

# The Male Muse: Intimacy, Distance and Touch

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2015

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## Introduction



Fig.1. Durer, A. (1507) *Adam and Eve* [oil on panel]. Two panels, each 209 cm x 81 cm, Prado, Madrid.

In September 2014 whilst standing in front of Albrecht Durer's *Adam and Eve*, my heart stirred, this painting from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century actually provoked a physical reaction in me. This was not the first time I had seen this painting but this time I was touched. I was not drawn to the Christian subject matter but I was drawn to Durer's oil painting.

The painting(s) are of a man and a woman, both nude. Their bodies appear oddly shaped, with their pale lit bodies against a dark background. They are removed from an earthly setting, they stand on a lunar-like ground. Adam's feet are on tiptoe, Eve stands on one foot, the other coquettishly resting behind the front foot. Is this a strange dance? Celestial darkness frames the couple. The green fauna covering their genitals, like

emerald highlights, is exquisite yet almost comic in the exacting delicacy. The frames of the panels stop Adam and Eve touching; the frame is a barrier between them. They do not meet each other's gaze. His mouth is open, hers is closed. Both hold an apple in anticipation of taking the forbidden bite. Leaning in to each other the vulnerable gesture of Adam's right hand takes the viewers eyes on diagonal journey via the foliage up to the apple. This diagonal line is replicated with Eve's hands.

It is Adam that holds my gaze. His golden curls remind me of Durer's self-portraits. I am drawn to his parted lips, their cherry redness inviting, wanting to be kissed. His body is young and old, gnarly and hairless. At the time of painting he would have been 36, an age I have been whilst studying for the Doctorate - no longer young.<sup>1</sup> Being intrigued by the man who painted this painting, led me to find propositions that Durer may have been homosexual or bisexual. 'Meanwhile, in private letters, he rhapsodized over "handsome" soldiers. He was particularly fond of one of his apprentices.' (Cohen,2012) Like me, his amorous or indeed narcissistic gaze rests on Adam and those red lips. Slowly I understood that *Adam and Eve* was a touchstone for my practice. The painting holds the key ingredients to my work: a man and a woman, intimate yet distant. My photographs use a similar jewel-like lighting set against darkness. There is unexpected desire in the image. I left the painting thinking of the light against the darkness, love and death; the beginning of a journey.

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<sup>1</sup> A brief chronology of Albrecht Durer: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/in-depth/in-depth-self-portrait-by-duerer-1498/the-artists-chronology/>



## Witnessing woman



Fig. 2. Mathias, N. (2014) *Untitled from Witnessing Woman Series* [Digital C-Type Print Reverse Mounted on Acrylic]. 90 x 60cm.

*Witnessing Woman* is the umbrella title for a large group of artworks produced since 2010 when I started this Doctoral research. *Witnessing Woman* has grown from images that express joy in the male body into a series that is increasingly driven by revealing the 'punctum' of a relationship. 'Punctum' is meant in reference to Roland Barthes' (1984) use of the term in *Camera Lucida* to refer to something that 'pricks' the viewer's attention; it wounds, it touches the viewer. A similar word to help describe the function of the images for the *Witnessing Woman* series would be the French word for touched: *touché*. It is also the exclamation used in fencing when the opponent is touched with the point. The images under the *Witnessing Woman* umbrella can be understood as

touched points, as they have touched the artist and the artist intends the viewer to be touched too.

## **Women's Images of Men**

The starting point was a desire to fill a perceived gap of images of men by women within the canon of art history. Whilst on my MA the most relevant research I found was written about an exhibition at the ICA in 1980 *Women's Images of Men* and *What She Wants: Women Artists Look at Men* a touring exhibition and book (Salaman, 1994). Since then, such imagery has still been scarce. Gray Watson states: 'Indeed, there is today a very distinct lack of images of men as objects of heterosexual desire, produced either by female or by heterosexual male artists.' (Watson, 2008, p.127)

## **Luce Irigaray – productive mimesis**

I was concerned that the notion of absence and the questioning of power relations that the male / female gaze implies would mean that my art would emerge from a negative position. I needed to find a positive theoretical framework upon which to rebuild my practice. I was introduced to the contemporary feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, through writings by academic Hilary Robinson (2006). I was drawn to the suggested methodology for producing art: Robinson takes Irigaray's use of mimesis as a way of breaking down philosophical discourse and applies it to the production of art. As with Western philosophy, the structured discourse surrounding art has been predominately masculine. Visual theorist and feminist scholar Griselda Pollock (1996, p.xvi), bluntly states that: 'We do not live merely in a culture that has forgotten women. As I have argued before, we must come to terms with the official and modern erasure of women from the records of culture.' Looking at contemporary art practices by female artists, Robinson comments on the visible mimetic practices and suggests these practices should be questioned in terms of their gendered nature, how they are produced and what structures there are to reconsider them. Robinson suggests that looking at a

female artist's practice can reveal firstly: '...how she has learned her visual language – and how she has sought to advance and make that language her own. Second, we are looking at her knowing interrogation and critique of practices that have gone before.' (Robinson, 2006, p.18) This idea of revealing what is beneath, or making the invisible visible or revealing what is not there are key ideas of productive mimesis. It allows artists to revisit the culture of what has gone before and position themselves within it. By mimicking art that already exists, and subverting that art, the status quo can be undermined.

### **Irigaray - Witnessing Woman**

The 'Witnessing Woman' in the title of my series refers to Robinson's writings that builds on Irigaray's concept of 'parler – femme', it is mostly translated as 'Speaking as Woman'. 'Parler – femme' was Irigaray's calling for a new syntax in linguistics: 'What a feminine syntax might be is not simple or easy to state, because in that "syntax" there would no longer be either subject or object, "oneness" would no longer be privileged' (Irigaray, 1977, p.133) Robinson changes the translation: 'Speaking as woman', to 'Witnessing woman'. For Robinson, 'witness' connotes a visible and intellectual way of looking, therefore making 'Parler-femme' not only a concept for linguistics but as a productive concept for visual artists. Robinson writes that: 'the phrase can also indicate the woman and women who witness(es), an active witnessing of the construct 'woman', and the performative mode of a woman bearing witness.' (Robinson, 2006, p.42)

It is the 'performative mode' of bearing witness that is important, it is active word not a passive one. I use *Witnessing Woman* to refer to creatively gaining knowledge from experience and observation.

### **Elizabeth Peyton**

The contemporary American painter Elizabeth Peyton can be seen as operating within the dual mimetic art practice that Robinson refers to: the revealing of how the artist has

learnt her visual language and the knowing interrogation and critique of previous art practices. Peyton's portraits show visual evidence of her art education – referencing old masters as well as the contemporary references of magazine imagery.<sup>2</sup> If we look at how she has used this knowledge within her choice of subject: effeminate men, beautiful boys and admired women, we can see that she is introducing the feminine through productive mimesis. By using the traditional medium of painting and portraiture, she references the art history canon, yet her portraits are subtly different to the historical painted portraiture such as the Tudor portraits in the National Portrait Gallery. Peyton's increasing 'community' undermines the sense of the painted portrait as dominated by images of power. Her 'community' is her choice of subjects. Unlike traditional portrait painters she paints who she wishes, she is not constrained by commissioning. Her portraits include androgynous rock stars, friends and celebrities seen in magazines. She has said that she "loves" the people she paints, which seems to go against the conventional hierarchy in contemporary art. Her painting *Jarvis* (fig. 3.) gives us a blue eyed, rosy lipped young male pop star, who dreamily looks straight at us. He is the image of a teenage pinup, there to be consumed. 'She quietly but persistently undermines the notion of the possessive gaze as a male prerogative.... Her art seems to question the continued relevance of the monolithic concept of the gaze as a sexist assertion of superiority and control.' (Tscherny, 2009)

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<sup>2</sup> Peyton's choice of people is discussed in this interview:  
[http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/elizabeth\\_peyton.shtml](http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/elizabeth_peyton.shtml)



Fig. 3. Peyton (1996) *Jarvis* [Oil on Board]. 11 x 14 in.

It is this questioning of the gaze that is appealing. In her essay on the gaze, Margaret Olin comments that: 'Those who wish to argue against this view must think of the gaze as a socially positive act.' (Olin, 2003, p.216) The view she is writing about is that of the male gaze, as written by Laura Mulvey (1975) in her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. Mulvey's position uses psychoanalysis to understand that the gaze within film is male gendered. Women form the spectacle and to take any pleasure from looking, they must assume a male gaze and understand women as objects. Olin is suggesting that if you question Mulvey's theory on the male gaze then you are questioning the negativity of that position. Through her paintings Peyton offers the viewer her own gaze, I would argue that this is a socially positive act. By I will explore this gaze further in the chapter, Intimacy and Distance.

## Degas and Bonnard's bathing women

Like Peyton I sought to bring into question the male gaze and its relevance to my practice. Instead of using portraiture as a starting point, like Peyton, I was drawn to paintings of domestic daily life, more specifically the famous bathing women of French painters Degas and Bonnard of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Degas in Paris painted nude women bathing, undertaking their daily rituals of bathing, drying, and hair combing, from 1870 until his death in 1918.



Fig. 4. Degas (1896) *Coiffure* [Oil on Canvas]. 114.3 x 146.7 cm.

Bonnard on the Cote d'Azur is famous for the paintings of his wife in the bath, the interior of his home and daily life activities such as feeding the cat.



Fig. 5. Bonnard (1937) *La nu a la baignoire* [Oil on Canvas]. 93 x 147cm.

Whilst considering Degas' and Bonnard's bodies of work, I wanted to transform images of intimate bathroom scenes into photographs that disclose cohabitation, reveal the male body and show vulnerability.

