

# **Queer strokes, sexual subjects: gay male artists' representations of male bodies in selected contemporary South African artworks**

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## DECLARATION

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I hereby declare that this dissertation, unless otherwise indicated in the text, is my own original work. This research has also not previously been submitted to any other institution for degree purposes.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke, positioned above a horizontal line.

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# ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores how the male body is utilised and visualised by a selection of gay male artists working within the post-Apartheid South African context. The male body is the means by which they represent these concepts of sexuality and identity. The complexity of contemporary visual arts is, in this dissertation, viewed as a signifier of cultural change. The visibility of gay males in South African society (read as a sign), is also reflected in the foregrounding of male bodies in artworks after 1994. Queer theory and theories of representation are used as a conceptual framework, in which readings are presented of how the male body is interpreted and represented as a site of contestation and convergence of power. The politics of sexuality and identity are represented and discussed in this project through the mediums of painting, photography and installation. These different mediums are linked conceptually, in the same way that sex, gender and sexuality are interlinked; influencing, yet not predetermining each other.

**Keywords:** Visual arts, representation, body, sex, gender, sexuality, painting photography, installation; queer

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# DEDICATION

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I dedicate this dissertation to Margaret Clark (my loving and adorable grandmother) whose perceptions of reality, society and art make me realise how far South Africa has progressed in her lifetime.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Whether personal or political, the male body has been a site of artistic inspiration, investigation and exploitation. This dissertation explores how the male body has been used and visualised by a selection of gay male artists working in the post-Apartheid South African context. South African art (see Williamson and Jamal, 1996; Williamson, 1999), since the late '70s and '80s, has been dominated by images and issues related to the liberation struggle against Apartheid. Given that cultural boycotts and international isolation negatively affected art production until South Africa's reintroduction into the global art community, the internal politics of the country were the overarching themes reflected in South Africa's art. Resistance to oppression, especially in relation to the Apartheid struggle, was vital to the transformation that occurred after 1994. The socio-political climate changed, and the sense of freedom that emerged has since been reflected in the visual arts. The themes that have subsequently emerged focus on identity formation and personal responses to historical inequalities. In particular, the visibility of gay males in South African society is also reflected by the foregrounding of male bodies in artworks after 1994. This date marked a turning point in South African history for homosexuals as the decriminalisation of homosexuality created a political climate that was free from legal discrimination. Although artists in the West have been tackling these issues surrounding identity (for example, see Cooper 1986) since the '60s, these themes – I believe – have only become more prevalent in South African art during the last decade. For example, representations of the male body, in various forms, by gay male artists may signify a wider cultural change in South Africa. By “cultural change”, I am suggesting that the transformation to democracy is to some extent reflected by the greater visibility of representations that focus on issues of non-normative sexualities. (I shall elaborate on this further in *Chapter 2*)

Representation (see Hall, 2000; Hartley, 2002) is a social process that occurs during the interaction that takes place between a viewer and a “text”, thus producing a signifying practice that exposes or reflects underlying ideologies and attitudes. Representations of images depend on cultural understandings of shared signs, and the view that signs are meaningful, and that meaning is itself a subjective process. The latter emphasises the fact that meaning is never fixed, predetermined or pre-given, but rather that it is socially determined and constructed. Viewing meaning in such a way has come to be understood as the *constructionist approach* (see Hall, 1997; Nelmes, 2003), which incorporates the cultural context in which meaning is produced and received. As such, contemporary representations of the male body, by gay male artists, challenge conventional assumptions. This may, in part, be reflected in queer theory's problematisation of normative practices and stable identities.

Using queer theory (clarified in *Chapter 2*) as a conceptual framework and point of departure, readings of how the male body is interpreted and represented are offered. Theoretical debates relating to two-dimensional visual art will be discussed and highlighted, drawing on concepts and issues from disciplines that inform the production and meaning of the male body (these are also explained in *Chapter 1*). First, the dissertation explores how queer theory (since the '90s) creates a vocabulary that challenges existing concepts pertaining to “masculinity” and identity through visual and performative representation by self-identified South African gay male artists. Second, the dissertation applies selected concepts (such as the “performative” and the “body”), as propounded by Butler (1993, 1999), in relation to selected visual texts. Visual art, in this dissertation, is demarcated by the body of texts chosen in the fields of painting, photography and installation.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I shall briefly define the terms “painting”, “photography” and “installation”, as these three conventions of visual art describe



and reflect the work of Verster (painting); Van der Merwe (photography) and Coetzee (installation).

Painting (see Adams, 1999; Berger, 1972; Kissick, 1993) is primarily the practice of applying pigment to a surface with an instrument. Traditionally, oil painting has dominated the realm of “high art”. Photography (see Barthes, 1990; Clarke, 1997; Sontag, 1978) could, first and foremost, be considered “painting” with light. The process of photography records an image of physical reality depending on the quantity of light permitted through the shutter. The camera is the mechanical device that questions our physical reality by presenting us with a representation of reality. Installation art is a relatively new genre in the history of art, and the importance of site-specificity in installation is useful to highlight the spatial boundaries imposed on homosexuals. The space in which the work is shown or installed is directly relational to the location's meaning.

Art, in this dissertation, is also viewed as a cultural product. It can interrogate, explore and critique our society and its views on issues relating to sex, gender and sexuality. Signifying practices, for example – art production – are representations of concepts that, through material practices, produce meaning. These representations are signs that may be read at multiple levels and symbolise the importance of ocular epistemology in our image-saturated society. Art is a “language” of signs. However, it is not a written language with a grammatical structure. We “read” visual art more in terms of statements, rather than actual words (see Evans and Hall, 1999). Kissick (1993), for his part, explores how images have been created by humanity as a means of communicating. In terms of the vocabulary of art, there are certain characteristics that may be singled out and explained, such as: composition (placement of signs in the picture plane); subject matter (themes that the work deals with); style (certain conventions that the artist works with); medium (the material that the artist uses to express his themes through); context (the place or discourse that the artist has produced their work) in this case located in South Africa. Using

these five characteristics, and their respective modes of artistic production, the artist conveys signs for the purposes of social commentary.

It is not my intention to rewrite art histories, but rather to employ concepts and issues relevant to the study of art for the purposes of this study. Reading an artwork as a type of text depends not only on an understanding of the vocabulary, but also the cultural context in which it was produced; the society in which it exists, and the artist's own relationship with society (see Kissick, 1993). Art can, as a result, be considered a matrix of signification, whose normative conventions apply in order to read styles simultaneously. Sex, gender and sexuality are complex modes of communication available to create normative subjects.

I have selected two works each from three artists, and each work will be read as a "text". By "text" I refer to the images that are read as texts precisely because they constitute a matrix of signifying practices as evident in the reading of certain literature (see Barthes, 1990; Clarke, 1997; Hall, 2000 and Kissick, 1993). By applying relevant concepts taken from semiotics (Barthes, 1990 and Hall, 2000) and queer theory to the images, this dissertation will strive to reinforce a critical discussion of issues arising from the artworks.

For the purposes of this enquiry, the artworks will create backdrops to contemporary debates that relate to how representation of the male body never has a unified singular meaning. On the contrary, the male body is a complex and often contradictory site of multiple positions informed by cultural, historical and aesthetic perspectives. The use of the term "backdrop" implies a sense of theatricality. The idea of setting a stage with actors, props and backdrops connotes the scripted performances that are played out in society, highlighting Butler's formulation of performativity. Performativity (see Butler, 1997) is a complex and politicised idea that involves questions of identity and subjectivity (explained in *Chapter 2*). Understanding gender in such a way should include the

notion of performativity because it refers to how behaviours and – indeed – identities are not merely products of socialisation, but rather the effects of performance. Gender can be seen as the cultural interpretation of our biological sex, yet, our sexuality is not a simple expression of either biological sex or gender. How individuals dress or perform their gender in public is not indicative of their sexual behaviour, or of their desire between the sheets (Halperin, 2000).

The modes of representations used by gay male artists become a “queer” endeavour, the gender instability of which questions other normative ideas such sex and sexuality. The complexity of identity is reflected in the use of certain terms that denote same-sex relations, specifically between men. I choose to identify the artworks as “queer” precisely because they highlight and politicise identity in a public arena, and challenge ideas about heteronormativity. The terms “homosexual”, “gay” and “queer” are linguistic signs that signify the underlying historical and culturally specific connotations in our language. The most contested term “homosexual” (see Halperin, 2000; Fone, 2000; Foucault 1990) is understood in relation to the historical baggage of the bio-medical discourse of the nineteenth century, in which the emergence of the homosexual as a subject of scientific discourses was established. The term “gay” (see Fone, 2000; Jagose, 1996) is aligned with the political implications of the ‘60s liberation movement in the United States, with particular reference to the storming of the Stonewall Inn in New York in June 1969, which signalled the beginning of the modern gay movement. Gay implies a social identity rather than a biological one. The reappropriation of “queer” (with its original pejorative meaning) signifies a more contemporary understanding, which is influenced by the recent academic debates relating to how sexuality – as a subversive identity – is highly politicised.

Although all three terms are used interchangeably throughout this study, the unique specifications of each are explained in relation to the artists’ conception of non-normative sexualities and will be used in respective chapters. Queer theory takes an anti-assimilationist position. It emphasises difference by claiming that

people, as individuals, are different from one another and that diversity must be celebrated (see Butler, 1993, 1990; Jagose, 1996; Sedgwick, 1994). These critics view heterosexuality as an institution that is constructed and upheld through matrices of signification. Furthermore, incorporating semiotic theory becomes instrumental in understanding how the taken-for-granted normative status of sex, gender and sexuality are codes and conventions imposed on a physical body. The body, as it were, becomes a text that can be read in terms of signs that indicate a deeper level of signifying practices.

The argument in this study, as indicated earlier, focuses on the work of white, gay male artists and the representation of male bodies in their artworks. The white homosexual, like most homosexuals in the Apartheid state, were seen as subversive and a threat to national security (see Elder, 1995). This dissertation is structured around five chapters, and – while this is far from being a strictly chronological account of contemporary South African art – there is a development implied in its arrangement, which demonstrates a diachronic focus in terms of the chronological order of the artists' work.

*Chapter 2* defines and develops a few of the theoretical and conceptual arguments employed in this study. These include: theories of representation, in particular, how meaning is produced through language; definitions of terms such as “queer” and “performativity”, which will be explained in view of key debates related to the development of South African post-Apartheid art; semiotic theory; queer theory and its broad relation to gender and sexuality. This chapter also teases out vocabulary that will be central to the subsequent analyses. Furthermore, I elaborate on the importance of the traditional notion of the subject as an individual endowed with consciousness, autonomy and freedom.

*Chapter 3* focuses on Andrew Verster's *Erotic Interiors* (1996). This chapter analyses how Verster's paintings challenge certain conventions in the field of art, such as the subject positioning on the canvas. By placing the male bodies in a

position traditionally used for depicting women, Verster subverts the heterosexual male gaze. Specific paintings can, in the above sense, be viewed as some of the first works that publicly feature two male bodies engaged in same-sex erotic depictions. The paintings unequivocally celebrate same-sex desire within a new political context. Verster's work can be viewed as a response to the political freedom that is expressed through his treatment of the canvases. This chapter focuses on a selection of two paintings from his collection, which mark a transition into a new phase of his extensive *oeuvre*.

*Chapter 4* considers Hentie van der Merwe's impression of masculinity through photographic images. Van der Merwe is fascinated with how we record and negotiate the world through the eye of the camera. His exhibition of large photographs of military uniforms, shot at the Museum of Military History in Johannesburg, interrogate notions of violence, identity and geographies of experience (see Smith, 2000). Through his exploration of masculinity in a historical context, the absence of the physical male body is replaced by uniforms, which signify the body. His photographic works highlight the military institution as a site of hegemonic control and construction, which embraces standard notions of masculinity. An important facet of his work is the manner in which the photographs subvert "compulsory heterosexuality" within the context of the military. The works reveal the constructedness of concepts such as masculinity and highlight how clothes become signs that represent certain types of bodies. This chapter foregrounds two photos from his *Trappings* (2000) exhibition.

*Chapter 5* examines the way in which Mark Coetzee's work explores the language used to describe the male body. The main focus of this chapter is Coetzee's *Moffie* (2000), which makes particular reference to the gay male body and issues addressing the representation of such bodies within the context of global culture. By tracing the etymology of certain words such as *moffie*, gay and homosexual, as well as the connotations implied by their linguistic meanings, this chapter highlights the physical impact language has on bodies. This chapter, in

view of queer theory and – more specifically – Butler's idea of performativity, discusses, in part, the ramifications of homophobic speech in society.

In the concluding chapter I will provide a summation and evaluation of some of the main concerns of the dissertation that highlight how the male body has been represented. The use of the male body, expressed through various artistic mediums, reflects the codes and conventions that are explored and challenged by queer theory. I now turn to an explanation of the theoretical grounding of this study.



## CHAPTER 2

### **Queer strokes, sexual subjects: a reading map**

The following chapter unpacks concepts pertinent to the analysis of the respective artists in the study. An important facet of my argument is encapsulated by the title of this dissertation, *Queer strokes, sexual subjects*. The title may suggest that the strokes of a paint brush could be queer (in this case meaning “strange” or “against the grain”) and that the subject of a painting is of a sexual theme. The title may also imply that the “stroke”, in a sexual sense, is queer (used in a connotative sense relating to gay males in this study), and that the subjects (as individuals) are sexualised and eroticised. This title is intentionally ambiguous and underscores the post-structural reading of the artworks. This chapter outlines some concepts and debates related to representation, the male body and identity politics in relation to queer theory within the context of art in South Africa.

### **Art production in South Africa post-1994**

In order to understand art production in South Africa, a brief contextualisation of some political conditions that preceded the emergence of these artworks is outlined below. According to Perryer (2004), artists in the past decade or so have been freed from the socio-political conditions of apartheid, thereby allowing for new issues to be addressed, specifically issues focussing on individual identity. Apartheid, South Africa’s oppressive system of hegemonic control, criminalised and demonised homosexuality, and this is clearly reflected in the art that was produced, as well as absent, in South Africa during this period (Williamson, 1996). In America, the gay liberation movement occurred during the late ‘60s, and the art produced subsequently tackled the issues of identities in relation to sexuality (Cooper, 1986). My use of America as an example serves to strengthen the correlation between radical social change and art production.

According to Reddy (2002; 2005), the culture and history of homosexuality in South Africa has only recently been explored and documented from a variety of perspectives. These studies include Gevisser and Cameron's *Defiant Desire: A history of gay and lesbian lives in South Africa* (1992) and Bart Luirinck's *Moffies: Gay Life in South Africa* (2000).

The defining moment for gay liberation in South Africa came in 1994 when the first democratic elections took place. Soon after this, the new Constitution<sup>1</sup>, which was established in 1996, and the introduction of the Bill of Rights in 1998, further facilitated the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and created a political climate that promoted the visibility of gays, lesbians and transgender people. The art that has been produced since the end of Apartheid has tackled a multiplicity of positions previously overshadowed by the label of resistance art. MacKenny (2001: 1) states:

The first democratic elections in South Africa heralded a new constitution which legalised many people's existence. The institutionalised hierarchy between races fell away, homosexuality was no longer deemed illegal and the equality clause in the constitution (Section 9 Act 108 of 1995) gave freedom to many groups previously constrained.

Artists that were previously barred from exhibiting now had the opportunity to explore and express their personal responses freely in a public arena.

Art (in any medium) is created by artists who are informed by the society in which they live, and their artworks are cultural products. Art is the action of theory and experience combined. Seeing artworks as cultural products highlights the intertextuality between art, society and subjects (as individuals). This constructionist perspective relates to contemporary theories on sexuality and identity. Art history and criticism has predominantly viewed artworks in an essentialist light, thus assuming and ascribing a fixed meaning to the artwork,

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<sup>1</sup>Section 9, Act 108 of 1995 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa holds the Equality Clause which States that no one may: unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.



and viewing this art as “somehow above historical and perspectival determinants” (Wolff, 1993: 49). Wolff (1993: 49) argues that:

works of art, on the contrary, are not closed, self-contained and transcendent entities, but are the product of specific historical practices on the part of identifiable social groups in given conditions, and therefore bear the imprint of the ideas, values and conditions of existence of those groups, and their representatives in particular artists.

This approach to understanding art, which includes and acknowledges historical and social factors, is reflected in Foucault’s (1990) and Butler’s (1993, 1990) views with regard to how the subject’s identity is socially constructed. I would argue that art production is closely linked to these variables of history, identity, race and class – all of which are shaped and configured by power.

The history of art production has been directly affected by the cultural isolation engendered by Apartheid in South Africa, which denied artists the chance to develop to their full potential (Cook, 1997). Despite this cultural isolation, art was produced, while “resistance” or “protest” art became a way of actively challenging the status quo.

