PERFORMATIVE GESTURES
An Exhibition of Painting

by

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AUTHORS DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

My painted self-portraiture explores identity as changing social performance or masquerade and examines bodily flesh as the vital interface for reciprocal encounter on life's stage. The larger-than-life sized images demand viewer attention and compel inter-subjective engagement. The works also affirm artistic agency and subjective presence through gestural brushwork and the vivifying power of oil paint. Hybridity and ambiguity in the images suggest the dynamic and reflexive nature of identity. A theatrical colour palette further reinforces the notion of identity as social performance or masquerade. Conceptually the works are rooted in both post-modern feminism and phenomenology. Artistically they draw inspiration from contemporary figurative painters and portraitists who use this medium and genre to navigate the boundaries of self and society.

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

To my greatest teacher, my Mother - who has instilled in me her own insatiable life-long love of learning.

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INTRODUCTION: PERFORMANCE, PORTRAITURE AND PAINT

"Oil paint, as Willem de Kooning observed, was invented because of the need to depict flesh."[1] *Performative Gestures,* an exhibition of painted self-portraiture, uses the vivifying power of oil paint to convey flesh as our vital interface for reciprocal encounter with the world. In this exhibition, identity is explored as changing social performance - in essence a masquerade. The exhibition's self-portraits confirm agency within life's theatre – roles played, masks worn, and gestures performed. The hybridity and ambiguity of the portrait images suggest the constantly evolving state of subjective identity.

This body of work is informed by the feminist theory of Judith Butler[2] and the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty[3]. Like bifocal eyeglasses, these two separate yet juxtaposed lenses allow the works in this exhibition to be viewed from the respective perspectives of both theories at once. The exhibition also builds on Joan Riviere's notion of "femininity as masquerade"[4], an idea rooted in psychoanalytic theory but consistent with Butler's notion of gender performance.[5]

The multiple masks worn in identity performance are explored through the vehicle of painted self-portraiture. "The self-portrait is the artist's most personal form of

[1] Mark W. Scala, "Introduction," *Paint Made Flesh,* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), p. 1.
[2] Judith Butler is an American postmodern feminist who has written extensively about the concepts of subjectivity, agency and gender performance.
[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a French phenomenological philosopher who was an important figure in the transition from modern to postmodern philosophy of art. His concept of the reflexive inter-subjectivity of bodily flesh and world flesh underpins most of the images in this exhibition.
[4] Taking a psychoanalytic perspective, Riviere suggested that the masquerade of femininity is a reaction-formation that occurs when a woman acts as the subject of discourse rather than its object. According to her interpretation, womanliness is assumed and worn as a kind of mask to hide the possession of masculinity and to avoid any repercussions should she be suspected of possessing traditionally masculine traits or assuming a masculine role.
[5] Mary-Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader,* ed. Amelia Jones, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 66.

expression. It is the ultimate means of self-analysis presenting an opportunity for self-reflection and self-expression."[6] Its use in this exhibition allows for the consideration of artistic agency, for the consideration of self as subject and object and for the consideration of portrait as mask - a mask that can conceal and reveal. And, as Merleau-Ponty has suggested, a painter's self- portrait is a good illustration of reflexive inter-subjectivity since it "generates an infinite regress, which expresses the very heart of human reflectiveness"[7].

The production of this exhibition relied on the alchemy of oil paint, a medium well-suited to a feminist agenda, a phenomenological approach and the rendering of flesh. The commentary about its properties found in the writings of both James Elkins and Mira Schor confirmed its suitability for this project. Elkins points out that "paint is a cast made of the painter's movements, a portrait of the painter's body and thoughts."[8] Mira Schor celebrates the feminine qualities of paint in her book, *Wet*[9]. She seeks to overturn the notion of painting being primarily a masculine oeuvre and highlights the feminine connection. She draws attention to oil paint's fluid, dripping, sticky and abject qualities and likens it to the fluids of the female body. However it is Jenny Saville, a contemporary figurative painter who provides the most persuasive argument when she describes oil paint as "a kind of human paste."[10]

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[6] Liz Rideal, *National Portrait Gallery Insights,* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2005), p. 7.
[7] Galen A. Johnson, ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting,* Transl. Ed. Michael B. Smith, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 226.
[8] James Elkins, *What Painting Is,* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 5.
[9] Mira Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism and Art Culture,* (London: Duke University Press, 1997).
[10] Mark W. Scala., ed., *Paint Made Flesh,* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), p. 29 and 65.

