Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

A Project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Nicole Slatter
BEd, BA (Hons), MCA (Res),

School of Art
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University

September 2015
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the choose an item is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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ABSTRACT

Identifying with the field of representational painting, this project investigates the embedded complexities in urban landscape that can be experienced and communicated to provide a greater understanding of place. Through two main foci: articulations of place and contemporary landscape painting, I aim to question how the experiences of place can contribute to the construction of evocative spaces through urban landscape painting.

The urban and suburban places I choose as focus in this project are ones that are familiar, experienced, passed through and lived in. They can be at times digressive and changing in either incremental ways or dramatic unexpected transitions. My interest in the urban landscape originates from my own tactile experiences of time spent in these places both in an early part of my life and in current daily experience.

Within this project I reference examples by contemporary and historical artists who use painting and photography to explore representations of place, including Pierre Huyghe, Roni Horn, Antonio López García and George Shaw. The consideration of visual representation of place through painting has required an understanding of facture and materiality to unfold evocative practical, poetic and psychological connections. My principal concerns with place are based in experience, memory, feeling and tactile interaction. I use painting to explore these themes through elements such as scale, composition, tonality and colour, manipulating the material of paint to unfold the non-physical and physical experience of place.

I draw on the research of social anthropologists, philosophers, theorists and writers to delineate the broad possibilities of place; particularly how understandings of place impact identity and belonging in a rapidly changing world. The understanding of place in contemporary and historical thought is defined through the time spent in, and the embedded experiences of place. Personal experience and collective societal understandings of urban place are vital to the tactile understandings elaborated in this project.

The writing of aesthetic theorist and architect Lars Spuybroek has been a key influence in terms of sensing and feeling the urban environment through the conceptual and physical construction of images to create sympathies with the urban landscape. In this project I particularly focus on how the perceptible and fragile complexities of our experience of being in an urban landscape can be mediated. I represent and manipulate the known experiences of a place shifting emphasis between the physical objective facts of the space and subjective remembered experiences of time spent in the space.

This creative project uses the medium of paint to investigate and provide insights into the representation of place through four series of paintings that explore the complex aspects of place. These series provide the basis for exploring and articulating notions of place to create original understandings of the complex matterings of place in the genre of contemporary representational landscape painting.
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
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Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
Nicole Slatter: Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

**Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1 - Witnessing Urban Place – <em>Drift</em></th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Defining place.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 ‘Suburban time’.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Definitions of landscape and representational painting.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Lars Spuybroek and the ‘infinitely textured universe’.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Attunement, projected empathy and tactile surface.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2 – Perceiving Change – <em>Bowling club (a case study)</em></th>
<th>29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Pierre Huyghe’s complex representation and experience of place.</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Painting time with López García.</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Facture, fragment and Friedrich Schlegel’s ‘forever becoming’.</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Collective memory and changing place.</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 3 – Fragmented Place – <em>Interval</em></th>
<th>48</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 My use of metonymy and motif.</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Shared memory of place and object.</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 The porosity of Walter Benjamin’s city.</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Paintings the impermanence of place.</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4 – Destabilizing Familiarity – <em>Confluence and Influence</em></th>
<th>68</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Using the diptych.</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 The retraceable action of painting.</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 My use of darkness and lightness.</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Time and space for the viewer.</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 The resonance of vision and touch, figure and ground.</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion | 87 |

References | 90 |

Table of Images | 95 |

Appendix | 101 |
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
At first consideration, the word ‘place’ seems a simple concept describing the here, the there or the somewhere. As the saying attributed to the polymath Benjamin Franklin goes, ‘a place for everything and everything in its place’ (Kenning 2014), which suggests this apparently simple word can be all encompassing. The potential for such total inclusivity makes place a very complicated concept with multilayered meanings. The human experience of the concept and landscape of place provides personal and collective histories and memories. These experiences of place are at once solid and ephemeral, real and imagined, and contribute to the complexity of place.

This research project brings together two main fields of inquiry: contemporary articulations of place and the field of contemporary representational painting. In this project, I aim to question how the experiences of place can contribute to the construction of emotionally evocative spaces in urban landscape painting. In order to isolate and extend urban place through painting, I represent and manipulate the known experiences of a place, shifting emphasis between the physical objective facts of the space and the subjective recollection of time spent in that place.

The fields of knowledge pertaining to both place and landscape painting are important in contextualising how this painting project addresses my main research question: *In what ways can knowledge, histories and memory of place contribute to constructing new understandings and experiences of urban landscapes through contemporary realist painting?* My focus in the studio practice and the dissertation is on knowing, sensing and feeling, as well as considering how all these things affect the representation of place through painting.

The sorts of urban places and experiences I draw on are varied, and include passages through spaces and over periods of time. By emphasising the physical passages through a place, I build associations with the human interactions and familiar occurrences in that place. These familiar occurrences are described by Michael Sheringham (2009) as the everyday, and they constitute places of routine and everyday interaction. Other places have a ‘neither here nor there’ feeling of abandonment or underuse, the sort of place that Marc Auge describes as a non-place1 (Auge 2008). Some of the experiences of these places are of an ephemeral nature and, as such, prove more of a challenge to visualise or evoke through painting. It is this challenge of embedding time, experience and a proliferation of narratives that I explore in this representational landscape project.

Throughout the project, I draw on the idea of place as a known territory of experience, one in which the social processes of human interaction play a crucial role. Geographer Edward Relph suggests that places ‘are constructed in our memories and affections through repeated encounters and complex associations’ (Relph 1976, p.26). These key attentions to place are paralleled with the material feel of a place, the experiences within the place, and how the combination of these things can influence representations of place. I contend that paintings can transfer a sensorial and embodied experience that involves the experiences and memories of the artist and the viewer, as well as the physical attributes of the place being represented.

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1 Marc Auge (2008) coined the term ‘non-place’ to refer to areas of transience, spaces that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as places.
I note the elusiveness of the term ‘place’ is widely acknowledged in all contemporary disciplines. Place has all sorts of generic qualities and associated synonyms as well as having a wide range of metaphorical meanings (Bird, et al. 2012). I choose to use the term ‘place’ for this project because of the possible connections across disciplines and meanings and, like geographer David Harvey, I feel that the ‘ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning might be advantageous’ (Harvey cited in Bird, et al. 2012, p.4).

The philosopher Martin Heidegger’s determination that communities are materially and physically ingrained in particular places through dwelling (Heidegger and Stambaugh 1996), and sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s construction of place as material artefact (Lefebvre 1991), have been important considerations in this project. Extensive discussions of place as ‘embedded’ space by many philosophers and theorists are acknowledged (Relph 1976; Heidegger 1996; Tuan 1977), but not expanded on here, in favour of an emphasis on the discussion of painting. At any rate, it is noteworthy that many contemporary theorists, particularly Relph, agree that place is important to identity, especially in a world where borders and territories are shifting, but where understanding the experience of place as rooted and tactile is equally important.

In this project, I refer to the digressive character of suburban space, by which I mean the diverse, sprawling and constantly changing nature of these places. This digressive character, and our relationships in and to them, has provided the subject for testing various methods of representation in my paintings. I draw on my experience growing up in the inner suburbs of Perth in Western Australia. Although I have a personal connection to the places that I explore in this project, I strive for a sense of universal understanding. I grew up in a suburban setting and experienced the world through the places and spaces of the suburban environment, which also provides a sense of otherness, a possibility of dread, or a portal to something experientially larger than the physical attributes of the space itself. The academic Michael Sheringham revisits the ideas of Henri Lefebvre to theorise everyday space as a sphere for creativity and underscores how the ‘level of reality’ is characterised by movement and not fixity (Sheringham 2009, p.47). Sheringham interprets Lefebvre’s spatial metaphors of the tension between freedom and constraint, to communicate a sense of the everyday that is not grounded and hard to define, which is simultaneously:

of nature and culture, history and lived experience, individual and social, real and unreal, a place of transition and meeting, interconnections and conflicts, in short a level of reality (Lefebvre cited in Sheringham 2009, p.148; original italics).

In Ordinary Affects, social anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2007) proposes an increased attention to the affective dimensions of the everyday. She argues for an analytical focus on the charged atmospheres of everyday life, coining the term ‘atmospheric attunements’ to refer to the moments when the sense of something in a place becomes tactile (Stewart 2011). Her questioning of the ‘forces [that] come to reside in experiences, conditions, things, dreams, landscapes, imaginaries, and lived sensory moments’ provides an impetus, as well as an approach, for representing the landscape through painting in this research project. Stewart suggests that atmospheric attunements:
are palpable and sensory yet imaginary and uncontained, material yet abstract. They have rhythms, valences, moods, sensations, tempos, and lifespans. They can pull the senses into alert or incite distraction or denial (Stewart 2011, p.1).

I align my project with the innovative approach of Stewart and, in particular, her method of writing culture and the narrative of the everyday. She challenges how we approach ideas of knowledge and power, and serves as an inspiration to my painting of place. By highlighting ‘affect’ in the familiar and less described everyday landscape, and focusing on the intimate and less dramatic events and relationships of place and time, Stewart turns a seemingly mundane site into a rich object of writing. Through this focus on emergence and becoming, she avoids the need to uncover a definitive truth, and instead ‘tries to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique’ (Stewart 2007, p.4). Stewart is a leading proponent of an approach to social anthropology that uses creative strategies and methods to encourage connections to the experience of place. My own project is contextualised by this approach, as well as Lars Spuybroek’s radical aesthetic theories of sympathy – specifically, vital nature and touch. This nexus between the sociological experience of place and contemporary art representations has provided an impetus for this research project.

In this project, I also contextualise the social philosophical influences in Kathleen Stewart’s evocative narrative attunements in space through related historical and theoretical positions. The history of empathy and, specifically, the interpretation of the concept of Einfühlung has been influential to this project as key to engaging viewer experience in the paintings. Stewart’s unravelling of narrative in suburbia is considered in relation to Lars Spuybroek’s contemporary revitalisation of John Ruskin’s notion of living forces. Spuybroek’s attempt to restore a relationship to lively matter by suggesting that sympathy – or understanding of the way things work – develops through the act of ‘doing’ in space (Spuybroek 2011), has been an important influence on this project. Spuybroek reinvigorates a romantic idea of sympathy, calling for an aesthetic experience full of understanding and feeling.

I reference contemporary art theorists and thinkers who relate ideas of contemporary art experience that are accessible and reliant on viewer interactions and experience. In her 2005 essay ‘On the Art of the Future’, Susan Stewart discusses the importance of art’s hypothetical and incomplete characteristic as essential to the conceptual freedom it affords and its capacity to offer ethical orientation. Stewart, in a reconsideration of Kant’s Critique of Judgement, suggests that the task of art is in its ‘general incompleteness’ and that this relies on human interaction and mediation – using aesthetics in ‘sense experience’ and drawing on inter-subjective apprehension (Stewart 2005, p.184). The state of incompleteness and becoming in various forms of representational painting aligns maker and viewer, experience and narrative. The combination of apprehension, sensing and subjectivity contributes to the complexity that constitutes an art experience. Stewart’s proposition still resonates in 2015, and highlights the continuing significance of temporal implications in a contemporary painting practice, where the sense of incompleteness allows for a freedom of imagination:

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2 Einfühlung translates from German as empathy or ‘in-feeling’/‘feeling-into’. The term was first used by Robert Vischer in 1873 to describe a viewer’s active participation in a work of art. Theodore Lipps (1852-1913) has been the most important proponent of the idea by taking it and subsequently claiming that in perception, the subject permeates the object. Later on, the German Romantic Philosophers used the term in the psychology of perception (Nowak 2011).

3 Lars Spuybroek uses the word ‘sympathy’ to describe the dynamic relationship between things and the making of things, between figure and configuration. His own brief description of it is in terms of ‘what things feel when they shape each other’ (Spuybroek 2011, p.9).

4 The Romantic period of the early to mid nineteenth century is known for its emphasis on emotion and imagination, a focus on the subjective view of the artist and nature and the uncontrolled (Galitz 2004).
Art’s full array of sensual resources makes it of more usefulness as a sphere of such hypothetical encounters than the discourse conventions of ordinary speech or action, which cannot accommodate the unsaid, the undone, or the merely imagined and so limit us to realms of manifestation. I am suggesting, in other words, that we revise our usual sense of sublimation – it is life that might seek to be adequate to the capaciousness of our experiences of art (Stewart 2005, p.307).

Stewart, in her description of the generous and dissimilar nature of artistic communication, builds on a history of art being one of incompleteness, where fragments are constantly oscillating and manifesting in experience. Ideas about art experience can be traced through a diverse lineage: Friedrich Schlegel (1991), John Ruskin (2010), Walter Benjamin (1996), Henri Bergson (1968), Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Lars Spuybroek (2011). Each of these philosophers has his own interpretation of temporality, movement or materiality, yet all share a common understanding that works of art are ‘forever becoming’ and only encountered through the development of a relationship between the maker and the viewer. This relationship oscillates backward and forward from an apprehension to a subjectivity, ignited by narrative and feeling.

Through my project, I look to the field of painters who use realist techniques and unfold a connection to the scene they are rendering that moves past a technical rendering of the space or the objects within the space. I focus, in particular, on the work of Antonio López García a realist who depicts a scene over a very long period of time, sometimes up to twenty years. The interaction with the scene over time, while not deviating from a realist rendering, embeds time and traces of interaction and memory. Researching the work of López García has influenced my consideration of the amount of time spent on paintings, and the amount of time spent focusing on one place of interest. The choice to look more closely at certain surfaces to really depict and create a feeling of the texture, temperature, or the way that surrounding elements impact on a surface, is influenced by the realist painters López García and George Shaw. Although these artists differ in approach, their style of realism and their respective considerations of time and mark making have been useful influences. López García’s approach to painting change and time was especially useful in approaching Bowling Club (a case study), as discussed in Chapter 2.

Within the project, I investigate the representation of memory and experience, as well as more ephemeral aspects of place, such as time, temperature and pace. I contextualise this with reference to selected realist methods of representation in landscape painting and historical landscape painters, who have tackled the representation of space through less tangible and visible means, such as J.M.W Turner (1775-1851). He was arguably a pivotal leader in romantic painting, who made many paintings of the same space, and used the narratives of the space to find painterly means to represent a mood and understanding. Turner’s work is heralded as using paint to communicate in a way other mediums could not (Bockemühl 2000).

The medium of paint enables me to combine non-representational expressionist abstraction and formalist approaches with representational realist strategies, to explore the digressive character of suburban places. I position this project in relation to the contemporary state of painting which, even while striving for newness, is

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5 Friedrich Schlegel and the Romantic idea of the fragment raised the twinned question of completeness and incompleteness, resulting in the notions of ‘forever becoming’ in a work of art, which were initially used within the discussion of poetry.
nonetheless constantly moving backward and forward in time, drawing upon the knowledge and understanding of
the history of painting to discover innovations and cultural inventions (Myers 2011). In this project, I use traditional
methods of observational drawing as well as photography and digital imagery that has proliferated through the
Internet, in order to form an understanding of place and time.

I explore how fragmentation, scale, fixity of motif, and series function to enable and heighten a viewer’s experience
and understanding of urban place. I contend that painting enables the visual experience of that which repudiates
adequate representation and accepts instead material experience to develop new understanding of place. Using
painting to interpret and approach place draws on the sensibility of touch and feeling to render a brush mark.
Interpretation of attributes in the painting, as well as decisions on the hierarchies of information, help to build
painterly construction and discover new ways to approach and experience the understanding of urban places.
The relationship between the less pictorial and more subjective aspects of a place such as the mood, time and
temperature are contrasted against the challenges of realist painting\(^6\) such as form, perspective and composition.

Through the representation and re-evaluation of certain qualities and emphases of a place in painting, I endeavour
to expand the tactile qualities of paint to reference history, time and a proliferation of narratives. These more
fluid components of place derive from the physical space, my experience as artist and mediator, and the prior
knowledge and experience of the viewer. The physical space comprises the solid, physical and visible objects and
elements of the place, such as the trees, the concrete ground, a post, a pathway or a swimming pool. The places
that are chosen as the subject for a painting are those that have a sense of human interaction; they seem to have a
story embedded in the fabric of the place. The textures and the relationship between natural and introduced items
relate to each other in a certain way and impact each other. The connection or influence that one physical object
or surface has to the other has a slowing sense and forces a different emphasis in looking, as opposed to taking
a brief or superficial look at reality. The rendering of this nexus and focus on particular relationships can force a
slower way of looking and feeling in relation to the spaces and surfaces – for example, the feeling of a puddle of
water on the concrete road, or the dry dead grass next to an Olympic-size swimming pool, or the flatness of a road
sign next to the flatness of a pond’s surface.

In this project, I reference other contemporary art practices besides painting that are useful to consider in terms
of their methods and outcomes of representation and experience. A discussion on Roni Horn’s photography and
the multimedia works of Pierre Huyghe help to distil relevant approaches to the representation of place in the
contemporary context. The associated issue of how, in these practices, every mark is not filtered through the
artist’s hand, as in painting, is also considered. The scrutiny of other relevant visual art practices that deal with
place, as well as realist and romantic representation and experience, allows for a greater level of clarity in the
discussion of studio methods and strategies.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. Each of the chapters will provide a theoretical and practical
framework to reflect on different aspects of the research question, including a discussion of the paintings
produced, and the theoretical and philosophical thinking that has influenced considerations and discoveries in the

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\(^6\) Realist painting is understood to be the representation of a subject exactly and objectively in terms of how it is, and without
the subjective interpretation of the artist. Direct observation is attributed to realist painting.
I divide the project into four main elements that outline associated ideas and combine with a cumulative effect. Beginning with compositional devices in Chapter 1, and moving on to the use of the fragment in Chapter 2, motif and metonymy in Chapter 3 and finally, in Chapter 4, darkness and facture in paint, I test a range of associative meaning in relationship to place in realist painting.

In Chapter 1 - Witnessing Urban Place – Drift, I establish my concept of place as permeated and inscribed by events, time and experiences, and outline my aspiration to find new ways to represent experience and place. Acknowledging the vast philosophical field devoted to the understanding of place, I draw from social geographers, philosophers and artists relevant to my research question. From a history of landscape painting representation, I outline the specifics of Realist and representational landscape painting. I reference Australian landscape painters, Tom Roberts and Frederick McCubbin, and, in particular, the way J.M.W Turner painted the landscape by capturing the essence and feeling of place, from being in the landscape. I also discuss, compare and analyse the works of two key artists from different time periods, John Everett Millais and George Shaw. I discuss a series of my paintings I collectively title Drift, and contextualise the experience of place and art in this work though key writings by Lars Spuybroek on sympathy and feeling, and Kathleen Stewart’s concept of ‘atmospheric attunement’. In addition, I discuss compositional arrangement, use of perspective and passages through place, which are integral to the creation of experiential place and narrative in the paintings produced. I introduce the importance of time in the project and describe it as ‘suburban time’ – time that feels like it operates on a different scale compared to other places. ‘Suburban time’ seems slower and attuned to the experiences and fabric of the place.

In Chapter 2 – Perceiving Change – Bowling Club, I focus on a case study of a suburban place undergoing dramatic or significant change. The paintings in this series titled Bowling Club represent and respond over an extended time period to the physical, remembered and associative attributes of the site. The approach of contemporary artist Pierre Huyghe provides a comparable contemporary strategy for visualising time and space that is reflective of changing representations, and offers a consideration of place and events unfolding. This engagement with the language of representational painting in a more fragmented and serial way subsequently encouraged a reading of Friedrich Schlegel, a key figure in the early German Romantic movement. I explore the idea that the work of art is ‘forever becoming’, through consideration of Schlegel’s ideas of incomprehension, and alongside the production of paintings representative of place. Realist painter Antonio López García is particularly influential to the Bowling Club series and features in this chapter for his approach to seeing and painting familiar experience over an extended duration.

In Chapter 3 – Fragmented Place – Interval, I reflect on the series of works titled Interval, which explore the fragmented aspects of memory in place and representation in constructing paintings of urban and suburban place. This third series of paintings extends the testing of the use of focus via fragments of an image and developing connections through metonymy. The painting Still Life by Luc Tuymans is discussed in terms of cognitive associations of visual representation and the use of metaphor in painting. I consider Walter Benjamin’s idea of the porosity of urban place in relation to theories of representational landscape painting. Peter Doig’s Cabin series of paintings are used to contextualise a number of my works that utilise a tension between the figure and ground of a painting. The Interval series is evaluated in terms of material complexity and compelling viewing experience.
In **Chapter 4 – Destabilizing Familiarity – Confluence and Influence**, I explore my rationale for the use of memory and fragment in the experience of artwork about place in three intertwined endeavours that had developed since the beginning of this project. These three topics or aims in this final chapter extend earlier considerations and discoveries to bring this project to a resolution: (1) sensing and feeling the physicality of a place; (2) the retraceable act of painting; and (3) the use of darkness and nocturne to ‘see-feel’, and the familiar and the unfamiliar in realist painting. Selected works of Francisco Goya and Bill Henson are discussed in terms of the use of material darkness; and Roni Horn’s sensorial and associative tactics are also considered in relation to my strategies in this chapter. I further consider my paintings through the fragmented theoretical positioning of the overall practice in bringing together notions of sympathy, feeling, fragment, memory, realism, abstraction and comprehension through studio practice.

Working between the generality and specificity of representation, while simultaneously constructing and restricting representational breadth and depth in painting, I hope to reveal ideas and feelings embedded in urban places. I do not intend to uncover a definitive truth, but to instead provide a sensorial attunement to the complexities that inform the understanding of place. Through this project, I argue for the need for greater emphasis and accessibility to feeling and experience in both the physical and the imagined representations of place.
The title of this chapter ‘Witnessing Urban Place’ succinctly describes what it is to exist in, travel through and occupy urban place, as a participant and as an artist. As a painter I explore place, observing the simple and complex facets of the urban environment with an interest and focus that I compare to witnessing. The witnessing is about looking, experiencing and remembering and it is as much about my point of view, as it is about creating scenarios for the viewer. This chapter focuses on my first forays through the urban place and the resultant series of paintings titled Drift. Through this series, I acknowledge the act of moving through an urban landscape, and reference the concept of drift as the English word for dérive. The dérive is a Situationist practice of drifting through the landscape, letting go and allowing oneself to be drawn towards elements encountered in that place. The title of Drift is a reference to the connection I have with moving through this space, but for the purpose of this project, I do not engage with the politics, psychogeographies or traditional aspects of dérive.

1.1 Defining place.
Artists and writers Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar attempt to provide a definition of place in their book Place, recognising its importance in philosophical thinking: ‘It would be difficult to find a major philosopher who has not attempted to answer the question “what is place”? (Dean and Millar 2005, p.25). They suggest that place is difficult to describe and although we might think we understand it, we only really ever understand place emotionally (ibid). This point is crucial to the considerations of experience and meaning I discuss in this dissertation and through my body of paintings. In his influential text Place and Placelessness, geographer Edward Relph focuses on people’s identity of and with place. Phenomenologist David Seamon describes Relph’s conception of the persistent identity of place in terms of:

three components: (1) the place’s physical setting; (2) its activities, situations, and events; and (3) the individual and group meanings created through people’s experiences and intentions in regard to that place... For Relph, the unique quality of place is its power to order and to focus human intentions, experiences, and actions spatially (Seamon 2008, pp.45-46).