Exhibitions serve the purpose of documenting art production, and the work that is displayed reflects – to some extent – conscious decisions on behalf of the artists and curators to showcase a more inclusive selection of the diversity of South African identities. Art, in South Africa, is a hybrid of global and local issues confronting artists today. Most notably, since the first democratic elections, predominant themes have been issues of identity: identities along multiple axes including race, culture, sexuality and gender. One such exhibition entitled *A Decade of Democracy South African Art: 1994-2004*, (held at the South African National Gallery [SANG] in Cape Town (2004) showcased a myriad of diverse trends and issues relevant to the last decade of South African history. This collection is seen as authoritative in terms of South African art, and could be viewed as not only compelling and integrated into global discourses, but more importantly “evocative of both the issues that have dominated cultural discourse

in this country, and those that have shaped our developing national psyche” (Powell, 2004: 62). Exhibitions such as these document the change in the visual arts, and reflect the freedom of expression now available to previously marginalised groups in a public arena where participation is allowed.

Publications that document the change in South African visual arts explore and highlight the multiple ways in which South African artists question and challenge the fledgling democracy. For example, *10 Years 100 Artists* (2004) is a book that represents the diversity and change that has occurred over roughly the last decade in the visual arts, and documents the abundance of creativity that has revolutionised the artistic landscape. The artworks in this study represent some of the changes to that landscape. Over this last decade, artists have responded to the socio-political climate from multiple positions. This pluralism is reflected in the post-structural understanding of identities.

### **Approaches to reading and representation**

A post-structuralist position implies the polysemic (the sign's ability to have multiple meanings) nature of visual imagery, which consequently allows for the constant shifting and multiple possibilities of meaning (Nelmes, 2003). To understand how meaning is derived from any text, whether the text is literary or visual (as in the case of this study) one must understand how a text is read. The act of reading always denotes a relationship between an author, text and reader. According to Hall (2000), all images are both encoded and decoded. They are encoded in the production process and by their placement within a certain cultural setting. They are then decoded by the viewers/readers. This semiotic approach to reading visual texts places emphasis on the importance of the viewer in the production of meaning. Hall identifies three positions adopted by viewers/readers in meaning making. First, there is the *dominant-hegemonic reading*, whereby the reader can identify with the hegemonic position. In this way they receive the dominant message of an image or text in an unquestioning

manner and accept it passively. Second, a *negotiated reading* allows the reader to negotiate an interpretation from the image and its dominant meanings. Third, an *oppositional reading* focuses on the reader taking an oppositional position, either by completely disagreeing with the ideological position embodied in an image, or by rejecting it completely (by ignoring it, for example).

Hall (2000) defines how meaning is produced in representation using the following three approaches: the *reflective*, the *intentional* and the *constructionist* approaches. The reflective approach is understood as the mirror reflection of reality. The meaning is thought to reside within the person or object being represented; the notion of mimesis is used to explain how language or painting can mirror physical reality. In terms of art, this approach becomes problematic as the meaning is apparently fixed by the mere detonative rendering of a three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional surface. In the intentional approach, the author is the maker of meaning. This is also problematic as language is based on social systems relying on shared linguistic conventions and codes. A text (in this case, the art product), no matter what it means personally to the author (or artist), enters the public arena (such as an art gallery), and here engages with spectators and readers, becoming open to other subjective interpretations. The constructionist approach acknowledges the social character of language. "Things don't mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems- concepts and signs" (Hall, 2000:25). The meaning of a painting that uses a visual language is not fixed by the object being represented or the author who composes the signs. Rather, the meaning is constantly constructed by the social actors involved in reading/decoding the language/image. The meaning relies on the sign's symbolic function, not in the object being reflected or intended by an author. The manner in which the artists in question visually represent these concepts becomes a signifying practice open to interpretation by my role as reader of the image.

The title of this dissertation, *Queer strokes, sexual subjects*, also motivates a semiotic understanding of the process of signification by which we as individuals, who are part of a society and moulded by culture, communicate abstract concepts through language, images or text. In instances where language and text are more dependent on a common culture or intersubjectivity between individuals, images can reach a far more extensive audience. The use of certain conventions (such as oil painting) originates from a common source i.e. Western art traditions. Through these cultural codes we the audience/viewer decipher or negate a reading of signs. The audience, therefore, requires a degree of cultural relativism in order to contextualise the artworks. Reading the title of this dissertation conjures – in my mind – images of art, queer theory, sexuality and subjectivity. The intended meanings implied by the title of this study may be unpacked by isolating the words individually, as well as their connotations, which are derived from their juxtaposition with each other. These conceptual components (queer theory, semiotics) reflect the multiplicity of meanings that are derived and ascribed to Hall's negotiated reading of the artworks. The negotiated readings take a constructionist approach to representation. Representation (see Hall, 2000; Hartley, 2002) is the way in which meaning is produced through language, in this case *visual* language. By examining the words used in the title, the understanding of the theoretical and conceptual aspects of this study are foregrounded. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of "queer", "stroke", "sexual" and "subject" become points of departure and highlight the polysemic nature of language. By briefly defining some of the denotative meanings one becomes aware of how meaning becomes contextualised.

## **Queer theory**

The term "queer" defies any set definition. The reappropriation of queer from its traditional usage resists any normative determination and actively destabilises any fixed notions of identity. The dictionary lists, among others, the following

possible definitions of queer: strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, questionable character, suspicious, dubious, a male homosexual.

The word queer has been and continues to be used as a word that denigrates homosexual men. In the early '90s an emerging academic discourse reappropriated the term from its derogatory connotations. Although the word has not lost its pejorative meaning, it has instead become a signifier of the affirmation of the complexities of identities; a way to encapsulate all. Queer has also been used as a loose label for a body of work tracing the narrative of the progression of gays and lesbians. Nevertheless, the definition is not just another word for same-sex desire. Queer is, rather, an example of the polymorphous and unstable characteristics of sexual identity. According to Jagose (1996), queer theory reworks the post-structuralist understanding of identities as being unstable and occupying multiple positions within a specifically gay and lesbian context. Within the body of theories examining the nature of homosexuality there are two prominent schools of thought: *essentialist* and *constructionist*. Essentialists believe that an individual's identity is innate, natural and fixed. The essence of the person is independent of culture and is not constructed by society (this view reflects the traditional view of the subject which will be explained later in this chapter). Jagose (1996:9) motivates this cogently:

The essentialist claim that some people are born homosexual has been used in anti-homophobic attempts to secure civil rights based recognition for homosexuals; on the other hand, the constructionist view that homosexuality is somehow or other acquired has been aligned with homophobic attempts to suggest that homosexual orientations can and should be corrected.

Some gays and lesbians who lobby for civil rights for homosexuals have utilised the essentialist belief that some people are born gay (i.e. that it is inherent and that nothing can change this behaviour). Constructionists, on the other hand, assume that identity is not natural and that it is constructed by society through various means of conditioning.



A semiotic approach to queer from a constructionist perspective assigns value to the fluidity of meaning, as the word in self-reflexive usage resists any fixed definition. The political efficacy of the word is also undeniable as the word “queer”, according to Luckhurst (1995), is also a performative signifier that through its enunciation articulates and enacts the sodality of groups which, prior to its utterance, it did not represent. As a result, “queer” is open to re-construction and non-fixity, which allows the polysemic nature of identities to correlate with the understanding of the artworks in this study. The artworks, for their part, express the fluidity of identities, and by positioning the male body as the subject of the work, artists problematise and question the stability of identity. Subsequently, the artworks highlight the multiplicity of positions taken in order to visualise the construction of a “queer” identity. In my view, the artworks signify “queer”, and challenge the heteronormative assumption of conventional understandings of the stability of sex, gender and sexuality, in so doing exposing and displacing some of the myths that are propagated.

Queer theory debunks fixed and stable categories of sex, gender and sexuality, allowing for the inclusion of the possibility of multi-faceted and dynamic identities. The three terms in question are, in my view, fluid and unstable. “Sex” refers to the biological sex of an individual. “Gender” refers to the performative role one plays in society, as influenced by culture, whether it be masculine or feminine in nature. “Sexuality”, in turn, refers to the sexual orientation of the individual. These categories will be explained in further detail to show how each displays specific characteristics that influence one another.

“Sex” refers to the anatomical characteristics of an individual. In particular, “sex”, is defined in relation to the genitalia (i.e. the penis and the vagina), which distinguish between male and female anatomy. “Sex”, as a category, functions as a norm, thereby constructing an ideal, which is “forcibly materialised through time”. This notion problematises the nature of how the physical body is contoured, moulded and named. Basically, through the exclusion of what the

genitalia is not, the child is assigned a sex. Butler (1993) interrogates the practice of labelling an infant as either sex in her book *The Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), which questions the regulatory ideals and power interests of the hegemony in the seemingly innocent act of labelling “boy” and “girl”. Butler (1993:1) succinctly demonstrates this concept:

In other words, ‘sex’ is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialise ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms.

The limitations and discursive practices that uphold control over existence are problematised by the reality of intersexed infants who defy categorisation and are unjustly assigned a gender. This highlights the performativity of the act of naming, and strengthens the interconnectedness of language and power (see *Chapter 5*).

Gender ( for example, Butler, 1990; De Lauretis, 1987), is the culturally constructed expression of the sexed (sexualised) body; the socially produced and enforced ways of behaviour that are in accordance with the dominant ideologies’ canons of “masculine” and “feminine”. Gender can be viewed as performance, stylisation and repetition of socially constructed gestures. Gender is not a predestined or innate expression of one’s biological sex, but rather an external expression of society’s ideals for that sex. This makes it possible to read gender in other ways. As De Lauretis (1987) maintains, gender is better understood as a system of meanings that, according to the cultural contents of social hierarchies, correlates to sex.

Discussions about dressing in ‘drag’ (the utilisation of cross-dressing exemplifies the visual and gestural qualities socially ascribed to gender) were initially used as an example of how gender does not empirically follow biological sex, although in Butler’s preface of *Gender Trouble* (1999) she acknowledges and rearticulates this notion as appearing too autonomous (an action) to describe the complexity

of gender. Butler (1999:140) conceives of gender as unstable by saying:

Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.

Performativity is highlighted by the gender parody of drag. Drag creates the illusion of an authentic biological female by imitating the gestures and adornments (i.e. the signs) of femininity which are socially constructed.

Performativity (Butler, 1997; Wolfreys, 2004) is a ritualised, ongoing process that constitutes an individual's identity. The idea of performativity is different from the physical act of a performance, in that it is not a singular exhibition involving actors on a stage for a limited amount of time, but rather a continuous social process. The act of naming is another dimension of performativity. Butler (1997) reveals that a word not only names something, but also that something (an agent) has to perform that name. Performativity is crucial to understanding how subjects perform their identities, and it bears a striking resemblance to Barthes' concept of the "myth". Both formulations involve ideology and the manner in which ideology is masked by ritualised performances that conceal the underlying structures of ideological interpellation. Performativity dualistically (as does "myth") exposes the illusion of the naturalness of gender, or of a sexualised body as a construction or regulatory fiction. Butler demonstrates that performativity is involved in shaping our identities and subjectivity. The understanding that performativity is a "renewable action" that lacks a clear origin, or a definite end, further suggests the "mythological" status of language (speech acts) and (biological) sex, gender and sexuality, which all appear to be constituted by historical specificity and cultural imperatives.

More recently, Butler (interviewed in Reddy, 2004: 116) reasserts what 'performativity' is not:

The first point to understand about performativity is what it is not: identities are



*not* made in a single moment in time. They are made again and again. This does not mean identities are made radically new every time they are made, but only that it takes some time for identities to be brought out; they are dynamic and historical [...] This is not just a question of a private struggle with the self, but of the social terms by which identities are supported and articulated. In this sense, it is always in the context of a certain constellation of social power that I am able to pose the question of my own becoming differently. Through what constellations of social discourse and power was I brought into the world? [...] My view is that there are norms into which we are born – gendered, racial, national – that decide what kind of subject we can be, but in being those subjects, in occupying and inhabiting those deciding norms, in incorporating and performing them, we make use of local options to rearticulate them in order to revise their power. Norms cannot be embodied without an action of a specific kind.

This passage represents some of the important parameters of Butler's thinking, which inform the theoretical basis of my study. Among the parameters are the interrogation of the ontology of language and discourse; the relationship between politics and language and the critique of identity; and the subversive nature of identities as configured within (and by) the heterosexual matrix.

Sexuality (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1990; Wolfreys, 2004) refers to a human quality inherent in the constitution of identity; it encompasses the social constructions of our desire, and touches on a range of aspects in human life from reproduction to disease. Our understanding of sexuality is limited and continuously debated. According to Reddy (1999) sexuality designates desire and embraces ideas about pleasure, physiology, fantasy and anatomy. Sexuality has become a continuously debated topic and less of a moral given. Sexuality has been seen, in recent times, as a site of oppression as it has been used to control people in heteropatriarchal contexts, by defining "normal" sexualities and marginalising anti-normative ones. The component of the term "sexual" in the title is related to this understanding of sexuality. The *OED* defines "sexual" as pertaining to sex or the attribute of being male or female; existing or predicated with regard to sex; or, in a political light as in sexual politics, which are the principles determining the relationship of (between) the sexes. Foucault's (1994:70) understanding of sexuality in linguistic terms resonates through the artworks, for it is within the 'silence' where the truth of existence lies:

We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have, to be exact, taken it to its limits: the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos; the limit of language, since it traces that line of foam showing just how far speech may advance upon the sands of silence.

We will never be able to articulate this silence through the use of language, nevertheless, we gain a better understanding of it through art and sexuality. Sexuality, in the queerest sense, challenges the normative function of sex and the subject. The relationship between queer theory and Foucault is fully explored by Spargo (1999).

In view of this, identities are always under construction and subjectivity is problematised. The artists who have produced these works are gay men and their subject matter makes reference to the male body. Queer theory's politicisation of sexuality and the challenge to prevailing heteronormative assumptions becomes crucial in understanding how these works are queer. The artists work with male bodies as subjects, and by representing subjects as subject matter, queer also becomes an act of reading.

Queer theory takes an anti-assimilationist approach by claiming that people, as individuals, are different from one another and that this diversity must be celebrated. This freedom of expression and existence is protected by our constitution, and allows individuals to live without fear of legal discrimination. However, although the revolutionary laws reversed the past vilification of gay and lesbian identities, society still has to raise the level of acceptance and tolerance of homosexuals. Individuals do not live in a parliament building: they exist and live in homes and interact with social prejudices on a daily basis. Homophobic attitudes continue to corrode the fabric of society and fuel more fear and hate. The murder of Matthew Shepard in 1999, a gay twenty-one year old American student, by two 'self-proclaimed homophobes' (Fone 2000: 13) is just one horrific example of the fact that homophobia, expressed through gender violence, is still prevalent (see Fone, 2000).

The term “homophobia” is a fairly recent addition to the English language. It was coined in 1972 by George Weinberg in his book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*. Originally, the term referred to “the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals”. Our contemporary use of the word describes a fear of and hostility towards homosexuals, and also refers to the violent acts that homosexuals often fall victim to. According to Fone (2000), a motivation for excusing and justifying homophobia could reside in the perception “that homosexuality and homosexuals disrupt the sexual and gender order supposedly established by what is often called law” (Fone, 2000: 5). Homophobia is concisely described by Bristow (1996:247) as follows:

Pathological hatred of lesbians and gay men. Gay politics has taken homophobia as one of its main targets. The roots of this phobia probably lie in dominant cultural understandings of gender, particularly masculinity. Same-sex desire can be threatening to those institutions of power, such as the family and state, that assume that heterosexuality is a natural as opposed to a cultural phenomenon.

One of the most profound movements that contributed to the development of queer theory is undeniably feminism, with its efforts to politicise and re-conceptualise the role that women were assigned by patriarchal authority. Butler (1990) argues that feminist theory assumed that there was an existing collective identity that could be identified as “women”. This category constituted the subject for political representation. Nevertheless, the complexities of identity were overlooked in order to initiate feminist interests within discourse. Butler’s critique of this was that if women were considered part of a stable category, they could then be politically represented, however this strategy only homogenised women in order to protect them against the monolithic group ‘men’. Feminism (Macey, 2000 and Reddy, 2004) is neither unified nor homogenous as there are many strands of feminism that incorporate a multiplicity of positions. I utilise the Anglo-American canon of feminist discourses to reinforce my argument with reference to the inadequate understandings of anti-normative sexualities.

