Self Discovery through Figurative Painting

Yvonne Abercrombie

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Narrative painting through allegorical figuration

For the initial stages of my master’s project I embarked on a series of works that were a tentative step towards understanding the notion of ‘narrative’ and how this might be embraced within figurative representation.

My project employed narratives that were derived from personal recollections of childhood events. These events were recreated through an emotional register, framed by a fictional scenario. I staged scenes with models as a reference point to paint from. This involved the use of costumes and props that were devised to enhance the ‘allegorical’ implications of the narrative.

Untitled #1, oil on canvas, 2015
The narrative associated with *Untitled #2* was from a particular scene of my childhood. The device of constructing the painting through the successive layering of imagery was to forestall any obvious interpretation. To some extent I felt that while this succeeded in the image not being understood in purely literal terms, it also appeared somewhat arbitrary and random, further distancing itself from the ‘narrative’ that motivated the imagery. My response was to then de-clutter the amount of visual imagery included within the painting. These subsequent works *Untitled #3–#7* focused on bringing only two elements to the image, recognizable figurative reference with differently scaled and sized imagery that was not readily recognisable. The deliberate choice around colour and tonal range could now further enhance the narrative intent.
Untitled #3
Untitled #4

Untitled #5, oil on canvas, 2015

Untitled #6, oil on canvas, 2015
The successful outcome of these works was a letting go of the natural and an acceptance of the unnatural. The unnatural is the manner in which the combination of something recognisable with what is not immediately apparent creates a visual discordance.

Another success was being able to see colour combinations by making decisions informed by the narrative. These formal considerations provided a mechanism to extend narrative implications.
Despite this however, what was becoming apparent within the imagery, was the tension between areas of the painting where the paint was freely applied in an expressive manner and where the paint was controlled in the service of representing the image. I now started to read the quality of paint more as a language and less as a mediator of the image.

With each approach to a new narrative, my main attention was the reliance on the photograph. I was held back in the painting process by fear. I didn’t want the figure to look or seem out of proportion or wrongly executed, or to ignore any detail in the photo. I was consumed by what others would think of my paintings if they did not demonstrate these skills. This robbed the brush of its ability to be expressive. The colour palette and tonal range were often restricted to what could be inferred from the photograph.

Acknowledging these technical and formal issues that came from relying for the most part on the photograph to provide the narrative content, required me to rethink my approach to narrative. The artist, George Condo, was instrumental in opening up my approach and understanding of what narrative could be.
The figurative painting of George Condo

George Condo, *The Birdman*, 1995, 72 x 76 in, oil on canvas

The precarious nature of George Condo’s painted scenes is a conglomeration of diverse elements and aesthetics that make for a new proposition in figurative painting.

“The wish to keep control, to hold together, to maintain a balance of forces in a single form, with an awareness of the difficulty of doing so, is the basic issue of Condo’s pictures...the tension between control and loss of control that runs through all his work.”

Condo invites us into his work by drawing upon common and familiar themes and recognisable imagery. These lure us into feeling safe in the environment he has created for us. He then disarms that sense of comfort by disturbing the imagery through his invented psychotic reveries, making what is familiar to us now unfamiliar. This creates a disjunction in our identification of where the painting should be situated formally and contextually.

1 (Kuspit) page 19
The concoction that is Condos paintings, have a particular affiliation with the ongoing discussion of the way the figure has been and is presented and therefore viewed. Condo forces us to gaze upon what we want to believe is a standard representation of the figure, yet we can not reconcile these fictitious beings with what we expect to be true of our represented selves. In observing Condo’s characters it provokes in us the same judgement and silent accusations we direct towards others who do not meet the normative conventions that society has predetermined.

I believe Condo’s paintings challenge us to question what the ‘ideal’ figure is. By replacing the art historical idealisations of the figure with his own inventory of estranged Neanderthal-like characters, we now attribute Condos figures to their substituted peers, granting his inventions permission to be on equal par to the ‘ideal’.
Donald Kuspit talks of Condo's conflation of past versus present characters in the context of them being ‘metaphysical mannequins’, stating that they are “divine beings out of mortal remains.” He describes the operations of these figures to be resurrecting fantasies of self-indulgence out of the decaying features of the past. This exemplifies our darkest fears, and strongest desires at the same time. Fear of decay, mortality and of dwindling beauty; desire to be a perfect being regaining youth, vivacity and wealth. “The metaphysical mannequin is the perfect being we wish we were, and as such an indication of our profound alienation from ourselves.”

The influences evident in Condo's work seem quite apparent, art history meets Cubism, meets Walt Disney. Condos work exists around the edge of these cultural borders, causing confusion by the merging of different tongues. Condo thus creates visual possibilities by inventing feuds between cultures, forcing opposites to collide and arranging marriages between these uncommon tribes.
It is Condos understanding and kinship to these languages that enables him to formulate his imagery. The ‘familiar’ entices the viewer, but the concoction of imagery repels us. “The artist raises the stakes in this game of attraction-and-repulsion by inflecting many of these monstrous portraits with an off-kilter and abject eroticism...several of these canvases present half-figure nudes with conventional female bodies, revealed as if offering the viewer not a horror show, but objects of desire.”

