PRACTISING UNCERTAINTY IN
SEARCH OF SOMETHING
STRANGELY ATTRACTIVE

AN INQUIRY INTO THE MECHANICS OF A
PAINTER DURING THE PRACTICE AND
VIEWING OF PAINTING

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Project 2010
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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously written or published by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or institution of higher learning, except where made explicit in the references.

Amber Wilson 2010
Abstract

This document traces the development of a studio-based project concerned with gaining understanding about the mechanics of a painting practice and the uncertain fugitive behaviour of painted images.

Beginning with the concepts of irregularity and repetition the project moves from opaque yet promising ideas, to focus on painting processes, then to an investigation into perception. Connections are drawn between decorative patterns, chaos theory, aesthetics, painting procedures, formal conventions and the activity of viewing. Underpinning the project is a driving tension between two opposing attitudes towards making. The desire to operate in a premeditated manner and acknowledge the intuitive poses a situation to be resolved through the project.

This project sits within a broader context of contemporary abstract painting. This terrain is characterised by its adoption of both modernist and post-modernist attitudes and strategies; a privileging of formal values coupled with ambivalence towards strict conventions or purity in aesthetics and meaning. Key painters located in this realm and identified with are Mary Heilmann, Tomma Abts and Deanna Georgetti. These painters share an interest in the depiction of ambiguous abstract forms in a close yet expansive pictorial field. They also adopt a contemporary, and sympathetically ironic view on the seriousness of both modernism and post modernism. Bridget Riley has also been relevant to the research in regards to her ideas on colour and perception.

The works produced during the project, and documented here, make manifest the practicing and joining together of these ideas.
Masters Exhibition

- Paramount Cushion 36x30in oil on canvas
- One Splendid Rangle 28x24in oil on canvas
- Tremulous Rampage 28x24in oil on canvas
- Pearl Redux 28x24in oil on canvas
Pernickety Rick Rack 28x24in oil on canvas
Flambé Memorial 28x24in oil on canvas
my Venus de Milo 36x30in oil on canvas
Vertiginous Quiff 28x24in oil on canvas
Exegesis

Section One

INTRODUCTION
Figure 1 *Kelim Carpet 1800–1899.*

Figure 2 *Sampler from the Netherlands. Janette Maas. Late 18th century*

Figure 3 *Amber Wilson Vegas 2007*

Figure 4 *Amber Wilson fish eye frieze 2007*
Document Outline

The following text elucidates the developments of this Masters of Design by Project. Section one, *A Background*, provides an account of the foundations of the project stemming from the graduating work of my Bachelor of Design degree. Section two, *Identifying Field of Inquiry*, will discuss the initial developments in contextual research which became paramount to the project. This section will describe the formulation of problems regarding studio research. Section three, *Developing Solutions through Making*, recounts how those problems were solved. This section focuses on the discovery of solutions through practical strategies. Section four, *Investigating Nuances of Viewer Perception and a Wider Context for the Project*, details several ideas surrounding viewer perception, the formal construction of paintings and the broader context of the project. This section examines ideas which, through research have emerged out of, and become central to, the project. Section five *Conclusion* presents some reflective commentary and a summation of ideas explored through the project.

A Background

In 2007 I completed a Bachelor of Design majoring in painting. The series of eight paintings produced at the end of the final year established the foundation on which this Masters of Design by Project developed. These paintings all contained elements drawn from textile patterns. They were predominantly Persian kelim carpets along with embroidery samplers, and Florentine weaving patterns sourced from books and the online catalogue of the Victoria and Albert Museum textile collection.

Part of the attraction to woven handcraft objects is in response to their unique qualities and slightly fantastical skewing of the natural world. For example, a motif which is meant to be straight sitting at a slight angle, an apparently symmetrically balanced composition which is riddled with asymmetry, missed stitches and extra stitches. These qualities produce such fancies as gargantuan birds perching on minuscule shrubs.

One of the key attributes of textile patterns made use of in these paintings was the figure to ground relationship. This relationship in the textiles in which it occurs creates visual structure and depth. For instance, in Figure 1 the central form can be viewed as sitting on top of the bordering pattern or as sitting behind. This convention was used to simulate the optical behaviour of the paintings and to encourage movement within them.
In the production of these works the primary concern was orchestrating awkward arrangements and affective optical events within them. The most enduring of these works, figure 4, combines these two impulses equally. The composition of the work is awkwardly balanced within the frame, with the dominant motif not quite in the centre and orientated at an oblique angle. The combination and difference between the scale of marks in the corner patterns and around the centre creates a shimmying optical event. The zig zag pattern appears to be moving down whilst it is expanding. The blue scallop frame seems to move upwards but also stay stationary. This frame acts as a portal through to the pink background which might also be sitting on top of the blue scallop pattern. These aspects of the work help to conduct the affects of disorientation and strangeness, a sort of vertigo, as well as visual fascination and optical delight.

