

FACING DEFACING

A Formless Approach To Painting



GILLIAN WARDEN

Master of Fine Art (by Coursework) 2012

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Master of Fine Art (by Coursework) P/T 2011–2012

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Cover Image 'Mining' (detail) Oil on board 23.5cm x 32.5cm 2012
This page 'Ballerina' Book cover defacement circa 1968

S U M M A R Y

In this studio-based research project I use abstract painting techniques to generate figurative imagery, landscape and portrait in ways that blur the boundaries between figure, landscape and abstraction. I will experiment with ideas of the 'formless' derived from Bataille to destabilise coherent categories and to vitalise a change in my painting style, methodology and conceptual intent.

B R I E F D E S C R I P T I O N

This project seeks to enact aspects of portraiture that cannot be easily identified as either 'face' or 'portrait'. The function of the formless as an 'operation' to displace fixed or essentialised terms and challenge claims to coherence (Bois and Krauss pp15-31) has been utilised in my research to develop a destabilising approach to portraiture that merges abstract and figurative process and eludes easy narrative answers. Abstract painting techniques are used to blur the boundaries between figure and landscape, and different surface qualities are created to promote a density of experience and multiple possibilities for interpretation. Aspects of human subjectivity are explored at the same time as the boundaries of the human are questioned.

The assessment series is comprised of the diptych painting 'Mined' and a series of small painted 'Mining' details, which elaborate and explore aspects of the larger work. Mixtures of lean and thick paints are used in building surfaces. There are paint pools and colour merges, with some areas partly destroyed, or scraped back to the canvas, and others more transparent and luminous to create a layering of colour and light. The surface works a tension between revealing and concealing. The colour palettes render areas bright and subdued, clean and muddy, warm and cool, banal and complex including high key colours demanding focus and 'ugly' colours linked to qualities of the abject.

Key to the research has been a radical re-imagining of personal methodology. Approaches that have supported this transition include more playfulness in the process of painting, a welcoming of abject qualities in the work as enriching of creative possibility, and explorations of the formless.

KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How can I enact operations of 'the formless' in painting in order to blur the boundaries between figuration and abstraction and thereby challenge categories of human subjectivity?
- How can I experiment with process-as-content in abstract painting techniques in order to facilitate opportunities for operations of the formless?
- How can I combine the figurative with abstraction in a way that is loose and playful, non-hierarchical in order to open the work to ambiguity and different interpretations of meanings?
- How can I develop and combine different qualities of surface such as thick and thin, light and dark, transparent and opaque in ways that keep the work open and breathable while illuminating its history.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- To create a series of paintings that experiments with using the formless as an operation by using abstract painting techniques to blur and destabilise the boundaries between figure and abstraction, and suggest ambiguity in human subjectivity.
- To explore non-hierarchical ways of combining figurative and abstract techniques so that the figurative is not immediately recognizable or suggestive of primary content.
- To explore the use of unfamiliar tools and mediums while experimenting with abstract painting techniques in a way that is loose and playful in order to facilitate being more open to the possibilities of happenstance, and more attentive to the emergence of surprising imagery that can offer new perspectives for my investigations.
- To introduce an element of risk to my methodology, such as the use of paint stripper or an orbital sander, in order to shake up any sense of preciousness, sentimentality or attachment to the work and invite a more non-hierarchical, co-creative approach to making art.
- To work on the canvas in the horizontal plane and build surfaces through paint pools and colour merges in order to explore a formless operation of 'horizontal', to open the physicality of my painting process, and to offer multiple or fragmented perspectives to the viewer.
- To explore ways to reveal a surface that is transparent and luminous in order to capture layers of colour and light that suggest moods and atmospheres, other times and other worlds.
- To include works where light is dispersed to act on all sides in order to elude any fixing of perspective and open multiple points of view.
- To include part-destruction of the painted surface in order to enhance degenerative and abject qualities, and to explore operations of entropy by creating uncertainty between figure and ground and thereby creating uncertainty regarding coherent subjectivity.
- To paint a series of works simultaneously in order to open possibilities for how the series can speak as a whole, to bypass perfectionist tendencies to overwork, and to encourage playfulness in my painting practice.

R A T I O N A L E

My use of the formless is referenced particularly from the way in which Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss have engaged with the work of Bataille to "put the formless to work" (p18) and open new ways of reading works of modern art. Bois and Krauss argue an understanding the formless as not a stable motif but a "term allowing one to operate a de-classification", not an opposition of form to content, but an operation that displaces both of those terms, not a theme, substance or concept but an active process of uprooting and rootlessness, one that does not locate the subject anywhere or seek to invest it with meaning, but goes beyond, which is "more significant than meaning" (pp15-21). It is a context where categories become porous, and multiple locations are possible.

In this studio-based research project I also have been 'putting the formless to work', by using it as an active process to open new ways of making and conceiving my painting. Practices of destabilisation have operated as a guide to facing/defacing my 20 years of figurative painting for a commercial market, and the deep frustration and impasse which motivated my MFA research.

A (brutal) description might be that my paintings, inhabited by dreamlike character/creatures, employed sentimental imagery and were easily digestible, verging on the kitsch. They were overworked, sometimes claustrophobic in effect, with densely packed surfaces built up through layers of concealment that were often resolved through caricature and cliché. (Figure 1 page 7)

The aims and objectives outlined above articulate a conceptual approach to my work that would have been unimaginable in the early stages of my research. My research is facilitating a transition process, shifting my painting practice from creating figurative works that seek to resolve a coherent (if abjectly defined) subject, to creating formless works that merge abstract and figurative techniques and leave the nature of subjectivity ambiguous and open-ended. In this way my studio-based research can be understood as an emergent methodology (Barrett) growing out of a self-reflexive engagement with new ideas and fields of enquiry and enabling materialising practices (ibid).

Using operations of the formless as a way to approach my work is freeing it from perfectionist drives to figurative resolutions and offering new locations and permissions for abstract experimentation. Explorations within a formless structure can support the co-existence and discernment of different approaches, traditions and techniques, so that I do not need to adhere to the logic of any one approach but can freely appropriate what is useful for my purpose. It can dissolve cliché, open passages through and beyond kitsch, and offer excitement to the discomfort of the abject, the raw, and the unfinished.

While the formless is an "ensemble of operations" (p24), there are four such operations that Bois and Krauss elaborate: horizontality, base materialism, pulse and entropy. I have attempted to engage with these operations in my studio research, with particular interest in the effects of entropy and horizontality. I am attracted to the way in which bringing horizontality to the work, both as a way of seeing and a plane to work in, is non-hierarchical and re-configuring of the role of the painter-subject in the painting process. Gravity, surface and paint become equal makers with the painter. The capacity to work on the painting from all sides means that no perspective needs to dominate; no meaning needs to be fixed. As a lover of paint, this is a deeply satisfying experience that frees new meeting places for ideas, explorations and play (Figure 6 page 7).