The balance George Condo has acquired for his paintings has resulted in an off-kilter perception of imagery. We don’t know if the artist is being serious or humorous, if he is implying something comical through the filters of reality or if he is saying something serious through the façade of kitsch?

‘Condo...uses humour to filter and contain horror.’

“Whatever uneasiness or repugnance we feel before Condo’s absurd and abject figures is undermined by their “contradictory clownishness, which is at once vulnerable and demonic.”

Condo contends with opposing ideologies in order to disrupt any single emotional response to his work, forcing a variation of responses. The pictorial
devices Condo refers to are obvious, therefore maintaining an order of balance requires him to be quite extreme in his image making.

Through his crafty manipulation of the ‘normal,’ Condo manages to provoke multiple reactions through his unique approach to figurative painting. “They seem utterly innocent of their repellent appearance, and this makes them at once ridiculous and shatteringly pathetic. Indeed, it is hard to know when first looking at these portraits, whether to laugh out loud or to wince.” He challenges our very human behaviour and fixation on ‘self-image’ as if we are comparing our physical status to his invented physical beings.

Condos mastery in pushing the visual and theoretical bounds of his work allows it to have numerous interpretations. The balance of devices and pictorial forces gives plenty of tangibility for the viewer to construct his or her reading, ‘identifying self’ through the lens of Condos figures. “That we stand before these paintings as if...before a two-way mirror, sensing some unknowable presence looking back into us, scrutinizing our own unseen worlds...”6

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George Condo, *The Psychoanalytic Puppeteer Losing his Mind*, 1994

6 (Marlow)
Historical context

To recognise the 'ideal' we need to look at its treatment throughout the history of western painting. If we isolate these themes to the female representation in painting, we can start to recognise common approaches associated with the ideal and how the female figure still endures to provoke these standards. The various discussions around historical understanding of the nude in art calls this to attention.

In a documented series by Tim Marlow called 'The Nude in Art,' we see that what is acceptable and what is not in the representation of nude, has been largely dictated by the changing perceptions and beliefs on how the figure should be upheld and received.

Marlow’s series discusses the different ideals the ‘nude’ has endured throughout history. In Ancient Greece the male nude in art often aimed to signify strength. The male nude in sculpture was presented as highly athletic in stature, and classical in form. This was a representation of the ‘ideal’ of that period. His nakedness was a symbol of complete freedom, which meant complete power. At this time of antiquity a sculpture of the female nude Aphrodite of Knidos by artist Praxiteles 350bc appeared sexual, enticing and provocative. The nude of the male and female were depicted according to the dictates of a patriarchal society. Since then the female nude and her distinctiveness have come under intense scrutiny.

At the end of the 15th century, Botticelli’s ‘The birth of Venus' brought about a fusion of Christian and Classical motifs. The Christian ideal now thought of the nude as being the ‘divine source of all perfection,’ revoking previous connotations of guilt and sin. This new representation of the female nude still had to operate within the bounds of the art canon, which we see represented in Tiziano Vecellio’s painting Venus of Urbino.

Tiziano Vecellio, Venus of Urbino, oil on canvas, 1538

7 (Marlow)
This mythological painting of the ‘young Venus lying down’ is classically posed, her hand politely covering her complete exposure and her gaze slightly amiss so as not to engage directly with the viewer. However over three hundred years later a painting that was modelled on Tiziano’s Venus created considerable drama and cause for reprimand.

Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, 130.5 cm × 190 cm (51.4 in × 74.8 in)

Manets ‘Olympia’ was accused of being too real in her composure such that the image acted as an allurement, making her seem obtainable. The influences within the painting made for a contentious display of female nudity. From the bed being ruffled (insinuating an intimate act has already occurred,) to her confident expression, her accessories and of course her name ‘Olympia,’ (referring to a prostitute’s name,) has all resulted in her non-compliance to the classical standard of the female nude.

My concern for this topic is how the painted female has been a common practice but generally only within the understanding of prevailing conventions. For the female nude not to be contentious, the image would have to satisfy our preconceptions of the human condition.

The challenge the female nude has presented in various historical eras has proven problematic. On the one hand, painting conventions gave artists ‘guidelines’ or ‘boundaries’ to work within. On the other hand it built a dialogue of common understanding that provides the artist with given interpretations. When these conventions are challenged this can help skew the typical reading of the figure in painting.
**Exploration**

I conducted a series of small studies. The purpose of these studies, which I refer to as a series of explorations, was to provide me with different ways with which to rethink the concept of narrative.