The crux of this lived intensity is the identification with place, which Relph defines by means of the concept of insideness—the degree of attachment, involvement, and concern that a person or group has for a particular place (Relph 1976). This is extended by Relph to existential insideness and its opposite, existential outsideness, which together provide a context for me to consider the familiar yet dissociative powers of the urban places I focus on within this project.

In any given discussion of place, it is necessary to also consider its relationship to space. The term ‘space’ can be replaced with ‘place’ once there has been a lived experience within it. Place is therefore not a synonym of space, as pointed out by Dean and Millar (2005). They further suggest that artists deal with this unknowable subject in an associative and non-verbal way, with attributes like sound and narrative, through history and invention. Places can be considered as personal and intangible while, at the same time, they can be universally understood (ibid).

7 The Situationists or Situationist International (SI) were a group of avant-garde artists, intellectuals and political theorists active from 1957 to 1972. The Situationist foundations were anti-authoritarian Marxism and the avant-garde art movements, Dada and Surrealism. The dérive was a proposed remedy to the social alienation of capitalism (McDonough 2004).
For me, place is more than the physically mapped space, and I have a significant interest in the felt experiences and narratives possible in place, rather than merely the visual experience of the space. For my project, I choose to focus on perspectives of place that are permeated and inscribed by events, time and experience in addition to textures, light and visible form.

The places that I paint in the Drift series are those I have a personal connection to. They are my local suburban places where things happen and events take place. Each has an individual story, as all other suburbs do, and each also shares similarities, where one suburb could easily stand in for another. That said, each place provides its own potential for strangeness, a possibility of foreboding or a portal to something experientially larger than the physical attributes of the space itself. The personal connection comes from time spent in and around these sorts of places, which might appear polite and normal, but where there is a possibility of some sort of social transgression. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart, in her article 'Atmospheric Attunements', refers to these places as attuned through attention to the duration and intensity:

... an attention to the matterings, the complex emergent worlds, happenings in everyday life. The rhythms of living that are addictive or shifting. The kinds of agency that might or might not add up to something with some kind of intensity or duration. The enigmas and oblique events and background noises that might be barely sensed yet are compelling (Stewart 2011, p.445).

This project is centred on representing, sensing and feeling the place of the urban landscape, and the kinds of complex matterings that Stewart values and finds compelling become as much a subject as the physical visual information of the space.

1.2 Suburban time.

In any consideration of place, it is also necessary to discuss the notion of time. From a fleeting moment to a lifetime of experience or memory, duration is an important part of the articulation of place. I use the term ‘suburban time’ to describe duration in suburbia where time seems to operate on a different scale compared to other spaces, for it is closer, slower and attuned to the experiences and fabric of a particular place. In my project, painting the place, by its own nature, slows down the experience of it. When making the paintings, I want to make a connection to the slower pace of familiar activities performed in suburban life. Places in suburbs, such as the home ground, local playground and local school, allow for a more open sensing and feeling of the place, and the application of paint can aid in this sensing. These places are made and inhabited by local residents, but are often empty and devoid of people. The local residents are part of this place and they have a developed experience and memory of it – remembered with suburban time. I think about the overall suburb and the individual zones, and how they fit together, as I am deliberating on which scenes I choose to paint. Amongst these suburbs are spaces that are places of or in transition. These spaces may have been abandoned, and they are awaiting redevelopment or may be developed over time. They are common to any developing city and usually located within the residential and urban areas between the city and the far-reaching suburban outskirts. These places have been enjoyed, lived in and reconfigured, but also abused and misused. They are often empty of permanent inhabitants, paradoxically at once filled and abandoned. They are examples of Relph’s insideness and outsideness. There is a cacophony of tactile narratives embedded in these places that help define and impact on the inhabitants who live in and
experience these places. These places are divided, developed and bordered over time, not only by other suburbs and infrastructures, but also by the history of past experiences and lives. This is in contrast to the newer outer suburbs, where ideas of place can be thought of as more superficial, where occupancy and history is yet to develop.

1.3 Definitions of landscape and representational painting.

I paint representations of place as a way of connecting to the environment, of grounding myself in a place, and to understand my relationship to where I am living or visiting. Definitions of landscape painting usually cite the use of the horizon to situate the viewer and the inclusion of the sky to refer to the weather experienced in the landscape (Appleton 1996). To this end, I am more interested in landscape painters who are in the landscape, experiencing the minute facts and noticing the differences that make unique the places they choose to represent. A unique contemporary artist who has spent a considerable amount of time painting a specific part of the British landscape is Stephen Taylor. In his book The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work, Alain de Botton describes the intense engagement Taylor has with the landscape:

Stephen Taylor has spent much of the last two years in a wheat field... repeatedly painting the same Oak tree under a range of different lights and weathers... Taylor first came across the tree five years ago... following the death of his girlfriend... he was overpowered by the feeling that *something* in this very ordinary tree was crying out to be set down in paint (de Botton 2010, pp.172 and 174; original italics).

Taylor’s paintings and, in particular, his Oak tree project (*Figures 1-3*) painted over three years, are noteworthy for their mode of knowing a place based on close experience and engagement. His practice is influential to the second series of this project, namely, *Bowling Club*, which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

*Figure 1* Stephen Taylor, *Oak and Crows*, 2003-2006, oil on board, 30 x 30 cm
*Figure 2* Stephen Taylor, *Swallows at 9pm*, 2003-2006, oil on canvas, 102 x 102 cm
*Figure 3* Stephen Taylor, *Oak at night*, 2003-2006, oil on canvas, 92 x 66 cm
The history of a European approach to landscape painting in Australia is overwhelmed by the theme of the experience of place. Many of the earlier representations of Australia were painted in the colours, tones and forms that European artists were familiar with and, as such, were not a true representation of the bright harshness of the Australian landscape (Lane 2007). It took time for European eyes to see and connect to the idiosyncrasies of this place as quite different to familiar European representations of place. Arguably the first major landscape art movement to accurately depict Australian landscape was the Heidelberg school of painters, who painted in the landscape using Impressionist techniques. In a letter to fellow Heidelberg artist Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin writes:

I fancy large canvases all glowing and moving in the happy light, and others bright, decorative and chalky and expressive of the hot, trying winds and the slow, immense summer (Cited in Australian Government 2015).

In these words, McCubbin describes attributes that are more easily sensed in the time spent in a landscape, rather than the physical visual certainties that can be easily represented in painting. It is also noteworthy that much of the discussion surrounding the authenticity and trueness of the Heidelberg paintings as representative of Australian landscape is around the time spent in the landscape en plein air (Lane 2007). Correspondingly, for this project, in order to know a place, one must spend time in it; experiencing the stories of the place, before any authentic representation can be made of it, is important. Australian Aboriginal artists have been using this approach for centuries and, consequently achieve an unrivalled connection to the sensorial place of the landscape that is most evident in painting abstract form. I believe Indigenous artists such as Rover Thomas and, more recently, Emily Kame Kngwarreye achieve the most authentic and representative Indigenous paintings that are a translation of country, or being on country. These artists make landscape paintings of Australia through this connection and the material sensitivity of paint, mark and scale.

Even though my project exclusively focuses on realist urban landscape, this discussion relating the authentic experience of a landscape as being one of inhabiting and living in it over time, is one that is of particular interest in my first series of paintings. Drift began with an approach that relied on moving through the urban and suburban spaces that surround where I live. Many of the painted scenes in the works are places that I travel through regularly, and have experienced at various times of the day and night, through the changing seasons. I also consider the different emotional states I may have been in whilst experiencing any one of those places. Sometimes I may have been in a hurry and worried about being late or, on other occasions, I may have had time to slowly contemplate the day. Each of the places I painted was selected because of the traces of time and usage, and the ability of these traces to permeate my representation of the physical qualities. Having said this, the scenes must not be overwhelmed with the event that has taken place, so much so that it would effect connections between the physical attributes of pattern and form, and the traces of story or time. Some of the sites in the series provide potential portals, or convey the ability to move, from one threshold to another, such as pathways or swimming pools. In contrast, some changes in place leave temporary traces. Puddles from a broken sprinkler, smoke from a fire that was intentionally lit and dead brown lawns embody the more ephemeral and transitory effects of weather and human interaction. The intention to use painting to extend possible associations to the time spent on the experience of these transitory spaces required that I had to have actually experienced the spaces and felt the associations.
1.4 Lars Spuybroek and the ‘infinitely textured universe’.

One of the key focuses of this project is the relationship between surfaces. As an observable subject, surfaces differentiate the elements of place. As a paintable subject, the challenge of representing surfaces through paint is, for me, one of the reasons for being a painter. For example, the observation of a soft muddy surface sharing qualities with the feel of foliage is something that these early images investigate. In his book *The Sympathy of Things*, academic Lars Spuybroek refers to this felt experience as sympathy. Spuybroek refers to paintings by John Everett Millais to discuss methods that Millais used to create harmonies between the colours, patterns, shapes and surfaces of a painting. These harmonies show the sympathies that the surfaces have for one another and how they impact on the feeling and meaning of the work (Spuybroek 2011). The description of the work *Mariana*, 1851, *(Figure 4)* by Millais as being ‘made part of an infinitely textured universe’ (Spuybroek 2011, p.83) resonates with the paintings in *Drift*. Spuybroek laments the modernist dismissal of this painting by Millais as ‘realist’, even ‘photorealist’ (ibid). He compares the painting to a tapestry woven together in which there is no possibility of extracting yourself from the texture of things. The detail is so meticulous that not a single leaf stands in for another and each part of the image has its own definable character, reliant and knitted together with all the other textures (ibid). Reflecting on this description and interpretation of *Mariana* helped me to consider my paintings in *Drift* as a complex web of surfaces that depend on and affect each other. The projection of empathy from life experiences encouraged by Stewart, as well as the embedded physical tensions of surface articulated by Spuybroek, encouraged in my project a landscape representation full of memory, experience, sensorial knowledge and tactile visual reality.

*Figure 4*
John Everett Millais, *Mariana*, 1851, oil on wood, 59.7 x 49.5 cm
Spuybroek’s discussion of *Mariana* describes a lack of pictorial depth, yet there is an immense textural depth in the treatment of the painting, a noteworthy factor considering the perspectival devices in this painting. In the series of paintings in *Drift*, the amount of details and textures, while at times causing a flattening of space, nonetheless allows for the detailed weaving of the textures of the space. The tensions and uncertainties that exist between the details result in a kind of viewing depth that is immersive and expansive, and more reliant on relationships than perspective. The places I chose to make into paintings were ones that I had a close relationship to. I passed through them many times and had witnessed in many ways, mostly on foot, and therefore more slowly and in closer proximity to the weather, sounds and textures. The philosopher Walter Benjamin refers to different encounters with place that make the experience of knowing place:

> One only knows a spot once one has experienced it in as many dimensions as possible, you have to have approached a place from all four cardinal points if you want to take it in, and what’s more, you also have to have left it from all these points. Otherwise it will quite unexpectedly cross your path three or four times before you are prepared to discover it (Benjamin 1986, p.306).

This quote by Benjamin is particularly relevant to the way I consider passages through and being in place numerous times. This quote, as well as essays in his book ‘One Way Street’, has been influential in my selection of spaces to paint in *Drift*.

A painting made early in the series, *Waiting* is of a school gymnasium I would walk or drive past almost everyday. The school gymnasium holds potential, it houses activities unknown to those who pass by. One day I passed when the doors were open, providing an exciting difference to the known and expected. I noted that the idea of waiting for something to happen was a more evocative subject for the painting and allowed the potential for involving a viewer’s imagination or memory.

The painting *Waiting*, 2008, *(Figure 5)* focuses on the ability of the paint to weave a textured relationship in the surfaces of the landscape to hold attention to the surfaces of the place. This painting uses textural devices of layering and wiping back, to give the grey building a thick concrete-like texture, and then wiping the white milky paint over the dried surface. The methods in this painting serve to represent in a realist sense and use the tactility of touch of the brush. The sticky-looking texture of the building at once represents the reality and slows the process of looking to consider the possibility of stories and experiences that are held within the walls of this school gymnasium.

These methods mediate the place through painting the internal (*insideness*) and external (*outsideness*); they are intertwined and oscillate between the feeling of both. Some of the key moments of recognition are evident in such things as the detailed painted textures, the use of horizon line perspective, and the possibilities of surfaces and objects to function in more than one way. The attention to the surface of the paint through processes of representation reflects how I am aligned with the attunement to the urban space, as described by Kathleen Stewart. In 1929, Alfred North Whitehead in *Process and Reality* was first to refer to the concept of attunement; ‘things attune with each other’ (Whitehead 2010). More recently, in 2013, Kathleen Stewart uses the term ‘attunement’ in a social anthropological view of interactions in suburbia. In her article ‘Atmospheric Attunements’,

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Stewart describes how she uses several case studies on the experience of place in an attempt to interpret this sense of something tactile,

I try to open a proliferative list of questions about how forces come to reside in experiences, conditions, things, dreams, landscapes, imaginaries, and lived sensory moments. How do people dwelling in them become attuned to the sense of something coming into existence or something waning, sagging, dissipating, enduring, or resonating with what is lost or promising? I suggest that atmospheric attunements are palpable and sensory yet imaginary and uncontained, material yet abstract. They have rhythms, valences, moods, sensations, tempos, and lifespans. They can pull the senses into alert or incite distraction or denial (Stewart 2011, p.445).

I use the familiarity, and a certain ‘attunement’ or ‘sympathy’, I have with the places I choose to depict, in the attempt to move from representing the obvious physical space, to associations of moods and memories. In the painting *Waiting*, I draw on both the experiences of being outside and waiting for the kids to emerge as well as the

*Figure 5* Nicole Slatter, *Waiting*, 2008, oil on linen, 80 x 105 cm
possibility of those waiting to emerge from the inside. The anticipation of the doors opening and the space filling with movement is evident in the well-worn paths left behind.

A space opens up in the ordinary. There is a pause, a temporal suspension animated by the sense that something is coming into existence. The subject is called to a state of attention that is also an impassivity - a watching and waiting, a living through, an attunement to what might rend up or snap into place (Stewart 2012, p.365).

Stewart refers to the experience of place and not the image created by the experience; attunement comes from experiences that are textural and psychological. They are formed via interactions with the people, places and objects. I use this attunement when painting. I choose the experience of place that I feel is best able to be represented in the paintings, based on the way I think the representation might aid an understanding or consideration of that experience.

In his book *The Sympathy of Things*, Spuybroek discusses the idea of *Einfühlung*: a German word that translates to empathy, but is commonly interchanged with sympathy. Spuybroek expands sympathy to describe the connections and feelings translated from image to viewer. *Einfühlung* was first coined by Robert Vischer in 1873 and was further discussed with reference to esthetic experience and abstraction by Theodor Lipps and Wilhelm Worringer in the early 20th century. Lipps’ view is that the object world is unstable and our understanding of it gains stability through empathetic identification with it (Rader 1960).

The relationship between projected empathy towards objects and places provides a way of considering both the making and reading of paintings. In these early works, my interest was on the more detailed knitting of textural surfaces. There is a density to the paintwork in these images that exacts closer attention and allows more subjectivity towards each surface represented. The distance of the viewer from the scene in the series of paintings in *Drift* positions the viewer as a witness more than a participant. I leave the spaces unoccupied, the implied and imagined participation in the surfaces and atmospheres of the place are conveyed through the painting process. Many of the scenes feature things that are built for human usage, so there is an implication of the imagined use or potential for positioning the viewer in the space as a participant. This series finds a place between what can be physically seen and the possibility of what can be sensed or felt through attunement, projected empathy and tactile surface.

1.5 Attunement, projected empathy and tactile surface.
One of the attributes of painting is the visibility of the act of making on a prepared ground or in the painted mark. As Spuybroek suggests, ‘To feel sympathy we need to see form and being formed simultaneously: we need to see-feel form and force at the same time’ (Spuybroek 2011, p.184). I consider the idea of ‘see-feel’ that Spuybroek suggests as an attribute to the act of making a mark with a brush on a surface.

During the act of painting, the long sessions of building ground and space help develop sympathies to the objects and place being depicted. It is a balance between looking, thinking and feeling. Both the decisions made when constructing a painting, and the feelings and knowledge about the place being represented, combine within the painted surface. By considering feeling, seeing and forming, I am able to reflect on the methods of observation I
have used this project. To record observations, I use drawing and field notes and a camera to see form. Although important as a device for capturing the scene and as a tool for remembering, the camera is one of many ways for gathering information about a place. I might take a photo using a phone or camera, knowing that it will not provide the only information. The time or temperature of the place, or the potentiality in how the place is used, will also be considered in the lead up to the process of painting. There are gaps in what the photograph can reveal about the place, and so the known and felt sense, as well as memory, of the place are equally as important.

The works in *Drift* are focused on the potential of placing the viewer into the place to develop an experience or feeling of it. In the empty stillness, there is an expectation that something is about to happen. The places used in the paintings, in addition to being transitory, can also be misused or used in unintended ways. These painted images are not simply intended as purely documentary, but are triggers for association to the complex matterings of the place. One of the variables tested by the paintings in *Drift* is the strength of the trigger of association. Do places with stronger or more unstable memory have the ability to trigger a felt connection, or are these found in the more ubiquitous spaces that I have perhaps spent more associated time interacting with? The places that have more instability in their relationship to the objects contained within them tend to draw my attention. The tensions between the objects become as much a subject as the rendering of a complete image.

The motifs and scenes tested in *Drift* include: empty schoolyards, car parking lots with reflective puddles, skid marks on roads in industrial areas, paths through parks, public swimming pools and construction sites. These locations are found in many inner urban environments and have a familiarity to me. The transitory character of the places I selected served to intensify the focus on the past and future of the depicted place. The choice to use spaces that have a primary function relating to transition was made, in part, as a way of considering the idea of *durée* developed by philosopher Henri Bergson. Bergson suggests that both objects and space become part of a 'perpetual flowing' (Bergson 2008, p.301), as reality is perceived in a highly intuitive way, and is mobile and continuous rather than static and discrete. Bergson suggests that the notion of *durée* has an affinity to art (Bergson 2007) and I consider his description of ‘perpetual flowing’ reality to be particularly relevant to the process of painting.

In this project, I use passages as physical and conceptual ways of extending duration. Passages can be temporary or permanent demarcations of place. They are worn out over time and identifiable as traces left on the surface. They are indicated by pathways, stairs, swimming pools, playgrounds and playing fields. These place-markers are utilitarian: they are used and experienced, they provide cues to remembered and imagined usage. I have composed and represented the passages of place using various pictorial devices. The use of vanishing points, horizon lines and the overarching compositional choices position the viewer either higher or lower, as a spectator or participant, and they are crucial to the demarcation of space, representation of time and recording of occupation. In both daily experience and painting, passages are, at times, fleeting and, at other times, slow paced. The experiences of driving through a place in a car, contrasts with the slower contemplative experience on foot. In this series of paintings, I position the viewer as protagonist. I place them as if they were walking or driving through the landscape, or standing and experiencing place.

My decisions made in the process of making place aim to amplify the potentials of transition, duration and

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8 The term *durée* in this section refers the theory of time and consciousness proposed by Henri Bergson to discuss the elusiveness of time, with particular attention to images and imagination (Bergson 1968).
instability in a number of ways. Painting becomes an act of heightening the experience of a colour, or temperature, or sense of focus, to emphasise personal experiences through representation. My decision to amplify a certain quality or change an arrangement is important as a subtle articulation of the complexity of a meaning of the place. Some of my paintings are developed in the photographic and collage stage, but many in this series are made through decisions directly on the canvas. The use of collage during the making of *Drift* is not intended to be visible or made obvious in the finished works. A decision to move or remove a motif is made in order to amplify a different connection between objects in the picture. This connection might be overwhelmed by all the other attributes in the actual photographic scene I have documented as reference for the painting. For example, many of the skies in the paintings are subdued to an even grey colour. By removing the highly saturated blue sky, I have changed the relationships between the other factors in the scene. The painted sky is still representative of real sky; it is just diminished in intensity. Sometimes when the subdued grey sky is included, I think about those days when it is about to rain, and the expectation of moisture in the air seems to link up the elements of the day quite differently. These days seem, to me, to go on forever – or at least at a different rate and duration.

The first painting in the series, *Transit*, 2008, (*Figure 6*) is a place that I have only moved through in a car, even though I have travelled through the space many times. In *Transit*, the movement and the two forms of focus depict the feeling of transition through place. In this painting, pace and rhythm of viewing is the central theme, and I aim to use paint to expand the relationship we have to experiencing a place at a varied pace.

*The centre of this painting is where the extreme edge of an out-of-focus leafy branch meets the exaggerated void*
of the sky. Brush marks that slip in between them are made up by a series of abstract gestures and are equally acknowledged as a series of marks that depict an awkward meeting of paint. In this work, the slippage in the space being moved through is evident in the varied speeds of these intersecting spaces. The tactile role of paint establishes an engagement that seeks out referential forms and possible narrative interactions, whilst drawing attention to the surface qualities of the painting. The painting is squarer than many of my other paintings and focuses on a chunk of space that slips uncomfortably in time. The weave of the linen in this painting is obvious in the surface of the painting and in the unpainted edges of the thick-framed structure of the stretched canvas. This surface slows the eye further, on the way to examining the necessary visual cues. The very lightly primed surface allows for the paint to embed and disappear into the surface more readily than in my usual heavily primed and sanded surfaces. The quality of the surface sucks all the fluidity from the paint while in other places, where more layers are applied, around the trees edges, the pooling of thicker paint creates a sheen on the surface. This variation in the surface further slows the reading of the pictorial realist image, thereby allowing for the materiality of the paint and tactility of the surface to be more important in the painting.

Transit is a direct attempt to show the visual experience of driving or being driven through place. Transit comes from the different connection to duration and to moving at speed through place, in contrast to the majority of paintings in this project that are based on walking or standing in place. Driving through place means being less affected by the tactility of place and, as a consequence, being slightly removed. This potential has influenced my attempts to fragment and embed sensorial qualities such as textures and shifting luminosity to the reading of this image.

In Transit, I adapt the experience of transition to the form of painting. The use of the wiped painting mark that merges in and out of the spacious grey ground acknowledges the gesture as handmade. The qualities of a reflective iridescent aqua road sign hovers in the top right and poses different difficulties of visual and spatial purchase. The elements of this picture do not have a firm foothold, yet there is a familiar and comforting cool green/grey palette, coupled with a space that encourages a fleeting moment of observation, on the way to another thought. The palette for Transit is subdued and de-saturated except for the road sign that is almost fluorescent. This contrast heightens the dislocation and instability that can be felt moving at pace through place.

