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NORMAL WHAT

By

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Abstract

The title *Normal What* refers to a group of paintings that emerged from my Masters of Visual Arts 2004/05 studio project. Individual paintings are chronological self portrait reflecting upon my own experiences and those in the wider community who at some point in their lives have had to endure the struggles, and negative stigma that is so often attached to those who have become marginalised and detached from mainstream society. People found in this category include the disabled, homeless, unemployed, and those with addiction problems.

Each painting bears a close connection with techniques associated with abstract expressionist painting. This radiates through the vast expanse of drips, stains and explosions which appear to suffocate the paintings delicate monochrome surface. Strong references to Kristeva's theory on Abjection arrive through the aggressive and violent outbursts of paint that evoke an atmosphere of symbolic horror, personal dysfunction and social oppression. This emerges out of the shadows and private spaces of the painting's domestic interior.

Deep emotional, psychological, sociological sensitivities are raised throughout my studio practice. Combined with a series of unresolved tensions, and questions surrounding normality run deep a consequence of society's push for normality are being felt most acutely by those effected by this form of sociology.

The ideas raised through my studio project had a profound influence on the research being conducted for the dissertation. Kristeva's theory on Abjection, along side the

practices of Eva Hesse, Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin emerged from a group of highly emotional abstract paintings. This strengthened the connection between the studio project and the dissertation. Aimed at deepening a personal understanding and commitment to researching the subject of normality and how it could be successfully articulated through a visual narrative.

Introduction

This dissertation will examine in detail the contemporary issue of normality. By definition normality refers to the ability to conform to the common type; regular usual, natural not suffering from any abnormalities the ability to conform to a fixed standard. In psychology it's defined as the quality of being approximately average with respect to any psychological trait, such as intelligence, personality, emotional adjustment and without any mental aberrations¹

Research into this complex subject lead me to purse in detail an investigation into the theories to emerge from a growing personal interest in Kristeva's theory on Abjection, including the work of Eva Hesse, Agnes Martin, Barnett Newman. The inclusion of these individuals enabled the development of a solid foundation in order to purse the subject of normality further.

All in response to contemporary society's belief and understanding that the majority of the population is normal. My concern lies for those who don't appear to fit in or comply with what society consider or clarify to be the norm. The decision to undertake this form of research stemmed from a social conversation I had during the interlude between completing Honours marking four years of undergraduate study and commencing Masters the following year. The conversation moved into discussing and debating the sometimes sensitive issue of normality and how obsessive society has become and the lengths it's prepared to take to obtain and preserve that ideal.

¹ Delbridge A, ' *The Macquarie Dictionary*, Revised Edition, Mc Mahon's Point, 2001 1306

I have since concentrated my investigation on the humanitarian impact of those left behind who have subsequently found themselves side lined and pushed out of the equation and therefore classified as a threat to mainstream society. Therefore has the potential to influence people's perceptions of what they themselves would define as normal. An idea heavily backed and supported through a cross section of the mass media. For example it's been promoted through the advertising of cosmetics and other branded consumer products.

Kristeva's theory on abjection identifies in detail the emotional and psychological trauma that society inflicted on those who don't fit into its definition of normality. Kristeva brings the subject of abjection out of the dark shadows and recesses and into the public arena, with the intension of increasing awareness by showing the impact of societies push for maintaining a state of normality.

The work of Eva Hesse addresses the subject of abjection through a unique practice that combined the aesthetics of painting and sculpture together. Resonating a deep and refined visual dialogue indicating a solid and unresolved commitment to voicing the experiences of the most vulnerable and disenfranchised people in the community. No individual or location can be easily recognized from Hesse's work. This is done deliberately to maintain a sense of privacy and anonymity for each of the individuals and places represented throughout Hesse's paintings and sculptural forms. Instead they become a voice that represents elements of social dysfunction and marginalization whereby the artist attempts to make these issues know to the wider community in the hope of

generating change in thinking and attitudes. An eye witness account of these experiences have been portrayed through a complex abstract symbolic language that's been pushed through a dialogue of geometric forms holding strong references to abstraction and minimalism. The abject is revealed through the application of paint in the forms of drips and stains and other mediums that transcend into imagery associated with bodily function and experiences that extend beyond the mainstream aesthetics of human experience emerges into a deep abstract void of pure emotion. Hesse's paintings create the ideal conditions for the realm of the abject to become fully integrated into an abstract/minimalist form. References to this can be sited in Hesse's gouaches created between 1960-61 *Untitled*, gouache and ink on paper, 6 x 4 ½ inches, 15.2 x 11.4 centimetres, 1960-61, Private Collection. *Untitled*, gouache and ink on paper 6 x 9 inches, 15.2 x 22.8 centimetres, 1961.

