

**Narratives of Departure: A Body of Art and Literary Work  
Accompanied by a Theoretical Enquiry into the Process and  
Methodology of their Production**

Faye Julia Spencer  
Student Number: 942400384

Supervisors: Professor Cheryl Stobie & Professor Michael Wessels

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## DECLARATION

As required by University regulations, I hereby state unambiguously that this work has not been presented at any other University or any other institution of higher learning other than the University of KwaZulu-Natal, (Pietermaritzburg Campus) and that unless specifically indicated to the contrary within the text it is my original work.

-----7 March 2017  
Faye Julia Spencer

As candidate's supervisor I hereby approve this thesis for submission

-----7 March 2017  
Professor Cheryl Stobie

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## **PREFATORY NOTE**

This thesis represents the theoretical component of a practice-based PhD research project. As is appropriate, this kind of enquiry combines interrelated creative works and a thesis. The practical component of the project comprises the creation and presentation of original creative work made up of three bodies of practice spanning painting, creative writing and printmaking. Select work from these three bodies of practice were exhibited for examination in the Jack Heath Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, in tandem with this submission. The author-date or Harvard form of referencing has been used throughout the thesis as it is the preferred form for theses in the Arts at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Because of the close connection between practice (creative) and theoretical research in practice-based doctorates, the thesis contains a number of photographs which either document aspects of the three creative projects or which serve as records of the creative works themselves. It is here noted that all these photographs are my own.

## ABSTRACT

This research undertaking comprises the dual submission of closely related practical and theoretical research. The thesis represents the theoretical component of a practice-based PhD research project. The practical component of the project is made up of original creative work drawn from three bodies of practice across the creative spheres of painting, creative writing and printmaking. My *Office Politics Series*, comprises an extended immersion in paintings and drawings that utilise dogs and canine behaviour as metaphors for the workplace specifically, and the present social climate more broadly. The second project, *The Indian Yellow Project* began in creative writing, and consists of both printmaking and creative writing. The story unfolding within the writing is one of familial loss and efforts at recovery. Through writing I was enabled to create visual imbrications on this theme in printmaking. The prints themselves and the images contained therein reference the story outlined in the novella but also serve to act independently of it. The third project, the *Wish List Project* began as a series of paintings by a single creator (myself) but over time transformed into a multiple participant print-based collaboration for a public space. A significant part of my research comprises a detailed enquiry into the manner in which each of the three projects engages with notions of departure and dislocation in various forms. In my thesis I consider the dialogue that each project establishes internally in relation to the theme of departure as well as the form that this dialogue assumed across all three projects, including the novella. I reflect on how this exploration of departure relates to the humanising functions that I believe art fulfils: catharsis, cohesion and community.

In my thesis I refer to writing from a wide range of contemporary theorists. These include ideas on signification, visuality and narrative proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, insofar as these relate to my philosophy and experience regarding the function and potential of creative practice. Also contributing to this research are Bakhtin's notion of dialogism (1981, 1984) and what he terms the "eternal" (1984:202) mobility of signs. In my *Indian Yellow Project* specifically I consider numerous ways in which the text and images can be read. The cathartic function and the 'call to' or motive for writing (and other creative acts) form a central question in the thesis, and ideas proposed by Cixous on the relationship of writing to death and to catharsis are of particular relevance to this research enquiry.

The reading and creative investigation for the project span philosophical, narrative, thematic and material (medium-related) concerns. I also reflect on the important role metaphor and story-telling play in each project; and I consider their use as mechanisms for dialogue. Through my practice I discover, as Hannah Arendt (1995:105) suggests, that in story-telling we make sense of experiences, we uncover meaning without cancelling out or defining it in a narrow ambit. Through my enquiry into each of the three projects I consider ways in which creative practice offers the creators, and those who view, read or interact with the works, opportunities to, as Cixous suggests, say the unsayable (1993:53). My thesis and my practice are driven by the conviction that art is a valuable site for healing and for dialogue which "avows the unavowable" (53). While the first of my projects analysed in this thesis specifically references ideas about power

relations and feelings of disempowerment, on the whole the traumas I reflect on in these three bodies of practice are personal in nature. Nevertheless, I believe that their implications for creative practices as tools for catharsis and communication of the “unsayable” are particularly relevant to a society such as South Africa where there remains so much scope for repair. As a person involved in arts education I believe it is important to draw attention to my conviction that creative practice offers opportunities for dialogue and repair, and my engagement with this thesis is an effort to emphasise this conviction.

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1. Background

This thesis represents the theoretical component of a practice based PhD research project. In its entirety the enquiry comprises, as is appropriate for a practice based PhD (Macloud & Holdridge 2005:197), interrelated creative works and a thesis. The practical component of the project consists of the creation and presentation of original creative work comprising three bodies of practice: the *Office Politics Series* (2010-2016), the *Indian Yellow Project* (2010-2016) and the *Wish List Project* (2009-2016). Key features of each of the three projects are provided below.

The *Office Politics Series* was initiated with a group of nine small scale vivid oil paintings featuring canine imagery. These first panels began an extended enquiry in paintings and drawings that utilised dogs and canine behaviour as metaphors for the workplace specifically, and the present social climate more generally. The paintings, collectively, as noted in *Jabulisa 2010: The Art and Craft of KwaZulu-Natal*, “speak of dynamics within large groups of individuals, of power relationships”, and “plays for territory” (Bell:135). The series references “the disturbing (and sometimes quirky) interactions between individuals with varying agendas” (135) and can be seen to reference the workplace specifically and, more broadly to reference the tensions of the “postmodern habitat” (Smith 1999:154). Although the very early panels are small in scale, the series is deliberately composed of work in a range of scales, smaller scale works encouraging the viewer to close proximity with the imagery, while the larger formats overwhelm the viewer. Following the initial group of panels, the series grew to include large format mixed-media drawings and paintings that utilised media such as acrylic, oil, glue, wax and charcoal.

The *Indian Yellow Project*, like the *Office Politics Series* spans 2010-2016 but this project is in printmaking and in creative writing, and not in painting. The *Indian Yellow Project* began with the creation of a novella. The story unfolding within the writing is one of familial loss and efforts at recovery. The narrator of the tale is a child who describes

the circumstances of her mother's sudden death and its consequences for her family. The writing was driven by my own efforts at working through the loss of my triplets – something which I initially had tried to address unsuccessfully through painting. The act of writing, increasingly, and to my surprise, enabled me to create visual imbrications on this theme in what, for me, was a new medium: printmaking. In this way I embarked on the creation of over 20 linocut prints in dual or single colour, with embossed and printed imagery in combination. The prints themselves and the images contained therein reference the story outlined in the novella but also serve to act independently of it. The forms used in the prints are often deliberately spare so that they can speak in an iconic rather than a literal register. Aside from enabling the creation of these large-scale prints, in the course of writing the novella I began to envision ways in which I could illustrate the book. Thus this project has multiple parts which inflect, yet are also distinct from one another. The relationship of these components to one another, the manner in which they speak to the theme of departure, and the ways in which processes of writing and printmaking served as mechanisms for interrogation and repair are aspects of the project that I scrutinise in three of the chapters forming part of this thesis.

The *Wish List Project*, the third project that I reflect on in this thesis, began life as a series of paintings produced in 2009 and 2010 for a display in a gallery environment. More accurately, the project began life as *two* series of paintings: *Smaller Wish List Series* and *Larger Wish List Series*. The smaller series consisted of 18 panels, each measuring 25 x 25 cm, and each comprising a painted trompe l'oeil decorative frame surrounding a circular 'window' containing an image. The larger series is a more loosely connected group of five paintings, measuring 60 x 60cm, and each featuring an extreme close-up of a single object. My writing at the time confirms that I began the paintings in order to reference and reflect on "personal wishes as well as common human desires" (Artist's Statement, Spencer: 2009). Indeed, both sets of paintings were compelled by my need to reflect on my longing for a child, and to come to terms with the, then, recent loss of my triplets. This experience had forced me to think about what people sharply desire, and why we might desire those things. I did not initially envision a life for the paintings beyond the gallery, nor did I imagine that they might be located in a medium other than

painting. Reflection on them in that space, and dialogues with fellow artists about my intentions for these works, led me to consider alternative media and means of creating a wish list. My experience of this loss had forced me to think about what people sharply desire and why we might desire those things in order to reference and reflect on personal wishes as well as common human desires. The project, then, was initiated in painting by a single creator (myself) but over time transformed into a multiple participant print-based collaboration for a public space, a transformation which allies them more closely with my original compulsion that the work initiates a conversation about things that people long for, and things that may connect us. In Chapter Five of this thesis I reflect on the transformation that the project has undergone, and what that may suggest for the direction my work will take in future.

I am an artist, educator and woman living in South Africa today. This is my home and I have always considered it as such. Our violent past, divided history and remarkable shift towards democracy are widely-known. Despite many heartening efforts towards the creation of our country as a home for all its citizens, in 2016 alone South Africa has experienced great turbulence, from student protests to economic challenges and the eruption of race politics (Rivera 2016). Events such as the “violent service delivery protests” (Devenish 2016) and questions around “bad governance, corruption and a lack of vision by the elected government” (Du Preez 2016) speak to the parlous state of our young democracy in social, political, educational and economic spheres. I believe creative arts, both visual practices and creative writing, have much to offer the inhabitants of a region like South Africa which continues to be gripped by trauma, violent conflict and discord. I consider the capacity creative practices have for self-realisation (vital if one is to come to know, care for, and participate alongside others productively), catharsis and dialogue to be extremely valuable. I believe that creative practice offers the creators, and those who view, read or interact with the works opportunities to, as author Hélène Cixous suggests, say the unsayable (1993:53). My thesis and my practice are driven by the conviction that art is a valuable site for healing and for dialogue which “avows the unavowable” (53).

While the first of my projects analysed in this thesis specifically references ideas about power relations and feelings of disempowerment, on the whole the conflicts or traumas I reflect on in these three bodies of practice are predominantly personal in nature. Nevertheless, I believe what they suggest about creative practices as tools for catharsis and communication of the “unsayable” to be particularly relevant to a society such as South Africa where there remains so much scope for repair. As the South African Police Service’s annual crime statistics from last year show, the murder rate in South Africa is “five times higher than the global average” (Grant 2015). Ours is a society not short on trauma. As a person involved in arts education I believe it is important to draw attention to my conviction that creative practice offers opportunities for dialogue and repair, and my engagement with this thesis is an effort to emphasise this conviction. Finally, as a woman who has suffered a profound personal loss (the death of three of my children) in a country where the infant mortality rate for 2016 is estimated at 40.19 per 1000 births (2016: Geoba.se- Gazateer) and as someone who has found in the arts a productive space in which to reflect on personal trauma, I believe my practice may be a useful touchstone for other people who have suffered similarly through the death/s of persons close to them.

As creative products emanating from my own personal experience, the novella and the visual artworks comprising each of the projects, are irretrievably and inherently unique. In particular, the way in which I reflect on and present the connections and differences between these projects, and my sustained consideration of their relationship to the theme of departure, comprises an original contribution to knowledge. My thesis will contribute to the field of visual arts theory in its role as a text by an artist *about making*. More generally, the study of my creative practice that comprises this PhD will contribute towards building a clearer understanding of the value of art and the creative process for both its practitioners and its audience, as well as for other fields of human experience and knowledge. I agree with James Elkins’ assertion that many artists “have made compelling work even though they have no idea of the critical matrix to which their work belongs,” and that not all artists’ work benefits from self-reflexivity. At the same time, though, Elkins also notes that some artists’ work “thrives” on self-awareness (2009:153). I believe this has become true of my practice and the PhD project offers me a unique

opportunity to take my creative enquiry to another level and marks a significant growth in my artistic development. Undertaking a project like this, in which practice and theory are intrinsically linked, affords me the opportunity and scope to engage with my practice in significantly greater depth than I have done in the past.

In 1999 and 2000 I undertook a Masters in Art as a young student with little actual experience of the world either as a practicing artist or as a conscientised adult. I avoided examining my own practice in the theoretical part of my MA degree, choosing instead to concentrate on the work of Clive van den Berg, an artist whose work is very different from mine. At that time, I viewed the MA as a means through which to continue to explore the practice of painting, and the theoretical component as an interesting but mildly awkward hurdle I needed to jump in order to complete the degree. Subsequent experience and the passage of time has led me to conclude that it is both necessary and appropriate for my development as an artist (and an individual) to record, reflect on and analyse my creative practice, paying careful attention to methodology, process and thematic underpinning. I think it is important for artists to question why they make things in a certain way so that they do not remain confined to a particular idiom or way of working out of habit, especially when a willingness or openness to exploring other mediums or idioms may lead to a more expansive understanding of their own practice and the potential therein for catharsis and a more profound engagement with others.

My reason for combining practice and analysis in a single overarching project (that of my PhD) is bound up in my conviction that the act of creating facilitates my ability to “think differently about our human situation” (Carter 2004:xii). Practices such as painting, drawing and creative writing serve as languages that enable me, as an artist, to speak the unsayable and to communicate ideas about making, bereavement, dislocation, mortality and loss in ways that are open and non-prescriptive and which, therefore, invite dialogue and reflection on subjects that are often avoided or suppressed. One of the distinctive results of creative research is what art theorist Paul Carter describes as “local” knowledge (xi). Recent personal history has led me to consider and reflect on notions of departure, death and disorientation, and the relationship of these to my own practice. As noted, I

believe that these experiences have a value that extends beyond the private and personal, even though they are local and particular.

My PhD enquiry explores connections and differences between my *Office Politics Series*, *Indian Yellow Project* and my *Wish List Project*, each of which comprises a complex of mediums. My thesis seeks to develop a language that is appropriate to talking about the creative process itself. The connections and departures within these three bodies of work are explored both in the written thesis and in the creative works themselves. The enquiry also, specifically in the case of the *Indian Yellow Project*, considers the connections and differences within that single project's component iterations. As the title of the thesis suggests, each of the projects connects with ideas related to departure and the various departures referenced in the three projects are scrutinised. The relationship between theory and practice in this undertaking is intricate. It might best be described as "symbiotic". The reading and creative investigation for the project span philosophical, narrative, thematic and material (physical and medium-related) concerns. The exegetical writing and self-reflexive writing, in turn, impact on the creative works.

My thesis charts this dialogue and locates it within the fraught arena of postmodernism, as a central concern of this enquiry is a consideration of how creative practice can function meaningfully in the present age and place. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes the contemporary milieu – frequently termed postmodern – as "liquid" modernity (2005:1). This is a terrain in which the "signposts and orientation points" suggesting which path to follow, "far from staying put, seem to be on castors," changing "places quicker than the destinations they point to can be reached" (Bauman 2002:73). I believe the liquid environment of uncertainty described by Bauman bears close resemblance to the present day experience of life in South Africa, as well as the wider world. My enquiry examines and asks questions about the very nature of the relationship between practice and theory and the potential role of the artist in today's "liquid world" of "rootless strangers" (Smith 1999:17). My writing on each of the creative projects that comprises the practical part of the PhD explores how art can reflect on and make a useful meaningful contribution to the time and place in which it is situated. While the three



projects that comprise this study were conceived independently, my charting of their development and subsequent reflection on their genesis has led me to identify areas of synchronicity and difference that invite further exploration. The initial work on each project has inspired me to take each of the projects in new directions in the course of my PhD creative project.

The *Office Politics Series* represents a reflection on the present-day social climate and implicates departure in that it comprises a shift away from my earlier and more literal paintings which focused on the human form in the domestic, private realm. The *Wish List Project* which began as a series of conventional easel-paintings (by a single creative practitioner) has been extended to include collaborative installation-type works. This project also intersects with departure in that it signals a departure from painting, but also implicates departure in more nuanced and far-reaching ways which I examine closely in the penultimate chapter of this thesis. This project again differs markedly from the *Indian Yellow Project*, in both medium and format. The *Indian Yellow Project* was conceived initially as a body of writing but this project transformed to include a set of prints, emanating from the novella, which serve to speak in an alternate register of the novella's themes of loss and recovery. In addition, the novella, which began solely as a written iteration, has evolved to include illustrations – some of which appear in the independent prints, others of which are entirely unique to the book itself.

While the three practical projects differ in terms of process, media and overt themes, they connect in ways that I analyse in the theoretical part of the thesis and explore through the actual practice of working on the creative projects. Both the analytical and practical parts of the broader project engage with the connections and the differences between the creative projects.

## **2. Practice as Research**

“Research that takes the nature of practice as its central focus”, as Linda Candy emphasises in her informative guide, “is called ‘practice-based’ or ‘practice-led’ research” (2006:2). This kind of research is undertaken by practitioners “such as artists,

designers, curators, writers, musicians, teachers and others, often, but not necessarily within doctoral research programmes” and “has given rise to new concepts and methods in the generation of original knowledge” (2). As Candy asserts, the terms “practice-led” and “practice-based” are frequently used interchangeably, yet they are in fact distinct (2). The distinction between these terms, as well as the location of my own work within the arena of research as practice, will be emphasised in the methodology section of this thesis. Here, however, I provide a broad introduction to practice related research. One of the principal theories on which this research of this kind is based is that of “reflection in action”, also defined as “reflective practice” and “knowing in action” (Gray and Malins 2004:22). This kind of “knowing” is described by Carole Gray and Julian Malins as dynamic and intuitive, a “knowing how rather than knowing what” (22). Proponents of practice as research work from the premise that creative practitioners think “in practice” through the medium they use and that reflection occurs in action. Furthermore, they contend that the unhappy division of practice and theory has largely been the result of an “inability or unwillingness to articulate this kind of knowledge” (22). This kind of thinking is present in the writing of Paul Carter (2004), Estelle Barrett (2004, 2007) and Barbara Bolt (2007), and I refer to writings on this type of research throughout the chapters in which my three projects are analysed.

There remains a division between practice that is deemed “creative” and practice that is scholarly, rational and academic, from which follows the implication that the creative process “cannot stand up to rational inquiry” (Carter 2004:xi). To dispel this myth, artists need to contribute through their own writing to the realm of academic research. As Carter notes, efforts by artists to write about their own practice will reduce gaps in the on-going discourse about art, its function, value and the implications that creative research may have for other disciplines (xi).

Creative research is uniquely capable of presenting the “complexity of the human situation” in a “tangible but non-reductive form” (xii). Artists/writers come to know things about themselves and the world through making, and through making are able to share those ideas with others, to test out assumptions, reach conclusions and enter into

dialogue with others. As Carter emphasises, the experience of making and the dialogical nature of such practice are not necessarily overtly or even usually apparent in the artefact (painting or novel) itself. In Carter's view, the thinking and technical aspects of making that may be revealed through exegesis and self-reflective writing (*the research*) is at least as valuable as the artwork (*the product*) itself. Without an exegesis or theoretical text, these aspects may remain hidden. Creative research has, therefore, the potential to demonstrate the significant role works of art can play in the "ethical project of *becoming* (collectively and individually) oneself in a particular place" (xii).

Theories of practice as research represent a theoretical position that is a central premise of this research and my own practice. Reflexive practice, as Gray and Malins note, like participatory action research, unites research and practice in a framework for inquiry which "involves practice, and which acknowledges the particular and special knowledge of the practitioner" (2004:22). Through my creative practices of painting, printmaking and writing, *through making*, I examine in the course of this doctoral enquiry both the process of making and the reasons for my engagement in these forms of practice. Through the act of making, questions are posed, answers are proposed and tested, and meaning (function/potential) is examined.

### **3. Research Objectives – My Key Questions**

My thesis, and my practical enquiry, is located in five key questions.

I ask what processes and iconography I use in the creation of each of the three bodies of work. Answering this involves a consideration of the mediums/combinations of media that are used in each of the projects and an exploration of why they have been chosen. A closely related question concerns the function of scale and format in the works.

I also consider how the works (the paintings, drawings, prints and the novella), inflect or reference one another. To answer this, I examine how the three bodies of work relate thematically to one another and how they differ. This involves a scrutiny of what the principal narrative in each of the three projects is, and an examination of how it is eroded or supported by sub-themes that underlie the imagery or text in each case.

An additional question I ask is what modes of display and media are used for each of the three projects. What are my reasons for these choices? I ask how the various mediums used differ from one another, and consider (particularly in reflecting on creative writing and printmaking) what qualities the mediums share.

I reflect on the relationship of the novella to the illustrative works that emanate from it. I consider whether it addresses something that the illustrative components of this particular project do not, and if so, how this is achieved.

I consider, also, how the processes and images in each of the three works is informed by or inflected in the theoretical imperative underpinning the works. This involves a consideration of the primary “imperative” for the creation of these particular works and how this complex question can be explored in a text-based exegesis. I consider questions about whether the artist’s beliefs about “making” are evident in the work in any way. I also examine how this foundational thinking makes itself manifest.

#### **4. Research Objectives – Broader Issues under Consideration**

The theoretical research comprises a number of principal investigations, chief of which is concerned with the function of making – why artists feel compelled to make the kinds of works they do. This question is complex and involves philosophical ideas regarding meaning and being. I situate this question mainly in the specificity of my own work though I draw (principally, but not exclusively) on aspects of the thinking of philosopher Paul Crowther, as well as ideas regarding the impact of the contemporary political, economic and social climate on individuals, proposed by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. I refer, too, to the experience and ideas of art theorists such as Paul Crowther and Suzi Gablik, and artist and theorist James Elkins.

Another investigation concerns narrative or storytelling. What are the viewpoints of contemporary thinkers concerning the position and function of narrative, particularly with reference to writing as a tool for repair or catharsis? Feminist theory and writing by Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva on the function of narrative and the creative act are

relevant here. I ask how these views support or counter my own views regarding the potential (actual or realised) of the narrative in the contemporary arts arena. I consider the possibilities that the “fictions” of art objects and novels have for revealing truths.

Some broader concerns relate particularly to exegetical research. I explore the text-based “mapping resources” (diagrammatic, discursive, documentary photography) that are useful for visual arts practitioners in the development and creation of an exegesis of their own work, which remains an emerging field of inquiry. Another important question concerns the ways in which writing about and recording work in process alters or influences that and subsequent works. I attempt to chart and understand this dialectical process. I also examine the implications for the artist’s perceived and potential role in society of the view that exegesis is a kind of revelatory documenting that debunks the mythic status of the artist as divine and as at one step removed from the world.

It is my intention through this research to highlight the complex, multivalent facets of making and illustrate the special place visual arts practice and theory has in the research arena. Practice based engagement has the capacity to generate innovative research as a result of its innately interdisciplinary complexion. Clive Cazeaux explains what is meant by this:

It involves combining different subjects and methods; for example, the interaction between an artist’s practice specialism and the interest they want to explore through their practice, with the research value lying in the negotiation that takes place between them, and what that negotiation produces. (2008:108)

The creative projects and their combination provide the basis for the self-reflexive study that is pursued in the thesis. They also constitute, in their own right, a significant new body of artistic work that contributes to the development of new artistic techniques and areas of artistic engagement. Special attention is paid in each of the chapters to the ways in which the creative projects engage with notions of departure and dislocation in various forms. Central to my enquiry is the dialogue that each project establishes internally in relation to this theme and the form that this dialogue assumes across all three projects. I also examine the way in which this exploration of departure relates to the humanising

functions that I believe art fulfils: catharsis, cohesion and community. While these concepts are largely held to be at odds with postmodernist conceptualisations regarding the role art plays in the world today, I refer to my own experience and to writing by a range of contemporary thinkers (chief among these are Bauman, Crowther, Gablik and Cixous) to support my view that visual and creative arts practices may serve as tools for catharsis and enhanced engagement with others.

Reference will be made in this thesis to ideas on signification, visuality and narrative proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva insofar as these relate to my philosophy and experience regarding the function and potential of creative practice. Creative practices such as writing and visual arts are held by both Kristeva and Cixous as practices that allow for change (Kristeva 1986:17) and healing (Cixous 1994:93). The cathartic function and the ‘call to’ or motive for writing (and other creative acts) form a central question in my work and, therefore, ideas proposed by Cixous on the relationship of writing to death and to catharsis are of particular interest to me. Also relevant to this research is Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism (1981, 1984) as I examine the polyvalence – or what Bakhtin describes as the “eternal” (1984:202) mobility of signs – in my *Indian Yellow Project* in particular and consider numerous ways in which the text and images can be read (202). The application of this concept (and the accompanying notion of heteroglossia) to my research is referred to in more detail in the methodology section of this introduction.

## **5. Theoretical Framework**

While I consider the concept of practice as research early on in this introduction, the theoretical framework that underpins this enquiry warrants a more detailed explanation given the relative “newness” of this kind of enquiry in creative arts at PhD level in South African tertiary institutions. It is only in the last five or six years that tertiary institutions in this country have been actively offering doctoral qualifications in the visual arts with practice based components (Thom, personal communication 2016, September 9). The theoretical framework that my research engages with straddles contemporary theory in the visual arts – with particular reference to the function of making – and the technical

sphere of knowledge about two-dimensional practice. My enquiry is located in the perspective of a practitioner. A key consideration of mine is the potential for creative practice as a communicative tool. As noted, ideas about catharsis, the acts of writing and making and their relationship to mortality are explored, with reference to both my personal experience and select writings by contemporary thinkers. While the emphasis in this dissertation remains on the experience and practice of my engagement literature drawn from philosophy, sociology, narrative theory and arts practice play a significant supportive role. A review of the main literature I reference, therefore, follows the methodology section of this introduction.

## **6. Methodology**

My research methodology comprises qualitative research and includes both a creative, practical element (the three bodies of work referred to in my introduction) and a scholarly, qualitative reflection and analysis of this practice (the thesis). As I noted in the earlier section headed *Practice as Research*, there are “two distinct types of research that have a central practice element” and these are termed “practice-led research” and “practice-based research” (Candy 2006:2). The terms are often used interchangeably, yet the difference between the two can be summarised as follows: “if a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge” then the research is “practice-based” while “if the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice” then it is best defined as “practice-led” (3). My own enquiry falls under the rubric of practice-based research as “an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice” (3). As Candy emphasises, in practice-based research “while the significance and the context” of the research is “described in words”, a full understanding” can only be obtained with “direct reference” to the creative artefacts (3). Practice-led research differs from practice-based research insofar as, in a doctoral thesis, the results of practice-led research may be fully described in text form without the inclusion of a creative outcome (3). The preceding definition clearly locates my doctoral enquiry in the field of practice-based research, as while the thesis provides “a substantial contextualisation of the creative work”, part of my original contribution to the field resides not solely in the thesis, but is also “demonstrated through the original creative

work” (3). My research can be described as an empirical study insofar as it involves *the creation of* primary data (paintings and works on paper) and a formal analysis of this data. It involves both an experiment and a survey of the experiment. My practice is interdisciplinary, comprising not only theoretical reflection on my practice, but also engagement with practices across a range of mediums: creative writing, painting, as well as printmaking. A complex of methodological concerns is thus involved. These concerns include questions relating to the material and the performative aspects of my practice (physical/medium specific, action-based), formal and iconographical analyses, as well as questions of narrative (both verbal and visual), and also sociological and philosophical questions of being, meaning and purpose. These questions provide the imperative for both the desire to communicate and the message contained within the artist’s vehicle for dialogue. Each of these primary methodological concerns is expanded on below, beginning with ideas related to the material and the performative (physical/medium specific, action-based) approach.

As my research is grounded in practice (comprising the conception and creation of visual artworks and creative writing), the methodology applied is that of invention, an approach described by Michael Serres as “the only true intellectual act” (1997:92). Through inventing creative works, I bring into being what is unknown and unanticipated. The practical part of the research project consists of the creation and construction of imagery and text through painting and printmaking. In addition to the visual practice I have, as noted, undertaken the writing of an illustrated novella, from which further visual products emerged. The novella, in itself a creative work, serves as a mine from which additional creative work has arisen.

The performative aspect of the work is concerned with the feeling or experience of the process. It is a consideration of the *in situ* thinking and the physical experience of the practitioner in the moment of making. This kind of knowledge is tacit knowledge: “a very specific sort of knowing, a knowing that arises through handling of materials in practice” (Bolt 2007:29). It provides a very specific way of understanding the world, one that is “grounded in material practice” (29). Material thinking (a term Bolt borrows from Carter)



offers us a way of considering the relations that take place “within the very processes of making” (29). Materials, in this conception, are not merely passive objects to be used instrumentally by the artist. Instead, the materials and processes of production have their own intelligence that comes into play in the interaction with the artist’s creative intelligence. Material thinking is underpinned by “handlability” and the Heideggerian premise that our theoretical understanding or knowledge of the world occurs only after we have come to understand it through physical experience (31-33). Emmanuel Levinas’s (1996:19) concept of “originary” thinking clarifies this kind of methodology. Originary thinking is a way of understanding that “derives from, or originates in and of the thing in question” (Bolt 2007:30). Through the experience of making and the generative potential of process, I have arrived at new insights which inform and find form in both the artworks and the theoretical writing – see particularly Chapters Two, Three and Four, wherein I detail how one insight or struggle led to a new realisation or to a reformulation of the original idea. This exploration is in keeping with practice-led research in the visual arts, where, as Candy notes, “the emphasis is on creative process and the works generated from that process”, and the artefact plays a “vital part in the new understandings about practice that arise” (2006:3).

