

# **Constructing Self. Mimicry and Multiplicity in the Work of Frida Kahlo, Berni Searle, Steven Cohen, and Rory Klopper**

Rory Wallace Klopper  
Student Number: 202515434

Supervisor: Faye Spencer

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**Dedicated to my mother and father.**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to interrogate my perception of self which is grounded in my visual arts practice. Through my enquiry into the works of Steven Cohen, Berni Searle, and Frida Kahlo, I expose the corporeal body as an illusion of sociological enculturation.

Using concepts situated within sociological discourse, for example, I foreground the grotesque body as a body in the act of becoming, as theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin. I consider the multiplicities inherent in queer theories and interpret these multiplicities through my Fine Art practice. I use the concept of the cadaver exquisite as a vehicle to draw these theories into a visual realm; situated within fine art making.

I scrutinise processes, imagery and motivations that underlie the search for self. I present my findings through consideration of select works by Steven Cohen, Berni Searle, Frida Kahlo, and myself. I draw connections between the work of these artists and my own practice. Chief among the works I focus on are my series of self-portraits, namely, *Smile Like You Mean It* (2013), *Crap Baby (Part III): The Intervention* (2014), and *I Tried To Make You See* (2014); my paper cut-outs, namely *The Dancer* (2015) and a series of photographic work, namely, *Jellyfish: series I* (2015) and, *Jellyfish: series II* (2016), as well as the following assemblages: *Fat Man* (2015), *Phantom of the Opera* (2015), *Jellyfish* (2015), *Mantis* (2015), and *Cake* (2014 / 2015). I draw attention in my analysis of my own practice to the role played in the development of these works by examining the performance art of Steven Cohen, namely, *Chandelier* (2001 – 2002), the installation work of Berni Searle, namely, *Snow White* (2001), and the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo, namely, *Self-portrait with Necklace of Thorn* (1940).

## **Chapter One**

### **1.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I draw up the blueprint from which the body of the text is derived. This will assist the reader in navigating the complex issues I come to address in later chapters. I discuss the purpose of my research, the problem statement, the background that gives insight into the reasons for this investigation. I define the perimeters of my research with my research question, and finally, I make clear the objective of this undertaking.

The structure of my dissertation inverts the chronology of my practical experimentation during Master's and thus requires explanation. I begin by exploring two primary theories (grotesque realism and queer theory) that inform my work over this period. These theories provide possible answers to my understanding of myself as a white, gay, South African man and help explain my social context that influences more personal aspects of my persona. My sexuality and the colour of my skin are (politically) considered my defining features, features I identify in the work of Steven Cohen. This grounding then narrows to inform the nuanced gendering of my sexuality as a construct that connects with the work of Berni Searle. Finally I consider the corporeal self and reflect on ways in which my work has been influenced by Frida Kahlo (narrowing further to the surface of my skin).

### **1.2 Purpose**

I aim to investigate my own ideas and studio productions of both two- and three-dimensional works with focus on the mimetic body (Grosz 1995), multiplicity (Jagose 1996), and identity (Walker and Leedham-Green 2010). My exploration of my body as a site for investigation has been of primary interest to me stretching back many years, and it is through the creative process that I explore perceptions of myself. As a consequence of the act of becoming (Bakhtin 1968) the multiplicity of the self emerges, and this is of key interest to me because in my attempt to actualise my authentic self I strive to attain a more enlightened version of being.

I reflect on the artworks of Frida Kahlo, Berni Searle, and Steven Cohen which have profoundly influenced my practice and provide me with instances of comparison and contrast for my own self-expression. I propose to explore how these artists (myself included) represent their self-identities as multi-layered and changing, in view of Sophie Perryer's

critical statement that they “refuse to respect the boundaries that cultural readings impose on the body, [they] disrupt identity to revel in difference, instability and incoherence” (2004:51).

My written research aims to scrutinise internal and external social and cultural dynamics of power that impose identity as if a singular entity. I will address debate about, and argue for a possible multiplicity of identity extolled in queer rubric as a principle theory (Jagose 1996, Morland and Willox 2005), and touch on the surrealist concept of the cadaver exquisite which, increasingly, is impacting on my practical work narrative.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

As a gay artist I am concerned with visual expressions in the politics of identity (Price and Shildrick 1999, Rinehart 1992, Walker and Leedham-Green 2010) and the body as a site of cultural productions (Juschka 2009), and wish to engage critically in my art with the awareness that we are conscripted at birth to adhere to the ‘norms’ of a dominant social construct - heteronormativity. As someone who considers themselves othered, I will question the idea of normality, and so my creative narrative will explore the idea of creating a space to inhabit where I am comfortable with who I am.

### **1.4 Background**

It is intense pain that destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. (Wendell in Price and Shildrick 1999:31)

This dissertation stems from a deeply personal motivation and I begin, therefore, with an explanation of how I came to research the body as a site for investigation into the construction of my self-identity.

As a third year fine art student in 2004 my lecturers at the time, Jinny Heath and Michelle Coetzee, were imparting ideas on how to find one’s artistic voice. At this time my suppressed homosexuality was beginning to impose on my thoughts and I was struggling to navigate complex feelings. I turned on the television one day catching part of *The Laramie Project* (2002). The film, based on real-life events, tells the story of a young man named Matthew Shepard; an American college student who was tied to a split-rail fence and pistol-whipped by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson because he was homosexual. The injuries he sustained led to his untimely death at the age of 21.

The theme of the film, converging with the process of ‘coming out’ – of that proverbial closet – a few months before my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, and unpacking authenticity in discovering my artistic voice were all pivotal to my re-evaluation of self. Shepard became a martyr for the gay community and a symbol for me – of me. Subsequently my practice shifted from a focus on the skills and technicalities of art making to socio-political engagement. I used my visual practice to investigate my feelings concerning the process of coming out which Annamarie Jagose describes as “a potentially transformative identity that must be avowed publicly until it is no longer a shameful secret but a legitimately recognised way of being in the world” (1996:38).

Shepard’s murder was a crucial moment in my art and the issues around my sexuality. These two elements had been consciously avoided until I learnt of his death, and particularly how he died, thus begun my first metamorphosis. I felt very emotional about this young person’s death and I wanted to convey that angst constructively and introspectively through my art.

My first artistic influence at this time to whom I connected was Berni Searle. She used her body to convey what, for me, was an authentic and personal response to the emotions she was exploring from the entrenched politics of her self-identity. I wanted to learn to convey personal feelings through my work, and Searle was my first teacher in this regard. By mimicking aspects of her creativity, I reinterpreted her visual aesthetic to reflect my emerging queer narrative.



**Plate 1.** Berni Searle. *Snow White* (2001). Two projector video installation, Artthrob article. [Image online].

**Plate 2.** *Death of the Act* (2004). Performance art, photo credit Davis, L.



In **Plate 1** I interpret Searle's intention from the response it provokes within me; and thus I see a docile body that becomes a body that labours, "in the space of duty, of endless and infinitely repeatable chores that have no social value or recognition, the space of the affirmation and replenishment of others at the expense and erasure of the self" (Grosz 1995:122). For me her voicelessness in this performed act reinforces the notion "of silence and passivity as feminine virtues" explored in Annette Iggulden's article '*Silent*' *Speech* (Iggulden in Barrett and Bolt 2007:66).

Understanding her multi-layered narrative from my own frame of reference allowed me to enter into the dialogue in appropriation and response to her work. For me racism, sexism, and homophobia are linked because of the over-arching prejudice attached to these categories. I believe that my efforts to socialise with different ethnic groups, the deep friendships I cultivate with women primarily, and the respect I bestow on different belief systems (although culturally challenging at times) stems from my appreciation and sensitisation of what it means to be 'othered' as a gay man.

By mimicking Searle, my *Death of the Act* (2004) performance: **Plate 2**, came to investigate the taboo of homosexual sex effectively making the act invisible: non-existent to a consciously ignorant public. This act was performed in private, surrounded by animal bones. The motivation to create this piece was provoked by my exposure to opinion on homosexuality being acceptable if it was not performed in public. The documentation of the performance is presented to the public in a space they can choose to either view or not view. As I was dealing with issues that dealt with my sociology I felt that I needed to implicate the public in a more confrontational and direct manner. It was then that I took an interest in the work of my second artistic influence; Steven Cohen.

In my Honours year (2005) after a tremendous amount of soul-searching I decided to create a performance piece, knowing I would feel incredibly uncomfortable. I felt I could work with the emotions that were evoked within me; and project those feelings on to the audience that would happen upon me during the enactment.



**Plate 3.** Steven Cohen. *Chandelier* (2001 – 2002). Performance art, photo credit Hogg, J. [Image online].

**Plate 4.** *For Matthew* (2005). Performance art.

**Plate 3** titled *Chandelier* (2001 – 2002), sees Cohen move through an informal settlement in the process of being demolished; dressed in heels and a self-made corset chandelier. Cohen connects to his own displacement as a gay man, yet seems uncomfortably detached by his white privilege (Murinik in Perryer: 2004). Again I implicitly mimic Cohen's work in further construction of my artistic identity.

In my performance *For Matthew* (2005) my face and body makeup allowed me to embody a more confident persona and detach myself from my shyness: **Plate 4**, enabling me to confront my enculturated victimhood in the public domain where it needed to be acknowledged; despite the fact the performance was, for me, a personal journey of affirmation borne from the murder of Shepard, I needed to expose my feelings in this regard to an unprepared audience of which I was very nervous. I painted myself white in reference to Searle's earlier influence on my creative practice.

I walked around the University of KwaZulu-Natal Pietermaritzburg campus from the art department to the drama department and back. Along the way I reflected upon and connected with organic elements: I purposefully interacted with nature, feeling the bark of trees, their leaves, flowers that had fallen from their branches. It was my way of expressing that this is how I was born. I was angry with a society that was telling me that homosexuality is a choice, when it felt and still feels completely natural to me. I channelled my anger and my immense turmoil regarding Shepard's murder, forcing myself to be the spectacle I never wanted to be. In the introduction to *Performance Studies: Readers in Cultural Criticism*, Erin Striff writes:

Performing in culture often involves making a spectacle of oneself. The lack of formal structure creates an element of danger, of performing without a net. And for us, as spectators, the performance occurs before we have a chance to rely on our received responses that would, perhaps, dull our sensibilities and limit the depth of our reading of what took place before us. (2003:13)

For the reasons highlighted above I ignored compliance with campus authorities to inform them when my performance would take place, believing that by alerting them to my performance I would undermine the authenticity of the work. I felt a tremendous responsibility to carry out my performance with respect and dignity for Shepard and myself. It was only near the end of my performance that campus security found and confronted me, rallying friends reasoned with them and I was allowed to finish the work I had started.

My walk around campus ended with me being bound by fellow art students to a split-rail fence I had constructed, pretending to haemorrhage from my anus; this was to draw attention to that area of the anatomy that homophobic rhetoric focusses on – never allowing gay people to be more than a sex act.

Ten years later I found myself engaging once more with visual art – and the motivation for this dissertation - to help guide me through another defining life experience (yet another metamorphosis), which ultimately has come to chronicle my laborious recovery – using art creation as a mechanism to initiate the healing process.

When I (as a gay man) married (a man), everything I thought I knew about myself was challenged. I engaged with an enculturated belief system that endorses a very specific life template; that adheres to a norm of which I was unable to subscribe. Following the heteronormative rubric as my yardstick, I held to this ideal for as long as I could. Then I had a nervous breakdown, resigned from my job, and divorced my husband in a matter of months. I felt completely obliterated. Unable to reconcile myself with the person I had become, I questioned my motivation to continue living.

I experienced crippling depression which after a year was replaced by equally crippling anxiety. Simultaneously I was dealing with my mother's own nervous breakdown (and brief institutionalisation) and my husband's descent into mania; a consequence of bipolar disorder that transformed him into a person I knew but no longer recognised.

Ultimately the aforementioned events led to my destruction of self which is my point of departure in this dissertation. The chapters that follow document my attempts to reconstruct myself; and heal through a consideration of the self and body grounded in my visual practice.

Between Honours and Master's study, I worked for the Exhibitions Department at a local museum in Pietermaritzburg, helping to conceptualise and construct dioramas and immersive environments. The museum caters for both natural history and human sciences, and I feel that my years in this environment has influenced the work I am currently making, how I conceptualise the space, and the materials I use. There is an element of theatricality in museum dioramas that feeds my current creative process, and thus is very much part of my artistic narrative.

## **1.5 Research Question**

My primary research question is: Who am I? This complex and convoluted question was motivated primarily by personal traumas, as revealed in my background statement, which evoked huge shifts in my perception of life and myself. Using my creative practice to examine my wounds and to unpack complexities inherent in my definition of self has assisted in my understanding of how I am constructed sociologically, and how I express my truth as a product of these findings. Sub questions that aid in constructing my definition of self are as follows: How do I perceive myself through the eyes of the other (within my sociological construct)? How does my ethnicity influence my understanding of myself? How does my gender influence my understanding of myself? How does my homosexuality influence my understanding of myself? How does my relative privilege influence my understanding of myself?

## **1.6 Objective**

By unpacking the fundamental concepts of queer theory as unstable and reflexive; I aim to show how identity is socially constructed through language, and using language as the voice of the oppressor, how heteronormativity entombs identity as singular. Whereas queer theory destabilises this rhetoric in its assertion that identity is unfixed and liberated from its corporeal body (or at least has the potential to be).

I aim to discuss the reviewed artists and a selection of their works in relation to identity as a process of becoming within their marginalised worldview. To show how each artist uses their own body image to create a narrative that allows for the fluidity of identity directly linked to their perceived experiences of their lived life.

