Perception and gesture

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A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

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March 2010
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 thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since official commencement date of the approved research program; and any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

David Hamilton
Acknowledgements

In the early stages of this project, supervision was undertaken by Jim Taylor as Senior Supervisor and Nick Mourtzakis as Second Supervisor. Unfortunately for me, both left RMIT University to pursue other avenues. I thank them both for their guidance, advice and critical feedback.

I wish to extend particular thanks to Godwin Bradbeer, who took up the mantle of Senior Supervisor and undertook the supervision for the greater part of my research. Any tendency to immobilize myself through self-criticism was counted by his advice and humour.

Similarly I also wish to extend thanks to Lesley Duxbury, Program Director of Post Graduate Research, and Joy Hirst, Program Admin. Officer of Post Graduate Research, for their guidance and assistance.

I thank Kate Vandestadt for her work in the design and formatting of my ADR.

A special thank you to my wife Karen, whose forbearance, encouragement and support enabled me to complete this project.

David Hamilton
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Summary

This project will be undertaken through practical research involving the production of a series of drawings on paper. The project explores ways in which a response to perceptual indeterminacy may be given expression through the drawing process.

The project critically re-examines a range of representational codes, from marks that serve a mimetic function, to those of a more diagrammatic and abstract value, and seeks to apply them in ways which suggest a sense of flux and change.

The works produced in this project will demonstrate an exploration of naturalistic pictorial values; which I suggest predominate within the genre of contemporary figurative representation in painting and drawing.

The rationale which motivates this project is the belief that the critical re-examination of the conventions which inform a tradition is integral to the development of the tradition and to its continuing relevance.

Through the presentation of a series of drawings I hope to add to the continuing dialogue concerning the position of figurative representational drawing within contemporary visual culture.
My practice as an artist centres upon the interpretive activity of drawing and painting from direct observation. In my experience the interrogative orientation of this activity heightens an awareness of the instability and indeterminacy within perceptual experience. For example the transient impressions received through the constant movement of the eyes, shifts in focus and vagaries of visual memory.

I am interested in exploring ways in which one might allude to this aspect of perceptual experience through drawing.

Artists whose pictorial aims I identify as bearing relevance to my concerns, and whose work I will examine in this project are: the late paintings of Paul Cezanne, the graphic work of Alberto Giacometti, the drawings of Edwin Dickinson and the process based drawings of contemporary British artist Claude Heath.
Description

This project will be undertaken through practical research involving the production of a series of drawings on paper. In contrast to the static pictorial space expressed within naturalistic styles of pictorial realism, I will explore ways to express my response to a sense of perceptual indeterminacy – creating a pictorial space that suggests transition, flux and change.

My approach will be to critically re-examine some of the fundamental principles and formal elements that have informed the western tradition of representational drawing and to select and configure these to permit reference to this aspect of my experience.

This will involve re-examining the function of line and tone and methods of perspective and measurement.

For example, specific attention will be given to exploring the function of line; the ways different types or configurations of line may signify or refer to different types and levels of experience.

A diagrammatic vocabulary of straight, angular or geometric configurations of line will be examined both as a means of structurally defining form and making evident a process of measurement – signifying conceptual or rational forms of thought and analysis.

A more organic line will also be employed, and will be examined both as a means of description and abstract expression (i.e. a trace of the contour of a perceived form or boundaries between forms and a gestural response which may signify something seen or felt).
I will also focus upon exploring ways in which I may allude to aspects of experience such as the ambiguities of peripheral vision or the mutable impressions within visual memory. One approach will be to increase pictorial and spatial ambiguity. Examples being to smudge or blur the drawn mark, so that these marks possess a more ambiguous or equivocal value, and to apply linear and tonal values in unconventional configurations (i.e. line and tone placed so they are incorrectly ‘registered’).

An emphasis will be placed on making more manifest evidence of process and revealing aspects of the formulation of the works. This emphasis will give the works a quality of ‘incompleteness’ providing an expressive means best suited to alluding to the open and unresolved nature of experience.

