

Maturation, old age and mortality in western art:

Idealism versus realism

Michele Silk

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Supervisor: Dr. J.C. Leeb Du Toit

Centre for Visual Art

School of Literary Studies, Media and Creative Arts

University of KwaZulu-Natal: Pietermaritzburg

Declaration

Except where it has been acknowledged to the contrary, I declare that this dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michele Silk". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'M' and 'S'.

Michele Silk

Centre for Visual Art.
University of KwaZulu-Natal.
Pietermaritzburg.

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Abstract

The central premise of this research is the paradox between idealism and realism in the visual arts in the context of the themes of maturation, old age and mortality. Throughout the history of art there have been artworks that feature the realistic representation of this theme in contrast to traditional idealistic trends.

Selected artworks are highlighted from different art-historical periods in western art history dating from antiquity to contemporary times. These dates include artworks from the Hellenistic art of ancient Greece, Roman art and some examples from the middle ages. This theme flourished in the early modern period and in the 17th century, resulting in some artworks only being mentioned. The 19th and 20th centuries show less interest in this subject, therefore the examples are rare. Finally I examine my own art and my interest in the theme of old age in relation to a few examples of contemporary South African art.

Old age is a social and cultural phenomenon, therefore the socio-political, anthropological, philosophical and cultural influences in each period are briefly investigated. The manifestation of this theme is initially concurrent with the development of realism in art history and the changes in art theory and criticism, but other factors are revealed in the course of this research which indicate that this subject has a bearing on moral and spiritual enquiry.

In conclusion, it is anticipated that this discourse will enlighten the reader to the mysterious workings of the human creative nature and psyche that are stimulated by such topics as old age and mortality.

Preface

The text style and layout used in this dissertation was prescribed by the Centre for Visual Arts, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg. The Harvard method of referencing and endnotes has been used.

The list of contents describes the order of layout with page references and includes the illustrations. The illustrations have been scanned from books, the sources of which have been included after the bibliography. Information obtained from sources consulted by the candidate, such as authors, books, journals and websites have been acknowledged in parenthesis.

Full details of publications (books, journals and websites) are listed alphabetically at the end of the dissertation. This list comprises a complete set of references to all authorities consulted in the text.

Titles of books, journals and websites are italicized, as are the terms in foreign language.

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Introduction

My dissertation focuses on the themes of maturation, old age and implicit mortality as a counter to idealism in the visual arts. The result is essentially an historical analysis exploring the manifestation and interpretation of this iconography from periods in western art that extend from antiquity to the early 21st century. My dissertation seeks to highlight the main factors that could have contributed to the occurrence of this theme in the art-historical periods at issue. I also seek to evaluate the creative strategies of the artists concerned. Furthermore, a part of my dissertation examines some of my own work dealing specifically with the theme of old age. Hence my study may seem to be unduly broad historically, but as the above-mentioned themes occur quite rarely in the visual arts, the number of my examples and the available literature on the subject are fairly limited.¹

*

In all societies the issue of death, as Huntington and Metcalf (1972:2) observe, throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live and evaluate their experiences. Life thus becomes transparent against the background of death, and fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed.

For the majority of people old age advances the threshold of death and forces one to the point where mortality and the transience of life come into clear focus. Facing old age and death in antiquity and in the 21st century would appear to be different, but as history unfolds through the investigation of old age and mortality in art, certain fundamental social and cultural issues reveal themselves from each period.

¹ The themes of old age and aging have become central among historians, anthropologists, and psychologists in the last thirty years, but have been centred mostly in the fields of poetry, drama and philosophy and not in the context of the visual arts, where there is a need for research. As my dissertation is limited in length and is not an exhaustive survey of visual images of old age and mortality, further research on the topic is warranted. Moreover, themes of old age and mortality are subjects that are being explored more frequently by contemporary artists. Further research in this respect could discuss elderly women in art.

Old age is embedded in cultural and personal contexts, and because concepts of age participate in larger cultural systems, ‘their representation in the many forms of human expression provide a window on a culture as a whole’ (Falkner 1998: vii). The prevailing thoughts and attitudes of philosophers and religious and political leaders often reflect perceptions that are intrinsic to a particular society. Thus, understanding a society’s perception of old age and mortality through its culture is important in establishing reasons for the representation of these themes in the visual arts, so that the cultural and historical contextualization of the particular artworks becomes necessary.

*

Idealism and realism are concepts that need to be analyzed in order to understand the theoretical framework of my dissertation. Osbourne (1970: 555) states that idealism is the artistic theory or practice that places a particular value on the representation of the perfect form according to the imagination, whereas realism is the accurate representation of nature.

The Greeks developed idealism as a concept and applied it in art to mean that which ‘reproduces the best of nature but improves and perfects it’ (Osbourne 1970: 555). Idealism also has another meaning in the language of art and criticism that is derived from Plato’s theory of ideas. This theory assumes that ‘all perceptible objects are imperfect copies approximating to unchanging and imperceptible Ideas or Forms’ (Osbourne 1970: 555). Plato’s theory of knowledge, which was radical but also highly influential, became fundamental to ancient notions of artistic essence and its aspirations.

Besides idealism, realism is a term from art history, art criticism and theory that has many meanings and applications. In the most basic and general sense, realism describes art that represents the real world objectively, as it exists, without distortion or exaggeration. Thus the themes of maturation, old age and mortality can in themselves be regarded as realism.

In antiquity Greek and Roman writers, philosophers and poets such as Homer, Aristophanes, Euripides, Sophocles, Cicero, Horace, Virgil and Ovid frequently address issues of old age and convey certain attitudes towards the binarisms of youth and old age; ironically they are as obsessed with old age as they are with idealism. This trend is further reflected in political changes, religious cults and literary and cultural activities, including drama and mime, from the ancient world. Consequently the theme of old age recurs in the

form of naturalistic and veristic representations in Hellenistic and early Roman art, for example an elderly woman is shown caring for a young child in the *Figurine from Tanagra* c.200 BC (Fig 2) and the figure of an older man is depicted in the statue of *The Republican* c.100 BC (Fig.11). These representations, again, ‘cannot be evaluated apart from the corpus or literary tradition as a whole’ (Falkner 1989: viii), since they are inherently linked and collectively reveal the value systems of these ancient civilizations.

An important system in Greek and Roman culture, and one that gave purpose to classical and Hellenistic art, was the religious function of sculpture as transitional objects which for the ancients connected the living with the dead and their gods. Winnecott (in Schneider Adams 1996: 201) identifies ‘transitional phenomena’ and the significance of transitional objects as a cultural basis for creative pursuits, each serving the purpose of symbolization. He states that the transitional object becomes the paradigm of all art, which assumes a transitional aspect. Hence Greek and Roman funerary art, death masks and portraiture are transitional objects between life and death, between people and their gods, just as the image of old age and imminent death is a *memento mori*, a transitional image, and reflects man’s ‘coming to terms’ with his own or another’s destiny.

*

The rise of Christianity in the first century AD had an impact on attitudes to art and resulted in the condemnation by church leaders of realistic images and statuary which were regarded as pagan forms of worship. Human life took on a symbolic value and the elderly were seen as part of the symbolic order of the world and its spiritual dimension. The symbolism of the early middle ages is demonstrated in the religious art of the time, and in the portrayal of old men as religious paradigms.

My study of these periods does not focus on their individual artists, but rather distinguishes their social and cultural history in terms of idealism and realism.

The aftermath of the great plague (AD1350) had a marked impact on society, particularly in the mortality of children and young people, which led to conflict between the generations in later decades, specifically in the early Renaissance. The rebirth of classical perceptions of art at that time resulted in a renewed emphasis on idealism which gave rise to humanist representation of beauty, youthfulness and the ideal. By reviving Greek idealism, however, the Renaissance witnessed an unprecedented repudiation of

old age provoked by the anger of a generation which worshipped youth and beauty (Minois 1989: 249). The problem of aging thus became a cultural and social dilemma, a central theme in poetry and literature, and led to more depictions of old people in art than at any other period in art history.

Although idealism predominated in Renaissance art, specific artworks showed that certain artists were concerned to portray aging and old age in veristic imagery. I take the example of the *Penitent Magdalene* c.1454-55 (Figs. 18, 19) by Donato di Donatello, the *Last judgment* c.1535 - 41 (Fig. 36) by Michelangelo Buonarrotti, various works by Leonardo da Vinci such as his *St. Jerome* c.1483 (Fig. 20), and Albrecht Dürer including his *Portrait of a 93-year-old man* c.1521 (Fig. 27) to support this point of view. These artists used the figure of old age as a metaphor for spiritual meanings.

In 17th century art, though idealistic representation indicated the social aspirations of the nobility, the development of realism and subjectivity increased. Political and religious conflicts between Catholic and Protestant resulted in the abolition of art in some churches in Europe - for example in Holland. Although artists still painted religious themes, they focused rather on the common matters of daily life which incorporated the realistic portrayals of ordinary people such as the old. In particular, the work of Rembrandt demonstrates a preoccupation with realism reflected in his numerous sketches of old men and women. In his many portrayals of his own aging body, again, he demonstrates the desire to show reality with particular reference to a religious or spiritual dimension exemplified in his *Self-portrait* c.1668 (Fig.50).

*

The impact of the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution in the first half of the 18th century resulted in changes in art which ultimately brought important consequences. Political change caused a shift from the religiosity of previous centuries to an increased secularization, a trend that was later profoundly influenced by the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of species* (1859). Philosophers began to question society, its values and its traditions, and people began to value their own opinions. Artists challenged the academic traditions of high Renaissance idealism and searched for new ways to describe reality through individualism. Philosophical enquiry, again, and the ideas of Edmund Burke began to influence artists. Burke explored the emotion that could be generated through depicting the 'sublime' or the disturbing, whereas other philosophers such as

Hegel and Kant concerned themselves with other realities in a spiritual dimension. Thus, art became instinctual, transcendental and timeless as artists went in search of the spiritual without conforming to traditional methods.

I indicate how the work of Caspar David Friedrich such as his *Monk by the sea* c.1809-10 (Fig.52) reflects this notion. In addition I refer to the work of Fransesco Goya which embodies depictions of old men and old women and frequently refers to moral and spiritual meanings with the use of narration and satire. His self-portrait *Goya attended by Doctor Arrieta* c.1820 (Fig.59) is one example.

*

French 19th century realism demonstrated a turning point in the conceptual understanding of art. The work and philosophy of Gustave Courbet and the impact of P. J. Proudhon's quasi-socialist ideas, exerted a radical influence on the development of Modernism, marking the beginning of avant-garde art. Williams (2004: 120) maintains that modernism in art is a response to the transformation of society that resulted from 'the upheaval of revolution and the advent of mass politics, in addition to the gradual but still traumatic shift to an increasingly urbanised, industrial economy that depended on technological innovation and the exploitation of cheap labour'.

Significantly Proudhon considered realism in art as a political vehicle for anti-government and anti-religious sentiments, and his influence led to radical varieties of realism which developed over the decades and incorporated personal and social issues. The Symbolist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries involved a 'redirection of literary interest away from the representational and social reality toward an exploration of subjective experience' (Williams 2004: 144). The consequence for art was a turning from the real to the ideal in order to express inner states of reality or mysticism. This thinking was influenced by Baudelaire who endorsed personal experience and the irrational (Williams 2004: 146). Works by Edvard Munch and Gustav Klimt demonstrate this thematic content with specific references to the stages of life. Included in some of the examples are Munch's *Women in three stages* c.1894 and Gustave Klimt's *Three ages of life* c.1905 (Fig.69).

*

During the inter-war period, as Prendeville remarks (2000: 15), realism displayed 'its capacity for rendering the human image in universalizing, symbolic terms,' and so answered the political demands of the time. The response was known as 'social realism', and German artist Käthe Kollwitz was among the artists who used depictions of old age as a personal, internal interpretation of the reality of life around her during this period. Kollwitz became preoccupied with aging and death and many of her artworks are self-portraits in old age for example *Self-portrait in profile* c.1938 (Fig.72), done when she was over 70.

Rosenberg (1985: 307) contends that 20th century art has absorbed the phenomena of secular life resulting in the adoption of a scientific outlook. A recurrent theme of such work, he continues, has been the 'demystification' of art which philosophers such as Derrida have endorsed. Art no longer has a value based on its religious, philosophical or ethical ideals, but is to be judged on its aesthetic merits – 'the category of experience that is indifferent to truth or reality'.

*

Intellectually art in today's society is closely allied with science and technology, and identifies with the dynamic world of speed, construction, rationality and power - elements that reflect the youth culture of the 21st century. The re-evaluation of art has stripped it of any identification with the mysteries of religion or the spiritual, and has imbued it instead with the self-glorification inherent in idealism and consumerism. Artists have continued to subscribe to realism, however, using images of the real world as symbols and metaphors for other realities involving emotions and perceptions, the conceptual and the spiritual.

New social Darwinism and *agism* are predominant in society but the effects on the marginalized are often not acknowledged. Depictions of old age have been less frequent than in previous centuries, but there are examples of artists who have centred on this subject largely due to their own encounters with the aged. Artists such as Lucien Freud and his paintings of his elderly mother (Figs.74, 75) have addressed themes of old age and mortality. Again these themes are evident in the work of Ron Mueck, such as his *Seated woman* c.2000 (Fig.77) and *Old woman in bed* c.2000 (Fig.79) and effectively disassociate the illusion of reality from the social element and its varied meanings.

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In the context of South African art, certain artists, whose work I discuss later, have on occasion depicted the themes of old age and mortality. American-born photographer Roger Ballen, for example, often engages in images of aged rural whites, documented in his books *Platteland* (1994), *Outland* (2001) and *Shadow chamber* (2005), while Andries Botha focuses on his aged father to combine multi-faceted personal and social identities. Other South African artists who have represented the aged as allegories and have located their inclusions within a social dimension, often with indirect and critical aims, include Robert Hodgins and William Kentridge. Examples of their work include Hodgins' *Sir Anthony Blunt* c.1994-95 (Fig. 99) and Kentridge's, *Sobriety, obesity and growing old* c.1991 (Figs 100, 101).

My personal encounter with the aged has prompted me to investigate old age in much of own work. Some of the most explicit examples, which I shall discuss later, include *Passing time* c.2005 (Fig.93), *Resonance* c.2005 (Fig.94) and *Three figures* c.2005 (Fig.103). In my case the perception of realism is not just the representation of the mortal figure, but includes the spiritual and the internal, the subliminal and the subconscious, notions which reflect my personal beliefs and value system.

As my research covers a broad spectrum of history, and involves the social contextualization of the aged as well as the development of art theory in relation to idealism and realism, I have been unable to do more than mention many of the artists and their works. Therefore it is necessary to regard my research as an overview of a theme that warrants further and more thorough investigation.

Chapter 1

The birth of idealism and early references to depictions of old age and mortality

Ancient Greece and Rome produced substantial written accounts on the visual arts, but only fragments of these remain. These accounts are located in the theories of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and in the works of rhetoricians like Cicero and Quintilian (Williams 2004: 8). In addition to these sources, thoughts on life abound in the poetry, drama and myth of antiquity.

*

Greek attitudes toward old age are reflected in literature and drama, where they caricature or idealize the elderly. Historians warn that these sources are not reliable indications of attitudes to old age in Greece because of their frequently obscure origins and because certain aspects of poetry, drama and philosophy tend to exaggerate the truth and promote idealism (Minois 1989: 44). The fact that the theme of old age was prominent in Greece, however, indicates that general assumptions can be made when the subject is placed within the context of the social, political, economic and cultural environment of the time.

This chapter will focus on the Hellenistic period (325-30BC) and on Greco-Roman portraiture of the 1st and 2nd century AD (Osbourne 1998: 528), as these are the periods when the most prolific manifestations of realistic artworks occur. I will consider the veristic portrayals of the aged in the visual arts and will place them in the context of the cultural framework of Greek society. I shall then briefly explore the conceptual art of the middle ages as well as the revival of realism prior to the Renaissance.

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At the end of the classical period a new humanist mentality prevailed in Greece and gave artists the opportunity to explore realism, now a common manifestation. Robertson states (in Green 1993: 91) that the change from classical to Hellenistic art was not something inaugurated by the artists themselves because of discontent with established idioms and conventions, but was rather almost entirely a reflection of changes external to art itself: changes in the structure of the known world and the way it ran.

Onians contends (1975: 7) that Plato (429 - 347 BC) understood that a nation's use of art is integrally related to its political structure and economic organization. This remark is fundamental in establishing reasons for the changing developments in Greek and Roman art. Thus, when social and political changes in the classical age shattered many entrenched idealistic patterns of Greek cultural life, realism began to show signs of superseding idealism (Pollitt 1986: 141).² With the development of commerce and urban society and a new competitive economy, individualism became prominent in all fields of cultural life (Onians 1975: 7). Historians Robertson and Pollitt (in Green 1993: 97) both agree that the interest in naturalism or realism in art was a new emphasis rather than a radical departure from previous art. The trend was, however, in direct contrast to the prevailing attitudes in society.

Hauser, again, states (1962: 75) that the classical style of ancient Greece is 'idealistic', and that classical Greek art represents the 'characteristic expression of the aristocratic frame of mind'. So Plato's idealistic values and teachings, we learn, are rooted in the aristocratic conception of life³ and in the theories of Hellenistic philosophy.⁴

Plato's *Dialogues* are particularly significant for my theme because they reflect his views on idealism and realism in art. Plato believed that the purpose of art was to improve

² At the beginning of the 4th century BC, the conquests of Alexander and the founding of the Hellenistic kingdoms initiated a series of migrations and political realignments that shattered the enclosed world of classical Greece. Small, tightly knit communities decreased, resulting in less control by traditional leaders. The concern for personal rather than communal experience and values further resulted in a keen interest in the world beyond personal, social and ethnic traditions (Onians 1975: 6, 7).

³ In assessing Plato's values it becomes clear that there was a social distinction between the elite or noble aristocratic class and the masses. His vision for the ideal city-state, known as the *Kalokagathia* comprises a Utopian environment where the spiritual elite, or privileged upper class, exist and control the state (Hauser Vol.1 1962: 75).

⁴ *Stoicism and Epicureanism dominated Hellenistic philosophy. In Stoicism the individual lives by laws set in nature; his life and activities must revolve around the city-state. In effect this lifestyle is idealistic and reflects Plato's values. In contrast Epicurus preached and practised a philosophy that was based on an understanding of nature with the emphasis in the individual who has no responsibilities and should live life to his own satisfaction without structured rules (Onians 1975: 33).*

or perfect the appearance of nature. Without his ideal forms ‘the world would be a chaos of meaningless sensations and art and science would lack their universal importance’ (Reynolds and Seddon 1981: 86).

In the *Republic*, again, Plato discusses three levels of reality: the ideal, created by God; objects on earth that are poor copies of the ideal; and the imitated. It is the representational artists who, by copying what they see around them, imitate the ideal (Williams 2004: 19).

Aristotle (384-322 BC) questioned many of Plato’s assumptions. He understood that art involved the imitation of nature. In his *Poetics*, he observed that man takes great pleasure in looking at imitations, particularly the imitation of living persons or human action (Onians 1975: 38).

Plato’s ideal of art had to conform to absolute moral and aesthetic standards which reflected the same principles he applied to human life, whereas Aristotle introduced a more flexible system of standards reflected in the Epicurean outlook. He established that art was an autonomous activity. As a result, although Greek philosophy was rooted in concepts of idealism, a new attitude toward art developed that considered ethics and aesthetics as separate entities (Onians 1975: 29). This change in thinking was fundamental to the understanding of Hellenistic art because it liberated artists from creating art that reflected idealistic values and allowed them greater freedom of expression.

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The cultural life of the polis was not simply a derivative of philosophy; rather belief systems were essentially the most important influence in the structure of society in ancient Greece and created fundamental attitudes towards life in the polis. Many cults, myths and religions centered on the world of mortal men, having some communication with (or obtaining individual access to) the spiritual realm and the world of the immortal gods.⁵

Openness towards the gods, prompted by philosophical scepticism, removed the awe and fear attached to them in mythography. Robertson (in Green 1993: 73) maintains that the new attitude to religion directly affected art. Experimentation now allowed artists

⁵ The nature deity Dionysus was incorporated into the religious life and the custom of Athenian festivals and formed an integral part of Greek life. The festivals traditionally provided a period of contact with another world: the spiritual realm where the dead exist and which provided the source of blessings they offer (Gernet 1981: 49).

to break down the barriers between the divine and their own living world. Following on this freedom in art, religious statues, traditionally placed only in tombs, were now to be found in secular contexts.

These new Hellenistic trends in art-making reflect the ways in which the weakening of idealism led to an interest in ‘the variety of experience rather than the essence of it’ (Pollitt 1986: 141). The artist was no longer restricted to specified canons of representation but was now free to draw inspiration from everyday life and to imitate it. Onians (1975: 40) states that the most clearly imitative or naturalistic style in Hellenistic art was realized when applied to the representation of familiar subjects from ordinary life - a theme that is emphatically linked to the imitation of the everyday world in comedy and mime.

*

The manifestations of realism in Greek and Roman art, especially depictions of old age and images that symbolize or represent the dead or death, are to be found in the field of sculpture. The most distinctive examples in Hellenistic naturalism are shown below in Figs 1 to 9, which I discuss as I proceed.

Greek and Roman artists reflected a remarkable sensitivity to their experience of the natural and human world, and motivated their perceptions with an interest in the individual and what made him unique. This idea of individual personality became more attractive than Plato’s idea of perfection (Pollitt 1986: 141). Pollitt contends (1986:9) that the prevailing individualism explored the ‘inner workings of the psyche’ rather than the experience of society as a whole, and thus reflected a humanist mentality. Many factors could have influenced sculpture in this regard, but the question is - what issues, textual, traditional, or creative, influenced representations of old age? Historical and cultural attitudes, specifically towards old age as a personal and cultural phenomenon, are significant in contributing towards the depiction of sculptural forms.

Leisure time was part of the Greek ideal that many of the elderly welcomed in order to stimulate their mental faculties. Philosophical treatises, which were written to demonstrate the wisdom of their years, often reflected the conditions, opinions and

prejudices of the old (Hauser Vol.1 1962: 104).⁶ This is not surprising since philosophy, according to Harlow and Laurence (2002: 117), was the ‘mental antidote’ for the old.⁷ In pre-Hellenistic Greek and Latin literature concepts of and attitudes to old age and images of the elderly are so abundant that they can be said to be one of the central topics (Falkner 1989: viii).

Platonic idealism emphasized youth and perfection, reflected particularly in the young male. The ideals of Plato and his philosophy contrasted with the reality of old age and death, two phenomena which no-one could control. Plato showed an idealistic concept of old age in his *Utopia*. His model old man lives in ideal conditions with some political status and is a model of dignity and wisdom. Contrary to this, the Greeks were constantly reminded that the gods were ‘forever deathless and ageless’ (Garland 1985: 1). Minois (1989: 43) states that ‘for a people who were used to searching for human perfection, beauty and the achievement of full human potential, old age could be classified among the divine curses...at least death guarantees the grandeur of destiny but decrepitude shrivels heroes and seems worse than death’.

In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle gives a repulsive description of old age, ‘accusing the old of every fault: they are timorous, hesitant, suspicious, parsimonious, fearful, cowardly, selfish, pessimistic, talkative, avaricious and ill-humored’ (Minois: 60). Minois maintains (1989: 62) that Aristotle’s description reflects both the objective situation and the prejudices of his age and civilization, which were clearly not well disposed towards the old (62). Aristotle believed that old age did not guarantee wisdom or political ability (as Plato believed) and that the decay of the body ultimately affected the soul.

The idealization of youth and deathlessness is central to Greek mythography. Perpetual youth and immortality were not confined to human beings, but animals and even material objects shared this benefit. Numerous examples are recorded where various individuals in Greek myth have managed to shed old age and become youthful.⁸ However, the wish to obtain youth was not desirable, except as an escape from the ailments of old

⁶ The majority of Greek and Roman philosophers achieved an advanced age and so spoke of senescence subjectively. The longevity of eminent philosophers is listed by Minois (1989: 55).

⁷ Stoicism was reflected in negative attitudes towards aspects of old age and approaching death. The Stoic was not supposed to have feelings of pain, fear, desire or pleasure because they represented what was bad and weak. The connection of pain with evil is a characteristic of Stoicism. In this context the pain experienced in old age was perceived to be a result of some moral failing (Harlow and Laurence 2002: 117).

⁸ These are cited in Richardson (1969:61-70). The Greeks believed that it was only the gods who could bestow this gift on certain individuals.

age, which were held in extraordinary dread. The Greeks were only interested in obtaining a long life if they could retain good health and activity (Richardson 1969: 71).⁹

Through analogies and metaphors much Greek literature describes the differences and the frequent conflicts between youth and old age. Considering the psychological implications of these conflicts, Garland's observation is pertinent. He maintains (1990:11) that 'the antithesis between youth and age constituted a highly significant feature of the collective consciousness of the Greeks and remained the most commonly remarked upon age-distinction in Greek oratory'.

A binary system of classification is reflected in various Greek literary and artistic expressions. The figures on the Parthenon frieze, for example, depict the polity at worship and the men, both human and divine, appear either at the height of youth, with man in ideal physical condition, or in the maturity of old age, when man is considered wise (Garland 1990: 10). Again, two centaurs found together in Hadrian's villa form a pair depicting youth and old age. Smith (1991: 132) considers this a mildly allegorical study in opposing natures, as indicated by the use of subtle contrasts in the bodies. One 'expresses carefree youth' while the other 'shows the suffering of old age'. Polarities are also exemplified in Greek mythology, as in the case of the brothers Hypnos (Sleep) and Thanatos (Death), who are depicted as charming and youthful on the one hand, and old and repellent on the other (Garland 1990: 243).