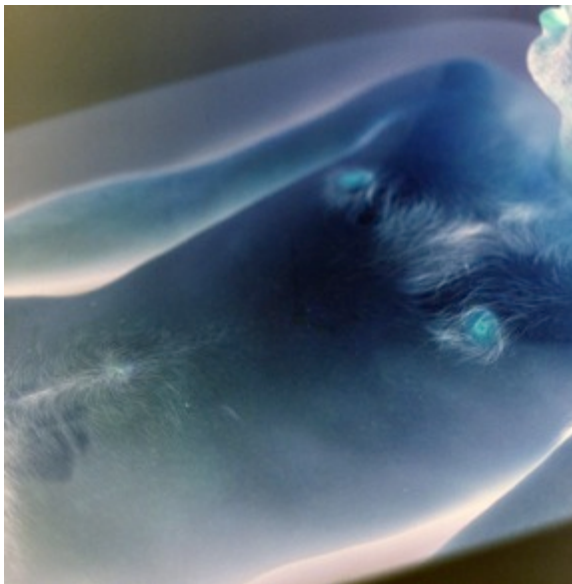


Fig. 6. Mathias (2010) *Blue Torso* [Digital C-Type Print]. 50 x 50cm.

I photographed my partner whilst bathing and in the shower. To emphasis the difference from Bonnard's bathing wife and to distance the photographs from being seen as documents, the photographs were shown as negatives or else had the colour adjusted digitally. Feedback at a work-in-progress seminar in 2010 indicated that the shifts in colour obscured the imagery.<sup>3</sup> I am now ambivalent to this feedback. Looking again at Fig. 6. I can see a similarity with Bonnard's colour, a similarity in intimacy. The hairs on the chest mimic Bonnard's painted textured strokes of light. At the end of 2010; *Witnessing Woman* had transformed into images constructed of ovals and circles within a dark grey rectangle. This instinctual leap was informed by the pattern-making in my job at a digital fabric printing bureau.<sup>4</sup> One of the services we offer is to make a customer's file into repeat pattern. Using pattern I was able to bring together the artist's eye, images of men and repeating patterns of phallic cranes. The greys were used to give the work a more objective look in opposition to the more poetic use of the blue torso in Fig. 6.

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<sup>3</sup> Feedback was received during a Work-in-Progress seminar in 2010. Work-in-Progress seminars are integral to the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art program at The University of East London. After work is presented discussion follows with fellow students and Doctorate staff.

<sup>4</sup> I manage a digital fabric printing bureau at The University of East London four days per week. For further information: [www.uel.ac.uk/fabpad](http://www.uel.ac.uk/fabpad)



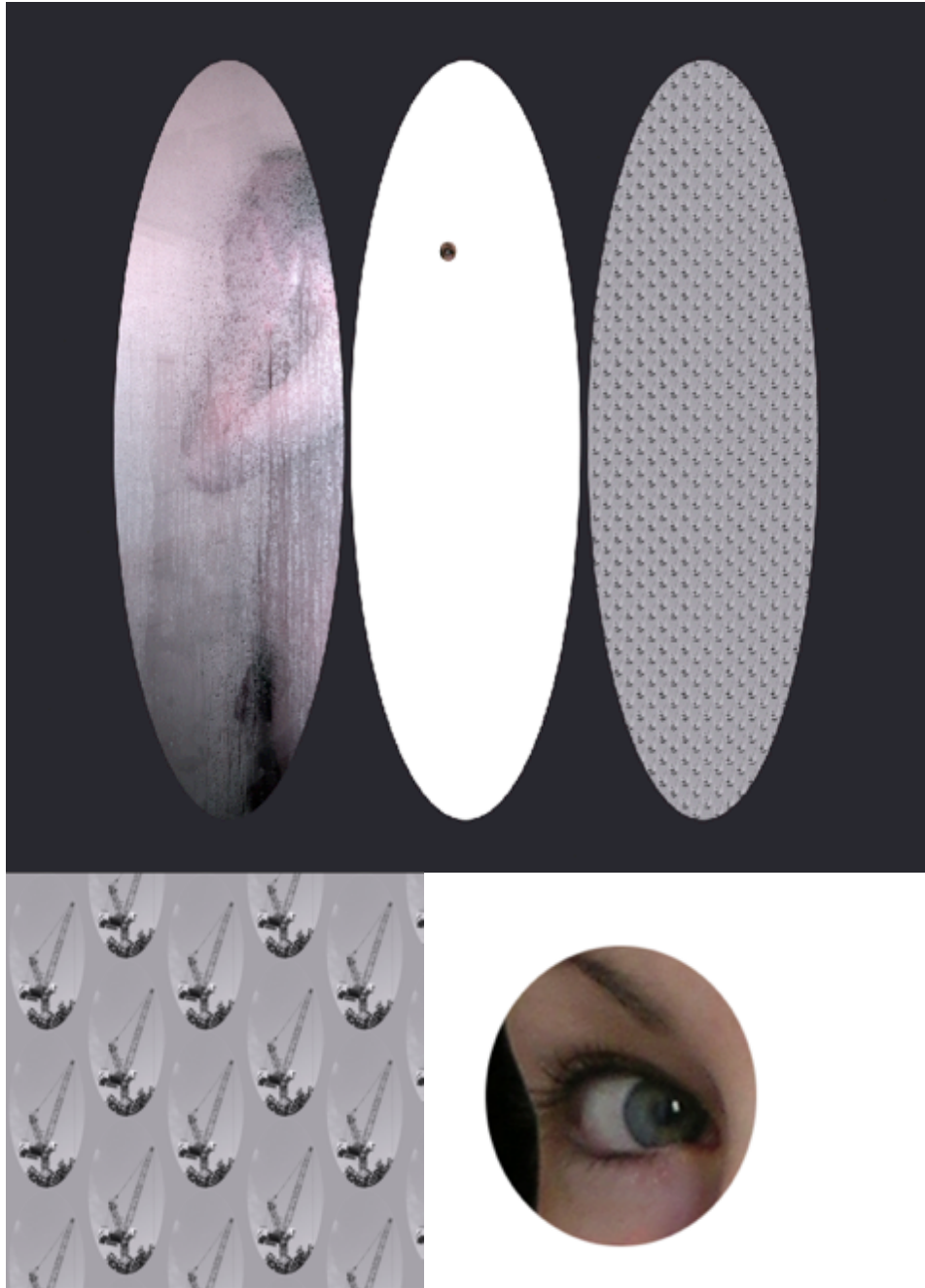


Fig. 7. Mathias (2010) *Witnessing Woman – Triptych no.1* [Giclee print]. 150x160cm and details.

The images were graphic and slick. On reflection I can see that the work was becoming less emotional and too designed. The feedback I received was that there was no passion. Although there was tenderness in the photography, overall they were restrained and polite. It was suggested that the prints were not precious, perhaps not

reflecting the intimacy implied in the imagery. The use of scale was seen as successful. In Fig.7. the photograph of the man in the shower is larger than life; it is an intimate image that revealed less as the viewer drew closer. In the central oval my eye was printed at life size. On the right the cranes were tiny repeated in a pattern where coming closer to view the images was rewarded with detail. The movement of looking at the images mirrored the movement in looking to take the photographs. Perhaps a better title would have been: *The Dance of the Gaze*. Between 2011-2012 the *Witnessing Woman* series transformed and became colourful, whilst still holding onto the use of the circle and the oval. The work was becoming more object-like and the discussion was more about the semantics of presentation than the actual images. It seemed that the glossy, machine – created finish of the images had put a barrier between the viewer and the intended tenderness of the work. I sought to remedy this by reintroducing the hand crafted, the visceral. I disrupted the perfect surfaces by using paints and pouring thick acrylic media. The drips were bodily and the colours highlighted the emotional content of the images. In Fig. 8. I used a circular photograph of a man drying himself placed centrally in a square. Two vertical ovals were overlaid to reference a vagina, obscuring the penis. A thick clear acrylic medium was poured down the centre, intimating vaginal pleasure. These I brought into my first work in progress seminar of the year where the response was predominantly negative: the images too easily read, still too polite. The experience encouraged me to take apart the images and start again.

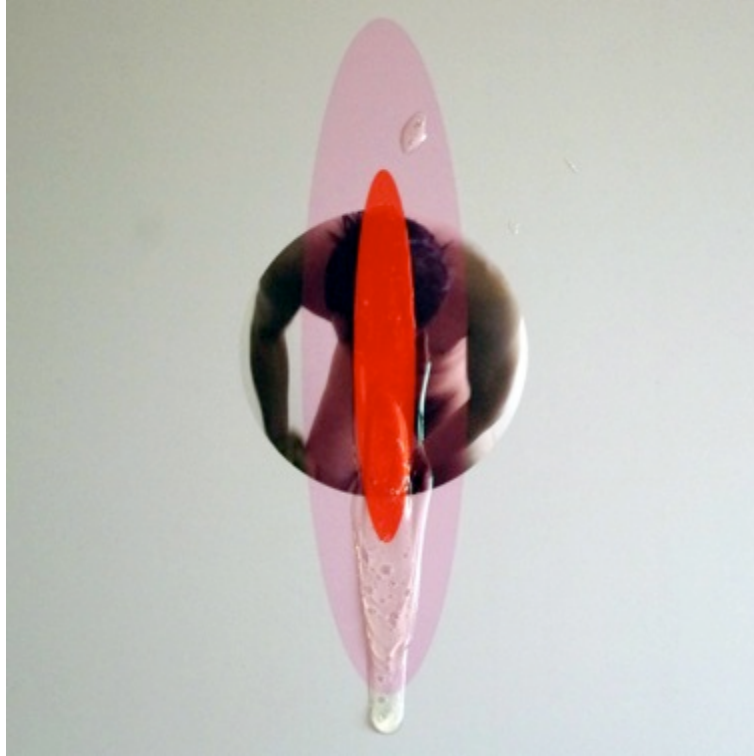


Fig. 8. Mathias (2012) *Untitled (Artwork with disrupted surface)* [Digital C-Type Print Mounted onto Dibond with Acrylic Gel Medium]. 30x30cm.

Over the previous two years I had learnt from Irigaray's productive mimetic way of writing, and recognised it in the work of Peyton. I had become a witnessing woman, and had used the historical painters Bonnard and Degas to create a new body of work. I needed to work out where to go next.