The exhibition, *Performative Gestures* grew out of my initial interest in boundaries and their impact on finding identity and connection. But the painting of these works required the inward-looking gaze of introspection to navigate the permeable intersections of consciousness. For as Mark Scala, curator of the very insightful 2009 exhibition of figurative paintings entitled *Paint Made Flesh* has suggested, "humanity has always been a great subject for artists" and "paint can be excruciatingly 'right' when capturing the history of human experience."[11]

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[11] Mark Scala, E-mail to the author, 10 Feb. 2009.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Impact of Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern feminism and phenomenology provide the theoretical underpinnings of the specific works within this exhibition. The paintings draw their conceptual inspiration from these theories as a discussion of some specific examples will illustrate. The painting *Double Entendre*[12] is but one example, which demonstrates the influence of Butler's theory of performative gender identity in my work. The figures appear to be revealing something about themselves or playing a role that is as dynamic as the masks they wear. The ambiguous nature of identity is visually depicted by the apparently conjoined limb. One is uncertain whether a thigh grows out of the other figure's body. The painted edges of the thigh, which signal to the viewer where one body begins and the other ends, have been blurred and are undefined. Are they connected in some way or are these two discrete bodies? For me personally, these figures affirm the multiplicity of identity played out in life's masquerade. The masks they wear have been constructed with thin layers of paint and glazes to reference the artifice and changeability of the socially constructed self. The surface texture of the porcelain-like masks stands in stark contrast to the painted flesh that has been built up in thick layers of lumps, and bumps in an attempt to acknowledge the reality of a woman's corporeality.

Another work, which alludes to the impact of masquerade and performative identity in my work is the painting *Crossroads*[13]. The multiplicity of identity is demonstrated through three instances of the same painted figure on one canvas. If these

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[12] Miranda Urbanski, *Double Entendre,* (oil on canvas, 5 feet x 6 feet, 2008), [Figure 1].
[13] Miranda Urbanski, *Crossroads,* (oil on canvas, 5 feet x 7 feet, 2008), [Figure 2].

figures all exist simultaneously, then perhaps they are masquerading in three separate roles. There is one central figure out of which a second figure appears to have grown; at the back of the central figure's head, a third face emerges. The arrangement of the figures is meant to suggest passage of time. The moving figure implies that identity is in a constant state of becoming – it is not static but rather dynamic. This idea is reinforced by the undefined ambiguity of the figures' feet, which are in a state of partial existence – a state of becoming. The crossroad at which the central figure stands is a reminder that in life we have choices. There are many roads – the roads we select and the actions we choose contribute to the socially constructed identity we perform.

In addition to the concept of identity as changing social performance, the notion of multiplicity also plays a significant role in post-modern feminist theory. We play many roles and are many people. This concept is visually made manifest in *The Hybrids*[14]. The bodies that are the subject of this work directly reference the plurality of gender identity, a concept consistent with Butler's discussions of multiplicity. Often unnoticed at a viewer's first glance, the bodies in this work are hybrids. The work is comprised of two maybe three discrete agents, understood by a singular head and torso. However, like the limbs of a spider, each body appears to have grown extra arms and legs, which extend like antennae into the web of space around them. Their multiple limbs are a literal expression of the many roles one is capable of performing and a reflection of how the body is always already implicated in those performances.

It is my intention that the almost grotesque image of a multi-limbed female figure may temporarily suspend the female body from its weighted contextual framework and

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[14] Miranda Urbanski, *The Hybrids,* (oil on canvas, 5 x 6 feet, 2009), [Figure 3].

allow the viewer a less biased and broader vision of the expressive plurality with which she performs her identity. Using this mask of multiplicity, the figures' potential and agency are revealed not concealed.

Influence of Phenomenology

The theoretical influence of phenomenological philosophy also plays a central role in this current work. This area of philosophy has allowed me to identify the importance of the body in my experience of the world and art practice. Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenological philosopher, specifically "recognized the living body's centrality in lived experience. The body enables us to enter into relations with other presences – without this body there would be no possibility of experience." [15] "He insists, against the Cartesian binary model, that every thought known to us occurs to a flesh. It is through this understanding that he defeats the Cartesian subordination of body and offers a newly complex model for understanding…subjects"[16] and the chiasmic nature of the mind/body relationship.

