Aisthēsis

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for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, however, without the artistic direction and support of my supervisor, Matthys Gerber and the unique Directors of AADK, Spain, Abraham Hurtado and Elena Azzedin, I would not have even found my nose to have been able to follow it.

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Signature

Eila Vinwynn
Abstract.

This exegesis explores the idea that subjectivity is mapped via physical sensations known in their raw state as ‘qualess’, or qualia: that it arises from sensations being filtered through bodies. It explores the role of perception, which is seen as a hinge between sensation and the language we attach to it. While modern aesthetics are arguably dominated by visuality, the Ancient Greek concept of Aisthēsis included the full sensory spectrum. It is this more complete phenomenological approach to painting that I will explore in terms of my practice; the way the process of structuring sensations is modelled in the making of art. Written in three sections I will outline my methodological approach, perform these concepts in narrative form and finally apply them to my body of work to provide a broader aesthetic framework.
This work is dedicated to my fellow students,

the inspirational artists I have met at

Sydney College of the Arts.

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Aisthēsis

Introduction

Much has transpired during the three years of my MFA, including two trips to Spain for residencies related to the research, the decimation of Sydney College of the Arts (SCA), the culmination of a class action I was involved in against an orphanage where I was placed as a child, a divorce and the deaths of both my father and my eldest brother who, as a teenager in the seventies, was incarcerated at Callan Park when it was a psychiatric hospital. These events have parallel psychological effects not overtly evident in my works, but overall they have given it a background wash. Inevitably, they intertwined in interesting ways, especially the time slap of my brother, SCA at Kirkbride and their almost concurrent demise. The other event entwining itself, has been the writing of this research paper. The effect of grappling with text on the page has also become evident in the painting. Like ink on blotting paper, my painting practice has soaked in the need to write about itself.

Originally, the questions shaping my MFA enquiry were driven by a perceived sense of occlusion from language and how that might have affected my cultural agency, in particular my agency as a female painter in an historically male-dominated field. By ‘occlusion from language’ I mean being the non-generic subject of a language which uses ‘man’ as its generic term within a phallogocentric culture more generally. I felt as though I needed to make sure I wasn’t inadvertently co-opting myself into a field irrelevant to my experience at best, or at worst, hostile to it, however, my experience of being in the world was more complexly mapped than I at first realised. The occlusion I sensed belongs to more than just my linguistic self, but also to a sense of psychological and ‘cosmological’ displacement.

Initially, I researched feminist critiques of language (such as those of Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous) but engaging with feminist discourse at the level of language felt too limiting in terms of the experiential aspect of aesthetics. So I turned to an investigation of phenomenology as a more embodied approach. In particular, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of perception’s links to creativity and Guy Claxton’s investigation into neuroscience.¹ I also discovered the term ‘qualia’: the raw data of sensations as they reach the body. Qualia are the ‘raw feel’ of any sense, rather than the ‘cooked feel’ which is the term for a sensation once we try and describe it. It was through investigating the

pre-lingual realm beginning with sensation, that I became aware of the two other areas from which I experienced a sense of occlusion; one psychological in the form of blocked memories from childhood experience and the other physical, in the form of a sense of being on the outside of a cosmology that integrates being with place as a non-Indigenous person born in Australia.

These co-ordinates form natural fault lines along which the paper has fallen. **Section one** is a discussion on qualia and their relationship to structuring aesthetics. It outlines the way sensation is laminated to language and how the two can be thought of as a Mobius strip. **Section two**, on sensation and subjectivity, is a creative cartography which I have called ‘A Very Clear Legend’. It is an example of perception exploring its physical and psychological realities; an unreliable narrative based on a combination of fact and fiction, a map of nodes of experience over several locations and times. A legend is both a key to a map and a story which may be allegorical. It speaks to experiencing multiple, fluid selves constituted throughout a non-linear time and space and moving between fact, fiction and myth – the self as a set of fictions built around a scaffold of some firm (and many unfirm) facts. The legend reflects the relationship between writing and painting and my tendency to produce work contextually. Writing has become a substitute for painting as I grapple with the requirements of writing about painting in this paper. **Section three** is a chronological list of the works I completed for this MFA, an exegesis of place, blindness and intuition. It also relates each work to its genealogies.

**Section One**

During my undergraduate study I painted a native gum tree yellow. I returned to this early experiment during my MFA, as it came to represent a point of departure from the limitations I felt from the traditional canvas. In the process of painting a tree limb, I had an intuitive sense that it was the ‘body’ that was missing from approaches to painting in a deeper sense. While my painting on canvas can broadly be classed as contemporary abstraction, I still felt as though my practice was vulnerable to being rendered invisible and too easily subsumed by generic terms.

I wondered if there was a shared, ungendered experience outside of language from which I could speak and so, in getting to a place prior to language I looked at physical senses as a source of experience. Qualia is the philosophical and scientific term for the qualities (quales) our senses detect. The really interesting idea for me about qualia is the way the brain sorts and files these raw sensations. They are mapped in our brains into a vast and complex matrix of associations which constitute our picture of the world. Our minds, labelling and categorising the information using
language of not only words but of entire bundles of linked and interwoven chunks of ‘meaning’ - associations it synthesises into a rich fabric – give us what we perceive as an ‘inner life’: a facsimile of our interface with the world over time, mapped together along nodes of memory. As Ben Thomas writes: ‘In the brain’s taxonomy, there are no discrete entries or “files” - just associations that are more strongly or more weakly correlated with other associations’. The brain works to build a model of the world via a web of associations constructed from real-world encounters in and into which it is intrinsically also bound.

In teasing apart the subjectivity arising from qualia, or sensation, it became clear to me that perception is a sense in its own right. This isn’t a new idea; Buddhism counts six senses, not five, and the sixth is perception. Merleau-Ponty reserved a special place for perception and devoted his entire philosophical enquiry to it. He saw it as our ‘kinaesthetic, prescientific, lived-bodily experience and cognition of the world—the unification of our affective, motor and sensory capacities’. Perception is that magic-seeming realm where the material body amongst other materials, senses itself (including sensing itself sensing).