A particular fetish of mine is to wear a different outfit each day or a different combination so that no combination is ever the same. This could be described as obsessive compulsive however I see it as more a response to trying to make the familiar unfamiliar. I used this preoccupation with clothing as the narrative, and the genre of self-portrait as the structure to build the narrative on. This simplified the practicalities of making works. Without the complications of staging photographs, manipulating and dissecting imagery in order to get to the narrative I now had a simple approach to recreate a recognisable theme. This new approach made it easy to locate the intention. The repetition of archiving different outfits meant that I had permission to be explorative in other areas. I could now be imaginative with colour, texture and brush mark, as none of these distracted from the given subject of the work.

![Self Portrait #4, 2015, oil on canvas](image1)
![Queen for a Day, 2015, oil on canvas](image2)
These studies were successful on several accounts. They had a self-imposed time limit of 30 minutes that had an effect on the overall aesthetic of the paintings. There was more fluidity and control of the paint; each brush mark served a purpose instead of dissipating into over-blending. With the time limit controlling the amount of brush marks, there was no leeway to correct edges. Some marks went over the figures contour and others were a single stroke that indicated a tonal difference. This stopped the figure from looking cut out and indistinct in its surroundings.

Previously my reliance on accuracy came from being able to translate the photograph to canvas; now the accuracy came from an ability to communicate through the paint a more generous account of the figure, which enabled for a less confined rendition of the portrait.

The mirror confining the portrait to a particular dimension allowed for the figure to become confrontational. They were stiff, always looking out at the viewer, confined and overly intrusive. These explorations were becoming more prominent in my studio than the initial narrative paintings that were still in progress.
Reflecting on these small self-portraits, some regular themes emerged that became predominant and took place as the narrative. These concerns came about in the nature of the paint. Decisions on colour, composition and contrast were made spontaneously as the painting evolved which made room for ideas I would not have originally pre-empted. Time to add detail or to render each image in a conscious manner was forfeited therefore this process enabled the
paint to perform with ‘attitude.’ I now had ability to envisage the figure in a more imaginative way.

Painting the figure in this more liberating way meant that representing an idea became easier. However there were consequences for the figure, she was incorrect, maimed disproportionate, and kind of ugly. This outcome is what repositioned my practice and situated it in an unlikely territory.

**Where wrong becomes right**

The mismatched colour, out of proportion, contorted and abased figures had subconscious implications; these were raw, unfiltered and unperfected representations of myself which in turn, rendered these portraits in an unbecoming state.
Positioning the pose in order to fit the mirror’s frame bestowed on the figure a sense of awkwardness and disability. The accidental cropping and repositioning made for an uncommon format in the classical tradition of portraiture. What also contributed to the portrait’s unease was the background lacking a sense of propriety in relation to the figure. This implied a disorienting presence, which started to build a complexity to the works.

My fascinations with these portraits were in the way the figure was being exposed. Was she perhaps a repressed reflection of self, or a projection of the alter ego? I continued to play with these themes of an extension of self,
representing the past, present and future. This opened up the dialogue to feelings, behaviours, emotions, and projections of self-reformation.

At this point I realised the “paint” had just as much linguistic qualities, if not more, than the image. This acknowledgement of the materiality of paint has a lot to attribute to the context of body image. Giving permission to be flawed, raw,
expressive, aggressive, wrong and ugly in the paintwork gave licence to the figure herself to be true to who she was in all her facets. No person is without flaw, blemish, iniquity and insecurity, no matter how much one covers it up with social facades. We are all human, the very beautiful can be made ugly and the ugly can be made very beautiful. This is the conundrum we face in our ‘image focused’ culture.

Self

Photographer Cindy Sherman courts the topics of identity, self-image and social medias distorted ‘ideals,’ by posing her figures in an unbecoming fashion. Cindy Sherman’s work is about ‘betraying a desire to find her true identity within the myriad guises she has assumed.’¹⁸

Sherman’s fascination with changing personas reveals an intelligent insight on the contemporary worlds perception of self-portraiture. Her countless identities, roles and illusions would have individual interpretations had Sherman not posed as the subject. Positioning herself in multiple scenarios, genres, and scripts has amalgamated the individual themes of the works into one confused state of identity. ‘Betraying’ this ‘desire’ of the viewer, helps position her identity as a unique and individual interpretation of the human condition. Her works create callousness

¹⁸ (Amanda Cruz) page 7
towards the ‘voyeur’ by mocking the usual functioning of desire, thwarting desires instinctive ability to operate.

The ‘desire’ we see now is particular to Sherman’s identity, her fetishes, fantasies, portrayals and innuendos. Portrayed in many different ways, we get to see a theatrical miming of Sherman’s inner world.

The repetition of Sherman posing herself in these images implicates the many facades and alter-personalities we clothe ourselves with. As culture and fashions change, we too attire ourselves to fit the social norms. The sheer amount of visual propaganda has made it easy for us to follow suit.

Common attributes in her work are the use of prosthetics, latex, costume and heavy makeup. Sherman augments the literal reference to culture being overrun by popular trends and its intrusion of an imitation identity. Her work is “the fashioning of self identity as mass deception.”

