

THE NEXT BEST THING

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Introduction

The collective discourse within the Doctorate has been of particular importance to me as my practice has generally been a solitary experience.

The title of my Doctorate came from a quote by the German artist Anselm Kiefer. In an interview he was asked when he first thought about becoming an artist. He said that he had decided to be a priest when he was seven years old but was told that only God could make that choice. He consequently decided that being an artist 'was the next best thing'. I have often felt that art practice borders on being a belief system and this quote underlines this. Making art would, in ancient times, have been an important and pious activity and I think somehow this attitude has been carried down over the centuries into our secular world.

The report is divided into a number of sections starting with this Introduction and an autobiographical context; the main part of the report covers my creative practice, theoretical research and professional practice. The guidance for theoretical research advises looking at the writing around artists that one admires or who have influenced ones work. I found this particularly challenging as many of the artists that have influenced me during my career have died. I did manage this, after a few false starts, by reading about Cornelia Parker's discovery of the writings of Noam Chomsky. Subsequently I have researched James Lovelock, Felix Guattari, Richard Sennett, Iain McGilchrist, Richard Kearney, Daniel Kahneman and many other writers as well as looking at artists like Grayson Perry, Ian Hamilton Findlay, Wolfgang Tillmans, Rachel Whiteread and Bill Woodrow.

I have decided, in discussion with my supervisors, to approach the main section by discussing the key works that I have produced throughout the programme and reflecting on all the aspects of research, influences and professional outcomes that have surrounded these works. In my conclusion I have summarized the outcomes of the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art and how it has informed my practice and particularly its impact on my approach to teaching.

Autobiographical Context

I was born in 1953 and have lived for most of my life in East London. I studied Fine Art at Portsmouth Polytechnic from 1977 to 1980 for my BA Degree. At that time most courses in the UK had very distinctive identities, which were reflected in the profile of the teaching staff. My interests were not particularly supported in a painting department where the grand themes of formal abstraction were being championed. I found that printmaking offered me greater scope for my story-telling instincts. In the second term two new staff members; Percy Peacock and Richard Mackness joined the sculpture department and promoted the use of the ceramics. I found this liberating and continued working in printmaking and ceramics at undergraduate and post graduate level.

My early concerns were to do with the passage of time. As I explored this theme I gradually developed my own archaeology, using the pictorial and material qualities inherent in processes such as raku fired clay and deeply etched steel and zinc.

A strong influence at this time was the ubiquitous military presence in Portsmouth, historical fortifications dating back to the Napoleonic wars and naval scrap yards where ships and submarines were broken up (Fig 1). This presence offered rich subject matter and in turn expanded my interest in history and architecture, and I began attending lectures in the School of Architecture.



Fig 1 John Pounds Ltd, North End yard, Portsmouth

Influential staff at that time also included Nick Roberts and Darrell Viner, with regular visiting lecturers like Terry Shave, Paul Coldwell, Ann Hownsome, Richard Wilson, Bruce Lacey, Brian Catlin, and Helen Chadwick. I developed an interest in the architects Boullée and Ledoux, and the artist Michael Sandle. The work I was making at this time was mainly etchings and ceramic sculpture, which reflected my interest in distressed and aged surfaces.

In 1980 I progressed to the MA Printmaking programme at Chelsea College of Art where my work became more technically complex but also more visually aligned to the conceptual style and influence of artists Tim Mara, Denis Masi, and Mary Kelly whom I came into contact with at Chelsea. The programme also gave me an understanding of more underlying influences, notably Eduardo Paolozzi and Robert Rauschenberg, Tony Cragg, Richard Wentworth, Anish Kapoor and Bill Woodrow.

My Masters exhibition consisted of display cases containing ceramic objects proposing a future archaeological display of 20th century artifacts such as scissors or pliers (Fig 2 *Fossils*).



Fig 2 *Fossils*, 1981, Ceramic, glass and wood

These were displayed alongside a series of pseudo scientific prints that explored the aesthetics of charts and diagrams (Fig 3, *20th Century Object and Probable Use*).

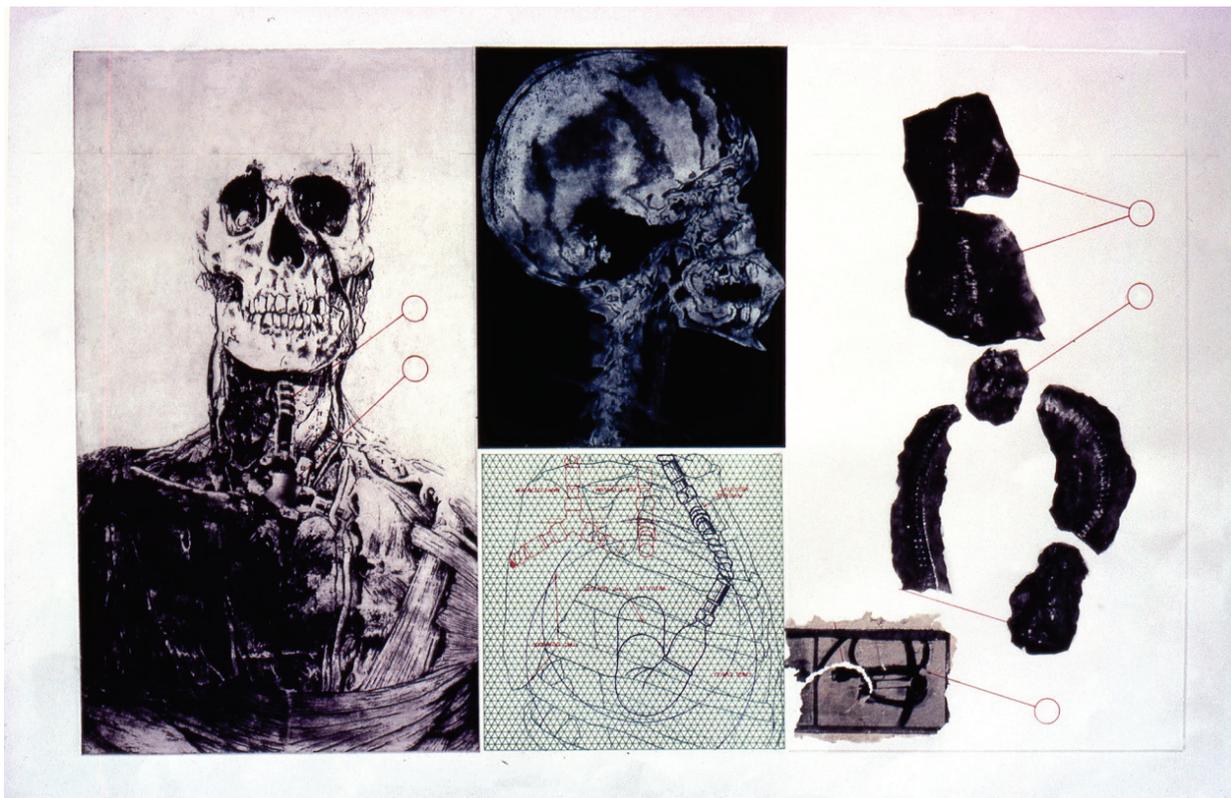


Fig 3 *20th Century Object and Probable Use*,
1981, Etching and Lithography

In 1983 I moved into a studio in Chisenhale Road in East London and built a printing table and began to use screen printing as a medium. I began referencing images of coral reefs in the South Pacific, notably a place called Million Dollar Point where the US dumped all their army surplus plant after WW2. Referencing expressionist painting for colour and texture, I began what was for me an important series of highly coloured prints (Fig 4 *Vice II*). These prints explored in a more painterly manner the language of distressed of surfaces.



Fig 4 *Vice II*, 1983-4, Silk screen print

My interest in natural phenomena is further influenced by my mountaineering experiences. In the mountains one develops a fine tuning for changes in the weather and a general awareness of the environment as it is crucial to safety and survival. Mountaineering is a strangely meditative activity, involving hours of strenuous physical activity in extremely stressful situations. Huge voids and vast distances go hand in hand with a need to explore the small and close up in search of holds and places to fit climbing aids. It is an activity that often brings the fragility of life into sharp focus. It is also a collaborative activity and not one to be shared with someone that you don't have complete confidence in.

It is also an activity that frequently brings one into contact with some of the more antisocial activities of mankind, open-cast mining, factory fishing, nuclear or military installations such as the listening dish in Fig 5 which is a pre-radar early warning device.

These anomalous edifices in the landscape fascinated me and have appeared in various forms in my prints and drawings for many years such as the sea defences or *Dragon's Teeth* in Fig 6.



Fig 5 Listening dish at Hythe in Kent.

I have developed interests in artists who use the landscape as a subject, from the Romantic tradition of the 17th and 18th century through to more contemporary practitioners such as Robert Smithson, James Turrell, Hamish Fulton, Richard Long and Ian Hamilton Finley.

I am an avid reader of books by climbers and mountaineers and I was surprised to find that John Ruskin was a member of the Alpine Club. I knew that he regarded climbers as 'rock huggers' who despoil the sublime beauty of the mountains. In the 19th century Ruskin espoused ecological responsibility as a social necessity.

I was drawn to read more about Ruskin after this discovery and found his social and aesthetic views strangely reverberant in our post-industrial, post-modern world. I also identify with the dilemma that faced William Morris, the relationship between the businesses of Arts and Crafts and the philosophical and conceptual position of being an artist.



Fig 6 *Dragons Teeth*, 2nd WW Sea defences at Cramond, Lothian, Scotland.
circ.1992, Charcoal drawing

My early concentration on, and love for printmaking, found full expression when I began sharing a studio with two other printmakers, Eric Great-Rex and Tim Mara. Tim's untimely death in 1997 was a turning point and soon after that I decided to stop screen printing, as I felt the need to work more directly through drawing and painting.

I was asked at the initial Doctoral presentation of my more recent large drawings *Rebuild* (Fig 7) why I thought my work had become less melancholy, more optimistic or lighter. My initial response was it was possibly the result of having a family and bringing up children. However after further consideration I realised that I started these shortly after my father's death. My father was deeply affected by his experiences during WW2 and it hadn't occurred to me until recently how much his melancholy affected me creatively. He was also aggressively anti-establishment and identified strongly with the working class community. His sense of social injustice has had a profound effect on my aesthetics and my moral and critical positions.



Fig 7 *Rebuild*, 2001, Ink drawing on paper

I think that the large drawings were a cathartic exercise for me; a real break from the tightly ordered rationale with which I had developed my work prior to this series. The methodology of printmaking can provide opportunities for chance and accident to be a productive part of the creative process. I began to find a parallel with drawing by letting go of the subject and letting the image evolve on the page through an almost meditative process.

I immersed myself in the process and tried to avoid controlling the flow of images beyond the general composition. This enabled me to respond in a more subconscious and intuitive way, without pre-ordering or designing the composition.

I have a range of sources for the drawings: observational sketches, photography, digital manipulation and memory. Influences range from the high cultural paintings of the Renaissance exemplified by the linear work of Botticelli and the mathematical compositions of Piero Della Francesca through to more modern and mass cultural influences of Jackson Pollock's expressive odysseys and Herge's (George Remi) narrative. I wanted to create images that did not have obvious antecedents; I wanted

these to be difficult to place, to compress the critical distance between high and mass cultural references.

Many of the artists who inspired and influenced me in my formative years still resonate, though the influence is less a stylistic one and more an intellectual or moral one. I recently attended an exhibition of one of my tutors and friend; the late Tim Mara. It struck me what an extraordinarily rigorous artist he was.



Fig 8 *Power-cuts imminent*, Tim Mara

The work was formidable in its intensity, his practice meticulous, cerebral, yet playful and full of a quiet humour. He was very much a conceptual artist but I think his Catholic upbringing allowed this to be imbued with a sense of metaphor rare in many of his contemporaries. He was also a master craftsman and this manifested itself as an almost moral commitment to the discipline of printmaking. It seems quite out of step with the sensationalism of that time (the late 1990s) and completely alien to the pseudo-conceptualism of the current art market!

I think the screen print *Power-cuts Imminent* (Fig 8) exemplifies his concerns with the paradoxes of contemporary life and it includes people who are close to, and important to him. His father in the lift paralleling the action of the newsreader on the TV screen, artists and friends Chris Plowman (with his back to us) and Dick Jewel (with projector), and most importantly of all his wife Belinda the underpinning bedrock of the Mara enterprise.

In 2006 I took part in what I think was a unique learning experience. Grayson Perry, who was a contemporary of mine at Portsmouth, was an Associate Professor in the school at that time. He and his wife Philippa suggested forming an Artist Community Group which would meet weekly to discover the roots of its members' creative instincts. The group was organized around a series of workshops that used psycho-therapeutic exercises to deconstruct and help us understand our creative processes.

This was revelatory as it made me value aspects of my personality that hitherto I had perhaps neglected, and to be more confident in my creative practice. I think that one of the most interesting techniques I learned was to visualize my ambitions, desires or needs, to create and name an image that represented them. The things that I had considered incidental; personal relationships and history, musical tastes, sporting activities, suddenly became more relevant and demanded more careful consideration in relation to my creative practice.

