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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 aberrations<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 cited 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'.<sup>2</sup>

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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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'.<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

## Chapter One 'Allergic Reactions'

The title '*Allergic Reactions*' refers to a series of abstract paintings signalling the starting point for my research into the sensitive issue of normality. I have examined the consequences of the often extreme measures society imposes on those it considers to be of little value or importance. I have looked at the immediate effect this social attitude is having on those who've been sidelined and pushed out of the equation consequently been branded as a threat to mainstream society. Personal experiences of being sidelined has influenced my decision to proceed with the development of these paintings.

First hand experiences have been used to highlight the consequences of such ideas.

Developing this dissertation was just a matter of regurgitating elements of personal hardship but an opportunity for me to create a direct and powerful response to societies push for normality. Aiming at drawing the viewer's attention to what's happening on a broader scale beyond individual experiences was my intention.

Eric Han head of the department of genetic medicine at Adelaide's Women and Children's Hospital said in an interview published in the Sydney Morning Herald's Weekend Edition August 2004, titled '*Made to order: babies missing the X Factor*' said that the rapid growth and development in genetic screening programs in Australia is likely to have a negative impact on those suffering from various forms of genetic defects. Although Fragile X is an exception because of the way it's inherited for many serious disorders universal screening might raise inappropriate anxiety and devalue

disabled people. We set the standard of quality of life very high based on what we define as 'normal' he said. What is a good life [can be] a very broad range of human experience.'<sup>4</sup>

From an artistic perspective the first painting in this series of works also titled '*Allergic Reactions*', 2004 Oil on Canvas, set the precedent for the subject of normality to be integrated into a visual narrative. The painting depicts a vision of heightened panic and mass hysteria resulting from the trauma being felt and experienced by those who have become victims of a social policy that devalues them. This is intensified through the paintings use of colour, scale, and through the materiality of paint. It draws together the humanitarian impact of those left behind and pushed out of the equation those who have been classified as a potential threat to mainstream society. Complex colour combinations choreograph the painting into a vision of panic, resentment and anger. This stems from the frenzy of drips and stains appearing to transform the painting into an overstimulated abstract landscape emerging from the aggressive and undomesticated nature of colour imposing a fearful dominance over the painting.

It highlights a permanent departure from the production of large-scale paintings, holding strong connections to Jung's theories on the Unconscious and the surrealist technique of automatism. For me this represented a radically new form of painting that involved a cocktail of diluted paint being poured systematically onto a rendered surface with the capacity to transmit sensations of visual overload through entangled webs of repulsive

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<sup>4</sup> Julie Robotham, '*Made to Order: babies missing the X Factor*,' Sydney Morning Herald, August 2004.

combinations of colour bleeding aggressively into a cluster of visual confusion. Strong references to Kristeva's theory on abjection operate within the large scale pigment effects existing in plague proportions across the canvas. The role of abjection in this case is to reveal aspects of human experience and function which is normally removed from the public gaze. It breaks all the social conventions governing the function and privacy of domestic spaces. The abject is identified by the physical, emotional, psychological trauma that has been inflicted on individuals who don't fall into society concept or definition of 'normality'. By definition Kristeva defines the abject as 'something that disturbs the identity and order and doesn't respect borders or regulations. She draws distinctions between subject and object. Any violation of the body's boundaries is perceived as a threat to the self. She refers to abjection as a means of describing an individuals attempt to retain a sense of selfhood by rejecting those things in the environment that are considered impure.'<sup>5</sup>

Yet the brutality and trauma unfolding in the painting resonates from the apparent residue of pulp fragments scattered across the canvas which carefully symbolise the fragility and vulnerability of human nature within a twenty first century context. This also releases a deep and profound sense of determination to overcome obstacles and challenging circumstances that one might face over a lifetime. It signifies an increase in the levels of anxiety, tension, and uneasiness that could potentially contaminate what little remains of its surroundings.

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<sup>5</sup> T, Patin, '*Artwords; a glossary of contemporary art theory*', Greenwood Press, Westport Connecticut, 1997 1-2.



**Figure 1** Zoe Friend, '*Allergic Reactions*', 2004. Oil on canvas, 1m x 1.5.

The next painting in the series titled, *Normal What*, 2004 oil on canvas, 2004 again returns the viewer to a world or community where dysfunction, trauma, and scenes of emotional turmoil dominate the picture plane. Exposing the viewer to an immediate crisis is aimed to leave a lasting impression. Aesthetically the painting is grotesque and quiet confrontational which makes any form of interaction or engagement with the work more challenging.

An attempt is made to awaken the wider community's awareness of the stigma and devaluation of people who fall outside our perception of what is considered 'normal'. I refer to Kristeva's definition of abjection mentioned in Hal Foster's '*Return of the Real*,' when he said Kristeva once again defines social abjection as a violent exclusionary force operating within the modern state. Abjection then becomes a force that strips the labouring masses of their human dignity and reproduces them as dehumanised social waste, describing a single identity, or group as useless and unworthy of status or community standing.'<sup>6</sup>

Abjection also represents the ugly, wild, and undomesticated. It then becomes something that is completely removed and hidden from public view and attention. However Foster goes on to make the point that abjection is a condition, in which the subject is troubled, where meaning collapses hence its attraction for avant- garde artists who wish to disturb the ordering of their subject and society alike. Foster continues his discussion on abjection by examining its role or position within the context of contemporary art.

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<sup>6</sup> Hal Foster, '*Return of the Real*', MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 2001 49

‘Stating that from a conventional regime where nothing is real and the subject is superficial, contemporary art presents reality in the form of trauma and the subject in the social depth of its own identity. It is then reconstructed or acted out through a desired visual narrative, conveying a symbolic body of dysfunction, suffering, rejection, violence. This practice offers the viewer an insight behind the scenes examination into the private realm of the human experience within a contemporary situation.’<sup>7</sup> Foster concludes his discussion on abjection by once again referring back to Kristeva’s theory. Indicating that ‘the realm of the abject is drawn to the broken boundaries of the violated body often conveyed in a depressed and aggressive sculptural form.’<sup>8</sup>

This concept is repeated throughout this series of paintings. The variation in size, scale, and colour combinations allowed ideas and narratives to be pursued across a broad spectrum of canvas. The final painting in the series has many similarities and cross references to other works in the series but is slightly different. It’s visual dialogue tells the viewer of the apparent and on going suffering being inflicted upon the most vulnerable members of the community. It’s the unique combinations of colour, texture, form and scale seems to complete the series. ‘*Normal What*’ oil on canvas also elevated the series to another level.

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<sup>7</sup> Hal Foster, ‘*Return of the Real*’, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 2001 164.

<sup>8</sup> Hal Foster, ‘*Return of the Real*’, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 2001 164.



**Figure 2,** Zoe Friend, *Normal What*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 2m x 2m. Private Collection, Sydney Australia.

I conclude my discussion on this chapter with a quote from Australian art critic Robert Hughes who's comment draws a connection to my own practice. 'When you look at a wall spotted with stains or a mixture of stones if you have to devise some scene you may discover a resemblance to various landscapes or you may see battles and figures in action or strange faces and costumes or an endless variety of objects which you could reduce to complete well drawn forms. Appearing promiscuously like the sounds of bells it may recall for you any name, word, you choose to imagine.'<sup>9</sup>

On a personal level this quote by Robert Hughes challenges the viewer to see beyond the paintings physical identity and allow themselves an opportunity to capitalise on their own imagination and personal experiences. Strengthening the viewer's connection to a group of paintings would hopefully become a natural one. I considered this quote to be an important step in obtaining a greater understanding and appreciation for the style of painting I've been engaged with over the duration of my Masters of Visual Arts at Sydney College of the Arts.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Hughes, ' *The Shock of the New* ', Thames & Hudson, London 1991 225.