Apart from the changes in thought that developed in the Greek polis, as discussed earlier, there is evidence of another deep-rooted structure in Greek culture which is relevant to my theme. In antiquity age was not defined by years with a transition at a set age, as there were no civic records denoting birth or socially prescribed retirement. The stages of life were therefore broadly understood in the context of time and culture. Several ancient authors refer to the stages of life not in years but by Aristotle's method of observing 'the division which nature makes' in terms of which analogies are drawn between the human life-cycle and the seasons, the times of day, plant growth and the cosmos (Garland 1990: 3).

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⁹ In Greece medical interest in the elderly was confined to the process and symptoms of aging rather than to their alleviation. Old people received little help from doctors and according to Garland this 'hints at their emarginated social status' indicating that for those who were not part of the aristocratic elite old age was difficult (Garland 1990: 249).

In addition to the philosophical and mythical concepts of old age, actual life for the elderly in antiquity reflected two polarities. For the wealthy elite, old age tended to be a time to be endured rather than enjoyed; but for the poor old age must have been difficult (Parkin in Thane 2005: 69). Thus Fig.1 shows the sculpture of an *Old market woman* c.50-100 BC who bears the marks of hardship and age.

Sons were held responsible for caring for their parents or grandparents in ancient Greece, but if children predeceased them, Finley (in Falkner 1989: 14) states that there was probably no private or governmental function to assist the old. Generally historians agree that the continuity of the family was the main concern, not the survival of the elderly, and without family support the destitute were commonplace in towns and cities and constituted a *memento mori* (Falkner 1989: 14). For the elderly who were fortunate enough to have a family, continued activity and care could still exist, for example, elderly women would care for the young as seen in the *Figurine from Tanagra* c.200 BC (Fig 2), where a grandmother (or possibly a nurse) tends to a baby.

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Greek tragedy, drama, comedy, mime and poetry contain many descriptions of old age, numbers of them are negative. Homer's Aphrodite claims, 'The gods hate old age' and the Homeric Hymns use expressions like 'sorrowful old age,' 'the hatefulness of old age' and 'gloomy old age' (Minois 1989: 47). Homer's *Odyssey*, on the other hand, describes the hero as destined for a 'sleek old age'. The myth of Eos and Tithonus, again, tells the tragic story of Tithonus, who wins immortality without the complement of eternal youth and who, at the mercy of Aurora, is turned into a cicada, the ultimate mythical symbol of extreme old age.

In Greek drama Aristophanes uses old men as a metaphor of Athenian values that are being undermined, frequently implying political manipulation and seduction of the elderly. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, again, the misery of a very old man facing death is represented.

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The development of realism in Greek art was also based on new expectations and responses in the spectator, an aspect that was distinct in drama. Aristotle believed in the

communication of emotions, particularly the fear, pity and laughter associated with tragedy and comedy, and in the psychological effect of these emotions on the audience (Onians 1975: 29).¹⁰ In popular Greek theatre, known as *mimos*, the portrayal of old men was intended to convey the stupidity and pity conducive to laughter and ridicule. The portrayal of old women, again, often conveyed suggestions of witches and duennas, being conducive to fear, hatred or evil (Minois 1989:122). These characteristics, associated with old men and old women respectively, were often referred to in literature and, as I suggest, old men were considered to regress childishly, while old women were shown to have become bitter, hateful and revengeful. Moreover, stereotypical aged females were often portrayed with virulence and obscenity as sex-crazed witches and alcoholics (Falkner 1989: 11). An example may be cited from *The assembly of women* by Aristophanes which refers to women as repulsive, foul-faced bags, and old crocks (Halliwell 1997: 191).¹¹ Parkin (in Thane 2005: 53) stresses that these common descriptions point to marginalization in terms of age and gender, indicating that older women might have been dismissed as non-functioning members of society.

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The concept of abjection is relevant, when considering the Hellenistic naturalism I have mentioned, in the context of Aristotle's emphasis on emotional response. Aristotle remarks that things that repel us in everyday life, such as corpses and lower animals, actually delight us when represented in art (Onians 1975: 28). Pollitt (1986: 143) notes H.P. Laubscher's suggestion that in ancient theories of *physiognomics*¹² many ugly features in works such as these, including the short beards, large ears, snub noses and protruding lips achieve a high level of pathos and were interpreted as signs of stupidity and lack of dignity. Thus, these sculptures have shed 'all vestiges of the age-old idealism of Greek art' as advocated in theatre by Plato and Socrates, and portray naturalistic

¹⁰ The essential response to drama was now thought of in terms of *pathos* (emotion) rather than *ethos* (character). This idea opposed Plato and Socrates' opinion that *ethos* was the only good and should be sought after (Onians 1975: 54).

¹¹ Euripides' plays frequently highlight the stereotype of the 'vengeful old woman' (Falkner 1989: 11).

¹² *Physiognomics* was an Aristotelian science that enabled a person to know someone's character by recognising the emotion reflected on his face (Onians 1975: 55). This 'science' was later reinvented and established in the 18th century by the Swiss theologian and Protestant pastor, Johann Kaspar Lavater. He founded the *Science of physiognomics* in which he demonstrated links between facial expression and the divine. He also claimed to have identified the relationship between facial features and crime (Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol.13, 816: 1967).

representations that appeal to the emotions, generating feelings of pathos for the aged (Pollitt 1986: 142).

Old age created a heightened emotional response when represented in art, despite the fact that it was generally deplored in antiquity (Onians 1975: 28). *Chrysippos the Stoic* c.206 BC (Figs 3, 4), a Roman copy of a Hellenistic original and *Homer*, late 2nd century BC (Fig.5) veristically portray old age in great detail.

Pollitt suggests that images of old age might depict the ideal life of religious sacrifice and could function as a binarism to the ideal of youth.¹³ No attempt is made by the artists to hide their physical condition by portraying the perfect image of old age as ideally virtuous or happy. *Old shepherdess* late 2nd century BC (Fig. 6) depicts an old woman whose body shows the physical strength of hard labour.

Contrary to this opinion, however, Smith (1991: 139) contends that the Hellenistic figures are not concerned to idealize a life of labour or to make moral or class statements, but rather amount to objective, neutral portrayals of poverty and old age. For aristocratic men, hard work was abhorrent and designated a life of poverty inflicted by the gods. This theme recurs in literature from Hesiod to Theocritus (Smith 1991: 139). Moreover, conceptually the genre statues are concerned with Hesiodic man and his rustic toil. This theme is reflected in Hesiod's *Works and days*: poverty requires incessant labour which makes man old and feeble. Smith believes (1991: 139) that these statues are about human mortality: 'Heroes combat mortality by glorious deaths, philosophers by intellectual insight, but peasants can only labour and die'.¹⁴ This idea is exemplified in the *Seneca fisherman* c.200 BC (Fig. 7), which depicts an old man with his body bowed by age. Stationary and stooping as if fishing, he is at work as indicated by his clothes. Smith (1991: 138) asserts that this figure represents Hesiod, the poet of rustic labour. Many rustic figures, as referred to in Theocritus' *21st Idyll* describe fishermen with a mixture of realism and sentimental sympathy for their aging bodies, reflecting again the notion of pathos in the spectator (Pollitt 1986: 146).

¹³ The rustic festivals of Lagynophoria at Alexandria, mentioned earlier were connected to the popular philosophies and attracted the elite and aristocrats who enjoyed identifying with the simple peasant life which was 'free of the complications and ties of the world of sophisticated urban intellectuals' (Pollitt 1986: 146).

¹⁴ Although there are strong indications that these sculptures were created for dramatic effect associated with mime, Pollitt suggests that realistic Hellenistic sculptures could have been the 'philosophical predilections' of the artist and were perhaps reminders of the philosophical spirit preached by men like Bion and Teles who promoted Cynicism and Stoicism and the idealistic values inherent in a life of rustic ease. Their teaching advocated self-sufficiency through a life of austerity and self-discipline and often required a life of sacrifice and poverty (Pollitt 1986: 145).

Drunken old woman, late 2nd century BC (Fig. 8) is a naturalistic representation of an old woman sitting on the ground clutching a wine jar. The wine jar is Hellenistic, known as a *lagynos*, and is bound with the characteristic Dionysian ivy wreath which serves as a reference to the god's festival at Alexandria. The woman is of 'respectable social class'¹⁵ but is shown laughing, drunk and merry, suggesting her celebration in honour of the god of wine.¹⁶ Smith (1991: 138) suggests that the figure is a study of old age and reflects Dionysus' power because 'he can make an old woman laugh at her fate'.

Pollitt (1986: 144) notes that the sincerity and seriousness of the artist's execution, the large scale of the genre work and their multiple copies, denote importance and suggest a religious content. He concedes that they are votive sculptures, possibly dedicated in sanctuaries or public commemorations.

Smith (1991: 138) notes that many of the genre statues of old peasant figures carry explicit emblems of the Dionysian festivals such as ivy leaves, believed to be part of the Dionysian countryside, suggesting that they are on their way to a Dionysian festival, not just to the market. The *Old market woman*, c.50-100 BC (Fig. 1) and the *Old fisherman*, early 1st century BC (Fig.9), are both shown carrying baskets of food as they walk. His full cloak suggests an activity other than fishing. Although the old market woman's attire suggests extreme poverty, Pollitt (1986: 143) confirms that she could be offering her goods as part of the rustic festivals such as the Lagynophoria at Alexandria. Gernet (1981: 32) contends that these offerings constituted a serious and vital part of the emotional and religious life of Greek society.¹⁷

In contrast to the generally negative associations in depictions of the elderly in Greek society, the religious role of elderly women among the Greeks, according to Parkin (in Thane 2005:50), was deeply significant. Moreover, Thomas Wiedemann (1989: 77) observes that because the marginalized in society were powerless, they were more likely to be in touch with the divine than male adult men. Prophets and seers in literature were often depicted as marginal members of society, usually women or old men. Wiedemann's statements reinforce the argument that my selected figures of old women and men served a

¹⁵ (Green 1993: 105).

¹⁶ Ancient customs included the practice of feasts associated with the nucleus of religious thought within society. Communal meals had an important place and in rites and myths, eating and drinking were integral features. There is some continuity with a very ancient past, for example, in the historical period women distributed food at feasts (Gernet 1981: 31).

¹⁷ Gernet (1981: 31) maintains that the Greek community participated in festive rituals that related to the seasons and to the human life-course. The festival of the dead took place at the end of winter, significant because winter denotes the end of life in Greek allegory. By making offerings to the dead, the dead in return give the assurance of life and then restore earth's fertility to humans and animals alike.

religious purpose. In this context there is a significant correlation between the content of the sculptures of the aged in Greek society and the cultural phenomena of rural festivals relating to religious practice. This fact justifies the assumption that the selected sculptures are in effect a *memento mori*; a reminder that from death comes new life (Gernet 1981: 31).

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Aristotle concluded that the arts provided pleasure, and the most important consequence of his conclusion was that he defined the function of the arts psychologically. By the Hellenistic age, however, art as a religious ritual, moral guideline or divine inspiration had become irrelevant (Onians 1975: 53). What interested the Hellenistic artists was the effect of man's feelings, and this prevailing emphasis on individualism gave them the freedom to interpret reality from a personal perspective rather than to produce art according to social structures (Onians 1975: 54).

Creating art for pleasure was a new feature in Hellenistic art. The change in the role of the artist significantly affected the expansion of art and contributed to the development of the art market in Greece and in other countries. Furthermore, the impact of political changes in Hellenistic society and culture brought the art of the Hellenistic age to Rome, which was flooded with works of Greek art as a result of war and trade. Shiploads of Greek marbles and bronzes were brought to Rome by generals and political leaders seeking to adorn their palaces and public buildings. The Romans subsequently became important patrons of Hellenistic art (Pollitt 1986: 50).

The popularity of copying Greek genre sculptures in Rome could have been influenced by Roman descriptions of men and women like that in Cicero's *De senectute* (*On old age*). The subject of old age is prevalent in Roman literature and ranges from Plautus (d. BC 184) to Juvenal (d. AD 130).

Although both the idealizing and the realistic type of portrait existed in Rome from Greek sources, it was the Roman interest in Hellenistic naturalism that exerted a transforming influence on the nation's psyche, resulting in the development of a Roman art that was distinctly original and involved detailed realism. The Roman manifestations of realism in old age are directly related to traditional ancestral Roman portraits.¹⁸ The

¹⁸ In the context of the Roman life-course, the birth and death of a person was a culturally constructed system and did not necessarily follow biological or mental development. The experience of aging was strongly influenced by the status, gender, wealth, personal choices and empowerment determined by the expectations

religious cult of venerating ancestors, and ancestral portraits in the form of death masks, assigned an intensely private function to Roman statuary and distinguished the Roman portrait sculpture clearly from the Greek, which was designed for public monuments (Hauser, vol 1. 1962: 98).

Roman custom required the display of wax ancestral masks in the doorways of their houses, in order to ensure that the dead were constantly remembered and that their actions in life would be reinvented through their children (Harlow and Laurence 2002: 143). The cult of commemorative ancestral portraiture remained a feature of aristocratic funerals and was not practiced by plebeian families. This ritual of making a replica of the dead relative's face was fundamental in influencing sculptors to accentuate individual identities and expressions (Smith 1991: 258). Initially this art form was used for the commemorative portrait of public figures, showing them in their true likeness but it was soon demanded by wealthy families for their own homes (Hall 1983: 35).

Head of a Roman c.80 BC (Fig. 10) depicts a descriptive and literal portrayal of older Roman, emphasizing in particular the deep furrows and creases of the aging process. The artist avoids idealizing the face in order to represent a particular individual. Garland (1990: 198) describes this sculpture as veristic and 'a kind of superrealism', that demonstrates the artist's objectives which are 'determined not so much by esthetic motives as by religious convention'. *The Republican* c.100 BC (Fig.11) shows a veristic statue of an older man, carrying two portrait busts of his ancestors, probably executed from their funerary masks. Features that signify his status are his bald head and furrowed brow and the deeply etched lines of his face which emulate a death mask. He stands for the generations who have served the state in war and politics (Harlow and Laurence 2002: 120).

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Although the literature of drama and poetry tended to ridicule the physical features of old age, Minois (1989: 112) maintains that the Romans spoke more about old men than about old age and managed to preserve the dignity of old people by honouring them in their art; he contends that many of the Roman sculptures showing old people express

of others. These influences were passed on from generation to generation in order to uphold the preservation of family traditions in all aspects of life. The placing of death masks of deceased family members in homes was paramount to the preservation of family expectations on future generations (Harlow and Laurence 2002: 121).

grandeur, nobility and tenderness indicating that the Romans admired old men who were considered great and noble and worthy of their official role and accomplishments.

Gardiner (1975: 232) maintains that members of the Roman lower classes are generally portrayed realistically, while official portraits of the ruling class tended to shift between realism and idealism, depending on the period or perhaps on the preference of the sitter.

Respect for the old was an ancient custom in Rome, but young men began to disregard the traditional practices that honoured their fathers (Harlow and Laurence 2002: 121). When Julius Caesar's nephew Octavian came to power at the age of only 19, he immediately challenged the entire age structure of the Republic and questioned its purpose. Furthermore he abolished the practice of traditional Republican portraiture in favour of the propagandistic image of eternal youth found in the statuary and on the coinage of the Augustan era (Harlow and Laurence 2002: 111).

The onset of Christianity marked the last major occurrence of Roman realism, which included themes of maturation and old age, until centuries later: the freedom of expression that had liberated the artists of the Hellenistic and Republican eras ended. Art was now dominated by a new spiritual authority, and naturalism only recurred towards the end of the middle ages (Hauser Vol.1 1962: 102).

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Christianity was established in Rome within the first century AD and gradually spread throughout Europe, despite periods of persecution. In the fourth century there was a turning point in the history of the western world when Constantine incorporated Christianity into imperial religion and established it as the state religion of the Roman Empire. From Constantine onwards, most of the Roman emperors were nominal Christians, and Theodosius imposed the new religion as a counter to mythical and nature-based religions (Minois 1989: 30).

The emergent Christian ideal did not at first alter the outward forms of classical art but within several generations it had become effectively expressed. Images including statuary were considered a part of pagan worship and were condemned by church leaders (Hauser Vol.1 1962: 167). Departure from the realism of classical art developed in two directions: symbolism and illustration. Now 'art was no longer regarded as an object of aesthetic enjoyment', but as an 'extension of divine service, as a votive offering and a sacrificial gift' (Hauser Vol.1 1962: 168). Scholarship, art and literature were now centred

in the monasteries where monasticism exerted the deepest influence on the development of art and culture in the middle ages (Hauser Vol.1 1962: 152). *St. Matthew*, from the *Book of Lindisfarne*, c.700 AD (Fig.12) shows a typical example of book illustration.

According to Hauser (Vol.1 1962: 112) the departure from realism in Christian art and the trend to simplify forms were not deliberate idealizing but were due to the inability to render natural forms correctly. Early Christian art was done by simple artisans and amateurs who lacked talent. It was only when Christian art became the official art of the state and the court, of aristocratic and educated circles, that real artists began to improve the quality of art.

With reference to the old in the middle ages, Shahar (in Thane 2005: 71) states that they were regarded as part of the symbolic order of the world and as an integral part of society, as reflected in written texts and in art. The theme of the division of life into stages was developed in various contexts - scientific, medical, didactic, homiletic and literary - and was related to different configurations of nature and time. The purpose of these formats was to convey the symbolic identity of each stage of human life and to avoid an evaluation based on biological or social criteria.

Within these divisions of life, the theme of old age and images of old men were common, and were rendered in an idealized symbolic manner. Depicting the stages of life was a custom that remained constant from the 14th to the 19th centuries - a man or woman was depicted throughout the circle of life and proceeded from a happy childhood to a healthy old age. So Fig. 13, for example, shows an idealistic old age in the 14th century AD English *De Lisle psalter* (Thane 2005: 70). Other popular images in the middle ages include the personification of time as a winged old man with hour glass and scythe, a portrayal corresponding to the cyclical concept of the stages of life (Langmuir 1997: 50). Bearded ancients representing the elders of the Apocalypse, prophets or venerable saints were common and were often sculpted for church porches or porticos, as in Claus Sluter's *Isaiah* c.AD 1383 (Fig. 14) and Moses figure from *The well of Moses* c.AD 1395-1406 (Fig.15) from the trumeau of the south portal of St. Pierre in Moissac. In religious pictures such as *The life and miracles of St. Audomarus* c.AD 1100, hermits and anchorites are shown as emaciated, long-bearded old men.

The church did not necessarily correlate physical old age and true old age, but used the concepts symbolically (Minois 1989: 117). White hair was represented idealistically and related to man's goodness and wisdom. According to Minois (1989: 119) white hair provided a visual image of a spiritual condition; it was the sign of the venerable character

of an old man and revealed the immaculate aspect of his soul and his true youthfulness and innocence.

Moralistic and didactic treatises made use of old age to imply moral responsibility, using allegories to express views about sin and diverse vices. As a result a pessimistic view of old age was constantly reflected in art and youth and old age were used as binary symbols of the new man saved by Christ, while sin and evil were considered equal to the hideousness and decrepitude of the old, and like age itself, led to death (Minois 1989: 119).¹⁹ In St. Augustine's *Epistle of St. John* he compares the similarities between the sinner and the old man. While on the one hand the old man possesses wisdom of white hair, he also shows the mark of sin by his withered skin.

Apart from the conciliatory references to old age in terms of white hair, all other descriptions of the state are repulsive at this time. Moreover, there was little difference between the descriptions of the physical and psychological ills of old age by Christian authors and the portraits described by Plautus and Juvenal, all of which were negative and often cruel (Minois 1989: 120). According to Minois (1989: 125), John Chrysostom, a Father of the church, did not appear to like old people and complained that old age was 'lazy, slow, forgetful, its senses are rusty, it is angry'.

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In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries several important changes took place in the economic and social sectors which affected art for decades to come. Humanization²⁰ was nurtured by the teachings of St. Francis who focused on the God-made beauties of the world and on the notion that the natural world represented the spiritual one, a teaching that

¹⁹ Most of the comparisons in literature referred to the old male body but avoided the female one. This is significant as this prejudice towards women evolved from ancient Greek and Roman attitudes, which were revered and have persisted for centuries. According to Thane (2005: 87) Caroline Bynum has demonstrated the association of the young woman's body with food in medieval culture. She is often depicted with an exposed breast to symbolize goodness and unfailing giving. However, the old woman, whose milk has dried up, cannot be a life-giver but is a curse. *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*, written in the 14th century by William of Deguileville vividly describes the binary contrast between the young and old woman (Thane 2005: 87).

²⁰ In addition to Christian humanism, pagan humanism developed and can be attributed to Petrarch, the 4th century poet who first propounded the values of individualism and humanism nourished by the study of classical antiquity. His thinking was fundamental to the later humanist developments of the Renaissance (Gardiner 1975: 398).

was instrumental in the development of the naturalism in art that began to surface during the thirteenth century (Gardiner 1975: 397).²¹

The period of art history known as Gothic is characterized by its move away from symbolic art toward more naturalistic representations that reflect individualism, an aspect of art that was also dominant in Dante's poetry. So the uniqueness of the individual is evidenced in the figures of the west portal at Chartres. The old peasant man is depicted with individualism and character evidenced in the high cheek bones, broad splayed nose and slanting eyes. The relationship between nature and spirit was altered here, and nature took on a spiritual significance. Idealism in the Gothic period was essentially a naturalism which sought to represent spiritual and ideal figures 'in a manner that would also be empirically correct' (Hauser Vol.1 1962: 215). Hauser maintains (1962: 238) that 'the uniqueness of the art of the middle ages is not in naturalism itself but in the fact that it has value in itself without being subservient to a symbolical and supernatural meaning'.

The humanization of religious subject matter was a turning point in the development of realism in art in subsequent decades. The life-like aspect of figures is evident in Giotto's *Lamentation* c.1305 AD (Fig.16). He uses simple naturalism by showing detail and individualism in the figures of the elderly apostles and incorporates the illusion of space. These aspects lend the painting realism and contribute to the naturalistic character of late Gothic art (Hauser Vol.1 1962: 241).

Masaccio was a painter who followed Giotto's example and focused on the individual features of the figures he represented. *The tribute money* c.1427 AD (Fig.17) depicts the disciples grouped around Jesus. The rendition is natural and the elderly bearded men show their individual characteristics.

In the middle of the fourteenth century (c.1348) the great bubonic plague temporarily halted the progress of art and impacted on every aspect of society. The phenomenon also affected the way old people were treated in the following centuries and related directly to the manifestation of themes on old age in the art and literature of the Renaissance.

The plague brought terror to the whole of the western world and was reflected in art by a morbid preoccupation with death, the fear of eternal damnation, and an emphasis on the sufferings and agony of Christ (Munro 1978: 124). At Pisa a cycle of frescoes

²¹ In addition to art, naturalism found expression in various forms of literature including the fable and farce, the prose novel and the short story. In poetry the idealist Dante (1265-1321) began to use descriptive details.

(c.1350) were painted which linked the idealistic lives of the hermits ²² to the theme of death and the plague. Hall (1983:215) maintains that these paintings were done for the monumental cemetery by an unidentified artist, possibly Fransesco Traini.

Although the 14th century was a time of desolation and destruction, the role of old people strengthened. A demographic fact that supports this assertion is that the killer epidemics of the 14th and 15th centuries, especially the plague, killed more of the young and children than old people.²³ The ‘uprising of the aged’ had an important effect on relationships between the generations ²⁴ (Minois 1989: 210). The natural consequence was that the more the aged served in or occupied important roles in society, the more they became rivals to be despised and feared. Old men became objects of ridicule, especially in reference to worldly pleasures, while old women were shown as evil incarnate, as appears in many written and artistic accounts (Minois 1989: 235).

The demographic recovery of the young, which started in 1480, created an influx of youth who eventually pushed the elderly aside. With the advent of changing traditions and thinking, the elderly were victimized and dominated by the young, which, coupled with the rebirth of classical prejudice, set the stage for unprecedented attacks upon the old in the 15th and 16th centuries (Minois 1989: 248).

²² The image of the hermit was automatically used as a symbol of victory for the penitent spirit. This thinking was directly related to ascetism which was gaining in importance because the teachings of the Franciscans endorsed a life of poverty typical of hermits.

²³ The old who survived however often existed without someone to care for them, leaving them destitute. Many who had lost families were reduced to begging and regrouped to survive (Minois 1989: 210).

²⁴ Old men gained economic and political power as a result of the black death. Without sons to inherit property the old men would have longer to accumulate wealth. The increase in power of the old gradually led to a rivalry between the generations and reached its peak in Florence (Minois 1989: 210).

Chapter 2

The early modern period and the paradox of old age

In the 15th and 16th centuries a renewed interest in classical antiquity developed, particularly in Italy where substantial sculptural remains were a constant reminder of the traditions of ancient Greek and Roman art. The influences of antiquity, specifically the literature of philosophers, theorists and poets, culminated in a cultural transformation which permeated every facet of life, including literature and theatre, with ideas, intellectual insights in the sciences and a ‘theoretical self-consciousness in artistic developments’ (Williams 2004: 65). Best known as the Renaissance due to the ‘rebirth’ of classical learning and the revival of the arts, this was an epoch essentially located in an imitation of classical patterns and values (Williams 2004: 65).²⁵

The interest in Plato’s theories was predominant and was grounded in a ‘self-conscious philosophical idealism’ (Williams 2004: 70). The philosophy of Plato and Plotinus was expanded and from it Neoplatonism²⁶ developed, forming the foundation of what was thought to be a new and universal philosophical system embracing the fundamental truths of all systems.

The quintessential element of Neoplatonism was based on idealism. Hauser (Vol.2 1962: 39) states that ‘Neo-Platonism, like Platonic idealism itself, was the expression of a purely contemplative attitude to the world and, like every philosophy that falls back on

²⁵ Hauser’s opinion is that the ‘rebirth’ of classical learning was an essentially Italian movement, as opposed to the high Renaissance and Mannerism which are European movements. This is so because of various economic and social circumstances. For one, feudalism and chivalry were less developed here than in the north resulting in an established rural aristocracy and led to the emancipation of the urban middle class earlier than in the rest of Europe (Hauser 1962: 8).