Within the traditional Anglo-American feminist understanding of gender assuming

that gender characteristics of masculine and feminine would be built upon male and female bodies. Although feminism has interrogated and critiqued patriarchal power and its structuring of society, as well as denying that biology is predetermined, by stating that women are constructed by society to become women, it has inadvertently complied with compulsory heterosexuality as coined by Rich (1980). Butler develops this theory by creating the concept of the “heterosexual matrix”. This matrix predetermines the identity/behaviour of individuals through social construction. For this reason the linguistic function of “sex” is seen as a constructed category that perpetuates the system in an effort to construct identities, solely in accordance with heterosexual desire (Butler, 1990). But, this leaves no room for difference within the construction of identity, thus restricting women to be constructed as “feminine” and men to be “masculine”. These designations reinforce the binary opposition of men and women and result in compulsory heterosexuality. This view leads to the exclusion of gay and lesbian identities as a possibility. Conversely, when faced with the reality of same-sex desire, the predetermination of sexuality as only being heterosexual is problematised.

Butler (1990) views the stability of sex and gender as regulatory fictions set within the binary framework. These regulatory fictions naturalise and consolidate the masculine heteronormative power regimes through which intelligible genders can be read. Cultures construct male and female bodies through institutions of power such as the family, schools and state. Children identities are constructed through institutions that teach them how to think and act, and these behaviours are reinforced by social institutions that support the dominant phallogentric ideologies. According to Butler (1990), our desire is heterosexualised by the discrete binary oppositions between masculine and feminine that are understood as extensions of the categories of male and female respectively. The reality of intersexuality problematises this polemic and illuminates the collapse between binary structures. The importance of this, according to Holmes (2002:175), is that:

Intersexuality is a historical and a cultural construction rather than a simple biological phenomenon. The categorization of intersex is related to the ideological commitments to a presumed binary 'nature' of male and female, coupled with a paradoxical assumption that gender is so fluid that we are entitled to make of infants and children what we will.

Foucault's (1990) historical analysis of how sexuality has been controlled and shaped by power structures creates an understanding of how normalisation and socialisation has greatly impacted on our contemporary notions and ideas on sex, gender and sexuality. Foucault has been instrumental in critiquing institutions of power that maintain heteronormative society's "regulatory ideals". The propagation of their naturalness signifies the underlying, insidious quality of their construction. The regulation of society is visually documented in the case of photography and how "social types" were photographed and constructed (see *Chapter 4*).

Butler's texts also address many similar issues, which could represent the fundamental rethinking necessary for the progression of sexual politics towards a more expansive and inclusive understanding of sex and sexuality. These developments in fact mark the beginnings of queer theory.

## **Semiotics**

The term "stroke" has a multitude of meanings. Among the possible meanings that could be ascribed to this are a stroking movement of the hand, especially for the purposes of healing, or an act of stroking (by way of intimate caress). Stroke is also a slang term for an act of copulation, or the act of hitting someone. All these connotations involve a subject; a body doing or being done to. The painter creates with a stroke of his brush; a lover caresses a body, or a teacher administers a stroke with a cane (corporal punishment). The stroke even becomes visible as the mark left behind on the body, and this may be read as a sign that an action has taken place; in other words a stroke is an action that may leave a trace.



Semiotics (see Hartley, 2002; Evans and Hall, 1999) deals with the theory of signs and their usage, including the way in which signs are read. According to Hartley (2002), semiotics seeks to comprehend how language (signs) is made meaningful and how this meaning is communicated in society. By focusing on the construction and representation of combined signs in relation to texts, semiotics becomes a useful conceptual tool to help us understand how meaning is produced through cultural lenses. As a methodology, semiotics becomes useful in decoding some of the signs employed by visual artists. A sign is anything that stands for something else in the production of meaning. Signs include words (text), photos (images) or gestures. Signs are the perceived and perceivable aspect of communication. They can be seen, heard and touched. Reading and interpreting signs is a fundamental cultural activity, and this indicates that they must be communicated by a system or code that is shared. Saussure describes the sign as consisting of two components: namely, the *signifier* and *signified*, which are specific to linguistics. This dichotomistic theory of the sign is incompatible when applied to the visual arts because images, irrespective of the medium, do not have an underlying grammatical formulation.

In the viewer's mind, the sign stimulates another kind of "mental" sign, which is referred to as the *interpretant*. The sign also stands for a concrete object in the real world, which we call the *referent*. The sign also represents the referent to some degree, which is called *ground* (this corresponds with *code*). Pierce says that the interpretant can become a sign, which in turn produces a new interpretant, and so on *ad infinitum*. Thus, a complex matrix of signification comes into play when reading paintings, photographs and installations.

In order to understand how a semiotic approach is beneficial when analysing art, I will outline a few of the main concerns that are relevant to my study. The idea of the code and message is important as we constantly send messages that consist of different signs. These messages (basically anything from making a phone call, waving our hand, or even the clothes we choose to wear) are based on codes; in

other words, culturally defined systems of relationships. While living in a certain environment, we internalise sets of codes that affect our semiotic behaviour, whether we are aware of it or not. Codes and conventions become the means of expressing messages, which are then the reflection of a wider, underlying process of signification. This idea can be applied to how we read gender signs and even sexuality. The latter idea may be extended into the visual arts.

When reading codes and messages in the visual arts the way of reading becomes apparent, denotative and connotative. The distinction between denotation and connotation is the guiding idea of Barthes' semiotic theory. Barthes (1978) claims that when we read signs and sign complexes we can distinguish between different kinds of messages. Denotation is the "literal or obvious meaning" or the "first-order signifying system". For example, the denotative meaning of an image refers to its literal, descriptive meaning. A painting or photograph of a rose is at a denotative level a rose. Connotation refers to "second-order signifying systems", which refer to the additional cultural meanings we can also derive from the image or text. This implies that the painting or photograph of the rose is symbolic of something else, such as love, for example. This second level of meaning informs the viewer of a wider level, in terms of how we classify a photograph by relating it to our understanding of other signifying practices and assumptions (Clarke, 1997: 31).

Barthes (1978) links connotation with the operation of ideology (which he also calls "myth"). According to Barthes, ideology or myth consists of the deployment of signifiers for the purpose of expressing and justifying the dominant values of a given society, class or historical period (the signs express not just themselves, but also all types of value systems that surround them). As myths, signs tend to appear natural and self-evident (although they are basically always artificial and coded), and hide the operations of ideology. Myths disguise ideology and ideology exposes myths. Althusser's understanding of ideology as a representation of the imaginary relationship between individuals and their real

existence in fact shows that art is a means of representing reality ideologically. Ideology (myths) interpellates subjects through an apparatus. This idea corresponds to the matrix of signification that limits the subject to restricted possibilities of identity. The notions of masculinity and femininity are ideological constructs that interpellate bodies through signification matrices. When the study of semiotics is applied to the signs of masculinity and femininity it exposes the myths that govern the system of binary opposites.

According to Barthes (1978), there are two kinds of relationships between text and image: anchorage and relay. All images are polysemic: they are open to endless readings, thereby implying an uncertainty and lack of contained meaning. For this reason, a linguistic message is usually linked to an image to guide interpretation. Examples of this are the titles of exhibitions and the titles given to individual artworks. This notion of anchorage, in other words, the linguistic message such as a caption in an advertisement or the title of an artwork, guides interpretation of the "text", subsequently locating the meaning of the image by naming the intended denoted meanings (which helps identification). At the level of connotation the principal function of anchorage is ideological. The text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image towards a meaning that has been intended. The notion of relay emphasises that the text and the image are in a complementary relationship. Both the words and images are fragments of a more general syntagm, and the unity of the message is realised on a higher level. Relay can often be found in comic strips and films. Anchorage and relay concepts are useful semiotic tools that help the audience understand the artist's intentions for a particular work.

Intertextuality (see Macey, 2000, Nelmes, 2003 and Wolfreys, 2004) refers to how signs, whether spoken or written, refer to other preceding signs. The pre-established quality and structure of signs already exists. The producer of images, here the visual artist, can utilise their forms from previous texts and images that a culture has produced in a different form. Previous forms of analysis, such as



iconography inherited from the modernist era, take the historical precedent as the source, and in so doing the late artist is virtually dictated to by an essentialist dogma. The term is strongly linked to post-modernism as it refers to, either implicitly or explicitly, other “texts” through allusion, pastiche or parody. (Nelmes 2003: 459).

In artistic terms, intertextuality is reflected through certain styles such as “camp”, for example. The notion of “camp” (see Bergman, 1993; Meyer, 1994 and Sontag, 1983) is reclaimed by queer theory as a political tool to critique the heteronormative standards of identity. Dyer (1992: 135) views “camp” as a distinct marker of a queer identity:

Its is just about the only style, language and culture that is distinctively and unambiguously gay male. One of our greatest problems I think is that in a world drenched in straightness. All the images and words of the society express and confirm the rightness of heterosexuality.

Camp (explored further in *Chapter 5*) could be described as a style or a sensibility. The actual definition of camp has been widely contested, yet there are qualities of camp that are recognisable and distinctive. The meaning of camp continues to change over time. As an adjective it describes a propensity for exaggerated gestures. It is a term used widely in theatre to describe someone who is flamboyant, and is usually used in the stereotypical depiction of gay male behaviour.

Other qualities that identify elements of camp include that it is a style that favours artifice, and exists in tension with popular mainstream culture. It also subscribes to notions such as nostalgia, irony, humour and theatricality. The theatricality of camp implies a performative quality that highlights Butler’s use of “drag” as an example of the myth of gender being a natural predetermination of biological sex. Camp also refers to a refinement of an upper class English society, whereby stereotypes of effeminate masculinities were perceived to be cultivated. Camp is also a political strategy and critique of mainstream culture, which allows for the

visibility of homosexual elements within the arena of heteronormative society. Sontag (1983) criticised the use of camp for its lack of politics, claiming that it underplayed the subversive nature of camp as a gay subculture's tool to challenge the hegemony of heterosexuality. As Meyer (1994: 7) points out:

With its homosexual connotations downplayed, sanitised, and made safe for public consumption, Sontag's version of camp was extolled, emulated and elaborated upon in a flurry of writing on the subject that lasted until the end of the decade.

The elements of camp in the artworks in this dissertation signify the presence of the queer subject. The understanding of the subject in this study is explained below.

### **The subject**

The understanding of the subject has radically shifted since the emergence of queer theory. The *OED* offers many definitions for the word "subject" including: that which is under the domain or rule of a sovereign, or a conquering or ruling power; owing allegiance or obedience to a sovereign ruler or state, a temporal or spiritual lord, or other superior.

The "subject" (Butler, 1992; Foucault, 1999; Gagnier, 1991) is a ubiquitous term that has multiple meanings, and is still in many senses a contestable concept. In order to understand the function of the subject there is a need to highlight some of the many definitions and theories informing the subject. The concept of the subject never has a singular meaning. There is always more than one subject that can be identified; the acknowledgement of the word indicates both oneself and another. The subject of a book, an artwork or movie relates to the topic of the study. Queer theory foregrounds identity formation of the subject as an unstable notion that is always under construction and reconstruction. The subject is open to an ever evolving process; therefore conceptualising of subject can never be fixed. According to Hall (1994), there have been five decentring shifts

in the traditional conception of the subject namely Marxism, Freud, Saussurian, Foucault and feminism. A brief outline of how these shifts have contributed to a queer theory understanding of the subject is given below.

Marxist theory refuses the notion of an essential human nature by showing that individuals are subjected to certain conditions that are produced by an individual's position in society. Subjectivity is not a universal given, but rather an ideological restriction placed on individuals in order to accommodate capitalism. Louis Althusser argued that we are interpellated as subjects by ideology.

Freud's psychoanalysis and understanding of the unconscious suggested that the subject is in constant negation. The subject is formed in relation to others, and identity is learned – it is not a given. French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan is seen as enormously influential within semiotic theory. Lacan extended a re-reading of the Freudian model of the subject in relation to Saussure and Levis-Strauss, thereby consolidating the interrelationship between subject, signifier and cultural order (Silverman, 1999). Lacan's theory of subject formation has a narrative structure starting from birth and describing how the infant goes through stages of identification, pleasure and the acquisition of language. Although Lacan has been critiqued, his views on the subject have still been appropriated by feminist and queer theories for the heterosexual male-centred formulation, and have been useful in application to several texts, such as those by Laura Mulvey (Harrison and Wood, 2002: 982) and Judith Butler.

The importance of the Lacanian model which Butler (1990) critiques and extends, is the notion of desire. The subject only comes into being through desire (this complex stage of identity formation could become a thesis in itself and is far beyond the parameters of this dissertation) and the significance of desire becomes, in essence, the constitution of the subject. Desire (Wolfe, 2004) is recognised through the acquisition of language, and language is a complex matrix of signification. The language through which the subject constitutes his/her

existence precedes the actual subject. This language or matrix of signification is essential to understanding desire. As Butler (1990) argues, it is an already fixed and gendered determinant that closes off and limits the range of possibilities that exist outside the matrix. The matrix consolidates the cultural paradigm and imposes boundaries of complicity that must be adhered to in order to exist in reality. This matrix is conceptualised on the binary opposition of the Western two-sex system; this dichotomy produces the fixed categorisation of biological sex as either male or female, and gender as masculine or feminine based on the respective biological sex. Nevertheless, Butler's enquiry into gender challenges this presupposition as a limitation on the possibilities of desire, which is the basis of Lacan's subject. How the subject perceives his/her self, confined to the limited two-sex, gender polarised and heterosexual matrix, affects their identity. Lechte (1990) expands the Lacanian subject in relation to Julia Kristeva, who views 'art' as constitutive of both subject and object; the activity of notions of subject in process is reflected in the idea of art as a process. Art, for example, a painting, is a process from construction of material support, through the actual application of paint to the surface. What is represented (the subject) is in constant fluctuation of meaning, notably here the "notion of art as constitutive of the subject rather than constituted by the subject" (Lechte, 1990). According to Lacan's paradigm, our identity is structured within gendered terms which subscribe to the hierarchical binary opposition of man over woman and masculine over feminine. As a result, the group that holds the lesser of the two positions becomes labelled the "other", and the "other" generally becomes anyone that is not a white, heterosexual male.

Saussurian notions of the subject, position the individual within language. Language, from a semiotic perspective, constitutes our reality and marks a shift from the way in which the traditional subject is imagined.

For Foucault (1999), the subject is located in discourse. By analysing concepts such as the self, truth and power, he exposes how individuals are constructed

through discourse. Subjectivity is a convergence of (to use Althusser's terminology) ideological state apparatuses involving processes of regulation, domination and coercion. Foucault (1990) examines how the power of the bio-medical discourse created the homosexual subject. A sexologist first coined the term "homosexual" in 1870 to describe same-sex-orientated individuals, and the formation of the medical discourses to investigate and find the core-defining feature of homosexuality thus emerged. Foucault (1990: 101) notes:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and 'psychic hermaphrodisism' made possible a strong advance in of social controls into this area of 'perversity'; but it also made possible for the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf.

Historically, until the nineteenth century, no category had described same-sex acts; however, laws prohibiting certain forms of sex between members of the same sex had been in place, and people practising these acts were persecuted because they had committed sodomy. The homosexual thus became an object of increasing medical inquiry; a person with a case history and identifiable characteristics. The discourses that emerged increasingly supported the phallogocentric hierarchy's notion that homosexuals were abnormal and needed to be policed and studied in order to control and root out the cause of their homosexuality.

Feminism gave the notion of the subject a gender. The idea that the universal subject was somehow outside of the reality of women was challenged by feminism. Feminism highlighted the myth of a patriarchal gender hierarchy, challenged traditional sex roles and opened the way for queer theory.

According to Butler (1992), the subject – as an individual – views him or herself as an autonomous being, paradoxically suggesting that the subject is located within the ideological determinations of the law. The subject or subjectivity is constituted by the regulation and coercion of the ideological state apparatus.



Gays, lesbians and transgender individuals do not conform to the conventional categories. Butler (1997: 89) succinctly conveys this idea in the quotation that follows:

Subjects who have been excluded from enfranchisement by existing conventions governing the exclusionary definition of the universal seize the language of enfranchisement and set into motion a 'performative contradiction', claiming to be covered by that universal, thereby exposing the contradictory character of previous conventional formulations of the universal.

In terms of this dissertation, the subjectivity of the viewer is called into question; simultaneously the subject matter of the artworks become a negating medium of the artist as subject, who are the previously disenfranchised as subjects, and the public. The subject is a "performative contradiction" as it names a particular universal subject, while simultaneously referring to the diversity within the idea. The male body becomes a site of the multiplicity of meaning and the diversity of definitions.