Base materialism, (Figure 2 page 7) which for Bataille is the "material of which we have no idea, which can make no sense" (p29) is approached in my research through a willingness to include the colours of the 'ugly', or to scrape the surface back to squashed remnants underfoot, so to speak, in the canvas. I am interested to include all this, as part of the subject we face everywhere.

Pulsation, (Figure 3 page 7) an "endless beat" that "punctures" the possibility of a disembodied subject (p32) is for Bois and Krauss an operation of the formless that agitates and fragments the unified visual field. Pulsation has been explored in my research through colour, surface densities and texture, combining areas of activity and quiet within the works, and also through exploring movement and links between the works.

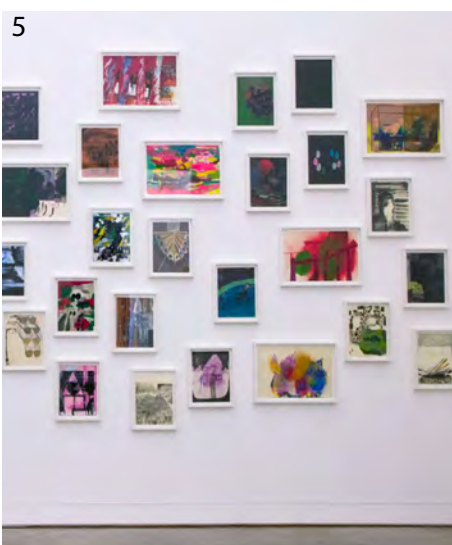
Entropy, (Figures 4 page 7) the "constant and irreversible degradation of energy...that leads to a continually increasing state of disorder and non-differentiation" (p34) opens possibilities for portraits where the boundary conditions are breaking down. We can look at ourselves from any point in space, we can lose the divisions between ourselves and the environment that surrounds us, we can see ourselves existing as decomposition. I investigate this through blurring the boundaries between figure and ground, and in the way the assessment series merges aspects and details of its title portrait, so that there are no singular coherent portraits, but an "ensemble of operations" (p24) of the one, simultaneously multiple formless portrait.

An important element in the transition of my painting practice has been a shift in my relationship to the qualities of the abject. Following Kristeva, the abject is that which must be excluded to achieve a coherent subject (Foster-a 179). These can be aspects of the body or nature that defy clear boundaries, such as entrails, excrement, compost or decay. It can also be emotions that are excluded from the 'socially acceptable' such as trauma, vulnerability, melancholia, loss or rage. The abject functions as a source of fear to projects of containment and certainty, since it undermines their very possibility. As a liminal category, neither subject nor object, it is "charged with an intense ambivalence" (Foster-b 12)

Qualities of the abject have long been present in my work, however while an ideal of 'beauty' remained as an operating imperative for 'resolution' of a work, what I found 'ugly' was refused, concealed or painted over in order to achieve 'beauty'. In the same way that the abject can never be successfully expelled, the abject permeated my paintings, in the overworked and deadened surface of concealment and the muddying of colours that concealment caused. Welcoming the abject has provided more options to build and reveal surface, more passages and pathways to other worlds within a painting and within the series as a whole, more opportunities to find completion moments in the raw, unfinished and indeterminant, and contributes to the understanding of ambiguous subjectivity that I wish to communicate.

OUTCOMES

For assessment the diptych painting 'Mined' is located within a non-hierarchically organised series of its 'Mining' details. The series emerged from studio-based research engaging with the research questions outlined above, using combinations of abstract and figurative techniques.



- 1 Figurative work: Gillian Warden 'Skidaddle' Oil on canvas 92cm x 92cm 2010
- 2 Base Materialism: Anthony Pontius 'Untitled' mixed media on Masonite 30cm x 30cm 2008
- 3 Pulsation: Adrienne Gaha 'Purple Foeal' Oil on canvas 89cm x 116cm 2009
- 4 Entropy: Phoebe Unwin 'Beach Portrait' Oil on linen 61cm x 51cm 2008
- 5 Simultaneous: Phoebe Unwin 'The Grand and Common place' mixed media on paper 2008
- 6 Horizontality: Dale Frank 'Transient Ischaemic Attack Painting: There are no female Leprechauns: Which way does a compass point in Space? Fly Spray' Varnish on linen 200cm x 200cm 2005

METHODOLOGY

PROJECT ONE Experimenting with abstract process as content

My starting point was an attempt to abandon the figurative and instead explore abstract techniques, using unfamiliar grounds, paint mediums, colours, tools and scale to invite a sense of play. My approach was inspired by the work of Melbourne artist Anne Hastie. I was particularly interested in her compositions, and the elusive tensions between revealing and concealing.



'Abstract experiment' Oil on canvas board 46cm x 51cm 2011

Anne Hastie 'Trails' Oil on board 30cm x 40cm 2007

I worked on four small-scale canvases simultaneously, using rubber tipped brushes and exploring transparent colours and glazes. Base coats of haphazard colours and shapes were applied and layers then built up over time and sessions. I painted in the white linear structures, applied transparent colour glazes over the top, scraped back to reveal previous layers and then painted out the negative shapes.

I found that I was unable to resolve the abstract experiments in ways that satisfied me. Process-as-content did not seem enough, and I did not know what to do. Through frustration I sought a figure in the paintwork, and switched to known painting methods and mediums, developing a figurative image on the canvas and completely covering the abstract experiments.

NOTE In later stages of my research, once I had decided to explore operations of the formless, I was able to return to this work and include it in conversations with portraiture.



'Abstract experiment' collapses into figuration. Oil on canvas board 46cm x 51cm first semester 2011



'The Galah in the Boat'