In my choice of subject matter I will focus upon the human subject, the head and figure, excluding the description of surroundings or ‘place’. My purpose is to limit possible reference to an overt pictorial narrative and to assist in amplifying aspects of the abstract design.

By making more evident the process of formulation, increasing pictorial ambiguity and emphasizing abstract values, my intention is to engage the viewer in actively interpreting the representational content, thus eliciting in the viewer a process of engagement analogous to my experiences of visual exploration.
**Aims**

- To observe, analyse, and interpret a perceived form through the drawn mark.
- To establish a formal vocabulary analogous to the process of observation and interpretation of the drawn mark.
- To explore and make more evident ways in which a synthesis of abstract elements such as line and tonal values create representational content in a series of drawings on paper.
- Through ongoing literary research I will identify and examine a range of theoretical and philosophical ideas relevant to my core subject concerns. This engagement will provide a framework of ideas which will inform my practical research (see bibliography).
Research questions

- How may subjective aspects of perceptual experience – of perceptual instability and ambiguity – be alluded to through drawing?
- How is the experience of observation and visual analysis made manifest through drawing?
- How may the pictorial conventions of naturalistic representational drawing be configured to permit reference to an experience of space and time?
Rationale

This project is undertaken from a position that identifies observational drawing as a process of exploration and questioning, addressing both the nature of perceptual experience and the “language” of representation.

My attempts to interpret and translate my perceptual experience through drawing and painting have made more evident the degree to which one remains dependant upon prior knowledge of pictorial conventions or representational codes, and that it is the way these are selected, adopted or configured that enables personal expression.¹

The project is motivated by an understanding that the critical re-examination of the conventions which inform the tradition of figurative representational drawing is integral to the development of the tradition and its relevance within an increasingly technological visual culture.

This project re-examines and explores a range of representational codes, from marks which equate to aspects of visual phenomena, to those of a more diagrammatic and abstract value and seeks to apply and combine them in ways which offer a means to express a subjective response to my perceptual experience.

The works produced in this project will demonstrate an exploration of naturalistic pictorial values which I suggest predominate in the genre of contemporary figurative

representation – as in the work of artists such as Graeme Drendel, Peter Churcher, Anne Wallace and Brian Dunlop.

Through the presentation of a body of paintings and drawings I hope to add to the continuing dialogue concerning the position of figurative representation in painting and drawing in contemporary visual culture.
Methods

This research project will be undertaken primarily through studio based practical research. Library collections will be utilized. I will examine the work of other artists whose work may be relevant to my concerns through gallery visits and literary resources and will attend relevant forums, seminars and artist talks when available. (Examples cited in outline below). Through ongoing literary research I will identify and examine a range of theoretical and philosophical ideas relevant to my core subject concerns. This engagement will provide a framework of ideas which will inform my practical research. (See bibliography).

My practical research will involve maintaining an empirically based observational practice. Both preliminary studies and final works will represent engagements of varying duration, from the momentary to those of a more extended duration. My research programme will be undertaken in sequential stages which will overlap.

2005 (1) Stage 1.1. March – May: Draft proposal. Literature review (examples see bibliography).

Stage 2.1. June – August: Literary research. Preliminary studio research: investigate methods of erasure upon test panels (oil paint) e.g. sandpaper, knife blade, rubbing with solvent. Sketchbook studies in graphite and watercolour from life. Begin painting and drawings exploring structural definition of form exploring principle of measurement. Attend exhibition and artist floor talk: “Slow Burn: The Art of Nick Mourtzakis” at the RMIT Gallery (June 4 – July 23).


2007 (3) Stage 1.3. January – July: Continue practical research, studio work/investigations further refining developments established in stages 1.2 – 2.2. Explore creating spatial ambiguities in readings of positive and negative space through tonal values. Work evaluation. Documentation.