**Figure 3,** Zoe Friend, *Consequences* , 2005. Oil on canvas, 1m x 1m.



**Figure 4** Zoe Friend, *The Final Solution*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 1.6 x 1.5m

## Chapter Two 'Perfect'

'Perfect' is the title given to a series of paintings that provide a contrast to 'Allergic Reactions'. By definition perfect is defined as an ' adjective, noun, verb,1. In a state proper to a thing when completed; having all the essential elements, characteristics, etc; lacking in no respect; complete, 2. In a state of complete excellence existing without blemish, or defect, faultless. 3. Completely suited for a particular purpose or occasion. 4 Corresponds to a type or description. 5. Correct in every detail, a perfect copy'.<sup>10</sup>

The perfect series convey to the viewer a deep sense of inner peace, signaling the departure from the development of paintings that retain a strong connection with abstract expressionism. Instead they move into the realm of the minimalist/ monochrome from a historical prospective revolutionised the position of painting on a grand scale. They indicate a complete withdrawal from any pre conceived ideas or philosophy in relation to the process of painting. The high saturation of colour projects an ideal environment where life exists and operates free of major obstacles and other difficulties. Demonstrates a lack of willingness to confront and deal with issues concerning social oppression. Symbolised through the smooth textural refinement of industrialised oil paint converging on a two dimensional surface.

Somehow it possesses hidden qualities of beauty, strength and refinement which cascades through endless realms of colour dominating the paintings exterior and interior a delicate is drawn between inclusion and exclusion.

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<sup>10</sup> A. Delbridge, 'The Macquarie Dictionary' Mc Mahon's Point 2001 770

Advertising an existence where all aspects of life live under a uniformed umbrella, protected from any form of threat designed to cause a major disruption and inconvenience to the wider community. Again the absolute clarity and rawness of colour dictates the extent of societies push for achieving what it defines as 'normal'. Each of the paintings invites the viewer to contemplate the presence and experiences of an interior subject canflouaged by extensive bands of colour. Francis Colprit in *Minimal Art* examined Kandinsky's approach to colour in his discussion on minimalist art. 'According to Colprit Kandinsky 'defined colour as a means of exerting direct influence upon the soul; and that it has a physical and psychological effect on the beholder.

He considered colours to be the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers and the soul is the piano with many strings. It's the artists hand at play, touching a key or another to purposively cause the soul to vibrate. It was Kandinsky's attempt to ratify the process and understanding of painting beyond the simplistic notion that classifies it to be little more the two dimensional surface completely consumed in colour.<sup>11</sup>

Kandinsky hoped that is contemporary new age stance would elevate the level of appreciation of paintings that articulated and complied with the aims of expressionist art. Hence the important and significant contribution his theory bought to the continued articulation of my own painting practice.

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<sup>11</sup> Francis, Colpitt '*Minimal Art*': *the critical prospective*, Ann Arbor , Michigan , UMI Research Press, 1990 76

My own painting titled *Perfect, Oil* on canvas, 2004 Private Collection, Melbourne Victoria demonstrated a direct response to some of Kandinsky's ideas on accelerating the meaning and position of painting beyond the definition of a two dimensional surface saturated in endless bands of colour. This painting is a definitive example of the transition that's taken place within my own practice throughout the duration of my Masters candidature. Although small pockets of tension do appear to radiate a small presence through my paintings use of colour which elevates it beyond themes of personal psychology. Therefore my practice has become more refined and focused on responding directly to issues of a global nature.

Maintaining strong connections to Agnes Martin, Eva Hesse, and Barnett Newman continue. These connections filter through the intensity of colour achieved from carefully selected pigment and having payed close attention to how this process would be carried out. This is achieved without having to compromise on the paintings ability to reveal strong links to human experiences, emotions, and psychological responses without compromising on the minimalist technique or formula of painting.

A personal involvement and commitment to form of practice sparked resurgence in my artistic development without compromising on technique. This filtered through the choice and application of pigment and was significant to the final outcome. Success or failure was depended on the interaction and combination of pigments. I'm still in the development stages and still have a considerable distance to travel before I've completed my training in this field of painting. It was all about covering new ground and starting

from scratch. Due to the complex nature surrounding the issue of normality I embraced the challenge of producing two bodies of work that looked at issue from different angles. One required a more expressionist approach achieved from pouring a cocktail of pigment and medium directly onto a two dimensional surface, symbolised the emotional and psychological impact of society's push for normality on the most vulnerable. The second body of work again falls under the title given to this chapter aimed to encapsulate a smooth radiant void of symbolic perfection where everything appears to be completely robust and mainstreamed. All that remains are small fragments and references to a cold heartless world which is revealed through vast empty voids of colour, that's been applied in single and multiple layers across the canvas.



**Figure 5, Zoe Friend, *Perfect*, Oil on Canvas, 1.5 x 2m 2004 Private Collection, Melbourne Australia.**



**Figure 6,** Zoe Friend, *Nothing*, Oil on Canvas, 2m x 2m, 2004.

### Chapter Three *Influences.*

The decision to concentrate my theoretical attention on the areas of Abjection, Abstraction, Minimalism, came about from the development of two unique bodies of work that simultaneously connected with these aspects of art history. Therefore I considered my practice to be both minimalist/expressionist. From a minimalist prospective it elements all traces of meaning, value, subjectivity. Under this umbrella my work is no longer identified as a medium that concentrates solely on the expression of emotion, and human experiences. Instead it became something of a commemorative medallion that acknowledged the success of society's push for normality. On the surface everything appears to be perfect, the appearance of fine lines, wrinkles, and other abnormalities are clearly visible. Yet there seems to be nothing left, completely empty with no hints of resistance.

On the other hand my work is expressionistic; I've used this as a tool aimed at communicating the anger, frustration, and experiences of those who have found themselves marginalized from the mainstream community. Echoed through an intense symbolic language designed to both outrage and inform the viewer of what goes on behind closed doors, away from public attention. I was then drawn to the practices of Eva Hesse, Barnett Newman, and Agnes Martin. Initial attraction derived from a comment Newman gave in an artist's statement for an exhibition in regards to the process and direction behind his paintings. 'He classified the creation of painting as a special almost sacred event, that's separate from the rest of life. The meaning of his paintings as he sees it lies in the first hand experience that radiates from the physical beauty captured through

the huge monochrome canvas that comprises of a few bands of colour, which also encompass the gentle harmonies found in Rothko's paintings that infuse a light delicacy combined with Newman's rich symphonic colour's consisting of red, gold, black help render a deep majestic quality'.<sup>12</sup> From a personal prospective Newman's paintings emerged as the ideal example of how the subject of perfection/normality could be articulated through abstract/minimalist painting. While taking into account my experience of his work has been limited to published reproductions yet I still held and immediate connection with his ideas and approach to painting.

His use and manipulation of pigment was the bait which secured my connection and relationship to his paintings. Close attention was noted of his method of application and implementation of colour. This technique becomes embedded in deep layers of colour and pigment promoting a strong reference to a world where we find ourselves saturated with imagery aimed at stamping out all traces of imperfection and ironing out all the creases. This affirmed the need to excel my practice beyond the representation of an aggressive and highly symbolic language and towards a more unified and smooth reformation. Resulted directly from investigations and research into Newman's practice and signaled my departure from an expressionist style of painting. It forces a line of direct communication to take place between the painting and the viewer, and one that works against the minimalist conventions by opening up a dialogue of emotion and experience. The intervention of Newman's visual language into the core structure of my practice allowed the work to flow in a sequence of smooth rhythmic patterns across the picture plane.

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<sup>12</sup> Ann Temkin, '*Barnett Newman*', Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 2002 87

I responded to this challenge with a series of black and blue monochromes despite the flatness of colour yet I haven't fully complied with the minimalist idea of producing work with zero emotional subjective content, and the emotional connection to abstraction has been maintained. Mirroring a chance to heal old scars through the transformation of everyday experiences enabled an escape into a series of deep rhythmic voids that reveals a hidden garden of eden, where the viewer finds themselves completely at ease with nature. Although dense patches of pigment, and colour choreographed into a unique composition that cascades over a large and expansive field of colour that radiates through this process of painting.