I ask what the relationships are between the artist, artwork and their historical, social and political environments. I will show how this has directly influenced the artist and their work,

specifically around issues of gender and sexuality within politically unstable environments; that shift ideals and cultural beliefs to suit the dominant group in any given time and place. Given that people “learn in culture to reproduce or to challenge the meanings and values inscribed in the signifying practices of the society that shapes them” (Striff 2003:ix).

I ask questions about and examine the formation of my own narrative as one that is influenced by the practice and thinking of Berni Searle, Frida Kahlo and Steven Cohen. By mimicking their creative process I effectively create a dialogue between their work and mine, building on and evolving from an existing concept that I appropriate using my frame of reference. I highlight connections and differences in the selected works under study using the concept of multiplicity to indicate how and why works that embody similar concepts can often contradict and muddle a rhizomic narrative indicative of the human condition.

In this chapter I have introduced my argument for why I have chosen to investigate the politics of identity in an attempt to understand who I am, and have discussed my personal history as the foundation of this research. I have introduced the artists that flesh out the following chapters as important influences to my creative practice. I have briefly mentioned principle theories that I elaborate on in the body of this dissertation, that of queer and Bakhtinian theory, as well as the concept of the cadaver exquisite which forms a triangle of knowledge from which my foam work emerged.

## Chapter Two

### 2.1 Literature Review

In this chapter I review the literature that has assisted in my understanding of myself. As I work intuitively I often find difficulty in expressing the emotions I am tapping into and why. Using the thoughts and reasoning of various authors considered experts in their respective fields of knowledge, I now have a greater understanding of my own practice, and can tie their words to my thoughts and feelings. Included in this chapter is a methodology section that clarifies the paradigms or more simply put, the angle of the lens through which I am viewing the world within this document. “The nature of reality, the status of human knowledge, and the kinds of methods that can be used to answer research questions” (Macleod 2009) are brought to light in this section.

At the inception of this study my supervisor, Faye Spencer, encouraged me to look to the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin, as she felt that my earlier performance work and subsequent *Flesh* portraits from 2008 onward suggested a possible kinship between his words and my artwork, and it was in his dissemination of the grotesque that I found an anchor from which to launch my investigation attached to my personal history.

Bakhtin looks to the work of Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais, in his essay *Rabelais and His World* (1968). Rabelais related political conflicts to human anatomy. Bakhtin philosophises that the grotesque body transgresses “the limits dividing the body from the world” (1968:347). Due to the transformation occurring in my own life the concept of grotesque realism resonated personally. It speaks to the idea of an identity in flux, always transforming, always becoming – which helped me to understand that I am not one thing that is constant, but am multifaceted and complex, and always evolving. This is how I grew to understand the grotesque. “Life is shown in its two fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body” (Bakhtin 1968:26).

The construction of self via the medium of language and its implications is addressed in *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (1984) by Tzvetan Todorov. I found this work engaging because of how I have come to problematize language in this dissertation, in my struggle to reduce the work I create to a sentence that evokes its emotion-based complexity. Further to this Professor Ian Calder suggested I look to queer theory as my homosexuality

informs the pieces I create. Queer theory's multiplicity has consequently coalesced with the grotesque's 'act of becoming' in this dissertation.

In the publication *Readers in Cultural Criticism – Queer Theory* (2005), Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox contextualise the emergence of queer theory in the 1980's as a political strategy hybridised from the gay and lesbian civil rights movement in America, thus I introduce 'Westocentric' (Van Zyl and Steyn: 2005) but arguably global queer theory as an authority on identity's multiplicity, to holistically situate queer within its globalised context and, pointedly, the Americanisation of my South African context.

Addressing my contextualisation as fundamental to my understanding of myself, the following publication was instrumental in informing my thoughts on South African identities, specific to sexuality and gender: *Performing Queer: Shaping Sexualities 1994 – 2004; Volume 1* (2005). Mikki van Zyl and Melissa Steyn have compiled personal stories by academics in the fields of gender and sexuality, inspiring me to reflect on being allowed to live my truth as an 'out' gay man. I am very aware that as a gay South African under the apartheid regime my sexuality was deemed a criminal offence. This realisation is relevant to the frame of reference from which I address my interpretation of my current self-identification (i.e. the freedom to express and manifest my true self as I perceive myself presently).

Understanding my body as a sociological construct has allowed me to scrutinize ideas attached to it from the viewpoint of being othered. The experiences I relate in this dissertation come from a place of embodiment, "continuously created and recreated by and in social interaction that takes place within and around corporeal action" (Price and Shildrick 1999:71). The literature that I found most useful in trying to interpret the experiences attached to my body from an enculturated and sociological perspective is sourced from *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (1999); by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick.

The above mentioned literature contributes the bulk of my enquiry into identity politics. I have used articles that have been condensed into anthologies primarily because I am dealing with the body as a subjective concept. The various authors that have contributed to these publications offer personal insights that support their views on gender and identity. Allowing myself to be open to various, nuanced, and personalised ideologies has been necessary when contemplating how I experience the world in accordance with the notion of identity as a concept in flux – rather than a static label.

In her work titled *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (1995), Elizabeth Grosz brings to attention the research of French sociologist Roger Caillois, regarding his study on insect behaviour in relation to human behaviour. I found his writing on mimesis of particular interest. It made me think about how and why I mimicked the work of other artists in search of my own visual voice. This was a key find because, for me, mimicry and multiplicity have come to define the human experience within sociological contexts. I have subsequently used mimetic links to indicate the influential nature of the work made by the artists I discuss in this dissertation, as an investigative tool to help me unpack my concept of self. Furthermore, Caillois research into assimilating insect behaviour with the human condition was fundamental to my exploration of my physical body as insect-like in two particular assemblages, namely *Phantom of the Opera* (2015); **Plate 6**, and *Mantis* (2015); **Plate 8**.

In the reader *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art* (2004) by Sophie Perryer, the literature helped guide my understanding of how the body; as a vehicle for art; can be motivated by the politics of a country as a political tool to create awareness of a particular cause, thus creating a dialogue between the social and the personal. Within this anthology *The Enigma of the Rainbow Nation. Contemporary South African Art at the Crossroads of History* (2004) by Okwui Enwezor was of particular interest to me, drawing on themes of desire, identity, and sexuality during apartheid. I found Enwezor's interpretation of the black female body as "a body of excessive organs", and the gay body as "an absent body" (Enwezor in Perryer 2004:33/ 34) during the apartheid regime, poignant.

Literature on Steven Cohen that I found to be useful was sourced from the biography *Steven Cohen* (2003) by Jillian Carman. The essay in this biography *Surgery without Anaesthetic: The Art of Steven Cohen*; by author's Shaun de Waal and Robyn Sassen draw on Cohen's earlier years in South Africa, examining his forced military conscription during apartheid, which problematized his homosexuality, his whiteness, and his Jewish ancestry.

Cohen is primarily a performance artist, and I will be presenting insights on his performance of *Chandelier* (2001/2002) that resonated with me. The focus in my dissertation is the iteration he performed in a Johannesburg informal settlement in the process of being demolished. In their aforementioned article, De Waal and Sassen discuss at length the potency of *Chandelier*. Cohen was interviewed for the article, and I am able to reflect on his perception of his own artwork which he described as an "anti-ballet", "creating amid



destruction” (De Waal and Sassen in Carmen 2003:26). Erin Striff’s anthology on performance art; *Performance Studies: Readers in Cultural Criticism* (2003), was useful in understanding the social significance of this art form, and why I found it (in my own performance piece) to be a necessary and important part of my artistic journey.

Information on Searle that I found to be of particular interest was sourced from an article online: authored by Professor Desiree Lewis, lecturer on women and gender studies at the University of the Western Cape originally published in *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* (2001). The article – *The Conceptual Art of Berni Searle* – explores Searle’s concerns around black women’s subordination in both racial and gender hierarchies. In trying to understand how I relate to the work of Searle, I found Ian Barnard’s research titled *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (2004) invaluable. A key find was Barnard’s assertion that “sexuality is always racially marked” (2004:2). Furthermore Peter Aggleton’s article *Researching Same-Sex Sexuality and HIV Prevention* (2009) suggests that same-sex relations cannot be understood without reference to gender. These particular insights guided my exploration of Searle’s work, broadening my ideas on my own ethnic gendered identity in relation to my sexuality.

A key idea from the writing of Grosz concerning how “civilisation carves meanings onto and out of bodies” (1995:34), I consider in response to Searle’s *Snow White* (2001) installation, which I interpret as Searle being a commodity enacting a certain mundane domesticity prescribed by her gender within society.

Integral to my artistic development is the artist Frida Kahlo, whose life and work I discuss in the latter part of this dissertation. One of the more informative publications I found was by the author Claudia Schaefer, titled *Textured Lives: Women, Art, and Representation in Modern Mexico* (1992). Schaefer acknowledges the cultural and political ties that nourish the work of Kahlo beyond pure aesthetics and supports my own perception and experience of self, and the relationship of self to environment. *Political Bodies/ Body Politic: The Semiotics of Gender* (2009) by Darlene Juschka introduces the work of Mircea Eliade, who explains the importance of symbolic thinking, which is something I have tried to cultivate in my own mind, as influenced by the work of Kahlo.

Kahlo’s self-portraits are more than just a mirrored rendering of how she perceives the surface of her skin. The artwork I have chosen to reflect on in this dissertation; *Self-portrait with Necklace of Thorns* (1940); was sourced from a biography written by Andrea

Kettenmann, *Kahlo (1907 – 1954): Pain and Passion* (2003). This is one of my favourite Kahlo portraits and was the initial inspiration for my symbolic portraiture. The thorny vine is a familiar symbol in numerous of my self-portraits. *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (1995) by Carlos Fuentes and Sarah Lowe gives further insights into her life and work, because both Kahlo and I create self-portraits as visual diaries, her written thoughts compliments her artistic practice and aided me in a deeper engagement with it.

## 2.2 Methodology

I position my dissertations argument within a constructivist paradigm or worldview, whereby people actively construct or create their own subjective representations of objective reality. In her article *Paradigms in Research; Or, How your Worldview Shapes your Methodology* Alison Macleod makes clear that constructivists believe “human beings construct their own social realities in relation to one another. Reality is subjective and experiential: that thing over there that looks like a table is actually being used as a chair” (2009). This example typifies many aspects of my creative practice. My particular construction of reality might be shared with many other people, but other people could construct the same reality in quite different ways.

*Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (2007), by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt has encouraged me to engage with the innovative and critical potential of practice-based research in its capacity to generate personally situated knowledge. This neonarrative approach is guided by the study of stories, which is a qualitative research method situated within creative practice (using non-numeric data), as representative of one’s own claims to knowledge. I am motivated to explore new ways of modelling and externalising such knowledge. As Barrett remarks, “once a certain level of complexity is reached in any system, genuinely novel properties – those that have never been instantiated before – emerge” (Barrett and Bolt 2007:6). This is termed emergent methodology, whereby one experiments without knowing the outcome. My artistic practice has evolved to adhere to this methodology.

“In qualitative research, using the constructivist world-view,” as asserted by Rebecca J. Hogue in her article *Constructivism and qualitative research* (2011), “there isn’t a single truth, rather all truth is relative and constructed by the individual or society.” This is termed triangulation which is concerned with being aware of and understanding multiple and differing perspectives (Hogue 2011).

Particularly helpful was the study conducted by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari regarding rhizomic thought processes, as “an acentred, non-hierarchical, nonsignifying system” (Barrett and Bolt 2007:103). Which I believe assimilates into identity’s ideological multiplicity.

Using the rhizomic thought model to challenge my perception of self, I have allowed my thoughts to explore my inherent multiplicity that negotiates a preconceived logic perpetuated by my sociology. I then engage with my creative practice as I believe it is in the making of artwork where my authentic being emerges, and thus through art making my visual voice empowers me to actualize my uniqueness and challenge social projections that do not adhere to who I believe I am.

The data I have sampled is purposive by nature, by which I mean I am interested in why particular people, namely Steven Cohen, Berni Searle, Frida Kahlo, and I (Rory Kloppe) feel particular ways, and the processes by which our attitudes are constructed. “Embedded in this is the idea that who a person is and where that person is located is important” (Palys in Given 2008:697).

The validity or trustworthiness of my research is borne from sustained reflection on my part. Dialogue with peers about the work I am doing, and the more formal critique sessions forced me to refine what I was trying to achieve and express it in a way that makes sense.

Discussions with professors Ian Calder and Cheryl Stobie, as well as my supervisor Faye Spencer guided my erratic thoughts into this reasonably coherent document. Due to the personal aspects of my practice I felt compelled to do extensive research on identity constructs from various authors to back up my claims, and as an opportunity to understand myself better.

In this chapter I briefly outline the sources I have cited in the reviewed literature section, which I believe best support the intent from which my work is made in both philosophical and sociological realms. In the methodology section I position the theoretical implications of my dissertation acknowledging as Grosz asserts that “theory must be prepared to accept that any position has its limits; no position can encompass the entire field. To present a position, to provide a strategy, to make specific claims, is always to exclude, to deny and to problematize other, competing positions” (Grosz 1995:60).

## Chapter Three

### 3.1 Identity constructs in queer theory and grotesque realism

Identity. Purpose. Meaning. Victimhood. These are concepts that inform my work and the search therein. My personal history documents how my identity's inherent multiplicity has caused confusion and immense disruption in my life. Perceived through the eyes of another, I want to believe I am one thing (a relatively good thing) but my reality is far more complex. The external gaze distorts and informs ideas I cultivate about myself. Bakhtin theorises that, "we oversee and apprehend the reflections of our life in the plane of consciousness of other men" (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984:94).