The overall palette of the group was the result of a combination of influences including science fiction movie posters circa 1960, 1970s interior decors and movie posters and the natural colours of the textile patterns. These were combined into a scheme of high key pastel pinks, blues and greens, with warmer reds, browns, oranges and greens. Figure 3 shows a grouping of the pastel tones. Figure 4 shows how the pastel tones were combined with the deeper browns and reds.

Towards the completion of these paintings I began to think of them each as individual complex systems. Each element in the work was understood as a unit with unique qualities which were all influencing each other. Feedback loops between the units cause reactions and dialogues which facilitate the emergence of novel aspects in the work. The interactions between the units, their ease or difficulties, became the key concerns of the works. This line of thinking directed me towards chaos theory and the possibility within it of a painting methodology. This was where my Masters project began.
Section Two

IDENTIFYING FIELD OF INQUIRY
Figure 5 Amber Wilson untitled
2008 watercolour on paper

Figure 6 Amber Wilson.
untitled 2008 polymer clay

Figure 7 Amber Wilson untitled
2008 mixed media on paper

Figure 8 Amber Wilson untitled
2008 digital drawing

Figure 9 Amber Wilson untitled
2008 digital drawing

Figure 10 Amber Wilson untitled
2008 digital drawing
**Chaos Considered**

The Masters project began with a premise to interrogate. I wanted to see if connections could be drawn between chaos theory, aesthetics, and the decorative and structural patterns of textiles, and applied to painting methodology.

The initial title, research question and aim of the project were:

**Title**

*In search of something strangely attractive.*

**Research question**

*How can repetition and irregularity guide the making and content of a fine art practice?*

**Aim**

*To investigate how repetition and irregularity seen in decorative patterns and discussed in chaos theory and philosophical discourse can inform the processes and imagery of contemporary painting.*

During the early stages of the project my studio research was exploratory. Work was made across a range of media including collage, digital drawing, watercolour drawing, clay models and small format oil paintings. These activities were productive and explorative; testing a wide range of media endorsed discoveries, see Figure 5—10.

At this time of exploration my contextual research for the project was focused on chaos theory. Principal texts were Fritjof Capra’s *The Web of Life* and Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stenger’s *Order out of Chaos*.

Capra and Stengers are scientists and Prigogine a philosopher of science. Their works are engaged in the field of chaos theory. These two texts by Capra and Prigogine and Stengers discuss dissipative structures as systems which are open to, and developing iteratively in response to their surroundings. Dissipative structures maintain themselves over long periods of time at a stable yet far from equilibrium state. In a far from equilibrium state a living system experiences strong fluxes of iterated self amplifying reactions that feed back into the system. The strong fluxes in the chemical processes may cause points of instability “at which new structures and forms of order can emerge.”(Capra 186) Capra discusses Prigogine’s discoveries about dissipative structures as interlinking:

...the main characteristics of living forms in a coherent conceptual and mathematical framework that implies radical re-conceptualisation of many fundamental ideas associated with structure – a shift of perception from stability to instability, from order to disorder, from equilibrium to non-equilibrium, from being to becoming. At the centre of Prigogine’s vision lies the coexistence of structure and change... (Capra 186)

There was an interest here in seeing if the concept of dissipative structures and these ideas about moving between “stability to instability” and from “order to disorder” could be applicable as painting methods.
Figure 11 Amber Wilson *Natural incline*. 2008
Watercolour on paper
It seems that during the making process, painter and painting are engaged in an iterated feedback loop with each other. When painting you make a series of marks and assess them, then proceed in response, repeating this again and again so that every move is different to but shaped by the one before. When viewing a painting the combinations of forms, paint treatment, colours and patterns engage in feedback loops with each other and the viewer. Colour speaks to colour, which speaks to form which in turn speaks to composition, though not necessarily always in this order. These loops are a dialogue which stimulates the emergence of novel events in the work the parts produce more than their sum. In Figure 11 three discreet forms combine to make a scene. This arrangement was unplanned and is the result of a dialogue between each element. The yellow nebulous shape assumes the form of a pool out of which the black undulated patterns grow and begin to resemble a rock formation. The flat yellow oval hovering towards the edge of the frame becomes something planetary. One of the novel events to emerge in this work is a distortion of scale. It is unclear how close or far, or large or small each element is in relation to the others. This skewing of scale enhances the ‘strangeness’ in the work.