While Merleau-Ponty asserts that movement proceeds from sight, contemporary neuroscience has provided evidence of the converse: sight proceeds from movement. According to Claxton in his book *Intelligence in the Flesh: Why your mind needs your body much more than it thinks*, experiments show how our perception is developed as a result of our physical interface and interaction with the world. It shows that our perception of the world is limited and flattened unless it is linked to our movement through the world physically - unless we map it by pressing against it as we move our bodies through it. In this way, sensation and meaning are laid over one another until we have a fabulous working model of the world and our bodies in it. This is the nature of our experience of the world – a working model, related to our body’s capacities and needs and augmented by narrative structuring: ideology, science, myth and culture.

The way we make sense of the world has been theorised as the model of aesthetics. John Dewey, in ‘Art as Experience’, argues that this process is what we understand as aesthetics and that the reason

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5 Claxton, G. *Intelligence in the Flesh* p 61.
we find things aesthetic is that they match this process of association and refer to it\(^6\). Structures in art appeal to this way our brains structure ‘knowledge’; that which is mapped within our cells via experience. In particular, I have come to see painting as a facsimile of this web of associations, in practice and product – a kind of mind/body analogue or aesthetic praxis.

There is a forgotten concept in Western thought, of a holistic, integrated aesthetics called Aisthēsis. As Jojada Verrips points out in his essay ‘Aisthēsis and An-aesthesia’:

Aisthēsis comprises more than just visual perception; it stands for general perception with all the senses, as well as the impression that the perceived leaves on the body. In the original meaning of the concept, tactile and visual perception constitute a whole, and it was not until later (i.e. in the Kantian tradition) that this meaning was reduced to merely an eye that observes, without a body\(^7\).

Aisthēsis relates to the actual senses such as feeling, seeing and hearing, as well as intellectual perception. It includes that which is perceived, for example, scent. The ability to perceive, our powers of discernment and cognition are also considered parts of this extended sense of aesthetics.

As Jacques Ranciere argues in his book Aisthēsis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art\(^8\), the end of the 18\(^{th}\) century marks the point where Western art moved from having strict representational strictures to being underpinned by an ‘aesthetic regime’. While Ranciere focuses on the political capacities that have been lost with the advent of modernism, at the same time he argues that art in fact is irredeemably political in that it continually alters what can be seen and thought, even the most abstract. My focus on aisthēsis is aligned with Ranciere in that I too perceive abstract art operating on this level.

Painting has a comprehensibility in terms of intrinsic aesthetic resonances entangled with meanings simultaneously; it has an equivalence with meaning. Abstract painter Albert Oehlen’s aim was to get away from meaning but no matter how hard we might try we find meaning in painting, in just the same way C.S Lewis’ nonsense poem “The Jabberwocky” makes a kind of sense. Dewey argues that abstract images appeal to us because of the way knowledge gets structured as a web of associations, in a similar way that a painting is a web of associations. Michael Polanyi says, ‘we know more than  


we can tell. Thus, not only does knowledge come in different forms, the forms of its creation differ. The idea of ineffable knowledge is not an oxymoron. The liberation of the term knowledge from dominance by the propositional is a critical move. There are myriad ways we communicate without words and without propositions. We communicate with sound, with the gestures of dance, with body language and touch, with our eyes, with art. Direct empathy with bodies connects us with meanings implicitly understood: physical and emotional states or the memories of them.

In attempting to see if there was a place prior to language, a place of shared embodied experience, I came to see that perception structures the qualia, raw sensation, into the meaning we make of these otherwise inchoate experiences. That structuring is an endless cycle of sensation laminated to language by perception. This very act is a kind of aesthetic structuring which I see reflected in the performance and product of painting.

**Section Two**

**A Very Clear Legend**

My father used to think the word ‘misled’ was pronounced with a long ‘i’ - *mise-eld*. Misled. I have often been mise-ld so, for my map, I have had to make A Very Clear Legend.

**Null**

0° 0’0”  0° 0’0”  (Love)

**Always**

It’s a kind of pathological love. *Pathology* is ‘the structure and functional deviation from the normal that constitutes disease or characterizes a particular disease’. My love ‘deviates from the norm and characterizes a disease’. But *pathological* is Greek from ‘pathologia’, the study of the emotions. Love is the study of emotions: Love is the definition of pathology.

So not *just* emotion, but all of experience, *including* suffering. The word has mutated into a synonym for suffering and disease.

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10 Pathos: from *paschein* (pathein) Greek; to experience, suffer - suffering, emotion.
Disease: - Middle English *disese*, from Anglo-French *desease*, *desaise*, from *des* – *dis* + *eise* - *ease* is a word describing ‘a movement away from a state of equilibrium’. Also, Latin *dis*—literally, apart, adjacent—a double whammy. Maybe ‘beside oneself’ would work as a good description of disease. My love makes me to be beside myself. My love for you doesn’t make me beside myself, it makes you stand within me. You do stand within me, fully and completely from your beginning you are held within me. And if another definition of pathology is to do with what is in the blood, the more the better.

It wasn’t deep and dark, it was a shallow and briny lake. The moon fell like undergarments about my knees.

**Home: 6 Rose Crescent Mosman Bay, NSW. Australia**

*33° 50' 22" S 151° 13' 54" E (Caution)*

**April 8th 2015**

The sun broke itself to pieces against the mud-brown water. The ferry slid in like a meteor. The back of the plastic deck chair is an exquisite grey. If you were to paint that chair, it would not be possible to see it as exquisite grey, and if you just painted the exquisite grey it would lose some of its enthusiasm, being unattached to its meaning as the back of a front-lit chair. You would have to paint the exquisite grey against something, some other mark, to bring out its exquisiteness.

Whatever I say it will be too much. Today I am elsewhere. Closer to here. Nearer to now. Reckless.

I am sitting on my couch just inside the balcony. The balcony is bathed in northern light (finally) and the bay is mud-brown. I am writing and watching the ferry leave the wharf.

I’m painting vast canvases using a pendulum to empty the paint in great gentle motions, mathematical and chancy, spattering and unsure in their gravity-feed. Loopy you might say.