### **The male body**

The "body" is a central issue in this dissertation and will be further explored in the chapters that follow<sup>2</sup> in relation to an analysis of the artworks. The body is an important concept in relation to gendered interpretations of sexuality and has long been a topic in women's studies, and is no less important to the study of gender. In recent years the body has been rethought in our society. We can no longer view the body simply as a natural object. The body is to some extent a cultural representation, constructed through various media and is both material (as a physical organism), and immaterial (e.g. a body of beliefs or myths). The body can be used as a metaphor to describe a nation, its territory and its political structures and hierarchies: the body politic. The material body could be viewed as a form of beauty, but also staged as a type of performance in a racialized

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<sup>2</sup>There is an extensive critical literature on the body. I do not list all of the texts except to highlight the relevance of conceptions of the body to my study. See for example Connell (1994; 1995); Whitehead (2002) focuses on key themes and new directions in the area of masculinity and the body; see also Cavallaro (1998); Scott (1993); Synott (1993); Weis (1999) and Welton (1999).



sense.

A number of issues arise in relation to understanding the body in relation to my study. While I shall not be focusing on all of these issues, I list some of the relevant concerns:

- The human body is not simply a biologically given fact but a social construction (that is, the body is produced by social practices). We shape, construct and socialize our bodies by a range of factors: the role of consumerism such as fashion (clothing and make-up) and physical appearance (diet cultures), culture, religion, media, sport & leisure (gym).
- Western and African feminism continue to question how, in our societies certain types of bodies are privileged over others. As a result of patriarchy men's bodies have been privileged over women's. Feminism has questioned for example the relegation of women's role to that of motherhood and nurture.
- The impact of gay liberation as also questioned society's privileging of heterosexual bodies over homosexual bodies. Society's hetero-normativity has been questioned by gay liberationists. According to Reddy (2005) gay liberation has equally challenged heterosexuality as a normative, accepted and standard form of sexuality. In this sense the sexuality of bodies are also questioned and challenged.
- The impact of disease (especially HIV/AIDS, breast cancer) have had an important impact on how society strives to view the body influenced by disease, and also ageing.
- One important aspect about the physical body (**material body**) and the **immaterial body** (beliefs about the body) is that it is integrally connected to building our sense of identity, and identity has a lot to do with how we perceive our own and other people's bodies. The body and its relationship to sex, sexuality, gender, disease and identity is never innocent; it is always a relationship that is political.

In applying the above to my study, I view the body in relation to representations of the 'physical'. Though each artist represents the "body" through a visual medium, their particular reference to the male body is essentially the queer understanding of sexuality. By representing the male body, in what ever way, for example, through painting (see *Chapter 3*) or through language (see *Chapter 5*), the mode of reading lends itself to a queer theoretical undertaking. In other words, by using the background of queer theory and semiotics, this dissertation will foster a deeper and wider understanding of the artists' depictions of the male body within a contemporary South African context.

The subject lives within a body. The male body is a site where power and representation converge. To represent the male body is to acknowledge the history and power that is inscribed on the body. The influence of queer theory on the understanding of identity has been evident in the South African visual arts since 1994. Using a semiotic approach to view the male body in art is a useful strategy employed to read bodies. The chapters that follow will illuminate how the concepts outlined in this reading map are expressed visually through the codes and conventions of art. Each artist tackles a different aspect of the male body and explores how the body may never have a singular fixed meaning. The male body can expose the "myth" of the naturalised heteronormative understanding of masculinity. By representing the male body, the artists are not merely showcasing bodies that are simply male, but also representing the ideological and material implications of the male body. The historical use of the preferred ideal type of male body in the visual arts is documented from classical Greece through to contemporary times.

Foucault (1990, 1987) views the body as being directly involved in a political field; the body is forced to perform ceremonies and emit signs. Signs of power relations converge upon and through the body. The body is trained, tortured and ritualistically bound up, in accordance with complex, reciprocal relations. The body is caught up in a system of subjugation and becomes a useful force, only if

it is both a productive body and subjugated body (Foucault, 1990). For her part, Butler (1993), in her extended argument on the body considers how, in a culture, certain bodies come to *matter* more than others. Her theory of materialisation views the material category of sex as a site of permanent contestation, meaning that the body is a site of vulnerability, of longing, of suffering, disease, reproduction (sometimes), dying and death.<sup>3</sup>

Mackenny (2001) in turn clarifies the importance of identifying the implied meaning of “the body”. By separating the idea of the body into the experienced body, which is felt, and the theorised body, which is gendered and represented, the privileging of the theorised body over the experienced body takes precedence.

The liberation of the male body in representational art is a testament to how artists in South Africa can freely express their desires. Queer theoretical readings facilitate and focus much on the political constitution of homosexuality by also foregrounding the importance of the body. This is why Butler’s notion of body motivates that some bodies *matter* while some do not, most notably queer bodies. A queer reading thus prioritises the political nature of gay and lesbian bodies and identities as heterogeneous, fragmented and political. By applying queer theory within the context of South African visual arts, a more nuanced understanding of the cultural shift and acceptance of anti-normative sexualities is evident. I now turn to the analysis Andrew Verster’s *Erotic Interiors* (1996). These paintings highlight the repositioning of the male body in view of the new freedom experienced within the socio-political climate of a new, democratic South Africa.

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<sup>3</sup>Butler (interviewed in Reddy, 2004: 117) clarifies the position more cogently: ‘To understand any of these profoundly human dimensions of bodily experience, we have to consider the body as something that not only occupied specific sites and places, but something that is also in time, temporalised. It is impinged upon, for instance, by social norms, but it also enters into extended ways of living, modes of appropriating and re-enacting social norms, ways of giving material substance to norms that can be described as processes in time’

## CHAPTER 3

### **Queer strokes, the body on display: Andrew Verster's *Erotic Interiors* (1996)**

As indicated in *Chapter 2*, painting refers to both an object (an actual painting) and a process (to actively be painting). I believe that just as one can draw parallels between identity formation and art, so too can parallels be drawn between art and sexuality. The link between a subject and a painting is strengthened by the social constructivist position in understanding the meaning of both (as discussed in *Chapter 2*). A painting does not magically appear before us as a complete isolated object, neither do subjects (as individuals) appear ahistorically and complete. Each painting and subject has a history, and a process of becoming involved. The process might be hidden from view, but the end product is on display and opens itself up to interpretation. This chapter explores two paintings from artist Andrew Verster's *Erotic Interiors* (1996) series, which represents the male body (see *Appendix*: plates 1 and 2). The title of this chapter expresses the ambivalent meanings of painting and sexuality, which highlight the political change evident in South Africa over the last decade. Verster's paintings challenge the traditional binary positioning of the heterosexual male gaze employed in oil painting. He does this by utilising established codes and conventions (such as composition), and references classical antiquity as a source of intertextuality in relation to sexual expression. In so doing, Verster highlights the male body as an object of desire and celebrates the visibility of the queer subject. This chapter focuses on the physical body and the politics of identity. By applying concepts from semiotics and queer theory to Verster's paintings, the chapter focuses on how the representation of the male body signifies a wider cultural understanding of identity.

The following section begins the analysis of the paintings from a denotative perspective. This position allows for the reading of the connotative aspects to be discussed later in the next section

### **Composition from a denotative perspective**

Before entering into an analysis of the paintings, there are many considerations to take into account. First, the images of the paintings are reproductions of the originals. For this reason, the size and quality of the actual artworks have been diminished. Second, mere descriptions of the paintings cannot do them justice. I believe paintings such as these possess a quality that cannot be recreated using words. I can, nevertheless, evoke an emotional response having viewed the actual paintings myself. These particular works have echoed in my mind, and I associate them with a radical departure from South African art that was exhibited in the public arena pre-1994.

This section keeps these limitations in mind, and analyses the paintings from a denotative perspective. By looking at the paintings (see plates 1 and 2 in the *appendix*) we visually “read” the images in terms of their polysemic nature and what they represent to us as the viewer. An overall impression of the paintings should be taken into account when discussing how Verster has represented the male body.

These paintings incorporate a Barthesian formulation (in terms of the image and the text) and context in which they were created (including the cultural conditions under which they were produced). These two paintings belong to a series of four oil paintings entitled *Erotic Interiors*, and share common themes pertaining to sexuality and the visibility of gay male desire. They are part of a greater body of work produced by Verster. Although these two paintings share some common characteristics, by describing them separately – at a denotative level – the accessibility of the connotations and interpretations are activated.



When viewing art, the title of any piece becomes a crucial point of reference in relation to its meaning. The title reflects some of the intended meanings the painter is exploring, and anchors the paintings; relaying between the painted images and giving credence to what is being represented. The title *Erotic Interiors* becomes the text that focuses our attention on the connotative references, by narrowing our field of inquiry. The term “erotic” conjures up associations of eroticism, sexuality and pleasure, whilst including the term “interiors” fills the mind with notions of that which is interior/inside, private, intimate and psychological. It also evokes ideas of the closet, and that which is hidden, secret and removed from public gaze.

When viewing a painting or any two-dimensional visual artwork, such as a photograph, the viewer assumes a position from where it is possible to look at the piece. This position focuses the act of viewing on that object and holds a gaze. The gaze of the viewer is thus always inherent in the position of viewing an artwork. The acknowledgement that meaning making shifts, from author (artist) to reader (viewer), places a greater emphasis on the person viewing the text (painting). As a result, how the viewer interprets the painting involves a complex process of subjectivity and power, which is intrinsic to the act of looking. Who the viewer is in terms of their identity plays an important role in how they look and respond. The “gaze” (Cook, 1997; Macey, 2000 and Mulvey, 2002) is a concept that is evident in both the formation of subjectivity and the visual arts. Lacan’s theorisation of the “gaze” is appropriated by Mulvey (2002) in order to expose the dominance of the heterosexual “male gaze” in cinema. The binary opposition of male as active and female as passive is reinforced by the “gaze”. The gaze of the viewer, supported by the underlying structure of linear perspective, denoted a single point-of-view. Ocular epistemology (see Lalvani, 1996; Foucault, 1987) privileges the knowledge of sight and vision above other senses. According to Lalvani (1996), vision is linked knowledge and power in the same way that bodies are organised through arrangements in social space; the power invested in the invisibility and visibility is tied to domains of knowledge. The heterosexual



“male gaze” is inherent in the visual arts, as most paintings of female nudes (most paintings of erotic subject matter) have been historically produced for consumption by heterosexual males Cook (1997). Verster destabilises this practise by placing the male bodies in the positions previously reserved for women. This emphasis on the sexualisation of the male body in terms of scopophilic pleasure, serves to destabilise the regulated binary positioning. Cook (1997:23) explains as follows:

In the case of a male nude by a gay artist, the voyeurism is subversive: heterosexual males are invited to enjoy viewing the body of another man, heterosexual women are confronted with the object of their desire, and lesbians experience what gays routinely feel on viewing female nudes.

Both paintings are executed in the medium of oil paint and utilise linear perspective to create the illusion of space within the pictorial plane. Linear perspective is a geometric plan underlying the structuring of objects in space, and is a key element in the composition of styles of painting influenced by the West. The composition of a painting, according to Gettings (1982), is the way in which an artist places and organises all the elements on the pictorial plane; this arrangement of shapes on the surface reflects the ideological expression of the artist. “One of the most common ways in which the artist sets out to evoke a particular mood or feeling is by means of the underlying structure of his picture”(Gettings, 1982; 17). Both paintings employ the strong use of lines to create the space, and this highlights the construction and organisation involved in conceiving the works, as though Verster is acknowledging the traditionally invisible underpainting. Painting renders the three-dimensionality of reality onto a two dimensional surface, and the manner in which an artist composes the shapes on the canvas can create an illusion of space and depth. The organisation of the space is constructed in an illusionary way and categorised into a foreground/background dichotomy. This dichotomy is crucial to a Western understanding of how individuals perceive reality and sexuality, and is characterised by the binary system of categorising concepts and physical reality into “boxes”, (such as the “boxes” of self and other, male and female,

heterosexual and homosexual, for example). The paintings appear to conflate the past “high art” tastes that dominated Western art with their elitist canon of inaccessible signs and unary meaning. Since the rise of modernism as the canon dictating art production, abstraction of form dominated and the “figure” almost disappeared entirely from painting. Cook (1997: 34) describes the recombination of the style as creating a “dialectic of illusionistic space and painted surface: of the exclusive flatness of modernism to the inclusive space of post-modernism.” The lines in the painting create the structural illusion of the interiors, and by placing figures in that space, interplay is created between them, highlighting – among others – the re-emergence of the figure, and the re-inclusion of the male figure and subject back into art.

Verster’s use of line has many merits. A line is the path traced by a moving point (Adams 1999), and it implies the presence of space. In the painting it describes the interiors and the form of the two figures. The halo-like outlines in luminous colours give solidity to the men. The muscularity of their bodies indicates a certain type of male contour. The type of male that one can read from the signs of the linear form connote the young, athletic male body, which was glorified and desirable in Greek antiquity as the epitome of the ideal man. The male bodies appear unaware of being watched, and for this reason the notion of watching them becomes a highly scopophilic experience. According to Wells (2004: 171) the power of voyeurism is clearly expressed as:

Voyeurism describes a mode of looking related to the exercise of power in which a body becomes a spectacle for someone else’s pleasure, a world divided into the active ‘lookers’ and the passive ‘looked at’.

The viewer is looking into a private space watching two men engaging in an intimate act. The intimacy is heightened by the figures kissing. The implication of voyeurism is an important facet in the production of meaning in these paintings.

The paintings compositionally foreground two male figures who are passionately embracing on the floor. The figures, or lovers, are placed within the context of an interior space such as a room in a house. This interior becomes a private area in which the figures are engaged in intimate acts. Houghton (1997: 51) observes how:

The lovers appear as if suspended in time, enclosed as they are in the voluptuous, hothouse atmosphere of the luxurious interiors which they inhabit. However this is human element remains secondary to the accumulation of objects, things, in the rooms.

This is of particular importance when considering how Verster represents the male body. The bodies are informed by the objects; the objects are cultural artifacts that hold value in a paradigm influenced by the West. Verster could be seen as highlighting the relationship between the subject and society. The bodies are read in relation to their surroundings, and this informs the figures by placing them in a context. "The context of a painting is, in a pure sense, any suggestion of a background or setting which locate(s) the figure in space" (Smith and Wheeler, 1988: 62), and this visually represents how the subject's identities are constructed in relation to their culture. The lovers' sexual engagement is also read in relation to the interior setting; their sexuality is on display. The reading of their sex and sexuality in the context of the interiors exemplifies the theoretical understanding of how queer identities are in constant negotiation with society and culture.

The space created is both private and intimate. The darkness of the figures appear harmoniously engaged with and simultaneously isolated from the canvas, thus evoking a sense of union and separation. This could be seen in terms of the intimacy and isolation that are continuous themes reoccurring in Verster's work. These conditions appear to be overarching thematic concerns found predominantly in the work of gay male artists and writers, by which are only alluded to and never stated implicitly. His "psychological condition" (Berman, 1983: 476) was discussed and his "pictures often cause controversy mainly

because of their subject” (Harmsen, 1985: 40). Verster has painted the male body before, but, these particular representations are undeniably the most openly queer renderings and acknowledgements of gay male desire. The visibility and openness of the subject positioning of the figures on the canvas becomes a political statement, as the sexuality of the lovers could be seen as an extension the artist’s sexuality. The artist’s desire is rendered as a political statement that comments on the manner in which the paintings are received in a public arena, and challenges the levels of acceptability in the new South Africa. As Smith and Wheeler (1988: 62) comment:

Artists have not always had the freedom to present the figure in any chosen manner, as is generally considered possible now. Social and moral constraints have at times proved too powerful to be ignored, and have often prevented artists from being honest or explicit.

In the first painting (see plate 1) the interior is filled with statues and objects that refer to classical antiquity. This intertextual use of classical Greek sculptures highlights Bals’ (1994) notion that artists, in this case Verster, acknowledged and reconstructed the ready-made quality of the signs available from the culture that produced them. The lovers appear to be nude, but in both paintings their bodies are actually cropped by the borders of the canvas, allowing only the heads, arms and torsos to be viewed. The importance of utilising the classical vocabulary in this painting gives credence to how depictions of the male body in Western art have relied on the canon of an idealised male form that has been ideologically used to elevate heteronormative values, simultaneously expressing an undeniable homoerotic quality. The perfect proportionality that was developed was viewed as the personification of reason, harmony and order. This type of body could be seen as the *mesomorph soma-type* (this concept will be explored further later on in this chapter), and is closely linked to notions of power and masculinity in Western society.

According to Barthes (1978), art is semiotically placed as myth, and the realm of myth is ideological and embroiled in power struggles.

