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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School of Art

In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

What Surfaces From One

By

Danielle Johns

Date: May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009

Thesis Committee: Keith Howard, Luvon Sheppard, and Eileen Feeney-Bushnell

CONTENTS:

Introduction: Artistic and philosophical background for the body of work.

Body: Context, Evolution and Description of the body of work.

Conclusion: Summary of Intent.

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## ABSTRACT

Through a body of prints and paintings I have examined the fragility and ephemeral qualities of the human form. The artists Egon Schiele, Kiki Smith and Marlene Dumas are referenced as inspiration for my body of work, as well as Friederich Nietzsche's great work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. This thesis examines and delineates the innate awkwardness of people. The imagery embodies, literally and figuratively, some of the pathos of which we are inevitably a part.

What Surfaces From One is an exploration of the emotive aspects of the human form. I present the figure at a vulnerable moment, in a compromising and often uncomfortable position. In life, people turn away from these awkward moments. My work presents the viewer with the opportunity to reconcile with the uneasiness and vulnerability of human experience. Through a body of prints and paintings I examine the fragility and ephemeral qualities of the human form.

The intent of this thesis was to create a body of work that explores aspects of personal experience that become known through unrequited questions: those that accompany the monotonous pursuit of trying to understand oneself and the choices that are made along the way. It is through introspection that I explore my own responses to memory, moments of transition and my own sense of self.

A sense of the close-guarded side of human nature is conveyed in my work as an invitation to the viewer to see a part of myself. This is offered as catalyst for the viewer to draw upon individual memories and feelings so that the personal may become universal. When recognizable objects are separated from their surroundings, context

evaporates and ambiguity fills the empty space. The viewer then contributes his or her own experience to the work.

I am influenced by the Mannerists and the Expressionists, who provided an artistic background for the development of my figural work and will be referencing Nietzsche's great work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. The human figure has been depicted in all mediums of visual art throughout history. Mannerism is a European art movement and style that developed between 1520 and 1600. It is recognized and defined as a concentration on the human form, often in bizarre and convoluted poses, and with overstated muscular development. The subject matter is deliberately obscure or treated so that it becomes difficult to understand. The Mannerists used color not for descriptive or naturalistic purposes but as a powerful complement to the emotional impact of the figure (Murray, 30). This use of discordant color schemes to enhance the emotional tenor of the figure has been influential on the palette for my own work. Additionally, the exaggeration of certain parts of the body, used by Mannerists such as Parmigianino in his "Madonna of the Long Neck (Fig. 1), is also a strategy that I have come to employ in my own paintings. These visual distortions have brought a strong emotive dynamic to the development of my figurative works.



Fig. 1, Parmigianino, *Madonna with the Long Neck*, oil on panel, 1534.

The Expressionist Movement has also been significant to my work as an artist. As in the Mannerist movement, Expressionism is the tendency of an artist to distort reality for an emotional effect. It is a subjective art form. The Expressionists placed heavy emphasis on communication through emotion. Influenced by the Fauves, Expressionists worked with arbitrary colors as well as jarring compositions. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche played a key role in originating modern expressionism by clarifying and serving as a conduit for previously neglected currents in ancient art.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche proposed his theory of the ancient dualism between two types of aesthetic experience, the Apollonian and the Dionysian; a duality between the plastic "art of sculpture", of lyrical dream-inspiration, identity, order, regularity, and tranquility, and, on the other hand, the non-plastic "art of music", of intoxication, forgetfulness, chaos, and the ecstatic detachment of identity in the collective. Apollonian is defined as measured, ordered and balanced in character as resembling the god Apollo. Dionysian is defined as being related to the god Dionysus and is being of a frenzied or orgiastic character (Webster, 58). According to Nietzsche, both Apollonian and Dionysian elements are present in any work of art (Ross, 162).