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9 (Rosenberg)
Sherman’s photographs never reveal any specific self-insecurities, however they suggest an intense disequilibrium of portrayed character. Imposing her self-assuredness on these non-fixed personalities creates a sense of control over the imagery. Her figures hold their own not ashamed to be the model of a disquieting image. Identifying the unattractive, outcast, mocked, sexualized, perverted, maimed, sad, and pathetic, Sherman digs at the fashioning of these identities. She pulls on the heartstrings of the critical and judgemental, employing them to reveal the true condition of our society. As Rosenberg notes, ‘...these images promptly begin to unravel in various ways that suggest how self identity is often an unstable compromise between social dictates and personal intention.’

In recent works, Sherman she situates herself as an aged woman. Pressing on the insecurities we have concerning our decaying mortality. The interest with these images is that they are less degenerate than her earlier works, which are perhaps more overtly controversial. Presenting to us these figures in a more naturalistic light implies there are no added innuendos needed to exacerbate the message; we are instantly faced with the human condition.

Painting other models in the early stages of my project I was always concerned with having to present them respectably. Now that I’m the model that is no longer a concern, I can treat the figure in whichever pleasant or disrespectful way I choose. This is where painting ‘self’ is liberating, I have license to expose the portraits ugly and pretty sides, good and bad, light and dark because I’m not offending anyone. If someone takes offence there are no repercussions as I am inflicting these conditions on myself, therefore taking the ownership and full responsibility for the figure’s treatment. I have given her and myself permission.

10 (Rosenberg)
Female Condition

As if the genre of ‘self-portrait’ was not enough to draw attention, the addition of it being a female self-portrait topples the boat. Extending the discussion beyond the bounds of self-portrait into an even more disquieted domain, ‘feminism.’

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active male and passive female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.”

The human condition is preoccupied with its physical appearances. It is a stereotype but also factual that there is pleasure in the exchange of behaviour relating to self-image. Both genders condone one another’s behaviour as their thriving off each other promotes a sense of self worth. The female knowing her ability to woo with her exterior disposition gives licence to beautify and intensify her given features. Clothing, make up and cosmetic enhancing procedures become a pleasurable preoccupation for the woman, as she knows her reciprocated reward, the confirming glance from an onlooker. The male thrives off this too as it gives in to his fantasies and endorses them, thus giving him pleasure. This concern with how we are viewed, how we want to be viewed and how we let ourselves be viewed lends itself to the long-standing argument on the ‘male gaze.’

“Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”

The pressure imposed on women to conform to an ideal pleasing the opposite sex has become a constituent that has shaped her identity, overriding her true identity. “Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by sense of being appreciated as herself by another.” This concern for appraisal of the outward appearance has assumed greater importance than the acceptance of the inner identity. The inevitability of the male gaze has resulted in a generic fashioning of the female exterior complexion. If the male gaze could be taken out of the

11 (Mulvey) page 809
12 (Berger) page 47
13 (Berger) page 46
equation, the female and the way in which she composes and conducts herself may indeed look quite different.

The discussion on the ‘male gaze’ veers towards inequality within the genders (the female being made out to be a victim of his visual enjoyment.) My paintings are steeped in this discussion of what the female has incurred as a result of the male perception. The works situate themselves in a direct state of vulnerability. The single centred female figure instantly positions her as the object, and the viewer as the accused. Walking through a crowd the onlooker gets to choose who is ‘gazed’ at after a visual sifting. These paintings don’t allow for segregation. What is to be viewed has been preordained which positions the female in the painting to be objectified and subjectified.

In my self-portrait studies I was allowing myself to be viewed in an unseemly state, which isn’t my normal preference, and if I can speak for the majority of women, it is not how any of us would want to be seen. For some uncanny reason it was exciting to entertain the idea that my own ‘female’ condition was being challenged in all this. It went against all the norms of aiming to appease the visual desire of the opposite sex. This ‘tease’ played on my mind and implicated imagery and contradictory provocations that I hadn’t entertained before.

The unsettling state of the figures in my work meant in order to engage the ‘gaze’ of the viewer the figures needed to create tension across a variety of boundaries to manipulate the onlooker’s attention. There needed to be a combination of lewd enticement, empathy and repelling qualities, which were held in some form of equal balance that declared neither of these attributes in any obvious or literal manner.

*Nowhere to be seen, 2016, oil on canvas*
"In the art-form of the European nude, the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal relationship is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women... They survey, like men, their own femininity."\(^{14}\)

Berger describes how the woman has asserted herself into a social context that pardons her from seeing herself as she really is. Instead she views herself through filters and lenses that have been passed to her from prevailing fashions, social expectations and sexual conformity.

My interest is to challenge these constructions of female identity as well as to contemplate the possibility of an unfiltered view of ‘oneself.’