The following year I was asked to lead and develop AVA's newly formed Drawing Research group and as an inaugural event we held a two week drawing festival which included an exhibition of drawing practice from across the school from Architecture, Fine Art, Illustration, and Graphic Design through to Fashion Design and Textiles. To launch the event I organized a day-long conference on drawing and presented a video of three artists in conversation on their relationship to drawing; Grenville Davey, Richard Wilson and Faisal Abdul-Allah.

These experiences inspired me to develop further my interests in my own creative practice and influenced my decision to undertake the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art.

Creative Practice, Theory and Professional Practice

During my early reading for the Artists and Theorist section of the Doctorate programme I found it difficult to align myself with particular contemporary artists. My early research into artists Richard Wentworth and Mark Wallinger wasn't particularly fruitful in helping me identify a theoretical direction although it flagged up broader interests, such as the relationship that contemporary art has to neuro-scientific research, ethnology, philosophy, sociology and politics. The theoretical writing I found in relation to these artists was interesting but uncritical; more marketing than cultural context.

For my early research I read historian John Carey's book "*What Good are the Arts*". He takes an ethnological and psychological approach to understanding our relationship to art. I too am interested in the broader social context and function for art practice that is distinct from the myopic culture of the art market and its promotion of celebrity. My influences are generally experiential. I respond to observed visual phenomenon as well as to social and political events.

I was encouraged through tutorial discussion to look at other artists and I eventually did some reading on William Kentridge and Cornelia Parker as they both reflect, in different ways some of my own cultural, aesthetic and philosophical considerations. Cornelia Parker's work in particular became very influential though not in an explicit way; I like her use of humour to allude to complex and sometimes alarming subject matter.

"*Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*" (Fig 9)1991 features a garden shed and its contents which she arranged to have blown up by the British Army. The shed is displayed in exploded form as if caught in the instant of exploding; a frozen moment of time. I find this allusion to time compelling as a sculptural form. But also, according to those who witnessed it, watching the shed being blown up by the bomb disposal team was like witnessing an absurd comic execution or performance.



Fig 9 *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, 1991, Cornelia Parker.

Her work often uses black-humour. I find work that uses paradox and wit to address serious issues disturbing, compelling and ultimately rewarding.

Parker's work hints at an awareness of social injustice without being explicitly political. She became more aware of political issues such as globalization, since having a child and becoming concerned about climate change. After taking up an invitation to a weekend seminar at Oxford University on the environment, Parker wrote;

"It was a consciousness-raising event where scientists invited artists to engage with their cause. They felt that they had been shouting in the dark for a long time, trying to get politicians to act. So they asked the 50 or so artists and writers who attended; people such as Philip Pullman and Ian McEwan, to use their creativity to explore the

emotional dimension of climate change. I left the event sober; as a mother of a six-year-old, the implications of what I had learned seemed huge.”

The event made her research a subject not normally on her agenda, and this eventually led her to Noam Chomsky’s writings.

“What was the most important thing I learned from Chomsky? That capitalism compels us to work ourselves to death in order to stuff our houses with things we don’t need. Perhaps this is one thing art can do: create a new aesthetic, one of austerity.”

She has recently interviewed Chomsky in an overtly political work related to her series “Abstracts” at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. In this work she interviews him but edits out the questions that she asks him. We instead watch him listening to the question before making a response. Parker comments that we often witness talking heads on screen but rarely see people listen.

Further to this I noticed that the editing on the film was by John Smith who is a colleague and Professor of Fine Art at UEL. In talking to him about the piece he was interested in what I thought of the inaudible questions. I said that I felt that Chomsky’s answers made the questions evident. John reflected that Chomsky tended to answer what he wanted anyway regardless of the question!

Chomsky’s book ‘*Failed States*’ is a piece of research that comprehensively dismantles the disinformation of successive Washington administrations. It makes interesting parallels between the actions of undemocratic failing states and the US, of neo-liberal and neo-conservative politics and those of fascist Germany, of the irresponsibility and corruption of the corporations that are promoting the global economy and its economic, political and environmental sustainability. Chomsky built his reputation through his work in the field of Linguistics; his understanding of the use of language is employed in his critique of speeches of our political leaders. His knowledge of the subtleties of speech has made him a vehement critic of what he sees as duplicity and self-interest on the part of those in power. His writing is extremely illuminating and angry. Chomsky articulated in a succinct and profound way many of the concerns that I felt regarding America’s national and international policy and how it affects global agendas. I certainly identify with his anger; I think anger has often motivated me to make work.

Another writer that has been an important influence is the scientist James Lovelock. His books: “*Gaia, A new look at life on Earth*” and “*Revenge of Gaia*” propose that the planet Earth is in fact a self regulating biosphere that adjusts constantly to create a stable environment for life. He developed this concept during his time working at NASA

on the Voyager missions to Mars during the 1970s. Photographs taken from space of the Earth contrasted vividly with the dead worlds of Venus and Mars.

Lovelock explains that he wrote his books to appeal to a wider public than the scientific community. This approach, he feels, resulted in his ideas being initially condemned or derided by the scientific community. I think however that there is a pagan or romantic undercurrent to his conclusions (which he acknowledges) that would probably be anathema to the scientific establishment, especially in the US.

Lovelock's writing, although targeted at non-scientists, is still a difficult read. I am intrigued by his philosophical conclusions primarily because they are based around universal laws, such as the laws of thermodynamics, cybernetics and the sheer timescale of terrestrial events. The second law of thermodynamics states that all the entropy of an open system must increase and as we are all open systems that means we will die. However the unending death roll of all creatures releases energy that is essential for new life. The death sentence applies to identities rather than species so that: 'Mortality is the price of identity'. Lovelock goes on to speculate that although we have limitations individually, collectively we are a developing species. He has faith in the fact that, although we have invented technology which may destroy us, our ability to mass-communicate will enable us to marshal forces against environmental catastrophe.

"The mutation rate of man himself may be very slow but the rate of change of the collective association which constitutes mankind is increasing all the time. Richard Dawkins has observed that major and minor technological advances can be regarded as analogous to mutations in this context."

Lovelock, 2000

This reading provided a very sound contextualisation for my work during the first year of the Doctorate. It was revelatory in my understanding of the wider international and political events that unfolded in 2008, but also informed my personal experiences, most importantly whilst travelling.

The Beauty of Flying Debris

In April 2008 I visited both Rome and Berlin on UEL business and was struck by some interesting parallels between the two cities. In Rome I was able to view Andrea Pozzo's painting on the nave ceiling of the Church of Sant'Ignazio. These paintings celebrate the adventurous spirit of Jesuit missionaries and are possibly propagandist in nature, perhaps a product of lost cultural confidence as the Church reeled against the Lutheran and Calvinist influences splitting Europe at that time.



Fig 10 The ceiling of Sant'Ignazio, Rome

In Berlin I witnessed a city coming to terms with a post Cold-War condition. Here the debates were about the rebuilding of an Imperial palace on the Alder Den Linden (the main avenue) in the place of the East Berlin Communist headquarters. East Germans have accused the authorities of attempting a cultural erasure of the communist past.

It was after this trip that I produced *The Beauty of Flying Debris* (Fig 11) a large colour digital print. This print was one of the first significant images that I made on the programme and it embodied a set of concerns that I had been working with for about a year.

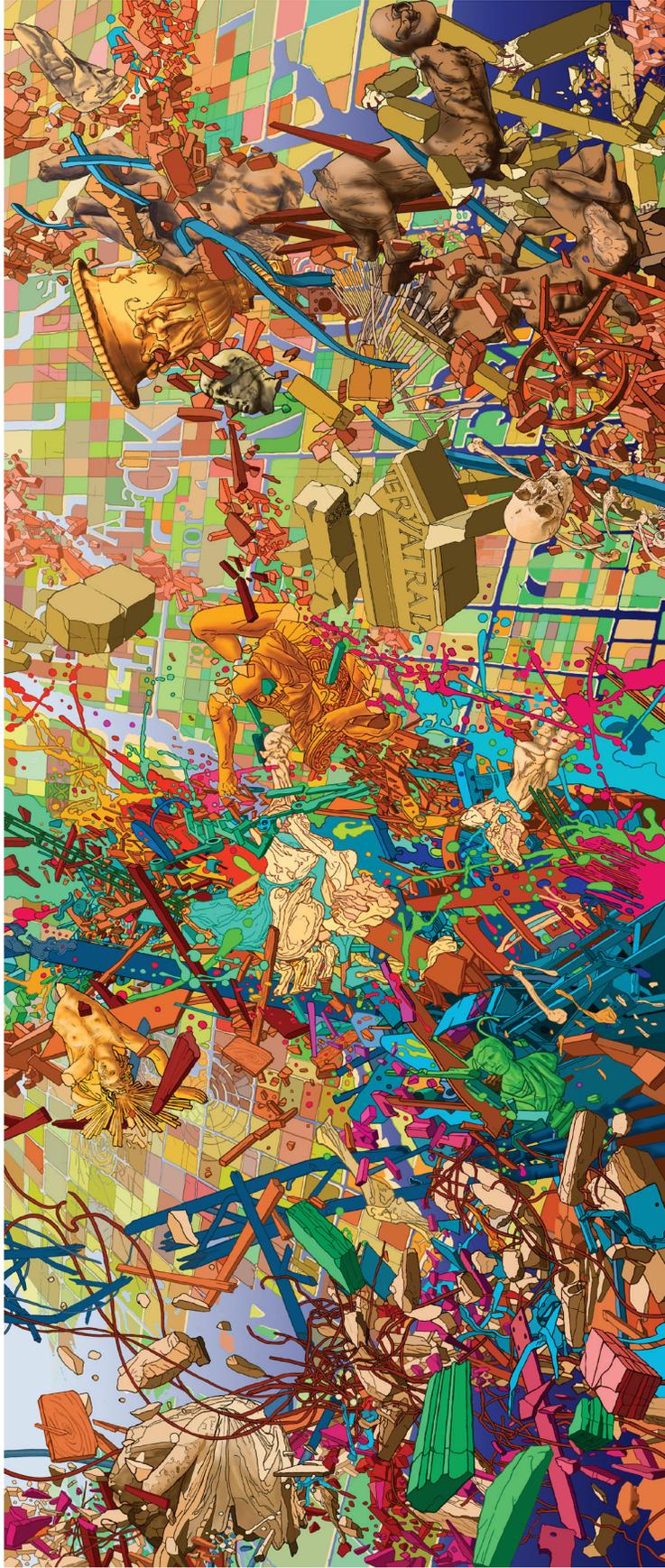


Fig 11 The Beauty of Flying Debris, 2008-9, Digital Print

The narrative of the print was influenced by my reading and subsequent visual research which included drawings and photographs from a wide range of sources as diverse as museums, demolition sites and scrap-yards. The print questions the value or adoration we bestow on objects, whether these are ancient cultural artifacts or consumer products. The composition is reminiscent of the ceilings I saw in Rome, scenes of damnation or redemption, but it also contains subliminal references to the frozen moment in time that Cornelia Parker employs in her work *Cold Dark Matter*.

There are other subliminal influences; John Martin for example, and even a formal nod to Jackson Pollock; Martin, because of his apocalyptic subject matter; and Pollock because his uninhibited gesture is underpinned by accomplished draughtsmanship. Both artists offer a distant and close reading of their paintings which is something I have come to understand whilst making my early large drawings.

I think my intentions for the digital image were caught somewhere between the formal and the narrative and this created a set of difficult issues that I managed to bring to a conclusion. I also produced a black and white version of this image as digital print and as a painting, which are both formally more resolved and 'graphic'.

This work and an the accompanying black and white painting entitled *Against Stupidity the Gods Themselves contend in Vain (Fig 12)* were exhibited at the APT Gallery in February 2008 in an exhibition called 'The Thinking Hand'.



Fig 12 *Against Stupidity the Gods Themselves contend in Vain* 2008, Acrylic on Canvas

In the autumn of 2008 I undertook training in video production software and I have tried to expand my digital language into animation. There is still some way to go before I am confident with the technology but I feel there is definite potential in the medium to facilitate my story-telling instincts. I have a strong need for a materiality or physicality in my work. So often the digital output through print, even on a large scale, is not as satisfying as, for example, the activity of etching or block printing which provides tactility and importantly, surprise.

It was suggested in a discussion with my supervisors that I might find *The Craftsman* by Richard Sennett of interest. Sennett questions the cultural shift away from physical and practical learning in favour of the theoretical or virtual. Using the example of medieval apprentices, journeymen and masters, he explains how the best craftsmen strive, sometimes obsessively, for perfection and this can often take the form of borderline personality disorder. He recognises that obsessive behaviour is often a positive function of the creative process. The importance of practice and the development of 'finger memory' are fundamental to training artists (and musicians). Repetitive actions form synaptic connections in the brain, the basis of what Sennett terms the 10,000 hours rule, the length of time it takes to become an 'expert' at just about anything. Effectively 3 hours a day, 7 days a week for 10 years.