The basic characteristics of expressionism are Dionysian: bold colors, and distorted forms-in-dissolution, within two-dimensional images that do not deal with perspective. This influence can be seen in both my prints and my paintings. Distorted

poses and bold, unnatural colors are both characteristic of my work. The Expressionists were directed by their instinct, by the feeling that experiences aroused in them (Dube, 111). This is directly connected to the way in which I work. I often feel estranged to moments that I am in, have been in or can only remember. Through memory, I can recall a color, an expression or a certain feeling and create my work in response.

Nietzsche believed that the primal unity of the Dionysian brings us into trepidation of the suffering that lies at the heart of all life. The Dionysian impulse in human beings is to give free rein to passion and to lose oneself in ecstatic frenzy. According to Nietzsche, we cannot properly appreciate or criticize the Dionysian from within a tradition of rationality because the Dionysian stands outside of rationality.

Nietzsche put forth that the Dionysian tendencies within human beings is the source of our myths, our passions, and our instincts, none of which are bounded by reason. While the civilizing force of the Apollonian is an essential counterbalance—he is firmly against the complete abandonment of reason and civilization—Nietzsche warns that we lose the deepest and richest aspects of our nature if we reject the Dionysian forces within us (Ross, 165).

For Nietzsche, art is not just an exercise of human activity but is rather the highest expression of the human spirit. *The Birth of Tragedy* is well expressed in what is perhaps its most famous line: “it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*.” One of Nietzsche's concerns in *The Birth of Tragedy* is to address the question of the best stance to take toward existence and the world. He criticizes his own age for being overly rationalistic and for assuming that it is best to treat existence



and the world primarily as objects of knowledge. For Nietzsche, this stance makes life meaningless because knowledge and rationality in themselves do nothing to justify existence and the world.

Nietzsche puts forth that life finds meaning only through art. Art, music, and tragedy in particular bring us to a deeper level of experience than philosophy and rationality. Existence and the world become meaningful not as objects of knowledge but as artistic experiences. According to Nietzsche, art does not find a role in the larger context of life, but rather life takes on meaning and significance only as it is expressed in art (Ross, 167).

This philosophical premise is important in my work because I draw upon my life experiences as a source of inspiration. I create works that embody my own feelings and memories in hope that they will relate to other people's experiences as well. I began my current artistic investigation by looking at the artists Egon Schiele, Marlene Dumas, and Kiki Smith who draw upon the idea of the figure as the embodiment of emotion.

Egon Schiele's work is noted for its intensity, and the many self-portraits that he produced. The twisted body shapes and the use of expressive line that characterize Schiele's paintings and drawings mark the artist as an early exponent of Expressionism, although he is still strongly associated and tied to the art nouveau movement (Wilson, 24).

Using temperate and stark handling, Schiele set his figures against empty space, devoid of any pictorial associations. (Dube, 192). His self-portraits embodied a desire to

explore a psychologically driven emotive presentation of the self (Price, 168). He dispensed with classical poses and preferred a style that has often been dismissed as “ugly.”



Fig. 2, Egon Schiele, *Gerti Schiele in the Nude*, 1910, charcoal and watercolor

In his studies of the human form, Schiele focuses on the concentrated power of line and color isolated within the page empty. *Gerti Schiele in the Nude* is a strong example of how Schiele employed these devices in his work (Fig. 2). The empty space around his figures becomes an integral part of the work: its weight and importance balances the subject itself (Price, 401). He favored a vertical composition on a rectangular sheet. The large amount of empty space in my prints and paintings and the strange vertical positions of the figures are directly influenced by Schiele’s preferences.

Schiele created many figure studies using his own body as his model. His elongated, attenuated figures seem to float on the page, in bright red, yellow, green, and violet. These hues that were likely influenced by the French Fauves, and would later

evolve to a more somber palette of colors (Price, 145). He directly confronts reality and reshapes it through the filter of his own vision (Wilson, 18).