A notion of silence appears to infuse a suffocating dominance over the large areas of colour taking up prime position on the canvas. The focus shifts between the paintings spatial and emotional content aimed at endorsing the viewer's full participation on all levels. Australian art critic Robert Hughes puts forward his view on this form of painting. ' He believes that painting is no longer the analogue of visual experience but of operation and process, it's now turning away from the idea of painting as an illusion of space behind the literal plane of the canvas and moves towards the flat bed picture plane. Therefore the visual experience becomes interactive exerting sensations of poetic freedom communicated through a dramatic abstract discourse that speaks volumes about the world in which we live.' It examines in detail the less comfortable aspects of contemporary experience that's reflected through the calm individuality of journey and experience. That occasionally goes unnoticed, through the decimation and elimination of impurities. Colour is used to broadcast these intensions with the aim of achieving a more

intense reaction. It all conveys a deep sense of self and reflection that pushes the boundaries of colour beyond a preconceived comfort zone.<sup>13</sup> Deep layering of colour has produced an aura of despair and grief that echoes the emotion of those left behind in the race to achieve perfection. Intensity runs deep through the various shades and tonal properties of colour. The darker tones envisage feelings of isolation, weakness, disorientation and emptiness, once again voicing a strong association with Barnett Newman's practice. Written commentaries on Newman's practice mention his belief that 'painting was the one and only medium with the potential to express its subject through its own symbolic language'.<sup>14</sup> It is believed that he maintained this view point throughout his career along with the notion that art was the expression of ideas and meaningful truths.

From a personal perspective Newman's paintings enabled the development of paintings dealing with the subject of perfection to be expanded even further. It was Newman's application of pigment that identified how the notion could be successfully implemented through abstract painting. He set the parameters which formed the ideal model in order for me to pursue this concept further.

At present I'm still in the learning and development stages although I'm mastering the technique of pigment application. There is still a long way to go before I've achieved my objective. Despite the initial teething problems encountered along the way I do believe I'm making good progress towards achieving my objective. Further development

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Hughes, *History of American Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2002 335.

<sup>14</sup> Ann Temkin, *Barnett Newman*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia 2002 40.

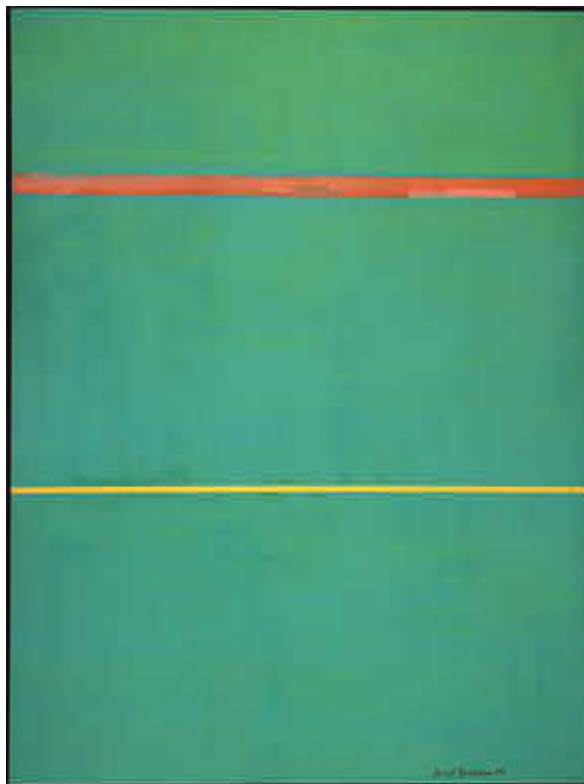
combined with experience and personal growth will increase the rate of successful outcomes. The unification of all areas involved in the painting process should see the emergence of a body of work that touches upon the viewer in a deep and meaningful way.



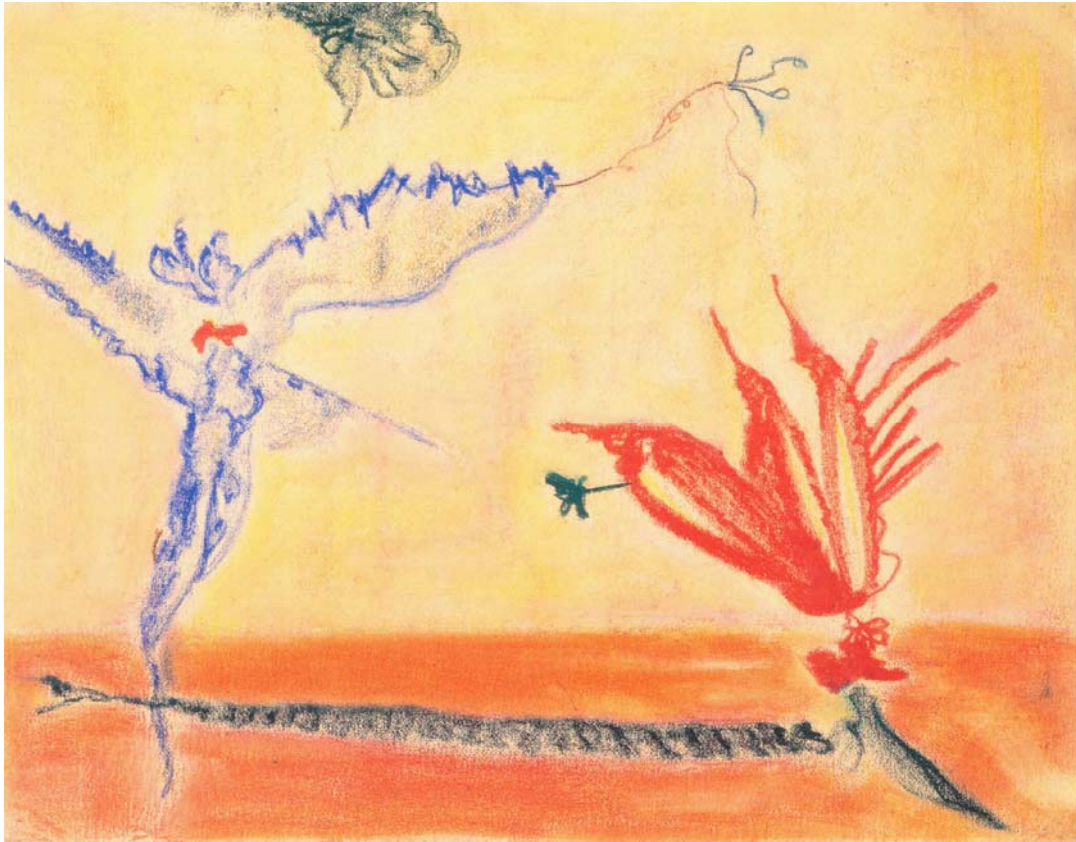
Figure 7, Barnett Newman, *Pagan Void*, Oil on Canvas, 33 x 38 inches, 83.8 x 96.5cm, 1946 National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.



**Figure 8,** Barnett Newman, *Day Before One*, Oil on Canvas, 132 x 50 inches, 335.2 x 127cm 1951 Basel, Switzerland.



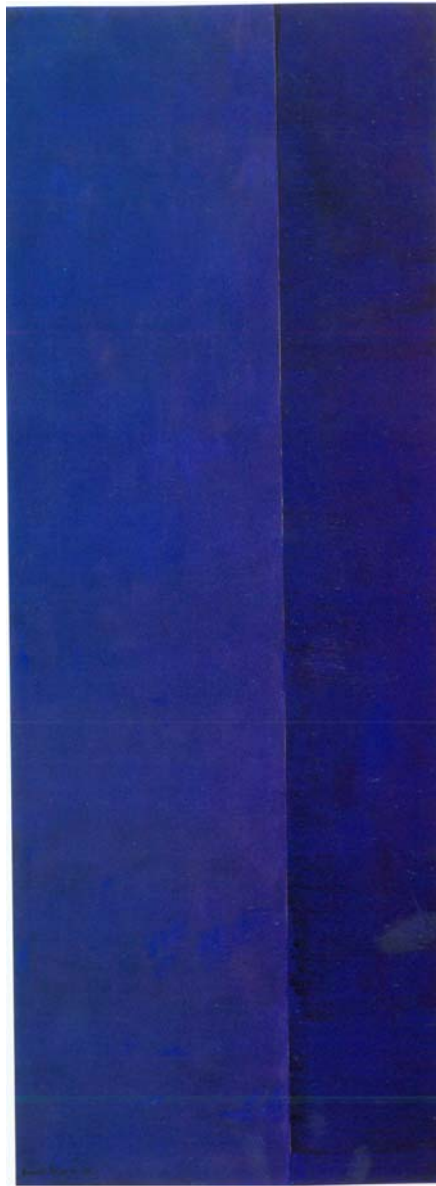
**Figure 9**, Barnett Newman, *Dionysius*, Oil on Canvas, 67x 49 inches, 170.2 x 124.5cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Gift of Annalee Newman in Honour of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art.