²⁶ Neoplatonism was further developed by Marsilio Ficino, a priest, philosopher, physician, and writer (1433-99). He set about uniting the principles of Platonism and Christianity into a single coherent system. He also combined classical myths as well as the writings and poetry of Cicero, Virgil and Dante, the natural sciences and astrology. The Neoplatonists of the Renaissance expressed the basic concepts of their philosophy by means of the figures of classical myth and legend, often using allegories, metaphor and symbols to disguise inner meaning (Hall 1983: 261).

pure ideas as the only authoritative principle, it implied a renunciation of the things of common reality’.

Conversely, Leon Battista Alberti ²⁷ developed a theory from Neoplatonic thought which emphasized the study of nature. However, it did not include ideas pertaining to the imagination which the Neoplatonists emphasized. Alberti’s ideas, which stemmed from Aristotle and Vitruvius, declared that only a continual disciplined engagement with nature could lead an artist to the idea of perfection; and he urged artists to combine the most beautiful elements in nature to achieve this. Alberti’s thinking was fundamental to the emergence of realism in the decades to follow, and to the binarism of the ideal and the real which characterized this new period (Hall 1983: 233).

Alberti’s scientific rationalism answered the demands of human reason rather than the mystical needs of medieval Catholicism; and it reflected a typical humanist philosophy characteristic of this period. ²⁸ Among early Renaissance artists who betrayed Alberti’s influence was Donatello (1386 –1466).

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Donatello’s work reveals a personal expression of the new humanism in its pursuit of the ideal beauty of the male body which typifies classical forms. Parallel to this, however, Donatello’s art demonstrates realism based on the objective study of man, nature and the fundamental themes of human experience. His sculptures often disclose this paradox between idealism and realism; more specifically the idealism of youth and beauty and the reality of old age. Donatello also represented childhood, soldiers, holy men, beggars and extreme old age. Jakob Burckhardt in *De Cicerone* (1855) states that ‘Donatello certainly did not lack a feeling for beauty, but beauty had to give way to character whenever character was called into question’ (Bennett and Wilkins 1984: 210). Moshe states (1976: 111) that by showing both the ‘emotional vehemence of action and by

²⁷ Alberti was a humanist who combined learning with a scientific outlook and a deep devotion to classical studies. He practised painting, sculpture and architecture. He encouraged artists to explore the relationship between painting and poetry and to develop a humanistic outlook (Hall 1983: 233).

²⁸ According to Hall (1983:233) humanism was born in Italy in the second half of the thirteenth century. The expression was used by Cicero to mean a literary education and the modern term ‘humanities’ is derived from the Latin *studia humanitatis*. In the 14th century it was revived and acquired a more specific meaning. It now included rhetoric, grammar, poetry and history based on classical authors. Cicero used the word to describe the idea of refinement and the pursuit of culture and this attitude was adopted by the medieval humanists.

representing the gesture in actual physical detail', Donatello's work reveals the tendency toward expressive naturalism.

Donatello's last period (c.1453) is marked by an expressive realism that shows exaggeration and distortion turning to a realistic representation verging on the grotesque; he 'set about to achieve a kind of anti-aesthetic manner', a technique that mirrored the abjection which Aristotle endorsed (Gardiner 1975: 437). Bennett and Wilkins (1984: 210) conceive that in some of his more subtle subjects, Donatello creates 'psychological states' that 'evoke empathy' as in his naturalistically polychrome wood figure of the *Penitent Magdalene* c.1454-55 (Figs. 18, 19). Magdalene is rendered as an aging woman with hands clasped in prayer and is clothed only in her own hair. According to Bennett and Wilkins (1984: 215) the hair in Donatello's representation is a symbol of Magdalene's attributes; 'it is a reminder of her former beauty and sensuality, an emblem of her honouring of Christ and of her repentance, and a symbol of her neglect of worldly things during her life as a hermit saint'. Furthermore, it is not age in itself that explains Magdalene's appearance, but her repentance. Donatello uses old age and the abject as metaphor, to portray piety, religious fervour and emotional strength; and his use of rational methods to convey spiritual meaning reinforces the influence of Neoplatonic philosophy.²⁹

Significantly Donatello's youthful work such as his *David* 1430-32 in his mature idealistic style, contrasts with the work of his mature years when he used gesticulation to describe objective reality. The *Penitent Magdalene* to refer to it again - could have been prompted by meditation on his personal experience of old age and imminent mortality – with the conviction that it seemed futile to portray a perfect world when man's body was doomed to grow old and perish. Bennett and Wilkins (1984: 218), however, argue that the *Magdalene's* inherent naturalism, evident in the representation of soft and smooth skin and the realistic detail of wrinkling around the buttocks and armpits, 'conforms neither to a generalized Renaissance ideal, nor to a specific antique type'.

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The influence of idealistic philosophy was fundamental to artistic developments in the early 15th and 16th centuries, then, but it impacts equally on the development of

²⁹ The personification of ideas was a common practice among Renaissance artists and was particularly favoured by the Neoplatonists who used allegories, metaphor and symbols to reconcile the classical myths with Christianity (Hall 1983: 261). The representation of a weeping figure includes the typical gestures of self-injury which involves the tearing of garments and hair and scratching of the face (Moshe 1976: 115).

realism. What is significant to my research is that with the emergence of realism at this time, the theme of old age became more prevalent than during any other period. What influences contributed to this emphasis on the real at a time when the entire cultural period was infused with classical concepts of beauty, perfection and the ideal?

The black death in the 14th century impacted on the demography of society as a whole, and especially on the mortality of the young, so that the economic and political power of the old increased. This led to serious clashes in some cities between the youth and the aged. In Italy, for instance, where municipal appointments had great significance, the concentration of power in the hands of the elderly was especially obvious and led to a direct confrontation between the generations at the beginning of the 15th century.

These social conflicts influenced cultural activities to such an extent that much poetry and theatre ridiculed the binarism of youth and old age with savage humour. Numerous examples exist of caricatures of old men and women, by writers, poets, literati and dramatists.³⁰

The increased longevity of the old and the vulnerability of the young could only have exacerbated the impatience of youth when confronted with the monopoly of authority and property by the elderly (Minois 1989: 222). It is not surprising to find that by the mid-15th century these attitudes had culminated in the revival of classical idealism celebrating youth and beauty. Furthermore, the young welcomed the ancient negativism in literature toward the old and exploited it to their advantage; hence the proliferation of Renaissance works disparaging the old.³¹

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Leonardo da Vinci was intensely interested in nature, landscape and human anatomy. His fervour and determination to understand nature in the objective world culminated in his moving beyond art into a wide range of scientific investigations. He

³⁰ This explains the popular theme of the old lover in *Pantaloone* (De Beauvoir 1972: 155). The same theme was simultaneously used in countries all over Europe by different writers. In England, Ronsard, George Peele, Edmund Spenser, Thomas Wyatt and Samuel David developed the idea while in Italy, Ruzante, Machiavelli, Bandello and the Bishop of Agen exploit the theme (Minois 1989: 250, 251).

³¹ In Thomas More's *Utopia* he classes all old people among the parasitical poor and considers them to belong to the same category as vagabonds, the sick and even robbers suggesting they should commit suicide when they grow too old. William Shakespeare's plays frequently reflect society's opinion toward old age. Minois (Minois 1989: 277, 278, 282) contends that in the Renaissance period old age was detestable, but old people were worthy of respect. Generally it was considered an achievement to grow old, generating a certain degree of pride in advanced years.

believed that ‘painting is born of nature ...the grandchild of nature and a descendant of God’ (Williams 2004: 62). Although his views reflected the idealism of Neoplatonic philosophy, he opposed the Neoplatonic belief that sensory knowledge is superficial (Emboden 1987: 104); and unlike the intellectuals of his day, who continually appealed to the authority of the ancient writers, Leonardo insisted that the artist was responsible only to the higher authority of nature, and that one learnt more from experience than from books. This view mirrored Alberti’s thoughts, which were Aristotelian in essence, but Leonardo developed the scientific principles which Alberti had applied to the arts. Whereas Alberti brought rationalism to bear on the facts he observed, Leonardo applied the direct observation of phenomena. As a result his art flowered from the actual representation of reality and influenced the development of realism in art in the following decades (Blunt 1968: 26).

In his painting of *St. Jerome* c.1483 (Fig. 20), Leonardo uses a combination of realism and symbolism to portray his subject.³² The saint is depicted as a near-naked, thin old hermit close to death in a desert cave. Jerome gives Leonardo the opportunity to exhibit his anatomical knowledge which he achieved by dissecting bodies and recording his findings in notes and sketches. Jerome’s chest is covered with self-inflicted bruises and he is poised to beat himself with a rock. Metaphorically his action represents the anguish of his impending death. Leonardo uses age and emaciation to intensify the sense of pathos behind this wilful self-punishment (Murray 1967: 28).

There are links to the popular belief that the first hermits among the 14th century desert fathers of Egypt, where the monastic movement evolved, were considered paragons of Christian asceticism and that their lives formed an important part of the legends of the saints. The lives of the hermits were often linked with death and exemplified a triumph over the plague. Their survival was due to their remoteness from the pandemic and was seen as a victory for the penitent spirit (Hall 1983: 215).

Metaphor, allegory and analogies were the methods that Leonardo often used in his scientific study of nature. His attempt to understand and explain the human life cycle using analogies of youth and old age by entwining the realistic representation of a tree and an old man is demonstrated in Fig. 21. The branches spread through the torso of an old man and

³² St. Jerome was a scholar who translated the bible from Greek and Hebrew into Latin and influenced the development of the Catholic church as a result. He was known to have reproached himself for preferring Cicero to the style of the prophets. Leonardo uses metaphor to identify St. Jerome with the legend of the hermit to refer to the saint’s victory for his repentant attitude (Hall 1983: 215).

transform into his vascular system; but the branches are petrified and barren and signify old age (Emboden 1987: 143).

Leonardo developed a systematic approach to human vagaries by wandering the streets and sketching facial and figurative types and movements of the body. He trained his eye to record conceptually and reproduced his glimpses later from memory. Some of his most expressive drawings are figures of the elderly, some of which were in preparation for paintings, as for example his *Study of a head* c.1498 (Fig.22) for the *Last supper* 1498. Leonardo's pen and ink drawing of *Grotesque heads* c.1485-90 (Fig.23), shows exaggerated grotesque features to caricature the old. According to Emboden (1987: 105), Leonardo wrote fables for the court and often borrowed and embellished them verbally or in drawings which were meant to exploit facial expressions.³³

Portraits of the aged reflected Leonardo's efforts to capture the psychological and physical reality of the faces that he drew. One of his last drawings was his *Self-portrait* c.1517 (Fig. 24), executed in his early sixties. According to Mannering (1981: 74), Leonardo suffered from premature aging and was believed to have had a stroke, leaving him paralyzed in his right hand. Leonardo portrays himself with precise detail, his brow heavily lined while he broods on what is perhaps a *memento mori* in the last moments of his life.

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The work of German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, particularly his *Christ disputing with the doctors* c.1506 (Fig. 25), shows an affinity with Leonardo's rendering of ugly old men. The painting offers the 'maximum contrasts between youth and old age, beauty and ugliness, innocent wisdom and crabbed knowledge, virtue and vice' (Murray 1963:198). The grotesque old man to the right of Christ symbolizes sin and maximizes the contrast between his ugliness and the beauty of Christ, portrayed as an ideal sinless youth. *The artist's mother* c.1514 (Fig. 26) is a portrait of Dürer's mother done two months before her death. This realistic representation demonstrates a personal expression of intimacy in the detail of her divergent squint, sunken cheeks and bony neck. Significantly Dürer portrays his mother with grace and dignity, without any leaning toward the idealistic

³³ Leonardo's theory of expression states the importance of showing emotions and the ideas in a person's mind by means of his gestures and facial expression. These ideas were taken up by later theorists, particularly in France during the 17th century, where the systemization of gesture and expression was expanded (Hall 1983: 35).

trends associating old age with death and evil, a paradigm that was followed in previous decades. The personal experiences that Dürer had with old age seemed to have made an impression on him as several of his paintings featured this subject and were based on portraits of old people whom he knew. *Portrait of a 93-year-old man* c.1521 (Fig. 27) and *St. Jerome* c.1521 (Fig.28) exemplify Dürer's ability and interest in realism, more specifically old people. Based on a portrait of an old man whom Dürer met in Antwerp, these paintings are said to have had a dramatic effect on Netherlandish painting by their life-like realism (Anzelewsky 1982: 6).

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The assessment of old age in the 16th century was unquestionably negative, especially because it contradicted all the virtues of the ideal man: beauty, strength, the capacity for decision-making, intellectual growth (Minois 1989: 287). This general pessimism impacted on the visual arts and many artists were influenced by the fantasy world created by poets and playwrights. *The book of the courtier* c.1515, and the *Praise of folly* c.1515 by Erasmus, both demeaned old age. Matthias Grünewald's *Dead lovers* c.1470, Pieter Bruegel's *Old peasant woman* c.1568 and Hans Baldung's *The hag* c.1505 reflect this thematic emphasis (Figs. 29, 30, 31). De Gheyn's drawing *Study of four heads* c.1585 (Fig.32), skilfully describes the physical expression of an old woman's grimace. The old man shows a kinder rendition of old age, whereas the old woman has grotesque, witch-like features.

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The plays of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) reflect the opinions of his age and simultaneously analyze them. Shakespeare describes the ambiguous position of old age in his day and presents it as a 'timeless and universal dimension' (Minois 1989: 281). Themes on the ages of life, the conflict between youth and age, the effects of aging on the human body, and the distress and reproach felt by the aged form a major part of his repertoire. Likewise in painting, themes on the life stages of man, beauty, youth, old age and time were popular and usually personified, reflected in works like Titian's *Allegory of prudence* c.1576 depicting the three stages of man, Baldung's *Three stages of woman*

c.1509 and *Fountain of youth* c. 1450 (Fig.33) by an unknown artist. The personification of time as a winged old man with hour glass and scythe was frequently portrayed.

The Renaissance exalted physical beauty, 'praising female excellence, though in contrast to this the ugliness of the aged seemed even more detestable' (De Beauvoir 1972: 148). As in the ancient world, and in 14th and 15th century folklore, old women were often synonymous with witches, were suspected of having malevolent powers, and were considered the incarnation of evil.³⁴ Minois believes (1989: 249) that attacks against old women derived from the rage of a generation which worshipped youth and beauty. As aging appears to have an even more devastating effect on women than on men, the young woman, in youth a symbol of beauty, love and worldly pleasure, is destined finally to become a symbol of ugliness and decrepitude.

Simone de Beauvoir (1972: 151) sees the criticism of old women as anti-feminist and asserts that prejudice against old women, obvious in the humanist writings of Erasmus, is often exaggerated and cruel. Erasmus speaks of 'these broken-down women, these walking corpses, slinking bodies', who 'display their flaccid, disgusting breasts' (De Beauvoir 1972: 151). Dürer's painting of the *Old woman with a bag of coins* c.1507 (Fig.34) reflects this description and is reminiscent of the Hellenistic sculpture *Old market woman* c.200 BC (Fig.1). The drawing of *The hag* c.1505 (Fig. 31) by Hans Baldung likewise depicts an old woman with one exposed breast, also reflecting the type of prevailing male prejudice that was widespread in the past. Shahr suggests (in Thane 2005:107) that Baldung intended her to be a procuress and perhaps planned to use her in a brothel scene.

Flemish and German Renaissance painters rivalled one another in their abuse of women and in their rejection of old age. *The ugly dutchess* c.1525-30 and the *Temptation of St. Anthony* c.1539 by Quentin Metsys, *The ugly sorceress* c.1517 by Niklaus Deutsch, and Hans Baldung's *The three ages of man and death* c.1510 (Fig.35) are paintings which exemplify sentiments like those I have described (Minois 1989: 254).

Contrary to De Beauvoir's assessment of anti-feminist attitudes during this century, Minois (1989: 301) believes that if a dislike for old women existed, it was mainly a literary device; he states that there was actually a marked difference between the way people talked about old age, with 'contempt, bitterness and rancor, even hatred,' and the attitude they actually adopted towards old people, which was one of sympathy. This is a

³⁴ Unfavourable prejudice accused old women of being witches and the Paris Parliament regularly condemned them (Minois 1989: 256).

questionable evaluation, however, when one considers how the Utopians dealt with the aged.³⁵ They were merciless, and if the elderly contradicted the ideal of the old man with wisdom and virtue, they were of no value and should not exist.³⁶

Scholars have noted that there is a tendency to masculinize all data in the many medieval visual representations of the stages of life in science, medicine and literature. The absence of women from most statutes and ordinances is explained by the fact that women were considered inferior to men. They were not subject to military service and held no public office. In addition women were not exempt from compulsory labour, which brought poverty, begging and vagrancy to many of them (Thane 2005: 76). The low status of women in society remained a prototype in the 16th century and exacerbated the negative attitudes and treatment of old women.

Courtiers and politicians were examples to their contemporaries and both joined in condemning old age (Minois 1989: 256). Humanist doctors, philosophers and religious leaders were especially concerned with the problem of old age and its suffering and frailty. Medical practitioners explored every path to resolve the enigma and to eliminate it or at least postpone it. The most they could offer was a list of symptoms and prescriptions for longevity. The unprecedented number of written works on the origin and treatment of aging is proof that the middle ages tried to understand and control it (Minois 1989: 274).

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A paradox can be noticed in the 16th century between the way people spoke about the old and their actual role in society, economy, politics and art. On the one hand gerontophobic³⁷ sentiments prevailed but on the other admiration and pride were felt for those who had reached extreme old age (Minois 1989: 301).

Many military leaders and popes were in their seventies and eighties and were proud of their age. Numbers of these leaders commissioned artists to do portraits of them. Raphael and Titian painted portraits for the papacy; these were often idealized, but interest

³⁵ The Utopians were humanists who believed in the ideal state where men were considered incorruptible and unalterable and where no aging or time existed.

³⁶ Their Utopian aim was to abolish old age and then suggested legal assignation of the aged. Priests were to advise excessively feeble old people to commit suicide by taking poison. Antonio de Guevara, Bishop of Cadiz, took an even more radical stance and in his *Diall of princes*, published in 1529, suggested that everyone over 50 should commit suicide in order to avoid decrepitude. He was 49 when he set forth this proposition, but it was never implemented (Minois 1989: 277).

³⁷ Gerontology is the study of old age and gerontophobia is the fear of old age.

in realistic old age continued, for example, Ghirlandaio's *Old man and grandchild* c.1490 (De Beauvoir: 161).

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Michelangelo is an example of an artist who experienced the psychological effects of aging and the threat of death. De Beauvoir (1972: 440) notes that one's social context has an influence on one's relationship with death in old age. In Michelangelo's circumstances, it may have been difficult for him to come to terms with aging and mortality owing to his idealistic philosophy and the views of the time; he had a life-long fear of old age and death.

Michelangelo believed that beauty was a reflection of the divine, particularly in the human body, and he wished to reflect this in his work. This Neoplatonic ideology caused him to obsess about his aging body, his transience and the lapse of time, factors that contributed to his fear of not fulfilling his artistic vision. The paradox between these concepts brought despair and disillusionment to his life, as demonstrated by his poetry. He describes the feel of his aging skin, its dryness and leathery texture. He sees his soul as shedding its flesh, and man as shedding his skin like a serpent does against a rock (Clements 1963: 355). His old age was an incessant battle against a body worn by vexations and illness. Old age formed an insurmountable obstacle to the deification of man and contradicted all his efforts to create the perfect human form.

When he was still a young man in his forties, Michelangelo spoke in his letters and poems of his 'coming death' and complained of being 'not only old but already numbered among the dead' (De Beauvoir 1972: 513). The psychological impact of thanatophobia is reflected in his writings. He says that his labours have broken, undermined and dismembered him, and that the inn to which he is travelling, and at whose table he shall drink is death (Minois 1989: 244).

In addition to Michelangelo's fears of aging and death, there was a change in his outlook on life in his later years which is reflected in his art. This change could have been due to the imminence of death and his personal experience with Christianity as a result of his association with Vittoria Colonna, a humanist whose main interests were religion and Neoplatonism. In his *Last judgment* c.1535 - 41 (Fig. 36) Michelangelo no longer deals directly with the ideal beauty of the physical world. The nude figures have thick limbs and lack grace. According to Blunt (1962: 67), Michelangelo was aware of their physical

defects and used this realism to convey an idea or to reveal a spiritual state. Michelangelo now felt that the love of physical beauty was vanity and that true love lay in spiritual beauty. This thinking prompted him to see death as a deliverance from earthly bondage.

Michelangelo's painting of the *Last judgement* depicts a tragic vision of humanity hurled into eternal damnation by a wrathful God and his angels. The artist's realization of the futility of idealism and the reality of death is demonstrated by the metaphor of his self-portrait in the flayed skin that Saint Bartholomew holds which functions as a *memento mori*.³⁸

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The breakdown of idealism soon resulted in the disintegration of the social structure on which Renaissance art was based.³⁹ The ripple effect of this resulted in the development of various styles in art and heralded the advent of Mannerism, which was largely controlled by the church. Art now emphasized theological or supernatural aspects, often engaging in methods that involved deliberate elongation and colours that appealed to the emotions rather than reflecting reality (Blunt 1962:106).

³⁸ In ancient Greek literature the phenomenon of the cicada beetle shedding its skin is used as a metaphor of death; the human physical life is shed and replaced by an immortal life in another realm (Falkner 1989: 75).

³⁹ After about 1545 the papacy changed and the more fanatical counter-Reformers established their ideas; ideas that supported blind belief in authority, strict obedience, and absolute rigidity of doctrine, similar to the ecclesiastical domination of the middle ages. The individual rationalism of Humanism became an anathema to the counter-Reformers (Blunt 1962: 106).

Chapter 3

The decline of idealism and old age as metaphor

By the end of the 16th century artists had replaced their focus on research into nature and natural appearance with a study of the various styles of the great masters of the Renaissance. Thus, art in the 17th century was dominated by eclecticism. Hauser (Vol.2 1962: 89) contends that the classical art of the Renaissance degenerates surprisingly quickly into a 'purely external imitation of classical models and spiritual aloofness, as the artistic expression of the Cinquecento was based on an ideal rather than on reality.

Moreover political turmoil⁴⁰ heightened the notion of a *status quo* that could not be maintained and resulted in disillusionment and insecurity (Hauser Vol.2 1962: 89). These sentiments are reflected in the work of the poets and dramatists of the time who, like Cervantes and Shakespeare, discerned the conflict between romantic idealism and realistic rationalism. Hauser (Vol.2 1962: 134) explains this dualism as the 'impossibility of realizing the idea in the world of reality and of reducing reality to the idea'. For example, the portrayal of a character was presented in typical binaries - the hero as both saint and fool as achieved through the use of humour. Thus, Shakespeare was one of the most popular and influential writers of the time, because he mixed tragedy and farce, nobility and vulgarity, and so appealed to a broad public (Wright 2001: 27). His generally pessimistic view of life was based on the experience of political realism (Hauser Vol.2 1962: 150).

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⁴⁰ This political turmoil was based on the Catholic church's reaction to the progress of protestantism. After 1530 the papacy was the most powerful single state in Italy, but its policy was now dominated by its new ally, Spain (Blunt 1962: 104). According to Blunt (1962: 104) its aim was to establish the ecclesiastical domination and absolutism which the church had held during the middle ages and reintroduce feudal and medieval policies. The papacy led a military, diplomatic and theological campaign against protestantism in order to eradicate its influences.

The terms Mannerism and Baroque refer to the leading tendencies in art during the 16th century. The Mannerists declared the artist's right to his own interpretation, and looked for inspiration to Neoplatonism. From previous artworks artists abstracted forms which they further idealized, resulting in a distinctly distorted and exaggerated rendering, often involving imaginative fantasy (Gardiner 1975: 511).

In the intellectual sphere, the counter-Reformation opposed individual thought and the right of the individual to make his own judgments based on personal reason. The movement thus withstood the individual rationalism of humanist and Renaissance values. On the one hand, then, the Protestants denied any value in religious art, condemning it as idolatrous, while on the other hand, though heretical or secular paintings were condemned by the Catholic Church, they were nevertheless recognized as valuable weapons in the propaganda sphere (Blunt 1962: 107).⁴¹

A new naturalism in art developed at this time, based on the assumption that the artist should paint what he saw without any regard for the traditions established in antiquity or the Renaissance masters; the artist should comply with the recommendations of the church which were 'simplicity and austerity in compositions' and 'sincerity and respect' in subject matter (Mérot 1995: 76). The art of the Carracci brothers in Rome, Annibale and Agostino, and that of Michelangelo Caravaggio in Naples, was 'the most celebrated manifestation of a return to reality, to truth to life, to naturalism' (Mérot 1995: 76). The most characteristic aspects of this realist genre was the everyday quality of the scenes and characters, particularly those from the margins of social life, such as people in drinking and smoking dens, fortune tellers, beggars and other representatives of marginalized society. Caravaggio replaced the distortions and the dramatic effects of Mannerism and 'undermined the process of idealization' which was the traditional mode of expression, particularly in religious painting' (Mérot 1995: 83).

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The theme of old age fell into the category of common life in the 16th and 17th centuries, and continued to be used in painting, revealing the social condition of the elderly and the poor. Images of old men portrayed by artists such as Jacques Callot were used as

⁴¹ As a result, pagan myths, religious imagery and any classical sourcing including historical subject matter were not tolerated in the churches (Gardiner 1975: 607).

preparatory sketches for his panoramic landscapes depicting festivals, ceremonies, and postwar scenes. Another French artist concerned with the accurate portrayal of social reality, often with quiet suggestions of a religious or spiritual dimension was Georges de la Tour. The realistic images of *Couple eating peas* c.1618 and *Old peasant* c.1618-20 are dramatized by the strong contrast of lights and darks typical of much of the art of this period. Sofonisba Aguißola, one of the few female artists of this time, was concerned with painting reality and executed several self-portraits, one rendering herself in her later years c.1610 (Fig. 37).