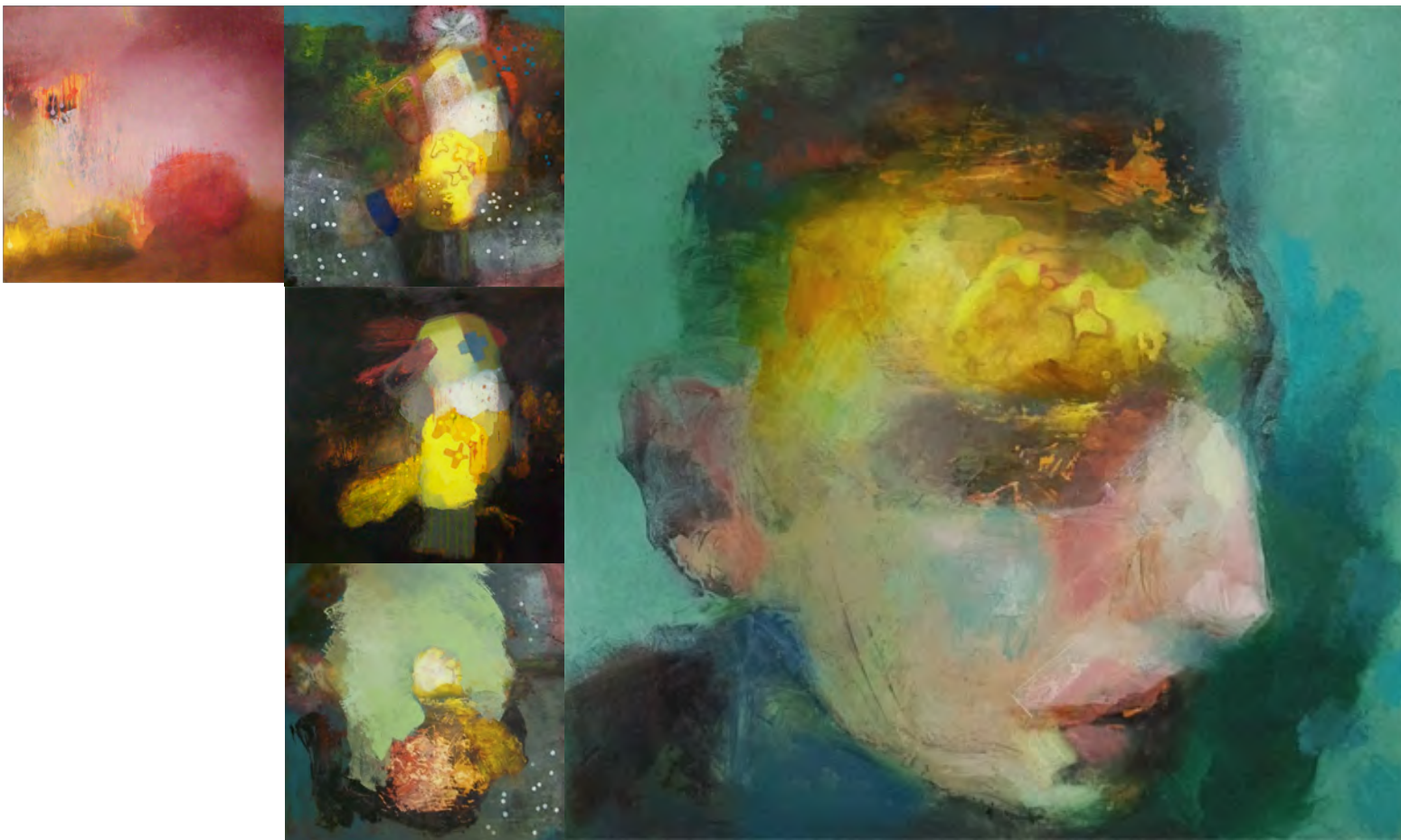
PROJECT TWO

Challenging the criteria for assessing a finished work

An earlier unresolved abstract experiment on canvas was used as the basis for a new painting. Paint stripper was applied to peel back old surfaces and reveal previous layers, forming unexpected shapes and marks, which I observed/interpreted in developing an unfolding narrative and composition of a man 'lost in his own world' with downcast eyes suggesting a brooding or dreamlike state. To promote this narrative, opaque colours suggesting the external world were juxtaposed with transparent colours suggesting an internal world.

I was interested in challenging my assessment of a finished work and avoiding habitual methods of overworking, and so kept in the painting old and new areas of abstraction I was uncomfortable with. This engaged the viewer with interesting areas, kept the painting open, and provided an opportunity to reveal its past and direct its future.

NOTE this painting continued to develop and is part of the assessment series. My ideas around narrative and the boundaries of internal/external have changed in the process of Studio based research.



Documenting 'Mined' Oil and mixed media on canvas 120cm x 120cm 2009-2011

PROJECT THREE Changing the pathways that lead into making; approaching painting as visual and intellectual ground for mining unconscious imagery

Changing to a smaller, varied scale of work and working simultaneously was an attempt to free up new approaches in style and technique and bypass the intensities of individual figurative works. I experimented with the Surrealist technique of Decalcomania and also with artist Anthony Pontius' technique of using mediums as grounds (gesso, ink, watercolours, enamel). Working on the horizontal plane allows the surface to build through pooling and merging and increases the happenstance of emerging imagery. Working this way, I was interested in Jung's ideas of the collective unconscious as 'the creative source of all that evolves into the conscious mind and the total personality of each individual' (Johnson 7). I looked for emerging imagery and resisted developing obvious figurations and narratives, or over working the surface.

Working in this way to open pathways was a welcome relief, however I was not sure what I could do to 'complete' these works. NOTE many of these early works were later used as part of a continuing simultaneous working practice in developing the assessment series.

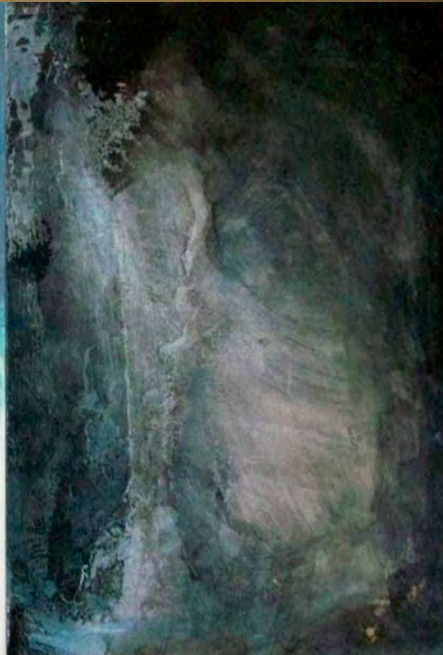
Brunswick Studio: Experimenting with scale and media 2011