It Was Always Going To End In Tears

Much of my work deals with the subject of hubris or vanity. Hubris and vanity are the most classic of human weaknesses. Indeed, for the ancient Greeks hubris was the embodiment of tragedy. I make work that explores these human frailties rather than work driven by overt concepts or social injustices. My work also bears a relationship to a longer standing interest I have in surface decoration and ornamentation.

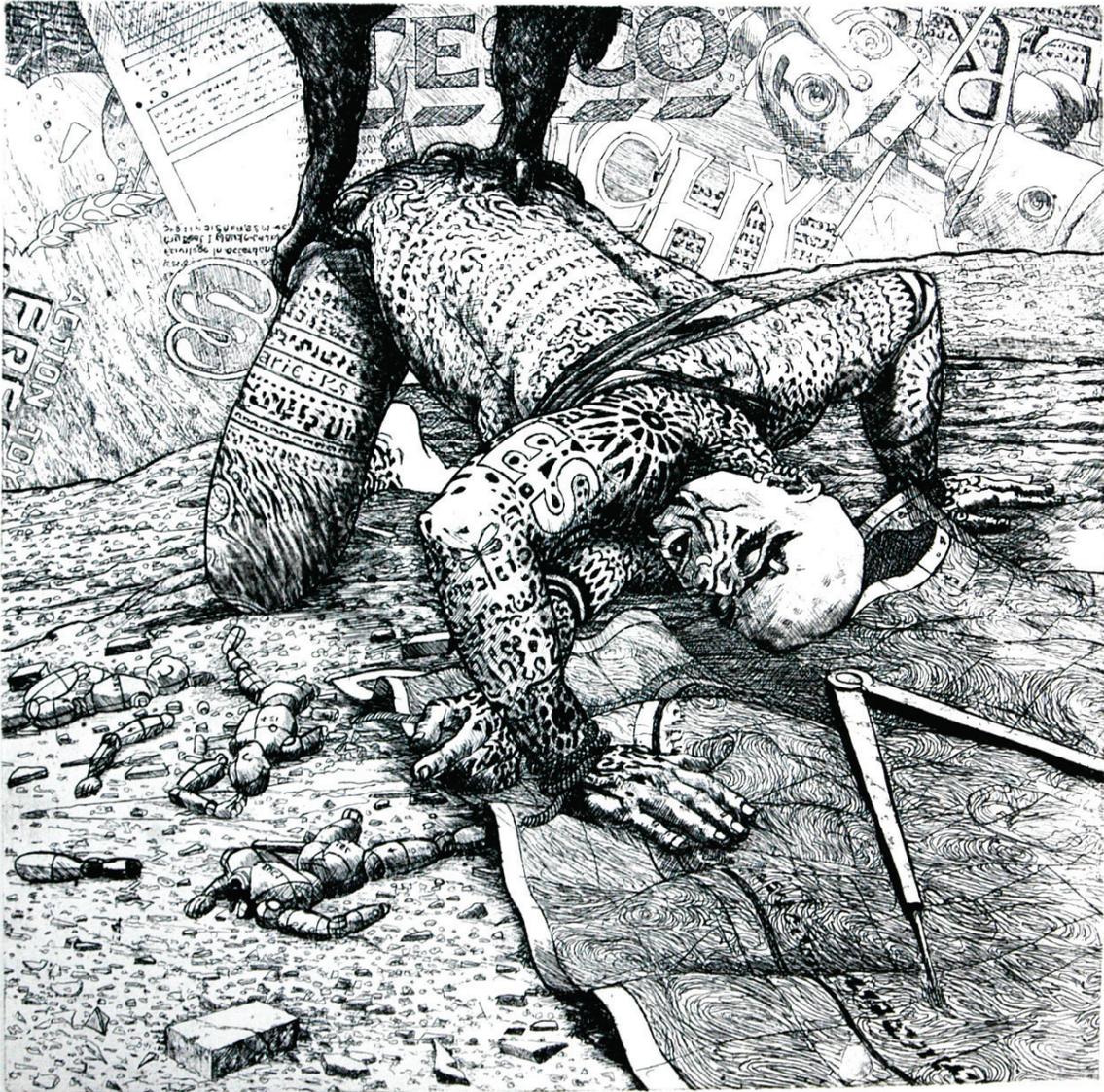


Fig 13 *It was always likely to end in tears*, 2009, Etching

These concerns shaped an etching I made at this time and also exhibited at the APT Gallery in February 2008, entitled *It was always going to end in tears* Fig 13, a depiction of a modern Prometheus. I think this was a pivotal piece of work and seemed to validate or give authority to more subliminal ideas.

There are reasons artists adopt certain types of media. Sometimes these reasons are practical ones, bound by individual competencies. Often however a particular medium allows a degree of personal communication that others do not. The communication can often be with oneself, a profound empathy with the material, be it clay, charcoal or paint. I think my relationship with print and etching in particular is multifaceted, bound up in the restrictions that the medium places on me. It offers resistance, it is reproducible and the outcome of the process is never quite certain no matter how accomplished a practitioner you are. The image is made as much as drawn and, in the case of etching, it is also monochrome so the quality of drawing and the narrative are of prime importance.

This print brought together a cocktail of references; Prometheus appears as a tattooed sub-cultural figure in a disturbing environment of marketing references, robots and manikins. He has a map and dividers to chart or plot the world, his pose reminiscent of Blake's image of Newton. This print shifted my language away from the symbolic towards a more explicit narrative.

I began reading *The Classical World* by Robin Lane Fox shortly after producing this print and was subsequently recommended Richard Kearney's *The Wake of the Imagination* at an annual review feedback session. I found this a particularly engaging piece of work charting the developments of imaginative thinking in philosophical terms from the Ancient Greek and Hebrew tradition to present day Post-modern narrative.

The first part of the book deals with Pre-modern Narratives and was especially interesting for me as it dealt with the myths of Adam and Eve and the parallel myth of Prometheus. In the Genesis account God, breathes life or 'Yetser' into Adam. The Jewish thinker Eric Fromm defines the term yetser as follows:

'The noun yetser means form, frame, purpose and with reference to the mind, imagination or device. The term yetser thus means imaginings (good or evil)...The problem of good and evil only arises when there is imagination. Furthermore man can become more evil or good if he feeds his imagination with thoughts of evil or good. They grow precisely because of that specifically human quality-imagination.'

(Kearney, 1988, p 40)

Yetser Hara (evil impulse or imagination) therefore became the dominant theme in the Talmudic tradition, and was related to man's corporeal nature, particularly sexual desire due to the seductive role played by Eve. We can still see, even today, a residue of the ambivalence that the monotheistic religions have towards imagination (and women).

The myth of Prometheus is an equivalent to the biblical story. The name 'pro-metheus' means fore-sight, the ability to anticipate the future by projecting imaginary possibilities. According to the myth, Prometheus stole fire from the Gods and gave it to man. With the use of stolen fire, man was able to invent his own world. He began to develop the various skills (arts) which transformed the world of nature (a world governed by the whim of the Gods) into a world or culture of his own making (freedom to plan and control his own existence). The stigma of theft was attached to imagination, understood broadly as that Promethean foresight which enabled man to imitate the gods. It became the source, as Aeschylus noted in *Prometheus Unbound*, of 'every art possessed by man'.

In "Thieves of Fire", a study of the formative influence of the Prometheus myth on Western literary heritage, Denis Donoghue has this to say about the ambivalent origins of imagination:

'The power of imagination helped men to maintain a relation between themselves and nature, but it did not bring peace between men and gods.....The imagination has always been a contentious power, as a result, so far as men are concerned in their relations with gods....the divine power in men, falsely acquired, stolen from the gods in the first of many similar outrages.'

(Kearney, 1988, p 80)

Both the account of Adam's fall and the myth of Prometheus's theft portray the acquisition of imagination as an offence against the gods. Both however are also ambiguous as they see the offence as a pre-condition of human culture. Imagination gave man power over his environment. He was no longer a victim of circumstance, but self-determined. Kearney writes, "*We can however never escape the feeling that our imagination is merely an imitation of the original act of creation (and an unlawful one). Imagination can never forget that its art is artifice, that its freedom is arbitrary, that its originality is a simulation, repetition, mimesis.*" (Kearney, 1988, p 82)

The theme of art mimicking the works of god runs through the medieval period where all art is seen in relation to the almighty. Our current attitude of a god-given right to shape the world and the environment as we want should be remembered as, perhaps a stolen right.

In the modern section of the book Kearney discusses how the enlightenment saw the blossoming of man's imagination in the material world in the shape of the industrial revolution. In the Romantic Movement, religion or metaphor is replaced by art as the driving narrative of sublime experience; the satanic mills of industrialization are now seen as a Promethean nightmare!

Kearney's develops the theme through Existentialism and up to the present post-modern culture with the domination of our lives by technology and especially the all pervasive media. Kearney uses some interesting artistic examples to illustrate his argument. He refers to the way Samuel Beckett makes his narrators comment on their own narrative, confirming "it is only a play" in a self mocking way. He proposes a post-modern aesthetic of failure- i.e. the failure of the artist to transcend art by paradoxically exposing its artifice. One Beckett quote was particularly resonant. *"To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is the world and to shrink from it desertion."* p 309

I believe that failure or the confidence to accept failure as the price of knowledge is fundamental to all intellectual development and to artistic practice. An artist's failure however tends to be played out in the public realm and consequently requires reserves of confidence not always in abundance. I think our cultural obsession with notions of genius and celebrity make the self-deprecating artist particularly vulnerable, so the defense has become irony rather than poetry.

Kearney questions whether the undecidable status of imagination in Beckett's work has a more general implication regarding the capacity of man to transform history into stories. He goes on to quote Walter Benjamin who, in the 1930s predicted that the advent of mechanical age of mass communication would threaten the original practices of imaginative creation (original work giving way to reproductions, copies) and more broadly of storytelling as a whole. Benjamin defines story telling as the "ability to exchange experiences" and the crisis of narrative in our time is construed as a symptom of the decline of communicable experience.

The mass media age, Kearney argues, has converted personal communication into a system of impersonal communications- a technological system in which experience becomes synonymous with information.

To some extent this returns to the political concerns that I found so interesting in the first year of the Doctorate. Kearney uses some interesting examples of how art has lost its power to confront or challenge the presumptions of society and especially power. He believes that the post-modern celebration of mass-media culture is a symptom of

today's multi-national capitalism. It is not just one more style of fashion, but a 'cultural dominant' inextricably related to the socio-economic dominant of our time. Our society has now reached a point where aesthetic production has become integrated into commodity production generally. One serious consequence of this is the facility of the established commercial culture to recuperate or neutralize the 'oppositional' power of art".

Kearney concludes his work with an upbeat account of the possibilities of the poetic imagination: he explains how advances in neuroscience and psychoanalysis have explained the unconscious as a playground of images and symbols which defy the laws of formal logic. Quoting Freud who spoke of the world of dreaming where "either/or" is replaced by "both/and" as equally valid interpretations, he explains that the unconscious is inclusive and tolerant: allowing contradictions and opposites to co-exist, refusing to deny the claim of one for the sake of its contrary, to sacrifice the strange on the altar of self-identity.

'The language of the unconscious, expressed at the level of the imaginary or symbolic, is the portal to poetry. Poetry is to be understood here in the extended sense of a play of poesis, a creative letting go of the drive for possession' Kearney, 1988, p 368

The last phrase I find particularly illuminating. Letting go of the drive for possession requires confidence and an ability to celebrate chance. I believe my understanding of printmaking affords me the confidence to take risks, in the knowledge that whatever I do I can recover the image or adapt it. That unconscious assurance is not so developed in other aspects of my practice, especially digital imaging which has taken me years to find a voice within the medium.

My earlier digital work was very much about exploring the limitations of the medium. I produced a digital print called *Vanitas* Fig 15, which was very much a playful attempt to use Adobe Photoshop, learn the software and explore its potential. This print and the accompanying image, *It Could Have Been so Different* Fig 14 were developed using similar working methods with graphic line work and heightened colour; they relate back to my earlier work and interests in pseudo science/archeology as well as hubris.

Vanitas



Fig 15 *Vanitas*, 2009, Digital Print on paper

I have been making objects for some years, my own disposable cultural artifacts and they are made out of recycled materials such as cardboard, wood and paper mache. I first started making objects as props for local community activities which proved liberating for me as it offered the opportunity to explore ideas, forms and materials without knowingly making art. There is a certain innocence in these pieces; they are a product of what perhaps Kearney means by poetic play.

The *Vanitas* print coincided with the production of a series of objects loosely based on the same subject matter. I started making these objects with the print in mind but gradually the individual pieces began to take on a life of their own and have their own distinct importance to me. I produced a shell, a globe, skeletal remains and a skull. All seem to have developed their own potential narratives beyond the original idea. The sculptural piece most closely related to the idea of the *Vanitas* is the skull and bones provisionally entitled *Remains Fig 16*.



