *Picturesque* and *The Cloud* embody these discursive considerations between form and non-form, past, present, material and digital. In my studio enquiry these potentially binary-bound ideas are unpacked, resulting in the dislodged icons of *The Cloud* and the hybridised narratives of *Picturesque*.

In this age of the screen, the general first-world populus is well accustomed to a virtual reality. One need not don the oversized VR goggles to experience it but simply switch on the television, a phone, computer or tablet. The screen appears to the user as a magic window to elsewhere and yet it is entirely two-dimensional. The monitor is purely a receiver of light displays. It is however a powerful portal into which one might imagine. It is beyond this corridor that exists a labyrinth of images, all abstractions of their referent. The material original is made an effigy by their proliferous presence and identities remain in flux.

This consideration of screen-materiality finds agency in “the device”; how it may direct one’s gaze and way of actively looking. In Chapter 2 *The Opaque Mirror; The Digital Screen, its Precursors and Influence on Contemporary Painting*, I shall unpack the allure of the screen aesthetic and how it manifests in my project and in the practice of contemporary painting.

Chapter 2

The Opaque Mirror; The Digital Screen, its Precursors and Influence on Contemporary Painting

The phenomenon of the screen is paradoxical. By traditional definition, a screen is a barrier, a *partition*, a surface that is used to conceal; or a space upon which to project. The *digital* screen however, with which I am concerned in this chapter, is the opposite. Unlike the screen-partition, the digital screen represents a passage, a liminal portal through which one can project. The glassy, reflective surface of the digital screen belies its capacity to *absorb* its viewer. So deific has the digital screen (or monitor) become that it has its own “culture”. From computers, to laptops, tablets to smartphones, it would appear that the smaller the scale, the more captive the viewer.

In the following text I shall unpack the complexity of the screen’s allure and how this manifests in the aesthetics and content of my studio project and of contemporary painting. Like paintings, digital screens frame the viewer’s transference to another space. What exists outside of the frame momentarily ceases to exist, as if that which is framed represents all that there is to see. The hypnotic glow of the digital screen is transfixing like a campfire at night, it has the power to arrest the mind and fix our gaze. The power of fire and its awesome glow exist deep within our human DNA and scientific research pays testament to its restorative power (CD, 2014)

The “gaze” in the discourse of contemporary art and its relationship to the digital screen is likewise fascinating but my concerns in the context of this project are more directed at identity than DNA or animal instinct. The gaze is complicated by the use of digital devices. Just as I look *at* it, the screen gazes *back* and interpolates to me. It is also possible to be present within the screen, as avatars and profiles; disembodied personas. It is possible, via the screen, to change views, look without, look within and see through another’s eyes altogether. This interchange between subject and object is pertinent in the study of the digital screen as well as painting. The notion of identity reassignment finds poignancy in the arena of contemporary painting, where identity is often destabilised by homage, appropriation and quotation.

It is necessary to begin this chapter with a delineation of its boundaries – This chapter is not concerned with the history or the invention of screen technology, as it does not advance the knowledge of how and why the digital monitor has affected contemporary painting. I do however look at two early “screens” of sorts, from the Neo Classical and Romantic periods that serendipitously foreshadow the influence of digital screens in painting and culture in general. The two historical painterly devices in question are the *Claude Mirror* (c. late 18th- early 19th century), and Thomas Gainsborough’s *Showbox* (c. 1780s). I will limit my discussion of the screen to its relevance in contemporary painting and refrain from including a discussion of lens technology and photography. The latter’s influence upon the screen is indeed profound and well documented in contemporary art history and theory. In my quest to harness new knowledge I will frame my discussion closely around the digital image, as exists on a monitor. Likewise, television and its forefather, cinema, could also be considered relevant to my discussion of the computer screen. Again, their inclusion in my text will be limited as they represent a tangent that points awry from the project’s premise: This body of work and its supportive text consider, more specifically, the discursive passage that exists between painting and the digital screen – as a surface, a portal and as an indexical deferral.

The screen-based device is materially present in my project in various forms which I outline here. Its presence is clear in the final outcomes of the project - most notably the projected paintings on the wall. The gallery wall in SITE EIGHT, itself, performs as screen, displaying the data fed in by the monitor-screen of the laptop, concealed below the plinth. There exists however, more insidious ways that the screen performs in this project.

Methodologically the artworks are primarily born of the screen via Google searches. Displayed originally as small thumbnails, the images inherent in *Picturesque* and *The Cloud* are all born of these small digital referents. None of the works have been made from observation of printed reproductions nor from visiting original paintings in gallery collections. Indeed, that may have been easier in the pursuit of verisimilitude however I was faithful to the premise of the project being born exclusively of digital Internet sample images. The entire body of paintings that make up this project were painted from observing the screen of my laptop. This process allowed for me to zoom in on detail that I wished to view more closely even though most of the time this resulted in pixelated image displays. In cases like this, where detail was indiscernible, I would take “artistic licence” and simplify the content. Such is the case in *The Reluctant Bay Hunter* (Plate 5). In the right hand foreground exists a small faun-like creature, which was so small and blurry in my reference image that I recreated the animal as a silhouetted gradient. Not only does the gradient replace indecipherable details, it signifies a popular filter that is featured in Adobe Photoshop. Since the software’s inception the *gradient tool* has been a salient example of the application’s aesthetic. Photoshop's ability to create soft blurs and the illusion of a photographic surface it is exemplary of the program’s key functionality. Its addition in this painting acts as an index to the source from which it emanates: the screen. The same faun figure features as a cut out painting in *The Cloud* series as a reminiscent gesture to the process of translating digital data into painted imagery.

The whole *Picturesque* series and *The Cloud* were, in fact, painted in a manner that nods to the digital screen. Clearer references to this digital source include the hyper-saturated colours and the cut-collage arrangements within the composition. These motifs may be

recognisable to those who are familiar with the tools in Adobe Photoshop, and their actions - literally named “cut”, “copy” and “paste”. Colour and tone enhancement are also broadly featured throughout the software’s interface.

A more subtle reference to the screen however appears in the smooth and veneered surface of the original artworks. In copying images from a screen I have not employed much gesture or impasto at all. This is due simply to the fact that I actually can’t see gesture or impasto in the digital image. It is flat, no subtle shadows are available to view, and so they don’t appear in my appropriations. In order to create a stronger likeness between my painting and its digital referent I employ a “softening” technique, whereby I use a large, soft, flat house painting brush to lightly graze the wet painting’s surface, eradicating any relief elements in the paintwork. A final varnish when the painting is dry provides a slick glassy layer that likewise evokes a screen aesthetic - smooth, reflective and impenetrable.

The digital screen is one example of how one may defer *lived* visual experience of the world to a device. It is not however the first device to do so by any means. In the following I shall discuss two poignant precursors to this use of a “screen” in the making of paintings.



Fig. 23



Fig. 24

Fig. 23

Bingham, G. C. (1853)

The storm (detail)

Fig. 24

Newey, S. (2016)

The Reluctant Bay Hunter (detail)

Oil on Canvas

1000 x 2500 mm

Poetic Precursors

The Claude Mirror

Picture this: The reverend, artist and writer, William Gilpin, late 18th century sitting before a *picturesque*⁴ landscape, complete with all necessary tropes of cliff, river and an old ruin. In his lap he cradles a small sketchbook into which he is painting with watercolours in the *en plein air* method. In his right hand he holds a palm-sized, rectangular black mirror. He inspects the shiny object carefully. It appears to be reflecting the pastoral scene before him - as reference for his painting. What is this curious object of his fascination, this screen which he studies so carefully? One could be forgiven for thinking he was inspecting his

⁴ Rev. William Gilpin (4 June 1724 – 5 April 1804) was an English artist, Anglican cleric, schoolmaster and author, who pioneered the concept of the “picturesque” in the latter part of the 18th Century. Gilpin’s annual Summer tours around Britain were annotated as poems, paintings, travel journals (some published like *Observations on the River Wye and several parts of South Wales*, 2nd Ed. London: R. Blamire, 1789). The writings Gilpin made on the picturesque were not based on philosophical contemplation but rather created as a guide for training the eye to a way of appreciating the landscape. He directed these ideals toward the *en plein air* painter, the naturalist and tourist. The key components to a picturesque scene according to Gilpin were compositional balance, a dark foreground, side “screens” a bright middle distance and preferably a ruin or dilapidated castle.

The proportion of its parts - the propriety of its ornaments - and the symmetry of the whole, may be highly pleasing. But...[s]hould we wish to give it picturesque beauty,... we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a smooth building we must turn it into a *rough* ruin.” (Gilpin 1789)

smartphone, had we not mentioned the century. Alas, Gilpin is not time travelling; the artist is in fact holding a Claude Glass or Claude Mirror (Fig. 25, 26). Its purpose is to

...offer[s] the observer a reduction of the visual field and of color (not unlike the reduction which a painting offers). This reduction allows a unification... It unifies all objects into one glance of the eye and it reduces shadow, light, and colors to a tonal unity respectively. (Dupré 2005)

It would be logical, given its name, to assume that the device was invented by or used by Claude Lorrain, however, curiously, it was not. The Claude Glass was designed to provide the artist with a simple tool to capture and emulate the very popular painterly aesthetic of the day, championed by Lorrain some 100 years earlier. Thomas Gray popularized the use of the Claude mirror in his 1769 *Journal in the Lakes*, a pioneering account of tourism in the Lake District of the north of England. It was made popular by practitioners like Gilpin and remained so for the better part of a century in Britain, Europe and North America. Even tourists carried them in pursuit of the picturesque. Mirrors could be purchased from philosophical or scientific instrument-makers, opticians, shops selling artist's supplies and sometimes at tourist establishments themselves.



Fig. 25 and 26

Maker unknown (c. 1775-1780)

Claude Glasses.

William Gilpin, champion of the picturesque ideal, was noted to say of Claude mirrors, "they give the object of nature a soft, mellow tinge like the colouring of that Master". Gilpin mounted a mirror in his carriage, from where he could take in "a succession of high-coloured pictures...continually gliding before the eye". (Gilpin quoted in Mitchell 2017)

One can recognize the influence of the Claude glass in Gilpin's Goodrich Castle (Fig. 27). The image is oval shaped which was one of the shapes common to the glass's design as well as the soft cornered rectangular model pictured in Figures 25 and 26.

Painted in sepia, this watercolour sketch imitates the desaturated reflection from the glass. The scene has been fashioned into a most pleasing composition, making reference to many of the picturesque cues.



Fig. 27

Gilpin, W. (1872)

Goodrich Castle.

I confess to the novelty that the Claude Glass represents; the device has an uncanny resemblance to a smartphone. There are however, similarities between this antiquated device and its contemporary doppelganger that go past the purely visual. Firstly, the Claude Glass was usually small, which aided in its portability for the plein air painter, but its size performs more than this practical end. What I find most curious about this object is its popularity beyond its use as a device for painters. The Claude glass was considered an elegant accessory for the British tourist; the Grand Tour elite, who would ponder the British landscape as reflected by their own pocket “Claude”. It is as if Gilpin had prescribed a way of seeing for the cultured gentry –their view was to be filtered, to use a contemporary analogy, by a “picturesque” screen. It appears that nature is better experienced this way, for the refined traveller, edited down somewhat, from its “incomprehensible” scale.

The case is, the immensity of nature is beyond human comprehension. She works on a vast scale; and, no doubt, harmoniously, if her schemes could be comprehended. (Gilpin 2017)

Capturing portions or scenes, it appears, is more palatable for the viewer than beholding the vast and sublime environment in situ. Or, alternatively, considering Baudrillard's quote below, is the vastness of the landscape boring? The Claude mirror presciently imagines how we would use screens in the future, to replace lived experiences with captured scenes on a mobile device.

The country-side, the immense geographic countryside, seems to be a deserted body whose expanse and dimensions appear arbitrary (and which is boring to cross even if one leaves the main highways), as soon as all events are epitomized in the towns, themselves undergoing reduction to a few minia-turized highlights... Thus the body, landscape, time all progressively disappear as scenes. (Baudrillard 1983)

From a technical point of view it is commonly agreed upon by artists undergoing training that working from "life" is more challenging than drawing or painting from a printed or screen-based photograph. For one, in *life* the artist needs only to tilt their head and the whole perspective before them shifts. The Claude mirror also moves - it may not *fix* an image like a photograph can, however it serves as an excellent framing device. When the artist draws from life he must discern a composition and scale from the visual information before him. The Claude mirror simplifies the task in the same way a photograph does.

The smartphone is used ubiquitously to capture and abbreviate visual experience. I wonder how willing the average tourist would be, in our contemporary age, to experience the wonders of nature without a camera or smartphone, only to rely upon our fallible memories to picture again the sights we have seen. Our cultural, nervous compulsion to "capture" everything that is of beauty or merit hearkens back to Sontag's notion of

converting experience into an image, a souvenir. It is fairly common to see a tourist photograph a view and then immediately inspect their phone, sharing it with their travel companions, instead of purely enjoying the actual environment. The Claude glass predates photography. Indeed the tourist of the late 1700s, including the aristocracy would have had no notion of the magic that a portable camera would proffer within the next half-century. And yet, the desire to frame, filter and reflect their experience of nature already existed in the prescient device of the Claude mirror. According to Crary, the 19th Century foregrounds a new way of “subjective looking”.

[This text] seeks to describe some of the features of this new kind of observer and to suggest how his or her formation in the nineteenth century was immanent to the elaboration of new empirical knowledge of vision and techniques of the visible.
(Crary 1990)

For it was through a device, like a Claude Mirror that this was possible. The observer is capturing a scene from their own specific vantage point and in their own way, claiming a kind of ownership.

...subjective vision in the early nineteenth century is part of a shift which Foucault calls "the threshold of our modernity" (Crary 1990)

Hugh Sykes Davies (1909 – 1984) was an English poet, novelist and communist who was one of a small group of 1930s British Surrealists who remarked upon this prescient fashion in the late 18th century. In noting how the tourist would be required to turn their backs upon a scene to view it through the Claude Glass he comments: "It is very typical of their attitude to Nature that such a position should be desirable." (Buzard 2002) In the instance of the Claude Glass and the smartphone both devices are respectfully used to suspend the bond between the viewer and the viewed. In a paradoxical way the traditional definition of the “screen” is befitting here, as it partitions, bars and divides. So too does the reflection

of the Claude Glass and the appendage of the smartphone camera, by “standing in” for lived experience.

Linking the mirror as we do with contemporary popular culture, tourism, snapshots, web-based security and surveillance technology, exposes the on-going mediation of nature through technologies of vision. It reveals the layered, culturally-determined nature of the gaze. It draws attention to the complex mediation between looking and mark-marking, framing and representation, as well as the many interventions that occur between apprehending and understanding landscape. (Mc Kay and Matheson 2017)

The Claude glass is an indexical object. It provides a buffer between the immediacy of the landscape that exists in real space and the impression or painting that is made in its presence. The deferral of the pastoral scene to the reflective surface reduces its complexity, its sprawling edges, and packages it as a consumable referent.

The Show Box

Also worthy of discussion about precursors to the digital screen I would like to acknowledge a painter from the early Romantic period; Thomas Gainsborough (1727 - 1788). Gainsborough enjoyed a high profile during his artistic career, earning his reputation through numerous royal portrait commissions and landscapes of his native Britain. He was accepted into the Royal Academy and exhibited his portraits there for some 10 years. What is less celebrated within Gainsborough’s oeuvre however is the rather curious contraption that he invented later in his life during the early 1780s – the *Showbox*.



Fig. 28
Gainsborough, T. (c. 1780)
The Showbox



Fig. 29

Gainsborough, T. (c. 1780)

A painted glass slide from *The Showbox*

The object is a large timber box that features a convex viewing portal. One may view four separate landscapes, hand painted on glass slides through the lens, which can itself be adjusted. Four glass slides are individually set before a silk diffusing screen that was originally lit by three candles (now electronic light) to create the effect of great luminosity, like a modern lightbox or a digital monitor. The box opens at the top and back and also contains slots for storing the transparent slides. Painted on each slide are fairly typical pastoral scenes – a stream running through woods with cows, a small cottage among trees. Notably, the gestural qualities of the works are more fluid, transparent and perhaps less finished than one would have expected from a painter so revered for his lightness of touch. Painting on glass would indeed present challenges but the relative crudeness in the rendering of these scenes suggests that in this instance Gainsborough was more interested in the experimental effects of light rather than painterly virtuosity.

Gainsborough's Showbox can be viewed at the V&A Museum in London. It sits in a room amongst other works by the artist but unlike the canvases upon the walls, it creates for the viewer a more captive space. It is as if Gainsborough attempted to create a very private portal for the viewer – a most unusual approach to the landscape genre, which is often grand in scale and aspect. Again I refer to Crary's "subjective observer" who encounters, via an external device, a visual experience that is framed their gaze, alone.

..the individual as observer became an object of investigation, a locus of knowledge in the first half of the 1800s, and... the nature of vision was thus modified. (Crary 1990)

The Showbox does not place the viewer's body in the space of the painting; instead it asks them to liminally project into a space outside of their bodies. It is an antiquated monitor of sorts, a rudimentary version of the way we often view art today, on a screen, online. One may imagine the flickering glow of the candlelight that originally illuminated these glass paintings and the hypnotic effect that this may have imposed upon the observer.

Gainsborough's showbox straddles the line between art and the machine. Its appeal to the imagination, its privatisation of the aesthetic, and its dependence on technology... (Bermingham 2007)

It is of interest that Gainsborough did not use sunlight as a way of illuminating the slide paintings within the Showbox. The candle burning in a darkened box excludes the participant from the world outside in a way that cinema and virtual reality technologies do today. Curator Ann Bermingham makes the point:

"As a visual technology it [the Showbox] anticipates cinema for it invites the viewer to suspend disbelief and participate in a shared illusion." (Bermingham 2007).

The Showbox foreshadows the portalised culture that would manifest some two and a half centuries later. For this is an era in which visual experience...

...no longer involve[s] games of scene, mirror, challenge and duality; they are, rather, ecstatic, solitary and narcissistic. The pleasure is no longer one of manifestation, scenic and aesthetic, but rather one of pure fascination, aleatory and psychotropic.” (Baudrillard 1983)

In the following I aim to investigate this private, portalised space that Gainsborough has foreshadowed by creation of his *Showbox*. In contemporary times this is to become the model for “interaction”. As in the 1780s it remains a space of transfixion but to ends that surpass the purely visual.

The *embodiment* of vision is a key theme in Crary’s thesis. His position is that the viewer is not a passive recipient of “vision” via a device but rather an active observer; the body creates its own visual experience. A unique example he gives for this *production* of visual material within the subject’s body is the “afterimage”. For the afterimage appears only once the observer has averted their eyes from the subject - the afterimage is a “demonstration of autonomous vision, of an optical experience that was produced by and within the subject” (Crary 1990).

I am reminded here of a poetic body of work that I had the pleasure to view at CCP in Melbourne, 2013. The exhibition *After Images* by Daniel von Sturmer is most relevant to my discussion of Crary’s ideas. the exhibition was comprised of a series of printed, soft-edged, black shapes, on white ground, hung around the gallery space at eye level. Minimal as the artworks appeared, their *after-effect* was nonetheless, mesmerising. Upon examining and moving on from each black shape, I was bedazzled by a white, glowing counterimage. The effect can be disconcerting after a period and reminds one that they do not, in fact, *have to* look. The afterimage is created by the viewer, by their own volition. It reminds one that to observe is to *act*. Vision is not indifferent.

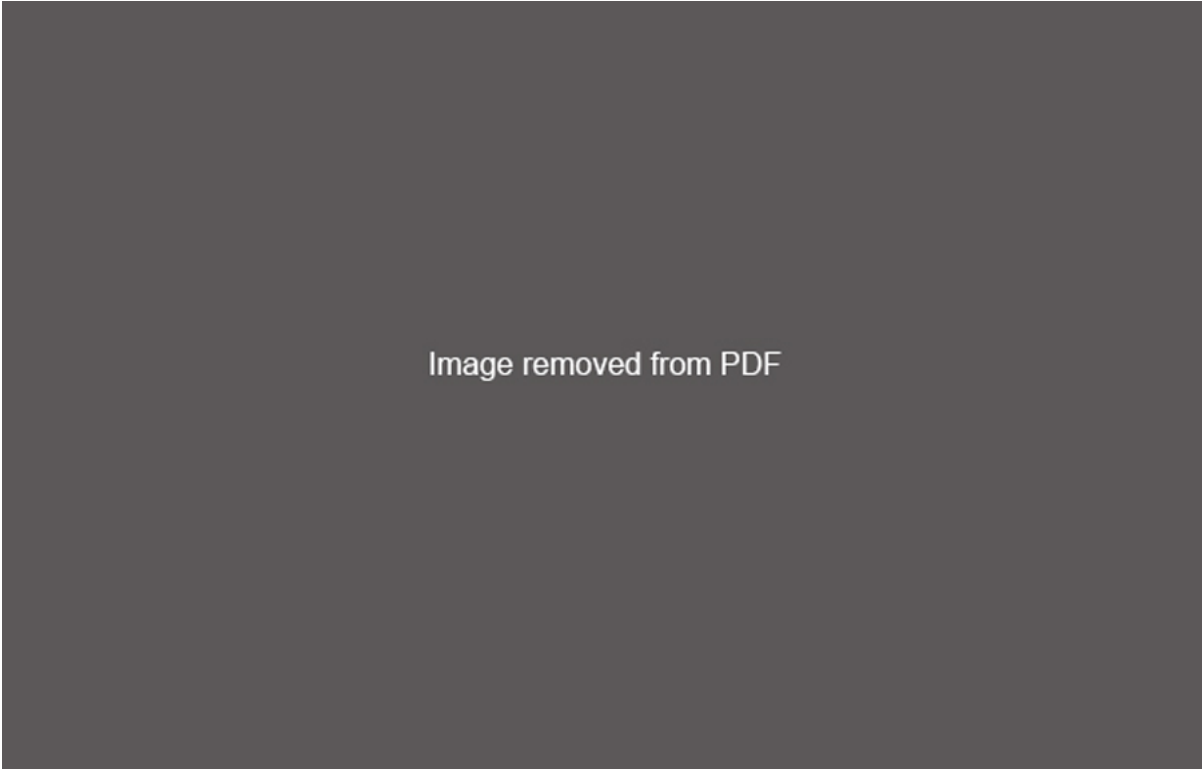


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Fig. 30

von Sturmer, D. (2013)

After Images

Installation view

Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne

Crary cites many examples of devices in early modernity that exploit the perceived illusion of motion that the afterimage could provide. The first inceptions of cinema and the moving image derived from these experiments. This form of autonomous vision he claims, informed the design of various 19th C devices⁵

⁵ Advancements in industrialization affected advancements in how vision could be “manipulated” “[In the] early 1830s, Plateau constructed the *Phenakistoscope* (literally “deceptive view”...). By 1834 two similar devices appeared, the *Stroboscope* invented by the German mathematician Stampfer and the *Zoetrope* or “wheel of life” of William G. Horn” (Crary 1990)

Like the study of afterimages, new experiences of speed and machine movement disclosed an increasing divergence between appearances and their external causes... accidental observation of new industrial forms of movement, in particular mechanized wheels moving at high speed. (Crary 1990)

The afterimage created by von Sturmer's exhibition has an enchanting quality however it is not for pure novelty. Also compelling about von Sturmer's exhibition is the shapes themselves. Not obvious to the eye (like, for example, the silhouette of a figure) these shapes and their dimensions are, however, highly reminiscent of digital and optical devices. The Apple iPad and iPhone for example would match these forms very closely upon comparison. Significantly, it is precisely these light-emitting devices that create afterimages for the common user, daily. One only needs to stare at a laptop for half an hour to see floating grey rectangles everywhere else they look. It is as if von Sturmer is suggesting that these objects inform a new type of vision - quite like how the Claude Mirror informed a sense of the *picturesque*.

The ghostly presence of an afterimage suggests a lasting connectedness that one shares with their device(s). Like an appendage, they complete the present-day human. This contemporary condition is illustrated by the common capacity to immerse oneself in the screen's glow until time veritably slips away.

Assenting to life up to the point of death

A perceived “disembodiment” is required for the viewer to become fully immersed in their screen world. Joseph James Nechvatal is a post-conceptual digital artist and art theoretician who creates computer-assisted paintings and computer animations, often using custom-created computer viruses. He speaks of a notable ontological shift that occurs in the viewer when they privately engage in screen based interactivity and virtual reality:

...interactivity to me is not merely the ability to manipulate and modify a virtual world, but the substantial ability of the immersant to self-modify (reprogram) his or her sense of self.

(Nechvatal 2001)

Nechvatal, working with a team of research scientists, outlines the physiological changes that occur in the brain when total screen immersion has been achieved; when the viewer or player has become *immersant*. What can only be described as a “Plethoric sense of hyper-embodiment” occurs when “360 degree cognitive vision enlivens receptive and organizing attributes of peripheral awareness and thus intensifies thalamic input to the cortex by making the active thalamic neurons in that region fire more rapidly than usual” (Nechvatal 2001). For a participant to reach such a hypnotic or hyper level of engagement with the screen indeed surpasses any analogies to cinema or regular *screen culture*, it is in fact at times a serious and dangerous mental state into which a person may fall. Baurillard hauntingly prophesises about the kind of disembodiment that screen culture would one day affect. In his more metaphorical musing in his 1983 essay however, the device in question is the television:

It is well known how the simple presence of the television changes the rest of the habitat into a kind of archaic envelope, a vestige of human relations whose very survival remains perplexing. As soon as this scene is no longer haunted by its actors and their fantasies, as soon as behavior is crystallized on certain screens and operational terminals, what's left appears only as a large useless body, deserted and condemned. The real itself appears as a large useless body. (Baudrillard 1983)

And yet it is not figuratively speaking, in contemporary culture, that the body is “deserted and condemned” - ominously, it is, at times, the literal outcome for the “disembodied” gamer. As accounted in the following, there exist multiple reports of deaths occurring whilst gaming in this immersant condition.