The inclusion of the flat, inorganic, almost fluorescent sign in this painting is almost the opposite of the landscape. There is a tension between natural vegetation and the manmade inclusion of an architectural form. When painted onto the surface of a canvas, the large flat areas of architecture relate to abstraction, while the realism resides in the individual leaves and changing form. In the genre of landscape painting, urban landscape distinctively includes or makes reference to the built environment (Britain et al. 1983). The type of contemporary landscape painters most relevant to this project fit into this category. Artists such as Tim Eitel, Tina Cullen, David Hockney, Jeffery Smart and George Shaw represent elements and forms of the built environment. These objects or architectural inclusions act as an interruption to the space or a demarking of the space, but they also operate counter to the properties of the organic landscape. The relationships between these two attributes are developed further in addressing the research question and are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

The work of contemporary English painter George Shaw has been influential to the series Drift. His work is
notable in the field of contemporary painting because of its intentional sentimentality. His work can be considered part of the Romantic genre in the sense that it denies the scientific view of the camera, and any simplified or abstracted representation of landscape. Similar to the position of the Romantic painters from the 1800s, Shaw’s landscapes seem to be the antithesis of technological advancement. They are crafted on every level – the textures and surfaces exude temperature and moisture. His paintings are of the landscape around the Tile Hill area of Coventry in England, where he grew up during the seventies. He photographs the area extensively before painting and uses an extensive process of extracting contemporary references like cars or buildings from the images. In order to create the necessary look, Shaw also adds objects, like an old fashioned phone box identical to the ones he remembers from childhood. In this manipulation of the images, Shaw decides on the relationships he wants to create and uses this device to amplify the nostalgia already redolent in the image. This nostalgia is emphasised by his use of Humbrol enamel paint, the type used by generations of children to paint plastic models of planes and tanks. Writer Chris Townsend observes that in Shaw’s work, ‘the medium itself is the memory’ (Townsend cited in Pooke 2012, p.102). The first works of this kind that Shaw exhibited was part of a series called The Passion in 2002. In the catalogue for the show titled What I did last summer, Shaw’s artist statement outlines:

They are paintings of places that were familiar to me in my childhood and adolescence, places in which I found myself alone and thoughtful. They are places in which I forgot things... I paint the paintings of all the times and all the thoughts I lack the language to describe. For the one single moment that I can recall, I feel a dull sadness for the thousands I have forgotten (Cited in artist’s statement, 2002).

This statement reflects on his recollection of a childhood experience of place. It accounts for his attempt to make the paintings stand in for and represent the feelings, experiences and sympathies he has had with the place. The romantic and materially seductive paintings are small in size, yet very detailed and intimate. The intensity of brushwork on the surface brings to mind the words of 19th century art critic John Ruskin ‘to forfeit no atom of truth’ (Ruskin 1910, p.34).

Curator and writer Elizabeth Manchester discusses Shaw’s work and compares his painting practice to that of John Everett Millais, the artist that Spuybroek also uses to describe the way a painting can embed such sympathies and depth of feeling that cannot be represented in any other method. For Manchester, ‘Shaw’s use of it in the “realistic” depiction of nature recalls the work of such pre-Raphaelite painters as John Everett Millais (1829-96)’ (Manchester 2004). When reflecting on my Drift series, I find similarities to Shaw’s subject matter and strategies of representing personal experience. I relate to the idea of remembering spending time in a place at a time of life when things are considered differently and I aim to access this accentuated sensorial quality and possibility in painting. This feeling stretches beyond the place where you stand, yet relies completely on the physicality of those attributes. The potential for moving through remembered experiences, acts of transgression or longing, and the place itself, becomes a platform for transformative thought.

Shaw’s works are made over intense sittings and may be considered photorealist, but they actually supersede the photographs he works from. The level of exruciating detail, and the tension that the sentiment and focus creates is unnerving. When confronted with the painted image, you can almost feel the dampness of the weather and the
prickly sharpness of the winter trees. He extracts enough of the English light to physically pervade and penetrate the scene. This provides a tactile experience aligned with discussions on empathy and the body as expressed by Theodor Lipps, which will be further discussed in Chapter 3. The combination of elements in the representation that Shaw uses makes me aware of my own bodily relationship to the environment. It reminds me of the times spent in playgrounds at dusk on cold days, away from the safety that comes from the population of a place in the daytime. The place overwhelms your senses with the detail of experience that is so much more than purely visual. One of the most prominent attributes of Shaw’s paintings is the intimacy achieved through the sensorial qualities of light and temperature, and the sense of physically being in the place. My own interest in experiencing urban place is furthered when considering the sensory and tactile qualities used by Shaw.

Shaw forces the viewer to slow down and look at how one surface relates to another. This is why the comparison to Millais is such an appropriate one. Shaw’s painting Scenes from the Passion: Late, 2002, (Figure 7) is about time through texture and experience in place. It is not a fleeting moment. Instead, it is the sort of repeated time that allows you to really stop and contemplate the effect of the surrounding on your body, the dampness of the air, the warmth of the last bit of sunlight at the end of a day, the hardness of the concrete and the heaviness of a sodden tree branch.

The title of Shaw’s first exhibition What I did last summer acknowledges the subjectivity of the relationship between the subject and the act of making the paintings. For Shaw, painting an unpopulated site in the urban landscape is an attempt to create a sense of hiatus and expectancy, as the painted space can be filled with the viewer’s own narratives of place and memories. Shaw discusses the unpopulated spaces he represents,

To me, they are teeming with human presences… The people I grew up with, family, passers-by, they are all in there somewhere, embedded in the paintings (Cited in O’Hagen 2011).

I consider the human presence that Shaw talks about can also include references to other human creative outputs

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Figure 7
George Shaw, Scenes from the Passion: Late, 2002, enamel paint on board, 91.7 x 121.5 x 5.2 cm
that have sensorial capacity. One of my favourite contemporary songs is *Middle of the Hill* by the Australian musician Josh Pyke. This is a song that is filled with a specific narrative, yet the lyric that is most evocative and relatable for me is: ‘And I could cool my head on the concrete steps’. This narrative that Pyke uses in the song is close to the case study stories that Stewart uses in her essay ‘Atmospheric Attunements’. It is this level of remembered sensorial experience that I find important to extract and emphasise in my paintings, particularly in the *Drift* series. Unlike Shaw, I aim to extend a more varied quality of the painting surface to extend the sensorial narratives and tactile qualities by changing aspects of the methods and strategies of the painting process. Painting allows for the control of subtle changes to levels of detail, wetness, weather, light, and those sensorial effects on our corporeality are integral to developing an understanding of place in this project.

In my paintings, I explore sensorial amplification of some qualities over others, aiming to aid the viewer’s memory in making associative connections to experiences. In two works *Ground Water*, 2008, *(Figure 8)* and *Direction*, 2008, *(Figure 9)* I make use of changes to place caused by temporary atmospheric conditions like weather.

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*Figure 8* Nicole Slatter, *Ground Water*, 2008, oil on linen, 80 x 104 cm.
The puddles that form the focus of the paintings provide portals within the usual façade of the picture ‘plane’. The image in the puddle is an unstable reflection of the stable world surrounding the viewer. The puddle allows the two worlds of the real and the reflected to be conflated into one space. It reads as real, but as soon as a car is driven through it, the image is disrupted and dissipates. The puddle is an ephemeral addition to the place and, as such, holds a duration that is temporary, but represented through the painting becomes a permanent record.

In *Ground Water* and *Direction*, I employ the conventions of realism, but attempt to include more than the make up of the atoms of space, as Ruskin suggests (Ruskin 1910). The layering used in this painting is such that the surface of the whole painting is initially given a treatment of the surface of the road. In the same way the actual road surface is built up with layers of prepared ground, road base and top layer of asphalt. For these two puddle paintings *Ground Water* and *Direction*, I spent the time layering a space that can be moved into and through, even though in reality it has only a small depth of a few centimetres. I wanted to emphasise the space above the ground between the sky and the shallow puddle on the ground.

Reflecting on the works in the *Drift* series made me aware of the compositional devices I employ to encourage
movement through the image. The focal point in these two paintings – and in most of the paintings in Drift – is an elliptical focal point that is central in the top half of the painting, a place to gravitate toward an imaginary horizon, the place where the sky would meet the landscape in a standard landscape painting. Almost half of the picture is foreground in both Ground Water and Direction, emphasising the closeness of the viewer to the scene. I often use structural devices such as a fence, or a demarked car parking space in the case of Ground Water, to push the viewer’s gaze up and though the image. These shared structural devices in each work help draw the two paintings together. I consider Ground Water and Direction as separate paintings – or both one painting – with a shared aim of finding the representation of time and space between the real fabric of physical attributes, and the felt, sensed and remembered experiences. This is something I became more aware of only after the paintings were completed and put together.

The use of layering and transparency to insert time into the details between the physical surfaces in the thin layers of the paint, aims to guide a consideration of tactile experience. The experience could be the ability to sense the inevitable disruption of the stillness, or feel the crispness of colours that become more noticeable on an overcast day. In testing the different ways painted marks can represent place, I strive for a greater awareness of place, texture, light, wetness, flatness, space and colour. The painted surface is made up of layers of painted marks, highlighting extremes of each texture and colour, encouraging a slowness and stillness. This intentional change of pace is an attempt to increase my perception as a painter and the perception of the viewer. This seemingly overambitious aim for a realist painting to promote perception itself is discussed by artist, critic and curator Dominic Eichler, in a review of painter Wilhelm Sasnal:

One of the reasons painting remains viable is that it still demands self-consciousness and self-awareness about looking. It requires thinking about perception (Eichler et al. 2011, p.36).

Eichler’s statement was useful in articulating the perception of an important element in Direction. The rosemary bush in the left foreground of the work was present in the car park, but my close observation of the rosemary was made by looking at a bush outside my studio in my garden. The strange bright prickly quality set against the smooth reflection of sky in a car park puddle is a device to draw attention to the oddness of time and temperature. I put them together to make a space that is realist, yet achieved only by conflating two spaces together. The shallow puddle reflects the deepness of the sky and encourages a consideration of the space between the immense space above and the ground underfoot. The more realist and seamless representation and paintwork is an attempt to produce a slow viewing relationship. The arrow in Direction is built up with layers of white paint in a method similar to the way road line-marking is created. The various modes of representation used in these paintings extracts different paces of viewing and thinking about the place.

Another painting, Oasis, 2008, (Figure 10) uses as its reference, the Kent Street High School swimming pool, close to where I live. Oasis extends some of the ideas that I have discussed in regard to Ground Water and Direction. The body of water is the dominant subject but, as in the two puddle paintings, serves to contrast and highlight other aspects of the scene. The location of the swimming pool is in relationship to the dry and subdued colours of the surrounding landscape. This presents a generative image for my continued questioning of how the accumulation of physical and psychological experiences of a particular place can provide new understandings of urban place.
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

*Figure 10* Nicole Slatter, *Oasis*, 2008, oil on linen, 77 x 60 cm
This painting is important in the Drift series as it responds to Lipps’ idea about in-feeling,\textsuperscript{10} particularly in terms of how an embodied response to the relationships of represented objects and surfaces can use a sympathy between the key components of the place to give a heightened sensorial experience.

In considering the actual place depicted in Oasis, I have three specific visual memories. Firstly, in summer, the grass on the oval turns brown, where the arc of the sprinklers does not reach. Secondly, the palm trees seem strangely out of place. Thirdly, the positioning of the sparkling blue swimming pool next to the dry playing fields that are affected by the unyielding heat of the summer, amplifies their different qualities. The stark difference in the colour of the pool acts like the street sign in Transit: I tried to emphasise the pool’s wetness, making it cooler and brighter by surrounding it with the dry and smoky environment. The space behind the pool is vast and the centre of the canvas is focused on the patchy dry grass, beholden to the limited arc of the sprinklers. The dry and longer grass in the extreme foreground places the viewer in an unstable position above the scene. The tiny, highly detailed, metal swimming step rails amplify the scale and distance.

The issue of how the elements of a painting affect and create each other is examined by Spuybroek in The Sympathy of Things. He discusses the famous painting by Vincent Van Gogh A Pair of Shoes, 1886, (also discussed by Martin Heidegger in The Origin of the Work of Art (2008)), and builds on Ruskin’s inference of sympathy and the becoming of objects, through traces of use. Actual things, a farmer’s shoes, that have rubbed against other actual things, have been painted sympathetically, so that we are led into the life of those things. As Spuybroek elaborates, ‘things are not open to the world they are open to relations with other things’ (Spuybroek 2011, p.245). For Ruskin, the sky and the earth create each other. I, likewise, think about things creating each other when I look across the landscape space I paint. Looking at the scene and selecting it to be painted is not only reliant on the possibility of memory and activity within the site, but also of the relationship of the surfaces or objects in the place, and how they may, in Ruskin’s terms, ‘create each other’. In this endeavour, I might also focus on how an object seems out of place, not belonging and somehow not created by its surrounds.

The Perth urban landscape is dotted with palm trees that are not indigenous to this part of Western Australia. They seem a vain attempt to align this place with an exotic ideal. The palms look alien in the environment and are often a reminder that things, objects and surfaces are misfitting, thus resulting in conflicting outcomes – conceptually, physically and historically. My interest in these imported palm trees has resulted in a folder of collected images of palm trees in locations around Perth. In considering sympathies and feelings between elements in urban landscape, the misfit and out-of-place object is relevant and useful to this project. The strangeness brings a psychological and sensed experienced of space together with representational painting to develop sensorial understandings of place.

I think of the motif of the palm tree as having a strange optimistic hope for beauty. This is something I continued to work with across all the series’ of work for this project. The palm tree became a possible description of a place that acts as a portal to, or conveys visions of, other places within it. I imagine a palm tree will lend life to the things around it as if all the parts of the scene are in sympathy. In Oasis, the palm trees are clearly an introduced and

\textsuperscript{10} In-feeling is German psychologist Theodore Lipps understanding of (Einfühlung). Lipps uses in-feeling to describe how aesthetic feeling can tacitly refer to an overall ‘feeling together’ of all things.
planted species. The swimming pool is a modern addition, and the atmosphere is grey with the smoke of summer fires. The combination of these elements, the space they occupy, as well as the spaces between them, are full of potential narrative and metonymy. I use the literary term ‘metonymy’ in the visual sense; my use of the term is outlined in greater detail in Chapter 3. In this instance, the three palm trees in *Oasis* can be seen as a stand in for the idea of utopia or an exotic location. The contiguity of cerulean blue water and the surrounding space (things frequently experienced with palm trees) leads the viewer to the ideas, experiences and memories associated with palm trees and swimming pools. I consider the paintings in *Drift* as being like stage sets. They have a stillness that is about to be inhabited and the place used to play out a drama. Cultural theorist Paul Virilio suggests that ‘the fabric of the landscape is made by the myriad of incidents, minute facts either overlooked or deliberately ignored’ (Virilio 2000, p.25).

In this statement, Paul Virilio, acknowledges the complexities of the urban environment. In his book *A Landscape*...
of Events, Virilio expands the idea of defining a place by the events that occur. In the painting titled Drift, 2008, (Figure 11) the skid marks are observable, but the event of making them in that location has to be imagined by the viewer. I have used two-point perspective and a vanishing point in a very graphic way to draw the viewer’s eye into the painting. Almost three quarters of the canvas is the plane of road that the car would occupy, allowing a palpable space for experience above the road. The highly saturated red and blue colours of the doors help draw the eye from bottom right to top left and balance the perspective of the road. All these tested methods aim to pull the viewer into the narrative and place. The skid marks left by the now-absent drifting cars are painted in one movement each, providing a sense of movement captured in the still brush mark.

The compositional strategies in the Drift series tested one and two-point perspective, varied horizons and other techniques to move the viewer through the image at various speeds. The paintings construct a place that enables complex felt and visual understandings of place, particularly that of suburban time.

In the painting Development, 2008, (Figure 12) I focus on passages through the picture plane. The sensation of mud underfoot is evident and the remnant of usage from the tire marks left by delivery vehicles is recorded in the paint. The bottom quarter of this painting looks down onto the mud, while the middle section uses single point perspective to enter into the picture plane, only to be stopped suddenly at the woodpile. Of the convergent four planes in this one-point perspective space, the subject is the potential of the muddy plane to be enacted on, to be a space of possibility. The aerial position of the bottom third helps position the viewer in the paint, with the muddy roughly painted marks coming right to the viewing point. When painting the mud, I started using the palette remnants to fill in some bits of the ground. It started out of convenience, but became a way of cogitating convergence, and embedding the colours of the surrounding objects and structures into the mud. The feeling that half of the surface of the painting is a breakdown of the elements of the rest of the site became a consideration in drawing the painting together in a physical sense. It also was a consideration of my original interest in the site that it was one of flux and development. The rapid emergence of the new building seems almost as quick as the aging and demolition of the previous old house and garden. There is a feeling that there is entropy at work on all things around us, that morphs everything back to its elemental form, before it again becomes something new.

The heavy dark mass of foliage on the top right of the painting is an attempt to show the dense history that may have been removed to make way for this transient space. The sort of domestic foliage is scrubby and wild, yet not so tall as to be real wilderness; it is the kind of foliage that cubbies are made in, a space that has potential for hiding. It is place within a place, both insideness and outsideness, familiar and foreign. It is the kind of foliage and representation that philosopher Wilhelm Worringer might say holds empathy and vital feeling (Rader 1960), as opposed to the manicured and abstracted landscape garden that will soon replace the muddy track.

Development is about an awareness of objects that are for the moment fixed, yet the subject is the fleeting moment described by the movement of individually apparent brush marks through an implied human presence. The expressive brush marks that represent the muddy and slippery ground of the construction site are nestled into the realist painting technique of the foliage in the top right hand corner and the power line in the distance. The painting is seemingly realist but, like the process being depicted, is in differing states of completion. The abstract and expressive qualities of textures, flat marks and surfaces of the muddy path and asbestos fence, are held
together with the intense detail of the woodpile at the end of the path and the textured, dark stippled foliage. The apposite title of this work Development is intentionally transitory in describing the nature of how a painting is made and for the process being depicted. It explores the physical and conceptual construction and representation of place. This transitional space in Development questions the duration of place in a simple straightforward way but, importantly, this work became the bridge to the next chapter of work, Bowling Club, which furthers the idea of representing a changing place.

Figure 12 Nicole Slatter, Development, 2008, Oil on linen, 69 x 79 cm
I titled this chapter ‘Perceiving Change’ to acknowledge a significant shift in the project in which I introduced an emphasis on the development of narrative relationships. After the first series Drift, which focused on discrete scenes of parts of place in each painting, I decided to slow down and look more carefully at one particular scene. I wanted to explore and experience a changing place, working on multiple paintings of the same place. The research for Chapter 2 focuses on one specific place – a suburban bowling club during a period of dramatic physical change. I establish a connection to the work of artists Pierre Huyghe and Roni Horn to contextualise my project in contemporary practice, particularly in terms of ideas about the complexity of relationships, memories, experiences, facts and fictions.

The paintings I produced over this period of time is further considered with reference to the paintings and approaches of Antonio López García. In this series of paintings, my facture becomes more obvious through the building and rebuilding of space within the painting surface. I investigate the evocative nature of ruin, as well as the idea and use of the fragment, within a single image, and across the series of works. My studio methods change to include multiple approaches to the same space and the isolation of elements in fragments. I reference the Romantic movement and, in particular, Schlegel’s concepts of the fragment, uncertainty and ‘forever becoming’.

The exploration of place in this series considers the memories made in the site, the memories held in the physical attributes of the place, and the possibilities of the shared memory of viewers. These ideas are furthered through the consideration of collective memory (Halbwachs 1992) and the writing of Michelle Packer on the representation of demolished spaces (Packer 2012). One of the emphases in the testing and production of this series is on remembering how the place once was at a different time – be that in terms of years, months or days earlier. This consideration of the past and present also takes into account the future development of place.

In this series of works, I extended the discoveries that began in Drift in order to achieve broader complexity of connections between elements of place. I manipulated the composition within the rectangle of the canvas, and experimented with different scale and focus. These strategies contributed to addressing my main research question in terms of the ways in which the historical, psychological and imagined aspects of a place can be advanced and embedded in realist landscape paintings of urban place.

2.1 Pierre Huyghe’s complex representation and experience of place.

Integral to my understanding of creating connections through working with a series of images and ideas of place, is a consideration of the methodology of artist Pierre Huyghe. Arguably one of contemporary art’s most innovative visual artists, his practice is based on the questioning of reality and time, and disturbing or subverting the expectations of an exhibition. Although Huyghe’s practice is not based in painting, his methods and outcomes are influential as contemporary approaches to the representation of place. His work has a particular emphasis on sensorial and tactile combinations that provide significant possibilities for representation through painting.

The two works of Huyghe that have helped my questioning and understanding of place and representation are L’Expédition Scintillante: A Musical, 2003, (Figure 13) and A Journey That Wasn’t, 2005. Both of these works only come into existence through a combination of the various attempts at communicating multiple factors of place,
which, in this case, is Antarctica. For Huyghe, the only way a true appreciation of a place is felt and understood is through relationships between representation and experience – or experience and then representation. His sensorial and experiential approach provides significant possibilities for considering representation, and offers ways to further the ideas of empathising physically with the space, as initiated in Chapter 1.

I would ideally like contemporary landscape painting to achieve the extremes of sensorial tactility that Huyghe achieves in his elaborate installations, stage shows and video works. By examining his approach with a focus on the complexity of relationships, memories, experiences, facts and fictions, I believe that a similar conceptual approach to realist landscape painting is possible. The two works \textit{L’Expédition Scintillante: A Musical} and \textit{A Journey That Wasn’t} became useful in clarifying conceptual ambition and new methods and approaches. They were especially useful in the series of works titled \textit{Bowling Club (a case study)} and the \textit{Interval} series discussed in Chapter 3, which were completed during a similar stage of the project and were less reliant on the constancy of a single location.

Huyghe’s work \textit{L’Expédition Scintillante: A Musical} was inspired by an interest in topology as a way to translate an experience without representing it. This interest in the spatial relations of things is a way of reading and interpreting the world (Barikin 2012). The work is based on Jules Verne’s story \textit{Journey to the Centre of the Earth} and was started in the mid 1990s. Huyghe developed the multifaceted work over a number of years, defining and fine tuning the presentation of the work in different gallery spaces. In the 2002 resolution of the work \textit{L’Expédition Scintillante} in the Kunsthart Bregenz, Austria, Huyghe utilised three floors of gallery space to represent the experience and representation of a journey that is not fixed in time or motif. Each space of the
gallery installation was transformed by Huyghe to communicate a feeling of place. Such was the sense of place evoked in the installation that the critic Tom Morton describes each space as a landscape (Morton cited in Barikin 2012). L’Expédition Scintillante helped me consider coming to terms with the perhaps less definable subjective unknowability of an experience so vast and expansive, that it cannot be confined to one individual representation. The audacious way in which Huyghe attempts to visualise the impossible, and create a work with the emphasis often centred on the audience experiencing the individual elements, rather than any idea of a finished product, is both enticing and liberating.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev describes the work of Huyghe as being in ‘a permanent state of incompleteness’ (Christov-Bakargiev 2004, p.405). At first examination it seems Huyghe has tried different explanations and visualisations to give a more complete experience or explanation. It is as though there is a cacophony of communication, and Huyghe has tried communicating something in different languages, speeds and formats to get the complexity of ideas across. In this way, I think the idea of incompleteness is key to the success of the work. It allows for a conversation between the viewer and the artist, and it allows for an idea to take hold in the viewer more effectively. Communication does, however, depend on the viewer’s prior knowledge or experience, and the order in which they encounter the works in the series. Thinking about incompleteness not only in terms of missing pieces, but also the liberty to find and make connections, experiences and feelings in different ways, has become an added aim for my painting project.