Anthony Pontius
Studio 2008

'Experiments' Mixed-media on small boards, generally 25cm x 30cm 2011





'Experiments' Mixed-media on small boards, generally 25cm x 30cm 2011

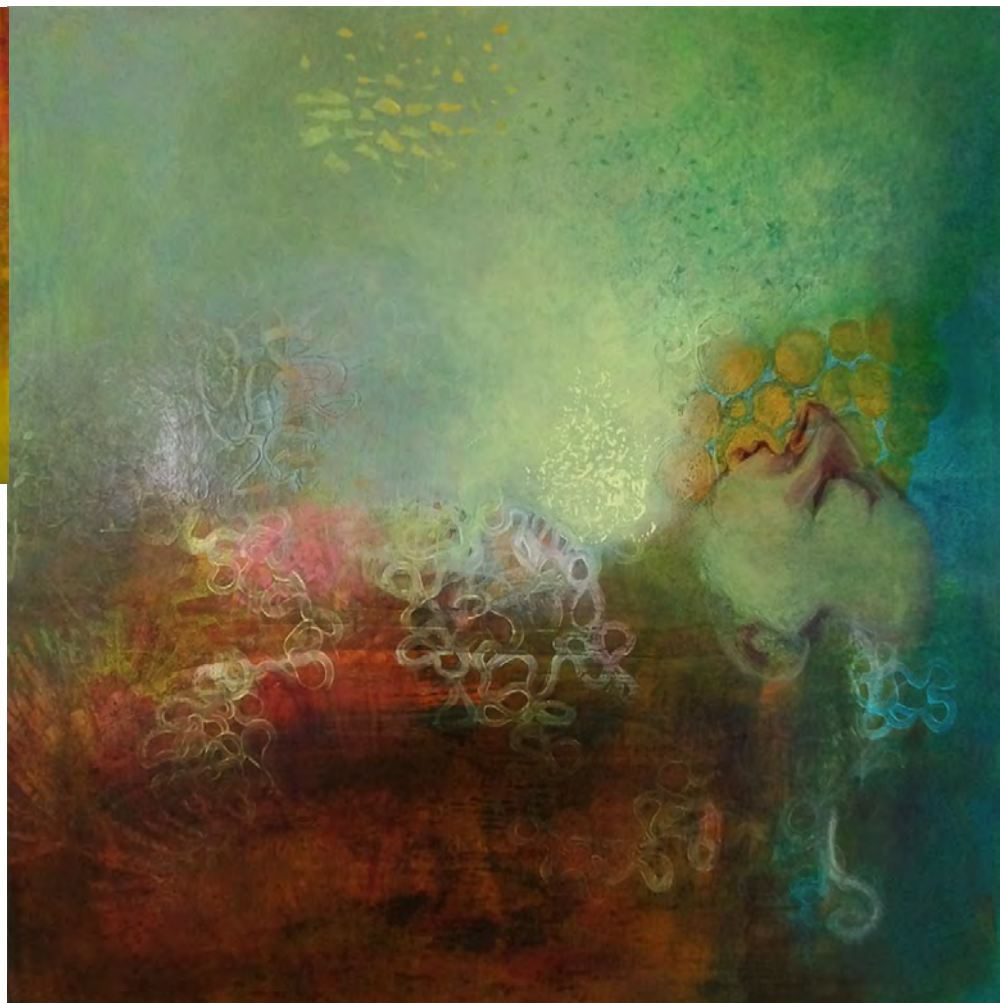
PROJECT FOUR Testing a changing relationship by engaging new ideas for thinking about and approaching the figure

I painted over three abstract experiments to exploit the materiality of the surface, engaging with remnants of the abstract painting as forms suggesting meaning, which could be interpreted as memory images and motifs from the unconscious slipping through. I intensified these possibilities using colour and surface, and expanded the emergent imagery using resource material to support figurative expression, pose and gesture. Imagery was revealed and concealed, and I consciously decided to leave areas that might be useful to the viewer, even if they jarred my own imperatives for resolution. I again sought to refrain from overworking the paintings by accepting and evaluating outcomes and completion moments.

Figurative painting as an ongoing interest in my work was affirmed in this project. I recognised that a new thinking vocabulary was supporting the painting process and shifting my relationship to the work.



'Abstract experiment' from semester 1 2011



'Twilight' Oil on Canvas 92cm x 92cm 2011

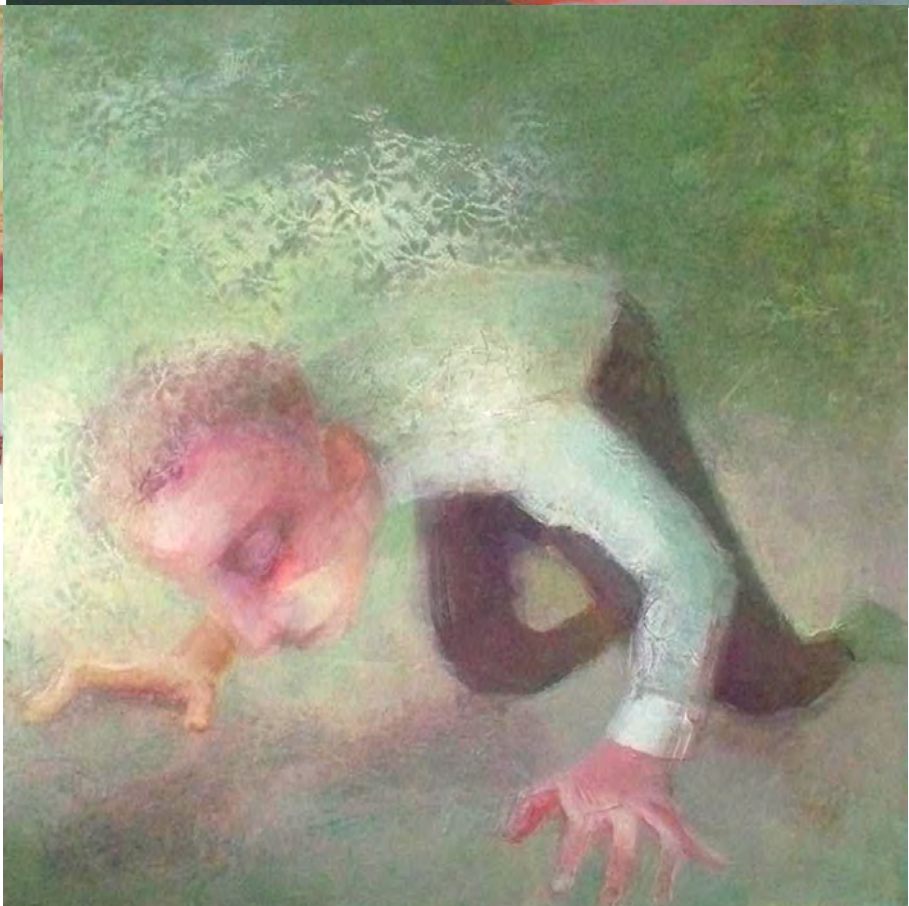
'What happened to Julia' Oil on Canvas 92cm x 92cm 2011



'Abstract experiment' from semester 1 2011



'Abstract experiment' from semester 1 2011



'Boy' Oil on Canvas, 92cm x 92cm 2011

PROJECT FIVE

Exploring abstraction as a pathway from the unconscious to enable conscious development of psychological imagery