I don’t drink nearly enough. But do prefer opiates.

The bay is mud-brown. The air is tall with bright clouds.

I am going to Spain for three months to simply be.

If I go mad before I leave, I will just stay there. Mad.
Edge of Tomorrow, aka EoT - North Turramurra, NSW Australia

33° 42' 28" S  151° 8' 57'' E (Doubt)

November 22nd 2017

The first biography was written by Cornelius Nepos in bCe 44: the first biography of a woman was published in AD 1807 and was a compilation called Female Biography; Or, memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of all Ages and Countries (R. Phillips, 1803) and was in six volumes. One thousand eight hundred and fifty one years fall between.

Where shall I begin – throw a dart at (my) history and go there? Everything that's mapped seems relevant. There is only one location from which to fix all geocoding failures; zero by zero on the fictional island of Null. This is not a heavy tome, this is as light as air.

I paint and also make things out of raw stuff and time, to be washed away or to leave invisible traces. I observe my memory; does it bubble up in my cells? I observe my body as ephemera – time and empty space – held taut within a small frame of levers. Pipes, water, air; permeated by vibrations, resting on the world. I am contingent transience in this solid place, but its porousness becomes clearer the more I look.

6 Rose Crescent Mosman Bay, NSW. Australia.

33° 50' 22" S  151° 13’ 54” E (Confusion)

April 8th 2015

As it stands, I am flotsam on the edge of everything and even though so many things fail me, like rational logic and ideology, I can’t seem to shake off meaning. I think that means that meaning lies somewhere deeper within my biological being, the ‘me’ that is an entity made of organic substances. Nothing much makes sense to me, but rivers do, and empty beaches. Rain blizzards down again. The torrents of yesterday wash down, down into the deep long undercity drains out to the sea and fish and sea grasses. I am tangled there amongst the fronds, pushed and lulled by the tides, the storms, the currents above. Sea weed. I am firm and hard on a bed of white linen, enclosed in my limitations of bone, bound by the limits of my understanding. I hear the wind lashing about in the top sails of
next door, funneled into the narrow parking way. I feel my spine twist within me. I bunch my memories into a strange bag, like a big tea bag, waiting to be strained and strained again with new pourings of time.

The chalk of my existence written onto the pavement.

Words of girls I loved stack neatly into towers of book-shaped rooms. I live there often.

**Null 0° 00' 00" 0° 00' 00''**

**Darax, Spain. 38°18'84''N 1°38'61''W**

**North Turramurra 33° 42' 28'' S 151° 8' 57'' E**

**Once Upon a Time**

In a Spanish legend, there is a river that runs to the sea through a valley of lemon groves. The groves, each with a simple dwelling, were all smallholdings except for one, which had been the home of an Arabian Prince. He had long since died and his lands had been divided up into two sweeping plots, fronting the fast-flowing river. Reclining on the gentle slopes up to a high ridge behind, these expansive groves enjoyed a perennial afternoon breeze that sent its notes through the tall rushes crowding the river banks. Legend has it that the water picked up the taste of the lemons as it coursed through the ancient irrigation channels, then laid in the carefully constructed levy walls of the Prince’s orchard and drained away back into the river. For long summer afternoons, visitors would rest on exotic outdoor swings imported from India and be lulled by the chiming music of the reeds. It was said that when they drank of the cool water stored in enormous earthen pots inside the alcázar, they became enchanted. They would dream dreams of lemon-scented water fused in a current of its own, wending its way down the river, into the lake beyond, and across the plains to the sea. It was said that the lemon-scented current brought to anyone who touched it, dreams of Darax.

It is a cornflower blue afternoon, not quite still but with a smooth breeze.

**El Rio Segura, Blanca, Murcia: Spain**

38°10'57"N 1° 22' 49"W (Dissolve)
July 12, 2015. 2pm.

Here beside the river, with life pulsing along around me, foreign sounds are babbling amongst themselves, immersed in meaning, exchanging within meaning. The hills beyond, the orange or lemon grove opposite, the houses like home-grown stone painted the soft colours of skin, but flat and foreign too, hand-made, the earth made functional, or more so...

The river, the shade trees and the not-so-piercing blue sky, press against me. The sky reaches down and into my lungs, penetrating and entwining me with itself, just as these boys entwine themselves with the water - throwing themselves into that soft-held fall. The air presses itself against the horizon then rises as a blue curtain, reaching up, up and over to rest on these stones behind me. The green water reflects the blue sky changing it to smoke. Breeze describes me, returns my arms, the undersides of my dangling legs, the side of my head, to me. The strong line of the hammock slung under my knees pushes me there to myself.

As I watch the river coursing past me, with its urgency and aim, I feel my body's correspondence with it. I am the river, the river is me. If my body resists the landscape it's by the narrowest of margins. And where these margins are located is also debatable. The membrane of my skin seems a logical barrier and yet my wet skin soaks in the river, my skin breathes and sweats and bleeds into this landscape. I take it in literally, the air and the fruits, become me. I don't know how to discern myself from the world around me. At which interface does this sentience meet this materiality?

Matter is mostly empty space. What holds this empty space together into a tree, water, the earth, the sky... hardly held at all though it is? All the physicists can say is that quarks (the subatomic particles that are the most basic building blocks of matter) are held together by the strong interaction, or strong force, that is one of the four fundamental forces in nature. No stable form of matter would exist without the strong interaction holding it together.

This river, coursing past me with such purpose and aim, with such urgency, moves to the force of gravity – another of the four – and finds its level, rushes as it is pulled down, to the centre of the earth.

The discrete bodies of landscape and human, separated by the skin of perception, blend and are the same, and separate again with the other's qualities – the landscape with its human naming and the human with its deep oceans and light blue horizons.
North Turramurra


November 22nd 2017

This is a map of the dark sea at night. Feel the soft rocking of the boat, don’t fear. Leviathan may well be under the waves but you don’t have to kill it.