Fig 16 *Remains*, 2009-10, mixed media

This piece was quite a challenge and came about through my desire to contest the properties of the cardboard and try and shape something almost organic from it.

Creating artifacts that attempt to convey cultural authority and also disposability I found quite challenging. I wished to present an ambiguous message on our value systems. I struggled with these cardboard objects, not with their construction or my conceptual position, but mainly how to place them within my personal iconography. The purposeful 'gaucheness' has proved immensely difficult to execute, the material unyielding but it has enabled me to explore and utilise a rawness that has been one of my most important creative discoveries on this programme.

After questioning the effort I invested in something so throwaway I decided to render these objects with filler and paint. This has opened up a more transformative practice that is less easily rationalized and therefore seemed to offer much more potential for development.

Much of the work produced at this time had been germinating for several years. The end of year Showcase 2009, culminated in a lot of speculative practices. It gave me the chance to review the various strands of my practice and reflect on them. I thought that the work I produced during this time demonstrated a broad range of practice, opening up for me, potential avenues or themes of practice.

At the seminar that accompanied the Doctorate Showcase, the Gallerist Paul Hedges offered a contrary view and recommended that I limit my range of practice. As a gallerist he is, of course bound to make this sort of professional consideration as galleries need consistent products that can be marketed and sold to clients who expect signature works. I think my expectations and ambitions were focused more on personal discovery and enquiry at that point. The observations regarding the hanging of the work helped me reconsidered the way my sculptural work is seen and perhaps made me value it more in sculptural terms.

Overall however I felt the exhibition was compromised because I was showing work simultaneously in another space in the exhibition. As a consequence the full range of the sculptural work wasn't on view, and the print and digital work seemed disparate in this context.

Is There Anyone Out There?

I realise that the shell, *Is There Anyone Out There* (Fig 17) relates to my climbing experiences, to geology and archeology. Some years ago I read Fergus Fleming's book *'Killing Dragons: The Conquest of the Alps'* which is an historical account of the exploration of the European Alpine region. In it he explains how the earliest ventures into these hostile environments were scientific expeditions. Geology was the cutting-edge science of the time and the discoveries of fossilized remains of shells at high altitude sat uncomfortably with the religious doctrine of the time and the conventional view of creation.



Fig 17 *Is There Anyone Out There?* 2009, Mixed media

In a recent discussion with one of my supervisors, we discussed my longstanding passion for mountaineering and rock climbing. Many years ago a colleague at another art institution remarked that I would have to develop the ability to suppress my imagination in order to expose myself to the precipices and dangers involved. On reflection, I feel that it is not imagination that is 'suppressed' but fear that is 'controlled' and this has an enormous benefit in the way I feel about and approach the world in my day to day life and in my creative practice. There is an element of adrenalin rush in

putting yourself 'out there', of boldness or risk-taking perfectly in tune with the demands of creative practice. I read recently an interview of a brilliant young climber/mountaineer called Leo Holding who is in his early 20s. When someone suggested to him that mountaineering is "escaping from reality" he pointed out that it is in fact "escaping to reality".

Ed Douglas, a former editor of the *Alpine Journal* and author of *Tenzing: Hero of Everest*, and incidentally, someone I spent many hours with in a freezing Scottish mountain white-out, recently contributed an article to the *Guardian* newspaper on the accelerating and devastating ice loss in the Alps and Himalayas. He writes:

'Reports that global warming is changing the climbing route on Everest re-awakened memories of Climate-gate. In late 2009, at the height of the so-called controversy, it emerged that two "papers" on the disappearance of mountain ice cited by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in their 2007 report were nothing of the sort. One was a dissertation by a Swiss geography student and mountain guide. The other was an article in an American climbing magazine by the mountaineer Mark Bowen. The sceptical community was gleeful. What could a bunch of self absorbed adrenaline junkies contribute to climate science?'

He admits that they have a point but goes on to say:

'Then again, I know Mark Bowen, not just as a climber but also as a scientist and the author of Thin Ice, an account of glaciologist Lonnie Thompson's work and how climate change is affecting the world's mountains. One evening over dinner, Bowen and I shared our admiration for John Tyndall, the father of climate science, after whom the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change is named. Tyndall was a talented alpinist who first attempted the unclimbed Matterhorn in 1860, a year after he discovered the properties of carbon dioxide that make it a greenhouse gas. The curiosity that drove his science also drove his zeal for climbing. If only Tyndall could see how his beloved Alps have changed. Photographs taken a few decades ago reveal the mind-boggling scale and rate of change. Whole glaciers are disappearing. Ice cliffs, called seracs, are changing position as the ice recedes, threatening previously safe climbs. Rocks once frozen in place are loosened as permafrost recedes.'

As a climber, one develops a keen awareness or instinct for these things as it is fundamental to one's safety and although it is true that the mountains are notoriously variable and unpredictable in their local conditions Douglas goes on to argue that it is impossible to cling to this argument given the scale and acceleration of change in the mountain environments of the world and especially how it impacts on the people who live there.

I think my interest in climbing has certainly cultivated a love of wild places free from human activity, so it is especially disturbing to witness these changes. It also makes sense that these concerns appear repeatedly in my creative practice. My depiction of the shellfish (Fig 17) questioning what is going on outside of its carapace symbolizes our introspective, myopic view of the world.



Fig 18 *The Sealing of Knowledge*, 2009-10, mixed media, cardboard, pigment

Recycling waste cardboard has a strong appeal to me given my environmental position but I think there is also potential in practices such as casting and possibly carving, where the material guides the subject. I was particularly fascinated by the 'Wild Thing:

Epstein, Gaudier-Brzeska and Gill' exhibition at the Royal Academy Oct 2009-Jan 2010; the celebration of mark-making and the potential it offered for working and reworking ideas through process.

I have started to understand where colour can be better employed in my work. Early attempts using colour in digital prints, although effective have been problematic as they soften the edginess of the subject matter. The colour I use in the sculptures have however a different, more physical presence that I find much more challenging. Several staff and fellow students on the programme have commented during the seminars or during the exhibitions to this effect and I feel this has begun to find evidence in my approach to colour.

A comment made by Karen Raney was that my sculptural pieces have embodied colour and this is very different to the way I have used colour in the digital prints. I think this is an important observation and made me reconsider the way I approach painting.

The book piece above, Fig 18 *The Sealing of Knowledge*, is an oblique reference to the marketisation of education. On this piece I have used viridian green pigment which seems to suck light in and yet also gives an organic quality as if the book is growing or alive. I am intrigued by the emotional capacity of pure pigment to affect the work's reading.

Education, Education, Education



Fig 19 *Education, Education, Education*, 2009-10, mixed media

Object-making is a necessary part of my practice; a three dimensional extension of the pictorial concerns. A recurrent theme for me is the book and I have made several of these *Education, Education, Education* (Fig 19), *Dyslexicon* (Fig 20) and *Untitled* (Appendix Fig 38). I have a fascination with them as objects. It is an object that symbolizes knowledge, wisdom and also a reference to the passage of time. McGilchrist refers to the earliest recorded manuscripts being lists of accounts or battle orders, he links the written word with the will to power. As a dyslexia sufferer they have perhaps a psychological representation; a mysterious, unattainable jumble of symbols and hieroglyphs.

Originally these books were designed to be viewed laid flat as part of the *Vanitas* arrangement and as they evolved I decided to hang them on the wall. This seemed to deny the object quality of the pieces. At the interim showcase in 2010, I was encouraged to arranged them in such a way as to emphasis their physicality rather than just hang them on the wall. Since doing this I have revisited the *Dyslexicon* piece and reconfigured it as a free standing work along with several other pieces in production.



Fig 20 *Dyslexicon*, 2009-10, mixed media

The use of letter forms and text in these books are metaphorical rather than literal, falling, jumbled, incoherent symbols and signs. My early influences of artists such as Michael Sandle and Ian Hamilton Findley are reflected in these works.

In the summer of 2009 I visited “Little Sparta” in the Scottish Borders. This is the house and garden created by Ian Hamilton Findley. The garden is laid out with his sculptures integrated into the landscape in a way that is refreshingly sympathetic to the nature that surrounds them. There is a sensitive poetry to his work that doesn’t try to dominate its surroundings; washing lines and watering cans sit side by side stone carved or cast sculptures.

I was particularly interested in the toy boats and objects that he had in his shed as it was after making these for his children that he first began making sculpture. I also noted how Grayson Perry in his autobiography, ‘Portrait of the Artist as a young girl’ mentions the importance of his father’s shed as a masculine shrine to making.

An early influence on me was the poem 'Ozymandias' by Percy Bysshe Shelley inspired by the statue of Ramesses II acquired by British Museum in 1816.

*I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

It is a sonnet about hubris; the inevitable decline of all leaders and of the empires they build and it seems to me to highlight our idiosyncratic relationship to images and idols. (The sonnet was used recently in an article in the Times to describe the towering empty cityscapes of Dubai.)

Being a regular visitor to the British Museum I find the rooms full of carved stone almost surreal. The Victorians' obsession with artifacts created the value system that led to rising nationalism in the middle-east. Rubbish only becomes treasure when someone values it. It may be rubbish again someday.

The Forum Roman was a quarry; the stone used built St Peters and the Vatican City. Over time the relationship we have to these ruins has gradually grown into a cultural reverence. When I first visited Rome in 2006 one could wander through the Forum at one's own leisure on your way to the Coliseum. When I returned in 2008 the Forum had been sectioned off and now one has to pay. The cultural reverence has been transformed into a cultural commodity.

At a work in-progress seminar I discussed my recent work and was reminded of the work of Bill Woodrow, by Grenville Davey, my supervisor. This was an astute observation as Bill Woodrow (Fig 21) was another important influence on me as a student (he taught me on my Foundation) and he became a prominent artist just as I left art school in the early 1980s.



Fig 21 Sculpture by Bill Woodrow

In August 2010 I travelled to Linz and Vienna in Austria and was able to visit the Holocaust Memorial, a commissioned work Rachel Whiteread (Fig 22) that has taken years and some controversy to come to fruition. I was particularly interested to see this work as she uses casts of books to form the work and these casts act as a metaphor for the life stories of those lost in the holocaust. It has a paradoxical quality; the concept of a building made up of books is an intriguing idea. I found the memorial an elegant and moving edifice, perhaps one of the best of her sculptural works I have seen. Most disturbingly for me was that stylistically it seemed to reference the work of Albert Speer!



Fig 22 The Holocaust Memorial Vienna by Rachel Whiteread

The Greenman



Fig 23 *The Greenman*, 2008-12, Driftwood and mixed media

During the summer of 2009, the organisers of Wanstead's 'Music in the Park' asked me to make them a 'Greenman'. They wanted a puppet like figure that could be dressed up and decorated by children during the course of the day. I have been collecting driftwood for many years and I decided that this would be a suitably archaic material for this project.

I spent some weeks building the head of the figure and soon realised that I had imbued the project with much more significance than required. The head was mounted originally on a pole, given arms and adorned with a big green cloth for the desired effect. After the event I decided to continue the building of the figure to take on more convincing proportions. He has gradually grown in height and overall physicality to now stand at about 12 feet high.

The link between the *Greenman* (Fig 23) and the language of my etchings became more evident. Both seemed to express a rawness that isn't so apparent in the rendered cardboard (though the untreated cardboard sculptures have a similar feel).

At a presentation I gave in May 2010, I talked about my father's experience during WWII. He returned from active service suffering from a psychosis we now know as post traumatic stress disorder. This manifested itself as anger, frustration, bouts of depression and melancholia. Reflecting on the occupants of the estate where I grew up, this was a common condition of the returning ex-servicemen. This raised the issue of anger as a motivating force in my work.

It was also pointed out to me afterwards how a lot of my creative inspiration comes from projects that I undertake for my local community. These aren't conceived as 'Art' but often have a direct influence on my practice. As mentioned earlier, it was one such project that first led me to start working with cardboard.

I believe one of the prerequisites of learning is the willingness to accept change and to do this we have to place ourselves in a position of vulnerability, to accept the possibility of failure. To be comfortable with uncertainty requires confidence, emotional maturity and an ability to control one's fears.

I am interested in the idea of art that is conceived and exists outside the genteel conventions of the gallery 'temples'. I recently read Walter Benjamin's essay '*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical reproduction*'. In this essay he explains that the earliest forms of art came in to being in the service of some cultic ritual, originally magical then later religious. The artifact is a utility object inseparable and subservient to this ritual. The Green man or Wildman is certainly a manifestation of this concern.

When the organisers of the Music in the Park event first asked me to make a Green man they were very sensitive to what the Corporation of London (who own Wanstead Park) would think of it due to its non-Christian, pagan sensibility. Benjamin talks about works having two separate values; cultic and display value. The Corporation of London would be more comfortable with something less contentious (cultic), and more obviously contemporary art, (display).