Schiele's *Nude Self-Portrait* is an example of the strong use of the stark compositional style and expressive line he employed to create visually disarming work. His face is partially covered by his arm as he looks down towards his torso. His legs are spread and truncated, exposing his bony pelvis, legs and ribs. The body appears emaciated and vulnerable while being presented in a position of self-assurance (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3, Egon Schiele, *Nude Self-Portrait*, Watercolor on paper, 1910.

The flatness of the body that he creates is a device that I use in my own work as well. These works are exercises in Expressionist body-imagery; the inner emotion is manifested through the gestural impact of the exposed, contorted, bony body, in all manner of poses and seen at a variety of different angles (Price, 406). This is shown in his lithograph of 1912, *Self Portrait* (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4, Egon Schiele, *Self-Portrait*, Lithograph, 1912.

Schiele depicted many versions of the self; grimacing, crying out, squinting, red-eyed, anxious, posturing, with a tortured expression, showing inner turmoil, and confident pretense. As varied as they are, these self-depictions are always very emotionally charged. Through these studies we can follow Schiele's process of relentless self-examination (Price, 407). Like Schiele, it is through unyielding introspection that I have come to build my own body of work. I am interested in the aspects of personal experience that become known through unrequited questions: those that accompany the monotonous pursuit of trying to understand oneself and the choices that are made along the way.

Another artist who has influenced my body of work is Marlene Dumas. Like Schiele, she employs the use of the figure on a barren background, but the figure is presented on a much larger scale. Marlene Dumas is a contemporary painter who was born in South Africa and now resides in Amsterdam. Her paintings focus on the emotional aspect of the figure. She does not focus on anatomical proportions or detail in her work, instead she is interested in capturing private grief and exploring the transience

of intimacy (Winzen, 53). These effects are created in part by the large washes of unnatural color that she employs as well as the loose, gestural drawing of the large figures.

In *Young Boys*, Dumas uses flat washes of grays and white to create a strong sense of vulnerability (Fig. 5). The boys are covering their chests with their arms, some are covering their genitals. This evokes a strong sense of vulnerability and unease in the figures. The line of young boys fades out towards the right into a blurred wash of gray.



Fig. 5, Marlene Dumas, *Young Boys*, oil on canvas, 1993.

Dumas has said of her work: “I am dealing with emotions that everyone feels. But I’m always conscious of this tension between knowing that you are making an object, a physical thing, and being aware you are also referring to things (the emotions) that cannot actually be painted. If the painting works, that tension is in there.” (Butler, 147). This is something that I have attempted to create in my body of work. I am dealing with emotions that I believe are universal, that everyone feels at one time or another. I hope to

express these emotions so that the work becomes almost like a mirror. I want the viewer to see not only a part of myself, but a part of themselves too.

In *The Artist as a Painter* Dumas says: “Historically painting was seen as female but the male were the painters, and the female the models. Now the female takes the main role. She paints herself. The model becomes the artist. She creates herself. She is not there to please you. She pleases herself. The question is not ‘Who is she, but, who are you?’ (Dumas, 8). This quote is significant to my work because my intent is to create a feeling in the viewer that they are not only looking at me, but looking at themselves.

Dumas does not draw the figures before she paints them. Instead she paints directly onto the canvas or paper, which creates an immediacy in terms of the handling of the material. Dumas utilizes the space of the canvas as an arena of psychological tension and the face or body of the human form as a container for meaning. (Butler, 44) Dumas takes on suggestive, uncomfortable subject matter and examines it through deeply intimate portraiture. (Van Der Vilst, 84).

Another artistic influence on my work is Kiki Smith. Examining the human condition through the metaphor of the body, in all its strengths and weaknesses, Smith has been exceptionally innovative in the field of figurative sculpture. She is also one of the most accomplished printmakers at work today (Tallman, 210).