I peered beneath the black surface into the deeper black below. My face is salty and wet, did I cry this ocean? You are too poetic by half for me, I am much more the pillar than the ocean, of salt. I slump back into my small boat, which has everything I need in it. My jar of - well it can’t be a human heart that would be morose, or a goats heart that would be too cultish, kombucha is too new-age, but something living or some source of life is in that jar, with its lid on. Pretty sure it’s not formaldehyde in there either. I was born amongst sea-faring men and cannibals. This is a true story. I was born on this raft. Without my empty space I would fit into a particle of dust.

But space is never truly empty. It’s full of wave functions and invisible quantum fields which, as we know, are systems with an infinite number of degrees of freedom. Down there at the bottom, right down there unobstructed, I hear the obsessive pounding of the blood vessels pumping redness through me and through me into the stumbling lines of veins that are drawn through me, my body a question constantly posed and otherwise distracted always and constantly by memories like thorns snagging and puncturing the flow, letting, letting me escape and dissipate beyond the confines of my definitions, loose-ing my quantity of madeness so that I become further and further diluted.

In a vacuum the pendulum will keep on going, ad infinitum and can drive the works of an external clock, keeping time with the tick and tock of the moving gear. But time may go on ad infinitum outside of gravity. Gravity withers us away and folds us back into the earth and stars, that is how time works in us. My position and momentum can be measured, making me observable, making me mappable. I have heard there is a buoy at zero degrees north, zero degrees west, or some say, an imaginary island of one metre square, used to fix geocoding failures. It’s not down on any map; true places never are.

I find my bearings at sea again, this dark sea, at night. One sphere of blackness. As above - so below; stars in the water. Where, on the sand of a narrow beach on the Isle of Sheppey and on the Atlantic Crossing on two nights, fifty years apart, and one more sight of the Northern Star in relation to these, I can see the edges of my body.
The Prince of Darax in his humble alcázar was noted for his kindness. During the wars, his village was known as the hiding place, the refuge for all; widows, orphans and wounded soldiers of all nations. It wasn’t his village; it was the nearest village to his home. It was called Negra.

El Rio Segura, Blanca, Murcia: Spain

38°10’57”N  1°22’49”W (Found)

July 12, 2015. 5pm.

Will the memory of these sounds return to me; of these young Arabic men socializing in the next space beside me on the riverbank; the colours so soft, the light spread so thinly and slow-moving?

When they jump in, they make the sound which says the river is much colder than they expected. Silence intersperses with thick dense waves of voices as groups come up to jump in at this head of the path, where the flowing point is first accessible. They float along in bunches and then I watch as a single lemon floats down the current by itself.

My body is the bound and unbound, the bridge. Physics concurs. Empty space and points of light. At the sub-atomic level, wave patterns and observation, all possibilities. For all intents and purposes, we experience boundedness yet we never touch anything. That’s reality; how we experience it is what we believe. Touch and pressure are real, but we believe a real barrier exists where there is none, just a force field - but I can pass in to you. My waves can move through yours, like 3d ripples in a 4d sphere.

In the fresh air, walking on the asphalt, drawing the sky into my nostrils - cold at the back of my throat then warm - passing over into the cells and exploding; the dry blue air and some clouds.

The day is like washed clean cotton on the skin. Smelt good.

Iron.

(I’m afraid, she said into her pillow. I am afraid that your body will dissolve when I touch it. I’m afraid, she said, into her door, that when I open you, there will be nothing behind you. No other room. I’m afraid, she said, into her window, that in the morning you will still be dark and not let in the sun. The door and the window said, don’t tell us your problems. It’s one thing to talk into your pillow but talking to us is quite another thing).
The lake shimmers below the damn - a bulging vein in the valley. The sky is over there, pale blue like oxygen with too much air; pressed in a line against the mountains - squeezed into their shape. Far off and far off, the hills recede. A man jogs along the valley road. A young boy is on the river, his kayak pushing fast down the current.

Within the walls of my small apartment, the air reaches around and welcomes itself and surrounds me, and sits on the couch and invades my bathroom. The front wall is just doors; two sets of double doors and one single one to come in by, on the right. Six steps lead up to it from the terrace so that the view over the valley is uninterrupted, lifting the room up over the rim of the lower tiled roofs. Along the left wall, from the front to the back, is the stove, sink and benches and then the door to the bathroom. The right wall is blank. The stairs to the back landing are behind me. The stairs are timber. All the doors are timber and they are open. The walls are rendered smooth plaster of the palest skin colour. The ceiling is high.

The terracotta tiles are diamonds against the front of doors, so that the window bars make shadows cutting across them and not with them. My mat is still in place, pale green with white stripes, barred with shadows. Cars rise up to my ears and the cool breeze makes my skin. Especially my right foot, the ball where it rests on the tiles feels icy in one small spot, defining me in one sharp point right there. I feel one limit of my containment there in that limb. The sky seems to fall over the lake, obscuring it more. The sky and the smoke are uniting and washing the valley, moving close to the town. Horns note themselves in me, and faint far off voices and faint far off dogs. The hum of life is inside me. I am here and here is within me. I am sound and I am the faint sky that moves into my room as a cold wind; all is faint, all is drawn as thinly as a watercolour, enmeshing me in one more-solid form, as solid as the door or the rail, or the terrace, yet not. I am hollow somewhere, the hollowness of the ever-reaching mind, free to wander to the limits of my vision and free to wander all the paths of memory and conclusion. Free to visit my stories and free to re arrange them. Far off, the sun carves the forest into the hills and chisels it into the lake’s edge. The tiles of the roofs are a dirty pale brown making a jumble of patterns. The cars are in my throat, vibrating there. Like the points of pressure on my body, my foot, sounds shape me: the twitching bird to my left, the fall of a knife onto tiles at my right. I am an amalgamation of the world, I am only these senses, here.
I am the tolling bell tolling in my chest and lingering in my ears. I am the swaying movement of the hammock. I am the shadows in awesome rectangles, stacked on my small front landing, and tasselled with the marks of the aloe scratching along the bars. I am the broken chair with a green cushion.