Barnett Newman on the other hand has taken the unusual step of creating a body of work that redefines the practice and principles of minimalist painting. In his hands it's become a medium that camouflages the emotional and psychological sensitivities felt by the marginalised and vulnerable members of the community. Newman's work becomes a shield of protection for these people sheltering them from the outside world and the harsh stigma that's so often attached to those living outside the mainstream. Barnett Newman's '*Day Before One*' Oil on Canvas, 1953 becomes a reference for this idea. It's the combinations of blue being applied at various intervals throughout the painting process a deep abstract security blanket emerges from the thick and dense layers of pigment. This also takes on the role of protecting mainstream society from the lifestyle reality and

behavioural characteristics of those living on the fringes. It's all been ushered under the carpet for our own protection and those with prying eyes and a stream of curious on lookers. All carefully choreographed and neatly presented so that a clean cut images is broadcast to the rest of the world generating a feeling of universal harmony and prosperity.

A clear indication of a society that finds it difficulty to deal with a confront issues concerning people branded as outsiders is who are vulnerable and insecure. ' *Day Before One* ' attempts to grab the viewer on a sensory level hoping to make them aware of the personal experiences of the subject camouflaged behind multi layers of colour. A deep, dark, and unchallenged and robust shield emerges guarding against intruders and other elements classified as a security risk. In an artist's statement written for gallery visitors to his 1950 exhibition Newman indicated that 'this paintings are not abstractions, nor do they depict some 'pure' idea. They are specific and separate embodiments of feeling, to be experienced, each picture for itself. They contain no depictive allusions, full of restrained passion; their poignancy is revealed in each concentrated image.' Newman also wished to emphasise that the paintings were not meant to be read either as narrative or as design, but to be felt'.²

These ideas in the above commentary draw close ties with Newman's early drawings and paintings of natural flora and fauna. ' *Untitled* ,' circa 1944 or 1945 oil, oil crayon, and pastel on paper. 'Technique and application of pigment where at the centre of these particular works , he rubbed softly with the side of a crayon creating fan like arcs, pressing hard enough to almost tear the paper, before he applied dabs of dry pigment.

² Ann Temkin, ' *Barnett Newman on Exhibition* ', Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 2002 87.

Incorporating the paper's surface prevented the composition from becoming too dense. The paper provides airy relief as it shows through rubbed areas while other sections remain untouched. The artist's interest in variations of texture and reflectivity is evident in the distinctions made between the soft pastels and the rich greasiness of the oil, and in his deliberate counterpoint of sharp and gentle applications of a single colour. The geometric forces appear to be separating or an attempt is definitely made to try and endorse a departure'.³

These avenues flowed on into Newman's '*Pagan Void*', Oil on Canvas 1946. This particular painting conveys a tangled web of emotional outbursts beaming from a cluster of pigment that's been applied in a aggressive and hypersensitive mannerism. Attention shifts away from the onslaught of heavy duty pigment to concentrate on the paintings hard core aesthetics and pictorial space steal the limelight.

This concept appears to clash with the highly rendered monochrome background from which is an explosive, atmospheric nightmare that resembles some connection to stars in a galaxy coming to the end of its life. Bands of geometric colour bond together to create a vast areas of abstract space that forces the viewer to focus their attention squarely on the large menacing black hole consuming the painting's centre. Various combinations of blue, cream, with a hazy green background does seem a little distracting. Volumes of pigment appear to infuse and cross contaminate each other from all conceivable directions.

What emerges are a series of endless and expansive voids that creates a cosmos sourced from a central location. These expansive metaphors are on going and repeated a various

³ Ann Temkin, ' *Barnett Newman on Exhibition* ', Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 2002 115

intervals throughout the painting. They signal an endless expansion beyond any conceivable or comprehension limit or restriction, that may or may not have been imposed by the artist or other factors driving the artistic process. Strong references to personal hardship and vulnerability are infused in this tangled web of expressionist painting. In the mist of all the apparent dysfunction and paranoia lies a small window of hope that one day the burdens and struggles will cease, resorting an idealistic existence where acceptance, confidence, achievement take centre stage.

A more contemporary reference to the issue of normality and abjection can be identified through the works of Australian born photographer Bill Henson. His January 2005 retrospective held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales addressed these issues of normality and abjection through a photographic discourse. At times his images can be confronting in his detailed examination of the harsh realities of those living on society's urban fringes, mainly the homeless, disenfranchised youth, individuals with substance abuse and the unemployed. They have become the detritus of society. Henson brings these subjects out of the shadows and into the public domain. Informing the viewer of their desperate situation and the community's reluctance to provide and assist these or care.