**Figure 10,** Barnett Newman, *Untitled*, 1944 or 1945, Oil, oil crayon, and pastel on paper 19 3/8 x 25 x 1/2 inches or 49.2 x 64 x 8 cm. Collection of David and Jennifer Stockman.



**Figure 11,** Barnett Newman, *Achilles*, Oil on Canvas, 95 1/8 x 79 1/8 inches, 241.6 x 201cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.



**Figure 12**, Barnett Newman, *Ulysses*, Oil on Canvas, 132 ½ x 50 1/8 inches, 336.6 x 127.3cm. The Menil Collection, Houston. Gift of Adelaide de Menil Carpenter and Dominique de Menil.

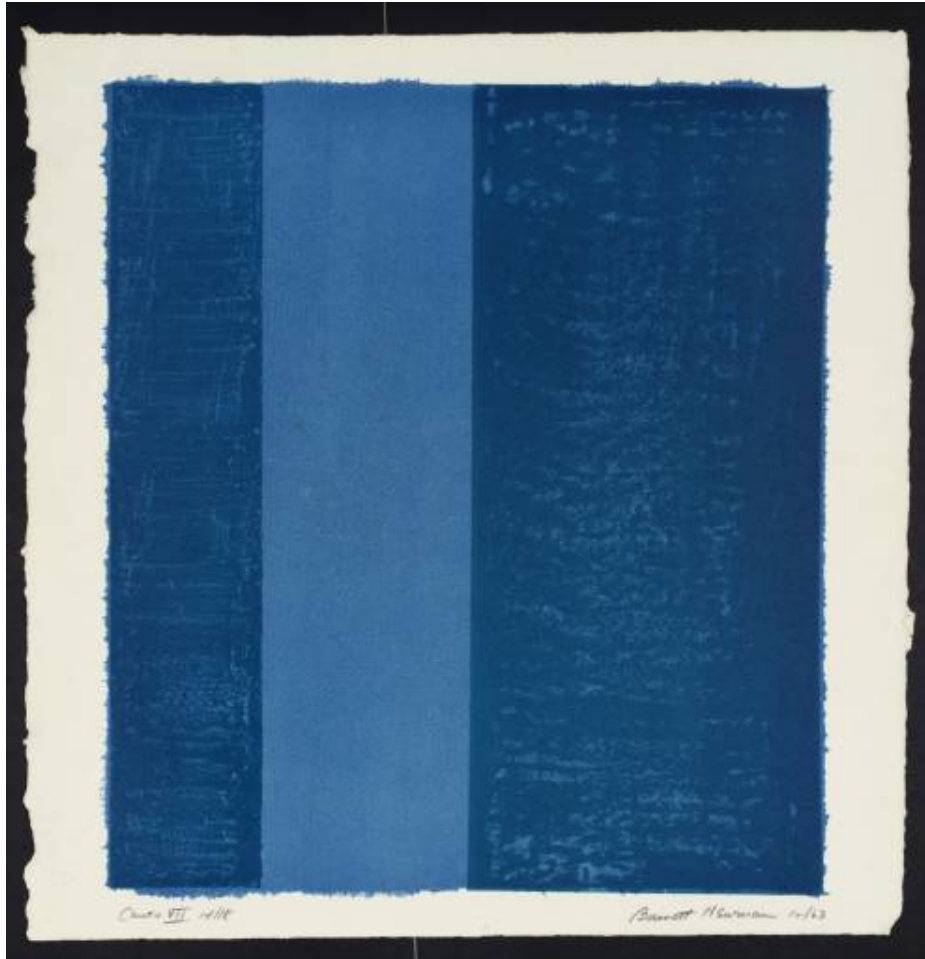


Figure 13, Barnett Newman, *Canto, VII* 1963 Oil on Paper.

Parallel with the artistic subject matter of Barnett Newman, the practice of Eva Hesse joins the fold of influences that have helped shape my practice over the past two years. I drew particular inspiration and influence from her series of abstract/minimalist paintings along with her ability to spark an atmosphere of tension that's invigorated throughout the presence of red and black pigment. Her paintings are simplistic in nature with only two colours allowed to dominate the paintings composition. Generating sensations of vulnerability, caution, sadness, and an element of dysfunction. The unique combinations of red and black created a smooth muddy border symbolizing a less than harmonious existence. This encourages the viewer to draw their own conclusions on the subject matter and the artist's intentions.

From a personal perspective Hesse's paintings indicated that we live in a troubled world that's consistently struggling to identify the cause of pain and suffering and the solution as to how to resolve these issues. Abstract painting was a movement that encouraged artists to produce works of art that dealt directly with complex human emotions and experiences through a dialogue of body and facial expressions. She represents the harsh reality of the modern world for those in the communities who have fallen through the cracks and have been subsequently abandoned by mainstream society.

Without having to put in jeopardy the long standing commitment and close association with abstract painting. Each of Hesse's paintings and drawings has the potential to ignite a strong sense of terror, anxiety, vulnerability. Hesse's work is released from the deepest point of human experience; her work unearths a loss of memory, and elements of

personal sacrifice igniting a deep presence of emotional content throughout her paintings. Each piece of work has the potential to spark an unwelcomed return to an atmosphere of tension and growing hostilities. Any form of routine unpleasantness has become entangled in an endless stream of consistent repetition, and the impact of isolation is closely guarded. The application of gouaches, oil paint, and other supplementary materials doesn't attempt to force the work into a specific category or impose any form of pre conceived philosophy on the viewer.

The viewer becomes the witness to an abstracted vision of human experience with elements of emotional subjectivity being played out on a two dimensional surface, that concentrates heavily on the symbolism and repetition of human experiences being felt and acknowledged through the restrictive parameters of the domestic environment. The persistent use of such repetition has the capacity to influence the viewer's imagination beyond any form of formal discourse the work might bring to the viewer. The abandoned architectural spaces feature heavily in Hesse's paintings as spaces that no longer serve an important function in the wider community, only to be subjected to form of mistreatment and vandalism which in turn speeds up the process of decay. All that remains is the skeleton that serves as a permanent memorial to the structure that once occupied the space.

This reflects a sense of hopelessness and despair that's often linked to the experiences felt by homeless people who've become dependent on the dark spaces as a source of protection and sanctuary away from gazing eyes without being subjected to any form of intimidation. It was Hesse's unique form of practice and the intensity of her subject