The written word seems inadequate when trying to understand my concept of self. Art does not need to subscribe to codes of rationality in order to be expressed, which problematizes structures of language for me. Visual arts strength is its ability to transcend these structures and codes of control. As Bakhtin explains, "artistic creation, defined with respect to its basic material, consists in the overcoming of this material. The artist frees himself from language in its linguistic determination not through negation but by means of its immanent perfecting" (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984:67). I overcome the material by negotiating its immanent imperfections as part of its uniqueness, nonetheless what Bakhtin is suggesting is that liberating oneself from codes of control is achieved in the process of art making where chance allows new knowledge to be accessed. I realise that language is the means by which we make sense of ourselves and our world, because it is only by naming things that we can order them in ways that have meaning as a collective (community), which implies that meaning stems from order. However something that has meaning for you does not necessarily hold meaning for me, and thus meaning becomes ambiguous concerning self and other.

As my work is highly personal in nature I find it difficult to situate it within a theoretical framework without sacrificing its emotional charge. In my practice I am working toward the construction of an 'outside language' that is both logical and illogical, within reason, and external to reason, based on polarised ideas I have about myself.

For myself, and through my immersion also in the ideas of the artists under analysis, I have come to understand that the process of creating something is where a kind of truth lies, rather than the outcome or 'finishedness' of whatever it is I am trying to achieve. It is in the active participation of trying to make something that meaning evolves and emanates from.

The corporeal body is a core interest of mine: Regulated. Probed. Dissected. Socially imposed constructs are layered upon it. Juschka observes “flesh comes to us out of history; so too does the repression and taboo that govern our experiences of flesh” (2009:48). When one stares into a mirror one see a body – ‘their’ body – and one seems to create an idea of oneself around this body. Many of these thoughts of ourselves are not our own, rather they stem from the judgements of others; from a socially endorsed and particularised moral code regarding who they think one is or ought to be. Some days I look in the mirror and I perceive myself as attractive, other days I perceive myself as unattractive. Often this perception is based on how I believe others perceive me or what others have said about me. This observation endorses the notion that my physical (body) appearance has little to do with my perception (emotion-based mind) of my appearance.

One is taught a code of signs and symbols; that allow us to construct an idea of ourselves and others – both negative and positive (I am trying to avoid connotations of *negative versus positive*; and *truth versus lies*; because these terms only serve to distract from the insurmountable complexities that govern the inhabited habitual human body). Culturally these ideas of negative and positive can shift similarly to ideas around beauty, religion and sexuality. Feminist author Vicki Kirby hypothesizes how “language and culture are mutually implicated” (2006:68). This suggests we are bound by our enculturated body to adhere to systems of control that potentially restrict our sense of authentic self.

Naturalised from infancy, one projects an idea of oneself into their social narrative. Human beings are taught via mimesis to role play, often losing ourselves in the role. “For [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty, the subject’s relation to its own body provides it with basic spatial concepts by which it can reflect on its position” (Grosz 1995:92/ 93). In order to assimilate into a group I consciously construct my gayness – I advertise myself as the gay friend to heterosexual women and the sexualised body to other homosexual men.

Unavoidably, we assimilate assumptions projected on to our self into our core belief of ourselves and re/act accordingly. Whether one is a fat body or a thin body; a girl body or a boy body; a black body or a white body; a gay body or a straight body (to name a few of personal interest), each body is manipulated by socially imposed heteronormative ideals. As noted by Helen Marshall in *Our Bodies, Our Selves: Why We Should Add Old Fashioned Empirical Phenomenology to the New Theories of the Body* (1996), “there is a very fine line

between the facts and fictions of my body as I experience it in the here and now, and the history of that body” (Marshall in Price and Shildrick 1999:59).

Heteronormative ideals stem from a system of power and control which privilege the white male heterosexual body, maintaining a social order that others all that does not subscribe to the aforementioned description; thus achieving a hierarchy based on exclusion, using religious doctrine primarily as the voice of reason and unquestionable authority. In *The Belly of the Beast: Sex as Male Domination?* (1997) social feminist, Lynne Segal writes:

The more we explore the social and historical dimensions of masculinity, the more it is revealed as heterogeneous and contradictory, defined through a series of hierarchical relations: rejection and suppression of femininity and homosexual desire, command and control over (often seen as protection of) the weak and inferior. (Segal in Whitehead and Barrett 2005:100)

I believe my anxiety stems from formulaic principles that dictate how I am supposed to live my life. My creative practice is a way for me to embrace the kaleidoscopic complexity of life as I perceive it. I am not searching for a definition of logic found externally – rather I am trying to engage with my inner self so that I *become the world* rather than merely exist in it, entering “the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 1968:19). Trying to rationalise the irrational plays between multiple contradictory consciousnesses that exist simultaneously in me. Logic implies a separation of mind and body, but this “indissoluble unity” as described by Bakhtin suggests a more complex interpretation that falls beyond reasonable thought. This questioning of logic’s validity appeals to my examination of the sense of chaos I have experienced in my life, described by Kirby as “the internal disquiet of restless reinvention” (2006:11). It is also a principle theory in feminist and queer literature – as “the interrogative force of identity’s constant interruption of itself” (Kirby 2006:11).

In his article *Who Speaks for Bakhtin?* (1981) American literary critic Gary Saul Morson writes: “[Bakhtin] questioned the extent to which we can be present in our own utterances, and investigated our strategies for appropriating languages we have not made in contexts we have not chosen. He saw that we cannot be ourselves, we must cite ourselves” (1986:17). As much as I am aware that I am citing the voices of others, even in my own words, I am also aware that the voices I cite as principle theories; are citing those that came before. Mimetic behaviour in verbal and written language facilitates learning within the sociological paradigm. This is the same process I use to tap into the iconographic styles of Cohen, Searle,

and Kahlo, using aspects of their artworks as a template from which I begin a conversation about my own identity and ideas related to notions of self.

In *Struggles of Authenticity* (2005) Charles Hattingh indicates that “instead of creating our own meanings, we often identify with and internalise the ready-made” (Hattingh in Van Zyl and Steyn 2005: 205). My concern is always a question of how I go beyond what I know and create a visual voice relatively unique to me. With this in mind I think it is important to be aware of the illusory nature of my perception of my lived experiences, but nonetheless allow those experiences to feed my creative practice in an unselfconscious way. I do not question my motivation too much that would only serve to delay action. Instead I simply start an artwork and try and resolve issues as they present themselves throughout the process. In this way I believe a certain authenticity is achieved. As with any process awareness is key. In the construction of my identity, based on mimicking artists that inspire me, I am and always will be in the process of becoming. Meaning is extracted from this process by virtue of the personal nature with which I as the artist interact with myself as the subject, and the materials I use to express that self.

I am concerned with contemporary issues and visual expressions in the politics of identity and the body as a site of cultural productions, defined as “what we experience as natural to and good for the body are learned values we receive through the process of enculturation” (Eicher et al. 2000:41), and thus are conscripted at birth to adhere to the norms of the dominant social construct. Oliver Phillips’ article *Ten White Men Thirteen Years Later: The Changing Constitution of Masculinities in South Africa, 1987 – 2000* (2005), indicates how his homosexual identity informs his world view “as it forces [him] onto a liminal path from where centralised power and the singular absolutism of its ‘truth’ are inevitably challenged” (Phillips in Van Zyl and Steyn 2005:137). This insight is something to which I attest, with my divorce from my spouse, as an example that challenged my truth.

When unpacking the complexities of identity I believe it is important to distinguish between homosexuality as sexual behaviour between people of the same sex, and being gay which is the self-description or labelling of a sexual identity. In the article *A Brief, Slanted History of ‘Homosexual’ Activity* (2003) Donald Hall writes, “gay represents a modern stance concerning a well-formulated, highly politicised sexual identity” (Hall in Morland and Willox 2005:98). To elaborate; when one refers to homosexuality they are referring to same-sex behaviour. When one refers to being gay, they are embracing their identity as part of a

collective, as described in *Beyond Identity Politics: Homosexuality and Gayness in South Africa* (2005) (Leatt and Hendricks in Van Zyl and Steyn 2005:305). Furthermore, research in *Identity Judgements, Queer Politics* (2000) indicates that “many individuals take their sexual orientation to be a feature which plays an important role in their perception of who they are”. The authors note that most people believe that “they would not be the same person if their sexual orientation were to change” (Lance and Tanesini in Morland and Willox 2005:171).

Professor Cheryl Stobie and I engaged in a discussion about theoretical distinctions between gay and queer terminology (March 31; 2016). She noted the non-binary binarism of gay being identitarian and queer being anti-identitarian, an important point in the politics of identity, when one chooses to label or un-label oneself. In the context of this dissertation I will be asserting my identity’s multiplicity by alternating between identifying as gay and homosexual; relevant to the issue being explored. I identify as this duality and thus I understand my gay identity to be a choice, but my homosexual identity to be innate.

Queer positions itself at odds with normative, legitimate, and dominant structures. In the afterword to Morland and Willox’s anthology Mandy Merck reinforces that “queer is not what has gone before, but what is yet to come, a perpetual dialogue between sexual identity and its critique, looking forward without anticipating the future” (2005:187). Barnard makes it clear that queer is not the other of straight. Its definitional slipperiness is such that some straight people might be thought queer, while many gay people emphatically disassociate themselves with the term (2004:11).

When one refers to being gay or queer, they are asserting their identity. However, “acknowledging the inevitable violence of identity politics and having no stake in its own hegemony, queer is less an identity than a critique of identity” (Jagose 1996:131). When one defines oneself as something, or not something one is regulating their ideas about themselves, which both problematizes and reinforces one’s social conditioning. The very concept of identity arguably categorizes which potentially excludes. Adrian Poole’s article *Identity and Meaning* (2010) acknowledges that “identity is a powerful magnetizer and divider of us against them, especially when annexed to class, gender, ethnicity or nation” (Poole in Walker and Leedham-Green 2010: 13), further to which, Lance and Tanesini add: “Self-attributions of identity amount to asserting that one occupies the psychological and social placings that



are currently associated with that identity” (Lance and Tanesini in Morland and Willox 2005:178).

Much like queer theory’s definitional indeterminacy, the grotesque body makes ambiguous the terminology used to describe it. My primary interest is grotesque realism a term coined conditionally by Bakhtin described as the material bodily principle “contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” (Bakhtin 1968:19).

The more I researched queer theory and the grotesque body, the more my work began to mirror these concepts. Furthermore during my research I became inspired by the surrealist imaginings of the cadaver exquisite, which I interpret as the visual expression of queer theory’s multiplicity; and the grotesque body of Bakhtinian philosophy. The work that I feel best embodies this amalgamation is *Fat Man* (2015); **Plate 5**. This work manifested itself as a concluding aspect of the practical component of my Master’s Degree. As I became more confident with the material (expanding foam) I challenged myself to make it stand, and thus *Fat Man* was conceptualised. Within the descriptive context of the grotesque body, “the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose” (Bakhtin 1968:26).

The expanding self becomes a metaphor for the process of moving the borders of one’s identity outward, to encompass all life. *Fat Man*’s multiplicity is uncovered in the process of making. He is made from various materials that I have put together to construct him, thus he is the sum of all these things. During the time of his conceptualisation there were a number of riots taking place on University campuses around the country. The spark that lit this fuse was when a student, Chumani Maxwele, flung human faeces at the Cecil John Rhodes sculpture on the University of Cape Town campus, demonstrating a collective under-current of anger toward the colonisers and subsequent disenfranchisement of the indigenous people.

As Bakhtin asserts, and I connect: “It can be said that excrement represents bodies and matter that are mostly comic; it is the most suitable substance for the degrading of all that is exalted” (1968:152). I did not actively follow the events or how they unfolded, but was aware of the situation. I believe this awareness evolved from my subconscious into *Fat Man*, who became a fat white statue both angry and frustrated at the situation, and himself, his history, his

legacy, his voicelessness produced from projected racism attached to his skin – amongst other contributing elements. In line with identity's multiplicity my current work imbibes multiple narratives in a single piece, thus my divorce, my sadness and depression, and my anxiety regarding how to enjoy life is incorporated as part of this work.



**Plate 5.** *Fat Man* (2015) [with mouth and foot detail].  
Automatic assemblage, 210 x 140 x 90 cm.

*Fat Man* (2015) is a distortion of myself. One could construe him as my truth or personal myth. I studied my body as a template to make his body. Physically he becomes the antithesis of me, but emotionally he mirrors me in my current state of perceived metamorphosis. An excerpt from *Rabelais and His World* extracted from L. E. Pinsky's publication *Realism of the Renaissance* (1961) proposes that the grotesque in art "is related to the paradox in

logic. At first glance, the grotesque is merely witty and amusing, but it contains great potentialities” (Pinsky in Bakhtin 1968:32).

My anxiety locates itself physically in my mouth, inhibiting my speech. When I become distressed I develop a speech impediment – which I find embarrassing but also amusing. The frustration I feel is manifest in *Fat Man* with his open frothing mouth devouring the world and pleading to be devoured by the world. For me, the mouth resembles the continent of Africa, this was not intentional until it presented itself as such, and so I did not try to make it look more like a human mouth. The colour of the gums were inspired by a man that I became infatuated with recently, and who caused me some heartache. Nonetheless I found his gums very interesting and chose to incorporate them in the work. Although I think of *Fat Man* as foaming at the mouth, the white froth ambiguously appeals to my humour as a gay man; suggestive of the remnants of a sex act. In wanting to avoid becoming too descriptive of the grotesque as ugly I kept his teeth whiter than one might imagine they should be. The grotesque is not about being ugly as one might perceive it by current standards, it is about transformation which resides in a space of its own making. Any ugliness perceived when observing *Fat Man* comes from the emotions I felt attached to events that provoked metamorphosis in me, thus it is the process of transformation that can be ugly, not necessarily the concept.