The comic poet Aristophanes' famous myth, which featured in Plato's *Symposium*, correlates conceptually to the idea of a third sex and a third gender within Indian mythology. According to the ancient Greek myth, humans were originally eight-limbed creatures, with two faces and two sets of genitals. The myths explaining the origins of human beings existed in order to account for the variability of nature observed by the ancient Greeks. By acknowledging the presence of three sexes, a greater acceptability of same-sex relations was allowed. These round creatures came in three sexes namely, male (ἄνδρας), female (γυναί) and male/female (ἀνδρογυνος). Zeus, the ruler of the gods, punished the ambitious beings by splitting them in two. He then stretched the skin over the exposed flesh and moved their genitals to the front of their bodies. These beings would forever search for their missing complementary halves, and once they found them they would cling together no matter the consequence. "Aristophanes extracts from this story a genetic explanation of observable differences among human beings with respect to sexual object-choice and preferred style of life"(Halperin, 1990: 19). Halperin (2000) tackles many areas that have been seemingly clear-cut and, yet, utterly confused throughout history, from the categorisation of same-sex relations and desire to the genealogical analysis of homosexuality. By drawing on history to look at same-sex relations (specifically male) and gender hierarchy, Halperin traces how unstable contemporary sexuality is.

A more in-depth study of the construction of contemporary views of homosexuality is formulated in Halperin (1990) whereby he explores ancient Greek society and their understanding of sex, gender and sexuality. Halperin (1990: 32) expresses this interplay between sex and politics noting:

The social articulation of sexual desire in classical Athens furnishes a telling illustration of the interdependence in culture of social practices and subjective experiences. It thereby casts a revealing light on the ideological dimension- the purely conventional and arbitrary character- of our own conceptions of sex and sexuality.

This concept of interplay between sexuality and social values is reinforced visually through Verster's paintings, precisely because of the intertextual use of classical artefacts.

The erotic tension created by the figures sets the stage for an exploration into gay male experiences. The foregrounding of the male figures in the paintings correlates with the foregrounding of sex and sexuality in queer theory. The artworks can be a visual example of how some of the issues raised in queer theory are executed through the use of another language – the language of painting. Art and sexuality are inextricably woven together in a tapestry of ideology, resistance and artistic expression. Cook (1997: 23) highlights this in relation to Verster's subject matter:

Verster has always been committed to the pursuit of freedom, at what ever level. His morality and integrity have consistently led him to resist oppression, and to subvert the structures which underpin hegemonic power relations.

The sexuality of the artist, which is a central marker of his identity, is in a post-Apartheid democracy a sign of the tolerance and acceptability of gay males. The visibility of gay male erotic art is just one example of the change in social attitude. Lucie-Smith (1997) notes that erotic art works function on multiple levels simultaneously. Within a Western tradition, erotic works contain combinations of hedonism, critical views of society and are transgressive for transgression's sake (Lucie-Smith, 1997: 7).

Verster utilises the traditional Western medium of oil painting, (Berger, 1972) which is a genre within the broad history and practices of painting. Oil painting has a heterosexual, phallocentric history, the origins of which can be traced back to Europe at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Feminism critiqued this absence of female artists from the canon of Western art (oil painting in particular), and queer theory challenged the lack of alternative forms of art from history. The medium of oil paint allowed artists to render their subject matter,



often depicting objects which are buyable in reality (for example jewels, money, food or other objects of commodity), as realistically as possible (like a photograph). Berger points out the way of seeing, which in oil painting is analogous to the notion of “possessing” (Berger, 1972: 83). The tradition of oil painting created specific codes and conventions, such as incorporating linear perspective when composing and ordering pictorial space. A distinguishing feature of the canon of oil painting is the ability to convey the illusion of the tangibility of textures and objects. Oil painting became the main source of visual documentation as its semblance to reality was uncanny. There exists an extremely well-established body of texts that explore how art, but specifically painting, was used for recording events, and one such painting was Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage* (1434). This painting is regarded as a masterpiece of Dutch oil painting. The convex mirror reflects the painter in minute detail, and it is assumed to be a legal document of a wedding. Van Eyck's painting embodied the classical vocabulary; the representational illusion of high art that conformed to the canons of Western aesthetics. Van Eyck developed a style that could be viewed as “art as a mirror of nature” (Kissick, 1993: 173). This style of natural painting dominated until the emergence of photography. Later, experimentation and modernism changed the function and perception of painting. Berger (1972: 84) claims that:

Oil paintings are still being painted today. Yet the basis of its traditional way of seeing was undermined by Impressionism and overthrown by Cubism. At about the same time the photograph took the place of the oil painting as the principle source of visual imagery.

Within the tradition of Western oil painting there were many genres, and the genre held in highest regard was the mythological picture. According to Berger (1972:100), a painting of Greek or ancient figures was automatically elevated above still life, a portrait or landscapes. These artists drew on classical references, and incorporated idealised views of the world into their work. The male body was usually displayed as a hero upholding the power and passions of Western civilisation. The body was invested with patriarchal authority, whilst the

homoerotic quality was sub-diffused into the content. The male body was allowed to be present only under the pretence of philosophical or artistic enquiry. Verster, on the other hand, uses the male body as an object of desire, highlighting the erotic quality that has been masked by heteronormative regulations of how the male body should be represented. Many of the objects painted in the rooms are signs of Western aesthetic mainstream culture and can be read on multiple levels; these denote actual sculptures and furniture, or – on the connotative level – represent values and ideologies that govern the world in which the figures inhabit. In a parodic sense Verster is not only filling the room with camp cultural artefacts, but is also critiquing the culture that produced them. By isolating some of the intertextual references in the paintings, we can see how the paintings are informed by existing conventions or genres.

The exuberant abstract colours and highly expressive use of line, which is reminiscent of Matisse, fills the room with an unashamedly decorative quality. The room has doorways and windows, which refers to the notion of the “outside” versus the “inside”. This integration of binary opposites heightens the sense of the painting’s psychological aspects, which are suggestive of the “closet”, and representative of the notions of “coming out”: an experience most gays and lesbians deal with when acknowledging their orientation and publicly announcing their identity. “It is a term mostly associated with gay and lesbian people, and ‘coming out’ is likened to emerging from a closet of secrets” (Reddy, 1999). Gay masculinities are, according to Reddy (1998), negotiated on two levels: that of the private and that of the public where coming out occurs in a politicised arena. The notion that an intimate act, which is usually performed in private, is in this instance being publicly displayed (in a gallery) challenges the assumptions of traditional roles established within the discourse of oil painting.

Sedgwick (1990) explores the concept of the closet, arguing that even though an individual has publicly affirmed his or her sexuality, the notion of the closet frames their existence. The closet can be viewed as a metaphor through which

most gay men negate their self-acceptance and social identity. Sedgwick (1990: 68) outlines the importance of the closet:

The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence.

This concept is represented in the paintings symbolically by the inclusion of doorways and windows. They suggest another space outside of the main focus of the rooms, and this strengthens the sense of union and separation as mentioned earlier. The interconnectivity of an internal and external space could be viewed as the continuous negation of visibility and invisibility of sexual expression in society. The interiors are private spaces and play with the binary of public and private, by placing the figures in the foreground Verster draws on that notion creating an erotic tension between the figures simultaneously commenting on the public display of their private actions.

The paintings could be viewed as diachronic interrogations of the issues surrounding the formation of identity and the construction of same-sex relations in terms of power. The male figures appear to be engaging in sexual activity, which is dynamic and excessive. I see this power play between master and slave as a form of desire which constitutes the beginnings of the "subject". Same-sex relations, specifically male-male coupling in these paintings, do not conform to the Lacanian subject paradigm. By representing two males engaging in sex, Verster overturns the traditional dichotomy of the heterosexual matrix of signification; the disruption of the male (self); female (other). The conceptual ramifications are immense; the subject in Lacan's paradigm is built on difference, but here the power is equalised in language. The excessive connotation of non-procreative sexual activity has historically been condemned in our Judeo-Christian-influenced culture. The condemnation of specifically male same-sex relations has led to exclusionary practices and punishment by a plethora of

judicial and social laws, which have tried to regulate and eliminate homosexuality.

The control of sexuality becomes a powerful exercise in Foucauldian self-surveillance and scapegoating. The regulation of individual actions, which codified and shaped private lives, was exceedingly evident in the laws passed by the Apartheid government. The manifestation of the homophobic paradigm was particularly aimed at white male homosexuals, who were, according to Elder (1995), a threat to the patriarchal and vehemently heterosexual Apartheid system. Although the government's racist stance was evident in the laws it passed, such as the Immorality act of 1957 (an act that enforced the separation and prohibition of relations across the colour divide), homosexuality in mining compounds or migrant labour communities was seen as a "necessary evil" (MacKenny, 2001). Open acknowledgement of black male homosexuality within these spaces was justified because workers lacked spouses and female companionship. This acknowledgement is interesting as harassment and legal action was enforced predominantly on white male homosexuals. The white homosexual was perceived as more insidious and impossible to contain by an open signifier, therefore, more capable of undermining the power of the regime. As such, white homosexuality was far more problematic, as the "enemy" was not visible and was seen as a greater threat to the societal order. Verster has explored this by using the interiors of rooms that appear to be filled with upper-class objects that signify a particular position in society, relating back to the systematic persecution of white male homosexuals. Cook (1997) highlights how Verster himself was a victim of such harassment in both his personal life and his professional career. The space created by Verster speaks about the spatial boundaries that contained homosexuals indoors, hidden from the public sphere. Through the artist's depictions of such a private space he is challenging the ideological grounding of Apartheid's regulatory practices of invading personal space. The interior space highlights one of the greatest threats to the Apartheid government – that of the private space. This reinforced their fear of the elusive

homosexual who existed under their very noses, or even in their own houses, and the subversiveness of these individuals was considered most likely to undermine the “moral basis of the populace” (Elder cited in Mackenny 2001).

## **Conclusion**

The meaning of the male body is represented as an object of gay male desire, and it is also influenced by the culturally constructed understandings of sexuality. (This is visually represented by the artefacts and furniture which can be read as cultural products.) The male body is a personification of ideology and has held an equivocal position by being both the valorisation of heterosexual supremacy in mainstream culture, as well as being the desired object of the previously disenfranchised gay male.

The visibility of queer subjects in visual arts is public affirmation of the presence of the queer subject within heteronormative society. This is a highly political act, which echoes the gay struggle for liberation in South Africa. The historical references reflect the past struggles, present situation, elusiveness and omnipresence of the gay male. The visual arts, as explored in this chapter through the medium of oil painting, are a powerful platform to interrogate and showcase the diversity and progression of South Africa. South Africa's political and social arena's direct engagement is documented through cultural products. Verster has showcased and explored how the male body, rendered in oil paint by consciously smearing paint onto a constructed surface, is saturated with historical connotations, and is simultaneously unique and universal. He utilises the vocabulary of this traditional medium to reflect the contemporary attitudes towards same-sex relationships in our society. The staging or setting of the figures he depicts in the interiors resonates not only with his personal life's journey, but also synchronically challenges the ideology and homophobic attitudes of South Africa's political history.



The male body in Verster's paintings reflects the political change in our country. The body becomes an object of desire built on a level of likeness and equality as opposed to traditional differences. The historical references connote the extensive and, until recently, subtextual homoeroticism in mainstream depictions of the male body. Verster uses the freedom of the new constitution to express and celebrate his experiences as an individual, and as a South African.

The next chapter will explore how this male body, as seen here in terms of pleasure and desire, is regulated through a mechanism of power to conform to an ideal masculinity. The gender of the male body as an ordered and unified concept is challenged through photography.



## CHAPTER 4

### **Militantly masculine, gender is on display: Hentie van der Merwe's *Trappings* (2000)**

Photography's ability to record an image of physical reality depends on the quantity of light permitted through the shutter. The camera is the mechanical device that has the capability to challenge our perception of physical reality by presenting us with a representation of reality. The subject matter which is photographed calls into question notions of vision and truth. By photographing the body, the subject becomes the object of the image. Sontag (1978:3) claims that the act of photography appropriates the object being photographed, thus placing oneself "into a certain relationship with the world that feels like knowledge – and therefore, like power". The act of taking a photograph is the process of capturing a representation of reality, and Hentie van der Merwe's fascination with how we record and negotiate the world through the eye of the camera is evident in the images he presents. His subject matter questions seemingly clear-cut constructs of masculinity and could be used to highlight queer theory's destabilisation of heteronormative assumptions. His exhibition consists of large photographs of military uniforms, photographed at the Museum of Military History in Johannesburg. According to Smith (2000), van der Merwe interrogates notions of violence, identity, and geographies of experience. Through his exploration of masculinity in a historical context, the absence of the physical male body is replaced by uniforms which signify the body. This chapter utilises concepts from semiotics, queer theory and Butler's formulation of performativity to analyse two of van der Merwe's photographic works from his *Trappings* (2000) exhibition, and to investigate how he has represented the male body through the medium of photography.

In this study there are two main factors that limit my analysis of photographic exhibitions. First, the works are reproductions and cannot be contemplated in their entirety. For this reason, any form of analysis is limited to an interpretation of the images reproduced in the appendix. I have seen the exhibition firsthand, and the advantage of this is that it adds a deeper level of meaning to my interpretation. Second, my own sexuality that of a gay white male living in South Africa, will invariably influence my response to the image's positions, and the other issues focussed on in this chapter.

The following section describes the exhibition as a whole. The importance of this description is to create a setting or "set the stage" in which these images are to be read.

The title of the exhibition creates an overarching thematic thread that is explored through the different images presented. *Trappings* denotes things being trapped, whether conceptual or physical, which relates to the notion of masculinity. Murnik (2004: 386) succinctly notes:

The work looked at the symbolism of military uniforms and regalia as misleading, as the visual adornment for bravery and heroism that they display conceals the dramatic effects that war and violence have on the individual, and in so doing, reinforces a particular coded myth of impenetrable masculinity.

Masculinity here is presented as an historical construct and exemplifies a Foucauldian mode of power; a power that has been enforced and regulated by institutions such as the military. By focusing on such institutions, specifically homosocial institutions, the effects of the power invested in these environments is visible on the physical body. The "coded myth of impenetrable masculinity" is, in a performative sense, an exposition of that masculinity, and thereby shows the fragility and vulnerability of the multiplicity of masculine identities. The category of "masculinity" becomes a complex matrix of signification that can be read through the adornment of signs.

By focusing my analysis on two images from the exhibition, I attempt to show how these works represent the male body through the medium of photography. Photography, as a medium, is conceptually different from painting in many ways, the most notable of which is the traditional way that photography creates an image from reality. Van der Merwe's engagement with the codes of conventional photography becomes an intertextual reference in his overall work, thereby questioning notions of clarity and truth.

The discussion of the "gaze" (as explored in *Chapter 2*) is applicable to the photographic works in this chapter. The image and presentation establishes a position for the viewer to read the "text". This position is embedded in certain, specifically Western, ways of seeing that which exposes underlying power structures. Although the linear perspective that underscores the paintings to create an illusion of realistic space is still present in these photographic works, the composition and shallow depth of field limits the space created. The immediate space informs the subject by placing it into a context; the context is not necessarily denotative and literal, but is read on a connotative and figurative level. This connotative level of reading the context is a valuable means to acquire an understanding of the subject matter.

The clarity of the photographs titles is paradoxical on a denotative level, as the images themselves are blurred and out of focus. The blurring of the subjects being photographed goes against certain conventions of photography that place importance on focus and clarity. The clarity of subject matter in a photograph authenticates the claims that photography captures the "real" truth. One of the arguments supporting the scientific uses of photography is its ability as a medium to represent an image of the subject before the camera in sharp focus. This has given credence to the perception that an image mirrors truth. The limited lighting of the subject adds to the ambiguity of the image by creating a shallow depth of field, which fills the image with dark shadows that become the contextualising space that informs the subject. Most notably, what is highlighted (see plate 3) is

the top of the mannequin, which is headless and emphasises the absence of an individual identity; it connotes decapitation. This decapitation could be viewed as a physically violent act, connoting a symbolic death of the masculine figure; that of the soldier or – on another level – of the remains of an ideal form of masculinity that is created and upheld by homosocial institutions. What remains is an icon of such constructs; a symbol of an ideal invested with heteronormative ideology. The iconographic quality of these images is supported by their composition.

In the first photograph the title indicates *Lieutenant Full Dress Tunic, Staatsartillerie van Die ZuidâAfrikaansche Republiek c. 1895* (plate 3). The catalogue formatted description of the title becomes the Barthesian (see *Chapter 2*) anchorage of the image, which relays messages between the image (the photograph) and the text (the title). This particular image could be used as a showcase of certain themes that Van der Merwe explores in other photographic works.