2008 (3 cont.) Stage 2.3. August – December: Continued studio work/investigations; Work evaluation. Explore principle of passage – interpenetration
of planes. Begin to examine, select and formulate formal vocabulary from initial findings. Work evaluation. Documentation. Review work and resolve.


Books: Theory


Books, Catalogues: Artists


Periodicals, Journals, Articles:


Documentation of project
Preface

In the development of a series of representational paintings and drawings produced prior to undertaking this research project, I explored ways in which I could utilize a traditional perspective device, the ‘draughtsman’s window’, following the principles as illustrated in Durer’s etching.

Initially the intention to employ this system was to assist in further developing skills relating to the representation of optical appearances.

However a desire for the work to be more faithful to my experience led me to explore ways in which this process – of seeking to measure space – could become part of the works content.

With this in mind I decided that any relative changes in position between the subject and myself or changes in light should be acknowledged and that the work be both revised and the process made evident.

The method I adopted was to scrape and erase existing layers and to then work from the residue, permitting registration marks, the grid or any formal abstract elements to remain visible. Through this process of revision the works developed a surface patina, the residual layers revealing a history of the works formulation.

Author John Berger, writing in regards to the work of artist Alberto Giacometti, speaks something of my own pictorial aims at this time:

“... the content of any work is not the nature of the figure or head portrayed but the incomplete history of his staring at it. The act of
I became interested in the quality of surface produced by this process and the ‘negated’ image as a means of expression with possibilities for further research and development. A review of the work of other contemporary Australian artists, working within the tradition of figurative representational drawing and painting, revealed few exploring a similar aesthetic. This became the motivation to undertake this research project.
The images in this section, all oil on canvas, represent the work undertaken in the early stages of my research. Initially I had proposed to produce both drawings and paintings, however as the project developed, I chose to work exclusively with drawing media, for reasons which I will outline below. These works have been included as I consider them to possess the quality of drawings, in that the process of their production remains explicit, and as the problems encountered, both technical and conceptual, informed the direction of my research.

My pictorial intentions, and the methods and procedures followed are those outlined in the preceding introduction.

They were produced concurrently between September of 2005 and March of 2007.

In my experience the creative process is essentially an intuitive one, driven by antithetical impulses. Paradox is explored, both as an expression of this, and with awareness in engaging with seemingly irreconcilable positions one is forced to think and act creatively.

In this instance I was motivated by a desire to represent appearances while engaged in a method, which potentially negated my means to do so. As previously stated it was pursued, as the results appeared to offer possibilities for further development; a means to express a kind of visual scepticism and to break with conventional pictorial values.
In working somewhat outside the bounds of a conventional formula or systematic procedure, the work developed slowly. For me, direction is determined relatively intuitively, responding to what is discovered in the work. In seeking to develop the work further, problems were met:

- I realized that I was too dependent upon the element of chance as the determining factor in any discovery; having little control over what ‘information’ was kept and what was lost.

- The main technical problem, which hindered possibilities for further development, was that continual erasure of the paint layers destroyed the tooth of the canvas making it difficult for the surface to hold subsequent layers effectively.

In reviewing the work produced I felt I had little to show for my efforts. I was disappointed with the results as an adequate expression of my experience, beyond a certain satisfaction with the effect of a surface patina. A request to focus entirely upon drawing was approved.
Lemon tree (Unfinished)
oil on canvas
48 x 51cm, 2005–2007

Details (right)
Valley (Unfinished)
Oil on canvas
48 x 51cm, 2005–2007
Self 1
oil on canvas
31 x 29cm, 2005–2007

Process (above)
Chloe
oil on canvas
31 x 26cm, 2007

Detail (above)
Self 2
oil on canvas
31 x 28cm, 2005–2007

Process (above)
SECTION ONE

Mirror
oil on canvas
31 x 28cm, 2007
Section two

Notes relating to images on pages 30–35

“One of the oldest and most pervasive legends of the origin of painting involves the observation of a shadow and the tracing of its outline.”