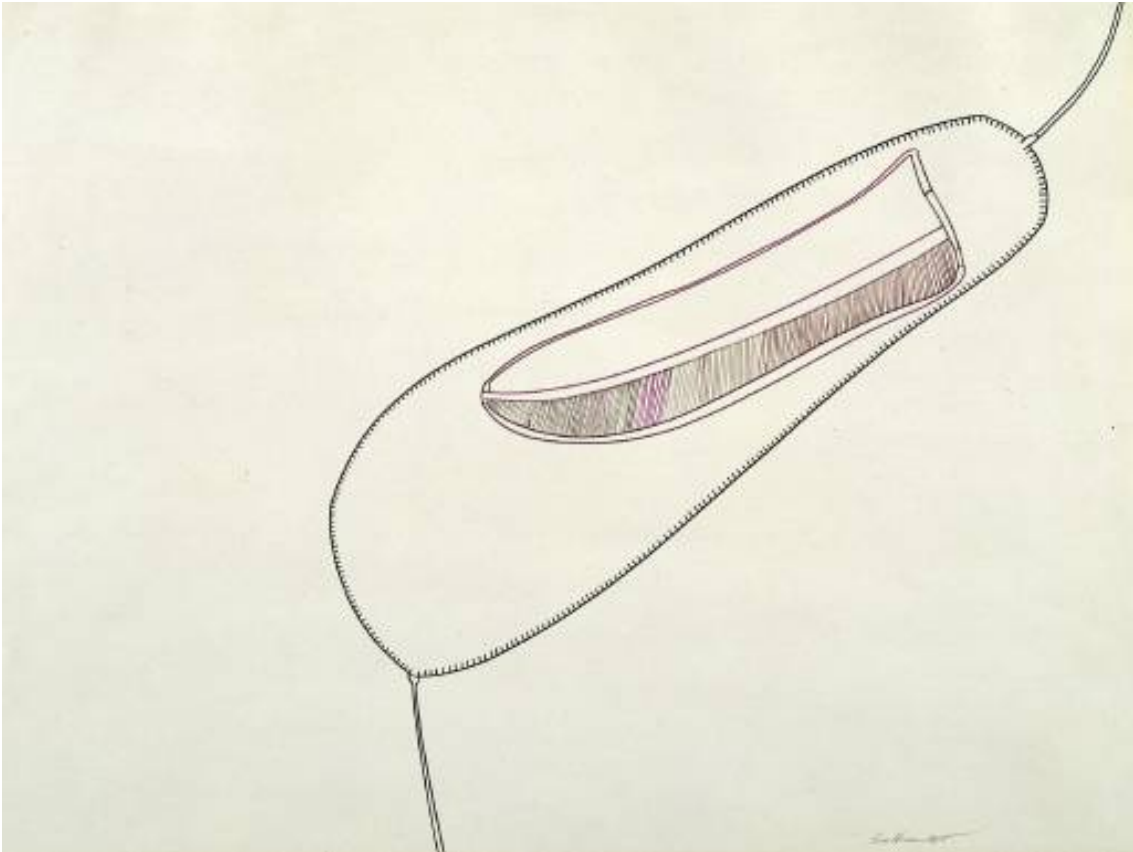
matter that attracted my attention. Her continued references to human experiences and emotion strengthened the bond between my practice and hers. Hesse's array of paintings and sculptural forms demonstrated how my own intensions could be pursued through abstract painting. In essence it broadened my knowledge and understanding of the complexities that governed my art practice. It identified how similar subjects can be manipulated across a broad spectrum of artistic experiences and situations, also redresses the importance of transparency and clarity. This struck an immediate connection with the subject outlined in the process of creating the intentions of a chosen subject constructed into a visual form. Hesse's work reignites old themes and transports them into a unique and complex visual narrative. Nothing appears as it seems. Her work encourages the viewer to look beyond what's immediately in front them and to take the time to explore the work in more detail. It encourages the viewer to use their imagination and experiences as a resource in order to obtain a subjective response. These elements once again strengthen my connection to the work of Eva Hesse.



**Figure 14,** Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, gouache and ink on paper, 6 x 9 inches, 15.2 x 22.8cm, 1961, Private Collection.



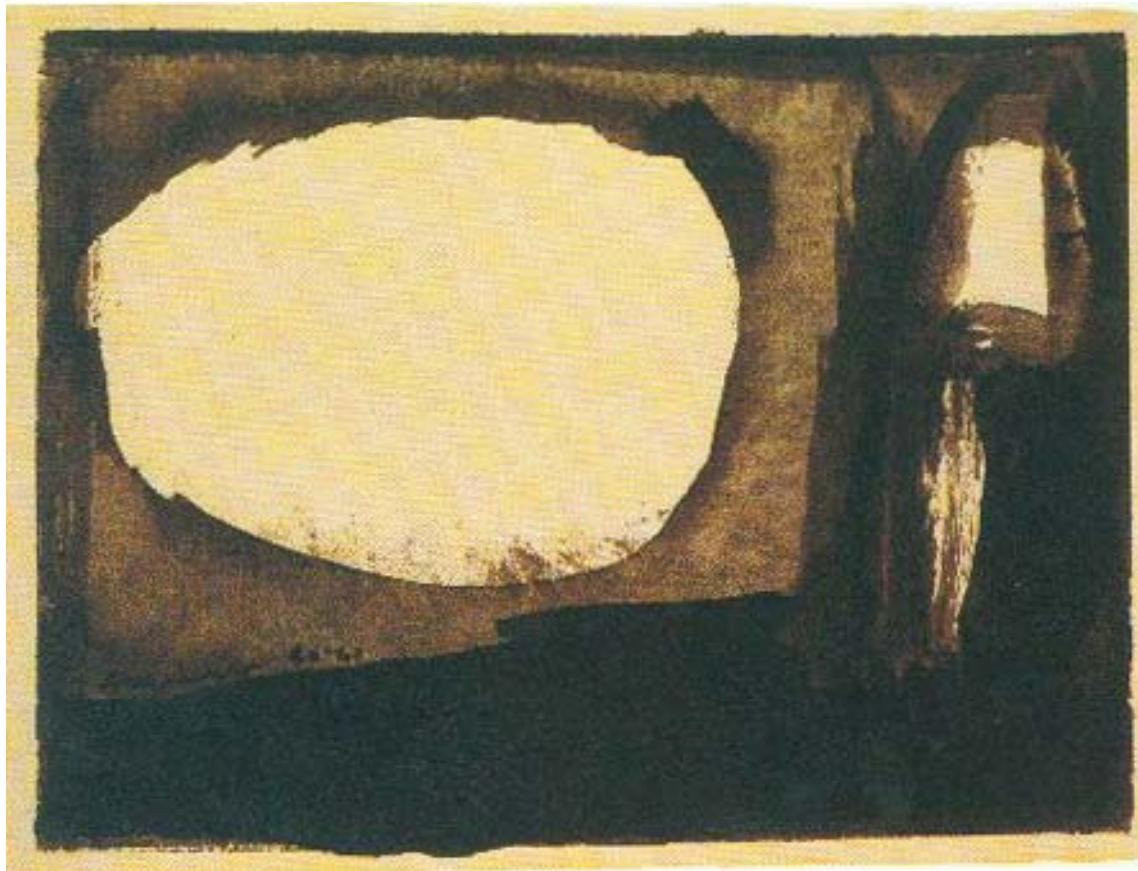
**Figure 15,** Eva Hesse, *Tomorrow's Apples 5 in White*, Enamel, gouache and mixed media on board object: 654 x 556 x 159mm, Tate Modern Museum London.



**Figure 16,** Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, Drawing on paper support, 459 x 610mm, 1965. Tate Modern Museum, London.



**Figure 17**, Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, gouache and ink on paper, 6x 4 ½ inches, 15.2 x 11.4cm  
1960-61 Collection of Mr and Mrs Tony Ganz.



**Figure 18,** Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, gouache and ink on paper, 4 ½ x 6 inches, 15.2 x 11.4cm, 1960. Private Collection.

Agnes Martin is the third artist who influenced the development of my practice during the course of my MVA. She argues that meaning and subjective narrative and responses are the responsibility of the viewer. Stating that ‘perfection’ is simply a state of mind and therefore perceptions of perfection are purely symbolic.’ One must be able to see that the ideal in one’s own mind it’s like a memory of perfection. She continues to add that an artist cannot and does not prepare for a certain response. They don’t consider any responses they simply follow their inspiration.<sup>15</sup>

She considers a painting that conveys a strong geometric void of colour becomes a direct or symbolic representation of perfection arising from the experience obtained from individual perception. ‘Therefore our own individual representations of perfection are far from being perfect, which is both unobtainable and unattainable. Again responsibility lies with the viewer not the artist. In response Martin adds when you gain inspiration and therefore seek to represent your source of inspiration the observer creates the painting. Martin considers the ideal person to be someone who is a natural conqueror, one who accumulates and overcomes disadvantages and persists with the strength and courage to help and define and draw connection with a series of pre occupations and emotions that emerge into a formless abstract space.’<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> L. Alloway, *Formless Breaking Down Form; The Paintings of Agnes Martin*, Studio, Volume 185, 1973 61-63.

<sup>16</sup> Joanna, Drew, *Agnes Martin Paintings and Drawings 1957-75*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London 1977 10.