In *Bakhtinian Thought – An Introductory Reader* (1995), Simon Dentith explores the nexus between the grotesque body and cosmic terror, the hermeneutics of which I discern as the fear of the unknown and meaninglessness of life, describing how dung and urine “lend a bodily character to matter” represented by the corporeal body, transforming “cosmic terror into a gay carnival monster”. In man’s attempt to overcome this fear “he became aware of the cosmos within himself” (1995:241/242). When I was inserting the hair into *Fat Man*’s head – a laborious task on which I meditated – I felt like I was plotting out constellations and galaxies along lines of axis. So he becomes an externalisation of my internal goings on – soft and permeable, while I on the other hand have tried to make myself hard and impermeable [impenetrable].

His (*Fat Man*’s) concept is further influenced by the story of two giants; the father and son Gargantua and Pantagruel as authored by Rabelais, but he also comes from an earlier concept of work I was exploring and expanding on; titled *Meat* – the body as meat, which was born from *Flesh* the original concept of my Master’s work and basis of my self-portraits. During a

critique session of postgraduate work Professor Calder observed that *Fat Man* was the sum of 34 years (my age) of life experiences, an observation of which I do concur.

In this chapter I have introduced the reader to two theories, namely grotesque realism and queer theory which are woven into the structure of this dissertation. I have highlighted ways in which these two theories play a role in my creative practice. I have also raised some questions about, and the difficulty involved in discussing practice (one medium) through another medium (that of language). I have considered some of the implications of this for fine art creative practice, and I have foregrounded identity's multiplicity fundamentally in gay and homosexual culture, under the umbrella of queer-theoretical rubric and grotesque realism.

## Chapter Four

### 4.1 The politics of identity

In this chapter I examine my own work as influenced by the work of Cohen, using our respective bodies as sites for investigation; geographic and historical contextualisation is crucial to having a greater understanding of the underlying motives behind the work I create. An exploration of socio-political constructs provide me with a foundation for my interpretation of shifting identities within the narrative contexts of Cohen and myself. My focus is on South Africa, the geographical home to myself, Steven Cohen and Berni Searle. As the preface to Van Zyl and Steyn's anthology illuminates:

Since South African society – as are many other societies – is still organised in a variety of ways along racial and ethnic fault lines we cannot eschew the historical and social categories of people designated as black, coloured, white or Indian and which position them within complex relations of power and privilege. (2005:9)

This excerpt highlights how identities are challenged within the cultural shifts at play. In the article *Towards an Adversarial Aesthetics: A Personal Response to Personal Affects* (2004), Liese van der Watt suggests that, in South Africa, rather than fixed in the binaries that apartheid tried to uphold, post-apartheid one's identity is openly fluid and complex (Van der Watt in Perryer: 2004). By comparing and contrasting the political context of our creative practice I show how each artist deals with memory and remembering, and how politics of state and body has had a direct influence on the work made by socially conscious artists such as Cohen, Searle, Kahlo and myself. In the preface to *Skin Deep: Women Writing on Colour, Culture and Identity*, Elena Featherston reminds one that:

Re/membering is a form of resistance, it is a life-affirming and self-defining act. Re/membering is a cry of defiance in the face of that which would steal our past, predetermine our future, cut short our present, challenge our humanity, render our lives meaningless, and make us invisible. (1994:v)

It is also important to remember that memory and experience are shifting, variable and diffuse, which is why histories need to be and are constantly rewritten. Our concept of self is directly related to our lived and learned experience of what it means to be a functional person in the world today. As noted in the prior chapter the space in which one exists directly influences how one engages with the world at large. When one's personal space is invaded and freedoms that are afforded to those considered the norm are denied, it becomes an emotionally and physically oppressive space to inhabit. Robert Connell in *The Social*

*Organization of Masculinity* (2005), theorises how “violence is part of a system of domination, but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection. A thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate” (Connell in Whitehead and Barrett 2005:44). Systems of control dictate social conscription to politically motivated ideals that want to exert control of one over another. The dismantling of the apartheid regime offered the promise of a more inclusive society, which has to a point come to fruition. It has been an uneasy transition, cultures clash, egos are wounded, and an uncertain future looms. I believe art is an effective way to communicate visually stimulating ideas. The human body in art is most effective in communicating ideas because people can identify themselves in someone because of shared physical (corporeal) similarities. “In performance art, the performers themselves become the text to be read [...], frequently through the expression of their bodies” (Striff 2003:9). I believe that as malleable beings one most often mirrors one’s environment; and that this is especially true for artists. From my point of reference, artists have a tendency to internalise their understanding of their place in the world, process their thoughts thoroughly (in my experience the mind of a creative does not stop) and emanate from conclusions arrived at. In *Spiritual Attunement in a Secular World* (1992), Karla Jackson-Brewer writes: “So much energy is focussed outward, by design, that there is little time left for inner-focussed, receptive, nonlinear thought” (Jackson-Brewer in Featherston 1994:172).

I appropriate concepts from artists that have been influential to me, and allow my life experience to dictate how I interpret their work; and the direction I want to take my work. This process often allows the work to evolve into its own unique thing that situates it apart from the original concept and is absorbed into my own narrative.

With the work that I do in assemblage I often appropriate found or bought objects that I merge into the work. It struck me that what I am doing is speaking to my innate multiplicity. By incorporating seemingly random objects into one art piece I am effectively creating an armour of ideas about who I think I am. My work has increasingly become theory driven, having played an important part in my understanding of the issues I address via visual modes during Master’s. However no matter how invested I have become in the theories that have so richly informed my current art practice, these theories often become secondary and sacrificed to my intuitive response working with the materials I use, allowing for new and more interesting ideas to emerge in process.

My identity is constructed rhizomically as a consequence of how I interact with the world around me. Thoughts and emotions felt in the moment are authentic and honest – even if manipulated by the events that evoked them. By attempting to abandon notions of myself being a good person or a bad person (i.e. ego) I am allowing myself to inhabit the spaces in between, to be open to dialogue and allow it to permeate my own thoughts and creatively interpret this synthesis in the form of an artwork, as this is how I process life – through my art. I am not making art that answers questions, its subjectivity is such that it makes suggestions in an attempt to avoid becoming rigid in its concept: allowing for interpretation. I have come to accept that my purpose in life is driven by a deep desire to create art to validate who I am. I would like to think that my contribution or legacy to the interrogation of self has the capacity to assist in humanity's quest for enlightenment, but this is arguably ego's attempt to make me feel special. Often the dialogue is unclear and confusion manifests, through which the contradictory nature of the human experience is foregrounded. As an observer of people, with an interest in the human condition, I feel confident in my assertion that from my observations of myself and those around me, we are fundamentally all contradictions of ourselves. In my opinion we are affectations of a morally disingenuous society. I believe we will change for the better, it is a process that will take time.

## 4.2 Steven Cohen

An artist who has had considerable influence on my own creative narrative, and has inspired me to explore uncomfortable issues within myself is the controversial performance artist Steven Cohen, whose impact on me I noted earlier in the background to my dissertation. As a conscript subjected to the racist ideals of the South African army during apartheid, Cohen “was deeply implicated in the construction of a normative white masculinity, and how that relates to ‘other’ identities” (Phillips in Van Zyl and Steyn 2005:145). This period of his life has forever left its mark on his body politic. Cohen himself asserts: “I never take for granted that being white is not an issue” (Murinik in Perryer 2004:77). I too am profoundly aware of my whiteness and my homosexuality. *Women and Everyday Spaces* (1993) author Gillian Rose claims that “whiteness retains its hegemonic position by denying its own colour as so becoming transparent to the critical gaze [in this way it is] limited in as few ways as possible by corporeality” (Rose in Price and Shildrick 1999:362). I wish to reclaim my whiteness as neither a good nor bad colour, but intrinsic to the spectrum, even within itself, and open to reinterpretation. Furthermore, in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) Judith Butler hypothesises that

“the regime of heterosexuality operates to circumscribe and contour the materiality of sex, and that materiality is formed and sustained through and as a materialisation of regulatory norms that are in part those of heterosexual hegemony” (Butler in Price and Shildrick 1999:243). My social body is undeniably South African, and I have the power to change the meaning of this body as it evolves in its historicised sociology if I take ownership of its representation. Campschreur and Divendal argue that “what we see in South Africa at present is a white culture no longer European (or even ‘Western’) but not yet fully African” (1989:165). Although written almost thirty years ago this statement still feels true for me today. My experience is that white South African’s are still in a state of transition. Our complex relationship with our historical past is yet to be resolved.

The conception I have of myself as the cadaver exquisite is complex and multi-layered. My social body is problematically preconceived within my social context, however I am theoretically liberated by the awareness that I am not my body: nevertheless, I do not know what it is like to not exist in my corporeal self, thus, although awareness affords me the capacity to see beyond my self-reflection I still interpret my being from a site of embodiment whereby my “embodied self is being continuously created and recreated by and in social interaction that takes place within and around corporeal action” (Marshall in Price and Shildrick 1999:71).

Stemming from a history of oppression, both Cohen and I address our queer marginalised identity within art practice. As indicated by Anne Smith in *Where was I in the 80’s?* (2005), “Sexual acts between members of the same sex, along with masturbation and bestiality, constituted, under the law, punishable behaviour in its turning of permissible procreative sex into impermissible recreational sex” (Smith in Hoad et al. 2005:59). Our current expression of this seemingly liberated identity with historical implications is fundamentally linked to our progressive Constitution; with its anti-discrimination based on sexual orientation clause. Theoretically this has made the invisible visible in post-apartheid South Africa, by creating what Mikki van Zyl in *Shaping Sexualities: Per(trans)forming Queer* calls “legitimised discursive spaces, for example in the media, for everyday representations of same-sex relationships” (2005:19).

Well known for being provocative, Cohen “creates his pieces both in ‘art spaces’ such as galleries and contemporary dance platforms, and, entirely uninvited, in public spaces such as city taxi ranks, horse races, sports events, black townships and national election voting



queues” (De Waal and Sassen in Carman 2003:5). In the same way that Cohen sticks or attaches things (signifiers) to his body, I appropriate ready-made objects for my assemblages and tattoo my history onto my body.

Both Michelle Stewart and Wayne Reddiar, lecturers in the Digital Arts on the University campus have on separate occasions posed this question of environment in which these ‘creatures’ I create should or would exist. Like the performance art of Cohen where environment is critical to how the piece is read, and no doubt influenced by my museum experience constructing dioramas, my assemblages do lend themselves to the idea of existing within a particularised space. There is also a theatrical aspect to them in that they are exaggerations of my internal conflict existing in a space of transition. In this space the lines between what I understand my reality to be, and the surrealism of emotion-based concepts must blur. The intention is to implicate the audience as active participants in a surreal space – which is a principle idea in performance art – without distracting from the integrity of the work.

In his artwork Cohen often asserts his homosexuality with determined focus on his penis and anus as emblematic of his white, Jewish, gay male identity. “When Cohen makes his private parts public, he is playing with a contradiction inherent in the policing of social boundaries” (De Waal and Sassen in Carman 2003:22). Cohen exposes himself in a very literal way in a mode that lends itself to an immediate and visceral response, whereas I create artwork that is more ambiguous than Cohen’s and requires perhaps more active decoding. My penis both defines, defies, and mystifies me, part of my corporeality and my multiplicity. As a gay man my penis is socially scrutinised from a heteronormative perspective, thus projecting on me certain perceptions of what one might consider normal or abnormal behaviour. The anus is equally problematic in this equation, ideas of which I investigate in the following works:



**Plate 6.** *Phantom of the Opera* (2015). Automatic assemblage, 110 x 60 x 60 cm.

**Plate 7.** *Jellyfish* (2015). Automatic assemblage, 136 x 50 x 50 cm.

*Phantom of the Opera* (2015); **Plate 6**, dissects the multiplicity of the male organ. Centipede, spinal column, carnival monster. It emerges from the portal of the tooth studded anus, boiling over in a huge pot that locates its prescribed ontology within the feminine realm. It is both machine and organic – cultural and biological, where one ends and the other begins is woven in a matrix of concept and plausibility. The title of this work, *Phantom of the Opera*, was derived intuitively. I felt compelled to title it thus without conscious reason. Subsequently, in Kate Ince's *Orlan: Millennial Female* (2000:76) I read the following description, which I felt resonates with my own work. In reference to the phantom of the opera she writes: “[His] deformity is symbolically phallic, [...] the misshapen feature is read as the inscription of the maternal gaze on to the surface of the offspring's face”. I was struck by the maternal reference because I have a strong bond with my mother, to the point where even our nervous breakdown's seemed to be synchronised. I find our connection both reassuring and disturbing because I look at my mother, and how she struggles emotionally, and I feel like I am glimpsing into my own future.