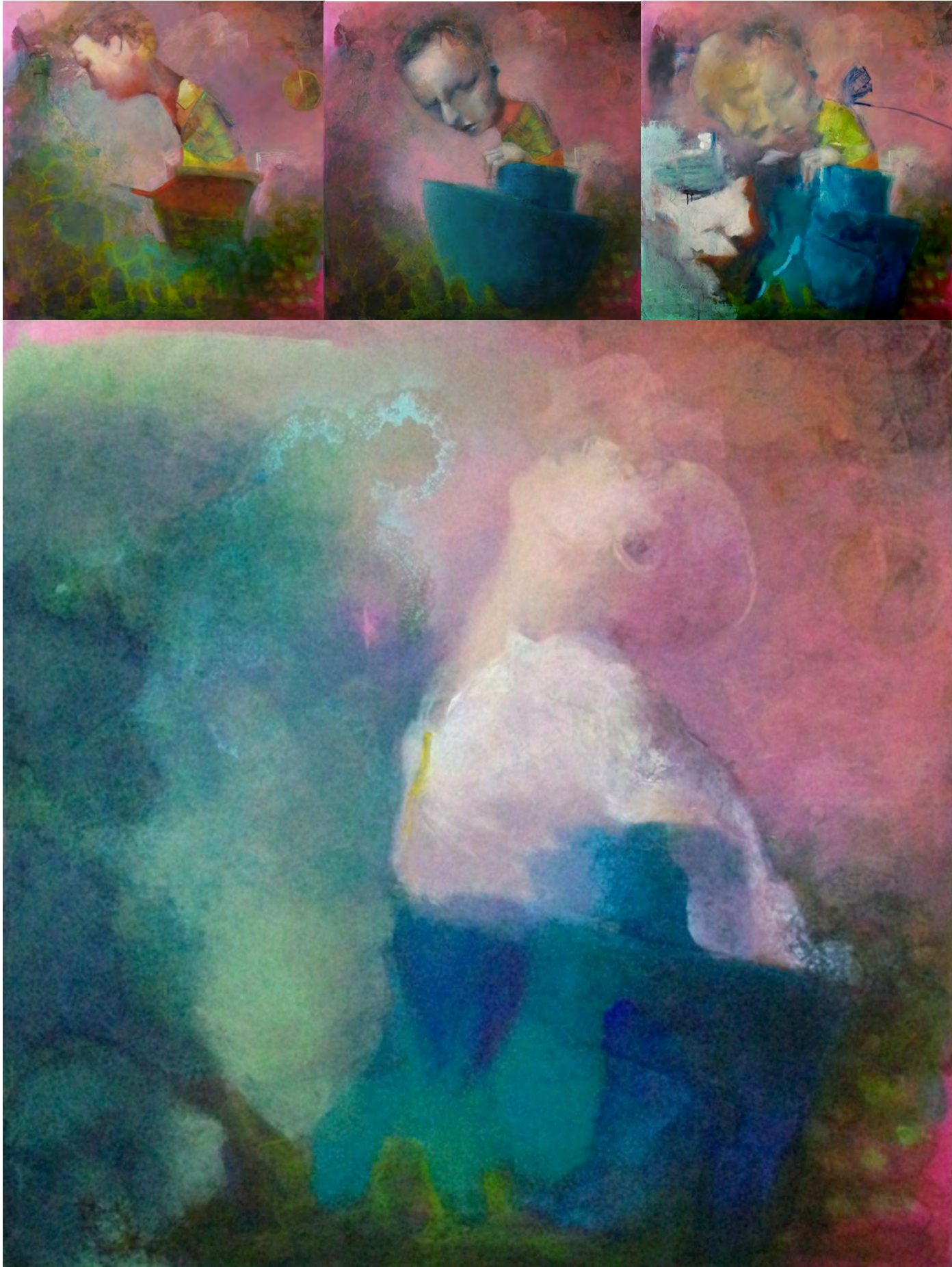
I selected two blank canvases of 120cm x 120cm and worked on them in the horizontal plane, simultaneously, using abstract techniques with the intention of intuiting imagery from the unconscious (following Jung, see Johnson p29) via paint pools, merging colours, expressionistic random marks and drawings. I observed emerging allegorical, lyrical and archetypal (ibid) imagery and began to develop it.

I began to concentrate on painting #2 using reference material to develop and support the figure's anatomical features, scale and proportion. I chose to develop elements of Jung's description of the uncanny that I recognised as a recurring theme in my figurative character creations, where something can be familiar and yet strange, can attract and yet repulse, can be ugly and yet beautiful, can inspire feelings of ambivalence at the same time as existing with deep and timeless certainty.

In my endeavour to achieve a resolution that was 'beautiful', the work became trapped in a cycle of overworking. Colours muddled as the layers built until at last I left them, ugly and unresolved to consider completion moments. I questioned my tendency towards an illustrative and Pop Surrealist style and realised that a lack of formal skills was contributing to the overworking. I began to question whether Jungian ideas and psychological imagery were of creative service, given how claustrophobic the process had become. The need to understand aspects and ambiguities of space, of colour and of anatomical accuracy was identified.

Documenting Painting# 2 'Untitled' Oil on canvas 120cm x 120cm 2011







PROJECT 6 An enquiry into the relationship between scale, surface materiality and image

Given that faces have been a recurring theme in the figures emerging in my paintings I decided to make this my primary source of content exploration in 2012.

In many respects the painting 'Rock' was a failure. I used a new oil based primer to support the use of Piñata glass inks but the slick new surface was slippery, I found the mid scale of the canvas limiting of expressionistic potential, and the extreme rapidity of the ink's drying time stifling and distracting. However, attention to greater anatomical accuracy prevented caricature.



'Rock' (+2 documenting images)
Oil, Ink and Plastic bag imprint on Canvas 50cm x 40cm 2012