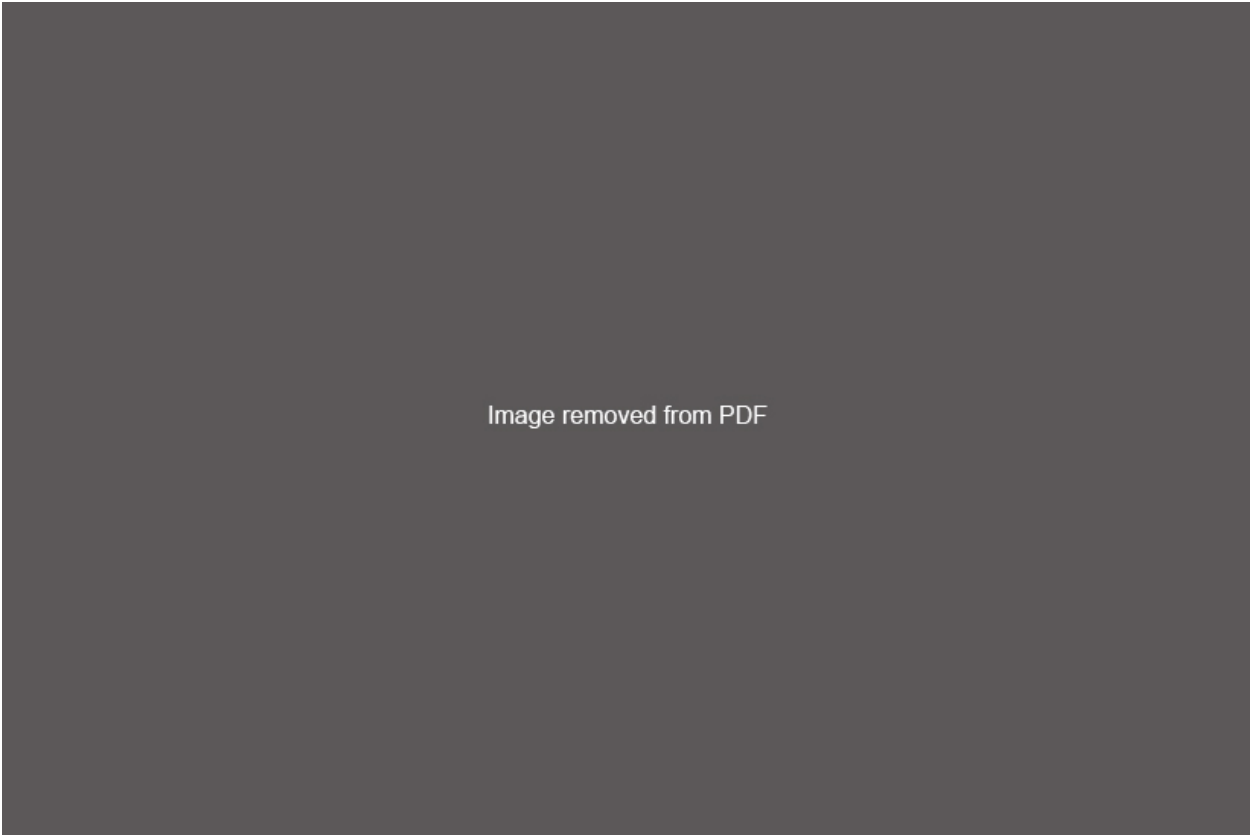


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Fig. 31

Deceased man in a gaming lounge, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, 2015. (CNN 2015)

In 2015, a 32-year-old man died after a 3-day gaming binge at an Internet café in Taiwan's southern city of Kaohsiung, the second of such cases that year. It was reported that other patrons appeared nonchalant about the death and continued playing even as tables were cordoned off for criminal investigation. Police couldn't confirm how long the man had been dead but say his corpse had begun to stiffen by they arrived. He may have been dead for several hours. (Hunt 2017) Online games have such strong interactive capacities and feature graphics now so lifelike that they offer a compelling alternative to "real life". It is a bitter irony that one of the most popular of these immersive games is titled *Second Life* (Linden Lab San Fransisco 2003) – an online "world" in which gamers (or "lifers" as they have been nicknamed) may assume multiple identities as avatars, own properties, take on missions, sexually interact with other avatars and even have professions that earn them actual money in "real life".

The aforementioned Taiwanese man who died whilst gaming online was so utterly starved and exhausted that he experienced heart failure. It is as if the gamer crossed an existential threshold, "assenting to life up to the point of death" (Bataille 1986). In his essay *Towards an immersive intelligence*, Nechvatal draws links with Bataille, Hegel and Kierkegaard's theories of Erotism and Existential disembodiment. "Kierkegaard asserted that in passion the existing subject is rendered infinite in an eternity of imaginative representations." (Nechvetal 2001).

It may not appear immediately obvious how screen culture relates to painting yet there are synergies that I will identify - not only in my own practice but the work of others. I will discuss how contemporary painting has incorporated, in many examples, the hypnotic allure of the digital aesthetic. Screen *culture* also manifests broadly in the content of some key paintings that I will discuss. Notions of disembodiment, hypnotic awe and the kind of passion that may enslave are descriptive of a sublime state. The history of painting lays a large claim on the sublime, hearkening back to the Romantic era. The contemporary, *digital sublime* is now pertinently represented as a new arm of painting's "expanded field".

In the following I will discuss how the process of painting can be immersive - for as a process alone it may evoke, for the artist, a sublime or all consuming state.

The way a painter engages with the making of a painting varies quite distinctively. The Modernist painter, for example, attempted to harness emotion and “the moment” in the gestural application of paint. Not exclusive to Modernism but highly prominent in works of artists from Kandinsky to Pollock are examples of almost hypnotic immersion in the movement of the medium and its performance upon the support. (Tate 2019) It is a state in which the conscious “thinking” mind gives way to instinctive, and as Pesonen declares below: “unconscious forces”.

“the artist has to be able to give up conscious control and stop thinking in order for the unconscious inspiration to emerge. Hence, the essence of the creative process concerns a duality between the two opposites: conscious control and the surrender to unconscious forces.” (Pesonen 2008)

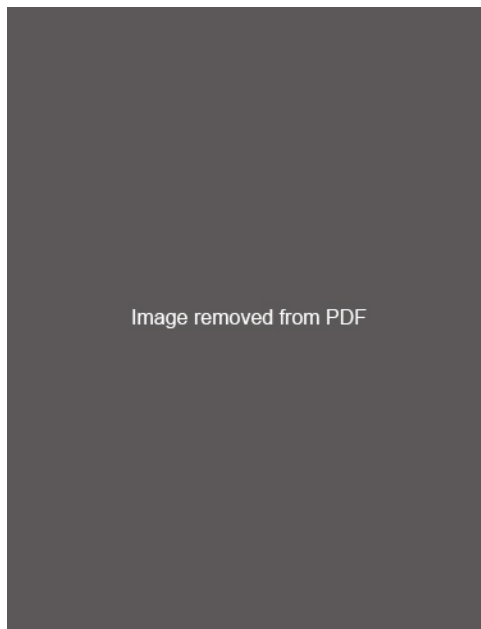


Fig. 32

Masson, A. (1924) *A Paul Éluard*

Automatism⁶ is the penultimate example of how this immersive state can be reached via the painting process. Andre Masson's automatic drawing *A Paul Éluard* (1924), (Fig. 32), is an example in which the artist, in a state of deep meditation, allowed his subconscious to emerge via fragmentary marks of his ink pen upon the page. Masson and the Surrealists manifest their legacy in the contemporary Melbourne artist, Peter Ellis, who employs a similar automatist methodology.

Ellis's imagery has its origins in automatic drawing from the imagination that is often simultaneously intimate in scale, calligraphic and articulate. Strange animals, characters and abstracted forms are dredged from subconscious thoughts often without preconception. (Langford 2019)

⁶ "Automatism as a term is borrowed from physiology, where it describes bodily movements that are not consciously controlled like breathing or sleepwalking. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud used free association and automatic drawing or writing to explore the unconscious mind of his patients.

Freud's ideas strongly influenced French poet André Breton who launched the surrealist movement in 1924 with the publication of the *Manifesto of Surrealism*." (Tate, 2019)

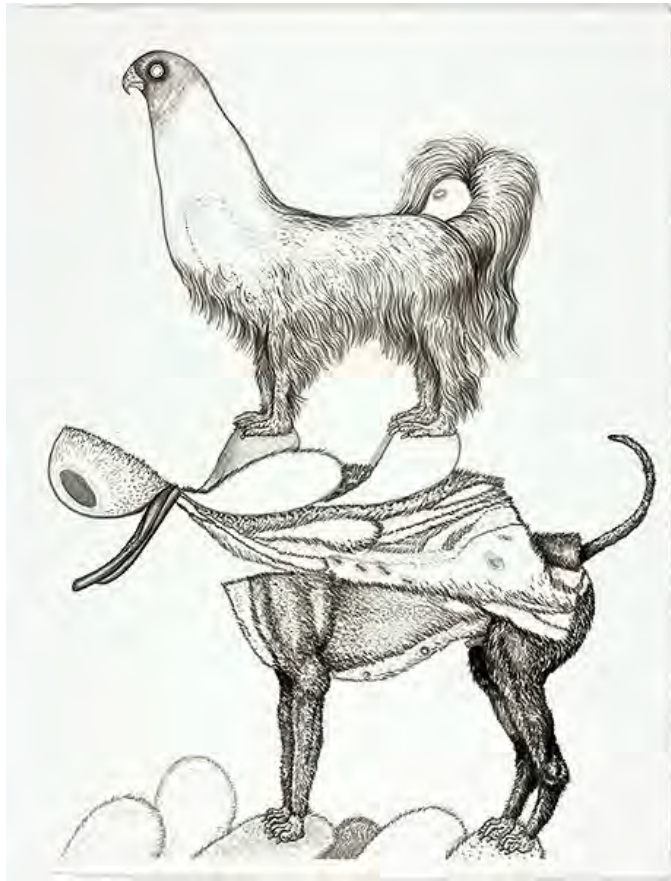


Fig. 33

Ellis, P. (2009)

Balancing

Strange, hybridised creatures emerge in artworks like Ellis's *Balancing* Fig. 33. Discernible are the head of a hawk atop a dog's body and another canine-being that merges formidably with a type of duck-beast, complete with erect insect-like beak. The stylisation of the image is warm, antiquated and reminiscent of Sir John Tenniel's illustrations (1820 – 1914) only to be belied by its content, which is quite unnerving. Although the imagery may have been conceived in the automatic state, such as the duck hybrid, it is evident that the artist finessed the details of the image after the hypnotic event had concluded to include reference to c.18th engravings evoking a collage like methodology. Nevertheless, the process admits to the same immersive condition that was sought by the surrealists. So

how does this meditative, artistic immersion compare with the way screens may capture and arrest their user?

This artistic-immersive state is in some ways akin to the submission one may encounter before a digital screen - an unconscious submergence into online labyrinths. In entering the online environment, what one seeks to find is not necessarily where one arrives. Indeed, it is often the discrete machination of algorithmic “cookies” that lead us awry from more important business. The way a search engine organises its data is algorithmic. Like the automatic drawing process, there is no narrative logic to the way data (or images) emerge.

At a glance, one might assume I adopted similar Surrealist methodologies for *Picturesque* and the incongruent collection of motifs in *The Cloud*. My images however, I confess, are not born of an immersive state, nor does the painting process find me meditative. The conception of my two projects, as outlined in the Introduction Part 2 *Methodology*, was via the Google Search Engine. What this process does share with the Ellis and the Surrealist movement is the element of chance. The two methodologies share the “labyrinthine” process of discovery that I mention above, albeit via different means.

Painting, for me, is not a spontaneous performance and I confess that it can, at times, be somewhat onerous. There are of course moments that cause elation and conversely problems to solve in the act of rendering appropriated paintings of Romantic (and contemporary) origin. Nonetheless the excitement is largely in the original conception of the image - the surprise element and chance discoveries that emerge out of the Google Image Search portal. The haptic pleasures of painting are alive in the process - the application of colour, creating movement, transparency and, in my case, creating likeness are very gratifying. A large portion of my concentrated time is spent in this space and yet as a process, it is not immersive. If I were to compare my painting process to the experience of digital screens it would be an aesthetic kinship rather than immersive capacity.

Painting the virtual encounter

Consider the ecstasy of screen space in an aesthetic context. Here I will highlight various motifs in contemporary painting that conjure the space inhabited by the gamer, that existential space of imminence, action and out of body rapture of which Nechvetal speaks. Counter to this, I will demonstrate how the screen performs as an unrelenting feeder of disinterested visual information. Television has long performed this occupation and now the mantle is handed to online social media and its endless “feed” of information. Contemporary painting both celebrates the screen; its allure, glow and omnipresence and likewise critiques its banality - the endless ubiquity of images that are pitched to us - and the apathy that results. Painting, I will assert, has absorbed the aesthetics and content of screen culture and reflects it back to us with poignant exposition.

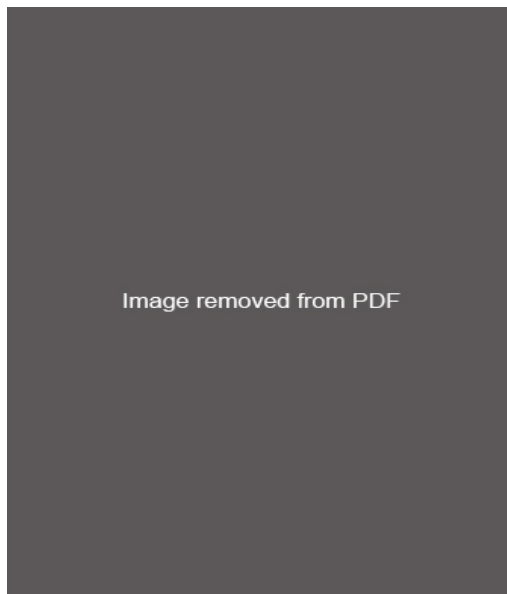


Fig. 34

Nelson, J. (2010)

Betty

Jan Nelson (b. Melbourne, 1955) is one such painter, whose work captures the glassy, colour-saturated aesthetic of the monitor. So fine are the layers of glazed oil colour on linen that they defy the viewer into believing they are digital prints, until closer examination. Her ongoing series of portraits entitled *Walking in tall grass* (1999 - current) depicts disengaged tweens-to-teens, all in brightly patterned clothing, who manage to avert our direct gaze. A 2007 iteration of the project, *In the Pines* (Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, Sydney), saw the installation of 12 paintings hung on a rush of horizontal coloured stripes, painted directly on the gallery wall.

Dynamic and distracting, the stripes conflict and flare with the static, “slowness” of the portraits hung along their length. The colours strobe together as if they were a monitor glitch. Contrarily, the pattern announces attention to the paintings’ diffident content. The figures in the paintings are all self-absorbed, in their own space, as if they too were immersed in an online *world*. They all take on a guise in their dress – a persona or avatar of sorts; *Viktor* (2005) adorns a horror mask; *Betty* (2010), (Fig. 34), wears a *Disney princess* wig, geisha style lipstick and a brightly patterned t-shirt featuring an illustrated Buddha. The subject’s identity is somewhat subverted to the viewer. Despite the adornments it is not entirely clear whether Betty is a girl, boy or non-binary – nor can we ascertain a cultural lineage; the figure appears Caucasian despite the Asian references. The teen dolefully plays with a lock of hair, entirely unaware of our gaze; indeed Nelson makes voyeurs of us. We, the viewer, can gratify our curiosity by staring at these youths because there seems to be a metaphorical, transparent screen or two-way-glass that separates us. The work muses on self-absorption and indifference in a way that eloquently reflects our relationship with digital and online culture. In both cases, identity is evasive and our subject is a confluence of archetypes or characters generated by social media.

Certainly, this private universe was alienating to the extent that it sepa-rated you from others - or from the world, where it was invested as a protective enclosure, an imaginary protector, a defence system. But it also reaped the symbolic benefits of alienation, which is that the Other exists, and that otherness can fool you for the better or the worse.” (Baudrillard 1983)

Ry David Bradley (b. Melbourne 1979) is a Melbourne based artist who works with the Internet as an informant in the making of his paintings. His interests, which reflect my own quite closely, are in the online environment, in particular, the internet-as-archive. His 2015 exhibition *Access All Areas*, at the NGV presented a body of paintings incorporating heat sensitive prints on suede with spray paint. They are images from video taped landscapes, edited and cropped from their source. Bradley is a member of the international group *Painted ETC*. The following text from their website echoes my own interests in the connection between the Romantic landscape and the digital sublime.




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Fig. 35

Bradley, R. D (2015)

Border Protection

The contemporary landscape here though as a painting has been re-orientated into a portrait format, not unlike the mobile devices on which we now view a majority of what we see on a daily basis. If the sublime in Romantic painting were cast as a powerful natural force, perhaps a digital sublime may be located within the recesses of vast networks. (Painted etc 2015)

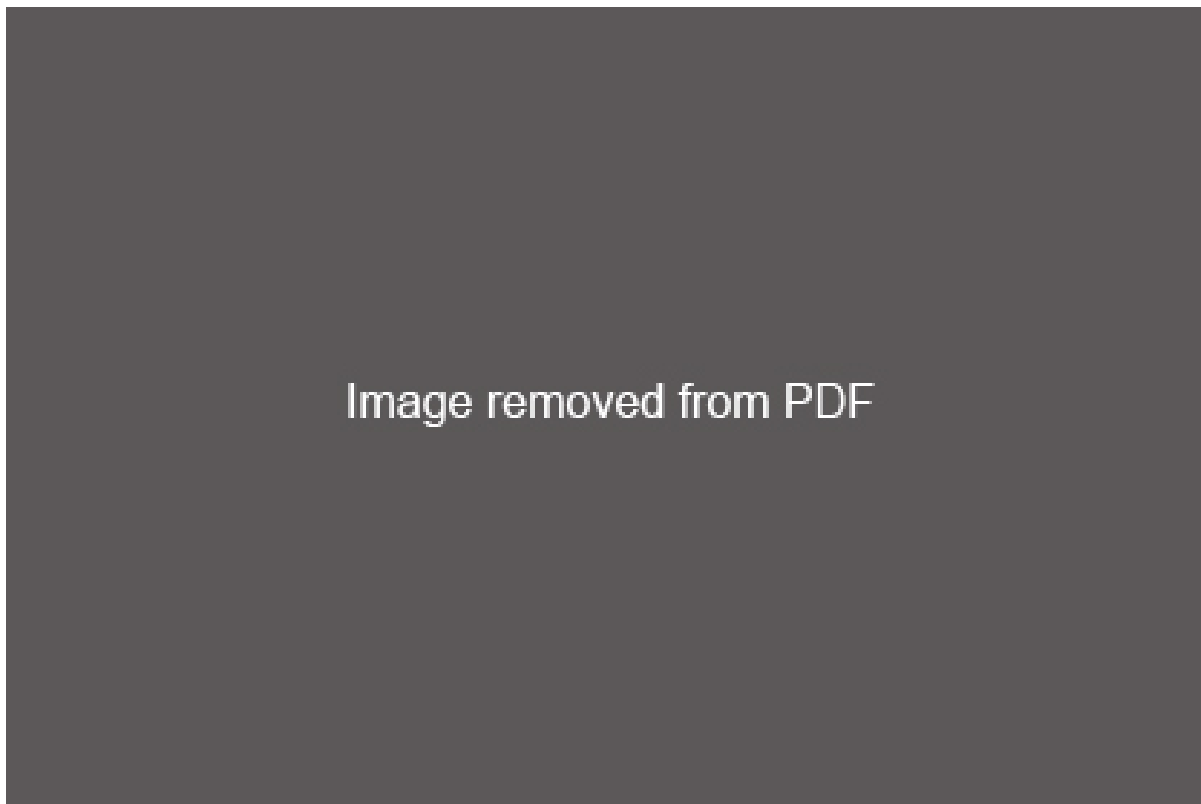


Fig. 37

Bradley, R. D (2016)

Overworld

COMA PIECES (3-10-2016 17:08:54),

Dye Transfer on Velvet

(Coma Gallery 2016)

Ry David Bradley's 2016 project, *Overworld*, considers the aesthetics of the digital pixel and its prescience in Seurat's pointillism⁷. Further to this the works explore the worlds that inhabit the screen. Concepts of surveillance, access and immersion are inherent within the paintings, which form an installation that invites the viewer to interact and navigate beyond pure passive observation. The artworks themselves are printed from digital displays onto velvet, offering the colours increased saturation and smoothness, quite similar to that of digital display.

Acknowledging this parallel between the screen and the history of painting, Overworld presents a new body of work where pattern and repetition are employed alongside hidden surface manipulation in a series of paintings that seek to merge tradition with contemporaneity. An Overworld is an area within a video game that interconnects all its levels or locations. Typically it presents an aerial perspective, a global map of the stages that have been completed or are yet to be, allowing one to see what may lay ahead without revealing what that is. Access is granted by completing tasks, or entering secret passwords. In presenting an exhibition installation that mirrors the aerial stage, where some positions have been unlocked, and others are yet to be known – Ry David Bradley continues an exploration of access and restriction within specific worlds, each an enquiry for where painting was, may now be and is yet to be. (Coma Gallery 2016)

Bradley addresses the space of the digital screen as it was a color field painting. The abstraction inherent in the printed images reminds us that what we see on screen is an illusion derived from an algorithm. These images are reminiscent of something but also nothing. It is a new pictorial language that Bradley presents to us in the new context of

⁷ In 1886 Georges Seurat developed a technique of painting with tiny flecks of pure colors inspired by scientific theories of light and perception prevalent at the time. Though Pointillism was heavily criticised, its principles are now the standard manner in which we see all screen based images, where tiny dots are placed in an array of shapes and patterns. The technique relies on the ability of the eye and mind of the viewer to blend the spots into a fuller range of tones.

painting and in doing so, expands the field further. Our visual language in the case of Bradley's work, has been augmented by the aesthetics of digitisation.

In new forms of technological representation, such as database ones, the technological tool is integral to the form, content, context and process of the art, not just a way of transmitting it. (Lovejoy 2004)

Within screen culture we find many tangents – they range, to name but some, from gaming, fantasy, social media and blogs on everything imaginable. From each of these branches we receive new imagery, new aesthetics and to a degree, visual pollution. A quagmire of the fantastic, the banal the truthful and the fabricated all co-exist to create *screen culture*.

Digitisation has destroyed the faith in the truthfulness of representation... all of this has led to the destabilisation of the image, of the art object, and of the function of art in daily life. It has also led to an overloaded image culture. (Lovejoy 2004)

Nelson and Bradley make artwork that reflects and also resides within this visual landscape. In their respective oeuvres identity and narrative exist in a state of flux. So too, in my two projects, *Picturesque* and *The Cloud*, does the clarity and stability of authenticity break down into fragments. The project, entirely sourced and appropriated from screen based Internet imagery, conflates history, myth, the Romantic and digital into an intangible and unstable narrative. A certain aesthetic disjointedness is represented in the series by the digitised “collage effect” featured in each work. Opened in Photoshop, all of the original reference is selected, cut from its source and montaged into a new composition with other artwork – some from the same period and some not. *The Reluctant Bay Hunter* (Plate 5) exemplifies the conflation of images, mentioned earlier. Note, for example, the varying directions and colours in the sea's current. So too do the narratives traverse varied paths.

The screen has functioned in the creation of this painting in manifold ways. Firstly, the Internet is the database from which all images were sourced. In Photoshop they have been manipulated in scale, composition and colour and collaged together, despite different colour casts and styles, to reveal the clash of source material. Despite the calamity and chance employed in its making, the painting still attempts to tell a story and we the viewer will attempt to “join the dots” to some extent. Absurdity prevails, however, in our endeavours to homogenise these motifs together. The image is at once beautiful and distasteful, reverent and transgressive – it resists clear analysis. I have tried to capture the alluring and deific glow of the digital portal and its perceived pathway to another world. In this case it is a world constructed from disparate digital cultures, freely colliding with the Romantic painterly oeuvre. The painting’s slick rendering reveals that the sources were not only Romantic paintings but digital fantasy-art illustration as well.



Plate 5

Newey, S. (2016)

The Reluctant Bay Hunter

Oil on canvas

1000 x 2500 mm

Because imaging technologies are available to a wide population outside of the usual cultural communities, a new populist circulation of images with disregard for “high culture” has arisen. (Lovejoy 2004)

Despite Post Modernism’s claim on the conceptual it is not immune to the influence of fashion. Various trends prevail in the presentation of artworks - tropes can be identified from gallery to gallery. For one thing, “Realism” is not particularly *cool*, especially Photorealism. It is often perceived as brassy and slick and bases its appeal too heavily upon craftsmanship. Fantasy art does not belong in the club either - for now it seems. It would seem that painterly *style*, in general, is deeply distrusted and can often suffer the penance of being perceived as lightweight, lowbrow or illustrative. One such artist that embraces this postmodern cringe is Adelaide painter, Tim Schultz (b. 1960, Sydney). His paintings, in all of their slick perfection, exemplify the idea of historical montage and all of the effrontery this may afford him. His paintings have a seamless, otherworldly character that defies the materiality of the medium. *The Secret Society*, (2015), (Fig. 38), with its plastic forms could have been made in Adobe Illustrator, so moulded and smooth are the figures. It is as if Schultz has montaged Dali’s backgrounds with mannerist cartoons that slither throughout the composition like *Star Wars* extras. Where else could all of these referential motifs coexist but the Internet?

His recent paintings are excursions in psychoanalytic structure buried within a labyrinthine visual frame. In these works, Schultz consecrates Dali’s perversity and attenuates it with Guimard’s phantasmal caprice, confessing predilection toward the Art Nouveau (after all a rebirth of the Rococo), an unruly line that connects painting with the architectural, and the breast. He edifies us with “Imperial monuments to the ‘Venus of bad taste’” (Schultz) and demonstrations of mental exhibitionism, sensually and metaphorically entwined and idealized.” (Thecommercialgallery.com, 2016)



Fig. 38

Schultz, T. (2015)

The Secret Society

Picturesque and the artworks I have discussed in this chapter all speak to a cultural desire to frame spaces, times and contexts just as the *Claude Mirror* did centuries ago. The historical and very human longing to capture and record the visual is championed in the Internet era. It is as if these framing devices – the *Claude Mirror*, *The Showbox*, the digital screen and indeed the painting provide a sense of ownership and control over the proliferation of visual data in our lives. The deific Internet has the power to pull the user into its vortex. The screen, even on its smallest scale, is a portal to elsewhere; a cultural transfixion that proliferates in one's home, relationships, public transport and working life. Its omnipresence and "culture" is reflected and critiqued in the medium of painting. Indeed, the latter is a visual medium that predates, foreshadows and informs the space of the

screen. It is a paradoxical and exciting discourse between the two and one that will ever shift and evolve. This *opaque mirror* – the digital screen, is at once a barrier and a threshold. For the viewer it will continue to frame desire.

Chapter 3.

Plural Texts; The Network and the Narrative

Picturesque and *The Cloud* are themselves “plural texts”. The narrative potentials in the project work are multidimensional. A linear or single interpretation is nigh impossible which is due to the fact that the paintings are a product of the Internet. The latter is a vast database that branches in every direction. Like the Cloud series, it exists as a network of ciphers that bear no obvious relationship to one another. In this chapter I interrogate both narrative and network structures; how they operate online, as archives, how these ideas operate in my project and in contemporary painting.

In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without anyone of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances... the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable ...the systems of meaning can never take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.
(Barthes 1974)

It is as if, in the above, French philosopher and semiologist, Roland Barthes (1915 -1980), forecasts what we now know as *the Internet*. Or perhaps it was the writer and futurist HG

Wells (1866-1946) who, well before Barthes' text, conceived the idea of a "world brain". As early as the 1930s Wells ruminated on the idea of "a complete planetary memory for all mankind". (Wells in Campbell-Kenny 2013) Wells wrote, in a prescient vision of things to come:

The time is close at hand when any student, in any part of the world, will be able to sit with his projector in his own study...[and] examine any book, any document, in an exact replica. (Campbell-Kenny 2013).