### **Moving away from productive mimesis**

After a productive conversation with my supervisor I decided to reread *Elemental Passions* (Irigaray, 1982) as a source material for inspiration. Immediately it brought to mind the French essayist and critic Roland Barthes' *A Lovers Discourse* (Barthes, 1978). Academic Gonzalez (2010, p.4) suggests that there were a number of writers and theorists in France in the late 1970s and 1980s who wrote about love. Alongside Barthes and Irigaray there were: *The Post Card* by Jacques Derrida, *Tales of Love* by

Julia Kristeva, and *The Wisdom of Love* by Alain Finkielraut. Being unable to find any articles comparing these books, my research has been confined to Irigaray and Barthes. What is interesting is how different the writing is. Barthes tells us through short chapters about the life of a lover's affair, everything predetermined and following a cultural norm. The text is often comprised of quotes from literature and philosophy, including Goethe's *Werther* and the writing of Plato. The book is insightful and the comments on love recognisable and easily empathetic. Irigaray writes in a completely different way and although mimicking fragments, the writing is poetic, meandering and offers fragments from a woman's voyage as she goes in search of her identity in love. The writing becomes a proposition for a new way of being, a way of how we can love and a way to find ourselves. There are moments of clarity but the work is more complex, more opaque than *Camera Lucida*. Irigaray exposes the lack of female desire as subject, but the writing is also a journey of love and what that might mean. Cecilia Sjöholm (2000, p.98) reads the work as a response to *The Intertwining—The Chiasm* a chapter of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, she writes that:

A desiring feminine subject may be absent from philosophical discourse, but she constitutes its limit of reflection. Even if we cannot find any such thing as a buried original "woman," we find the traces of feminine alterity. *Elemental Passions* is a key text in this regard. The two aspects of Irigaray's writing—the abstractions and the recovery of a female body into philosophical thought—are brought together in a chiasmic turn where she transforms the reciprocity, folding, and fitting of passions into a conflictual, engulfing and cannibalistic drive. (Sjöholm, 2000, p.98)

Reading *Elemental Passions* I enjoy the conflicts of emotions and reactions within the writing. This emotion appeals to me as an artist. Within the book one moment there is sexual joy, the next she is furious at the inadequacy of 'you'. When she uses 'you', it is difficult to know if she means man, philosopher, or you the reader. I empathise with Irigaray's anger at being held back, at man trying to constrict her within his own limits. Irigaray mimics the ups and downs of a literary love story with the complexity of the emotions and the change of tempo and temperature of her writing.

In the last chapter Irigaray writes about the light touching and making visible, although if the light is glaring then everything becomes invisible. Irigaray speaks of the air binding us, the density essential for our vision. Her use of air as something full rather than empty will somehow connect us and enables us to see ourselves and our lovers differently.

I opened my eyes and saw the cloud. And saw that nothing was perceptible unless I was held at a distance from it by an almost palpable density. And that I saw it and did not see it. Seeing it all the better for remembering the density of air remaining in between. (Irigaray, 1982, p.104)

We see better if we remember and understand that the air around us connects us to one another and that the distance between us is not empty. If we can understand that we do not exist alone, being cut off from one another, we will be able to know ourselves and each other better. In her essay 'The Look of Love', Kelly Oliver talks about the link that Irigaray makes between the texture of light with air: 'The unseen source of sight is a sensuous caress that touches and is touched by another sort of look, a tactile look that does not pry or gaze, but caresses in the flow of irrigation and irradiances.' (Oliver, 2001, p.69) Irigaray's writing is an utopian vision: a possibility of a different world where structure and being is fluid, in which men and women are different but equal, where we are not stuck in the past but have a quest to go forward and understand each other better.

## **Irigaray and Rist**

This utopian-like vision, linking the elements with ourselves, making all around us interconnected seems to have a relation with the work of the contemporary Swiss artist

Pipilotti Rist.<sup>5</sup> I visited her exhibition *Eyeball Massage* at the Hayward Gallery in 2011, and her recent show at Hauser and Wirth London in 2015. Rist's installations evoke Irigaray 's merging of the elements. She films the natural world, bodily interiors, non-idealised bodies, the constant movement eradicating emptiness. Her films seem the utopia that Irigaray suggests we strive for. Her current press release for Hauser and Wirth describes these connections:

Rist delights in patterns created by manipulating creases of skin, caressing, pushing and pulling to depict the varied textures of human flesh. These corporeal images periodically overlap with close-up fragments from nature as Rist blurs the boundaries between the self and organic structures. She explores the relationship between internal and external, how individuals are linked to the tissues and blood vessels of other organisms, and in so doing, she suggests relationships with the universe at large. (Hauser and Wirth, 2014)

The connections between the body and universe, the inside and the outside seem to echo Irigaray's writing. The constant fluid movement in *Worry Will Vanish Horizon* (Rist, 2014) and the invitation for the viewer to lie on the duvets on the floor all lead the viewer to a seemingly alternative space, a strange utopia.

## **Back to Work**

The inspiration I had hoped to receive from rereading *Elemental Passions* (Irigaray, 1982) was slow in coming. I started taking photographs of clouds – an obvious reference to Irigaray's quote about vision and touch. I had always taken photographs from aeroplanes but they had never been edited into my art practice before. The Baroque beauty of clouds and their contrast with my domestic imagery was intriguing. They were reminders that no matter how close I was to my subject I was also very far

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<sup>5</sup> For further information on Pipilotti Rist: <http://www.pipilottirist.net>

away.

After feedback that the layers in my images were becoming barriers, distracting the viewer from the image, I removed them from my work. I was forced to examine the photographs as a body of images rather than a body of constructed collages. I was relieved and excited that the photographs stood up to scrutiny. The circles and squares and ellipses that had been using were still important to me; I understood them to be building blocks of my visual language. The shapes of the circle and the ellipse were attractive for many reasons: the shapes create an eye, the world, a lens. They also seem persuasive of bodily references: a cock, a vagina and a pair of breasts.

In 2013 I booked a space within the art school to coincide with my next work in progress seminar. I had three full days to experiment and install my new work. I printed many photographs, chosen to be circular or elliptical depending on composition. Composition decisions drew on a mixture of intuitive, emotional and formal values. The images were printed at different scales; I wanted to go into the space with a flexible and playful approach. The images were printed onto a material called Phototex.<sup>6</sup> Phototex is re-positional peel and stick polyester fabric material, I used an inkjet printer. It is a forgiving material that allowed me to cut out the shapes precisely with scissors. Again this was chosen for flexibility and the ability to play, and it allowed me to hang a show by myself even though the diameter of circles went up to 150cms. Not having to mount, nor frame, but to let the image sit flat on the wall felt liberating. Placed on the gallery wall the images became portholes and glimpses.

Repetition, rhythm, scale and the creation of a visual language were all considered in the hanging of this work. I had to take into consideration the architecture of the room: I could use height to my advantage; the placement of clouds could elevate the work rather than ground it. The images became patterns, like musical notes, changing their meaning depending on where they were placed. The space was generous and light, I

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<sup>6</sup> Further information on Phototex can be found here: <http://www.phototex.co.uk>

was conscious of Irigaray's references to clouds and the way in which space connects us. A few of the images needed their colour temperature changing as they were too cool when seen in relation to other images. The installation became one piece: I no longer saw the photographs individually but as a whole.



Fig. 9. Mathias (2013) *Untitled* [installation].

The installation with the useful seminar accompanying it felt productive. I began to consider the idea of distance in the work, the physical distance that a lens requires and the accompanying emotional distance. The most helpful comments were from fellow students who suggested that I think of the work architecturally, cinematically and photographically. The use of hands seemed important, as they are the tools of touching.

At the 2013 interim show the productivity had stalled. I placed one Phototex circular cloud image low on a wall so that the bottom edge touched the floor. The gallery space had low ceilings with no clear space near the ceiling. The image did not work placed high in the space. However exhibiting the image touching the floor didn't work either. I



felt I had come to an impasse. Through conversation the use of the circular image was questioned; were the metaphors used within the image cancelled out by the metaphorical use of the circle? I understood the complexity of using a circle. The image had worked when I had placed a large circular image of clouds above a door but placing the image on a wall without the architectural height and baroque references left the image lacking transformation. The circular line against the white wall was a distraction from the image within the circle. This questioning of the circle did not mean I would abandon them. In later work I would use circular images in more sculptural forms, printed onto fabric and padded out. I used the knowledge gained at this impasse to enable me to use the circle in a more nuanced way. (See p.54 and p.61)

Through the discussion of my work with externally invited practitioners, I came to produce more work through photography, thereby using my knowledge and experience in photographic practice to explore these new means of expression.<sup>7</sup>

For the end of year show I filled the gallery space with seven separate pieces. The aim was to see as much new work in a gallery setting as possible. A fruitful discussion helped me understand that I could use the *Witnessing Woman* series as a fertile source for new work. In it's current form there were threads that could be drawn out to expand the work. For example what would become *Gestures* started with a photograph of fingers that I had shown under the umbrella of the *Witnessing Woman* series. (see p.32). Potential failings of the *Witnessing Woman* series were revealed: some images were seen as less weighty than others; the cloud imagery was too simple in comparison with the more complex, ambiguous pieces. I needed to put the idea behind the clouds *into* the photographs. A looped film of clouds, projected small, was deemed successful in the use of scale. This was especially the case in relation to the larger than life image of a man's neck and ear. Looking back it is at this moment where the questioning of the form, the use of clouds and the use of scale would lead to regaining the confidence in my photography and using that photography to express my intentions with more authority.

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<sup>7</sup> A list of visiting tutors is provided on page 67.

It took going to Artoll, two weeks of removing myself from day to day life, to understand what I needed to do.<sup>8</sup> Artoll gave me the space and time to see my photographs on their own. I took with me photographs that I hadn't printed before and I printed them onto photo gloss paper. Pinning them up I immediately saw that they worked without heavily considered installation. They worked without cropping them into circles or ellipses. I was pleased with the images and felt happy to leave them as photographs. This was a revelation. I saw that the journey of my art practice had acquired baggage; I now needed to remove that baggage yet leave the residue of the knowledge and desires gained on the way. I needed to spend more time photographing and less time constructing.