The swallows swoop and whirl. Draw circles over the village. The valley holds the lake slick and wet. All moist for me to dive in to. Swim in. Drown in. Be reborn in. Emerge baptised. I am lost in translation. Connecting the dots from inside to out. I am not lost here, I’m found.
Section Three

January 2015

Eros is eros. 2015 Oil and acrylic on canvas, 3m x 2m.

Having looked long at the blank canvas, I took up a container of bright orange paint and spread it in a thick arc across about a head-level area. Orange is my favourite colour. It’s very unruly. After this, denying the direct use of my hands in making marks (for example by using a brush) I tipped, sprayed, poured and wiped instead, manoeuvring the unwieldy canvas in its awkwardness and using ropes to suspend my paint tins as they poured. Then I picked through the resulting chaos, hiding most to bring out the image and finally added my quick-unpick motifs.

I wanted to access a pre-lingual process which I felt was impossible by using directly guided marks, my hand/eye link being so deeply logical and coded and precise. All conscious mark-making disappears off the canvas for me, having been ‘worked over’, as Merleau-Ponty would say, already and stylized into tropes.11 Maybe Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois and Yannis Kounellis feel closer to how I wanted my work to feel, where brooding materiality evokes a tangible pathos. Not that I wanted to brood or overly engage pathos, but that quality of sensation brought about by the materials particularly in Hesse and Polke too, which seems to echo Hesse – the transparencies, somehow evoke my body’s felt responses as bodily thoughts. ‘Eros is eros’ lurches towards the bodily by having ribs and lobster coloured flesh, by being placental and large. The name plays on Gertrude Stein’s poem, “a rose is a rose” and the name of Marcel Duchamp’s alter ego, Rrose Selavy (which translates to ‘eros, that’s life’). It evokes the idea of eros being just what it says it is and also all that there is. The inversion of the word rose, however, and the fact that Duchamp is playing the role of a woman, inverting gender, is a playful way of revisiting these two Queer artists who enjoyed a lively repartee. The body is not just a body, its role in structuring aesthetics is something which I intuit but don’t fully understand or yet trust: eros, libido, drive and the structuring echoes of perception. My sense of blindness, or what I conceptualise as blindness, is, I think, this intuition I haven’t yet understood, haven’t yet theorized.

Figure 1 Eros is eros. 2015 Oil and acrylic on canvas. 2m x 3m
Figure 2 Eros is eros. 2015 Oil and acrylic on canvas, 3m x 2m.
Aktuelle Architects der Kulture (AADK) is a programme based in Blanca, Murcia which originated in Berlin. It was initiated by the Performance Artist Abraham Hurtado with others including Jochen Arbeit from the 80’s industrial band, Einstürzende Neubauten. The main interest across all their programs is to explore the notions of body, spatiality and territory. They are open to all kinds of practices and provide a rich, diverse and supportive platform for research. During my first residency, Meg Stuart (contemporary American dancer/choreographer) hosted a ten-day workshop for dancers. Contemporary sound artist and local film-makers also worked on projects during the period of my residency as well as several other painters from Argentina, Poland and Canada, a multi-media film-maker from Denmark and a sound performance artist from Montreal.

Blind was the culmination of a month spent following my nose and allowing that sense of intuition to guide me. Fortunately for me, the brief I submitted to AADK – to have no idea whatsoever what the outcome would be, but to be in a state of receptivity and response – was accepted. I was able to fully immerse myself in the foreignness of the location and the language. Initially asking if the foreignness I was experiencing, the sense of occlusion or the blind spot, came from a sense of occlusion from my own language, that is, from occupying the non-generic subject position in my own language, my brief to the university was to further push that sense by being immersed in an actual foreign language. I framed the exhibition in terms of four journeys taken over four weeks.

Diary from Blanca, day 2. It’s the middle of the night, on the other side of the world, a long way from where I mostly stay. So much to assimilate, the landscape and the way the world turns differently here. That bell is still calling ringing clanging away at 130 am. Only the deepest hours of sleep are undisturbed. I woke with a crown of thorns – not starfish, headache. My body clock, my clock tower chimes and clangs my head is a church bell relentless. I watch as I slow down, care less, hear more the low earth’s hum speaking to my flesh and bones. Being away is astonishing. Is so soothing, so restful to my psyche. I was interested in language, the human structure which receives data and outputs language. The language game. The filters, structures, categories, ways of making sense. The human subject in its raw state. But even the almost imperceptible nod and eye contact between the Spanish lady and me, which said something like, I acknowledge you, thanks or hello or whatever it was, is structured by our own languages. Language though, comes from the raw material.
**Week 1.** When I arrived in Blanca, for the first week, I felt like I was in a painting, the surface of the town appeared to me as so aesthetic and hand-made, every surface rendered with the earthy colours, every surface touched by hands. I made a series of photographs devoid of people.

![Figure 3 Aaron. Wall Text](image1)

![Figure 4 Yellow Fence](image2)

![Figure 5 Yellow Window](image3)

![Figure 6 Cobble Path](image4)

**Week 2.** During the second week, I went behind the village, up to the old Arab fort. The landscape behind the city, the raw hills with old ruins, like history, like all things past, like memory, is another zone – colourless and dry, a deeper introspective space outside the village. It was like stepping through the painting to find a ruin, a statue, and a barren hilltop overlooking the rich valley and river. Silhouettes of ancient Muslim travellers marked the way. The long grass was straw. We frame things and we make sense of things by association. I associated this landscape with memory, and I thought of my family as I trudged up the hill. I picked up a stone for each, even my father, and one for Jonathan (my younger brother who died in 1993 aged 24) and placed them at the foot of the statue because it commanded an amazing view. Placing them there was a kind of acknowledgement
of their impact on me, of our impact on each other and of all that we have shared. Nine stones at Mary’s feet.