A belief I share with Merleau-Ponty is the idea of the body as an open circuit that completes itself only in things and in others through sensing and interaction. Later in his career, Merleau-Ponty began to write less about the body and instead replaced it with the idea of "collective flesh", which came to signify both the flesh of the body and all that was external to it in the sensuous and sentient world. This notion has been very influential to my practice.

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[15] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous,* (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 44.
[16] Amelia Jones article "Meaning, Identity, Embodiment: The Uses of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology in Art History", Art and Thought, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 76

Having earlier discussed my painting, *Crossroads* within a feminist framework, I would now like to shift lenses and consider it from a phenomenological perspective. Merleau -Ponty talked of the human body as "flesh" - the same flesh shared by the world. He suggested that it is because of this shared materiality that we can know and interact with the world. With this in mind, I wanted to draw a parallel between the flesh of the body and the "flesh of the world" in this painting. The materiality of paint in this work plays a significant role in accomplishing my objectives. The figure in this piece exists within a space defined by thick paint which is both flesh-like in colour and texture and which speaks to the importance of our bodies in sensing and interacting as subjects and agents in the world around us.

A second painting that draws on ideas of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy is *Sim.pa.ti.co[17]*. The relationship I have with this work is inter-subjective[18] on a number of dimensions. Because this work is a self-portrait, my body is suspended between existence as object and existence as subject; I am both painter and painted. I am neither completely one nor the other but both simultaneously. Inter-subjectivity is also explored in this work in the relationship between the two painted figures. Their heads come together at an ambiguous meeting point at the center of the canvas as if joined like Siamese twins. The image is a visual metaphor for shared consciousness – where two individuals have become *simpatico*. If only for a moment, these figures have a mutual and shared acknowledgement of one another's experience of the world.

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[17] Miranda Urbanski, *Sim.pa.ti.co,* (oil on canvas, 5 feet x 6 feet, 2008), [Figure 4].
[18] From a phenomenological perspective, inter-subjectivity involves experiencing another body as another subject, not just an object among objects. By experiencing another as subject, one also experiences the world as a shared experience rather than something available only to self.

Staring Contest[19] is a multi-layered work with roots in both feminist and phenomenological theoretical frameworks. The work consists of a larger-than -life sized head constructed of poly-chromatic paint and thick gestural brushwork. It is in part a critique of the historical tradition of the passive female gaze[20]. This self-portrait subverts that tradition and confrontationally demands the viewer to engage in a staring contest. The first participant to break eye contact or blink loses the game. But since one opponent's gaze has been eternally suspended in paint, the conditions of the game are such that the viewer can never win. Though the viewer rationally understands this condition, I nevertheless hope that the title and the painting's persistent expression issue a challenge. If the challenge is accepted, the figure in the painting and the painting itself secure phenomenological engagement with the viewer. My own engagement with the work is also interesting from a phenomenological perspective. As both painter and painted I navigate the breached boundary between subject and object yet my relationship with the work is paradoxically inter-subjective. Similarly, I hope this work invites viewers to generate rhetorical questions rather than to necessarily contemplate definitive answers. Who is this? Why is she staring at me? Why am I staring back? I want them to engage reflexively with the painting, with the figure in the painting, and with myself, the artist through the image and the reality of the brushwork.

Visual content alone does not a painting make. In viewing this work through a phenomenological lens, the thick and gestural application of paint carries much

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[19] Miranda Urbanski, *Staring Contest,* (oil on canvas, 5 feet x 6 feet, 2009), [Figure 5].
[20] The concept of "gaze" describes how the viewer views the people presented and represented. Feminist theory developed "the gaze" in describing the social power relations between women and men – how men gaze at women denying them human agency and relegating them to the status of objects. In representations of women, the viewer is presumed to be male and is invited to actively survey the female, whose passive gaze acknowledges that her role is to be seen.

information about the work as well. I hope that the defined and deliberate visuality of the brushwork used to construct the image suggests to the viewer my own relational body interaction with the work and therefore my presence in it. If, while viewing the work a person can retrace the motion of the brush or turn of the wrist used to make a mark, then *Staring Contest* becomes the interface for communication between the viewer and artist. This experience illustrates the inter-subjective reflexivity present in a more general way between our bodies and the world.