The assumption that an image always reveals the truth has led to the exploitation of the medium as a tool for scientific revelation. The early development of photography (see Wells, 2004) gave pseudoscientific discourses, such as phrenology and physiognomy, of the nineteenth century the opportunistic visual validation of their claims, which supported the ocular epistemologies. This constructed and ordered society into groups based on visual types. Interestingly enough, the date of the uniform that is given in the title correlates to the time when these “scientific” discourses were in full force. During the Victorian era, photography was instrumental in creating an expansive vocabulary relating to sexuality and establishing homosexuality as a pathology. The pathologisation of homosexuality as a deviance from the norm was supported by the exploitation of photography’s claim to record and reveal physical reality. The manipulation of the medium to disseminate stereotypes and regulate society is reflected in Van der Merwe’s conscious decision to not allow the viewer clarity of the uniform. By

reading the image on a connotative level, Van der Merwe problematises our relationship with such discursive practices. Lalvani (1996) argues that our perception of vision, or ways of seeing, is historically located and organised through and by certain discourses. Consequently, this system of interaction between visible and invisible is highlighted (in the image) by not presenting the clarity of vision that is synonymous with truth. Plate 3 is read in relation to the signs exhibited by masculinity (through the uniforms) and how discursive practices construct a particular form of masculinity (hegemonic and, above all, heterosexual).

Clothing is considered a highly encoded practice, which according to Mackenny (2001), is a display either to attract (where it functions as a lure) or/and to protect (where it helps to defend one). The notions of “performance” and “masquerade” are called into question, as the uniforms in Van der Merwe’s work operate as a display of the male bodies that wear them. The absence and simultaneous signification of the presence of the male body, in Van der Merwe’s images, signifies a certain type of male wearing the uniforms, that of the *mesomorph* will be discussed. The fetish quality of the military attire connotes the homoerotic subtext of military institutions. The fetishisation of the clothes stand in for the whole body and, as a result, a simulation of a real body is presented to us.

The uniform becomes a highly ritualised signifier of masculinity; the performance of the body that wears the costume reveals the process and power invested in that particular masculinity. In so doing, the masculinity that is exhibited is exposed as a myth, which becomes indicative of Butler’s postulations on the use of clothes to emphasise the performative aspect of gender. Butler’s (1990) example of cross-dressing becomes extremely relevant to the extent that female clothing becomes a signifier of femininity and, therefore – in this case – the uniforms are signifiers of masculinity. Butler’s (1997) explanation of the ritualised process of performativity informing and constituting an individual’s identity, could be applied to the costumes that characterise the act or performance of



masculinity. By utilising the metaphor of the theatre, and labelling the uniforms as costumes, the instability of a unified concept of “masculinity” is placed in the spotlight. Furthermore, by placing the subject centre stage, so to speak, the audience’s (in this case the viewer’s) “gaze” is directly drawn to that historical icon of masculinity.

The clothes that are left behind become the signifiers of the bodies that used to exist within them. The uniforms become the snares of masculinity; a particular ideal, hegemonic masculinity that requires order and regulation to maintain the status quo. The images convey this form of masculinity as an extension of the state and an embodiment of ideology that is above all heterosexual. Homosexuality was not part of that order and was seen as a threat to the stability of national security, whereby the containment of such sexuality was deemed necessary. This pronouncement of an ideal is best revealed during the Apartheid regime when, according to Mackenny (2001) and Elder (1995), the harassment of male homosexuals, particularly white, middle-class men, was enforced by the police as an extension of state ideology. Arguably, the most distinct example of state ideology being exercised over individuals is the treatment of suspected homosexuals in the military, specifically white young men. (This will be elaborated on further when looking at the second image).

The images speak of a violence done to bodies, specifically the male body. Violence is a means of maintaining control and serves as a warning to not transgress boundaries. This is extended into gender and sexuality, and the repercussions of crossing the imaginary lines that demarcate bodies are evident in the image. The violence that the image speaks of is multilayered, and works on these different levels simultaneously. Van der Merwe illuminates another kind of underlying violence that is insidious; it is a gender violence that still privileges masculinity and heterosexuality. This is best described by O’Toole and Schiffman (1997: xii) as a structural violence:



Violence can also be structural, as when institutional forces such as governments or medical systems impinge upon individuals' rights to body integrity, or contribute to the deprivation of basic human needs. By our definition, gender violence is any interpersonal, organisational, or political orientated violation perpetrated against people due to their gender identity, sexual orientation, or location in the hierarchy of male-dominated social systems such as families, military organisations, or the labor force.

The example of dressing in drag highlights the outward signifiers of the binary oppositions of masculine and feminine gender roles. The presentation of the uniforms raises the notion of gender constructs, precisely because the uniforms historically would have been worn by male bodies.

The title of plate 4, *Cape Town Rifles (Dukes) Bandsmen (1913-1926)* locates the uniform in a South African context; the image at a denotative level could be read as a mistaken or an accidental out-of-focus shot. The connotations of the uniform give the image an entrance into a matrix of signification. The second image appears more abstracted than the previous one, producing a more ephemeral quality. The emphasis on such a ghostly, intangible quality is that the image speaks more about memory and experience.

The camera can be considered as a metaphor for an eye, as the human eye captures images and imprints them into our memory. If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then the mechanical "eye" of the camera can be seen as a metaphor or an extension of the photographer, reflecting inwards and projecting outwards through what he has witnessed via his eyes. The camera simulates the function of the human eye and the images contain aspects of memory and consciousness. This simulation of a bodily function is pertinent to the image presented to us, the viewers, and it is an image that draws on the history of the military as an institution; an institution that maintains the status quo by relying on order and conventionality.

Connell (1994: 15) notes that the recent debates over "gays in the military" highlight the notion of gender projects, "these are a process of configuring

practice through time, which are collective as well as individual. Thus, the homophobic attitudes of the state, which is masculine, is extended and reinforced by institutions such as the military.

In the United States (US), where this struggle was most severe, critics made the case for change in terms of civil liberties and military efficiency, arguing in effect that object choice has little to do with the capacity to kill.

Connell goes on to say that the preservation and presentation of a particular form of masculinity is culturally important to maintaining order and cohesion. This is evident in the history of the South African military.

The documentary *Property of the State* exposes the practices of the South African Military system during the Apartheid years. Army psychiatrists, aided by chaplains, aggressively ferreted out suspected homosexuals from the armed forces, sending them discretely to military psychiatric units, chiefly ward 22 of 1 Military Hospital at Voortrekkerhoogte, near Pretoria. Those who could not be “cured” with drugs, aversion shock therapy, hormone treatment, and other radical “psychiatric” means were chemically castrated or given sex-change operations.

Van der Merwe’s work relates directly to his iconic use of the military uniforms that stand in for, or simulate, the physical male body. According to Allan and Van der Merwe (1999), the male body was utilised by grand narratives and institutions to facilitate the conceptualisation of health. Through the achievements of photographer Hugh MacFarlane, the conventions of photography and the initial premise of recording reality, an ideal male body has continued to exemplify the ideological preference of the state, while simultaneously eroticising under another guise. Bataille’s writing on the elements of eroticism facilitated a radical understanding of human sexuality; one that is equivocal and dynamic. As Bataille (1987: 29) defines:

Eroticism is one aspect of the inner life of man. We fail to realise this because man is everlastingly in search of an object *outside* himself but this object answers the *innerness* of the desire

This is evident in post-structural writings on identity. As Dyer (1992) notes, sexuality is the inner most part of man and by understanding that aspect of man, one obtains a deeper understanding, and therefore knowledge, of society. This correlates with Butler's proposition that our sexuality is an effect of power.

The photographs that MacFarlane took during his lifetime are divided into two components. One set appears to have been taken in some sort of official capacity for the state; this set consisted of hundreds of white South African Allied soldiers. The other set consisted of mostly naked, young men in natural settings under the studio title of *ATELIER ALPHA*, and these images were distributed worldwide through mail order catalogues. Allan and Van der Merwe (1999) argue that both components of MacFarlane's images operate in the service of a singular objective regarding the male body: that of the demarcation of a notion of "health" using the construction of a particular type of masculinity, however diverse in their use of photographic conventions.

The use of "physique" magazine photography became a highly encoded practice of homoerotic imagery under the disguise of the bodybuilding culture. The publication of such material is a queer practice. By utilising the classical Greek vocabulary, the pleasure of looking at another man's well-defined body is legitimised without challenging the sanctity of heterosexuality. As Cooper (1990) points out, the duality of classical referencing becomes the codification of same-sex desire by highlighting the aesthetic quality of mainstream culture. Van der Merwe's representation of the male body in a similar manner – by re-contextualising the military canon of masculinity – subverts the notion of a fixed masculinity, thereby destabilising the compulsory heterosexuality of the military. By presenting the outward signs of masculinity, Van der Merwe exposes the myth of gender being a natural given and fixed category.

The ideal military body is best expressed through the ideal of the male body. This ideal is representative of the masculinity that could be described as the hegemonic masculinity in its physical form. The mesomorph is, by definition, the soma-type that incorporates the classical idealisations of perfect proportionality as developed by the ancient Greeks. Grogan (1999) claims that the masculine ideal is a muscular shape "because it is intimately tied to Western cultural notions of maleness as representing power, strength and aggression" (Grogan, 1999:58). The ideology that accompanies this somatic shape is a cultural prejudice that conflates masculinity and a particular form of the male body. This is in contrast to the other identified body types, namely the ectomorph (thin) and the endomorph (fat). These male body types are assigned other personality traits that are certainly not ideal. The characteristics ascribed to the ideal mesomorphic type, could tender greater body dissatisfaction in males. This dissatisfaction is, as Crossscope-Happel, Hutchins, Gertz and Hayes(2000, 367) explain, perpetuated by the media as shown below:

For years the media have beckoned us to achieve a certain physical ideal. As the male physique increasingly becomes in demand for selling every product from soda to underwear, so too does the pressure to conform to a specific body type.

The pressure to conform to a particular body type propagates a particular ideology; the hegemonic, mesomorphic body epitomises the canon of masculinity that is put forward by the military. This mix of reality and fantasy has consequences on the physical body, and this is evident in the manifestation of eating disorders, such as anorexia, in males. Male anorexia is more rampant than before and is a sign of deeper cultural disorders (Bordo, 1999; Grogan, 1999).

Eating disorders, according to Bordo (1999: 112), are reflections of consumer-culture inconsistency, and the ability to remodel the physical exterior to conform to an abstract idea. The pressure to comply is more evident among gay males and heterosexual women (see Grogan, 1999), which raises questions about

gender inequality.

According to Celant (1995), photography has become a device for capturing images that dart into our memory and consciousness. As such, photography *projects* the inner world outwards. Van der Merwe visually captures the ambiguous space between discontinuity and continuity through the medium of photography. Although Celant (1995: 20) makes reference to the work of Joel Peter-Witkin, the summation of his images is relevant in the case of Van der Merwe's images:

The image is not supposed to speak of a regulated world but to span a temporal and spatial destiny that, by its archaism, alludes to a mysterious, almost sacred intensity.

Photographic images transcend the physical limitations and elevate towards a realm or experience that can be described in terms of eroticism. Art that contains an erotic quality could be seen to exalt itself to a higher state of beauty; not merely the superficial beauty of naked flesh, but rather the soulful spirituality of a metaphysical realm inaccessible to mortal inconstant beings.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has utilised concepts from semiotics to read the images at a denotative and connotative level, thus allowing for the application of some concepts to be read in relation to the images. The images express some of the theoretical concerns of queer theory, and by analysing the images individually from Van der Merwe's photographic works from his *Trappings* (2000) collection the impenetrable nature of masculinity is exposed as a myth. The propagation of the myth is nurtured by structural apparatuses of power such as the military, and is responsible for creating a particular body that embodies heteronormative ideals. Butler's formulation of performativity is influential in understanding how the body performs these ideals, in terms of gender.

Van der Merwe has represented the male body through the clothes worn by the body; in this case the military uniforms. His subject matter is concerned with the military regalia and uniforms, which are read as signs of a particular type of masculinity. The medium of photography is used and draws on established conventions to represent the male body as a showcase of historical constructs of masculinity. His manipulation of the medium has challenged the reality of the image and questions the truth of that representation of reality. Simultaneously, Van der Merwe has questioned heteronormative assumptions of an impenetrable masculinity by highlighting the vulnerability of the gay male in the military. The images spoke about the memory of an ideological type of masculinity and the experience of the individuals that through force comply to that ideal. The violence of the ideological canon is best expressed through the following chapter and how the language used to describe also harms the physical body.



## CHAPTER 5

### **Wilde accusations, sexuality on display: Mark Coetzee's *All Our Sons* (2000)**

Installation art is a unique method of engaging the audience in the presentation of the art work. The interaction between the viewer and the installation is reflective of the post-structural shift in meaning making. Installation art heightens the importance of site-specificity and is useful in drawing attention to the spatial boundaries imposed and enforced on homosexuals. The space in which the work is shown or installed is directly relational to the location's meaning. The word "installation" refers to the art that is assembled or installed in a particular space, and it is a relatively new form of artistic expression. Van der Merwe (see *Chapter 4*) used uniforms as signifiers of the male body. When constructing a particular masculinity through the medium of photography, an important facet of this construction was the undeniable element of violence. Coetzee's work explores the violence of words that describe the male body. His installation pieces rely on the medium of photography, however, the audience's interaction alters the meaning. Coetzee uses language to represent the male body, and certain concepts from semiotics and queer theory can be applied to the images in his installation. By highlighting the relationship between gender and language, the image's emphasis on the power that language conveys and the implications on sexuality will lead to a discussion of homophobia as a form of hate speech, which has ramifications on the physical body. Coetzee makes specific intertextual references to historical figures, notably Oscar Wilde, to heighten the effects of homophobia within the South African context.

The section that follows begins with a description (on the denotative level) of the installation as a whole. This offers an overall mood of the work, and creates a platform from where to read the images, and to separately access some of the connotations in the section.

This section describes the installation briefly and creates a mental image that should be kept in mind while discussing the issues in this chapter. Before entering into an analysis of the installation, there are some points to consider. First, the images are from an installation which, to be fully appreciated, should be experienced first-hand. The images (see *Appendix*; plates 5 and 6) are merely a documentation of what is left behind. Second, due to the constraints of this dissertation, the interpretation is limited to only a few of the many issues Coetzee sheds light on.

Coetzee's installation was set in a darkened gallery with images being projected onto four walls. The black and white images of outstretched arms appear to blanket the walls, and point towards an image of a floral lettered wreath upon a grave spelling out the word "MOFFIE". The black and white images on the walls are set in stark contrast to the bright pink letters constructed out of rosebuds. Williamson (2001) describes how Coetzee's presentation of the piece makes it impossible to avoid interaction with the installation:

As the projectors are on the floor, it is not possible to cross the gallery without having one's moving shadow thrown on to the images and in this way becoming part of the pilgrimage to the monument- a poignant and successful piece of staging by the artist.

The projectors are placed strategically on the floor and cast the viewer's shadow across the wall, thus integrating them into the images. According to Williamson, this staging by the artist creates a thought provoking placement of the work, drawing focus to the word 'moffie', placing the word conceptually at the centre of the stage. This idea of "staging" works on many different conceptual levels and connotes the notion of theatricality. Within the discourse of "theatre", the performance of actors playing characters could, as I mentioned earlier (see *Chapter 2*), be used as a schema to understanding representations of gender and sexuality. Mackenny (2001: 6) argues that in theatre the awareness of the contrived artificiality of an actor's performance is suspended in order to believe the reality being presented. Mackenny concisely captures how, through

performance, the collapse between the literal and the representational space is possible:

In theatre one is particularly aware of the paradoxical nature of re/presentation. In theatrical performance there is a collapse of the space between the literal and the representational. The audience is asked to 'suspend disbelief' yet the artificiality of the situation still remains. Theatre utilises dichotomy to present its meaning:- it uses an actor/presence to refer to something else; it presents pretence through actuality.

Theatre acts as a corresponding example of how "reality" can have an alternate presentation. The collapse of the literal and representational binary opposition is important not only to the theatre, but equally to other forms of art. Within the parameters of this dissertation, this becomes a revealing point that visualises the theoretical applications. The question of reality or, more specifically, the representation of reality in relation to performance on a stage is to some degree a simplification of the major undertakings of queer theory. This simplification is also reflected in the terms and categories that have been used to demarcate homosexuality.

This transforms the position of the viewer by incorporating their shadows into the actual art piece. By becoming actively involved in the meaning of the piece, the audience is confronted with issues Coetzee raises at a more intimate level. This placement creates interplay between the subjectivity of the viewer and the subject matter, by the artist who himself is a constituted subject. The ability to become part of the artwork sets installation art apart from painting or photography: when viewing these two mediums the viewer still maintains a physical distance from the artwork. The "gaze" of the viewer is no longer visually directed at an artwork of particular dimensions, allowing the viewer to project their subjectivity onto the image. In Coetzee's installation the viewer is to "gaze" at themselves. This conflation of the subject and object positioning turns a traditional binary opposition into a tool that exposes subtle and effective power plays.

In this instance the title is integrated into the image as part of the artwork. The text becomes the image and the image is of the text. This central positioning of text in composition foregrounds the text as the point of departure into a deeper meaning of the installation.

