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Original Citation

Howey, Barbara (2004) Critical Autobiography and Painting Practice. In: Narrative, Memory & Identity: Theoretical and Methodological Issues. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 23-36.

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2 Critical Autobiography and Painting Practice

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Abstract

In 2000 I completed a PhD in Creative practice (painting) which had a contextualising thesis as part of the submission. My paintings at this time were based upon issues of memory and the text presented a narrative of the construction of the work but also examined how I was constructed by the work (both through the painting and writing). The tension between the past and what we make of it was central to my argument about the creative self in painting and so the title of this conference is very apt to the issues I was (and still am) dealing with both in my painting and writing. This writing also arose out of a feminist desire to unearth, in the words of Janet Wolff, 'buried selves' and to render visible the threads which connect experience and biography with intellectual work (Wolff, 1994, p.15).

In this paper I will seek to address what theoretical and methodological issues I adopted in my Creative Practice PhD. In my thesis I established a triangulated research model of Self/Painting Practice/Social Practice. The first part of this paper will set out the model and the second part will develop it in relation to the production, intentions and form of the paintings themselves. A version of this paper was published in the *Journal of Visual Art Practice* Vol.1, No.3.

Self

Throughout this paper I refer to the 'self', myself, and the 'self within the act of painting'. By the self I mean the embodied reality of being gendered female as a self constituted through memories of past experiences that inform a project: the ongoing construction of my own sense of self, my identity as a painter. Morwenna Griffiths (Griffiths, 1995) has argued that Western philosophic systems of self have been constructed on masculine concepts of rationality and objectivity which are based on exclusion (of women, children, other cultures, emotions, relationships and personal experience). She argues for a philosophy of self which more accurately reflects the fabric of interconnected relationships that signal a female relationship to the world. This, in her argument, operates around an interconnectedness and plurality where language,

values, personal experiences and relationships with others overlap and are not separated off.

The proposal is that self (the self, the individual) is constrained by overlapping, various communities, each of which is itself changing. Such plurality is the norm, not the exception. (Griffiths, 1995, p.93)

This idea of female psychosocial life as one of interconnectedness and overlapping is also in the work of psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow (Chodorow, 1995). She argues that girls form closer bonds with their mothers which are not severed at the Oedipal stage, as is the case for boys, and thus women's relations to the world is formed by closeness or empathy to others and to the world. The relationship of mother and daughter are primary identifications, and continued bondedness is also strongly marked in the writing of Luce Irigaray (Irigaray, 2001). My own painting project has also been a search to place the mother/daughter relationship within the picture surface, but also to identify how this relationship is expressed within the embodied relationship to process and materials. This can be expressed in psychoanalytic terms, as the relationship of self to other, which I shall develop later in this paper.

I would argue that the sense of self is continually being reappraised and reconstituted and this concept of identity is central to my project, specifically in relation to the painting process as part of this self-creation. In order to access this relationship, I include autobiography as part of my methodology. By autobiography I do not mean a stream-of-consciousness approach, but offer up what feminist philosopher Morwenna Griffiths has termed "critical autobiography".

The term is needed to distinguish such writing from standard autobiography, because of the strength of the current cultural norms that 'autobiography' should be a personal, confessional, individualistic, atheoretical and non-political linear narrative of a life. "Critical autobiography", in contrast, makes use of individual experience, theory, and a process of reflection and rethinking, which includes attention to politically situated perspectives. (Griffiths, 1995, p.70)

In this paper I have drawn from Griffiths' definition of what constitutes a 'critical autobiography'. She lays stress on individual experience which is examined in relation to 'theory', 'a process of reflection', paying 'attention to politically situated perspectives' theory, she argues 'is a term which can be used to describe a communal endeavour to understand each other', (Griffiths, 1995, p.67) and this she develops into a methodological principal which 'continue(s) seeking out different perspectives and do(es) not expect stable, unchanging state(s) of knowledge ... In short what is needed is a continual reflection on experience ...' (Griffiths, 1995, p.67). This reflective activity involves examining theoretical perspectives in relation to personal experience

drawn from my journey as a painter. Utilizing this method has meant that I continue to reflect on my own position throughout this paper. The ‘politically’ situated perspectives I have derived from Griffiths’ methodology are linked to class and gender and are woven into the fabric of this text in my autobiographical reflections. In an attempt to make visual certain autobiographical themes within my painting, I have used photographic fragments from my family album, textile prints and collaged elements from selected films. This process is developed later on in the paper.