When one's offspring makes a defining gesture in their search for truth and happiness, a parent bears witness to an emergent being dislocating him or herself from their sheltered parental nucleus. My chosen title for this work in tandem with Ince's description of the

phantom (an idea I assimilate into the work), suggests to me that this work is about the mother figure. I present myself, my private parts, as misshapen; as I perceive the maternal gaze to reflect upon me. Not because there is truth to that perception, but because internalised homophobia is a presence in my self-perception. Within my labelled identity as Rory Kloppe, nothing would hurt more than my mother's disapproval of who I think I am. *Phantom of the Opera* is thus a work based on fear. Like most of the work I make it is an attack more than it is a defence, stemming from complex insecurities about who I am meant to be in this world. My other penis inspired work is *Jellyfish* (2015); **Plate 7**. I perceive the jellyfish as a beautiful and poisonous luminescent life-form floating in an ocean of uncertainty, uncentered and permeable, it sucks in and expels the world; it is its life source and its puppet-master. Made from steel, foam, komatex, ping-pong balls, diaphanous fabric and a plastic clothes basket. *Jellyfish* is a metaphor for how sex has evoked polarised emotions within me. It is a physical act from which I have created happiness and sadness. When I abide by the rules of an intimate relationship I am doing something 'right' subsequently happiness is the reward. When I bend or break the rules I am doing something 'wrong' subsequently sadness and guilt are the punishment. My character as a person who feels anxious when control or rule is imposed lends itself to a potentially destructive outcome within particular structures of control, and thus this work, once again, illustrates my polarised concept of self.

In *Gay Men, Lesbians, and Sex: Doing It Together* (1994) bisexual transgender activist Patrick Califia reasons that "our culture's phallic mythology has given the male sex organ so much highly charged symbolic significance that anything powerful is a phallic symbol" (Califia in Morland and Willox 2005:27). My work supports this notion but also pokes fun at the virility of the heterosexual penis and the glorification of its procreative function, which is relatively redundant to the homosexual male. My experience of the venerated penis in gay culture indicates a commonality in straight culture, but more so from an aspect of hedonistic pleasure. This homonormative exaltation of the penis has caused tremendous conflict in my life, because it has distorted the socio-ethical implications of the boundaries between love and sex. Love seems cerebral, and sex physical – relationships define how these concepts are enacted, often in equilibrium. I have tried to investigate the reasons for the imbalance of this equilibrium in my own life. Two thoughts that keep coming to the fore are issues of control and ownership, neither of which instil peace nor comfort in me. Why I perceive relationships to embody these relatively negative terms is also of interest to me – and difficult to answer.

Working with concepts in queer theory, the grotesque body, and the cadaver exquisite, and constructing assemblages motivated by my interest in these concepts; I am figuring out how to unknow my body, disregard ego, and reveal my authentic self to myself and those around me via the mode in which I work. It is in the unknowing that I can reconceptualise myself apart from sociological ideologies that would seek to reinforce a particularised and stereotyped identity. The unpredictability of the mode in which I work, to a point, allows the work to create itself. I stand as the architect conceptually, but because I have about thirty seconds to work with the volatile nature of the expanding foam before it sets; the control I exert over it is limited. The unknown element of the foams unpredictability is its most interesting feature. Bolt notes that “materials are not passive objects to be used instrumentally by the artist, but rather, the materials and processes of production have their own intelligence that comes in to play in interaction with the artists creative intelligence” (Barrett and Bolt 2007:29).

The materials that I have chosen thus, compel me to make what I term *beautiful mistakes*, for it is in these chance, accidental, or unanticipated forms that my next thought is provoked. I make decisions regarding the resolution of my artwork based on what I am presented with in a step by step process. Often the foam does not expand quite in the way I anticipate, deviating and challenging my intention, which then requires re-evaluation. During the construction of *Phantom of the Opera* the expanding foam I use pushed the skull off the shaft, entered the skull and exited its apertures. I had anticipated it working its way through the skull, but I cannot stop it from expanding, only control the process by guessing how much to mix. I did not think it would push the skull off the shaft; and in a futile gesture tried to leverage my weight on the skull to hold it in place. I created a collar to disguise the ‘mistake’. The fortuitous element to my assemblages is what makes their construction so compelling and relevant to me. Perfection does not interest me, the uncontrolled and flawed speak more closely to my reality. My experience with the foam makes me feel that the foam itself is a collaborator in making, not merely a material I wish to master.

*Mantis* (2015); **Plate 8**, addresses the synthesis of multiple realities and details the contradictory nature of the politicized body. *Good and bad* as well as *pretty and ugly* as polarised concepts are interwoven in an attempt to reveal – what one might term – my shadow self to my social self. I have a personal relationship with the work I make and thus consider all my work metaphors of the self. The likes of *Mantis* and *Fat Man* are no exception – they are vehicles for self-reflection. As theorised by Ince: “The body which

shapes the social imaginary is not an empirical but already a symbolic one, in which a metaphorical relationship to anatomy lends particular shape-related values to thought and to culture” (2000:38). Both *Mantis* and *Fat Man* are attempts to interpret facets of my identity. *Mantis* may renounce the overt illusion of the human body, but covertly it represents the most intimate conception of my body, that of my emotional self.



**Plate 8.** *Mantis* (2015) [with back and eye detail]. Automatic assemblage, 190 x 100 x 210 cm.

Having observed two rather large praying-mantises about a week apart from each other a project began to generate in my mind, and when I saw an old wheelbarrow rusting in my parents’ garden the concept of *Mantis* was born. Using various items that I placed together like a puzzle: a cow skull, whips, spoons, a wheelbarrow, synthetic flowers, plastic butterflies, garden rakes, marbles, dustpans, brushes and so forth, I created a surreal creature that was inspired by my life journey and informed by the theories of this dissertation. *Mantis* is a mobile landscape of organic skeleton, steel and plastic. It both emphasises the grimness of reality and the farcical nature of unreality. Emerging from this seemingly random collection of objects a singular form was created. As Latimer states in her article *Unsettling Bodies: Frida Kahlo’s Portraits and In/dividuality*, “assemblage and juxtaposition make

explicit the complex, heterogenous nature of reality and selfhood” (2009:50) whereby the body is reconceptualised in terms of assemblage.

Through its construction and materials *Mantis* becomes a question of politicised ideals that manipulate and contort in reaction to socially prescribed norms that dictate male and female roles. The praying-mantis comes with sexualised iconography: devouring its mate during copulation. (Am I this man-eating creature?). Conceptualised to stand in an attack pose, ready to impale, butterflies and flowers and a clutch of eggs (marbles) on its back situate it in an ambiguous realm. Is it trying to protect? Defend? Attack? Why is part of it lush and brilliant in colour, and the other half dead or dying? Because I work in a manner whereby from the onset the direction is unclear, it is difficult for me to give a concise argument for its creation. In one sense it is ‘just because’, and derived from intuitive processes, yet of course, it comes from me and is borne of my experience and so is implicated in my history and the politics of my identity.

The work seems to be the product of my anxiety regarding my true identity. At times I consider my physical form irrelevant because it only seeks to conceal. A few scars indicate some trauma to the surface, but the wounds I have found hardest to heal are the emotional ones. In my life I have been both defender and attacker having hurt and been hurt by people, and hurting myself. I have also loved, been loved, and loved myself. My experience of myself is one of contradiction and ambiguity as manifest in *Mantis*.

In this chapter I have noted how the oppressive nature of social indoctrination informed both the work of Cohen and myself. I have also shown how my assemblages connect to the performances of Cohen. By expanding on the ideas of Cohen using his body as an assemblage, I have explored similar social issues through my own work in sculpture and assemblage. I have given examples of how I have come to perceive myself through the art I make. The politics that mark my body create a version of me in what one might describe as monstrous; as indicated in works such as *Mantis* and *Phantom of the Opera*. I have also noted accidental or chance happenings during the process of making, which is increasingly becoming a defining aspect of my work.

## Chapter Five

### 5.1 Gendering Sexuality

In this chapter I consider gender and sexuality and ‘gendering sexuality’. I will also draw attention to particular ideas on the racial marking of sexuality. I introduce the concept of the personal myth and its relation to my artwork. I re-introduce Berni Searle as a practitioner who continues to inform my work on various levels. I reflect on a defining moment in my practice when I went from exploring my narrative on paper, to sculpture and assemblage which, I believe, has significantly amplified my visual voice.

Gender and sexuality are social constructs formed around the corporeal body. In the foreword to *Queer Race*, Barnard writes: “In the contemporary world, we have come to understand gender and sexuality as shifting sites of signification,” he continues, “gender and sexuality are multiple, fluid, variable, contingent, and contextual as they operate under a variety of cultural, historical, rhetorical, and ideological conditions” (2004). Furthermore, in the article *Researching Same-Sex Sexuality and HIV Prevention* (2009) Peter Aggleton claims that “issues of gender are crucial when it comes to understanding same-sex relations [...], one cannot be understood without reference to the other” (Aggleton in Reddy et al. 2009:4). Socially one cannot escape the body one inhabits and thus one’s response to the world is dictated by one’s enculturation. Enwezor examines the constructs during apartheid that informed the labelling of the black female body as “a body of excessive organs, owing mostly to the domesticity of its labour and fantasies of aberrant sexuality.” Furthermore he reveals the gay body as “an absent body. [...] without sex, constantly struggling to free itself from the social norms of heterosexual domination” (Enwezor in Perryer 2004:33/34).

Sexuality indicates both the sex of a person and/or their sexual predisposition. Codified behaviour is scripted in the act of the sociological paradigm. Understanding the historical construction of sexuality as a basis for identity formation was pioneered by Michel Foucault. In his publication *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (1979), Foucault argues that at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century sexuality was fluid, shameless and open. This was to change during the Victorian era when sexuality became confined to the home. “The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction” (1979:3).

If one believes one is a good person; but is enculturated to believe their sexual predisposition is bad, they have no other choice but to question the formula for a 'perfect' society. I would not say it makes life easier, but I believe that I am more open to experiences and ideas that challenge me because I am gay. As theorised by Califia: "Gay people have responded to persecution and homophobia by creating our own mythology about homosexuality. Whenever desire and behaviour conflict with rhetoric, it's time to re-examine the rhetoric" (Califia in Morland and Willox 2005:26). My visual art reinforces the idea of the personal myth. The scenes I paint and the creatures I create do not subscribe to a collective norm, they are my understanding of an aspect of my multiple-realities, they are an interpretation of my life story and as such they are my myth.

An examination of Plato's *Symposium* (c. 385–370 BC) concerning the purpose and nature of love, highlights the mythological constructs of sexuality as follows: The world was once made up of conjoined beings. When Zeus divided these beings into separate individuals, sexuality was determined by the search for one's missing half or soulmate, either of the same or different sex. (Hall in Morland and Willox 2005:101). This myth was used as an argument for justifying homosexual behaviour in the late 1900's. I use this as an example of the dualistic nature of the human experience which is supported in both queer theory and grotesque realism. The myth speaks of becoming – searching for one's completeness; and also of multiplicity – extending beyond the limitations of the corporeal as we, in our limited capacity to embrace the unknown, understand it.

The idea of this myth of sexuality led me to the work of Carl Jung who; in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961) wrote: "What we are to our inward vision, and what man appears to be *sub specie aeternitatis*, can only be expressed by way of myth. Myth is more individual and expresses life more precisely than does science" (Jung in Claxton 2005:364). Furthermore Juschka elucidates on the idea that "myth, ritual, and sign-symbol are understood as signifying mechanisms that provide and elaborate meaning within social bodies" (2009:19), in which a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor are codified; as described in Foucault's – *The History of Sexuality* (1979).

Gender as a social construct imposes certain rules on one's body, "embedded in the organically marked bodies of women primarily", reasons Donna Haraway in *The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determination of Self in Immune System Discourse* (1989) (Haraway in Price and Shildrick 1999:210), – the male body, as I understand, as the architect of gender



has escaped its corporeal conditioning, a body beyond regulation (within the heteronormative rubric). It is the dominant body within our cultural construct – a construct that adheres to specific conditions in which we live and create and recreate ourselves. In her article *Fat Like the Sun* Van Zyl writes: “I have often felt that I am battling against a conspiracy of genes and culture which trap me in time and place, at the intersection of hegemonic forces like white privilege and heteronormativity” (Van Zyl and Steyn 2005:88). An observation I strongly connect with.

“[Judith Butler] draws a dividing line between Nature (the unknown, the ‘before thought’ and language) and Culture (the known, the thought, the articulated) on the surface of the skin” (Kirby 2006:83) in an attempt to articulate the facts and fictions of the body. Drag and homosexuality challenge the status quo and become problematic because they destabilise normative constructs that require conformity within the boundaries of one’s gender. “Physical and chemical bodies exist outside human society, whereas the products of ideological creation develop only within it and for it” (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984:17). That is to say “the biological body is often believed to be politically and materially static, while political and material malleability is reserved for the cultural body” (Fraser and Greco 2005: 9). The above excerpts indicate how gender is used to other the female body by placing it “outside human society” because its chemical processes make it unstable and too animalistic. Whereas the male body is perceived as the “cultural body” because it is seen as a stable body. These ideologies have more in common with control than truth.

We learn to mimic our external stimuli to co-exist in whichever culture we happen to be born and evolve in. Our truth then speaks more of our enculturation than anything one might describe as innate. Sociologist Roger Caillois findings on insect behaviour reiterate this point:

Mimesis is particularly significant in outlining the ways in which the relations between an organism and its environment are blurred and confused – the way in which its environment is not clearly distinct from the organism but is an active component of its identity. (Grosz 1995:88)

These ideas on mimesis evoke childhood memories whereby I felt obliged to perpetuate boy-like qualities and suppress girl-like qualities. My mannerisms, my voice, my walk, my likes and dislikes were something I became conscious of when these affectations were brought to my attention by my peers, to the point where I withdrew from them because the pressure to keep up my heterosexual persona was emotionally exhausting. I learnt to enjoy my own company where I could be myself. Perhaps this experience of my childhood informed and

continues to inform the world I construct through my art. “Butler’s conviction that our lives assume their significance through the structural play of language, provoke her to insist that it is within language, not outside it, that the possibility of different sexual lives can be discovered” (Kirby 2006:43). However, Jagose argues that “language is commonly misunderstood as the medium by which we express our authentic selves” (Jagose 1996:79). From my point of view; visual art as a language unto itself that can be redefined and reconceptualised from a personal and intuitive response to one’s lived experience, has much to offer me with regard to understanding my authentic self.