At a denotative level, the image appears relatively straightforward; a floral wreath placed on a grave. This could be interpreted as an act of respect for a deceased individual. Yet, the lettering of the wreath and the individual who lies in the grave precipitate a deeper level of signification. In terms of anchorage, the word that appears in the image narrows our field of possible interpretations. The artist strategically places the text in a central position, thus invoking the iconic use of subject positioning. The title *Moffie* is also the image, and for this reason the relaying of messages is even more intense.

The bold pink colour of the text in the image is set against the muted neutral tone of the grey grave. This tension and contrast between colours could be a sign for the dichotomy of life (the vibrancy of the pink) and death (the cold grey grave), heightening a sense of drama and tragedy. The theatricality of the work stresses the performance aspect of the word, creating an awareness of the construction or artificiality. “All representations have a politics; they also have a history” (Hutcheon, 1990: 44). The word “moffie” can only exist within the South African context and is representing a historically loaded meaning. The power of the word is only relational to the context. However, the concept that the word connotes is a particular sexuality.

A brief etymology of the word “moffie” (Branford, 1987) is central to understanding this piece. “Moffie” is a colloquial term, which in South Africa denotes an effeminate gay male. The term ‘moffie’, however, is perhaps the most widely used, and well-known term in South Africa that covers a range of interrelated meanings. It is an Afrikaans word referring mainly to either a male homosexual, gay man, an effeminate male, or tranvestite (a meaning found in the

Cape Coloured community).<sup>4</sup> Its use is usually pejorative. De Waal (1994:x) explains that the etymology of 'moffie' relates to 'mophrodite', a variation of 'hermaphrodite', as well as 'mophy' which was a slang used as a term of contempt among seamen for delicate, well-groomed youngsters. The association with 'hermaphrodite' is perhaps closer to a similar meaning assigned to 'stabani' by heterosexuals. De Waal (1994: x) also notes that 'moffie', despite its derogatory implication, has been claimed as a form of self-affirmation:

Recently, however, it has been reappropriated by homosexuals and transvestites in referring to themselves, losing some of its negative connotations. This is partly due to an ironic, camp tradition containing elements of self-mockery, and partly a political statement in the manner of African Americans, who have appropriated the insulting term 'nigger' (for instance the black rap group Niggers with Attitude).

The term also raises the concept of gender in a distinctive way, and the effeminacy of the male becomes the labelling marker. The term could be seen as the equivalent of "queer" in England and in the United States; other countries have their own variation on the word. Words such as "moffie" and "queer" are part of a vocabulary that denigrates homosexuals. The installation highlights a specifically South African appropriation of the queer theoretical underpinnings of this study. This verbal form of abuse depicts the homosexual as a subordinate feminised masculinity. This feminisation of the male through language speaks volumes about the forms of gender violence in our society. Reddy (2002) notes how the language used to describe and denigrate homosexuals are gendered to affirm a male heterosexual hegemony. Reddy (2005: 36) also motivates that 'moffie' references a language of perversion and criminalisation that underpins the stigmatising, heteronormative discourses of homosexuality. The import of the words Coetzee exhibits is their representation of history and the bodies that are affected by the speakers, whether collectively or individually. In so doing, he exposes the word's performative construction as a myth in their utterance.

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<sup>4</sup>Lewis and Loots (1994) provide perspectives on stereotyping and the use of language and naming (focusing on the notion of the 'moffie') in Cape Town. See also Achmat's (1994) life history called 'My childhood as an adult-molester: A Salt River Moffie'.

As the subject comes into being through the acquisition of language, the articulation of desire becomes a priority in constituting the “queer” subject. The words that allow a vocabulary to define a particular existence also limit that existence. The sexuality that is defined by the desire of the individual is paradoxically the term that limits the perception of that individual.

The use of a post-modern device that collapses the binary of text and image becomes transgressive in this installation. Hutcheon (1990: 43) describes how such devices, in this case using a term of abuse as a symbol of defiance, challenges the conventions of the historical or traditional parameters of the distinction between the image and the text. Similarly, as Verster (see *Chapter 2*) recontextualised the male body into the “feminine” position as the object of desire, consequently highlighting queer sexuality. In other words, the intimate acts between the figures become a political act. Coetzee showcases the words that represent that sexuality from a position that seeks to disenfranchise the individuals; he challenges the assumptions that give those words substance. Coetzee relies on the cultural specificity of South African colloquial speech, and challenges the conventional usage of “moffie” in a similar way to how gay men reclaimed the word “queer”. The power of the words are challenged by Coetzee as Hutcheon (1990: 43) concisely states:

What is common to all these post-modern challenges to convention is their simultaneous exploitation of the power of that convention and their reliance on the viewers’ knowledge of its particulars.

Language is a mode of signification, and words represent concepts. By focussing some attention on the “act of naming”, the power that a seemingly innocent word has on the physical body is highlighted. The act of naming an infant instantaneously initiates them into a “matrix of intelligibility” whereby biological characteristics (sex) determine the mode of signification through which the infant is represented. This is most evident in the treatment of intersexed (intersexual) infants by medical institutions. Butler (2001: 175) identifies how the intersexed



infant questions the limitations of the human body and the society in which that body must exist:

When we ask what the conditions of intelligibility are by which the human emerges, by which the human is recognized, by which some subject becomes the subject of human love, we are asking about conditions of intelligibility composed of norms. Of practices, that have become presuppositional, without which we cannot think the human at all.

Using the example of intersexed infants stresses the role of binary opposition in our understanding of sex. Butler (2001) demonstrates how intersexuality is interconnected with the ideology of cultural and historical constructions that rely on assumptions, such as the fluidity of gender, and which justify the violence done to the bodies of these infants. Coetzee's images connote such violence, and the arms express the pain that is inflicted. The ideology of the seemingly innocent words such as that of "boy" and "girl" expose the power invested in such categories

The reliance on the stereotypes of the deviant or perverse homosexual, which have been documented visually by photography (since the nineteenth century), are vocally enacted and employed to denigrate homosexuals. Accordingly, words such as "moffie" and "queer" expose the underlying homophobic discourses that could be described as speech acts. Speech acts, according to Butler (1997), have a dimension of performativity that reveals not just the individual it is directed at, but also becomes a sign and reflection of other converging discourses.

Butler's extrapolation of the ideological importance of the performative utterance is demonstrated by certain African leaders who utilise homophobic rhetoric to justify the persecution of homosexuals. Blaming national problems, such as poverty or illness, on homosexuality exposes the underlying structure of homophobic discourse. "Implicit in the architecture of homophobia is that it reveals the mind of its speakers, and their own anxieties" (Reddy, 2002: 174).

The staging of the word “moffie” on Wilde’s grave makes connections between many conceptual links. One of the most prominent connections being the use of Wilde’s grave, creating a link between the word ‘moffie’ and Wilde. The details of Wilde’s life are not as important as his mythological status as a gay icon. Reading Wilde as a gay icon illustrates Barthes’ concept of “myth”, as the idea or the legend is a sign of the attitudes towards homosexuals in the late nineteenth century. Coetzee is employing the myth of Wilde as a signifier of greater cultural attitudes in contemporary South Africa. He does this by placing the word “moffie” upon the resting place of an icon of martyrdom. As Fone (2000) points out, Wilde’s trial is the most famous example of how homophobic attitudes destroyed an individual. “Wilde’s trial remains the most celebrated example of homophobia directed against an individual. Wilde stood for all that England detested” (Fone, 2000: 308). The trial sheds light on the violence that is done to bodies by words.

The importance of words and language are emphasised when looking at his trial. Wilde’s (1994) novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was used as evidence in his infamous trial, and could be viewed as an example of how language and power wield a sword of homophobic discourse in the guise of natural law. The accusation that Wilde was according to McKenna (2004) a sodomite and his subsequent trial illustrates how same-sex desire was viewed as a vice worse than murder.

The literary depictions of homosexuals as self-destructive and narcissistic, one of the many views of the deviancy of the homosexual in Victorian society, is epitomised in the character of Dorian Gray. The reference to the ancient Greek Doric order is the greatest signifier that positions the story within a homoerotic context. The narcissistic central protagonist possesses a Grecian male beauty and indulges in a hedonistic lifestyle that could be viewed as characteristic of the intemperance of what, in contemporary terms, could be described as “queer”. Queer is the sense that the character’s non-conformity becomes highly politicised in a “camp” defiance of the mainstream culture. The story evokes images from

the Greek myth of Narcissus, and can be understood in terms of intertextuality. The portrait is the reflection in the water, and Dorian is Narcissus. Wilde's text calls to mind the homoerotic quality of ancient Greece by modelling Dorian on the classical male beauty that was considered to be the ideal male form in Victorian times. However, this form has a duality of meaning, which is used simultaneously as the valorisation of a heteronormative ideal, and as an object of gay male desire. Lucie-Smith (1997) notes a resurgence of what he describes as homoerotic subject matter becoming evident in both literature and art at the turn of the twentieth century. The emergence of the homosexual as a personage was given a face or made representable in the form of Wilde. The representation of Wilde as the image of the quintessential homosexual becomes Coetzee's intertextual reference by which the homophobic attitudes of the "law" are exposed.

This form of intertextuality alludes to the connotations of the term "moffie", which are historically and politically loaded. Coetzee utilises the word in a camp style. The flamboyancy of the pink flowers and the performance of the theatre Coetzee's linguistical representation of the male body is both serious and humorous. The humour hides the tragedy of the plethora of individuals affected, and his style is unambiguously that of a gay male. The work becomes an iconic affirmation of the historical struggle for validation in society and acknowledges the violence done to the body by language.

The images of the arms depicted in black and white are reminiscent of forensic photographs taken of corpses at a crime scene. The arms appear to point towards the larger full colour image of the word "MOFFIE". The arms could be read individually or as part of the greater installation. The words are read against the body, specifically the gay male body. As Williamson (2001) notes:

In this case, the arms are reaching out to the world, the names displayed proudly. Gay men have accepted the insults and turned them around by using them as names of solidarity.

Coetzee highlights the term as having a physical effect on the body; the external scars expose the trauma of internalised damage. The outstretched arms appear to have slashed wrists, and this self-mutilation is read as a signifier of homophobic attitudes represented in the words “PEDE” and “FAGGOT”. These words are synonyms for queer and moffie, and represent the history of hate and discrimination. According to Reddy (2002) the grammatical themes and the lexical choices in homophobic discourse clearly demonstrate that it is a form of hate speech bent on recuperating a natural and thus heterosexual order in society. Coetzee's image of the singular out-stretched arm is a physical manifestation of the violence that words incite. The connotations of the words evoke the histories that have shaped the contemporary constitutions of queer identities. Williamson reads the names as an act of solidarity, politicising the names and challenging their conventional usage. The reappropriation of these derogatory terms draws a parallel with the taking back of the term “queer”, and can be analysed in much the same way, the most notable difference being the geographical association of each term. One of the common features of each term is the homophobia invested into each term. “Terror is used as a means of establishing the dominance of one form of masculinity over another, as in heterosexual violence against gay men” (Connell, 1994: 17). This creates a mixture of terror and fear that regulates the visibility of homosexuality. The “terror” shapes perceptions of identities and influences choices by imposing consequences on non-normative masculinity.

Homophobic rhetoric is one of the most public displays of power that reinforces the mainstream culture of “compulsory heterosexuality” as defined by Rich (1980). The predominant heterocentric mainstream culture needs order and clarity, which can be compared to the military institution. Homophobic stereotypes merge with biomedical discourses, which perpetuate myths of a singular type that is used to fuel and propagate public moral panics. The notion of a moral panic, according to Reddy (2002), stirs up public emotion and often

empowers the state to enforce certain laws which will address this problem. This empowers the state to further sanction and regulate individuals.

Fone (2000) documents the historical attitudes towards homosexuals and how the hostility and persecution of homosexuals is systematic; at times homosexuals strategically become the scapegoats for society's problems. "The most recent expressions of homophobia draw upon the age-old fears about the dangers that homosexuality and homosexuals pose to the stability, the morality, and the health of society" (Fone, 2000: 11). The HIV/AIDS pandemic is just one example of how homosexual behaviour is considered a danger to society. For a full discussion on this, see Watney (1995) who shows how the representation of HIV/AIDS is embroiled in a complex politics of power and stereotyping. The stereotype of someone with AIDS is polemically constructed into conflicting imagery of either "sadistic over-simplifications of racists, misogynists, and homophobes' or equally oversimplified idealizations". This divergence creates an abstraction of meaning that could be read on a symbolic level, thus constructing the idea of the discourse as a sign.

Sontag (1991) explores how the idea of AIDS is a metaphor that can be read as a sign. The discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS linked disease and desire to homosexuals. The homophobic lexicon of the early discovery of the disease suggests how AIDS has been popularised in the media as an untreatable, irreversible and invariably fatal condition. Common themes and misconceptions of the narrative of the disease are characterised by Treichler (1999) who presents many of these perceptions. The signification of the disease creates myths that cloud the real challenges and sometimes even halts progression that could have been made to find solutions. Just as myths are ideological, they are also performative, in that while they conceal they simultaneously expose. AIDS was initially named GRID (Gay Related Immuno Deficiency) from when the first cases were discovered in the gay communities of San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles. As Sontag (1991: 111) notes, due to the sexual nature of

transmission, the illness is considered by many as a self-inflicted calamity brought on by not only “sexual excess”, but more so by perversity. This is evident in some of the misconceptions surrounding the contraction of the virus. This included naming the virus a gay plague, which justified the State's abuse of people's rights and invasion into their privacy. HIV/AIDS was simply considered the price paid for anal intercourse; the price paid for participating in the hedonistic 60's and the gay liberation. It was just another sexually transmitted disease that offered a golden opportunity for scientific studies and fundraising. All these discourses permeated the biomedical interventions, and even public policy measures that were explored were limited. Doctors were baffled by the “flu-like” symptoms of these cases, and it wasn't long before people started dying. “The fact that these patients were all homosexuals suggests an association between some aspect of a homosexual lifestyle” (Treichler, 1999: 27). This initial observation lead to the association of HIV being an effect of a so called gay lifestyle, however, this view did not acknowledge heterosexual female patients who, according to Treichler, exhibited the same symptoms.

The common factor that men suffering from AIDS were also gay gave rise to the assumption that it must have something to do with their sexual preference and lifestyle. As Reddy (2002) points out, HIV/AIDS is still seen as a “gay disease” in many parts of Africa, despite the prevalence of the virus in the heterosexual population. This misconception is evident in the political speeches made by leaders of certain African countries.

Coetzee visually references these themes of homophobia and the violence that has been and is being done to male bodies. The scarred words resonate painfully at a physical level; the flesh is being cut and sliced, but this is read as a sign of the deeper pain being experienced on a psychological level. The recent increase in cases of male anorexia is just one of the many new forms that this violence takes. The limited scope of this dissertation prevents a full discussion of



this topic, however, the connection between body image and sexuality is an area that needs to be investigated further.

Homophobia constitutes a disease that has been highlighted by the pandemic of AIDS, the factors are evident. Rosenberg (1992: xiii) problematises traditional notions of a disease by questioning the definition:

The reality is obviously a good deal more complex; disease is at once a biological event, a generation-specific repertoire of verbal constructs reflecting medicine's intellectual and institutional history, an occasion of and potential legitimization for public policy, an aspect of social role and individual-intrapsychic-identity, a sanction for cultural values, and a structuring element in doctor and patient interactions. In some ways disease does not exist until we have agreed that it does, by perceiving, naming, and responding to it.

This definition applies to how homophobia has until only recently been culturally sanctioned. The images speak directly of the violence that the homophobic lexicon has on the somatic and psychic. Coetzee illuminates the dark underpinnings of homophobia through linguistic devices in a visual form. This linkage heightens the awareness of homophobia as a disease that still silences individuals. The narrative of the AIDS pandemic showcases the phobia ascribed to bodies and in particular the gay male body.

## Conclusions

The male body is never a singular unified representation. Language and power are inextricably linked to how the body is linguistically represented. Coetzee's use of a primarily visual medium draws attention to the importance language has in shaping perceptions of the male body, and in this case the particular form of male body. Having applied certain semiotic and queer theory concepts to the images of the *All Our Sons* installation, Coetzee's representation of the male body through language dramatically highlighted the relationship between gender, language and specifically sexuality. Discussions of homophobia as a form of hate speech are transferred onto the physical body in the images. Oscar Wilde is an historical figure who has been documented as an intertextual reference that

heightens the effects of homophobia as sanctioned by government, and this is juxtaposed against the South African context. Coetzee makes the poignant connection to the structural and material violence that shapes the existence of gay males.

The violence that can be done by words is evident in the scars left on the body. The male body is not the impenetrable hegemonic ideal, but rather an individual that can be affected by words. The words used to describe the materiality of the somatic exterior are both constructive and destructive.