Visions of concentrated thought are all quarantined through a narrow vision of biomorphic shapes which have been constructed into an atmosphere consisting of a combination of thickly and thinly applied paint appearing to multiply through unrestricted spaces of pure abstract colour. This strengthens Martin's connection to the immortal sublime, aimed at obtaining a softer more domesticated and tamable outcome. Martin's paintings were designed to convey a message that concentrated on the outpouring of emotions and other personal, physical, psychological responses. Strong references to nature have developed through the luminous qualities of abstract painting that bleeds into expansive voids and spaces. The effects are obtained from the use of watercolours, pastels, coloured pencils and diluted oil paint. However during the 1960's Martin shifted from the use of oil based paints to acrylic and at the same time abandoned the use of coloured pencils for graphite. Using acrylic gave Martin greater flexibility and control allowing her to create the misty backgrounds she required. This gave her more time to experiment with the tone and colour density and with the intension of creating images that hold strong connections to complex human emotions and experiences. These are achieved through an intense abstract language.

This intensified the beauty and increased the aesthetic appeal of her pale coloured canvas's that rendered a soft mellow valance of colour. Memories and experiences foliate through a prism of infused pigment and enforce a monopoly over the canvas's surface

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and interior cavity. Throughout her career Martin maintained her intension of producing paintings that embraced and connected with the viewer on a deep and meaningful level and included experiences and emotions that also represented avenues relating to the artist's own life. These paintings were also created with the intension of been able to produce an image of personal significance. Martin declared ' what we make is what we feel; the making of something is not just the connection it's about feeling everything is about feeling and a process of recognition.' <sup>17</sup>

At this point Martin refers to a comment made by Klee as a link to the form of practice she's been engaged in over a significant period of time. 'Every sign, and colour achieve their own quality only when in their extreme determination; they are fought with the infinite meaning and content and thereby gain the same forcefulness as an any point on the same horizon of being'. <sup>18</sup> This has become encompassed in a deep cascade of visual expression that conformed to mainstream minimalist practice. Martin hoped that her decision to include simplistic geometric forms would see the viewer connect with the painting on a subconscious level that would reveal aspects of human emotion and experience. It also shows her interest in non western cultures which draw particular attention to Indigenous North American rug designs and terracotta's found in New Mexico and ceramic designs found in Aztec cities.

Martin reconfigured these designs into a system responsible for the co ordination of a complex network designed specifically for the purposes of extracting energy from a

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<sup>17</sup> Herausgegeben , Von D.S , ' *Agnes Martin Writing's* , Cantaz Verlag Publications, Germany 1991 11.

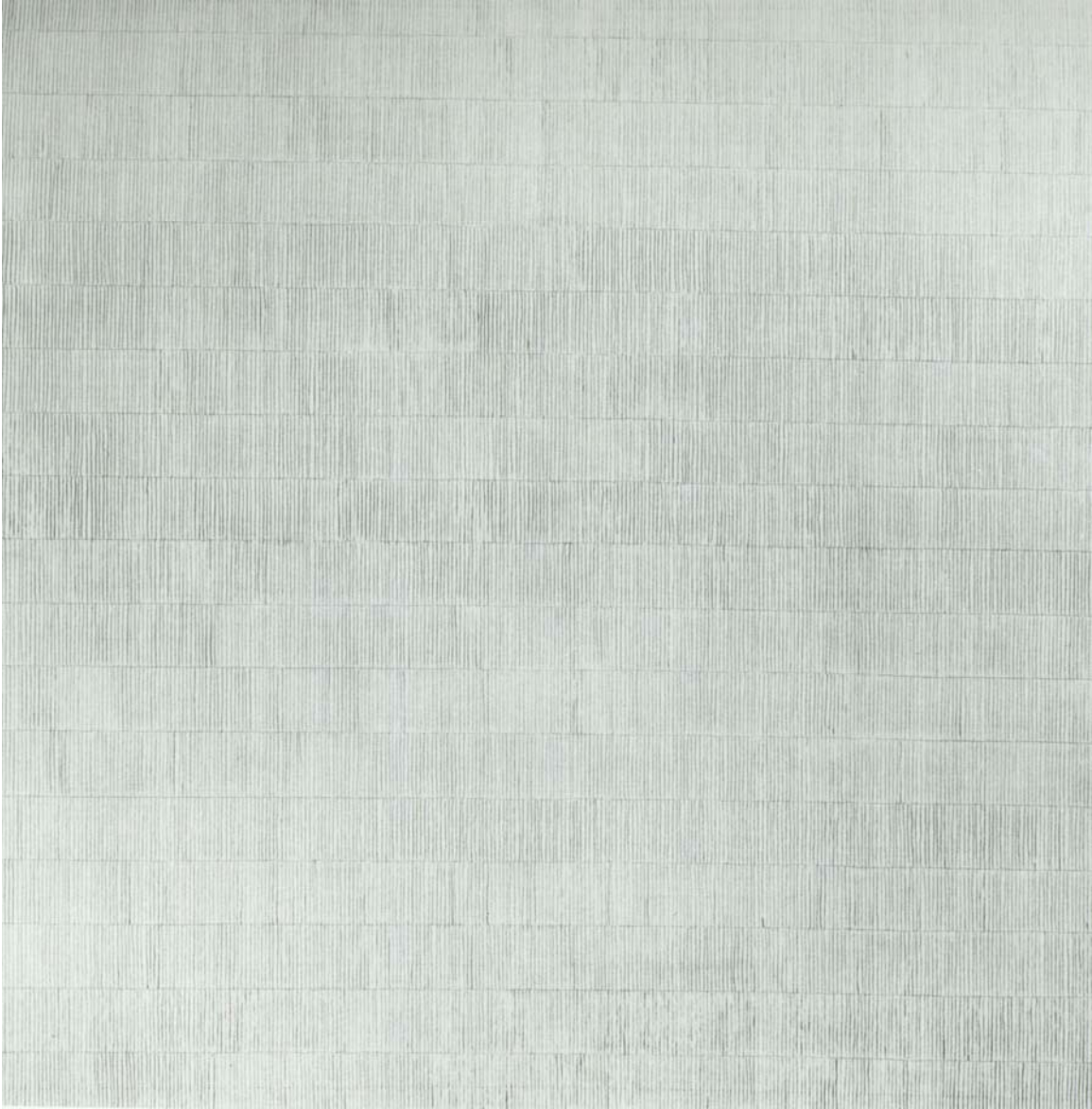
<sup>18</sup> Herausgegeben, Von D.S, ' *Agnes Martin Writing's* , Cantaz Verlag Publications, Germany 1991 11.

surface of pure colour. While taking into account the rigid geometric forms, these radiate a sense of authoritative control and influence over the paintings structure. The deliberate uneven surface identifies life's challenges and the occasional barriers one faces in a lifetime. This has been orchestrated into a narrative of order, control, and been configured and reconstructed to suit a mainstream ideal.