Figure 11 belongs to a suite of watercolours which were made using the idea of emergence as a tentative guide. It was begun by making tiny marks in a chevron pattern in a randomly chosen area of the paper. These marks grew line by line, the width height and shape of each line was determined in relation to how the previous one appeared. All of the works in this suite grew literally step by step, each form responding to and germinating out of the previous one. The works developed iteratively, the parts building a whole.

I reached a point where I needed to expand the parameters of the research. I realised there were limitations to the investigation into chaos theory. One being that perhaps order and disorder were more appropriate as concepts than repetition and irregularity. My understanding of the relevance of these concepts to the project was yet unrealised.

Gathering material on the relationship between chaos theory and painting led to a consideration of generative art. Generative art is made through the use of semi-autonomous systems, where a system is set in place by the artist that removes a degree of their control and injects an element of randomness into the work. My studio research seemed at odds with these particular procedures. The work was not being made through the use of semi-autonomous systems and nor was it considered as a possibility that they would be. There was a need for structure, a system to follow, but without having to give up control over any decisions regarding the work. This enabled the significant realisation that my interest in chaos theory was in its potential to offer metaphoric not scientific applications. It seemed plausible to make a constructive analogy between painting methods and the behaviour of dissipative systems. This would assist in understanding the generative and dissipative system that is a painting practice. My contextual research at that time was not helping to achieve this. One of my biggest challenges at this point was thinking that a workable methodology could be extracted out of my contextual research and grafted onto my practice rather than the reverse.
Figure 6 Amber Wilson *A lighter shade of pale.*
2008 Oil on canvas
A Sojourn to the Swamp of Beauty

In light of these reconsiderations the focus of my research shifted towards the value of beauty, towards the aesthetic. My painting decisions so often refer to whether I like what I see. That feeling of ‘like’ requires certain conditions, one being the need to err on the side of not liking what I see in order to fully like it. My work should be attractive but also visually challenging. This is not to say I deliberately set out to make paintings that are overtly ugly or complicated. There should be some aesthetic challenges, overt or subtle, within the painting to reconcile.

When painting a lattice pattern out of intersecting lines, see Figure 12, the lines should wobble and intersect at irregular points, rather than join together smoothly with regular intersections. The order of the pattern has to seem to be just holding together smoothly with regular intersections. The image appear volatile or unstable, as if it may just be appearing or on the verge of transforming into a different arrangement.

Whilst there should be an aesthetic challenge in the work I do not wish for myself or others to have to overcome a visual assault in order to enjoy the paintings. My work does not deal out-rightly in a beauty which privileges the ugly, though it does just a little. It would seem that the best decisions I make are the ones that follow a genuine impulse; an impulse which drives me to make and adjust an image because I think it will look right, that I will like it and so experience it as beautiful. Focusing on these practical aspects of studio behaviour led to a shift in contextual research.

Principle texts from this research were Peter Scheljdahl’s Notes on Beauty Richard Shusterman’s Interpretation, Pleasure and Value in Aesthetic Experience and Kant’s Critique on Judgement. These texts all seek to locate, understand and measure the value of aesthetic experience. The reading of criticism around Shusterman and Kant enabled the discovery of Alexander Nehamas, who has written critically on both of these authors.

In his work The Return of the Beautiful: Morality, Pleasure, and the Value of Uncertainty he makes a case for the value of uncertainty in an experience of beauty. Beauty, according to Nehamas is a judgement which cannot be justified. It is a hunch that the things we call beautiful have value to us in “ways we do not yet understand... we sense that we have not exhausted them.”(Nehamas 402)

Nehamas offered up a useful angle from which to view the concept of beauty. In these works there must be a balance between the familiar and the strange. The origin of the painted forms should be in question. This uncertainty causes a rolling recollection, ‘it’s like this and that and those and a bit like them’, which places importance on the searching frame of mind rather than concrete knowledge of the original source object. In this way an understanding of the work is dependent on uncertainty and the work’s value, its beauty, is not exhausted. This is the pleasure of uncertainty in beauty which Nehamas values and it is this pleasure the works in this project offer. And so beauty becomes valuable because its value is always in question.
Order in the Studio

Research into chaos theory and the uncertainty of beauty was a vehicle to investigate the management of studio practice. Chaos theory and the uncertainty of beauty provided the means to begin resolving studio practice. They helped to identify the importance for order in the studio. Restrictions endorse a controlled approach towards making, though these restrictions should be permeable and entirely dissolvable if need be. Without confines or restrictions making can be formless and unchanging. Within a confine, restrictions can force inventiveness. The making process should be shepherded yet free to wander, ordered with allowance for chaos and uncertainty.
Section Three

DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS THROUGH MAKING
Figure 7 Ikat robe from Uzbekistan 1825-1850