Formal and iconographic analysis is used as an entry point through which to decode each of the projects and begin reflecting on their broader thematic. It also provides clues as to the projects’ (perceived/intended) functions. Formal analysis occurs both during and after the creation of the work. Analysis of the formal elements of the paintings, drawings and other visual artworks takes place in the specific chapters relating to each project. A chapter outline is provided at the end of this first chapter. Formal analysis is concerned with the examination of the visual appearance of each work in terms of its formal elements, such as the kind of colour, tone and compositional arrangement in the works. This approach, as researcher Gillian Rose emphasises, is concerned with a “detailed scrutiny of the image itself”, and serves as one of the entry points into the theoretical investigation of it (2001:135).

Iconographic analysis, notes Richard Brilliant, assists in uncovering the meanings implicit in “ritualised” or repeated symbols in the creative work (1988:121). An examination of how these symbols are manifested across each of the projects aids in identifying underlying narrative and thematic concerns in each of the projects. In order to uncover and closely scrutinise the thematic and structural relationships, I document, examine, analyse, reflect on and revisit the formal elements that comprise the three bodies of work. To accomplish this I utilise and include in my dissertation photographs, diagrams, sample works in progress, personal reflections and remembered accounts of the action of making, the iconography and the formal elements such as composition, line and colour arrangement.

This sort of analysis cannot, in itself, present a full account of the production of the pieces. Contextual analysis is also necessary. It involves considerations that are apparently outside the work itself but that impact on and influence its construction and reception. These include the artist’s background, as well as the context in which the art is presented. The ways in which work is displayed and the motivations behind the chosen form of display need to be considered, for example. This involves a critical reflection on my motives for making and a scrutiny of the climate in which I am working.

Apart from experiential knowledge, my enquiry is also located in reading about and considering contemporary sociological and philosophical positions of being, meaning and purpose. Accomplishing this adequately requires what researchers Martin Terre Blanche and Kevin Durrheim describe as “triangulation” (2006:380). Triangulation is not the application of a single specific method: it “has come to refer more generally to the use of multiple perspectives against which to check one’s own position” (380). I apply this approach by reflecting on and recording areas of confluence and difference in the three bodies of work under scrutiny. I relate the theoretical knowledge gained in this way to my personal experience as a creative practitioner. In effect I practise a kind of “syncretism” wherein I confront discourses on the same topic (Kristeva 1986:51). Discourse analysis, a methodology which centres on “text, inter-textuality and context”, is utilised as I explore

the relationship between the various texts and between theoretical writing and my own creative practice (Rose 2001:135).

## **7. Literature Review**

Diverse writings drawn from a range of present-day thinkers have contributed to my practice based engagement. While there are overlaps between them, I refer to literature from the following broad fields: literature concerned with the concept of practice as research; literature located in philosophy and sociology (or socio-economic concerns); literature concerned with narrative (and with writing and mortality); literature on trauma and catharsis (repair); and also literature on particular artists or particular visual arts media and processes. Below I draw attention to some of the keys texts from each of these fields.

Writing on practice as research provides an important methodological and theoretical resource for me to think about my own creative practice. It is also invaluable in order to understand the ways in which practice as research has been conceptualised and realised by other practitioners, and how such research has been perceived by academics and by fellow practitioners in the creative arts arena. Writings by Estelle Barrett (2004), by Barrett and Bolt (2007), Carter (2004) and Sullivan (2010) explore questions of exegesis, invention and tacit and experiential knowledge about practice based research, which I take up in my thesis. In *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (2007) both Barrett and Bolt emphasise the need to transform negative perceptions of the function and status of the creative arts in the arena of institutional debate.<sup>1</sup> The exegesis, particularly self-reflexive exegesis in which the practitioner reflects on his/her practice, can be a powerful catalyst for effecting this change (2007:161). The self-reflexive exegesis, as Barrett explains, is valuable precisely because “it can operate both as a noun

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<sup>1</sup> This call continues to be made both at conferences on the arts internationally (2010), in The Hague, and locally, for example, in Pietermaritzburg at the (2015) conference of The South African Visual Art Historians (SAVAH).

– an artefact in its own right – and a verb – a re-enactment of the artefact as process”. Thus, it comprises a “double articulation” (2004). Through its dual voice, notes Bolt in a similar vein, the exegesis becomes a means through which to (1) validate the process of studio enquiry, and (2) elaborate on the value of its outcomes (2007:161).

This body of literature also includes and discusses examples of successful practice based research projects, useful in that writing on research located in practice drew my attention to the scope and variety of approaches artists have undertaken in conducting this type of research. Of the number of books on practice as research that I have referred to in conceptualizing and developing this project, I found Gray and Malins’s *Visualizing Research* (2004) to be one of the most valuable in terms of project design. While writings by Carter, Sullivan, Barrett and Bolt have informed my practice, these texts have mainly been helpful in terms of the theoretical support they provide, especially the ideas they present for the role practice can play as research. *Visualizing Research* has been useful because it lays out the planning stages and possible methodologies involved in practice-based research in a structured way. The authors present a graduated chapter-by-chapter plan of how to organize an art or design research project. I found the fourth chapter particularly helpful. Entitled “Crossing the Terrain”, it is concerned principally with presenting and defining the numerous (14 are identified) and varied methods that an artist might use. Each is considered in terms of context, tools required, ethical considerations and its advantages and drawbacks. This chapter helped me consider the range of formats through which I could present writing and thinking about my practice within the body of my thesis. Collectively, the aforementioned texts on practice as research make a strong case for practitioners to contribute to the existing body of theory about practice through their own contributions and reflections on the nature of the practices in which they are involved.

Philosophical writing about aesthetics and being have also been significant to the conceptualization of this research project. A number of texts by Paul Crowther, in particular, are referred to in my thesis. His writing has played a significant role in the development of my practice, and has given me confidence, too, in that his view on the

humanising potential of art coincides with my own. In *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (1993), Crowther argues that art and aesthetic experiences have the capacity to humanize. In subsequent writing (1993a, 1997, 2003) he explores this theme in greater detail, arguing that art can bridge the gap between philosophy's traditional striving for generality and completeness and the concreteness and contingency of humanity's basic relation to the world. Importantly Crowther highlights a "problem" with philosophy because it "denudes the concrete particular" (1993:4); at the same time, he proposes another sort of philosophy in which art has a significant role to play, as I believe it does, in conserving what is valuable in humanity.

Crowther notes that art, in making sensible or imaginative material into symbolic form, harmonizes and conserves what is unique and what is general in human experience. In the reception and creation of art the embodied subject is fully at home with his or her environment (1993a:12). Crowther holds that the aesthetic experience has an "integrative power" which can counter and redress the oft noted "fragmentation of the postmodern sensibility" (2003:7). The artwork, through its creation (for the artist) and its experience (for the viewer), serves as a critical foil to the dislocation and "rupture of self" present in modern being (7). His writing is valuable to this project in that my reading of it has enabled me to understand and articulate my ideas on making with greater clarity and depth.

In the section of this introduction entitled "Practice as Research" I have drawn from Carter's *Material Thinking* (2004) in several instances to define practice-based research. Aside from Carter's definition of this kind of research – and the valuable insights he provides on the contributory role exegeses can play in shedding light on practices that are not necessarily visible within the artworks themselves – I draw attention to *Material Thinking* here again in my review of literature relating to philosophy because his writing also describes an aesthetics concerned with being and belonging in the world, and supports the idea of making as a contributory discourse by highlighting the valuable role creative practice can play in self-realisation (2004:7).

While South Africa, of course, has its own unique social and economic problems, and my location here makes the idea that art can be non-ethical untenable for me, it is equally clear that “we are all insiders and permanent residents” of a “full world” (Bauman 2002:12). The fullness of the world means all our actions impact on our neighbours and, thus, are profound and far-reaching in their effect. Thus, as both a citizen of South Africa and of the world I have an obligation to reflect on the environment in which I am located both regionally and in a broader context.

To enhance my scrutiny of the conditions and environment in which I am working, I turn to a number of writings by contemporary theorists on the present social or socio-economic climate. Chief among these are Anthony Giddens (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the late modern age* and his *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives* (1993); *Postmodernism: The Key Figures* by Johannes Bertens and Joseph Natoli (2002); and Richard Lane’s *Jean Baudrillard* (2000). I consider these authors’ various conceptions of postmodernism as a socio-economic formulation, as well as noting some of their ideas on the implication the postmodern has for the practice of visual and creative arts.

I also draw on, particularly with reference to my *Office Politics Series*, writing by Frederic Jameson (1991, 2007) and Zygmunt Bauman (1995, 1997, 2002). In my thesis I consider the implications for the artist of Jameson’s (1991: 6) contention that postmodernism is characterised by a “new depthlessness” and is neither an ethical nor a politically responsible intellectual paradigm. I ask what this means for the artist/individual in relation to Bauman’s notion of “liquid” modernity (2002:16) and consider whether Bauman’s position counters that of Jameson’s to some extent, and enables artists and thinkers to play a meaningful role in the present. I also refer to Dennis Smith’s *Zygmunt Bauman: Prophet of Postmodernity* (2000) in which Smith examines where Bauman’s distinctive vision comes from, asks how convincing it is and what Bauman’s particular contribution to understanding ourselves is. In my thesis I draw on Smith’s reading of Bauman since it offers support for my own thinking with regard to the role of the intellectual and artist in the context of postmodernity. In my first chapter

particularly I draw from Smith's summary (9-10) of postmodernity as a "key idea employed by intellectuals trying to cope with the impact of four massive changes in the 'big picture' of modernity" because of the concise, clear manner in which the author captures and explains these changes.

In my thesis I consider how a theoretical knowledge of narrative can inform the creation of a novella that is conceived intuitively and, also, how knowledge of narrative theory can feed into the visual arts areas of my creative practice. Mieke Bal's discussion of appropriation and vision in *Narratology* (2006) prompted me to think through the differences and similarities between reading a visual image and reading a text. This is significant because I am involved in the simultaneous creation of both for this PhD project. Like Bal (1985), Altman (2006) and Currie (1998) trace the history of narrative and clarify various modes of narrative. Both these texts have provided me with valuable basic knowledge about narrative in terms of its definition, origins and scope. Altman explains how single, dual and multiple focus narratives function and illustrates their practical and theoretical application in terms of textual analysis, literary and film history, social organization, religion and politics. Crucially, Altman highlights the way in which contemporary definitions of narrative have been "so heavily marked by past treatments that scholars have often unknowingly accepted an unreasonably limited definition of narrative" (3). Pointing out that few human endeavours are as widely spread or more generally endowed with cultural importance than narrative (2006:1), he proposes a "new definition of narrative" that is "open to a more inclusive range of texts and experiences" (3). Altman also draws attention to the other theorists who, like himself, have diversified and extended the corpus of narrative. Accordingly, I draw particularly on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986, and 1990) in my thesis. Of special relevance is his thinking concerning the word as an "eternally mobile medium" (1984:202) and his notion of heteroglossia, the base condition that governs the operation of meaning in any utterance. Bakhtin says of heteroglossia that "it is that which assures the primacy of context over text" (1981:428). In my thesis I consider an utterance to refer to that which may be spoken/written. A visual product – a painting – can also be described as an utterance.

The feminist writings of Julia Kristeva (1986, 1995) and Hélène Cixous contribute to my consideration of narrative in this thesis. Kristeva's (1986) essay, "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident", spells out her conviction that art and literature are privileged sites of "transformation" because of their reliance on the notion of the subject (17). Cixous (1991, 1993, and 1997) emphasises the flexibility and scope of narrative and the significance of the personal or autobiographical in writing. Her position on death or mortality and writing, presented in both *Rootprints* (1997) and *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (1993), strikes a chord with my own thinking regarding mortality and the creative act. The chapter in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, entitled "School of the Dead", is especially relevant to this aspect of my research undertaking. In it Cixous notes that "we go to the School of the Dead to hear a little of what we are unable to say" (53), and this drawing out of the unutterable, "this avowing of the unavowable", is a crucial concept in my own experience of writing (53). Cixous considers her father's death to be the spur to her first writing. Here she also reflects on how, through reading and writing, different kinds of deaths are enacted and (re)presented. In my thesis I compare Cixous's philosophy regarding the motives for (and the potential of writing) with my own reasons for embarking on the *Indian Yellow Project*. While Cixous presents these ideas specifically as they relate to the practice of writing (and reading), my own experience suggests that they can be applied also to painting and printmaking.

Both Cixous and Kristeva's writing on repair and on creative practices concur with my own position about creative practice in important ways. They also invite a necessary feminist angle. Cixous, for example, writes about a women's language (*écriture féminine*) that works differently from patriarchal discourses. Kristeva's feminist practice and interests straddle linguistics, psychoanalysis and literary and political theory. While my creative practice has not been consciously feminist until now, its imagery, experience and the sort of connections that I make between the different bodies of work that make up this project are undeniably the product of my personal gendered experience. The *Wish List* series and the novella, particularly, could only have been made by a woman as they are



located in the needs and experiences of a woman, particularly as regards attitudes to and experiences of motherhood.

Like Kristeva, Roland Barthes argues that society wants us to believe there is a consumerable (finite, decipherable and clear) meaning in all texts (2003 Allan: 76). Roland Barthes's critique of the sign forms part of a theory of writing, or, to use his term, a "theory of the text" (1986 51-52) whereby writing is freed from the fiction of the author and works to dissolve notions of consumption through resistance to the idea of reading as passive. His "Death of the Author" in *The Rustle of Language* and Barthes notion of "multiple writing ...wherein everything is to be disentangled" (1986: 53-54) is relevant to my PhD project because this writing posits an active role for the reader in the production of meaning. Following Barthes, instead of being a "passive consumer, the active reader is able to shift to the performative mode and reading becomes a performance" (Willette 2013). This idea that when "the reader performs writing, the issue of 'authorship' is blurred and the 'Text' is presented through a process of writing and making meaning" (2013) is one that has contributed to and informed the construction of the novella. Writings by Kristeva and Barthes inform my project because they challenge conventional assumptions about authorship and viewer and present a "radically new sense of the relationship between reader, text and meaning" (Allan 2003:79). These ideas have led me to consider anew the relationship of audience/viewer to my creative work and lead me to reflect on and construct work which will accord the "viewer/reader" (who exists as a co-creator) a more active role in the production of meaning. I reflect on these ideas of active readership in my thesis. My writing provides an additional dimension in relation to writerly and readerly texts in that it considers imagery, as well as writing, that emanates from a single overarching project, my *Indian Yellow Project*.

Writing by or about Hannah Arendt features in my thesis. Of particular relevance are Arendt's ideas on the special attributes of storytelling contained in her essay on Isak Dinesen in *Men in Dark Times* (94-109:1968). Simon Swift's book *Hannah Arendt* is also valuable to my research. His direct and concise text covers many key ideas from Arendt's dense and significant writings on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1966) and *The*

*Human Condition* (1958), as well as offering insights into and access to some of her lesser-known writings. Swift draws attention to the relevance of Arendt's thinking regarding the rights of man in a democratic state, and the politics of freedom. He highlights, too, her passionate call for the creation of a public sphere through free, critical thinking and dialogue. In the face of threats to democracy, both in the wider world, exemplified by 9/11 and the war on terror, and closer to home in the “tumultuous climate” of violence characteristic of protests about service delivery, economic challenge and perceived injustices in South Africa in 2016 (Rivera 2016), I believe Arendt’s ideas on democracy cannot be emphasised enough. The most significant contribution to my research that Swift’s guide affords, however, is his detailed focus on Arendt's views on storytelling and community which I believe has urgent relevance for artists today. In my thesis I refer to Arendt’s thinking on community and the value of narrative with reference to my own efforts in printmaking and in creative writing.

I look, too, at writing on trauma and repair in my search to interrogate the themes that are implicated in my projects. I refer mainly to *Writing Wounds* (2004) by Kathryn Robson; to Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), and to Michael White’s *Narratives of Therapists’ Lives* (1997). Both Robeson and Caruth present definitions of psychic trauma that I reference in my thesis, in relation specifically to the undertaking of the *Indian Yellow Project*. And both liken the experience of trauma to that of a wound that resists healing and “addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (1996:4). White’s writing also intersects with trauma, and he draws on therapist Barbara Myerhoff’s notion of remembered lives. This notion of “re-membering” (1997:22) is examined in relation to my novella, as well as in relation to the prints that arose from my engagement in the creative writing.

Texts on or by several artists and art researchers have inspired and informed my three projects. I refer to both Richard Noyce’s *Critical Mass: Printmaking Beyond the Edge* (2010) and *Printmaking: A Contemporary Perspective* by Paul Coldwell (2010) for technical information on relief printing. Coldwell’s insights into the history of relief printmaking, and both Coldwell and Noyce’s ideas regarding the scope and attraction of the medium and practice of printmaking have contributed to my own thinking about what

it means, and can mean to make prints. I draw on these texts particularly in relation to my experience of making the prints that arose out of my *Indian Yellow Project*, as well as to the communal effort that constitutes my *Wish List Project*.

Writing by artist and art theorist James Elkins (1988, 2009) has played a role in my thinking about creative practices, specifically my own painting. His commentary on what the act of painting feels like for the painter closely parallel my own experience of this medium. Because of the insightful and accurate way in which he describes the experience of painting and of the painting studio, I refer quite extensively to extracts from his book *What Painting Is* (1998) when I analyse the difference between painting and printmaking, and reflect on what drew me initially to attempt to use painting as a means to reflect on loss.

Elkins is not the only visual artist whose writing has contributed to my research. Writing by and about painter Marlene Dumas (1999, 2007) has made a several-fold contribution. Her reflections have fed my interest in exploring the relationship of writing to other creative practices. The aforementioned texts also comment on the function of the multiple or the serial nature of image-making and the dialogical nature of making which are areas I address in my own enquiry. The introductory essay by Dominic van Boogerd (1999) highlights Dumas' main themes and usefully contains a number of excerpts from her journal. This view of the dialogical relationship between viewer and work has important implications for my work: "I started to embrace the ambiguity of the image and accept the realization that the image can only come to life through the viewer looking at it, and that it takes on meaning through the process of looking" (26).

Dumas' own writing about her practice also features in *Intimate Relations* (2007). Her characteristic inclusion of text (artist's statements and creative writing such as poetry) alongside her exhibited work interests me as a form of exegetical practice in itself. It is expressive of Dumas' notion that "through art we talk to strangers" (2007:37). One of the predominant themes that informs her practice is empathy. As Emma Bedford notes, Dumas' works "stimulate consideration of what it means to be human now" and remind us that we cannot divorce ourselves from what happens to others elsewhere on our planet

or even in our own cities” (45). Dumas herself acknowledges that the aim of her work “has always been to arouse in my audience (as well as myself) an experience of empathy with the subject matter” (43). In a similar way, I reflect on, refer to and re-examine ideas concerning the serial image, empathy and writing and the relationship of writing to image-making while involved in the creation of the paintings, prints and writing that comprise this PhD enquiry.

Finally, Suzi Gablik’s writing, particularly *Conversations Before the End of Time* (1995), as well as *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991), and her essay of the same name in *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art* (1990) edited by David Ray Griffin, have significantly contributed to my thinking about my own practice, and the role visual and creative art can play in the world of today. In these writings Gablik considers how art might be implicated in an awakening sense of responsibility for the collective fate of humanity and the “high levels of psychic and physical toxicity in our environment” (1991:179). Gablik makes it clear that humanity has reached a “critical threshold where the option of continuing as we have before is being perceived as no longer viable” and notes that “there has been an increasing demand at the creative edge of our society to shape a new social order” (Gablik in Griffin 1990:178).

Gablik identifies two kinds of postmodernism apparently emerging within the world of artistic practice (1991:19), which she terms “deconstructive” and “reconstructive” postmodernism. Each of these represents the polar opposite of the other and each “believe[s] its scenario and view of the future is the correct one” (21). Gablik states that reconstructive postmodern practice is “less visible in the mainstream than deconstructive art” and her writing is an attempt to “offer a framework for reconstructive postmodern practice” (22). In like fashion, my own engagement (explored in my three creative projects and my thesis) can be seen as an effort of reconstructive arts practice and an attempt to “transform the paradigm of alienation to one of healing and contact” (169). While the trajectory of my work across all three projects intersects with alienation and with repair I draw on Gablik’s thinking on reconstructive postmodernism most emphatically in relation to my *Wish List Project*.

## 8. Structure of the Thesis

In my introduction I provide a broad overview of each of the components that comprise the overall PhD enquiry. I also consider the concept of practice-based research, referring to its emergence, current status and potential as a research tool. In introducing my practical projects, I indicate the approach, methodology and principal theories that underpin the three projects. I have included a review of the key writings that contribute to my research. I also set out the structure of my thesis and emphasise the relevance of my enquiry in my introduction.

In Chapter One I reflect on my *Office Politics Series* (2010-2015) and analyse construction, imagery and the role of metaphor in these paintings. I draw connections between the working space and what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes as the “postmodern habitat” (Smith 1999:154). I ask if there are alternatives to the widely-held and persuasive view that postmodernism is, as Jameson suggests, neither an ethical nor a politically responsible intellectual paradigm (1991:6). Within my analysis of the series I investigate questions of the present, and tease out concepts such as modernism and postmodernism and what these might mean in terms of art practice and the socio-political milieu and cultural paradigms in which the artist lives and works.

In Chapters Two, Three and Four I explore processes, function and imagery that evolved in the creation of the *Indian Yellow Project* (2010-2016). As noted, the project comprises a novella, illustrations which reside within the novella and a series of prints that emanate from the creative writing project. The project looks at several ways of narrating loss and its imbrication with trauma. I begin Chapter Two with a broad introduction of narrative and consider my conceptualisation of narrative in relation to some generally held theories regarding stories and story-telling. In this chapter I refer to a number of contemporary theorists’ ideas on the function and scope of narrative, namely Mieke Bal, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes.

In Chapter Three I examine the relationship, confluences and differences between the written text and the images (prints and illustrations) that emanate from the writing. I also consider why I felt compelled to utilize the medium of writing, most particularly the form of the novella, to begin a sustained reflection on my particular experience of loss.

I continue my enquiry into the *Indian Yellow Project* in Chapter Four. I reflect on what I have discovered about the act of writing, specifically returning to the novella after a period of time and subsequent to reading about narrative theory. I consider my actual experience of this and contrast it with what I imagined a return to writing might entail.

I then turn to a consideration of the relationship of narrative to trauma and death, the question that underpins the written and visual components of the project. I refer to my own experience and practice here in relation to the ideas of author and literary theorist Hélène Cixous particularly. I also draw on thinking about story-telling and/or creative practice by Hannah Arendt, Julia Kristeva and painter Marlene Dumas, noting where these converge with my own experience.

Chapter Five involves a consideration of the *Wish List Project* (2009-2016), in which I reflect on the project's origins and transformation. I draw attention to the ways in which the project relates to the thematic of departure, namely, in its origins in loss, in its departure from the original medium of the series – painting – into printmaking and in its shift from a single creator to multiple-makers. I also reflect on the project's relationship to narrative, referencing certain ideas on community and storytelling by Hannah Arendt. I consider ways in which the project has been informed by Suzi Gablik's ideas on reconstructive art practice, and by my growing search for a means of engagement that extends beyond the individual self and embraces the concerns and participation of others.

In Chapter Six I reflect on the territory the three projects have spanned. I draw conclusions about my findings in the previous chapters and consider further questions and possibilities my research prompts. I reflect on the direction my work will take in future in the light of what I have learned through undertaking this practice-based doctoral study.

## **9. Summary**

In the preceding pages I have introduced the three bodies of work that collectively, and in conjunction with this thesis, comprise my research undertaking. I also provided contextual information on practice-based research in the visual arts. In addition to providing a broad overview of each of the components that make up my overall PhD enquiry, I indicated the approach, methodology and principal theories that underpin the three projects. I have outlined the structure of my thesis, and emphasised the relevance of my enquiry so I will now turn to an analysis of my *Office Politics Series*, the first of the three bodies of work that comprise my doctoral study.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Postmodernity and the *Office Politics Series*

### 1. Introduction

In this chapter I reflect on my *Office Politics Series* (2010-2016). I consider the imagery and media used in these works and show how the series speaks to theories about the socio-economic climate generally and the workplace specifically. I reflect on the present global cultural context in which artists find themselves and consider what led us to this point. The paintings that constitute this series have become inextricably and inevitably bound up in questions, findings and the search for answers about the contemporary cultural and social context and how to work meaningfully within it. The paintings from my *Office Politics Series* comment on power and feelings of fracture and powerlessness. They also serve, as my enquiry will show, as a way to counter such feelings of fracture, inertia and dis-enfranchisement. While the ideas explored in these works certainly speak to the climate of the broader socio-economic arena, they also speak to the mood of the country which presently is one in which people reel in incomprehension at the “widespread corruption, state capture, enrichment and abuse of resources” (Du Preez, 2016). Du Preez draws attention to similarities in outlook between the South African Post-1994 populace and the social climate in Nicaragua after protracted civil war, noting that the population felt “apathetic, aggressive, directionless”, seemed “prone to violence” and possessive of a “negative self-image” (2016). Similar ideas of apathy, incomprehension, and threat characterise my *Office Politics Series*. As a thinking artist I cannot avoid paying attention to and questioning the context in which I work. I find it necessary to explore this environment in order to consider and uncover how to work meaningfully within it.



Chapter One is divided into three main sections. In the first, I draw attention to the concepts modernity, modernism, postmodernity and postmodernism. I highlight some complexities relating to these terms, particularly modernism and postmodernism, which are used to refer both to *theories* and to sets of artistic and literary practices, while modernity and postmodernity are used to reference temporal, socio-political situations. As there exist various interpretations of both postmodernism and postmodernity it is necessary to draw attention to postmodernism's "apparently protean" character (Bertens 2002:xi), while at the same time trying to describe it. In the second section of this chapter I reflect on thinking about postmodernity, meaninglessness and meaningfulness. I introduce certain ideas on meaninglessness and contemporary art proposed by thinkers such as Richard Kearney, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean Baudrillard. I contrast these with ideas on meaningfulness and engagement proposed by Suzi Gablik and Zygmunt Bauman amongst others. In the third section I consider these ideas about postmodernity, the postmodern space and meaningfulness in the light of my own creative practice and experience.

## **2. Modernity, Modernism, Postmodernity and Postmodernism**

Typically, the period in which I am situated as an artist is described as postmodernity, a slippery and contested term which, depending on the theorist, encompasses or excludes a great many variables. I believe it is important to think about the period (postmodernity) in which I am located as well as to consider theories about postmodernism and postmodern art, and reflect on these in relation to my practice. Like postmodernity, "postmodernism" notes Frederic Jameson, is a difficult term to define because it is a term "shared by a motley crew of strange bedfellows" (1991:xii) and has an "apparently protean" character (Bertens 2002:xi). Work that is postmodern, notes Richard Lane, for example, "a postmodern text, building, performance", is usually made up of "a mixture of styles, drawing upon different historical movements and features to produce a hybrid form" (2000:85). Hybridity, emphasises Lane, "is in direct opposition to modernism" which turned its back on the past "to build a new, enclosed style of its own" (85).

Johannes Bertens and Joseph Napoli identify several levels/forms of postmodernism, noting that, at its most concrete level, the term denotes “a new set of literary and artistic practices” which emerged in the 1950s, gained momentum in the 1960s and came to dominate much of the arts arena in the 1970s and early 1980s (2002:xii). Further they note that, in certain arts disciplines, postmodernism referred initially to a new self-reflexivity, while in others it signalled “a return to the representational practices that had been ousted by modernist art’s tendency towards purity and away from representation” (xii). The extent to which this term is coated in slipperiness is emphasised as, to “complicate matters”, certain of the arts disciplines “notably dance and literature” use the term *postmodern* to refer to “both an initial self-reflexivity and later a return to ironic forms of representation” (xi).

As a hybrid form that is in opposition to modernism, some of the dominant narratives that postmodernism upsets include “the Enlightenment narrative of instrumental reason”, as well as the grand narratives of human freedom proscribed by both Capitalism and Marxism (Lane 2000:85). Widely considered to embody “an incredulity” to metanarrative, postmodernity is typically held to be dynamic and inclusive (Lyotard 2000:85). With its “stridently nominalist and anti-foundationalist rhetoric” postmodernism turns its back on “all universal explanatory systems and the privileging of homogenized groups such as the working class, in favour of an analysis of discrete micro-narratives and particular identities” (Bertens 2002:180).