In the essay ‘On the Art of the Future’, Susan Stewart talks about the potential of art to embrace incompleteness:

Art’s hypothetical and incomplete aspects are vital to both its conceptual freedom and its capacity to bear an ethical orientation. To say that art-making is a practice indicates from the outset that the task of art is unfinished (Stewart 2005, p.301).

I agree with Stewart’s suggestion that the strength of art is in its hypothetical suggestive power and that through the incomplete attributes, there can be a possibility of more complex connections and interpretations. For me, the space that Huyghe leaves between elements in his installations can be also considered within painting, both compositionally and in relation to the readability of the mark or motif. In Huyghe’s case, the physicality of actually moving from floor to floor of a gallery to encounter the whole installation amplifies the use of time and space, timing and presence in the communication of ideas. His work L’Expédition Scintillante blurs distinctions between factual and fictitious, as well as abstract and real, responses to a landscape, thereby making the fictitious response as palpable as any experience from everyday life. Huyghe has defined this exhibition as ‘something you cross, where you suspend your conclusions’ (Christov-Bakargiev 2004, p.112). In an interview for the Art21 documentary series, Huyghe explains his artworks are about choices that govern the situations rather than the situations themselves; they privilege multiple connections rather than a closed unchanging final representation (Art21 2007).

When I translate these ideas to a painting practice, the idea of connections being made and encouraged through the act of mark making recognises both the process and the final representation. Huyghe’s belief that in order to communicate, one needs to go to the dark areas to show the mistakes and hesitations, is the liberating factor
that allowed this series to depart from the hermetically sealed images of *Drift*. A further attribute of Huyghe’s practice worth considering for my own project is the development of one work over many years and the recurrence of themes in new artworks.

In 2005, three years after *L’Expédition Scintillante* was shown, Huyghe was given the opportunity to realise the journey proposed by the work. The work that followed, *A Journey That Wasn’t*, saw Huyghe, along with seven other artists and ten crew members, sail to Antarctica on a research ship. Huyghe characterised his work as a search for the non-knowledge zones and discussed the significance of taking away the certainty of knowledge to access ideas:

> We don’t know if I went there, if I saw this island, if I saw this white creature, maybe I did, maybe it is a special effect? What is important to me is to create holes on the map; by doing so, you bring back some myth, create zone of no knowledge, blur certitude... I am trying to be less narrative. It is an emotional landscape that I am trying to experience. Here, I want people to experience more of an emotion, than to experience a simple narration (Transcribed from Art21 2007).

The approach Huyghe suggests in engaging with representation leaves enough gaps for the representation to become experience. It allows for emotion and feeling and other forms of understanding to fill the gaps. Such was the impact of Huyghe’s work on my thinking that I consciously embarked on adjusting my approach to urban landscape painting, so as to embrace the spaces between the known understanding of representation. Huyghe had added to insights and influences gained from a consideration of Spuybroek’s notion of sympathies and feelings, along with Stewart’s concept of attunements.

The second series of works *Bowling Club* is a case study that tracks the change to a particular suburban site over a period of four years. Taking the approach of vital beauty outlined by Lars Spuybroek after John Ruskin, I consider this place as a living space where things make each other via their object of encounter (Spuybroek 2011). My approach to this series of paintings reflects the influence of Huyghe’s focus on connections, rather than completeness, and Ruskin’s ideas of how individual elements connect and affect each other:

> His [Ruskin’s] sympathy is more advanced, since it distributes itself among all things, organic and nonorganic, since they are all equally saturated with life and force (Spuybroek 2011, p.227).

In order to better engage the relationships between individual elements, I worked by focusing on a number of paintings at once to include different viewpoints, scales and times of engagement with the painting. I worked over the top of failed attempts and tried not to consider the process as anything more than just a process and not an outcome. I wanted to engage with the gaps in representation and try to see ways of understanding place that I had not seen before. I revisited the place again and again at different times over a number of years, in different seasons, and through a process of change. This level of consideration of the total place is what I find compelling about the work of Huyghe. In my consideration I hoped to access the topology and something of the entropic nature of this place.
The *Bowling Club* series spans 2009-2012, and mixes factual experience and observation with fictive imagined scenarios. The Carlisle Bowling Club is a place I drive, walk or ride past almost daily and have done so for a number of years. It is a place that had been defined by its use and had notable rhythms; it was full of people and activities on weekends and certain nights. I took an interest in the space as a spectator and have images of the people in white uniforms and hats on bright green demarcated spaces. Almost overnight, this activity stopped and temporary fencing was installed, restricting access to the site. For a few days, I thought that the buildings might be renovated, but the space became empty of life and the grass turned from green to brown. Over the next few months, the demolition of the bowling club began, with a slow destructive rhythm at first, then a flurry of diggers and filled skip bins, and then it was quiet again for weeks.
I did not record the demolition every day – or even every week – but whenever I passed, I would notice how things were going and record images of what was happening, sometimes noting in a journal information about other factors not captured photographically. I was interested in the fact that something you see regularly for years can be taken away and only lives on as an image and memory, sometimes for a short time and sometimes for longer. The paintings, although based on a specific location in Carlisle, Western Australia, were more about the process and activity of change, and the remembering and forgetting. The paintings in this series were at times uncomfortable and difficult to complete, and I would like to think this feeling of suburban destruction translates through my experience onto the canvas.

The first painting in the series, *Bowling Club*, 2010-2012, *(Figure 14)* was an overly ambitious effort to represent the early part of the demolition in a realist manner. It was my first painting after the *Drift* series and, on reflection, I realise I was aiming to get too much information and feeling into one image. It was not the authentic representation full of potential memory and histories as well as futures that I was hoping for. It felt like I was writing a story with too many plot lines and, in the process, nothing much was communicated successfully. One discovery that was successful was the erasure of an element that had previously dominated the painting. I had originally painted a big orange digger demolishing the bowling club on the right hand side of the building. I found the image to be too obvious – simply a painting of demolition – and decided to camouflage it into the trees. I did not paint it out completely but, at the same time, did not allow it to be immediately obvious. The use of a matt version of the same tree colour caused the digger to almost disappear but still remain as a reminder of its form. Within the history of painting, *pentimento*, the Italian word for repentance, describes when a painting had been altered, and the artist had changed their mind about the placement of something. I decided that, unlike the traditional examples *(of pentimento)* where an artist might change the position of a hand or face in a painting to make the image more compelling, I would use the process of covering and uncovering in a more communicative way, to paint things out that no longer existed, or were only there momentarily. I realised that this strategy could communicate some of the impermanence I found intriguing. The ability of a painting to hold a permanence or impermanence of the history of actions or events is integral to my research project.

2.2 Painting time with López García.

The work of Spanish realist painter and sculptor Antonio López García proved to be an important context for this *Bowling Club* series. He is known for his process of working on paintings over a period of many years. Discussing an exhibition at the Reina Sofia Museum in 2011, he reflects on his works:

I have worked as constantly as ever, and as always on many things at once in an apparent anarchic fashion, but this is the way I work. Some of the pieces completed during these years will be here. There will be also others on which I continue to work and that will be shown in the midst of that process. Still others will have to wait for subsequent exhibitions... The differences or changes in my way of interpreting them have not been voluntary, in general, but rather are the result of the transformations imposed by the passage of time, which marks our physical being and inevitably affects everything we do (López García, et al. 2011, p.17).
López García works in a way that represents everyday life, while also revealing more than is actually visible in the scene. The choice to bring certain things into focus, and push other things back, is a method that moves beyond a skilled representation of what is literally seen. López García uses the sort of everyday subject that the writer Georges Perec calls the *infra-ordinary*, that is, objects that ‘occupy the sphere of daily existence that lies beneath notice or comment’ (Perec 1997, p.206). The intensity that López García is able to achieve turns these objects and spaces that are *infra-ordinary* into the extraordinary. He paints time and the relationships to time between the people and the objects. In his painting *The Dinner, 1971-1980*, (Figure 15) López García sets up relationships for the viewer to ponder: the gaze of the young girl and the hyper-focus of the meat on the table. The extended period of time, combined with a technique of painting over and repainting, gives the subject matter an added importance. López García says,

> I began to understand that emotion could be found in light, in objects, in walls, in faces or in flowers. That is to say, the whole world could reside in that which is most proximate (López García, et al. 2011, p.30).

He goes further to discuss that in the search for emotion, the dominant feeling is often one that is uncomfortable and difficult. For López García, the ‘key … is time and also the capacity to feel and believe’ (ibid, p.30). Reading this statement by López García reminded me of Spuybroek’s discussion of Ruskin, and the nature of life embedded in things, as well as the sympathetic connections with surfaces discussed within the work of Millais.

After reflecting on the limitations of my initial painting *Bowling Club*, I started to work on a more definite series of paintings. To better investigate individual methods, moments and times in space, I worked concurrently on many views and versions of the bowling club. I worked over the top of failed attempts and tried to consider the process of painting, not as an outcome, but as a way of perceiving change and time.
The work *Demolition*, 2010, (Figure 16) was made over a number of painting sessions, whilst mainly working on other smaller paintings of the same site. Often I would complete a section using the remnants of the palette to add elements of rubble and detritus. By using the distinctive material colour palette of the club, I found that the construction of these paintings inversely mirrored the destruction. In *Demolition*, the interior wall of the bowling club is left standing, still glistening white, with what I presume to be the honours board of a clubroom still showing the original skin-coloured paint from a previous era. The quiet persistence and perseverance of the original bowling club era functions to make time visible. Academic Donal Fitzpatrick writes in a catalogue essay for these paintings:

> But what is the ruin in contemporary suburbia? What are its characteristics and to whom do these piles of rubble and abandoned spaces speak? In the suburbs the ruin is the physical manifestation of the degradation of dreams, of ruined marriages and partnerships, of bankruptcies and repossessions. The ghost of ideals and the broken promises that lie smashed and neglected upon the un-mowed and overgrown grass (Fitzpatrick 2010, p.4).

Fitzpatrick extends the metaphor of the ruin as being reflective of the negative and difficult experiences of suburban life. At the same time, I consider Spuybroek’s discussions of the ruin as being in a caring and reflective position, ‘caring because it shows traces and accidents within existence’ (Spuybroek 2011, p.225). I think of this in the subject of the bowling club and the painting itself (full of accidents and existence). By working on *Demolition*, I developed...
an interest in specific parts of the building, in all its rapidly changing states of existence. The crumbling corporeal skin tones of the salmon-coloured bricks and the twisted rusting metal forms each warranted their own focus and painting. I experimented with methods of wiping back and whiting out, to overlay and conceal images from a previous painting, allowing just enough opacity to cover the past, yet enabling some knowledge of its existence.

Some of the smaller close-up paintings that came after the first less successful attempt, *Bowling Club Study* (Figure 17), focused on specific elements like the contrast between inside and outside of the space. During the demolition process, a removed wall had exposed the interior and a dark tangle of the demolished inside was visible through the opening. From a distance, it was difficult to get a visual purchase on the material and it made me consider the tangle of human engagement Fitzpatrick referred to in his catalogue essay. It was a reminder of the stories and lives lived within the building that had been the bowling club. The incompleteness inherent in the process allows openness in thinking and a connection to time passing, as if obliterating and removing paint might provide an experiential parallel to the removal of a wall, roof or brick. Other elements of shape, colour, shadow (or lack thereof) are also manipulated to engage the experience of demolition.

*Figure 17* Nicole Slatter, *Bowling Club Study*, 2010, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm
Although my practice is predominately oil on canvas or board, I also use watercolour as a way of quickly trialling ideas. The watercolour studies produced over this time period were important as they began to influence how I thought about strategies and methods in the oil paintings. Initially made out of speed and convenience, the material specificity of watercolour helped achieve more sensitivity in the oil paintings. The tension between permanence and impermanence that watercolour provides, and the resultant washed-out appearance, akin to the feeling of an overly bright day, was particularly noteworthy. The watercolour paint embeds itself into the surface of the paper, more than oil on canvas or board, resulting in a feeling of the image dissolving into space as in *Bowling Club Study (WC)* (Figure 18) and *Site Study* (Figure 19). Although watercolour is a medium known for being unforgiving, the fact that it seems to hold more of the feeling from the mark of the brush, is an advantage. This is evident in *Aperture, 2010,* (Figure 20) where the amount of detail that I choose to leave out in the painting of the interior somehow makes it seem more emotive. The compositional decision to work on the view of the bright exterior and the shadowy interior began as a formal choice, but the mass of fleshy bricks spilling from the space, and the darkened less definable interior, became an extended metaphor for the body.

In the Bowling Club series, I was able to explore the addition and subtraction of a floating image on and in a pictorial field, as though it had been collaged onto the space and left floating on an incomplete background. This
Chapter 2: Perceiving Change - Bowling Club (a case study)

Figure 19 Nicole Slatter, Site Study, 2012, watercolour on paper, 45 x 53 cm

Figure 20 Nicole Slatter, Aperture, 2010, watercolour on paper, 45 x 53 cm
was a technique I had not used for the previous series. I felt somewhat empowered by the way López García approaches painting over time, and the idea of things being finished or unfinished at various stages. López García builds his paintings by layering and obliterating, wiping off and rediscovering, all adding to the substance of the painting. I found these strategies useful in striving toward a feeling or understanding that is captured in painted marks. The Bowling Club series is perhaps a more proper example of the word ‘series’ than the previous groups of works. By this, I mean the paintings that collectively make up Bowling Club were always intended to work together and be exhibited as a group. I liken this method of display to the predella, a historical method of arranging didactic narrative in painting, which was often used in religious altar painting, where a series of smaller works are arranged in a line, or where smaller works flank a larger painting. The most noteworthy attribute of the predella is that it affords the artist freedom from iconographic conventions of the larger scene (Ryan 2004). The smaller works often show detail, or the image, from a different viewpoint or time. This consideration, along with my musing on the process of López Garcia, prompted further research into fragmentation as a strategy for my project. The fragmentation of the parts of place – to amplify and emphasise the narrative or corporeal attributes that were developing in the studio – enabled the possibility of change in scale and viewpoint. My use of the fragment to describe place is therefore a logical development in this project. It helped me free up my sense of spatial representation and allowed me to push the boundaries of spatial convention.

In the essay 'Painting Spaces', Anne Ring Petersen argues that, in the last 15 years, painting has taken a third direction of space, wherein the representational space is not an illusion, but physical and tangible space (Petersen, et al. 2010). She argues that conceptual developments are creating physical development:

Today, much of the experimental energy is put into exploring the spatiality of painting, not as a product of illusionism, but as something physical and tangible. Artists are investigating painting’s relations to objects, space, place and the ‘everyday’, and in doing so they are expanding ‘painting’ physically as well as conceptually. In many cases one can hardly say that the artist is painting pictures; he or she is rather painting or creating spaces. This rethinking of space in painting, or of painting as space, brings about changes in the relationship of painting to the viewer, the exhibition space, the art institutions, the market and the other contexts of the artwork (Petersen et al. 2010, p.126; original italics).

Petersen offers the work of Peter Bonde as an example of this rethinking. She suggests that Bonde’s painting installation (Figure 21) from Galerie Brigitte March, Stuttgart, 2000, is a ‘hotbed of conflicting ideas’ where:

Bonde … invites the viewer to experience and read it as a spatial environment, an installation with countless cross-references among its elements and a multiplicity of vistas that overturns traditional pictorial perspective. But at the same time it also urges the viewer to contemplate and read each painting as an individual image (Ibid, p.128).

Petersen concludes that the installation display turns painting into something more complex, intertextual, contradictory – and more spatial. I reflect on the methods of spatiality in the same way I have with Huyghe; they inform my decisions within the frame of the image and when the works are installed on the wall, although my use of space in the Bowling Club series of works does not move off the wall in the same way as Bonde’s painting
installations. I hope the motif, colour and other connections of space will lead to the experience of the whole space as well as that of the individual paintings. At any rate, I want the relationships in the motif, and the feeling within the application of paint over time, to be the main forms of communication.

2.3 Facture, fragment and Friedrich Schlegel’s ‘Forever becoming’.

When considering the representation of place, it is the process of discovery through my direct experience and that of the viewer, which is influential in this project. The observation of fragmented moments in time, and selected aspects of place that are explored and developed on site, forms the basis of the Bowling Club series. It is the collection, collation and presentation of these fragments that I consider as the ‘becoming’ of this body of work. The notion of ‘becoming’ or ‘forever becoming’ has its foundation in the early German Romantic movement of the 19th century (Tanahisa 2009). One of the proponents of the German Romantic movement was Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel, the German poet and philosopher. Schlegel conceived the term ‘forever becoming’ (Millan 2012). The Romantics’ open and playful approach to literary form, unlike the conventional philosophical discipline, did not guide the reader systematically to the conclusion, and instead involved them in the experience of ‘becoming’,
through the use of fragments. These ideas from 1800’s regarding romantic poetry as ‘forever becoming’ provide a basis for my methodology in this painting series. The exploratory stages of the investigation began in separate locations and starting points around the same place, the Carlisle Bowling Club, and became reunited at the point of exhibition.

The idea of the fragment of presence and absence is evident through the ruin and relic of the Bowling Club. The enticing nature of the endlessly transformative quality of the fragment links to my interest via the endeavours of Pierre Huyghe. As previously discussed, I consider *L’Expedition Scintillante* as arguably one of the all important and highly influential artworks of this century. Huyghe deals with a truly contemporary relationship to place understanding through change and multimodal access, through sensory understanding, timing and aesthetics foremost, and through factual information as an optional or secondary component.

Another contemporary artist of great influence to this project and, in particular, to this series of works is the American artist Roni Horn. She has engaged with the same landscape in Iceland since the 1970s and, in particular, makes work about the affect of place. Her work *You are the Weather*, 1994-95, *(Figure 22)* is about looking and noticing, being and becoming; and it has been influential in the consideration of representation – and for my painting – in this project. Her practice is known for its emotional and psychological dimension that establishes a connection between the subject and the viewer.

*Figure 22* Roni Horn, *You are the Weather*, 1994-1995, photo installation: 64 C-prints and 36 gelatin-silver prints, 100 parts, 255 x 205 mm (each)
You are the Weather is a photographic series in which Horn has repeatedly photographed a young woman emerging from the hot springs in Iceland over the course of two months. The location and position is identical with the only differences being atmospheric changes in the place. This work is less about the woman and more about 'how she is' (Rittenbach 2009). The subtle changes between images and the repetition combine with the suggestive title to encourage sympathy for the affect of the place on the woman’s face. The title You are the Weather implicates the viewer as an active participant in the understanding of this work. This work is about all of us, our surroundings, and the effects these ephemeral, almost-impossible-to-represent elements have. Horn’s 100 photo series encourages a really close looking, like no other work I know. It suggests to me that looking, and repeated looking, will lead to feeling and understanding. This work interests me at the level of representation and realism, and the combinations help me consider how a realistic image can be so much more than the sum of its parts.

2.4 Collective memory and changing place.

The works in the Bowling Club series vary in intensity, in regard to the details of material, scale, compositional changes and the discernable speed of paint application. As the painted fragments of place come together, each functions to support the intent of the series (Figure 23). The small painting Ruin, 2010, (Figure 24) focuses on the debris filling the view and forcing the individual characteristics and qualities of the materials to combine together. The broken, twisted lengths of steel structure and crumpled pieces of metal sheet have a material quality like a silky fabric. I emphasise this resemblance by using muted tones and painting the objects in a similar key. Out of all the Bowling Club paintings, Ruin has a timelessness. Although it represents a demolition pile from the Carlisle Bowling Club, it could represent other ruins in another time period. Rather than taking the focus away from the place of the Bowling Club, I think that, within the context of this series, Ruin encourages viewers to access their memories of similar types of images.

Figure 23
Nicole Slatter, Interval, 2010, Beaver Gallery, Canberra, installation detail, photograph: Nicole Slatter
The utilisation of connections to trigger memory and experience in the viewer is considered by historian Michelle Packer in 2012. Packer writes about the representation of demolition in 17th century Dutch art. In her discussion, the image of demolition becomes a potent symbol of physical and social separation. Packer uses Maurice Halbwachs’ concept of the social dimension of memory to articulate the role of memory and belonging (Packer 2012). In reference to Dutch paintings and ruins, Packer posits that the very quotidian quality of the structures of ruins enabled them to serve as rich carriers of collective memory. The painting of things as disjointed from their original narrative and with somewhat timeless qualities, has the potential to engage a collective memory. Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs writes about memory as being, by nature, multiple and yet specific; it is at once collective, plural, and also individual, and takes place in the spaces and objects of life (Halbwachs 1992). It is not only one personal memory of lived experience, but that of other paintings which have similar characteristics from different times, shared through our recollection of ruin.

When painting Ruin, I found that I kept thinking of the muted tone of Théodore Géricault’s The Raft of the Medusa, 1818-1819, (Figure 25 and 26) – particularly the bottom right section of the painting. I was accessing my memory

Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
of similar visuals from art history. The girders, flesh and cloth that mingle and spill in a downward direction bear strong formal comparison to my work *Ruin*. The light and tone of my brighter image gives a modern feel, yet still muses on historical painted recording or story, telling of a changing place, event or situation. In order to attribute qualities such as striving or hopefulness to the small suburban occurrence within a contemporary domestic space, *Ruin* helped me to focus my selection of pace, brush mark and composition.

The discussion of the use of the ruin in the history of painting, oscillates between the depiction of rich shared experiences and troubling upheaval. In her broader discussion of the image of the demolished building as ‘broadly accessible sites of collective memory’, Packer discusses the isolation and feeling of trying to orientate oneself in relation to the changed place in the work of Jan van Kessel:

Van Kessel leaves the viewer in the most uncomfortable and troubling stage of a change: at its midpoint. He depicts the stage of demolition when the familiar has been stripped away and the promised improvements are still very far from realization (Packer 2012, p.16).
Packer extends the concept of orientating and organising by referring to philosopher Michel de Certeau’s concept of walking to help orientate oneself in surroundings:

Viewers of such images, like the figures in them, enact a mental walk, retracing the areas depicted at different points in time... Viewing an image becomes a substitute for actually moving through the space depicted. Through viewing, beholders regained an element of control over their environment by observing the spatial boundary between the city and its surroundings, a control lost in expansion (Packer 2012, p.17).

This moving through and around place, with the idea of ‘forever becoming’ proffered by Schlegel, influenced this second series of works. While still dealing with suburban landscape and connections to experience, narrative and place, the Bowling Club series allows the disorientation and incompleteness of the changing place to enact an imagined movement through the representation of place on each individual canvas and the combination of works in the series. The complexity of viewing the surface of painted movements extends the focus via the pile of debris from the demolition of the bowling club. Paintings of tangles of both building material and paint are produced to bring the movement of the mark and the movement of the viewing to attention.