Figure 8 Ettore Sostass Memphis Casablanca Cabinet 1981

Figure 9 Amber Wilson The Dummy Reversal 2009 watercolour on paper

Figure 10 Amber Wilson The Enterprise 2009 watercolour on paper
An important time during the project was the making of a series of watercolours that were drawings and intended to be works in themselves. These works retain some of the off-hand searching and experimental qualities of a drawing whilst having the assured and finished look of a resolved work. They are a kind of laboratory for compositional solutions, formal relationships and colour combinations. They are also a way to generate patterns and to begin to understand the structure of the referenced patterns. It is important to know how a pattern fits together, what the sizes of the spaces between each form are or which lines dissect each other. Once this is known the pattern can be disassembled and reassembled with more acuity.

Having gained a working knowledge of how the elements of a pattern fit together it can be mutated more effectively. Identifying, mutating and combining the most important components of a Florentine pattern, an Ikat robe and a piece of decorative Memphis laminate so that they appear to belong together in an inevitable way. Whilst joining these different elements together the original source retreats. Each pattern and form gets stretched and merged so the different qualities of the sources recede. Having grafted a woven zig zag pattern onto a Memphis lamp shape both are changed to be more compatible with each other. They resemble themselves but do not represent themselves. It is necessary to exaggerate curves, distort proportions and twist symmetries.

Each of these works takes multiple sittings to complete. The medium adapts well to time consuming accumulated small scale marks. As the watery marks dry, pigment from the watercolour paint spreads across the water. If it is a small mark and so does not buckle the paper the paint dries in an even flat tone with a very fine irregular dark line around the outer edge. I can plan for this but I cannot control it, I set the conditions to allow it to happen. It requires careful repetitive application to get this effect happening with a detailed pattern such as in the central form in *The Enterprise*.

A technique employed throughout the making of this group approximates the effect of dyed Ikat fabric. The selected shape would be marked out in a pale yellow or pink wash. When this was dry it would be dampened with clear water, highly saturated watercolour paint would then be released onto the damp form. This is another technique which harnesses control over something a little uncontrollable.

The fineness of these works, their delicacy of mark and gentle clumsy shapes combine successfully. They provide an opportunity to develop visual understanding of the referenced patterns. This activity enables realisations regarding the application of dissipative structures to painting methods; the connections between theory and practice.
Figure 11 Amber Wilson. *En Pointe* watercolour on paper 2009.

Figure 12 Amber Wilson *Hilman Superminx* watercolour on paper 2009
Figure 13 Series exhibited in Contemporary Beauticians at Anna Miles gallery 2009
Walk the Line

The suite of watercolours are intended to be seductive in their attractiveness though tempered with strangeness. They operate in a mildly disturbing way, the images providing visual material to develop further. Susan Sontag’s Notes on ‘camp’ helped to clarify a new ambition with these works. Camp is the name Sontag gives to an aesthetic style which is characterised by a love of the exaggerated, the ‘off’, an attitude that is somewhat indifferent to content. Camp invites delight in the silly or extravagant, objects decreed camp attempt to do something outlandish, to be too much or over the top. “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious” (Sontag 279). The watercolours walk a line between the frivolous and the serious. They suggest this line of inquiry could be extended.

When beginning to draw out and distort a sourced decorative textile pattern I tend to camp it up at least a little. Often the patterns will already contain some exaggerated or outlandish qualities; a kind of oddness of their own. This becomes amplified and new qualities are added, following impulses towards the strange and bizarre.
Figure 15 Amber Wilson *Horror 2* 2009 oil on canvas

Figure 14 Amber Wilson *Horror 1* 2009 oil on canvas
What had been assimilated during the drawing lab needed to be capitalised on and the campness of the works needed to become evident. A move from watercolour and paper into oil paint on canvas allowed this. Oil painting carries more visual weight than watercolour on paper, ‘all the better to see you with my dear’. This was the first attempt at bringing over into oil paint some of the qualities of the watercolours. The works provided opportunities to test out different painting procedures. Figures 14 and 15 demonstrate a change in size from a medium to a larger format. Increasing the size of format necessitated an increase in the size of the painted forms. This demanded a change in the scale of mark-making compared to the works on paper. I experimented with a range of different paint treatments, some more successful than others. The scale of mark was too small for the large size. When beginning each work there was no plan, nothing in mind beyond the first pattern which was sourced from other watercolours or textile objects. This method using emergence as a guide had been successful with the watercolour works but did not transfer well into oil paint. In some cases I began a work with patterns I had not used before, and so did not have a working knowledge of their structure or any ideas on what forms were compatible with them.