Smith is a sculptor and a printmaker whose work with the figure is introspective, beautiful and disturbing. Her work includes many anonymous female figures as well as

self-portraits. She portrays the human body in stark yet poignant forms and treats the female figure with great honesty and vulnerability (Wietman, 11). The posture of her figures often indicate sadness or resignation. They are an expression of both the body and the spirit, and may generate associations with the mortification of the body and the ideation of the ascendant soul as found in the Catholic belief system. They also embody the psychic or emotional injuries that we may each endure at some time in our lives, an idea that I strive to convey in my own work.

Smith turns to female experience in her work and attempts to universalize the female body as generically representative of humanity in a break from the long history of exploitation of women's bodies as tools of erotic aesthetics. (Weitman, 16). In Smith's work, the female body becomes the site of opposition and transgression. Her figures are sexual beings, not erotic objects. Her figures are so deeply introspective that they remain blind to the power they hold to shock. (Posner, 20).

Smith has often remarked that her work is an autobiographical effort to make sense of her life and her place in the world. Her symbolism, though, is indirect and allegorical, evoking mental states rather than making absolute declarations.

Smith's self portraits do not arise from narcissism, in fact she often exaggerates what she considers her physical flaws, turning weakness into an advantage in her work. Whereas she typically intends her figurative sculptures to be anonymous and universal, Smith has often used her own body in her printmaking, restricting experiments in self-portraiture to that medium (Weitman, 13).

Among her most personal works is her print, *Sueño* (1992), that memorializes her

sister Beatrice (Bebe), who died in 1988, one of the many victims of AIDS. Smith has noted that the curled, skinned figure in *Sueño* reminds her of her sister, though its outline is actually traced from the artist's own body.



Fig. 6, Kiki Smith, *Sueño*, etching and aquatint, 1992.

In “Sueno”, Smith is depicted in the fetal position (Fig. 6). Sueno’s abject female figure appears both vulnerable and frightening in it’s dream-like pose (Weitman,18). This vulnerability and unease that Smith portrays is also found in my own work. Schiele, Dumas and Smith all work with the idea that emotion is revealed solely through the isolated human form. Their work has had a great impact on both the concept and technique that I use in my prints and paintings.

The central component of my prints and paintings is the emotive aspect of the human form. Starting with acrylic hard ground etchings I created self-portraiture through line drawings. I utilized acrylic aquatint to create large masses of color that were emotive not only in choice of color but in shape and relation to the figure. This was a first attempt to combine abstract emotive elements with formalist portraiture to create an emotional space within the work.



Through the process of attempting to create an emotional space for the human form to exist in, I began to use the Pastel Intaglio-Type technique. The Pastel Intaglio-Type is created by drawing with pastel on a sheet of one-sided Mylar film, and then exposing the drawing to an ImagOn plate. The result is a similar mark to those that can be created through traditional stone lithography.

I moved away from the self-portrait and began to work with a model. I created life size drawings of the model in positions that suggested the acts of sharing, giving, taking and recoiling. These positions included the model lying down, not facing the viewer, but facing herself. She is in a comfortable position, as if she is lying in a safe place such as her own bed, but her expression and the way in which her figure is rendered suggest unease and vulnerability. The space around the figure is ambiguous, suggesting the potential for her to be surrounded by cloth, bedding, or water.

This series of prints became confusing and ambiguous. They did not clearly reveal the emotive aspect of the human form or the emotional space that I wanted to create. In response to this body of work I realized that the emotional space that I was trying to create was within the figure, not outside of it. The emotional space that I had been searching for and trying to reveal was within myself.

Simultaneously I created a body of oil paintings. The paintings included the figure in an abstract space surrounded by symbolic objects. I used personally meaningful objects such as a wishbone, a peacock, and a bonsai tree to evoke associations with the passage of time, memory and place. The juxtaposition of the objects, the space, and the figure were intended to reveal the emotional aspect of the work but inevitably became too

obvious and literal. I eliminated the objects from the work and began to work only with the figure and the space within which the figure existed, focusing on position, expression, and color. The space in the paintings became progressively more empty and stark.