Robert Rosenblum

“We are playing with things that disappear.”

Henri Cartier-Bresson

During the period in which I was developing the paintings I began to explore a method of drawing informed by my use of the perspective ‘window’. The principle of this system is that depth is treated as surface, as if objects seen through a window are traced upon the pane.

Primarily working in small sketchbooks I could carry with me outside the studio. I began producing contour drawings from the human subject exploring drawing as ‘tracing’. I wished to adopt a method conducive to change, one which could allow things to happen ‘free from the minds operation’.

Some were produced in a conventional manner; the to and fro of looking at the subject to page, while others were produced ‘blind’, that is drawing without looking at the page. In each case, the intention was to abandon a static viewpoint, for the line to keep pace with my eye, with the movement of the subject. The process

2 Quote noted in my private journal but source not identified.
became as much a way of thinking about drawing and representation, as it was a means for making images.

Working with this idea of drawing as a kind of trace, brought to mind other forms of representation that had long held an attraction and significance: hand stencils from rock art sites, silhouette portraits and photographic negatives. The power these forms have to engage my imagination lies with the awareness of the method of production. They are ‘factual’, a form of documentation which, for me, explicitly expresses fundamental states of ‘being’ – of presence and absence.

I began to see that both the paintings and contour drawings I was producing, though sharing little stylistic similarity, were essentially an exploration and expression of this theme. (The painting on page 24, which I saw as the most successful, is very much a kind of silhouette).

In contrast to the paintings, the appeal the contour drawings had for me was with their directness and immediacy, how presence could be evoked through minimal and relatively abstract means. I wished to find a way to maintain these qualities in the production of drawings which were the result of a more sustained or prolonged engagement. With these thoughts I established a clearer awareness of my ‘pictorial’ concerns, themes and motivations, which directed the remainder of my research.

The production of the contour drawings continued throughout the period of my project. The drawings fill 16 sketchbooks, for this reason only a small selection are reproduced.
Notes relating to images on pages 38–63

My working methods make it difficult to present my work in a strictly chronological order. Often formal investigations being undertaken branched out in different directions more or less simultaneously; works exploring tone, those exploring a more structural or schematic vocabulary and the continual production of the contour drawings. On occasion some drawings would be revised and unresolved drawings completed in light of formal discoveries. My intention was always focused upon critically re-examining conventions, identifying and selecting those elements and qualities (of line, tone and surface) which could provide a means of expression appropriate to my stated aim. Sometimes this was for purely practical reasons. It was not always possible to obtain a ‘model’ (I drew from people close to me rather than professional models) or to sit for a period long enough to complete the work. The method I adopted was to create drawings from earlier work. An example of this can be seen on pages 38–39. The images on page 38 (from left: Study for portrait of K.H., 2008 and Portrait of K.H., 2008) represent a preliminary study exploring the structural definition of form which informed the more ‘resolved’ image. At a later date, with no model available, I returned to these drawings to use them as a basis for formal experiments. These are represented on page 39 and were produced between 2008–2009.

Pages 40–45 essentially explore the structural definition of form. As the drawings developed, stylistic similarities were recognized with the work of several artists. Most notably, the work of Euan Uglow and Nick Mourtzakis. Their work provided a
point of reference that informed my critical thinking and decision-making. Another point of reference was the “Pier and Ocean” series of paintings by Piet Mondrian. Later works appearing on page 42–45 reflect the influence of tonal studies which were being investigated concurrently.

Pages 46–49 document the tonal studies in which I sought to create a more ambiguous pictorial space and to define appearances in terms of an essential geometry.

Pages 50–53 draw upon formal elements of the two previous areas of study. In these images I sought to create a sense of flux or change. They were influenced by descriptions relating to the process of visual perception. Summarised here by John Berger, “Appearances, at given moment, are a construction emerging from the debris of everything that has previously appeared.”

Pages 54–59 I wished to establish a subtle tonality through which to create a sense of the image either emerging or disappearing.