Spanish artists were particularly brutal in their realism, and generally scorned idealization of any kind. Spain rejected all that the Italian Renaissance stood for, and reacted to the harsh reality of the counter-Reformation and the often merciless torture inflicted on its citizens as the victims of religious fanaticism. The modern Spanish critic, Enrique Lafuente, sums up their attitude: ‘The Spaniard knows that reality is not Idea but Life...The supreme value of life is linked with experience and the moral values that are based on personality. Ideas, beauty, formal perfection, are abstractions and nothing more. Art, in its turn is bound to concern itself with realities and not with dreams’ (Gardiner 1975: 600).

Velázquez’s work exemplifies Spanish realism. Although he painted religious pictures influenced by Italian Renaissance, which would ordinarily be idealized, figures appear in strong lights and darks achieving a blunt reality. He also showed a Baroque interest in native naturalism by portraying human ‘types’ as in his *Mennipus* c.1630 (Fig.38) and *Aesop* c.1630 (Fig.39). Another Spanish artist, José de Ribera, depicted emaciated figures of old people in his religious paintings of *St. Andrew* c.1624-38 (Fig.40) and *St. Jerome* c.1624-38 (Fig.41) and *St. Paul the hermit* c.1624-38 (Fig.42). The ‘dark manner’ of Caravaggio strengthens the illusion of reality and reinforces the persistent rejection of any idealism. The characteristic element of these Spanish artists is their use of contrasting light and dark tones to create moods that represent a dominating spirituality (Clavell 1976: 47).

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In Holland genre themes were predominant because ‘severe Calvinistic Protestantism was puritanical toward religious art, sculptural or pictorial’ (Gardiner 1975: 607). Artists turned to their environment for inspiration and resorted to the pictorial

possibilities of everyday life and nature.⁴² Above all, the portrait became one of the most prolific genre themes appealing to the Dutch aristocrats. These portraits reflected courtly decorum, military command and hereditary nobility closely linked with the rise of Dutch middle-class bourgeois individualism (Woodall 1997: 76).⁴³ However, although the choice of subject matter was based on reality and the style reflected the influence of Caravaggio's realism and somber *chiaroscuro*, the focus was in presenting the identities of the middle-class bourgeoisie. Anthony van Dyck's painting *Charles I c.1635* (Fig 43) exemplifies this paradigm.

Contrary to these tendencies in art, Rembrandt van Rijn made a series of religious paintings and prints in the Baroque tradition, resisting the demands of bourgeois society for idealistic portrayals to satisfy its vanity. Rembrandt was in search of verisimilitude and more explicitly sought to express the human condition. This is exemplified in prolific works that deal with the theme of maturation and old age, including numerous self-portraits.

Rembrandt produced a series of naturalistic studies of old men's heads and numerous sketches of old men as in Fig. 44. His work reveals a deep sympathy for the old people he portrays, some depicted with emaciated faces, leaning on walking sticks and crutches. Rembrandt had many aging friends in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam and enjoyed portraying their old faces often using them as models for his Biblical scenes, for example, *Old man with hands clasped c.1633* (Fig.45). Rosenberg (1964: 72) notes that what interested Rembrandt was not only the outward appearance of these people, but their inherent 'spiritual qualities'. He did many works of his mother and father when elderly (Fig.46, 47), dressing them up in different clothes and portraying them in different attitudes – thoughtful, in prayer, leaning on a Bible - expressions that would give them a 'more profound inner life' (Rosenberg 1964: 139). According to Rosenberg (1964: 152), Rembrandt was not just concerned about depicting the real and rendering attitudes and facial expressions, but he wanted to give his figures a spiritual significance. In the paintings of *An old man in an arm chair c.1652* (Fig. 48) and *An old woman reading c.1655* (Fig. 49), for example, he isolates the figures from the context of their everyday environment and activities to place maximum emphasis on 'spatial depth and

⁴² They began to specialize in different subjects that included landscape, seascapes, animals, still life, flower studies and interiors to cater to the demands of a growing public opposed to one patron (Gardiner 1975: 608).

⁴³ According to Woodall (1997: 96) they 'used the realist mode of portraiture to claim positions equal to, but distinct from, both the hereditary nobility and each other. In so doing they began to define and elaborate elite identities...which acknowledge 'interior virtues' such as intelligence, genius and constancy, which became the foundation of bourgeois individuality'.

psychological content', using half tones to create an atmosphere of contemplation and spiritual reflection (Rosenberg 1964:38). In this context the technique of merging light and dark to produce the visual equivalent of silence and the illusion of shadows was very important to Rembrandt, because the representation of light and brooding atmosphere was ultimately a metaphor for truth and the immanence of God (Kitson 1971: 21).

In Rembrandt's *Self-portrait* c.1668 (Fig.50) one sees a physiognomic likeness of himself as he is - an elderly man reflecting on the burdens of his own tragic life. Kitson (1971: 22) suggests that critics have seen a resemblance between Rembrandt's paintings and the philosophical ideas of his fellow-resident of Amsterdam, Baruch de Spinoza (although the latter was too young to influence Rembrandt). Both were steeped in the Jewish scriptures, and Rembrandt would have shared Spinoza's doctrine of the integration of spirit and matter.⁴⁴

The reason that Rembrandt was absorbed in the depiction of the old for much of his life, including images of himself, was partly due to his interest in the human condition and the characteristic demeanor of old people with their bent figures. Rosenberg (1964: 10), however, comments that Rembrandt's deepening religious attitude could have been responsible for his intense interest and unusually sympathetic attitude toward old people, in particular Jews. He also suggests (1964:17) that perhaps 'this fondness of old age was implanted during Rembrandt's childhood by his Bible-reading elders and resulted from a deep impression made upon his imagination by the venerable patriarchs of the Old Testament'. Yet Rembrandt's lifelong affinity for the spiritual and emotional qualities of old age cannot be fully explained by these influences. So Rosenberg concludes (1964: 17) that 'this feeling must have arisen, in the first place, from an inner predisposition'.

Much of Rembrandt's life was filled with grief following the death of his two wives and the loss of three children at infancy followed by the demise of his son Titus later. These tragedies and the burden of advancing age seemed to deepen his insight and human understanding, and may account for the somber undertone of his later works, the figures in which embody a 'kind of super-real presence which is more intense because there is no rational cause' (Rosenberg 1964: 15). Portraying the human soul was central to Rembrandt's motivation, and this 'profound self-realization was... indispensable for his access to the spiritual and the transcendental' (Rosenberg 1964: 37). Rembrandt's aim was

⁴⁴ Spinoza (1632-1677), Christian philosopher and intellect, wrote the *Ethics* in which he gave a theoretical definition of God emphasizing the notion that God is in everything that exists (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1967 Vol. 2: 37).

to portray reality and to use the psychology of light, the visual suggestion of time, the art of pose and facial expression to present his own psychological feelings about age and spiritual life (Gardiner 1975: 613). Rembrandt used old age as a metaphor of his own mortality and imminent union with God - represented by light.

The care of the aged continued to be neglected in 17th century society and was exacerbated by the misery and suffering induced by disease and a thirty-year war in Europe.⁴⁵ The consequences of the war left many old people in dire circumstances. Could this social phenomenon have inspired Rembrandt to portray the plight of these people? Perhaps the state of their well-being and his own suffering had a psychological effect on him, prompting meditations on his own age and life as a *memento mori* and resulting in numerous self-portraits.

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Generally society in the 17th century was authoritarian and absolutist. Woodall (1997: 77) comments that there was 'an acute consciousness of social exclusivity and honor' which also contributed to the plight of the poor and aged. The elite had no time for the aged, and deplorable post-war conditions caused immense suffering among old and young alike. This was exacerbated by the continuous exploiting of the proletariat by the nobility. The church provided help, but it was inadequate, and La Fontaine observes that 'this is an age without pity' (De Beauvoir 1972: 168).⁴⁶

Negative attitudes toward the old persisted. Considered to be on the periphery of human existence, they were generally marginalized (De Beauvoir 1972: 168). Seventeenth-century literature continued to be critical of the aged, particularly women, a prejudice that had continued since medieval times and reflected the association of women with witches and evil. The Spanish poet and novelist Francisco de Quevedo was obsessed with old women as objects of disgust, calling them hideous, wrinkled and loathsome. He is particularly cruel in his descriptions of witches, housekeepers and (most of all) *duennas*

⁴⁵ Rising national powers colonised the globe and wars took place between Renaissance cities and continental empires.

⁴⁶ In some instances old age was regarded as honourable. The very elderly were elected to the Council of Trent after which the papacy consisted of usually very old men who were required to lead austere lives. Age helped in contributing to their perceived holiness and sacred character. The same principle still applies today (De Beauvoir 1972: 167). Consequently, the popes were respected for who they were, not for age in itself; just as the wealthy man or the dignitary, leader or landowner was respected for what he had attained in life in virtue or materialism despite his age (De Beauvoir 1972:168).

who for him are the quintessence of old age: 'Her nose is in conversation with her chin, and they are so close together that they form pincers' (De Beauvoir 1972: 169).

According to De Beauvoir, only a few writers discerned any positive value in old age, and only one poet, Maynard (1582-1646), defended old age in women (De Beauvoir 1972: 169). Corneille (1606-1684) created impressive characters in the person of old men, and Shakespeare had a great following, dealing as he did with the miseries of old age personified in a hero like Lear; but these are the exceptions to a generally negative attitude to old age.

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At the turn of the eighteenth century European political structure underwent radical changes that ushered in the Enlightenment. The dictatorial aristocracies gradually abandoned their administrative function to ambitious, influential and increasingly wealthy middle-class men. Outspoken thinkers like Voltaire called for reforms of old abuses and for a restriction on the privileges of the monarchy, aristocracy and clergy (Gardiner 1975: 631). Traditional political values were overthrown in the effort to create a utopian view of society involving freedom and equality. Individual initiative, personal freedom and hard work became the basis of new ideologies that attempted to construct an ideal social order (Williams 2004: 92).

Although royalty and nobility were slowly becoming obsolete, they remained patrons of the arts, and as a result the arts essentially expressed the philosophy of a declining aristocracy, for whom life involved the pursuit of pleasure and escape from boredom. This was reflected in a frivolous, sensual and intricate artistic taste.

The humanistic image of man, and his commanding Renaissance position over nature were evaluated anew. As a result a cultural transformation took place, marked by a definite intellectual liberation from past concepts and ideas. This awakening, known as the Enlightenment, marks a transition in society. Empirical scientific discoveries were made, and liberated the intellectual classes from the view that the past held all knowledge (Crouch 1999: 10). Simultaneously the advance of technology and industry promoted the unprecedented use of machines. Hauser (Vol.2 1962: 52) maintains that the machines were not new, but the 'mechanization and rationalization of production' was a new approach to industry, and caused what is called the Industrial revolution, which began in England at the height of the Enlightenment c.1750.

The rapid multiplication of industrial potential not only brought about the riches of imperialism, but also caused immense human suffering, resulting in the growth of sprawling slums and in the social isolation of the poor from the rich, all of which affected the social status of the aged (Vaughan 1994: 18).

Subsequent revolutions⁴⁷ impacted on all facets of life and the social and economic organization of vast areas of the world. The invasions of the French Revolution (1789) shattered all faith in religion and laid it open to criticism, making young thinkers rebel and develop their own philosophies (Vaughan 1994: 19). Charles Darwin's *Theory of evolution* had the most profound influence on society, changing the course of history and contributing to the ushering in of secularization. The implications of Darwin's theory created a chasm in culture causing a division between the natural and supernatural orders impacting on leaders in political and industrial circles effecting science and academia.⁴⁸

Old absolutisms of the church were challenged, and this initiated new values and structures in society such as democracy, nationalism and social justice, and also human rights⁴⁹ for men and women (Hauser Vol.2 1962: 53).⁵⁰ Cultural anthropology and sociology became important areas of investigation and discussion amongst scholars. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, philosopher, politician, and scientist, determined that humanism rejected a system of divine moral judgment in favour of a system of moral judgment based on socially determined legal codes. Morality came from the individual who was autonomous and was able to discern corruption within his society, even if it was sanctioned by a ruling class (Crouch 1999: 18). Rousseau's views proposed that culture acknowledged material conditions as determining factors of social and cultural life, and his thinking provided a stimulus towards the progress of humanitarianism. This ultimately challenged the treatment of the underprivileged classes, including the aged.

⁴⁷ The French Revolution and revolutions in America against slavery were inspired by humanitarianism and the rights of man.

⁴⁸ His collection of theories were published in a book in 1859 and included *The origin of species by means of natural selection* or *The preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*. (Magro, E: 2005). <www.conspiracyarchive.com/NewAge/Darwin.htm>

⁴⁹ Thomas Paine was an idealist, rhetorician and revolutionary propagandist who wrote the *Rights of Man* (1791/92) and played some part in making governments aware of the needs of mankind, for example, he outlined a government plan for popular education, relief for the poor which included provision for 140 000 aged persons, pensions for the aged and public works for the unemployed. Sambrook attests that even today 'most societies pay lip service to the rights of man, the liberty of the individual, and to the theory of popular sovereignty and representational government' (Leighton 1992: 24).

⁵⁰ Gender relationships were challenged and women increasingly made their voices heard in a male-dominated society. Mary Wollstonecraft took up the case for women regarding their education in 1816 (Leighton 1992: 143). The feminist and radical Flora Tristan published several tracts and a novel describing the liberation of women (Eisenman 1994: 203).

In 1780 a small group of Parisian men founded an association called the *Société Philanthropique*, consisting of members of Paris high society, nobles, past government officials, bishops, lawyers, clergymen and financiers. They provided assistance to the poor and gave to various charities, prompting other humanitarian organizations to develop. This manifestation of human consciousness was summed up by an 18th century commentator, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who remarked that ‘no previous century has seen benevolence and charity distribute their largesse more liberally or with greater constancy and compassion’.⁵¹ The *Société*, which was uniquely independent of the church government, had private and public support, and was thus characteristically secular. It went beyond conventional poor relief by providing medical care, education and work training. It followed the principle of encouraging hard work, and even assisted people to find employment, thus allowing families to remain independent. It further aided those who could not work, and initiated pensions for workers in their old age.⁵² For the first time in history, the aged were treated with some compassion and the development of old-age havens increased.

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The foregoing revolutionary changes created a ceaseless questioning of values and the arts. Hence this period marks the beginning of modernism in art. Williams (2004: 120) describes it as ‘a response to the transformation of society that resulted from the upheaval of revolution and the advent of mass politics, as well as the more gradual but still traumatic shift to an increasingly urbanized, industrial economy, dependent on technological innovation and the exploitation of inexpensive labor’.

New approaches in art criticism developed, and the visual arts, literature, drama and music became interrelated. Freud and other radical thinkers explored the critical potential of psychoanalysis. The French philosopher Denis Diderot elevated art criticism to a high literary level and exerted great influence through his thinking. His philosophy demanded that paintings ‘should evoke deep feelings’ rather than reflect the frivolity of noble or royal patronage. He placed great value on realistic, everyday and common scenes of life, and his thinking developed into a more aggressive anti-academism and in the next century (Williams 2004: 94).

⁵¹ (Encyclopaedia of Social History 1994:486).

⁵² (Encyclopaedia of Social History 1994:486).

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After the Enlightenment, art became a never-ending sequence of competing 'movements', each seeking to establish its authority, each with its own ideology, and each subject to displacement in the process of artistic progress. Between c.1750 - 1850 Romanticism in art developed. It and has been described by historians as a symptom of the times rather than an explicit movement (Vaughan 1994: 17). Hauser (Vol.2 1962: 59) points out that this phenomenon 'cannot be explained by a spontaneous change of mind, but only by social displacements and restratifications'. Essentially Romanticism owes both its initiation and its influence to the Revolution, and mirrors the intellectual atmosphere created during this period, which was anti-traditionalist and anarchic. What originally began as a revolutionary attitude progressed into a reactionary standpoint against the misery of the exploited and the inadequacies of life and the effects of war.

Théodore Géricault spent two years in England during which time he became interested in depicting the commonplace and ordinary. He focused particularly on urban misery in the industrialized slums. *The piper* c.1821 depicts an impoverished old man playing the bagpipes against a backdrop of an expanding city. Once Géricault returned to Paris, his desire to represent reality and depict human suffering prompted him to visit hospitals in order to sketch the victims of mental disorder. Géricault and his contemporaries frequently studied inmates of hospitals and institutions for the criminally insane. His *Portrait of an insane man* c.1822 and *Mad woman* c.1823 (Fig.51) are examples of renderings which capture the 'real' in nature - the effects of aging and the 'haunting domain of irrationality' which, in the case of the madman, 'forces us to confront in the most individualized terms this frightening human potential' (Rosenblum 1984: 123).

The spirit of Romanticism⁵³ celebrated a reality that was based on intense personal emotion and so initiated new knowledge and art forms free of previous authorities (Vaughan 1994: 17). It demonstrated a tendency toward individualism, emotionalism and moralism with a predisposition to melancholy, elegiac moods and pessimism (Hauser

⁵³ Romanticism represented those people who were critical of existing conventions and were committed to strong social and political standpoints. Historians believe that revolutionary politics and avant-garde art evolved in the social context of Bohemianism. This was a term used by artists and intellectuals who were anti-establishment, independent of social conventions and opposed bourgeois society and organisational principles of capitalism (Frascina and Blake 1993: 151).

Vol.2 1962: 59). Thus, disillusionment was reflected in poetry, literature and art, and was centred on themes of death, loneliness and detachment.

Romanticism subscribed closely to the philosophy of Edmund Burke and was concerned with the roots of emotion. Burke reasoned that aesthetic pleasure could be stimulated not only by the awareness of beauty, but also by that which is mysterious or repellent, by the 'sublime' (Vaughan 1994: 33). Burke's theory emphasized the suggestive quality of art and gave new significance to what was disturbing; 'ultimately repulsion could become a new means of intimating the Ideal which, for the Romantics, was unknowable' (Vaughan 1994: 33).

Given the search for sublime experiences of terror and awe, Romantic landscape painters such as Casper David Friedrich explored the mysteries of life and death using nature as a metaphor. Nature is often revealed as a religious force that is omnipotent and engulfing. Friedrich rejected the lure of traditional idealized, corporeal forms and painted not only what he saw before him, but also what he saw within himself, thus reflecting Hegel's belief in the all-comprehending principle of the spirit (Rosenblum 1984: 86). For Friedrich the spirit meant the realm which reflected his religious fervour. In his *Monk by the sea* c.1809-10 (Fig.52) he reduced three landscape elements, land, sea and sky, in such a dramatic way that they took on a symbolic meaning. The mood of awe and doom in this work is intensified by the lonely diminutive figure facing the void before him, his back to the viewer as if contemplating his mortality. Like the lonely figure, the viewer is automatically placed in the same situation, facing a similar physical and spiritual chasm, as in Friedrich's *Wanderer above a sea of clouds* c.1818 (Fig.53).

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The concept of the sublime is dramatically displayed in the work of Spanish artist Francisco Goya. His work demonstrates a characteristic appreciation of the grotesque and a ruthless condemnation of the human condition, reflecting the time of crisis he was living in. Ferrari (1962: 11) describes Goya as a moralist who criticizes the 'idleness and ignorance of the privileged ruling class, the corruption of power and justice, the exploitation of the common people and the prevailing superstitions'. Thus the painting of *Two old people eating soup* c.1821-23 (Fig.54) portrays the witch-like figures of an old man and old woman in clearly dire straits.

Scenes of daily life in which human defects are often ridiculed with moral satire, and subjects that include religious hypocrisy and usurers, appear in Goya's *Caprichos* and the *Album* drawings. A major part of the series draws inspiration from Goya's obsession with women and old age in his later years - themes which were exploited in the literature of the 16th and 17th centuries, specifically the works of Quevedo, Cervantes and Juan de Valdés (Sanchez 1989: xc). Goya sees women as seductive temptresses, as people responsible for social evils and for the downfall of man. Terse titles explain or comment on the scenes, many of which are allegories with erotic overtones, alluding to sexual perversion and excess, to moral and physical degeneracy.⁵⁴

According to Sanchez (1989: 299), in the *Caprichios*, Goya reflects the contemporary interest in the theme of moral decadence using a combination of women and old age as a metaphor as in *La filiacion* c. 1797-98 (Fig.55). In *Hasta la muerte* c.1797-98 (Fig.56) Goya makes a comment on the vice of vanity by depicting an ugly old woman, dressing up and putting on her hat while looking in the mirror. Behind her are a group of young men laughing up their sleeves. The satirical themes of dirty old men and women further reflect the influence of literature such as Erasmus's *Moirra* (Folly).

Goya created many satires about prostitution, old bawds and witches. *La Celestina* c.1816-18 depicts a girl wearing a revealing dress while displaying herself on a balcony. Behind her is a grotesque old bawd, a theme based on the literary version of *La Celestina* c.1816, meaning manual of prostitution. These grotesque procuresses and duennas reveal falsehood, deception and malice by their postures, sniggering and self-concealment behind the young women. One etching in particular demonstrates Goya's criticism of hypocrisy in the church. *Ruega por ella* c.1797-98 (Fig.57) depicts an old bawd counting her rosary, deceitfully portraying an air of piety while a young girl prepares herself for prostitution. *Mother Celestina* c.1816-18 (Fig. 58) depicts an old woman slouched in a chair at a table on which rest bottles of alcohol. In her one hand she holds a bottle, in her other a rosary,

⁵⁴ The exploration of the sublime, included fantasy, mysticism, horror and sexual perversity and often found expression in art and literature as images of naked nymphs, fairies and demons. This trend was typical of the period between 1770 and 1830 throughout Europe. It is notable that Lavater's influence of physiognomics, mentioned in chapter 1 (footnote 12), extended far beyond Switzerland. His claims included the link between facial features and criminal characteristics in people and one of his theories suggest that the pug nose has this link, a characteristic feature of many of the figures in Goya's etchings.

<www.cas.usf.edu/criminology/po3610c.html>

leaving little doubt that the drawing refers to Mother Celestina herself, and not just to any procuress.⁵⁵

In addition to the literary tradition, carnival celebrations common to folklore with which Goya was familiar focused on popular humour using common subjects such as the aged in various forms and gestures symbolic of moral criticism.⁵⁶ These devices provide a visual association with deeper meanings.

One of Goya's most significant works in the context of old age is *Goya attended by Doctor Arrieta* c.1820 (Fig.59) done when he was 73 years old. It is a self-portrait and depicts his doctor friend who saved him from serious illness not only by medicine but by his profound humanity, as indicated by the caring arm with which he supports Goya. There is a parallel in religious work where the dead Christ is sustained by an angel. Sanchez (1989: 270) suggests that the faint figures in the background could allude to demons awaiting Goya's death and that the image of the artist's agony is more an imagined than a real fear of facing death.

⁵⁵ The church at this particular time was cruel and ruthless, for example, in the treatment of 'false' converts from the Jewish faith; and many tortures and atrocities were performed by the Spanish Inquisition in the name of the church.

⁵⁶ Sanchez (1989: xciii) states that the language of folly and buffoonery and carnival festivities was a popular device in the eighteenth century and the only possible voice to express a moral judgement freely and without concessions.

Chapter 4

New realities and looking beyond old age

The period from c.1850 marks the beginning of 'Modernism', which Williams (2004:120) describes as 'a response to the transformation of society that resulted from the upheaval of revolution, the advent of mass politics, as well as the more gradual but still traumatic shift to an increasingly urbanized, industrial economy, dependent on technological innovation and the exploitation of inexpensive labour'.

One of the most influential theologians was a staunch supporter of evolution. Herbert Spencer developed the social application of *Darwinism* or social evolution. His ideology made use of Darwin's model, namely, the survival of the fittest and natural selection, and had far reaching repercussions decades later. It is still recognized today existing in society. The factory owners, as leaders of industry, embraced social Darwinism to justify laissez-faire, or unrestricted capitalism, imposing whatever treatment they saw fit for those below them on the social ladder.⁵⁷ Modernization inculcated existing social class divisions; reinforced binarisms between the rich bourgeoisie and the under-privileged, and marginalized workers.⁵⁸ The expansion of capitalism and industrialization initiated the rebuilding of major cities and, as a result, many people were displaced due to unemployment and poor living conditions. The accompanying social and economic changes impacted on every community, and the poor and aged were particularly affected.

Frascina and Blake (1993: 99) maintain that over a million people were living in a state of poverty verging on starvation and that, in 1863, 118 000 of the urban poor were officially listed as destitute while 10 000 others were arrested as vagrants and beggars.⁵⁹ Since many of these people were old, artists were prompted to portray the plight of the

⁵⁷ (Magro, E. 2005). <www.conspiracyarchive.com/NewAge/Darwin.htm >

⁵⁸ Modernization is the process of cultural and social transformation by the avant-garde (Crouch 1999:8).

⁵⁹ The modernization program included strict laws against vagabondage and mendicancy. Baron Hausmann's estimate of people displaced by the reconstruction of the city was 350 000 which was a large percentage of the total population (Frascina and Blake 1993: 90).

poor and elderly, as evidenced by the drawings of old men and ragpickers by artists such as like Francois Bovin, Charles-Joseph Travies and Albert Bertall (Figs.60-62).

Modernism in the arts developed most profoundly in France, where the political and social upheaval was most intense, and the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* came under constant criticism because of its outmoded attitudes that still supported idealist trends and the narrative art of Romanticism. A gradual dismantling of this system began as artists attempted to embrace new conceptions of what art was or ought to be (Williams 2004: 120).

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The artistic movement that dominated early Modernism is Naturalism. Hauser (1962: 60) reserves the concept of ‘realism’ for the philosophy opposed to Romanticism. He maintains that Naturalism as an artistic style, and Realism as a philosophical attitude, are distinctly separate; artists such as Courbet and Honoré Daumier were Realists in that they reflected this philosophical attitude – a position which heralded disenchantment with Enlightenment ideals. These artists focused on contemporary life in industrialized cities, depicted disinherited masses of people, and thus gained the reputation of being social realists.