While conceptually rooted in theory, the works in this exhibition reflect the strong artistic influence of a number of figurative artists and portraitists whose way of working, visual imagery and use of formal elements have inspired and motivated my creative production. The impacts of Jenny Saville, Tai Shan Schierenberg, Cecily Brown, Betty Goodwin, Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger and Cindy Sherman are best illustrated by reference to specific techniques and approaches within their oeuvres that I have used in various pieces within this exhibition. Individually and collectively, these artists have all informed my way of working. In various ways they have informed everything from the pre-painting preparation of the self-portraits, to the visual content of my paintings (including self-portraiture as the genre of choice, my penchant for ambiguity and treatment of "the gaze") to the formal elements of the work (including canvas size, gestural mark- making, paint application and colour).

Planning and Preparation

Planning a new painting can only begin when the notion of an image presents itself to me. Fortunately, the language of my conscious and unconscious self is very visual and pictorial. Imagery plays a significant role in my conscious introspection and is also the unconscious stuff of which my dreams, memories and associations seem to be made. Sometimes images for paintings come to me during times of quiet self-reflection; as often they seem to bubble up from an unconscious level of awareness while dreaming or daydreaming. Sometimes they are triggered by a shared memory or situational association; other times strong feelings associated with connection or loss suggest visual

imagery. I am following the example of artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, who actively uses self-analysis and the generational memories found in the collective unconscious as important imagery sources in her work. Increasingly, I have been paying attention and documenting in my artist's journal the imagery that emerges with apparent spontaneity during periods of wakeful self-reflection, drowsy relaxation, or sleep. The images are usually reflective of my emotional state, thought patterns or the social atmosphere prevalent at the time the work is created. All have proven to be a rich source of inspiration for the visual images I ultimately incorporate into my portraits.

Once an idea for the imagery in a work has compelled me to make a painting, the subsequent step in my way of working is to create reference images to use as a starting point for that piece. Since my recent work consists of mainly self-portraiture, it is important for me to take my own reference photographs. In this sense, the camera is as valid and necessary a tool as a sketchbook or drawing pencil – it is a way for me to record thoughts and work out compositional problems and ideas. But reference photography is but a small part of the process – a narrow capillary through which meaning can be carried. More importantly, paint itself is the aorta of a painting's circulatory system. It is in the translation from small photograph to initial preparatory painted sketch, to large painted image that my emotional and expressionistic reflection is made manifest in the form of thick, purposeful brushwork. Painting a self-portrait necessarily requires consulting my mirror image as well. I am never able to see myself directly. For this reason, the integrity of my presence in my portraits relies heavily on the performative gestures of my paint-laden brush.

Visual Content

Self-portraiture is central to my way of working. It provides a platform for an

exploration of identity, subjectivity and agency. Painted self-portraiture allows me to

question the space between object and subject, to invent devices for dealing with the

objectifying gaze, and to express my own female agency. "In contemporary culture, the

artist's own body is widely used to guarantee presence in representation."[21] From a

phenomenological point of view self-portraiture allows me to begin to understand my

current and changing place in the world and how I function within it. I am inspired in this

regard by a number of contemporary artists including Jenny Saville, Tai Shan

Schierenberg and Cindy Sherman. Both Saville and Schierenberg's self-portraits

highlight the transmutation of paint to flesh. The artists' subjectivity is confirmed in both

their rendered image but more importantly in the flesh that layers of paint and their

brushwork become. Cindy Sherman provides a different kind of inspiration for my self-

portraiture. Her feminist exploration of identity as masquerade through the use of

elaborate costume and staging in her "Untitled Film Stills"[22] of photographed self-

portraits encouraged my use of theatricality and costume in my work. This is perhaps

most evident in *Double Entendre* and *Expensive Habit*[23] where the figures'

accoutrements add symbolic power to the pieces.

Expensive Habit exemplifies the use of costume in my work while referencing

traditions of heroic portraiture. The piece suggests multiplicity by conflating three

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[21] Joanna Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 13.
[22] Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills Series,* (photographs, 1977-1988), Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
[23] Miranda Urbanski, *Expensive Habit,* (oil on canvas, 5 feet x 7 feet, 2009), [Figure 6].

personal roles of identity played out in my world and the inherent contradictions evident within these roles. The patterned dress may be read as emphasizing traditional notions of femininity while the equestrian riding boots, spurs and saddle are references to heroic portraiture elements historically considered more masculine. The presence of the paint brushes affirms that the artist persona also has a place in this particular identity performance. The image demonstrates that a single person can embody many tendencies and that gender and identity performance exists along an ever-changing continuum. Though it is impossible for the work to suggest all combinations of these possible tendencies, the work seeks to subvert the uni-dimensional depiction of women so prevalent in society today.