Janet Wolff, a feminist cultural critic, argues for a personal, autobiographic and memoiristic voice within the academy. She states that “the separation of the academic and the personal is not only artificial, but also damaging” (Wolff, 1995, p.15). She suggests this is because traditional “objective” forms of knowledge are alienating to both author and reader and are a product of a patriarchal culture. As a part-time lecturer within an art school I have found that this type of academic writing is one from which many art students feel particularly excluded. Wolff also argues that the binary positioning of academic vs autobiographical writing is an oversimplification, in that:

... issues which are normally presented as purely academic matters are more than likely to originate in, and remain connected with, biographical and subjective concerns. (Wolff, 1995, p.14)

This is particularly true of certain types of creative practice and is a point I strive to develop in relation to my own working practice. My work is tempered both by autobiographic material and intellectual debates. Hence my insistence on positioning myself through autobiography as an embodied reality in my painting and writing, and why my aim is to realign the practitioner and the practice as central to the argument. It is here that the painting, both as process and as material, can be argued as interaction between the self, the history of the self, and the position of the self within a social history. (In this case that history interacts with gender and with social background.) Within this paper, such problematising of the gendered self, within the visual arts, is explored via the painting as palimpsest of that personal history, the decorative arts, and the fine arts.

Griffiths and Wolff and in bringing the speaking self (the “I”) and the lived self (the autobiography) together, articulate the position that I inhabit as a writer/painter, one that I seek to problematise and interrogate. The starting point for this investigation is that personal experience can be considered as part of the artists’ psychic material, the relationship between self and object. My exploration of this mental process therefore operates within a theoretical framework based within phenomenology. Psychoanalysis is part of that framework in so far as it is an explanatory model that allows the self to become the subject of debate. The unconscious self is more problematic to define. It

could be asked, how can unconscious processes be identified by the subject (myself) if they are unconscious? I argue that however, a close examination of my working process provides evidence to suggest that the self is tempered and challenged through unconscious processes. These processes form and produce the living dynamic which is a painting. I have chosen to articulate these processes through the methodologies that Michel Foucault refers to as “Technologies of the Self” (Foucault, 1988), processes he identified as those by which we come to know and understand ourselves. “Critical autobiography” is one way of articulating this and I have used various aspects of psychoanalysis as, arguably, the most influential twentieth century “technology of the self”.

Painting Practice

Painting forms the crux of the triangulated model of self/painting practice/social practice. It is here, in the embodied relation to processes, motivation and ideas that go towards the making of a painting, that the self becomes part of the outside world in terms of the object (painting). I argue that painting is integral to ideas of self and social practice and that these aspects are not finally separable, but rather are interdependent, forming what Griffiths so aptly called a “web of identity” (Griffiths, 1995).

The metaphor of a web is useful in understanding both ‘becoming’ and ‘agency’ (with ‘web’ understood here as tapestry, weaving, crochet and lace, rather than as a spider’s web). (Griffiths, 1995, p.179)

This metaphor of self as an interconnecting mesh of strands (painting/self/social practice) is also one that resonates with my painting practice, in that it engages with aspects of weaving, crochet and lace making as part of the formal and conceptual apparatus which informs the process, production and meaning of the work.

In my PhD I offer a model which describes the painting process and the feelings inherent in making the work and reflections upon it. I also give a contextual account of the debates which encompass the work. I pay attention to the formal structure and organisation of my own painting and argue that the formal apparatus is closely linked with the developments in my sense of identity, in terms of choice of subject matter and methods. I also argue, in terms of my own work, for a critical painting practice which uses various formal strategies (figurative, juxtaposition, collage, colour, space, tactility), to engage with ideas such as class, gender, embodiment, memory. Importantly, I stress that these formal strategies are mechanisms by which I engage with ideas and are tightly bound into the chosen form of the work. Yve-Alain Bois, (Bois,

1993) among others (Heywood and Sandywell, 1999) has redirected critical attention away from what he sees as the over dependence on semiotic analysis to an understanding of the ideological function of form in painting:

European formalism not only did not deny content, did not make content a conditional and detachable element of the work, but, on the contrary, strove to attribute deep ideological meaning to form itself. It contrasted this conception of form to the simplistic realist view of it as some sort of embellishment of the content, a decorative accessory lacking any ideological meaning of its own.