Avoiding any idealization, the realist Honoré Daumier portrays random aspects of human existence: ordinary, unimportant people, including the old, in natural unposed attitudes. Eisenman says of Daumier (1994: 208) that he is a realist by virtue of his common focus on contemporary working-class life and urban and rural conflict. Daumier’s choice of images is conditioned more by political than by artistic considerations and ‘chose anachronism to satirize the ‘real conditions’ of his age (Eisenman 1994: 208). This trend is exemplified in a series of Daumier’s satirical sketches and sculptures of caricaturing old men, particularly those holding political positions (Fig.63-66). Daumier’s sculptures and lithographs were anti-government, and as a result he was sentenced to six months’ imprisonment.

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Courbet’s ‘realism’ is not a matter of painting a ‘realistic’ appearance, or of focusing on ‘humble’ subject matter. These were the conventional means of other realist

artists who dealt with human suffering. Rather, Courbet's figures represent various forms of commercial exploitation or victimization as a result of industrialization and urbanization, thus making his art controversial and even politically subversive (Frascina and Blake 1994: 67).

Courbet's thinking was directly influenced by the philosophy of P.J. Proudhon, a political anarchist who opposed all forms of government and propagated 'peasant socialism' (Rubin 1980: 9).⁶⁰

His idea of liberty was anti-government and was linked to the ideals of the Enlightenment. In Courbet's work art loses its 'aestheticism' in order to become relevant – both socially and politically. In the eyes of Proudhon and Courbet, naturalism in art and political rebellion are different expressions of the same attitude - and they see no essential difference between social and artistic truth. Courbet declared: 'By reaching the conclusion that the ideal and all that it entails should be denied, I can completely bring about the emancipation of the individual and finally achieve democracy. Realism is essentially democratic art' (Williams 2004: 124).

Courbet's realism, as he claimed in 1861, was 'the negation of the ideal' and its purpose was to reveal the Romantic notion of liberty through the imagination by demystifying creative activity (Rubin 1980: 30, 71). He considered the artist a worker, and not an inspired poetic genius with privileged access to the ideal. Thus art propelled political change by challenging the existing academic relationship between art and the viewer, changing the passive and proletarian *Salon* spectators into artistic collaborators, thereby essentially elevating and empowering them at the expense of their alleged bourgeois superiors (Eisenman 1994: 212).

Courbet achieved this concept in his painting *Burial at Ornans* c.1849-50 (Fig. 67), and effectively questioned the status of art within the society in which it was produced. In this painting Courbet refused to idealize his figures, and portrayed ugly old women, drunken old men and other figures that seem uninterested in the funeral. Conservative critics opposed his realism, declaring that the ugliness and crudity of his peasants and

⁶⁰ Rubin (1980: 34) states that Proudhon's social aims were accomplished by altering human consciousness. He believed that the resignation to mechanisation was encouraged by religion and government and was made possible by a submissiveness to myth. He felt that by convincing man of the existence of external and universal powers beyond his reach, religion deprived him of his capacity for self-fulfilment. Proudhon believed that anarchy was the only possible condition for social progress, because it was the only condition that respected the positivist premise of the physical and economic nature of man. Proudhon strongly opposed Rousseau's belief in man's essential spirituality, believing that man could change society through the mutual interaction of consumer and worker.

workers, and his portrayal of old, fat and indecent middle-class women, demonstrated anti-establishment attitudes and his 'contempt for idealism' (Hauser 1962: 63). This is the *avant-garde* in practice, a 'self-conscious and critical engagement with representations of modernization and all its rapid and contradictory transformations in pursuit of capitalism and bourgeois ideals' (Fracina and Blake 1993: 103).

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Towards the dawn of the 20th century, modern life began to reassess man's beliefs, continually questioning and challenging the fundamental nature of 'reality'. Science had radically changed the concept of life and the physical world and continued to produce new theories. 'Meaning', 'truth' and 'reality' became problematic and relative terms. Crouch (1999:72) suggests that artists were confused by the human condition and were drawing on the cultural tradition of Romanticism; the key issue was 'the struggle of the individual against an alienating and unsympathetic world', in a welter of industrialization. These feelings were legitimized intellectually by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, both of whom believed in the 'inner essence'.⁶¹ The new psychology associated with Sigmund Freud and his interpretation of dreams opened up the concept of the unconscious.

One of the most influential poets of the 19th century, Charles Baudelaire, reflects a deep hostility to all forms of modernism. He believed that developing and cultivating the life of the imagination was essential in order to exist in the midst of a disturbing and oppressive society (Williams 2004: 129). The thinking reflected in his poetry was fundamental to the development of Symbolism in the 1890s. Goldwater (1979:1) describes Symbolism as part of a philosophical idealism in revolt against the positivist and scientific attitudes that affected painting and literature. The importance of art for the Symbolists lay precisely in its ability to transcend realism. Their search for the mysterious reality behind appearances resulted in an art that aimed at representing inner states of reality through emotionally charged images.

By the beginning of the 20th century the concept of reality had changed and copying nature had receded in importance. Consequently the subject matter of the

⁶¹ Having already been liberated from past religious codes by the Enlightenment, Nietzsche (1844-1900) encouraged the individual to transcend his environment by acts of supreme spiritual self-determination. The quasi-mystical, visionary nature of his writings was particularly valued by the German Expressionists (Crouch 1999: 73).

Symbolists is increasingly esoteric and becomes visionary and dreamlike rather than realistic and representational. Artists during this period reflect a deep disillusionment with modern society and a pessimistic critique of urban civilization. Also based on personal experiences, metaphorical images are chosen for their ability to convey states of mind.

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The Norwegian painter and graphic artist Edvard Munch stated that ‘a work of art comes only from inside a human being’ and that ‘nature is not only what is visible to the eye, it is the inner reflection of the soul in the mind’s eye’ (Heller 2002: 11). Munch was consumed by the anguish and mental anxieties prevailing in society, and by the unavoidable loneliness that, according to the philosophy of existentialism, was inescapable. Munch’s art predominantly features themes of pain and death motivated by personal tragedy, and betrays the influence of the celebrated writer Ibsen. Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and Reinhardt’s production of the plays, which focused on the theme of hereditary illness and death, intrigued Munch and are reflected in paintings titled *Scream* c.1895 and *Vampire* c.1895 (Heller 1984: 190). During the last decades of his life, Munch produced a series of self-portraits in which he traced, year by year, his mental and physical progress towards his approaching death. He paints his self-portrait *Between clock and bed* c.1840-42 (Fig.68) as a *memento mori* in which he places himself standing between the clock and the bed; he depicts himself as an old, lonely figure tall and emaciated in a brightly coloured room with his life’s work behind him.

The three stages of life, youth, maturity and old age, was a popular theme amongst the Symbolists, and is evident in Munch’s *Women in three stages* c.1894 and Gustave Klimt’s *Three ages of life* c.1905 (Fig.69). Evident by the titles *Night*, *The day*, *Spring* and *Autumn* Hodler’s paintings are synonymous with the stages of life. Hodler interprets the life-course through the relations between the sexes, and in most of his paintings the role of women is emphasized, woman being the ‘spiritual guide of man’ (Goldwater 1979: 236). The Symbolists’ preoccupation with the stages of life, often in a sequence of related pictures, their correspondence of human feeling with the changes in nature, and their suggestion of an unseen reality are all indicative of idealistic thinking (Goldwater 1979: 236).

Other Symbolist artists like James Ensor targeted women with his aggression, reflected in his chauvinist remark about red-lipped prostitutes, and in his painting *Strange*

masks c.1891, in which portraits of elderly women have been used as a metaphor for misogynist mockery (Eisenman 1994: 315). The same theme is taken in *Old woman with mask* c.1891 in which the woman is surrounded by masks, but at the same time her face is a mask, and behind her is the hollow mask of death.

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In Germany in particular, the influence of Ensor and Munch led to the development of personal manner in German expressionism, and was essentially based on a subjective feeling toward objective reality and the world of the imagination. One independent German artist whose work was intensely affected by her environment, and who portrayed her own aging body and themes centered on death and human suffering, was Käthe Kollwitz. At a young age Kollwitz's life was influenced by strong personalities. Her grandfather, father and brother were outspoken and radical in their religious and political views. Consequently, as a young woman Kollwitz was actively involved in political events and social gatherings, and her strong feelings for the rights of people developed from there.

As the wife of a doctor in a poor working class district of Berlin, she became familiar with 'the social deprivations of the proletariat, the spirit of revolutionary protest and death' (Timm 1980: 6).⁶² Reluctant to submit to the ideals of academic convention, which promoted a socialist ideology, Kollwitz made a significant shift from symbolism to a more realistic approach in order to effectively portray reality as experienced in social injustice and humanitarian issues. Thus she became one of the pioneers of social realism⁶³ (Prelinger 1992: 21).

Around 1909 Kollwitz became preoccupied with aging and death, focusing particularly on women and women with children. As with Munch, Kollwitz's work is imbued with the binarisms of life and death.

Many of Kollwitz's artworks are self-portraits in old age (Figs.70, 71). Some of her prints show death as a friend giving his hand to the old and the tormented in a gesture of

⁶² Her interest in Emile Zola's naturalist mining novel *Germinal* c.1885 reflects her long-time interest in the lives of workers as opposed to the bourgeoisie. Max Halbe's *Jugend* c.1933 was a play that led her to produce a series of works on the themes of social deprivation of the proletariat and the spirit of revolutionary protest, death and human conditions (Prelinger 1992: 21).

⁶³ This should not be confused with socialist realism that presented a selected reading of reality to comply with the demands of an ideological programme for artistic production where objectification over subjectivity is the criteria (Crouch 1999: 124).

release. Among these is one self-portrait as an old woman where she depicts the hand of death laid on her shoulder. She instinctively raises her hand to grasp that of death as if in readiness to depart. This mood is also reflected in *Self-portrait in profile* c.1938 (Fig.72), done when she was over 70. She depicts herself with a walking stick, stooped by old age, the burdens of life and sorrow.

Kollwitz's preoccupation with old age and death was mostly due to a state of anxiety centring on the safety of her children. The eventual personal tragedy involving the death of her younger son in the war left her consumed with grief and resulted in her memorial sculpture to her son depicting both her husband and herself in old age.

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World War 1 had a devastating effect on Europe because of the millions that were killed or wounded. Many observers and critics blamed capitalism for the war, in as much as the destruction was brought about more efficiently by modern technology, which the previous century had celebrated in the hope of a better life. The war was seen as a 'betrayal of enlightened values' and revealed that man's reason had the capacity for evil (Williams 2004: 188).

In the first three decades of the 20th century progressive reformers had strong faith in science as the cure-all for the problems relating to industrialization and human society. The revelations of a new science of genetics gave birth to a new science of social engineering. Eugenists argued that defective individuals brought about social problems such as pauperism, feeble-mindedness, criminality, prostitution, alcoholism and other symptoms which could be avoided by introducing a rational and efficient approach to social problems. One of their solutions was sterilization.⁶⁴ Many eugenicist theories stem from Spencer and his social Darwinism and also from Lavater's theories on physiognomics linking crime with certain facial characteristics. Phrenology or head-shapes was an equally popular field of research to scientists supporting Darwin's theory of evolution. These theories supported arguments favouring eugenics, for example the Nazi party used to demonstrate that biological devolution was present in the skulls of Jewish people, justifying their execution. The crucial point to be understood is that the poor and homeless classes, many of which included old people, represented a biologically or

⁶⁴ (Garland, A. Date unknown). <www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay1text.html>

inherently inferior group of individuals who suffered as a result. Professor of European history, Richard Weikart states that 'Darwinism played a key role not only in the rise of eugenics, but also in euthanasia, infanticide, abortion, and racial extermination, all ultimately embraced by the Nazis'.⁶⁵

The shock of the war and its 'cold' aftermath, the persistent threat of atomic annihilation, the recognition of human suffering, and the perception that life had no meaning or value evoked the protest of artists against a mechanized culture that made no allowance for the nonconforming individual (Williams 2004: 187). By the end of the Second World War, despair and the feeling that self and existence had no value or meaning was rife. Europe witnessed the most appalling atrocities that left it with devastated cities and millions dead, and which finally culminated in the horrors of the atom bomb.

As a result some artistic expression became harsher, more defiant and rebellious, and the work of Francis Bacon, who distorted the human figure to express strong emotion, became indicative of the 'age of psychology' and the fear of mental illness. Other artists retreated from the radical experimentation of the early 20th vanguard, and turned to social realism on the one hand, particularly in the field of photography and to self-analysis on the other. Alan Trachtenberg writes in '*Signifying the real; documentary photography in the 1930's*', that during the great depression, photography emerged as the leading documentary medium. Photographs by Dorethea Lange, for example *White angel breadline* (1933) and *Jobless on edge of pea field* (1937) depicting elderly impoverished men, and other photographers like Ben Shahn and Walker Evans exposed the desperate condition of people and humanized the tragic consequences of the great depression. Lange traveled America with her visual documentation in the hopes of influencing the government to change social welfare laws but her work was so critical that the army impounded it.⁶⁶ The work of these photographers profoundly influenced the development of photography in the decades to follow.

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⁶⁵ (Weikart, R. 2005). <www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay_1_text.html>

⁶⁶ (Anreus, A. 2006). <www.psupress.psu.edu/Justataste/samplechapters/justatasteAnreus.html>

Realism in art took on many forms after the mid-20th century, and art generally reflected the social emphasis on youth culture which evolved during the pop art era. Themes on aging and mortality became rare after the mid-20th century and appeared in select examples where the artist focused on his own mortality. In 1980, when Bacon was 71, he painted a triptych self-portrait at a time when he became concerned at his own mortality (Fig.73). His old age and the fact that several of his friends had died in the past decade, including his partner George Dyer, who committed suicide, left him lonely and fearing death.

Chapter 5

Contemporary depiction of old age

Before I turn to late 20th century art, it is worthwhile to consider how perceptions toward aging and old age have developed, and the possible influence such ideas may have had on artists. In the last few decades of the 20th century longevity and the number of old people have increased. There were many contributing factors to this change in demography, including unprecedented provision for the elderly, either through government or the private sector; improvements in living standards, diet and hygiene; and quantum leaps in medical science and research. These factors have resulted in a far higher life expectancy and better quality of life for society in general (Thane 2005: 277).⁶⁷

The benefits available to the older person are, however, still based on the economic status of the individual and reflect the different lifestyles available to individuals on the basis of wealth. Although life has improved for the older person, the binarism between rich and poor is still evident, particularly in developing countries, and has resulted in the continued marginalization of the elderly.⁶⁸ Old age has manifest disparities throughout the various cultures, and within the global split between east and west. Western (European and North American) culture has a far more advanced infrastructure for the aged.⁶⁹

Noumbissi's research (2003) on poverty in South Africa reveals that the percentage of aged, especially among the black population, is the highest in Africa. While more than

⁶⁷ According to Thane (2005: 284) by the end of the century there was a simultaneous survival of large numbers of fit people in their 60s and 70s and large numbers of chronically ill older people. The majority of people surviving to their 80s or 90s at the end of the century did not suffer from acute illness and regarded themselves as in good health and capable of independent activity.

⁶⁸ Bobbio (2001: 5) maintains that in traditional societies the older person has the experience in terms of life skills such as morals, customs, techniques of survival, treatment of diseases and attitudes toward life after death and this knowledge is passed on from father to son. In developed societies, however, the accelerating change in custom, technology and the arts has completely overturned the relationship between those who possess knowledge and those who don't. Thus, in modern society, the youth are thought to have the knowledge because of their ability to learn and experiment.

⁶⁹ (Noumbissi, A. 2003). <<http://www.uaps.org/confageing/anoumbissi.pdf>>

14% of the white population is aged 60 or over, only 6% of Africans are so distributed.⁷⁰ Within the white community the prevalence of abject poverty is not endemic, whereas within the black population more than 40% of the elderly reside in the poorest conditions. Those living in abject poverty do not have access to electricity, clean water, garbage disposal or flush toilets. The use of water from rivers and dams, and of animal dung for cooking and heating, seriously affects the health and well-being of the black population and especially of the elderly.

Advances in medical technology, and the availability of medical care to the elderly black population of South Africa, has caused the percentage of elderly to rise dramatically. In addition to this an important proportion of the elderly (about 10%) continue to work in advanced old age as care givers, due to the increasing number of orphans as a result of the death of young parents who have fallen victim to HIV/AIDS.⁷¹

Although older people these days remain active for longer, the universal age of retirement remains at 60 or 65.⁷² Within this large proportion of South African society, there is very little emphasis on preparation for retirement, although within the more affluent, predominantly white society there is a tendency to emphasize preparation for the future after retirement. Financial investments and life insurance plans are encouraged and the trend toward greater freedom is evident in the increased number of retirement homes and villages where older people can live independently.

There is more security for the elderly today in matters of health (Thane 2005: 263).⁷³ Much research is being done on aging and the diseases associated with it, and as preventative treatment before its onset. In general men and women not only live longer, but remain healthy and active later in life. This has been the desire of man since Plato's time - the prolongation of active life. All these factors have contributed to a positive and objective attitude toward old age in the 20th -century compared to previous centuries.

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⁷⁰ (Noumbissi, A. 2003). <<http://www.uaps.org/confageing/anoumbissi.pdf>>

⁷¹ (Noumbissi, A. 2003). <<http://www.uaps.org/confageing/anoumbissi.pdf>>

⁷² Although people were living longer and remaining healthy to later ages, retirement at earlier ages is common, especially where high levels of unemployment recur.

⁷³ Improvement in medical technology and drug therapy resulted in procedures such as implantation of cardiac pacemakers and joint and organ replacements. Causes of death in older age groups of heart disease declined through improved diet and exercise (Thane 2005: 282).

The last decade or two have seen a number of books and films depicting old people with a contented, happy disposition - *Babette's feast* (1987), *Local hero* (1983), *On golden pond* (1981), *Red* (1995) and *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989). Conversely people who hate old age, and have become bad tempered and frustrated by it, have also been shown - *Jean de Florette* (1986), *Manon des sources* (1987) and *Lost in Yonkers* (1993).⁷⁴

Many factors have contributed to a more positive attitude to aging in the 21st century. Through the media and consumerism, diet regimes, medications and anti-aging creams, a healthy way of eating and an emphasis on fitness have promoted the ideal condition of health, youthfulness and beauty. But the wish to retain a youthful appearance and a younger lifestyle has become obsessive in the wealthier sectors of society. With this in mind it seems that in the 21st century the psychological response to aging is as significant as it was in antiquity, as witnessed by attempts to mask the effects of old age for as long as possible. This situation also hints at the modern-day marginalization of old people evident in a general disregard and lack of respect for them. This attitude is reflected in the paucity of 20th century artworks which address the themes of old age. The scarcity of such images is ironic, given the media emphasis on idealism and longevity. What is significant is that in most cases where artists have addressed themes of old age, they are generally themselves middle-aged or have personally encountered old age through contact with relatives or friends.

It follows that the tendency to marginalize the aged is generally found among the young people. Cumming and Henry (1961:4) note that apart from biological changes during middle and old age, social and psychological aspects of aging include 'changes in attitudes, sentiments and values'. Furthermore Schaw and Henry (in Cumming and Henry 1961:8) have concluded that there are shifts in orientation in the stages of life from 30 to 60 where the individual becomes increasingly preoccupied with 'inner states' and an 'abstract inner-world orientation'. Based on these observations, it is plausible to contend that artists who have addressed aging have focused on 'inner states' which include an apprehension of mortality and 'abstract' thoughts on the spiritual aspect of life.

Today aging is relative, for example, a skateboarder of 20 can be considered old. Conversely a middle-aged person may participate in 'younger' activities such as tattoos that would previously have been considered taboo (Holland 2004: 7). This thinking is

⁷⁴ Novels include Anne Tyler's *Patchwork planet* (1998), Dick Thompson's *The last resort* (1998) and Angela Carter's *Wise children* (1991) and poems by Jenny Joseph and Dylan Thomas (Thane 2005: 293, 295).

typical of 21st century society and reflects the perceptions of youth culture.⁷⁵ Since the 1950s the consumer market has targeted young people and is structured to appeal to their tastes and instant gratification. This includes music, clothes, cars and even cell phones. As a result little attention is given to the aged and, if they are acknowledged, it is in relation to their retentions of youth and an active state of life in an ideal old age. Prejudice against older adults through attitudes and behaviour has been termed *agism* and was introduced in America by Dr. R. Butler in 1968. Protection from age discrimination has become a growing concern over the last few decades indicated by the amount of literature on the subject. It continues to exist in many areas of life but is often not acknowledged. A recent example is the devastation that occurred as a result of hurricane Katrina; 60% of the victims were 61 or older. The harsh reality is that the bizarre notion of a new social Darwinism exists in contemporary society.⁷⁶

Idealism is a term that is no longer seen as central in contemporary society. It has become a subliminal ideology that is promoted and distributed through mass media in the interests of consumerism. It is aimed at portraying certain ideals related to all aspects of life, including the phenomenon of the aging process. These percepts are directly related to the youth culture of the 20th and 21st centuries.

When applied to the context of contemporary art, the concept of Plato's 'ideal forms' no longer seems to have any currency. Contemporary artists do not compare the model's body to a conceptualized perfect form. Drawing is not conceived as mediation between the ideal and the real, which were previously coloured by ethics and theology. Steve Connor (1989: 81) suggests that 'what holds modernism together in art is a program or ideology, rather than any particular, identifiable form of practice; correspondingly, what underlies debate about postmodernism is a shift in this program'.

A key figure in understanding contemporary art is Jacques Derrida who bases his views to a large extent upon those of Nietzsche rather than Marx. He rejects systems that 'prioritize the universalist, communal and objectifying approach to understanding the world' and concentrates instead on subjectivity, the quest for some 'individualistic, essentialist experience and understanding'- notions which were fundamental to

⁷⁵ In the 1950s there was a preoccupation with the study of 'youth' and 'subculture' particularly in Britain, when there was a growing interest in the new concept of the teenager. This term was conceived in the USA and was primarily a marketing and advertising invention and a response to growing numbers of affluent young people (Holland 2004: 20).

⁷⁶ (Age concern, England, 2007). <www.ageconcern.org.uk/AgeConcern/ageism_about.asp> (Administration on aging, US, 2004). <www.ilcusa.org/prj/ageism.htm>

Expressionism and Surrealism. Derrida believes that in order for the individual to make a difference to the structures within society, he should question 'the language of the dominant ideology, attempting at least to disrupt and destabilize it' (Crouch 1999: 171). 'Deconstruction' is the term used by Derrida to describe the process of persistent criticizing of prevailing ideas, be they cultural, social or political. In this context certain contemporary artists have attempted to 'deconstruct' the ideology of idealism.

In this final chapter I will highlight some of the artists who have 'deconstructed' notions of idealism to portray themes of aging and mortality. I will then discuss my own work in the context of contemporary South African artists who have touched on these themes.

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Lucian Freud participates in the realist tradition, and his depictions of old age, include representations of his mother. *Painter's mother resting II* c.1976-77 and *Painter's mother III* c.1977 (Figs.74, 75) show his elderly mother. Predeville (2000:186) describes Freud's realism as 'excessive'; he does not glamorize old age but presents the truth in a crudely realistic way, defying idealism of any kind. Although Freud's work is manifestly realist, Heidegger's contentions in his essay '*The origin of the work of art*' are valuable in grasping it. Heidegger contends that the work of art 'is not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be present at any given time; it is on the contrary, the reproduction of the thing's general essence' (Heidegger in Blocker and Jeffers 1999: 261). In this context Predeville states (2000:183) that 'the work of art is not a picture of the world but is rather something that brings a world into being' as 'historical, cultural and collective; it is affective and social'.

In his later years, when he was over seventy, Freud painted his self-portrait *Painter working, reflection* c.1993 (Fig.76). He faces the viewer as if communicating directly with him, bridging the gap between artist and spectator. In this painting Freud's communication is confrontational because he does not assume the conventional, dignified pose of an old man but stands naked and exposed. In this context he reminds the viewer of mortality on a personal and collective level.

More recently British sculptor Ron Mueck often features the theme of old age and mortality. Like Freud's figures, Mueck's are not based on impersonal observation but are brutally honest. Often awkward, flawed and imperfect, they counter idealism and any

preconceived notions of a perfect body. Mueck's sculptures conform to absolute naturalism and observe the naked body rather than the nude, to the point where Mueck's own hair is implanted into the surface of the silicone, though he still manages to 'restore subjectivity and humanism to the hyper-real' (Greeves 2002: 59).

Since Mueck trained as a model-maker for television, advertising and film, his sculptures reflect his ability to reproduce the real by using infinite surface detail. He deliberately exaggerates or diminishes the sizes of his figures, however, and so creates 'an existentialist realism rather than an illusionist counterfeit realism' (Greeves 2002: 59). Greeves (2002:59) describes Mueck's work as 'psychological realism' because it conveys 'emotional states and...is the impression of an inner life that holds our continued attention'.

In his *Seated woman* c.2000 (Fig.77) Mueck creates a portrait of senescence. The old woman sits on a low stool as if waiting, her facial expression and pose suggesting contemplation. She is not life size, but is reduced to only 60cm in height, though she retains a life-like representation. Mueck's images of the elderly are all sourced in his own experience, or are linked to him through familial bonds. Hence his deep empathy with the aged. *Dead dad* c.1996-97 (Fig.78) is an anatomically exact simulacrum of his deceased father's body, but is diminished to a disturbing one metre in length. The small figure, which seems immortalized in acrylic and fiberglass resin, creates a 'lapse between the reality of the art object and reality itself' and 'demands a response that integrates emotion and cognition' (Greeves 2002: 56).