**Week 3.** The third journey was the discovery of an abandoned hut glued to the back of the AADK studios, which itself sits at the highest point of dwellings on the hillside, just below the fort. The Centre, Centro Negra, itself is an amalgamation of five huts with terraces added and spaces enclosed to form the workshops and common spaces. Inside the hut I found a poem in English about blindness. An internal landscape of tiny trees and pebbles and drawings of eyes on mesh frames, had been left as an intervention by previous artists, Elena Azzedin and Selu Hernandez, who had also left the verse. This felt like the final innermost space, this metaphorical internal landscape, the inversion, the reward for following intuition – a poem about following intuition. I knew right away that I could remake it in Braille and write it on the city walls. The lines: “In time we forsake our illusions/ and yield to the passing of time/ let us drink from the cup of confusion/ and be king in the land of the blind”, are from the song ‘I am the sweetest of Devils’ by Ordo Rosarios Equilibrio. I changed ‘Kings’ to ‘Queens’ and instead of making it tiny, I decided to make a curtain out of strung clay beads that could hang in the weather and dissolve. Each piece of clay Braille was threaded into place and held there with a knot.

**Week 4.** The final week was spent translating the words into beads of braille text. Each vertical string had to be plotted to hold the beads so they would read horizontally. It hung first in the gallery/studio and during the second month was installed by the river.
Figure 7 Blind. 2015. String, clay, timber 5m x 2.5 m Installation view in Centro Negra
Figure 8 Blind. 2015. String, clay, timber 5m x 2.5 m Installation view in Centro Negra
Figure 9 Blind. 2015. String, clay, timber 5m x 2.5 m Installation view in Centro Negra

Figure 10 Blind. 2015. String, clay, timber 5m x 2.5 m Installation view in Centro Negra
Figure 11 Blind. 2015. String, clay, timber Installation view by el Rio Segura
Figure 12 Blind. 2015. String, clay, timber Installation view by el Rio Segura
Figure 13 Blind. 2015. String, clay, timber. Installation view by el Rio Segura
‘Blind’ was a foray into following intuition. It seemed fortuitous to find a verse in my own language, hidden away in a derelict bothy. The end result reflected a feeling of occluded meaning. Even if you could reach out and touch the braille, it would remain impossible to read, it hangs just out of reach anyway. Reading it without touching it is one possibility, but in the translation from the studio to the river, the addition of the branch to stabilise the strings, meant it went out of register anyway. Two ideas emerged, or were reinforced for me; one, that touch and language are intertwined and the other, that there is more to language than words – the medium is the message. ‘Blind’ recalls Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse who says ‘It is really hung painting in another material than painting’.  

It is like Bourgeois and Hesse for both its foray into psychological expression and material empathy. Louise Bourgeois saw art and psychoanalysis as symbiotic and a ‘mutually reinforcing continuum of sophisticated electronics’. Art forced her to enact the ritual movement from passive to active that depression would otherwise deprive her of. Art forces me to keep circling around a sense of blindness. In psychoanalytical terms, my repressed keeps returning as a sense of occlusion. But an

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explanatory exegesis of Bourgeois’ work as psychoanalysis could never revoke its power; it’s psychoanalysis that I doubt. ‘Don’t ask what it means or what it refers to. Don’t ask what the work is. Rather, see what the work does’, says Hesse.¹⁴

**July 2015 AADK Blanca**

*The Minus Project*

Over a period of two weeks, for an hour each day, I collected rubbish along the riverbank, which is engineered with about three metres ballast. A walking path winds beside it. I had conceptualised the idea on a bike ride around the lake and riparian gardens. There I came upon a side road on which rubbish had been left to accumulate. To frame the project as something other than community service - or than just community service, I decided to call it ‘The Minus Project’ and to only work on it between set hours each day. Initially, the only documentation I wanted was that of those who witnessed me working, and my poor quality before-and-after i-Phone photos. The intern, Jorge, however, made a three minute promotional video of it for the AADK website.

My aim was to leave an invisible trace. Cleaning up the riverbank answered a feeling I had about adding to the town with imagery that would remain after I left, which didn’t feel right to me, it felt disingenuous. I had no confidence in my right to visually impose on a place I didn’t live. Leaving an invisible trace, a beneficial addition, solved that problem. I can frame it as an interweaving of minimalist and conceptual art, a raked, linear trace Agnes Martin would appreciate on both an aesthetic and therapeutic level or which Sol le Wit or Yoko Ono could have left instructions for. It pays homage to Merle Lederman-Ukeles’ ‘Maintenance Art’ from 1973, in which she washed the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, bringing attention to the undervalued role of maintenance by turning it into art. I could wed it to my doubts about the place of the feminine in language and culture on this premise. Francis Alýs’ unravelling and melting ice works, and The Minus Project, function in similar ways, as there is less to show the more work that is done. Even a walking trope can be invoked. But nothing falls into simple, neat categories and psychology seems to be a constant driver behind all our elegant partitions. I was yet to learn how enmeshed my bodily actions were with my psyche and with my practice, however. Erasure itself was the thing I was enacting.

¹⁴ Hesse, E. quoted in *The Tate Magazine, volume 2, 2002, Tate London*
Figure 15 The Minus Project video still 2015
September 2015

*idk* series 1-8. The Wool Derivatives min 1.2m x 1.5 max 3m x 2m enamel on canvas

Tate Modern, London. On seeing Christopher Wool when I didn’t know who Christopher Wool was. I came very close to his painting and wanted badly to touch it but the invigilator was sitting right there. I took photos. Its marks were the washed-off marks of black spray-painted lines. Uncertain marks already had been wiped, leaving another mark of the solvent-laden cloth. It was a very smooth mark, swiped by hand in a gesture typical of wiping off a dirty surface. I got the impression the marks were an accident that made the grade. The original marks then became an excuse to wipe and leave the more interesting marks. But the original marks therefore took on another kind of character. When I made these marks myself in order to wash them off, in order to experience making these beautiful erasures, I wanted the original marks to be like an awkward attempt to write, an attempt to communicate; a way of saying something in a language upon which I had only the merest grasp. But it felt as though my canvas was far rougher than Wool’s. His marks, the wiped ones, were so silky smooth, as though screen-printed (which he does do). Or as though his canvas was glass, almost. They struck me as so beautiful because of my work with blindness and language, with Braille and erasure – The Minus Project. All these enquiries were ripe in my mind and the painting was an example of something resonating with me at that time. The Cy Twombley painting was similar – had a similar impact, but Wool’s was more emotional. I like Twombly’s excessiveness – the scale of the gestures were giant-sized, a superhuman arm circle, or superhuman scribble. They had a deliciously uncanny feeling and while I preferred Twombly’s blood-red to Wool’s black, Wool could not have done his work in red. It has to be black washed off into grey. It refers to text in a different way. Cy Twombly’s big red scribbles refer to blood, the body, are visceral, whereas Wool’s marks seem sad, or wistful, or humble. The work is quiet. It emanates doubt. Perhaps this idea of not having a thing to say that was any more valuable than what someone else might say, not having any particular authority, was the thing about them which resonated. In Blanca I had that feeling and this work encapsulated it perfectly, uncertainty writ large. Also, I had been without my painting gear and the painting summed up those two projects of mine in paint.