Most poetically (and hauntingly), however I laud Baudrillard's essay; *The Ecstasy of Communication*, as the most seminal philosophical musing on what would eventually transform culture: the screen-based network.

By carefully distilling the most radical elements of his previous books, Baudrillard constructed the skeleton key to all of the work that was to come in the second half of his career, and set the scene for what he termed the "obscene": a world in which alienation has been succeeded by ceaseless communication and information. *The Ecstasy of Communication* is a decisive, compact description of what it means to be "wired" in our braver-than-brave new world, where sexuality has been superseded by pornography, knowledge by information, hysteria by schizophrenia, subject by object, and violence by terror. (Baudrillard 1983)

Baudrillard's text possesses a kind of dystopian melancholy that sets it apart from others. His vision of the hyper-connectivity specific to contemporary life is one in which... " [a]ll secrets, spaces and scenes [are] abolished in a single dimension of information. That's obscenity." (Baudrillard 1983).

And so it was to be – by the mid 1990s, what HG Wells, considered "science fiction" gave way to Baudrillard's presaged "network" - a revolution in communication, the World Wide Web. Indeed, the conception of the *plural text*, *world brain*, or *network* marks more than a change in communication but more significantly, a new way of thinking, feeling and "knowing".

Wells imagines a culture in which all manner of information is at our fingertips, (literally via a computer keyboard) – indeed it is “on demand”. This newfound quick access to information, this graspable and own-able knowledge is as available to the high-profile visual artist as it is to the novice or outsider artist. They are likewise represented side by side, without category, in the online space. Interestingly, the meta-connectedness that we have with one another has resisted a homogenisation of artistic styles and tastes. Contemporary painting, and I include my own practice in this finding, is guided by and reflects the miscelleneity of the information archive – the Internet. In the following I shall address how the Internet has influenced the way an artwork is received by its viewer, how it can manipulate taste and the tone of an artwork as well as its ability to conflate unrelated images.

It was through the practice of “Googling”, cutting, editing, composing, painting and “re-googling” that I arrive at this research enquiry into networks. In the selection of my compositional elements, I must first consider the options that Google’s grand network offers. Within its database, I scroll through countless possibilities of compositional elements that are usually visually similar in colour and composition but often radically diverse in content. In the studio I am essentially chopping up the narratives and contexts inherent in each and every image and regurgitating them into new artworks. The experiments leading up to *Picturesque* highlighted to me the diversity of the Internet archive. In re-assembling parts of paintings, illustrations and photographs together I consider myself an author of plural texts – each with their own signature language of marks.

This new way of sourcing information, in its randomised and atomised state reflects the new epistemology of contemporaneity. The older, accepted hierarchies of information, categories and systems that predate the Internet are lost. There is a new dis-order that assumes the place which art-historical *categories* once occupied. The Internet has disrupted our perception of art history as well as the identity of the artist, artwork and the

oeuvre in the Internet era. The following text addresses, with particular attention to painting, the very *shape* of painting's history as encountered online. I consider how the Internet has interpreted the traditional narrative and linear progression of art history and how it is newly disseminated in fragments. Digitised artworks online, both past and current, I argue, possess a new level of indexicality. Not only are they removed from their chronology in the passage of time; they are displaced from their site of creation, from their cultural context and their maker. Never before has the "original" been so distant from its digital, online referent.

The Art Database

An online cataloguing system for works of art might be a good means of contextualising esteemed works of art. It may potentially save a valuable painting by Thomas Cole from being matched with a digital sea monster illustration. In actuality, such online art-archives have existed for the last 15-20 years but I question their functionality on a few levels. The following is a selection that I have annotated:

www.Artcyclopedia.com

This is a very comprehensive archive of well-known artworks. The site does however defer all searches to Google, Bing and Flickr, begging the question of the site's necessity.

www.artchive.com

A website littered with banner advertisements and merchandise for sale. This archive was arranged alphabetically by artist's surname and key movements of mostly the European, Modernist period. Only very canonical examples are included. For example, a search for Australian Modernist artist Sidney Nolan returned no results.

www.artres.com

This website professes to feature high quality images of works of painting, sculpture, architecture from most of the world's major museums, monuments, and commercial archives. Images can be downloaded for a fee, much like stock imagery. Again, only key masterpieces were available from the archive. A search for Ben Quilty returned no results.

<http://www.amico.org>

The AMICO Library™ was a licensed digital educational resource available under subscription to universities and colleges, public libraries, elementary and secondary schools, and museums. It represented works in the collections of AMICO Members. Access to images was subject to subscription and a fee payable. The archive ceased to be managed after 2005.

The disadvantage to the non-art specialist using these museum sites, however, is that s/he would need to know to look to these museum sites for works specifically in their collections. (Ferrari 2005)

As discussed in *Chapter 1: The Burden of Originality*, the online artwork is but a phantom made from algorithmic code. Its lineage to an original, material entity has undergone a series of deferrals that corrupt and erode its identity. My current practice and research online into historical Romantic artworks reveals this shifting indexicality most poignantly, especially in the following example.

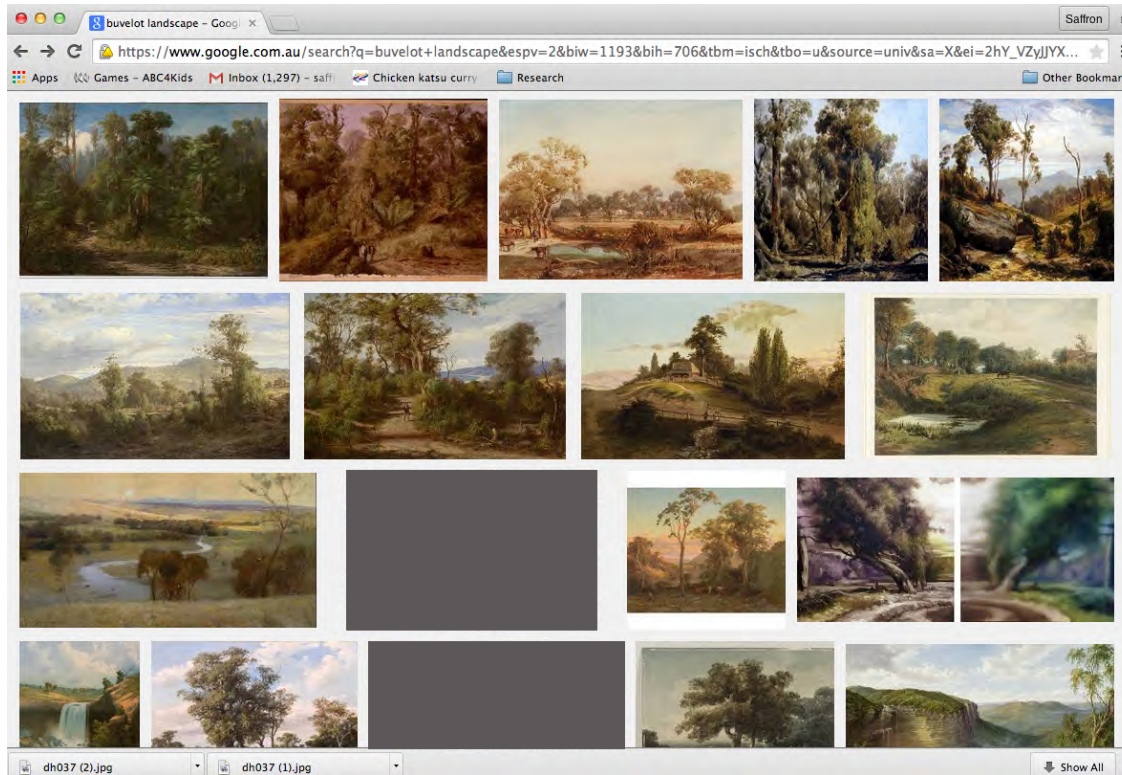


Fig. 39

Google image search results for “Buvelot + Landscape” including my own painting.

(Google.com, 2015)

In a recent Google image search I typed the words “Buvelot landscape”. To my astonishment, an image of my own work appeared in the search results (Fig. 39). This time, I had used words to search for an image – which employs a different protocol to the Reverse Image Search method of matching pixel dimensions and colours to “visually similar images”. Alternatively, in a search using words, Google finds text-based matches to “Buvelot + landscape.” My painting entitled, *Detached landscape (after Buvelot)* (2014), includes both of the words in question and hence its inclusion in some of the key images. On this occasion, Google had made a contextual link instead of a pixel-based, algorithmic one.

In addition to mine, there existed a significant number of other paintings in the search results that were *not* made by Louis Buvelot. Included were examples by Arthur Streeton,

Nicolas Chevalier and some unknown amateur artists. No doubt this was caused by the *hypertext*⁸ that accompanied each of the search results - which also included the words Buvelot + landscape. My hypothesis remains that Google cannot correctly identify, contextualise nor categorise artworks even with the use of text. One is confronted with plural identities and newfound relationships that disrupt the original's status as a discreet art object made by one particular artist. Such is the conflation of histories, images, oeuvres and identities that I propose are key to our contemporaneous era. We may well consider whether the Internet provides us with knowledge at all, or just samples of information. (Bulajić 2010)

Embedded in this project and its dissertation is a topological type of thinking. I find myself pondering the landscape or the map of the Internet – and I find it sublimely difficult to imagine. The effects of picturing this abstract, networked space is perplexing - for the network is something one only encounters from a private portal. There is no panoramic or whole view available to us.

There is in effect a state of fascination and vertigo linked to this obscene delirium of communication. A singular form of pleasure perhaps, but alea-tory and dizzying.
(Baudrillard 1983)

I have talked about its branches and archives, its meandering labyrinths of data. The strong linear narrative, the “timeline” of art history, now splinters apart in this contemporaneous era of the present. The Internet - a sprawling database of lists, branches and networks is the most sublime illustration of the condition of *contemporaneity*.

⁸ Hypertext: A software system allowing extensive cross-referencing between related sections of text and associated graphic material. (Kemp 2002)

With accelerated globalization, the concomitant ubiquitous influence of information technologies and spread of neo-liberalism over the last 3 decades, after the so-called “end of history”, disparate cultures and art worlds have become interconnected and contemporaneous with each other, forming global networks of influence. (Cox and Lund, 2016)

In their text *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory thoughts on Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art* Cox and Lund describe time in a similarly topological fashion. For them time is non-linear. Time according to the authors, is a *multi-scalar* phenomenon. These “scales” are pockets or periods of time that all exist “at once”. Cox and Lund discuss contemporaneity as a space in which the past, present and future are coexistent and interchangeable. The concept is similar to historian, John Lewis Gaddis’s concept of *The Singularity*⁹. Importantly, Cox and Lund assert that the present cannot be “slotted in” to an existing narrative. For, as they would have it, neither history, the present nor the future are successional - but instead coexistent.

To survey the oeuvre (albeit filtered and edited) of Louis Buvelot, via Google on a digital screen in 2016 is in itself an illustration of contemporaneity – of coexistence between past and present. The artist’s paintings, now digital cyphers of their material selves, have found their way into the future, some 140 years after their making. Despite the algorithmic status of these small jpegs one might still imagine something “real” about the artworks – its probable that the artist’s body, at one point at least, stood within the landscapes painted. We know that it was his own manual labour that created these pastoral scenes - now

⁹ John Lewis Gaddis’s text, *The Landscape of History* (2002), suggests that

“... the present is a singularity through which the future must pass in order to become the past. On the future side of the singularity, continuities and contingencies are fluid and indeterminate; however as they pass through it they fuse and cannot be separated. The present locks these swirling possibilities and shifting relationships into place and they cannot be unzipped.” (Griffiths 2016)

digital phantoms online. Likewise, finding my painting *Detached Landscape (after Buvelot)* (2014), among Google search results for “Buvelot Landscape” is another version of time travel or coexistence. Conversely, in this instance, my artwork has found itself travelling back in time, to be archived alongside Buvelot’s paintings, made well before my grandparents were born.

To read a narrative about the life of Buvelot and his work would not include these posthumous accounts of his work online, nor their misidentification. The linear narrative is not discursive enough to include the future. It is not capable of going sideways, way ahead and back again like the contemporaneous model that accommodates Cox and Lund’s concept of “multi-scalar” time or databases of memory. Chou confers with the concept:

With various human experiences under different time, space and domains, artists are “cross-dimensional glue that links the spiritual with the material, the past with the present, social continuity with the need to adapt and innovate” (Braman, in Ying-Yi Chou 2003)."

In my research it has been tempting to draw distinct opposition between narrative and database as epistemological models; however it has become apparent that this neat binary equation is not so impervious. We will see how data and narrative can combine – with poignancy in examples of my work and that of my contemporaries. I consider myself a (visual) “historical novelist” of sorts, using random data and Internet sources to create new painterly narratives. The network of the Internet has provided exciting new, sometimes absurd results in this painting project, which proclaims that there may be a glitch in the “world brain”.

The Rhizome

In 1941 Jorge Luis Borges wrote *The Library of Babel*. It is one of the most prescient of fictional texts about the *archive* of the Internet. It has appeared as a reference in various texts I have read throughout my candidature (by Vaughn, Foster and Chomsky to name

but a few). In Borges' Library the order and content of the books is random and apparently completely meaningless, the inhabitants, some of whom are called "searchers" believe that the books contain every possible ordering of just 25 basic characters (22 letters, the period, the comma, and the space). Though the vast majority of the books in this universe are pure gibberish, the library also must contain, somewhere, every coherent book ever written, or that might ever be written, and every possible permutation or slightly erroneous version of every one of those books.

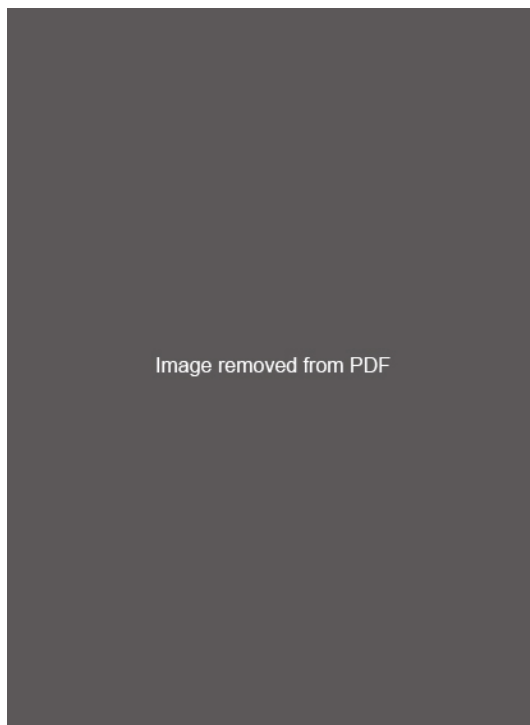


Fig. 40a

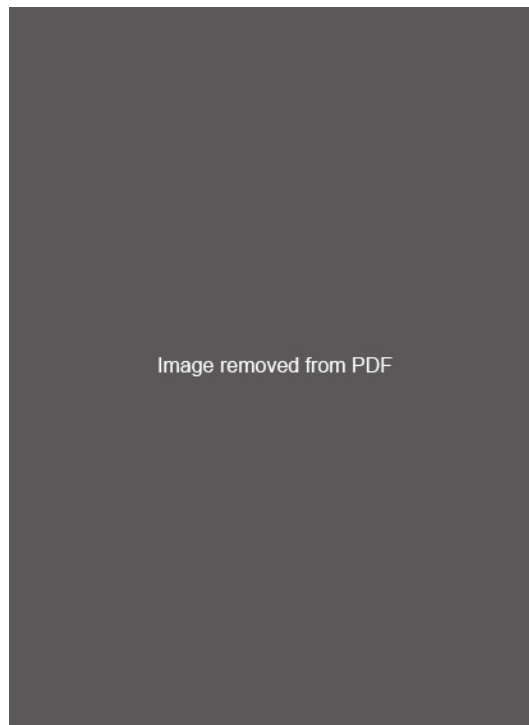


Fig. 40b

Fig. 40a and Fig. 40b

Desmazières, E. (1997)

Illustrative interpretations of Borges' *Library of Babel*

...let Your enormous Library be justified. The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception. They speak (I know) of the feverish Library whose chance volumes are constantly in danger of changing into others and affirm, negate and confuse everything like a delirious divinity. (Borges 1941)

The Library is unlimited and cyclical. If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder. (Borges 1941)

Borges' Library, containing multitudinous texts, parallels closely with the Internet, which also contains data that is "constantly in danger of changing into others" (Bulajić 2010). The meandering and labyrinthine growth of the Internet has been likened to the *rhizome*¹⁰. In the first years of the 21st Century a collective of artists concerned with Post Internet arts culture established www.rhizome.org. It is the penultimate online repository of digital and internet-based art projects and has been a useful resource throughout my research.¹¹ The Internet's rhizome-like anatomy bases its structure upon algorithmic logic. This counters the dissemination of information into "categories" – via historical context, narrative, culture or theme, for example. The world wide web's groupings, categories and associations are made in a much more "ad-hoc" and random manner.

¹⁰ Rhizome: A continuously growing horizontal underground stem which puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals. (Lexico Dictionaries | English, 2017)

¹¹ Founded by artist Mark Tribe as a *listserve* including some of the first artists to work online, *Rhizome* has played an integral role in the history of contemporary art engaged with digital technologies and the internet. Since 2003, Rhizome has been an affiliate in residence at the New Museum in New York City. (Rhizome.org 2017)

[The] Database is a multi indexing device. Its structure can be tree-like, a rhizome or like or relational, parallel world, leading to embedded databases which require data-mining. (Lovejoy 2004)

My artwork's confusion with that of Louis Buvelot is one such example of the Internet's desultory logic. There are however, further manifestations of contextual estrangement that affect the contemporary (and historical) artist.

Fear of the loss of originality and the revered artist personae are frequently connected to the endless reproductions that digital media affords. Another source of fear for artists confronting the new technologies is the integration of individual artists into the context of other works or the creation of metaworks. (Bulajić 2010)

When an artwork exists online it becomes infinitely accessible. This being so, it's possible to find the same artwork in various different online places, contexts with sometimes, unusual associations. The algorithms that govern the (somewhat abstract) architecture of the Internet defy the historical conventions of consecutivity, genrefication and periodisation. This is characterized by the way Google "organizes" artists in groups. For example, in a Google Image Search for painter Wilhelm Sasnal (b. Poland, 1974) I was offered auxiliary search items - other artists - that Google *associates* with Sasnal. Included in the search results for the latter were works by two other painters: Michael Borremans (b. Belgium, 1963) and Marlene Dumas (b. South Africa, 1953). Aside from painting there is not a great deal else that unites these three artists. Stylistically and thematically they are each quite diverse. Dumas for example, is some 20 years senior to Sasnal and studied in Cape Town. Borremans, 54, works in a style that recalls 19th century painterly traditions. One may wonder why indeed these artists are grouped together at all. Certainly, they co-exist in the present, yet their artistic concerns are quite different, their backgrounds are culturally disparate and oeuvres vary quite distinctly. To what do we owe this new grouping?

The answer lies in this sentence: *People also searched for*. The technology behind this kind of “grouping” is beyond hypertext. It is in the more advanced realm of hypermedia, which involves the tracking of text and image searches amassing a colossal bounty of data history. Despite its efforts, Google has in fact, led us awry on our search for Wilhelm Sasnal by de-contextualising his oeuvre. It is clear, by the sheer arbitrariness of these search results, that Google’s ability to “categorise” is purely sourced from algorithmic search data – not an art history book. (Lovejoy 2004)

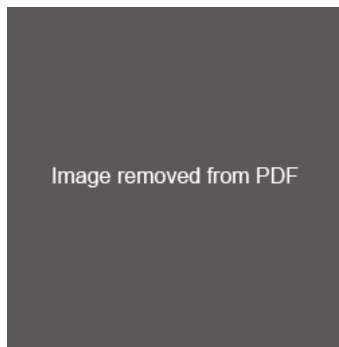


Fig. 41

Fig. 41
Sasnal, W. (2001)
Girl Smoking (Peaches)

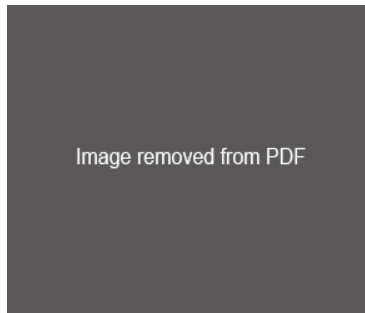


Fig. 42

Fig. 42
Borremans, M. (2015)
The Horse

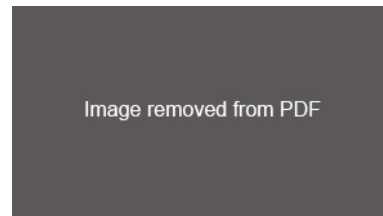


Fig. 43

Fig 43.
Dumas, M. (2013)
The Widow

A Timeless Space

The printed archives of art history are heavily reliant upon *time* as a model – a phenomenon which appears not to exist in the World Wide Web, a timeless space. Books and timelines dominated the education of art history for centuries, indeed, my first year history exam at art school demanded the student body *memorise* dates and artists' names, so heavy was the emphasis on chronological information. As an undergraduate student in 1991 my classmates and I relied on *The story of art* (fourteenth edition, 1986) written by E.H Gombrich. The annals of art history were presented to us via a system of sequential narrative. It is a well-utilized methodology for teaching, one that begins in childhood through song, rhyme and story. I could again refer to the parallel made earlier, of narrative-as-knowledge versus data-as-information. This is a complex binary however that resists perfect diametric opposition.



Fig. 44

The Millennial Perspective (3000 BC-AD2000) An example of an art historical timeline in Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (Gombrich, 1984)

...IT process foregrounds information over knowledge. The latter is a long-term process, conceptualized within the mind. Information is a form of short term statement that can be delivered easily by automated processes.” (Vaughan 2005)

The Internet relies on the latter to store its facts, in tables and lists, but not stories. An “offline” education in art and the humanities, such as my own undergraduate one, was traditionally based in books - narrative and chronology.

As discussed earlier, this binary is contentious and has been challenged in contemporary historical discourse. The epistemologies behind historical accounts are at once empirical and imaginative. History (*his story*) is under scrutiny. The writing of history is a creative act. Contemporary historian Greg Denning revolutionised the teaching of “history” in Melbourne during the 1970s. (Griffiths 2016). As a lecturer in *Reflective History* at La Trobe and Melbourne Universities he taught his students about the past...

by first requiring them to describe the present... Thus they soon learned how difficult it was to describe the present and ‘that everything they discovered was the subject of the reflective discourse by somebody else’. In Greg’s hands, history was no mere subject at university; it became a form of consciousness, a definition of humanity, a way of seeing – and changing the world. (Griffiths 2016)

Versions of Now

The *Picturesque* project began in 2015 with the creation of a small painting *Versions of now* (Plate 1). The title itself, came from Tom Griffiths, the author of *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and their Craft* (Black Inc. Carlton, 2016). I had heard the author interviewed on ABC Radio National whilst painting the picture.



Plate 1



Plate 1 (Detail)

Plate 1

Newey, S. (2015)

Versions of Now

Plate 1 (detail)

Newey, S. (2015)

Versions of Now

Its conception arose from my curiosity about colonial paintings and whether there were similarities across cultures and times regarding this theme of “settlement”. Since the Australian pastoral was painted with a distinctive Eurocentric gaze and with questionable historical authenticity, I wondered if this was common to other lands populated by the dominant British Empire. The answer was found in a depiction of the American pastoral by artist Thomas Cole (1801-1848, England), in his series *Course of Empire* (1833 - 1836), which captured all the fury and triumph of the American, Romantic spirit, complete with images of local “savages”. In my homage I include these Native American people, as depicted by Cole, as tiny motifs within the shadow of a rock by the lake. Their scale does not comply with the surrounding image; a homage to Louis Buvelot’s *Waterpool at Coleraine (Sunset)* (1878). Buvelot’s painting features cows and ducks, which in my new version, dwarf the “savages” of my Cole adaptation.

The two stories (Buvelot and Cole’s) don’t quite gel together. They share great passion and Romantic longing but ultimately the history I have forged between them is fictional. In this image I have played historical novelist and conflated two historical “events” together. In *Versions of Now* I expose three narratives: Buvelot’s, Cole’s and my own, as myth. The artist is often bestowed with the honour of “historical authority” however this is dubious. In the reading of more “plural texts” about the colonial conditions of both America and Australia, I know that the paintings in question are tainted with patriotic projection and fantastical embellishment. The reason these works are revered as historical masterpieces goes back to a perceived faith in antiquity – “time adds weight to a culture, an object”. (Griffiths 2016) When appropriated, the original artwork is launched into a timeless space – once separated from its original oeuvre, context and history, it becomes a timeless cypher. In my painting, Cole’s version of the 1830s, Buvelot’s of the 1870s and my 2015 are equivalent. They are all but *versions* of a time.

...rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology ("this happens before or after that") and recaptures a mythic time (without before or after); ...rereading is no

longer consumption, but play...[it becomes] a plural text: the same and new.

(Barthes 1974)

Appropriated artworks create synergy between the past and present. There is a kind of “time travel”, to use Griffiths’ term, that occurs when a historical artwork is exhumed and reanimated as a new form or contemporary musing on its original premise. The act of appropriation reenacts or reperforms history in a poetic way. To study and copy the marks of Buvelot’s *Waterpool at Coleraine (Sunset)* (1878) is a more complex act of *looking*. To begin with - its very technically challenging. It became clear to me that Buvelot made the painting in a series of sittings; perhaps *en plein air* to begin with however it was in no way altogether, *alla prima*¹². My appropriation necessarily “abbreviated” some of the detail that Buvelot had so beautifully described in his painting. In an attempt to mirror Buvelot’s marks I studied the image file very closely, only to have it pixelate upon zooming in tightly on smaller sections. To some degree I had to guess, indeed, *invent* the scene before me. Artworks that are chosen for this kind of homage, or indeed critique, are usually the ones that “carry the weight of time”, artworks that have enjoyed some form of celebrity in their own period of creation. The present, contemporaneous era is the penultimate condition in which this discipline of reanimation and re-contextualisation thrives.

In my project, contemporaneity is willfully enacted by the art of appropriation. I have acknowledged my allusion to artworks from the Romantic period and beyond. In an example offered by Slovakian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, however, it becomes clear that contemporaneity can be identified in works of art, beyond the intention of the artist. Contemporaneity is not exclusive to the act of appropriation. It may be present in works of art in more insidious ways. I found Žižek’s example most compelling: In his lecture *Ontological Incompleteness In Painting, Literature and Quantum Theory*, in 2012¹³ Žižek

¹² Alla prima refers to the act of making a painting in the wet-into-wet tradition, in one sitting.