In its most ambitious formulation postmodernism is used to reference “a new sociocultural formulation and/or economic dispensation” that is generally perceived “at least in the Western world” to have “come to replace modernity” (Bertens 2002:180). Interpretations of postmodernism, at this level of aggregation, differ widely. The conceptions of postmodernism offered by François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson and Zygmunt Bauman are, for example, variously nuanced and will be drawn on in subsequent sections of this chapter. Despite wide-ranging interpretations of postmodernism (in terms of a socio-economic formulation, a theoretical field, and a set of literary/arts practices) postmodernity can be summarised, at a “panoramic level of

generalization”, as being “characterised by both an aggressive, entrepreneurial capitalism and an intense and prolonged wave of self-examination taking different but related forms” (Bertens 2002:xv). The term *postmodernism* gained currency in the 1950s and 1960s and came to be widely used in the 1970s with the appearance of Lyotard’s influential *La Conditione Postmoderne* in 1979 (Lane 2000:85). While no single event can be seen to have caused the shift from modernity into postmodernity, World War II (1939-1945) and the Vietnam War (1959-1973) are sometimes cited by theorists as historical events that, each in their own way, contributed to a growing distrust of technology and authority and simultaneously promoted what Lane describes as “the televisual experience of reality” (2000:85).

In its broadest view, postmodernity might best be seen as “the uneasy and contradictory coexistence of the outcomes of two related struggles that have their origin in the 1960s: one over the economy and the other over culture” (Bertens 2002:xiv). As postmodernism is widely seen as a counter to modernism – a response to or refutation of ideas of modernity – it is appropriate here to establish what some of the key characteristics of modernism are generally held to be. Dennis Smith notes that in the modern age three significant forces came into play: the nation state, modern science and capitalism (1999:7). At the core of modernity is an apparent and relentless “struggle for betterment: being better, doing better” and “getting better” (7). This competition takes place on a number of levels: it occurs between “individuals, families, cities, empires, governments, companies” and so forth (Smith 1999:7). Smith emphasises that a key feature of the “struggle within modernity is the contest between ideologies” such as liberalism, fascism, communism, democracy, each of which lays claim to the promise of a better tomorrow (7). He suggests that “during the past century, men and women have been trained to view modernity through the rose coloured spectacles provided by ideologies of this kind” (8).

Where modernism was seen to produce “difference, exclusion and marginalisation” (Giddens 1991:6), postmodernism was hailed as inclusive and open. Yet postmodernism’s relationship to modernism is more complex and nuanced than simply that of binary opposition. Like Jameson, Smith notes that one of the most significant

“features of western culture in the present phase of modernity is the widespread use of the idea of postmodernity by intellectuals” (1999:9). Smith emphasises that talk about postmodernity “does not mean that modernity is over” (9). More accurately, “postmodernity is a key idea employed by intellectuals” in their effort to cope with the shock of four “massive” changes in the “big picture” of modernity during the last 30 years of the twentieth century (9).

The first of these major changes is the shrinking and weakening of the nation state which previously was perceived as a powerful force with the capacity to “reshape society” (Smith 1999:9). Bauman, too, speaks of the “emaciated sovereignty” and waning powers of the nation-state (2002:11) and acknowledges its collapse as one of the core changes in modern life.

Spiralling risk is the second significant change. Awareness of risk across multiple fronts has increased. The expectation of Western society that the state will care for and protect people from birth to death has been forcibly refuted by experience. The belief that the state will protect and nurture its people has, in South Africa as in the West, also withered. Under apartheid Whites experienced high levels of state support coupled with high levels of threat and insecurity. The widely held expectation that under a post-apartheid government we would all be better off has by no means been realised fully. Not only have “attacks on freedom of expression,” especially efforts by the ruling party “to tamper with media independence”, raised serious concerns about the government’s commitment to the protection of basic civil and political rights but “the failure of the government to enforce existing labour and tenure laws” to protect its most “vulnerable workers” has also come under scrutiny (Human Rights Watch 2012). In addition, health-care access for all in South Africa is constitutionally enshrined yet considerable inequities remain, largely due to distortions in resource allocation (Norris 2010). These inequalities further contribute to a loss of faith in the post-apartheid state and in its willingness to care for its subjects. Family too is viewed as an increasingly failed institution, both in the West, as Smith notes (9), and in South Africa where, in the decades since apartheid, the following factors weaken family life: HIV&AIDS, high levels of poverty, gender inequalities,

unwanted pregnancies and absent fathers (Ratele 2012:553). In addition, and Smith emphasises that this is the most terrifying by far of the risks unveiled, science and technology once hailed as mechanisms of salvation are just as likely to “produce bad outcomes as good” (1999:9). Furthermore, as Smith notes, the possibility of technologies threatening life and health is both high and difficult to predict, while officialdom is likely to conceal or underestimate the level of risk (9). While Smith is speaking specifically of the Western world and governments, I see no reason why, in South Africa, science and technology are less likely to “produce bad outcomes as good” (Smith 1999:9), nor do I have any reason to imagine that officialdom here would be more transparent and honest about risks development might pose to health or the environment.

The third significant change concerns the globalisation of Capitalism. Big business has severed its formerly close links with nation states (links upon which Keynesian welfarism was dependent) and multi-national companies now conduct their business across national borders (1999:9). Bauman notes that one of the most significant consequences of globalisation is that boundaries are rendered “tenuous, frail and porous” and “share in the new facility of disappearance” since they are effaced while being drawn (2002:14). He emphasises that geographic distance under these conditions becomes irrelevant as every place is brought into almost the same speed-distance from every other, rendering “all places mutually contiguous” (13).

As Smith notes, the fourth dramatic change centres on the collapse of European Imperialism. The cities of Moscow, Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Vienna and London were (as recently as the 1900s) not merely political or commercial capitals of their respective countries, but each was the centre of vast multinational or multi-ethnic empires within and beyond Europe. A mere century later, largely as a consequence of American intervention in World Wars I and II, all that has changed (1999:9). The Empires of Europe are no more. European Imperialism has been replaced, first by growing US “military and economic domination” (Jameson 1991:5) and latterly by the rapid and “increasing economic prominence” of China and India (Winters & Shahid 2007:101).

The conditions of postmodernity are the consequences (both inevitable and vast) of modernity. The preceding summary – borrowed largely from Smith – highlights an intricate relationship between modernity and postmodernity, supporting the suggestion that the postmodern may be “little more than a transitional period between two stages of capitalism” (Jameson 1991:417). Jameson follows the view that postmodernity is best grasped as “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (1). This has far-reaching implications for the artist. One of the questions I ask is how, as an artist, I can counter the loss of integrity that has accompanied these changes or relocate the idea of integrity in creative practices such as visual arts and writing. Postmodernity has transformed the historical past into a “pastiche” (21) – a chain of emptied-out stylizations that can then be commodified and consumed. Jameson is highly critical of humanity’s current historical situation which he describes as a schizophrenic environment, a “bewildering new world space” of late or multinational capital (6). Jameson gives voice to a disturbing image of the present which he associates, in particular, with a loss of our connection to history (6).

This notion of disconnection is a feature prevalent in many recent contemporary theorists’ writings on postmodernity. Confusion and loneliness are ideas writ large across the broader postmodern terrain. Migrancy, displacement, exile, disorientation and powerlessness feature significantly in, for example, much recent sociological writing in the last two decades. *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping our World* (2003) by Anthony Giddens illustrates how the consequences of globalisation, specifically the rise of “risk consciousness” and de-traditionalisation, undermine institutions like the Nation State, the family and religion, which previously provided men and women with a sense of security and stability. Displacement, stranger-hood and disorientation feature significantly in Bauman’s early and more recent writing on postmodernity (1991, 1997, 2002, 2005). Nor is the motif of the exiled or displaced person peculiar to sociological texts: “modern Western culture”, as Edward Said notes in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2000), “is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees” (137). He goes on to note that the main difference between earlier exiles and those of the present day boils down to “scale” (138), stressing that the present age, with its “modern war-fare,

imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers – is indeed that age of the refugee” (139). An urgent and deeply felt concern with the loss of personal and communal bearings certainly seems to cut across multiple forms of contemporary endeavour: sociological, philosophical, literary and artistic. In Gablik’s formulation, the present social, political and economic environment is one which has been “complicated by changes without parallel” and is a space wherein the standards and models of the past appear to be of little use to us (1984:13).

Given this, it comes as no surprise that in the postmodern environment people flee from the “desert of the real” and pursue the “ecstasies of hyper-reality” (Baudrillard in Bertens 2002:53) and the new realm of computer, media and technological experience. In the realm of the hyper-real, entertainment, information and communication technologies replace lived experience with experiences more intense and alluring than those of banal everyday life (52). But where is the artist situated in a hyper-real world? If artists are not reflecting on lived experience, and if everything is a simulation, what is art’s function? Is the modernist strategy of defamiliarisation possible under such conditions? Baudrillard suggests, in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays in Extreme Phenomena*, that artistic creativity has been exhausted and the present situation is one where everything has been done and there is nothing new left to do; notions of authenticity, integrity and critique, even, would seem to fall away completely (1993:12-14).

This view of art differs markedly from that of modern art which was widely held to possess a critical edge, examples of which can be found in the work of artists in the period of high modernity who did not merely participate in and subscribe to the limitations of the episteme but also provided a meta-commentary on it and highlighted its hidden premises, assumptions and power dynamics by exposing what the episteme repressed. This operation within modern art is clearly illustrated by Foucault’s essay on *Las Meninas* in which he shows that Diego Velazquez’s painting, ostensibly a conventional court painting, activates a “complex network of uncertainties, exchanges and feints” (1970:4) detailing how elements within the painting (the painter, unseen canvas, the figure arrangement, mirror, window, and the position of the subject) speak of

the complexity of vision and representation and serve to critique the Spanish court's idea of painting as a lowly craft in service of a patron. Postmodern art though, as Baudrillard and Jameson and others suggest, tends to participate in rather than critique the conditions under which it operates. Arts theorist Gablik describes this kind of postmodernism "which bait(s) us with its indifference" as "deconstructive" and "uncritical" (1991:19).

As Gablik, among others, notes, the dominant paradigm of our present age, a mantle which hangs over multiple spheres of human endeavour, is one of "disenchantment" and "disconnection" (1991:11). In this world "everything is in continuous flux: there are no fixed goals or ideals that people can believe in, no tradition sufficiently enduring to avoid confusion" (1984:13). Although I would like to believe South African art, and the South African art scene fall sway to a different order of things, it is not clear to me that the art world and the predominant feelings of disenchantment experienced elsewhere are not experienced here too. The postmodern art scene in South Africa sounds much like the postmodern art scene in the wider world, for as Jillian Carman notes, despite efforts at redress, the visual arts sector in South Africa continues to maintain "the exclusions, marginalisations and hierarchies experienced by a colonial and apartheid legacy" (2011:7). Equally to me it seems that in South Africa, as in the wider world the prevalent feeling is that "everything is in continuous flux "and there do not appear to be fixed goals or ideals that people can believe in or traditions "sufficiently enduring to avoid confusion" (1984:13).

In such a world, can the artist represent reality or only a simulacrum of it? Can contemporary art refer to anything outside itself? Baudrillard argues that it cannot. Contemporary art, he argues, is "banal" and "null", it is "a quotation" devoid of the irony it claims to possess (2005:54-55). He proposes a vision of the present in which art has penetrated all spheres of existence. Art has become "transaesthetic" (25) and "nothing now distinguishes it from the technical, promotional, media" (89). Ironically, he notes, the dreams of the avant-garde for art to inform life have been realized. Yet, the realization of art in everyday life further renders art empty because art itself as a separate, transcendent and privileged phenomenon has disappeared.



Transcendence is also an idea that features in Bauman's vision of postmodernism, as does the idea of fracture, though neither is formulated in quite the same way as in Baudrillard's conception. For Bauman postmodernity means "dismantling, splitting up and deregulating the agencies charged in the modern era with the task of pulling humans, jointly and individually, to their ideal state" (1995:27). Like Jameson, Bauman views postmodernity as a bedfellow of modernity and suggests that news of modernity's collapse is "grossly exaggerated" (Bauman and Tester 2001:75). He emphasises that the "postmodern perspective", which enabled the "scrutiny of modernity's failures and the debunking of many of its undertakings as blind alleys, far from being in opposition to modernity has from the outset comprised modernity's "indispensable *alter ego*: that restless, perpetually dissentful voice that enabled modernity to succeed in its critical engagement with found reality and the many realities sedimented by that engagement" (75).

Postmodernity, quips Bauman, is "modernity minus its illusions" (2001:75). His conception of this phase of modernity is characterised by the idea that postmodernity is a "liquid state" (Bauman 2002:16) in which nothing is certain or fixed and in which the drawing of boundaries is futile as "all boundaries are tenuous, frail and porous" (13). "The world", as Bauman notes, is "full ... there is no outside", no escape route or place to shelter, no alternative space to isolate and hide in (12). Nowhere is one free to follow one's own ways and goals and remain "oblivious to all the rest as irrelevant" (12). Bauman stresses that "we are all insiders and permanent residents" of this "full world" and that "there is nowhere else to go" (12). The point he is making is that the fullness of the world inhibits freedom and means all our actions impact on our neighbours and, thus, are profound and far reaching in their effect. Postmodernity or late modernity, Bauman notes, is time and again heralded as the "ultimate crowning of the modern dream of freedom" and of the exacting and time consuming effort to realise that dream (1995:6). Under such freedom "with universal principles and absolute truths dissipated or kicked out" the particular personal truths and principles individuals embrace are ultimately irrelevant (6). This is the picture postmodernity holds of itself. Bauman, however,

stresses that in fact, and this must be stated with “considerable conviction”, exactly “the opposite to the postmodern account of postmodernity is the case”. The idea that in such a world it does not matter what one believes or does not believe, how one does or does not act, is false (6). He notes that “the demise of power assisted universals and absolutes has made the responsibilities of the actor more profound and indeed more consequential than ever before” (6).

### **3. Reflections on Postmodernity, Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness**

The preceding characterisations of the postmodern present collectively a nightmarish picture of the present and imminent future. In spite of the complex of opinions about what it means to work and live in the present age, theories of the modern and postmodern (particularly those of Jameson and Bauman) have become significant to my practice. Gablik’s writing about the meaning and future of art under conditions of rapid social change and spiritual crisis (1991; 1995) also inform this project in important ways and have helped to contextualize the environment and extend and challenge the way in which I think about and produce work within it. While the preceding arguments, drawn from contemporary thinkers’ conceptions of the present age, suggest multiple interpretations of postmodernity and testify to its “protean” character (Bertens 2002:xi), I draw attention in the following sections of Chapter One to those ideas which are paramount to me and significant to this research enterprise.

I emphatically agree with Bauman that *it matters particularly now - what we do and don’t believe, and how we do and don’t act* (my emphasis). In order to act meaningfully as an artist in the postmodern environment one needs to be aware of, and think about the implications of, several different conceptions of the postmodern. While the views of the cultural theorists on which I draw are often contradictory, there are large areas where their concerns overlap: they all agree that the world is, as Bauman repeatedly notes, full: comprising no place in which really to escape from the present paradigm and begin anew. All hold that, as Smith describes, “the global economy is like an accelerating truck with no-one at the wheel” (1999:156). Under these conditions, as suggested in the various writings of Bauman, Jameson, Baudrillard and Gablik, it would appear that *freedom* has

been gained for the wealthy elite while human connectedness and the idea of a meaningful life have dissolved for the majority of people. These are the significant features that the various conceptions of postmodernity collectively highlight. It is, in my view, unavoidable and morally imperative to engage with these characteristics of postmodernity as an artist. My practice serves as an effort to simultaneously engage with these conceptions of the present age and, as I will show, to query and counter the predominant narrative of hopelessness and inertia contained in them.

In this kind of world, visual art (and creative endeavour in general) might seem to contribute little, perhaps even adding unhelpfully to the seemingly endless fullness of the present and the Gordian knot of production and consumption. Richard Kearney, in Chapter Five of *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries* (2002), suggests that in the crisis of the present age humanity finds itself surrounded by images – ours is a world saturated in, bombarded with and engulfed by imagery – and yet, simultaneously, this is a space in which individuals are deemed less and less responsible for the workings of their imaginations (Kearney in Glowacka and Boos 2002:85). In such a situation, Kearney, following Levinas, suggests that the dominant role of imaging becomes parody: the image loses its referent to something original becoming “instead a simulacrum: an image of an image of an image” (85).

As noted earlier, Baudrillard too, speaks of the danger and prevalence of the simulacrum and the complicity of art in the collapse of the real. Contemporary art Baudrillard suggests, is “empty and insignificant” even in its claim to practice irony (2005:27). It conspires with rather than critiquing a world that “has already become hyperrealist, cool, transparent, marketable” (26). Baudrillard comes close to suggesting that visual art has no role to play in uplifting society. Are there convincing counterpoints to this conception of art? Might art also be able to contribute usefully in such a world? These are questions that plague me and many artists who are working today and answering them is not simple. Questions concerning how art might usefully contribute to society today direct the many areas of my practice and drive me to consider various ways of approaching, conceiving and executing my creative ideas. My search has prompted me to read widely, to look

beyond the confines of art theory (the boundaries of which, in typical postmodern fashion, have grown permeable anyway), to consider the writing of several social and cultural theorists and to reflect on their thinking about how to live meaningfully in a postmodern environment.

Questions about living meaningfully must, for an artist, concern questions about how to render their role (and/or the objects they create) useful to others. The first and potentially most valuable point regarding the role of art in a postmodern context is made by Bauman in numerous of his writings, and is concerned with how to live a meaningful life under liquid modernity. Bauman stresses that when confronting ethical dilemmas in the postmodern world individuals can no longer pass these questions on to *experts* (bureaucrats, politicians, scientists) who act as conduits of moral knowledge. Instead of looking to others for answers, the responsibility for answering ethical dilemmas is each individual's *alone*. In *Life in Fragments* (1995), for example, Bauman notes:

More than two centuries after the Enlightenment promise to legislate for an ethical and humane society, we are left, each of us, with our own individual conscience and sentiment of responsibility as the only resource with which to struggle to make life more moral than it is. (279)

In this kind of environment, “dilemmas have no ready-made solutions” and “it is equally easy” to overdo or underdo what is ideally required by acting responsibly (2-3). “Moral life”, Bauman acknowledges, “is a life of continuous uncertainty” (3).

I agree with Bauman's view that people “are able to make several aspects of society different and better by acts of choice” (Smith 1999:21). Our capacity and responsibility to do this are greater than we are generally led to believe or would like to admit. “Belief in their own powerlessness”, notes Smith, “disenfranchises ordinary men and women” (21). It is the responsibility of intellectuals and educators to redress the balance of power by “dissolving this belief” (21). While it is not the responsibility of intellectuals and educators to make or direct the moral choices of others, it is their responsibility (and an urgent one at that) to “provide interpretations and explanations of the world that relate to the experiences, needs and wishes of their audience” (21). Bauman refers to Richard

Rory's assertion that true intellectuals serve others by trying to "expand their moral imagination" and "enlarge their sense of what is possible" (Bauman 2005:13). Their task is to "make relevant knowledge and understanding" accessible to as many people as is possible (Smith 1999:21).

#### **4. Ideas on Postmodernity and Meaningfulness in Relation to my Creative Practice**

In the preceding section four key ideas regarding life in the present age have been raised. These ideas are borne out by my own experience and are also reflected in the various writings I have referenced. These can be summarised in four points. First, the postmodern environment poses awkward questions about how to live meaningfully in the present age. Burgeoning capitalism, the collapse of the nation state, greater awareness of risk and the collapse of master narratives all combine to create a sense of vulnerability, alienation and fear in the individual (Bauman, Jameson and numerous others speak to this idea). Secondly, there are no easy answers to complex questions. Questions concerning meaningful life in the present age have no ready-made solutions and cannot be directed upwards to officials or experts. Postmodernity "is the moral person's bane and chance at the same time" (Bauman 1995:8). Thirdly, despite the above, individuals have much greater agency than they admit or are led to believe. We can improve a number of aspects of society – we can improve and change certain things by acts of choice (Smith 1991:21; Bauman 2002:5-7). Finally, intellectuals and educators have a responsibility to provide relevant informed explanations of the world. It is not their duty to answer these questions for others, but to expand humankind's "moral imagination" and our sense of what is possible (Bauman 2005:13).

In my work, and in my personal capacity for my own sense of navigation, I read social theory (as noted, Jameson, Zizek, Bauman and Gablik mainly). Some of this theory makes it hard to imagine how art, particularly visual art, might be useful in a world as chaotic, implosive and explosive as the one that is presented by these contemporary thinkers whose writing is shot through with references to things apocalyptic. The titles of many of their works, alone, evoke doom and entropy on a global scale: *Living in the End*

*Times* (Zizek 2010); *Society under Siege* (Bauman 2002); and *Conversations before the End of Time* (Gablik 1995). In the era of postmodernity, it seems, we are witnessing the end of everything and are faced with a condition of epilogue. The funereal mood of the present age is aptly described by Smith as “an intense subterranean feeling of bereavement” (1999:11). Despite, or perhaps because of, this collective sense of “the end of this or that” (Jameson 1991:1) the prevalent mood is not one of solidarity amongst individuals, but of isolation and disconnectedness: “the legacy of modernism is that the artist stands alone” (Gablik 1984:13).

Having read such texts, I am then compelled to ask “What good is this?” and “What now?” Apart from drawing attention to widespread feelings of loneliness, uselessness and despair, what good purpose can reading such works serve? These feelings of existential isolation and the idea that “life has nothing worthwhile to offer becomes a fundamental psychic problem in circumstances of late modernity” (Giddens 1991:9). I ask in what way such feelings of personal meaninglessness can be countered. Further, in a climate which requires, as Levinas suggests, “initiative and responsibility”, are there convincing counterpoints to his conception of art as “essentially disengaged”, functioning as an “evasion”, a distraction from reality and the responsibilities of the present” (Levinas in Hand 2009:141). Levinas goes on to say that in artistic enjoyment there is “something wicked and egoist and cowardly” (142). Might art also be able to contribute usefully to such a world rather than serving, as Levinas (142) claims, as an act of inserting the “inhuman” into the human world?

It was while considering the four key ideas, summarized above, that many of the works in the *Office Politics Series* were created. One of the principal paintings in this series is a large landscape format work entitled *Lost: No Guidebook* (2012), Plate 1, pictured on the following page. The painting’s title was inspired by the chapter titled “Living without a Guidebook” in Dennis Smith’s *Zygmunt Bauman Prophet of Postmodernity* (1999). The painting is an important work in the series as it distils a number of ideas concerning the working environment (both a personal space/experience, and a shared experience). This environment further speaks to several ideas/ experiences – powerlessness, dislocation,

rupture, isolation and a lack of guidance – which may be seen as distinctive of postmodernity.

The painting features a barely visible lone creature (some kind of whippet-like/ basset-type canine) looking out of the bottom left of the canvas. The canine, cropped at the knees, as if about to slip out of view, is surrounded by an abstracted field of tree trunks, which cuts across the canvas and splits sky and ground into separate discrete atmospheric segments, each of which is dislocated from the adjacent path of sky with which it ought to be continuous.

The dislocation between each fragment of sky and the fracturing of the ground plane by the tree trunks create a physical environment akin to the bewildering chaos of a liquid state. Aside from referring to liquid modernity, the fractured space talks simultaneously of personal anxieties, dislocation and the feeling of isolation that inevitably accompanies changes in departmental size and leadership structures. Yet, it is not in this specificity that the value of the work lies but in the way that it makes use of metaphor and, in turn, in the way that metaphor speaks of much broader prevalent concerns of current experience.



**Plate 1.** Faye Spencer. *Lost: No Guidebook*. 2012. Mixed media on board. 100 x 200 cm.

The dappled ground with its swathes of glaze, punctured by staccato slabs of thick paint render the ground as if it were quixotically formed: one moment solid, the next porous, a visual evocation of Bauman's liquid modernity. If this work, like the others in the series, were merely a manifestation of private concerns, the work – in my view – would be particularly dull and of little value to anyone but the artist. It ultimately references what I term a *community of experience* that is typical of both the corporate working world and the current social climate under which humanity toils. The use of metaphor enables it to do this: the forest, the dog and its rather literal singleness exemplify the characteristic aloneness of postmodernity.

My personal experience, reflected in my creative practice, is that the contemporary world is a dark and difficult place in which to live well. In the past there were particular things that helped individuals create a meaningful and rich engagement with others. These included family connections, small integrated communities and faith. Much of this has been erased and there is little with which to replace it. The single most significant thing, as Anthony Giddens notes, that has come to replace the (false) certainties of the early modern world is doubt: it “permeates into everyday life as well as philosophical consciousness, and forms the general existential dimension of the contemporary social world” (1991:3). Ironically this all-pervasive characteristic of postmodernity is the gift of “modern critical reason” once widely upheld as the mechanism through which humanity could achieve a meaningful, moral and fulfilling existence (Fracina 1992:18). Doubt becomes a defining feature of postmodern life pervading all spheres of human endeavour because the postmodern environment makes us all “rootless strangers in an ambivalent world” (Smith 1999:58).

In the present milieu it seems ever harder to find answers to both highly personal and much broader questions concerning life and lifestyle choices – the questions individuals privately face loom larger than the individuals themselves. Artists and researchers in arts, here in Africa for example, might ask hard questions about the sustainability of their career choices in the present socio-economic climate. Some decades back, one of the answers to those sorts of questions would readily be to seek employment in cultural



strongholds elsewhere. These days, in the face of austerity measures in Britain, collapsing economies in central Europe and increasingly impenetrable borders in the US, answers to both personal and broad questions about life choices are not so easily found. Further, doing what is right inevitably feels like the kind of action that is beyond the scope of a single actor. One's ability to act and to control or alter circumstances seems disproportionately small compared to the myriad things that require transformation. This idea is captured in the painting *Ability Confronts Duty* (2012), Plate 2.

This canvas comprises a pink smoky haze – a space of no defining features – where diaphanous dappled glazes and smoky cloud-like scumbles meet and diffuse. In this misty atmospheric space, wherein no ground plane or horizon line is marked out, a tiny mongrel (Ability) confronts the large and looming Great Dane of Duty. Both appear nonplussed – neither creature knowing how to proceed with his particular companion. Their stand-off is not even depicted as one of aggressive stillness; it is not a tense waiting to see who will make the first move. Rather, both exhibit a seeming ambivalence or indifference to one another – a state of bewilderment that produces inertia.

Indifference, inertia and ambivalence appear all pervasive in the liquid modern world (Bauman 2002:73). Bauman notes that “contradictory, ambivalent, illegible or inconsistent labile signals” lead to the development of inhibition or behavioural paralysis within men and women (73). Typically, in the “liquid stage” of the modern era, as Bauman asserts, signposts and orientation points, far from staying put, “seem to be on castors; they change places quicker than the destinations they point to can be reached and hardly ever remain in place long enough to enable the wanderers to memorize the trajectory” (73). For me, Bauman describes an all-too-recognisable world – a world I allude to in *Lost: No Guidebook* (2012) – a space in which men and women are all strangers cast adrift in a shifting landscape. While they might look outward (as the canine in the painting does) for answers, none are forthcoming. Postmodern men and women are confused both about themselves and the world in which they live because the postmodern perspective is steeped in “a sense of the ambivalence of existence, the contingency of events, and the insecurity of being” (Smith 1999: 156).



**Plate 2.** Faye Spencer. *Ability Confronts Duty*. 2012. Mixed media on canvas. 120 x 100 cm.

The bewildering array of possibilities and pitfalls afforded by the collapse of certainty leads to a state of inertia. This, in my experience, is a state akin to muteness or a loss of language. It is like having a mechanism (voice) without the opportunity or ability to speak. This loss of power disarms and frustrates. The pervasiveness of this state compels me to try and speak about it through my creative practice and, thus, it features with

frequency, in particular in the *Office Politics Series*, serving, for example, as the starting point for *His Tiny Eye* (2012), Plate 3, pictured below.



**Plate 3.** Faye Spencer. 2012. *His Tiny Eye*. Oil, charcoal on board. 61 x 61 cm (detail).

The painting, in its most pedestrian interpretation, comments, rather unsurprisingly, on the idea that often people in the work environment are given responsibilities without the power required to fulfil those responsibilities properly. But this image can be read in multiple ways and is meant to embody several ideas. And, of course, ideas can be brought to it that are not my own. The image can be about something apparently strong being weak (illusory); it can be about the fear of an unpredictable threat; it can be about the falseness (groundlessness) of fear because the thing that threatens you is a false threat. Following one such reading the painting typifies the inertia/ambivalence paradigm endemic to the postmodern experience for me, in that the creature appears threatening

(potent) yet is muzzled. The muzzled creature is in fact muzzle-less: a close scrutiny of the painting will show that the creature has no mouth and, therefore, no apparent obvious or conventional mechanism through which to either engage with others, or critique or comment on his/her present situation. In the condition of postmodernism we seem to have choices and options but selecting which option, choice or path to follow is never clear. Prior mechanisms, forces and people who once appeared in the popular imagination as powerful, advisory and protective, no longer appear to possess those qualities. The dissolving of illusion has left postmodern men and women feeling stunted and seemingly devoid of apparent mechanisms for speech and action.