## 5.2 Berni Searle

As a coloured (black) South African woman Searle’s use of her body within her work identifies as a marker of oppression and a reminder of an oppressive history. In *Playing on the Pavements of Identities* (2001), Bernedette Muthien notes that “during the anti-apartheid struggle, activists who were not classified white by the apartheid regime, identified as black, based on the teachings of Steve Biko, the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa” (Muthien in Van Zyl and Steyn 2005:43). The Group Areas Act (No. 41 of 1950 and No. 77 of 1957) which was consolidated by further legislation in 1966, imposed legal residential segregation on the whole population (Innes 1975:6). Many non-whites (and some whites) were forcibly removed from their homes and towns. Furthermore “the Mixed Marriages Act of 1950 banned marriages between members of different racial classifications” (Hoad et al. 2005:16), Searle is a product of this wounded society. Professor Desiree Lewis notes how Searle draws on a plethora of “symbols, postures, acts, icons and colours that feature prominently in colonial and racist portrayals, Searle’s work often recalls black women’s history of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’” (2001:109). Furthermore, Searle asserts:

I’m very aware of not wanting to represent myself in a way that is static. I think that the work itself exists as a result of a creative process, as well. And often my processes attempt to convey something about the intangibility or a flexibility and a state of flux which is central to my view of occupying multiple identities which are constantly changing. (Lewis 2001:108)

Understanding the effects of institutionalised oppression based on race and gender as explored by Searle, gives me a greater understanding of her enquiry into identity and politics of the body, and how she has overcome the labels that sought to erode her dignity and sense of self. Barnard’s assertion that “sexuality is always racially marked, as every racial marking

is always imbued with a specific sexuality” (Barnard 2004:2), gives me a point of access from which to engage with instances of comparison between the work of Searle and its appropriation by me, as I identified my struggle in her struggle. My sexual orientation implicitly informs my gendering and often enters the narrative of my work, concurring with Sue Tolleson Rinehart’s assertion that “gender consciousness is one’s recognition that one’s relationship to the political world is at least partly but nonetheless particularly shaped by being female or male” in *Gender Consciousness and Politics* (1992:32). Juan Nel’s article *Same-Sex Sexuality and Health: Psychosocial Scientific Research in South Africa* (2009) calls for a libertarian view of gender/sex identity that ponders the notion, what if “instead of the state adjudicating who is who in terms of sex and gender, people ought to have their own say about what their genders are, regardless of their anatomies” (Nel in Reddy et al. 2009:39).

“Themes of cooking and foodstuffs feature often in [Searle’s] work, balancing a reference to family and continuity with an invocation of the female realm” (Murinik in Perryer 2004:51). When I first started experimenting with expanding foam I took inspiration from the sea-life in coastal rock pools. This seemed dislocated from the *Flesh* portraits I was making in my first year of Master’s, so I revisited the concept and decided to investigate beneath the flesh, which lead to the exploration of my physical body as a piece of meat in my *Meat* sculptures. *Cake* (2014/2015); **Plate 9**, is a work I made early in 2014 and elaborated on in 2015 when I learnt about the cadaver exquisite. The inference to food adheres to Searle’s food incorporated themes “with an invocation of the female realm” as mentioned. The idea for the cake was evoked by watching how the liquid components, when mixed, activate and expand like bread in an oven.

The cream/fat from the cake/meat hangs from the ‘body’ of the cake. A spinal column rises from the centre as if it were a candle atop a birthday cake. The cake sits steadfastly on its stand (a lamp stand that I reinterpreted). The yonic shapes repeated around the circumference are suggestive of female genitalia. ‘Pubic hair’ made from wire, reinforces the suggestion. A wedge is cut from the cake and old ‘rotting’ clay teeth stand perched ready to bite which disrupts and subverts the cake-like narrative.

The object is painted to assimilate an idea of meat, as well as cake. It was then dabbed with layers of liquid latex that yellow over time, giving it a flesh-like texture, as well as to suggest rot had set in. This *Meat* sculpture poses questions about how I as a homosexual man perceive my gay self from the perspective of heteronormative ideologies that address

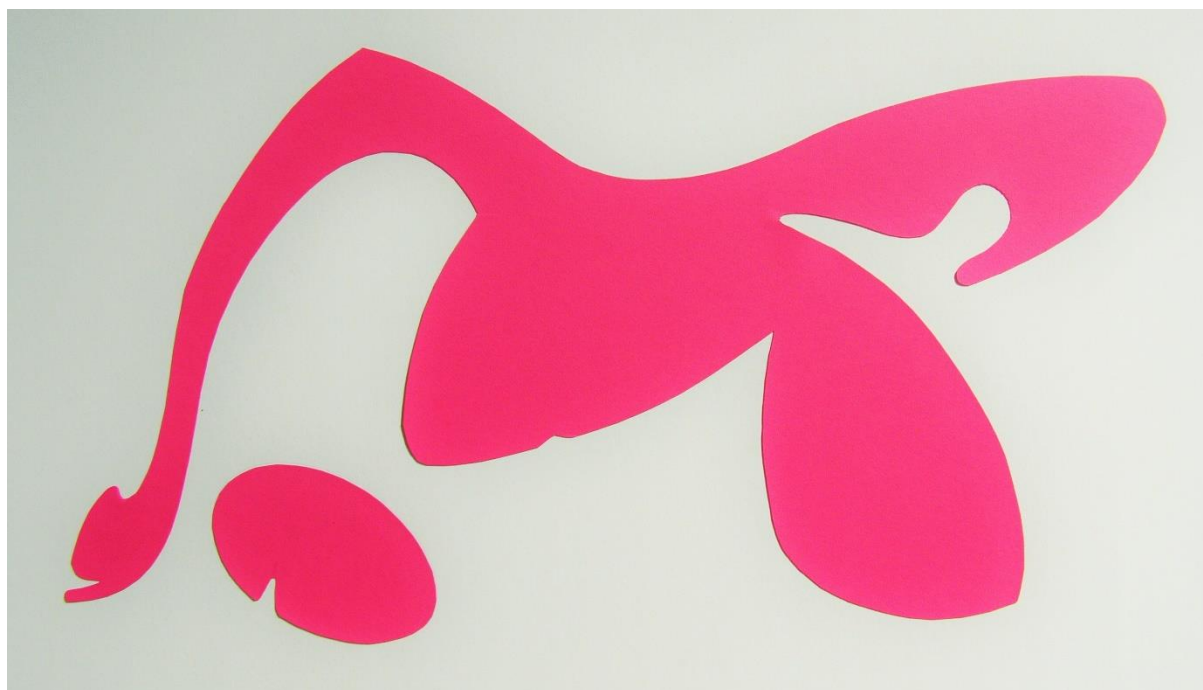
homosexuality as a pathological disorder. It is a reactionary piece based on perceived ideas of normality as projected by society. Recognising genders social construction allows me to reconstruct myself as this hairy vagina meat cake: appealing to my humour, thus I am as the title *Cake* suggests, a sweet confectionary indulgence, however, as the visual element of the artwork suggests I am bitterly and blatantly unappetising, leaving my audience space to contemplate and question my motives and their own ideological responses to something they think they know. I aim to make work that generates debate and believe that if there is no dialogue I have not achieved my objective to make people think beyond what they anticipate and understand – which is an effect of social conditioning.

In this instance food and gender coalesce to provoke dialogue over feminine and masculine realms and how these realms are actively distorted by queer rubrics. These distortions dislocate from the normative realities of most individuals, in doing so they feed into the consciousness of public opinion and allow for a more holistic interpretation of the other to generate in the mind of another. As a gay/homosexual man I have not allowed myself to be sexually penetrated by another person because it does not appeal to me. This admission to my gay friends often brings about derisive laughter at the expense of my supposed virginity. Interesting then that I should pocket the body of this artwork with open orifices, when I myself am not currently willing to be penetrated by some body or the world.

The gendering of my sexuality is further illustrated in **Plate 10**, playing into and subverting ideas about conventional depictions of female and male forms in visual art. Colour and contour are used to examine the boundaries between the masculine and feminine. *The Dancer* (2015) illustrates fluidity of form and expression. The semi-erect penis-like shape reinforces masculine phallic mythology subverted by a title that implicates the image in an activity typically associated with the feminine realm. The colour makes implicit the gender binary of colour relationships imposed on the male and female body, and suggests the sociological feminisation of gay men.



**Plate 9.** *Cake* (2014 / 2015) [with teeth and yonic-shape detail]. Automatic assemblage, 100 x 50 x 50 cm.



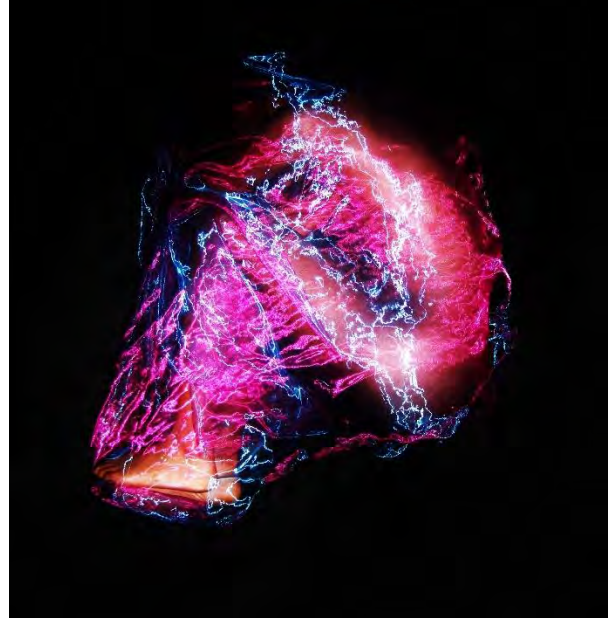
**Plate 10.** *The Dancer* (2015). Colour paper cut-out on paper, 35 x 45 cm.

My interest in paper cut-outs was inadvertently ignited in conversation with Professor Calder, who suggested I expand my repertoire beyond portrait painting (my principal focus at the time). Calder suggested I experiment with printmaking techniques. I have to date never felt compelled or inspired to translate the work I do through the mode of printmaking – the process does not ignite my creative spirit. I knew Calder was trying to nudge me in another direction because my self-portraits were arguably feeding my victimhood and hindering my full creative potential. Thus I began to think about how I could interpret the idea of print without the process. The flatness of simplified screen-prints appeals to a certain aesthetic within me. I then remembered experimenting with paper cut-outs while studying in Sweden (2002). I connected the appearance of the cut-out and that of a screen-print, a connection which shifted my Master's narrative considerably.

The freedom of expression I felt when I was reinventing the human form through my cut-outs and off-cuts led me to reflect on my time in Sweden. The town (Gävle) in which I lived had a very large Henry Moore sculpture in the town square, and as I was exploring the fluidity of form through my cut-outs, this particular sculpture kept entering my mind. Reconstituted and reimagined, the simplification of the forms had me thinking of how the body might manifest in sculptural form. This led to my investigation of the body in sculpture, assemblage, and photography, thus the whole dynamic of the work I was making during my Master's endeavour was challenged, and from this point forward my work evolved quite quickly and dramatically.

For myself the immediacy in the act of making stimulates my creativity. I find the unknowing in art-making seductive, my heart begins to beat faster and I feel the release of adrenaline in my blood-stream. When the process is protracted I seem to lose impetus, and the formula becomes mundane. I do not consider myself an experienced photographer – my camera is a *point-and-click* – and I use minimal digital manipulation to create something that satisfies my vision. The subject is placed on a black sheet in a dark space cacooned in diaphonous fabric. I take the photo with the flash on and enhance the contrast on my laptop. The way I use the digital image satisfies the immediate gratification I seek out in most if not all the creative genre's I am currently exploring. The attraction I feel for my human subject, my muse, creates a sexual energy that feeds the work in a compelling way for me. My subject's Xhosa ancestry, his Hindu faith, and his homosexuality enhances my interest in his complex body, which I then layer further with my own ideas. My introduction to him via a mutual friend has led to a number of collaborations in drawing and photography. I am

captivated by the beauty of his unusual elongation. Working with my muse has enabled me to look beyond my own reflection and create work that is not confined to my corporeality.



**Plate 11.** *Jellyfish: series I* (2015). Photograph.

**Plate 12.** *Jellyfish: series II* (2016). Photograph.

**Plates 11 and 12** evoke a sense of tranquility, weightlessness, and isolation. The title evokes my attempt to reconceptualise the corporeal body. During my darkest days, as my divorce was being finalised I spend time at Shaka's Rock along the KwaZulu-Natal north coast. This coastline has brilliant rock pools with interesting and unusual sea-life. I would lose myself in these pools, spending hours observing the wide variety of life forms. The colours and forms I use in my artwork are inspired by these observations. I am unsure why the jellyfish holds such intrigue for me. Its gelatinous form is one that I feel compelled to return to, having explored it in my sculptural work and in one of my self-portraits. There is an aspect of transformation in the way this sea creature moves through water that appeals to me.

Colour is particularised in my artwork to highlight issues of gender and sexuality. Ambiguous gendering is a theme that I find myself exploring often, an ambiguity embodied by my muse's unusual form. Ensnared in pinks and blues I am questioning the colour separations that indicate male or female. As discussed in *The Dancer*: **Plate 10**, I am suggesting a gendered subversion. The softness of the shapes and the hardness of the colour play off these dichotomies. As Grosz explains: "The body can be regarded as a kind of hinge or threshold: it is placed between a psychic or lived interiority and a more socio-political exteriority that

produces interiority through the inscription of the body's outer surface" (1995:33). I am layering the surface of the subject's body to project upon him social discourse that affects me.