Whilst in Germany I took the opportunity to experiment with medium format projection; I wanted to see images large. I was excited to see that the quality of the projection was beautiful, that the light was different from that of a digital projector.



Fig. 10. Mathias (2014) *Untitled* [installation].

For the end of year show I wanted to use this analogue projection but to see it in relation to my other pieces. To do this I had to play with the projector in a light space. This meant that instead of projecting large I had to go small. This would mean the

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<sup>8</sup> Directional Forces set up by Hedley Roberts is a residency programme that runs annually in Artoll, Bedburgh-Hau Germany. For Further information: <http://directionalforces2012.tumblr.com>

projector would need to be close to the projection, becoming part of the viewed work. Instead of the viewer becoming immersed in the image, the viewer would necessarily have a closer, more intimate relation to the work. I thought of Peyton's small painted portraits and thought of peeking through doorways. This influenced the images I chose; images of my husband's legs in the shower and whilst stretching. The images are in a domestic space, both were taken from a low angle. By placing the projector at hip height the action of the viewer is to bend to see the image more clearly. The viewer sees only the lower part of the male body, echoing the restricted view you would naturally have when bending down. By using a large bracket I was able to show a projection and in relation to that image the viewer could also read the non-projected slide. By using a bracket the projector became part of the piece rather than being purely functional. From the *Witnessing Woman* series I also showed *Runner* a photograph taken of my partner's legs, blown up to 150cms high on Phototex' next to the projector piece. Exhibiting helped me understand that the projector piece is one piece, not to be shown too close to the other work.<sup>9</sup> The visiting tutor suggested I should put it in a darker space, that she enjoyed the shelf and really it is the beginning of a new work. I agreed that by trying to show in a light space had compromised the clarity of the projected image. I would need to experiment with how it would function by itself, and to also try enlarging the work by increasing the number of projectors used. On a practical note the vintage projector used two bulbs for that short show. It would be prudent to find a more modern robust projector for future exhibiting even though I would lose the phallic lens that the old projectors used. *Runner* was the wrong scale and in comparison to the other images on display it was too soft, more like an i-phone image. I had previously printed *Runner* at a smaller scale and it had worked well. This time my experiment with scale did not work.

Entering the final year 2014/2015 *Witnessing Woman* as a series made more sense. *Runner* was framed at a small scale, using a glossy acrylic mount with a dark brown wooden thin box frame. *Ear* was framed in the same manner and renamed *Scopophilia*. The ultra glossiness of the acrylic mount means that it is hard to look at without seeing

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one's own reflection. This reflection is a substitute for the cloud images, a reminder of the distance between the viewer and the viewed, emphasising the difficulty of looking. The acrylic is a physical barrier between the photographic print and the viewer. The glossiness of the acrylic makes the images jewel-like. The scale mimics the feeling of being close to a person – the closer you are, the bigger they seem. *Scopophilia*, was accepted in *The Discerning Eye* 2014 exhibition at the Mall Galleries, London. The show was hung in a salon style. This was not the ideal way for viewing the work but I was glad to see that the image had the strength to be seen in such a crowded environment.



Fig.11. Mathias (2014) *Scopophilia* [installation]. The Mall Galleries.

### **A return to the Male Nude**

As an epilogue to the current *Witnessing Woman* series I have revisited the male nude by women photographers for a co-curated exhibition with Julie Cook.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition seeks to question the role of the male nude in today's art world. To help understand our motivations we submitted a proposed paper for a conference *Fast Forward: Women in Photography – Then and Now*:

### *The Nude Male*

*Do women need to get naked to get in the Met. Museum? Less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women but 76% of the nudes are female Guerrilla Girls (2012)*

*There is considerable history of sexualised images of the female nude but less so images of the male nude, especially comparatively little work by women. It has been suggested by Sarah Kent (2014) that it is harder for women to objectify in the same way as men and that the transition from subject to maker is not easy. Scopophilia – the pleasure of looking at another as an erotic object has been historically discussed within cinematic theory, particularly in work by Laura Mulvey (1975). Traditionally this pleasure has been seen from an active male viewpoint where the passive female is the object and where desire and representation are closely linked to subconscious thought. However this may no longer be strictly the case, for women may be seen as increasingly and conspicuously active in actively producing work of male subjects who are complicit in the collaboration and exchange of traditional roles.*

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<sup>10</sup> For further information on Julie Cook: <http://www.juliecookphotography.com>

*This paper started with curating an exhibition of male nudes at the University of East London. The exhibition aimed to bring together female photographers using the male nude within their practice. Researching the historical context alongside contemporary examples led to some reflection and speculation. We asked a number of questions - what was the motivation for producing this work? What does the audience gain from seeing women's photographs of men? What have been the gender roles in producing photographic images? Has this changed over time?*

*Though in the last decade there has been a surge of feminist blockbuster exhibitions such as Wack! in New York and Elles@ Pompidou in Paris, but we haven't had an updated version of the great exhibitions: "Women's Images of Men" at the ICA in 1980 and "What She Wants: Women Artists Look at Men", a touring photographic exhibition curated by Naomi Salaman (1994). These shows specifically considered how women have looked at men. They received negative reviews (mostly from men) yet were successful and popular. Such shows rarely make it through the gate of canonical art history. At the same time the body, including the male body has been at the centre of so much attention within newspapers, magazines, television and advertisements. Within society we are surrounded by naked or semi naked images of both men and women.*

*The paper, to include visual work from the exhibition, seeks to contextualise contemporary women photographers with their historical precedents, celebrating their complexity and variety anew. (Cook and Mathias, 2015)*

In order to understand my relation to the male nude, whilst curating this exhibition I have found myself defending why women would want to see a male nude. This is telling: I feel no need to defend photographing clouds, or any other subject in my art practice. There are scientific studies exploring the sexual response of men and women to the visual. Many confirm the longstanding myth that women are not visually aroused but prefer the written word. The *New Scientist* (Vince, 2007) reported that women are

worse 'oglers' than men: a study using an eye-tracking device found that women had more roving glances. Meredith Chivers (2004) conducted a study that showed that women were sexually aroused by images of straight, gay and monkey sex whereas men were only aroused by the sexual preference they had, whether straight or gay. It is interesting that the men were able to verbalise their arousal whereas women, who were aroused by all but the landscapes, only admitted to being aroused by heterosexual sex. The studies confirm that women enjoy looking at men yet also reveal reluctance to express that enjoyment, suggesting that assumptions about a female gaze is more strongly linked to cultural circumstance than scientific fact. Would I suggest there is a male and a female gaze? Looking at photographs of men by women leads me to think not. The gaze is more complex. There are women like the American photographer Dianora Niccollini who has specialised in the male nude, who is interested in portraying the 'perfect' male body whose images relate more to homosexual male photographers such as 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Robert Mapplethorpe.<sup>11 12</sup> Revealing vulnerability may be common theme of women's images of the nude male but it is also tackled by men such as the British photographer John Coplans.<sup>13</sup> This questioning of the gaze seems to be echoed by Stephen Bull when writing about the role reversal and perceptions of power in the *What She Wants* exhibition:

These experimental reversals of who was in front of and behind the camera represented only one step towards a visual conception of the 'new language of desire' that Mulvey called for in the 1970's. The power relations of actively looking and being passively looked at almost always remained present in the images,

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<sup>11</sup> For further information on Dianora Niccolini: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dianora\\_Niccolini](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dianora_Niccolini)

<sup>12</sup> For further information on Robert Mapplethorpe: <http://www.mapplethorpe.org/biography/>

<sup>13</sup> For further information on John Coplans: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/john-coplans-2353>

regardless of the gender of who was on either side of the camera's lens. (Bull, 2009, p.56)

I came to realise that it is the relationship between women and the male nude that interests me, that women artists and photographers have often used their partners in their artwork. The reason seems two-fold. First it is convenient and secondly because they are loved and we want to photograph them. These reasons I shall explore further in the chapter: Intimacy and Distance.

## **Gesture and Touch**

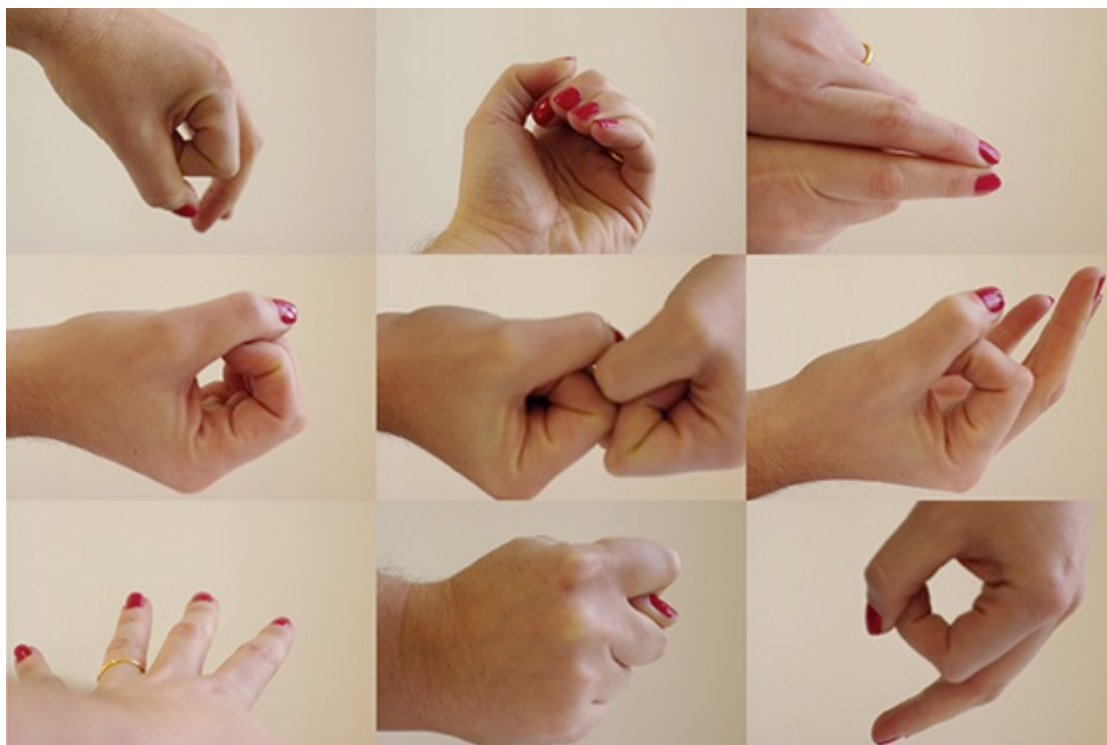


Fig.12. Mathias (2014) *Gestures* [Digital C-Type Print Reverse Mounted on Acrylic]. 60x40cm.