While the postmodern perspective seems steeped in inertia and largely devoid of the faith and optimism of the earlier modern age, the cultural and socio-political arena – Bauman’s “postmodern habitat” (Smith 1999:154) – remains driven by the idea that progress, improvement or betterment is achieved through the accumulation of wealth (Bauman 1995:31-33). This notion underlies the idea of higher wages as an incentive in all professions and walks of life: artists, artisans, labourers, even people in management positions. Performance management, staff development programmes, policies to enhance productivity, incentives, are all familiar jargon of the working world and, almost without exception, the carrot on the stick is money. At the start of this chapter I noted that one of the areas my work strives to comment on is how ordinary people are affected by the consequences of globalisation/global capitalism. While collectively works from the *Office Politics Series* reference the dehumanising, slippery, unsatisfying and fraught conditions of present-day working life *Incentive Reward?* (2012-14), Plate 4, deals quite specifically with monetary incentives, pointing both to my own personal experience as well as to the general prevalent feeling that management’s attempts to incentivise the workforce tend to have the opposite effect.

The painting refers to the idea of reward and suggests emphatically that the present system of motivating the workforce is flawed. The idea that “money can’t buy happiness” is so widely known that it is a phrase in common parlance and yet money remains the primary form through which companies claim to reward their staff. Research that

supports this idea is, also, far from new or hidden. For example, in August 1993 Robert E. Lane's article "Why riches don't always buy happiness" was published in *The Guardian* (1993:9) and, no doubt, many hundreds of articles of a similar theme have been published in media throughout the world since that time.

Surveys and studies that illuminate and reinforce the idea that money is not the best method to reward or retain staff continue to be undertaken and seemingly ignored. One such relatively recent survey (2013) by researchers Michael O. Samuel (University of Witwatersrand) and Crispin Chipunza (Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein), specifically directed at South African tertiary institutions found that "a stimulating academic environment and challenging work" (105) were among the strongest motivators in retention of staff. Other variables that impacted significantly on the attrition or retention of staff were interpersonal relationships, job security, and availability of resources for research or teaching (107). Significantly "salary and other financial fringe benefits were the only variables that did not positively influence academic staff to move from their previous employment" (104). That money is a flawed incentive appears to be widely known in both academia and the corporate world. It features in scholarly research, printed media but also even in very accessible formats such as Dan Pink's You-Tube motivational presentation *Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose* (Pink 2012: January 4).

My own life experience and that of my peers suggests that we still seem to toil under the illusion that wealth plus success equals happiness. Experience then seems to suggest exactly the opposite of what orthodox economic wisdom claims – and has long done so. Despite this, corporations large and small tend to incentivise their employees via monetary rewards that, if at all attainable, will likely make no actual difference to the quality of their lives, and they continue to downplay the role of personal, meaningful reward which derives from the feeling that one's work is acknowledged, contributory and valued. The painting *Incentive Reward?* (2012-14) speaks to the experience of this peculiar and distressing phenomenon. In the painting a large undernourished, Boxer-type dog (suitably yoked with a corporate blue-black collar) looks with incomprehension at the object placed before him. On the ground plane sits a lean and meatless bone –

something that surely serves to provoke or tease the recipient, rather than serving as a reward



**Plate 4.** Faye Spencer. *Incentive Reward?* 2012-14. Mixed media on board. 100 x 80 cm.

Having detailed how paintings from my *Office Politics Series* speak of disillusionment and dislocation in the postmodern arena I turn briefly to two smaller scale works in order to draw attention to two further things this series suggests. These ideas are pointed to but not emphatically explored in the series. They do, however, emerge more profoundly in the other two projects that comprise this doctoral enquiry. *Employee of the Week* (2012),

Plate 5, features a delighted eager sausage dog in lurid red and pinks seated above a banner declaring the hound “Employee of the week”. Above the canine a painted swirl (which could merely be a dirty office wall) suggests a halo. *Early Retirement* (2012), Plate 6, comprises similar discordant reds and pinks, but here the dog, a shaggy nondescript breed in blue and pink, trots happily in a grassy landscape.

While the presentation of these happy yappers in these two paintings, of course, may suggest a critique of the working space, I turn to these paintings to draw attention to the idea that the series speaks not only to negativity, inertia and dislocation but also to the power of making – for while in the main my canine paintings reference inertia and dislocation, the very act of their creation, their appearance in public exhibitions and museum collections (Tatham Art Gallery, Durban Art Gallery), my analysis of them in a paper on Power presented at SAVAH (2015), and the fact that I present my consideration of them in this chapter itself, references the inverse. Thus, while they speak to inertia they testify simultaneously to the power of the creative act, and to presence in the face of dislocation.

Secondly, these works begin to speak to the power of levity – and thereby represent a departure from my former painting practice – which prior to this series could not have been described as jocular or light. In these works, though, as reviewer Moray Comrie notes, “the humourous turn encourages the audience to consider and reflect anew on their own responses and reactions to conflict in the workplace” (2013). The creatures that feature in Plates 5 and 6 are figures neither of mockery nor bona fide threat. While we might recognise them, one of their purposes is to counter the negative feelings so often engendered by chaos (in the workplace or indeed in broader arenas) and they pay tribute to the power of the imagination. Simon Critchley, a prominent researcher on humour, observes that “Phenomenologically” humour can be described in “very broad terms as a specific social practice” most readily identified by its effects (2002:3). Key characteristics of humour are “specific physiological effects – laughing, giggling, grinning and smiling, and emotional affects including joy, relief, surprise, excitement, enthusiasm” (3-9).



**Plate 5.** Faye Spencer. *Employee of the Week*. 2012. Mixed media on canvas. 51 x 41 cm.

Because of these effects humour is often described as a balm, something healing and curative (15). Levity lightens or unburdens us in other ways, too, as Critchley explains: “humour,” has a “socially de-stabilising effect” because “in an exchange with and an intervention into the symbolic order” it causes “momentary displacements of this order” (18-19).





**Plate 6.** Faye Spencer. *Early Retirement*. 2012. Mixed media on canvas. 51 x 41 cm.

Thus, while works in the series point to serious and often distressing conundrums faced under postmodernity (powerlessness, imbalance, inertia), the series also, through its call to levity and through the use of metaphor and of the imagination, points to something else, much less dark: to the possibility of feeling differently, to the possibility of upliftment. For, as Critchley summarises, humour can function to “produce new perceptions of the surrounding world, as well as of oneself” (9-11). Humour “renders the ordinary extraordinary”, it “defamiliarises the familiar”, creating a “distance to the immediacy of things (including oneself)” and allows us to consider an environment or situation in which alternate possibilities, other possible relationships, can exist (9-11).

## 5. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented a scrutiny of my *Office Politics Series* (2010-2016) highlighting some key works. Here I have considered the imagery and media used in these works, and shown how the series speaks to theories about the socio-economic climate generally, and the workplace specifically. Importantly the chapter serves also to illustrate my thinking on and experience of the postmodern arena. I considered how paradigms such as modernism that have led to the present cultural context in which artists find themselves. While the series reflects a chaotic and tense location, at the close of the chapter I also suggest that the practice of making can serve a cathartic function, noting this is something I explore in depth in subsequent chapters of my thesis.

Having reflected on the series and considered ways in which these paintings tell stories about the working space and, more broadly, the postmodern environment, I will now turn to a scrutiny of my *Indian Yellow Project* (2010-2016) which comprises 2D work (prints and illustrations) as well as creative writing (a novella). To situate the project, I begin Chapter Two with a broad introduction of narrative and consider my conceptualisation of narrative in relation to some generally-held theories regarding stories and story-telling. In the upcoming chapter I also reflect on why I was compelled to utilise the medium of writing, most particularly the form of the novel, to begin a sustained reflection on my particular experience of loss.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Narrative and the Mobility of Language

#### 1. Introduction

In this and the following two chapters I explore the processes, functions and imagery that evolved in the creation of the *Indian Yellow Project* (2010-2016). As noted, the project comprises a short novel, illustrations which reside within the novel and a series of prints that emanate from the creative writing project. The exhibited prints intermittently overlap with the images used to illustrate the novel. While the same symbol/image often appears in the novel and in the exhibition, the image may be differently composed (in terms of colour or formal arrangement). Alternately, the image in the exhibited print may include other visual elements which speak to the broad themes of the novel – trauma, familial death, efforts of recovery – rather than simply serving as literal visual renderings of the text. The project, thus, looks at several ways of narrating loss and its imbrication with trauma. The loss of triplets 23 weeks into my pregnancy is the driving force behind the writing. In the novella, though, the family member who dies is a parent, rather than a child.

I began the novella almost immediately after the stillbirth(s), wrote profusely without stopping for a number of months and edited nothing initially. The story remained incomplete although I knew the shape it would take. In 2013 I returned to the novella to edit and complete it. I also began working on imagery inspired by the writing. The visual component of the project was not something I envisioned when I first began and then abruptly stopped the writing: both the idea of illustrating the novel and of creating a parallel exhibition that spoke to the novella's themes were conceived during the process of producing a proposal for my PhD. Revisiting and reworking the text and returning to the act of creative writing has allowed me a sustained and penetrative reflection on writing as a creative act, on the function of acts such as writing and art-making, on the

relationship of these acts to death and on the relationship between writing and image-making (particularly in print).

The novella's text was born from a traumatic experience of death and loss. In an inversion that is peculiar to art, it was born from a stillbirth. Reworking and completing the novella has been an especially challenging resurrection. It is a creative act that has been personally both necessary and useful. In undertaking this task I have been compelled to rely on wide-ranging and unorthodox resources. I have turned both to texts on trauma (depth psychology, in particular), and to collegial support from fellow artists. Artists Natalie Fossey and Wayne Reddiar formed a kind of focus group with me, reflecting on both the writing and the imagery that emanated from it. They contributed to discussions about how I might explain the ways in which the exhibited prints explore the themes of the written story in an alternate register. This process has been enriched by discussions with psychotherapist and poet Floss Mitchell who works extensively with trauma. She helped me gain a deeper understanding of the project and enabled me to examine the relationship between narrative and remembering (or returning to trauma) in fresh ways.

In the opening chapter of this thesis I maintained that the act of making (certainly my acts of making) fulfils three functions: catharsis (healing), cohesion (a sense of self-knowledge, an understanding or working out of where the maker is) and community (a feeling of belonging and working together with others). As noted, it is in fulfilling these three functions that I believe the real value of creative practice lies. Part of the investigation in this thesis is concerned with why an artist would continue to make art in a chaotic, implosive and fractured world. Though I find ideas regarding the present social-economic climate that reference its fractured and dystopic nature quite persuasive – chiming with my own experience of discord, confusion and fracture – at the same time I wonder if the theory of postmodernism may overstate the dilemma when viewed historically. Though Jameson's views on postmodernism tend to be described as 'dystopic' (Fellugo 2011), he argues himself for a critique that considers the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as "catastrophe and progress all together"

(1991:47). Many ages have seen artists consider and comment on their time and circumstances as apocalyptic, chaotic and fractured, often drawing connections between their own time and the Biblical Doomsday. Examples of such works include Albrecht Dürer's *the Apocalypse* (1498), Edvard Munch's *Scream* (1893); and Otto Dix's (1924) *Der Krieg* (Bell 2015). Other well-known works that speak to their own time and place as "an age of decay and disintegration" include Theodore Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819), Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), Max Ernst's *Europe After the Rain II* (1941) and, more recently, Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* (2007) which can be seen to comment on capitalist decadence and on the art market itself, and to "warn of impending doom" (Trump 2011). In a like fashion, in Chapter One of this thesis I begin – with my analysis of the *Office Politics Series* as a manifestation of and comment on the postmodern climate – to address questions of chaos, fracture and disempowerment. I begin to ask, too, what the artist's role is in such an environment. A consideration of my *Indian Yellow Project* in the following three chapters continues this enquiry. This project though, is framed in a much more deeply personal register than the *Office Politics Series* which can be understood chiefly as an act of cohesion, while the *Indian Yellow Project* as I will show, possesses a cathartic function.

As the *Indian Yellow Project* comprises several components that intersect with narrative in multiple ways I have divided this chapter into two main sections, the first of which is entitled "Beginnings – Some Thoughts on Narrative". I begin this section with a broad introduction of narrative where I note some of the basic ideas theorists Mieke Bal, Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes have brought to the definition of narrative. Observations pertaining to the scope and function of narrative/narratology by writers Rick Altman and Mark Currie will also be referred to. I consider my conceptualisation of narrative in relation to some generally-held theories regarding stories and story-telling. This is an important part of the self-reflexive nature of the creative practice which forms the practical part of my PhD project. Reading broadly on narrative theory has provided me with a language in which to explore the practice of writing; engagement with these kinds of texts has deepened my understanding of the process and theory of writing.

In the second main section, entitled “The Mobility of Language”, I discuss my novella in relation to ideas on multivocality, mutability and ambivalence. I consider why I was compelled to utilise the medium of writing, most particularly the form of the novel, to begin a sustained reflection on my particular experience of loss while in the chapter that follows, I examine relationships of similarity and difference between the processes of creative writing and the construction of prints and imagery emanating from the novella.

## **2. Beginnings – Some Thoughts on Narrative**

Narrative – the practice of storytelling – is widely regarded as a pervasive and important human practice; it is both universal and culturally specific and significant. Narrative as a core practice of human expression clearly “commands our attention” (Altman 2008:1). It is ‘as inescapable as language in general’ and serves as testimony to the idea of human beings as “narrative animals, as *homo fabulans* – the tellers and interpreters of narrative” (Ricoeur in Currie 1998:2). Storytelling, after all, “exists in every known human society” and like metaphor “seems to be everywhere: sometimes active and obvious, at other times fragmentary, dormant and tacit” (Branigan 1992:1). Stories are stored, spoken and scrutinised throughout the world and “regularly occupy a place of honour in society” (Altman 2008:1).

Yet, as Altman stresses, despite its long history, pervasive character and versatility – comprising the bulk of sacred texts, serving as a significant vehicle of personal memory and a “mainstay in law, entertainment and history” the definition of narrative has often been restricted (1). Thankfully, throughout history writers and forward thinking theorists have ignored, countered and variously complicated these limits. For example, Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* notes how the “utter inadequacy” of literary theory is exposed when it “is forced to deal with the novel” which he defines as incomplete, still evolving and young (1981:8). Bakhtin suggests that literary theory works confidently and precisely in the case of the other genres because they are “finished and already formed” objects (8). In his 2008 text Altman recognises that, in the main, existing definitions of narrative share several flaws – most stress a single characteristic

over others, are based on a limited corpus and take one type of narrative as representative of the entire field (6).

Bakhtin, and he is not alone in this, also notes that Aristotelian formulations of narrative still tend to dominate narratology and remain the stable foundation for the theory relating to narrative genres, although these formulations are “occasionally so deeply embedded as to be invisible” (1981:8). More inclusive conceptions of narrative by thinkers such as Bal, Bakhtin and Barthes, point to a conception of narratology that erases some of “the boundaries drawn up by history” (Altman 2008:2). Writing by these three theorists has been particularly useful to me as their views broaden the scope of narrative to include much more than literary text. Bal’s narratology, for example, holds that it is “the ensemble of theories of narrative, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events, cultural artefacts” that “tell a story” (2009:3). My project, after all, consists of both an illustrated novella (text) and images (an exhibition of prints whose imagery grew out of the novella but which serve as something other than illustrations of the story). The images in these prints tell stories other than – and separate from – the novella. A definition of narrative that includes images and fragments is not only helpful, but essential to my work.

Bal identifies three central concepts pertaining to narrative: text, story and fabula. She describes text as a “finite, structured whole composed of signs” (5). Text, she points out, may refer to linguistic units such as words and sentences, or to different signs, cinematic shots and sequences, or to painted lines, dots or blots (5). Note that Barthes uses the term “text” to refer to something different. His use of the term pertains to his understanding of writing. I will consider his analysis of text at a later point. I will begin with Bal’s notion of text because it usefully distinguishes between different elements of narrative. Bal explains that the story is the content of a text. “The story”, she notes, produces a specific “manifestation, inflection and colouring” of the fabula, while the fabula is “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (5). A fabula “that has been ordered into a story is still not a text” (9). A narrative text must be conveyed to recipients – it is a story that is told “and this telling requires a medium: that is, it is converted into signs” (9). Questions relating to medium, to choice of medium and

what the use of a particular medium itself means feature widely in contemporary art theory. As arts researcher Francis Halsall notes, what the work of art does is “inextricably bound up with an ontological question of what is doing the doing” (2007:46). Since Marshal McLuhan’s pivotal book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, it has become impossible for artists and readers of contemporary theory to ignore the notion that the “medium is the message” (1964:9). McLuhan puts it thus: “The ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print and print is the content of the telegraph” (23–24). The idea that the message is connected to whatever it is constructed out of, is one that artists cannot avoid paying attention to. Halsall, in writing about visual art stresses that “the work of art gives the medium form, configures it and thus actively constitutes it as a medium” (46).

Because the question of what is done by the artwork “cannot” be answered without asking “what the agency for that action is” (45) it is important for me to consider why I have used particular media for the messages I have sought to convey and how (or if) those media counter, assist or alter what occurs within them. A related question is how the media in my projects relate to or differ from one another. In the remainder of this chapter I consider the various media used to tell the story in the novella and show how the prints speak in an alternative register to the text. I present questions about, and reflections on, what the text in the context of the *Indian Yellow Project* comprises: what is the text? Is the text the same in the novella (writing) and in the images that come out of it? Why, if the novella has the capacity to present multiple voices and to tell a story I could not (initially) tell visually, do I then return and include visualized (pictured) aspects of the written story? What is the function of the independent prints that emanate from the novella? I also consider the relationship of writing and viewing to reading, and the role of the writer/reader with reference to this project.

Bal notes that the corpus about which narratology proceeds to make its pronouncements comprises “narrative texts” of all kinds “made for a variety of purposes and serving a range of diverse functions” (2009:3). I have used several different medium and formats



(writing, particularly a novella, but also imagery in the form of illustrations and also in the form of an exhibition of prints) to narrate a story of loss. I believe it is important to try and uncover how these media have influenced one another – if they have – and also what the purpose of utilising each has been. I have to ask why, when the format of a novel gave me particular freedoms and allowed for an immersive and varied exploration of grief that was broad, inclusive, challenging and rich, I did not *stop* with the novel but went on to make artworks as well. Why, I must ask, did I feel compelled to 1) illustrate the novel, and 2) also produce a set of prints that emanated from it, but which I claim were not *illustrations* of the novella. They spoke instead more broadly to themes of loss and repair. These are the kinds of questions reading about narrative theory has produced in relation to my project. I note some of them in this chapter, and consider them in greater detail in Chapters Three and Four.

Like Altman and Bal, Currie, in his introduction to *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, stresses the ubiquitous nature of narrative. He points out that a contemporary narratological cliché is the refrain concerning the every-where-ness of narrative. “So many recent studies”, he notes, “point out that narrative is not confined to literature” (1998:1). “However often” he continues, “it has been repeated, it is a key characteristic of the recent change in narratology: a massive expansion in the narratological remit, in the scope of objects for narratological analysis” (1). Frequently cited examples of narrative in daily life are “films, music videos, advertisements, television and newspaper journalism, myths, paintings, songs, comic strips, anecdotes, jokes, stories of our holidays, and accounts of our day” (1). In academic circles there has been an acknowledgement that narrative is at the core of representations of identity, self-representation, and personal memory. It is also central to the “collective identity of groups such as regions, nations, race and gender” (2).

Much contemporary narratology, as Currie notes, follows the move away from the “scientific assumption” that narratology comprises or strives even to be an “objective science which discovers inherent formal and structural properties in its object narratives” (2). Post-structural narratology, for example, illustrates how structure is something

projected onto the work by the act of reading and is not necessarily a property of a narrative discovered by the reading. “Structure,” emphasises Currie, “came to be seen as a metaphor” utilised by readers of a structuralist inclination “to give the impression of stability in the object – narrative meaning” (3). Post-structuralism, on the other hand, posits an ambiguity of signs and the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning. These ideas interest me and are a lens through which I have produced and considered both the creative writing for the *Indian Yellow Project* (2010-2016) and its visual companions. Concepts such as multivocality and ambivalence are especially important to my practice and I scrutinize them in the upcoming section. Reflecting on these concepts helps me understand why, after initially trying to narrate my loss visually without success, I turned to writing and then, again, why having begun to write, I was enabled and compelled to also produce a visual dialogue on loss.

### **3. Mobility of Language – Multivocality, Mutability and Ambivalence**

#### **3.1. Multivocality**

Mikhail Bakhtin, like Bal, is a thinker whose ideas have contributed enormously to narrative theory. Bakhtin’s sustained consideration of the novel – its uniqueness and particular gifts – is located mainly in *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984) and *Speech Genres and other Late Essays* (1986). In these texts Bakhtin sets himself in opposition to traditional linguistics which situates the word as “a static lexical element” when it should rather be viewed as something mobile and context dependent (Danow 1991:22). In his writing Bakhtin examines the generation of meaning through heteroglossia, the hybrid nature of language (polyglossia) and the complex relation between utterances.

Heteroglossia is a key concept in understanding the relationship of the word or utterance to other words/utterances; and in realising also the hybridity of language. I devote some of this chapter to explaining this concept because it significantly informs my thinking in relation to the novella, as well as in relation to the images I have constructed (the illustrations and the prints emanating from this project). Michael Holquist aptly explains how Bakhtin’s heteroglossia is “a way of conceiving the world as made up of a roiling

mass of languages, each of which has its own distinct formal markers” (1990:69). “These features,” he continues “are never purely formal for each has associated with it a set of distinctive values and presuppositions” (69).

Heteroglossia is an important concept in Bakhtin’s formulation of the novel which he deems unique because it allows for the genuine interplay of voices – it corresponds with what happens in living interactions. In this way the novel is “utterly different” from other genres “because it presumes a completely other relationship to language” (1981:xxx). Bakhtin argues that it is the only genre which can radically and completely accommodate heteroglossia (multi-voiced-ness /linguistic diversity). Bakhtin concedes that poetry, to an extent, has double and possibly even multiple meanings but since it usually comprises one speaker (as opposed to dialogue within the text) the dual or multiple meaning of a poetic symbol “never brings in its wake dual accents” (328). This has a lot to do with the fact that the narrator has a voice and not just the character in the story and is one of the reasons why the novel can bring many different discourses into play simultaneously. Like poetry, drama too, argues Bakhtin, is similarly limited as despite “the existence of many voices”, generally speaking, “it yields only direct discourse” and thereby lacks an essential property for “mediated double-voicing” provided by the author/narrator who maintains a pervasive presence in the novel (Adkins 2013:3). In this chapter I show how the simultaneous play of forces and the relationship of reader and writer (key Bakhtinian ideas) broadly inform this project.

Bakhtin holds that while words *in themselves* are neutral, there is no objective, innocent or neutral language as “the word in language is half someone else’s” (1981:293). Living communication comprises “utterances” (words), but, as Bakhtin notes, a word/utterance never exists in isolation. It is always loaded with history (prior use) and expectation (it is always addressed to someone and this shapes both how it is selected and how it is received). The only place where words are neutral or free from ideology is in a dictionary (294). Bakhtin shows that our dialogue as speakers is “not simply with those with whom we speak” but also with the “prior entrenched codes and modes of speaking that are associated with different social situations” (Allen 2003:80).

Following on from this is the claim that our words are never merely our own: words are “eternally mobile” and “never free from the values and aspirations of others” (Bakhtin 1984:202). A speaker, explains Bakhtin, “receives the word from another’s voice and is filled with that voice’ (202). Words are “already inhabited” and “permeated with the interpretation of others” (202). Bakhtin argues, though, that language as a social phenomenon does not exist in dictionaries. Language is always involved in the relations between specific speakers in “specific social situations” (Allen 2003:80). This characteristic of language results in his concluding that no language user creates meaning independently. “Our speech”, writes Bakhtin “is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of our-own-ness”, with varying degrees of awareness or detachment (1986:89). These words of others carry with them “their own expression, their own evaluative tone which we assimilate, re-work and re-accentuate” (89).

Following Bakhtin, there are, of course, multiple ways I might examine the play of words in the novella. Whose words (before they are mine) are the words in this story, I might ask. Are these the words of the writers I admire and enjoy? Are these also partly the words of Salman Rushdie, John Irving, Isabelle Allende and Hélène Cixous, for example? Of course, to some extent they must be although these writers’ use of words far surpasses my own. Irving’s novels are almost always structured around a missing parent and a child’s longing for that parent. From his best-known early work, *The World According to Garp* (1976), right up to his *Avenue of Mysteries* (2015), there are frequent glints of humour and absurdity that sweeten the terrible stings and injuries his narratives contain. Although my novella is much shorter than his lengthy texts, I see connections between his works and my own theme of departure: my own writing swings similarly between sorrow and laughter. Salman Rushdie is also a writer whose work I have read voraciously since my youth. Rushdie’s writing is extremely visual, full of adjectives and descriptive passages; it is pictorial to me. He also packs almost too much in a sentence. My own writing also spills urgently onto the page. There is a chaos in my writing and a plethora of visual details that I find in Rushdie too. Allende’s stories of love, passion and

compassion are intricately bound to the family, and to maternal relationships and connections between parents and children. Her *Paula* (1989), which celebrates her own turbulent life while also recording and reflecting on her daughter's untimely death, especially comes to mind here. My words are driven from the history of my reading; they cannot be mine alone.

Yet my thinking about the mobility of words extends beyond the mobility of each word (and questions about whose words they might be before they were mine) to the mobility of imagery (comprising words, and later also pictures) and the idea of dialogue. My interest in words (and images as words or signs) is borne in, and spurred on by, what Bakhtin terms the *dialogical* function of writing/image-making. My interest in examining this project in a self-reflexive manner is not primarily centred on the external influences on the writing so much as the opportunity that a novel allows for the presence and presentation of conflicting views and actions; in my case specifically, the writing allowed me a sustained meditation on loss and on the myriad ways people respond to loss and work through grief.

The otherness or multi-voiced-ness that a *novel* accommodates is of special interest to me. It is this "otherness" in all our words and images, even when we intend to use such images as symbols, this "double voiced discourse" (Bakhtin 1986:60), wherein words are always embedded with multiple voices and meanings, that has led me to consider ways in which the visual and verbal images in the *Indian Yellow Project* act as ciphers that might in fact perform one or several alternative stories potentially, even stories, as I will show, that may be completely at odds with the dominant "original" narrative.

Although the narrator is the primary voice through which the story is told in the novella, a number of other voices are present. Through their actions, interactions and dialogues the reader is presented with (or able to access) a variety of modes of grief and the reader witnesses (or is exposed to) a range of differing reactions to the trauma of loss. In the child/narrator one can witness the use of creativity as a healing agent and as the expression of a desire for sense making and closure when she seeks out messages and contact in signs from her mother. The idea of creativity as a mechanism of comfort or

healing is re-iterated throughout the novella in relation to the narration of the child's story. Even in moments where the mother's absence could most profoundly be felt – at the memorial service for example – the child continues to summon up her presence in an affirming way. Hiding upstairs “beside the lonely rhododendron” (Spencer 2016:31), she recalls leaning to the left with her ear to the floor:

I can hear the murmur of the bees in the light fitting beneath me. The upstairs lounge is hot and crowded and I close my eyes. I fall asleep pretending the hum and buzz of the hive is the sticky beating of my Mother's unstoppable heart.  
(32)

Another instance – a truly awful experience – is cast in a different light in the way the child narrates (and chooses to perceive) the moments in the whale tower when her father discovers that the box of ashes is screwed shut:

He rests his sad angry head on the top of the box where he had placed it neatly on the tower railing. His shoulders are shaking so I guess he is crying. He cries for half an hour with his head pressed down fiercely on the little box. I can't move to hug him. I can't move to get away. I just stand really still on the horrible tower platform. I stand and look at the sky. Empty and blue. I stare at the sea with its monotonous, well ordered, regular waves. Suddenly I spy a large splash and the magical plume of a spouting whale, the world shrinking rapidly with the furl and splash of its huge marvellous tail  
'Dad!' I shout. 'Dad I saw a whale.'  
My Father lifts his head slowly and peers out over the once bland ocean. Another plume squirts heavenwards. He has seen it. His mouth twists into a thin faint smile as he smashes the box fiercely against the railing. The box splits loudly, the tower sways and my Mother is free.  
'Any last words?' says my Father softly, turning away from the sea and towards me.  
'We miss you Liza! Good-bye' I call. 'Good-bye and thanks for the whale.'  
I look at my Father with his brown limbs and his now pale face. I look at my Father, the saddest man in the world. He doesn't know that he has the imprint of a small angry sun embossed on his forehead. He doesn't know that the only cloud in the azure sky is a great whale sent by Liza to watch over us. (82-84)

In transforming the sighting of the whale – both in the water, and in the form of a whale-shaped cloud in the sky – into signs from (or embodiments of) Liza, the child turns the profoundly distressing moment of scattering her ashes into a moment of illumination. The actual whale and the whale-shaped cloud are interpreted as signs of the Mother's

continued presence despite her death. These signs speak to the idea of imagination as an aid to healing. Similarly, through the child's particular dialogue with the reader, the telling of the story is my own (the author's) effort at healing through imagination. As noted, I have used the mechanism of fiction to consider and speak about my grief at the loss of my triplets.