Kearney's *Wake of The Imagination* was significant in elucidating some of the deep rooted fears that permeate our culture. At the end of the book he reflects on our contemporary cultural values and their relationship to globalisation, corporatization and international finance. He concludes that technological colonization of images is a symptom of a globalized network of 'third stage' multinational capital that proposes no alternatives, a *fait accompli*. He however proposes that the remembrance of the past provides a motivational power for change, that narrative identity is a task of imagination and that the poetical and ethical aspects of this narrative task point to a political project.

I subsequently went on to read "Art Incorporated" by Julian Stallabrass. In it he criticizes the proliferation of international art fairs as another manifestation of consumerism but he observes that they bring positive attention to lesser known artists from around the world who explore more rigorous issues than the celebrated inheritors of Duchamp, Warhol or Koons; art, he says, that is rooted in more real social or political trauma, less defined by the intellectually genteel.

This gentility, Stallabrass observes has resulted in what he describes as aesthetic entropy, whereby the search for ever more diversity of practice and expression has created an all pervading style. Constantly seeking the boundaries has created a new conformity. I identify very strongly with this view, but it is the devaluing of practice that most disturbs me and it is paralleled in broader cultural moves away from practical skills and production towards a service economy.

One of the most important aspects of my Doctoral research has been my gradual recognition of the causes of my aesthetic choices; or my subjectivity, my belief systems. The term 'recognise' is important, as we are hard-wired to 're-cognate' all new stimuli through the prism of our past. Our history creates a platform for us to understand the world as we perceive it. This obviously includes the cultural pool that we find ourselves in, its influences and reach and also the historical forces that shaped the country we live in. What has become more and more apparent is the huge influence that my childhood played in the development of my artistic self.

Psychologists refer to the importance of priming, how early pleasant experiences predispose us to seek certain environments that we feel comfortable in. This history forms the basis of our instinctive behavior. It is speculated that this leads us to particular career choices.

I think that art practice; particularly drawing created a mental or inner space for me when I was growing up. It was safe and I would perform the ritual of drawing every day, which became habit. Art School was a place that I thought I naturally belonged.

My mother's family was alienated from the church by the Victorian class system and my father lost faith, (in almost everything) during WWII. He arrived in Normandy driving a self-propelled gun six days after the D-day and eventually finished the war at Bremen. In 'Bloody Bremen', Charles Whiting documents the British army's movements from Normandy beaches to the end of the war at Hamburg, of those men that crossed the Channel only about 70 survived to the end of the war.

My father's experiences and recurring fears (and nightmares) have, I realise, profoundly shaped the family home that I was born into. They have also shaped my own cultural viewpoint. I have inherited his strong political and philosophical perspective, his contempt for authority and possibly some of his anger.



Fig 24 Men of the Somerset Light Infantry and the 4th Wiltshires outside Becker's bunker: From Charles Whiting's 'Bloody Bremen'.

In Fig 24 my father is standing fourth from the left partly obscured by the officer with the pistol holster.

It is widely felt that modern Britain has been redefined by the WWII in a way that it was previously defined by the Norman Conquest and the Reformation. Our national identity during my lifetime seemed to spring from that period of collective heroism. Certainly an intellectual and moral position was articulated by the philosopher Bertrand Russell, and for social justice William Beveridge. For a brief period it seemed politics occupied a higher ground, which was gradually eroded by the paranoia of the cold war. The welfare state appears like the Elysian Fields in this context.

Other influential books that I read at this time include Cullen Murphy's *'The New Rome'* where he parallels the Roman Empire with the US of GW Bush, Naomi Klein's *'Shock Doctrine'*, an account of the influence that the Chicago School of Economics led by figures like Milton Friedman had on the development of monetary policies around the world, Ha-Joon Chang's *'23 Things They Never Tell you About Capitalism'* which debunks most of the commonly held myths of the free market. Chang feels that the west is suffering from a sort of post-imperial guilt complex after the 2nd WW and has tried to devise systems to objectify everything. Similarly Michael Sandel in his Reith lecture series in 2009 believes that since WW2 we have become almost fearful of the subjective and try to find ever more sophisticated systems to analyse and objectify our world.

The Doctorate has allowed me a very particular prism to experience exhibitions through and this was the case when I visited the *'British Art show 7: In The Days of The Comet'* at the Hayward Gallery, Feb 2011 (Fig 25). I was particularly interested in Wolfgang Tillman's piece called *Truth Study Centre* not for its formal or aesthetic qualities but because in one piece of the collection he references an article that comments on Barbara Ehrenreich's book *'Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and The World'*. She argues that America's can-do culture has hardened into a suffocating culture of positivity that bears little relationship to genuine hope or happiness.

Ehrenreich claims the corporate culture in the US, has used this phenomenon to suppress real concerns, e.g. working conditions, to create a pliable workforce, a bureaucratic neutralizing of genuine issues and concrete concerns, left unaddressed.

Iain McGilchrist comments in his book *'The Master and his Emissary'* that 'being' requires belief and this is an integral part of the brain's function. Secular society and the complexity of our globalized consumer culture offers diminishing opportunities for firm beliefs. McGilchrist is a Consultant Psychiatrist and has taught English at Oxford

University. I think he has had a profound effect on my thinking as he proposes that western society has become increasingly left brain dominant and prone to a collective autism or schizophrenia.



Fig 25 *Truth Study Centre*, Wolfgang Tilmans, 2011

He describes how the brain is physically divided, left from right. He points out this phenomenon probably has its roots in the need to give two different types of attention to the world at the same time. Using the example of birds, he points out that they use one half of the brain to concentrate on close up activities like gathering food and simultaneously the other half of the brain is attentive on a wider spectrum, wary of potential predators. He goes on to discuss the nature of attention: the kind of attention we bring to the world changes our perception of what is real within the world. The way one would attend to someone if they were a friend is different to the way we attend to someone who is an employer, patient or a suspect in an investigation. The person

being attended would also experience a change if one's attention changed although nothing objectively has changed.

'Science, however, purports to be uncovering a reality. Its apparently value free descriptions are assumed to deliver the truth about the object, onto which our feelings and desires are later painted. Yet this highly objective stance, this 'view from nowhere', to use Nagel's phrase, is itself value laden. It is one particular way of looking at things, a way that privileges detachment, a lack of commitment of the viewer to the object viewed. It doesn't, however make it truer or more real.' McGilchrist, 2010, p 28

McGilchrist goes on to examine how this physical attribute in the human brain has shaped us culturally, with the gradual prioritizing of the left-brain, which has the disturbing feature of being able to deny the existence of the right-brain or any information that doesn't fit in with its re-presented world (the right-brain 'presences' the world and then re-presents it to the left).

The Colouring Book of Catastrophe



Fig 26 *Excerpts from a Colouring Book of Catastrophe*, 2010-11, Drawing

I have realized during the programme that digital imaging works better for me as developmental practice rather than being the final outcome or destination of an idea. I use digital technology at some point in almost my entire image making, generally at the formative stage but have returned to more analogue practices like print, drawing and painting.

In October 2010 I made a large drawing for the '*Rhizomatic*' exhibition in the Southall Gallery. This relied on digital preparation and research for its particular quality. This work was called *The Colouring Book of Catastrophe* (Fig 26). It also references some of my wall drawings from 2004.

Drawing of this scale has a simple but immediate impact; one has to physically move backwards and forwards to take in the whole image and see the detail. This image has evolved from a book-work I made in 2009 called *Exporting the Great British Landscape* (Appendix, Fig 31) which was a smaller, but longer composition. The original piece was comprised of drawings I had made over several years, scanned into the computer and recomposed into an extended landscape or panorama using digital manipulation. For this larger drawing I gridded up the paper and expanded the image over approximately 6 metres.

Although it would be conceivable and possibly easier to draw this image using a projector, gridding up and redrawing in close proximity allows chance and accident to occur in the process. I am so close to such a large image that an overall reading is impossible. This approach allows decisions to be taken that create ambiguous readings from a distance. The title is an ironic observation of the way we in the west continually seek to export our values, a remnant of Empire and colonialism.

The Artist and theorist Deanna Petherbridge, in the catalogue to “The Primacy of Drawing” exhibition writes, “*Drawing is by nature, fluid and concerned with movement in all its aspects.*” She goes on, “*Drawings are frequently part of a serial process-moving towards another state which might or might not end in a ‘finished’ painting, sculpture, building or artifact.*” Petherbridge, 1991, p 11

The seminar that accompanied the interim exhibition in the AVA Gallery was conducted by Mark Currah and it raised some interesting points. Several people responded to the cinematic feel of the drawing, commenting that it was like a frozen still from an animation; others liked the fact that it looked like a digital piece but was physically drawn. There was a general enthusiasm for the idea of the production a book entitled, “*Colouring Book of Catastrophe*”. I thought the use of different weights of line and perhaps more fluid materials would push the language further. Some observers felt it ought to be on a more permanent substrate such as canvas or wood and this is something I considered.

At the Showcase in the summer of 2011 I showed my current etchings, four in all, *It was Always Going to End in Tears* (Fig 13), *The Tormentors* (Fig 27), *Hermes Explaining the meaning of Life as Blue Grass Melody* (Appendix, Fig 33) and *Retail Apocalypse, Episode 1* (Appendix, Fig 34), partly because I wanted to be able see them all together as a suite and partly because the other work I have been doing this year (paintings, drawings and sculptures) were still quite unresolved.

The Tormentors



Fig 27 *The Tormentors*, 2009, Etching and aquatint on Copper

The etching *The Tormentors* (Fig 27) was a reworking of a print I started several years ago, I quite often rework etchings, sometimes to the point of destruction. This one however evolved its own subject. It was inspired by a visit to San Marco, a Franciscan monastery in Florence, which I visited many years ago. I was amazed by the murals painted by Fra Angelico on each of the small cell rooms. One in particular depicted Christ being mocked by disembodied hands and spat at by disembodied heads. It is certainly an ambiguous image, perhaps metaphorically implying his inner turmoil.

My etching seeks to exploit that ambiguity. It could be interpreted as symbolising the corrosive nature of the celebrity obsessed media but I also think it implies an inner psychological torment. The characters are being driven along, perhaps ostracised by mysterious forces, words seem to shout implied harm and the figures stumble sightlessly onwards. I think with this print I allowed my unconscious more licence and it opened up new avenues for me.

The Alchemist” or “The Curious World of Research

At a doctorate seminar in October 2011 I showed some prints, drawings and a painting but used the forum to expand on the theoretical context of my practice. I talked about the reading I had done and how this had informed my practice, underpinned my cultural viewpoint and motivated current projects. I showed a painting *The Alchemist* (Fig 28) which I had begun as a line drawing and then planned to develop into a painting using flat colour. My approach however changed and it soon evolved into a more realistic depiction. The basic composition draws heavily on Holbein’s *Ambassadors* and I have taken elements from that painting and added other artifacts. It also recalls Joseph Wright of Derby’s *Experiment with and Oxygen Pump*.

The first version was in oil on canvas, but after the seminar I decided to make another version on paper. This in turn took on a life of its own. Both paintings have a mixed iconography; the fetish of pseudo-science, pride, hubris, sadomasochism. They draw on my earlier interests in scientific devices and ambiguous compositional arrangements. In the work I question whether true research is in the realms of creative play or is it a vehicle for the powerful to uncover the secrets of new ‘gold’ or entrepreneurship?

I feel this painting has been pivotal. The complex iconography and sparse use of colour has echoes of some of my etchings. I seem to find it easier to express my ideas on paper and acrylic. The oil painting has physicality and a surface glow which I recognise communicates something more fundamental, perhaps even primal.

In discussions the point was raised that some of my work expressed a feeling of lamentation for a missing past, a romantic notion. There is a nostalgic feel to the painting that wasn’t evident in the original drawing but grew with the introduction of colour. Muting the colour expresses melancholy much more forcefully, perhaps even nostalgia. This painting has aspects of the gothic, the macabre, and is certainly romantic. It is familiar but disturbingly unfamiliar at the same time.

I think I have always been aware that some of my imaginings offer a hard sell to a public looking for something they can live with. To some extent my use of heightened colour is



Fig 28 The Alchemist on the Curious World of Research, 2011, Acrylic on paper

probably an unconscious response to this realisation. It seems that after years of trying to suppress my darker imaginings through bold colour I have decided to embrace this part of my temperament while softening my broader cultural disquiet with humour.

At the seminar I also mentioned some of the fictional reading during this period that has had an influence on my work. Mary Shelley Wollstonecraft's *Frankenstein* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* I read because of my interest in the promethean legend and the extent of human endurance and emotional stress. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* offered an unremittingly dark and sparse writing style. It is however a beautiful depiction of one man's love and investment in his son and perhaps his (genetic) future in a world that offers no future for man or beast. At the end of the book when the man is dying he urges the boy to continue the journey and 'carry the fire'. McCarthy seems to be referring to the Promethean gift of civilization. *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men* have inspired my more contemporary gothic imagery, especially the etchings, notably Hermes Explaining the Meaning of Life as a Blue Grass Melody (Appendix, Fig 32).