## **Gestures**



The *Witnessing Woman* series led me to consider the linking of the senses looking and touching. Unconsciously I found my hands creating gestures whilst thinking of what Irigaray meant with her metaphor of two lips. 'Lips, Irigaray often reminds us, constantly and unavoidably touch one another (Irigaray 1985b, 24, 26, 206, 208, 209, 2011).....Thus, the trope of two lips touching is antithetical to relationships founded on rules, shame and control (Irigaray, 1985b, 217)' Meyers (2014) Noticing this gesture led me to decide to explore these gestures further. Gesture had been used before in the *Witnessing Woman* series. At the end of year show of year three, 2013, the visiting tutor spoke in depth about Fig.13. a circular image of fingers. This was an image used before but the colour had been altered to make it less polite. This gesture was important as it brought together threads about the intricate nature of sexual politics. I reworked the image several times, cropping it into square and a circle.



Fig. 13. Mathias (2013) *Untitled* [Phototext print]. 15cm diameter.

During a residency in Germany in 2014 I photographed myself making gestures, thinking about relationships and sex and playing with moving my hands. My work was chosen to be exhibited in Belgrade at the O3one Gallery. They chose a screen grab

taken of a grid of photographs of hand gestures. Although I was dubious at first, as the grid seemed too easy, I decided to keep the same layout and the place the images next to each other without a gap. This would mean that the gestures could be read as if a language. The grided image looks like there is information to be understood.

For the symposium held at the gallery during the exhibition I discussed the original development of the work. Western paintings that use gestures were an influence, in particular the nipple tweak of *Gabrielle D'Este and One of her Sisters* by the school of Fontainebleau, 1594, at the Louvre. In 2003 I produced a series of portraits of people tweaking their nipple as an act of defiance. The gestures are also linked to pop culture gestures such as the ubiquitous peace signs in 'selfies', and the sexual gestures used by teenagers. Alongside this I enjoyed the fact that as a middle class British woman I would be unlikely to use sexual gestures in public. The painted nails and the wedding ring photographed seductively contrasted with the sexually explicit gestures. The soft flesh tones and colour red reinforced sexuality. The red hinting at power, promiscuity and perhaps danger. The seduction and elusiveness is aided by the glossy acrylic mount being reflective, alluring and distancing. I pointed out that within the canon of art history there are few married women so for me to have my wedding ring on was an act of defiance. It was pointed out that it also provided another hole penetrated in the image.

I showed this work at the end of year show 2014. Feedback suggested that at first it looks like sign language whilst not being descriptive; secondly that it looked as if it couldn't be taken further, and thirdly that by not having a frame, the imagery looked ruder. At the time I agreed that the work was finished but in writing about it and considering other artists using gesture, I decided to make a piece using a male and female hand. I have also been spurred on by meeting Catherine Elwes at CREATE/feminisms: a symposium, an artist who was one of the organisers of *Images*

of Men at the ICA in 1980.<sup>14</sup> Researching her artwork I came across her fitting film *Introduction to Summer*. 'It consists of a one-shot one-minute embrace between a male hand and its female counterpart. The image is simple and sensual and it plays out its digital coupling against the aural backdrop of summer sounds' (LUXONLINE, 2005)



Fig. 14. Elwes (1993) *Introduction to Summer* [1 min Colour U-Matic].

## Alexis Hunter

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<sup>14</sup> CREATE/feminisms: a symposium, 22 July 2014, School of Art & Design, Middlesex University, London. <http://adri.mdx.ac.uk.contentcurator.net/create-feminisms-symposium>



Fig.20. Hunter (1977) A. Approach to Fear XVII: Masculinisation of Society Series [C- Type Print]. 30 x 40cm.

At the same symposium I learnt about the work of the feminist artist Alexis Hunter. Her work often used her hands, often with painted nails. Her art practice was political and sexual, and very relevant to my own practice. In a review of *Alexis Hunter: Radical Feminism in the 1970s* Kathy Battista writes about Hunter's use of hands:

Throughout Hunter's work the hands lend a human element to the photographs in the form of a generic 'everywoman'. For example, *The Marxist Housewife (Still Does the Housework)* (1978) comprises a series of images that feature a woman's manicured hand cleaning a poster of the revolutionary thinker. This piece examines the fact that Marx didn't recognise domestic labour in his writing and illustrates the artist's engagement with a branch of Feminism that was preoccupied with class issues. (Battista, 2007)

That hands can be seen as a stand-in for 'everywoman' interests me as this is how I believe I used my hands. Hands have been used not only as a stand-in, but when using a whole body would be more problematic. By using her hands to touch photographs, facsimiles, that often represent men, Hunter was able to tackle subjects that would otherwise be taboo.<sup>15</sup>

## Touch

My supervisor pointed out that in my gesture images I am only touching myself. This had not occurred to me. The fact that I am doing this with myself reminded me of Irigaray's written image of two lips constantly touching. In order to explore this constant touch more I photographed my fingers touching in a swimming pool. The water becomes a fluid touching all of me. The orange nails against the blue of the tiles is also very pleasing visually and is reminiscent of a photograph by the French fashion photographer Guy Bourdin.<sup>16</sup> I enjoy the movement of my arm hair and the strangeness of one ghostly foot in the composition. As women are often expected to eradicate their bodily hair, exposing it offers rebellion.

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<sup>15</sup> Although her work was still seen as taboo – her work : *Approach to Fear XVII: Masculinisation of Society - exorcise*, 1977, consists of a sequence of photographs in which an image of a man with an erection is being inked over by a woman's hand, with sensual pleasure still residing in the application of the ink. The sequence was banned in Belfast City Gallery, Northern Ireland, as the museum security guards refused to come to work until it was removed.

([http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist\\_art\\_base/gallery/alexishunter.php?i=3176](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/alexishunter.php?i=3176), no date)

<sup>16</sup> For further information on Guy Bourdin: <http://www.somersetshouse.org.uk/visual-arts/guy-bourdin>



Fig. 16. Mathias (2014) *Untitled* [C-Type Print]. 60x40cm.

I intend to keep going with this series. I have been most intrigued with the hand gestures in Rembrandt's *Jewish Marriage*. On show at The National Gallery the painting is perplexing.<sup>17</sup> Firstly the painting is neither joyous nor solemn as we might expect a marriage contract painting to be. The man and the woman look worried. Although touching each other like true lovers, their faces aren't looking at each other, they seem lost in disquieting thought. Simon Schama (1999) in *Rembrandt's Eyes* suggests the painting is of a couple wishing to be painted as the biblical Isaac and Rebecca, so at this point they are escaping famine and pretending to be brother and sister, yet they are seen 'sporting' together. This explains their uneasy looks but there are many remarkable things about this painting including the way it has been painted: 'the paint seems to have been inseminated with vitality.' (Schama, 1999, p.666) The most extraordinary part of the painting for me is the place of his hand on her breast, upon her heart. It is a tender touch, solid yet light and practiced, and on his hand is her

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<sup>17</sup> Visited 2<sup>nd</sup> January, *Rembrandt The Late Works*, 15 October 2014 – 18 January 2015, National Gallery London

left hand gentle and loving. The hands seem to belong to each other, a left and right hand, one set. Although painted circa 1666 this gesture is timeless.

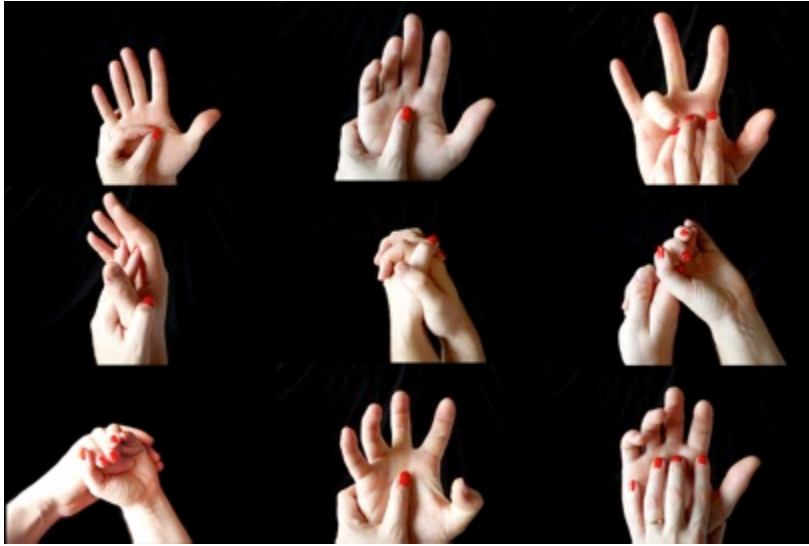


Fig. 17. Mathias (2014) *Untitled Sketch with male and female hands* [C-Type Print]. 45 x30cm.