¹³ Slavoj Žižek open public lecture was held at the European Graduate School EGS Media and Communication Studies, Saas-Fee Switzerland Europe in 2012. (YouTube, 2012)

discusses the Neo-classical masterpiece, *Death of Marat* by Jacques Louis David (1793). Within the painting, argues Žižek, exists a large black mass above the subject. This field, asserts Žižek, is prescient nod to Malevich's Black square, 1915. Asserting that for David, its inclusion is unwitting, but nonetheless an example that foreshadows the Malevich's epistemological premise. It is as if, Žižek purports, the black field that oppressively dominates half the space of David's painting, performs like Marat's own "thought bubble". If one could read the subject's thoughts, according to Žižek they would read: "We are walking on the edge of [an] abyss". It is, he claims, a "propaganda painting without the cheap optimism". (YouTube, 2012). The same sentiment can be found in select quotes about the square series by Malevich - although his Suprematist concerns, unlike those of the revolutionary Marat's, were more aligned with the perceived "end of painting", than the blackness of political revolt. (Malevich and Drutt, 2003)



Fig. 45



Fig. 46

Fig. 45

David, J. L.. (1793)

Death of Marat

Fig. 46

Malevich, K. (1915)

Black Square

[Black Square is meant to evoke] the experience of pure non-objectivity in the white emptiness of a liberated nothing... It is from zero, in zero, that the true moment of being begins. (Malevich and Drutt, 2003)

The thread that Žižek has drawn here, between 1793 and 1915 is indeed, long, yet quite persuasive and heralds the notion that contemporaneity may exist across countless other historical works of art. He identifies a contemporaneous relationship of forms, (or non-forms,) that would continue to occupy artists to the present day.

Of course artists have, throughout history, looked to the past and made intentional homages; “works after” their forebears. One difference between the past and today, I believe, is the tone with which an artist appropriates and the means by which they do so. It is not always one of reverence and homage nor is it only ever critique. There exist many subtle nuances of intention when it comes to appropriated artworks in the present day. One such that I find particularly interesting, in my discussion about “networks”, is Stephen Prina’s *Exquisite Corpse, the Complete Paintings of Manet* (1988 -). The tone or voice that I identify in Prina’s homage project is rather cool and academic. *Exquisite Corpse* is an archive of sorts that addresses Manet’s oeuvre more like an inventory than a story of the artist’s life and work. After I have discussed Prina’s project I shall continue my discussion of *tone* in a select painting from my project, *Picturesque*.

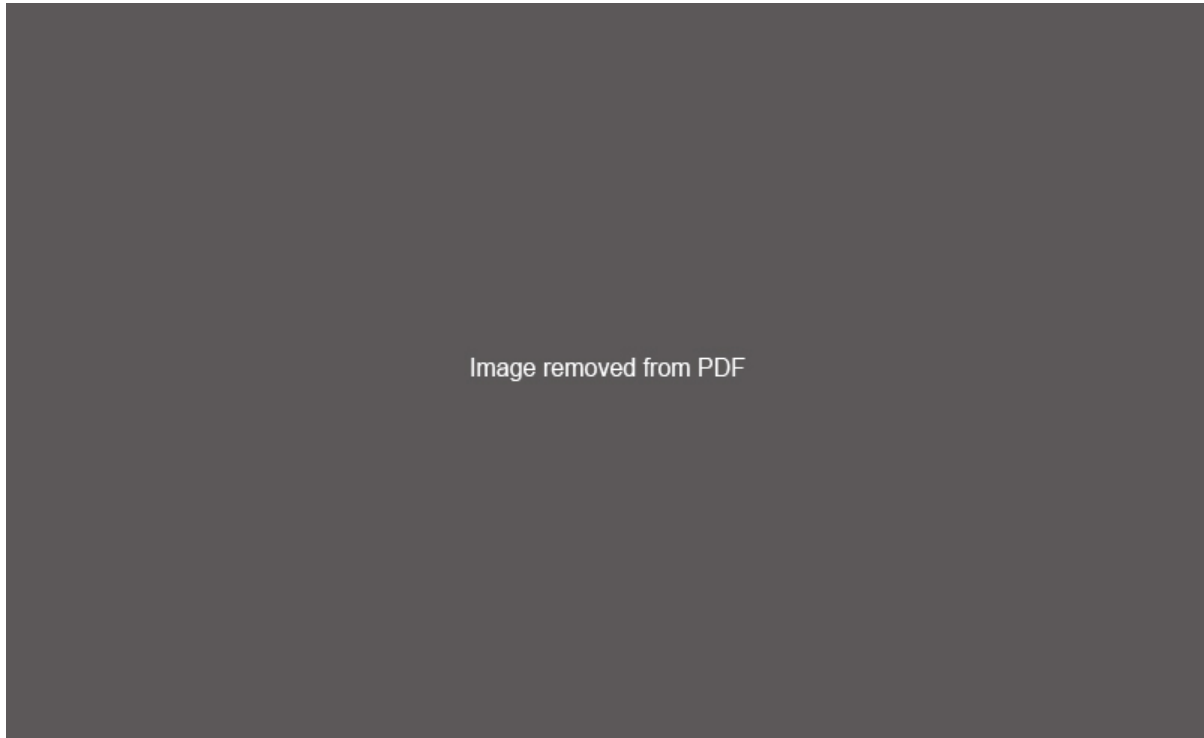


Fig. 47

Prina, S. (1988 -)

Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet, 218 of 556

I entitled the Manet project Exquisite corpse because it seemed necessary to see a complete body of work, in relation to his body and to my body. (Prina in Joselit 2009)

Exquisite Corpse, the Complete Paintings of Manet is a series of paintings that was begun in 1988 and is still continuing. Prina (b. USA, 1954) set out to make a painting of the same size and shape as every painting recorded in a 1969 *Catalogue Raisonné* of Manet's works. Since then the project has been exhibited in multiple galleries including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1990, MoMA, 1990 and Krakow Witkin Gallery, 2009. At each presentation Prina selects three of Manet's pictures, which he partially reproduces: he mimics the scale of the originals but only renders their respective images with colourfield washes of sepia ink. A "diagrammatic" drawing is always displayed to the right of each painting, featuring all 556 Manet works. It is a visual catalogue, an index of sorts

that features “thumbnails” of all works by Manet - represented as tiny shapes indicating the relative scale of his paintings etchings and drawings.

The diagram is by all definitions a database - and most befitting in this discussion of appropriation and databased networks. The key diagram accompanies all exhibited colourfield appropriations. One may wonder - why Manet - an artist who captured the great spectrum of human life with virtuosity, should be reduced thusly to a diagram? Maybe Prina's index aims to critique the “vanishing connectedness” that occurs when an artist's whole life's work is reproduced (in books, online, as souvenirs) over and over. Perhaps Prina's coolness, which I identified above, is a wry response to the vendible status of a Manet painting. Sourced from a 1969 *Catalogue Raisonné*, originally printed for an auction house, Prina's paintings capture only the scale and shape of their original referents. It is as if the image/picture itself is irrelevant or at least immaterial to its value and that artworks are more specifically valued according to their scale¹⁴.

...Painting since the 1990s has folded into itself so called institutional critique without falling into the modernist trap of negation, where works on canvas are repeatedly reduced to degree zero while remaining unique objects of contemplation and market speculation. (Joselit 2009)

Theorist and critic David Joselit writes about Prina's project in his journal article *Painting beside itself* in *October*, Fall 2009. Here he talks about the *Exquisite Corpse* project as a prime example of *transitivity*, that is, the way in which paintings exist and communicate

¹⁴ At Christies in November 2014, two paintings by Manet sold at a very polarised sale margin. *Toréador saluant, tambour de basque* (1879), a circular panel measuring 20 cm in diameter sold for \$197,000 USD. *Le Printemps* (1881) a painting measuring 74 x 51 cm, fetched \$65,125,000 USD. To be fair, the latter may have broader commercial appeal as a more “finished” painting featuring an elegant mademoiselle compared to the more impressionistic *Toréador* however it is clear that the larger image holds an intrinsic weight and status and consequently a matching price tag.

(Christies.com, n.d.)

with one another in a network. Prina's project helps us to "visualise the transitive passage of action from a painting out to a social network (or body), and from this network back onto painting." (Joselit 2009) This, I believe, also affects the tone of the artwork. *Exquisite corpse* is a most prophetic project as it predates the Internet but nonetheless imagines it, as it is known today. The artist has created an archive of Manet thumbnails that is uncannily alike the interface of Google's image search. It provides us with a broader view of the artwork as it exists *among* other artworks. Like an algorithm, Prina's allusion to the original work of art, painted by Manet's own hand is removed and replaced with a scaled square. Is the square an indication of positive space, or is it, like malevich's square, an abyss? Either way, it is a transitive presence, a cypher, in the network.

In the example of *St Jerome Discovers Scientology and it Changes Everything* (Plate 3), there exists various tones, not all intentional, which I will identify. In making the painting I encountered, for the first time, a note of irreverence in my practice. For all of the "dubious histories" that were recounted in the landscapes by Buvelot and Cole, I have always admired the mastery of their respective techniques and the Romantic awe that they conjured. Nonetheless, it is not their paintings that I have appropriated in *St, Jerome* but a work by George Petrie (Irish, 1760 - 1866) entitled *Dún Aonghasa, Inishmore, Aran Islands* (c.1827) (Fig. 49) and (circle of) Giovanni Bellini (Italian, 1431/1436 – 1516) *St Jerome Reading in a Landscape*, (c. 1480) (Fig. 50). These artworks, with the addition of another four, were sourced online as per the process described, in Introduction Part 2 - *Methodology*. The "mash-up" process via Google Reverse Image Search is not one that allows for accurate artist-acknowledgement and citation. It produces only random images, entirely divorced from their original/material identity. It was impossible, despite my tireless searching, to find dates and names on any website for the other four of the artworks that feature as appropriations in my *St Jerome* painting. It is not with frivolous abandon that I appropriate the work of masters such as the above, mashed as they are with examples of, what I believe to be digital fantasy illustration. The tone is complicated – I painted from my sources with as much accuracy as to honour their technical mastery but their newfound

affiliation with each other (ie, Renaissance *St. Jerome*-meets-digital unicorn) did not originally sit easily with me.

Plate 4

Newey, S. (2016)

St. Jerome discovers Scientology and it changes everything.

900 x 1150 mm

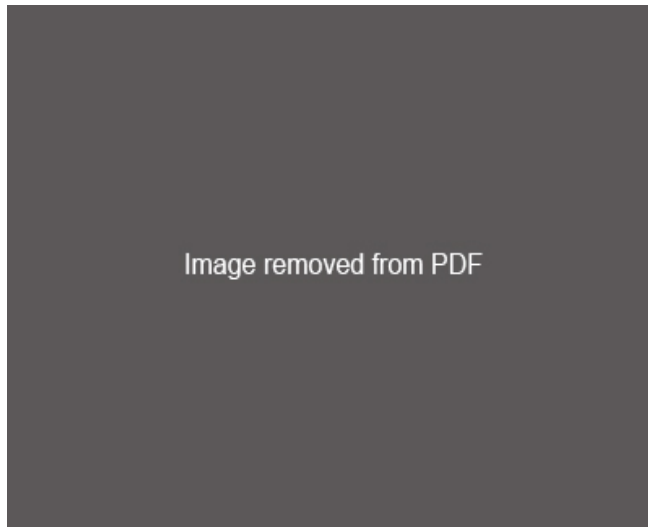


Fig. 48



Fig. 49

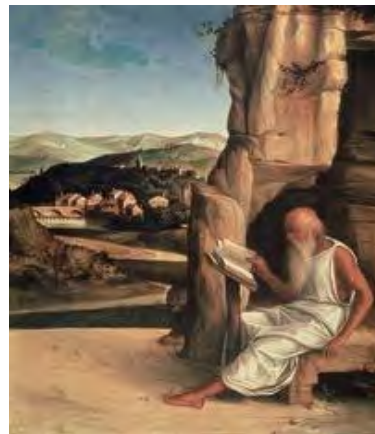


Fig. 50



Plate 4

Fig. 48

Unknown digital artist (undated)

Battle of the sea and sky

Fig. 49

Petrie, G. (c. 1827)

Dun Aonghasa, Inishmore, Aran Islands

Fig. 50

Circle of Bellini, G. (c. 1480)

St. Jerome reading in a landscape

How do we pay our respects, allow for dissent, accommodate complexity, distinguish between our voice and those of our characters? The professional paraphernalia has grown out of these ethical questions. (Griffiths 2016)

I believe my apprehension stemmed from my own reverence for the weight of time bestowed upon historical masterpieces. It was a pledge to myself however, to be faithful to my process and so the painting survives. The title, which refers to Scientology, occurred somewhat serendipitously when again, I was listening to ABC Radio National in the studio. As I painted Bellini's St Jerome, I encountered a radio documentary exposing corruption in the church of Scientology. It was a curious juxtaposition I felt, to be painting a saint who was canonised for "recording history", whilst listening to the absurd claims of the

Scientologists, whose creation story was penned by L. Ron Hubbard – a former author of Science-Fiction novels. It occurred to me that all of the elements in my painting, and the documentary that was playing on my headphones, were all based on myth to some arguable degree. The digital fantasy illustrations that are appropriated in my painting have no less credence-as-fact than any other element. The resultant absurdity is at once affronting and gratifying. I have since embraced the presence of humour in my work. As a methodology the project asks for these ludicrous associations to occur. I have since witnessed other contemporary painters embracing irony, humour and the absurd in their practice. Phil James and Sophia Hewson are two such artists who share the esteem of featuring the cartoon character, *Spongebob Squarepants*, in their paintings. James states:

On a surface level, I'm interested in pop-cultural iconography. There's a level of devotion/proliferation we see today that in times past was reserved for a higher power. Philosophically, I'm interested in 'the absurd', which in art history terms has been dealt with most famously with the Dada movement and later through the Surrealists. (Mcphee, 2019)

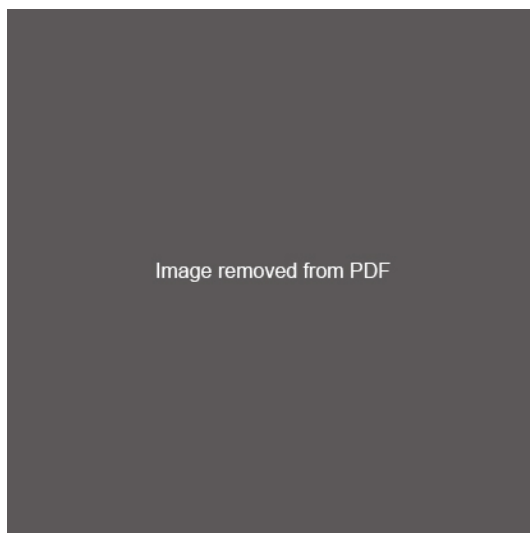


Fig. 51

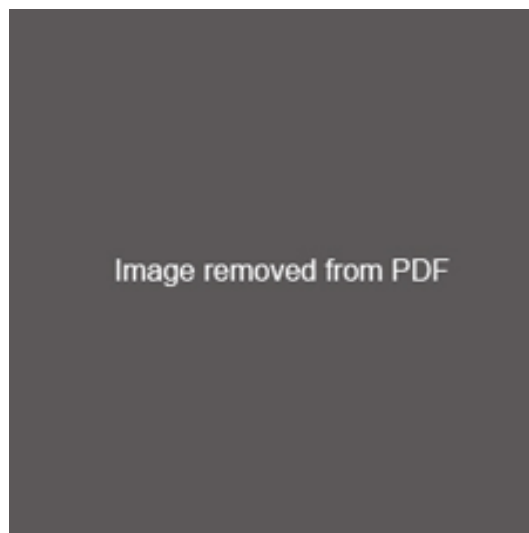


Fig. 52

Fig. 51

James, P. (2018)

Fig. 52

Hewson, S. (2014)

Looking out from within my perception

In the following, I address the second half of my statement about how contemporary examples of appropriation differ from those of the past. Indeed, tone, as discussed above, is a pivotal difference, but so too is the way in which appropriations are sourced. The World Wide Web performs as a primary “access point” or portal to the past and its fracturing of narrative has changed the nature of appropriation. Only now, can one see such a vagrant disregard for genre, time and context, because of the web. Also notable is the way in which canonical artworks are represented online – as noted in Chapter 1, *The Burden of Originality*, as immaterial algorithms. So filtered are online artworks that they are a distortion of their former selves, in colour, texture, resolution, let alone context. The digital artwork can make for a very dubious homage, indeed.

The Internet plays a significant role in how an artwork is received and interpreted. It has been of curious interest for me to gauge how my projects have been critiqued and interpreted, broadly, across various demographics. *Picturesque*, in particular, has illuminated to me a network of differing tastes and hierarchies in art circles. As the project developed I posted my artworks on Instagram quite regularly, noticing a steady increase in the amount of “likes” and “follows” that I received from digital and fantasy artists. I wonder if it is elitist to assume they are not embracing the irony that I invest in the project... I believe the paintings in *Picturesque* traverse various tiers and categories of taste. The images have the immediate appeal of drama, colour and awe. This kind of imagery can easily slip into tacky territory however. I enjoy the idea that these images could appeal to a more lowbrow audience; *The Reluctant Bay Hunter* (Plate 5) could look quite dynamic were it painted on the hood of a panel van.

The varied response to the work has, unfortunately, led to some negative consequences. Prior to *Picturesque* I was enjoying my 10th year of representation at a reputable Melbourne gallery with a track record of commercial success. This ended fairly quickly after *Picturesque* was exhibited and attracted no buyers. Feedback from previous collectors, relayed to me by my gallery director, amounted in “general confusion” about the new direction. One colourful comment likened *Picturesque* to the visions of utopian abundance and Armageddon depicted in *The Watchtower*, a magazine given out by Jehovah's witness evangelists. Out of curiosity I researched the magazine and was, myself, dumbfounded by the similarity! (See Fig. 53 – horsemen, top right and dominant yellow hue.)

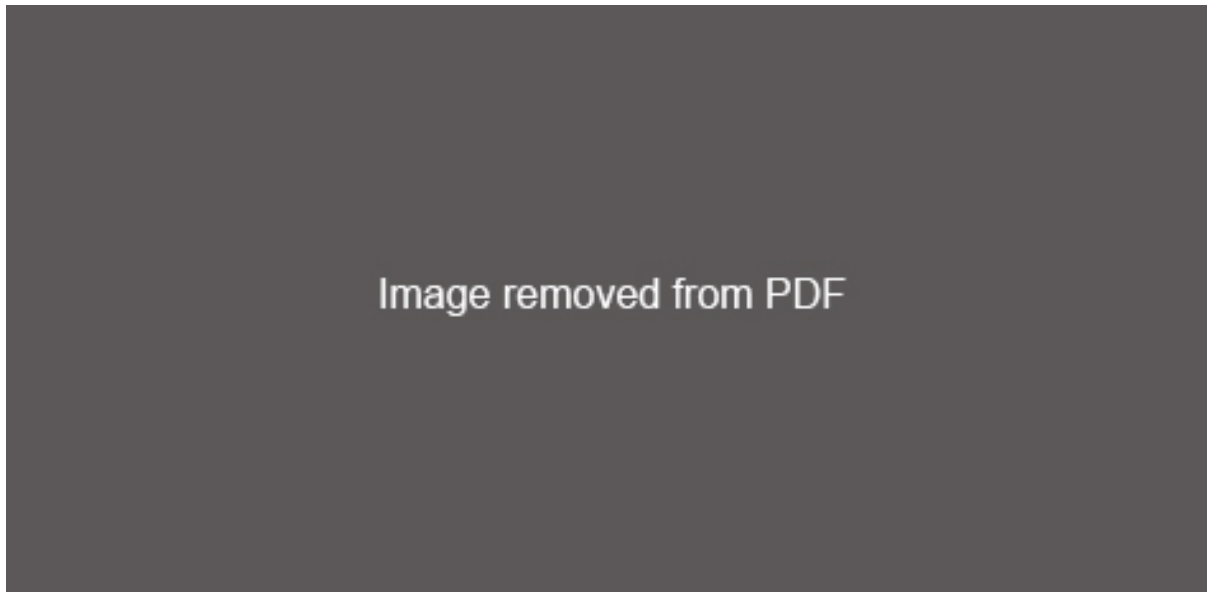


Fig. 53



Plate 4.

Fig. 53

Unnamed (undated)

Illustration of Armageddon found on www.jw.org (www.jw.org 2018)

Plate 3

Newey, S. (2016)

St Jerome discovers Scientology and it Changes Everything

900 x 1150 mm

Serendipitously, *Picturesque* and *The Cloud* have revealed to me that a very poignant aspect to the organisation of data online is *taste*. For it is taste that categorises my artworks into corners of the Internet, out of my control – on Pinterest and Instagram in the hands of fantasy lovers and as mentioned earlier, the Destiny Astrologer website. It is not however, taste alone that governs where we see particular works of art on the Internet. Google employs algorithms that can identify the frequency with which a subject is searched and by which users. It collates this data and creates “user types”, “cookies” and preference patterns. It is the reason why a Google Image Search for Wilhelm Sasnal resulted in additional images by Michael Borremans and Marlene Dumas – because these artists occupy the same echelon in critical circles and have been frequently searched for by the same users. Their conflation is due purely to patterns of user preference that Google has recorded and for no other reason like birth date, nationality, artistic style or

content. The only empirical reason for their grouping is the user data that was generated via Google.

In her text *Database Aesthetics, Art in the age of information overflow* Victoria Vesna Bulajić discusses this splintering of categories in great depth. She looks specifically at the perceived binary that exists between *narrative* and *data*. The role of *narrative*, she proposes, was a historical way of structuring information. In other words, history can be understood in a linear, chronological form based upon connecting stories. Her text asserts that the current alternative of breaking with narrative structures and the atomisation of culture is a product of our Internet era.

Indeed, if, after the death of God (Friedrich Nietzsche), the end of the Grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard) and the arrival of the World Wide Web (Tim Berners-Lee), the world appears to us as an unstructured collection of images, texts and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database – but it is also appropriate that we would want to develop the poetics, aesthetics and ethics of this database. (Bulajić 2010)

The Modernist narrative

Bulajić considers the dichotomy, in her text, that Modernism is governed by the narrative principle and Postmodernism is alternatively, structured as a database (Bulajić 2010).

Does this parallel assumption resist scrutiny? I do not believe so. To begin with, Modernism is made up of many overlapping currents that resist neat categorization in time. It, as a movement, has contemporaneous tendencies like our current “period” does; Modernism does not exclusively run in a linear, chronological, narrative.

For example – painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler (American, 1834-1903) has been aligned with various artistic movements. His early portraiture, with its sharp naturalism and notable incorporation of blacks and greys might identify Whistler as a Realist painter (Realism 1830 – 1870) (see *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1*, (1871), (Fig. 54). His

close friendship with Gustav Courbet, arguably Realism's most prominent figurehead, may also attest to this. Alternatively, he could be positioned alongside the Impressionists. The artist's later Nocturnes (see *The Falling Rocket*, (1872-77), (Fig. 55)), with their quickened gestures and tonal nuances piqued the attention of the Edgar Degas in 1874, who invited Whistler to exhibit in the first Impressionist exhibition. Observing the Nocturnes closely reveals the artist's captivating impressions of eventide and night - the same deftness of hand and sensitivity to light for which the Impressionists became famous. In any case, Whistler was criticised "as an Impressionist" - when the works captured the wrath of then critic John Ruskin who slandered the deftness or speed with which the Nocturnes were made. He famously quipped: "I have never expected to hear a coxcomb ask for two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." (Gombrich 1984)

Again, defying a tidy genre classification, Whistler went on to become a leader in the Aesthetic Movement, promoting, writing, and lecturing on the *art for art's sake* philosophy. Further to my assertion that Whistler's oeuvre traverses a range of Modernist categories, I point to his decorative mural work in *The Peacock Room*, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Fig. 56) which newly aligns the artist with the Anglo Japanese movement of 1851 to 1900. (Gombrich 1984). Clearly, this example of a "modernist artist" who practiced in the latter part of the 19th C, bridges multiple Modernist narratives that cross over one another and divert from the perceived linearity of the period.

Many such examples exist, of Modernist artists, who weave throughout defined periods, alliances and categories; from Turner, to Schwitters to name but two examples. I have identified only these key artists at the cost of a more comprehensive analysis, however I must move my argument forward. What resonates importantly in the example I have given above, is that narrative and network are *not* mutually exclusive. In many cases, like the Modernist period and Whistler's very own oeuvre, there exists a combination of narrative and data. I have highlighted here how in the narrative structure one can identify offshoots and tangents that are more typical of the database model. A narrative may flow forwards in

one direction, like a river. It may also however possess tributaries, creeks and canals that direct its waters awry into territories new.



Fig. 54

Whistler, J. M. (1871)

Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1

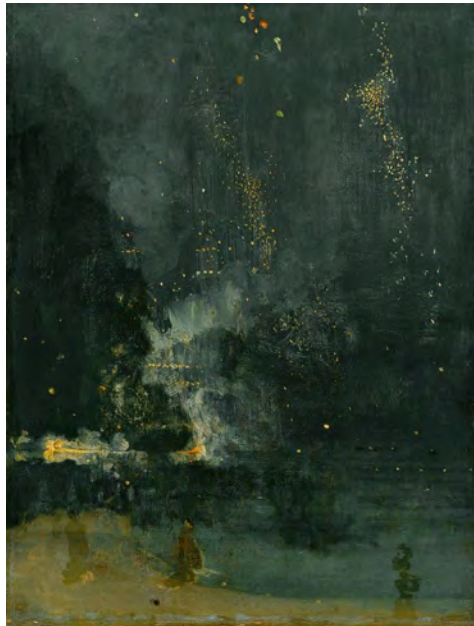


Fig. 55

Whistler, J. M. (1872 - 1877)

The Falling Rocket



Fig. 56

Whistler, J. M. (1876 - 1877)

The Peacock Room, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

In my discussion above about Modernism I dismantled the neat binary of narrative versus database. It is clear that within the modernist *narrative* paradigm there exists rhizomes of *data*. I shall now turn my attention to the Postmodern era and consider this idea in reverse: Can narrative forms exist within the database? Postmodernism could easily be considered the catalyst for “database” thinking. The analytical, questioning and deconstructivist tendencies of Postmodernism have unpacked the perceived *grand narrative* of modernism and left us with pieces of information and atomised identities. It is a culture in which a database is vital, for it is central to the organisation of cultural knowledge. The Internet, the “God” database has grown out of necessity to archive all of this splintered information. Exemplary of the very idea of *contemporaneity*, the World Wide Web performs a multifarious role. Its presence not only fulfills the necessity to *archive* information but, equally importantly, to *connect* it. The Modern period precedes the technological breakthroughs that enable communication on the scale we see today.