On returning to Sydney I made about eight canvases, experimenting with the sprayed and wiped marks. Using my left hand to spray and my right hand to wipe seemed to also interfere with my logic-brain wiring. The calligraphic markings are awkward but lyrical in their way. I added things
behind the canvas in some, to give a ‘rubbing’ effect; something leaving an impression from the other side; the underside of the Mobius Strip.

One of the things I appreciate about Wool, is his interrogation of painting as a form – the way the interrogation results in these wonderful marks, as though just the question is also aesthetic, the questioning. It doesn’t seem possible to wipe out painting. Its gestures are indelibly part of us. The European tradition of questioning everything, pulling it apart and examining it and in so-doing causing it to form a part of an integral whole, is reminiscent to me of the traditional Indigenous way of reiterating stories that in their performance, reiterate their own world-making.

Figure 17 idk 1. 2015 (detail) enamel on canvas
Figure 18 idk 2. 2015 Enamel on canvas. 1.2m x 1.5m
Feb 2016

el Rio. Oil and acrylic and charcoal on canvas. 1.2m x 1.4m

Soft riffing on my old work with misaligned registers, el Rio also tests a consciously tentative brushstroke and throws in some conjecture with its questionable question mark and unconvincing grid.

Brillig. 2016 Oil and acrylic on canvas. 2 x 2.4m

I reworked some of the Wool-inspired paintings. Brillig, named after the character from Lewis Carol poem “The Jabberwocky”, draws on energies and gestures, screens, angles and erasures. ‘Brillig’ riffs on the work of Sydney painter Matthys Gerber and develops the idea of more concrete painted erasure. It has an awkward quality I can’t help liking. Carol’s poem is a nonsense poem, yet it has just
enough linguistic structural mimicry to make sense. Aesthetic structures are mimicked in painting in this loose, nonsense kind of way.

Figure 20 Brillig. 2016 Oil and enamel on canvas 1.85m x 1.85m

July 2016

Sharps. 2016. Enamel, oil and acrylic on canvas. 2m x 3m

Bringing back colour with awkward marks of the brush, painting over the scrawled white text with my favourite blue, is a bit of cardiopulmonary resuscitation. In 'Sharps', the colour is brushed on again without the fear of over-determination I had previously. I used a thought-stream to hang it on more specifically, a list of memory flash-cards from places, experiences and emotions: ‘Just running along and along and running fast; a cobbled street, a Cleopatra’s Needle, a Champs Elysee, a river
green and cool, a red burning thought with no escape. A thing unfound, a beating heart, pounding, thumping, a memory, a thin stick drawing in the sand, a rake, a distance, a hot day, lemons, privacy bleeding out to be heard above all others, a clamour, a boy paddling upstream with his friend, a quiet river rushing past’.

The difference between ‘Sharps’ and ‘Eros is eros’, is that ‘Sharps’ is a lot more worried and anxious than ‘Eros’. The effects of writing the MFA are apparent to me in some of my work from this period, but the experiments are hauling my practice over the coals and adding a sense of reticence to it. ‘Sharps’ retains the discomfiture of ‘Brillig’ and is losing the text-as-text calligraphy in favour of a text-as-colour calligraphy. Rather than a return to Twombly and referential poetry, though, I see this as a move towards integrating language and body via colour.

![Figure 21 Sharps. 2016 Oil and enamel on canvas 2m x 3m (detail)](image)
June – September 2016.

Bracketed Life-Art Convergence – SAVE SCA Campaign Vigil, Occupy etc..

The Campaign to save Sydney College of the Arts in its (then) current form at the Kirkbride campus was a durational performance. A small core of people met frequently to organise events, and weekly student meetings. The same core made the materials and participated in those student meetings, The Archibald Vigil, Drumming SOS Requiems around the Quad at main campus and around SCA, researched what council and government were planning, liaised with other community groups and ran a Vision Group in a desperate attempt to formulate a model of possible use for the art school. This, we thought, could integrate the art school, Callan park and relevant research areas such as mental health and the relationship between making and intelligence for example, not to mention integrated community research. Then we Occupied. SCA became a community/practitioner space for me and my ostensibly female contemporaries.

I had a deeply personal reason for feeling so strongly about Callan Park and its abandonment as a mental health facility and so my paintings also have a certain topological and psychogeographic
relationship to Callan Park and Kirkbride. It is where my brother Guy was treated in the Rozelle psychiatric hospital in the 1970s. The studio has influenced my work spatially in other ways as well (given space is such a precious commodity now in cities such as Sydney, and SCA became such a contested space). I am now part of the last cohort of students to have studios here, so this thesis is also a homage, part anticipatory eulogy, to a disappearing creative space.

The space influenced my work in more literal ways too. The high institutional ceilings have enabled me to work on large canvases, which I carried across the rooftop from the stretching room to enter via the windows like a cat burglar. I work in a scale that is itself awkward, positing that painting as a medium is alive and well despite traditional studio practices being so under threat and that women should reclaim space. This studio has enabled my painting to be large, influenced as I am by the abstract canvases of other female contemporaries such as Charline Von Heyl and Katharina Grosse.
B713. 2016. Clandestine art show. As a part of the protests, fellow students James Thomson, Maggie Brink and I, mounted a clandestine exhibition in one of the disused homes within the grounds of Callan Park. Titled ‘B713’, it was a painting show in which I exhibited both ‘Square Circle’ and ‘Red Herring’, in homage to Emily Kngwarreye and John Nixon. Square Circle is a painting in which I considered the relationship between European post-modernism (Nixon’s monochrome) and Tjukulpa (Kngwarreye’s Yam Dreaming). The event was highly attended by students and some staff until security moved us on.