### **Intimacy and Distance**

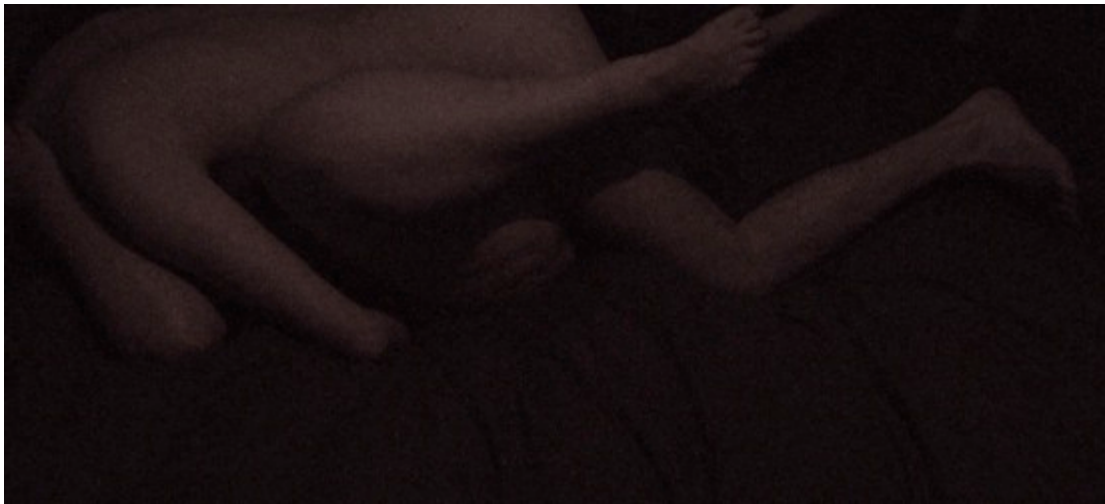


Fig. 18 Mathias (2013) *Untitled* [Phototex print]. 91x200cm.

### **Strong Gazing**

Andrew Graham-Dixon compares Caravaggio's strong projection of looking with Picasso's, and in turn relates this way of looking to historian David Gilmore's description of the Andalusian *mirada fuerte* (which literally means "strong gazing"). 'When the Andalusian fixes a thing with a stare, he grasps it. His eyes are fingers holding and probing...the sexual element is present also...The light of the eyes is highly erotic...' (Graham-Dixon, 2010, p. 43) I was excited to read about *mirada fuerte*: it seemed to link touch with looking and caressing. Reading the original text by David Gilmore conversely provided a contradictory reaction. The Andalusian culture he is revealing is macho and conservative. The looking is not only sexual and pleasurable but also violent and aggressive, linked to shame and envy. How could I reconcile this overtly masculine gaze with my gaze? It is difficult to do so, yet to try reminds me of the productive mimetic method of female artists working within the predominantly male canon of art history. What are the common threads, what is the difference? Rereading the chapter on hard looks I tried to remove the masochism, the sexism, the aggression, to find the commonality with a way of looking that artists have used. Graham-Dixon compares Caravaggio's and Picasso's strong look but I also recognize it in artists such as Jenny Saville, Cecily Brown and Sally Mann. Their art practice would not be possible without intense looking. The look exposes emotion, desire and vulnerability. When describing the importance of vision in Andalusian society Gilmore writes that: 'The ultimate judge of reality and of worth is sight, a kind of tactile sense, an ocular touch, a caress.' (Gilmore, 1987, p. 156) To see something is to be able to value it. This value then enhances the vision to include touch. By looking and then using this look to produce images we put value on the images we create.

### **Intimacy and Sally Mann**

This way of looking seems pertinent to Sally Mann's photographs of her husband. She acknowledges the social norm of men looking at women and the punishment of women who return the gaze:



I am a woman who looks. Within traditional narratives, women who look, especially women who look unflinchingly at men, have been punished. Take poor Psyche, punished for all time for daring to lift the lantern to finally see her lover. I can think of numberless men, from Pierre Bonnard to Harry Callahan, who have photographed their lovers and spouses, but I am having trouble finding parallel examples among my sister photographers. The act of looking appraisingly at a man, making eye contact on the street, asking to photograph him, studying his body, has always been a brazen venture for a woman, though, for a man, these acts are commonplace, even expected. (Mann, 2009, pp.26-29)

I am especially interested in her description of 'looking unflinchingly' (surely related to *mirada fuerte*) as well as the idea of 'daring to lift the lantern'. Both these phrases could be titles for my work. Mann is best known for *Immediate Family*, a series of candid and imaginative photographs of her young children. She has photographed her husband and has long been compiling a series called *Marital Trust*. So far she has released only part of this collection, *Proud Flesh*, which depicts her 61-year-old husband, who has muscular dystrophy.



Fig. 19. Mann (2007) *Kingfisher's Wing*, [Gelatin silver print]. 38.1 x 34.3 cm.

Mann uses a nineteenth century labour intensive photographic wet plate method called the collodion process and an antique large-format view camera. Using this method her photographs are necessarily black and white, and because of the delicate nature of the process Mann often exploits natural flaws that occur. Rather than seeking the perfect photograph she uses the flaws to add to the poetic nature of the imagery. In *Kingfisher's Wing*, we see her husband lying on the edge of an industrial looking table. I think of a pathologist's table. The flawed surface of the negative deliberately brings to mind the process of aging, of our bodies becoming frail. He lies on his side, a pose we normally associate with the female nude. The nature of the pose gives his hips almost a feminine shape. I find it intriguing that this image does not seem overtly sexual, yet there seems to be an intense looking involved. The gaze is tender and intelligent.

Although the *mirada fuerte* was born out a culture that sought to separate the sexes, within Irigaray's writing seeing and touching becomes more sensual.

Further research led me to a related piece of writing by theorist Jacques Derrida, who in turn is considering his friend and fellow theorist Jean-Luc Nancy:

But precisely, when my gaze meets yours, I see both your gaze and your eyes, love in fascination—and your eyes are not only seeing but also visible. And since they are precisely visible (things or objects in the world), I could precisely touch them, with my finger, lips, or even eyes, lashes and lids, by approaching you—if I dared come near to you in this way, if I one day dared (Derrida, 2005, p. 3)

Derrida's writing is a love letter: not only can I see you looking at me but I see the eyes you are looking at me with. I can see them and I can also touch them, 'if I dared'. When photographing my partner I recognize this exchange of looks. I do not hide my gaze. The difference is that I hold a lens in front of my eye so although my photographs may be read as love letters the photographs also contain the distancing filter of art. The photographs are not purely for my partner's eyes; I share them.

## **Cecily Brown**

When thinking of looking, touching and pleasure as a methodology I think of Cecily Brown. The paintings often contain sexual imagery, and her sensual use of oil paint is often linked to painting as the sexual act. In her painting *Sweetie* (2001), one of her less abstract compositions, it is easy to be seduced by the sweet pinks of the flesh. The couple seen in the act are sourced from pornography. Brown has transformed this potentially offensive image into something positive. Looking at the painting I see a couple enjoying themselves; the colours and use of paint reinforce this. I enjoy the equal pleasure of the man and the woman: the woman is on top, both look so completely lost in pleasure that they have merged into the background. The loss of self is not only to each other but also to the environment. The whole of the painted plane

seems to shimmer with their euphoria. This equality is where I see her art practice play with productive mimesis. The sweetness of *Sweetie* reminds me of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Rococo painter Jean Honoré Fragonard, but she has twisted the sexual subject matter from the male gaze to a heterosexual gaze.<sup>18</sup> Curator Philippa Found writes:

The agitated depiction of the body in Brown's work teeters between abstraction and figuration, and more than just evoking sensuality, serves to dislocate the association of abstract expressionism with male virility - suggesting that the act of painting and sex is just as much a female domain. (Found, 2010, p.14)



Fig. 20. Brown (2001) *Sweetie* [Oil on canvas]. 177.8 x 152.4 cm.

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<sup>18</sup> For further information on Jean Honoré Fragonard:  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/frag/hd\\_frag.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/frag/hd_frag.htm)

So Brown's art practice functions within the structure of abstract expressionism, yet playfully undermines its masculine associations. Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen (2001) argues that although she is undermining these associations she is not doing so in an aggressive way: 'Cecily Brown's paintings and motifs remove men from their old, privileged, power-based perceptual position, but do not turn them into objects or victims...the conventional positions of the sexes becomes fluid.' (Schmidt-Wulffen, 2001) Brown's paintings take pleasure in the representation of sexual acts; she invites the viewer to be seduced by the paint, by the content. In a sense you could argue these paintings are about touching as well as seeing. Rather than separate the thinking implied in fine art and the action implied by pornography, she mixes them, resulting in a glorious tactile painted image that is seen in a gallery but its pornographic source is not hidden.

### **Intimacy and Irigaray**

The strength of Irigaray is her writing. I am attracted to her writing because it is romantic. There is emotion, it is human and it has a visionary quality.

The more one considers just what Irigaray is saying in "When Our Lips Speak Together" the more one realises just how utopian and visionary she is being here. She is saying: that we ('women') are not mere voids to be 'filled' by them ('men'); that between lovers a secret world is created which is also wholly outside as well as wholly inside; the further inside one goes, the further outside one goes; the exchange of lovers will be infinite; because when you kiss me the 'world enlarges until the horizon vanishes', well that is pure religious poetry (Ives, 2003, p.82).



Fig. 21 Mathias (2014) *Untitled* [6x6 Colour transparency].

Irigaray's visionary writing has transformed my work. I have been more instinctive with my photography and the images are becoming more complex. Alongside pleasure there are darker emotions. Concurrent with undertaking the Doctorate, my relationship with my partner has flourished and undertaken its own journey. I am now married. In some ways being older and happily married, as an artist, is more difficult than being single: my emotions were more operatic, with failed love affairs. This new experience has changed my outlook and feeds into my art practice. By finding someone who I want to spend my

life with I now sporadically have moments of worry that something will happen to disrupt or end this happiness. I am more aware of the spectre of death. In the photograph Fig. 21, I started out wanting to take a photograph of my husband sleeping with a beautiful background – a scrubbed reclaimed train carriage acting as a kitchen in the centre of a living room. With my knowledge of my husband's depression I now read the image differently. In the foreground his feet seem to push the viewer away, his hand up against his forehead in an angst-like gesture. The red pillow seems to be a frame the danger area of his head. The sanded-down wood in the background with the layers of paints still seen seems to reinforce the disquiet. His glasses are visible on the table, his eyes are closed and the birds on his boxers are flying away. Rather than a dream-like sleep he seems to be unseeing and closed to the world. Even the leg of the sofa is unsettling as the decreasing rounded forms almost pierce the floor. This image is unsettling to me, holding more truth than is comfortable and more truth than was planned.