Through these changes my final body of prints and paintings were resolved, allowing me to focus on the human form, as the embodiment of an emotional space.

I created a body of Pastel Intaglio-Type prints and oil paintings, which convey these ideas. The prints are 32" x 40" self-portraits. The position of the body, expression, treatment of the mark and the composition of the work all lend themselves to the bare emotive quality which I had been searching for. In this work, the figure is starkly located in the center of the composition surrounded by a vast emptiness that focuses the viewer on the human form as the sole entity of feeling.

Through the creation of this body of work I have isolated the process from the imagery. There is no visible plate mark on the paper. This also creates a feeling of isolation and solitude in each print.

The orientation of the prints is disarming in that it is understood that these figures are lying down but they are presented to the viewer vertically, creating an interesting visual dynamic and sense of unease. It also creates flatness along one side of the body and creates a sense that the figure is falling, or suspended. The amount of space in the background also carries this idea. The figures become almost sculptural. The negative space within the figure also becomes very important to the psychology of the figure, which is rendered in a loose and gestural manner.

I also created a body of paintings whose subjects include myself and a friend. Each of these paintings contains a standing or sitting figure that is immersed in a non-objectively rendered space. The edges of the figures blend in and out of the space creating a psychological landscape through the reinforcement of the fluid relationships between time, memory and emotion.

My work allows the viewer to reconcile with uncomfortable moments of weakness, anxiety and vulnerability within the human experience. Through this body of work I have examined the psychology of human frailty and the transient qualities of the human form.

Simultaneously creating prints and paintings has allowed me to resolve problems in each piece through a synthesis of the different processes. The prints become more painterly and the process of creating the prints influences the paintings.



Fig. 7, *A Safe Place (Past, Covers, Place, Love)*,  
Pastel Intaglio-Type, 32"x40"

In *A Safe Place* (Past, Covers, Place, Love) the figure is central and the head is lowered with eyes shut. In the process of creating the print certain areas of the body became lighter in tone and almost completely faded out of the print. This ambiguity of figure and ground creates an interesting visual dynamic by enhancing the impact of the surrounding space on the figure (Fig. 7).



Fig. 8, *Try To Remember Everything*,  
Pastel Intaglio-Type, 32" x 40"

In *Try To Remember Everything* the position of the head is facing down. The figure is not resting but is introspective and physically attempting to cover herself. The position of the figure gives it the appearance of being covered. The drawing of the hands, feet and hair are loose and gestural. Parts of the drawing disappear to allow the viewer to fill in the gaps intellectually. Remnants of the process create scratches and striations in the tonal areas, which upon close inspection adds to the sense of unease and vulnerability (Fig. 8).



Fig. 9, *Things That I Don't Understand*,  
Pastel Intaglio-Type, 32"x40"

In *Things That I Don't Understand*, the figure is looking out and away with her hand at her mouth. It appears that she is biting her fingers or holding her mouth. Worry and tension are expressed in her face and body language. The position of the body again gives it the appearance that it is covered. The hands and feet appear to be loose and repetitive gestural marks, and the negative space between the legs creates a feeling of suspension or that this figure is defying gravity (Fig. 9).



Fig. 10, *I Fear I Have No Voice*,  
Pastel Intaglio-Type, 32"x40"

In *I Fear I Have No Voice* the facial expression is a critical element and indicates sadness, fear and resignation. The body is covered with the leg pulled into its center and held by the hand. The negative space between the legs reveals an angular and gestural ankle, dynamically anchoring the space.

There are dark tonal values throughout the entire body and the artifacts of the process are especially apparent in this print. The darkness of the tone and the cuts and striations add to the particularly dark feeling. The figure's hand is in her mouth—almost like a child, giving the appearance of someone that needs to be held or comforted (Fig. 10).