Of course, mine may seem a privileged voice within the narrative – yet the characters within the narrative itself also reveal other experiences of grief that are equally valid and acknowledged through their situation within the narrative. The form of this writing (what Bakhtin would describe as the *novelness* of the novel) allows each of these voices to rise up within the text and be heard. So in spite of what might be my own or the dominant position, the presence of all these other positions mitigates against the idea of proposing just one appropriate response to grief.

In contrast with the magic signs of the whale and the cloud (82-84), which suggest efforts at repair, the following excerpts show how the writing bears witness to extreme shock and despair, and to muteness and inaction in the face of loss:

My Grandmother gulps. She swims happily in the biosphere of her own ailments (being both fond of – and familiar with – these essentials: mild incontinence, arrhythmia and psoriasis) but she flaps helplessly, like a waterless fish, in the presence of somebody else's ills. She struggles for breath as the kitchen air becomes filled with poisonous and unfamiliar medical terms. (21)

The child's grandmother tends to be pro-active, comforting and to serve as a protector of the child. Even she, though, is rendered helpless at points in the story. In the example above, the grandmother, generally comfortable with medical terminology, feels unable to breathe when her son begins to talk about the medical condition that, ultimately, resulted in the death of her daughter-in-law. The depth of this kind of shock is evident in its most extreme form in the action (and inaction) of the father who "sit[s] and stare[s] sadly into the middle distance" and "roam[s] about the house at night, stopping only to lean on the walls or furniture" (55). His despair engulfs him and he is unable to hide it from the family. The narrator recalls:

My Father stands at a peculiar eighty-five degrees, with shoulders braced against the pantry wall. It is as if since my Mother fell, various aspects of our household architecture are on the verge of collapse and he is determined to support them: chairs would topple unless he holds them, table tops might rise were he not slumped on them, or even on occasion asleep on them, even the fridge threatens to swing its door wide open if he does not lean momentarily against its blank white coolness. (20)

The extent of his shock is emphasised in that not only is the father unable or unwilling to hide his trauma from the child, he is immersed in it, and the child witnesses this continually and frequently in the months following her mother's death. "His favourite pose", she notes, "seems to be a sort of flying buttress of head and forearms against the oval window frame in the lounge", and in the following weeks she "will discover that he has actually a limited repertoire of fourteen such positions, twelve of which" she can "adequately mimic" (20). The child witnesses the overwhelming despair of her remaining parent, his grief coming over him like a pall and rendering him immobile. He is caught in a number of still, frozen poses. The child tries to comfort her father in an inverse of their expected roles, but she does not know how to make him feel better – her mimicry the result of her not knowing how to comfort him. Through it she hopes to make him laugh or to provoke him to action.

Recognition is given in these examples to the overwhelming nature of loss. The idea of not overcoming it is a legitimate feeling also. Presented within the novella, too, are what I imagine could be called *efficient* and *proper* responses to loss. These are conventional and kind in the predominantly warm and nurturing responses of the grandmother who "knits and fusses, bakes and scrubs" and "plunges flowers into countless vases and hums wherever she goes in the house" (56). Also acknowledged are protocols of grieving and condolence witnessed in Headmistress Hepplewaithe's "pink, teary sympathy" and her "blinking praise" of the floral arrangements (24), in the gifts of flowers and fruit sent to the family, and even in the gesture of neighbour Susan's "large copper saucepan" of tomato soup (54). These gestures succeed for a time but, as the narrator concedes, these "bite[s] of normalcy" tend to be "brief" (54); in spite of the efforts of her grandparents and (occasionally) of her neighbour, Susan, and the distraction of visitors like Craig, home "without my Mother, is no home at all" (55). Clearly, then, while the idea that



imagination can heal (and that comfort can be found in the actions of others) are themes running through the story, there are also other threads (opposite and different from this idea) at play as well. It is this multiplicity that is significant to me, because it was only through writing a novel that I was afforded the scope to explore and present these varied responses to loss. This was one of the things that eluded me when I tried to respond to and consider loss through visual images, such as paintings and drawings. It is, then, the *novelness* of the novel, its ability to speak in multiple registers at different levels in relation to the theme of grief that allowed me the room for a complex and sustained reflection on my experience.

The narrator's view seems to be that protocols of mourning and condolence are not all that helpful in countering "the overwhelming soundless blackness of loss" (20). Her grandmother, for example, is not uplifted but "threatened from the front by a vast array of fruit baskets and chocolate treats" sent in plenitude by the "sympathetic; polite and neighbourly: something edible to sustain and distract the living" (20). Yet the presence of these many responses/modes of grief in the story (and their conflict with each other) shows that each varied response has its place. As noted earlier, Bakhtin believes that the novel particularly is a medium that enables the presentation and existence of diverging points of view. The novel is a form that allows such diversity because different characters emerge through their direct speech in the course of mutual interactions but also through the way in which the narrator views them.

The novel too, allows for a complex play between past and present even within a single character. In this case, for example, the person of the narrator is dual voiced – for the narrator is a child but the child is being presented in the past through the eyes of an adult author – so even within the form on one person or character (that of the narrator) there is the voice and experience of the child and that of the adult also. In my novella the value of different points of view is additionally emphasised in direct speech. The exchange transcribed on the following page provides an example of this:

‘David,’ my Grandmother shrieks, ‘you can’t leave this child running wild. She needs to go to school.’  
‘They are a bunch of arseholes,’ murmurs my Father. ‘Unsympathetic, stupid and prim,’ he states with more conviction.  
‘Well’, says my Grandmother quixotically, ‘that’s what they are for you know!’  
(12)

This extract shows two adults with very different perceptions about the role that schools (and specifically teachers) play in the lives of children. The father claims that the teachers’ role of caring for and protecting children is not being fulfilled. Their lack of empathy is completely unacceptable. His mother, on the other hand, with her riposte of “that’s what they are for you know” suggests that the value of being in school lies precisely in its abrasive nature. The grandmother expresses the view that school usefully presents children with an environment that is less cosseted than the home environment.

### **3.2. Mutability**

The notion that point of view (perception) is crucial to the unfolding of events, and can turn something terrible into something good, is alluded to at several points within the narrative. For example, in Chapter Five of the story, the child, angry and unable to sleep, lies on her bed and flings darts at a cardboard dragon she and her cousin have drawn. “I aim for his heart”, she recalls, “but I am a poor shot so his entire torso is pierced with holes” (67). Her father enters the room and he turns out the light. The pair look at the window where “light spills through my Dragon’s many minute wounds” (67). The father turns to the child: “Wow Baby,” he exclaims, “you made stars!” (67). This episode is one of several in the book, that points not only to the power of agency or will (surprisingly, in this instance the will of the father – a character who in the bulk of the novel remains trapped in his grief) to turn damage – the ruined punctured drawing of the dragon – into something as positive and illuminating as a sky full of stars. It also illustrates how easily mutable things are – in one moment the drawing is a ruin of puncture marks and immediately thereafter a sky of stars.

### 3.3. Ambivalence

This idea of multiplicity, or *many-voiced-ness* to use a Bakhtinian phrase, is also manifest in the ambivalence that is contained within the story. In this ambivalence (in the way the story plays itself out through signs that could be read in different ways) my practice of Bakhtinian dialogism makes itself felt. The novel is a social space full of the complexity and shifts of vision prevalent in human interactions. It is a dialogical space, as Bakhtin notes, “rich with plastic possibilities” (1) and “militantly protean” (1981:xxvii). The multiplicity and (potential) awkwardness of dialogue – and thus of human interaction – is noted even within the story itself when the father questions why Craig came to visit the family after Liza’s death: “I don’t know why the fuck he came all this way. You can’t apologise to the Dead”, he exclaims, noting that “it’s hard enough to right things with the living” (66). The novel, because of its particular form and its ability to present a multitude of clashing voices simultaneously, and because of its polyvalence of signs, is the form of creative writing that allowed me an engaging reflection on loss, one that could accommodate the complexity and various (often conflicting) feelings such an experience entails.

On the face of it the novella is a redemptive story. The reader follows the story from the beginning of the mother’s death and witnesses the disintegration of the remaining family. The relationship between daughter and father breaks down. The child runs away. The father is badly injured while searching for her. At the end of the story, though, the father and child are reunited. They seem to have re-established the lines of communication between them and travel off together across the ocean. This, it would seem, is a happy ending. And yet, how can *this* be a happy ending? Who can really imagine that a young child charging off across the ocean in a tiny vessel with a one-armed man, who is not an experienced sailor, is really a happy ending? Further, while the father and child are reunited, the family is further split apart as the two sail off waving to the grandparents left on the shore, people who have until this juncture featured significantly in the upbringing

and care of the child. The family is perhaps even further divided through the sailing away of the child and parent.

Perhaps this scenario might read as a happy ending if one takes a cursory and superficial or narrowly realistic view of the story? Or if one reads the events in a symbolic way, rather than in literal terms. Surely now danger is more imminent: they are as close to death as when the mother died in the story? It seems that there are other ways of reading the story, then, in which they are not necessarily safe or happy and are courting even greater danger. Perhaps, the idea inscribed therein is that one is never safe or far from tragedy, but what is important is how one walks beside it? I don't imagine that the text makes this emphatic. I hope, at least, it does not. Much depends on how the reader reads the symbol of the crow (good or bad) and the water (spiritual, cleansing, threatening abyss, both?). I trust that the ambiguity attending these signs means that the story may be read in different ways. "A word", as Bakhtin notes, "is a bridge thrown between myself and another, and if one end of the bridge depends on me, the other depends on my addressee" (1986:86).

This fluidity or mutability of words has parallels also in Barthes's conception of the reader and writer and of what he terms a *readerly* or *writerly* text. This is a relationship that I begin to reflect on in the novella itself. Like Barthes I am interested in the idea of the reader playing an active role in the production of meaning – in being "no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (1974:4). Barthes holds, as I do, that writing should strive to oppose readerly texts which are "controlled by the principle of non-contradiction" (156). Barthes is suspicious of texts which make no demands on the reader to assist in the production of meaning. Such texts, Barthes argues, are complicit with the common sense or *Doxa* of the surrounding culture. Readerly texts plunge the reader into a kind of torpor (40) where, "instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom to accept or reject the text" (40). This kind of reading is "nothing more than a referendum" (40).

By actively introducing contradiction I speak simultaneously of the complexity and conflict in grief and I enable the reader to enter into the production of meaning. For example, I do not intend to rule out a happy ending entirely, but imagine that the way the story is constructed allows for that possibility in the same way that it allows for the possibility of a darker ending. The story can be read one way or the other as the reader desires; after all, as Bakhtin notes, the word is “a two sided act”, one whose meaning is determined by whose word it is and, equally, by whom it is received (1986:86). I have tried to construct my narrative with a careful awareness that a reader will bring to my story their own interpretation of what the events may mean, and I hope that I have allowed the story to end as the reader desires. By this I mean that the reader is able to view the sailing away of the child and father as a good or happy ending, or as a difficult or problematic ending as suits their viewpoint. The dual nature of words, and of the text as something comprising “multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogue” (Barthes 1974:56) is explored in my writing practice, as the preceding extracts and dialogues show. The idea that “the word is a territory shared by both addresser and addressee” (Bakhtin 1986:86) is one that has compelled me to consider carefully the subtleties within the written narrative as the novella unfolds. Although its open-endedness was instinctively something I strove for, ideas on the orientation of the word and on the relationship between addresser and addressee have led me to think about, and to edit, the story in ways that would not have occurred to me otherwise.

The idea of ambivalence is underscored too by the figure of the crow, which sits again in a quixotic relationship to the narrative. A crow – whose compellingly malevolent and complex nature is perhaps best captured in Ted Hughes poetry anthology *Crow* (1972) – tends to be seen as a harbinger of death. It is a bad bird, described by Hughes as “blacker than any blindness” (1972:66) and is usually associated with something dark and foreboding. In its first appearance in my story, however, the crow introduces an element of humour in its attack on the washing. Perhaps also its inexplicable departure suggests the idea of the characters in the story not knowing or not being able to anticipate what will happen and so alludes to the unpredictability of events. The crow – a silhouette in

flight features as the final illustration on the back cover of the printed book – also brings us back again to the beginning of the story. Possibly this suggests that the end is not really the end of the story: that nothing is finished, that this is only the beginning of something else. It is also the first element introduced. It appears on the cover and is the primary image in the opening chapter of the novella.

As the writer, it is assumed I have a particular reading to emphasise – that I myself read the story one way or another. I intend that either the story is redemptive and has a happy ending, or it isn't and just points to more death, danger and disaster. My feeling, however, is that the story should remain open: that it can be read as redemptive (the family is made whole again but in a smaller form), as terrible (the presence of child and remaining parent on the boat together can only lead them to more harm, loss and sorrow) or as something that speaks of a rich (adventurous, full, fraught, incredible) life at the edge of loss.

As a *literary* theorist, Bakhtin's interest is in the otherness of words. I am interested in exploring the potential 'otherness' in images also. This is something I began to explore in the novella and continued to pursue in the prints created for the exhibition. Bakhtin's careful thinking on the voices that speak within the novel and his commentary on the uniqueness of the novel have helped me understand what led me to construct this project first as a novel and then through other kinds of artistic engagement. The idea that writing is "irreducible" and "plural" (59) is one of the important ideas captured in my *Indian Yellow Project*. As Barthes (1986) explains:

To show the *limitless* character of a work is to make it a text: even if reflection on the Text begins with literature (i.e., with an object constituted by the institution), the Text does not necessarily stop there; whenever an activity of signifying is staged according to the rules of combination, transformation and displacement there is Text. (72)

Bal, too, notes in her introductory explanation of the term *text*, "the finite ensemble of signs does not mean that the text itself is finite, for its meanings, effects, functions and background are not" (2009:5). Though Bal is not using the term 'text' in quite the same way as Barthes, both still link the idea of writing and a lack of limits together.

#### **4. Chapter Conclusion**

I began this chapter by considering the conceptualisation of narrative in relation to some generally-held theories regarding stories and story-telling. To do this I referred to certain basic ideas that theorists Bal, Bakhtin and Barthes have brought to the definition of narrative, as well as to writing pertaining to the scope and function of narrative by Altman and Currie. With the aid of passages from my novella, I went on to discuss my writing and its relationship to concepts such as multivocality, mutability and ambivalence. Through extracts and reflection on my writing I have drawn attention to some key ideas relating to the novella regarding the play of signs and the relationship of reader and writer. Through my selections, own commentary and reference to contemporary writing on narrative theory I have illustrated how these ideas manifest in, and also have informed, my writing practice. I turn now in the next chapter to examine the correspondence between the practices of writing and image-making that my engagement in the *Indian Yellow Project* has highlighted.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Correspondence: Imagery and Loss in Multiple Registers

#### 1. Introduction

In this chapter I consider the prints as they exist in the novella and as visual images and elements of an exhibition. Working on the visual components of this project has led me to consider the relationships (connections and differences) in printmaking and in painting. I could really only begin to consider the connections and differences between these mediums after a sustained immersion in printmaking as, prior to this project, I had a limited experience in print and considered myself mainly a painter. Natalie Fossey, a colleague of mine in the printmaking department of the Centre for Visual Art at the time, stressed that I am uniquely positioned to talk about these relationships because of my training as a painter and my later turn to printmaking. I draw substantially on my experience in both these media through the making of my *Indian Yellow Project* and *Office Politics Series*. I have also benefitted from conversations about these practices with colleagues in the CVA: Natalie Fossey, Wayne Reddiar and Ian Calder. Ms Fossey, particularly, helped me hone my ideas about printmaking and catharsis. Throughout 2013 and 2014, whenever we could snatch moments between teaching commitments, we spoke about painting, print and writing practices: how they feed into and differ from one another, and how they variously explore trauma.

In this chapter I examine the correspondence between the practices of writing and image-making that form part of my *Indian Yellow Project*, and in doing so uncover how both the images and the novella speak of loss in multiple registers, and not only as a linear tale of a Mother's death and a family's response to that loss. I examine this phenomenon in relation to character, location, point of view, labour, layering (presence and absence) and iteration (repetition and difference).



## 2. Character

In using the term *character*, I refer not to the characters/individuals described in the story or the prints, but to the character of the story and the character of the prints – the qualities that comprise these two sets of work. It is here especially where the work in one medium (the novella) has allowed for the development of something different in the other (prints). The novella is complicated, dense, detailed, almost overly descriptive, messy and multi-dimensional; it looks backwards to the past but, since it is addressed to an audience, it is also located in the present. The novel allows for ambivalence, contradiction, multiple layers, movements back and forth in time, and dreams and memories that punctuate the narrative. These features produce an appropriate messiness in the writing. It has allowed me to work with the prints in almost the opposite way. The elements in the prints are pared down: the colour and detail is limited and the forms are reduced to one, two or three focal objects floating on a clean ‘spacious’ page. If I compare the novella and the prints I might identify the character of each in the following way:

### Novella

cluttered, full of detail and incident  
overwhelming, chaotic  
slippery  
anxious  
dirty, visceral  
blunt, raw  
additive

### Prints

spare, pared down  
calm, focused  
stable, graspable  
controlled  
clean, ephemeral  
subtle  
reductive

Describing the character of the novella and prints in this way highlights how different they are despite springing from the same source. Yet their relationship is more complex than the antithetical one the list suggests. Both the processes of writing (an invention, an addition, a building up process) and of creating linocut (which involves cutting away and making a mark through erasure) were cathartic. The novella and prints intersect in various ways as my observations in the sections on location, layering, labour and iteration will show. While one of the significant areas of intersection could be described as

*catharsis* I do not analyse it in this chapter because I reflect on catharsis in depth in Chapter Four.

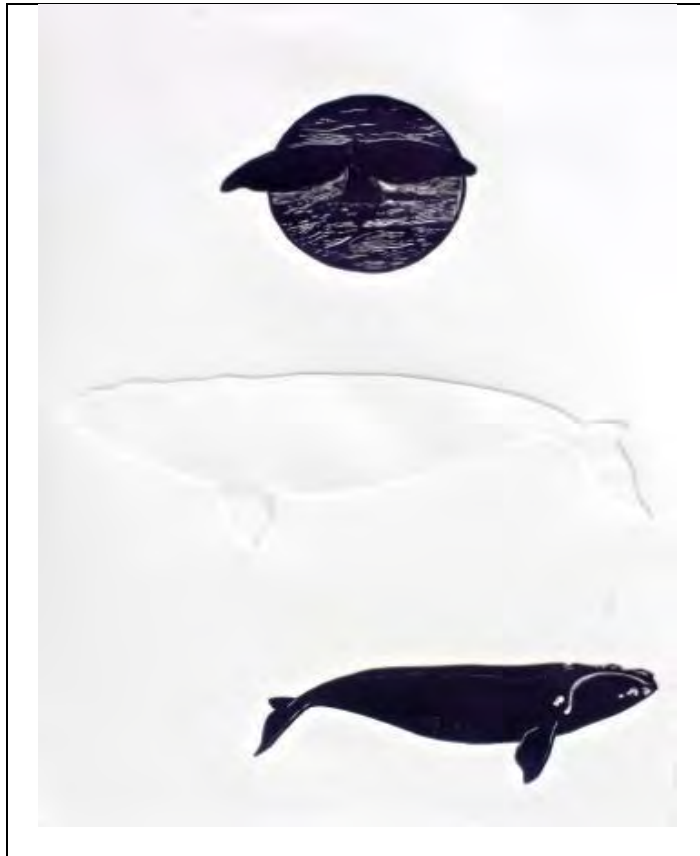
### **3. Location/Point of View**

The novella formulation of the *Indian Yellow Project* is focalised by an adult narrator who comments on, remembers and relays a past experience. This suggests a single and unitary location for the story. Nevertheless, the multi-vocality of the novel and the location of the narrator within fiction allowed me (the writer) to reflect and comment on a range of (sometime conflicting) responses to grief. The location, thus, in some sense shifts and is fluid. The work is located in fiction (the novella) and yet also in ‘truth’ as a deep immersive experience prompted by my own close and very real familial loss.

In her writing on autobiography, literary critic and researcher, Laura Marcus describes autobiography as a “hybrid” and “destabilising” form (1994:12). Marcus recognises and defends the “blurring of boundaries” between fiction and truth (201) when, for example, she speaks of an “escape from the fruitless endeavour to draw hard and fast distinctions between fact and fiction in self-writings” (201). Like Bakhtin’s conception of the novel, this form of writing Marcus emphasises “unsettles distinctions” such as “the division between self and other” and “inner self and outer, fiction and history” (15). In my own thinking about the fiction of my novella I too find distinctions such as fiction and truth are indeed blurred as the invented novel in its telling unpacks and explores the very real and actual grief I have experienced in losing my triplets, and thus in my view the writing also serves as a form of autobiography because it tells the story of my own real loss.

In addition to the multi-vocality that the writing is granted through its location in fiction, its location in that most “protean” of forms, the novel (Holquist in Bakhtin 1981:xxvii), makes it ever-changing. It can be returned to in a future time and viewed in new contexts. While the text is protean, the physical form of the book itself is still, small and contained. A book must be held and opened or closed, read or housed or discarded.

The location of the project in printmaking and an exhibition of prints also throws up contradictions. The format (paper) is fragile. Though permanence and solidity of the ink is countered by the easily fractured paper and also by the softness and almost-not-there-ness of the embossing. The tension between the softness of the embossing and the stark bold print is exemplified in *The Tail and the Tale* (2013), Plate 7. Were someone to apply pressure to the paper prints – to place them between two sheets of glass and tighten their grip on the panes – the embossing would be erased, squashed out and completely removed from the print. This print typifies a number of characteristics with regard to the exhibited prints in general. The images have to be centrally viewed (the artist is fixed in her position presenting a full frontal image or a side profile); they never offer an oblique view. The elements are pared down – there are just three forms that float on the A3 page. In contrast to the novel where the reader may be overwhelmed by the chaotic, detailed descriptions of events, the body of prints devised for exhibition, characterised by the example in Plate 7, tend to have a controlled, balanced feel to them.



**Plate 7.** Faye Spencer. *The Tail and the Tale*. 2013. Linocut and embossing on Fabriano. 80 x 60 cm.

## 4. Labour

I refer in some depth in Chapter Four to the act of writing and how it feels to write, but I do not make much mention there of writing as labour. The idea of labour – of work – in the writing and in the prints and in the construction of the book is a significant one. The ways in which something is made and the time it takes to make it are important elements of this project. Writing, creative or scholarly, takes time; it comprises drafts, revisions, reflection and editing. Printmaking also is an intensely laborious process, more so for me than painting, which is more spontaneous and which allows mistakes to be covered over. Paul Coldwell (2010:8) notes how Pablo Picasso's introduction of linoleum as an alternate relief surface to wood meant that cutting and the creation of a fluid line became easier. Nevertheless, making a linocut relief print (with even just a single layer of colour) is a labour intensive process. Working in reduction or with several colour layers and in dual media through the inclusion of embossing amplifies the work involved. The process involves selecting and constructing a drawing, cutting and shaping the lino, rolling out the ink, preparing and wetting the paper, working the print through the press, and, finally, placing the printed paper out to dry.

A book primarily derives its value through its literariness. In my view, though, a book is also a special object because of the way it is manufactured and also because of how it can be held, opened, touched, and its well-loved passages marked by a reader's hand. At moments I have been concerned about detracting from the literariness of the writing (my writing) through introducing images. My desire to image the work within the format on the book appears to me, though, to be a way of emphasising the labour involved in the writing. The printed images in the novella heighten the book's status as a precious object. They draw attention to its creation as a distinct reverential act. While this comparison with scripture might seem stretched (and I expand on this in the fourth chapter), the act of creating the novella has been an illuminating experience for me. Imaging the novella through prints and working the images and text carefully so they sit in harmony with one another reminds me of the preciousness of ancient books and of the idea of the written word as something valuable and uplifting.

## 5. Layering: Presence, Absence

Layering is an element which features both in the novella and in the prints. The narrative is layered in the sense that the story unfolds through time. It is also a remembered story: the narrator recalls childhood experiences from her position as an adult. In addition, many stories co-exist with the broader narrative. The first story within a story occurs at the beginning of Chapter One with the tale of Ozric. Layering is an important idea within the prints as well. There is a play between what is on the surface and what is ‘below’ (the impression on the paper created by embossed elements). The embossed surface – the paper and the layer of ink upon it in the print – parallels the layering of the story: the idea of one story existing because of another set of experiences is replicated in the idea that the embossed surface always refers to what is not there and has been lost. The emboss then acts as physical allusion to loss like that described in the story (the loss of the mother, who is always present in the story even though she is dead because without the loss of her the story would not exist). Considering the novella and prints from this point of view suggests a greater similarity between them than might appear at first sight.

Linked to this is the idea of what is seen immediately and what is hidden. The printed images are visible, obvious, apparent, and the embossing is visible but hidden and obscured. Liza too is there – this is a story about losing her after all – yet she is absent: she has gone. In a sense, she is resurrected by means of telling her story. There is also the fiction of loss (the loss of Liza) which stands in place of the real loss (the loss of the triplets). This is never made apparent in the novella but is alluded to in a coded way in the exhibited prints as seen overleaf in Plates 8, 9 and 10. Here again I have used elements from the story, in this case Liza’s empty shoes, as containers for the story of the triplets. The shoes feature as an emboss floating beneath a red anatomical heart (Plate 8) in the print entitled *Missing* (2013).

These same shoes, printed in the same red are situated on the final page of the first chapter in the novella (Plate 10). The pair of shoes are re-figured in the linocut print entitled *Eeny, Meeny, Miney* (Plate 9) and in *And Then There Were None* (Plate 11). I

hesitated at first to include these prints which more directly reference the loss of my triplets, yet the novella is in large measure a means of re-remembering, of resurrection and acknowledgement. In the prints here I have tried to acknowledge their part in this project by referencing them in a way that doesn't limit the possible interpretations of the prints.



**Plate 8.** Faye Spencer. *Missing*. 2013.  
Linocut and embossing on Fabriano. 80 x 60 cm.



**Plate 9.** Faye Spencer. *Eeney, Meeney, Miney*. 2013.  
Linocut on Fabriano. 80 x 60 cm.



**Plate 10.** Faye Spencer. *Untitled*. 2016. Shoe detail as printed in novella. Approx. diameter 11 cm



**Plate 11.** Faye Spencer. *And then there were None*. 2013. Embossing on Fabriano. 80 x 60 cm.

## 6. Iterations, Repetition and Difference

In addition to the writing in the novella, I have also created a number of illustrations which are situated in the book. Some of them are fragments from series of prints designed for exhibition, while others exist solely in the book. I have to ask, and answer, why I felt this necessary: why, having written or set out to write a novella, did I feel it ought also to incorporate pictures? And why are these pictures not exactly the same pictures as those in the exhibited prints? These are tricky questions to answer fully. I was driven by instinct yet my instinct has some underlying motivation and logic.



Plate 12. Faye Spencer. *Untitled*. 2016. Assorted illustrations exclusive to the novella. Varying dimensions.



In the novella there are pictured elements that do not appear in the prints edition intended for exhibition. Among these are the leaf, the abandoned house, the image of the marmite jar and the wheel-barrow (Plate 12). Each of these images exists in the text purely as an illustration and I have not used these images in the prints, which invoke more general themes.

The chief reason for the appearance of these specific images only in the novella concerns their literalness. They provide an inter-play between illustrations and text that, I believe, belongs only in the book. Many of the other images in the book, though, also appear as elements that make up the larger prints intended for exhibition. The whale's tail and the empty red shoes (shown in Plate 10) are images that appear both in the exhibited prints and also in similar iterations of colour and detail in the novella.

Sometimes, what exists as a printed form in the book exists only as an embossed form in the exhibition. The light-fitting, which is home to the large bee hive (Plate 14) on the following page is an example. It exists as a blue print (Plate 13) in the novella but only as an emboss in the prints created for exhibition. These iterations reference objects that are *there-but-not-there*, and allude to memory and departure. They refer to those who are absent yet somehow, even in their absence, always with us. The differences evoked by various repetitions of the same image speak also to the idea that memories of events and people can shift over time. The way in which things appear depends on the position or perspective of the person doing the remembering.

In Plate 13 I have depicted an object that literally comes from the story, the light-fitting that serves as a beehive. The larger print arising out of this object, though, (Plate 14) does more than simply illustrate the story. In the print a single blue bee flies towards the light-fitting. This is barely visible as an embossed form but it is a focal point because it is centrally placed. The print may allude to imminent danger, which could occur in several ways. Firstly, many people are afraid of bees. The idea of a bee caught in a room (an enclosed space signified by the light-fitting) is a threatening one.