Watercolour on paper is a forgiving medium which enhances simple painting strategies. This is not the case with oil painting. It requires complex painting strategies and a more direct intention. The accumulated small scale marks which work so well on paper do not have the same attraction in oil paint. The slow bleeding of watercolour paint into wet paper does not translate so well into oil paint either. A lot of binding medium is required to approximate this effect in oil paint, resulting in the surface of the painted area being thick and shiny. It is problematic assimilating this paint treatment into the surface of the work. Using this effect places the painting in danger of being perceived as about this process only. The method of making the watercolours had been to begin with a pattern and let the next decision arise out of how that looked. Making The Horrors translated that method verbatim, expecting the paintings to succeed as easily as the paper works had. This approach was hopeful but needed to be worked out more thoroughly. I was yet to tailor my process to the specific strengths and limitations of the materials and instead tried to use haste to get that effortless clumsy elegance. This is an attribute admirable in the works on paper but which takes much time to achieve, requiring a lot of effort and control. It was never going to be attained in oil paint in such a manner. The experience of making these works facilitated a rethinking of my approach.
**Charting Combat**

As a consequence of ‘the horrors’ a planning strategy was devised which became a major turning point for the project. After having the experience of making the horrors without a concerted plan it was necessary to construct an alternate approach. Charts of the patterns and forms intended for use in the works were prepared. Most of these elements were drawn from decorative textile patterns used in previous watercolour or oil paint works. Elements from the charts became sketches of compositions, pairing different patterns with different forms. Once there were several containing enough potential, preparations were made to paint them, whilst continuing to make sketches for future works. Often these plans changed slightly during the making process and occasionally they were dropped all together. This is a significant point and it reveals the importance of the planning stages. The preparation and planning helps to combat repetitive and unstructured making. The planning serves as a prop and a prompt. It provides an ordered foundation and frame that supports impulsive decisions; a restriction which is permeable. By working out the fundamentals of the image as a whole before beginning each painting some of the unknown has been made known. To think of this in terms of the earlier research on chaos theory, the charts and planning helped combine, as a dissipative system does, the “stability of structure with the fluidity of change” (Capra 186). This allows me to focus on iterative, and somewhat intuitive, decisions during the painting process such as those about colour and paint treatment. By going some way towards figuring out the shape of the whole I can then focus on the smaller integral parts, injecting a little control into the uncontrollable; being both systematic and fluid.

**Shifting Figure Moving Ground**

The charts and sketches helped uncover a successful painting procedure. These plans enabled a shift between automatic and manual behaviours during the making process. This procedure also helped to reposition the intentions within the project.

Keeping the surfaces of the paintings’ relatively flat provided the image with an unobtrusive plane upon which every form would better seem to resemble the figure or the ground. This oscillation between the two planes causes a shifting spatial dynamic to occur in the painting.
Figure 19 Tomma Abts lubbe 2005
acrylic and oil on canvas 48x38 cm
Tomma Abts’ paintings deal with space in a similar respect. An extract from Mary Heilmann’s book *Looking at pictures* where she is describing her attraction to Asian painting serves adequately as a description of the movement of Abts’ paintings. Heilmann describes her fascination with the space in Asian paintings “This is the front. That's behind. No, that's the front and this is the background. That's an edge. No, it's a line. That's a space. No it's a thing” (qtd. in Dumbadze 82). There is a similar sensation of movement felt when looking at one of Abts’ works. What is the front and what is behind, what is a solid and what is a line become intermittently confused. First they appear one way and then the next. The eye moves back and forth with these changing values, focusing and refocusing. Different forms appear then disappear. One must rearrange and re-evaluate what is seen with what might be seen. It is this active kind of looking which causes the static to become dynamic, the still image to move. The painting, the image, asserts itself again and again. Where Abts deals with a hard edged abstraction concerned with volumetric forms and moody colours, I step more lightly. Using distorted decorative forms and outlandish colours, I deploy my spatially twisted images in a brash and light hearted manner.

Thinking about Abts work in this way reveals a connection with Alexander Nehamas’ ideas about the role of uncertainty in a judgement of beauty. A potential relationship emerges between spatial uncertainty in a painting and uncertainty as a source of pleasure and beauty. The multivalent forms provide a measure of uncertainty. This encourages continued engagement with the painting and a protracted unfolding of the work; a pleasure which may be experienced as beauty.

*Increasing Format*

There is a commonly held view about paintings that they reveal more about themselves when bigger; that we feel the affects of a painting more clearly the larger it is. As Claire Colebrook explains in a chapter of her book on Gilles Deleuze, entitled *Powers of Thinking: Philosophy, Art and Science* “Affectations are what happens to us (disgust, or the recoil of the nostrils at the smell of cheese)...Affects are sensible experiences in their singularity, liberated from organising systems of representation”(Colebrook 21-23).