Along with our parents, the mass media raised us, socialized us, entertained us, comforted us, deceived us, disciplined us, told us what we could do and told us what we couldn’t. And they played a key role in turning each of us into not one woman but many women—a pastiche of all the good women and bad women that came to us through the printing presses, projectors, and airwaves of America. This has been one of the mass media’s most important legacies for female consciousness: the erosion of anything resembling a unified self.\(^{15}\)

Our individuality can get lost in translation by the filters, guises and facades that society clothes us with. The unravelling of these fabricated identities and exterior expectations is the focus of my paintings. The project is aimed at deepening an understanding of these social criteria, which pervades the approach to a painting aesthetic, and confronting the familiarities of figuration.

Trends and fashions have been influential in creating a generic standard for the public to adhere to. Yet these normative stereotypes have little affiliation with individuality.

\(^{14}\) (Berger) page 63

\(^{15}\) (Amanda Cruz) page 1, Quote by Susan J. Douglas, Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media (New York: Times Books, 1994), 13.
Succumbing to societies constraints hinders our personal expression and redefines it according to the social norms. This ‘chameleon identity’ is persuasive in the discussion of loss of individualisation; “Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.”16

In painting we see changing fashions in terms of how the figure is being represented. Over a period of time in the Renaissance, the painted female was voluptuous in stature with her breasts small in comparison to her body size. We could assume this was how the female figure actually looked then, however physiological studies might contradict with this; the larger the woman, the larger her breasts.

Peter Paul Rubens, The Arrival of Marie d Medici at Marseilles, 1622 25

Jacques Jordaens, Les Filles de Cécrups découvrant l'enfant Erichthonios, 1617

16 (Berger) page 46
However what was being represented at this particular time of the Renaissance was not a ‘realistic representation’ on how the female figure actually looked, it was a transposing of the ‘natural form,’ to a more desired idealised image, an inflation or enhancement of reality, a fantasy. The figure was an exaggeration of what the human condition personally esteemed to be, without blemish or infirmity, a rendition of grace, elegance and of stylized poise, not to be confronted with the reality of the physical appearance. The artist had a way of exposing the figure in a light that was pleasantly comfortable.

The ‘ideal’ in body image has changed as fashions have changed. Men and women have at times been preoccupied with size and colour and the distortion of the figure's natural form. These fashioning's and manipulation of the figure have given society its ideals.

It is much easier to put on someone else’s identity, especially after being confronted with a generic standard on a regular basis, than it is to assume one’s own and accept our indifference. It is also lost through fear, fear of who we really are and look like and are embarrassed to be, as it may not conform to the ideal.

When addressing the female figure, and contextually the female condition, the work and practice of John Currin is a pertinent example to position this discussion.
The positioning and hyper-enactment that these figures display, push sexualisation to a limit that is to some discomforting. However Currin is not so much painting an image of an ideal as much as he is painting a ‘human behaviour.’

He uses relatable imagery and familiar painting techniques that are both hyped up to a point of extreme. As if to make mockery of the female’s obsession with self-image, he applies methods that bring the joke back into serious context. We think the ‘ideal’ is being challenged, but a mud like quality of paint that attacks the women’s face counteracts this. The patient detailing of paintwork nulls the
perversity of over-exaggerated female parts, and the purposeful wrongness of proportion makes non-literal the blatancy of the context.

The extreme contradicting methods (fake with real,) pull his images out of common territory, skewing our perception of meaning to image. We come to read the image differently. This clever complimenting of elements lets us view the serious through imagery of the comic.

Currin enjoys dissecting the nature of the human condition; the fake and pretentious resolves itself out of the real and natural. In today’s social context, what is real of the female figure can be supplanted by fictitious motives and qualities.

‘Even Currin’s most obviously satirical depictions of women are now plausibly read as critical reflections on the excess and obsession with vanity that have come to characterize so much of contemporary American culture.”

A different type of figure

The functioning of the figure in its diverse operations has flooded our visual stimuli to the point we now have become well and truly accustomed to its presence and behaviours. As a result we have developed a sense of boredom and incuriousness towards the representation of the figure. As a general rule, we like it when we ‘don’t know what to expect.’ However the figure in art has had its expectations met. It has been worn so much that it is at risk of being out dated. For the figure to be reinvented, this boredom we have incurred as a result of the figures overuse, is essential in provoking new ideas.

With my self-portrait explorations I came to a point of boredom. They had reached their potential in the format I was using. I now had to take them out of the obvious state of self-portrait and reposition them to be more illusive. This was considered through a fashioning together of different identities. My intention was to visualise a more imagined portrayal of self than a physical one.

17 (Norman Bryson. Alison M. Gingeras) page 40
“There is something exhilaratingly Post Modern in the achievement of a whole composed of disparate parts, which is a form peculiar to the present.”18

The paintings of Gorge Condo were instructive in providing means of pulling on disparate imagery and themes to recreate a new approach to body image. This was becoming apparent in my own works. I discovered visual clues in other genres. I realised that in pulling on these recognisable sources I could formulate a language with which the female figure could steer in directions other than self-portraiture.