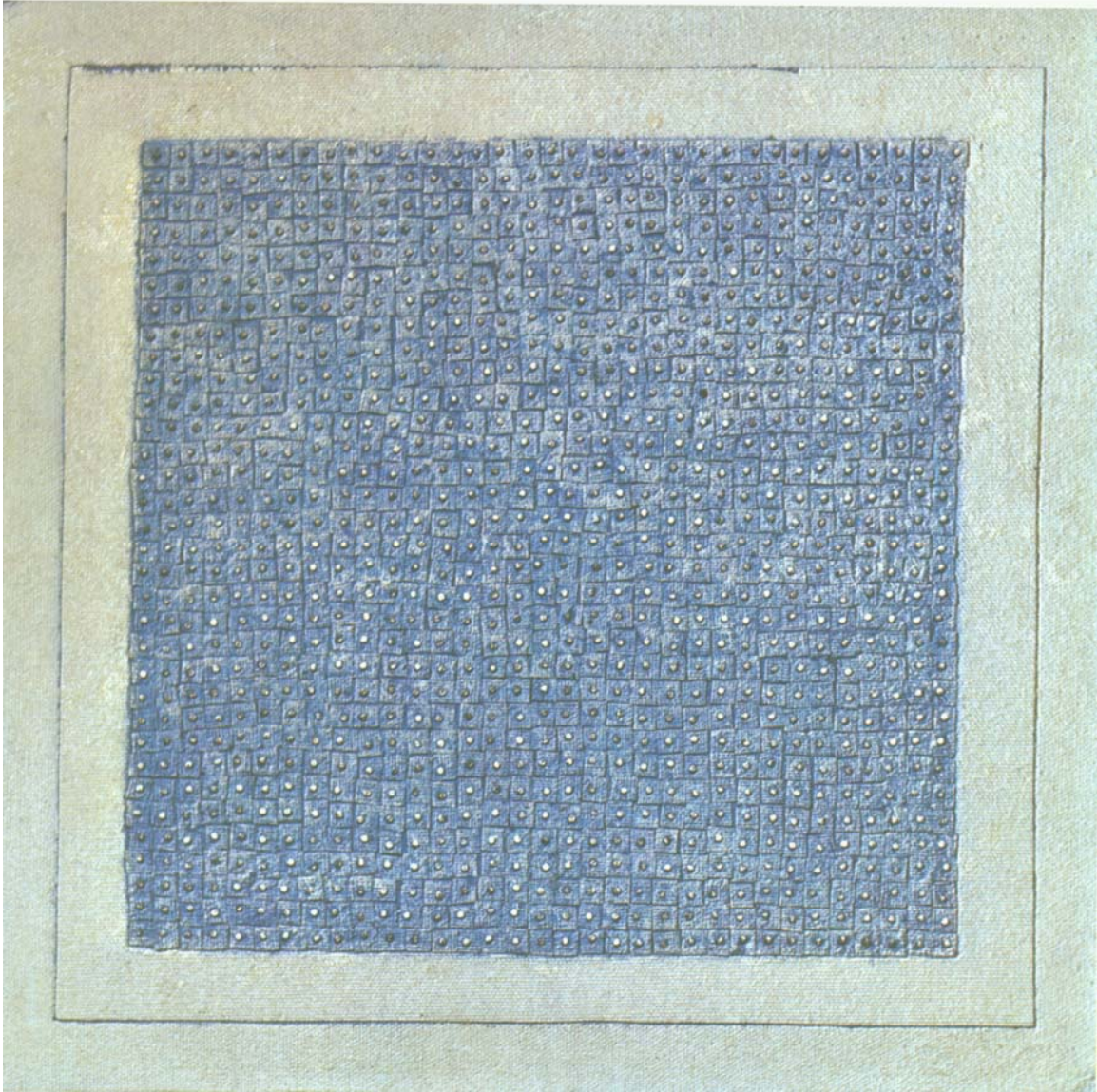
Australian art critic Robert Hughes describes this form of practice as, 'the passage of time and the variations of tone in the paint appear to drench the eye in light without offering a horizon', It's as though a part of nature has been taken out to it's bare essence then contrasted with an equally reduced emblem of culture the ghost of a building appears to be humanizing the landscape in which it is embedded.'

My technique, and choice of materials do differ from that of Agnes Martin but the underlying subject and motives run parallel. The intention is to produce work that on a conscious level symbolizes perfection, its importance and the value society places on perfection, all conveyed through a western cultural persona. My personal connection to the painting does continually refer to the superficial, commercial and disposable world we live in. The subjectivity of Martin's paintings parallel to my own, it's a connection that arose from reading a collection of Martin's own writing where she gives a detailed and personal account of the subjects and motivations pushing her art practice. It was a combination of the personal and the poetic nature of her work that attracted me to Martin's practice, demonstrating how the idea of perfection could be achieved through abstract painting. For me it pushed the notion of avant garde painting into another framework.

It was the combination of method's concepts, which emerged from the works of Eva Hesse, Agnes Martin, and Barnett Newman which signalled not only a change in direction but a permanent shift away from the repetitive examination of a group of artists with whom I'd developed an intimate knowledge of over the duration of my academic career.



**Figure 19**, Agnes Martin, *The Ages*, Oil on Canvas, 72 x 72cm, c 1959-60. Lent Anonymously.



**Figure 20,** Agnes Martin, *Blue Flower*, Oil, glue, nails and canvas on canvas, 12 x 12 cm. 1962. Lent anonymously.

## Conclusion

Researching in detail Kristeva's theory on Abjection, and the works of Eva Hesse, Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin added significant weight and influence on the development of my studio practice and dissertation ensured that the investigation into the subject of 'normality' remained at the centre of my research. A significant body of work emerged from this investigation motivated by the theories and visions steaming from the research I was undertaking into the subject of normality.

This presented an opportunity to accelerate the development of my own practice to a higher level. Pushing the subject matter beyond the realm of pure representation, symbolism hallmarked by an overwhelming presence of tears. A set of barriers aimed at preventing the true character, nature, subject of my paintings from reaching their full potential. Signalling the elimination of all the barriers that were preventing my practice from developing beyond what had been achieved at an undergraduate level. I therefore obtained a greater understanding of the subject, and theories surrounding my art practice having made the decision to undertake this form of research.

A reference to the subject of normality can be identified in the early 1990's children's television program '*The Raggy Dolls*' forms close ties with Kristeva's theory on Abjection and society's obsessiveness with its pursuit of what it considers to be normal. Emerges through each of the characters since each of them have endured some form of physical dysfunction that resulted in them all being disposed of and placed in the Toy Factory's Reject Bin. Kristeva's theory echoes through the character's physical

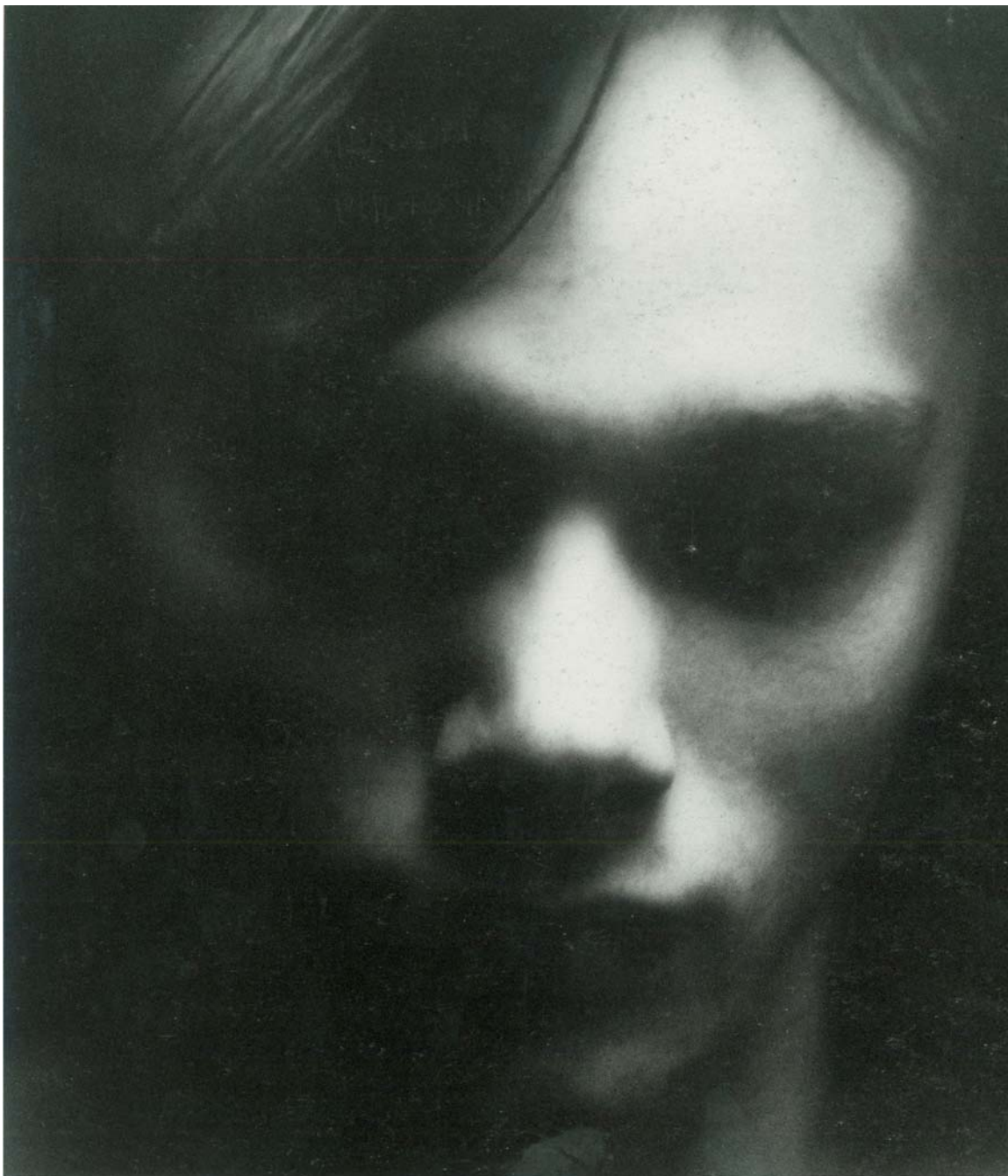
deformities consequently through no fault of their own forced to live out a primitive lifestyle in the Reject Bin. Because they were deemed less than 'perfect' and considered unfit for sale to the general public. A situation that's unable to be fixed or reversed through any form of intervention.