In April 2011 I had my work accepted in a national exhibition of printmaking at the Devon guild of Craftsmen. This was an interesting event and I was able to exhibit two of my etchings. I have a developing series of these now and also exhibited in a group show in Vyner Street in East London as part of a group show entitled *The Unreliable Narrator*.

In April 2011 I travelled to Thailand and Cambodia and realised a long held ambition to visit the temples of Angkor Wat. Angkor covers over 200 square miles of the Cambodian jungle near Siem Reap, an area larger than Manhattan and the single largest religious site in the world (Fig 29). It is the remnants of the Khmer civilisation dating from the 8th to the 14th century. The ruins were first discovered by the French Colonial authority in the 19th century and restoration was undertaken, however the Vietnam War and the rise of the Khmer Rouge meant that the area returned to the jungle. The restoration of the temples is in perpetual progress and everywhere the forest seems to loom Triffid-like at the edge of one's vision and in some cases has completely taken over.

This huge religious complex is the showcase of countless unknown craftsmen, lost like the rulers that commissioned them in the mists of time. This place embodies many of the themes that I am interested in; hubristic notions of grandeur, flawed economics, political intrigue and environmental catastrophe. It is an awesome sight to witness how quickly nature can reduce the most powerful of civilisations to rubble in such a relatively short space of time. There was something unnerving about the complexity and sophistication of the carvings in the grip of these natural forces.



Fig 29 Ta Prohm Temple, Cambodia

In September of that year I also visited Pompeii in Italy. Both of these visits give a sobering insight to the awesome power of nature and the whimsical pretensions of human endeavour. The visit to Pompeii and Herculaneum near Naples gave me the opportunity to view these two Roman towns frozen in time by the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. Herculaneum is particularly impressive as it still has lots of preserved (scorched) woodwork from that event. It was a seaside town and part of the original beach that fronted the town has been excavated. This is over 10 meters below the current ground level.

In the summer of 2011 I showcased the improved version of my driftwood figure; the Greenman (Fig 23) in Wanstead Park. I was struck by the reaction it received from people at the fair, particularly the children whose emotional responses are closer to the surface than adults. The sculpture became an object that seemed to elicit fear and aggression from them, so much so that eventually I was forced to take it down fearing that they might knock it over and hurt themselves.

Another influential trip I made in 2011 was the visit to the Sandham Memorial Chapel near Burghclere (Fig 30). This was decorated by Stanley Spencer as a way of coming to terms with his experiences in WW1 and also on the same visit we went to the Ashmoleum Museum and Pitt Rivers collection in Oxford.



Fig 30 *The Resurrection of the Soldiers*, east wall of Sandham Memorial Chapel
Stanley Spencer

The Sandham Memorial Chapel was particularly inspiring as it is such an epic undertaking. I studied Spencer's complex and sophisticated use of composition, his muted colour and the complex figure painting.

In the summer of 2011 I submitted a research proposal, which has been agreed, to rework in collaboration with film-maker Marc Coker, the drawing video series that I started at the beginning of the programme. The view is to bring these up to broadcast quality for publication on the web. I think the contextual research I have been doing will inform some of the interview questions that will be discussed with the artists.

Residency at Artoll, Bedburg Hau, Germany

In March 2012 I was able to join 14 artists, mainly from the Doctorate programme, on a two week residency in Germany. The studios in a converted psychiatric hospital offered me the opportunity to work continuously on a series of large drawings and paintings.

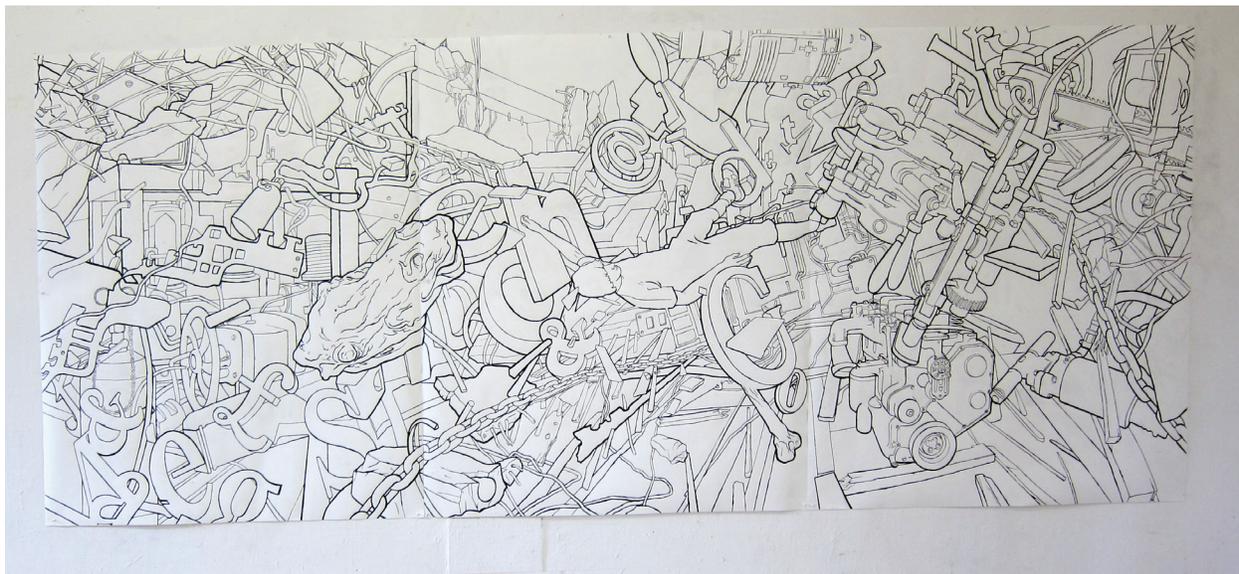


Fig 31 *Modern Times*, 2012, Acrylic paint on paper

The subject matter of this drawing relates to my earlier large drawing *Excerpts from a Colouring Book of Catastrophe* although it didn't spring from the same book-work it has a similar narrative inspired by chaos and catastrophe. The German press had asked for a statement from each of us about our work and I wrote how artists are like comedians in that they can speak a truth safe in the knowledge that nobody will take much notice of them. When they visited Artoll before the final exhibition they referred to the work as like Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times*, where the main character is swamped by the machines of industrial production. This then seemed a fitting title for the drawing (Fig 31). I was also able to produce two small colour studies from the drawing and also two paintings on paper exploring the Greenman theme (Appendix Fig 36 and 37). Before the residency, I had begun another etching that I have subsequently completed; *High Street Graces* (Appendix Fig 35) which explores contemporary British urban phenomenon, like alcoholism and loutish behaviour, in this case perpetrated by women. In December 2011 I was contacted by the poet and author Christopher Meredith who asked if he could use my digital image, *We All Fall with Icarus* (2009) for the cover of his new novel *'The Book of Idiots'* (Appendix Fig 39), described in the cover notes as, "a dark, offbeat and merciless examination of maleness and mortality."

Self Understanding, Fast and Slow thinking and Teaching Art

My relationship to art education is symbiotic with my practice as an artist. I think the Doctorate has had a significant impact on my teaching practice over the past few years and I have brought the reading and research, along with my practical concerns, into my teaching. The reading I have undertaken has furthered my interest in how we perceive the world and the limitations of the human brain. To this extent I am able to recognise how we perpetually deceive ourselves and become prisoners of certain preconceptions and modes of thought.

Students need to feel confident to take risks so the balance between building that confidence and employing rigorous critique is a fine one. I have seen how my own self-understanding has helped me understand others, and also how colleagues and fellow students on the Doctorate have been empowered by the programme and how that has had an impact across Art and Design within this school.

Thinking Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahnemann, (2011) offers the thesis that we assume to make important decisions based on rational 'slow' deliberations, which use a great deal of cognitive energy. The fact is we are programmed to do the opposite, using instead our intuition to make snap 'fast' decisions, that are invariably wrong. Fast thinking relies on our intuition, which is informed mainly by our history and experience. Deep learning occurs through the slower thinking process challenging our historical perceptions and experience. It also uses much more cognitive energy.

Kahnemann points out that individuals that are cognitively busy are more prone to expose prejudices and presumptions, make sexist or racist comments, be patronizing etc. as the brain cannot offer the same level of energy to intuitive control. He extends this idea of the 'lazy brain' into the way we are sensitive to our environment. We are more receptive to new ideas in a comfortable environment than in a challenging one. A challenging situation or environment will make us rely on our 'fast thinking'. This poses real questions as to how and where learning takes place

I recognise a tendency in myself towards over-aestheticism and self-consciousness in my own work that the Doctorate programme and reading has helped me to reflect upon and address.

It seems imperative that to be functioning healthily one has to embrace the concept of uncertainty, of the random, of chance. It is interesting that much of our humour uses ambiguity, the oblique, the unforeseen to make us laugh, and laughter, I think, is one of

the uniquely human attributes. It is disarming, non-threatening, yet intellectually rigorous. At its best it is questioning, un-hierarchical and irreverent, exposing the ridiculousness of the human condition with all our failings. I think art can do the same, and the artist's vulnerability, like that of the comedian, is crucial to the performance.

When I started the Doctorate my title gave me the licence to explore notions of belief other than that of religion. I have always been sceptical but have come to see scepticism and uncertainty in a different light. I realize that the act of not knowing keeps me interested, challenges me, drives my inquisitiveness.

“Certainty is the greatest of all illusions: whatever kind of fundamentalism it may underwrite, that of religion or of science, it is what the ancients meant by hubris. The only certainty, it seems to me, is that those who believe they are certainly right are certainly wrong.” McGilchrist, 2010, p460

List of Professional Activities

I am currently a senior lecturer at UEL teaching in the School of Art and The Digital Industries. I first joined the institution in 1987 and have taught on a variety of programmes at BA and MA level as well as being a supervisor to PhD and Professional Doctorate Students.

Joint Exhibitions:

- 2011, 'The Unreliable Narrator', Vyner Street Gallery, East London.
Group exhibition with four artists whose work explores narrative.
- 2010 Interim Doctorate showcase.
Exhibited a selection of sculptural works for this exhibition.
- 2009 Pick and Mix, Old Woolworths building, East London.
I curated exhibition in shop premises.
- 2009 'The Thinking Hand', APT Gallery, Greenwich, SE London
Group exhibition of artists on the Doctorate programme.
- 2009 Interim Prof Doc Exhibition, AVA Gallery, UEL, East London.
- 2009 Drawing Research Group exhibition, AVA Gallery, East London.
- 2008 'My Magic Life' in Kensington Church Street.
Produced sculptural work for inclusion in group exhibition.

Selected Exhibitions:

- 2012 'Apocalypse'. Selected summer exhibition at Edinburgh Print Workshop.
- 2011 'Up Close', Devon Guild of Craftsmen, Bovey Tracey, Devon.
Two prints selected for a national printmaking exhibition.
- 2010 'Rhyzomatic', Departure Gallery, Southall.
Invited to exhibit a large drawing in this large selected show.

On-line Forums:

- 2010 Petcha-Kutcha 20X20, Presentation at the Arches in SE London.
Presentation of work on a worldwide online forum.
- 2007-11 www.martinbarrett.co.uk

Residencies:

- 2012 Artist in Residence at Artoll, Bedburg Hau in Germany. March 5-18th

Research Activities:

- 2011-12 Currently planning a continuation of video interviews with artists: Susan Stockwell and Faisal Abdul-allah.
- 2012 Filmed artist Alexis Harding in conversation about his practice

- 2009 Produced a video interview of Grenville Davey about his work for the Essex County Council Town Hall Building
- 2007 Produced a series of video interviews of Artist talking about drawing. Artists interviewed included Grenville Davey, Faisal Abdul-Allah and Richard Wilson.
- 2007 I organised a Festival of Drawing at UEL, a two week event in April and May incorporating an exhibitions and conference, workshops and presentations.

Teaching Related Activities:

- 2010-2011 Represented School of AVA on the UEL Academic Board.
- 2008-2010 Programme Leader for MA Contemporary Art and Design Practice, AVA, UEL
- 2007-8 External Examiner for the Printmaking Department at the Royal College of Art.

Other Professional Activities:

- 2012 Cover Illustration for 'The Book of Idiots' by Chris Meredith.

Conclusion

One of the realities of being an artist is the solitary nature of creative practice. The Doctorate offers a unique community that supports and challenges the creative practitioner. There has been an incremental erosion of the value of practice within (art) education and in this climate it has proved ever more difficult for artists and designers to gain practical support for their activities. The Doctorate has proved to be one of the few established vehicles for this and has validated and given authority to my practice. Through the reading that I have been encouraged to undertake, it has offered me a broader conceptual understanding that underpins not only my art practice but my approach to teaching. My professional career has been dominated by my relationship to art education and the art school community. I recognise that this is every bit as important to me as my creative practice. I would say that it probably fulfills a suppressed need to perform. I think this is quite a common trait amongst teachers; some of the teachers I most admire have had a strong sense of the theatrical about them.