Chapter One, *'Allergic Reactions'*

This chapter forms a detailed discussion on the humanitarian impact of societies push for normality. It focuses on a series of abstract paintings that also reveal strong references to Kristeva's theory on abjection and the impact this social idea is having on societies most

vulnerable. The integration of techniques associated with abstract painting is exposed through a dominant force of colour that's been randomly applied through the action of pouring and dripping of pigment onto a conventional monochrome surface. This practice is associated with personal experiences both directly and indirectly, creates a melancholic atmosphere with the potential to spark feelings of hostility, anxiety, and other forms of dysfunction with no hope of breaking the cycle.

In essence this chapter sets the foundation for the broad and diverse topic of normality. It not only refers to the artistic and theoretical examples from art history and philosophy but also mentions an article written in the Sydney Morning Herald's Weekend Edition August 2004 identifies with some of the measures been taken and used by society in its justification for what it defines as '*normal*' and social implication this may have on individuals.

Chapter Two '*Perfect*'

This chapter examines in detail a group of paintings that registered a shift away from the melancholic atmosphere of abstract expressionist painting, to concentrate on delivering what society 'hopes it will eventually achieve from its policy of discriminating against those who it believes doesn't fit into its perception of it considers to be the 'norm'. A process that emerges through the multi layers of pigment each carefully choreographed onto a two dimensional surface. Achieved through the selection and application of pigment a process of obtaining a smooth and rendered surface where all the creases, wrinkles and other impurities have been removed. Developed into a series of paintings that embraced with open arms the 'new articulated visions and potential on offer through

participation and an on going commitment to the minimalist cause. One where a smooth rendered industrialized surface was paramount to the painting's success. Strong connections to Eva Hesse, Barnett Newman, and Agnes Martin are revealed through the unique combinations of pigment and subject matter driving this body of work. Using a brush rather than pouring directly onto the canvas enforced some sense of restriction on the capacity for pigments to interact and engage with each other. However stronger tones of pigment did allow me to achieve greater control, and flexibility and engagement in the whole painting process. This generated a host of creative and technical restrictions and limitations that been enforced across the painting visual and technical dimensions. It does seem to of made an impact on the protected outcome pushing this form of painting.

Three shades of blue and one of black completes the colour palette. Having viewed these colour combinations in abstract paintings dating from the later stages of the twentieth century I was hooked! I was particularly drawn to Newman's blue monochrome paintings at time when I was seeking a detour away from shades of red, yellow, orange, green which previously dominated my colour palette. In doing so I embarked upon the challenge of manipulating shades of black and blue to a level that not only held a deep personal connection but also examined aspects of world experience beyond individual perception. These ideas are discussed at length throughout chapter two.

Chapter Three '*Influences*'

This chapter introduces the works of Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin, Eva Hesse. A detailed discussion forms around individual practices and the significance and connection

these artist's have had on my own artistic development and also their relevance to the subject of normality. I refer to Eva Hesse's late twentieth century paintings and sculptural forms. Visually I gravitated towards the physical and psychological experiences of individuals who for what ever reason didn't and don't comply with societies definition of *'normal'*.

Here Hesse's practice works against the grain in her attempt to ratify a miserable situation. Making an effort to highlight to mainstream society what's happening as a result of this social ideal, something that's been pushed and promoted through all avenues of modern communication. Society uses this promotional tool to justify the need for the correction to host of potential and existing imperfections. Tagged with this is an individual guarantee of attaining a greater sense of personal and social acceptance obtainable through personal interaction and use of a particular product or service. This demonstrates the impact of commercial advertising and the effect this is having on the wider community, resulting in a greater sense of division rather than unity which the products and services been advertised promote. Each of these artists provided the contemporary detour I was looking for in my quest to shift my practice away from the concrete list of influences that I'd developed during my undergraduate years.

'The Conclusion'

The conclusion reflects upon the research that I've conducted into the subject of normality. Discussing in some detail the reasons behind the decisions made regarding the choice of artists and philosophy was driven by the need to gain a full understand of the concepts pushing the development of my studio practice and the research for the

dissertation. Analysis's in some detail both the personal and communal connection between each of the artists work and Kristeva's philosophy in relation to the subject of normality. In many ways the conclusion becomes an extension of the ideas and subjects discussed in chapters one, two, three. In many ways the conclusion becomes an extension of the ideas and subjects discussed in chapters one, two, three, and my reasons for taking the position I did with this dissertation. It also highlights the struggles and vulnerability that continues to remain hidden from view and the front pages of the newspaper and television.