Looking at the images in this chapter a commonality can be seen: the subjects often dissolve into the background, the form reinforcing the theme. The degenerative disease of Mann's husband is mirrored in the precarious photographic method used, the image seemingly deteriorating. Brown's oozy, luscious paint emphasised the sexual bliss of the couple. In my photograph of my husband in the chair his disquiet was echoed in the scrubbed, paneling behind. The photograph is acrylic-mounted, the acrylic performs as a physical barrier between the viewer and the subject, as if reflecting the mental distance between the artist and her muse.

## **A Male Muse**

That my husband is my muse is an interesting part of our relationship. His support and encouragement of my art practice is a necessity but his cooperation and willingness to be part of my art practice is surprising and thrilling. In researching the male nude I found many examples where women use their partners to create their work, yet the images



are not easily found. In a 2010 interview with Mann an unpublished series *Marital Trust* depicting her husband is discussed:

...in a variety of contexts – domestic, parental, sexual. Mann is well aware of how radical these images are: the female artist gazing on the male model, rather than vice versa. For now, though, she is holding them back: "This may sound hubristic, but they're beautiful pictures, like nothing I've ever seen before, and Larry looks terrific in them. But he's still working as a city attorney and I don't want to embarrass him. Maybe after he's retired..." (Morrison, 2010)

That the images might "embarrass" Mann's husband warrants pause: within the cultural constructs it is impossible not to think of the difference of the sexes. When editing the photographs of my husband I am sometimes aware of future negotiation. The negotiation of revelation is potentially difficult. An example of when negotiation went wrong is in 1989 when artist Claes Oldenburg used legal action to stop his ex lover and fellow artist Hannah Wilkes using images she had taken of him in exhibition (Cottingham, no date). When I understood the sadness and pain in the photograph Fig. 21. I sought permission before showing it. In a society where depression and mental illness isn't discussed openly I didn't want to put my husband in an awkward position. Like Mann, my husband is a lawyer, his sporadic depression and his presence in my artwork has the potential to be embarrassing. He dislikes the image because of the negative connotations for him, yet he understands the value and politics of not hiding depression. It is still uncomfortable but as time moves on he looks at the image to remind him of how much better he is now. The photograph is printed and framed to a small scale, reflecting too my ambivalence and difficulty in showing it. After living with it in the studio, I now realise it needs to be printed large enough to get lost in the image.



## Distance

As the *Witnessing Woman* series matures I recognise that distance has become an important element in my photography. I mean 'distance' to refer to the physical and psychological distance that the artist has with her subject and the ways in which the photographs play with the physical and psychological distance of the viewer. For example Fig. 18. is an image of an intimate view of sexual intercourse: it is presented larger than life but the viewer cannot see more by going closer. My motivation was to make an image of sex that wasn't pornographic. I was interested in the awkwardness that surrounds sex. I wanted the image to be positive, to show sex as a couple so close that body parts are mingled. The image uses low lighting so that the viewer cannot see any details, drawing the viewer closer, yet the viewer is also put in the position of voyeur. The low light means the image is dark with a red cast. This darkness reflects domestic lighting and it provides a veil for the discomfort I have of showing my husband and me in a sexual position. The darkness is not meant to entirely censor the work, but to help the viewer identify with the merging moment in sexual intercourse. In this way discomfort and distance has become integral to the work.

## The Intimacy of Ageing



Fig. 22. Mathias (2015) *Untitled* [6x6 Colour transparency].

## Touched Up

From the delights and pleasure of intimacy then comes the worry of ageing. It is now as I near 40 that I am most happy, at the same time my happiness seems linked to a worry of ageing and death. These thoughts expanded into a new series called *Touched Up*.



Fig. 23. Mathias (2013) *Touched up #1* [Digital print]. 40x30cm.

The *Touched Up* series started with a photograph of tulips that were dying. The dying flowers had been revived in Photoshop, mimicking the action of the plastic surgeon and the beautician, plumping up, adding colour, reversing the signs of age yet not being able to hide them entirely. The photograph was framed in a simple frame painted the same colour as the background wall in the image. The intention was to make the photograph more object-like, to give it some weight. Feedback at the 2013 end of year show was positive about the subject matter, suggesting that the title would become pivotal to the work.

As the series grew, I began to exaggerate the touching up, making it more obvious, trying to determine the boundary of when the flowers would still be flower-like. For the end of year show of my fourth year, 2014, the series had grown to six images. I put them all in similar painted frames, and hung them conventionally in a row. Feedback revealed that they were not being seen as beautiful and appealing as I thought they would. When exhibited the images were seen as Memento Mori, like Dutch flower paintings, speaking of death, referencing Mapplethorpe. The painted blue frames seen

as domestic. The roses were the most compelling as they were the most obviously treated, and as they didn't have a shadow. By using shadows the flowers were placed in a domestic space. Without the shadow the roses were using a different language, they transcended domesticity. John Hinde postcards were mentioned, using artificial saturated printing processes.<sup>19</sup> As this was not what I wanted I needed to rethink the images. I decided to take a step back and relook at artwork that I could learn from.

## Helen Chadwick

British artist Helen Chadwick and her series *Wreaths to Pleasure* (1992 - 93) came to mind, which were shown in Autumn 2014 at the Richard Saltoun gallery. The flower pieces use saturated colour, the round colour-matched frames make the images, object-like, portals, somehow reminding the viewer of orifices, emphasising sexuality.



Fig. 24. Chadwick (2014) *Bad Blooms* [Exhibition]. Installation View, Richard Saltoun Gallery.

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<sup>19</sup> For further information on John Hinde postcards:  
[http://www.johnhindecollection.com/johnhindepostcard\\_archive.html](http://www.johnhindecollection.com/johnhindepostcard_archive.html)

I revisited Chadwick's *Of Mutability*, shown at The Barbican in 2004, specifically *The Oval Court* (1984-6). This work spoke of mortality in a lyrical, mythological manner. The work was a huge installation of blue photocopies of Chadwick's body alongside, animals, food, pearls and ribbons. The work is baroque, speaks of beauty and death, pleasure and pain. Instinctively I knew that this work was related to the work I wished to produce. When interviewed by art critic Waldemar Januszczak (1987) she said: 'As you grow older you are more conscious of mortality. And of time passing, of pleasure turning into grief. And of the two being inextricable, one from the other.' (Januszczak, 1987) As previously mentioned I recognise this link of the consciousness of mortality with pleasure. These thoughts came together when I was asked to be in a group show in a car park during the Frieze art fair week in 2014.<sup>20</sup> I had been asked to show one of the *Touched Up* photographs. Before going away I sent an enlarged image of roses to the framers. I had increased the levels of digital manipulation so that the roses were a blur of slightly odd colour. When I returned I knew it was wrong, mostly because I had seen Albrecht Durer's *Adam and Eve* in the Prado in Madrid. Standing in front of the painting I was mesmerized. In the introduction of this paper, I wrote about the painting becoming my touchstone. The darkness of the background adds weight, making the bodies seem otherly, whereas my flowers with a pale background are closer to advertising images. I started re-photographing dead flowers, this time with a black background. I started to include myself holding the flowers, placing them across my chest, letting my head into shot. I was bringing touch, hands, flesh, into the frame. With Chadwick's *Oval Court* in mind I thought of the images on the floor, perhaps like black pools of unwanted oil. I used my fabric printing knowledge to print onto polyester satin.<sup>21</sup> I used polyester as I knew the black would be darker, more dense than on silk. I realized that the fabric would need to be weighted so that it wouldn't move when placed. I used a fleece fabric that weighted the satin and also gave the images a strange softness.

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<sup>20</sup> For further information on Frieze Art Fair London: <http://friezelondon.com>

<sup>21</sup> Four days a week I manage a digital fabric-printing bureau at UEL. We use reactive dye printing and dye sublimation printing.



Fig.25. Mathias (2014) *Installation views of Touched up – oil slick*, [Exhibition].

Spatial and temporal restraints (I had only a single day for installation) affected the curatorial decisions. Each artist had been given one car parking space, a black rectangle on the floor. My oil spills were placed to look as if they were irregular spills from a car. I imagined a washed away garden, also water lilies. Since the exhibition, I have thought about viewing the work. Floor based work is hard to look at as your eyes are your height's distance away from the work. With this in mind I tried hanging one of the floor pieces on the wall. Immediately it was easier to see. There is plenty of room for evolution with this work. The work has woven together death and ageing, touch and caress.

### **Touch, Photography and Age**

Understanding the importance of touch in my work led me to research two further publications which link touch to photography: *Touching Surfaces: Photographic*

*Aesthetics, Temporality, Ageing* (Cristofovici, 2009) and *Touching Photographs* (Olin, 2012). *Touching Photographs* explores the metaphors of 'touch' in relation to our relationship with the photograph. The book explores the way in which photographs are created to 'touch' the viewer - an emotional pull that leaves room for mistakes in understanding.

...the medium of photography to a large extent, and in a variety of ways, engages the tactile sense. The word *photograph*, meaning 'light-writing', evokes both vision and touch, and in exploiting the slippage between the two parts of it's name, photography gains power as a relational art, it's meaning determined not only by what it looks like but also by the relationship we are invited to have with it. (Olin, 2012, p.3)

It will be key to the relationship between the viewer and the photographs that there is 'slippage' between vision and touch. I have been photographing more flowers (Fig.22) and producing sketches to with the aim to make the experience of viewing the images more immersive. (Fig. 26)





Fig. 26 Mathias (2015) *Sketch for installation* [digital file].