The painting Ruin focused on the piles of demolition that had been sorted by the workers into different materials. It seemed that isolating one quite complex motif allowed the decisions of the application and movement of paint to be as much the subject as the pile itself. The work Pile, 2012, (Figure 27) is painted directly onto a piece of found form ply, which has a surface of rich dark paint and a direct connection to construction as a building material. By using the separate images of various materials (aluminium in this case), I engaged with the challenge of how to paint this awkward pile. I likened the black background to the dark interior of the bowling club and the technique of applying this paint was, at times, like the action of cleaning my brush, more than an attempt to represent things in a realist capacity.

I made five paintings focusing on this similar motif in varying scales. This motif of the pile crosses over into the next series of works titled interval, and continues the exploration of the subject's ability to resist and confound logic when being rendered. The use of darkness as background trialled in Pile, is further discussed and investigated in Chapter 4.

By focusing on one space in Chapter 2 – Bowling Club, over a period of intense change – I hoped to undo the somewhat hermetically sealed scenes from the Drift series, and looked at the same place from different views and angles. The use of the fragment has assisted in facilitating greater understanding of the individual attributes of place, including aspects of change, growth and demolition. Focusing on the same subject repeatedly as a strategy like Roni Horn, forces a much more intense looking and consideration of the elements being represented, and their meaning. This series opened up new lines of inquiry, including the consideration of fragmentation as parts contributing to the whole, as well as the complexities of experience, memory and the state of forever becoming.
Figure 27  Nicole Slatter, Pile, 2010, oil on form ply, 45 x 53cm
CHAPTER 3

Fragmented Place – *Interval*

This chapter introduces and reflects on the series of paintings that explore the complex aspects of memory representations of urban landscape. In this series titled *Interval*, I develop connections through the ideas of Spuybroek, Ruskin’s writing on the sympathy of form and textures, and continue the use of a fragment-focused view of place in the urban landscape. In Chapter 2, I tested ideas of the fragment by focusing on a single site; and, in this chapter, I extend this notion of place through a more expansive exploration of the wider urban landscape.

To achieve this, I started by making a series of small works that fixed on selected things or objects in a view, resulting in a sampling of perception and engagement. I continued the strategy of making work in series and of considering paintings in relation to each other. These combinations build on the idea and connection to place and experiences *in place* from Chapter 2. I recognised the developing importance of, firstly, time spent making and, secondly, opening points of access to the paintings. The use of one object or motif as the subject in the small-scale paintings vary from intensely attentive to a more fleeting representation. The results are more rhythmical and further explore considerations of pace and time in painting, as well as moving through, viewing and remembering place.

3.1 My use of metonymy and motif.

In order to attempt a thorough representation of place through any sort of medium, whether it be film, photography or painting, it is necessary to rely on metonymic devices (Jamieson 2007). In this project, I acknowledge the important part that metonymy plays in fragments and aspects of place to represent a larger, more complete idea of place.

The metonymic relationship in *[Place for event]* compromises important events which occurred at a particular place as well as activities typically performed at a given place as its setting. Relating places with what is typically done there is part of our cultural knowledge. It allows us to interpret the mention of the place (Panther and Radden 1999, p.42).

By isolating views in *Interval*, I acknowledge and draw on possible metonymic devices in a considered way, extending the use of associative meaning to places and objects explored in earlier work from *Drift* and in the *Bowling Club* series. I take my understanding of the term ‘metonymy’ and the traditional meaning of it to be a word that stands for something it is closely associated to. I like to think of the example of the ‘crown’ as representative of power and authority; the idea that the object refers to a bigger idea or concept (Dirven and Pörings 2003). In my paintings, I make use of different levels of metonymic devices in order to represent place and the elements of place. By that, I mean the use of a small detail within a painting such as a flying bird to represent a flock of birds as well as a larger idea like freedom. I use this strategy to assist with the realist representation in suggesting both concept and feeling.

The Belgian artist Luc Tuymans relies on metonymic devices in his paintings and considering his approach has been useful to the *Interval* series. Tuymans is known for his use of cognitive association with objects represented in his paintings standing in for historic events. The objects help represent concepts and feelings that are difficult to convey directly. Tuymans’ work, which makes cognitive association to the Holocaust or the atrocities of the Belgian Congo, is said to;
[e]ncapsulates the true banality of evil – the unspeakable horror in a teacup, the monstrous potential of an empty bath. Luc Tuymans’ paintings consciously fall desperately short of the iconic, becoming vestiges posed as counterfeit emblems for that which cannot be conveyed. Still Life is a monument to this inadequacy of language (Saatchi Gallery 2015).

Tuymans’ painting Still Life (Figure 28) was produced for the Documenta exhibition in 2002 and utilises a combination of metonymy and metaphor. Still Life is his response to the 9/11 (September 11th, 2001) attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. He admits the painting’s irony in an interview with Elina Čivle-Üye in 2013:  

I chose to go the way of something totally idyllic, something calming, something that didn’t have the slightest thing to do with the Twin Towers. The painting is actually quite ironic (Tuymans cited in Čivle-Üye 2013).

Still Life is a quiet and subdued painting but on a massive scale. At 347 x 500 cm, the painting cannot easily be visually comprehended. This work is useful for considering how elements of painting such as space, scale, palette, tone and light can be used to create direct associations to body, time and place. Tuymans utilises a
disquieting quality of light and a milky atmosphere to render an apparently unremarkable still life even more still and mute. I reflect on the decisions Tuymans makes in the representation of subject and feeling in the Interval series. His paintings are representational and realist, yet they are in no way straightforward representations. He uses metaphor and metonymy to reference subjects by making use of objects to represent and evoke attributes, which might be, at times, opposite to the meaning he grapples with. To me, Tuymans’ work strives to critique and address the difficulties of contemporary representation. I admire the depth of feeling and thinking that Tuymans can elaborate on through the painting’s cool façade. From examining his methods of exaggerated scale, duration of painting, tone and isolation of motif, I return to my own images of urban surroundings.

In *Lock Up, 2010* (*Figure 29*) one of the first paintings in the *Interval* series, I depict a shed located on the grounds of a school that I travel past on a daily basis. The shed is located not far from the gymnasium depicted in the painting *Waiting*, as discussed in Chapter 1. The painting continues my interest in the concepts of *insideness* and *outsideness* by depicting a shed in the middle of the canvas with a tree dominating the foreground. The main compositional aspect tested in this work is the relationship between figure and ground. This composition keeps the viewer very much on the outside based on the solidity of the shed. The shed is light grey and close in tone to the white space, yet formidable and foreboding, due to the structural qualities and potential associated narratives.

*Figure 29* Nicole Slatter, *Lock Up, 2010*, oil on canvas, 80 x 104 cm

Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
Lock Up was influenced by the palette and stillness of Luc Tuymans, as well as a consideration that the shed could be metaphoric and, at the same time, hold original narrative. I revisited this painting two years later affected by images from the Queensland floods of 2012 and imagined an unfamiliar natural disaster in a familiar place. I added the dark floating ground with straight horizon, changing the feel to a more dramatic image, both graphically and psychologically, Lock Up – High Water (Figure 30). I explored the potential of the shed’s insideness and outsideness by representing a part of the shed in a smaller painting titled Shed Side, 2010 (Figure 31). The study fragments the shed, subverting its solidity and security. By isolating the façade, I test the possibility that this wall is the space between inside and outside. In this smaller version of the shed, the façade is positioned with a lone school chair, suggesting a human presence and performing the function of the dramatic corporeal tree in Lock Up. Shed Side is one of a number of small paintings of the suburb in fragment that has been made for the Interval series.

These small painted images were views of objects and place that triggered association and memory. The strategy of the small scale attempts to elicit a quick simple viewing and the ability to read one image next to the other as in a sentence. Some of the images are of individual objects in isolation. Understanding the ability images have to refer, stand in for and expand meaning encouraged further research regarding metonymy, meaning and memory.

Figure 30 Nicole Slatter, Lock Up – High Water, 2010-2012, oil on canvas, 80 x 104cm
3.2 Shared memory of place and object.

A reading of contemporary social theorist Margarita Saona revealed a relationship between my interest in *Einfühlung*, and the idea of metonymy and memory. In her paper ‘Plain Things and Space: Metonymy and Aura in Memorials of Social Trauma’, Saona gives a clear and concise account of empathetic imagined remembering through metonymic means. She discusses the research of writer Alison Landsberg, who uses the term ‘prosthetic memory’ to describe how people weave themselves into the fabric of social memory without having necessarily experienced the place first hand. The empathy takes place in the brain and is ignited by stimuli such as a space, an object or an image:

[T]he word “empathy” itself entered the language of psychology through Edward B. Titchener’s interpretation of the concept of *Einfühlung* described by Theodor Lipps, who in turn elaborated on Robert Vischer’s aesthetic theories. Although the etymology does not seem to be relevant for the current understanding of the term “empathy”, it is significant that the word originated as an attempt to theorize the viewer’s relationship to a work of art (Saona 2014, p.74).
The ideas discussed by Saona helped me consider my series of individual motif paintings differently. I hoped for connections to be made between paintings, and to the viewer’s memories and experiences of these motifs. I wanted to extend this empathy in the viewing of art and combine it with Landsberg’s idea that people might weave themselves into the social memory of a place in the viewing of this series of works (ibid).

I continued to use a position gleaned from Schlegel’s discussion of the fragment, namely, that personal viewer experience completes the understanding and engagement in a work of art. An understanding of the urban and the fragment is gained from reading philosopher Walter Benjamin’s One-Way Street, particularly his writing on the urban landscape as fragmented observations of both fact and fiction. Walking through the city, Benjamin experiences a place in fragments in order to achieve a feeling and sympathy with the moment and the space (Benjamin 1996). I extend this approach to my communication through landscape representational painting: engaging with the process by selecting fragments from moving through the place. I was encouraged by my reflections on the critical writings of Schlegel, Benjamin, Ruskin and Spuybroek, resulting in a playful approach to making and arranging paintings. My studio research began with the experimental methods in the Bowling Club paintings, and continued and extended through the contemplation of the methods of artists such as Pierre Huyghe and Antonio López García. The shift from conventional landscape depiction aims to guide the viewer less systematically in order to facilitate the viewer’s own memory and experience.

In this Interval series, I break down and recombine individual motifs of the urban landscape. I use painterly devices to expand feeling and meaning. I attend to the possibility of memory and metonymy in greater depth, and I choose motifs that relate one’s thinking to something else or to another time. I use visual markers that help join other ideas and potential narratives together in spaces. Some of the motifs in this series refer more to internal, imagined or felt experiences, while others are real object markers of the place; nonetheless each are given equal status in the series. I also tested variations in perspective in some imagery by looking upwards, across and down. I explored differences in the light of day and of night to picture place in different natural situations. These variations altogether attempt to grapple with the complex matterings of a narrative and the experience of dense space via painting.

The painting Homing, 2010, (Figure 32) is a fleeting moment of birds depicted in various positions in flight. I aim for a momentary consideration of time and space from this image, always intending it to be only part of a bigger narrative as created by relationships to other paintings as in (Figure 33). Although I depict many forms of vegetation in my representations of place, Homing is the only one in the project that represents an animated living creature. I include this image to encourage a consideration of the lively moving surfaces of the non-living imagery in this series. Many of the images painted in this series contain remnants of activity and all contain a complex living relationship between the matterings of the surfaces.
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

**Figure 32** Nicole Slatter, *Homing*, 2010, oil on board, 31.5 x 45cm

**Figure 33** Nicole Slatter, test grouping, 2010, oil and board/ oil on canvas, various dimensions.
3.3 The porosity of Walter Benjamin’s city.

In their essay ‘Naples’, Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis explore ideas about the porosity of city space, which are influential to the considerations of the studio work in this series. Early ideas about the fabric of things by Spuybroek, as outlined in Chapter 1, and Ruskin’s understanding of the surface as being alive with connections, come into play across a wall of fragmented paintings. Isolating and fragmenting draws attention to the individual motif. Focusing on one object at a time allows a more specific emphasis and metonymy, like words in a sentence creating different meanings and emphases in different arrangements, as in Phone Tower (Figure 34). Metonymic devices can suggest other meanings linked in psychological associations (Nora 1989).

The notion of ‘porosity’ is central to Benjamin and Lacis’ joint essay ‘Naples’ (Benjamin 1986). This permeability, as explored by them, offers an exciting prospect to challenge representational painting. The possibilities of considering the porosity of place, through the fluid medium of paint, help extend and address the questions in my project. I consider this in two ways. Firstly, porosity facilitates sliding into a space, permeating interstitial spaces and moving through the gaps, both metaphorically and physically. These thoughts had their beginnings in studio investigation; the material connection of paint dissolving slowly or quickly into a surface, or the ability for the slow imbedding of the material to hold the viewer for longer. Secondly, I consider the porosity of space with the emphasis on memory and psychological (non-physical) permeation. Saona’s articulation of visualisation, memory and imagining, considered in conjunction with Benjamin and Lacis’ porosity of architecture, allows me to build up these ideas and the physical attributes of place in the porosity of the painting.

Figure 34
Nicole Slatter, Phone Tower, 2010.
oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm
I adopt Benjamin and Lacis' word ‘porosity’ to allow for the suggestion of a merging, attaching or dissolving, and for the maker and viewer to merge or fall into the physicality of the place. In the painting *Forecourt, 2010, (Figure 35)* I use a graphic device to make the ground seem as if it is chopped out of space; the graphic edge contrasts with the background tree and objects that dissolve into the sky. I have adjusted each element in this painting to align more closely in tone and texture, in order to engage a merging of elements. I return to my description of *Drift* in Chapter 1 where, as a child, I had already physically and conceptually embedded myself into the texture of my place. The reading of Benjamin and Lacis' essay contributed to my ideas about the memory of a place, especially in terms of retaining past events, traces of usage, that could be embodied in the paint, using the porosity, surface translucence and permeability of the medium.

I began reading Benjamin because I was considering the concepts of fragmentation and series through studio practice and the title of artist and writer Victor Burgin’s chapter ‘The City in Pieces’ seemed an obvious and literal connection (Burgin 1996). The possibilities of juxtaposition in studio practice, and the unfolding of various

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*Figure 35* Nicole Slatter, *Forecourt, 2010*, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm
connections to shared memories, actions and experience, is central to the research in this series. In Benjamin’s One-Way Street, he juxtaposes an erotic event – the city and the text (Burgin 1996). This is discussed by Michael Sheringham, who suggests that Benjamin’s use of the evocative names of streets is a way of aligning a sensual or voluptuous physical knowledge to the city:

Benjamin sees streets as “intoxicating substances”. A source of their evocative energy, the intense mental energy they generate, is the “interpenetration of images”. The name “Place du Maroc”, with its associations, induces “topographic vision” that is then intertwined with allegorical meaning, yet has a physical dimension (Sheringham 2009, p.378).

For my project, I considered the transgressive feeling of the line between the real and the imagined or remembered. I explored the discordant feel of time and pace that comes from becoming receptive to the experience of the textures and narratives available in the places of the urban landscape. My suburban wanderings resulted in a fragmented accumulation of sightings of and in the landscape.

I consider the paintings as parts of a whole – comparable to how Benjamin has developed ‘textual fragments’. I imagine the works could operate on their own or together, in different groupings. At the same time, however, they have the potential to contain more or less information, as I trial the use of more or less painterly marks, and more or less realist information. The groupings slow the pace of viewing for these works even if the painting itself has been quickly made. The amount of openness, or the calmness of the tones and colours, are all indicative of the calm and slow passing of time in these places. There are a few explosive moments, but the general lack of complication and the calm shifts between tones allow for smooth transitions from one painting to another. The arrangement of works for Interval shown in (Figure 36) is an example of the temporal elements of each painting in relationship to one another. The flight of birds and the moving fountain contribute to a consideration of the absence of the car that has left burnouts on the road. The shape of the lookout tower corresponds to the shape of the fountain and draws comparison. Following Spuybroek’s notion of sympathy, I consider the feeling of these motifs resonating in relation to one other.

Works that capture a rapidly moving substance in paint allow for a slow viewing. Night Fountain, 2010, (Figure 37) is a painting of a fountain at night, which holds this allusive substance that resists containment in space. The intention of this painting is more about the feeling of something fleeting, rather than a fountain of water as such. The impetus here is not about the political nature of water or its use to decorate parklands, but more about holding a deep breath or the feeling of being contained when you want to run free.

Whiting out or leaving out areas of landscape or object utilises an incompleteness to access some fragment or a feeling of an attunement once experienced in a place. Each work resonates with other paintings, punctuating each other to create a partial or fragmented conversation about moving, sensing, remembering, imagining and passing through place with feeling. By separating a larger view into pieces, and isolating moments or objects in space and attending to the individual characteristics, I hoped to provide an anchor for sympathy, memory and experience. I rely on the accumulation of physical and sensed experiences of my urban place to contribute to contemporary representational realist landscape painting.
Figure 36 Nicole Slatter, test grouping, 2010, oil and board/oil on canvas, various dimensions.

From left to right:

Burnout, 2010, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm
Homing, 2010, oil on board, 31.5 x 45 cm
Fountain, 2010, oil on board, 31.5 x 45 cm
Look Out 1, 2010, oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm
I return to the methods of Roni Horn, who has made repeated journeys to Iceland since 1975, resulting in numerous works in and about Iceland, identity and place. Horn states, ‘Iceland is always becoming what it will be, and what it will be is not a fixed thing either’ (Horn cited in Dean and Millar 2005, p.59). Horn refers to the experience of a place in a non-visual sense: ‘Iceland taught me to taste experience’ (Tate N.D.). During an interview in 1989, Horn furthers the sensorial relationship to landscape:

Any place you’re going to stand in, in any given moment, is a complement to the rest of the world, historically and empirically. What you can see in that moment, what you can touch in that moment, is confluent with everything else (Horn 1989).

I reflect on Horn’s statement about a sensorial confluence of place complementing other places, in relation to my small paintings of places, and the change in meaning when works are positioned differently. I consider the idea of sympathy when the flight of a bird or movement in one image is set against a stillness of space surrounding a watchtower or the traced movement of skidding tyres. The ability to empathise with a representation of movement or space is discussed by many aesthetic theorists and reconsidered more recently by Spuybroek.

Figure 37 Nicole Slatter, Night Fountain, 2010, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm
In his essay ‘Empathy, Inner Imitation and Sense-feelings’,11 Theodor Lipps discusses what he calls ‘esthetic imitation’.12 He uses the example of a bird seen as a still image. The bird is seen, but there is no flight, because the image is still; the viewer has seen flying before, but has not actually flown like a bird, yet the flying is still felt (Rader 1960).

Each of the images in this series implies a different pace and, together, they divulge the complexity of duration held in the urban landscape. The formal connections of shape colour, texture or composition between the individual small paintings are expounded when arranged and displayed together in certain combinations. The displaying of works in a group allows for an overall group narrative of complex duration and pictorial depth in a way not possible in a single image. The potential for a narrative suggestion was a key endeavour and I consider this series as a generative work—not work that culminates and resolves completely. Moreover, the series brings attendant concerns into focus and develops relationships between ideas I have been investigating. I hoped this series would be evocative and sensorial, but, on reflection, I evaluate the outcome as somehow too easy and simplistic. The display in a grid format for *Interval*, when viewed together, seems to devalue the individual strength of each image and demote their difficulty or complexity. On evaluation, I think this aspect of the series is the closest to illustrating a theory and the furthest from the deep, complex, compelling material feeling I had hoped to engage through this painting project. I thought this grouping of small-scale paintings would be evocative and sensorial; however following evaluation, I considered the grid installation to be contrived. Nevertheless, hanging the smaller paintings at eye-level in a line and spaced out achieved some of the aims for the work by allowing each painting to retain the possible complexities of reading.

### 3.4 Painting the impermanence of place.

As the small works for *Interval* were in the process of being developed, the possibility of cultivating metonymy and metaphor in the motif was also evolving, as considerations of the global to the local or personal became more apparent in the project. I was not intending to shift my focus from the local and the urban, to the global. Instead, I was interested in enriching my understanding of each element I was representing. By expanding my knowledge and understanding of each motif used in the paintings, I was hoping for to make wider connections to meanings and feelings. My methods of collecting images extended to news media and literature, both historical and current. I started to actively look for wider connections to similar motifs— for example, if I was looking at building rubble in my street, I would collect imagery of rubble in news events or ancient ruins or historical paintings. Scrutinising the motifs of place and the associative potential resulted in a wider search for associations and relationships. Some of these associations started to emphasise connections to more expansive subject matter, however the authentic relationship, for me, remained in the local and familiar landscape event.

An example of the influence of the global on the local place can be seen in introduced species. As discussed in Chapter 1, in the first series *Drift*, the painting *Oasis* featured palm trees that were out of place. The painting *Island, 2010*, ([Figure 38](#)) is the first of two paintings using the motif of a man-made island that emphasises being out-of-place within a place.

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11 ‘Sense-feelings’, refers to the feelings localised in the body—kinaesthetic sensations, motor disturbances, physical cravings such as hunger, and so forth.

12 Throughout the essay ‘Empathy, inner imitation and Sense-feelings’, Lipps uses ‘esthetic’, not ‘aesthetic’.
Figure 38 Nicole Slatter, Island, 2010, oil on canvas, 69 x 79 cm

Figure 39 Nicole Slatter, Habitat, 2012, oil on canvas, 69 x 79 cm
This island contains palms and exotic species. Its shape is a perfectly even ellipse, like a planter ring in the garden to isolate the garden bed or tree. My approach to painting this island involved positioning it evenly in the middle of the canvas, leaving the white of the canvas for the foreground and background, and letting the paint seep into the white primed surface. The palm fronds almost dissolved to nothing in places. I think of the island as a global place; it is foreign and yet strangely familiar, it is an anywhere island. The centre of the painting is an organic expanse that made me aware of control, both within the subject of a maintained garden, and the controlling strategies to paint an unruly mass of foliage. These two paintings of an isolated mass of not-from-here foliage took time to build and challenged any systematic approach I applied to painting it. Two years later, I decided to change the painting by adding a grounding of the concrete base and changing the name of the work to Habitat (Figure 39). I originally had in mind the containment of the island through the surrounding space; however the first attempt had left the island hovering. Due to its graphic complexity, the second work becomes more about the process of making and looking, comparable to the piles of rubble in Bowling Club. The result is more surprising and engaging than the smaller group of suburban motifs in a grid formation (Figure 36).
The next island painting *Model of a Desert Island*, 2011, *(Figure 40)* is a larger-scale version and builds on the notion of making of something visually difficult. Unlike the paintings for the *Bowling Club* series (which were also all of the same place), I kept the composition exactly the same as the smaller-scale island. I think painting the same view with a different figure/ground tension starts to focus the out-of-placeness. This larger painting with intense small detail in the central island is an attempt to provide a complexity of place that becomes more physically lost within. I reflect on the work *Concrete Cabin* *(Figure 41)* by Scottish artist Peter Doig who has painted a representation of the same place over a four year period from 1991-1995. Doig’s Cabin series is of the same subject painted from roughly the same viewpoint. I first encountered Doig’s painting *Concrete Cabin* in 2005 at the Saatchi Gallery’s *Triumph of Painting* exhibition in London. It took me by surprise because of its scale (200 x 275cm) and I was unable to read the representation until I was on the other side of the room. Doig’s Cabin paintings have the theme of failed utopia I tried to express in *Model of a Desert Island*. In Doig’s case, the Le Corbusier designed apartments have fallen into disrepair and viewing is dominated by peering through the textures, grittiness and melodramatic dark trees.