The experiences been played out by the Raggy Dolls is a typical example of how society deals with those in the community it considers to be of lesser value and therefore brands them as threat to what society defines as 'normal'. Forms the basis for a discussion on the parallels between my own practice, Kristeva's theory on Abjection along side Eva Hesse, Agnes Martin, Barnett Newman's painting and sculptural practices. I articulated their influence through a style of painting that I pushed at some considerable length throughout the duration of my candidature. Kristeva's theory is once again revisited through the multi coloured cosmos of splats that I created from dial outed oil paint which I then poured directly onto a two dimensional surface.

The influence of Agnes Martin, Eva Hesse, Barnett Newman has been released through the rendered monochrome surface and a series of lines that blend into the paintings background. Represents the fine line between what's accepted as normal and what isn't. On the other hand Bill Henson's photography concentrates on areas that I've addressed through abstract painting. Primarily those issues concerned with abandonment isolation and the reality for those living on the fringes of mainstream society. Hensen's images also centre on the projection of time, memory, and other human experiences that are directly or indirectly related to personal identity and social conditioning.



Figure 21, Bill Henson, *Untitled diptych*, Type c colour photograph, 98.3 x 73.6cm



**Figure 22,** Bill Henson, *Untitled sequence*, Chlorobromide silver gelatin photograph, 30.5 x 26.7cm, 1977.

On a personal level Henson's image provoke powerful states of melancholy and a whole range of other physical and psychological responses. Although I didn't pursue a long and detailed investigation into Henson's practice it did become the contemporary outlook for some of the issues I'd raised through my own practice. Highlighting areas that I'd developed a deep interest in throughout the duration of my master's candidature. Each painting attempts to forcibly remove the viewer out their comfort zones and their perceptions of abstract painting. At this point I refer to a comment made by Russian born American abstract painter Mark Rothko, 'I'm only interested in expressing basic human emotions, tragedy, and ecstasy and so on. And the fact a lot of people break down in envy when confronted with my pictures indicates they are expressing and experiencing the same experience I had when I painted them.'<sup>19</sup>

It's clear from the research I've conducted over the duration of my candidature that I've achieved my objective. I created two bodies of work that systematically translated the subject of normality into two different formats. Researching this topic did present its challenges but I was prepared to see it through to the end. It certainly gave me the opportunity to break some of the rules when it came to the development of my studio project. I've certainly gained a wealth of knowledge and experience from researching the topic of normality. What I've learned will no doubt carry forward into the next body of work. Arguably 'painting' proved once again to be the means for creating this body of work.

However each painting' as a medium, provided the ideal conditions for creating this body of work, demonstrates once again a major shift in my personal development and from the

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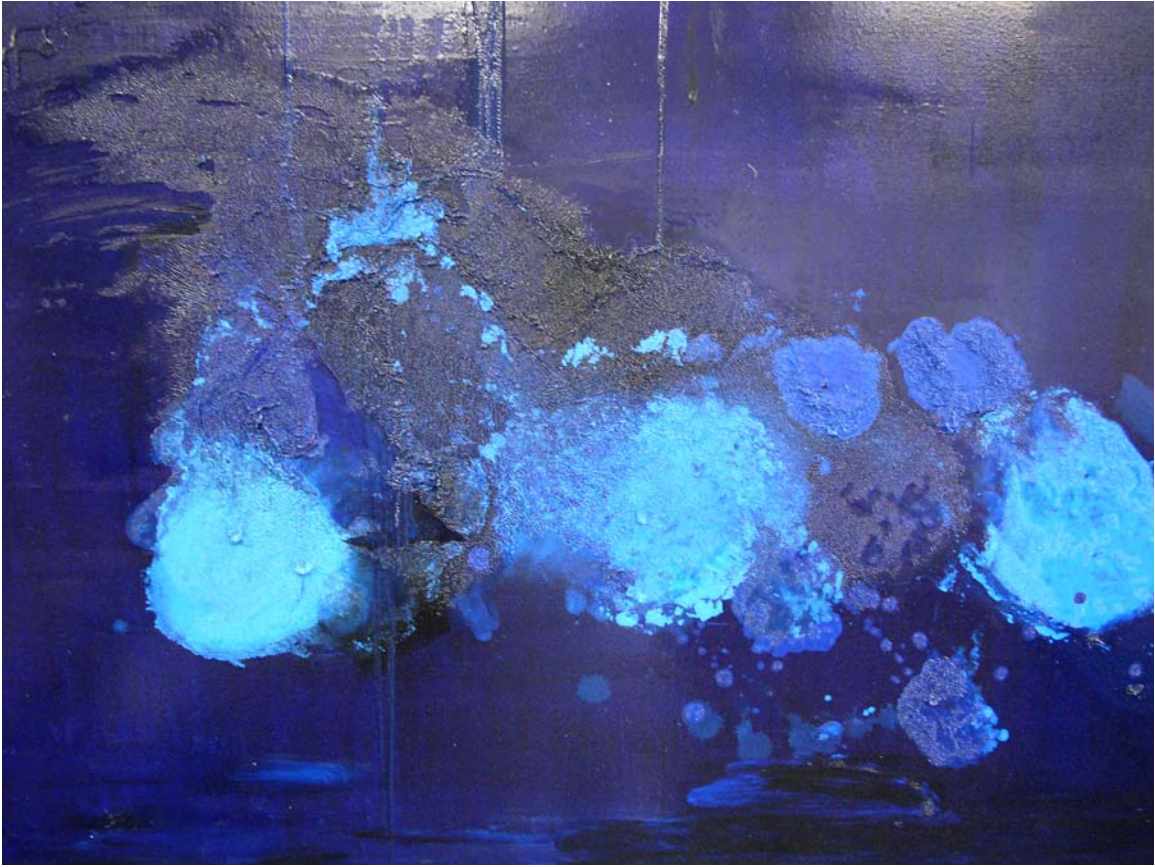
<sup>19</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, *Lives of Great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Artists*, Thames and Hudson, London 1999, 224.

work I created during my Honours year. Changes can be noted through the paintings overall choreography in particular the choice of pigment, size, canvas. These changes made the process more exciting and interesting indicating that it's possible to achieve the outcomes of this dissertation within a 24 month period.

I conclude my dissertation with a quote from the poet Robert Frost which sums up what can be achieved from walking down an unknown and unfamiliar path, 'two roads diverged in a wood and I took the one less travelled and that has made all the difference.'



**Figure 23,** Zoe Friend, *'Rejected Poor Quality,* Oil on Canvas, 40cm x 30 cm, 2005.



**Figure 24,** Zoe Friend, '*Seen and Not Heard*, Oil on Canvas, 1m x 1.5m, 2005.



**Figure 25**, Zoe Friend, *Prevention is always better than cure*, Oil on Canvas, 25cm x 30cm, 2005

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List of Works Presented for Examination at the 2005 Postgraduate Degree Show

Sydney College of the Arts.

1. Zoe Friend , *Deported*, Oil on Canvas, 1.5 x 2m, 2005
2. Zoe Friend, The *Final Solution*, Oil on Canvas, 1.6 x 1.5m , 2005
3. Zoe Friend, *Normal?*, Oil on Canvas, 1.5 x 2m, 2005.
4. Zoe Friend, *Consequences*, Oil on Canvas, 1m x 1m, 2005