Mueck's work is intensely personal and reflects particular representations, though they function so as to break down the boundaries between art and reality, connecting the viewer to universal emotions and experiences. In the context of old age and mortality, Mueck's works function as transitional objects for himself and the viewer. According to Winnicott (in Schneider Adams 1996:201) the 'transitional object becomes the paradigm of all art and always has a transitional aspect'. Mueck's sculptures of old people and the dead are 'visual reminders of another level of existence' and serve to connect the artist to those people, for example, *Old woman in bed* c.2000 (Fig.79), which portrays Mueck's memory of the last days of his wife's grandmother and acts as a transitional object connecting life and death, presence and absence (Schneider Adams 1996: 201). In a similar way *Man in blankets* c.2000 (Fig.80), a 60cm long replica of an old, sick man reduced to the size of a baby, becomes a transitional object to the viewer - a bridge between life, death and the after-life. Mueck's verism and reduced scale echo the

decreasing life of the subject, his frailty and isolation, and elicit an emotional response from the viewer.

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South African Art

For the rest of this chapter I will focus on art in South Africa that has featured themes on old age. Such works are not common, but they have occurred in the history of South African art, extending from the colonial period of the 19th century to present times. The more notable examples include the early works of Hugo Naudé that portray the humble models he chose to depict (Berman 1993:12). *The gardener*, late 19th century, shows the aged figure of a gardener and represents one of the many paintings Naudé did of farm labourers and servants.

The later work of Irma Stern also reveals an interest in the aged, evident in her *Golden shawl* c.1945, which depicts an old Arab whom she had seen in Zanzibar. What intrigued her about his disposition was that he was praying, and in her painting Stern aims at representing an atmosphere of spiritual repose (Berman 1993: 78).

The spiritual realities of old age recall my own work which was initiated firstly by the concept of old age and mortality. James 4:14 which states: ‘For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass...the grass withers, and the flower thereof falleth away’; and which continues by asking, ‘(What) is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth?’⁷⁷ Secondly, and more importantly, the concept of mortality recalls what for me lies beyond this life.

My interest in old age was initiated three years ago as a result of observations made of the number of elderly shoppers who attended the weekly pensioners’ discount day at my local supermarket. At the time my 84-year-old mother resided with me for nine months on account of illness, and a year later, my elderly and terminally ill brother-in-law lived with my family and myself for four months.

Initially I responded to the interesting physicality associated with old age, but my continuous contact with old people, and my personal encounter with my elderly relatives, had a significant impact on my psyche. Consequently my work reflects an aesthetic and psychological response to themes of old age, abjection and mortality.

⁷⁷ (The Holy Bible 1984: 1764).

For me old age recalls a person's mortality and their diminishing state. It is the finitude of life, the culmination of existence, and demonstrates the frailty of living amid the deterioration of body and mind. At the end of life everything on earth that is important and has value to natural man - his desires and accomplishments becomes insignificant in the light of imminent death. Hence the retrogression of what is made of flesh and blood but, simultaneously, the emergence of the spiritual aspect of life which assumes more importance in old age when it represents the passing from one level of existence to another.

Since I believe in life after death, then, the spiritual aspect of life assumes more significance to me and the anticipation of an after-life convinces me that man on earth does not finish at death, but steps into a new spiritual life. It is this that gives relevance to our existence and continues to inspire and motivate the theme of old age in my work. My spiritual awareness governs the thoughts and responses which influence my creativity and are ultimately reflected in it.

My *Seated old man* c.2004 (Fig.81) and *Seated old woman* c.2004 (Fig.82) are rendered in such a way that they provoke ambiguity in the relationship between the edges of the figure and the ground, creating an atmosphere that hovers between reality and transience. Areas of body and chair, chair and background, lose their definition to create an ethereal ambience. The presence of human existence is conveyed, and its immanent transcendence is opposed to an illusionist reality. The old man's hands grip the chair arms, metaphorically describing him as clinging to life in this world. My painting reflects the mortality of man and portrays a quiet wrestling between the physical reality of this life and the spiritual reality of an after-life.

The face of the man resembles my deceased father, although this was unintentional. The rendition of the face is a subconscious visual representation of the memory of my father. Berleant (in Maclagan 2001: 10) describes this phenomenon by pointing out that everything, every place and every event which is experienced by an aware body with sensory directness and immediate significance, has an aesthetic element to it.

Psychological and aesthetic responses combine and constitute an undeniable 'inner' dimension of aesthetic experience. In the context of my paintings, aesthetic experience is subconsciously and continuously affected by my environment and circumstances. This 'psychological lining of experience', as Maclagan aptly puts it, has a binary function in that artist and spectator both experience a feeling or emotion. This refers to 'the complex and shifting array of sensations, feelings, fantasies, thoughts and other less easily

categorisable events of mental life that accompany all our perceptions whether we are aware of them or not' (Maclagan 2001: 7).

Berleant's contention that everything that we see takes on an aesthetic significance is exemplified in the work of Andries Botha, *White skin blue* c.1998 (Fig.83). He addresses themes of old age specifically with reference to his father. In a series of photographs he focuses on realistic images of his father and elderly men which not only portray a personal encounter with old age but also describe a certain aspect of cultural taboo associated with tattoos and 'low' life. Botha's work is a rare example of contemporary South African art that addresses old age. Given that he often centres on the demise of the colonial and apartheid eras, such images function as metaphors for decline and the diminishing role of minority groups within society. Thus Botha adopts a personal perspective in his work, based on the presumed role-model of his father and the rippling effects of their relationship within a broader social context.⁷⁸

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Intensity c.2005 (Fig.84) is a triptych reflecting an interplay between aesthetic and psychological qualities and is based on the experience of having my elderly relative residing at my house. This septuagenarian, who is extremely conscientious about his personal circumstances and is consumed by his aging body and failing health, appears to be neurotic about achieving something significant before he dies. His ghost-like, aged face and haunting glare into the unknown represent his intense anxiety at impending death. This anxiety is also metaphorically reflected in the image of his hands, emulating-piano playing as if in rapid escalating crescendos.

My visual perception of this personal experience of an aged person would be classified by Maclagan as the recognition of an 'aesthetic element'. Maclagan maintains (2001:102) that 'words, perceptions, feelings and other mental states of the artist are, consciously or unconsciously, projected or translated into the work of art'. Tantamount to this is Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological view of the world. He brings the division between subjective and objective facets of experience together in an 'interweaving' between seer and seen. This involves the stimulation of many psychological effects such as 'feelings, memories, and imaginative constructions of one kind or another - many of

⁷⁸ <www.andriesbotha.net>

which may or may not enter into our conscious awareness of perception' (Maclagan 2001: 35). This has relevance to my paintings and to the work of Andries Botha, as demonstrated in our response to close contact with elderly relatives.

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One of the most striking examples of an artwork that is the result of the psychological effects stimulated by the response to the human condition, specifically in relation to old age, is by American-born photographer Roger Ballen. He 'began a photographic journey...in search of aesthetic symbols that synthesized an essential character' of the *platteland* and 'its historical presence, its mythology' (Ballen 1994: no pagination). Between 1986 and 1994 Ballen produced a set of photographs which highlighted in realistic, almost documentary style, the plight of aged and poor rural white families who ironically, 'despite half a century of political privilege in white South Africa are archetypes of alienation and immobility, victims of both political forces and personal circumstances'. In the context of Maclagan's thoughts on psychological effects, Ballen's photographs such as *Deep-level gold miner in bedroom* c.1987 (Fig. 85), *Old woman* c. 1992 (Fig 86), *A Swart, goat farmer* c.1992 (Fig.87) and *Sergeant F. de Bruin, Department of prisons employee* c.1992 (Fig.88), are shocking, powerful social statements and disturbing psychological studies. Peter Weiermair (in Ballen 1994: no pagination) comments that in these studies we perceive their reality as authentic because they are photographs; but the truth of their descriptions is difficult to grasp because one does not expect to see old white people in these circumstances.

Ballen's approach to work is reflected in Hegel's theory of art (Eldridge 2003: 194). Hegel states that 'the work exists for the spectator and not on its own account: it exists...only for the individual apprehending it, so that the apprehension completes the work and gives it final substance'. Danto (in Eldridge 2003: 195) suggests that in the end the work is about the viewer, not descriptively, but metaphorically. Ted Cohen calls such works 'metaphors of personal identification' (Cohen in Eldridge 2003: 196). In Ballen's photographs it is the viewer who completes the artwork by metaphorically identifying with the subject and responding with various emotions. Ballen's photographs are psychologically charged in that somehow the viewer has disturbing images implanted in his mind. In *Platteland* Ballen (1994: no pagination) refers to this experience as 'surreal in the expressive intensification of the grotesque'.

Several photographs from Ballen's books feature images relating to aged people. In *Oupa posing* c.2000 (Fig. 89) a thin old man is depicted in an obscure position on a table while *Puppy between feet* c.1999 (Fig. 90) contrasts a pair of aged worn feet with a young puppy. These images are disturbing because they focus on the abject in the human condition and on unseen aspects of white rural life. In Ballen's book *Outland* (2001: no pagination) he offers a variety of sociological explanations describing the process of marginalization and depicting the elderly as the result of 'victims of social collapse'.

In recent works from Ballen's exhibition *Shadow chamber* (2005), Ballen states that he 'deals with a realm of reality not necessarily associated that much with photography but perhaps more with cinema or paintings like Francis Bacon's – more complex visual pieces'.⁷⁹ 'I'm not interested in documenting social, cultural or political life', he adds elsewhere, 'I'm interested in the human condition, the psyche and consciousness'.⁸⁰

The theme of abjection or decay in the portrayal of old people is one that has occurred throughout the history of art, as I have shown in previous remarks on the sublime. Kant (in Blocker and Jeffers 1999: 334) characterizes those objects that give rise to the sense of the sublime by using terms like 'monstrous', 'formless', and 'negative'. He states that one can demonstrate that the absolute exists – through 'negative representation', which he calls the 'abstract'. These 'abstract' images are explained by Burke who explored the psychological bases of our responses (Williams 2004: 99).

The sublime involves things that excite ideas of pain and danger without putting us in real pain or danger. In the context of works such as *Ratman* c.2000 (Fig. 91) and *Bent back* c.2001 (Fig.92), Ballen 'commands a broad emotional spectrum in which horror, revulsion and guilt have their place alongside empathy, humour and wit', epitomizing notions of the sublime (Weiermair in Ballen: 2001).

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An image that reflects the sublime is central to my painting *Passing time* c.2005 (Fig.93), which portrays an old man in a strange beach setting. An overriding concern in this painting is the questioning of reality, illusion or imagination. The macabre image of the man's face resembles a skull and this is reinforced by the sunken skin around his

⁷⁹ (*Sunday Tribune* newspaper. November 13, 2005).

⁸⁰ (*Contempo* magazine June/July 2006, p.65).

mouth and exposed teeth. His intense gaze seems to be fixed on the viewer, but he could be looking beyond at the motion of the sea, contemplating mortality and imminent death.

Reflecting the 'abstract' images that Kant describes, *Resonance* c.2005 (Fig.94) depicts three grotesque figures of old people seated in a row; they seem to be floating in a transient state. Again these figures symbolise the mortality of one's life reflected in the ambiguous relation of figure to ground and in the layering of paint fusing areas of space and figure.

In my paintings entitled *Life support series* c.2004 individual figures of old men or old women are portrayed in compositions that are simplistic and more overtly abstract than realistic, as indicated by the flattening of background space. All the emphasis is placed on each isolated figure, for example, the female figure in *Life support II* c.2005 (Fig. 95) which carries the burden of not being able to walk independently and, metaphorically, bears the burden of old age, an impression reinforced by the visual effect of paint running down her shoulders. The strange white figure is her life support, but one cannot tell whether the figure is a real or spiritual being. In *Life support III* c.2005 (Fig. 96) various parts of the figures' clothes seem to be superimposed as if floating, and sometimes disappear into and sometimes pass the figures, creating discontinuity and shifting planes. This spatial ambiguity destabilizes the reality of the figure, metaphorically placing the figure in a conflicting vortex of time and place between this life and a metaphorical realm. Conventional methods portraying reality are here discarded and replaced so as to convey a transient, spiritual existence.

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Another contemporary South African artist, who deals with themes of aging and the sublime is Robert Hodgins. His work conforms to the deconstructive notions of postmodernist thinking and 'constantly tests the structures of conventional forms of representation' by distorting established art styles (Godby in Hodgins 2002: 77). Hodgins 'abandoned the generic art-school nudes, and moved from simply imagining the beautiful towards arousing unease, and into violent and distorted imagery' (Godby in Hodgins 2002: 77).

Ambiguity is characteristic of Robert Hodgins' work which has been compared to the work of Francis Bacon (Geers in Hodgins 2002: 67). His paintings question the human condition in urban life, an aim only sometimes revealed by his titles. His work is

characteristically filled with strange shapes and colours to denote figures, which often leaves the spectator with an impression resembling an old person. His works often give the impression of themes and contexts relating to elderly people. *A cosy coven in suburbia* c.2000-2 (Fig. 97) suggests a group of elderly women chatting while *Bus stop* c.1999-2000 (Fig. 98) seems to suggest an old person waiting for the bus. Although Hodgins refers to old people in his paintings, this not a conscious act and he denies that they have any connection to the fact that he is 86 years old. He is equally emphatic in denying that his paintings represent his own mortality (Godby in Hodgins 2002:77). What he does feel is that 'there reflects in the final image a sense that all humans are vulnerable, stemming from [his] own vulnerability'. This may well be the case, as artists could have very different reasons for portraying these themes. According to Cumming and Henry (1961: 204), the general consensus among gerontologists is that eighty-year-olds have higher morale than seventy-year-olds, reflecting their contentment with life. Erickson's developmental stages of aging characterize 'ego integrity' as the most mature phase that accepts 'one's one and only life cycle as something that has to be' (in Cumming and Henry). This observation is exemplified by Hodgins' insistent expression of the desire to paint, his 'rigorous working routine is not because time may be short but simply because he feels most fulfilled in his studio and that he is most alive when he is painting' (Godby in Hodgins 2002: 76). It seems that as long as Hodgins is painting, he has no thought of tomorrow and will no doubt literally paint until he is no longer physically able.

What stands out in Hodgins' work is the characteristic figure of Ubu who is similar to the emblem of French proto-Dada playwright Alfred Jarry (Hodgins 2002: 46). Hodgins' Ubu is more often than not depicted as a shape resembling the figure of a man; the general impression of his character is that he is an aging man depicted as a businessman or a military figure, for example, in *Ubu and the commanders-in-chief* c.1981-82. According to Rayda Becker (in Hodgins 2002: 34), Ubu represents the 'new white savage' shown as an overweight old white man decked with numerous medals. Hodgins states, 'I wanted to indicate what Ubu could be...what interests me is also the history of the flabby, evil man...' (2002: 34). Hodgins' Ubu-paintings are metaphorical and often reflect the black-white binary of African politics, his 'distrust of politicians' and his 'feeling about the placatory hand of the white guy in his white suit'(Hodgins 2002: 37).

In many of Hodgins' paintings the faces are rendered in abstract ways usually consisting of blotches of paint vaguely and economically defining features. In *Sir Anthony Blunt* c.1994-95 (Fig. 99) the aged face is built up from daubs of paint as though

constituted by blobs of mutilated or decaying flesh. The features seem consumed by decay, aging or disease.

*

The art of William Kentridge has strong cultural references to the past era of apartheid and the current socio-political environment. Using metaphor he addresses the binary of black-white cultural issues and identities which are central to his work. *Soho Eckstein*, based on Kentridge's self-portrait, is his image of an older man and industrialist, while Felix Teitlebaum, his alter ego, also a self-portrait, is represented as a generally nude artist. In his short animated film, which consists of many photographed drawings, some of which are shown in Figs 100 and 101, *Sobriety, obesity and growing old* c.1991, Kentridge describes the life of the dark-suited Soho 'whose combination of economic power, personal ruthlessness, and guilt-laden memory' represent an aspect of contemporary South African life (Benezra 2001: 19). The story reveals the conflict between these two characters, and in the midst of Soho's busy and stressful life, Felix wins Mrs. Eckstein. Finally the aging and lonely Soho comes to his senses, feeling personal and social guilt, realizes what is of value in life and begs his wife to return (Kentridge in Tappeiner and Wulf 2003: Video). Kentridge explores the idea that loss is the trigger that enables the former greedy industrialist to retrieve his humanity in the face of social and personal catastrophe (Cameron 1999: 66). This experience is intensified by his middle-age and reflects Kentridge's personal experience of the aging process and his perceptions of society in general. This observation is paralleled in Cumming and Henry's theories of human behaviour in aging adult males and the social-psychological experience of aging. They state (Schaw and Henry in Cumming and Henry 1961: 8) that men in their fifties tend to turn away from the 'active mastery of an outer world which to them seems amenable to conquest and become more passive with the years, turning inward and valuing the interaction of family and friends.

*

The use of age as a metaphor and symbol is central to my most recent paintings and, like Kentridge and Hodgins, I refer to cross-cultural and socio-political issues. *Journey* c.2005 (Fig. 102) depicts two women from different cultures (indicated by the

simplified African spears) both of whom are represented as older people. I do not specifically refer to skin-colour, but the cross-cultural reference to old age in both figures serves to impress that aging does not discriminate and is experienced by every individual and results in the final destination of death and after-life. *Waiting* c.2005 reflects on social issues relating to the treatment of marginalized sectors of society such as the aged.

According to Ricoeur (1997: 128), metaphor is responsible for creating conditions in which new meanings can be given, and a different picture of the world presented, by deferring ordinary references to reality. As a result a new understanding of the image is created along with a new mythical reality reflecting the projected world of the artist. In the context of my work, and Hodgins' and Kentridge's, the use of references to old age as a metaphor is particularly pertinent in relation to the political changes that have taken place in South Africa and Zimbabwe over the last 15 years, since these effectively represent the results, influences and remnants of colonialism.

My painting of *Three figures* c.2005 (Fig.103) simulates the regimental seating arrangements in the TV lounge of an old age home. Three pink-faced aged people sit as if strapped and unable to move among an enclave of potentially aggressive, encroaching spear-shaped heads. The painting is metaphoric and the three aged figures represent the colonial remnant of people in Zimbabwe.

The web c.2005 is a mixed-media collage work using a combination of painterly sketches of old white men superimposed on newspaper cuttings of black businessmen and politician's faces, indigenous plants, flames and skulls creating a literal web of interconnecting images pertaining to economic issues and the 'death' of colonialism. These figures depict pompous old men rather than victims in an intricate social and political matrix. A dialogue is created, both within the picture's own narratives and images, and within the cultural context from which the images are taken. Here the images of old men are used metaphorically to represent the demise of the 'colonial' in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The complexities of the communicating images in this painting indicate that 'meaning' is never quite resolved but is constantly deferred; the meaning of one image is changed when related to another. Derrida would call this process 'intertextuality', and in this context, the fragmentation of meaning in objects and ideas can indeed be described as

deconstructionist (Crouch 1999: 172). While this process is called deconstructing meaning, simultaneously existing meaning is questioned.⁸¹

Whether the complex set of symbols, signs and codes in the paintings I have discussed means an interrogation of the past, or a questioning of existing meaning, whether in art or life, hinges on the main issue of position, that is, on the ideological place of the viewer and the context in which the images are seen (Crouch 1999: 176).

⁸¹ Roland Barthes spoke of this in his essay *Death of the Author* (1968: 69). He argues that the text is something that is given meaning by the individual who interprets it, rather than something on which the artist imposes a single meaning (Crouch 1999: 172). The objectification of the artwork requires a social contextualization that deconstruction does not provide because it sees all signs and codes as independent of cultural context, forever changing at the demand of the spectator.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Ideas on old age have changed dramatically in the course of history. From ancient Greece to the end of the middle ages, old age was generally perceived as a tragedy, a state to be endured for the sake of a reward in the next world. In the Renaissance old age was despised because it contradicted the idealistic and humanist philosophies of the time. In the 18th and 19th centuries the criticism of old people eases, except for those who have other burdens to carry, such as poverty or poor health. It is only in the late 20th century that old age is seen in a more positive light and becomes a stage in life that, with the hope of good health and provision, can be enjoyed on its own terms (Thane 2005: 299).

The theme of this dissertation has been how artists have portrayed the subject of old age and mortality down the ages and how, in so doing, they have broken away from the trends of mainstream idealistic representation. As changes have occurred in societies as a result of various forms of criticism, perceptions of art have become multifarious, giving artists the freedom to explore old age by using various methods of expression such as naturalism, symbolism, metaphor and extreme realism.

What has remained constant throughout the history of art is man's desire to create and the link between old age, mortality and the spiritual dimension, an aspect that has become evident in the examination of the work of various artists in my dissertation. It is noticeable that this theme was more prevalent in antiquity and the middle ages, and it remains significant that in these periods the concern for man's spiritual life, particularly life after death, was central. Creativity was not aesthetic but functioned as a votive offering or symbol of man's spiritual state or union with God.

In the years of the Renaissance, despite prevailing humanist thinking and the idealization of youthfulness there was an awareness of the transitory existence of mankind; and the cyclical stages of man with the emphasis on old age were themes that reminded one of this and were constantly explored. The exploration of understanding creation

through the study of nature by artists like da Vinci exemplifies the continued questioning of man's existence.

In the 17th century iconographic art was replaced by other genres like honorific portraiture but the interest in showing man's relationship with the spiritual persisted and is demonstrated by the work of artists like Ribera and Rembrandt who strove to portray the presence of God by visual manipulation of light and dark tones and significantly chose elderly figures to achieve this emphasis.

A century later in an atmosphere of growing disillusionment and hopelessness of the human condition, artists such as Friedrich and Goya sought the reality of the spirit by the experience of the sublime and focused on the immensity of God, His power and judgment; sentiments that reflected Hegel's belief in the 'all-comprehending principle of the spirit' (Williams 2004: 116). Friedrich believed that this experience starts in the heart which 'is the only true source of art and comes from an impulse in the artist's heart, often without his knowledge' (Williams: 116).

Since the age of secularization art has become indifferent to religion, or has actively opposed it, and has adopted a scientific and technological outlook. On a less visible level, however, 'art has never ceased to search those areas of experience formerly considered to be the province of religion and metaphysics'. These 'metaphysical moods persist, allied with creation but disassociated from traditional forms and creeds' (Rosenberg 1985: 310). The work of Symbolist artists, Munch and Klimt 'searched far beyond the personal, and suggest the reality of another invisible world' (Goldwater 1979: 221). The Symbolists' preoccupation with the stages of life, again, qualifying man's destiny, reflect their mystical attitudes. Rosenberg maintains (1985: 317) that artists search for a hidden reality or truth, 'an illuminated state' where 'an ultimate reality reveals itself'. These realities exist in a spiritual dimension.

Art in the 20th and 21st centuries has progressively absorbed the phenomena of secular life, identifying with the dynamic world of speed, construction, rationality and power, aspects of life that are temporarily fulfilling and especially appealing to the idealistic youth of today's generation. The ideological commonalities between physiognomy, eugenics, new social Darwinism and agism demonstrate man's tendency toward an elitist mentality, ideas which oppose the laws of God. ⁸²In this environment art

⁸² (Asma, S. 1993).

<www.encyclopedia.com/printable.aspx?id=1G1:13255803>

seems to have estranged itself from the older mysteries that come under the umbrella of religious, philosophical or ethical ideals and is motivated by the principle of ‘demystification’; thus explaining the rarity of artists who have pursued these issues and invoke themes of old age and mortality.

The struggle to express the spiritual, ephemeral or absolute in an individually conceived language in art is fundamental in much art, and many of the artists whose works have been examined in my dissertation have reflected the desire to achieve this reality or truth by including the depiction of old age. What is it about old age that links it with a spiritual dimension?

It is evident that the social status and ultimate prevalence of old people in society affected the recurrence of my theme simply because artists were inspired to draw or paint what they could see, as was the case in the 17th and 18th centuries. The artist’s response to this theme is twofold. In the *Poetics* Aristotle argues that ‘the function of tragedy is to accomplish by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions’ (Eldridge 2003: 198). He gives his definitions of pity and fear in the *Rhetoric* and explains that pitying another and fearing for another involve seeing oneself in the same or similar situations and facing the same or similar problems. Following Ted Cohen’s theories Eldridge (2003: 198) talks about a ‘metaphorical identification’ that involves seeing oneself in another. It is a natural human ability that can be exercised in life and art and is achieved through acts of imagination and imaginative attention. The attitudes that can be expressed toward human life are varied and always present. These attitudes can be applied to subject-matter and the artistic working of materials. In the context of the theme of old age, the artists selected have responded to old age, identifying themselves with various people, such as Kentridge with his imaginary Soho.

Frank Palmer notes (in Eldridge 2003:196) that ‘understanding human action is saturated with moral concepts’ and that when ‘subject matter is presented as a focus for thought and emotion, then we see that doing as variously attentive, lazy, cruel, affectionate, forgiving, remorseful’. In effect therefore he suggests that we respond to old age with our conscience as is the case with Ballen. Eldridge contends (2003: 202) that when ‘we follow the work as an instance or product of human action, then we follow and participate in the emotional attitudes that are expressed in it’.

The other attraction to this theme involves feelings connected to mortality. The link with old age and the spiritual dimension is related to the imminence of death whether it is the artist’s own death or impending death of an aged relative, as with Rembrandt, Mueck

or myself. In other cases artists such as Michelangelo, Kollwitz, Freud and Bacon reflect on their mortality as a result of their own aging experience. When confronted with one's own mortality one faces life's finality like Bacon (who was agnostic) or the anticipation of a life after death, depending on one's beliefs. Many of the artists who have portrayed either of these themes have sought to 'experience the absolute and the transcendental' showing their awareness of a spiritual dimension (Rosenberg 1985: 314).

Idealistic theories concerning the spiritual realm have existed from ancient times and are inspired by man's inability to understand a clear purpose for his life on earth. The human image in old age appears at once substantial and ephemeral; it exists for a while and is then gone. Concerning art and images of old age and mortality, explorations of the actual and the elusive are age-old themes that have 'haunted pictorial realism in its many historical incarnations' (Prendeville 2000: 212). Rosenberg (1985: 308) contends that the artist will always need to respond to unpredictable situations in life with his creative ability. He questions, how one is inspired in a revolutionary age, in a period of crisis, private and public, unless he seeks an illuminated state?