The reading I have undertaken has been one of the most rewarding aspects of the programme. Because of the nature of creative practice, artists often have to make a choice between time spent on practice or visual research and time spent on theoretical research. The programme has encouraged me to give a balanced emphasis on both the practical and theoretical aspects of research.

Regular opportunities to exhibit my work have allowed me to explore more speculative ideas and push the boundaries of my practice. Similarly the group seminars have offered a controlled environment for exposing ideas to a rigorous discourse. Both of these structures have allowed me to test my ideas and challenge myself creatively in a supportive environment.

The research I have pursued has reinforced my interest in social history and polemic issues, of psychology and, increasingly, neuroscience. My inclination towards craftsmanship, formal relationships, mark-making and my passion for stark (sublime) beauty are manifestations of my many experiences. These concerns are often in conflict and I recognise the tendency to over-aestheticise my work and I have tried to construct methodologies to escape or neutralise my self-consciousness. This may be the dilemma of all artists perhaps, but as my reading has revealed to me it is an affliction that we suffer from collectively and culturally.

The subject of a Doctorate in Fine Art is essentially the study of one's own practice so in many respects the self analysis and self reflection mirrors therapeutic exorcising of past demons. One of the dangers of this deconstruction is that in seeking to uncover the roots of our creative drive we inadvertently 'cure the obsession'. Thankfully I think I am

incurable. This programme has given me renewed confidence to trust my (newly informed) intuition and to be less self-conscious in my approach to image-making.

One of the important aspects of this programme has been the opportunity to explore and give value to the different aspects of my personality or 'selves'. The importance of these disparate interests or 'selves' in feeding my creativity was something I first became aware of during the Community Art Group sessions in 2006.

To some extent the Professional Doctorate has acted like a parallel therapeutic experience where the subject of the Doctorate is the individual, it is a study of oneself, and therefore all aspects of one's personality and experience become valid areas for creative exploration. This aspect of the programme and the associated reading has been revelatory and has enabled me to recognise the causes of my aesthetic choices. It has enabled me to celebrate and gain confidence in my own diversity of practice and is liberating because of it.

My Doctorate proposes that 'Art' is a belief system, one of the many beliefs that humankind can adopt to make sense of the world. Like many beliefs this 'truth' is subjective and elusive. My research has brought me to the realisation that the more I pursue this 'truth' the more elusive it becomes. During the course of this programme I have explored a broad range of practices and techniques allowing chance and process to influence me. This has allowed me to produce two or three distinct bodies of work incorporating drawing, digital print, printmaking, painting and sculpture. I think the most important thing that I have gained is the licence to experiment, to creatively play, albeit full-bloodedly without the self-conscious feeling that I am making Art!

I am not sure if Art is a belief or a substitute for one but the compunction to continually work and make things has been redemptive for me, and in many respects, the next best thing.

Acknowledgements

In writing this report I have realized that it offers the reader the same bombardment of disparate influences and information that they might expect to find when viewing one of my images. So I would like to make a special thank you to Geoffrey Brunell and Karen Raney for their tireless enthusiasm, support and guidance on a very practical level and for the clarity and objectivity they offered.

Exhibitions attended:

The Futurists, Tate Modern, The futurist exhibition at The Tate reintroduced me to the work of Umberto Boccioni. I was interested to read that his iconic “Walking figure” bronze was originally made in plaster and was rescued from a skip after he had died.

Museum of Everything: I found this a really interesting collection, an extravaganza of obsession; disturbing work by Henry Darger and Morten Bartlett and a host of other strange outpourings.

Grayson Perry, Victoria Miro: Showed his Walthamstow mural and a brilliant etching about Politicians.

Keith Tyson, Victoria Miro: Cloud paintings, very accomplished technically.

The Sacred made Real, National Gallery: I found this exhibition of Church sculptures from Spain a very compelling exhibition, both in terms of the subject matter and the techniques used. No one does sex and violence like the Catholic Church.

Little Sparta I visited this house in the summer 2009 and noted that Ian Hamilton Finley first began making his sculptural work after constructing toys for his children. There is a strong playful element in his work that I admire. I was interested in the way that his sculptural work often doesn't try to dominate the landscape, he gives as much importance to trees and shrubs as his carvings.

Wild Thing, Royal Academy Oct 2009: Marks perhaps a cultural shift of interest back to the materiality of sculpture

Anish Kapoor, Royal Academy Sept 2009: Large exhibition showcasing the sculptor.

Van Gogh's Letters, Royal Academy Jan 2010: Interesting to see how the graphics of his letters was influenced by magazines and graphics from London.

Kuniyoshi, Royal Academy, March 2009: Fantastic wood blocks, un-unneringly, almost contemporary subject matter.

New American painting at Saatchi Gallery:

Tate St Ives, I was impressed by the materiality of Kenneth Martin's paintings

The Lowry Museum, Manchester, 2010. Lowry's paintings, I was surprised by the quality of paint work in some of his earlier paintings, where the figures are subsumed into the landscape. I was fascinated by the images (and short TV documentary of him working) of the Manchester and Salford cityscape, completely transformed now into a 'post-modern utopia'.

Don McCullin, War Museum North, 2010. I was particularly interested in the way his professional life, photographing war zones around the world, gradually affected his psyche to an extent that even his landscapes became doom-laden.

Gerhardt Richter, 2010, Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh.

Michael Craig Martin, Sept-Dec 2010, Gargosian Gallery, London. I was impressed with his technique of masking and layering paint in a way very like the screen printing process.

British Art Show 7: In the Days of the Comet, Feb 2011, Hayward gallery. I wanted to see the Clock piece by Christian Marclay which featured in this exhibition. I was also interested in Wolfgang Tillman's work.

Anselm Keifer, 2011, White Cube, Hoxton Square. I have always liked Keifer's work and enjoyed the chance to see some of his larger paintings.

Jake and Dinos Chapman, 2011, White Cube, Mason's Yard.

Tim Mara, Advanced Graphics, South London. A remarkable technician and accomplished and talented artist.

Degas and the Ballet, Picturing Movement, Royal Academy of Arts, Sept 2011, London. Particularly interested in the influence that photography, panoramas and stop motion technology had on his paintings and drawings.

Jaume Plensa, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Bretton Hall, Summer 2011, Yorkshire. Impressive series of carved alabaster heads.

Grayson Perry, 'The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman', British Museum, Oct 2011, London. This was a thoughtful and witty exhibition of his own work mixed with objects from the collection.

John Martin, Apocalypse, Tate Britain, Sept 2011, London. This proved an interesting exhibition for me as I was not familiar with his etchings.

David Hockney, Royal Academy Galleries, March 2012, London. This is a huge exhibition with many fine paintings, though some very overhung galleries.

Jean Dubuffet, Waddington Gallery Cork Street, March 2012, London. I thought his later paper works were ingenious.

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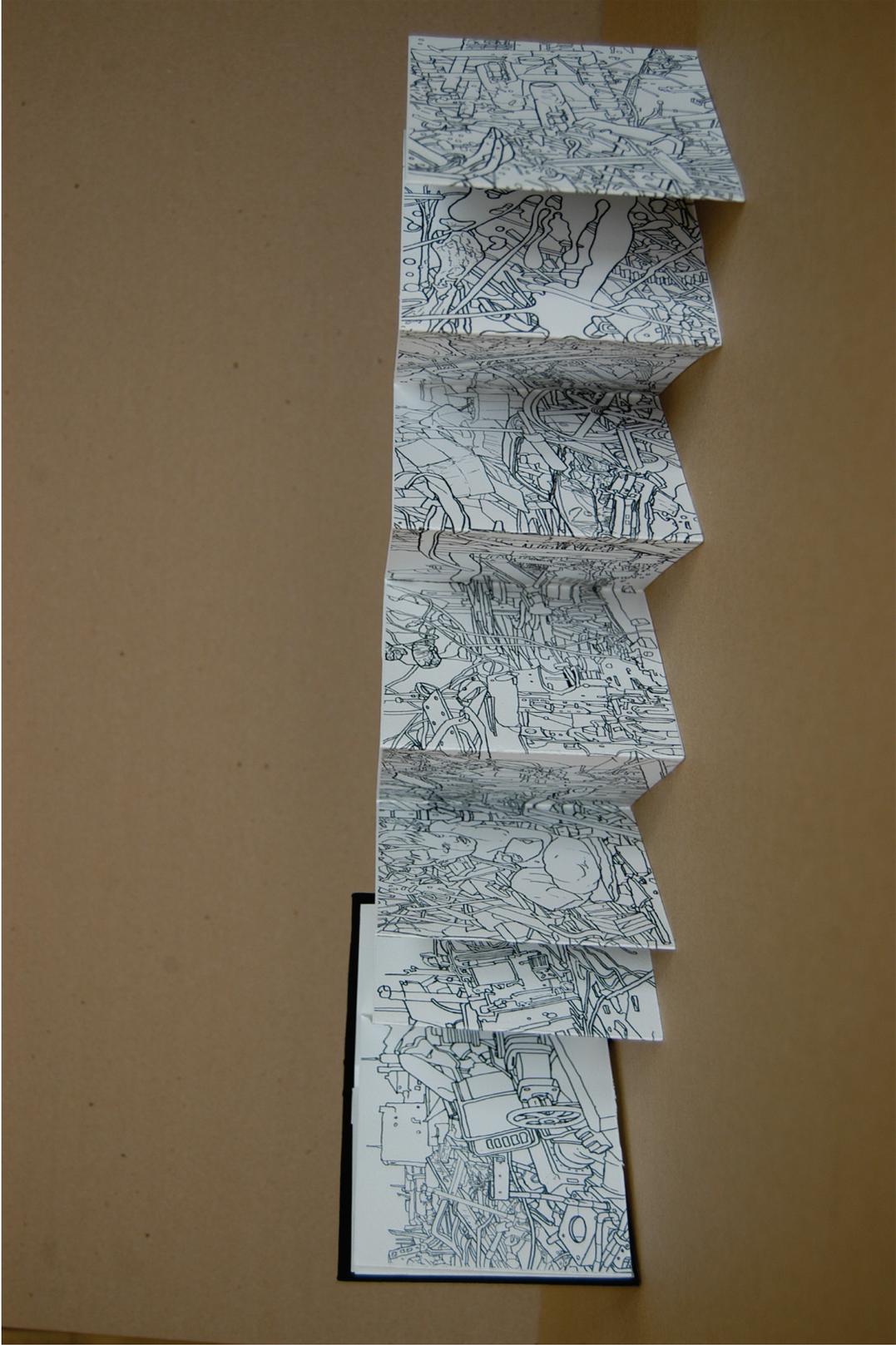


Fig 32 Exporting the Great British Landscape, 2009, Hand made book work

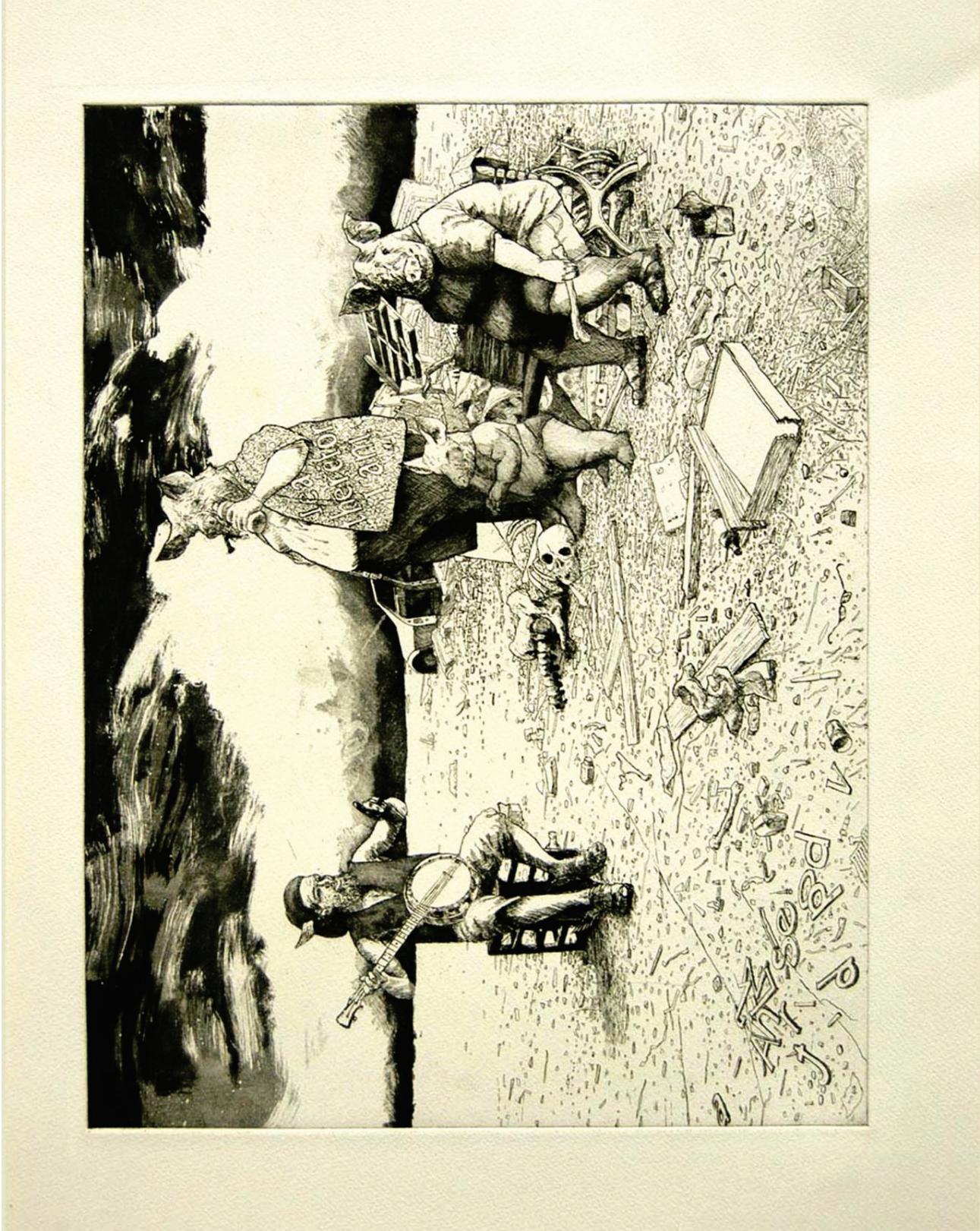


Fig 33 Hermes Explains the Meaning of Life as a Blue Grass Melody, 2010, Etching and



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"Retail Apocalypse, Episode 1"

T. Bonett

Fig 34 *Retail Apocalypse, Episode 1*, 2011, Etching, dry-point and aquatint.