My first attempts were quite self-explanatory when figuring out the right balance and combination of imagery. This situated the paintings in the area of ‘transposition,’ an undeniable combination of themes, which served well at first. However I wasn’t infatuated by the purposefulness of juxtaposing imagery. It made too conspicuous the genres that diverted the painting contextually from what it was meant to be. The portrait Making Light of the Situation had underlying themes that made the use of transposed imagery relevant. However the image was rendered too close to the reference. Making it look like a contemporary Madonna.

18 (Danto) page 5
I knew if I was going to be more astute about merging genres together to formulate my own language that I had to tone down the obvious point of references. They needed to be ‘undercover.’
I surveyed the representation of the figure through broader genres such as romance novel art, comic and pulp art, medieval manuscripts, mythological representation and naive art. This provided me with a diverse visual library of the figure and from it I gained a greater understanding and appreciation of the figure’s alternative representations.

Each genre in art performs according to its prescribed audience. Not everyone will enjoy a comic sketch and likewise not all will appreciate the painted cover of a romance novel. The majority understand that these genres are specifically aimed at viewers with their acquired taste. It is as if each genre is its own culture. People inside that culture understand its diversities and can speak its language. Anyone outside that culture cannot communicate with it or relate to it as easily as they are yet to be acclimatised.

These individual genres communicate in the same way, they speak to themselves and those of their culture, but not to others outside of their culture. Their operations stay within the boundaries lines. Yet what happens when the boundaries of these genres/cultures gets disturbed? When one culture invades and inhabits the other and where recognisable languages appear in unfamiliar context. The language is recognisable but not understood, grammar is confused and therefore destabilises the context of the imagery.

The challenge was to court the boundaries of these genres, pulling on references in each that would build a communicative device unique enough to tell my own story, not recreate one that already exists.

What helped diversify and confuse the boundaries was implementing other various sources that were part of my visual library. These were perhaps uncommon practices in the traditional sense of figuration. They fascinated me, as if I were acting rebellious towards some kind of standard in art. My investment into these practices allowed for an understanding of the language these particular sources were operating in.
In terms of the female portrayal, I found it interesting within these diverse conventions the way she has been represented. For example pulp/novel and comic art tend to exaggerate an idea of the human condition, portraying female figures in a pathetic and simplistic manner but also in an idealised sexualised way that lends to the portrayal of the male figure. He gives in to her narcissism yet holds her compliant to his inveigling stature.

The Barbie, how she has gone beyond the generic doll for children and takes on a more adult affiliation, trying so hard to be real but ultimately fake. This adds to the irony of our ‘plastic-fantastic’ culture today. Mass produced images of the ‘Madonna,’ would not assume this kind of representation. However the honour given to her allows her to be exemplified in art with rich symbolism in order to bestow on her adoration and respect.
The classical tradition of religious and mythological art is steeped in narrative. Nowhere else will you find images portrayed in like manner. The represented story gives the image licence to take on a particular persona. Jesus being revealed in glory with polite acquaintance to his surroundings, illuminated to differentiate his character from the rest. Allegorising the story helps the artist be decisive on several accounts, choice of colour, props and symbols, and the overall composition of the image. These methods come together to give the narrative its communicative intent.

Religious imagery has assumed multiple identities; the great painters were commissioned to do such works, illustrations in storybooks and printed images for devoted homes. However the language of this representation is sequestered; the theme is consistent no matter what form it takes and regardless of its diverse approaches, the representation isolates itself to the theme not trespassing beyond the boundaries of that narrative so as not to be misinterpreted. The compositional devices used are consistent with the reading and help with images visual impact.

![Giovanni Battista Gaulli, Christ In Glory, late 17th Century](image1)

![Christ and Peter](image2)

![Giorgio de Chirico, Christ in the Storm, 1914](image3)

![George Condo, Jesus, 2007](image4)

![Carl Bloch, Baptism](image5)

![El Greco, *Pietà,* 1575](image6)

The example of Jesus being depicted on the cross is meant to permeate sobriety in order to articulate the message in full representation of the narrative. This portrayal of narrative does not require oppositional imagery to perform, for
example had humour been added to the visuals of this narrative the intended impact would be compromised.

“If the new language of images were used differently, it would, through its use, confer a new kind of power. Within it we could begin to define our experiences more precisely in areas where words are inadequate.”\textsuperscript{19}

It is this ‘power’ that Berger speaks of that came as a revelation. The individual languages I was looking at operated on one level and within the conventions of their genre. They did not infringe on one another’s territory. However the question I asked myself was what if these languages did act to invade the other? What consequence could that have on the individual operation of visual language, and also what potential could it have towards constructing my own imagery?

Referring to these languages in my work helps the viewer familiarise themselves with themes, motives and emotions. This gives opportunity for the painting to have a tangible presence. Sensitivity was needed in merging these given genres, as I wanted harmonious combinations without confusing the overall meaning of the work. For example if I took too much identity from the comic era, my works would not be able to avoid that one reading, likewise if there was too much association with Renaissance traditions, then it would seem I was imitating works from that period.