Though self-portraiture is my subject, there are many additional layers of considered visual content in the work in this exhibition. The theme of multiplicity and hybridity is pervasive in this exhibition and exemplified by feminist theories of identity discussed earlier. Painting multiple self-portraits and multiple or hybrid selves within these portraits is consistent with the multiple facets of life which informs these works. A wide variety of interests, interpersonal relationships and pursuits lying outside the realm of art itself have provided the range of life experiences necessary for the development of this exhibition.

Though many of my works, including *Crossroads, Sim.pa.ti.co* and *Double Entendre* reference the idea of multiples, perhaps the strongest example of multiplicity incarnate is *The Hybrids*. This work depicts singular figures with multiple extraneous limbs. The visual image attempts to reference the multiplicity of identity across time and space. Each body's close proximity to one another suggests they are blindly reaching for

something beyond – there is the potential for connection in this work. The figures' heads are rolled in, looking at themselves in an inward gaze of self-reflection, while their many limbs reach out to engage with the world around them. A third head emerges from behind one of the figures. It is unclear whether it is a part of, or separate from the other. This figure's gaze meets the viewer's with puzzled or perturbed expression as it holds a guarded arm overhead. It is as if the viewer has interrupted this figure's private moment of inward looking thought, reminding us that though we may not always actively engage with the world, our embodied existence renders it is nearly impossible to escape from the world engaging with us.

These bodies are not only metaphors for plural identity but also signifiers for the multiple points of interface through which information flows in and out in our experience of the world. The body is the hub of all experience. The vast surface area that bodily flesh offers for interface with the surrounding sentient world is emphasized in this piece. Both the embodied flesh and the surrounding "world flesh" have been afforded a visceral materiality by the gestural brushwork and paint application. The figures' ancillary appendages further enhance the bodies' capacity to address the urgency and pressure of a culture characterized by rapid-fire information exchange. Perhaps the mutated multiplicity of these bodies is a sign of our times and signal of what is to come.

Both Jenny Saville and Cecily Brown have influenced my thinking because of the use of multiplicity and hybridity in their work. Saville's painting often fragments the figure with dividing lines that suggest the image of a singular figure has been knit together using the images of multiple figures. Her work also often insinuates ambiguous connections between bodies and conjoined limbs similar to that present in my works

Sim.pa.ti.co, Matrixial and *Double Entendre.* Brown also employs hybridity and ambiguity as part of her painterly vocabulary. Her negotiation of the figuration/ abstraction divide and figure/ ground relationship breaks down an existing convention and historical binary. Her fluid painting vocabulary facilitates her exploration of collapsed boundaries and makes multiple readings of her work possible.

The work of Jenny Saville has not only inspired and validated the theme of multiplicity in my work, her forced perspectives and the confronting stares of her figures have equipped me with strategies to control "the gaze" head on and confidently re-encrypt the female body as an image of feminine agency in painting. As John Berger observed, "a woman must continually watch herself. Men act…and women watch themselves being looked at"[24]. To combat this problematic state of perpetual self-consciousness, Saville "engages the history of art by questioning the permissible aesthetics of viewing, often reversing the gaze". Her figures stare back as though to make the viewer the object of the work's gaze. She "goes beyond the boundaries of what is socially acceptable" while rendering faithful portraits and self-portraits.[25]

Examples of this strategy used in my own work can be seen in *All the world's a stage*[26] and *Staring Contest*. Perched high upon a stool with mask removed, the figure in *All the world's a stage* meets the viewer's gaze in a downward stare affirming her own agency and maintaining subjectivity. The figure in *Staring Contest* affirms her personhood through a confronting stare directed out to the viewer. The painting playfully

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[24] John Berger, "Ways of Seeing," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader,* ed. Amelia Jones, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 37-39.
[25] Emily Braun, "Skinning the Paint", *Paint Made Flesh,* ed. Mark W. Scala, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009), p. 38 and 39.
[26] Miranda Urbanski, *All the world's a stage,* (oil on canvas, 5 feet x 6 feet, 2008), [Figure 7].

challenges the viewer with a stare that locks them into an inter-subjective relationship. The conundrum of object/ subject and the space between is investigated in these two examples. As in Saville's work, my drive to render my own image is meant to confirm my selfhood. Paradoxically the act of painting one's self (objectifying the self) proves one's existence as a subject[27].

Formal Elements

The imagery in my work is only half its story. I have learned not to underestimate the cognitive power of paint itself. The way paint is applied and manipulated on a canvas can carry just as much if not more of a work's intended meaning as the image it renders. My faith in the transformative power of paint is strong and enduring. Paint as liquid flesh is my medium.