At this point in the project the paintings were determinedly middle sized. The kind of size which fits comfortably on an average sized lounge wall. The size one person can carry unencumbered. The size where one is tickled by the detail rather than punched by the whole. Naturally it seemed necessary to test these painting procedures at a larger scale. I approached these works with the same planning procedure mentioned earlier.
Figure 20 Amber Wilson *Paramount Cushion* 2009 detail
Seeing these larger works finished furthered an understanding about scale and mark. Using a larger brush to make the work, building the patterns and forms out of slick repetitive dashes. As they were larger I did not have to step so close to the work to see these marks. I could be at a comfortable distance from the work, say 2 metres, and be able to view with clarity both the parts and the whole of the painting. I could still be tickled by the detail while being punched by the whole.

The painting does not swamp or dominate you when you come close to it. The individual marks, when viewed closely, reveal the construction of the painting but are as satisfying to look at as the painting viewed from a distance. The smoothness of the surface allows for fluidity between these two views, adding to the uncertainty of the image and engaging prolonged viewing, see Figure 20. When stepping close to view small parts of the work you do not lose sight of the whole, peripheral vision is engaged but the entirety of the work is still visible. This is an important aspect as it allows the work to be seen as simultaneously something fragmented and whole.
Section Four

INVESTIGATING NUANCES OF VIEWER PERCEPTION AND A WIDER CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT
Amber Wilson *Vertiginous Quiff* 2009 oil on canvas
Mechanic Intuitions

Whilst painting I become a machine, mark making is repetitive, stitch like. My eye to brain to hand processing is quickened and sharp. I have planned what forms, what patterns, where and in what proportion, now I fill them. I am operating almost without thinking. Pattern lays drapes over form, becomes form. What was flat becomes dimensional. The pattern is made of stripes the stripes are made of stripes. With the building blocks of the painting decided upon I am free to focus on each mark in relation to the others. Should it be a replica should it have significant difference, a drone or a queen? Do I want to be regular or irregular?

Semblances

Susanne Langer’s idea of semblance has helped clarify the intentions towards the project. She discusses this concept in her book *Feeling and Form a Theory of Art* 1953. Her ideas have also provided a way of explaining why it is important to distort and partially dissolve imagery from its origin, previously referred to.

For Langer the importance of an image exists in its visual attributes and relations; its visible character is its entire being. She is interested in the appearance of the work of art and its ability to conduct feeling. Semblance, for Langer, liberates perception and the power of conception from practical purposes, allowing the mind to confront the appearance alone of the art work. This approach works as practical application. Whilst making, thinking is directed only toward the image and the surface. Where the forms, colours, patterns or composition have come from or what they together might mean is not of primary significance.

Vertiginous Quiff encourages viewing that prioritises the visual by presenting an arrangement of forms which have a semblance of a number of things but not any one thing specifically. Encountering this work sparks the activity of recollection without recalling any particular object. The central pink rectangular form might be a cushion, maybe a curtain. The yellow striped blob on top could be bacteria, might be a planet. The purple striped area could be venetian blinds, might be stadium lighting.

Thinking Feeling

The philosopher Brian Massumi cites Susanne Langer in his work ‘The Thinking Feeling of What Happens; a Semblance of a Conversation’. In this discussion Massumi attempts to understand the role of the aesthetic in experiencing interactive art and how that differs to the experience of more traditional arts such as painting. He places form, vision and perception as central ideas in that discussion. He says of Langer that she

... reminds us that we see things we don’t actually see. We all know it, but we tend to brush it off by calling it an illusion, as if something is happening that isn’t real, and doesn’t have anything important to say about experience. But isn’t something happening the very definition of real? The question is: what exactly does the inconvenient reality that we see things we don’t actually see say about the nature of perception?(Massumi 3)
Figure 20 Mary Heilmann *Some Pretty Colours* 2001
Oil on wood 50x40in

Figure 21 Diena Georgetti *The object is the thing, this construction brings*
2006 acrylic on board 59.5 x 55 cm

Figure 22 Tomma Abts *Taade* 2003
acrylic and oil on canvas 48x38cm
The patterns and forms in *Vertiginous Quiff* move, slide, advance, bounce and swing. The three discrete forms swap places, shift back and in front of each other, separate and converge. Movement occurs but does not occur. This perceived movement creates a reactive and recurring responsiveness which, with the semblance of the forms, forces an awareness of the action of seeing. As Massumi says of semblances “there is the slightly uncanny sense of feeling sight see the invisible” (Massumi 6). The ambiguous content of the painting causes a rolling recollection of similarities which unites with an awareness of the activity of seeing. These qualities are mutually enhancing and they facilitate an extended engagement with the works. Extended engagement with a painting that is employing measures of uncertainty invites the use of imagination and an experience of beauty.