(Bakhtin in Bois, 1993, p.xviii)

Painting is also practice in terms of social and cultural interaction which I term (after Foucault) “social practice”, in which cultural exchange forms an important part. This includes the autobiographical, which gives voice to aspects of the self in terms of motivation and development.

Social Practice

Foucault’s later writing (Foucault, 1990) sought to locate the self, as a historically specific self, as site for the production of change and transformation. This fluctuating boundary is where personal identity engages with the social self in relation to writing and painting as a social practice. Whilst intimately tied into personal identity, painting is also a social practice which engages with the world of ideas, debates and other artists’ work. In this later work Foucault argues that the self can be productive of personal change and transformation through self knowledge.

My objective for more than twenty-five years has been to sketch out a history of the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge about themselves: economics, biology, psychiatry, medicine, and penology. The main point is not to accept this knowledge at face value but to analyse these so-called sciences as very specific “truth games” related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves.

As a context, we must understand that there are four major types of these “technologies”, each a matrix of practical reason: (1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

(Foucault, 1988, pp.17-18)

Foucault's later work (Foucault, 1988) marked a development away from the idea that power relationships consist of power being enacted upon "docile bodies". It suggested that power relations are more complex and dynamic than his earlier ideas may have suggested. This later work explores how the confession, amongst other "technologies of the self" (Christian confession, diaries, memoirs), marked one area of self knowledge and self definition.

Patrick Hutton argues that psychoanalysis is a modern technology of self care.

Whereas Freud asks how our past experiences shape our lives in the present, ... Past Experiences, Foucault argues, do not shape us irrevocably, as Freud believed. Rather, we continually reshape our past creations to conform to our present, creative needs. (Hutton, 1988, p.137)

This tension between the past and what we make of it is central to my argument about the creative self in painting. How I write and paint are shaped and edited in terms of what is useful to the creative project in hand. In other words, I reconstitute myself/identity through painting and writing. The text takes the form of "critical autobiography" in which my development is described and theorised.

Foucault sees this work of the construction of the self as a factor in social practice.

Around the care of the self there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself and communication with others were linked together. Here we touch on one of the most important aspects of this activity devoted to oneself: it constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice. (Foucault, 1988, pp.17-18)

This self as social practice as Foucault argues, pivots around communication of the self through speaking and writing. In writing about myself I have had to ask what, about myself and about my past, do I want to offer up for public scrutiny and why? After all, some memories would not be relevant to the task in hand. Self as social practice is also memoir. I use autobiographic fragments to elucidate aspects of the self in relation to my development as a social being, and to the paintings which mark that development. Lynne Segal remarked that such practice provides an insight into "internal" and "external realities" that can be presented as a story of your own scripting in which the present can be given meaning in terms of the past.

Memories present themselves through narratives that make sense in the present, modifying individual events and assigning them different meanings at different times. (Segal, 1999, p.134)

Wolff argues that the memoiristic fragment needs to “stand for something beyond itself, to be somehow typical of a moment in cultural history” and not to be “idiosyncratic, and lead nowhere” (Wolff, 1995, p.16). This is where the need to carefully edit and consider autobiographical material is essential. My own memoiristic fragments have been chosen with a view to position myself within a context that illuminates issues around creativity, gender and class. These are part of the cultural production of the self and are historically specific and as such could have reverberations with other lives and “buried selves” (Wolff, 1995, p.17).

A Family Romance

I began painting in my thirties at a time when my mother was dying of cancer. We lived together as an extended family group; mother, father, daughter, son-in-law and grandson. I think everyone in that household felt this arrangement to be a problem but nobody said too much because my mother was so ill. Her increasing frailty horrified and terrified me and painting for me seemed to offer something to work towards that had some hope. She died in hospital - my father and I were with her. Her weight had reduced until there was nothing left of her poor body. Only her smile and intense blue eyes were the same. She had slipped into a state of unconsciousness during the night. I had rung my sister and told her what the nurses said to me “... that my mother was fading ...” I didn’t understand those words. Just before she died she sat up in bed and asked me where my sister was, I told her she was coming and then she laid back and died. During the terror of losing her I realised that her dying moments had appeared so simple and such an easy transition from life to death. It was the living that was the difficult task. Her struggle over those last two years, from the onset of secondary cancer, had been terrible. The pain, the diets, the hospital visits, the appalling drugs, the indignities and the awful operations. And all through this the dreadful silence ... the not speaking of it. My sister arrived at the hospital shortly after my mother died. In a way it is difficult to admit to myself I had not wanted my sister or my father to be with my mother when she died. I wanted to be the only one there. I did not want to share her. I never did. When my sister was born I was intensely jealous of her. I was told to look after her and to love her. I tried and I did. We became inseparable and so close we could almost read each other’s minds, but underneath lay this terrible jealous resentment.