Tai Shan Schierenberg's portraits draw attention to this transformative power of paint. The energy in his brushwork affirms his presence as an active agent in the painting and its process. When you look at one of his portraits, it is the artist whom you actually see. His self-portrait *Self- Portrait as a Man of Clay* [28] appears as if the figure has emerged from the paint in a sculpted fury of energy and brushwork. Schierenberg's portrait is larger -than- life size and therefore the surface of the face is magnified. There is an optical play that happens on the surface of the canvas where, at further viewing distances, the figure is resolved, while closer, the features appear to be completely abstract. I have employed this thick application of paint-made-flesh in my work as well.

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[27] Amelia Jones, *Self/ Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject,* (New York; Routledge, 2006), p. viii.
[28] Tai Shan Schierenberg, *Self- Portrait as a Man of Clay,* (oil on canvas, 153 cm x 121 cm, 2008).

Matrixial[29] is a magnified double portrait in which the gestural quality of the thick paint used to construct the image is a reference to the physical energy with which it is made.

To seize the tactile nature of flesh, the work requires the application of large amounts of paint applied wet on wet. A work is begun by mixing several large pots of liquid paint sufficient to cover a desired surface area. Saville has also discussed working in this fashion. By not beginning with a new palette at every painting session, much of the "dried skin" of a previous day's palette often finds its way onto the canvas with new paint. In the present exhibition these lumps and bumps mimic natural imperfections, moles and blemishes of the skin; they help to subvert the ideology of classical perfection. Paint made flesh in this way allows a more honest gendered discourse than is found in the traditional painting of flesh. A faithful portrayal of the female body is made possible when carnal candor is not sacrificed to any convention of the idealized nude.[30]

It is difficult to speak about the visual vocabulary of paint without discussing the brushwork used to move it from palette to canvas; the two are inextricably linked. The visibility of physical gesture in my work is of the utmost importance. I am constantly physically engaged with the canvas. A series of performative gestures are what comprise my act of painting. The marks left on the canvas stand as a record of my subjective physical engagement and presence in the work. The word gesture itself implies physicality, movement and empathy - all concepts closely linked with my existing interests in subjectivity, agency and phenomenological connection with the viewer.

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[29] Miranda Urbanski, *Matrixial,* (oil on canvas, 5 feet x 5 feet, 2008), [Figure 8].
[30] Emily Braun, "Skinning the Paint," *Paint Made Flesh,* ed. Mark W. Scala, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009), p. 38.

To accentuate the gestural mark in my work I have employed a range of large brush sizes. My arsenal of painting tools also includes both trowels and wide putty knives typically used for dry walling. These tools allow me to vary the type of mark used to create an image and conceptually contribute to the idea of identity as something that is "constructed" through repetitive acts, in this case with paint. These tools also allow paint to be built up and scraped away leaving evidence of the construction process.

The painting *Staring Contest* employs additional mark making devices not used in prior works within this exhibition. I have intentionally left parts of a red and ochre under-painting visible in the work to suspend the painting in a perpetual process of becoming. The visibility of the underlay and overlay of paint in the portrait allows the viewer insight into the time lapse associated with its creation and the painterly actions and interactions that have changed its appearance. Extrapolating from this insight, it is my hope that the viewer may also come to appreciate that my identity, as depicted in the self-portrait, is also dynamic, changing and forged by my performance.

A less obvious perhaps, but no less important influence on the production of this exhibition, has been Canadian artist, the late Betty Goodwin. While her works are certainly not traditional portraiture, the phenomenological sympathies I read in her work and her sensitive mark making have made her a valued influence. Her figures may be thought of as portraits of humanity and even self-portraits of her relationship with others and the world around her. Much of her work is both humanistic and empathetic in nature. Gesture plays a significant role in her work as well. I view the translucent skin like surface of her Mylar drawing and sense a simultaneous presence and absence of the figure. It is apparent that there has been a repetitive building up and erasing away of the

image. These marks are a record of her presence; we see her in the gestural quality of the images she made.