**In Context**

There is a dimension to abstract painting descending from American post war modernist painting which favours the gestural and expressive hand of the artist. The rhetoric of the gesture venerates performance and spontaneity and exploits the viscosity of paint. This provides a framework to work against for many contemporary painters. Within this lineage and of significance to this project are the painters Mary Heilmann, Tomma Abts and Diena Georgetti.

Effortless elegance is a quality in Mary Heilmann’s work admired and described by critics as the “amused nonchalance of beginners luck”, and as “a controlled airiness” that “restrains any whiff of excess emotion by never celebrating the artists touch” (Dumbadaze 81). This is the kind of restraint I inject into the work which conflicts with an inclination towards a camp aesthetic discussed earlier.

Tomma Abts is also known for her restraint of excess emotion through not celebrating the artists touch. Abts painting process is laborious and measured. Each of her small paintings is built through the painstaking layering of different, though all very thin, surfaces. This results in an overall relatively flat painted surface which enhances a spatial ambivalence in her work.

With their extremely flat and coloured-in surfaces Deina Georgetti’s paintings exude restraint. Her complicated compositions juxtapose modernist patterns, furniture and architectural elements. This joyful plumbing of the past places Georgetti in the company of a generation of painters for whom quotation is celebratory rather than derisive.

Whilst working I am not performing impulsive acts. The steps it will take to make a painting are planned at the outset. That plan is the result of taking an intuited idea through several design stages. I am cautious with drips or serendipitous paint smudges that announce painterly virtuosity or celebration of the spontaneous. Theatricality is not relied upon to evoke feeling. Affective and dynamic painting is created through premeditation and fastidious application. In my case the spontaneous gesture is a burden though one I determinedly attempt to shrug off.

In my own work I prefer the surfaces to be predominantly flat. I do not want thick globs of paint or raised bumps to overwhelm the image. The painting ought to not over assert itself as an object whilst it is being looked at. Equally, a sense of representational specificity in the image should not dominate. A paintings merit should not rely only on the qualities of the material or what it might represent. There should be a balance between these two, equilibrium
between what the surface and the image offer to the viewer.

Amber Wilson *Flambé Memorial* 2009 oil on canvas

Figure 23 Bridget Riley *Shade* 1981 oil on linen

Figure 24 Bridget Riley *RA (inverted)* 2009-1981 screen print on paper
There must be equilibrium between the two, allowing for oscillation between their individual and combined appraisal. Each form should be capable of appearing to be similar to a number of things. Equally the paint treatment, colour, size, placement and scale for the pattern that will shape a form needs to be considered carefully as a paintings success hinges on the relationships and transitions between each and all forms and their different treatments. The subtleties of these relationships, the feedback loops created between all components, generate the feel of the image and constitute a beautiful i.e. successful painting. This assists in facilitating the shimmying fugitive behaviour of the painting.

**Colour Rush!**

Colour is hugely influential in realising the ambitions for the work. In the construction of each work considerations about colour are as significant as the decisions about form, composition, line and pattern. Colour is used to control the speed at which the different forms in a work advance or retreat. Used in this way it becomes an essential component to the configuration of uncertainty about positive and negative space within the painting.

Different colours make forms appear closer or further away in pictorial space. Depending on their lightness, saturation and hue marks in a painting seem to move differently to each other. A thickly painted dark green mark will recede from the eye. A thinly painted pale yellow will advance towards the eye.

Viewed in one way the long arm form in Flambé Memorial, opposite, appears to rush to the front of the composition, its yellow-ness pushing it forward. Viewed another way, the crisp edges surrounding the form and the flat paint treatment suggest an opening which exposes the yellow arm as a flat field lying behind the other forms; a tear in the seam.

The spatial depth implied by the colour conflicts with the flatness of the painted surface. One attribute suggests a distinct space with potentially knowable objects, the other a flat pictorial space of an essentially abstract image. This fracturing of the painting into two sensible modes, both knowable and unknowable, complicates how the image is understood, contributing to the affect of uncertainty in the image/the painting.

Whilst stitching these paintings together, having planned out the composition, much of the focus is on the smaller details. Tiny variations in brush marks and hue are carefully considered. This places much responsibility on the internal relationships of the details for creating the effects of the whole. It is when these internal relationships are focused on that the unstable images come unstuck, begin to quake. The paintings’ various lines of interpretation begin to bifurcate and intersect before rushing back into a state where there is a sense of inevitability and repose in the work.