In this present secular age the aesthetic experience has generally become indifferent to the spiritual or metaphysical in art; an aspect of creative enlightenment that, for the artists I have discussed, has been awakened through the phenomenon of old age.

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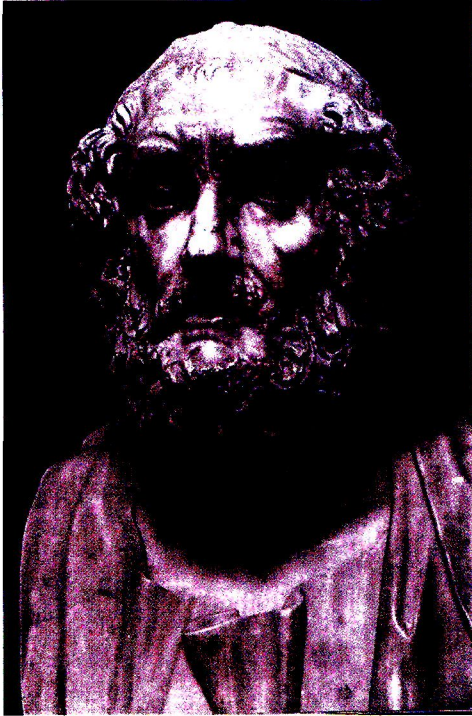


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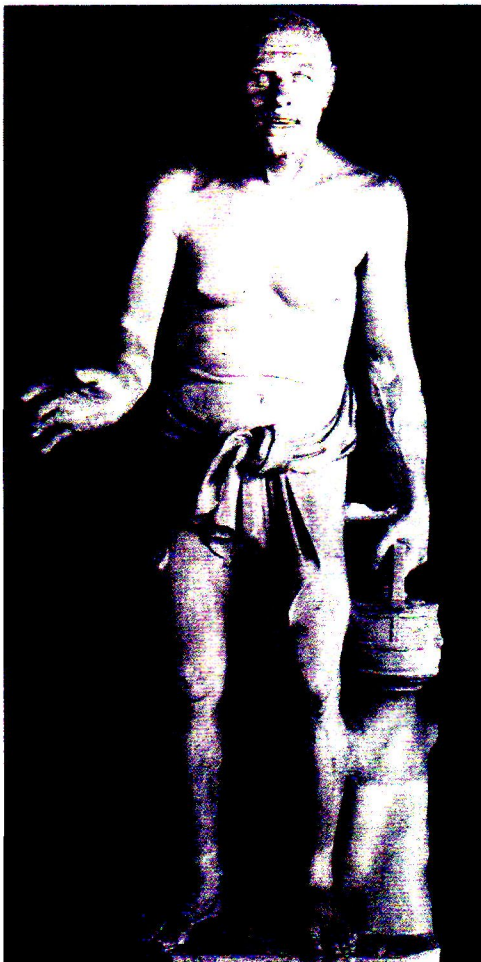


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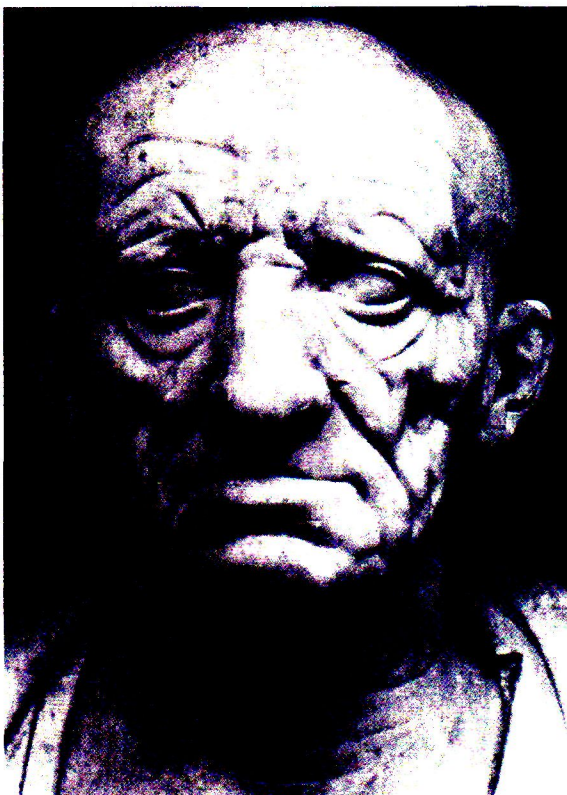


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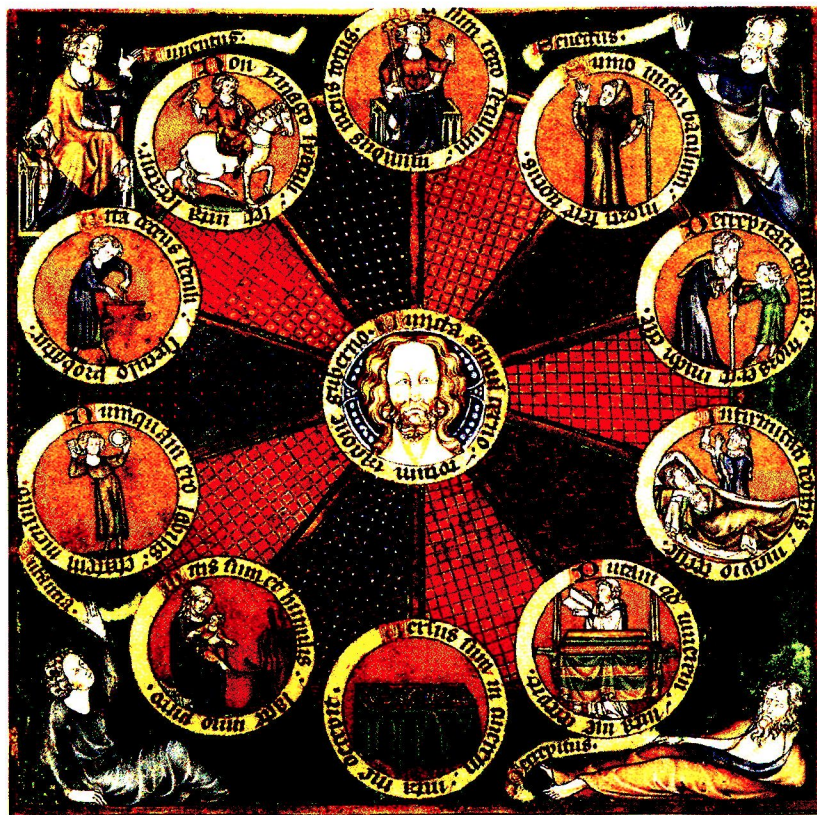


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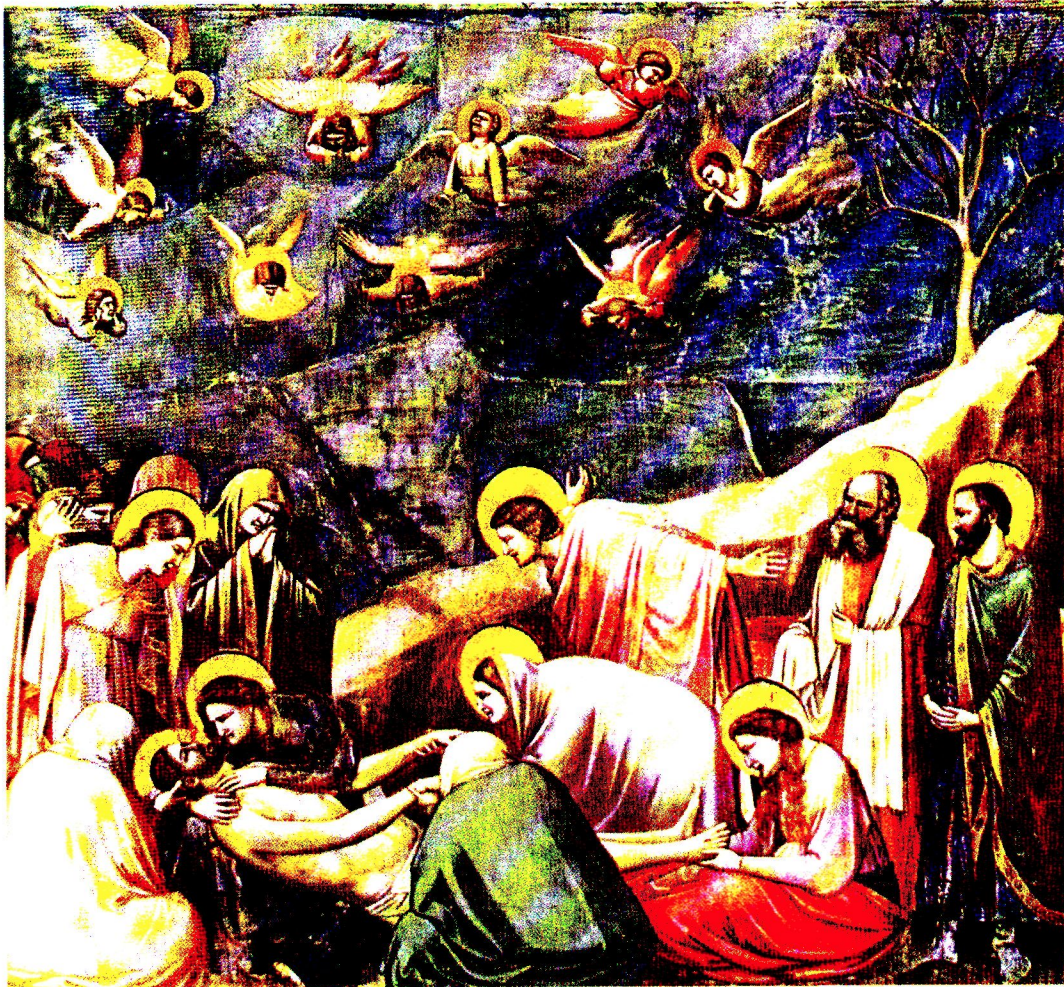


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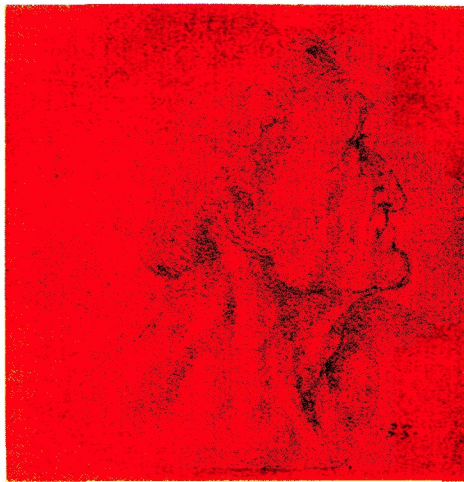


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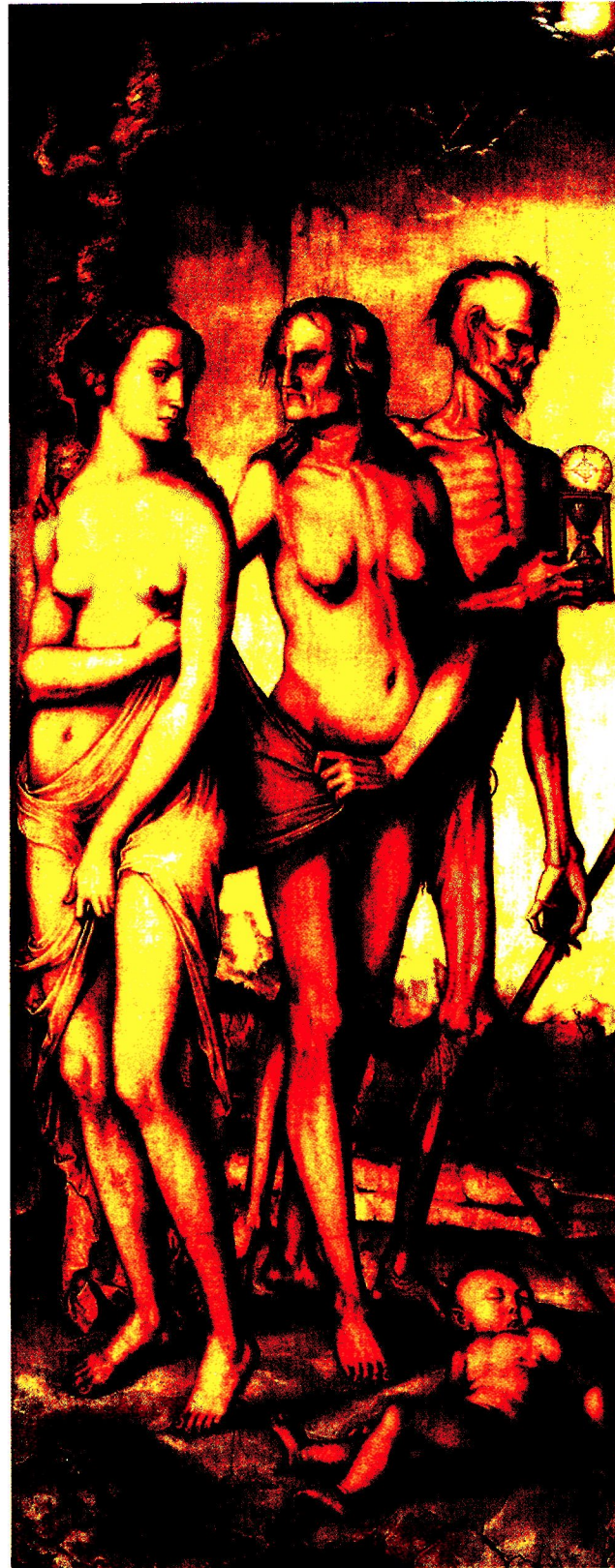


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Figure 36: Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement* c. 1535-41.
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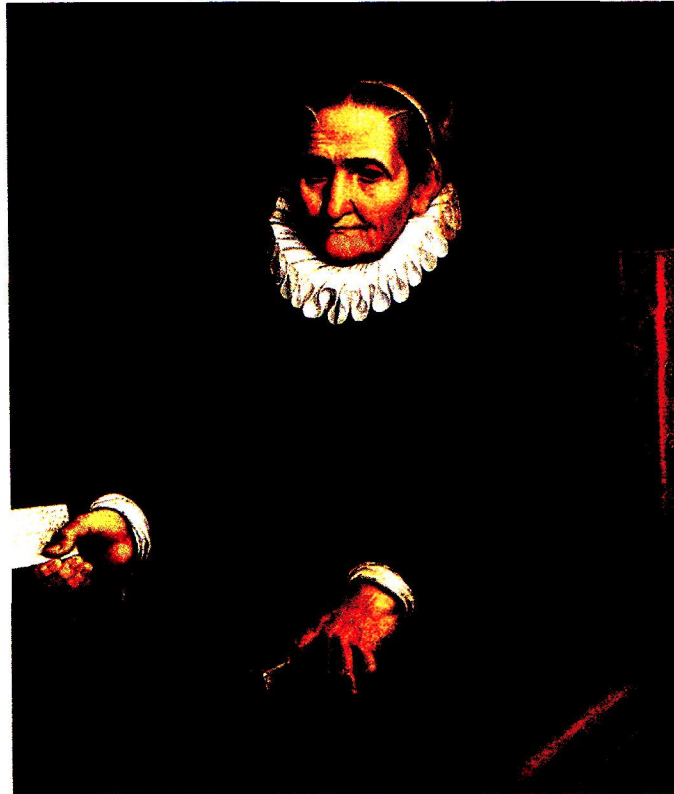


Figure 37: Aguissola, *Self-portrait* c.1610.
(Source: Thane 2005:141).

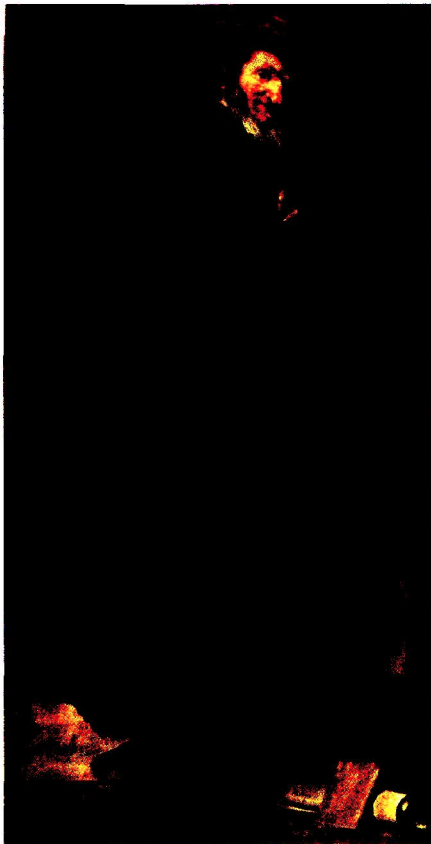


Figure 38: Velázquez, *Menippus*
c.1630. (Source: Clavell 1976: 30).



Figure 39: Velázquez, *Aesop* c.1630.
(Source: Clavell 1976: 30).



Figure 40: Ribera, *St. Andrew* c.1624-38.
(Source: Clavell 1976:18).



Figure 41: Ribera, *St. Jerome* c.1624-38.
(Source: Clavell 1976: 19).

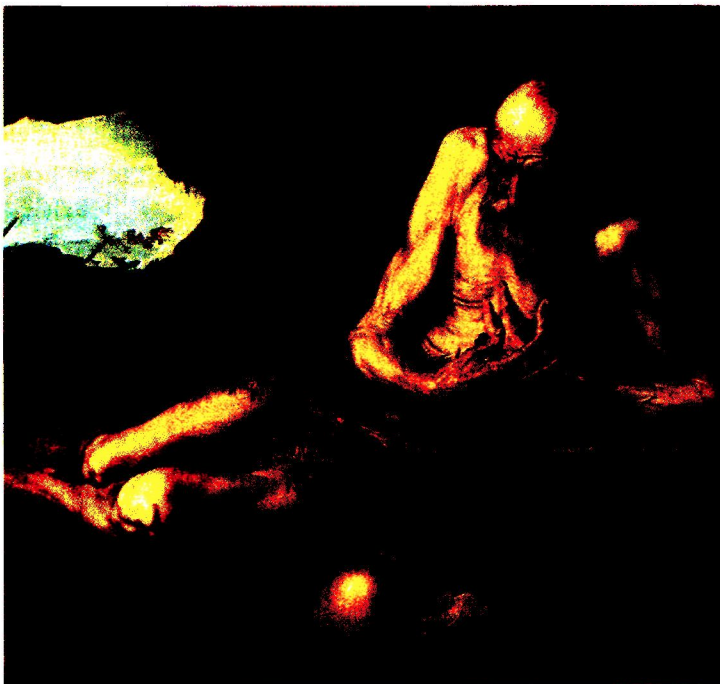


Figure 42: Ribera, *St. Andrew*
c.1624-38.
(Source: Clavell 1976:18).



Figure 43: Van Dyck, *Charles I Detail* c.1635.
(Source: Munroe 1978: 206).



Figure 44: Rembrandt, *Three studies of an old man* c.1643. (Source: Lambourne 1963: pl. 40).



Figure 45: Rembrandt, *Old man with clasped hands seated in an arm chair* c.1633.
(Source: Benesch 1947: 19).



Figure 46: (above): Rembrandt, *Rembrandt's mother* c.1628.
(Source: Lambourne 1963: pl.58).
Figure 47: (right): Rembrandt, *A bald-headed man* c.1630.
(Source: Lambourne 1963: pl.59).



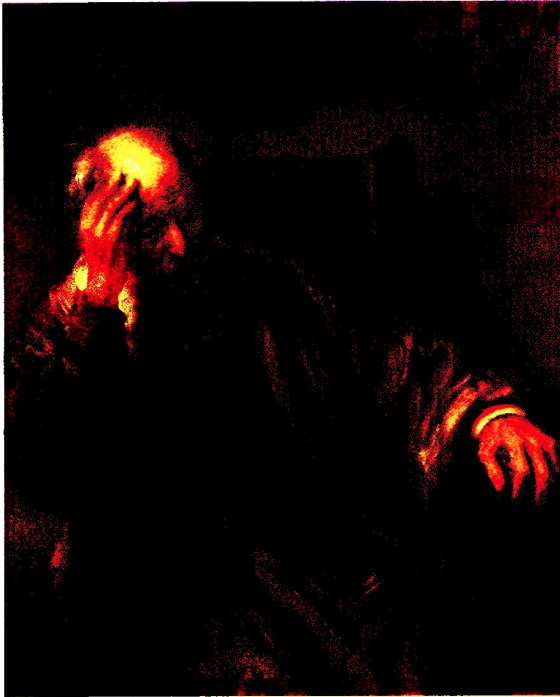


Figure 48: Rembrandt, *An old man seated in an arm chair* c. 1652.
(Source: Kitson 1971: pl.30).

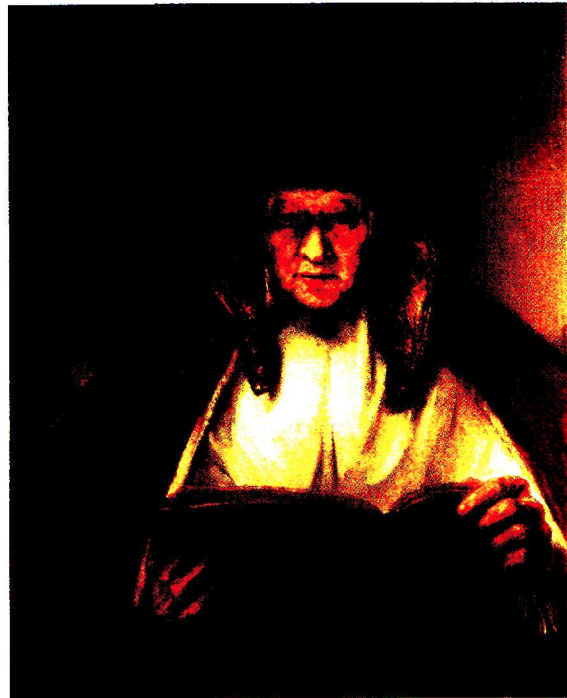


Figure 49: Rembrandt, *An old woman reading* c.1655.
(Source: Kitson 1971: pl. 37).



Figure 50: Rembrandt, *Self-portrait* c.1668.
(Source: Lambourne 1963: pl.25).



Figure 51: Géricault, *Mad woman* c.1823.
(Source: Thane 2005: 234).

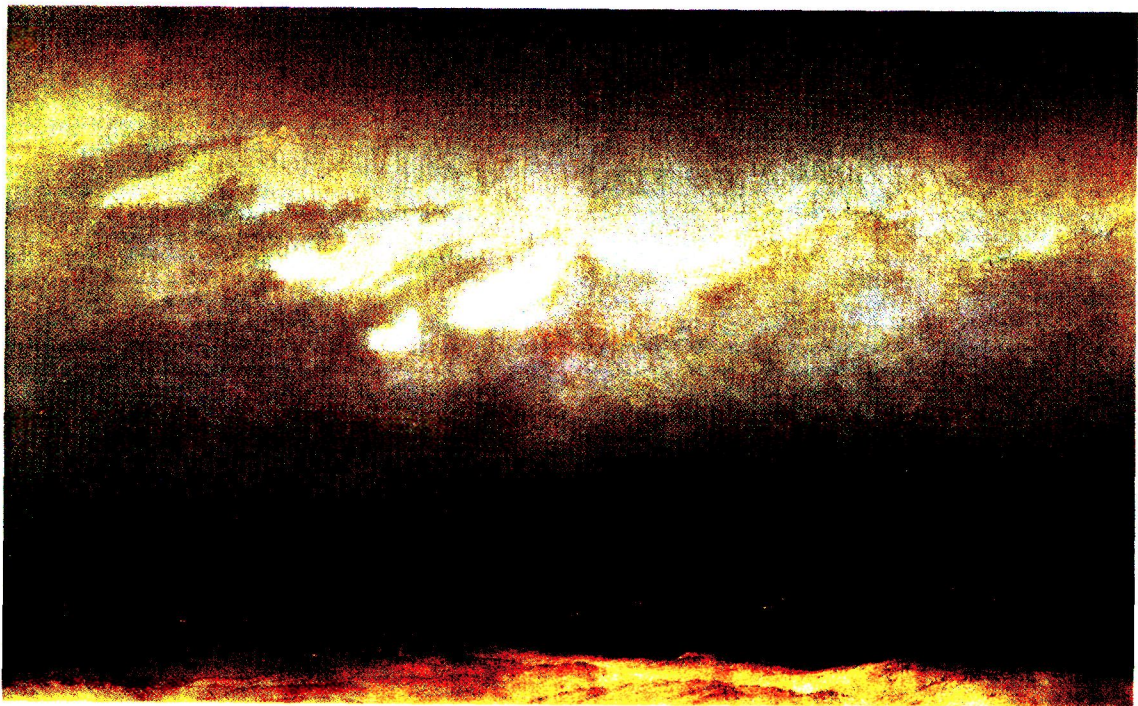


Figure 52: Friedrich, *Monk by the sea* c.1809-10. (Source: Börsh-Supan 1990: 86).