Bulajić does well to tease out the narrative versus data opposition later in the chapter. She makes the point that narrative and data combine in many examples of contemporary art. We see this in contemporary cinema and literature. One poignant example is David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* (1990-91 and 2017, Lynch/Frost Productions) in which the narrative traverses some 25 actual years. In the most recent series (Fig. 57a and 57b) it seems that past and present coexist in a most contemporaneous exploration of narrative. The story is interrupted by quite abstract sequences that, at certain moments, lead the viewer away into a transcendental state of pure sound and pattern. *Twin Peaks* has been a great inspiration to my project as a work of art that is conversely abstract, narrative, episodic and structurally so inventive. I will however, limit my discussion to this example of other media for my focus is on the narrative networks between *paintings*.

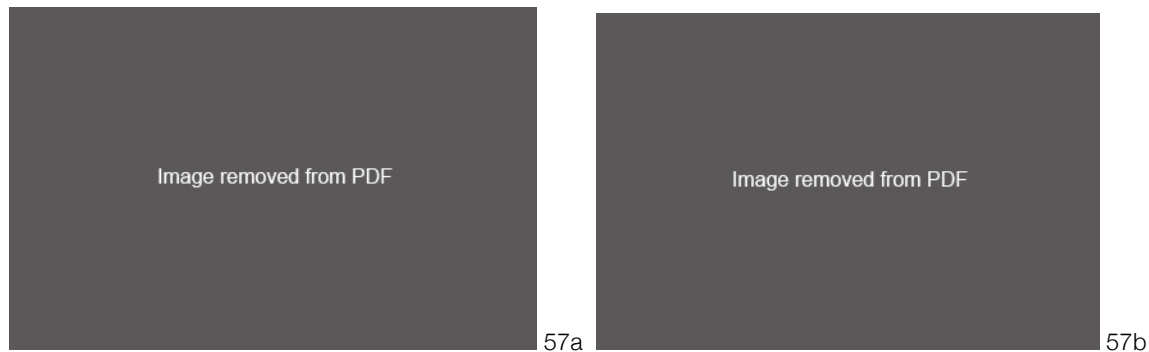


Fig. 57a and Fig. 57b

Lynch/Frost Production (2017)

Contemporaneity in cinema: The character of Laura Palmer (1990-2017) in *Twin Peaks*

The narrative is constructed by linking elements of this database in particular order... on a material level the narrative is just a set of links; the elements themselves remain stored in the database. Thus the narrative is more virtual than the database itself (Bulajić 2010)

Data

My project is an example of how data and narrative combine. Before I formerly recognised the distinctions that Bulajić makes about what data and narrative represent, my project methodology was already instinctively working with both. From the outset, before I had properly settled on my direction, I was busy researching the histories of early Australian painters Louis Buvelot and Eugene Von Guerard. Their narratives are recorded in books and online but when it came to finding reproductions of their work it was the Internet that provided more data (despite the fact that a portion of it was falsely identified). My homage to Buvelot and Cole was itself a *plural text* that recounted (my interpretation of) the settlement stories by an American painter and a Swiss-Australian one. My painterly, mashed narrative was then fed into Google Reverse Image Search to unlock a new horde

of data. The cycle then began of choosing images from this database of vaguely related images to be chopped and spliced into new collages – essentially, new narratives.

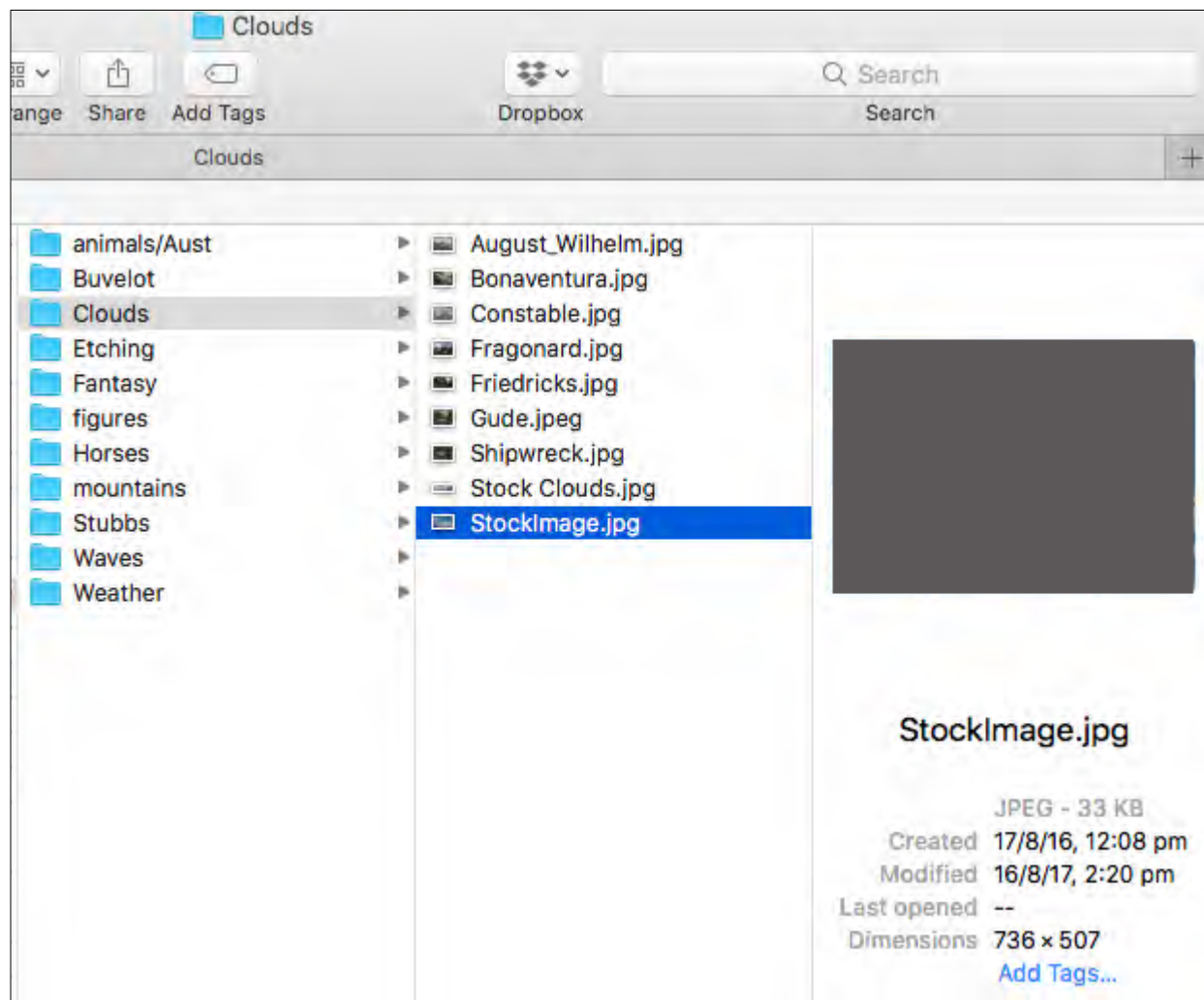


Fig. 58
Directory of files on my computer for *The Cloud* reference

The process itself, of collecting and archiving images into categories, was the impetus for *The Cloud*. For these cut-out pieces do not come complete with a context, history or background. They are essentially data that have escaped from the grand meta-data of the world wide web. Their new repository is a directory of image files on my laptop -

respectfully archived in files named “Clouds”, “Horses” and “Waves” among other categories. In Chapter 4 I unpack *The Cloud* project further and address how ultimately these cut-out fragments of data represent absence.

The *Picturesque* project has evolved organically in the studio to encompass very contemporaneous concepts. Studio practice poses a way of questioning and processing pertinent ideas and epistemologies in a language that is not verbal nor written but instead visual and haptic. This interchange between narrative and data has become central to the project’s methodology and enquiry. The process itself is sublime – in the Kantian sense that it travels an unknowable trajectory and shifts its shape in a chance instance.

In the above I have explored the topology or shape of the Internet archive. Its relationship to narrative structures is not as diametrically opposed as could be assumed. In my project the two coexist - in fact the narrative and the database have parented the *Picturesque* project quite serendipitously. *The Cloud* has sprouted henceforth from the *Picturesque* narrative as discrete units of data - a horse, a sea monster, a cloud. Their orphaned status and new conflation with one another create a bizarre new narrative upon the wall. The project is demonstrative of how data may be lost and decontextualised in the complex world wide web of information. “Baudrillard implies a sense of pessimistic bitterness regarding contemporary art: Artists float in the loss of “authentic historical awareness”, lost in the collapsed sign system.” (Ying - Ye Chou, 2003)

The Internet is growing exponentially like a labyrinth. Similar to Borge’s *Library of Babel*, images and texts can transitively cross one another, allowing even more narratives to emerge. I have highlighted, with examples how such cross pollinations of ideas, contexts, associations and “times” results in altered voices, tastes and identities. The result of being “archived” online has altered my own identity – as a newfound fantasy artist on Instagram and Pinterest and in my conflation with a colonial pastoralist who worked 140 years ago. The shape shifting potential that the Internet and the network exert over the artist, the homage and the original work of art are manifold and transformative. This infinite space is more than an archive and can only be described as sublime.

Chapter 4

Transitive Gestures; the networks in and around paintings

In the previous chapter my discussion delved into an epistemological analysis regarding the database and the narrative; their respective structures, uses and collaborative tendencies. This final chapter includes an analysis of my project *Picturesque* and its accompanying series, *The Cloud*. Thus far, my text has looked at the topology of the network on a macro level at how paintings contemporary and historical all reside and together within a network, online. To advance my analysis of networks a step further I will unpack in this chapter how they operate on a more *micro* level – inside a painting. The following will feature a discussion of painterly *passage* and the networks that exist within all paintings. In the *Picturesque* Project and *The Cloud* series this is particularly evident and I draw reference between it and other contemporary artworks, which similarly “declare” their conceptual and aesthetic influences and origins in another artistic source.

Identity and the network

What exists within every work of art are invisible aspects of organisation (Bulajić 2010). These invisible cues may come in the form of a borrowed gesture, a palette, indeed the central motif may homage (wittingly or otherwise) another artist’s work. As in the example of Malevich’s Black Square (1915), paintings may possess an imbedded lineage to

another, made even centuries before. In this chapter I examine how the original artwork, within its context, reveals an interior network. Our reception of this network, I will argue, varies when the artwork is reproduced digitally - essentially, when its *form* has been cast away.

A key theme throughout this series of works and its accompanying dissertation is the artist's *identity* and how this is confused, manipulated (or reinforced) through appropriation. In this chapter I consider how a painterly aesthetic acts as signifier to the identity of its artist-maker. Here I refer to Isabelle Graw's notion that traces of the artist's body exist within the painting's interior network. I shall highlight this idea with examples of my own painting work and also in select examples of modern and contemporary paintings. The painting-as-object also signifies networks, which are worthy of my discussion. Here I refer directly to the physical, material and formal qualities that define painting. I have discussed at length in previous chapters how the loss or absence of a painting's materiality online (and in digital reproduction) confuses the identity of the artist.

Its material presence in a *site* augments the artwork with layers of contextual meaning. Context is paramount to our reception of an original artwork. I will compare and contrast two examples of encountering artwork *in the flesh* and how its outside context colours the painting's (and artist's) identity. Conversely, the original possesses within its very body the transitive nuances of artworks that have preceded it. This brings forth an analysis of the "absent referent" – for the transitive capacities of contemporary painting all announce, in one way or another, the absence of their influences or sources.

Indeed the artist himself is (usually) absent when we contemplate an artwork.

Considering this - Can the ontological relationship between the painting and the body of the artist survive beyond this inevitable separation? Is the painter somehow embedded in the resulting artwork after it has left the studio? Or are we to consider the painter-auteur as a redundant voice after this separation; the artist's ownership of the work now transferred over to the viewer-interpreter? I shall in the following examine the relationship of painter to auteur and how this affiliation may be problematic. Ultimately the connections between the

painter to the painting and the painting to the world around it are manifold. These connections, I will elaborate are *indices* from one point to other various points – in history and place. *Context* and *absence* foreground my discussion around *indexicality* which is a term I shall define with expanded examples and discussion. An analysis of my own work will feature in this text alongside a comprehensive survey of other paintings that likewise possess the *indexicality*, *transitivity* and *passage* that exemplify painterly “networks”.

Appropriation

Appropriation would be one of the most striking examples of how indexicality and passage perform. This chapter would not be complete if I did not acknowledge some of the key artists that foreground a postmodern concept of “appropriation”. Homage, critique and appropriation lay bare the influence of another artistic source. Artists of the 1970s - 1990s such as Sherrie Levine (b. USA, 1947), Louise Lawler (b. USA 1947), Vikky Alexander (b. Canada, 1959) Barbara Kruger (b. USA, 1945) and Mike Bidlo (b. USA, 1953) are some of the noteworthy artists that herald Postmodernism’s reflexive inclinations. The respective oeuvres of the above artists vary in materiality quite broadly yet there is a prevailing attitude toward the art-object shared by all. The synergy that I identify is an interrogation into the object-status of the artwork, its lineage, identity, and provenance and ultimately of art’s value systems. My discussion shall not indulge in a lengthy survey of appropriation artists per se however I will touch upon the ideas and works of the aforementioned in this chapter in order to elucidate my points and frame my own practice.

It’s a perpetual rite of passage. I’m totally in my own world. I’ve created my own world, this whole bubble. I reflect and the bubble reflects all these different things at the same time. It’s like H. G. Wells’s Time Machine and you can just go from this time period to not interested in that one, (snaps fingers) go to this one, and create new perspectives along the way. I guess that’s what directors do, too. (Mike Bidlo, Bombmagazine.org.2019)

No other painterly practice or contemporary genre exemplifies the operation of networks quite like appropriation art. It is necessary to define the parameters of this topic before I expand my discussion. The term “appropriation” is defined by the TATE Gallery online resource as “...the practice of artists using pre-existing objects or images in their art with little transformation of the original.” (Tate 2018) Appropriation art tests the boundaries of what we consider authenticity and authorship, and questions the very definition of art itself.

Lawler's critical strategies of reformatting existing content not only suggest the idea that pictures can have more than one life, but underpin the intentional, relational character of her farsighted art. (The Museum of Modern Art 2017)

I do assert however that the networks within paintings are not always born of appropriation. Networks are more insidious than this and are not always a declaration of affiliation with another artwork. It needs to be stated that there exists a distinction between *extrinsic* sources of influence (appropriation, sampling and homage) and *intrinsic* cues within the artwork that do not identify their lineage (cultural influences as well as academic origins).

An artist may not be truly cognisant of the subtle forces that turn their gesture this way or that. Nor does the contemporary painter necessarily follow an established technical doctrine. Being an artist that practices heavily in appropriation I have been attempting to see through the eyes of another (usually deceased) artist. In doing so I have become sharply aware of my own painterly “habits” and defaults, which often conflict with those of my historical referent. The instinctive methods that I employ are a product of my traditional training in oils – which is itself a transitive nod to the compositional and technical traits imposed by my teacher, Jill Shalless of the McClelland Gallery School in 1983 – when I was an impressionable ten year old. Those early lessons have informed my style and method to a large degree resulting in a form of muscle memory that continues in my painting practice today.

Painting is a highly personalised semiotic activity. (Graw 2012) I extend upon Graw's position to state that we, as painters, are unique yet conversely products of our own histories. A painting encompasses and conveys the artist's whole lifetime of looking, learning and making. A painting can frame its maker's history - their influences, training and culture. What I shall reveal is that a painting, as a discreet art object, possesses cues and clues to an interior network of sources. These cues are like a transitive nod to other works of art, passages to other cultural methods and ideas and markers of time. The intrinsic and extrinsic forces that model an artwork lay ground for my exploration into painterly networks and passage. To demonstrate how this operates in my project I select an artwork from *Picturesque* and analyse the visual cues that allude to its networks.

The Visible Network

The *Picturesque* series employed a process of sourcing images online and using digital imaging software to create composite collages. This is evident in the way the paintings appear to be "cut and pasted" together – literally by cropped edges in the composition which appear juxtaposed in an incongruous way. In the second painting of the series, this is particularly apparent: *Native Tongue* (2016) (Plate 2). Painted in layers of massed out dark grounds and detailed with layers of glazes, the painting combines traditional methods with techniques that I have fashioned myself to achieve the visual effect of the digital screen. The image depicts a pastoral scene – a scrub of bushy forest by a lake featuring a highly reflective surface akin to polished metal. In order to achieve this almost holographic surface on the water I have used a very large, square edged, soft brush – rather like that of the house painter. With this tool I am able to softly blur the wet paint that sits on the surface of the support, being careful not to remove the paint too much. A chancy procedure, this "blurring" technique has become useful in emulating the super-flat surface of the computer screen. The holographic lake's edges are cut crudely and sharply as is typical of the selection tools in Adobe Photoshop. A tiny figure sits upon the bank of the lake pointing into the distance toward a row of modest 19th C cottages. Their hue is muted

and their edges likewise “cropped” from another scene. Beyond the cottages lies a majestic mountain whose doppelganger can be found the preceding painting: *Versions of Now* (Plate 1). Indeed, it is Thomas Cole’s famous mountain that itself appears across all five paintings of his *The Course of Empire* series (1833 - 1836). A running man (also sourced from Cole), bow in hand and clad in skins appears to be exiting the scene – emerging out of the river cavity and into the picture’s foreground. It is as if *cro magnon man* has time travelled to 19thC Britain via a watery wormhole. The psychedelic scene surrounding him is at odds with his own earthy hues.

Altogether the tone of the image is ominous. A foreboding cloud surrounds the mountain under a sky that is approaching dusk. Strangely, the bottom left of the painting appears blank and unfinished begging the question: what’s missing in this scene? This blank section of canvas operates in a self-reflexive way. It draws our attention to the materiality of the painting – with its very support laid bare. This is not just a compositional use of negative space for aesthetic balance. An “absence” of content, in this example, serves to create doubt in the eye of the beholder. It reminds us that we are viewing a fabricated scene, a painting, whose narrative content holds less credence-as-fact. I will discuss the importance of absence later in this chapter and how it may feature as an indexical device. The narrative I have ascertained from this happenchance painting is that time is twisting and curling in upon itself. Prehistory, antiquity, the present and the future collide in one contemporaneous space to create a surreal new world that is at once familiar (in recognisable, painterly homages) and unfamiliar (in the conflation of unrelated scenes).

The painting I have described possesses interior networks. From the appropriated motifs in Cole’s Empire series, to the methods I learned at the McClelland Gallery School in 1983. The colours and surface look smooth, like a digital image, filtered and colour enhanced like an Adobe Photoshop document. Those familiar with the latter’s toolset will recognise the “cut and paste” aesthetic typical of the software. Embedded here within this discreet artwork are layers of indices that point backwards in time - to the 1830s, the 1980s and travel forwards again to the digital age. These digitally projected paintings of Romantic

Europe encompass networks of time travel. As beacons of light on the wall the *Picturesque* series reminds us of ephemerality - the passing of time and the exchange of histories.

*...that's the way it always is with art: it always has a value as an expression of its time, but there's also a way in which it can always be perceived as lying outside of the time that produced it. There's always something that turns art into a transhistorical truth, and that's the part of the art that I think of as "philosophical."*¹⁵
(McDowell, 2014)



Plate 2
Native Tongue
Oil on canvas
2016

¹⁵ An excerpt from A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard and Bernard Blistène

Despite their materiality and obvious painterly conventions, this series of work has an intrinsic *algorithmic layer*. This is partly because the appropriate portions of the paintings were sourced online. More importantly however, the images and their resulting narratives are constructed from newly recoded data. An algorithm, by definition, is a set of instructions that results in the re-processing of existing data. This is principally how my process works. My very methodology, described at the beginning of this dissertation, relies on a set of steps that rearrange image data into newly compiled data.

There is no digital art or new media object in the broadest sense that does not have a layer of code and algorithms, even if its physical and visual manifestation distracts from this underlying layer.” (Klein in Bulajić 2010)

Each element, sourced from another painting, by another hand has come together to create the curious blend of narrative and data that has come to exemplify the *Picturesque Project*. I concur with Bulajić’s claim that identities become confused when narrative is combined with data. It is as if identity can never be finite or total. It is contingent, constructed and atomized. Digital images are, themselves, fragmented. They are made of pixels, each replicating a colour as analysed by an algorithm.

Phantom paintings



Fig. 59

Newey, S. (2018)

Test projection *Versions of now*, SITE EIGHT, RMIT

The five paintings of the *Picturesque Project* embody the nucleus of this research. From the first painting *Versions of now*, the winding trajectory was set for the ideas and discoveries that have culminated in an exhibition of five digitally projected paintings (as well as The Cloud series), two original paintings and this dissertation. Given their centrality to the project it is poignant that three paintings from *Picturesque* are materially absent from the exhibition. In their place are digitally projected, floating phantoms on the wall (Fig. 59). Like the multitudinous

historical references that have been appropriated in this series, the projections are all but indices to their material, original forms. In this exhibition the material, original paintings of *Picturesque* are replaced with pure coloured light – a *non-form* that aptly describes the original conception of the works – online, as algorithmic constellations of pixels. This light-based iteration of the project has an unnerving absent/presence by nature of its ephemerality. Happenstance, the viewer passes in front of the plinth-mounted projector and the image either disappears altogether or even more curiously, their silhouette becomes part of the image.

As transient beams of light, the phantom paintings of the *Picturesque* series represents a deferral from the painterly process. There exists no close evidence of my hand, nor visual clues as to the materials employed in the making of the paintings nor the labour invested in their creation. The story of their creation – the very painting process itself, has been removed from this projected iteration of the *Picturesque* project. In seeking evidence of marks and materiality the projections create doubts about their authenticity. It is as if the paintings have been stripped of authorship; they have been de-identified. Any effort to seek validation of the artist is further complicated by the mashed identities - the hybridity of references that are embedded in the paintings' (now projections') content.

The sources that feature in *Versions of now* (Plate 1), (including Buvelot's trees and Cole's mountain), have been translated by my own hand; the tree and mountain are now imposters of their former selves. Furthermore, the transition from paint to wavelengths of light renders the original artworks as totally dematerialised entities. Manifested in the *Picturesque* projections are the key themes that form this research. As discussed in previous chapters, the project considers *materiality* by highlighting its very absence. The use of devices, such as digital screens and projectors, have been central to their creation and presentation in the exhibition.

It is clear that the works have emerged from a *network* of references both historical and contemporary. Their status in the exhibition as projections highlights their indexicality and absence, both of which are themes central to this chapter. In addition, this final chapter will further extrapolate how a painting is affected by the context in which it is experienced. These themes with the addition of *absence* will be discussed with reference to *The Cloud* series, for these floating, lost icons, devoid of their former “backgrounds”, exemplify absence. Isabel Graw is a contemporary art theorist whose writing I will draw upon in this discussion. I will frame this idea of absence again with reference to Graw and how a painting may become lost in the network.

Context, Indexicality and Absence

Simply to hang a painting on a wall and say that it's art is dreadful. The whole network is important. When you say art then everything possible belongs to it. In a gallery that is also the floor, the architecture, the colour of the walls. (Kippenberger in Joselit, 2009)

Kippenberger's claim that “everything possible belongs to [art]” acknowledges how the artwork is transformed by its context. I extend upon his statement by asserting that the artwork absorbs and reflects more than its physical “site”. Beyond the aesthetics of the wall's colour and the architecture, the artwork reflects and responds to the culture of its space – its history, its uses and identity. So far I have elucidated examples of how networks perform within painting *intrinsic* cues to other artworks. These intrinsic networks are often subtle but influential to the way in which we perceive and read an artwork. There is however more to be garnered beyond these intrinsic sources. Context, I argue, operates in the painting's network also but this time it is *extrinsic* to the artwork. I will elucidate this position in an analysis of two sites, or contexts, in which I have personally encountered artworks by Henri Matisse. These two examples illustrate how context becomes

embedded in the artwork. Context, I argue is a formative component in the painting's *network*.

Reclining Nude on a Pink Couch (1919) (Fig. 60) is possibly the most noteworthy artwork by Matisse in the Victorian collection. Upon visiting NGV International, one experiences the artwork in the context of European Modernist tradition. We know this because it is hung on Level 2 in the Late 19th & early 20th Century Paintings & Decorative Arts Gallery. The lower ceiling in this section of the gallery is an architectural indicator of the artwork's modern context. Likewise it is hung on a plain white wall in the midst of other modernist paintings. Its inclusion in this part of the gallery is already a signifier of the artwork's importance to the art historical canon. Accompanying works like, Picasso's *Weeping Woman* (1937), will testify to this small painting's merit. This established, how do I receive this work of art, how do I read it? There is more to be garnered from this painting beyond what sits inside the frame. Its context in this space colours my perception. Fine as the painting is, its presentation is somewhat academic – it is a museum artifact. As a discrete object it does not give me a great deal of connection to Matisse himself, nor an idea of how the artwork fits in to his oeuvre as a whole. It may not be one of Matisse's greatest paintings, nor the best painting of a nude by any painter. Reproduced in a catalogue, one may be forgiven for flicking past. Nonetheless its inclusion in this space at The NGVI denotes value and credence. The curatorial process has a lot of influence upon our perception of a work of art. This is not purely a painting of a nude - it is a valuable, noteworthy Modernist artifact.

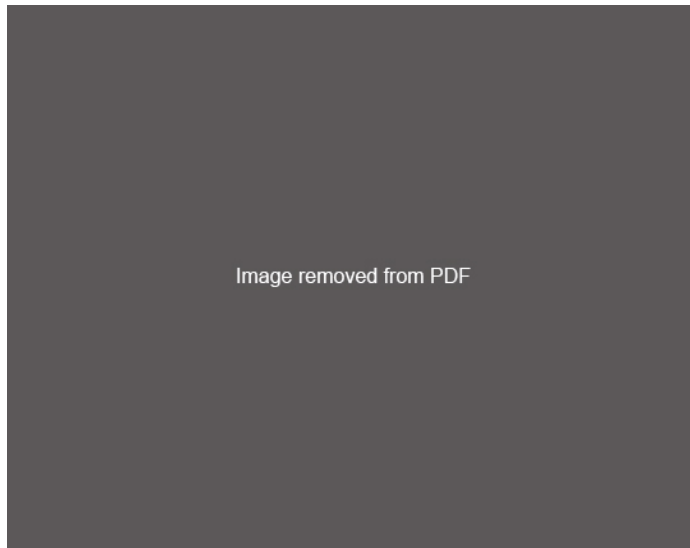


Fig. 60

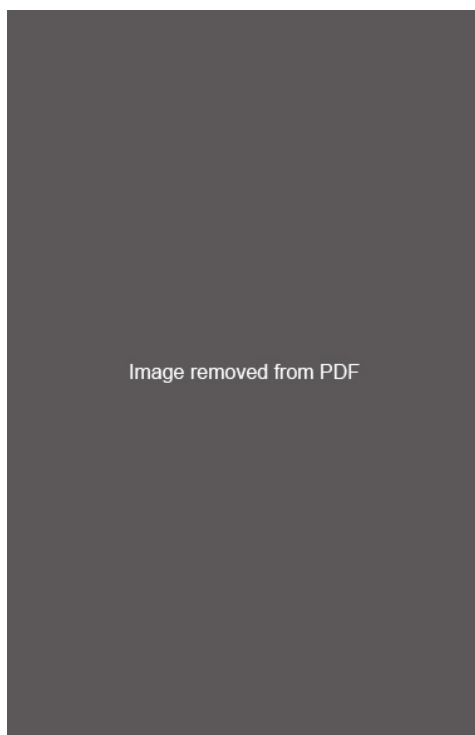


Fig 61a

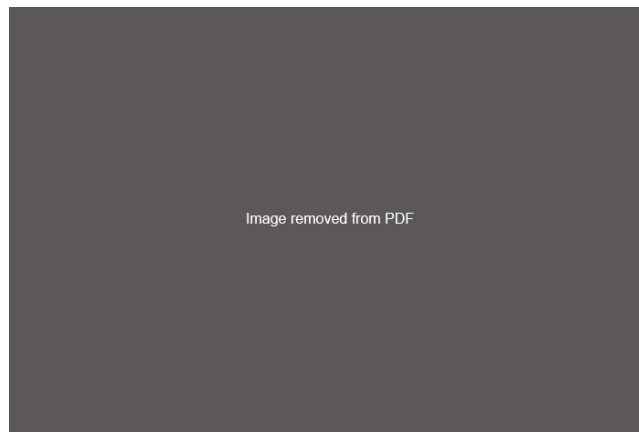


Fig. 61b

Fig. 60

Matisse, H. (1919)

Reclining Nude on a Pink Couch

Fig 61a

The Matisse Room at the Vatican Museum Rome

(Vatican-monacopatrons.com, 2015)

Fig. 61b

Matisse, H.