**Plate 13.** Faye Spencer. *Untitled*. 2016. Novella illustration. 15 x 14 cm.



**Plate 14.** Faye Spencer. *Light*. 2013. Linocut and embossing on Fabriano. 80 x 60 cm.

Alternately the bee could itself be facing death by flying into the light as insects are prone to do. I think that playing with these rather literal images derived from the story to speak in a more open way about themes of death, danger and loss is an important way for me to extend the dialogue about grief. It can also be read as a punning, rather silly take, on the euphemistic idea of dying as *entering the light*.

The crudeness of this kind of play is countered by the extreme delicacy of the embossed light-fitting. Also, I believe, it was only through writing the novella, which is cluttered with detail and anecdote, that I was able to work with images that are sensitive reflections on loss. The chaotic, visually overloaded quality of the writing allowed me to pare my imagery down and to work with spare yet resonant images in the prints.

Another figure that differs in the book and in the exhibited prints is that of the crow, the first illustration in the story (Plate 15). The crow is depicted on the cover of the book, and is also the first image in it. The standing crow appears in the same pose but as a less complexly wrought two-layer relief print in the exhibited prints (see Plates 16 and 17 over the page).



**Plate 15.** Faye Spencer. *Untitled*. 2016. Ozric image from novella illustration. Approx. diameter 10 cm.

In the novella, Ozric comprises a reduction lino in red and black. His pose is nearly identical in the book and the print. But the figure of the bird in the book comprises a network of lines as opposed to the flatter uniform forms of Ozric in the 2 prints – the bleed and ghost print of the same bird. In the exhibited 80 x 60 cm prints I show two versions of the same linocut print: one is overprinted, where the ink bleeds and smudges off the surface, and the other is a ghost print (a second run of an already printed layer on a new paper sheet means that the ink fades out and has the feeling of something that is watered down, or of an echo).



**Plate 16.** Faye Spencer. *Ozric's Tale*. 2013.  
Linocut, embossing on Fabriano. 80 x 60 cm.



**Plate 17.** Faye Spencer. *Ozric's Ghost*. 2013.  
Linocut, embossing on Fabriano. 80 x 60 cm.

Ozric is presented in these different ways in the book and in the exhibited prints. I felt that the book, an object that demands close engagement, required a more complex and layered image of the character that leads us into the story of loss. Also this image would sit alongside printed text and thus was necessarily and subtly different in appearance and linear construction than the crows devised for the exhibited prints.

Running horizontally under the iconic form of the bird, in each of the prints, is an embossed form of the washing line full of clothes. Of course, having read the novella, the context of the washing line situates the crow in the narrative as a literal evocation of the story of Ozric. However, most viewers will not have read the novella although they will encounter fragments of it in the exhibition. The prints of Ozric for most viewers will speak of loss in an open way through the way the print medium has been manipulated. References to memory and the passage of time occur in the bleed and fade of the ink. There are also references to loss in the embossed form of the washing line. The embossed form is something which creates an impression of something tangible and yet not fully

there. It alters the page but does not colour it. Embossing – here and in other prints from this series such as *The Tail and the Tale* (Plate 7) and *Missing* (which, as Plate 8 shows, features a printed heart flanked by an embossing of Liza’s tiny shoes that are only visible on close scrutiny of the print) – speaks of something that is absent but which has left a mark, a presence that is no longer present but which has left an impression. Collectively the use of embossing, bleeds, ghosts and iterations of composition (for example the shifts in the number of forms and the play between what is present (printed) speaks to something that is missing or being sought. Acknowledging that the series of prints reinforces departure as a body of work is also an important aspect of the exhibition and construction of the works.

The iconic and simplified imagery allows for an open reading of the forms – for example, the crow could be read as a portent of death: typically, the crow is viewed as an omen, a thing portentous and dark. Yet the crow is also a flying creature, and flight can be interpreted as something positive, as an escape, an upliftment, a change of some kind.

In the preceding examples I have highlighted that the prints can be read in several ways. Of course, by showing this, I run the risk of closing them off by imposing my reading on them again. I am not trying to suggest these are the *only* ways these, or indeed any, of the prints in the exhibition may be read. There are an infinite number of interpretations for each of them –as varied and potentially contradictory as the people who see them. In the construction of the prints, also, using a simplified centralised form (this is the case almost without exception) and an attendant second image, all floating on a vast blank space, I have tried to create an open kind of composition where the forms can be read as literal objects or as symbols – hence the avoidance of a fixed space (a horizon line) and a conventional perspectival play between the two or three forms.

Working with the press and with iterations of the image there is the seeming potential of endless repetition. This idea is apparently poles apart from the singular uniqueness – the unrepeatability of other kinds of two-dimensional art production. In her personal journals and in numerous catalogues and writing on her work painter Marlene Dumas reflects on the process of imaging in paint and the singularity of that kind of mark-making. She

likens the act of painting to that of “measuring your own grave” (Dumas in van den Boogerd 2009:155) and also speaks of how in painting each act is final and unrepeatable. This links painting with the idea of death and of the brevity of life. Printmaking, of course, allows for iteration in that an edition of prints can be made (as vast in number as the durability of the linoleum will allow), yet repetition is also a way of referring to a cycle and the idea of endlessness (immortality) as something located in print is countered by the fragility of the paper and by the use of embossing and ghost prints. Also, presenting prints in single or limited editions in a gallery context means there is limited access to the work: the print can only be retained if it is for sale. Otherwise the work can only be accessed in memory once the exhibition is over.

I have enjoyed the tensions that print sets up between the play of iteration and the significance and value of something that is unrepeatable. It presents me with questions I have never had to consider when painting. For example, do I edition these works, borne of something private and precious, but also comprising something I wish to share? Given that making editions is one of the features that distinguishes printmaking from other visual arts forms, I decided I had best learn to make editions (difficult in itself to create close replicas of work). The largest edition I opted for with this series is an edition of eight.

Despite their potential to exist as multiples, though, the prints feel valuable to me because they are hand-made and limited. In addition, I derived pleasure from connections between repetition in printmaking and the idea of endlessness and re-iteration that resides in, for example, Bakhtin’s thinking concerning the word as an “eternally mobile medium” (1984:202) and his ideas on the *endlessness* of the novel. Iteration also is bound up intricately with the *Indian Yellow Project* because the project’s earliest beginning arises out of the loss of children (a child, after all, is an iteration of the parent), and specifically out of the loss of my triplets (the very term indicating three of the same).

## 7. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined particular connections between my written story and my printing practice. I have considered the media used in the creation of the linocut prints, as well as scrutinising the images as they exist in the novella and as visual components of the larger format works created for exhibition. A key focus has been on how the novella and prints intersect (correspond) and how they talk to each other. I have highlighted areas where they are different, and also where they are connected through surprising, subtle intersections such as location, layering, labour and iteration. While I have looked at particular areas of correspondence in some detail, my investigation of writing and its manifestation in this project is not yet complete. A deeper enquiry into the act of writing is required and so I turn, in Chapter Four, to a sustained consideration of writing and catharsis in relation to the *Indian Yellow Project*.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Writing: Conceptions, Preconceptions and Catharsis

#### 1. Introduction

Having spoken to the mobility of language, and explored connections and differences between the written and visual iterations of the *Indian Yellow Project* in the preceding chapter I now continue my enquiry into the project, but in this chapter I reflect on what I have discovered about the act of writing, specifically returning to the novella after a period of time and subsequent to reading about narrative theory. I will contrast my actual experience of this with what I imagined a return to writing might entail. I then turn to a consideration of the relationship of narrative to trauma/death, the question that underpins the written and visual components of the project. I consider my own experience and practice here in relation particularly to the ideas of theorist Hélène Cixous and, to a lesser extent, to thinking on creative practice by Julia Kristeva, noting especially where these converge with my own ideas. Cixous's thinking is mainly (although not exclusively) concerned with creative writing and the act of writing as a mechanism through which to comprehend – to counter and simultaneously acknowledge – death. In *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* Cixous describes writing as “a way of pushing back forgetfulness” and “leaving no space for death” (1991:3).

I consider the function of my writing project in this chapter, examining the value of returning to a project that remained incomplete and which emanated from a painful experience that unseated me. I explore what it means to return to trauma and to pick at a wound that has left an indelible mark on my thinking. I do not ask this out of self-pity but in order to explore what it means to make work out of such an experience. I am curious about how this work serves me and others. I also ask questions about fiction and ‘truth’. I am compelled to examine why this project took the form of a fiction about death rather than a more true to life account. I could (theoretically) have told an equally redemptive story about a young woman, who spent months on fertility medication, conceived and



lost triplets, spent time in hospital, returned home and quickly and miraculously, without medical intervention, conceived and had a daughter followed, rather rapidly, by a son. This is a redemptive story. Of course it is not a story I could have written immediately after the loss of the triplets but I might have written it later. Instead I returned to the fictional story even though I could have abandoned it and told a truly redemptive story in its place. The “true” story is full, too, of the shock, blood and pain of reversed expectations and death. Why, then, did I tell another, rather different fictive story, equally full of loss, pain and recovery? This is a question, I think, worth asking, and one that interests me a great deal. I consider the implications and possibilities locating my exploration of loss in fiction has afforded me.

## **2. Conceptions and Preconceptions Regarding my Experience of Writing**

In my proposal for this thesis I wrote “Narrative *theory* is central to this research” and, to an extent, that is true, but not in the way I imagined. I anticipated that in returning to writing after having read about its composition, history and theoretical construction, my approach would be different and that the feeling of writing would be a much more deliberate experience. Thankfully, perhaps, I have had no such experience at all. Once again when writing I felt as if I was inside the story or even alongside it – my pen dragged about by the characters and events unfolding. Although I knew from the outset loosely how the story would end, much of the story unfolded as if it were being drawn out of me by a compelling force. Even when I returned to the writing after some years, there was, as before, nothing *between* me and the page. In a similar vein Cixous notes: “when I write fiction, I write with my body. My body is active; there is no interruption between the work my body is performing and what is going to happen next on the page” (Cixous in Wilcox 1990:27).

At the outset of the project and in the formulation of the dissertation I anticipated that a study (or at least some study) of narratology would be useful to me when I returned to the writing. This idea came to me as I contemplated the interplay between the intuitive and the intellectual: I imagined, having privileged the former, that reading about theory would

swing the balance to the latter. I anticipated that reading on narrative theory would help me as I completed the story and would consciously inform the way I edited the creative writing. In some respects, I could not have been more mistaken. It did not hinder me – this theoretical supplement to my intuitive knowledge did not stop me writing but it certainly had no conscious impact on my approach to the creative writing. On the contrary, it would have represented an obstacle if I had thought too hard about *plot* or *character* or *distancing*. Without doubt my experience in returning to the writing was that I had only to think of what was happening inside the story itself, and the actions, characters and events rose out of me as if unbidden. This was similar to my first experience of turning to writing when I drafted the first chapters shortly after the loss I experienced. However, I also see that the ambivalence in the story (which existed in the story prior to my awareness of post-structural thinking) can also speak of the ambivalence contained in the creative writing project itself. Writing the novella, it seemed to me contained these contradictory impulses: for on the one hand while I wrote to heal, at the same time in writing I was picking at a wound and reliving my loss.

Reading about narrative theory did not help me with the creative writing, but it has produced a new understanding of my work after the action of writing. Also it has, to an extent, given me a more nuanced approach to editing the text. For example, the idea that the novel crosses time and moves across time prompted me to try and situate it more carefully. Of course I cannot avoid the time-space in which it is contained but I removed dates so that it was more possible to allow the child's loss to be situated in a number of times or in a time of the reader's choosing. Also, I avoided naming the child so that the child might at any moment in the reader's imagination perhaps become the reader or a niece or a daughter. I wanted to make it possible for readers to situate themselves in close proximity to the child if they chose.

Though I imagine myself to be someone who reads fiction quite widely this familiar technique that imparts universality to a key character is not something I recall being aware of in my own reading of novels. Subsequent to my use of this unnamed protagonist in my novella, I have been introduced to writing which utilises this device, examples of which

are Henry James's *Aspern Papers* (1888), Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (2008). In each case the namelessness of the protagonists complicates the reader's relationship to the text, underscoring the narrator's seemingly marginal status, either in relation to the events that unfold or in relation to the community in which they find themselves. At the same time, the namelessness of the characters allows for the possibility of self-identification by the reader. In the *Aspern Papers*, for example, James's narrator possesses no identity outside of his incredibly overwhelming quest for the dead poet's writing, while the namelessness of the protagonists in *Surfacing* and *Cockroach* also speaks to the process of self-erasure, serving in these two works as an effort to conceal that which exists outside of social and cultural acceptability in order to protect the self.

### **3. Trauma, Catharsis and Writing**

I will begin this section by considering definitions of trauma and follow this with a discussion of some broad ideas relating to trauma and writing. I will refer mainly to two seminal texts on trauma by Cathy Caruth and Kathryn Robson respectively. Both Robson and Caruth's texts comprise detailed and insightful enquiries into the subject of trauma and its narration. Following this broader analysis of trauma, I will turn to a consideration of my own personal experience of creative writing/practice and trauma. I refer in this section to my own experience and also to relevant ideas of Cixous and Kristeva on trauma, catharsis and the creative act.

Trauma is a word blessed with a double definition. Like "heart" – defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a "hollow, muscular or otherwise contractile organ" which "keeps up the circulation of the blood in the vascular system of an animal" and also as "the seat of one's inmost thoughts and secret feelings" and the "depths of the soul, the spirit" (1989:60-61) – trauma has a physical as well as a psychic application. Trauma is "a wound or external bodily injury" and also a "psychic injury, especially one caused by emotional shock" (441). The dictionary definition notes further that the memory of this shock "is repressed and remains unhealed" (441). A succinct, but less sterile definition of psychic trauma is presented in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* by Cathy Caruth (1996). She notes that trauma "is always the story of a wound that cries out,

that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). Thus, trauma appears to be “much more than a pathology or the simple illness of a wounded psyche” (4). In its “delayed appearance” and “belated address” trauma “cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (4).

The above definitions point to trauma as something that haunts and motivates (causes responses in) yet remains elusive to its sufferers. In her preface to *Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in Post-1968 French Women's Life-Writing* Robson notes that trauma “is too overwhelming to be registered fully in consciousness as it occurs and is thus unavailable to conscious recall” (2004:9). It cannot, however, merely be relegated to the past but is relived endlessly in the present through repeated painful re-enactments. Trauma makes its presence felt then through hallucinations, nightmares and flashbacks. The past, notes Robson, “intrudes insistently on the present” (10).

#### **4. The Spur to Writing/Making**

Cixous (1993:7) holds that “to begin” one must have death, “the death that comes right up to us so suddenly we don’t have time to avoid it, to avoid feeling its breath touching us”. The idea that “each of us, individually and freely must do the work that consists of rethinking what is “your death and my death, which are inseparable” and the notion that writing (and other creative practices) “originates in this relationship” (12) is a key to my research. I skirted around this idea in my practice for years before the present project. Some of the key paintings, *memento-mori* type images relating to my grandmother’s death, in my MAFA of 2000, spoke hesitantly to this idea. I made the work but did not think very deeply about it. The theme was personal and important but at the same time it was also just one subject among several depictions of human relationships. Yet time and time again I have since been compelled to return to the departed in my painting, and to think and rethink my relationship with the dead. This may sound morbid but I do not believe that it is because it seems to me that life is valuable (or that we begin to extract from life what is valuable) because of its brevity.

As Arendt notes in *the Human Condition* (1958), human life is inherently “bounded by two fundamentals: birth and death” (19). It is life’s finite composition, life’s having a beginning and end that confers a unique identity and meaning on a particular life. This is brought home most profoundly and emphatically, I believe, when we witness the death of those we love; this witnessing *emphasises* and brings home our own mortality. Cixous claims that writing finds its origins in loss and that it begins in death. Her first book, she writes, “rose up from my father’s tomb” (1993:11). This experience of familial loss as a call to writing mirrors closely my turning to writing. After the loss of my triplets I tried to paint at first, but that was somehow unsatisfying; it seemed to capture none of the depth and conflict that I felt. The act of painting came too easily to me. It was the known. I needed a profound engagement with something new. Writing became for me “an effort to articulate that which would usually remain unsaid or unknown” (Robson 2004:63). I, like Cixous, found it “a delicate, difficult and dangerous means of succeeding in avowing the unavowable” (1993:53).

When I first began the creative writing I had heard nothing and read nothing of Cixous nor had I read or imagined reading about trauma, creative writing or catharsis. I simply followed an impulse that I was unable to resist. Painting seemed too flat and known to me: a response I had made before as an effort at sense-making, in a world that made more sense and was much more easily made right again. I needed something else, something that would accompany me through the dark place of my loss, and something that possessed enough layers with which to capture the sharp pains, deep shock and even the humorous moments in the darkness. Writing proved to be what I needed. Certainly, death and loss can be explored through painting, drawing and other visual arts and, as examined in the previous chapter, I subsequently was able to create a body of artwork that speaks to these ideas. At the immediate time of my loss, however, the only instrument sharp enough to sound out my trauma was writing.

Only after I had embarked on the writing, and some considerable time after the initial writing began, did I speak about what I was doing and hear about writers whose practice corresponded with my own. I discovered how Cixous emphasises the relationship of

writing to trauma, and to the trauma of death specifically, time and time again in her writing. She notes that “the condition on which beginning to write becomes necessary” and “possible” is one of loss (1991:38). It involves, writes Cixous “losing everything, having once lost everything” (38). Such a condition, Cixous asserts “is not a thinkable ‘condition’. You can’t *want* to lose: if you want to then there is *you* and *wanting*, there is non-loss” (38) This idea of being driven to writing through an unthinkable loss, the idea of writing as a necessary act *as opposed to* an act of will, echoes my own recent experience. Cixous’s explanation of the breadth of this kind of loss is captured with so much eloquence in this fragment of the essay “Coming to Writing” that it is worth reproducing here:

And so when you have lost everything, no more roads, no direction, no fixed signs, no ground, no thoughts able to resist other thoughts, when you are beside yourself, and you continue getting lost, when you become the panicky moment of getting lost then, that’s when you are unwoven weft, flesh that lets strangeness come through, defenceless being, without resistance, without batten, without skin, inundated with otherness, it’s in these breathless times that writings traverse you. (38-39)

The relationship of writing and other creative acts to death is, as this fragment also suggests, a complex one. It cannot sufficiently be encapsulated in the idea that writing serves as a foil to death or as a mechanism with which to confront mortality. Cixous notes its complexity when she says that through writing there is “no becoming resigned, consoled” in the face of death (1991:3). She emphasises that writing prevents us from “never turning over in bed to face the wall and drift off to sleep as if nothing had happened; as if nothing could happen” (3). The idea that writing does not allow us to become consoled would seem to problematize the idea of writing as something that Cixous also claims can heal or “repair” (1997:93). However, this is only the case if one applies a simple definition of healing, one that equates healing with cure, erasure or removal of the wound. My own experience and my reading (my interpretation of the experience of others) suggests a more nuanced interpretation of the idea of healing or catharsis, as something more closely aligned to change, a change or alteration that is useful and deepening – a kind of cataclysmic propulsion.

Julia Kristeva links ideas of making and repair when she asserts that art or literature are “privileged place(s) of transformation” (1986:17). For Kristeva, art’s communicative value is that it speaks to the uniqueness and irreducibility of individual experience, and in so doing acts as a place for catharsis and change. Kristeva’s ideas encompass both literature and visual art, and she believes that the role of aesthetic practice (along with psychoanalysis) “needs to be augmented” so that it may not only “counterbalance the mass-production and uniformity of the information age” but also “demystify the idea that the community of language is universal, all-inclusive and an equalizing tool” (1995:222). Through the experience of writing a story of loss and making the imagery that sprang out of the story novella, I became transformed and passed through a deep and powerful despair. I found the *performance* of the writing was an enabling act not only because it helped me work through the terrible emotions (shock, loneliness, anger, victimhood) and visceral confrontation (pain, blood, small bruised bodies) but because it also allowed to me to *remember* those things and to acknowledge the experience. Like Kristeva, Cixous privileges creative practices (specifically writing in Cixous’s case) as practices that possess a restorative function (1997:93). Writing is a mechanism for restoration. Cixous describes “words” as “the doors to all other worlds” (1994:xxvii). My own experience bears out the idea of the healing function of writing, but only up to a point. Here I want to look closely at the idea of *repair* and unpick it a little, especially in relation to how the writing has functioned for me and for Cixous and others whose work is imbricated with trauma.

## **5. Examining Repair**

When I began the creative writing project, and again when I was about to return to it, I would speak quite confidently of its cathartic function. Yet returning to the writing was difficult and editing the early chapters and commencing the story left me exhausted and reeling at times. In coming back to the fictional tale I returned to the memories I had of losing the triplets, the time spent in hospital and the immediate anguish I experienced after their loss. So rewriting this story of a family loss evoked a return of my feelings immediately after the loss of the triplets. This was not particularly pleasant, and I began to wonder what I was *really* doing and how helpful (restorative) this act really was.

Perhaps, I began to think, this is an act of masochism rather than of integration. Perhaps, I thought, in returning to the fictional novel and reliving (remembering) the trauma of the triplets I was reopening the wound unnecessarily. Yet at the same time it was something I did not want to let go of. I felt that in the writing (its actuality as well as its performance) there was something of value. If I had felt comfortable then with Jungian terminology I might have wondered if it was an act of soul. I was already thinking along these lines when I met with therapist and poet Floss Mitchell. She and I spoke about the idea of recalling something difficult, not to get past it but to note it and to place it within the realm of possible experience (which trauma tries to elude). One of the ideas we examined was the idea of re-membering. I spoke to Mitchell about my conflicted feelings regarding the project: was it healthy or unhealthy I wondered, and why was I compelled to keep returning to it and to, in doing so, resurrect my memory of the triplets – both what I had hoped they would be and, of course, the experience of losing them.

Mitchell suggested the emphasis in my enquiry might sit on the *membering* part of remembering. She recalled hearing Dr Michael White at a conference in the U.S speak about the idea that significant people who affect our way of thinking are situated in the *club* of our lives. These people shape and affect our thinking about ourselves and our world-view. In *Narratives of Therapists' Lives* (1997) White examines the idea of remembering, explaining that he “took up” anthropologist “Barbara Myerhoff’s notion of membered lives” (22). According to Meyerhoff, “re-membering” signifies a special kind of recollection and “calls attention to the re-aggregation of members, the figures who belong in one’s life story” (1982:111). Following Meyerhoff, re-membering “is a purposive, significant unification, quite different from the passive, continuous fragmentary flickerings of images and feelings that accompany other activities in the normal flow of consciousness” (111). White notes that the image of membered lives brings with it the metaphor of a “club” and that “this metaphor opens up options for the exploration of how a person’s club of life is membered” (1997: 22). White stresses remembering as an engagement that provides people with the opportunity to have a greater say about the status of particular memberships of their club through life (23). He notes



that re-membling practices enable people to “suspend or elevate, revoke or privilege, and downgrade or upgrade specific memberships of their lives” (23). The idea of inviting or excluding such people from one’s club is one that is widely used in narrative therapy. My subsequent reading of White and my conversations with Mitchell suggest that perhaps my desire to write the novella, and to make imagery relating to this traumatic experience, was a way of introducing the triplets as members in the club of my life and of emphasising their status in my life. This idea is of interest to me and seems to fit with my experience. Also, of course, because they only lived inside the womb, the idea of speaking to other people about them and situating them somehow in the world of everyday conversations and contexts is quite difficult, but my creative practice and the use of imagination, fiction and imagery allows me to situate them and my profound loss in a world peopled by others also. However uncomfortable it is to resurrect lost children (for myself and for whomever I speak to), the triplets have indeed shaped and altered my world-view and because of my experience of their being (and of their loss) I have sought a way to locate them in the present, and to acknowledge their contribution to my thinking. The novella and the prints that arose out of the creative writing form part of that acknowledgement.

As a consequence of speaking with Mitchell, I also began to read work by James Hillman (1989) and Thomas Moore (1992, 2004). Both Hillman and Moore set out a re-visioning of psychoanalysis and ask us to set aside “fantasies of cure, repair and growth, self-improvement, understanding and well-being “as primary motives for psychological work (Hillman 1989:1). Moore (1992) talks about the idea of difficult experiences, tragedies, losses, all kinds of trials, as experiences that lead to a person’s “depth of soul” and notes that what he calls “care of the soul” is different in scope from most modern notions of psychology and psychotherapy as it “isn’t about curing, fixing, changing, adjusting or making healthy” (xviii). Following Hillman, Moore notes that “we are a society hell-bent on happiness” (2004:306). Happiness is seen as a life goal and the thing for which we all should strive, and if you are not happy then you are depressed. Depression is a blanket term used to cover anything that is not happiness, and both Hillman and Moore (1989, 2004) argue that depression is a much overused and far too broad a term. Used in

opposition to happiness depression is always viewed as its 'bad' other. Yet interestingly, Hillman notes that through depression "we enter depths and in depths find soul" (1989:153). Depression, he continues "brings refuge, limitation, focus, gravity, weight and humble powerlessness" (157).

Moore talks about how life is always complex, comprising "a mixture of pain and satisfaction" (2004:315). Both Hillman and Moore acknowledge that in the present day happiness is viewed as healthy while unhappiness is something society wants to cure, valuing as Moore puts it "the removal of symptoms over the soul's sparkle or shine" (315). In our conversations Mitchell and I spoke about the idea that people should strive not necessarily for happiness (happiness and health are synonymous in this formulation) but for a rich and full experience of life – of which tragedy and loss are a part. Moore encapsulates this idea when he advocates striving for "numinosity" over health (315), which implies accepting and acknowledging terrible or difficult situations for what they are and also, as Moore notes above, stands in opposition to the popular misconception that sadness and despair are emotions that persons must reject and address. This idea that searing, difficult and challenging experiences are just as valid and valuable life-experiences as joyful and comfortable ones was an important discovery for me as it allowed me to view my *Indian Yellow Project* as a legitimate strategy for self-knowledge and acceptance of the deep sorrow that losing the triplets had unearthed.

In our dialogues Mitchell and I came to the idea that the profound loss of the triplets was a core part of my life's journey that contributed to my thinking and to my world-view. Yes, it was dark and full of sorrow, but it was also full of other experiences and feelings. My experience of this loss was in fact a matrix of contradictory emotions. We also spoke of the idea that even if pain does not seem always a conventionally enriching experience but something that can be senseless, cruel and confusing, difficult experiences are nevertheless a part of life, and life is rich and complex. We spent some time on this idea as when I returned to the writing I did indeed find it difficult to understand whether opening up the wound was a good thing or an unhealthy immersion. My conversations with Mitchell, my reading of Hillman, Moore, Robson and Caruth, as well as my

experience in completing the novella, have led me to conclude that my immersion in what Moore terms “a dark night of the soul” (2004:i) has brought with it important revelations of what life is about and that “in that darkness” I saw things I “could not have seen in daylight” (315).

In their various writings Moore and Hillman’s advocacy on tempering the role of happiness and as Moore terms it “weaving the dark into the light” (307) comes as a welcome relief. Both Moore and Hillman seem to emphasize the idea of recognition rather than repair and, in a world in which everyone is at pains to fix, improve and better everything, this seems a healthy position. I have arrived at the point where I feel that writing and other creative acts can act as catalysts for growth, as mechanisms for bearing the scar (and bearing with the scar), and not necessarily erasing it. Like Cixous, I have come to see that “writing is the effort not to obliterate the picture, not to forget” (1993:7). In the present day, so often “you are told to get past your mood and get on with your life”, yet, as Moore notes, “sadness and remorse can give you depth and character” (219).

## **6. Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented a consideration of my discoveries about the act of writing, specifically returning to the novella after a period of time and subsequent to my reading of narrative theory. I have compared my actual experience of this with what I had anticipated a return to writing might entail. I then turned to reflect on the relationship of narrative to trauma/death, which is the primary question that underpins the written and visual iterations or parts of my *Indian Yellow Project*. In reflecting on the relationship of trauma and death to writing I have drawn on my personal experience and practice in relation to the ideas of writer and theorist Cixous in particular as well as noting, to a lesser extent, connections between my own thinking on writing and creative acts and that of theorists Kristeva and Arendt.

Through embarking on the *Indian Yellow Project* and, in particular, in committing to the telling of a written story centring on familial loss, I have come to see that the trauma of my own loss is *not* something I believe I should entirely eradicate; it resides with me and

is part of who I have come to be. To erase the memory of that experience would be to undo a part of myself and do the loss a disservice. I resurrect it, in fact, because the experience of these deaths has led me to value what I have now (most especially my children) more deeply, and attuned me to the brevity and preciousness of life in new ways. In this sense *making* (and here I refer to the making both of writing and of imagery and prints) has acted as an effort at “reenchantment” and countering, as Gablik suggests, “the disenchantment of the world” (1991:11). I do not mean to suggest that I am happier now because of this experience, but that my sustained reflection on and response to this particular departure lent me a richer appreciation of what is valuable in my life. In the stead of increased joy, the writing and the construction of artworks that emanate from this place of sadness have allowed me to move alongside the trauma, to step forward with it rather than remaining stuck at the place of loss.