Bridget Riley’s ideas around the role of colour in a painting helped understanding in this area. Riley attributes instability in a painting to the volatile behaviour of colour. Paul Moorhouse in an essay on Bridget Riley called *A dialogue with sensation*, discusses her ideas about colour instability. He says Riley “had observed that the basis of colour is its instability and the tendency of colours to affect, and be affected by their context. Working with this instability entailed finding ways of increasing and encouraging the optical interaction of colours”(Moorhouse 18).
Amber Wilson  *Pernickety Ricky Rack* 2009 oil on canvas
The giving of titles to works is another means with which to create the fugitive uncertain qualities of these paintings. It is important to open the work up but not explain it away and provide an angle to view from without limiting how the painting may be understood. Aspirations regarding titling parallel the ambiguity strived for in the forms and spatial structures in the paintings. The titles should be strange but familiar, with a sense of inevitability and effortless elegance. In some way the titles reference a formal aspect of the work but resist flat out description.

Titles tend not to come till quite a while after that painting is finished. It is necessary to be further away from the experience of making the painting before potential titles can be seen. It is easier to see the work as a painting, rather than a catalogue of decisions, when the memory of engagement in its making is not so clear.

Words are picked up and put down, arranged, rearranged and discarded. I want them to swirl around the mouth and roll off the tongue. Each should have an edge of humour, an edge of surprise, an edge of menace and an edge of the absurd. To sound like a common term or name or adjective, but have no colloquial meaning.

The name for this work, *Pernickety Rickrack*, provides an example of a successful title. Pernickety meaning to be fussy and particular, rickrack being a kind of braided zig-zagging textile. Not a common combination, unexpected but familiar sounding. As a phrase this title is descriptive, ‘that rick rack is very pernickety’ but also works as a personal pronoun, ‘Ms Pernickety Rickrack’, both are a little absurd and neither is definitive.
Section Five

CONCLUSION
Parting Shot

This project seeks to contribute to an increasing body of knowledge produced by a new generation of painters. These practitioners value the historical developments in painting, but like previous generations they are eager to distance themselves from their direct predecessors. This results in a resistance towards a sardonic ironic post modern attitude. Sincerity is being valued again and without the heady moralistic overtones of high modernism, combined with a playful kind of irony, a sincere irony.

The project began with a set of interests and two key concepts, irregularity and repetition. Research into chaos theory and aesthetics helped to clarify one of the main undercurrents driving the project, the desire for a system to make by. The project incorporates into this field, inquiry and discoveries into metaphorical applications of chaos theory to practical painting procedures.

It has been a circuitous search for understanding about the mechanics of practice. Through practical and theoretical research, means have been sought to manage a flexible yet structured practice.

A system, a methodology was constructed with which to manage a painting practice that combines flexibility and rigidity. This system is open to further development in the future though provides a useful tool with which to guide painting procedures at the present.

Alongside this, traction was sought on the shifty and uncertain behaviour of painted images. Painting seems to elude; what is right one minute is wrong the next. Part of the strategy is planning to accommodate contingency. Towards completion the project has been interested in the relationship between seeing, feeling and thinking when encountering a painting. Understanding in this area was furthered by research into Susanne Langer’s and Brian Massumi’s ideas around the activity of seeing. Through practical experience this understanding was extended. Additional knowledge was gained about how colour, scale, form and pattern can alter and affect perception. The presence of uncertainty coupled with a tendency towards a camp aesthetic invites invention and imagination, conducting a humorous experience on the part of the viewer.

I am interested in how things appear and disappear. The way a point of view can shift and shimmer. Paintings can remind us that ideas are mutable, rearrangeable and entirely contingent on their context. What is right in one instance is wrong in another. Sometimes, with careful consideration and application what seems inappropriate just works in an entirely unexpected way. It is certain that uncertainty reins, and this produces a valuable beauty.
These two works are from a series of four collage drawings made with stamps and graph paper March 2008

These 2 works are from a series of five made with oil paint on prepared canvas paper March 2008

These two works are from a series of five made with cut up envelopes, origami paper, carbon and watercolour on paper April 2008
These two works are from a series of nine drawings made using watercolour and pen on paper March April 2008

These three works are from a series of seven made using watercolour and acrylic paint on paper April May 2008

These three works are from a series of six digital drawings pieced together in photoshop using digital cut outs from decorative patterns May 2008
These photographs are of arrangements made from small polymer clay sculptures. They are from a series of 7 photographs and 15 sculptures June 2008

These collages are from a series of 9 made using cut outs from William Hogarth prints, vintage children’s encyclopaedias and fluorescent cardboard July 2008
These three works are from a series of five made with watercolour on paper August 2008

These three works are from a series of five made with watercolour on paper August 2008
These three works are from a series of six made with watercolour on paper October November 2008
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