The interior themes driving the imagery were an exposing of hidden fears, anxieties and insecurities. These were the provocations to begin a painting. Although particular themes required sobriety, they also needed a sense of equilibrium for the imagery to be visually palatable. In the conceiving a painting I wanted the presentation to be colloquial in form but to also contain areas of uncertainty. In order to do this I looked to combine equal amounts of opposing ideas; comic verses classical, kitsch colour verses natural and fake verses real.

\textsuperscript{19} (Berger) page 33
My intention is not to overtly communicate one particular visual language. It is to filter human characteristics and to challenge perceptions towards identity. In order to do this visual contradictions are required so that the reading of the image is plural.

For example with *Fake Reality* we are not sure how serious the situation is. The figure is abased in her partially exposed state however the candy coloured background combats the intensity of the sickly looking female and is almost inviting.

As the viewer we are confused to know if the image is a joke, or if by looking at the pathetic state of the pose and naturalness of her nakedness whether we are meant to feel some sort of pity. Is she yearning to perhaps be accepted into her environment, which looks like the backdrop for Barbie and Ken, or is she content in her raw foibles.

The intended operations of my paintings are to assimilate ambiguity. The imagery needs to have diversity so that it does not fall into a singular reading. Like a musical instrument, if a single note is played it makes a solo melody and that is the only sound that can be registered. However if other notes are played with it to make up a full chord the singular note gets lost within other harmonies, therefore deeper listening is required to hear individual sounds. The combination of imagery in my work not only deepens the visual experience, it aligns emotional responses so that a variety of audiences get to participate in
its performance. For example if seriousness is filtered through the veneers of the comic then the message will be more accessible.

The co-opting of diverse imagery was purposeful to the narrative as the ideas I was dealing with included opposite sentiments, emotions that counteracted one another. For example if the sentiment of jealousy were proposed in the painting, the counteracting sentiment would be contentment.

The make-up of an individual contends with not just one emotion, but also all emotions in continual flux. The existence of one emotion makes it possible its opposite; if you are happy it is because you are aware of the absence of sadness. This is exemplified in my work by contending with these diversities, the pure verses tainted, using pastel colours like that of a children’s crayon set representing childlike purity, against disturbed and contorted figures. This exposes the continual push and pull of character that is the make up of the individual as a holistic entity.

To provoke a sustained reaction it is important to confuse the normal reading of the identifiable. For example in No Longer Hidden, we relate to the image as a representation of the female figure, however it is not what is familiar in the traditional sense, like that of the renaissance nudes, nor does it confer to pulp or comic readings. The colour is also challenged being uncommon; we are unable to recognise if the figure is fake or real. We are unable to ground the work regardless of its familiar components, the figure remains unsituated, orbiting in limbo. Having this discombobulation of disrupted imagery we are now coerced into interpreting the image through our own lens.
There is a food tasting test where a person gets blindfolded and is given common food or flavours to taste to see if they can recognise them. The food presented isn’t in its natural form so the contestant's kinesthetic's are confused. These items are common to the human palette however taking the visuals away shocks the senses and disorients their ability to perceive the item, even the most familiar of products can be incorrectly identified.

The type of imagery intended in my paintings is just this, a disarming of our common sensibilities towards common appearances, to reformat our palette in accordance with an introduction of uncertain familiarities.
The portrait of Self

The underlying context of my work is self-portraiture, or more accurately, the portrayal of self. Many artists have painted themselves in the conventional format of the self-portrait. Renowned painter Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn was prolific in this particular practice.

Rembrandt, *Self Portrait*, 1659
Oil on canvas 84.5 x 66 cm

Rembrandt, *Self Portrait at an Early Age*, 1628 Oil on panel

*Self Portrait*, oil on canvas, 1661

*Rembrandt as a Young Man* 
Oil on wood, 1630-35
I have never been interested in the explicit rendition of the painted self-portrait. The palpable act however of painting oneself gives the artist an instant connectedness to the work, the time spent painting the portrait is time spent dwelling on the self’s physical appearance, which can be confronting and intimidating. This is perhaps where the investment lies.

It is a precarious thing choosing to paint oneself. I don’t think any artist decides to paint him or herself for the sake of retaining the image, but perhaps out of a tentative fascination with being ‘exposed.’ In the profession of counselling, and a practice within the Catholic faith, the act of confession brings a sense of liberation and to a degree, absolution. The ‘exposure’ of their inner thoughts and desires in turn brings healing to the circumstance and frees the individual from mental anxieties. The processes in my work are an unravelling of these clandestine affairs. The painting concerns itself with the ‘reworking of self,’ exposing irrational internal conditions and positioning them in conclusive ways on the canvas in a manner that hopes to resolves their interior discrepancies.

‘Self-portrait’ changed for me when I extended its operations beyond the traditional format. Instead of having multiple versions of myself, I wanted to expose a continuous production of the interior condition. Therefore the figures physical appearance could take on a variation of characters while at the same time still representing the ‘self’.