Having considered definitions of trauma and explored ways in which trauma and departure are implicated in this particular project I will now turn, in Chapter Five, to a scrutiny of the *Wish List Project*. Like my *Indian Yellow Project*, it too has its origins in an effort at catharsis. I reflect on the impetus for the *Wish List Project*, as well as charting developments and transformations that occurred in the project. I will also pick up and expand on what Gablik terms the “reenchantment” (11) of the world, showing how my own interpretation of this idea makes itself manifest through the *Wish List Project*.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Making, Community and the *Wish List Project*

#### 1. Introduction

In Chapter One I spent some time discussing postmodernity and what it means, noting that it is a slippery and contested term. I will not repeat those findings here, though I return briefly to definitions of postmodernism in order to draw attention to certain ideas about the role art plays or could play in the conditions that prevail in the present age. Instead, I explore my experience of making and my own teaching practice. I support these reflections by referring to writing about studio processes and experience by painter and art historian James Elkins, as well as to ideas on art-making, postmodernism and postmodernity by artist Suzi Gablik. Their thinking supports my own position and experience.

Gablik's writing, particularly *Conversations Before the End of Time* (1995), as well as *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991), and her essay of the same name in *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art* (1990) edited by David Ray Griffin, considers how art can contribute to an awakening sense of responsibility for the collective fate of humanity and the "high levels of psychic and physical toxicity in our environment" (1991:179). Gablik makes it clear that humanity has reached a "critical threshold where the option of continuing as we have before is being perceived as no longer viable". She goes on to note that "there has been an increasing demand at the creative edge of our society to shape a new social order" (Gablik in Griffin 1990:178).

Gablik identifies two kinds of postmodernism emerging in the world of artistic practice (1991:19): deconstructive postmodernism (to which I drew attention in Chapter One) and reconstructive postmodernism. These two postmodernisms "are quite discrete, separate events" yet they share a common premise "that the belief system that belonged to the

modern worldview has become obsolete” (21). Like me, Gablik asks what kind of role art can play in response to the conditions and crises of the present age, and is deeply concerned with the mood of disenchantment that seems to hang like a noxious mantle over much contemporary art practice.

Gablik explains that the deconstructive artist’s practice is to hover in place and slow things down rather than to create anything new (Griffin 1990:181). These artists “reject what they perceive as the modernist myths of stylistic innovation, change, originality and uniqueness” as these are all among “the worn out trappings of a chic but totally impotent radicalism” (179). Frequently these artists “work by stealth” and take on the guise of a “counterfeiter or charlatan”, a “trickster figure” who, as Gablik notes, “is not going to get us out of the mess we are in, instead engaging in an endless play of signs without meaning” (1991:20).

Deconstruction is located “in a withdrawal of belief” and “an erosion of authenticity based on a retrospective reading of modernism that is fully aware of its limitations and failed ambitions” (Griffin 1990:179). Adherents of this position, notes Gablik, hold the view that there is “no longer any possibility of escape from the system” and that “the non-deluded individual of today is the one who has given up naïve hopes, and any pointless idealising of the artist’s role” (1991:14). Thus, “positive action is doomed to impotence or co-option by an economic system that has become virtually uncontrollable” (Gablik in Griffin 1990:179). In contrast, reconstructive postmodernism, Gablik emphasises, breaks with deconstruction “in that it does not merely react to the present state of affairs” (179). Instead, reconstructive postmodernism advocates a concern for, and involvement in, redressing disenchantment and apathy across as many fronts as possible (178-80).

While the project I will be discussing in this chapter is not in any way a form of eco-art, it tends towards an *ecological* perspective insofar as it is reliant on relationships and interconnections. In this chapter I describe the project’s transformation (from a single-author artwork) into a collectively made print installation for a public space. The project has been profoundly informed by Gablik’s ideas on reconstructive art practice, and by my

growing search for a means of engagement that extends beyond the individual and embraces the concerns and participation of others. This shift from an “aesthetic perspective”, which is “oriented towards the making of objects”, towards a perspective in which art is connected to an “integrative role in the larger whole and the web of relationships in which art exists” (7) has been described as a shift towards an ecological perspective as it foregrounds relationships rather than objects. The *Wish List Project* serves as an effort at reenchantment; it manifests as a gift from the artists (co-creators of the artworks) that provides a counterweight to the idea of the artwork as commodity. The first iteration of the project did not begin from this particular kind of expansive place, however, but from something quite other than that, so I turn now to the impetus for the original paintings.

In 2009 and 2010 I worked on two series of paintings entitled the *Wish List Series*: a *Smaller Wish List Series* comprising eighteen smallish (25 by 25 cm) panels in oil on Masonite and wood, and a *Larger Wish List Series* (five square format paintings each measuring 60 by 60 cm). At this point I had been seeking ways in which to use my creative practice as a mechanism through which to work through grief and the trauma of the loss of my triplets. In the years immediately prior to this loss, my energy had largely been spent on my teaching practice, commuting daily between my home in Pietermaritzburg and the school in Durban where I was employed, while also, of course, trying to fall pregnant. Thus I had spent an uncharacteristic amount of time away from the studio.

Writing about the project, from its early incarnation to its transformation into a collaborative print project with multiple participants, is extremely difficult given the timespan from its inception (2010) to this point (2016) and its metamorphosis from a single creator work to multiple creators. It is valuable, however, because reflecting on and writing about the *Wish List Project* provides the opportunity to consider a number of aspects of my creative practice. In conjunction with the idea of the work as an effort of *reenchantment* my reasons for including the *Wish List Project* in this dissertation are as follows: first, the project highlights connections as well as shifts between painting and

printing practice; secondly, the *Wish List Project* shows connections between my visual arts practice and my teaching; and thirdly, it charts the relationship between a privately made collection of paintings and a body of prints made by multiple participants, speaking therefore to the fluidity and organic way in which artistic works can develop. Finally, because of the unique way the project developed, growing out of a failed effort at healing, it highlights what painter Marlene Dumas once described as the “interconnectedness of everything” (van den Boogerd 2009:11); it gives me an opportunity to speak about ideas related to expansive connectivity. I will also give consideration to some aspects of narrative I did not emphasise in Chapters Two and Three, in relation particularly to narrative and the community. In this section, entitled “Interconnectivity, Community and Narrative”, I will also draw on ideas by Arendt and Crowther which correspond with my own discoveries.

In the following chapter I will expand on the several areas I highlighted as important aspects of the *Wish List Project*. I will discuss the origins, development and transformations that occurred in the project. In doing so I will have to begin at the beginning and draw attention to the project’s origins, connections between my teaching and making practice, and the print/painting shift. While this is difficult, as recording the early stages and development of the paintings relies on personal remembered experience and on noting down personal communication and interactions, it is important so that the context of the initial series is clear.

## **2. Origins**

I recall that after an hiatus of about 15 months, I picked up my brushes and began a small scale canvas. After some hours in the studio I was overcome with tremors – such was my need to return to the practice of painting, with its sticky, glutinous, pungent thrall. I needed a dirty, messy activity full of clots, cohesions, skeins and drips, that could match the dirty, messy, stickiness of my recent experience. Art historian and painter Elkins, in *What Painting Is* (1998), insightfully describes the painter’s studio as a “warm womb” (161), and I imagined that my return to this place of “interminable solitary confinement” and “infectious squalor” with its aura of things, to use Elkins’s description, “viscous,



gluey and phlegmatic” (161) would balance me and help make sense of the overwhelming bodily and emotional chaos into which my loss had thrust me.

Initially my return felt restorative, something comforting, a retreat to a womb-like place of safety, far from the shocks of the external world, but soon thereafter (and with increasing frequency) it began, instead, to feel like an intensely futile act in the face of recent personal experience. Increasingly I experienced the feeling that I was flailing in the dark, caught in “a trackless scene of perpetual isolated reinvention” (169); a step-less and elusive path hinting at a direction but seeming to lead nowhere. Yet the stickiness of the paint, the acrid smell of the turpentine, oils, and pigments, the glutinous mass of thick liquid oil and the disturbing scrape of *sgraffito* unearthing the layers of paint beneath, kept pulling me towards the studio, and I persevered with the series.

The original series, when exhibited at Art SPACE Durban (2009) and the Jack Heath Gallery in Pietermaritzburg (2010), took the form of what I then described as a painting installation. This description was, in fact, inaccurate: the paintings were not made for a specific space although they were intended as conventional wall pieces for a gallery-type space. The smaller works were laid out in the middle gallery in a row of five, while a grid of 12 works was placed on the main gallery wall. The grid format meant that wider connections could be drawn between the images. This allowed them to be ‘read’ in multiple directions, not just in a linear left to right manner. The set of five, hung in a linear sequence, were more literal images of maternity, birth and loss, linked by predominantly yellow and grey hues. The discordance of acid yellows and sombre grey tones activated a sense of discomfort – a visual dissonance standing in for the literal disruption I felt.

Early attempts at image-making were, in my view, quite hideous. I recall the smaller panels came first and were overtly and explicitly connected to the loss of the triplets, while the larger panels – I struggled less with these – referenced departure or loss more broadly. It was with this set of smaller paintings that I struggled most emphatically, especially at the start of my return to the studio. Images of pink empty booties (cloying, trite and yet insistent) and similar such bland references to the loss of children left me

unsatisfied and embarrassed. I persevered with the series after rejecting many of the early images. I was somewhat more satisfied with the imagery in the smaller panels, where I used metaphor to speak of the loss I was trying to describe, an example of this work being *Progeny* (2009/10), comprising an immature pomegranate, pictured below. A further example, also pictured, is *Flight* (2009/10). After some months I had produced the 18 small panels and five larger ones which comprised the initial series.



**Plate 18.** Faye Spencer. *Progeny*. 2009. Oil on board. 25 x 25 cm. **Plate 19.** Faye Spencer. *Flight*. 2009. Oil on board. 25 x 25 cm.

The larger works were hung more conventionally in discrete single unit formation. Pictured on the following page is a view of 12 of the 18 small works in the series, as shown at ArtSPACE Durban in 2009. Their layout in this manner encouraged the viewer to come in closer to view discrete panels while at the same time allowing for a distanced view which allowed for a reading that accommodated visual and thematic connections between the individual panels.



**Plate 20.** Faye Spencer. *Smaller Wish List Series*. 2009. Gallery view at ArtSPACE Durban. oil on board. Panels 25 x 25cm.

In each of the *Smaller Wish List Series* the circular window through which the images are observed is surrounded by a decorative painted frame. As noted at the time of their first public display “the frame is repeated with slight – and occasionally dramatic – adjustments”. At times the frame is decorated with “abundant lush forests of jewel-like leaves, at other times the painted frame disintegrates into a violent swathe of brush-marks” (Artist’s Statement, Spencer 2009). The painted frame was inspired originally by a filigreed, intricate, metal frame housing a wedding photograph, and also alludes to *trompe l’oeil* frames often found in 17<sup>th</sup> century Flemish *memento mori* painting, thereby reiterating the idea that the painted object is an illusion (thus elusive, not real, but desired) and emphasising “our mortality and death’s relationship to life” (Conterio 2016). The *memento mori* thematic (originating in antiquity) speaks to the idea that life is transitory, and is a reminder of the inevitability of death and the fleeting nature of experience. As my artist’s statement noted, “the portal and its enclosing frame point to the idea that the vision contained therein is both special (reverential/symbolic) and extracted from a private realm of experience” (2009).

The paintings of the *Larger Wish List Series* were hung adjacent to the smaller series in the gallery space. The images in the larger series were chosen for their potency, both as

symbols and as actual objects of personal value. In my writing about the work at the time for the very first exhibition of these works I emphasised that “the suitcase, for example, in *Safe Passage II* references both literal travel as well as trespass into otherworldly domains”; this makes it both “an object travelling from the past (belonging to relatives long deceased) and a reference to the present (a signal of change/flux) and portent of the future wherein a body moves from this realm into the next” (2009). I go on to observe it is a container – “a vessel that hides or protects something”, something that “has multiple references, and can be seen to speak both positively (of being transported, of travel or elevation) and negatively (of loss and dislocation), referencing relationships severed by mortality and/or physical distance” (2009).



**Plate 21.** Faye Spencer. *Safe Passage*. 2009/10. Oil, mixed media on board. 60 x 60 cm.

Any suitcase, of course, could be painted to allude to ideas like this, but the particular suitcase featured in the painting was an especially potent private symbol too in that it held a multitude of babies’ clothes gifted to me by the children I had taught while I had been pregnant with the triplets. After losing the triplets the suitcase held these contents for many more months than I had originally imagined it would. This made it a powerful, extremely loaded image as it resonated with a hidden but profoundly felt loss embedded in the image and the scratched and scarred surface of the painting. The suitcase itself is

an object from my husband's family history and is resonant also, therefore, of losses, destinations and movements to which I will never have access.

Like *Safe Passage*, the majority of works in the larger series allowed an open reading through the use of symbol – images which could be read in a number of ways. The telephone in the painting *Ring-Ring* (2009/10), not pictured here, could refer positively to communication or speak to its opposite, alluding to a loss of dialogue and to distance and absence. The desire for communication (and the difficulty of achieving it) features widely as a theme in these larger works. The urgency with which this loss is felt is emphasised by the rough brushwork in these works, and by the crude, heavy impasto and patches of ragged sgraffito exemplified by Plate 21, *Rest* (2009/10), which was the final work, in the larger series of paintings out of which the print project subsequently arose.



Plate 22. Faye Spencer. *Rest*. 2009/10. Oil, mixed media on board. 60 x 60 cm.

I would refer to these three paintings especially, and the use of metaphor much later again in 2014 when introducing the *Wish List Project* to learners at Epworth Girls' School. While their imagery would in many ways be closer in format to my *Smaller Wish List Series*, these larger works were useful in allowing for a discussion of objects as symbols and an exploration of how a form can contain multiple meanings: ones that might have personal (private or hidden) relevance, as well as ones with a broader application or value. In our first meeting the participants and I spoke about the idea of the suitcase

containing several meanings and how it could speak, therefore, to the wishes of others as well as allude to private wishes or experiences that the viewer may not share, nor be aware of. The suitcase, in particular, was useful for this as the object itself, as noted earlier, contained the many small baby clothes I had been gifted for the triplets. Of course, this would not be apparent to a viewer of the painting, but I spoke with the participants about how it rendered the suitcase a potent secret symbol for me at the same time as it suggested concepts of departure to other people.

Showing the two series of paintings in an exhibition at artSPACE Durban after working on them for some months should, I felt, have given me some feeling of satisfaction and closure. After all, the exhibition at artSPACE Durban was well received: reviewers of the exhibition noted, for example, that “Spencer intrigues her audience with subtle notions of stories waiting to be told – stories which encompass her own experiences of sadness, loss and longing as well as a more universal, emotional story we all share when faced with images of a phone or a suitcase” (Norval 2009). The act of exhibiting the work in both 2009 and 2010 was positive too in that it marked a return to making after a protracted absence from the studio. Yet the project left me unsatisfied in many respects. Somehow, despite the layers of paint, the labour and completeness (in appearance) of the paintings, the project felt unfinished; it was too finite, too closed off, and it had not yet brought me the relief or dialogue I was seeking.

Conversations with colleagues, Juliet Armstrong and Ian Calder, and artist Tony Starkey, then head of the Art Department at Durban University of Technology, centred on the iterativeness of the panels – how they almost wanted to be repeated and extended. Starkey said they made him think of small ceramic tiles or prints, and that perhaps pursuing them in another medium would make them more satisfying for me (personal communication). I did not immediately act on this; for a long time, they sat on the periphery of my consciousness, waiting for the right moment to be reactivated. I, also, remember feeling on looking at the exhibitions at ArtSPACE Durban (2009), and then later (2010) in the Jack Heath Gallery, that a body of art whose focus was on wishes, on things sharply desired and desperately sought, would be far more satisfying and richer if

it included other voices rather than speaking solely of my own vision of desire. I began, therefore, to consider how the project might be transformed into another medium which could accommodate the vision of others also.

At around this time, I lost my colleague in 2D studio-work in the CVA. The position of printmaking lecturer was not filled. Fearing that this skill was under threat in the centre, I began to learn about some of the processes and equipment in the print studio. I began with relief printing, which is the “earliest form of printing” and can be traced back to seventh century China woodblock images (Coldwell 2010:5). Despite its distant origins it is still one of the most immediate, direct forms of printmaking. I chose linoleum over wood as my relief medium because, as Coldwell notes, linoleum is known for its “ease of cutting and its capacity to render a fluid line” (8). I felt more comfortable with the simple cutting tools and the inexpensive accessible printing surface of the lino than the expensive and highly technical requirements of etching, and began to see that this medium was one which presented expanded possibilities for the *Wish List Series* that I had begun in painting. In addition, linoleum is an inexpensive surface, one which can often be obtained by approaching local carpeting or flooring companies for donations of offcuts – so I had a surface I could learn to master and which would give me a flexible, liquid kind of line, as well as being something I could obtain in quantities for fellow participants.

I felt that the presence of the pieces in a gallery space for a brief period had left them inert – I could not escape the feeling that they did not *do* enough in that space. I wanted the *Wish List Series* to do a lot more: to engage more widely with viewers and to speak in an expanded register about people’s longings. I imagined and hoped to find a site where they could have an extended life and bring pleasure or provoke conversation for a more extended period of time.

### **3. Development**

For many months the series sat waiting on the entrance wall of my Scottsville home; the images were insistently on the periphery of my consciousness. I knew I wanted to translate the project into print and engage the participation of other artists. I knew, too, that I hoped the re-visioned work could be more active and less inert. It could become something that was wanted and useful. It could enhance a public space. I considered working with local scholars and donating the project to the municipal library. After all, I reflected, the library is a public space, it connects, too, to my commitment to writing and its value. But a donation of something the library did not really want or need could have been construed as arrogant. I decided to abandon this idea. I would have to wait for a synchronous moment. It came suddenly after months of waiting in July 2014: Clinton George, then a newly appointed director of the hostel and youth programme for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Pietermaritzburg, was standing next to me in front of the paintings and discussing the large task ahead in his new job, which entailed the refurbishment and upgrade of numerous facilities at the YMCA. He turned to me and said, “Don’t you have some paintings for us? Haven’t you got work lying around that you don’t want?” (personal communication). He was laughing, and spoke somewhat flippantly. He did not seem to expect a positive reply. Thank you Clinton, I thought. I replied that I had something even better, “but it will take some time” (personal communication). I then spoke to him about the *Wish List Series* of paintings. I told him how I had been waiting to turn them into a print collaboration that could be of some value to the community. In this way the project found a home.

### **4. Connections: Teaching and Making Practice**

I then needed to consider who could be suitable participants. Where would I find them? What kind of artists would be appropriate to use for a project like this in a space like the YMCA? How could I enable the project to emphasise the continued presence of the CVA as a site of potential scholarship for young people in the community? I felt a keen responsibility to reiterate the presence of the CVA in the local community, to draw attention to it as a vibrant creative place in which a range of disciplines are taught, and to



draw attention to it as a potential choice for future study of the visual arts. As the project formed part of my own PhD study, though, I was loath to force students in undergraduate classes I taught to partake in it. I needed voluntary participants whose work would *not* have to be assessed as part of a course I was teaching.

#### **4.1. Participants**

Having found a medium appropriate to the project and a site which welcomed and sought an artwork, I wondered what kind of artists might be the most appropriate to use for a project like this, in a space like the YMCA. The choice became obvious in dialogue with Clinton and Alison George about the space and whom it serves. I learned that the YMCA (2014/15) had been tasked with upgrading several its hostel facilities because the housing problem of university students in the town is so acute. Given the fact that I was a lecturer in the university, I felt happy that the *Wish List Project* in its small way would be part of an effort to alleviate the student housing problem, an acute nationwide problem which, as noted in Dr Blade Nzimande's ministerial report, was resulting in "significant overuse and decay of existing infrastructure and utility services" (2012:14). In speaking to the Georges about their vision for the YMCA I learned that they wanted it to be a space that was comfortable, welcoming and a haven for the youth in Pietermaritzburg (personal communication). From our discussion it emerged that the most appropriate participants in the project would be young people in the community and with this in mind, I approached local schools to find out who might have the time and desire to participate in such a project.

#### **4.2. Transformation from Single Author to Multiple Creators**

I approached several local high schools in the Pietermaritzburg area. Shan Jacobs, art teacher at Epworth Girls' School, felt that her 2016 Matric class group would be suitable participants in the project. At the time they had not yet embarked on the matric curriculum but were laying the foundation for their final year. Their class projects were geared to developing critical thinking skills relating to visual interpretation. Epworth Art Department has its own press and the students had had some experience with relief printing, but this project would give the young artists an opportunity to work on a small

scale linocut project in a circular format, thus extending their practical experience with composition in this print medium, as well as increasing their familiarity and dexterity with the lino-cutting tools and press equipment. A new dimension would be added in that select hand colouring would be added to the black and white prints with watercolour paints after the print had been through the press a final time.

To introduce the project and place it in context I created a short presentation consisting of slides of my original two series of paintings and a worksheet, which could serve as a starting point for conversations about appropriate image making. In the first class I emphasised that the participants were “invited to design and produce a 16 cm diameter circular format motif (your special wish) which would sit inside a jewel-like decorative portal surround similar to the surrounds imaged in the small wish list painted series” (Spencer planning and preparation worksheet 1, 2014). I highlighted that I had shown them my own wishes in order to discuss how wishes *could* be imaged, not in order to suggest the kinds of wishes they should select. In my presentation I noted that the participants had been shown the early painted works to situate the project and to give some insight into the use of image as a symbol but that they were being asked to work in their own personal style, and to seek out a wish of their own. In the slide presentation and following group discussions I emphasised that the like format, decorative surrounds and common media would bring cohesion to the project. They should, therefore, feel free to use marks and imagery that felt appropriate to their own art making. This first meeting was also an opportunity for me to share ideas about the cathartic potential of visual arts practice and storytelling with young participants. I told them that the starting point for the original series of painting had been a place of loss.

Their task was to image a wish that related to a personal desire that could also be applied to others. This required the young artists to reflect on how to situate a concept (for example, abundance or plenty) into an image that could be interpreted by others. We spoke about metaphor and its role in imaging. The following were among the wishes the students deemed personally significant but also applicable to others: the desire for more time, growth/freedom; unity/belonging; success/knowledge. At times the participants’

written terminology seemed a little obscure, but conversations in the class environment revealed that they were chiefly concerned with personal well-being and the mastery of skills. We used the written worksheets as prompts for dialogue about metaphor, themes and imagery.

As noted earlier, the class group was selected with care, as understanding the use of visual metaphor would be a really useful skill for these students as they headed towards matric and would be very valuable to the participants for several reasons: it could assist them in interpreting the work of other artists; it could deepen their understanding of their art history syllabus and the role metaphor plays in the work of much contemporary art; and it could be useful in their own creative production in that they could approach their theme tasks in ways that were not necessarily literal. Visual literacy and interpreting of metaphor are, of course, aspects of the existing school syllabus. Ms Jacobs had already begun to familiarise the class with interpreting artworks and looking at images as symbols. The class's participation in the *Wish List Project* would reinforce these aspects of the curriculum. In addition, the philanthropic dimension of creating something for others was a call that the school was happy to take up: it was in line with their ethos of compassionate action. The school's motto is "Fida, Humana, Fortis – Faith, Compassion, Courage" and its emphasis on involvement in the community and care "for all who live here" (<http://www.epworth.co.za/>), meant that there were close connections between the project's motivations and the school's broader humanitarian ideals.

## **5. Transformation: Making and Unpredictability**

Allowing the focus of the *Wish List Project* to shift away from myself as the sole image-maker, meant that I would have to submit to a different sort of driving force behind the work. I would have to allow for the participants' work to suggest what happened next. In throwing the image-making and ideas formulation open to others, I thought I was well on the road to achieving this. However, in art making there are always surprises. Unexpected paths suddenly appear. As Sean McNiff (a prominent writer on arts-based research practices) emphasises, mystery and uncertainty "rather than reliability and predictability" are driving forces in artistic transformation (1988:43). I was forcefully reminded of this

truth on my second visit to the school to look at how the artists were progressing with their ideas and image construction.

“Magic”, as McNiff notes, “is an alchemical transformation which forms the basis of the creative process” and despite practising “our work systematically and diligently, the unexpected and unpredictable moments of magic are fundamental qualities of the enterprise” (43). Initially, as my reference to the worksheet and presentation earlier shows, I envisioned that I would connect the various individual circular prints created by the Epworth artists with a circular surround. This would take the form of an intricate, frame-like printed support, not dissimilar to the original surrounds that ‘framed’ the paintings of the *Smaller Wish List Series*. This, I imagined, would do two things: firstly, it would tie the prints back to the original paintings visually; and secondly, it would connect quite stylistically and technically diverse pieces together with a uniform surround, thus creating a cohesive whole out of multiple author parts. I had, in fact, already begun to cut the surround (pictured below) before I returned to the school to see how the print designs were progressing.



**Plate 23.** Faye Spencer. *Untitled*. 2014. Sample of partially cut Linoleum surround. 30 x30 cm.

I had imagined that I could connect each surround to the individual prints by picking up on the particular colours in each print – so, for example, for a circular motif that was predominantly yellow, I would use a like yellow in the leaves, and in one that was predominantly red I would use a similar red colour, and so on. However, on visiting the group for a second time it became abundantly clear that each print was so unique and so lovely that framing them all with a single uniform surround that did not speak to their interior concept would be inappropriate and insensitive. It was clear that each would require a unique surround that spoke to the interior surround. I did not feel it would be appropriate to set the Epworth group of artists a further task, though, given that there were many demands on them to produce works in anticipation of the year end portfolios. My experience with the young artists suggested that it would not be the right thing for me to design each of the surrounds myself either. I would be steering the project back to its origins in a way that wasn't really useful or appropriate given my wish to involve others in its creation.

I decided to see if I could turn what seemed to be a setback into an opportunity to bring other artists into the project. I spoke to a group of third year visual arts students who, on seeing the circular inserts and hearing about the location and impetus for the project, expressed a desire to contribute. The third year group was a small one, consisting of only four 2D studio-work students. Each of the surrounds creators, it was decided, would design a unique 'outer' for three or four of the circular insets. The third year students' advanced image making skills would enable each artist to design a unique surround that would both support and amplify the insets designed by the younger Epworth artists. The group saw the same presentation I had shown the younger artists about the project's origins in my own paintings as a counter to loss. In order to assist the creators of the outer surround, each received a copy of the circular inset and statements from the younger artists about the motivation for their choice of image.

While being aware that image as metaphor allowed for an open rather than a narrow reading of the work, the creators of the surrounds took care to respond sensitively to the message each of the younger artist had intended their image to convey. For example, as

illustrated in Plate 23 on the following page, Tess Galbraith was sensitive to Caitlyn Walsh's intention to use the ballet slipper (pictured in a dancer's pose of pointe) to reference strength, which was Walsh's unique wish both for herself and others. Galbraith noted that she had tried to support the idea expressed by Walsh by extending the pointe shoes' ribbon into the surround as she felt that with strength one is able to grow (personal communication). The growth of the ribbon becomes a metaphor for personal growth. Furthermore, Galbraith filled this surround with repetitive images of ballet dancers to draw attention to the ballet shoes and how strong one has to be to become a dancer and balance on one's toes (personal communication). In order that the surround amplify the inset Galbraith continued the stark tonal relationships and matched the colour in the ribbon to the inset (personal communication).



**Plate 24.** Caitlyn Walsh, Tess Galbraith. *Untitled. Wish List Project.* 2015. Linocut with hand-colouring on Fabriano. 30 x 30 cm.

Like Galbraith, Chad Reynolds, responded to both the visual image and the reason for its use in his design of a surround for Julia Arbuckle's inset in which she used a group of cows to represent her wish for prosperity. Reynolds appropriated the simple, easily recognisable cow motif from a road-sign and repeated it many times over in his surround to amplify the idea of plenty associated with prosperity



**Plate 25.** Julia Arbuckle, Chad Reynolds, Eloff Pretorius. *Untitled. Wish List Project.* 2015. Linocut, hand-colouring on Fabriano.30 x 30 cm.

Again the way arts practice produces the unanticipated was evident here, as Reynolds's use of this particular image, and his choice of small scale, which allowed numerous repeats to fit inside the format, meant that the image would be very difficult to create as a linocut. It would work much better as a silkscreen. Usefully, one of Reynolds' peers,

Eloff Pretorius (himself a designer of surrounds contributing to this project), is a printmaking student who wanted more experience with the technical aspects of silk-screening. Pretorius transformed Reynolds design into a silkscreen onto which the inset was *chine-colléd*.