Fig 35 *High Street Graces*, 2012, Etching and Aquatint



Fig 36 *Greenman Study 1*, 2012, Acrylic on paper



Fig 37 *Greenman Study 2*, 2012, Acrylic on paper

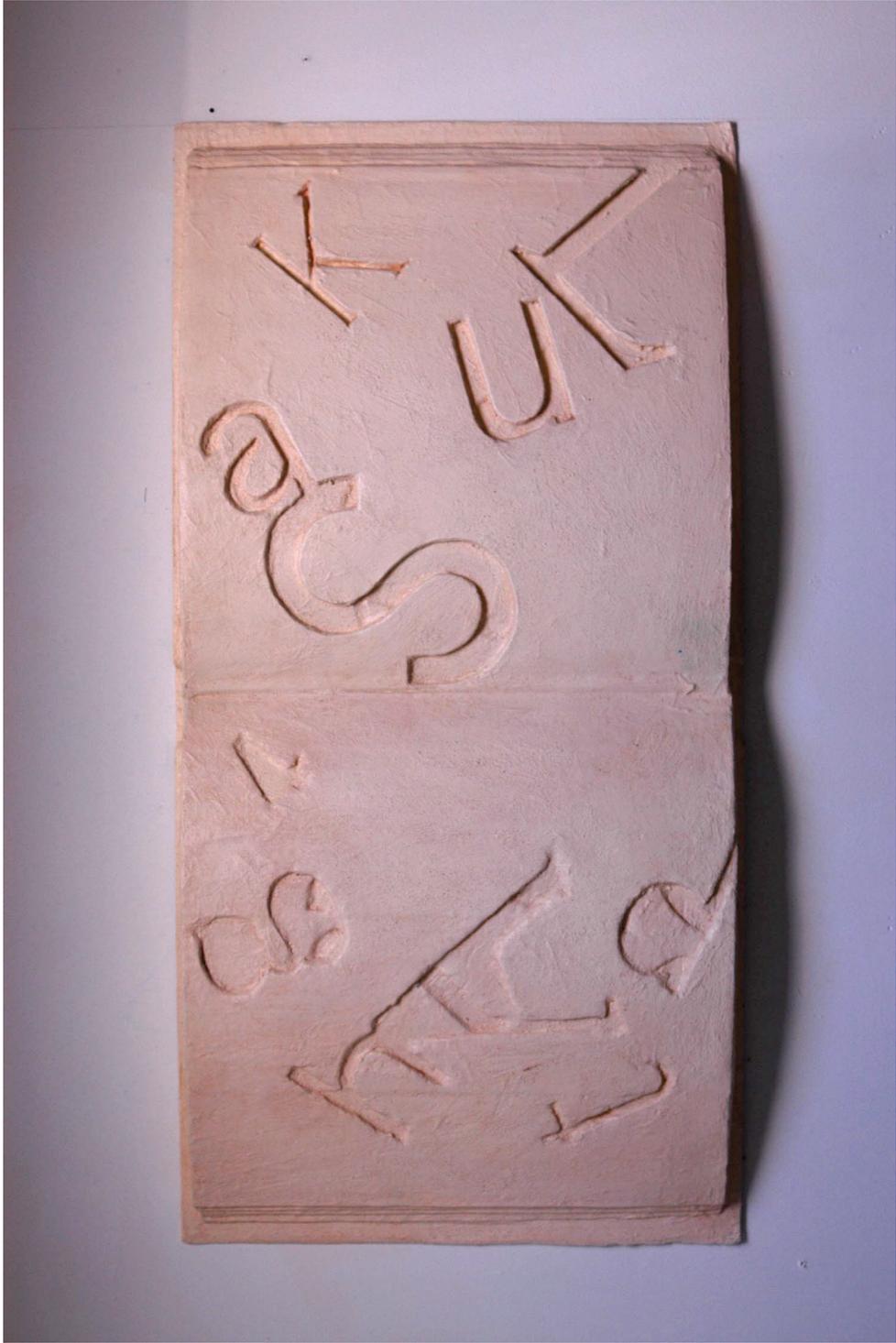


Fig 38 *Untitled*, 2008, mixed media

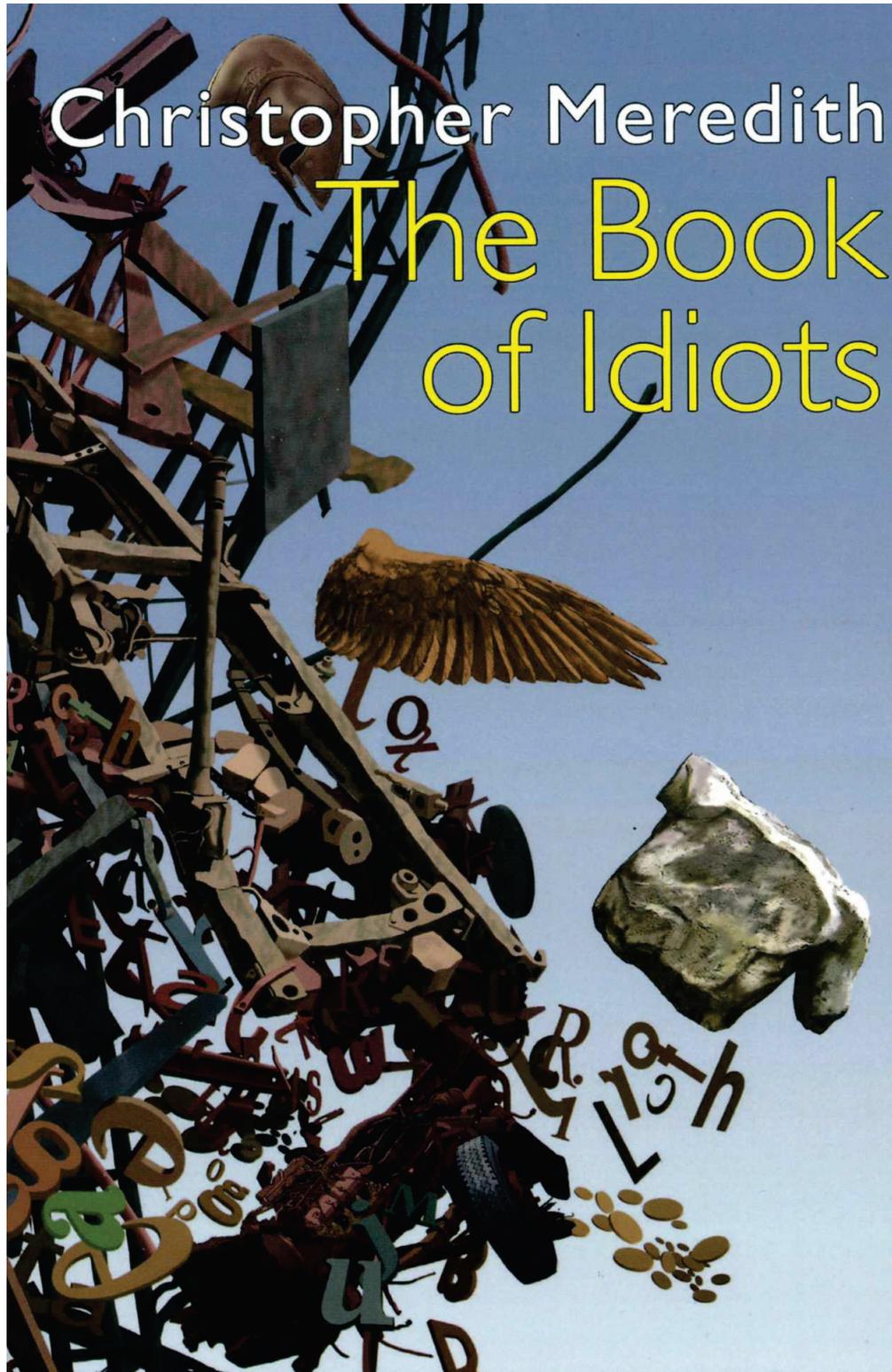


Fig 39 Cover image for 'The Book of Idiots' by Christopher Meredith

Final Exhibition
for the
Professional Doctorate in Fine Art.



Fig 40 Doctorate Exhibition,



Fig 41 'Education, Education, Education', Mixed media



Fig 42 'Modern Times', Acrylic on Canvas



Fig 43. Doctorate Exhibition



Fig 44 The Harbinger, Acrylic on paper



Fig 45 Doctorate Exhibition



Fig 46 Doctorate Exhibition: Etchings

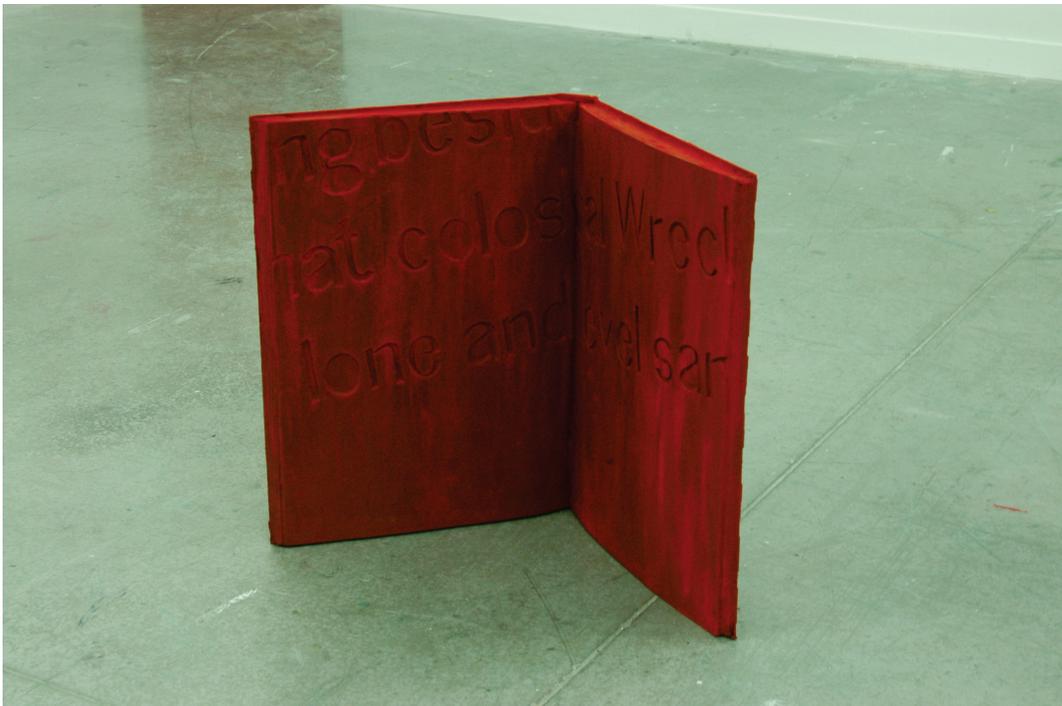


Fig 47 'Red Read' Mixed media and pigment.



Fig 48 Doctorate Exhibition



Fig 49 Doctorate Exhibition



Fig 50 'We All Fall With Icarus" Digital print



Fig 51 'The Gods Themselves', Acrylic on Canvas



Fig 52. Doctorate Exhibition: 'Vanitas', Mixed media



Fig 53 'Vanitas' detail.



Fig 54 'Vanitas' detail



Fig 55 'Greenman', Mixed media