In addition to paint application and gestural mark making, scale is another important formal factor at work in this exhibition. My choice to work on larger-than-life scale has been, in part, shaped by the impact that Saville's gargantuan figurative paintings have on the viewer. *Hyphen*[31], the work included in the 2009 *Paint Made Flesh* Exhibition, measured 8 ½ feet by 12 feet in size. The combined heads comprising that painting commanded an entire wall at the exhibition and the magnitude of the image drew viewers to the work from a distance of over two rooms away. The size of my work is deliberate and corresponds specifically to my own height. The use of large-format canvas has allowed me a full and active physical dialogue with the work. Most work in this exhibition ranges in size from about five to seven feet on its longest side. There is a direct correlation between the size of canvas on which I choose to work and the size of my body. Working on a surface of this size allows the painting process to become an athletic challenge, forcing me to move my body and use large physical movements to record my marks.

A discussion of the formal elements of the work would not be complete without considering my use of colour. I am indebted again to the inspirational example of artists such as Jenny Saville and Tai Shan Schierenberg whose work has encouraged experimentation with the theatricality of colour. In the *Paint Made Flesh* exhibition there were numerous examples of "harsh and clashing colours" employed to symbolically

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[31] Jenny Saville, *Hyphen,* (oil on canvas, 8 ½ feet x 12 feet, 1999), Private Collection.

"remove their subject's social skin to expose primal emotional states".[32] Colour is an enigma that I constantly try to decode and resolve. Beginning with an unrestricted palette, a system that identifies the lightest light and darkest dark, I set up the potential full expression of all colours of the visible spectrum. The dramatic lighting effects on the figures is deliberately exaggerated to increase the theatrical impact of the works and to mimic the light saturation found on a stage. This effect is further amplified in my paintings by intermittent use of coloured lighting gels to stage lighting in reference photographs. I often use complimentary colours to experiment with un-natural skin tones. This shift away from reality towards artifice and theatricality attempts to reference the masquerade of female identity.

The many possible paint combinations on my palette mirror the multiplicity inherent in Butler's notion of performed identity. Like our constantly evolving identity, the palette is in a constant state of evolution. And just as our identity is socially altered by our engagement in the world, my use of colour is altered by my paint's engagement with what is taking shape on my canvas.

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[32] Mark W. Scala, *Paint Made Flesh*, (Nashville: Vanderbuilt University Press, 2009), p. 5.

CONCLUSION:

CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF *PERFORMATIVE GESTURES*

When I began work on this exhibition I had a number of specific intentions or aspirations in mind. I wanted the exhibition's work to celebrate the importance of flesh – both its visceral properties as well as its capacity to provide vital interface between self and society. I wanted paint-made-flesh to be the honest medium that allowed female imagery to be employed in a non-sexualized and non-objectified way. I also wanted to demonstrate the suitability of self-portraiture for exploring the multiple masks worn in identity performance and hoped it would provide a better understanding of the social inscription and encryption of the body. I wanted to liberate female images from the tradition of the controlling gaze and to create empowered female images that visually confirmed their/my subjectivity and agency. And finally, I wanted to join the long and continuing tradition of figurative painters and openly proclaim the enduring relevance of paint and portraiture within contemporary visual culture. I have been encouraged in these efforts by some wisdom offered to me by curator Mark Scala concerning his 2009 exhibition entitled *Paint Made Flesh.* He said that "today's figurative painters are being reminded that they are in conversation with some incredible masters throughout history, a burden many people do not feel ready to assume"[33] but a challenge nonetheless well worth the effort of making.

Performative Gestures represents my efforts to have this conversation and to take up this challenge. The work seeks to question what it means to view. It reminds us that we are part of a reflexive dialogue. Our embodied existence does not let us view without

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[33] Mark Scala, Email to the author, 10 Feb. 2009.

being viewed. In understanding this reciprocal condition of existence, the seeds of empathy are *sewn*/sown. Provided that my work has actively engaged even one viewer or provided context in which one other artist can exercise her agency, or provided that it has stimulated one inter-subjective engagement or initiated one new dialogue, then I believe my artistic efforts have been worthwhile. These reactions to my work not only affirm my identity and agency as a female painter but they also confirm the potential my work has to promote empathy in contemporary society where identity is continually changed by the reflexive nature of social performance.