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13 Le Corbusier was the pseudonym of the Modernist architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris.

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*Figure 41* Peter Doig, *Concrete Cabin*, 1994, oil on canvas, 198 x 275 cm
The darkness of the water added to Model of a Desert Island holds some of the qualities of menace and the unknown that compels the understanding of failed utopia in Doig’s paintings. The brushwork on the left of Concrete Cabin is loose and wet-looking, and his paintings have a seeped-in quality, which is a method I use in Model of a Desert Island. In both Doig’s Cabin paintings and my Model of a Desert Island, the sense of perfection and cleanliness is encroached on by what I consider the sensorial and real, a grittiness that speaks of the visible traces of living in place.

I return to Benjamin and Lacis’ essay ‘Naples’ and the notion of porosity described through the impoverished, grubby reality penetrating the architecture and experience of the city of Naples (Benjamin 1986, p.165): ‘As porous as the stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrates in the courtyards, arcades, and stair ways’ (Benjamin 1986, p.172). I consider the facture of paint on the surface in Doig’s paintings and my own in relation to the idea of the porosity of the physical city. Art Critic Jonathon Jones writing in the The Guardian discusses Doig’s use of paint and the porosity of painting surface as follows:

Peter Doig creates his imaginary realms of joy with lush soaked-in colour. He’s a painter who never splats out big brushy gestures. Instead his colours blot into the canvas and pool on it. Sometimes he uses linen, which gives an even more blotted effect. Over the lakes of colour he adds pinpoints of dazzle – stars, lamps, fireflies (Jones 2015).

This connection to porosity via the consideration of surface and facture is important in terms of effectively addressing my questions about embedded place.

My painting Specimen, 2012, (Figure 42) was originally painted with an interest in the vast contrast between the tight and chaotic configuration of the foliage, like an overgrown forest surrounded by stark flat concrete openness. Specimen has similarities with Doig’s Cabin painting but there are also crucial differences. There is a tension between the natural plant forms and the hard-edged white modernist architecture. Benjamin and Lacis suggest that it is maybe the clashing between two elements that causes complex understanding of places as an affect of two opposing forces: ‘Here too, there is interpenetration of day and night, noise and peace, outer light and inner darkness, street and home’ (Benjamin 1986, p.172).

I find these visual deviations in consistency in suburbia to be compelling. The painting Specimen holds many of these opposing forces of light and dark, organic and man-made, noisy and serene. Extending this narrative, Specimen provides the possibility of being lost in a small jungle in the middle of suburbia; or possibly the visual metaphor of a knot in your stomach; or a struggle of understanding amid a seemingly safe, calm, familiar urban environment.

The exotic potential I found in the constructed ‘natural’ island depicted in Habitat has a visual and conceptual connection to Specimen. Both are islands in suburbia with arranged and contained ecosystems. Reflecting on these works, I discovered two important things. Firstly, I believe this physically composed isolation and strong connections to other tangible (not imagined) places became a barrier to my embodied definition of suburban place. My interest in the embodied experience of urban place through the medium of painting was no longer the main focus in these more exotic works, and so I needed to return to more rooted images of my urban landscape.
Figure 42
Nicole Slatter, *Specimen*, 2012,
oil on canvas, 60 x 77 cm

Figure 43
Nicole Slatter, *Specimen study*, 2012,
watercolour on paper, 45 x 46.5 cm
Secondly, I noticed that the paintings were successful when the technical challenge of the making was not so easy to solve, resulting in a material intensity in the facture of the painting. At this point, I realised that the feeling of place became more palpable when the painting was to some extent being solved on the surface of the canvas. It is as if the act of applying paint to depict place was ‘writing’ my connection to place into existence. I would like to think that this sensorial and physical engagement in studio practice translates through the painting to the viewer.

The two images of yellow skips in Skip Drawing, 2012, (Figure 44) and Skip Drawing Study, 2012, (Figure 45) attempt to give the material act of drawing and painting a more physical role. These works are of the same view and painted with the same intent, however Skip Drawing Study is a study made on-site and the Skip Drawing is worked from a photographic image. The huge pile of wire that dominates the view is my motif of interest. The rendering is informed by the feeling and physicality of the taut bundle of wire. The small watercolour drawing is made with an economy suited to the medium and I believe it is more successful. The material gains an unexpected life of its own: it falls in and out of focus against the yellow of the skip bin, and provides the sort of slippage between reality and realism that I have been considering throughout the project. This little discovery reminds me that scale is not necessarily the answer and that, for my project, painting allows for the reception to ideas of place in the sensitive combination of physical, material and narrative form.

In this Interval series, I have expanded relationships and connections between motif, knowledge and memory in the urban landscape conceptually and materially. I reflected on and applied discoveries regarding the complex act of viewing and rendering. This understanding of the parallel between the complexity of making and the outcome in encapsulating the feeling of embedded place, grew from the ruin investigations of the Bowling Club series and has been developed further using ideas of porosity, changing pace, scale and figure/ground tensions through the Interval series. These discoveries of porosity of place and surface of the painting, the tensions of figure/ground and the return to familiar urban place form the basis of the next part of my investigation titled Confluence and Influence.
Figure 44
Nicole Slatter, *Skip Drawing*, 2012,
oil on canvas, 60 x 77 cm.

Figure 45
Nicole Slatter, *Skip Drawing Study*, 2012,
watercolour on paper, 41.5 x 43 cm.
CHAPTER 4

Destabilising Familiarity – Confluence and Influence

In this chapter, I address the final series of works that are an extension of explorations and discoveries I have made, and provide a resolution to this project of painting place. The title of the chapter ‘Destabilising Familiarity’ describes my intention for the final part of the project in terms of my approach to the paintings and for the viewer experience. The foci of this chapter relate to sensing and feeling the physicality of a place, the retraceable act of painting, the use of darkness and nocturne to ‘see-feel’, and familiarity and the unfamiliar in realist place painting. I further my use of darkness to destabilise familiarity and to engage the viewer’s memory. I consider my use of darkness and nocturne in relation to the work of Francisco Goya and Australian artist Bill Henson.

In this chapter, I discuss the technical and material concerns – specifically, the methods of diptych, and the use of facture and surface to demand attentiveness to experience. I broaden the exploration of the non-fixity of landscape representation by further considering the work of Roni Horn, particularly the pairing of images, and the exploration of engaging experience of the landscape through representational pictorial means. As the writer Lauren Sedofsky states:

The underlying indeterminacy of the physical world, and perhaps all the more so, our experience of it reserves a rebuke for any kind of graphic fixity. It is a rebuke that Roni Horn has embraced, interrogated and accommodated in an especially diverse body of work (Sedofsky 2005).

This ability to deny graphic fixity while operating within the field of realist representation is an attribute of Horn’s methods that I find useful in this final part of the project. This series developed from the need to reconcile some of the investigations from earlier series. I wanted to bring the fragments back together and return from the dispirate locations of the island paintings.

4.1 Using the diptych.

In an endeavour to achieve sympathy to narrative, time and feeling in the connections, I tested the device of the diptych to literally bring together two existing images to test the possibilities of contrasting image and meaning. Firstly, I tried the combination of two paintings that had narrative relationship.

The first diptych Satellite, 2012, (Figure 46) utilises an earlier painting, namely, Bowling club study that focused on the dark interior space. I wanted to highlight the feeling of the spacious darkness of the interior visible through the doorway and window, so I decided to pair the painting with a deep blue-black field. I used a canvas of the same size and painted over a failed image underneath, the small lumps of the brushwork were still proud on the black surface. I sandpapered the surface to bring out a constellation of white and coloured dots showing the light paint of the previous painting. The quickly rendered phone tower draws the blue/black field back to an urban location, grounding it back to a physical place.

By bringing together fragments in this way, I hoped to bring sympathy and feeling to these two significant objects that have an intensity of physicality in these otherwise empty spaces. Both isolated in space, the phone tower and the bowling club are metonymic, and they situate a history and narrative. The bowling club is an architectural place at the end of its life, soon to be taken away and the human interactions ended. The phone tower is a paragon
of new technology and the staging point of human communication. I had painted other versions of this phone tower in previous years and had considered it as a punctuation mark on the landscape. I respond to the tower as an object responsible for connections between people, and acknowledge its similar form to space stations and satellites. I want the paintings to remain separate but comparable – I am pleased that the comparison is not easy and each image provides a slight awkwardness to the other. I think of this work in relation to the photographic paired propositions by Roni Horn in the series Becoming a Landscape, 1999-2001, (Figure 47 and 48) because of the pairing, and resultant questioning of form and meaning. I consider this work a visual alternative to the way that poetry can bring worlds together via fragments of evocative text.

Becoming a Landscape is a series of photographs presented in pairs: three pairs of portraits of the same young person facing six pairs of close-ups of hot springs. Visual relationships and sympathies exist between the girl’s face and the geysers photographed, resulting in a disturbing and enigmatic contrast. Horn demonstrates that composing the images in a similar way, and placing them together, can encourage the viewer to relate to them, materially and conceptually.

Horn’s photographic work of paired images create a comparison between the vital and alive nature of the landscape by emphasising positioning and proximity. In an earlier work, You are the Weather, 1995, (as discussed in Chapter 3) she uses repetition and suggests through titling that if you look at something for long enough or many times over, this increased attention will reveal more than simply the physical attributes. In the work from 1999-2001, Becoming a Landscape, Horn uses comparison to the physical fact, including the texture, space, wetness and crusty exterior of the geyser as well as the colour. She positions the viewer to make physical and conceptual comparisons. In a panel discussion at the Whitney Museum of American Art, titled ‘Landscape Talks Back’, moderated by Sina Najafi, Horn says,

— a point at which an object becomes too complex to be itself only, this is the point at which a thing becomes a landscape (Horn cited in Whitney Museum of American Art 2010).
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

*Figure 47* Roni Horn, *Becoming a Landscape*, 1999-2001, 10 paired C-prints, 20 prints total, 48.3 x 48.3 cm each

*Figure 48* Roni Horn, *Becoming a Landscape*, 1999-2001, installation view, Hauser and Wirth, Zurich
The panel discussed the implicit power of landscape as subject and object, focusing on the changeability and importance of narrative in the work of Horn. This discussion provides a consideration of my methods of representation, and the use and communication of experience, for the series of paintings called *Confluence and Influence*.

In considering the pairing of images, I focus on the physical and the narrative possibilities of the landscape depicted through the combined painting. The material physicality of the scratched surface set against the sharply lit representation of the phone tower in *Satellite* was a successful combination of motif. The next progression of the diptych came about from the similar testing of two paintings and then thinking about the way the new image reads. This combination tested two quite separate paintings – *Trench* (Figure 49) and *Liners* (Figure 50). Both images display elements of the changing environment, and depict space being dug up and altered. My aim for bringing these works together was to make them convincingly evocative of a feeling or atmosphere that I felt was missing from both original images.

*Figure 49* Nicole Slatter, *Trench*, 2011, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm.
In this pairing, the new combination required reworking and the use of introduced pictorial devices to consolidate the relationship. At this stage of the project, the paintings of changing environments I was working on started to make comparisons to similar disrupted environments from elsewhere. I made connections to images of earthquakes, war and human disaster with images of flood and rubble. Although these were interesting visual references, I knew the authenticity of my experience and interest lay in the intricate complexities and familiarities of the surrounding suburbs of daily existence in Australia. I considered, though shared memory and metonymy, the possibilities of a disruption in the local landscape being related to a global event, as well as the experiences of a familiar local place being a site for tactile experience of the broader world around us.

The bringing together of these two works suggests a combination that infers a local/global possibility. I used white painted marks to bring the spaces together and to create an uncertainty in the grounding of the space. This comparison between a local and the global is trialled via a pile of sand gradually becoming a mountain range, while the trench for a local development becomes suggestive of a trench for warfare in a foreign location the opposite of suburban place. The transparent white wash obscures the less important surrounding information and helps focus attention on the sections of the images that most promote comparisons and similarities to the local/global
possibilities. A brightly lit section of hills replaces the previous concrete building and becomes similar to a pile of white sand being dug out of the construction site. The bright orange objects in each painting provide a link and focus through colour. Parts of this work are successful in the creation of space, or a feeling of weightlessness and lightness, and there is a sense of forever becoming or forever receding. Ultimately, however, I think the combination of Trench/Range (Figure 51) is too contrived and the linking additions deviate too far from the aims of this project.

Having made this decision, I returned to a motif that slips between scale and geographical place, while remaining a more honest realist representation. The works that best exemplify this are demolition piles that have the ability to occupy more than one time, scale or location, which seemed most relevant in a project that is more centred on feeling place and narrative through painting.

This painting Refuse Arrangement (Figure 52), isolates the pile of aluminium from a building site and presents a combination of a real and imagined place. A way to think of and paint this pile of stuff was what and how it actually is – a pile of recyclable aluminium found in the landscape. One of my aims in painting this was to embrace the possibilities of it being a palpable knot in your stomach or the panic of being overwhelmed by complexity.

Considering again the thinking of Spuybroek and his discussions of William Morris and John Ruskin, I wanted this mass of metal (and paint) to be alive with possibilities (Spuybroek 2011). I painted it onto a failed self portrait that I had painted over with a black ground, which in the original painting was oil straight onto plywood, and so it already provided a dissolving spaciousness that embodied the struggle to make the surface retain a liveliness. I found the act of painting the pile was like building the pile itself; it had to happen by hand one step at a time, and the time taken mirrored the labour and feeling of creating a real pile of something. The organic nature of this pile is key to its quality of aliveness and the understanding of the motif in the painting. This is furthered via a consideration of a lineage of thinkers mostly encountered through the reading of Spuybroek, such as Lipps and Ruskin:

![Figure 51](image.png)

Figure 51 Nicole Slatter, Trench/Range, 2012, oil on canvas, 31 x 82 cm
If I am saddened by the view of a willow tree, Lipps argues, that does not mean there is no activity on the tree’s part. The willow “hangs” and “sways”: obviously we would not feel anything if it were a white cube or a black box. The sympathy is the accordance of the activity of the one with that of the other – an extensive movement answered by another extensive one, or an extensive one answered by an intensive one (Spuybroek 2011, p.181).

Spuybroek, Lipps, and Ruskin propose the idea that beauty is what the parts do, not what the whole is. Spuybroek writes that the ‘activity between the parts involves an onlooker’ (Spuybroek 2011, p.182). In this description, ‘we are not recipients but participants’; We simply become part of the relational, resonating network of sympathies. Lipps says, 'Einfühlung is the fact... that the opposition between myself and the object disappears...' (Lipps cited in Spuybroek, 2011, p.183). Furthering this idea, Spuybroek coined the term to ‘see-feel’:

To feel sympathy we need to see form and being formed simultaneously: we need to see-feel form and force at the same time (Ibid, p.184).
I consider these statements on networks and relationships in connection to the making and viewing of the complex small work *Refuse Arrangement*, and take up the possibility to see-feel place and painting.

I was not convinced initially that *Refuse Arrangement* fitted into my realist landscape painting project, but was compelled by the complexity and possibility of the image. I decided that the diptych might again work effectively. I chose a greenhouse at night, originally titled *Night-light*, which was also painted directly onto the plywood surface, and so gives a different depth of surface that emphasises the opposition of night and light. When I first painted *Night-light*, I hoped it would evoke a sense of wonder and possibility of tactile narrative. Separately, *Night-light* and *Refuse Arrangement* did not successfully explore the familiar and affective possibilities that I had hoped to engage.

In combining the two paintings, I did not join them together as in the previous diptychs, but simply placed them next to each other as in *Light Arrangement* (Figure 53). I hoped to bring the story back to the urban space of discovery without limiting the ability to use the space as a platform of experience. I wanted the combination to be not so open that they might be viewed as a pile of space junk, but hopefully not so inhibitive as to only think of the aluminium as a pile of dismantled greenhouse. I imagined the two light intensities as balls of energy full of potential but also suggesting a sense of dread.

![Figure 53](Nicole Slatter, *Light Arrangement*, 2013, oil on plywood, 45 x 63 cm each)

### 4.2 The retraceable action of painting.

In an essay championing the importance and contribution of research through art practice, academic Ross Gibson discusses the nature of unfurling insights in the studio. Specifically, he addresses how the surprising transformation of matter and moment that comes from art making creates knowledge of a different order. For Gibson, combining reflection and critical distance, with the immersive and iterative practices of the studio, provides a knowing that is more aligned with the challenges of contemporary existence:
All round me I see cultural phenomena and interactive relationships that are not objects, not stable or amenable to model analysis, not susceptible to distanced appreciation. Instead I see networked and interactive phenomena that are complex, dynamic, relational, ever-altering and emergent (Gibson 2010, p.8).

In an attempt to engage a complex dynamic and shifting urban landscape in the simplicity of a familiar landscape, I made a decision to bring the two ideas together in one image. This was to try and combat the history and tradition of landscape painting and resist a slip toward abstraction.

In my painting titled Confluence and Influence, 2013, (Figure 55) I focused on positioning connections and visual sympathies between two strong motifs. The BRADYS FOR CEILINGS neon sign was a fixed motif in a familiar landscape I passed by for many years. The iconic nature of this place marker was important to its local urban meanings, yet its possible Californian motif connection was also noted. I had photographed this sign over time and only decided to paint it after it was dismantled and removed. The original hand painted surface of the sign had weathered over time, causing the original marks of the physical making of the painted sign to show.
Instead of the flat sealed colour of the original finished sign, the order and direction of the application of the brush marks of the sign-writer had become evident. The neon tubes that no longer lit the sign, cast a thin linear shadow in the brightness of summer sun, adding to a tenuous and fragile feeling. The palm that had comparable utopian hopefulness seemed similarly time-weary yet defiant. I like to think of them leaning towards each other supportively and so coined the title *Confluence and Influence*.

The painterly quality of the palm mirrors the movement caused by the wind and, even without the indication of a sky, the residual weather that the battered palm fights with, in turn, relates to and affects the painted sign. I had mused on the techniques of Luc Tuymans to make a painting of one thing about something else and the suggestive ability of titling as used by Roni Horn. These painted motifs seep into the whiteness of the primed surface like the light on a bright day and, in some sections, the background looks transparent and impermanent. This painting has been shown twice in Western Australia and both times instigated conversation as viewers recollected their experiences of time spent in and around the area close to the sign. At the Albany art prize opening in 2014, one viewer was a previous employee of the Bradys company spoke to me at length a about the history and significance of the sign and the company.

I evaluate the success of this painting in terms of its inherent ideas, yet I find that the gentle and subdued qualities lack the potential subversive and tactile qualities I would like. The bringing together of potential narrative or psychological resonance is perhaps too subtle – pictorially, conceptually and materially. Reflecting on this, I wanted my further endeavours and reflections to evolve an evocative material surface to contribute to the realist renderings of urban place. I wanted to destabilise expectation by simultaneously claiming and challenging urban realist painting through motif and facture – and the pushing and pulling of these two forces.

In her essay on regionality, Kathleen Stewart discusses the familiarity of a known region or place and the strange delight in its transgressive possibilities:

> The cartography of what happens here, or what comes to matter, is lodged in a sensory certainty to which disorientation is foundational. Displacement, and singular forms of getting lost, are bubble worlds that reinvent the self-in-place by testing its limits. There is a habit of setting out alone, without a map. A venturing into a world that remains palpably unpredictable and seductive beyond the carefully cordoned zones of familiarity (Stewart 2013, p.276).

Stewart tells of a time when, later in life, she ventured from the nursing home her dying mother was living in. After admitting the tendency toward the ‘not-exactly-accidental act of getting lost’, she describes a three-hour journey of walking lost through landscape. ‘The event’, she concludes, particularly ‘its affective structure, is familiar from childhood and strangely satisfying’ (Stewart 2013, p.276). Stewart’s description is very similar to what the Situationists called a *dérive* (Debord 1956). Although the getting lost on purpose is not a technique I used to navigate place, it does suggest strategies for unexpectedness.
4.3 My use of darkness and lightness.

The words of Kathleen Stewart on the unfamiliar and the sense of delight in finding a way through place were timely for my painting. I had realised along the way that the works could be materially unpredictable, and the feeling, narrative and sympathy in realist painting I was hoping to achieve could, at times, only be solved during the process of working on the canvas. An example of this is the overexposed light and the possibility of an opposing immersive depth of darkness trialled in *Refuse Arrangement*. The fixing of time spent travelling within the pictorial surface of the canvas focused my attention on the surrounding or background darkness. I was interested in how some of the completed images sat on top of a black space while others emerged from darkness. Trialling different methods – including elements emerging from the space, use of dark and light, and considering the slow and deep introduction of light versus the monochromatic flat field – became important to this last series titled *Confluence and Influence*.

The realisation that motif needed to be compelling and destabilise expectations, yet still remain local and familiar, gave the project some adjusted parameters. Academic Nina Morris describes darkness as a space of uncertainty that creates a reliance on other forms of sensing over sight and the visual experience. It is this uncertainty that I have found to be useful in destabilising the familiar expectations of a painting.

Nothing is solid in the dark: it is harder to judge depth and distance, details are obscured and colours muted. One is obliged to ‘see’ by drawing on other senses such as touch, smell and hearing. In the dark how one senses what is surrounding is so fully restructured that it may no longer be appropriate to even label it landscape, given that this term has embedded within it a notion of the scene and which is visible (Morris 2011, p.316).

*Figure 56*
Bill Henson, *Untitled #6*, 1998/1999/2000, Type C Photograph, 127 x 180 cm
The subversion of defined landscape and strangeness in darkness that Morris describes can be seen in the work of Australian artist Bill Henson. In his photographic works, Henson embraces the qualities of darkness and achieves considerable material and atmospheric depth. (Figure 56). He refers to the use of darkness to involve the viewer and their own experience with the narrative:

> It is what goes missing in the shadows rather than what’s clearly defined. For example, I can take a picture of a road winding off into the darkness, but when the image really absorbs your attention it becomes your road (Henson cited by Moakley 2013).

I am interested in applying this sensing, which moves away from the purely visual, physical and metaphoric uses of darkness, to painting as well. I think darkness in urban and suburban landscape can be multifaceted. Darkness is palpable in the pitch black of night, the vast open space, and the imagined and uncertain other. Darkness in the Australian landscape is linked, for me, to the open expanse of night sky that often has no cloud cover and with the vast horizon comparable to being on a flat open country road at night. This open dark unknown is both exhilarating and to be feared.