As only one among the third year artists intended to pursue printmaking as their major, and as several students in the foundation courses in the CVA were aspirant printmakers, the majority of the surrounds were cut by artists who did not design them. The practice of shared creation is not unusual in printmaking. While helping to cut a print for a colleague is not an uncommon practice in many print-making studios, the cutters' participation is not usually acknowledged on the print. In conversation with all the artists it was deemed appropriate for this project that the initials of the cutters appeared alongside those of the creators in those cases where the surround was not cut by the artist who designed it. Including the contribution of the cutters we felt was appropriate to the shared nature of the work and to the idea of community participation driving the project.

## **6. Interconnectivity, Community and Narrative**

In Chapters Three and Four I discussed narrative and reflected on connections and differences between written and visual storytelling and on my experience of narrative as a mechanism for catharsis. I turn now to a consideration of some of the ideas regarding storytelling and community that are appropriate to situation of the re-visioned *Wish List Project* in a particular public space.

### **6.1. Interconnectivity**

The two original series of *Wish List* paintings began as an exploration of loss. Because of the unique way it has developed, the project has allowed me to reflect on ideas concerning narrative and the community and enabled me to clarify my own position regarding the social practice of art-making, and the function of literary or visual works as a cohesive tool – a mechanism through which to foster community, dialogue and integration. If the *Wish List Project* had succeeded in its private original intention and I had not struggled with it in the way I have, I would not have begun to write the novella,



nor would I have made prints that spoke to the novella's themes of longing, loss and repair. Nor would I have sought an expanded alternative role for the *Wish List* paintings; I would simply have put it aside and not considered it as a potential print project with multiple participants. It would have remained a small scale series created for a gallery. This highlights the rhizomic nature of making. In creative practice one project develops out of an earlier idea. A number of theorists, Bernard Lee, Joanna Macey and Katherine Keeler amongst others, in *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art* describe the "interexistence" or the interconnectivity of everything (Griffin 1990:1), and emphasise the organic and unpredictable nature of visual arts practice.

## **6.2. Community and Narrative**

Arendt underscores her belief in the fundamental importance of narrative when she emphatically states that "no philosophy can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story" (1995:22). She values storytelling over philosophical thinking for its attentiveness to the singular nature of human experience. Arendt is not the only philosopher to emphasise that creative practices can offer valuable insights that philosophy is unable to. In *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (1993), for example, Paul Crowther, drawing on and extending the vision of his predecessor, phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, argues that art and aesthetic experiences have the capacity to humanize. In subsequent writing (1997, 2003) Crowther explores this theme in greater detail, arguing that art can bridge the gap between philosophy's traditional striving for generality and completeness and the concreteness and contingency of humanity's basic relation to the world. Importantly, Crowther highlights a "problem" with philosophy because it "denudes the concrete particular" (1993:4).

Through her emphasis on the value of storytelling Arendt challenges "hegemonic and absolute notions of truth" and posits a new way of understanding the relationship between the particular human self, the community in which the self is located, and the wider world (Swift 2009:1). In an essay on Isak Dinesen, Arendt explains that storytelling uncovers meaning without committing the error of defining it (1995:105). This makes narrative a

wonderful and open form of communicating. Visual narrative in particular can be read in ways as innumerable as there are viewers, especially when metaphor is employed, as metaphor allows for broader interpretations than literal iterations do. The generative nature of the *Wish List Project* is something that deeply appeals to me. The domino or ripple effect that resulted from the way the circular format print was enhanced and amplified by a companion surround created by different participants was one of the most exciting features of the project. It also accorded with the character of printmaking in that it is really at its heart never a single author activity – even when working on single authored images in the print studio. The studio itself and the processes (for example, when wetting the paper, running the print through the press, laying the completed print out onto the drying rack) all work much better when two people are involved in printing. Thus, dialogue is encouraged, both through the image and through the processes from which the image is constructed.

Metaphor is an important aspect of storytelling, particularly in regard to this project, and was something the artists and I discussed in relation to visioning their wish in a way that would be apparent to viewers. I introduced this idea with reference to my own use of metaphor in the original paintings. As the prints were destined for a public space where they could be seen by many different people it seemed important that the images allude to rather than dictate an idea. The young artists were sensitive to the idea that use of metaphor allows the imagery to be open-ended, and can usefully be read in different ways by the viewers of the prints. I refer to two examples in this section, by way of illustration, although it is important to point out that any of the central images could work as an example of polyvalence through visual metaphor.

The image of the sailing ship, in the print pictured on the following page might bring a viewer to think of adventure or freedom (the expansiveness of sail) or reference the ability to harness and take advantage of what resources there are at hand (in this case the wind). Alternatively, the sailing ship might reference discovery and gaining new knowledge of the world, with its allusion to exploration, or it could be read as a call to an earlier less mechanised age.



**Plate 26.** Jade Taylor. *Untitled. Wish List Project.* 2015. Linocut, hand-colouring on Fabriano. Diameter inset 15 cm.

Likewise, the turtle imaged in the print pictured on the following page, Plate 27, can refer to any one of the following ideas: the tranquillity of swimming in the ocean, a wish for people to conserve an endangered species, a wish for a safe haven (alluded to by the shell).



Plate 27. Maxine Seethal. *Untitled*. *Wish List Project*. 2015. Linocut with hand-colouring on Fabriano. Diameter inset 15 cm.

In addition to the open-endedness of storytelling, the value of which is so well described by Arendt, The *Wish List Project* intersects with storytelling in other ways too. Arendt describes how storytelling “brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are” (1995:105). “All sorrows”, she emphasises, are made bearable “if you put them into a story, or tell a story about them” (104). I have found solace in storytelling, particularly in my experience of the devastating loss of my triplets. Through the invention of a fictional loss I was able to immerse myself in, reflect on and comment on loss, grief and recovery. As noted earlier, I tried to work through this grief initially through painting and image making but at first found these inadequate containers for the sticky, complex, contradictory, chaotic and even wondrous experiences brought to me by this loss. Arendt’s contention is that storytelling is an important mechanism through which to comprehend the world; and comprehension, Arendt (1967:x) stresses, “means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of reality – whatever it may be or might have been”. This is supported by my own experience, achieved through the act of

writing and also through the act of translating my loss into images which reflect on this experience. Although the *Wish List Series* did not ultimately succeed in helping me deal with maternal trauma and loss, the project embraced and came to embody an alternate cohesive function in that it developed into a gift for a particular public space. The *Wish List Project* came to involve a number of participants (18 in all) from the local Pietermaritzburg community. Their involvement in the project was a way to give something back to an organization that serves the community on many fronts (quite aside from the institution's religious Christian message – to which I do not myself subscribe). The hostel serves to provide accommodation to students in a city in which student housing is in crisis: students are crying out for improved facilities (Naile 2014). Further, the facility accommodates the needs of the wider community. It is utilised, for example, as a venue for Pietermaritzburg's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) group, and initiates and hosts a number of programmes for the homeless adults and street children of the city.

Cultural anthropology has long accepted the telling of stories as a mechanism through which cultures order their understanding of themselves. As noted by Swift, through its transformation into narrative a series of events can be understood, communicated to a wider audience and remembered by the community (2009:7). The idea that stories assist in making the world intelligible presupposes the idea of a community inherent in the act of telling. An artwork (in my view a mechanism through which narrative is told) without a viewer or a story without a listener, audience or reader is a voiceless or shapeless thing – an emptiness and a non-performance. As Swift notes, “storytelling” (and following that art-making if, as in my conception, visual arts is included in the idea of narrative) “presupposes a community inherent in the act of telling” (7). The community immediately “involves the teller of the story, the hero of the action, and the listener or reader who stands back, judges and responds to it” (7). This formulation of community suggests another key Arendtian idea – that free thinking is an activity that can really only take place in the presence of others, in a community rather than in the withdrawal and meditation required by theory. I subscribe to the idea that free-thinking is borne of

action/making in the world. It is this that drives my *Office Politics Series* as well, and the *Indian Yellow* and *Wish List* projects.

## 7. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have centred my inquiry on the origins and development of the *Wish List Project*. I have shown how the project highlights connections *and* shifts between painting and printing practice. My scrutiny of the project has revealed connections between my visual arts practice and teaching. In this chapter, I have charted the relationship between a privately made collection of paintings and a body of prints made by a number of participants and, in so doing, have illustrated the fluid and organic way in which artistic works can develop. My involvement with this project has again emphasised the value of story-telling. I have referred to thinking about narrative and community by philosophers such as Arendt and Crowther. Referencing Gablik's thinking on reconstructive postmodernism as support I have presented my ideas in relation to this project as an effort at *reenchantment* and considered how, in its manifestation as a gift from the artists (myself and my co-creators), it serves to resist the idea of the artwork as commodity.

While the *Wish List Project* prints were not made by me as such but by a collective of participants, each bringing their own narratives into play, each telling (or contributing to the telling) of their personal wish, the project itself, through its development from a single author project into a multiple participant work for a public space, also speaks on one level of my story, for it speaks of my effort to locate creative production meaningfully – to find a space where it does something positive for others and not only serves as an assuager of private intimate griefs. The value of the *Wish List Project*, I believe, lies in how it speaks of an effort to include many participants in the creation of a gift, of something that seeks to enhance a public space and takes up the call for what Gablik describes as a “new, connective, participatory aesthetics”. In so doing, it rejects both the subjective individuality of modernism and the nihilism of deconstructive postmodern art practice in favour of “an expanded context” that values connection with and service to others (1991:19-22).

## CHAPTER SIX

### Connections, Departures and Conclusions

#### 1. Connections and Territory

My practice-based enquiry has straddled a range of disciplines from painting to printmaking and creative writing. Given that my undergraduate and Master's practical training was almost exclusively located in painting, much of this terrain (in spite of the two-dimensionality that writing and printmaking share with painting) has presented new, challenging, yet compelling areas of creative engagement for me on both a technical and personal level. My prior training as a painter has attuned me to the differences and connections shared by these creative practices and compelled me to embark on an intimate scrutiny of what working with and across these various media entails, and also allows. I have enjoyed the fresh challenges presented by working with printmaking and creative writing, and their alternate register to painting has sharpened my attentiveness to the richness and scope contained within the practice of painting as well.

##### 1.1. Overview of the Doctoral Project

A significant part of my research comprises a detailed enquiry into the way the *Office Politics Series*, the *Indian Yellow Project* and the *Wish List Project* each engages with notions of departure and dislocation in various forms. In my thesis I consider the dialogue that each project establishes internally in relation to the theme of departure as well as the form that this dialogue assumed across all three projects. I reflect on how this exploration of departure relates to the humanising functions that I believe art fulfils: catharsis, cohesion and community. As I emphasise throughout my thesis, both my theoretical writing and my practice are driven by my conviction that art is a valuable site for healing and for dialogue which “avows the unavowable” (Cixous 1993:53). I am convinced that creative arts (both visual practices and creative writing) have much to offer the inhabitants of South Africa: a country which continues to be gripped by conflict and

discord. My Colleagues have drawn connections between my enquiry into and critique of power relationship in the series *Office Politics* and the work of contemporary south African painter Norman Catherine, whose practice locates itself around questions about power, powerlessness and discord in relation to his time and location (Fossey, personal communication: 2016). For Catherine, as for myself, painting can be seen as a site allows for the exploration of struggles against disenfranchisement and powerlessness. Catherine, as arts writer Hazel Friedman suggests, utilises humour, brash colour and rough distorted forms to describe and comment on a dysfunctional space (2000:77), and in this way there is a close connection between our practice as painters, both in terms of broad theme and moral impulse.

Judge Albie Sachs, in reflecting on culture and the role of art in the socio-political arena, notes “the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions” (1990:20), and I feel it is for these very reasons that arts practice has a role to play in our emerging, yet beleaguered, democracy. Similarly, it also has much to offer inhabitants of the wider world who, too, seem to inhabit a “liquid” environment “drenched in anxiety” (Bauman in Smith 1991:25). I believe creative practices have a profound capacity for catharsis, dialogue and self-realisation (and self-realisation is crucial if one is to come to know, care for, and participate alongside others productively). This conviction arises from my personal experience and has been further underscored by my engagement with this doctoral enquiry. Creative practices, I am convinced, offer the creators and those who view, read or interact with the works opportunities to say, as Cixous emphasises, the unsayable (1993:53). My thesis, as well as the three projects analysed in it, is driven by this conviction.

Metaphor and story-telling play an important role in each of the projects, and I consider their use as mechanisms for dialogue. Through my practice I discover, as Arendt (1995:105) suggests, that in story-telling we make sense of experiences, we uncover meaning – heterogeneous actions, passions, circumstances or misfortunes – without cancelling out or defining it in a narrow ambit. I show, specifically, how in the *Office Politics Series* metaphor enabled me to speak about my own unique and particularised



experience of the working world and socio-economic climate in South Africa, while simultaneously allowing me to consider and reference tensions, inertia and anxieties of the broader “postmodern habitat” (Smith 1999:154). Metaphor plays an important role also in my *Indian Yellow Project* in both the creative writing and the prints that emerge from the written story. In the written story – a tale replete with metaphors – the crow and the whale, as just two examples, refer to Liza’s presence and, simultaneously, to her absence. The crow is a popular metaphor for death or departure, of course, while the whale perhaps in this tale is a more idiosyncratic example, arising in part, I suspect, from my reading of *Moby-Dick* (1985 [1851]) as a child. And then, following the loss of the triplets (and at the time of writing my novella) I read Herman Melville’s dramatic novel again, this time aloud to my (in utero) daughter. Metaphor plays a significant role in the large scale prints too where, broadly speaking, the embossed forms can be seen to speak of absence and to stand in for Liza (the always missing, ever present character) around whose departure the novella is located. And, again, metaphor is a key player in the *Wish List Project* as a mechanism through which the many young artists involved could vision a wish that may be both personally meaningful to them and applicable to others also.

My three projects are further broadly connected in that each arises out of a feeling of *fracture*, either as a result of disorientation or departure (colleagues leaving a workspace, children becoming deceased, chaos replacing certainty are among the relevant departures applicable here). The *cohesive* power of creative practice is something that connects my three projects. Philosopher Paul Crowther speaks to this idea when he notes that the aesthetic experience has an “integrative power” which can counter and redress the oft-noted “fragmentation of the postmodern sensibility” (2003:7). My engagement in the *Office Politics Series* was born out of a desire for sense-making and connection in a fraught working space, while my *Indian Yellow Project* can be seen as a means with which to counter the fragmentation and dislocation experienced subsequent to the loss of my triplets. The paintings from my *Wish List Project*, too, sprang from that same desire. In addition, the *Wish List Project*, in its entirety, speaks to integration through its metamorphosis from a painting project (originating in a single creator) into a collaborative print project created as a gift for a community space that serves local

students and young people of Pietermaritzburg. Thus each of the projects can be seen to exemplify how creative works can serve as integrative strategies, acting as a critical foil to what Crowther refers to as a “rupture of self” (7).

## **1.2. The Project’s Original Practical and Intellectual Contribution**

I believe my thesis, and the related body of creative work analysed therein, makes a unique contribution to the academe precisely because of the expansive, multi-disciplinary nature of my research undertaking which, as noted, spans disciplines in visual arts (printmaking and painting) *and* creative writing. In my thesis I look closely at how these practices differ, intersect and have emerged from (unsatisfactory) efforts in one another. It also, because of its grounding in practice, offers insights and experiences that may be of value to those artists who may not perceive themselves as scholars. My scrutiny of the projects has highlighted, too, what can be described as the rhizomic and unpredictable nature of arts practice, showing in detail how one project or idea emerged from another. Texts on creative practice tend to stress that these are features of visual arts practice and have special attributes (Griffin 1990:1; Macniff 1988:43; Barret & Bolt 2007:3). Often, however, such texts (perhaps because they necessarily speak to broad areas of visual practice) do not elaborate precisely how this occurs nor do they speak specifically to how it might be valuable. My thesis serves, thus, as an example of work which speaks *closely* to both the rhizomic and unpredictable nature of arts practice and shows how this has been valuable for the artist.

Further, my contribution is of value because it adds to the very new body of scholarly work *by the artists themselves* emerging from South African institutions about visual art, motives for making and creative processes. Art-making and catharsis are terms that have been connected in relation to the contemporary art scene in South Africa for some decades. The work and efforts of the late Professor Colin Richards, for example, in the development of professional art therapy in South Africa, have been extensive and include the co-founding of an art therapy service in Soweto (Lamprecht 2003). Richards lectured widely on the subject locally and internationally (2003), but he tended not to write extensively about his own practice in relation to healing. My exploration in book arts,

through the creation of my illustrated novella, situates my work in proximity to that of fellow South African book artists Cheryl Penn and Estelle Liebenberg-Barkhuizen, whose works like *21 February* (2010) and *Needle Girls* (2009) respectively take advantage of the book form's potential for "intimate engagements" about topics such as grief (or, in the case of Penn, self-harm) that tend to remain unexpressed (Haskins 2013:22). While these artists' books are among a number by Penn and Liebenberg-Barkhuizen that can be considered under the ambit of catharsis and practice, neither artists have, yet, written about these explorations in a scholarly forum. My thesis then, in tandem with my novella, can be seen to extend the dialogue about art-making and catharsis, specifically in relation to book arts as well as in relation to writing by artists about their own practice.

A small but growing body of writing which ties catharsis and art-making together in relation to the production of South African artists does, indeed, exist. Professor Jill Bennett's insightful book, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (2005), which examines contemporary visual art produced in the context of conflict and trauma from a range of countries including South Africa, is one such example. However, like Bennett's book, much of this kind of writing tends to take the form of anthology-type documents or shorter conference papers, news articles and similar forms. At its most expansive this kind of literature might include unpublished research such as that by CVA Master's student Paula Hulley (2016). Hulley centres her inquiry on her own practice and that of Deborah Bell and Colin Richards in relation to healing. Similarly, in earlier research emanating from the CVA, Michelle Coetzee's dissertation (1996) connects the practice of South African sculptor Jackson Hlongwane – as well as that of German sculptor Joseph Beuys and American Painter Jackson Pollock – to catharsis. The theme of healing and visual arts practices also features in recent popular writing such as published monographs containing sections or essays on catharsis, such as *Penny Siopis: Time and Again* (2014), which focuses on the work of this contemporary South African painter. In this book contributor Colin Richards touches on the concept of trauma and Siopis's use of skin and mirrors, but this is one amongst a number of essays and the focus in the monograph is far from exclusively on trauma. Also, most usually, texts like these are

written not by the artists themselves, but by critics or even other arts practitioners. As I noted in my introduction to this thesis, practice-based doctorates in visual arts have only recently begun to be offered at South African tertiary institutions (Thom, personal communication: 2016). There is very little (if any) writing by the artists themselves that scrutinises the relationship between visual art-making, creative writing and catharsis in as immersive and scholarly a forum such as a practice-based PhD. I believe, because of the detailed way in which I reflect on my practice across these three projects, and because of the manner in which I reflect on their connections *and* differences, my doctoral enquiry makes a useful contribution to what could be seen as a paucity of research on visual and creative arts and healing.

In writing about my projects I devoted careful attention to the media and processes I have used and I show how working in a different medium – by this I mean a medium new to me – has (in my turn to writing in the *Indian Yellow Project*, for example, and my move from painting to collaborative print work) acted as a catalyst. My turn to writing opened up new approaches and possibilities for the aspects of the projects that I had been struggling with before. This idea that turning to an alternate medium has enabled me to address catharsis in a way I could not see before is an important one. My charting of it in this thesis is something I hope emphasises, for other artists and artist-researchers, especially, the value in breaking discipline boundaries and taking risks. I show how *turning to writing* enabled me to return to and satisfyingly image my loss. I had been unable to do so prior to writing the novella, and this shift was a revelatory and liberating moment for me as an artist. In addition, my inability to address this in painting encouraged an immersion in printmaking I would otherwise never have pursued. My experience of making has also, in this way, highlighted the kind of special gift that pitfalls in the studio can in fact offer. I believe that acknowledgement and interrogation of the frustrations and challenges the studio space presents for artists is an often overlooked, yet valuable, part of creative development. I hope that my drawing attention to my frustrations and breakthroughs in this PhD will encourage other artists to write unsparingly about their own experiences and learning in the studio.

In my thesis I show how my own experience and my reading (my interpretation of the experience of others) favoured a nuanced interpretation of the idea of healing or catharsis, as something more in tune with change, specifically a change or alteration that is useful and deepening. Broadly speaking, I explore the role story-telling can play in healing and speak to the emancipatory practice of narrative as it is presented across my *Office Politics Series*, the *Indian Yellow Project* and the *Wish List Project*. The value of narrative therapy is widely known in the arenas of therapy and creative writing both abroad and locally. Harold Shaub's *the Uncoiling Python: South African Storytellers and Resistance* (2010) is a popular example of writing that emphasises the value of this practice in a South African context; and *Art and Trauma in Africa: Representations of Reconciliation in Music, Visual Arts, Literature and Film* (Bisschoff and Van De Peer:2013) serves as one example of a recent publication which considers catharsis as practised across a range of arts media by artists across the continent.

Both the preceding examples are anthologies which, unlike my enquiry, do not analyse a single practitioner's efforts in detail across a range of forms. Even a rudimentary search on Google Scholar will show that there exists a wealth of material by both psychologists and writers on *narrative* and *catharsis* and practices such as *narrative therapy*, and I would not wish to suggest otherwise. However, my own work makes an additional contribution to this body of knowledge because it is located in my *experience as an artist who turned to creative writing* as a mechanism through which to open up my practice. It speaks in detail to my creative practice as an effort at healing. My reading on literary and creative practice, and my experience of writing the novella in tandem with my experience in visual arts practices, has reinforced my conviction that creative practices are indeed unique spaces which allow for dialogue and transformation.

Finally, while my *Office Politics Series* began as conventional easel-type paintings it also marked the beginning of a search for a connective and participatory aesthetics within my own practice; it began an effort at sense-making and cohesion. As the trajectory of my projects (from this initial series of paintings, through the *Indian Yellow Project* and the *Wish List Project*) suggests, my search increasingly tended towards a reconstructive

postmodernism which, as Gablik suggests, rejects both “the subjective individuality of modernism and the nihilism of deconstructive postmodern art practice” in favour of “an expanded context” that values connection with and service to others (1991:19-22). In my experience there is the perception that artists in South Africa either view themselves as following on or mimicking trends in Europe and the West, or consider themselves to be located in a terrain that is entirely different from those in the West. My reading and experience, though, connect my own work (including my anxieties about the kind of world in which that work is made and my efforts at addressing these concerns) to writing primarily drawn from thinkers in Europe and the West. I have found that that there is much in the contemporary experience that connects the practice of South African artists to that of practitioners in the wider world, and I believe that artists here can and, indeed, because of the *smallness* of an increasingly globalised world, *should* contribute to broad dialogues about making and about the responsibility and role of the artist in a world whose boundaries, as Bauman suggests, grow ever more “tenuous, frail and porous” (2002:13).

## **2. Future Possibilities: Departures Again**

I believe my sustained reflection on, and engagement in, the three projects that form part of this enquiry has enabled me to situate my making practice in arenas I had previously not considered. In the course of this doctorate I have marked a trajectory from painting (and single author works) to writing and printmaking, both new and challenging areas of practice for me: departures of a sort. While I am not suggesting that I now see myself principally as a writer or a printmaker, or will now never produce works that are single-author pieces, or even that (in having accessed the communal and collaborative turn in printmaking) I have turned my back on painting, I do feel that having worked on each of these projects has radically altered both the way I view my practice and the path of my life in a number of ways. I consider these departures below.

First, my experience in working on the *Office Politics Series* and in locating my thinking in both the painting and scholarly reflection on the painting has uncovered my feeling that creative practices are indeed part of the world and not separate from it. Much of my

work prior to this series was profoundly insular and spoke mainly to entirely private personal worlds. As I have emphasised in my first chapter, the *Office Politics Series*, though it grew out of, and was in part located in, my personal experience of a working space, also addresses wider concerns and this, I believe, is where the value of that work lies.

Secondly, while undertaking a doctoral study has necessitated an immersion in scholarly writing and procedures, processes and protocols of academia, at the same time my engagement with this doctorate has pointed me *away* from theory and tertiary education and back towards teaching at a more fundamental level. There seems an irony in this, yet my experience in working with younger artists (on the *Wish List Project* for example) has convinced me that my future teaching-life lies outside of academia and in engagements with younger artists in schools and in the local community.

Thirdly, my turn to writing has opened up a new field of creative enquiry for me. While I cannot yet imagine writing another novel, I certainly believe writing in some form or another will form part of my creative output in future. Aside from longer works of fiction there is the possibility of combining poetry (my own and/or that of others) with imagery that I (alone or in concert with others) have created. Again, there is scope for working on my own exclusively or for working with others to produce a shared creation. I look forward to continuing to test out combinations of writing, visual imaging and book arts. Having worked on producing the *Indian Yellow* novella mechanically through a printing house, and having previously had the opportunity to participate in workshops on hand-made books, there are many avenues I can now explore in the construction of pieces that combine both literature and visual arts.

Fourthly, although there is a pleasurable solitariness and satisfaction in making a work entirely on one's own, I have derived increasingly profound pleasure in the collaborative practice of the prints that form part of the *Wish List Project*, and projects such as this one that arise out of collaborative efforts seem more in tune with my feeling that art-making should play a contributory role in the community more than works I have created solely on my own. Given my increasing conviction that art should fulfil at least one – if not

more – of the humanising functions (catharsis, cohesion and community), I anticipate that my creative practice in future will largely be located around practices and projects which involve increased collaboration with others, rather than serving as the visions and voice of a single practitioner or creator.

Finally, my experience in printmaking will, I believe, enrich and expand my painting practice. There are artists who do make use of printmaking techniques in painting, so I am not suggesting that this idea is unique to me. However, the iterativeness of print and working with relief printing on canvas and in combination with oil paint are processes and approaches I intend to explore further. I suspect that co-opting techniques and materials in printmaking into my painting practice may enable me to work on painting projects that involve multiple participants and shared creation and I look forward to exploring this possibility.

### **3. Conclusions: Making and Writing – An Expanded Terrain**

The observations I have made in Section Two (above) speak to the extent to which my enquiry is located in the media I have used, and to the location of my research in the *processes* that making these creative works has entailed. However, it would also be accurate to say that my making-practice has led me into territory both abstract and elevated, because through it I have been forced to reflect on ideas that fall awkwardly and inconveniently (for conventional arts writers and critics) ‘outside’ the realm of art, comprising what often feels to me like a *fierce* interdisciplinarity and slipping into fields of enquiry like literary theory, theology, philosophy and even (rather terrifyingly) economics. The expansiveness of my doctoral enquiry has at times been difficult for me and, occasionally, I have felt far from afloat, treading unfamiliar water and rather deeply mired in ideas situated seemingly miles away from the familiar world of the studio with its brushes, presses and odours of turpentine, oils and inks.

Reading and reflecting on writing by Bakhtin, Bauman, Crowther, Gablik, Zizek and Jameson, for example, often made me wish I could have split my younger self into three entirely different beings and pursued studies in sociology, philosophy and economics,



then conjoined these three beings in order to have access to a really deep well of intelligence in these diverse fields. Yet, of course, this act of splitting and decomposition is not possible. And while engaging with ideas located in diverse fields like literary theory, sociology and economics unseats me, for my *development* as an artist (and as a person), I feel this is an unavoidable and necessary breadth. My engagement with writing the thesis in particular has brought home to me *emphatically* the idea that my creative arts practice is deeply embedded in the world as I experience it and that that I have a responsibility to consider how it comments on and is situated in the real world as opposed to an isolated private space. Further, I believe that undertaking the thesis, particularly through my writing about the *Wish List Project* has brought home to me the importance of locating my arts practice also in arenas and spaces beyond the gallery.

My creative practice is tied to the mundane (public, ordinary, hegemonic world of work) and to inelegant and frustrating, pervasive struggles for power and meaning experienced in the working world, about which there is nothing elevated or romantic. Equally, my practice is tied to other dirty, gritty things also – to private griefs and deeply felt sorrows. My work in painting, printmaking and creative writing is tied to efforts at renewal and to facilitating connections with others, and this places it inside a personal realm, as well as locating it in *teaching* and in the connection with others that that engagement requires. I have come to discover through the course of this undertaking that my practice is *in the world* and *of it*, not separate from it. My thesis, in tandem with the creative projects analysed therein, charts my search for more meaningful making and a journey towards a deeper connection with others through visual practice. I am convinced that having to reflect on these projects through scholarly writing compelled me to think far more deeply about the connections, potential and scope within each of the three projects that form part of this practice-based undertaking. Finally, I believe my sustained reflection on and engagement in the three projects that form the focus of this doctorate, as well as my scrutiny of the context from which they have been born and the ways in which these projects have developed, do indeed show creative acts as powerful tools for self-reflection and catharsis, re-connection and commitment to others.

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