'What happened to Julia' Oil on Canvas 92cm x 92cm 2012

PROJECT 7

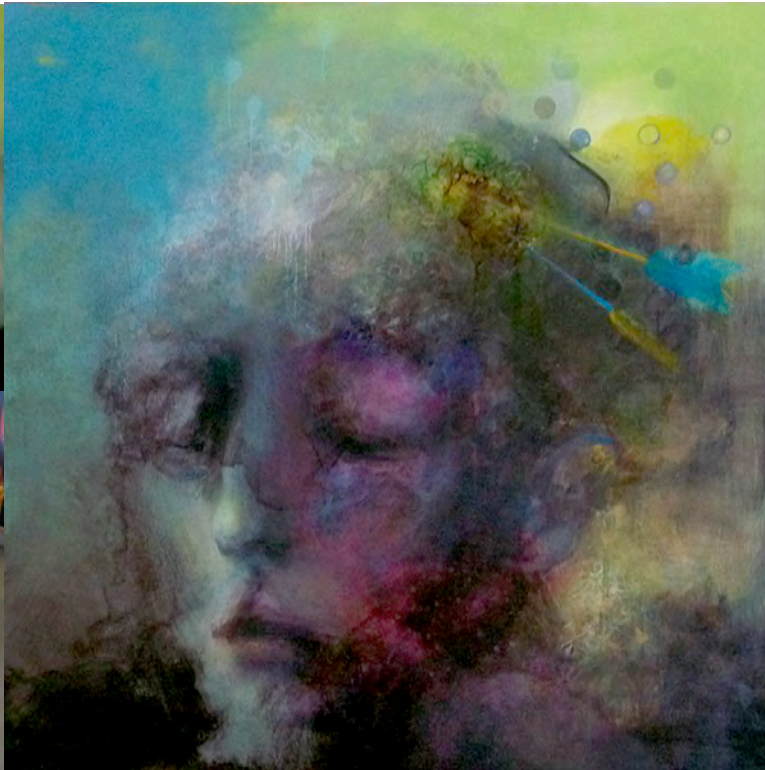
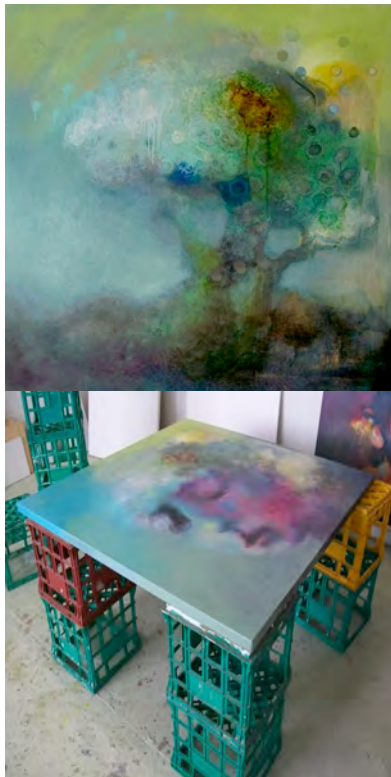
Experimenting with portraiture as a form of psychological landscape

I used an existing 120cm x 120cm canvas from Project 5 ('Mudtree') as the basis to develop a figurative portrait using the interplay of abstract and figurative technique. 'Mud Tree' had areas of exquisite paintwork, but overall, the object was clichéd. I decided to shift the 'feeling' of the tree to a portrait. I worked the canvas in a horizontal position, this awkward physical perspective being an "axis of variance" (Krauss 93) to help subvert pre-conceived outcomes. Looking to the work of Paul Ruiz for inspiration, I used the transparent and dynamic colours of glass inks and paint to render a large face, leaving remnants of the tree as a palimpsest of time, energy and intense, abject emotion.

I presented the painting for group tutorial, and was asked whether the painting was kitsch, or was referring to kitsch. The tutorial marks a seminal moment for me in terms of facing the kitsch (that is, the sentimental, easily digested and commodified) in my paintings.

Further reading, particularly Bois and Krauss in relation to the formless and Foster in relation to Cindy Sherman, offered groundwork for a clearer conceptual direction. I reworked the painting using a transparent glaze of Payne's Grey Violet, subduing the intense, garish, kitsch pink, altering the face, changing the gender, undermining any sweetness and introducing disturbing areas of heavy shadow. The painting began to feel real, open and raw, with mood and atmosphere invoking deeply embodied response. It was no longer a clichéd idea of what abject looks like.

Paul Ruiz (right) 'Ausencia' Oil on linen 31cm x 26cm 2005



'Untitled' work in progress' Oil on canvas 120cm x 120cm 2012

MAJOR PROJECT B Eluding definition through a repertoire of abstraction, portraiture and landscape

My initiating interest for the assessment paintings was to create a series of human faces, using the function of the formless to mobilise a de-stabilising approach to portraiture. I wanted to merge abstract and figurative process to displace oppositional categories of 'portrait' or 'landscape' and to challenge coherent or easy narrative answers.

In the studio, the entirety of my research to date became available as experimental possibility. I selected two large scale works of faces ('Mined' from Project 2 and 'Untitled work in progress' of Project 7) to place in the working area of my Brunswick studio, gathered the small scale abstract experiments on ply for inspiration and resource, and prepared a number of new small scale boards.

Grounds on the new (small) works were prepared using layers of gesso as a base, sometimes tinted with coloured ink or squashed together wet on wet then pulled apart to create surprising textures. Layers of ink, gouache, enamel and oil were applied on random boards. Enigmatic shapes, patterns and colour grew layer by layer.

All paintings were worked on simultaneously, comingling mediums, styles, colour mixes and axis to elude hierarchies, preciousness and overworking. I experimented with options for 'wild light' using luminous glass inks, which introduce intense colours that appear to glow in the dark, contributing to ambiguity by existing independently of any unifying light source¹.

My experiments with disintegration and fragmentation of sections of existing imagery saw chunks of surface gouged away using paint stripper and an orbital sander. The shifting surface rendered sections unrecognisable against previous iterations. The process offered no possibility of 'turning back'.

In the context of my interest in the formless, the face from Project 7 again seemed clichéd. As I had done with 'Mined' in semester one, I disrupted the image by defacing it using paint stripper, with the canvas in the horizontal plane, thus forcing a radical redirection. The figure-ground relationship became inverted with scraped patches from the surface revealing the canvas weave underneath. An act that I had resorted to through frustration and rage in the earlier work became in this later work a conscious strategy for creating 'holes of existential uncertainty' (Perry 234) between figure and ground.² I then returned to the easel, rotated the canvas by 90 degrees, and used a projector to compose a realist figure back into the painting.

I continued to work with the series as a whole, moving between paintings over an extended period of time. 'Mined' remained relatively unchanged, and began to function as formless anchor in opening possibilities for the emergence of the other works and the relationship between them.

¹ 'Wild light' is discussed by Krauss and also Foster, in relation to the work of Cindy Sherman as an operation of the formless.

² This function was first noted in relation to 'Mined' by fellow student Aaron McMurray during group tutorial.

In 'Mined' the merging, opaque pastel pinks and greens of the skin tones deny the viewer access to both physical and metaphysical layers. Co-existing with this soft focus is the high-key definition of the figure's mind, depicted by an area of saturated yellow and orange painted over and under thick black shapes. Focus is directed to this area, which creates abstract passageways of inner thoughts made visible and a story unfolding. Functioning as a portal, the area opens to conversations with the smaller works. I conceptualised the small works as offering vignettes or possible details of a much larger narrative, working to obscure definitions by offering the potential for imagery rather than its resolution. Working in this way raised questions about the role of the figure in Project 7. It appeared persistently contrived, and after attempts at merging it through soft line definition and palette, I again painted it out. What was left, this time, was an essence, a sense of resonance, a 'constructing of felt experience' (Trimming 296).