Maquette designs.

(Nomad, 2019)

I contrast this experience of viewing a “Matisse” with a very different one I had in Rome, 2015. *The Matisse Room* in the Vatican Museum, houses a priceless collection of “maquette” works by Matisse - plans for the Chapelle du Rosaire Vence in Provence, to which the artist devoted his last and very fruitful years of work, from 1948 to 1952. *The Matisse Room* is a modest sanctuary, which contrasts its greater surroundings. Situated as it is within the grand Vatican, its hallowed halls dripping in gold, a mecca for the Catholic faithful, home to the Roman clergy and museum of thousands of priceless artworks. Despite its minimalism by contrast, the room absorbs the great reverence of its context within the Vatican Museum.

Matisse’s *Room* is a chapel of sorts, a haven in which to remember the artist in his twilight years of declining health. An elderly man, recovering from surgery due to stomach cancer, Matisse, confined to his sick bed, made designs for the space using his *papier découpé* (paper collage) technique. The rationale to shift back to a medium he had made famous some decades earlier was as practical as it was aesthetic. The artist had ceased painting at this stage of life, no longer being able to sit upright at his easel. The room includes full-size sketches in the *papier* method for the three monumental coloured glass windows of the apse, the choir and the nave all of which were donated by the artist’s son, Pierre Matisse. Leaf motifs composed of blue and yellow feature in stripes around the room in a purity of form that reflects the wisdom of the man’s years as an artist and maker.

My impression of *The Matisse Room* was entirely different to the *Reclining Nude on a Pink Couch* at The NGV. What had been a rather detached experience of an original Matisse was now replaced with deeper understanding of the artist and his work. The inclusion of this unfinished series of designs in Vatican Museum endows the work with the gravity of centuries-old historical reverence.

Further to the impact that context affects I would like to identify what I consider to be the presence of a micro network, within the very maquettes themselves. The motifs in these patterned banners are themselves *indices*. The forms within Matisse's designs have a transitive quality that direct us to Matisse the man. The patterns exemplify his iconography; it is as if Matisse riffs on his own historical vernacular of shapes – the coral frond, the leaf. Unnecessary form has been literally cut away – the motifs themselves are an indexical nod to the artist and his legacy, his frailty and resolve. I propose that within the aesthetic of Matisse's *papier* pieces exists passage to a man's acknowledgement of his own mortality.

Painting's capacity to appear particularly saturated with the lifetime of its author makes it the ideal candidate for value production. (Graw 2012)

In *Thinking Through Painting; Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas*, editor and writer Isabelle Graw describes painting as a “highly personalised semiotic activity”. Matisse's shapes although cut from paper still represent his semiotic vernacular in the same way. Graw considers the painting with all of its inherent marks (semiotics) as an indexical agent to its maker.

...in painting, this bond between product and person is especially unbreakable, as its signs refer to the producer consistently and not only selectively, like in film”
(Graw 2012)

It is as if the painting stands in for the body of its maker, or as Graw would say, as a “quasi-person”. This is because the painting describes the very movement of the artist’s hand.

[The artwork]... is constrained by various factors that exert influence on its very structure: the audience, the historical period that will receive the work, the material elements that make up the artwork, and in particular, the already signifying elements that the artist reuses and recomposes to create a new work.” (Graw 2012)

Like context, discussed earlier, the gesture or mark has an indexical quality that forms part of the painting’s network. In the case of “the mark” it behaves like a semiotic link, an index to the body of the artist creator.

Indexicality refers to a theory of signs founded by Charles Sanders Peirce (American, 1839 - 1914). This network of signs consists of marks, motifs, materials and ideas that have been absorbed by the artist and reflected in the work. What *belongs* to the painting however is not always visible and may exist as an absent referent. Paintings, as indexical objects embody invisible networks. The network is made up of historical, contextual material and physical elements that have surrounded and influenced the painter. They are not always apparent to the eye. An artist, for example may observe the palette of a photograph in a magazine and use it in her own painting. The painting’s colour palette is then an indexical link to the magazine image, which is never revealed to the viewer. Indexical signs are like traces. Like tyre tracks in the snow, they indicate that a car has been present and yet the car and its tracks are different physical entities. (Sanders Pierce in Graw, 2012)

Icons

The paintings in *Picturesque* are loaded with a network of indexical references to elsewhere. In many collage experiments in Photoshop and with paper, I looked at the possibilities in laying out foregrounds with other backgrounds and was astonished at how images fit together without the necessity to be re-scaled. It occurred to me that there was more credence to the compositional protocol championed by Gilpin's – "Picturesque" than I had previously thought. *The Cloud* is an extension of the *Picturesque* project that came about most organically. In sourcing and appropriating "sections" of paintings by historical and fantasy artists I now have a great digital collection of "painting pieces" – a stockpile of skies, a hoard of seas and multiple animal files from cows and horses to kangaroos and even a sea monster. Some are printed, trimmed and pinned to my studio wall, as strange singular "pieces" of Romanticism. Most pieces remain as isolated jpegs, stored archivally in digital folders as identified in the previous chapter. Isolating these Romantic motifs and compositional tropes has illuminated to me how very interchangeable they are.

These pieces have indexical power. Each "motif" comes from somewhere entirely different; from the sable brush and fitch held by Thomas Cole to the Wacom tablet used by a Chinese teenager.



Fig. 62

Newey, S. (2016)

Foregrounds, horizons and skies cut from Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* series on my studio wall.

Combined together in the *Picturesque* paintings these pieces make surreal narratives that travel across time and result in the kind of contemporaneity that I discussed in Chapter 3. Another effect that occurs when a motif is displaced from its origin is a reensignment of “value”. Hans Güde’s majestic cloud from *Fra Hardanger* (1847) appears somewhat more kitsch in my appropriation, hanging as it does, isolated upon the gallery wall. It has now inherited the novelty value of the pantomime prop or theatre set piece.

A similar shifting of value occurs in Louise Lawler’s *Them* (1986-7). Here the artist has photographed what appears to be a selection of Greco-Roman sculptural artifacts - a relief panel, a bust and the order of a Hellenistic column, stored idly in the corner of a room. It is as if these relics were stuffed into a stockroom of sorts removed from the glorious plinth that would seem befitting of their valour. This curious displacement or recontextualisation has altered the perceived value of these relics:

In “Them” (1986-1987), two ancient sculptures rest in the corner of a blue room. Stripped of context that establishes them as untouchable and timeless masterpieces — apparently gathering dust in a corner — they come across as valueless pieces of discarded stone...Lawler’s photographs comment on the way that context informs our understanding of an artwork’s value. (The Museum of Modern Art, 2017)

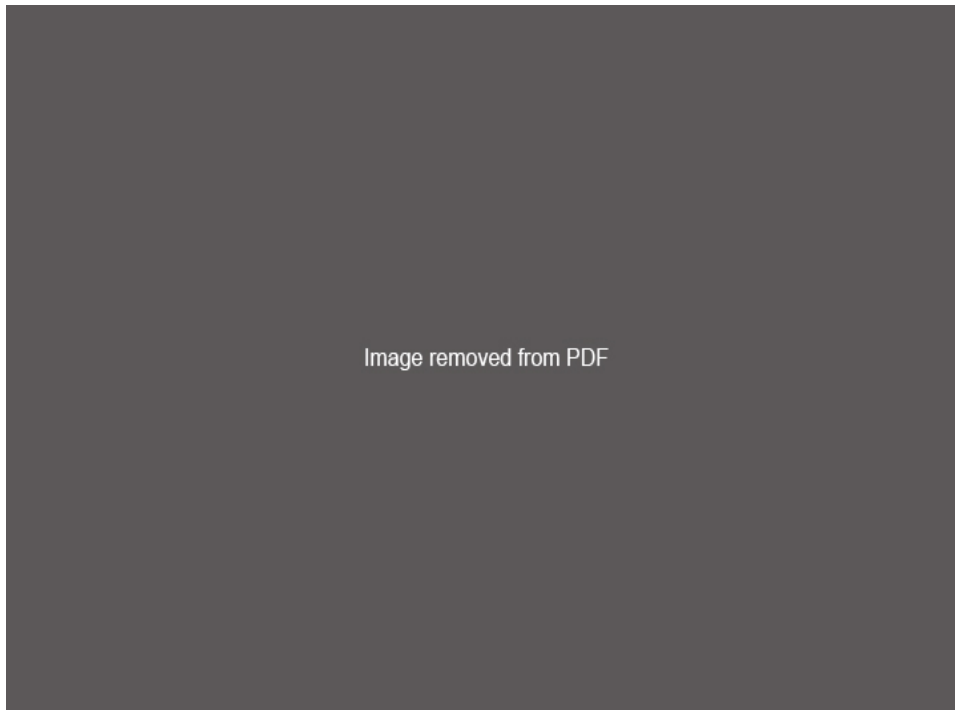


Fig. 63

Lawler, L. (1986-7)

Them

Installed at MOCA Pacific Design Center, 2018

Something transformative happens to the painted *subject* when it is isolated from its source. It becomes, like Matisse’s leaf motif, a more powerful index. It performs not so much as a “quasi-person” for the artist that has been appropriated, but more like a

branded association. In modern to contemporary painting this notion of branded iconography is very prevalent. Sidney Nolan's *Ned Kelly* series (1946 - 1947) is one such example as is Jasper Johns's *Target* series (1955 - 1961) among others. In my exhibition I have created a Stubbs *Horse* and a Güde *Cloud* among other iconic pieces. These motifs or "icons" of the *Picturesque* series have been liberated from the painterly "frame", altogether. It was the many hours of pondering over my studio wall, covered in cut-out clippings from Romantic paintings, that inspired this "icon" concept. I noticed how much each piece took on a new life of its own when removed from the original composition. From this vantage the idea to make the *The Cloud* series was born. Isolating Romantic motifs makes new heroes of them, so to speak. As the central motif from their respective painterly origins, the horse or the cloud, prevail in our visual memories most dominantly. It would be unusual for one to recall the "landscape" in Stubbs' *Antinoüs, a Chestnut Racehorse, in a Landscape* (undated, c.1760 - 1770) – it is the horse that draws the viewer's attention, the background dissolves into our peripheral vision.



Fig. 64

Stubbs, G. (undated, c.1760 -1770)

Antinoüs, a Chestnut Racehorse, in a Landscape

Having said this, given the right attention, one would take heed of how very beautifully painted *Stubbs'* landscapes are. His ability to render foliage and space was markedly attentive. Nevertheless, it is the horse that prevails as the indexical agent – in this case, its link is not to the painting as a whole but the artist's brand once again. Stubbs was a celebrated painter of sporting animals, so much so that his name is synonymous with the genre. Such is the potency that some pictorial elements and motifs represent. Their recognition and celebrity has the indexical power for which brands are renowned. *The Cloud* exploits this indexical quality by isolating the motif entirely and celebrating its autonomy as a new, discrete object unto itself.

In a strange twist the “remains” of the Romantic reference paintings now feature a hole where a horse once stood or a sky with a cloud-shaped void. The absence of subject – the “hole”, is equally loaded with inferences to elsewhere. The removal of a background and indeed the removal of the central motif direct me to my next topic of discussion: *absence*. From the very outset, indexical objects declare absence. They defer to that which is not present but forever embedded in the network of the art object.

Absence as a theme is well established in photographic and film theory. This topic has been covered with great poignancy in recent decades. Absence is a central concern in texts such as *Burning with desire* (MIT Press, 1997) and *Forget me not: Photography and Remembrance* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2004) by photographic historian and theorist, Geoffrey Batchen and more recently, *The Burning Mirror: Photography in an Ambivalent Light* (ASP Ltd, 2008) by academic and theorist, Melissa Miles, to name but two (Australian) authors whose texts expound the deferral of the photographic subject. Essentially what a photograph does is record what has passed – a moment, a scene, a person. By its very nature the medium acknowledges absence. Sontag famously claimed that:

All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt
(Sontag 1977)

The text connotes that the photograph performs like a relic or memorium – indeed, the death of the subject. She goes on to liken the click of the camera's shutter to a “soft murder” (Sontag 1977) endowing the device with a most predatory esteem. Roland Barthes (French, 1915 - 1980), a key theorist in photographic discourse responds to the absence which photography affords its subject thusly:

When we look at a photograph of ourselves or of others, we are really looking at the return of the dead. (Barthes 1980)

In this quote Barthes refers to the permanence of the photograph and transience of its subject. His tone, in *Camera Lucida* (1980) is one of a haunting longing for his deceased mother. Barthes' lament that photographs fail to capture the “punctum” of a memory - or in this case, an identity, is most moving in the text. His notion that photographs symbolise absent *presence* is prominent in photographic discourse.

Isabelle Graw includes painting in this discourse around absence. Hers is a view that paintings possess another level of indexical agency because they not only allude to the absence of subject but also the absent artists' body. Importantly, her idea differs from the aforementioned photographic discourse around death and absence - the painting not only indexically refers to its maker, it embeds them to some degree. Here, the painting performs as a sign and as a “quasi-person”, as identified earlier. This is because, according to Graw, the painting evidences marks left by the artist's body. This ontological trace is embedded in the object and, for Graw, manifests a more potent brand of indexical absence than the photograph. This concept of Graw's has not, however, been accepted universally:

While Charles S. Peirce's concept of indexicality is typical to photographic and filmic discourses, it also, according to Graw, extends to painting inasmuch as signs may be taken as an index of traces of the person (of the painter who produced the painting), and this specific process is somehow unique only to painting. (Douglas 2015)

In the case of *The Cloud* the subject has been returned from exile. This time however it is void of its original context. *The Chestnut Horse* and the *Cloud* are newly emancipated forms that belie their origins. Being frameless icons one is reminded of the material-object-status of the painting. Cut from multiple density fibreboard (MDF), I was able to trim their contours closely with a hand-held jigsaw (Fig. 65b). The creation of these paintings includes analogue and digital methods. From the online source I sampled the *Chestnut Horse* from Stubbs' famous mid -18th Century artwork. Transferred to Adobe Photoshop I traced the perimeter of the horse in a vector path, which after some formatting, became the digital path that I would then scale up and trace manually on to the sheet of MDF, using a grid. Despite the material-object-ness of the end result, this painting possesses "algorithmic layers" that go beyond anything I have created and called "a painting". *The Chestnut Horse* has been through multiple digital interventions and likewise, further steps of deferral from its original source – Stubbs' painting, which remains hanging quietly elsewhere, in a private collection.



Plate 9

Newey, S. 2019

Cloud (after Güde)

Oil on board

Approximately 500 x 600 mm

Painted in oils, the motifs in the *The Cloud* series display some of the usual techniques that I would employ on canvas however the shape dictates an alternative rendering of space and depth. The outline of a cloud, for example, (like the one I sourced from Hans Güde's *Fra Hardanger*, (1848)) is soft, diffused and not in any way hard-edged. This effect is impossible to achieve however with a jigsaw which crudely divides positive from negative form. It becomes the task of the painter to then create the illusion of softly receding nebula around the perimeter of this carved MDF object. This was in part made possible by the careful selection of cloud images.

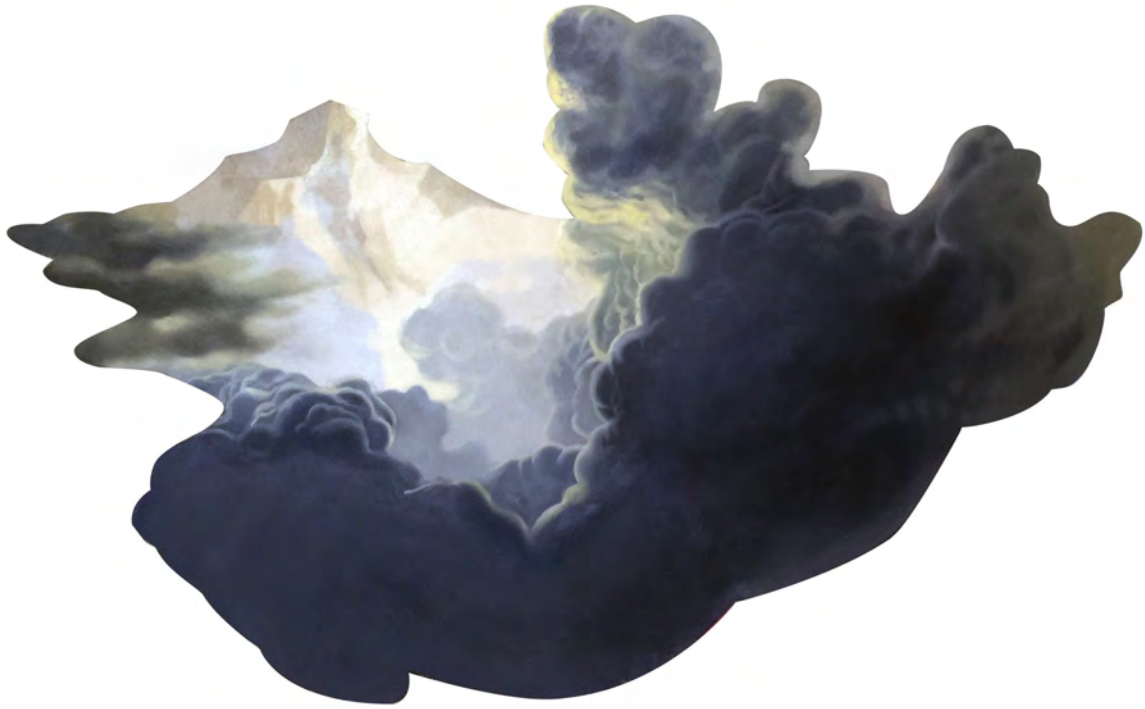


Plate 8

Newey, S. (2019)

Cloud (after Bierstadt)

Oil on board

500 x 600 mm

Knowing that *The Cloud* series was to be hung on white walls I chose to appropriate only backlit clouds by Hans Güde and Albert Bierstadt, many of which feature white outer-edges (sentimentally known as *silver linings*). Their glowing extremities served to mimic the effect of the clouds dissipating. The hard delineation of the board is softened by a diffusion of Zinc white and Naples yellow painted around its margin. When hung on a white wall a blend occurs between the cloud's boundary and the wall to conjure the illusion of

continuity. What this process highlighted to me however, this problem of “edges” is that materially the form is at odds with its content. Creeping behind the hung cloud lurks a harsh shadow on the wall – a reminder of the artwork’s object-status. For this “cloud” is not truly at home in this context. It is instead a subject that has been exiled from its former site, its home on the *Fra Hardanger*.



Fig. 65a



Fig. 65b

Fig. 65a and 65b

S. Newey (2018 - 2019)

Cutting and sanding MDF panels for *The Cloud* series

The motifs in these works do possess a kind of animism that adds to their curiosity. A cut-out horse appears, with strange enchantment, to have trotted out of its frame to graze upon the gallery wall. Together, the pieces that make up *The Cloud* series converse between one another in a curious way. Made with no intention of creating an overarching narrative, one has emerged nonetheless in *The Cloud*. In doing so the series, as an installation, delivers endless potential for rearrangement and the construction of new narratives.



Plate 10

Newey, S. 2019

Horse (after Stubbs)

Oil on panel

470 x 690 mm

Glenn Brown

To situate my practice in contemporary context I look to the work of Glenn Brown (b. UK, 1966) for I find great affinity in the tone of his appropriation. Unlike the artists of the 1970s - 1990s Brown not only recontextualises and critiques the canonical works of those before him, he performs a veritable artistic autopsy. Brown analyses the artwork as cultural and historical artefact and (in his own very deft hand) critiques its virtuosic grandeur. Like a glam-rock guitar solo, his work is at once mesmerising in its prowess and production but loaded with (at times cringe-worthy) melodrama. Brown has the ability to evoke the morbid and the saccharine within a single artwork. This affront to history is not new to the appropriation artist, it can be found in the work of the 1970s - 1990s artists mentioned earlier also. For me however experiencing this tone in the work of others represented a rite of passage. In viewing the work of Brown some five years ago I felt I inherited the licence to embrace the lowbrow, the syrupy irony that I was so tempted to employ in my work.

Tight-assed art historical taboos. I'm interested in exploring and penetrating those taboos. (Ménou, 2016)

Brown's is a practice that exemplifies the idea of "Interior networks". As an artist who works in the genre of *appropriation* his tone is as malleable as his hand. Identity is questionable and ever in flux. In the following passage I celebrate the artist and his own articulate contribution to the discourse around his oeuvre.



Fig. 66

Brown, G. (2014)

In my time of dying

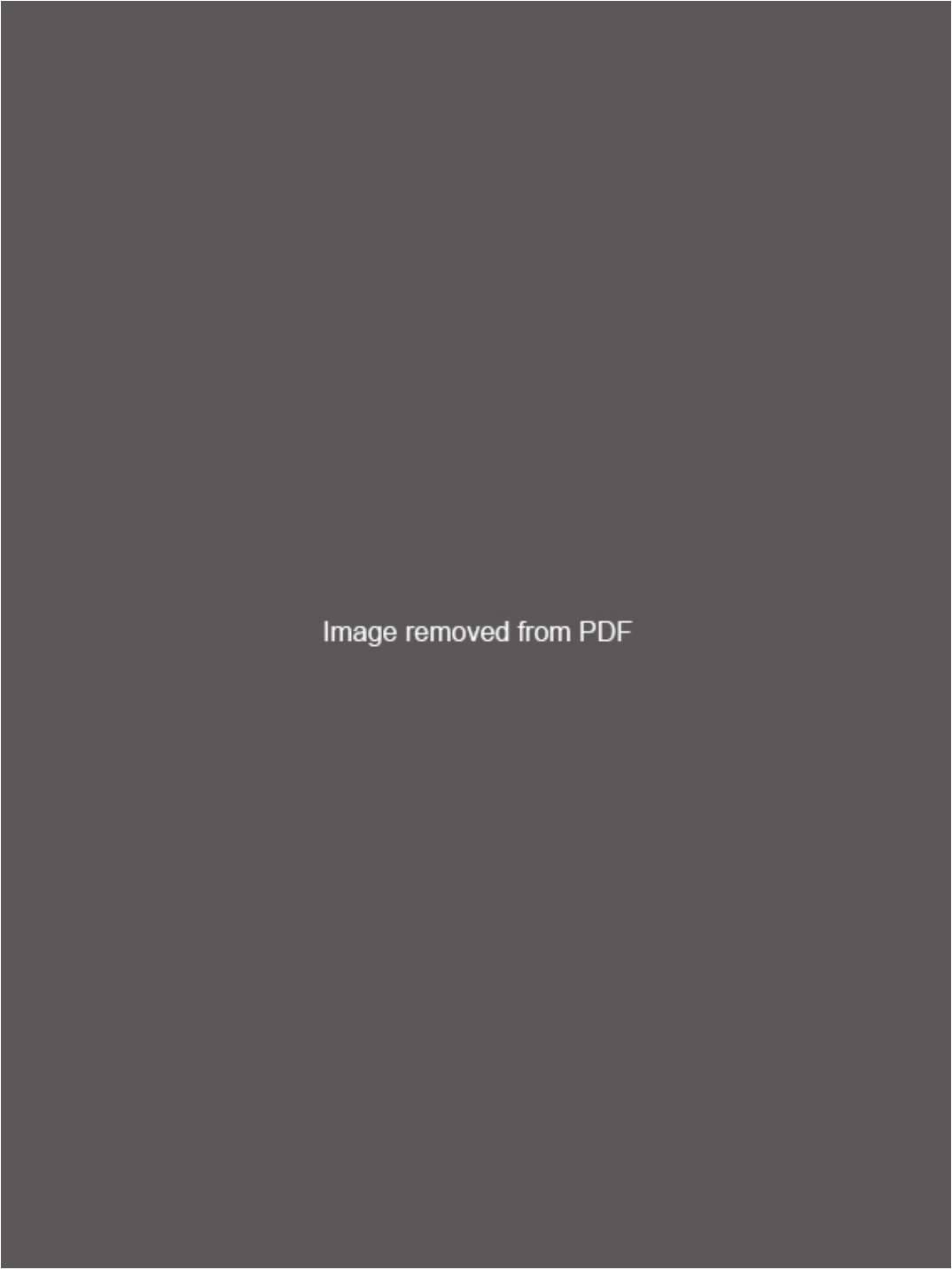


Image removed from PDF

Fig. 67

Brown, G. (2011)

The Shallow End (detail)

Glenn Brown is a British painter who exemplifies Klein's notion of "data convert[ing] into a novel". This virtuosic painter samples the content of historical masters, seemingly effortlessly, and quotes them into eerily hybridised new forms. The artist reanimates stylistic motifs and compositions from great masters of the painterly canon, ranging from Rembrandt to Dali and even contemporary fantasy artists. Brown's oeuvre of some 30 years includes highly detailed appropriations, for example, *In My Time of Dying* (2014) (Fig. 66) to sculptural, abstracted explorations into materiality - see *Maddalena Penitente* (2014) (Fig. 68)

The artist's gesture is most curious. At first glance his application of paint appears to be a buttery impasto. A closer inspection reveals however that the surface is deceptively smooth, like a printed image. These seemingly thick marks are in fact "flat" paintings of brushstrokes (see Fig. 67) *The Shallow End* (detail) (2011). It appears Brown's focus, in both painting and sculpture, is not only genre and narrative but painterly materiality also. It is as if he dissects paintings, and remakes them again into hyper-coloured and over processed new entities. In *Maddalena Penitente* (2014) (Fig. 68) what at first appears to be layered blobs of dried paint is actually the popular Baroque subject of the penitent Mary Magdalene, complete with copper wire halo. The sculpture, so colourful and abstracted by its own materiality has a comic irony akin to Jeff Koons's floral *Puppy* (1992).