I offer this up as a way of signalling how the disease that dominated the last fifteen years of my mother’s life had a psychological effect on her and on all of the people who loved her. Her life and illness have burned a psychic imprint onto me, the repercussions of which are evidenced in my life and work,

the extent and depth of which I can barely grasp. This story also tells of my underlying possessiveness for my mother's love. Nancy Chodorow discusses the way some girls relate to their mothers as a continually unresolved Oedipal fixation, sometimes for the whole of their lives.

... psychoanalysts emphasise how, in contrast to males, the female Oedipal crisis is not resolved in the same absolute way. A girl cannot and does not completely reject her mother in favour of men, but continues her relationship of dependence upon and attachment to her ... Deutsch suggests that a girl wavers in a "bisexual triangle" throughout her childhood and into puberty, normally making a very tentative resolution in favour of her father, but in such a way that issues of separation from and attachment to her mother remain important throughout a woman's life. (Chodorow, 1995, p.205)

The analysis of autobiography through the lens of psychoanalysis is part of my methodological process. Self analysis is a part of "critical autobiography" in that it is a process of reflection on elements of autobiographic material, those elements I have chosen to use as a mechanism for revealing insights into the creative process. I recognise that much of what Chodorow offers in this analysis gives a possible insight into my own revisiting of the site of my mother's memory. This story goes some way to explain the trigger for my creative journey and why I am still involved in making paintings around the subject of mother/daughter bonds. It also suggests why I have chosen to theorise my work within the constraints of certain psychoanalytic positions which foreground the mother as an important player in the formation of creativity (Chodorow, Irigaray, Milner).

Enacting Memory

The question for me was how I might make present in my painting aspects of my past and my relationship to my mother. After the death of my father I was going through an old suitcase stuffed full of family photographs dating back to when my parents were young, tracing their meeting and marriage and the children they had together. Many of my mother were taken by my father in their early years. There were a range of family portraits ranging from quite formal compositions to informal, more spontaneous groups. What occurred to me in looking at these images was how little they captured what I felt and knew about my past. As Barthes commented in *Camera Lucida*, when he was searching for an image of his mother that might convey his personal remembrance of her:

Photography thereby compelled me to perform a painful labor: straining towards the essence of her identity, I was struggling among images partially true, and

therefore totally false. To say, confronted with another, "That's not the way she was at all". (Barthes, 1980, p.66)

Barthes argues that there is both a cultural meaning to a visual image "studium" and a private meaning "punctum" (Barthes, 1980, p.26). The play between personal memory and cultural memory around images of my maternal family, mother, daughter, sister, aunt and grandmother and later images which function as maternal surrogates taken from film, is a subject that has dominated my paintings from 1998 to the present day.

These paintings are not real memories; they stage the idea of memory. This staging of memory works differently from the unconscious process of memory acting upon a painter's subconscious intentions. Even the memories that have been evoked in the autobiographic writing, which are part of the fabric of this text, are conscious narrative devices to enable me to stage my personal history and to give that history a voice. The photographs act as devices for my paintings, for representing ideas around memory in that they capture on paper, through the use of photographic emulsion, a visible trace of a frozen moment of the past. I wanted to explore the idea of loss and memory in relation to these images of my family and my past. As Sontag argued the family photograph is, in many cases, all the evidence that is left of those familial ties:

Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. A family's photograph album is generally about the extended family - and often, is all that remains of it. (Sontag, 1977, p.9)

The initial idea began to form around trying to articulate the feeling that who you were is incapable of being grasped and reconstituted in the present. It evades, it is partial; it is a fragment, a trace that is left. When I look at these old photographs, although many of them have images of me in them, I can remember nothing about the instant in which they were taken, although I can tell a story around them.