In painting my interiority I was conjuring up a conflict of intentions, emotions, behaviours and fears. The make up of the human condition has plenty of positive considerations; we have enjoyment, pleasure and affection, however coinciding with that we are consumed by stressful, worrisome and anxious cogitations. These conditions occupy our interior world and impose visual repercussions to our exterior world. For example if someone is self-conscious they usually hold their composure in a particular way that makes apparent to others their insecurity.
When we communicate with others, it is somehow easy to tell if someone is lying, and knowing people who have such characters renders them to be fictitious. I felt the same about my painting. For the work to have vivacity, vigour and authenticity, it couldn't be fraudulent; it had to be focused on the simplicity of image and paint regardless of its visual consequences.
Composition

Confining my images to a single female portrait in a landscape background allowed for indistinct themes to become apparent. The landscape helps compliment the narrative. Just as there is a consistency of the female figure, having the same consistency with the background condenses and signifies the themes.

Artist Hernan Bas exemplifies this in his paintings; continually situating the figure amongst nature makes evident his motives. Had he incorporated both genders and multiple settings in his works the interior themes would not be apparent, but we are led in to the sensual behaviour of the work through continuous visual pleading.

Hernan Bas, Night Fishing
Mixed media on linen over panel, 2007

Hernan Bas, Downhill at Dusk, 2013

Hernan Bas, Here’s the story, 2014
Nature is symbolic for ‘escapism.’ For me it is where I forget about the worries of the world and withdraw to a pensive environment. This is where painting the figures in landscape started. The figure contained worldly concerns and tensions of a personal nature and the landscape was a place of solitude and serenity, these opposites helped bring the narrative into equilibrium.

The context of the figure is in dispute over a real and fake world, a real and fake identity. These contradictions are at play in the figure. At times her body is painted to prove her ‘reality,’ yet there are moments that counteract this, her Barbie or comic features, statuesque form and at times a shine to suggest a plastic exterior. All contribute to the debate on whether she is fake or real. What the backdrop of the landscape does is to give an unquestionable reality for the implications in the figure to bounce off.

Untitled #28, oil on canvas, 1350x1750cm, 2016
**Untitled #24**, oil on canvas, 1350x1750cm, 2016

**View Point**, oil on canvas, 1350x1750cm, 2016
‘State of being,’ the painting and the person

Naturally, oil on canvas, 1350x1750cm, 2017
Standing Firm, oil on canvas, 1380x1800cm, 2016
The individual processes, understanding the context and the imagery and realising the language of paint, all of this have been synthesized within the project. The persistence of communicating better with the paint and being more explorative with the figure have both married together, the paint now informs the figure and the figure the paint.

My painting project has been a coming together of different events. Where it is positioned visually borrows from the methodology of George Condo bringing diverse genres together to hybridise figurative painting. Contextually the work explores identity through the practice of self-portraiture.

The process of finding one self in a flippant and fictitious world demands the ‘self’ to be unveiled, exposed, and even humiliated for it to be reconditioned. This requirement is an unendearing venture for any individual within the corporate body, but also for those in the world of painting. Proposing works that are of interiority in the form of figuration reopens the voluminous discussions of self-portraiture, and in the case of this project a discourse more boorish, the repetitive commandeered disquisition of feminism, to only ask myself “what is the point of contributing to this superfluous belligerency?”

The practice of self-portraiture is a bold, icky, taboo and yet liberating challenge to take on. Many of our art museums and gallery walls fail to present us portraits of self. They either are portraits of another or a varied selection of art genres. Perhaps for this very reason self-portraiture is not a common practice and is seemingly unfashionable. This opens the genre to greater potential. It is recently untrodden territory. The undiscovered and undisclosed possibilities in self-portraiture, along with the fact this genre pushes buttons, is all the more reason to pursue it.

Being able to position ones identity in contention and opposition towards the constraints of society is what I have realised with these works. The parallels of the profession of painting and the functioning of self are intrinsically related. Painting for me transitioned from excelling in technical ability, trying to be the best to exceed in its superficial aesthetic, and comparing it to practitioners who also operate this way; realising paints qualitative operations, its infinite communicative abilities. Likewise the pursuit of self as a result of this master's project has ceased in its compliance to social expectations and its competitiveness. It now operates as a stripping off of falsehoods and an accepting of disparities good and bad that make up the conclusive nature of self, an endeavour that will always be informative of my practice.
Fearless, oil on canvas, 1350x1750cm, 2016
Untitled #30, oil on canvas, 1350x1750cm, 2017
Untitled #31, oil on canvas, 1350x1750cm, 2017
Loner, oil on canvas, 1350x1750cm, 2017
Afloat, oil on canvas, 1350x1750cm, 2017
Bibliography


Catalogue of Portraits
Declaration

Name of candidate: Yvonne Abercrombie

This Thesis/Dissertation/Research Project entitled:

Self Discovery through Figurative Painting

is submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the Unitec degree of Master of Design

Principal Supervisor: Dr Leon Tan

Associate Supervisor/s: Richard Fahey

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Full name of author: Yvonne Abercrombie

Full title of thesis/dissertation/research project ('the work'):
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