CONCLUDING NOTES My enduring interest through this research has been the opening of my practice. In reflecting on changes in my methodology over the duration of the course, it is interesting to note that clarifying my conceptual approach and overall project has enabled a much more sustained quality of spontaneity and play than my earlier, general objective to 'be playful and allow paint to be process'. Using the formless as an organising principle has taken care of my earlier concerns to avoid kitsch, cliché and caricature in my work. Similarly, the discomfort I felt in attempting to use Jungian ideas to help structure my work process, particularly in relation to the unconscious and the uncanny, has been put to rest. A formless approach makes these unnecessary to my project, and has proved to generate more interesting work.

My interest in including the figurative as part of my work continues, but prioritizing an exploration of ways I can enact operations of the formless has meant that I no longer feel trapped in an imperative to figurative resolution. I feel a comfortable sense of creative adventure in sustaining porosity between categories, and including the figurative however, whenever, I want to. I have discovered a more confident curiosity in working with the unknown, and in welcoming the viewer into its mysteries.

Documenting Oil and Image projection on canvas 120cm x 120cm 2012





'Mined' (Diptych) Oil, Ink and Enamel on canvas 120cm x 120cm each 2012



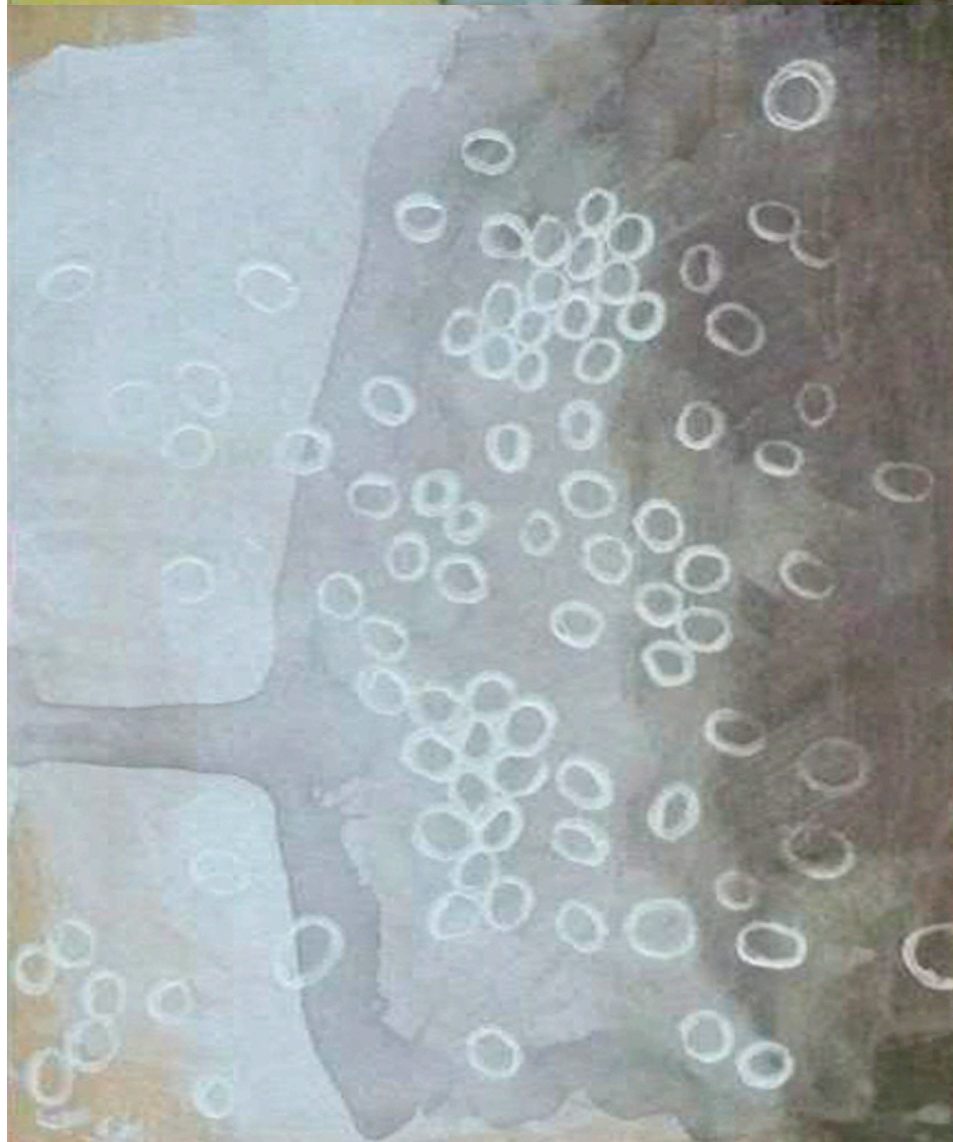
'Mined' (Diptych) Oil, Ink and Enamel on canvas 120cm x 120cm each 2012



Brunswick Studio October 2012
 'Mining' Oil, Ink and Enamel on boards of varying size 2012