Metamorphosis occurs with each event I perceive as significant. I reflect on these artworks as part of this journey. The emptiness, and loneliness I felt in times of extreme sadness and depression evoke the abyss in which *Jellyfish I* and *Jellyfish II* are situated. The vibrant colour reassures me that although sadness has entered my life, I am still vital and have presence. In her article *Art as Healing* (1994), Mitsuigi Forssen writes: "we all are comprised of layers of experiences that shape how and who we are. Although we tend to feel quite singular, we are in fact quite multifaceted; we are layer upon layer upon layer" (Forssen in Featherston 1994:184). As we mature our lives seem to become increasingly more complicated. In the preface to his previously mentioned anthology Morson writes: "Humanity is defined by its 'unfinalizedness' [...]. Whether existence is wholly determined or partially free, whether knowledge is possible or impossible, we retain the capacity to surprise ourselves and others" (1986:vii).

In this chapter I have addressed the complex relationships between gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity; and how I identify strongly with all three constructs because of my homosexuality. I have implicated Searle in my current exploration of form and gender, and examined my paper cut-outs as a harbinger for my photography and automatic assemblages. I have shown how the body as a site for investigation is predisposed to assumption and enculturated rhetoric. Further to this I have looked to personal myth as a way to justify how I perceive myself, and the work I create. I have also indicated how the concept of the cadaver exquisite has encouraged an exploration of physical metamorphosis of the corporeal as influenced by my *Flesh* portraits, my *Meat* sculptures, and the rock pools at Shaka's Rock that informed my photographs.



## Chapter Six

### 6.1 Constructing the self

In this chapter, I review my coming to terms with my identity's complex and contradictory nature. My analysis turns to a consideration of work by Frida Kahlo; who has profoundly influenced my artistic narrative. Kahlo opened up a plethora of possibility regarding how I construct meaning using generic symbols that I *give meaning* to, as well as looking at my corporeal self as a point of departure when engaging with my site specific sociology. Alongside the artists Cohen and Searle, and the ideas on the body discussed in previous chapters, Kahlo has a significant place in the development of my understanding of self-identity.

As Jagose tells us, it is best to understand identity as a process rather than a property (1996:79). Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710 – 1796) postulates that “[identity] has no fixed nature when applied to bodies; and questions about the identity of a body are very often questions about words” (Reid in Walker and Leedham-Green 2010:187). I am many things to many people and will embody many personas throughout my lifetime, not ever really knowing who I am because I never really am, but only always becoming. Bakhtin hypothesizes that, “all true understanding is active and already represents the embryo of an answer. Only active understanding can apprehend the theme [the meaning of the utterance]; it is only means of becoming that becoming can be apprehended” (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984:22). Upon reflection I consider my work “the embryo of an answer” which allows for growth, unrestricted in its unfinishedness.

Van der Watt claims that we are in a post-identitarian world – signalling a departure from identity, but no arrival (Van der Watt in Perryer 2004:47). I believe we are moving toward this space, people are beginning to identify themselves as hybrids of the standardised norm. Paradoxically, the hybrid seeks validation and approval from other hybrids because humanity relies on community. Community is based on common objective which requires rule and regulation, and this is why people with common agendas cluster. In order for this to happen one needs to identify the principles for which they stand, hence the boundaries of identity are problematic. Rather than a departure from identity, I consider identity in metamorphosis. Identity can only be deconstructed if allowed to evolve unrestricted in an intrapersonal and interpersonal space with awareness of self and other:

All that touches me comes to my consciousness – beginning with my name – from the outside world, passing through the mouths of others (from the mother, etc.), with their intonation, their effective tonality, and their values. At first I am conscious of myself only through others: they give me the words, the forms, and the tonality that constitute my first image of myself [...]. Just as the body is initially formed in the womb of the mother (in her body), so human consciousness awakens surrounded by the consciousness of others. (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984:96)

*Visualising Identity* (2010) by Ludmilla Jordanova suggests that “because of their visual qualities, and the languages associated with them, portraits make a central contribution to the task of keeping identities active” (Jordanova in Walker and Leedham-Green 2010:150).

When one is alone and observing oneself there is an opportunity to explore with honesty the depths of one’s soul. This is not necessarily a coherent conversation, but more a synthesis of the corporeal and the transcendental. People often refer to eyes as the windows to the soul, as Claudia Schaefer observes in self-portraits: “The eyes – being both observer and observed, looking outward yet into a mirror – are always gazing at themselves” (1992:16). To meet one’s own gaze, in my experience, is an incredible meditation in forgiveness and self-acceptance, as well as self-affirming, but also an acknowledgment of one’s shadow, or hidden self. “Conversely, our own idea (or perhaps illusion) of what is a whole person, an accomplished being, can only come from the perception of someone else, and not from the perception we have of ourselves” (Todorov 1984:95). This inherent paradox perpetuates polarised concepts of self that fundamentally obscure the reality or realities of the human experience attached to the corporeal body.

## 6.2 Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo is an artist who has left a lasting impression on me, particularly in relation to my exploration of symbolic portraiture and my use of symbolism in my sculptural practice also. Born into the Mexican Revolution, Kahlo immersed herself in the politics of the time, mirroring “it in her images of bloodshed, mutilation, loss, but also in her image of humour, gaiety, *alegria*, that so distinguished her painful life” (Fuentes and Lowe 1995:10), using her creative practice to promote her political opinions, classed as a *mestizo* or mixed blood (Hodges and Gandy 1983), she lived much of her relatively short life in constant physical pain primarily due to childhood polio and a devastating bus accident that broke her spine leaving her fractured and ruptured. As Latimer asserts: “[Kahlo] offers a vision of reality and

self that preserves all the pain and the wondrousness of non-coherence, of resistance to being subsumed to a single social or cultural category” (Latimer and Schillmeier 2009:54).

Her most recognised works are her self-portraits; personal and intuitive, they speak to her audience. She learnt to convey her emotions through simple brush work and compelling subject matter. “Her paintings with their symbolic palettes, kept madness and the claustrophobic prison of plaster and steel corsets at arm’s length. Her personal vocabulary of iconic imagery reveals clues as to how she devoured life, loved, hated, and perceived beauty” (Souter 2007:7). Her paintings share a number of characteristics with surrealism. By tapping into her subconscious mind using *psychic automatism* (automatic drawing), she would often reflect upon “disquieting, inchoate imagery and unorthodox subject matter” (Fuentes and Lowe 1995:27), although she was insistent that the main difference between her and the Surrealists was that she painted her reality.

Schaefer observes that “Kahlo’s increasing concentration on myth, nature, cosmic forces, and popular tradition as sources of healing power may indicate a turn away from medicine and technology as answers to mental and physical suffering” (1992:23). This observation interests me because of my personal dealings with mental illness. My observation of myself was that at my most unstable, the universe was revealing symbols of fate and destiny to me on to which I held in the hope that things would get better. To get through my turmoil I had to believe in something greater than myself, which I found difficult due to my inherent cynicism. Again this brings into question the idea of truth, purpose and meaning - the trinity of identity politics.

In the formation of identity, symbols reveal the “ideological construction of identity” (De Waal and Sassen in Carman 2003:19). Kahlo was aware of her body being “part of a complex series of relationships with the surrounding social order” (Schaefer 1992:14), she seemed to both embrace and detest these multiplicities. “In the self-portraits painted with forethought, Kahlo carefully constructed herself in a variety of settings, creating an artistic persona with an audience in mind” (Fuentes and Lowe 1995:25). She actively distorted her prescribed gender by dressing in men’s clothing and flaunting her bisexuality, using her art to turn her loneliness and depression into creative activity. Like Kahlo I too am aware of my body being “part of a complex series of relationships with the surrounding social order”. My white male body suggests heteronormative privileging and also ties it to historical implications within its context. My gay body subverts and denies this privileging. My homosexual body raises

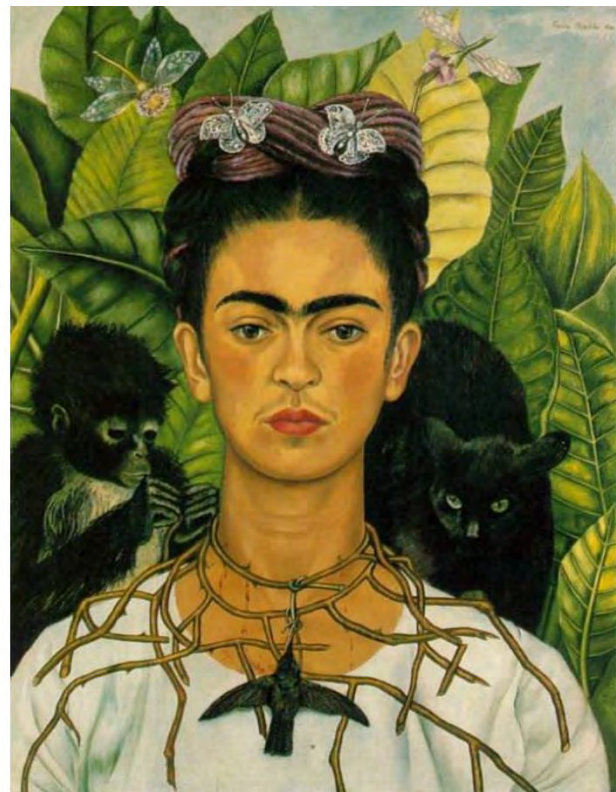
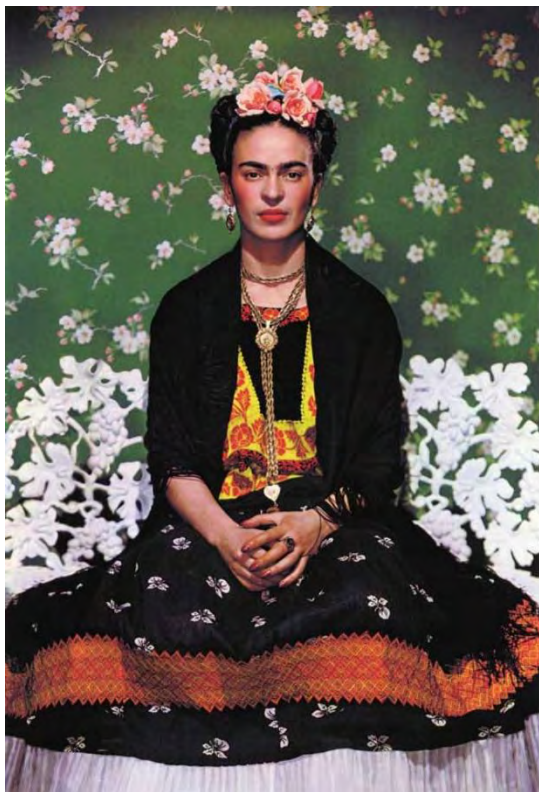
sociological issues around gender identification. The clothes I wear, the way I walk, the way I talk, as mentioned earlier, further implicate me in these multiplicities.

Connecting with her ancestry and constructing her identity around this, Kahlo would often wear elaborate traditional native costume that was observed as the ‘exotic other’ in the urban centre of her own country, as well as in New York and Paris, “Kahlo’s adorned and ornamented persona made a bold statement about her political and artistic ties to popular national tradition” (Schaefer 1992:25/ 26). In *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, Carlos Fuentes suggests that her dress was “a form of humour [...], a theatrical, self-fascinated form of autoeroticism, but also a call to imagine the suffering, naked body underneath and discover its secrets” (Fuentes and Lowe 1995:22). It can be argued that Kahlo embodied a persona and enacted a performance when dressed so elaborately. In this instance I draw comparisons between Kahlo’s public persona, Cohen’s performances, Searle’s installations, and my performance piece and other theatrical work. I believe each of us has constructed our reality based on concepts of the self informed by the culture in which we live, and the politics of the time, of which we consciously challenge and subvert to actively deconstruct preconceived notions of the self.

The symbolism in both mine and Kahlo’s work has been a way for us to construct a visual diary of events and people that have for better or worse left their mark on our lives. As historian of religion, fiction writer and philosopher, Mercea Eliade, elucidates: “Symbolic thinking is not the exclusive privilege of the child, of the poet or of the unbalanced mind: it is consubstantial with human existence; it comes before language and discursive reason.” Furthermore he reasons that “images, symbols and myths are not irresponsible creations of the psyche; they respond to a need and fulfil a function, that of bringing to light the most hidden modalities of being” (Juschka 2009:167).

In 2008, in an attempt to understand myself, I began to rework old charcoal line drawn self-portraits that I had made in my Honours year (2005). It was around this time that I really started to engage with the work of Kahlo, and thus started to layer my self-portraits with symbolic imagery that evoked meaning for me. I find that in moments of turmoil I return to them to unpack the issues I am experiencing at the time. I approached Spencer to register for my Master’s Degree early in 2014. At this time my mind was in chaos. I was finding it difficult to function, and felt as though I had no purpose. I intuitively knew that the only way forward was to leave the museum and to work through the outpouring of emotion I was

experiencing. I sat down in my allocated space at the Centre for Visual Arts and methodically sketched out the emotions I was experiencing. When I was satisfied that I could release that particular hurt I then painted into the image and sealed it with varnish. Over that year I created twenty-four self-portraits in this manner, each taking about a week to complete. There is evidence that as I began to recover from my personal devastation, my work in portraiture became more sophisticated and the line more nuanced and controlled, until I no longer needed to explore them. The images transport me to their inception and the events that evoked their manifestation. I surmise that my nervous breakdown was perpetuated by this crisis of identity. I had lost myself in someone else and in the process lost faith [meaning] in myself. To stare into a mirror and have this idea – myself – as this person I knew but no longer recognised reflected back at me; was very disconcerting.