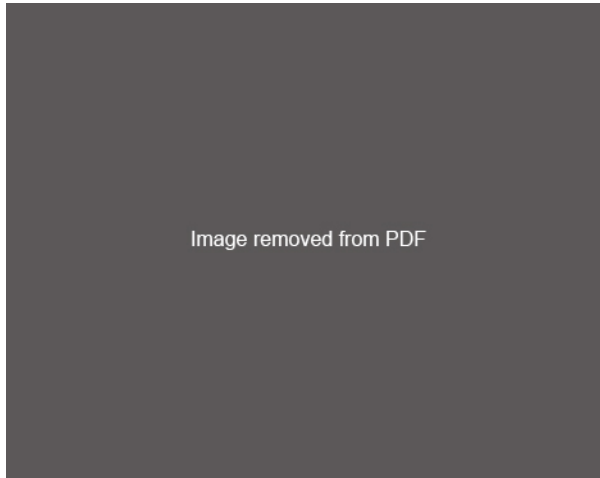


Fig 68

Fig. 68

Brown, G. (2014)

Maddalena Penitente

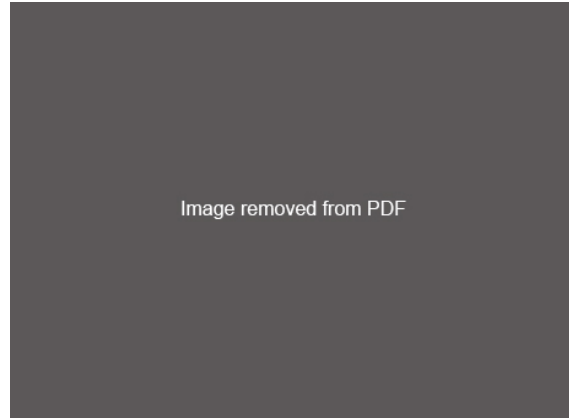


Fig.69

Fig. 69

Oldenburg, C. (1962)

Two Cheeseburgers with Everything

It is as if Brown is himself *penitent*, declaring his own insolence and irreverence in satirising Baroque masterpieces, no less a martyred saint. The artwork could be considered a painting, in an expanded definition, and an exploration into what a painting is, materially: layers of pigmented paste. It nods to Pop Art in the way it makes a branded icon of the sainted Magdalene. It is a monument of a consumer object in the same way Claes Oldenburg famously crafted (often giant) icons of pop consumer culture (see Fig. 69). Brown's *Maddalena Penitente* draws upon a network of references. Within this object are allusions to the Baroque, Pop and Post Material movements. Brown has converted this data into a new narrative.

In the following passage Brown deconstructs the network of ideas inherent in his painting *The Suicide of Guy Debord* (2001) (Fig. 70):

The colour of the work is from a Renoir painting. The brush marks are based on a Frank Auerbach work, and put together it creates a very heady, romantic, abstracted image which in some sense is very much against the writing of Guy Debord and his politics. He was into free love and freedom of expression. One of his books was covered in sandpaper as if to say: "The world is rough and we interact with each other violently. We destroy things. We create things but we're not romantic." Whereas, my painting appears to be in a way very romantic, and I like the clash of Renoir and sandpaper. The two opposites. One is the smell of fresh roses and the other is the smell of shit, and you put them together and get something interesting. That's why I wanted this philosopher and this honeyed painting together, to create this strange, upside down sensibility." (Brown in Ménou 2016)

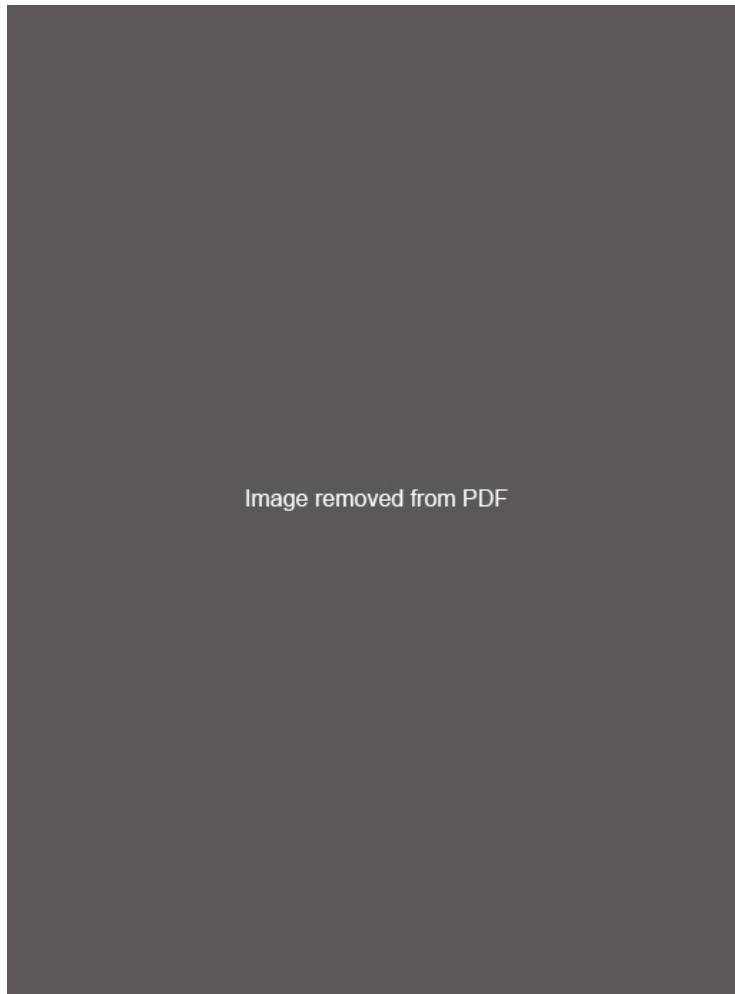


Fig. 70

Brown, G. (2001)

The Suicide of Guy Debord

The Suicide of Guy Debord (2001) has a distinctive tone of resignation. This knotted, painterly form hangs alone as if the stool has just been kicked and all is silent. It is difficult to deny however, that the painting is unabashedly phallic. The long and listless but heavy form, in its cadaverous hues of mauves and greys, is a flaccid tribute to the macho pragmatism with which Brown brands the philosopher. The image manages to conjure a whole speight of associations – from crude caricature, to painterly abstraction and even

corny Romanticism. It is one of Brown's less "figurative" paintings however it still manages to allude to so much beyond its frame. As is often the case in contemporary appropriation, there exists a hint of wry humour or mockery. I have discussed how Brown contributes to today's world of painterly homage and critique. Brown consumes all of painting – its history, genres, its materiality and place in pop culture. His vision is deconstructive in both a conceptual and material way to reveal the layers of association within a painting – its many networks.

In this final chapter I have acknowledged the multitudinous ways in which networks operate in paintings. I have discussed with references to my own project and the work of various painters from George Stubbs to Glenn Brown, the pertinent topics of indexicality, context and absence. The cues within a painting that direct our attention to other artworks are markers of influence that I describe as an *intrinsic network*. All of the artworks I have discussed, from Levine's *Monuments* to my own mashed Romantic appropriations feature this intrinsic network of sources that extend into historical labyrinths and interweaving timelines. I have however also identified how the context of viewing an original artwork operates as an *extrinsic network* - because the gallery, its culture and the very wall on which an artwork is hung, all affect our reading.

My exhibition at Site Eight elicits the experience of paintings both material and ephemeral, (as immaterial projections of light). When Francois Lyotard curated "Les Immatériaux," in 1985 at the Pompidou in Paris his enquiry was most prescient, he questioned: "do 'immaterials' leave the relationship between human beings and material unaltered or not?" (McDowell 2014). I believe that my projected iteration of *Picturesque* contributes to the discourse that Lyotard invited in his own curatorial project. Essentially digital media has transformed culture - the influence of digital and online media upon the way one looks at art is most profound.

The absence of material in this series has an effect upon the viewer that is I believe, duplicitous. The colourful glow upon the wall is mesmerising like a movie screen - it has an immersive capacity to which we are well acquainted. Eventually though, the lack of

painterly material has the effect of leaving the viewer indifferent. These projected, *light* paintings are a somewhat dispassionate example of painting; there are no marks to examine, no evidence of the making and for that matter (if we respond to Graw's position) no evidence of the artist. Those who admire painting for its haptic qualities may consider the "projected paintings" lacking or indeed not paintings at all. This point that I make is a reply of sorts to Lyotard's query surrounding the way immateriality affects our relationship with the "material". Copies and digital reproductions only serve to make the original artwork more desirable, untouchable and esteemed to us. The tangible material quality of painting has an inherent value that can "stand for the body of the artist" and (as I discussed in Chapter 1, *The Burden of Originality*) draw crowds of camera wielding tourists to galleries on a daily basis.

Appropriation is a way of declaring networks most pointedly in a work of art. It has become a veritable genre of its own in Postmodernism and a visual analogy for contemporaneity. Its use in my work is to confuse histories, identities and create doubts about authenticity. *The Cloud* plays with this notion with wry overtones. In sourcing "pieces" of historical paintings and making isolated "icons" of specific motifs I am branding them to some degree. With kitsch novelty value, one could hang an isolated Bierstadt cloud or Stubbs horse upon a wall. In a subtle way, the work performs like merchandise or a souvenir collectible.

Despite their status as singular motifs, the painted panels that make up *The Cloud* series possess networks of their own - to the artists they appropriate, to theatre props, to digital software, merchandise and being movable panels they are subject to the context (extrinsic network) in which they are hung.

Networks in paintings are indexical cues that deliver a multiple of contemporaneous sub plots and identities to the viewer. This project's enquiry into originality, materiality, devices, reproduction, appropriation and history are all nodes in this network and for this reason compile a comprehensive survey of contemporary painting in the digital era.

Conclusion

Professional time travellers have to know intimately the culture and coordinates of their own time – so they can get back to it! And so that they can speak to the present with sensitivity and discernment. (Griffiths 2016)

At this point of reflection I consider the trajectories that my project has roamed. From the outset, it was studio experimentation that allowed for this intrepid process of discovery. *Picturesque* and *The Cloud* are the product of this research but with the artwork comes also a new methodology and epistemology with regards to my practice. Like the rhizome I described in Chapter 3, this project is also a labyrinthine vine that originated from one seed - a painting, called *Versions of Now*. Early investigations around the beginning of my candidature consisted of cultural identification through painting and interrogations into the Romantic pastoral ideal. *Sullied Sublime* was a necessary project but one that I felt was ultimately unsustainable. *Versions of now* represents the segue between *Sullied Sublime* and my current enquiry which has culminated in this body of research. Shifting my concerns to the online, digital realm has been a personal “*Enlightenment*” and one that acknowledges a new emergent brand of sublime in the contemporary online environment. The methodology behind the creation of these projects is unique and discursive by nature. It employs the seemingly polarised worlds of the virtual/digital to inform a very traditional and haptic discipline: *painting*. I have discovered in my research how both worlds inhabit each other: as digitised paintings (jpegs), online and conversely, material paintings that

possess their own “algorithmic” layers. Painting’s materiality and object-status does not deny it having a very digital component. In the case of *Picturesque* and *The Cloud* the computer was an integral methodological step. It was a search engine that parented the content for my project and Photoshop was the application in which content was composed. Paint and canvas could be considered almost a final step in the making of the work, albeit a very important one. Nonetheless there exists residual evidence in the aesthetic of the painting of its online and digital sources, found in over-saturated colour, soft gradients, harsh crops and smooth, screen-like surfaces. The final iteration of *Picturesque* as projected light images returns the paintings, and all of their embedded references, to the digital space.

Within these investigations have arisen questions regarding the digital copy. In Chapter 1, I teased out the various implications of image reproduction. As a fully digitised entity in the online environment, an artwork becomes an immaterial version of its former self. Its make up is entirely based on algorithms. In this sense, according to Bulajić is not a reproduction at all, but an entirely different phenomenon: *code*. When considering reproductions, value is called in to question (in both fiscal and cultural terms). After the material-original has been transformed into a representation of itself it goes through multiple stages of deferral. The original marks and gestures may be lost in a print or a jpeg. Secondly, the material-original inherits the burden of being the one-and-only. Having a proliferation of “versions” creates a kind of cultural, over-saturation of an artwork. It is as if the original artwork inherits prestige in direct proportion to how many of its reproductions exist.

The online artwork, being infinitely reproducible calls out the ownership and authorship of a painting – indeed, identity is corroded by the copy, whether digital or otherwise. It opens up the possibility for mutations of the original to occur. My own project is implicated in this act, for appropriations can corrupt identity and conflate an artwork with its various copies (or homages, appropriations). In *Picturesque* this is enacted by the mash-up process; a Buvelot landscape is confused with one of Cole’s and painted by another hand altogether. *The Cloud* project singles out motifs in a way that their original usage and context is exiled.

The crisis of authenticity, ownership and identity are all a direct product of replication and appropriation.

Digital environments can be accessed via various devices. Devices all perform respectively like portals that can alter the way one sees the world quite profoundly. Viewing through the filter of a lens can frame or edit the perception of what lies before the spectator. Framing creates a private portal for the viewer - cutting away unnecessary information and to some degree, abbreviating visual experience. This is particularly prevalent online, where all content is edited, however the origins of “the portalised view” existed well before the advent of the world wide web.

In Chapter 2 I discussed two devices that originate in the 18th and 19th Centuries respectively, namely the *Claude Mirror* and Gainsborough’s *Showbox*. Both contraptions had novelty value in the way that they provided a subjective experience for the observer. *The Claude Mirror* was a device used by hobby painters and tourists of the time to compose a well balanced and *picturesque* landscape, according to the tastes of the day. Its simple design, a black, mirrored oval or square, held easily in the palm of one’s hand, is a prescient version of today’s ubiquitous smartphone. Used often for a similar purpose; the latter is a digital framing device (camera), for one, and a portal *par excellence* to what lies beyond.

What the screen has also afforded the artist, beyond framing a scene, is a new kind of aesthetic. When it is “shut down”, the monitor’s glossy black surface reflects the viewer’s image; when it boots up alternatively, it draws them in to an oversaturated and glowing space of images both moving and still. This aesthetic is captured in contemporary painting by artists like Jan Nelson, whose hyper-coloured, screen-like canvases, feature barely the slightest evidence of any brushwork. Similarly, Ry David Bradley’s soft focused fields of colour blur before us like a buffering download. Technically I have applied similar colours and gestures to my own projects in an attempt to capture the allure of the screen. I have described the use of devices in my methodology at length and believe the works, as final projects, inhabit the *digital* and *painterly* in equal measure.

In Chapter 3 I delved into a study of networks and how they have replaced the traditional way data are recorded. Networks, I argue, have a profound effect on the very shape of art history and the way artworks are viewed online. Most paintings historical and contemporary, today have a double life; material and immaterial. The ubiquitous practice of documenting everything digitally has increased exponentially over the last two decades. The result of this massive archive of artistic documents exists in a new brand of online database. The ordering of this database is however, somewhat randomised compared to systems that predate the Internet. Art history books, timelines, the Dewey decimal system, museums and art galleries alike, all apply the logic of consecutivity, category and narrative to organise works of art. All this chronological mapping is the product of human knowledge. The Internet doesn't possess knowledge; only fragments of information, which are accessed by simple word searches and image uploads. There is no meta narrative informing the Internet. Like in Borges's *Library of Babel* (1941), infinite associations and categories of data are possible. Baurillard, like Borges, forecasted a similar phenomenon on a wider cultural scale, in which the mass of networked information affects a *psychotropic* condition upon the human subject. His dystopian thesis is that man is rendered as "a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence." (Baudrillard 1983).

The splintered nature of my methodology; borrowing a gesture from here, appropriating a painting from there, is itself a happenstance and disorganised affair, rather like the Internet itself. The crossing networks that have informed my projects are visibly evident in their final aesthetic. Unrelated pieces, odd colours and mixed histories all find communion in one place - *Picturesque*. Likewise the orphaned motifs that make up *The Cloud* all reveal the intervention of "search engine logic". Playing with search engines or "networking" has been the most enjoyable aspect of the project because it's role was the arbiter of chance and discovery.

Chapter 3 acknowledged the prominence of networks online and between paintings, narratives and ideas. In Chapter 4 however I extend upon the discussion and purport that networks are even more insidious than this - they also exist within paintings themselves. Appropriation is a prime example of how various associations and lineages - networks may reside together with one frame. This is particularly clear in *Picturesque*. The paintings declare their discordant networks of influence quite plainly and in doing so, form the abstract visual narratives for which they are known. What lies immediately outside the frame of the canvas is also of note when considering networks. The context in which an artwork is hung - its "site", colours the communication of the piece very importantly. My example in Chapter 4, of *The Matisse Room* at the Vatican Museum, illustrates the way that site can impose great reverence on an artwork. Collections as redeemed as the latter are further afforded veneration by virtue of their site.

The most cogent example of an interior network is the *gesture*, which can perform as a powerful index to its maker. Isabelle Graw's statement that paintings operate as "quasi-persons" is testament to the claim there are cues within the canvas that point to the artist. The content of a painting can allude to many sources but the touch of the artist's hand reminds one that a body has been present and has with great personal attention, massaged colour into an image. Conversely, *Picturesque*, as a projected series of works, eliminates this haptic quality. The indexical link that connects the paintings with my body are broken by their immateriality. The material objects themselves are absent. Context, indexicality and absence are themes upon which I elaborated in Chapter 4. Both *Picturesque* and *The Cloud* epitomise absence; the former by virtue of their non-material, projected status and the latter as exiled remnants from other paintings. *The Cloud* is but a menagerie of odd references to *Picturesque*, Romanticism, digital fantasy art and stock imagery. They are migrated from their original context and networked together to form a strange new family.

This project has formed new knowledge through experimentation, serendipity and discovery. As a very chance based project, making *Picturesque* has illuminated to me how knowledge is not born through invention but rather through connections. It is the way ideas converge, associate and influence one another that form new knowledge. Studio play and networking images have revealed a whole new epistemology around the digital sublime, a space I did not originally seek to find, but one at which I arrived. The artworks themselves make new knowledge by exposing the “hyper connectivity” which Baudrillard predicted of our times. As paintings they embody networks of connections and frame new narratives that travel across time and place. In appropriating and combining my disparate sources I have openly challenged value, identity, technique and taste. This is not to mention the haptic discoveries I have made in appropriating from such a broad field of references. As a material enquiry the project has been rich in exploration and this is evident in the unique presentation of projections and cut outs - both new media to my previous practice as a “painter on canvas”.

Picturesque and *The Cloud* represent capricious new methodologies that will continue to traverse other spaces, genres and ideas about painting.

Appendix 1

Sullied Sublime

Exhibited October, 2014 at MARS Gallery, Windsor

About the project

In 2014 at the commencement of this research degree my concerns were developing toward the idea of painting as a document of “history” and how the painters of the Romantic period authored a view of “an emerging Australia” to some degree. The artworks produced during this first year were many and plentiful and represent a practical shift in the way I work. I selected seven of these works for an exhibition in October of 2014. The exhibition *Sullied Sublime* interrogated the artist’s role in the reportage of Australian history and the impact this has on our cultural identity. It too considered how historical artworks are represented in our Post Internet era. Although the work was successful in its own right I feel that it sits awry of the final project’s interests, which is more comprehensively about networks, devices, materiality and identity. I did however write a paper about the Sullied Sublime project which was presented at two conferences: *Identities and Identifications*; Euroacademia in Lucca, June 2015 and The Annual *Lumina Conference* at the University of WA in 2017.

This series of work focused principally on two migrant, European painters who influenced the perception of a cultural identity in the newly colonised Australia between 1850 and 1890: Swiss-born, Abram-Louis Buvelot (1814-1886) and Austrian, Eugene von Gerard (1811-1901). Both have been posthumously honoured as fathers of the Australian landscape and, conversely, criticised for their misrepresentation of Australian history.

The paintings of Von Gerard and Buvelot make a departure from the first colonial portrayals of the Australian pastoral which were mainly scientific illustrations. The period of landscape painting that followed featured a Eurocentric gaze that resembled more a Claude Lorraine than the local environment. Buvelot and von Gerard however, approached the landscape with an unprecedented naturalism and ambience.

To those at home in Europe, this new Australian landscape would tell the story of a bushy Shangri La; a romantic narrative, indeed. And yet, these images of majestic mountains and harmonious farmland belie Australia's wretched past - as a penal colony, the genocide of indigenous peoples, its harsh climate and burgeoning, unmanageable population.

Such is the prevailing critique of these two "fathers" of Australian landscape. One may well question the artist as the arbiter of history and identity. Is identity, after all, synchronic or are its conditions more mutable?

Buvelot and von Gerard's paintings present a version of events.

I accessed their artworks online, which likewise, presents multiples - variations on each "original". From the fractured space of the Internet, I sourced, appropriated, further distorted and misquoted the contended narratives painted by these two artists. My paintings, oil on linen, represent even further slippage from any claim that the artist may have on history or identity.

Studio methodology

The project was highly experimental from a painterly point of view and represents a great period of growth and self-reflection for me as a painter. I was encouraged to experiment with the gesturality of my painting work by my supervisors and this resulted in a highly energised haptic quality in the work. The chance nature of painting this way meant that not every painting “worked” and many were chalked up as “trials”. Nonetheless I developed a confidence in working large and challenging my mimetic tendencies.

The painting *Detached Landscape* (2014) is an example of this new found confidence. The artwork is an appropriation of Louis Buvelot’s Waterpool at Coleraine. In making the image I decided to stretch it first in Photoshop. I split the original Buvelot jpeg into halves and rendered the underpainting across two linen panels. Having the ground work down I was then free to play with the painterly surface. I rubbed and scumbled the paint in to the support to achieve a blurry or hazy effect. I then dragged it around the canvas with a large, soft bristled square brush. I discovered that when I brushed in one direction and then the opposite, I could create the wavy appearance that is now visible in the right hand panel of the final artwork.

This technique was employed again in the painting *Sullied Sublime*. This artwork and its companion *The Double Life of Clarice Beckett* (2014) were made toward the end of this period in homage to the work and life of the late Clarice Beckett. At this point I was quite busy pushing wet paint around the canvas to achieve various effects. The resulting work is the most “abstract” in the series and is quite appealing as an image - but something, in hindsight, felt wrong about the work. Despite my exuberance to make more gestural and expressive marks in my work, it was precisely these “effects” that drove me away from the process. The *Beckett* painting *appears* random and happenchance however it was, in fact, created with a rather contrived, practiced and studied gesture. The artwork’s central “swoosh” of paint had been wiped out and repeated countless times before I felt it looked right, my heart beating hard the whole time. I had begun to feel that this “gesture” was

feeling a little “put on” or staged - not highly chance driven and accidental like it had been in the beginning of the project. Ultimately I was still intent on a degree of perfection in the surface that pure chance and abstraction would negate.

Sullied Sublime represents a great learning curve in the development of this project that I believe is worthy of the generous attention that I have afforded it in this dissertation. It helped me to define the project’s parameters and drove my interest to countless new texts that have informed a new epistemology around painting and history. The studio during 2014 was a fertile ground upon which to grow new methodologies and challenge old ideas. I have since adopted a much more “playful” approach to making because of the *Sullied Sublime* project. This new openness has resulted in an exhibition of projections and cut out panels which set a precedent in my practice as an artist.



Plate 12

Newey, S, (2014)

Ultramarine (after von Guérard)

1000 x 2170 mm



Plate 13

Newey, S, (2014)

Sullied Sublime

600 mm x 1200 mm

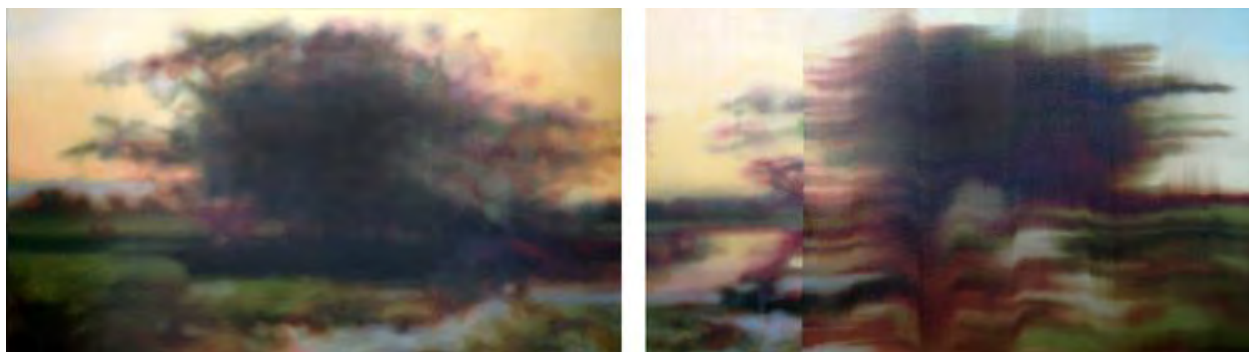


Plate 14

Newey, S, (2014)

Detached Landscape (after Buvelot), oil on linen, 2 panels,
each 750 x 1000 mm

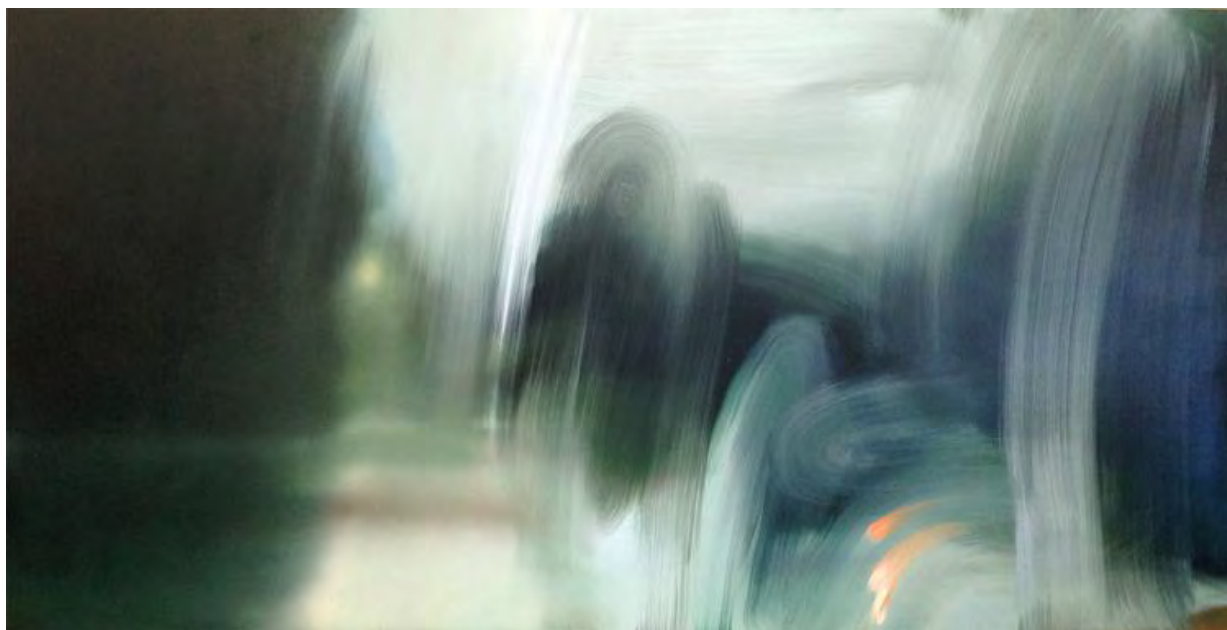


Plate 15

Newey, S, (2014)

The Double Life of Clarice Beckett (after Beckett)

600 x 1200 mm



Plate 16

Newey, S, (2014)

A parting of ways (after Buvelot)

2 panels each 600 x 600 mm



Plate 17

Newey, S, (2014)

Vanished Lake (after von Guérard)

2 panels,

each 300 x 350 mm

Appendix 2

1 The Immediate Past

2 Menagerie

1. *The Immediate Past*

Exhibited September 2016

Jan Manton Art, Brisbane

Artist statement: The Immediate Past

The Immediate Past is a series of 8 oil paintings that employ two key themes of the Romantic Landscape - sky and sea. Here, these two motifs are characters in a play about time.