Pages 60–63 I began to explore a method of stencilling, utilising the illusory contour. Form is described in terms of ‘unregistered’ semi transparent planes through which I sought to create a sense of vacillation and change.

All images are black pencil on paper unless otherwise stated.

Study for portrait of K.H.
30 x 24cm, 2008

Portrait of K.H.
30 x 30cm, 2008
Untitled
30 x 24cm, 2008

Untitled
29 x 20cm, 2009

Untitled
30 x 24cm, 2009
**Untitled**  
30 x 24cm, 2008

**Untitled**  
30 x 30cm, 2008
Untitled
29 x 26cm, 2008

Untitled
Black conté, 24 x 19cm, 2008
Portrait of my father
30 x 30cm, 2008–2009
Portrait of my father was begun in the later part of 2008 and was left uncompleted. In the early part of 2009 subsequent studies were undertaken (reproduced above) and were used to resolve the work.
Portrait of A.J.H.
25 x 20cm, 2008
Portrait of K.H. (profile)
29 x 26cm, 2008
Gladys
23 x 14cm, 2008

Girl seated
23 x 14cm, 2008

Standing girl
23 x 14cm, 2008
"Reading"
24 x 19cm, 2008

"Portrait of K.H."
24 x 19cm, 2009
Waiting room
23.5 x 19cm, 2009

Study of A.J.H.
Charcoal on paper, 24 x 19cm, 2008
Three studies for a self portrait (right).

Clockwise from top left: Pastel on paper, 30 x 20cm, 2009; Pastel on paper, 30 x 30cm, 2009; Pastel on paper, 30 x 30, 2009
Self
26 x 22cm, 2009
Natalie
Pastel on paper,
34 x 26cm, 2009
Study for Karen (detail)
42 x 30cm, 2009

Karen
Pastel on paper, 25 x 20cm, 2009
Study for portrait of N.S. No.1
42 x 30cm, 2009

Study for portrait of N.S. No.2
42 x 30cm, 2009
Study for portrait of N.S. No. 3
30 x 24 cm, 2009

Left: Study for portrait of N.S.
No. 4 26 x 22 cm, 2009
Self (detail)
39 x 19cm, 2009
Self (detail)
39 x 28cm, 2009
Portrait of K.H.
29 x 26cm, 2009
Portrait of C.E.H. (Profile)
26 x 22cm, 2009
Study of N.S.
39 x 28cm, 2009

Portrait of A.J.H. (Profile)
26 x 22cm, 2009
Self
34 x 26cm, 2009
Curriculum vitae

Teaching

2008–2009 Monash University, School of Art and Design, Department of Fine Arts, Sessional Lecturer in Drawing


2007 RMIT. School of Architecture and Design, Fashion Department, Guest Lecturer: Fourth Year Exploratory Group.

2006 RMIT. School of Art, Painting Department, Guest Tutor: First Year Painting.

2001 RMIT TAFE. Department of the Built Environment, Lecturer: Life Drawing

Related Employment

1999 – 2000. National Gallery of Victoria, Curatorial and Education Services/Programs Division: Information Officer (VPS2).

Education and Research

2005–2009 RMIT School of Art. Undertaking a Master of Arts by Research. Project undertaken through practical research.

1994 RMIT. Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours): Painting, Art History.


1984 Box Hill College TAFE. Tertiary Orientation Program: Art History, Painting, Drawing, Illustration, Graphic Design, Film, Photography.
Selected Recent Exhibitions

2004 69 Smith Street Gallery, Smith Street Collingwood: ‘We Work together’. (Artists working within the State Library of Victoria)

2004 First Site Gallery, RMIT, Swanston Street, Melbourne: ‘im/material’. (Exhibition part of the SENSORIA Festival of Design Education, RMIT School of Architecture and Design).


2002 Collingwood Gallery, Smith Street, Collingwood: ‘Studies and Variations: recent paintings and drawings’.


Collections

Work held in numerous private collections.