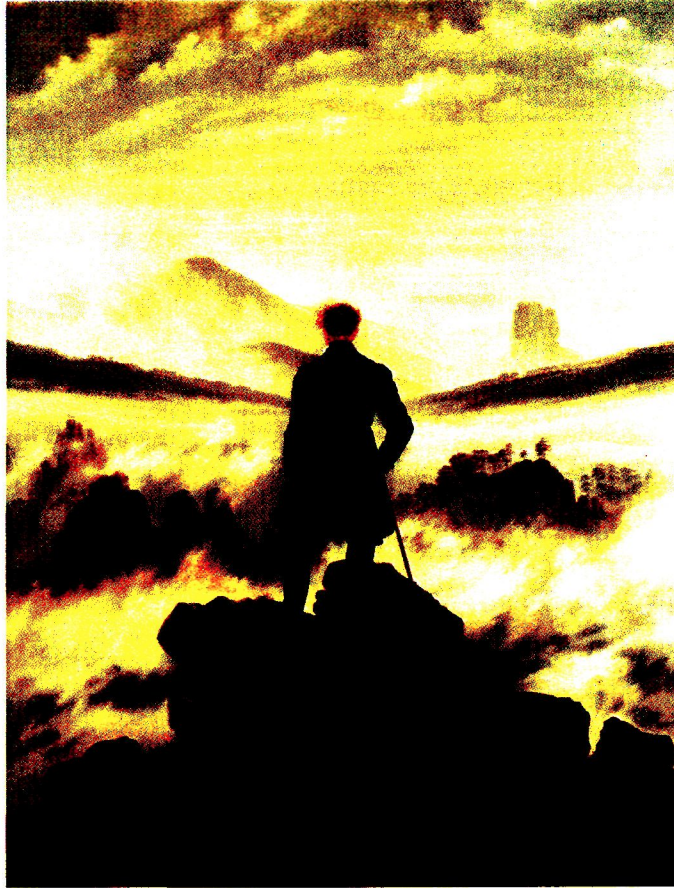


Figure 53: Friedrich, *Wanderer above the clouds* c.1818. (Source: Börsh-Supan 1990: 117).



Figure 54: Goya, *Two old people eating soup* c.1821-23. (Source: Thane 2005: 15).



Figure 55: Goya, *La filiacón*
c.1797-98.
(Source: Sanchez 1989: 39).



Figure 56: Goya, *Hasta la muerte* c.1797-98.
(Source: Goya 1969: 55).



Figure 57: Goya, *Ruega por ella*
c.1797-98. (Source: Goya 1969: 28).



Figure 58. Goya, *Mother Celestina*
c.1816-1818. (Source: Sanchez 1989: 299).



Figure 59: Goya, *Goya attended by Doctor Arrieta* c.1820.
(Source: Sanchez 1989: 270).



Figure 60: Traviès, *Le Chiffonier*
c.1841.
(Source: Frascina and Blake 1993: 91).



Figure 61: Bertall, *Le marchand d'habits*
(seller of clothes) c.mid-1800s.
(Source: Frascina and Blake 1993: 91).



Figure 62: Bovin, *Chiffonier* (ragpicker)
c.1854.
(Source: Frascina and Blake 1993: 90).



Figure 63: Daumier, *Two Barristers*
mid-1860.
(Source: Symmons 1979: 50).



Figure 64 (top left): Daumier, *D'Arg* c.1832-33.
(Source: Symmons 1979: 27).



Figure 65 (left): Daumier, *D'Arg*
Bronze of original. c.1832-1833.
(Source: Symmons 1979: 27).

Figure 66 (above): Daumier, *Clément Prunelle* Bronze of original.
c.1829-1848.
(Source: Symmons: 1979: 28).



Figure 67: Courbet, *The burial at Ornans* c.1850. (Source: Callen 1980: 40).

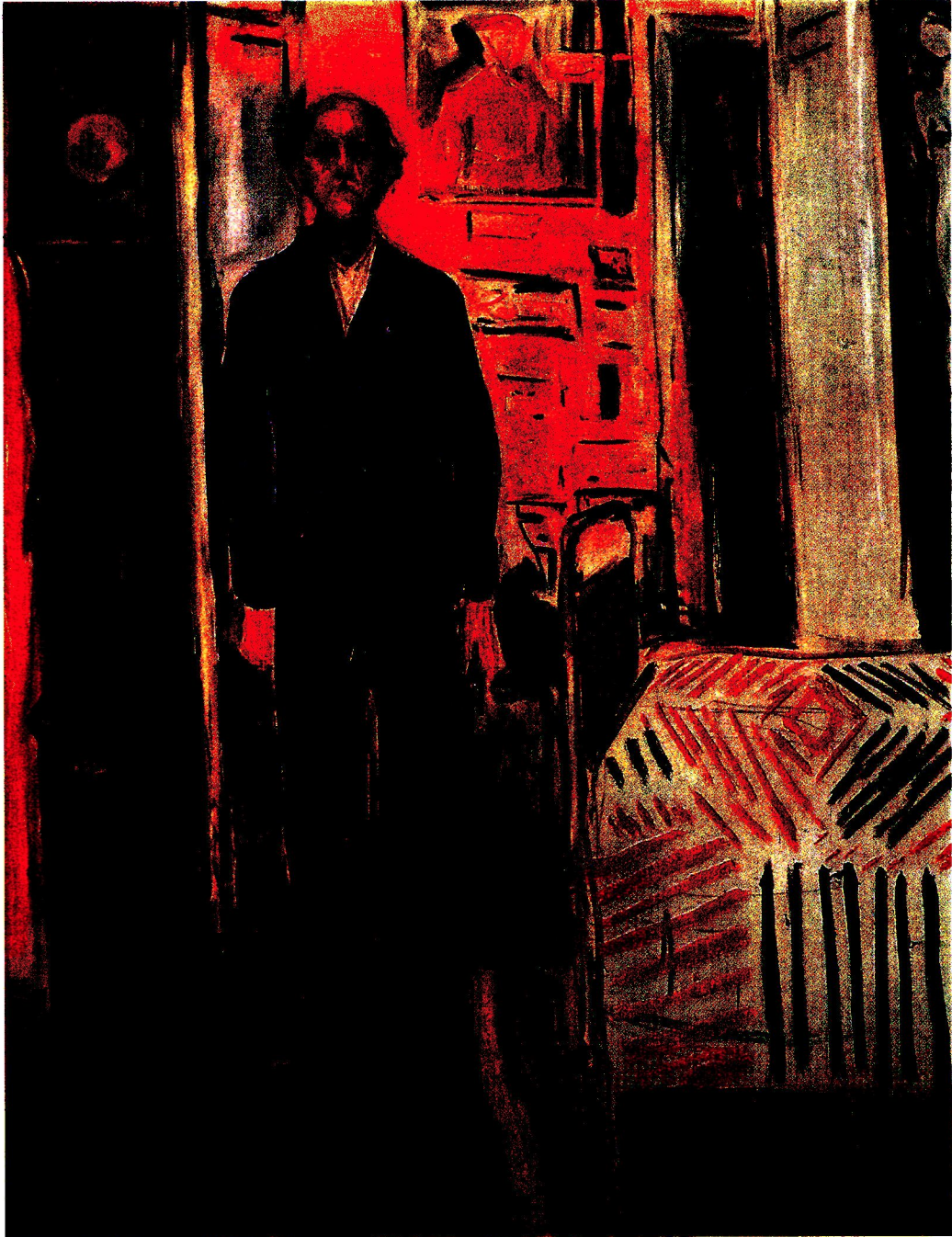


Figure 68: Munch, *Self-Portrait - between the clock and the bed* c.1940-42.
(Source: Messer 1987: 127).



Figure 69: Klimt, *The three ages of life* c.1905. (Source: Thane 2005: 26).



Figure 70: Kollwitz. *Self-portrait* c.1924.
(Source: Prelinger 1992: 16).



Figure 71: Kollwitz, *Self-portrait* c.1934.
(Prelinger 1992:16).



Figure 72: Kollwitz, *Self-portrait in Profile* c.1938.
(Source: Prelinger 1992:69).

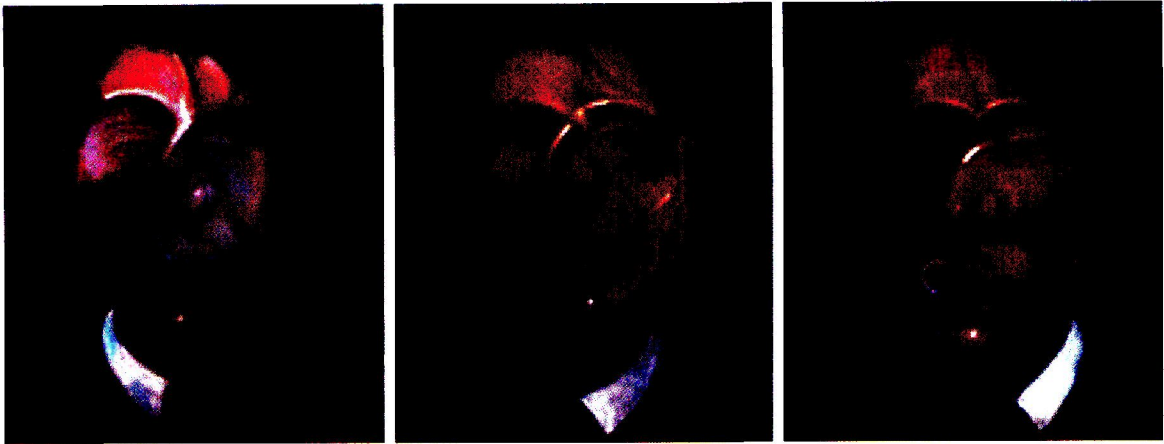


Figure 73: Bacon, *Self-Portrait, triptych* c.1980.

Source: <news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/5019932.stm>



Figure 74: Freud, *The painter's mother resting II* c.1976-77.

(Source: Hughes 1998: 54).



Figure 75: Freud, *The painter's mother III* c.1917.
(Source: Hughes 1987: 55).



Figure 76: Freud, *Painter working, reflection*
c.1913. (Source: Thane 2005: 286).



Figure 77: Mueck, *Seated woman* c.2000.
(Source: Greeves 2002: 52).



Figure 78: Mueck, *Dead dad* c.1996-7. (Source: Greeves 2002: 45).



Figure 79: Mueck, *Old woman in bed* c.2000. (Source: Greeves 2002: 58).



Figure 80: Mueck, *Man in blankets* c.2000. (Source: Greeves 2002: 57).



Figure 81: Silk, *Seated old man* c. 2005.
(Source: Artist collection).

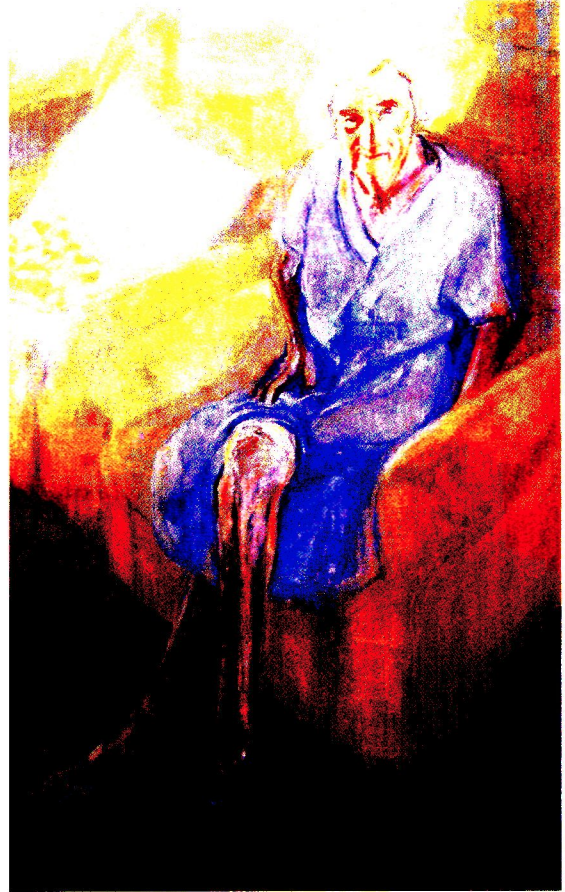


Figure 82: Silk, *Seated old woman* c. 2005
(Source: Artist collection).

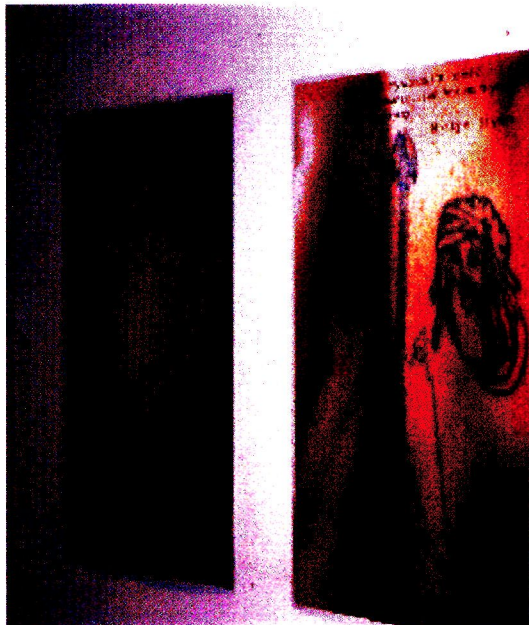


Figure 83: Botha, *White skin blue* c.1998.
(Artist collection).



Figure 84: Silk, *Intensity*, detail c. 2005.
(Source: Artist collection).



Figure 85: *Deep-level gold miner in bedroom c.1987.*
(Source: Ballen 1994: no pagination).

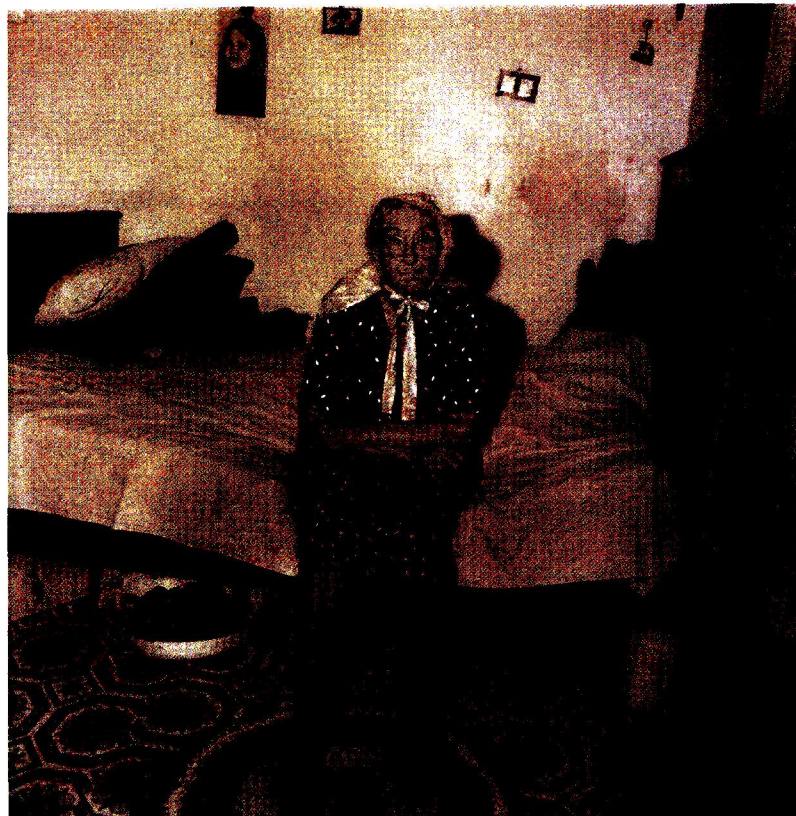


Figure 86: *Old woman c.1992.*
(Source: Ballen 1994: no pagination).

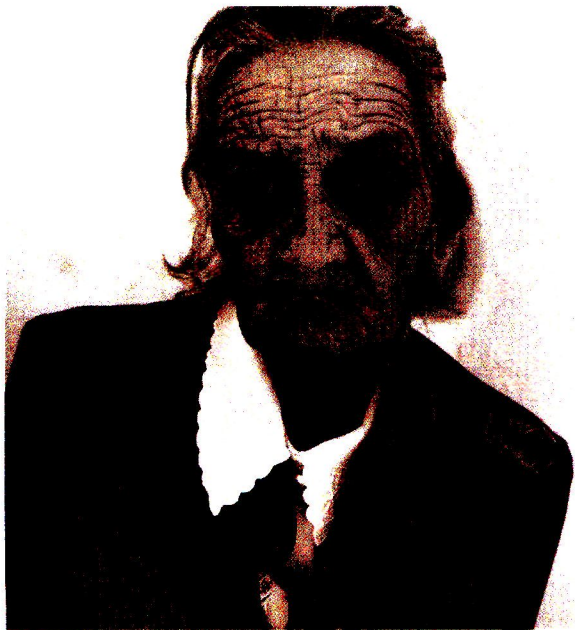


Figure 87: Ballen, *A Swart, goat farmer* c.1992. (Source: Ballen 1994: no pagination).



Figure 88: Ballen, *Sergeant F. de Bruin, Department of Prisons employee* c.1992. (Source: Ballen 2001: no pagination).



Figure 89: Ballen, *Oupa posing* c.2000. (Source: Ballen 2005: no pagination).



Figure 90: Ballen, *Puppy between feet* c.1999.
(Source: Ballen 2001: no pagination).



Figure 91: Ballen, *Ratman* c.2000.
(Source: Ballen 2005: 13).



Figure 92: Ballen, *Bent back* c.2001.
(Source: Ballen 2005: 55).



Figure 93: Silk, *Passing time* c. 2005. (Source: Artist collection).

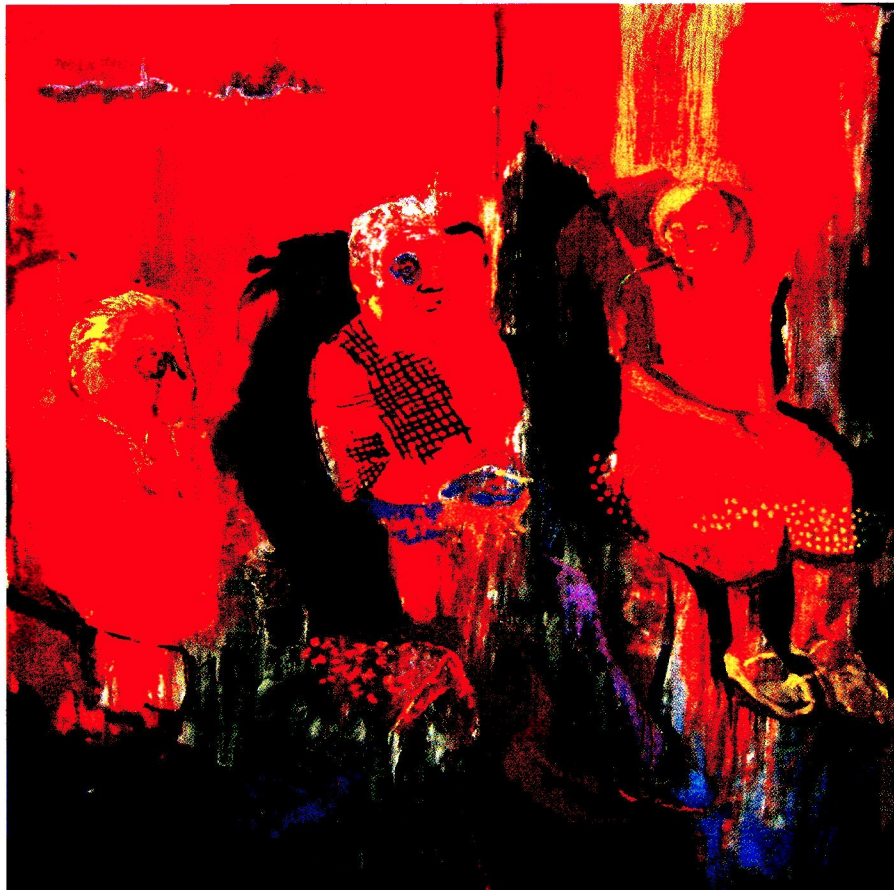


Figure 94: Silk, *Resonance* c. 2006. (Source: Artist collection).



Figure 95: Silk, *Life support I* c.2005.
(Source: Artist collection).



Figure 96: Silk, *Life support III* c.2005.
(Source: Artist collection).



Figure 97: Hodgins, *A cosy coven in suburbia* 2000/2.
(Source: Hodgins 2002: 89).

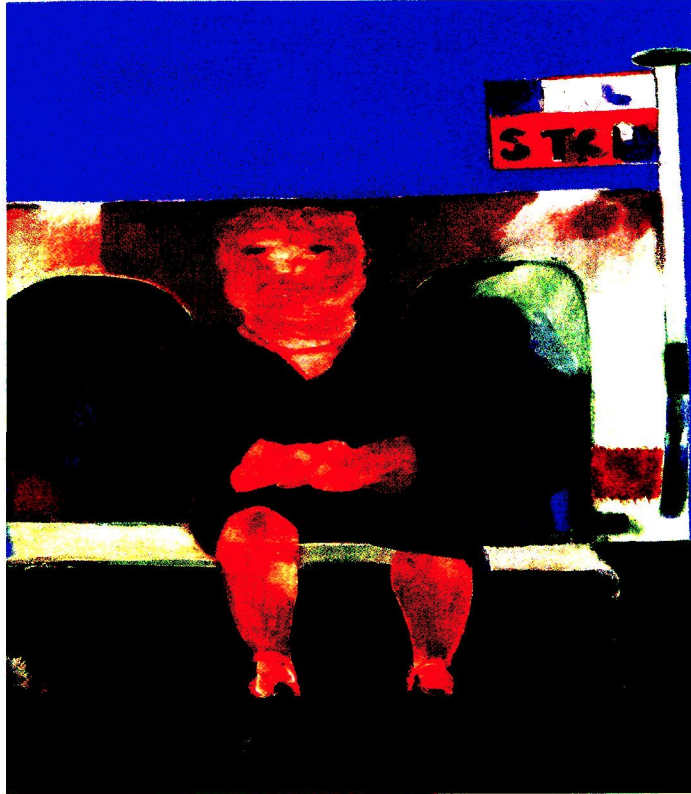


Figure 98: Hodgins, *Bus stop* c.1999/2000.
(Source: Hodgins 2002: 88).



Figure 99: Hodgins, *Sir Antony Blunt* c.1994/5.
(Source: Hodgins 2002: 130).

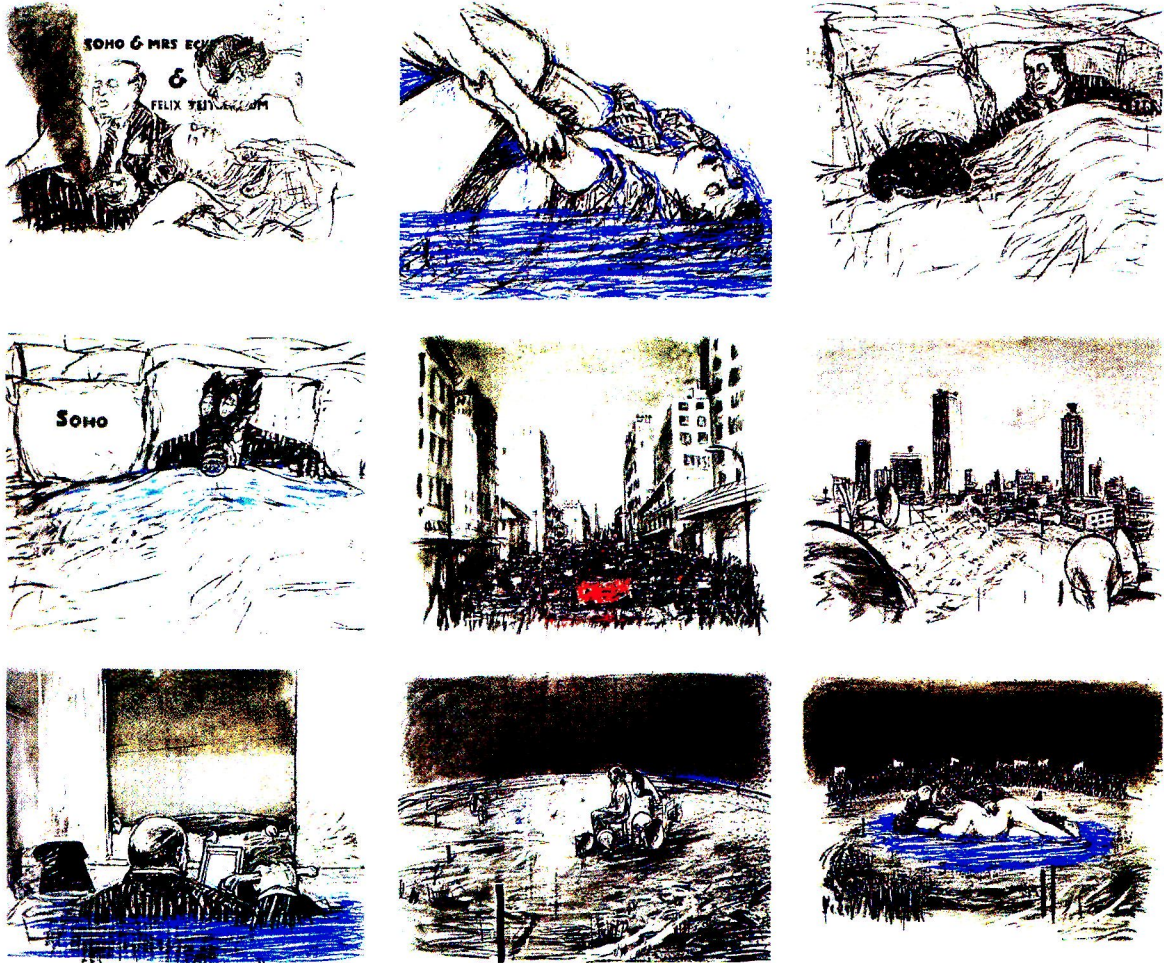


Figure 100: Kentridge, *Sobriety, obesity and growing old* c. 1991.
 (Source: Cameron 1999: 63).



Figure 101: Kentridge, *Sobriety, obesity and growing old* c. 1991.
 (Source: Cameron 1999: 63).



Figure 102: Silk, *Journey* c. 2005.
(Source: Artist collection).



Figure 103. Silk, *Three figures* c.2005. (Source: Artist collection).