Henson describes the action of looking – offering the viewer ownership of the place they are engaging with. In this series, I aim to extend the unexpected and sensorial, to encourage the viewer to feel the place and to make it personal. Henson suggests that a heightened sense of aliveness is found in great art:

> The best art always heightens our sense of mortality; this is not morbidity I’m talking about but rather that we feel more alive in the presence of great art and this is because a profound sense of continuity – our sense of being inside nature – is expanded (Henson cited in Art Gallery of New South Wales 2005; original italics).

These ideas suggest the viewer can feel the place and make it their own – to feel ‘inside’ nature not simply as an observer, but also as part of the place, as an insider. These contemporary discussions on the experience of an artwork bear a noteworthy resemblance to Ruskin and Spuybroek’s thinking around empathy and experience discussed throughout this dissertation.

The concept of darkness in the contemporary and over-lit world is different yet shares similarity to the notion of dread in paintings from previous centuries. The use of darkness in painting for both metaphoric and physical means is not new. Studying the dark paintings known as the Black Paintings (1819-1823) by Francisco Goya, I look specifically at the surrounding dark and the disappearance into darkness. There is an immense depth to the darkness achieved in these paintings. In the painting Reading, 1820-21, (Figure 57 and 58) the direction of the painted darkness and the slight colour shift from black to Vandyke brown enhances the depth of the room in candle light. Goya employs the materiality of the painted marks retraceable in vision and touch through the gesture of the brush marks.
Reflecting on the use of darkness in the painted surface draws my attention to the soaked-in feel of darkness against the gestural marks of representation on the surface. The manipulation of this darkness by Goya encourages a slow embodied looking in my opinion. I consider the shift in mark making in the painting *Reading*, specifically the long sweeping darkness with the floating lighter shapes that, when viewed from a distance, hold together as representation. There is a reliance on the viewer to fill the space between in these paintings and this activity helps the viewer to make the experience their own.

The painting in this *Confluence and Influence* series that best exemplifies these considerations is *Urban Allure*, 2014 (*Figure 59*). I bring as much feeling as possible to the combination of the elements in this painting of considerably nondescript elements. The title of the work acknowledges the drawing-in and soaking-in of the painting and the place I am creating. I highlight the drama and feeling of the darkness by arranging the elements as if they are spotlight on a stage. *Urban Allure* exposes the retraceable act of painting as the subject, more than any other work in the project. It is this painting that I feel the strongest connection to.
4.4 Time and space for the viewer.

Returning to the focus on narratives in the urban landscape, and considering the time and sensorial connection to the falling of darkness in the landscape, I made a series of three paintings connected by a familiar motif (Figure 60, 61 and 62). Each painting represents a different version of a basketball backboard. They have a quality of suburban time as discussed in Chapter 1 and feel slower, reminiscent of endless hours of school holidays. The use of the backboard allows for the defined space of a basketball court to be referenced without showing it – the familiar activity of the game and the social interaction to be remembered and imagined by the viewer.

In *Passing of time*, 2014, (Figure 62) the way the paint is applied is as though the night is being stroked onto the surface. I wanted the atmosphere of night to be solid and palpable, with the backboard describing a potentiality in space like an unpainted canvas in the studio awaiting interaction. The painting of the board shows the wear and tear of time and the interactions of play, thus revisiting ideas of earlier works. In this series of three paintings, moving from day to night slows the consideration of the impact of the feeling of descending night and finding the unknown in the known.
Figure 60 Nicole Slatter, *Extra time*, 2014, oil on board, 61.5 x 91.5 cm

Figure 61 Nicole Slatter, *The Dying Minutes*, 2014, oil on board, 61.5 x 91.5 cm

Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
This series of paintings helped confirm that my initial question for the project regarding the experience of realities of these urban places had become much more about sensing and feeling – and that a mark in paint can both represent and retain a feeling of the place it is representing. I consider the success of a painting is perhaps more dependent on the feeling and consideration in a combination of these marks. The simplicity in motif and composition in the final darker painting and the complexity of the painted mark revealed, makes the sensorial more active, and combines the visual with touch and the sensorial. It is a resonance discovered through painting and reflection on the results of painting:

Beauty can be located neither in the object nor in the subject: it is a felt resonance between the two, and as it resonates it dissolves the dualism (Spuybroek 2011, p.178).

The example that Spuybroek describes after Lipps is part of a larger discussion using the case of a storm. The storm in Lipps’ discussion changes the mood of the onlooker through empathetic feeling for the objects, trees and elements affected by the storm. Spuybroek describes this as a sort of resonance between things.
In this Confluence and influence series, I focus on the resonance of vision and touch. I try to leave space for the resonance to happen, and I attempt to make paintings of places that embrace more space for feeling and discovery by the viewer. I want less obvious images of place so that the viewer needs to spend more time in the unknown stage decoding the image, but leaving enough time for the beauty of the feeling to emerge from the viewer’s own experience. This is because, in itself, a column or a line is not beautiful at all, and though the object of my aesthetic enjoyment is the column, the experience of beauty is in me (Spuybroek 2011, p.181).

In this quote from Spuybroek, who is interpreting Lipps, I realise that I am more interested in the sense of unexpected place combined with the possibility of transgressions that are both physical and imagined. This is particularly evident with motifs and place that might suggest uneasiness in the landscape, which, in turn, can be rendered and subverted using realist painting techniques. I suggest the subversion of realist techniques is distinct from working towards abstraction as a premise. I think transgression and the unexpected are strategies I want the viewer to access, remember and imagine. Spuybroek says beauty comes from the resonance brought about by the viewer, not the object. I hope to access and communicate the beauty in the unease and the unstable experience of the attunements of place.

4.5 The resonance of vision and touch, figure and ground.

My largest work, to date, in the series is The Falling of Night, 2013 (Figure 63). I found that the larger scale of the painting increased its physicality. This was evident in the making of the painting and the experience of viewing the painting. The layers of white marks fill the field of vision of the viewer, as the painting is wider than a single view. In this work, I bring together many of the findings or realisations regarding the amount of the familiar or the unfamiliar, the complexity of materiality and the complexity of motif, which can aid the level of sensing, feeling and experiencing in urban realist landscape painting.
The last paintings in this project extend the contrast of darkness and light, and focus on destabilising the familiar. The painting *Between the Light and the Night* (*Figure 64*), encourages, through the title, a consideration of being wedged between the time and place of darkness and lightness. The material sensibilities of the place are amplified in the painting surface, for instance, the wet glistening leaves and the dry concrete wall are affected differently by the light and seep into the tactile surface at different rates. These paintings have an intended feeling of unease but are also composed and painted to draw the viewer into an unexpected experience.

This figure/ground relationship that emerged in the previous *Interval* series is furthered in this final series. Through testing of the figure and ground, I discovered that I did not want the places to be too dramatic in motif or place association, and that they needed to feel new and able-to-be-discovered. The works were more successful and compelling when they were not too eerie or overwhelmingly dark. The discomfort or the amplification of the sensing of something in the space needed to come through the facture, more than the choice of image. In order to achieve this, the image had to be less associative, and be more disorganised; or provide an unfamiliar suburban scene. Making the dark spaces active and making the whole surface active, especially the figure/ground relationship, was particularly important. My intention was to make the painted marks sympathise with the weight of time in the space. The push and pull between these forms of representation destabilises the expectation of the painting for the audience.
The retraceable action of painting is another important focus for the series. The use of painterly gesture and surface to heighten context or unsettle things, evoke feeling and a sense of something in a place, is suggested not through traditional representation, but through implied feeling of place and time though gestural facture in painting. As Kathleen Stewart suggests, ‘a concept attuning itself to things coming into form is, itself, both abstract and concrete, actual and unfolding’ (Stewart 2013, p.281). This final series of paintings test realist landscape painting in two ways: firstly, the motif and the facture that are capable of being more than one scale at once; and secondly, I use the figurative and felt, and draw from a lineage thinkers who consider sensing, feeling and sympathising with an experience and engagement of a landscape.

The paintings that I consider to have come closest to answering the questions for this project are the ones that are on the edge between feeling and place, and use the facture and figure/ground relationships to attain this. In fact, the particular emphasis of these paintings holds the viewer in the space between the figure and ground, between the felt qualities and the representation of place.

I return to the introduction of this dissertation, which articulated the reasons and interests that have driven this project – and that have come together in this final series of paintings. These include: the experience of urban landscape, and the feelings and ideas of place I have been compelled to communicate through the gestured and built up mark of painting; the ideas of physically being in these places and feeling their atmosphere; being more interested in the tangled mess of bush at the end of the street than the designated playground; the temptation to stay out just that bit longer at dusk as the unknown night approaches; and, as always, the thrill of touching every surface. The excitement of finding a semi-industrial space with uncertain spaces, or the transgression of crawling under the fencing of forbidden areas, be it a kindergarten, a racecourse or a school swimming pool, can become an empowering, tactile, social transgression into the interstitial spaces that hold place together.
At the conclusion of this project I consider my outcomes in the context of image production in the contemporary world. I reflect on a piece of writing that positions painting in relationship to digital image production. In the introduction of the 2014 book, *A Brush with the Real*, arts writer and editor Marc Valli espouses the importance of representational painting. Valli declares painting as able to represent and communicate sense and feeling in this age of modern digital image production:

> Painting knows texture. It can still render the idea of touch... Painters manage to entertain an intimate relationship with accident, without having to give up on purposeful action and method... While images are constantly flying around, being digitalized, re-used, cropped, intercut, blown, shrunk, lit, printed, projected, edited, Photoshopped, etc., and all the time fading losing their original meaning, poignancy and context – painters keep going back to their studios and slowly, patiently, trying to hold back the flood (Dessanay and Valli 2014, p. 8).

Valli’s writing leads me to reflect on my own discoveries and contribution of these paintings to the field of contemporary image making. I have over the course of seven years and four series’ of works, developed paintings in which I have embedded an experiential based representation of urban place. As Valli suggests paint offers the possibility of communicating a sensorial quality of experience. The subtleties of experiencing place such as touch, scale, light and temporality are also descriptors of the elements of painting and qualities of paint.

I join a field of painting practitioners in Australia and abroad such as George Shaw and Jeffery Smart who scrutinise and represent their urban surroundings through the medium of paint. My surroundings are familiar and lived in and contain the complexity that is a changing urban environment. Through this project I contribute to this field, a body of paintings that communicate the experience and feeling of being in these places.

Guided by creative practice and reflecting on the discoveries made through each series of paintings that constitute this project, the emphasis on the ‘embedded’ experience of place has developed over the duration of my research. At the beginning of this project, observations and exploratory representations of place resulted in paintings that focussed on narrative from a witnessed view. These paintings positioned myself as artist and, by extension, the viewer of the paintings, at a distance from the place. As the project progressed, the contextualisation of my work within the field of historical and contemporary paintings of place, and through the welcome influence of Lars Spuybroek’s notion of sympathy have resulted in a shift to a felt, sensed and sensorial embodied experience of place through painting. I consider material and embodied experience intimately rooted in place, and a stark contrast to an overwhelming contemporary space of moving and shifting borders, fleeting tactility and dwindling sensorial connections. This material discovery and the subsequent shift in my practice, has culminated in the paintings articulated through this dissertation and presented for examination. This understanding has impacted on the way I consider subject and method, and forever changed my painting practice.

Through this project, I have explored and examined the way I experience place. By painting these places, I have discovered that the experience of place is very much dependant on the amount and type of time spent within and around place. Many of the places that influence, or are referenced through, this project are visited and occupied; they are places to spend time in, rather than rush through. The places important in the early part of the project
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

– schoolyards, playgrounds, building sites, playing fields, car parks, pathways and swimming pools – have been observed, investigated and experienced. Spending time in these places has helped me to absorb the atmosphere and find ways for the painted representations to retain, emphasise and communicate some of the felt experience of these places.

My first series of painting investigations, *Drift*, explored the texture of surface, tactile connection to narrative, and time spent in a place. ‘Suburban time’ was explored through the slowness of the painting process, whilst possibilities for creating or constructing a painted surface in a similar way to a built environment were also slowly being built and developed, as in, for example the painting *Development*. The paintings from *Drift* are full of a hopeful space, made available from a period in life when time seemed elastic and endless, and perhaps slower than real time. Scenes that focus on passages through the landscape slow down both the act of looking at, and the feeling of, familiar urban place, in order to attune an audience to what Kathleen Stewart describes as the ‘complex matterings’ of surrounding place.

Perception, as configured through the act of doing and repeated looking, is invariably fragmented and, as Schlegel describes, ‘forever becoming’, as manifest in the second group of works, *Bowling Club*. I use one place for this series, aiming to emphasise the painted mark in the unfinished construction of the images. By using fragment and ruin in this series as both subject and physical painted outcome, I acknowledge the complexity of representing place. The fluid non-fixity of the substance of paint on a surface and the visible act of painting is crucial to representing the crumbling entropic nature of a place in demolition, allowing associative metaphoric connections to body and home. These ideas are most evident in the painting *Demolition*. The corporeal experience of change and memory is experienced across the surface of paintings that are built up over long periods, revealing gestures and experience. I reflect on the work of Antonio López Garcia, whose home ground is the extensive temporal engagement with realist painting. The less specific place of the bowling club case study allows space for viewer experience, memory and imagination to build a tactile understanding of place and time.

The *Interval* series approaches painting place through the concept of the fragment and encourages an exploration of metonymy. On reflection, while the success of this series as paintings is limited, the unpicking of place into separate pieces informed a deeper understanding of motif and meaning that have, in turn, influenced the subsequent series of works. The fleeting aspects of this *Interval* series, while seemingly counter to the embeddedness or solidity of place, are nonetheless important to this project in understanding the varied pace and time in suburban place. Notwithstanding the fragmented individual images in *Interval* – a phone tower, a flock of birds in flight, a water fountain at night, an isolated tent, an abandoned building or the side of a shed – the series, as a whole, develops a sympathy to form in space. A narrative is developed between the elements of motif, rather than the imagined participation, thereby isolating motif and moment. This realisation is evident in works such as *Specimen* and *Skip Drawing Study* that allow for a relationship between porosity and sympathy of form.

Finally, destabilising familiarity in the series *Confluence and Influence* enables the unknown to be felt in a familiar place. Drawing from the palpable associative relationships in Roni Horn’s work, as well as the possibilities of a viewer bringing their own experience into the painting’s darkened spaces, the final series of paintings encourages a felt response. The questions that Chapter 4 focuses on are still located in the familiar suburban place, yet they
are more related to seeing, feeling and remembering. The complex atmospheric matterings of place in earlier series become destabilised and transgressive as I expand the realist motif of suburbia. The method of applying layers of twisting paint and figure/ground painting contraventions compel a close relationship to feeling place in works such as *The Falling of Night* and *Passing of Time*.

Through this project, each aspect contributes to influence an understanding of tactility and feeling of place through painting. The important factors that enable this are: the time spent to create tactile feeling, and the ability to form sympathy with the marks, the making and the subject imagery. The project promotes connections to memory and history and knowledge; however it remains focused on the primacy of the senses to create feeling enhanced through an encounter with the painted space.

Beyond my personal development as an artist this project contributes to the genre of contemporary representational landscape painting, asserting the importance of the linkage between the observed, the felt and the represented. Through this project I contribute to the field of representational painting by extending the visualisation and representation of place, both materially and conceptually. By building on the history of painting place as an embodied experience, I consider time and its relationship to place in contemporary existence. At the conclusion of this project, I contend that experiences of place can be attuned through the senses, feeling and tactility, and be conveyed and represented through painting in a state of forever becoming.
REFERENCES


Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.


Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
CHAPTER ONE

Figure 1  Stephen Taylor, *Oak and Crows*, 2003-2006, oil on board, 30 x 30 cm.

Figure 2  Stephen Taylor, *Swallows at 9pm*, 2003-2006, oil on canvas, 102 x 102 cm.

Figure 3  Stephen Taylor, *Oak at Night*, 2003-2006, oil on canvas, 92cm x 66 cm.

Figure 4  John Everett Millais, *Mariana*, 1851, oil on wood, 59.7 x 49.5 cm.
Retrieved from: http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-mariana-t07553

Figure 5  Nicole Slatter, *Waiting*, 2008, oil on linen, 80 x 105 cm.
Exhibited in *Drift* at Perth Galleries, Perth. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 6  Nicole Slatter, *Transit*, 2008, oil on linen, 69 x 79 cm.
Exhibited in *Drift* at Perth Galleries, Perth. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 7  George Shaw, *Scenes from the Passion: Late*, 2002, enamel paint on board, 91.7 x 121.5 x 5.2 cm.

Figure 8  Nicole Slatter, *Ground Water*, 2008, oil on linen, 80 x 104 cm.
Exhibited in *Drift* at Perth Galleries, Perth. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 9  Nicole Slatter, *Direction*, 2008, oil on linen, 80 x 104 cm.
Exhibited in *Drift* at Perth Galleries, Perth. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 10 Nicole Slatter, *Oasis*, 2008, oil on linen, 77 x 60 cm.
Exhibited in *Drift* at Perth Galleries, Perth. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 11 Nicole Slatter, *Drift*, 2008, oil on canvas, 60 x 77 cm.
Exhibited in *Drift* at Perth Galleries, Perth. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 12 Nicole Slatter, *Development*, 2008, oil on linen, 69 x 79 cm.
Exhibited in *Drift* at Perth Galleries, Perth. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.
CHAPTER TWO


Figure 14  Nicole Slatter, *Bowling Club*, 2010-2012, oil on canvas, 60 x 77 cm. Exhibited in *Interval* at Beaver Gallery, Canberra. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 15  Antonio López García, *The Dinner*, 1971-1980, oil on board, 89 x 101 cm. (López García, A. 2011 p.229).

Figure 16  Nicole Slatter, *Demolition*, 2010, oil on Board, 64 x 102.5 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 17  Nicole Slatter, *Bowling Club Study*, 2010, oil on Canvas, 31 x 41 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 18  Nicole Slatter, *Bowling Club Study (WC)*, 2010, watercolour on paper, 45 x 53 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 19  Nicole Slatter, *Site Study*, 2012, watercolour on paper, 45 x 53 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 20  Nicole Slatter, *Aperture*, 2010, watercolour on paper, 45 x 53 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.


Figure 22  Roni Horn, *You are the weather* (1995-1995) Photo Installation. 64 C-prints and 36 gelatin-silver prints 100 parts, each: 25.5 x 20.5 cm. Retrieved from: http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/roni-horn-aka-roni-horn/roni-horn-aka-roni-horn-explore-exhibitio-25

Figure 23  Nicole Slatter, *Interval*, 2010, Installation Detail, Beaver Gallery, Canberra. Photograph Nicole Slatter
Figure 24  Nicole Slatter, *Ruin*, 2010, oil on Canvas, 31 x 41 cm.  
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 25  Théodore Géricault, *Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-1819, oil on canvas, 491 x 716 cm.  

Figure 26  Théodore Géricault, *Raft of the Medusa*, (Detail), 1818-1819, oil on canvas, 491 x 716 cm.  

Figure 27  Nicole Slatter, *Pile*, 2012, oil on form plywood, 45 x 53 cm.  
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

CHAPTER THREE

Figure 28  Luc Tuymans, *Still Life*, 2002, oil on canvas, 347 x 500 cm.  

Figure 29  Nicole Slatter, *Lock Up*, 2010, oil on canvas, 80 x 104 cm.  
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 30  Nicole Slatter, *Lock Up – High water*, 2010-2012, oil on canvas, 80 x 104 cm.  
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 31  Nicole Slatter, *Shed Side*, 2010, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm.  
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 32  Nicole Slatter, *Homing*, 2010, oil on board, 31.5 x 45 cm.  
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 33  Nicole Slatter, *Test grouping*, 2010, oil and board/ oil on canvas, various dimensions.  
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 34  Nicole Slatter, *Phone Tower*, 2010, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm.  
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 35  Nicole Slatter, *Forecourt*, 2010, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm.  
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

Figure 36  Nicole Slatter, *Test grouping for interval exhibition*, 2010, oil and board/oil on canvas, various dimensions.
From left to right:
  *Burnout*, 2010, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm.
  *Homing*, 2010, oil on board, 31.5 x 45 cm.
  *Fountain*, 2010, oil on board, 45 x 31.5 cm.
  *Look Out I*, 2010, oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm.
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 37  Nicole Slatter, *Night Fountain*, 2010, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm.
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 38  Nicole Slatter, *Island*, 2010, oil on canvas, 69 x 79 cm.
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 39  Nicole Slatter, *Habitat*, 2012, oil on canvas, 69 x 79 cm.
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 40  Nicole Slatter, *Model of a Desert Island*, 2011, oil on canvas, 120 x 154 cm.
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 41  Peter Doig, *Concrete Cabin*, 1994, oil on canvas, 198 x 275 cm.

Figure 42  Nicole Slatter, *Specimen*, 2012, oil on canvas, 60 x 77 cm.
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 43  Nicole Slatter, *Specimen Study*, 2012, watercolour on paper, 45 x 48.5 cm.
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 44  Nicole Slatter, *Skip Drawing*, 2012, oil on canvas, 60 x 77 cm.
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 45  Nicole Slatter, *Skip Drawing Study*, 2012, watercolour on paper, 41.5 x 43 cm.
Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.
CHAPTER FOUR

Figure 46  Nicole Slatter, *Satellite*, 2012, oil on canvas, 31 x 82 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 47  Roni Horn, *Becoming a Landscape*, (Detail), 1999-2001, 10 paired C-prints, 20 prints in total, 48.3 x 48.3 cm. Retrieved from: http://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/14/roni-horn/images-clips/93/


Figure 49  Nicole Slatter, *Trench*, 2011, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 50  Nicole Slatter, *Liners*, 2011, oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 51  Nicole Slatter, *Trench/ Range*, 2012, oil on canvas 31 x 82 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 52  Nicole Slatter, *Refuse Arrangement Study*, 2012, oil on plywood, 45 x 63 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 53  Nicole Slatter, *Light Arrangement*, 2013, oil on plywood, 45 x 63 cm (Each). Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 54  Nicole Slatter, *Confluence and Influence*, 2013, oil on canvas, 80 x 104 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 55  Nicole Slatter, *Confluence and Influence*, 2013, oil on canvas, 80 x 104 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

Figure 57  Francisco Goya, *The Reading*, 1820-21, oil on plaster mounted on canvas, 126 x 66 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid. Retrieved from: https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/the-reading-or-the-politicians/

Figure 58  Francisco Goya, *The Reading* (detail), 1820-21, oil on plaster mounted on canvas, 126 x 66 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid. Retrieved from: https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/the-reading-or-the-politicians/

Figure 59  Nicole Slatter, *Urban Allure*, 2014, oil on canvas, 80 x 104 x 4 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 60  Nicole Slatter, *Extra Time*, 2014, oil on board, 61.5 x 91.5 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 61  Nicole Slatter, *The Dying Minutes*, 2014, oil on board, 61.5 x 91.5 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 62  Nicole Slatter, *Passing Time*, 2014, oil on board, 61.5 x 91.5 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 63  Nicole Slatter, *The Falling of Night*, 2013, oil on board, 120 x 300 x 4 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.