Figure 1. Miranda Urbanski. *Double Entendre,* Oil on canvas, 5 x 6 feet, 2008

Figure 2. Miranda Urbanski, *Crossroads*, Oil on canvas, 5 x 7 feet, 2008

Figure 3. Miranda Urbanski, *The Hybrids*, oil on canvas, 5 x 6 feet, 2009

Figure 4. Miranda Urbanski. *Sim.pa.ti.co*, oil on canvas, 5 x 6 feet, 2008

Figure 5. Miranda Urbanski, *Staring Contest*, Oil on canvas, 5 x 6 feet, 2009

Figure 6. Miranda Urbanski. *Expensive Habit*, Oil on canvas, 4 x 7 feet, 2009

Figure 7. Miranda Urbanski. *All the world's a stage*, oil on canvas, 5 x 6 feet, 2008

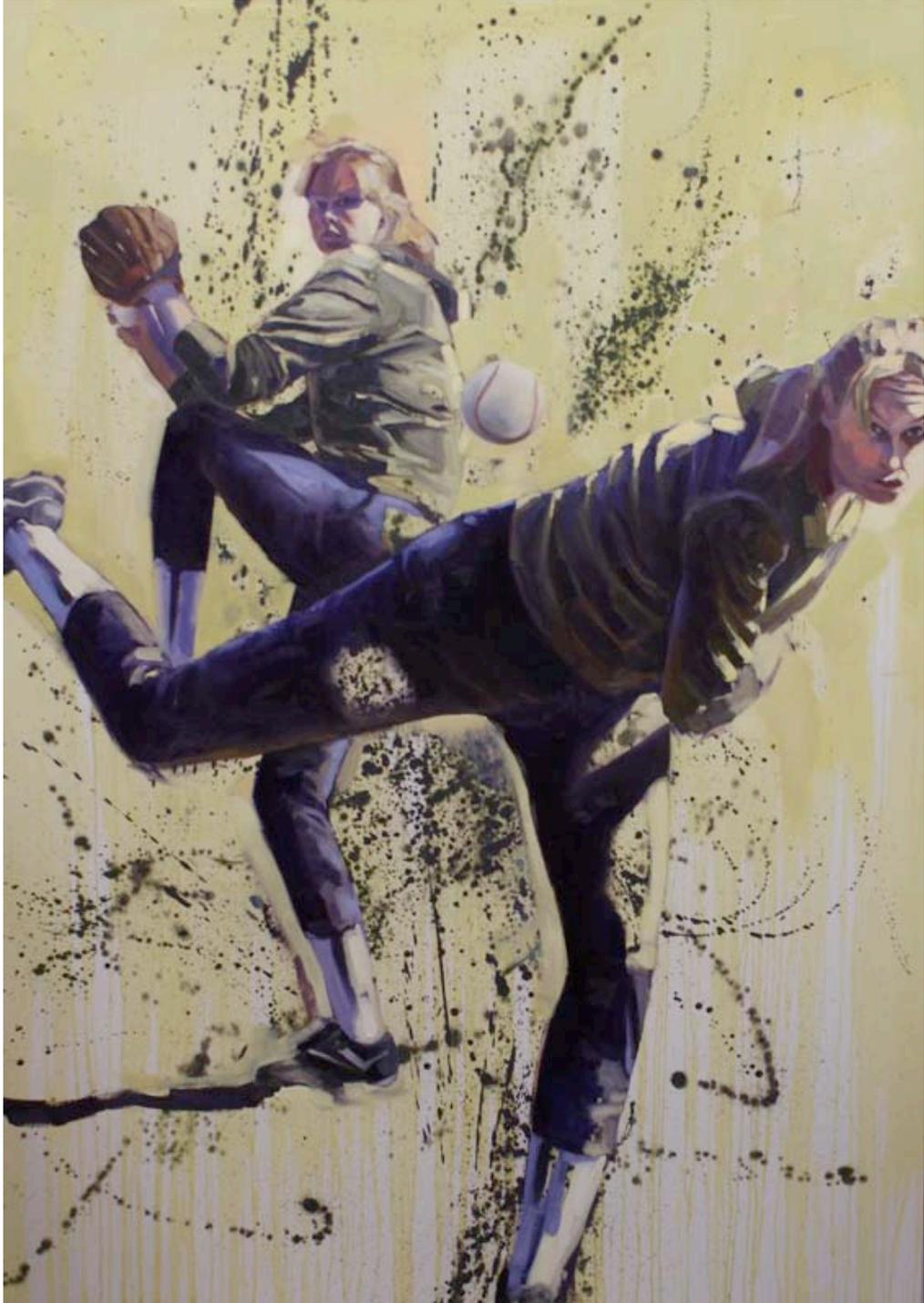Figure 8. Miranda Urbanski. *Matrixial,* oil on canvas, 5 x 5 feet, 2008

Figure 9. Miranda Urbanski. *Throws Like A Girl*, oil on canvas, 5 x 7 feet, 2009

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