Coetzee represents the vulnerability of specifically gay male bodies, recalling the historical persecution of gay men. This act of recalling or referencing the historical cases of homophobia at its most brutal exposes everything that is insidious and naturalised.

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion

In reviewing my preceding argument about gay male artists' representation of male bodies in selected artworks, I conclude that representations of the male body cannot escape the political. The power invested in the meaning of the male body take many forms and the modes of addressing the representation in the visual arts is a way of accessing some of the issues. This chapter makes tentative conclusions based on the main objectives explored in this dissertation, and ends with some questions and areas for future research. This study explored how three gay white male artists working in the post-Apartheid South African context utilised and visualised the male body. By applying concepts from queer theory and semiotics to this selection of visual artworks, the visibility of the queer subject becomes evident, and can be said to affirm the *public presence* of the queer subject in South Africa. These are read as signs of the change in South African society and continuously test the freedom of expression as envisioned by new constitution proposes.

Underpinning the chapters in this dissertation is the view that these artworks are interpretations, and as such are open to further reinterpretations. This study demonstrated that the male body is indeed a multi-faceted construct, which has been the subject matter common to Verster (painting), Van der Merwe (photography) and Coetzee (installation). As stated, these artistic mediums each have their own codes and conventions, which have been utilised by the artists respectively with particular intentions. The artists' understanding of their chosen medium is evident in their manipulation of these codes. The meaning of the male body holds different significance for each of the artists. Each chapter demonstrated that representation takes on many forms. The diversity of artistic practices is also reflective of the multitude of positions that individuals hold in our society.

My study on the artworks by Verster, Van der Merwe and Coetzee does not suggest that it is *only* through their representations that queer visibility is achieved. Rather, it could be concluded that the above artists, via the diverse mediums they have used, suggest alternative ways of understanding queer subjectivity, identity and freedoms for the queer subject that challenge heteronormative practices. My reading of their work is therefore not conclusive as the artworks are open to interpretation from other perspectives. For instance, it would be simultaneously necessary to ask critical questions about how the artworks articulate concerns about other crucial variables that matter to our developing identities as South Africans, such as race, class and ethnicity. There is little dispute that the context in which one analyses these particular works is continuously changing and this likewise influences subsequent readings of such artworks.

The progression of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender recognition and acceptability in our South African context has evolved significantly in the last twelve years. Since the early stages of conceptualising this dissertation, many legal and political developments in respect of queer equality have reinforced 'freedoms' for us as gay people. Most notably, the issue of gay marriage has dominated the news and the formal recognition of partnerships is the final hurdle in achieving full legal equality for queer South Africans.

*Chapter 2* presented a "reading map" that mapped out a selection of the theoretical debates, which provided the reader with an insight into queer theory and its applicability to the visual arts. The chapter also described aspects of art production in South Africa and identified some trends/themes represented by such production. In respect of the former, I motivated that the change in South African politics and, specifically, the attitudes towards homosexuality were a noticeable focus in some of the texts featured in this study. The poststructural framework of this study was motivated by the view that there are no singular (and thus finite) interpretations to a text, and therefore the analysis of the artworks

presented a view of how the artworks are read as texts where a plurality of meanings accrues. The chapter elaborated some relevant concepts pertinent to the analysis. Concepts such as queer theory and semiotics are discussed in their relation to the visual arts incorporating ideas of the subject, and the male body.

*Chapter 3* focused on two of Andrew Verster's paintings from his *Erotic Interiors* (1996) series. I claimed that the medium of oil painting was exploited by Verster to showcase the freedom of artistic expression in the context of a post-apartheid South Africa. Verster's use of placing the male body in the interior, private space highlighted some of the issues concerned with representing the male body by a gay male artist. Verster, in my view, motivated the display of the physical body; the sex of the body is interpreted in relation to the context in which the form is placed. Some of the issues also explored *how* the male body is influenced by culture; the intertextuality of the history of the classical Greek artefacts; as well as the notion that furniture can be read as cultural products, which are signs that enable an understanding of sexuality. The use of the furniture and sculptures as subject matter link the figures to the way in which bodies are perceived as cultural artefacts.

Verster's placement of the figures illuminated the meaning of the male body as an object of gay male desire. Openly gay male subject matter in South African art recalls the history of a racialised violence and struggle, politically engaging the viewers' knowledge and the artists' intentions to create a highly sensual and poetic critique of this history. The intimacy of the figures heightens the themes of pleasure and desire, and the erotic quality of the paintings challenges the boundaries of democratic values.

Simultaneously, the history of homoeroticism in mainstream art acknowledges and denies the presence of same-sex desire in society. The abundance of the male nude in many different depictions has, in queer theoretical terms, tenuously legitimised the gaze of males looking at other male bodies. This denial of desire

is curious in relation to the plethora of male nudes found in Western art traditions. These works highlighted the male body as an object of desire and re-addresses the pleasure involved in viewing such bodies.

*Chapter 4* showcased the construction of masculinity through the use of clothes to represent the body. The gender that represents the body is displayed and explored in a photographic mode. This particular kind of physical type is reflective of an ideal body type. This ideal body type is an embodiment of heteronormative ideological assumptions. Van der Merwe has, through the medium of photography, chosen to represent the male body as the historical constructs of masculinity which are propagated by institutions that uphold gender, such as family, state or the church. Van der Merwe intelligently combines elements of many areas that regulate the construction of such concepts, most notably the military. Other institutions are called into question, and so too is the role of science and the state in influencing how society understands bodies, genders and sexuality.

Van der Merwe has represented the male body through the clothes worn by the body; in this case the military uniforms. His subject matter is concerned with military regalia and uniforms which are read as signs of a particular type of masculinity. Through his manipulation of the medium, van der Merwe has challenged the reality of the image, and thereby questions the truth of that representation of reality. Simultaneously, he questions the heteronormative assumptions by highlighting the vulnerability of the gay male in the military. He does this by pushing the images into a temporal space that speaks about memory and experience.

*Chapter 5* focused on the representation of the male body through the use of language to describe the body. This is most evident when Coetzee showcases the homophobia underlying the use of the South African term “moffie”. In his installation he places the word upon the grave of Oscar Wilde, making a pertinent



reference to the historical attitudes towards homosexuals in society, and commenting on the current situation in South Africa. Most importantly, language has often been (and still is) used as a marker to exclude and pathologies through such terms as “moffie” and “queer”. It is my conclusion that Coetzee foregrounds homophobic discourse as form of ‘excitable’, ‘murderous’ and, indeed hate(ful) speech that is configured around a bodies that represent queer pathologies. Coetzee’s referencing of Wilde (a gay icon) therefore calls into question an entire history of oppression, violence and pathologisation of homosexuals.

Coetzee represented how the male body is a site where language and power converge to create or destroy bodies. The history and reappropriation of the term “queer” (as motivated throughout this dissertation) is of significant import as the word is, in some senses, a synonym for “moffie”, and effectively demonstrates the way in which a term of abuse can be reclaimed, reappropriated and deployed as a term of defiance and solidarity. Such a strategy reinforces a political act and represents an anti-assimilation stance that underpins queer theory’s resistance to heteropatriarchal power.

Homophobia as a form of hate speech, and arguably a type of disease, is transferred onto the physical body in the images; the nature of this is highlighted by the trial of Oscar Wilde – a historical case of homophobic injustice. The recollection exposes the insidious and naturalised way homophobia works. Coetzee’s use of Wilde’s grave represents the vulnerability of gay male bodies, and recalls the historical persecution of gay men.

The production of the male body in art in a post-Apartheid context is reflective of freedom of expression, which in turn reflects the attitudes towards gay men in South Africa. The reception of the male body in art indicates the interconnectedness of society, art and the artist as cultural producer. The multi-faceted signification of the male body is reflected in the mediums chosen in this study.

## **Areas for further research**

Due to the limited scope of this study, I have not undertaken investigations into other issues that need to be urgently addressed, and have only skimmed the surface of an argument on the representation of gay male bodies. I view my brief argument in this project as a starting point that should lead to further inquiry into interrelated issues (such as for example, race, class and ethnicity). More so, artistic production in South Africa is vast, and I believe it may be useful to consider inquiries into a broader corpus of texts that characterise South African art. I also believe that a comparative perspective could yield a good understanding of artists' treatment of sexuality in South African art that predates the post-Apartheid context. More so, a study of women's bodies in relation sexuality is worth investigated in order to possibly better understand how heteropatriarchal power configures images of women. Beyond the representation of male bodies by gay male artists, this study confirms that the representation of bodies is indeed political, and that identity politics in particular is intimately connected to the way we make and (re)make meaning about our diverse sexualities.

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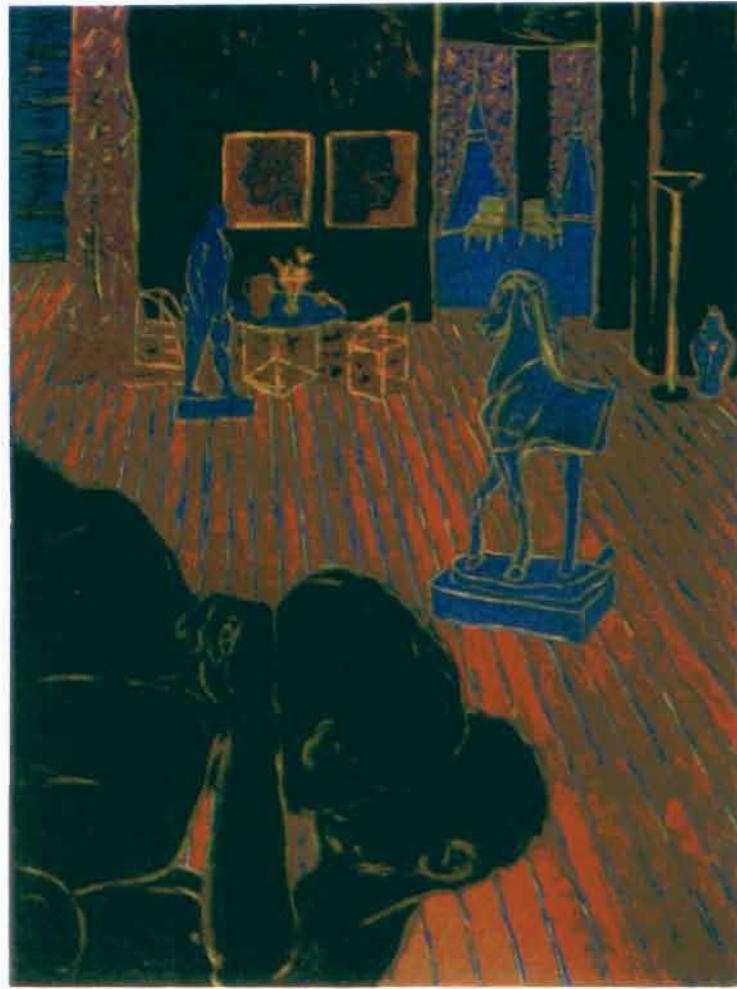
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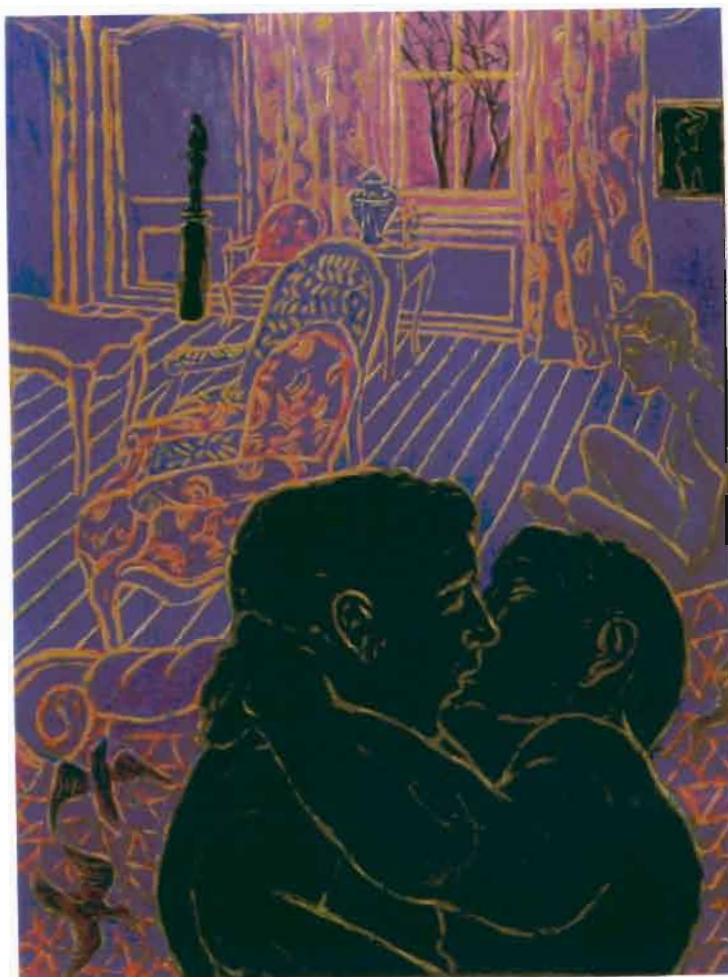
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NAME OF ARTIST: Andrew Verster  
TITLE OF PAINTING: *Erotic Interiors*  
MEDIUM: Oil on canvas  
SIZE: 1240 x 910mm  
EXHIBITED: NSA Gallery, Durban  
DATE: 1996



NAME OF ARTIST: Andrew Verster  
TITLE OF PAINTING: *Erotic Interiors*  
MEDIUM: Oil on canvas  
SIZE: 124 x 91 cm  
EXHIBITED: NSA Gallery, Durban  
DATE: 1996



NAME OF ARTIST: Hentie van der Merwe

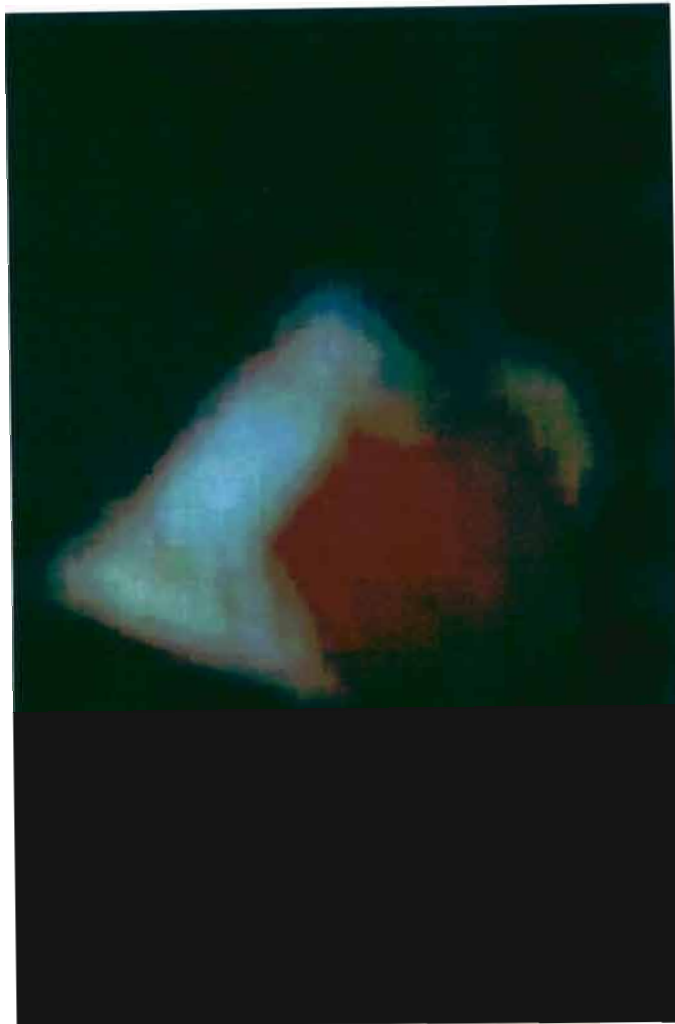
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MEDIUM: cibachrome photograph

SIZE: 103 x 72 cm

EXHIBITED: Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg

DATE: 2000



NAME OF ARTIST: Hentie van der Merwe

TITLE OF PHOTOGRAPHY: *Cape Town Rifles (Dukes) Bandsman (1913-1926)*

MEDIUM: cibachrome photograph

SIZE: 103 x 72cm

EXHIBITED: Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg

DATE: 2000





NAME OF ARTIST: Mark Coetzee

TITLE: Moffie

MEDIUM: installation mixed media

EXHIBITED: AVA. Association of Visual Arts Cape Town

DATE: 2000



NAME OF ARTIST: Mark Coetzee

TITLE: All Our Sons

MEDIUM: projected slides onto wall

EXHIBITED: AVA Association of Visual Arts Cape Town

DATE: 2000