November 2016

Long Summer, Darax. 2016 Broken pieces of a once-useful thing, time, glue, graphite on tracing paper.

Also known as ‘my life in pieces masquerading as a map and reconstruction of an old wine vase’.

I made a second trip to Spain and Europe from October 1st until December 31st 2016, two months of which were a return to the AADK residency. I left during the Occupation of SCA and returned to find I was homeless. I inadvertently made a work relating to these processes, which is a reconstructed clay wine vessel. This work evolved spontaneously. I found the pieces on a walk to Darax and brought them home as a project to fill in time while working out what I would do for the second month. I soon became obsessed and realised this was the work. The confluence of psyche and practice seems spontaneous in Blanca.
January 2017

Dear Emily. 2017 Enamel and oil on canvas 2.4m x 1.8m

During the second Blanca residency at AADK, I also tested some new techniques of drawing with water and splashed ink, washed off in the river. The resulting marks are amoeba-like traces and soft swathes of grey, similar to the Wool erasures. I brought these ideas home and reworked a previous Wool derivative, this time channelling Emily Kngwarreye’s words when she was asked what her paintings were about. She says; “They are everything, they’re not about something, they are everything”\(^{15}\). Kngwarreye’s repetitive marks in her Yam paintings inspired me and while I cannot make any links to meaningful narratives of place with my marks, they are my narrative of repeated erasure, and the indelible way psyche has been mapped in my life and practice.

January 2018.

*West head*. 2018 Oil and acrylic on canvas 2m x 3m

West head is tied to a specific place, Kur-ing-gai national park, at the mouth of the Hawkesbury River, Summer 2018. Hiking back up from the beach the lichen on the gum tress, the colours combined with the whole sensorium of the salt-water, the blueness of the sky and the dryness of the warm air in my lungs. I wanted to paint that. Also, I really wanted to do something with pink and
stripes, channelling Charlene von Heyl. (I co-incidentally have a pink striped towel I was using at the beach).

The painting was done at SCA studio the next day. I held over the intuition and feelings and painted it automatically. As opposed to ‘Eros is Eros’, I used the brush exclusively, fully engaging my bodily translations. Initially, I didn’t trust the hand-eye process of painting, relying on the innate properties of the materials and gravity to guide me. With West Head, I was immersed in the embodied practice.

Considering Katharina Grosse’s idea of her painting as ‘the first sedimentation of thought’, ‘West Head’ is my first sedimentation of sensation. Like Grosse, I aim to capture a prelingual presence. One side of this presence is sensation and the other side is language. While her use of explicit and raw colour operates as an indexical map of thought in its raw state, and has a calligraphic quality, my use of colour in ‘West Head’ references the body’s aesthetic structuring and has a sensorial quality. It has lost the references to language in my work after ‘Eros is Eros’. My abstractions are different to Grosse’s. In a quintessential Australian landscape, they are also different to the elders’ Tjukulpa painting, but become representations of me in place, as place presses itself through me.

Figure 29 Wes Head. 2018 Oil and acrylic on canvas 2m x 3m

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Conclusion

While I have always identified myself as a painter, I began this research process with the sense that something was missing from painting. This feeling of being outside, or occluded from, the practice also gave me a position from which to consciously consider how I might position myself. The research question that I began with then became: ‘How do I even paint?’ My practice-based inquiry into this question over the duration of my degree has yielded a number of insights that primarily arose from realising what was missing was ‘the body’. To begin with I had an intuitive sense of what my work was doing (eg: Eros) but I couldn’t have theorised why. In response to my doubts about painting as a form, initially I resisted using the brush and moved on to make installations about blindness and performances about erasure.

My realisation about the body led me to investigate the relationship between bodily sensation and its artistic expression, drawing on the philosophy of phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty’s application of this to painting (which he considered to be a visual exemplar). Early in my research I was primarily focused on the sense of linguistic invisibility as my base metaphor (as evidenced in Blind, the braille curtain I made on my first residency in Spain). Outside of my native language, location and free of the painting studio, I became acutely aware of my sense of being in the world: the weight of my body in a hammock, various pressures and sounds and how I was physically constituted. I also began to write creatively to capture perceptions of my physical reality (A Very Clear Legend): at this point the short answer to my research question was that I wasn’t ready to paint.

It was seeing Christopher Wool’s work in The Tate London that provided an entrée into a possible way of conceptualising my work: as a similar questioning of painting and language. When I arrived back in Sydney I began to paint on canvas again, initially replicating Wool’s marks and methods on top of an underlying palimpsest (to me symbolising something hidden or occluded). After making a number of black and white ‘textual’ paintings, perhaps also referencing the requirement I now had to theorise my work for the degree, I then worked back over them and re-introduced colour. I
started to map colour over the serifs, a little like remapping sensation over the linguistic, and then, in Wittgenstein’s words, ‘kicking out the ladder’.¹⁷

Through the process of producing this body of work and corresponding research into aesthetics I have realised I am a visceral, intuitive painter. The key for me was understanding that we map our subjectivity through bodily sensation, or being in the world, physically as much as psychologically. In my work I want to capture the experience of sensation (or qualia). With my use of colour, I started to consider the correlations between my work and contemporary painters such as Katharina Grosse, and Charlene Von Heyl. Once I’d engaged with my specific bodily experience of the world, and understood how it linked to my work, I stopped erasing. It’s as though I needed to go through a process of wiping away what was written there for me and replace it with something that was felt.

References.


¹⁷Wittgenstein’s ladder is used to describe steps in a process of gaining an understanding, in which the steps themselves are then seen to be nonsense.


South Yarra, Vic.: Queensland Art Gallery; Macmillan, 1998.