Figure 64  Nicole Slatter, *Between the Light and the Night*, 2014, oil on canvas, 80 x 104 x 4 cm. Photograph Robert Frith at Acorn.
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Landscape painters tend to exclude people from their work. Of course there are plenty of landscape paintings that do have a token figure as a ploy to indicate scale or underscore a theme about Arcadia or pastoral endeavour, meditation or physical labour, but in general landscape paintings, particularly in Australia, are devoid of people. Mostly we don’t notice. When confronted by a convincing landscape, whether it is urban, suburban, pastoral or wilderness, we immediately implant ourselves into that space and it becomes our space, a place where the impact of viewing is heightened by our memories, experiences and histories.

This is certainly the case with Nicole Slatter’s new works. We are drawn immediately into their familiar spaces of schoolyards, suburban streets, building sites and playgrounds, where nothing much is happening, although it clearly has or is about to. We are there! Her deft control of her medium gives us confidence to enter and linger, to wander visually through the spaces until we can feel the cold steel of the handrail, the prick of the Rosemary bush or the soft section of the mud beneath our feet. It is familiar, but…

There is something not quite right, indeed slightly wrong, about these spaces and although the disjunctions are subtle, the more we inhabit them the more we become aware of their awkwardness. We are hooked. No longer just a viewer we have become ‘a participant within a familiar scene and witness to a singular moment within a daily experience’, as the artist explains. As a result we are primed like a loaded revolver, full of anticipation, expectation and even dread. What is about to happen in the playground in Waiting? What are we waiting for? Is this another Columbine High School where a gunman will emerge from behind that gargantuan grey façade with its purplish blue door, load his rifle and proceed up the worn concrete stairs, push at the handle and enter the annals of crazed teenage mass murderers? Or will kids erupt out of classrooms on the bell and play happily until called back into class?

Slatter’s paintings spread far from the boundaries of the stretched canvas and into our lives: the drift of the exhibition’s title is a psychological as well as physical passage quietly through the spaces she describes. And it is so quiet. In her paintings the moment is frozen, it’s like being in an Alfred Hitchcock film where we are alert to the sound of a broken twig, the splash of a pebble into that puddle. In Ground Water, the crunch of gravel underfoot, a rifle being cocked or just a happy giggle. The expectation of fear is often defused by the ordinary. As Philip Larkin reminds us: ‘Oh well, I suppose it’s not the place’s fault, I said. Nothing, like something, happens anywhere,’ and so it is in Slatter’s paintings, the nothingness of everyday life can be riveting when you are attuned to it and place is just the catalyst. If you are vigilant!

This attentiveness is hard won, it is not by chance we slip so easily into these roles of passive observer, witness and participant, we have been coaxed and coerced into this state of readiness by the painter’s skill. A straightforward photograph of these places does not suggest the same level of intensity. Indeed the many photographs that lie around the artist’s studio attest to her ability to convert them into one charged spaces after cobbling many together, their details modified and distorted, the boundaries between them more precise or sometimes awkwardly unresolved. They keep us intrigued.

It is these transitions, translations and transformations of things originally seen, then photographed then made into paintings that give the works their unique ability to contain our imaginings. From photographs to black and white color photograms to the canvas where the painting is finally worked out the process is fundamentally important for it is this paring down, this whittling away of anything that is not essential, that creates spaces that can contain the projections of viewers who are now active participants. And then we wait.

As Jennifer Higgin has perceptively explained in her essay describing the visual and emotional tension in the work of Dutch painter Koen van den Broek, ‘Something as in life, is either about to happen or just has. (Painting as a pause, as an anticipation)’, and in Slatter’s work we have a similar sense of hiatus and expectancy. What is happening in that tent in Event is its eerie yellow glow masking some horror or maybe just a harmless liaison or nothing much at all? It is the potency of the image and the redolence of some kind of activity that keeps us looking in the hope of solving the mystery or reconciling ourselves that it was just our imagination after all.

Perhaps ultimately it is this delicate balance that gives her work its seductive edge. Formally tight and controlled, the internal structures are carefully and painstakingly resolved until harmony and equilibrium are achieved. The legs of the children in the top right hand corner of Direction are balanced against the dark weight of shadow in the puddle and the sharp green intrusion of Rosemary at the left and in Transit the wedge of the blue and white sign is counter-weighted against a dark mass of foliage, while in Pyramid the sharp triangle of flags lock into a rectangle of leaden sky. Within these formal environments, so empty and open, we feel comfortable, and at ease. Then life seeps in.

The atmosphere of these works is not the cool, shallow space of Formalist Abstraction but a heavy, tangibly real envelope of damp grey days after heavy rain. We know them well and can feel the weight of our clothes, smell the memories of childhood and conjure up the possibilities of those spaces with unnerving precision. That is why we look at them so long and so hard.

In her new works Slatter opens up a dialogue with her audience through the windows or stage sets she has constructed in her paintings and the active engagement they engender involves us in intense and memorable experiences that infiltrate our lives and raise questions to be rumination upon long after.

Ted Snell is Professor of Contemporary Art, and Dean of Art at the John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University of Technology. He is currently Western Australian art reviewer for The Australian and Chair of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council.

1. See Ted Snell, The Artist’s Rottneat, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988, for a discussion on the significance of the empty landscape in creating a sense of ownership and participation.
2. Nicole Slatter, Artist’s Statement for Drift, Perth Galleries, July 2008
3. Philip Larkin’s Remember I Remember” The Less Received, Marlw Press 1955

Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

Interval, Beaver Gallery Canberra, 14th October – 2nd November 2010
Group show invitation.
Appendix

Interval Catalogue, Beaver Gallery Canberra, 14th October – 2nd November 2010

Interval
THE RECENT WORK OF NICOLE SLATTER
These recent painted works by Nicole Slatter raise the question of the use and variety of non-spaces in our lived experience. These spaces defined and named by Marc Auge in his book of the same title, constitute a familiar order of experience in our contemporary lives, airports, parking stations, subways, supermarkets, shopping malls and hotels. They also bring to mind a sense of the intermittency of time, of its peculiar duration event hypothesis, as it inextricably moves from the past to the future. Within the ruins of the present there is a nothingness that occupies a terrain defined more by an absence of what has previously taken place, together with a terrible expectation of that to come, rather than the useful imposture of need, wrapped in the animal certainty of the present. (Auge, 1995)

In each of these painted and drawn images we see moments of time subjected to this same torpor. A fountain that plays haphazardly in the breeze before an abandoned ranch house in suburbia, a pile of ruined elements that once stood as a construction, a house with the telltale signs of broken windows and mounds of rubble signifying its new status. Significantly it is the house, the building and the dwelling that dominates these works. In Australia the house has become something other than what it is, no longer a roof over ones head, it is condemned to

Fountain, 2010. Oil on board, 45 x 31.5 cm.
Night Fountain, 2010. Oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm.
be an instrument of our aspirations and dreams. A casino, a bank, a source of status and in a telling manifestation, a literal construction of the future, an offering erected to the gods of Wall Street and beyond.

There are other spaces represented here too, the gap between buildings, a space whose identity is unknown, unreadable or at least indeterminate. Within these interstitial spaces there are the tyre marks of vehicles driven with giddy abandon in some lost joyous moment and only the woven tracks of the rubberised markings left as testament to such noisy action and intervention. These spaces are beyond the convention of modernity they are defined by a transitory freedom, they come alive to the possibility of presence as a feature only of transit. They constitute a new type of behaviour of the permissible within this domain of the un-space where the reckless and feckless are welcomed equally with the same numb resignation. They speak with the familiarity of hotel rooms, the same but different. The atmospherics of these paintings captures something of this drenched familiarity and alienation. They are an outdoors rendered as familiar as an interiority. Their material and physical outdoorness is conditioned by a blankness of unknown purpose. The air is thickened in these spaces and there is a fallow

*Burnout*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm.
quality to the bloodless colours of these walls, even the dirt and ground itself seems denuded of substance or strata, this is a nowhere with its own post code.

But we need these spaces in order that the game of urbanity can take place at all. There is something perversely reassuring about their familiarity. They speak to a purpose in us that is existent but not understood. Without their existence there can be no movement, there can be no definition. Somewhere someone makes a decision and upon this space there will be a building so many metres from this property line. Beyond this defined space there will be nothing until there is another property line. An interval of sorts occurs that becomes a spatial trope not defined by place. As Michel de Certeau observed,

“Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.”

(de Certeau, 1984, p.117)

We see something of this in the memorial spaces. Objects and or spaces dedicated to times

Bowling Club, 2010. Oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm.
Bowling Club Study, 2010. Oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm.
that no longer exist commemorating events that have a limited hold on living memory and speak to a fictional construct of history. These sites litter the public parks and squares of large cities and they contain something of the aura of the ruin, an unknown erased history that fulfills some desire for a past to have occurred but one mercifully free of the burden of cultural detail they quench our thirsty expectation for history as entertainment but leave us free to float and roam. But what is the ruin in contemporary suburbia? What are its characteristics and to whom do these piles of rubble and abandoned spaces speak. In the suburbs the ruin is the physical manifestation of the degradation of dreams, of ruined marriages and partnerships, of bankruptcies and repossessions. The ghost of ideals and the broken promises that lie smashed and neglected upon the un-mowed and overgrown grass. The silence of these spaces is their terrible weight within these paintings. They act as a metonymic device suggesting other meanings linked in along psychological chain of associations. (Nora, 2006.)

In some of these works Nicole Slatter has used the broad brushstroke and bucket of white paint to literally white out the details of the either too painful, the poorly remembered or the just temporally insignificant. Like memories they only revisit their last recollection and then

*Bowling Club Rubble, 2010. Oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm.*
*Ruin, 2010. Oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm.*

*Interval* Catalogue, Beaver Gallery Canberra, 14th October – 2nd November 2010
Demolition, 2010. Oil on board, 102.5 x 64 cm.

Interval Catalogue, Beaver Gallery Canberra, 14th October – 2nd November 2010

Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
close down upon our gaze. Through the painted shrouds of these surfaces the viewer is able to see through the translucent skin of paint to a buried past, where we catch a glimpse of a familiar shape, a twisted remnant, a memory of something lost. The paint surface of these pictures encircles its subject and even intervenes like a graphic metaphor of selectivity. The surrounded sense of these images and their pervasive atmospheres locates them within their situation as representations of place beset on all sides by the evacuation of space. The viewer is left unable to reconcile these images to any familiar cliché of representation as they elude our compass and exhaust definition. They are like ghosts haunted by uncomfortable forces that draw them reluctantly into our view. They stare back at you the viewer from their non-space, mute and tired, they lie helplessly compressed within the surface tension of the painting.

In some of the works this erasure through brushwork removes even the walls of buildings leaving nothing but a single wall standing deep within the white field of the painting and detailed as place only by the punctuated presence of a door and the ubiquitous delineation of a solitary plastic chair acting as testament to any former specificity of occupancy and

*Lock-up*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 105 x 80 cm.
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

In one startling image we see the very fabric of the architectural space itself ripped apart by this intervention of white paint, as if the moment we have just left in time is being slowly and mercilessly erased from existence. We as viewers are also existentially made to attest to the painting as painting, to the interventions of the painter and her painted image, the white paint editing and burying our observation as we look.

These spaces are possessed of a special type of refusal, they resist the very attempt to image them and exist only reluctantly as images, as if the domain of the invisible or the unrecognised were their natural terrain. The sites represented in these paintings have something of the quality of the anosognosic in their continued refusal to accept their condition. I am a “bowls club” they stubbornly seem to assert despite the evidence of their ruin to the contrary. They continue to transmit even after they have passed from the world of their initial existence into the site of the non-place, like a phantom limb they continue to signal presence even after they have been amputated from the space and light of this world.

Marc Auge in his book ‘Non-Places’ defined these sites as places unable to hold significance

Shed Side, 2010. Oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm.
Look Out 1, 2010. Oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm.

Interval Catalogue, Beaver Gallery Canberra, 14th October – 2nd November 2010
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Marc Auge in his book 'Non-Places' defined these sites as places unable to hold significance sufficiently to be regarded as places. They are spaces peopled, if at all, by the homeless, the obscure and the illicit and they are controlled and thoroughly disciplined through a type of regimented solitude. A solitude in some cases of grinding shrieking noise and dirty oily surfaces that reek with the stale odours of walls of indeterminate colour. Beyond dead reckoning these sites exist like the tea cup in the storm, forever menaced in a lost navigation outside observable space time. (Auge, 1995)

Donal Fitzpatrick
09/09/10, Perth

NOTES


*Phone Tower*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 31 x 41 cm.
*Homing*, 2010. Oil on board, 45 x 31.5 cm.

Interval Catalogue, Beaver Gallery Canberra, 14th October – 2nd November 2010
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.


PHOTOGRAPHY: Acorn Photo Agency

ESSAY: Donal Fitzpatrick

CATALOGUE: Benchwork

Interval Catalogue, Beaver Gallery Canberra, 14th October – 2nd November 2010
Beautiful new beginnings

Intellectual rigour goes on show at ACT debut. Jacqueline Williams writes

T he idea was simple: three young artists, who’d previously never met and hadn’t been shown in Canberra before, take their work and you to Galaro’s Gallery for the opening night. Yep.

For the specific purpose of showcasing new and exciting work, Nicole Slatter, Nicole Dinnage and Matthew Pannier formed a collective called, appropriately, Interval.

When we got there, it was like a walk in a park. The bright, white lights of the gallery shone down on the artworks, casting long shadows and creating a sense of mystery. The artists were all present and ready to talk about their works.

The paintings on display, each uniquely different, were a testament to the hard work and dedication that goes into creating art. The colors were vibrant and the brushstrokes were precise, showing the skill and technique of each artist.

Each piece was a story, telling the viewer something about the artist’s life and experiences. They were all unique, yet they shared a common theme of beauty and emotion.

It was a wonderful experience to see these new artists come together to create a cohesive body of work. The gallery was filled with excitement and anticipation as we waited for the opening night to begin.

The artists were all present, ready to talk about their works and answer any questions we might have. It was a beautiful night, filled with art, conversation and celebration.

In the end, it was a night to remember. The new beginnings showcased that night were a testament to the power of creativity and the importance of supporting local artists. They are all to be commended for their hard work and dedication, and for sharing their art with the world.

Interval, Canberra Times article, October 25th, 2010.
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

The Fleurieu Landscape Art Prize (Main Prize)

Located at Hardys Tintara Winery, Main Road McLaren Vale / Open 11.00am - 4.00pm Daily

To be launched by Nick Mitzevich & The Hon John Hill MP / Thursday 3 December 2011 / 6.00pm - 8.00pm

A $50,000 prize (non acquisitive) for landscape painting depicting any landscape. This prize celebrates the enduring importance and contemporary significance of landscape painting while exploring the changing nature of painting as a medium. The selected finalist works will be exhibited at Hardys Winery, McLaren Vale.

Fleurieu Art Prize exhibition catalogue p.11, November 3rd 2011
Nicole Slatter Studio photographs
Photographs by Nicole Slatter
From There to Here and In-between, Project Space/Spare Room, RMIT University, Melbourne (2011)

Group Exhibition Invitation

Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
Solo exhibition invite.
Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.


Installation shot. Photograph by Acorn Photography.
HOME GROUND

THE RECENT WORK OF NICOLE SLATTER

Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.

Refuse Arrangement, 2012
Oil on plywood
45 x 63cm

Cnr. Canning and Sth., 2012
Watercolour on paper
45 x 53cm

When the suburban homes went up around post-war Perth it must have been difficult to imagine their pristine concrete drives and their shiny roof tiles, luminous in the sunlight, as anything other than sparkingly new. Seventy years on, their newness has worn off and the sunlight illuminates a more complex set of relationships between these streets, their inhabitants and their destiny. As houses become scuffed round the edges with use, as foundations shift and shady trees loom precipitously over roofs and sagging car ports, these suburbs are revealed as spaces in which entire lives have been lived and generations of people have come and gone. In her paintings of this care worn suburban space resting between the city and the shiny contemporary suburbs at the end of railway lines, Nicole Slatter reveals a world of seemingly random physical, metaphorical and visual spaces. She paints life in this transitional place as a patchwork of experiences revealed by our daily routines moving in and through them, and in doing so connects us with their intrinsic value as reflections of our own lives.

The suburbs have long been contested spaces in Australian culture, often dismissed as ersatz city and in his recent article, *Is suburban living a neurotic condition?* Alan Davies neatly summarises the historical antagonism of the media and artistic elites towards the suburbs. Even before the advent of the uncontrollable suburban party made the genteel classes shudder, the suburbs have always been contested spaces, characterised as either bland or uncouth, yet like it or not, that is where most of us live. Using David Flew’s research to reinforce the point, Davies reveals the endlessly tense dialogue between the huge numbers of people who want a safe haven in the suburbs and the way in which this desire for stability is condemned as banal by “an assortment of intellectuals, political radicals and cultural critics”.

*Refuse Arrangement Study, 2012*  
Watercolour on paper  
40 x 48.5cm
Slatter’s paintings have productively removed themselves from this angst ridden Australian trope of worrying whether living in the suburbs is an authentic experience or not. Or at the very least her work can be productively set outside those debates that sustained so much academic anguish and produced so much dull painting on the subject in the 90s. The ‘suburbs good or bad?’ debate was ultimately self-defeating, but its masochistic broodings are useful in helping to understand why the suburbs were considered inappropriate for serious aesthetic examination on their own terms.

Historically the city has been seen as the crystallisation of human cultural endeavour, and the suburbs as an inferior urban sub-set of it; either a kind of battery that runs it, or a repository for those workers who keep the wheels of the city running but who are not quite urbane enough to be seen on its streets. The city used to be the place where special, shiny things were bought. This helps explain why, as the sociologist David Harvey characterises it, “the incoherent, bland and monotonous suburban tract development” is now subject to a kind of pastiche urbanism. Coffee shops, beauty parlours and health clubs are introduced into the suburban strip as a way of sublimating the desire for the lifestyle of conspicuous consumption that the city used to represent, but which is now available in a more readily accessible local environment.

*Salvage, 2012*
Oil on canvas
60 x 77cm

Despite this ‘also ran’ quality, the suburbs are rich with life, and to characterise them as places that are bereft of valuable emotion and intellectual life is to accept the fantasy of the city dreamt up at the start of the 20th century by the leisureed flaneurs of the European metropolises. The centres of empire were always dynamic places, but the city itself is an administrative centre, and these are not of themselves innately exciting places. What cities principally provided, and what the suburbs lacked were dynamic public spaces for play and cultural exchange. It is generally acknowledged that the communal, social function of the city is changing (most recently in Ali Madanipour’s Whose Public Space?) and that urban public space is vanishing as traditional city interiors are being transformed into spaces for managed recreational consumption and little else. The suburbs encircle them, stocked with cafés, and by a process of osmosis, increasingly displace the difference between the centre and periphery.

To borrow Henri Lefebvre’s phrase, what is more important is not the distinction between city and suburb but the production of space that characterises them materially and symbolically. It is the production of space that Slatter’s paintings address. Any contemporary investigation of the ‘sub/urban’ and its relationship with the landscape, whether aesthetic or sociological, is not about demarcating populations and buildings geographically. It is not about finding centres and then deriving sets of hierarchical meaning from them. Ultimately all of the contemporary sub/urban amalgamation is significant, because all of it is socially constructed and every bit as much a manifestation of our desires and aspirations as the 19th Century city square. What Slatter’s paintings do is to engage with these framing concepts phenomenologically. Her paintings provide partial, intimate glimpses of what is out there, refusing to command, demand and instruct, but instead giving us discreet portions of information that we can look at, consider, and then match with our own experiences. Her paintings help us complete our understanding of what is out there.
Lefebvre observed [in his book State, space, world] that there are three ways in which social space can be understood. There is the official space conceived professionally and theoretically by urban planners, property speculators and cartographers. This officially sanctioned space then is perceived in a ‘commonsense’ way through everyday interaction: Do traffic lights work? Is there a decent school nearby? How long does it take to get from home to work? Am I happy here? Lefebvre suggests there is also another way of understanding social space, that of the L'homme (and la femme) totale. This fully emancipated individual engages with social space through their imagination and exists in a lived space that Lefebvre calls le vecu, which is nourished and sustained through the arts. This space not only transcends officially conceived and functionally perceived spaces but holds the key to their reconfiguration.
Site, 2012
Oil on canvas
182 x 240cm

**Satellite, 2012**  
Oil on canvas  
31 x 82cm

**Satellite Study, 2012**  
Watercolour on paper  
47.5 x 38.5cm


Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
Any art that addresses le vecu is dealing with the intersections of people with the built environment, the natural world and our ideological attitudes towards them. If we can reveal the ways in which our social, material and cultural ecologies are managed (either for us or by us) then we can also reveal the ways in which landscape and cultural space impacts upon us and in turn frames our emotional and intellectual world. It is in this way that we begin to understand that the suburbs are more than just an embarrassing addendum to a city centre. They are spaces in which life is lived and in which those lived lives impact upon others. Slatter’s paintings examine in miniature form what Lefebvre called ‘everyday life’, the intersection of ‘illusion and truth, power and helplessness; the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control’ (1947, p 40). These paintings are not miniature because they are small, they are miniature because they concentrate on tiny observed moments of absurdity, unexpected beauty, or fragments of grander plans that may have fallen into disrepair. Like an explorer she marks out the things that she has observed, giving us glimpses of the world as it exists at the edges of our understanding. With this partial guide as help, we can navigate our own way around the suburbs finding our own spaces of melancholy and joy.

It is right that her paintings only give us glimpses of what is there, because, as the past has shown us, the whole problem of confronting the Australian suburban phenomenon is that the analytic approach to it has been reductive and universalising. If we think of the suburbs as fluid spaces, ebbing and flowing, less like Frankenstein’s monster and more like Perec’s fictional Apartment Block at 11 Rue Simon-Crubellier we can slowly realise that the suburbs are places of infinite wonder, no matter how infinitesimal those wonders are. When they are shared, “those fragmented echoes, those splinters, remnants, shadows, those first moves or incidents or accidents” as Perec calls them, can only make our lives richer (2008, p 23).

Nicole Slatter’s paintings edit a communal world on our behalf, and give us back pieces of a puzzle that we can reassemble. The puzzle is the suburb. Rambling and inexplicable, it cannot be reduced to an archetype because it is too vast and too contradictory to make any coherent sense. All we can hope for is the painter’s patient eye to reveal its details to us that may then have resonance in our own puzzling experience.
Nightlight, 2012
Oil on plywood
45 x 63cm

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ESSAY
Dr. Christopher Crouch

PHOTOGRAPHY
Acorn Photo Agency

CATALOGUE
For Love or Money Design


Painting place: Picturing experience and feeling in the urban landscape.
Winner
$25,000 Major Acquisitive Prize

Amanda Davies
Self Portrait: the Devil’s Tale

Acquired for the City of Albany Art Collection.

Winner $2,500 Commendation Award
Nicole Slatter
Confluence and Influence

The winner of the People’s Choice Award will be announced at the close of the exhibition.

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