'Mining' Gesso, Ink and Oil on board 28.5cm x 24cm 2012





'Mining' Gesso, Ink, Enamel and Oil on board 28.5cm x 29.5cm 2012

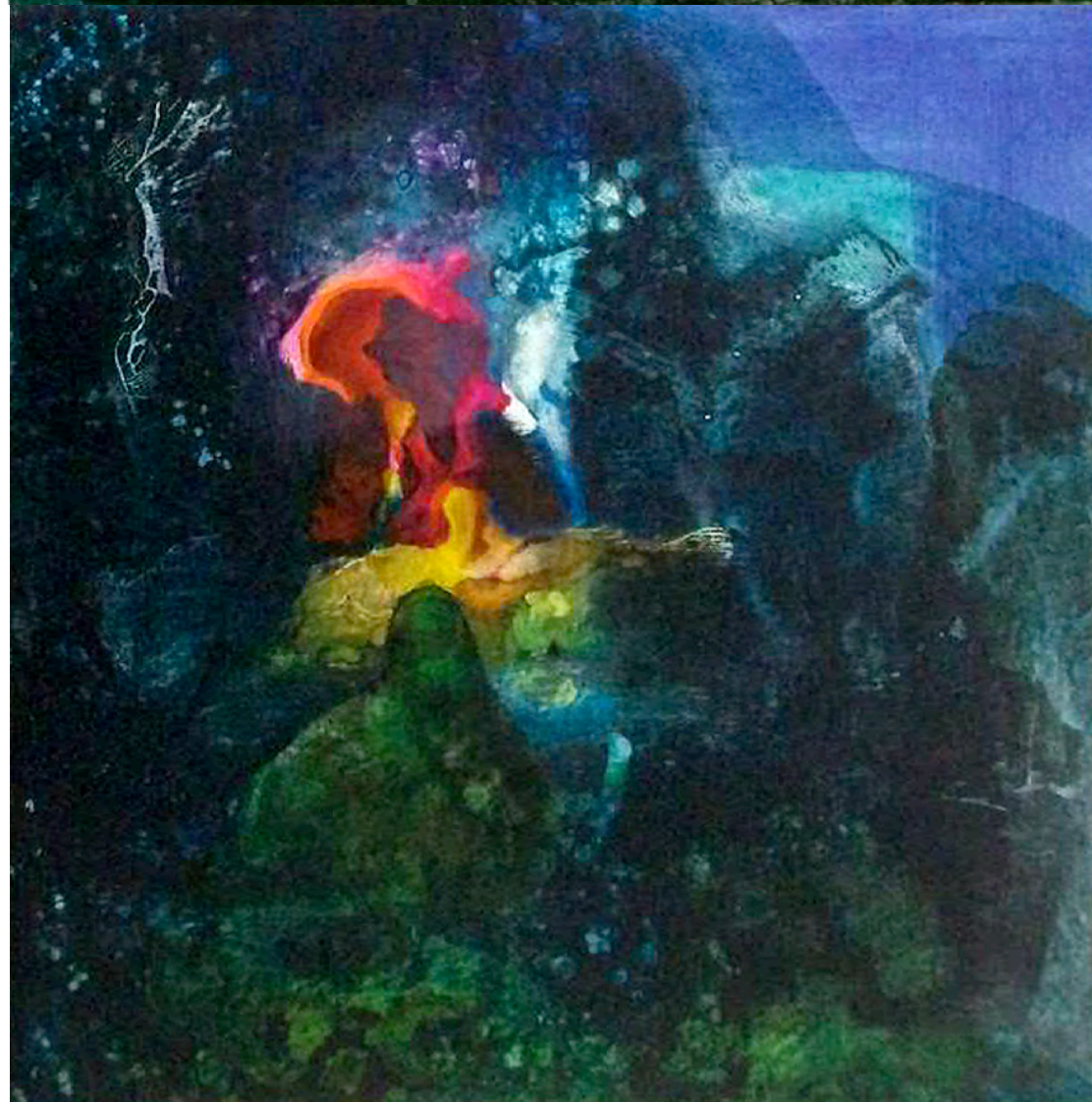


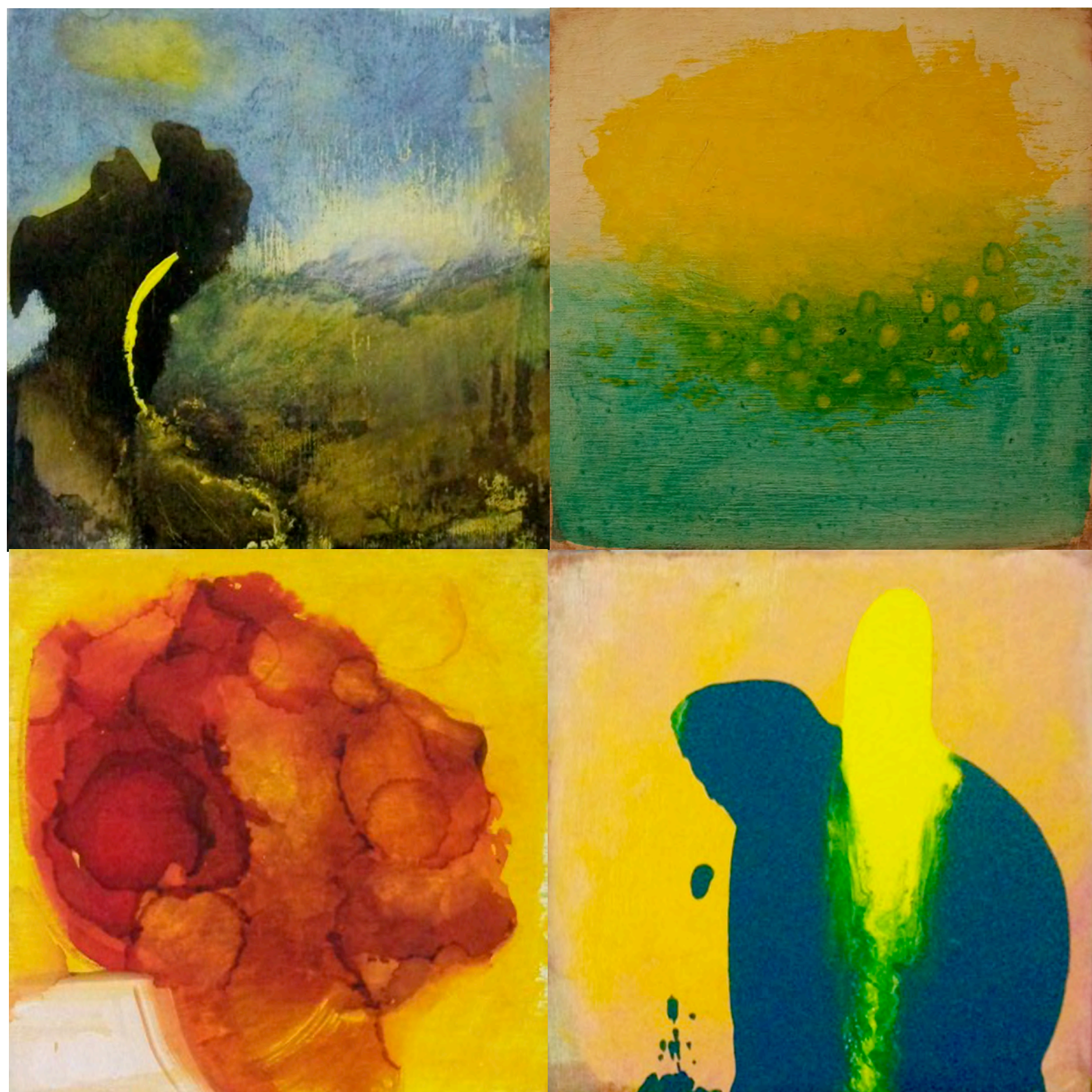
'Mining' Oil, Ink and Enamel on board 32.5cm x 23cm each 2012





'Mining'
Gesso, Ink, Enamel and Oil on board
28.5cm x 29.5cm 2012





'Mining' Oil, Ink and Enamel on board 23cm x 23cm each 2012



'Mining' Gesso, Oil and Ink on board 28.5cm x 24cm 2012



'Mining' Gesso, Oil and Ink on board 28.5cm x 24cm 2012



'Mining' Gesso and Oil on boards of varying size 2012

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