The tradition of landscape is subverted, in these paintings, by digital manipulation. Despite the traditional painterly method employed in their making, Newey's works feature the highly saturated palette of the digital screen and evidence of digital filters.

The source of these sky-seascapes was not born of the *en plein air* tradition, but quite conversely, graphics software and the Internet.

In the Immediate Past, sea, space, history and time are meshed together as flexuous painterly collages. A meeting of the Romantic and digital sublime.

(Newey 2016)

<https://www.janmantonart.com/the-immediate-past>



Plate 18

Newey, S. (2016)

The Immediate Past 1

Oil on canvas

77cm x 96.5cm



Plate 19

Newey, S. (2016)

The Immediate Past 2

Oil on canvas

77cm x 96.5cm



Plate 20

Newey, S. (2016)

The Immediate Past 7

Oil on canvas, 51cm x 51cm



Plate 21

Newey, S. (2016)

The Immediate Past 8 (in progress)

Oil on canvas

120cm x 250cm



Plate 22

Newey, S. (2016)

The Immediate Past 8 (finished, detail)

Oil on canvas

120cm x 250cm

2. Menagerie

Exhibited November 2017

Jan Manton Art, Brisbane

Artist statement

Menagerie features a gathering of Romantic motifs and vignettes, remixed and filtered via contemporary digital aesthetics.

Classic examples of Romantic painting from the 19th century have been sourced online, colourised, collaged and resampled in graphics software and repainted by hand in this series. It represents an ongoing conversation between the past and present in which information gets skewed. The works, oil on canvas and hand - etched drawings all revisit the tropes of the Romantic sublime - the epic seas, skies, flora and fauna of the Enlightenment period.

Masters of the sublime painterly tradition feature as homaged samples among the works - a George Stubbs bull, a Hans Güde mountain, even the Australian Louis Buvelot is represented among other nods to the Romantic era.

Animals float as apparitions, clouds and waves glow in neon pink. This confluence of past tradition and futuristic vision contemplates our perception of time.

(Newey 2017)

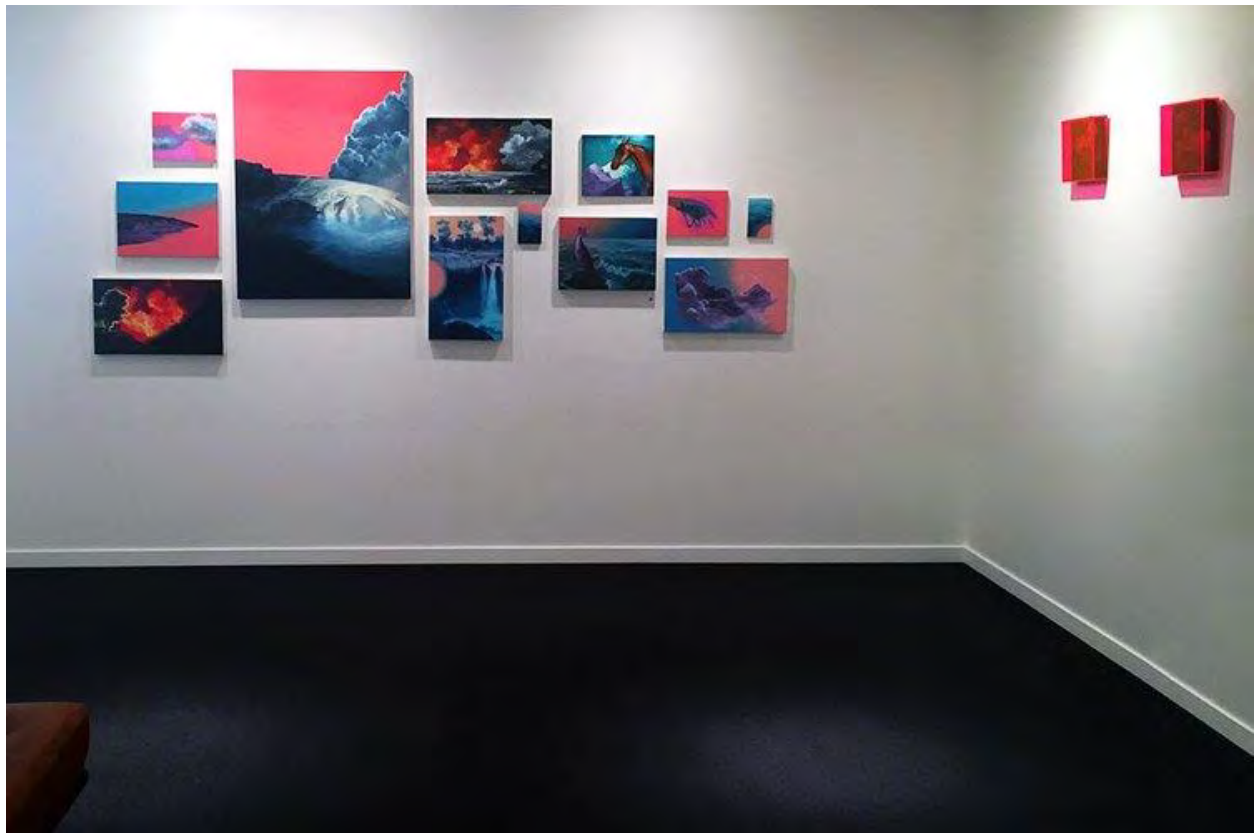


Plate 23

Newey, S. (2017)

Menagerie

Installation view at Jan Manton Art, Brisbane



Plate 24

Newey, S. (2017)

The Meeting

Oil on board

19 x 25cm



Plate 25

Newey, S. (2017)

Blind Spot 1

Oil on Canvas

550 x 300 mm



Plate 26

Newey, S. (2017)

The Singularity

Oil on canvas

30.5 x 51cm



Plate 27

Newey, S. (2017)

The Return Voyage of the Kongouro (after Stubbs)

Oil on canvas

30 x 40cm



Plate 28

Newey, S. (2017)

Future Phantom

Oil on board

25 x 30cm



Plate 29

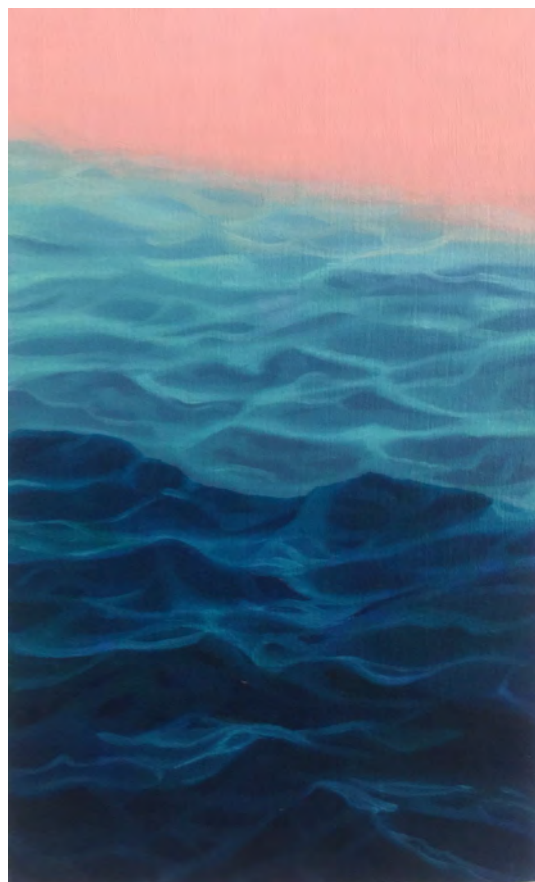


Plate 30

Plate 29

Newey, S. (2017)

Blind Spot 2

Oil on Board

160 x 110 mm

Plate 30

Newey, S. (2017)

Blind Spot 3

Oil on Board

160 x 110 mm



Plate 31

Newey, S. (2017)

Lunar Sea

Oil on canvas

92cm x 70cm



Plate 32

Newey, S. (2017)

Cape Shark

Oil on canvas

300 x 400 mm



Plate 33

Newey, S. (2017)

The Singularity 2

Oil on *Arches Satine* Cotton Rag

300 x 550 mm



Plate 34

Newey, S. (2017)

The Foundling

Oil on *Arches Satine* Cotton Rag, 300 x 300 mm



Plate 35

Newey, S. (2017)

Nocturne 1

Oil on Canvas

305 x 510 mm



Plate 36

Newey, S. (2017)

Nocturne 2

Oil on Canvas

305 x 510 mm

The *Vignette* series

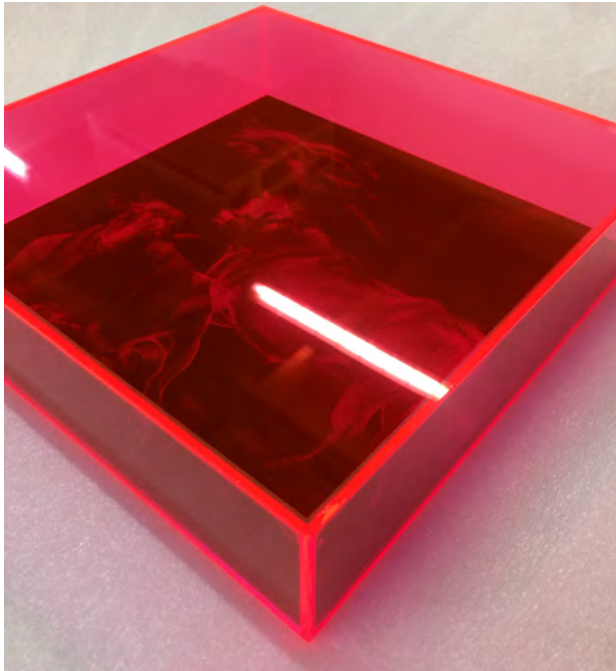


Plate 37



Plate 38

Plate 37

Newey, S. (2017)

Bovine Vignette (Display view including perspex box)

Etched ink on Clayboard

Mounted in neon pink Perspex

200 x 200 x 50 mm

Plate 38

Newey, S. (2017)

Bovine Vignette

Etched ink on Clayboard

Mounted in neon pink Perspex

200 x 200 x 50 mm

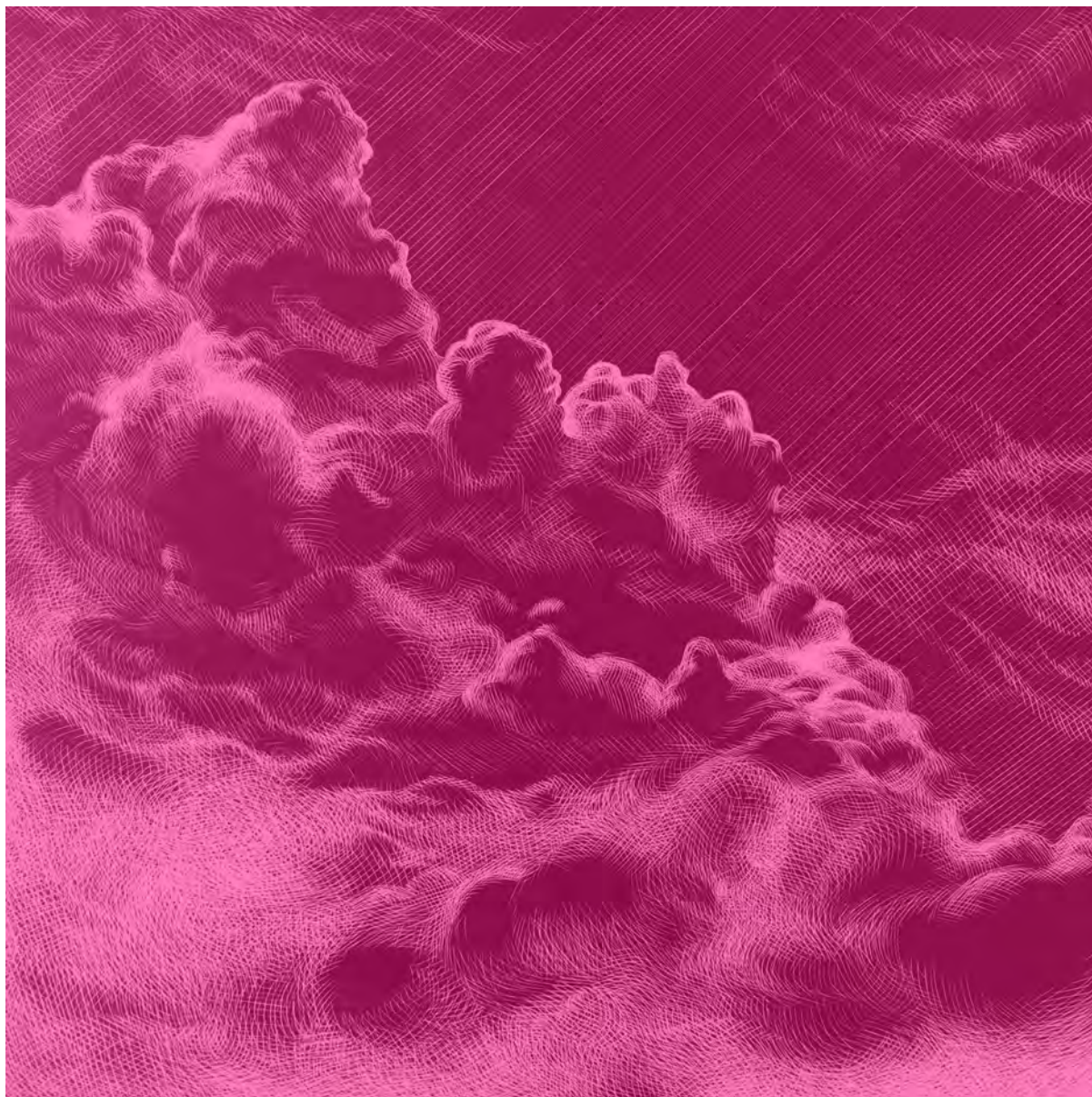


Plate 39

Newey, S. (2017)

Cloud Vignette

Etched ink on Clayboard

Mounted in neon pink Perspex, 200 x 200 x 50 mm

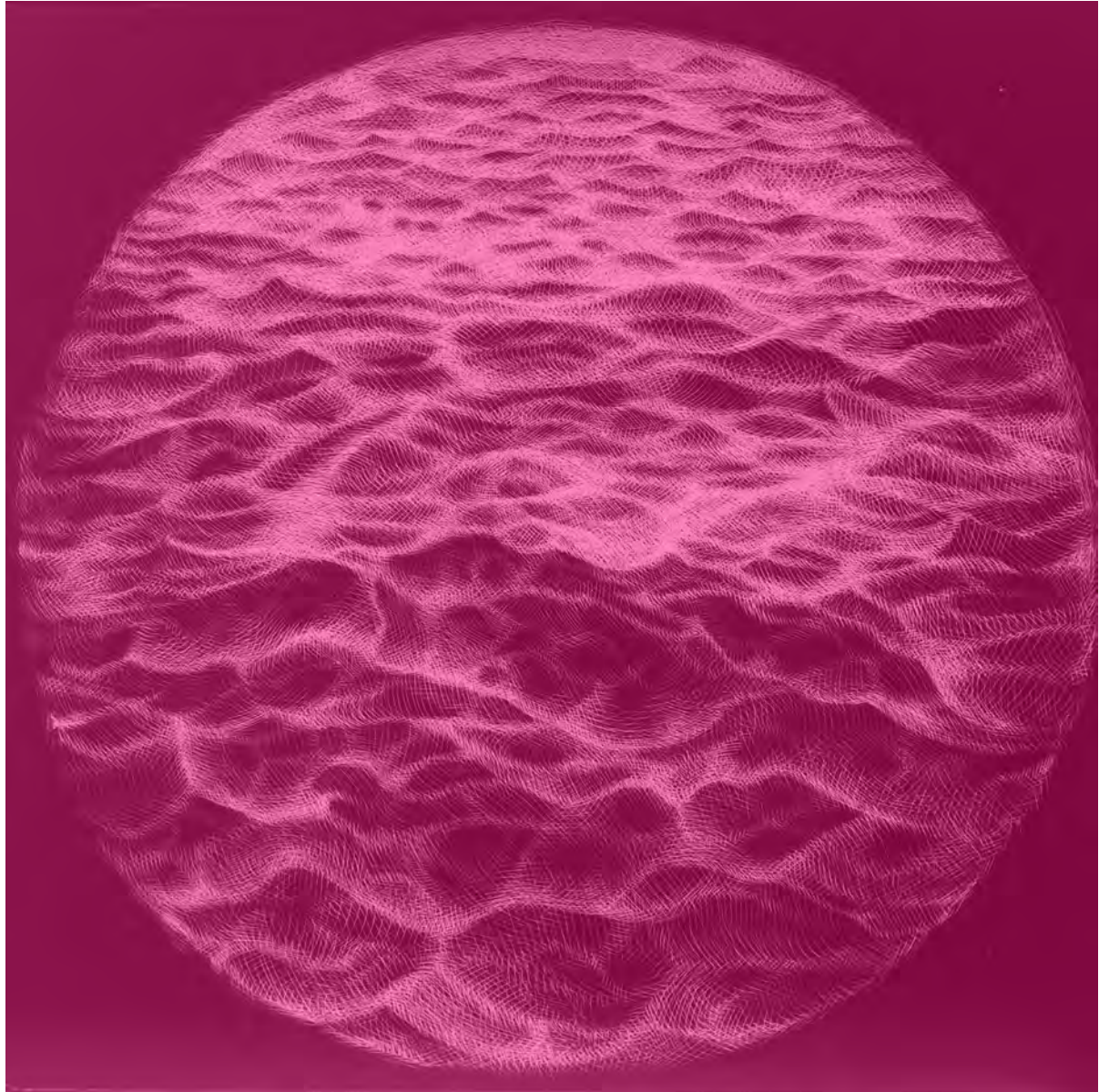


Plate 40

Newey, S. (2017)

Deep Sea Vignette

Etched ink on Clayboard

Mounted in neon pink Perspex

200 x 200 x 50 mm



Plate 41

Newey, S. (2017)

Equine Vignette

Etched ink on Clayboard

Mounted in neon pink Perspex

200 x 200 x 50 mm



Plate 42

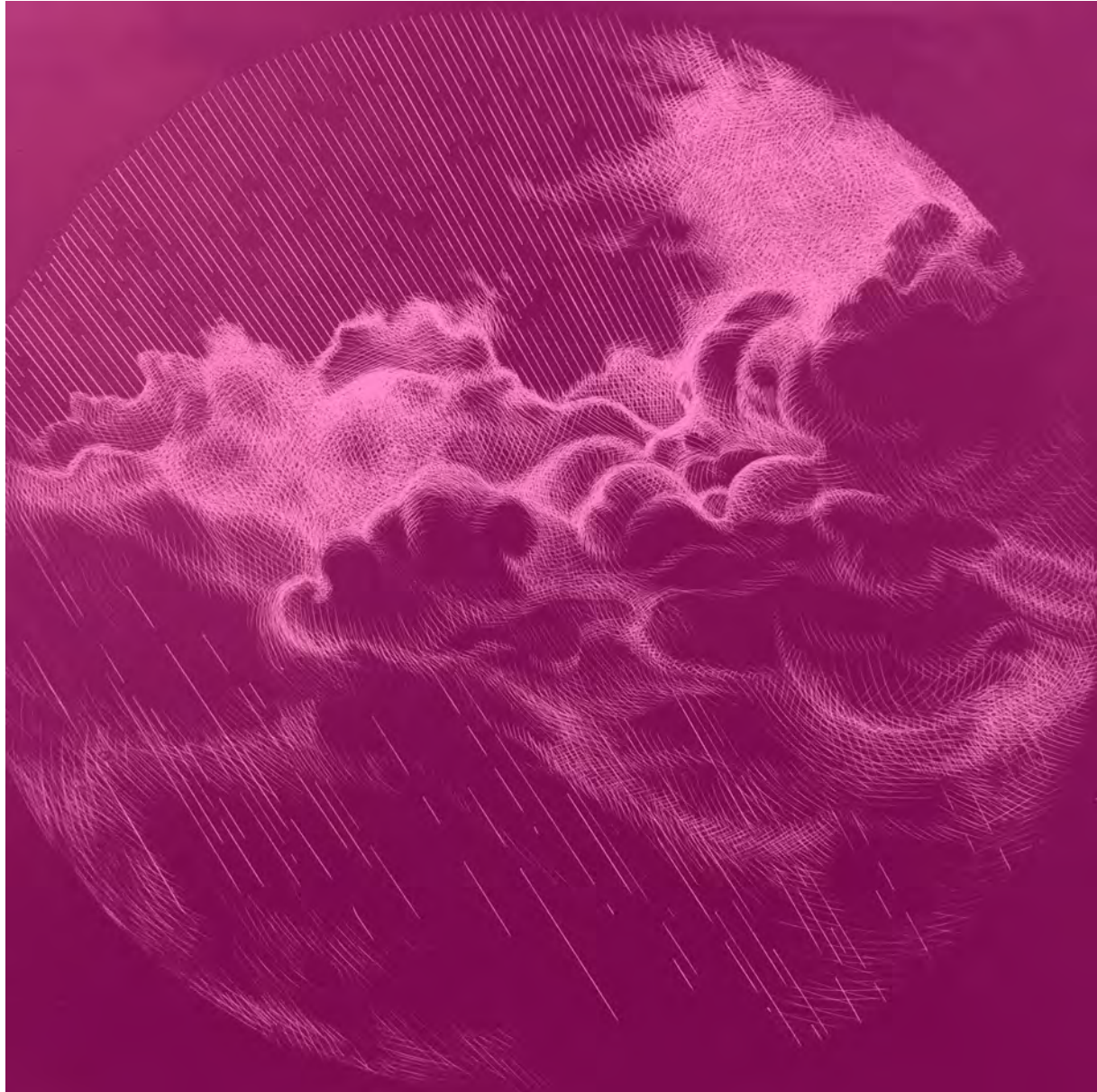
Newey, S. (2017)

Meeting Vignette

Etched ink on Clayboard

Mounted in neon pink Perspex

200 x 200 x 50 mm



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- 27 Newey, S. (2017) *The Return Voyage of the Kongouro* Oil on canvas 300 x 400 mm
- 28 Newey, S. (2017) *Future Phantom* Oil on board 250 x 300 mm
- 29 Newey, S. (2017) *Blind Spot 2* Oil on Canvas 510 x 305 mm
- 30 Newey, S. (2017) *Blind Spot 3* Oil on board 160 x 100 mm
- 31 Newey, S. (2017) *Lunar Sea* Oil on canvas 920 mm x 700 mm
- 32 Newey, S. (2017) *Cape Shark* Oil on canvas 300 x 400 mm
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- 34 Newey, S. (2017) *The Foundling* Oil on Arches Satine Cotton Rag 300 x 300 mm
- 35 Newey, S. (2017) *Nocturne 1* Oil on Canvas 305 x 510 mm
- 36 Newey, S. (2017) *Nocturne 2* Oil on Canvas 305 x 510 mm
- 37 Newey, S. (2017) *Bovine Vignette* (Display view including perspex box) Etched ink on Clayboard Mounted in neon pink Perspex 200 x 200 x 50 mm
- 38 Newey, S. (2017) *Bovine Vignette* Etched ink on Clayboard Mounted in neon pink Perspex 200 x 200 x 50 mm
- 39 Newey, S. (2017) *Cloud Vignette* Etched ink on Clayboard Mounted in neon pink Perspex 200 x 200 x 50 mm
- 40 Newey, S. (2017) *Deep Sea Vignette* Etched ink on Clayboard Mounted in neon pink Perspex 200 x 200 x 50 mm

41 Newey, S. (2017) *Equine Vignette* Etched ink on Clayboard Mounted in neon pink Perspex 200 x 200 x 50 mm

42 Newey, S. (2017) *Meeting Vignette* Etched ink on Clayboard Mounted in neon pink Perspex 200 x 200 x 50 mm

43 Newey, S. (2017) *Squall Vignette* Etched ink on Clayboard Mounted in neon pink Perspex 200 x 200 x 50 mm

FIGURES

1 Buvelot, L. (1875). *Waterpool near Coleraine, Sunset*

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8a Hobbema, M. (c. 1664 - 1665) *Landscape with Anglers and a Distant Town*. Los Angeles County

8b Unnamed (undated) Stock image of a sunset.

9 Newey, S. (2016) Digital Collage experiment in Photoshop

10 Newey, S. (2016) Collage experiment. Digital prints polystyrene panel, pins

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21 (signed) A.K. (1861) An unidentified landscape painting

22 “Sandara” (undated) *River dragon*

23 Bingham, G. C. (1853) *The storm (detail)*

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- 50 Bellini, G. (c. 1480) *St. Jerome reading in a landscape*
- 51 James, P. (2018) *Stranger in a strange land*
- 52 Hewson, S. (2014) *Looking out from within my perception*
- 53 Unnamed (undated) Illustration of Armageddon found on www.jw.org
- 54 Whistler, J. M. (1871) *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1*
- 55 Whistler, J. M. (1872 - 1877) *The Falling Rocket*
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- 59 Newey, S. (2018) Test projection *Versions of now*, SITE EIGHT, RMIT
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- 61a The Matisse Room at the Vatican Museum Rome (Vatican-monacopatrons.com, 2015)

61b Matisse, H. *Maquette* designs. (Nomad, 2019)

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