And as the years go by after the death of my mother, I can still feel her with me but her image in a photograph is nearly all that remains of her physical presence apart from an old garment of hers which I keep in a wardrobe.

The paintings *Mum, 1948* and *Mum and Me, 1955* are part of the series based on family photographs (see Figures 1 and 2). They must have been taken by my father. My mother is well aware of the camera and is posed with the admiring gaze of my father in mind. She was a caring mother who wanted everything to be right and could be very strict. I adored her.

Figure 1 Mum, 1948



Figure 2 Mum and Me, 1955



The process that I used is an attempt to render the idea of loss as it evolved over a series of paintings. It involved first under painting a coloured ground. Initially I used a patchwork of complementary colours, bright pinks and greens, which would produce an optical disturbance so that the ground would fluctuate and fizz and confuse the gaze. I then moved on to collaged fragments of 1940's and 1950's textile prints which worked to locate the work to a moment in time. The over-painting was white onto which I projected an image from a photograph which was transferred onto the surface by scoring into the wet paint surface with small convoluted gestures, like knitting, crochet or lace stitches. The idea of these marks was to suggest aspects of women's work which referred to domestic chores and to labour intense activity. I remember my mother knitting jumpers for my sister and for me, which were comforting like home-made cakes. In these paintings I wanted to create a spatial

ambiguity, a disturbance between figure and ground. This was an attempt to find a formal descriptor for engaging with issues of memory and loss. I wanted the surface to act as a metaphor for these absences. The process of creating a question mark around perception, memory and desire dominated this series of paintings. I also wanted to ground my own social history within the fabric of the painted surface as 'social fabric', as part of the 'web of identity' and the 'web' of the painted surface itself, hence my use of family photographs.

The painting *Fragment* based on a family snap (see Figure 3), is the only painting which has my father in it. My mother, my father, my aunt and I are seated on the grass. Everyone is dressed in Sunday best. Everyone seems happy. I made this painting just after the death of my father. My mother and father are seated together poised and smiling. My father was from Belfast but moved away because of the "troubles" and to escape working in a paint factory, which is what his mother had lined up for him. My father then joined the RAF and spent the rest of his life disconnected from his birthplace, only going back to visit his parents occasionally. He was lost when my mother died.

Figure 3 **Fragment**



My mother was from Cardiff and had lived in a large council house on the Manachty Road. My grandfather was a steeplejack. He played the violin and

had run a dance band in his spare time. My grandmother was the youngest of twelve children and had to wash and clean for the whole family. She had a sharp wit and temper and loved books. She gave me my first novel to read, *Adam Bede* by George Elliot. As a young family we would spend time with my mother's family even though there were underlying tensions between them which would often erupt into violent arguments. My aunt is seated, looking stylish in a fresh crisp summer frock and high heels with me sitting on her knee. My aunt was a gifted singer and an amateur painter, she had a career as a draughtswoman, unusual in those days. She was quite a bohemian, she posed "nude" at the art school life class and enraged my grandfather. When she got pregnant with twins as an unmarried girl he threw her out of their home.

This autobiographical background marks the circumscribed social expectations of the lives of my family members and the struggle to resist and transcend those limitations through books, music, art and relocation. The role model of my aunt as an independent woman and the pleasure gained through books and art have all left their trace upon my own strivings to make art and to write. Whilst the love my mother gave to me as a child underpins my motivation to signal in my work this debt. The surface/ground of the paintings has these histories symbolically embedded in it whilst the writing extrapolates these histories, these various "buried selves" from a silent and disappearing past. Thus the paintings become both a personal and public symbolic act of love and reparation when placed within the social context of the gallery.

Notes

Gender and painting has been identified as a troubled nexus within feminist scholarship see:

Pollock, Griselda, Painting, 'Feminism and History', in *Destabilizing Theory*, Phillips, A. and Barrett, M. (eds) Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, pp.138-176

Battersby, C., *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, London, The Women's Press, 1989.

Betterton, R., *An Intimate Distance - Women Artists and the Body*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996.

Paul Crowther's exegesis on the works of Merleau-Ponty encapsulates part of my methodological intention in terms of the link between embodiment, personal experience and aesthetic form.

The contents of the embodied subject's perception and consciousness are stylised: that is they are given unique inflections by virtue of being absorbed into a unique personal history.

(Crowther, Paul, *Art and Embodiment - From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, pp.200-201)

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