Fig. 11, *Where Do I End and You Begin?*  
Pastel Intaglio-Type, 32"x40"

*Where Do I Begin and You End?* is the only print in the body of work in which there is direct eye contact between the figure and the viewer. This is important because when viewing all of the prints at once this is the only one that confronts the viewer. It is also one of the darkest prints within the series. The artifacts of the process create striations throughout the entire body. A feeling of strength is expressed in the face that is not apparent in the position of the body (Fig. 11).



Fig. 12, *I Want To Share Meals and Ideas With You,*  
Pastel Intaglio-Type, 32"x40"

In *Take Care of Yourself* the figure stands in a frontal position and stares at the viewer (Fig. 13). It is a confrontational position but her arms are crossed covering her breasts, as if she is cold or uncomfortable in her own skin. Her facial expression is poignant—there is a sense that she is worried, sad, or deeply in thought. The colors are the primary conveyors of the emotion that I am attempting to communicate in this painting. The cool, pale flesh tones with shadows of deep violet, grey and mauve are contrasted by the rosy face with dark grey circles under the eyes.



Fig. 13, *Take Care of Yourself*,  
oil on canvas, 3'x4'

The collarbone, elbows and ankles are all examples of the exaggerated presence of the bones underneath the skin. The warm shadows become entities that stand on their own. The barren background is comprised of light washes and flat areas of color such as grey, light blue and a pale flesh tone that meld in and out of the edges of the body (Fig. 13).





Fig. 14, *Underneath*, oil on canvas, 3'x4'

In *Underneath* the hunched figure, arms covering her breasts, looks away as if she is searching for someone (Fig. 14). The shadows become strong figures in and of themselves, creating balance within the composition and an overall sense of unease. The colors are primarily cool grays and blues and pale cool yellows and flesh tones.



Fig. 15, *I Waited*, oil on canvas, 30" x40"

*I Waited* is an oil painting in which the figure is located in the center of the composition, sitting on a stool. The figure covers herself and the position of the legs is tense, and almost rigid. The colors are discordant, fleshy yet unnatural. The head is cropped at eye level. This is important because it lends itself to the idea that the figure does not wish to be fully viewed but is posing reluctantly. The knees, elbows, hands and feet are roughly painted and exaggerated with strong color (Fig. 15).

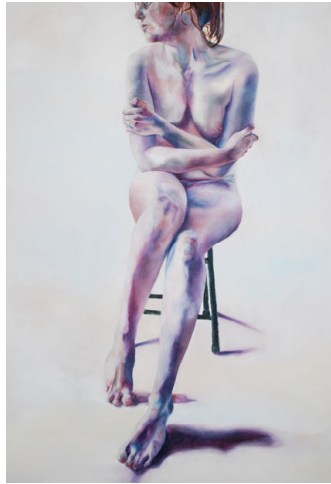


Fig. 16, *Stay With Me Please*, oil on canvas, 30"x40"

*Stay With Me Please* is similar to *I Waited* in terms of the composition and use of color (Fig.16). There are passages of strongly unnatural colors, such as blues, grays and violets fused with natural flesh tones. The result is a synthesis of abstractions and formalism.

I perceive myself as an awkward and anxious individual. Making art has become my refuge allowing me to make sense of the world and my experiences. This investigation of

loneliness, the weight of responsibility and the potential of choice has enabled me to explore the tension between experience and feeling.

My figures express the isolation that all of us bear, in both art and life. They emanate a melancholy originating in a clear-eyed view of the human condition. This work examines and delineates the innate awkwardness of people. The imagery embodies, literally and figuratively, some of the pathos of which we are inevitably a part.

My intent was to create a body of work that evokes bare emotion and experience through the expression of the human form alone. It is through inward reflection that I explore my own responses to memory, moments of transition and a sense of self. I was able to create an autobiographical record of my own feelings and open them up to interpretation by the viewer, in hope that the viewer would form an intimate relationship with the work.

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