The slippage and mistakes that Olin writes about occur because of the emotional relationship we have with photographs. I am photographing dead flowers but I hope the viewer recognises their potential ageing self in the images. The images begin to operate like a mirror. The fragility of the flowers and the tactile smoothness of the fabric evoke my grandmother's perfect skin.

In the book *Touching Surfaces*, the writer explores photographers who work with ageing as a subject, looking at the methods they used. Cristofovici writes eloquently about the piece *Blue Fear* by Canadian artist Geneviève Cadieux:

...the images includes inner space. The photographed subject's gaze, one that uncannily mirrors that of the viewer, creates an interstice, an area filled up with air, as it were, between the two simultaneous images of the same person, a buffer



space to hold that metonymic body, to abide the crisis of ageing. Such photographs can be considered as transformative holding objects. They go further into the perception of ageing than documentary photographs precisely owing to their aesthetic effects and create, I would argue, an illusion of vision as a modification of the sense of touch... (Cristofovici, 2009, p.50)



Fig.27 Cadieux (1990) Blue Fear [Colour Cibachrome print]. 73 x 116 in.

The use of 'touch' as a sense and as a feeling is important. It is the use of both that contributes to the success of my work. As I am working on flower photographs I am conscious of the implied space in Cadieux's Blue Fear, the space somewhere between the visible body and the emotional inner space. Looking at the photography in these publications has helped me assess my work in progress. I intend to increase the emotional space in the photographs. As I write, my thoughts return to Irigaray and the clouds: 'Seeing it all the better for remembering the density of air remaining in between.' (Irigaray, 1982, p.104)

## Conclusion

### Influences on the final exhibition

There have been important influences on the hang of my final exhibition. First, co-curating the *Nude Male* exhibition with Julie Cook provided me with an excellent opportunity to experiment with producing a whole exhibition. Most of my professional practice has involved being part of a group show. Working with an experienced technician gave me the chance to observe how to use the whole space to tell a story, how to draw the viewer in and the importance of space to view the artwork. The use of light enticed the viewer and the whole exhibition was a coherent entity.

The second experience that has informed the hang of my final exhibition was going to the Venice Biennale and seeing the Sarah Lucas exhibition. I was in Venice as I was showing a photograph from the *Witnessing Woman* series in a group show called *Fall of the Rebel Angels*. Whilst there I paid particular attention to the hang of the exhibitions as I wanted to understand why some were much better than others. Seeing Lucas' painted yellow walls cemented my desire to include painted walls in my exhibition. Using painted walls would help to create a more immersive space influenced by Rist and Irigaray. Lucas' use of yellow made her exhibition glorious. It gave the plaster sculptures weight but also a lightness of gesture that left me smiling. The bawdiness of the subject matter felt like the artist was giving every woman a knowing wink. Lucas is quoted as saying that she regards the show as:

“absolutely for women. Well I am a woman, I can't take that out of it. I don't think the world's fair. Yes, I am a feminist, and it is a feminine show. I am not on my soapbox about it, but yes, I wanted this to be a strong feminine show.” (Higgins, C. 2015)

I recognise this sentiment in my own installation. Whilst reworking the *Touched Up – Oil Slick* work, I came to understand that it was important to embrace and acknowledge a matriarchal lineage. I had photographed my parents and aunt holding flowers, yet I

edited my father out. Whilst padding out the images with foam and wadding, it became important that the objects were hand-sewn. I was learning through making. As I sat sewing I thought of my ageing mother, my grandmother before she died and the weaving of stories of women said and unsaid. This in turn led me back to Irigaray and 'parler – femme' and 'witnessing woman'.

### **Bringing two bodies of work together**

My *Witnessing Woman* and *Touched – Up* series have been transformed through both my research and exhibiting over the course of this Doctorate.

*Witnessing Woman* is now a body of photographic work exposing the everyday complexities within a heterosexual relationship. The gaze slips between lover, friend and vulnerable other. The images expose the problems of intimacy: is there romance after marriage? The viewer is confronted with the moment where desire meets embarrassment, shame and awkwardness. Man is seen as vulnerable, sexual and animal. The images reveal and question the physical and psychological distance between the artist and the subject, image and viewer. The photographs are glossy, acrylic mounted and seductive yet difficult to look at without seeing one's own reflection: a reminder of the distance between the viewer and the viewed, emphasising the difficulty of looking. I chose the photographs for their use of light in the composition and they are moments that reveal more than they should. The light illuminates the point of interest (touché). I had experimented with the scale of the images in previous exhibitions and now realised the scale is linked to my position as the photographer to the subject. The ear photograph, for example, is taken close up so the scale printed is larger than life. The legs running away had been printed at a large scale of 150cms in height but had felt too large and too remote from the experience of my gaze. Perhaps the scale relates to Irigaray's quote: "Seeing it all the better for remembering the density of remaining in between." (Irigaray, 1982, p.104) I have hung the photographs in a traditional gallery manner with white walls and provided a bench to encourage the viewer to sit and spend time looking.

*Touched-Up* has been transformed to reveal the contradicting emotions of ageing. The joys of finding a partner bring the anxiety of loss and death. The empowerment of gained knowledge and understanding of the self conflicts with the irritations of the maturing body. The resulting images of exquisite, dying flowers, hand gestures and darkness invite the viewer to be consumed with western culture's complex response to age. I chose the colour of the walls to evoke a Tyrian purple – an ancient dye which was rare and expensive due to its method of production from seashells. It is a colour linked to power and wealth “symbolic of both the heavenly world and the best of the human world” (Finlay, 2002, p.398) Finlay writes that the purple is also likened to a blood clot and a bruise. This complex colour therefore appeared perfect to represent the complexities of both ageing and mourning given its association with the body.

In the build up to the installation of my final exhibition, I sewed the wall-mounted images of dying flowers onto large pieces of foam, 1.3m x 2m. This was the largest I could print them. On the wall the print looked impressive but as a whole it began to look constrained. The dimensions were too similar to a single bed. Cutting out the flowers and sticking them onto the painted wall seemed an appropriate solution. I knew this could be achieved having visiting print trade shows as part of my role as a fabric print bureau manager. By putting the images directly on the wall and the floor, it would help create a space where immersion and distance could be explored.

I also experimented with ways of showing the fabric-printed images of flowers and gesturing hands, now presented as cushion-like objects. I had tried displaying them on the wall but this seemed too fixed. I wanted to find a way of lifting them off the ground using a visually light plinth. I therefore presented them as tripods using bamboo cane for the guard with a light green garden twine. This links the flower images with the garden and also gives them a precarious domesticity. I deliberately made the cushions lie on top of the canes in an uneven and seemingly perilous manner. This whimsical manner of display reflects the paradoxical emotions I have towards ageing. The installation was

lit to keep the edges dark and to provide conflicting and obvious shadows that help play with the viewers' sense of distance and scale.

Stepping back to look at the exhibition as a whole, I can see it is my research that links the two bodies of work. This has the fortuitous benefit of making it easy to title the exhibition: *Intimacy, Distance and Touch*.



Fig. 28 Mathias, N. (2015) *Intimacy, Distance and Touch* [installation]. AVA building, UEL, 2015.



Fig. 29 Mathias, N. (2015) *Intimacy, Distance and Touch* [installation]. AVA building, UEL, 2015.



Fig. 30 Mathias, N. (2015) *Intimacy, Distance and Touch* [installation]. AVA building, UEL, 2015.



Fig. 31 Mathias, N. (2015) *Intimacy, Distance and Touch* [installation]. AVA building, UEL, 2015.

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Judith Goddard: <http://judithgoddard.com>

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Cherry Smyth: <http://www.cherrysmyth.com>

John Stephens: <https://www.linkedin.com/pub/john-stephens/18/427/519>

Sarah Taylor: <http://sarahtaylor.org.uk>

## **Professional Practice**

### **Joint Exhibitions**

2015, The Fall of the Rebel Angels, Venice 56, Castello 1610/A  
“The Danger Area of Head”

2015, The Nude Male, AVA Gallery, UEL, London  
“My eyes begin to roll as I see you shackled to your phone”

2014, Discerning Eye, The Mall Galleries, London  
“Scopophilia”

2014, We Could Not Agree, Q-Park Cavendish Square  
Installation – Oil Slick

2014, PRAVAC SILA, O3one Gallery, Belgrade.  
“Gestures”.

2013, Good Times, Invented & Remembered – landscapes & homescapes, The  
Sanctuary – Art Project, Dungeoness.  
“Touched Up #1”.

2013, Interim Show, AVA Exhibition space, London.  
One work-in-progress.

2013, Sophie Bedingham Smith &, Folkstone.  
Various prints from Witnessing Woman series

2012, East is East, Nanyang Academy of Fine Art, Singapore.  
“Chest no.2”.

2012, East is East, UEL, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.  
“Chest no.2”.

2012, Interim Show, AVA Exhibition space, London.  
2 works in progress.

2011, Terrace 6, Terrace Studios and Gallery, London.  
“Witnessing Woman 4”.

2011, Interim Show, AVA Exhibition space, London.  
‘Witnessing Woman triptych no.1’.

### **Curating**

2015, The Nude Male, co-curated with Julie Cook, AVA Gallery, UEL, London

## **Residencies**

2014, Directional Forces Residency, Artoll, Germany.  
(Artist residency and exhibition - various photographs, one projection and a vase of dead tulips).

2012, Directional Forces 2012, Artoll, Germany.  
(Artist residency and exhibition – various prints with mixed media).

## **Teaching (or other relevant forms of employment)**

2014, Online Review for Hannah Hoch at Whitechapel exhibition  
[http://www.thefword.org.uk/reviews/2014/02/putting\\_the\\_pieces\\_together](http://www.thefword.org.uk/reviews/2014/02/putting_the_pieces_together)

2013, Creative Career Master Class no. 2 – Fashion and Intellectual Property, UEL, London.  
Organiser.

2012, Youth Enterprise Live – Women and Intrapreneurship, Earls Court.  
Panellist alongside Siobhan Benita.

2012, Creative Career Master Class no. 1, UEL, London.  
Panellist and organiser.