**Plate 13.** Nickolas Muray. *Frida on Bench* (c. 1931 – 1941). Photograph.

**Plate 14.** Frida Kahlo. *Self-portrait with Necklace of Thorn* (1940). Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 49.5 cm. [Kettenmann 2003:29].

**Plates 13 and 14** depict how Kahlo perceives herself in her dual realities of life and art. She connects with nature in many of her works. Some of the creatures are pets that she kept as companions of her well documented solitude. The pride in her heritage sees her incorporating

the fauna and flora of Mexico. Like me, in many of her self-portraits Kahlo depicts herself in the role of martyr. ‘She employs the Crown of Thorns, the arrow, the knife, the heart and open wounds to give particularly dramatic expression to her pain and suffering’ (Kettenmann 2003:67), elements of which I have subsequently used in my own self-portraits, as illustrated in **Plate 15**.



**Plate 15.** *Crap Baby (Part III): The Intervention* (2014). Charcoal, P.V.A., gold enamel, varnish on paper, 103 x 74 cm.

*Crap Baby (Part III): The Intervention* (2014) is loaded with imagery appropriated from the portraits of Kahlo. Particular events during my life thus far have challenged my understanding of life as a gift, as such in a number of my self-portraits I depict my birth as an anal evacuation which appeals to my humour, but *Crap Baby* only emerges when I am at my worst so it also evokes strong feelings within me. This portrait depicts such a moment: both Christ-like child and defecation, again illustrating the paradox of the self as I perceive it. An important symbol that I have used time and again in my self-portraits is that of the sunflower, which in this image sits above my head like a halo. The sunflower became my symbol for the *solar anus* (*L'anus Solaire* 1931) as conceptualised by Georges Bataille in his short Surrealist



text, as that “which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun, even though the anus is the night” (Bataille: 1931), and inspired by the performance art of Ron Athey whom I researched during Honours in 2005. Therefore the image of the sunflower in my artwork represents the anus as a body part from which sexual pleasure is stimulated (confined in this instance to the male homosexual). As sex is defined via heteronormative structures as procreative so I bestow the same ideologies from a homonormative perspective, and thus it follows: that in which the seed is planted becomes that from which the seed will grow. My adult face superimposed on an infant-like body indicates that the issues I am dealing with are of an adult nature (cerebral), linked to being born into a world I do not fully comprehend (emotional). I believe it was in this particular work that Spencer drew connections between the principals of Bakhtin’s philosophy on grotesque realism; degrading all that is high, spiritual, ideal, and abstract (1968), and my pink portraits. I vomit out my heart and cut off my own penis in a futile act of redemption for my sins. Being the victim of my own actions feeds into my martyrdom. Two other self-portraits which encapsulate a portion of my Master’s narrative, and illustrate an immanent destruction to my perceived self, are as follows:



**Plate 16.** *Smile Like You Mean It* (2013). Charcoal, P.V.A., gold enamel, varnish on paper, 103 x 74 cm.

**Plate 17.** *I Tried To Make You See* (2014). Charcoal, P.V.A., varnish on paper, 103 x 74 cm.

**Plate 16** and **17** depict the introduction and the conclusion to the story of the frog-symbol which heavily impacted the emotions evoked in **Plate 15**. *Smile Like You Mean It* (2013) illustrates me at a crossroads in my life. I painted this work while still married, I was employed at the museum with offer of a promotion and my friendships were all intact. I had no intention of applying to do my Master's degree. A few months later everything had changed, and I was on the brink of collapse. This work led to further investigation of the frog-symbol during Master's and thus I felt it to be a key piece to share in my dissertation; in the narrative of this work, and its importance as a catalyst for my academic endeavour.

The kingfisher-symbol represents my husband and myself, pulling the skin from my face to reveal a false smile-grimace. The frog-symbol represents the man who I was helping come to terms with his sexuality, and with whom I subsequently fell in love. He licks my heart foregrounded by the gold chest plate, haloesque-symbol. The act of licking suggests that my infatuation was more sexualised than I realised at the time. The gold that surrounds my heart/s is reflected through my eyes which suggests that I was not responding to logic, but rather to emotion in dealing with my feelings for this person. The multiple hearts indicate that I recognised a multiplicity within me, but at the time was unable to fully grasp the implications. Furthermore they represent my truth and vulnerability, they hang from veins that suggest there is pain attached to their exposure – I want to be open to the world but it hurts (a connection I made earlier with my *Cake* assemblage: **Plate 9**), a recurring theme in my life. The St. Joseph's lily, my mother explained to me as a child, is a flower traditionally placed on graves of the deceased, and has appeared in a number of my works as a metaphorical symbol of death.

The frill embellishment that collars me is the mother-symbol. She is my reason for being and hence is present in all my *Flesh* portraits, because all my portraits are situated in an amniotic womb-like space. If she had not given birth to me I would not have experienced all that I have. The mother-symbol represents the *giving of life*. In life I have struggled to find purpose and have questioned why I was born, nonetheless my mother imparted to me the gift of art as the key to unlock the answers I seek, which I have used to excavate my thoughts and feelings evoked by life experiences that I have grappled with.

Often when my partner and I were together we would see a kingfisher. The presence of this bird felt significant to the both of us for reasons that are not clear. One might postulate that we were intuitively responding to it from a spiritual inclination derived from our lived



experience. Essentially we were seeking confirmation of our union from ‘the Universe’/ ‘God’/‘a Higher Power’. I had the words *Halcyon Days* – in reference to the mythology of the kingfisher - inscribed into our wedding rings. I had hoped I was creating meaning, but upon reflection I think I was merely entertaining an illusion.

We were struggling to make things work and decided to explore an *open relationship* (introducing other open-minded people with whom we connected into our intimate relationship) – a risk we were prepared to take to save our union, and to demonstrate that we were not seeking to emulate the laws that govern heterosexual marriages. Enter the frog-symbol to whom I lost myself. This man gifted me a concrete garden frog on my birthday and sealed his fate in my subsequent depictions of him – the irony of the frog as my ‘prince’ is not lost on me. The frog-symbol has appeared in a number of works as I was trying to make sense of its presence and subsequent absence in my life. I had convinced myself that I had found my soulmate, and was willing to risk everything to be with him. Much later I decided to end my unhealthy obsession with this person by using my art to facilitate closure. I placed a noose around his neck and dramatically hung him: **Plate 17**, thus killing off a character that justifiably abandoned me. This was a very emotional symbolic-drawing for me to engage with, and one of the last I did before exploring other creative modes.

Soon after the completion of this work I began exploring the self and body more holistically. This took the form of drawing another person, then reinventing form from paper cut-outs, to sculpture, assemblage and photography. In retrospect perhaps I needed to put the issue of the frog-symbol to rest, because once I had done that I allowed myself to move forward in my life journey.

To initiate closure to this emotional chapter of my life and returning to *Fat Man* as one of my last assemblages for Master’s, I intuitively felt that I needed to further implicate *Fat Man*’s flesh with the history of mine, and thus I decided to ‘tattoo’ him – and then myself with the image of the kingfisher. Kahlo’s elaborate dress resonates with my tattoos as identity constructs. Clothes, like tattoos, layer, conceal, and tell a personalised story. Both perpetuate illusions in constructing the self. However freedom of choice, arguably, instils a sense of authenticity in how an individual has chosen to represent themselves.

I struggle to emotionally distance myself from the work I create, and I surmise that this tattoo illustrates my wanting to synthesize with my artwork. The idea of getting it done seemed like a poetic conclusion to a difficult chapter in my life; and thus my academic endeavour. It is a

*beautiful scar* psychologically and physiologically. One might venture that I do not wear my heart on my sleeve, I wear it on my skin, in effect my body is becoming a visual diary of my lived experiences (perhaps more accurately – my metamorphic experiences). I presume this is why I have addressed the work of body modification performance artist, Orlan. We both seem to have tendencies that lean toward becoming the artwork, not being satisfied with simply making the work as if it were separate from us.



**Plate 18.** *Fat Man and Me* (2015). Kingfisher detail.

In this chapter I have considered the politics of my identity by reflecting on these works: **Plate 15**; *Crap Baby (Part III): The Intervention* (2014), **Plate 16**; *Smile Like You Mean It* (2013), **Plate 17**; *I Tried To Make You See* (2014). I have shown how both Kahlo and I utilise symbols as a mechanism to interpret our respective realities, and the emotional content that resides therein. I have examined self-portraits as a personal exploration of the self, and fundamental to my construction thereof; in dealing with deeply personal issues that will forever scar my perception of myself. I have drawn comparisons between the elaborate dress of Kahlo and the tattoos I design and have inked into my skin, that reflect our attempts to construct our respective self identities as unique and set apart from the collective (society).

## Chapter Seven

### 7.1 Conclusion

In this dissertation I have reflected on and analysed my own work and the work of three artists that profoundly influenced my artistic identity, attached to my self-identity in its faceted multiplicity. The lives of these artists are woven into the work they create as my life story is woven into my own practice. Fundamental to my exploration of self and its construction are the concepts of multiplicity and mimicry which I have scrutinized in this dissertation. Steven Cohen, Berni Searle, and Frida Kahlo have deeply informed numerous aspects of my practice, and this dissertation serves as an effort to reflect on and interrogate the ways in which my practice connects with theirs. I have mimicked and appropriated from Searle, Cohen, and Kahlo in search of my own visual voice. Their influence has informed my artistic creations over a period of years, and synthesised into how I construct my current mode of exploration. Theories on the grotesque body and queer rubric were referred to in support of my claim regarding identity as being in a state of flux. Writing on practice-based research helped me to consider why I make the work I make and thus, too, has made a contribution to this research enquiry. Learning about rhizomic ways of thinking has allowed me to visualise my mind extending in all directions at once, broadening my possibilities and eventualities, and as such has aided in my understanding of the inherent complexities of the self.

Cohen as an artist that imposes himself into public spaces became a mechanism to debate the politics of my broader South African identity of which we both explore our 'whiteness' and our 'gayness'. The life into which I was born seemed to me like a good place from which to start the process of deconstructing myself. I then introduce Searle to flesh out the nuanced politics of identity formation around issues of gender which begins to narrow my focus more acutely on issues that impact me directly. Lastly I explore the work of Kahlo who holds a mirror to her emotions preserved in her self-portraits. This again intentionally narrows my focus to my physical presence from which I emanate.

In my attempt to figure out the politics of my body, I have come to understand truth as a trinity: yours, mine, ours; creating a thematic and cerebral link between politics, power and self. In reconstituting my fractured identity through writing and the cerebral play of art creation I am slowly coming back to myself. Through my work I am interpreting gender and

power relations (politics), and utilizing my own visual voice (power) to subvert and express ideas of sexuality and society.

If as Jagose asserts identity is a process and not a property (1996), and my artwork is “the embryo of an answer” (Bakhtin in Todorov 1984:22) then, as I reflect on who I am as my primary research question, I concede that I still do not know, that I cannot know. My reflections present a complex maze of who I think I am and are often contradictory. As the materiality of my artwork others itself from its concept, so I as a cultural body imbued with biological othering (the male/female dichotomy of homosexuality), other myself from projections and reflections attached to my queer body, thus the paradox of the self actualizes in a process of creation and recreation. Who am I? I am a body in search of truth via the mode of art creation. How I perceive my body within society and how my body innately reacts to its enculturated environment creates the question from which an artwork will manifest, this organic process liberates me from my corporeality, implicates me in my multiplicity, and generates more questions I feel compelled to investigate in pursuit of a purposeful life.

My Master’s enquiry, both in my dissertation and in my practical work, has led me on a journey of self-discovery. I have made a concerted effort to engage constructively with theories that inform my work and use them as a guiding light, to resolve the implications of academic discourse, as well as the navigation of a narrative in practice that is highly personal and deeply wedded to my sense of self.

Beyond my Master’s enquiry I foresee myself continuing to investigate philosophies on the grotesque, woven into queer-theoretical rubrics, and expressed conceptually via the cadaver exquisite. I have been made aware of how my work evokes elements of the fantastic and sublime, which is linked to the grotesque. These are concepts I intend to pursue in much greater depth in future two and three dimensional artworks. I feel that I will continue to explore the materiality of the expanding foam, but introduce new elements and textures to it. I have become increasingly more interested in myth: personal, historical, and queer, which I would like to explore further in the production of artworks, and opportunity permitting, also in the arena of academic writing and reflection on practice.

## 7.2 Glossary

### *Gaze:*

To look and be looked at, which informs and distorts ideas of the self and assists in the creation of the self's multiplicity, amongst other contributing factors

### *Queer Theory:*

A theoretical construct aimed at destabilising heteronormative rhetoric by showing that the laws of society are dictated by those in power to retain their power.

### *Self:*

A term used to assert an individual's autonomy apart from the collective (society).

### *Othering:*

Describes individuals that reside on the periphery of a heteronormative worldview.

### *Heteronormativity:*

A construct adhering to particular ideologies that ensures the dominance of the white male heterosexual while often oppressing those that do not fit the template specific to religion, sexuality, ethnicity, and gender.

### *Multiplicity:*

Viewing the human condition as plural (or multiple) rather than singular.

### *Cadaver Exquisite:*

Coined by the Surrealists to describe a method by which words or images are collectively assembled to make up an image of a whole figure whose multiplicity is made blatant.

### *Rhizomic:*

Coined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari is a term used to describe thought processes that are not sequential, but rather spread from a central idea in all directions without clear objectives.

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