UNDER THE BITUMEN THE RIVER

MARY PEACOCK
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 project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.
UNDER THE BITUMEN THE RIVER

MASTER OF ARTS IN FINE ART BY PROJECT

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BA (Fine Art) HONS

SCHOOL OF ART
DESIGN AND SOCIAL CONTEXT PORTFOLIO

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Cover page image: Diary sketch, 2004. Pencil and watercolour on paper. 30x21cm
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PROJECT PROPOSAL

Brief Description and Objectives:

My spatial practice takes a spiral path that links dream, imagination, my body and the viewer. Sensorial experiences, spatial patterns and objects emerge from the images and ideas that surface and take form from this multidimensional matrix. My work is informed by non-rational ways of knowing and perceiving and the focus of this project will be to explore areas of non-rational perceptions and how they translate into artworks through the use of every day materials such as plaster, gelflex, agar, sisal, pencil and paper.

My objective is to create an experience in the form of an installation which will involve aural, tactile and visual components. The work will draw on:

- Recording and exploration of dream.
- The imagination that is rooted in archetypal images and cultural myths and facilitates my capacity to work with images.
- My body as the point of reference through which the dreams, imagination, senses, ideas and materials come together and are translated into forms, patterns and events.
- My interaction with every day materials, procedures, techniques and technology.
- My position as viewer offering me a cohesive understanding of the process.

The dreams will be recorded in a diary and the images will be amplified by drawings, textual and visual research and connection with further dreams. This is a generative process distilling images, spatial ideas and forms that underlies and defines the work as it takes shape.

The imaginative process allows for ambiguities by drawing on an amalgam of images, materials, ideas, thoughts, forms and spatial considerations making connections between them. I create the potential for ambiguous readings for example work which is at once attractive and repulsive. I will investigate this aspect of the liminal in my work with reference to artists Carolee Schneemann, Anne Hamilton and Eva Hesse.

My work references the body and its physical processes in a similar way to Eva Hesse, Carolee Schneemann and Kiki Smith. This creates a visceral and proprioceptive relationship between the work and the viewer. Research via provisional performance/installations will document this interaction and these observations will be utilised in the finished work. The outcome will be an installation that will give presence and form to dream, imagination and body through the use of every day materials, offering the participants an experiential mode of non-rational perception. The installation will be an imagined topography created from the interaction and dialogue between projected images, aural landscapes, tactile surfaces and spatial constructions.
**Research questions:**

1. In what ways can I integrate material from the matrix of dream, imagination and body into works that will stimulate non-rational apprehensions?
2. In what ways can I communicate this experience of non-rational apprehension to the viewer in an artwork that involves a multi sensorial experience.

**Rationale:**

My project is informed by non-rational modes of perception and focuses on exploring how these perceptions translate into artworks and the relationship these works have with the viewer. This exploration has been an important area of research since Symbolism and continued into the Surrealist movement and its inheritors in contemporary art.

My project draws on dream material, the imagination and body, examining how these modes of perception are bought together into relationship where each transforms and amplifies the other, translating the ideas and images through the use of every day materials and techniques into aural, tactile, visual, and spatial constructions.

My way of working is informed by the ideas of Carl Jung, Deleuze and Guattari, Robert Avens and Merleau–Ponty. It also extends the research of artists Carolee Schneemann, Anne Hamilton, Eva Hesse and Kiki Smith whose work explores the liminal spaces of dream, imagination and body, which intersect in my work.

**Methods:**

The bibliographic research will include:

- Aspects of Jungian Psychology for example: dreams, active imagination and archetypal images.
- The ideas of Robert Avens on mythical thinking and the role of imagination in every day reality.
- The theories of Deleuze and Guattari on non-rational rhizomic practices.
- Merleau-Ponty’s work on the intersection between body and mind.
- Peter Dowton’s research into working and producing from a non-rational space.

**Bibliography**


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Von Franz, Marie-Louise, *The Psychological Meaning of Redemptive Motifs In Fairytales*, Inner City Books Toronto, Canada, 1980

Under the Bitumen the River

Under the Bitumen the River emerged as I glanced in the rear vision mirror to see the median strip pulsing up from the road and stretching into my imagination where it settled to become a site of potential for this project.
My project investigates similar ideas to the Situationalists who wanted to restore the hidden qualities of the labyrinth back into Paris, as they believed the city’s memories and stories had gone underground when the authorities replaced the maze of tiny laneways with a grid of wide avenues.

*Under the Bitumen the River* explores the links between the wide avenues of literality and the labyrinth of imagination by drawing from the underground river of memory, story and dream, which become *White Markers* on the grid of rationality.

*Skeleton Woman I* 2004. Pencil and watercolour on paper, 28x11 cm
**White Markers**

There have been a series of *White Markers* along this project’s path.

J M Coetzee described *markers* in this way:

‘In a life of writing books, I have often, believe me, been lost in the maze of doubting. The trick I have learned is to plant a sign or marker in the ground where I stand. So that in my future wanderings I shall have something to return to, and not get worst lost than I am, having planted it I press on; the more often I come back to the mark (which is a sign to myself of my blindness and incapacity) the more certainly I know I am lost, but the more I am heartened too, to have found my way back.’ ¹

Dreams are *White Markers*.

On April 17, 2007 I dreamt:

*I had mum’s jewellery all in a lump. I hadn’t looked at it closely and didn’t know the pieces and yet on the other hand I knew it unmistakeably as Mum’s. There were about thirty pieces, mostly small brooches and fine necklaces, nothing big. I was standing back a bit from it looking from the distance, observing. I felt I could see a minute gold snail amongst them and so I picked it up and looked at it closely, it was so tiny. It was yellow gold and had tiny diamonds set in the spiral. I guess it was valuable. I put it back and realized again that I hadn’t spent time actually getting to know Mum’s jewellery.*

This dream, *Mum’s Jewellery* held the seed of understanding of the Master’s Project; i.e. that I had been delicately unravelling and familiarising myself with the pieces I had been creating, and that I could use the snail’s diamond studded spiral as a framework in which to record this unravelling process.

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*Snail 2007. Watercolour on paper, 20x13 cm*
Masters Constellation 2007
Seed

The Oxford Dictionary defines seed as:
- The beginning of a feeling, process or condition.
- To initiate the development or growth of.


In this exploration seeds were held in a concentrated agar solution and hung in the sun. Metaphorically the agar acted as a container in which I could nourish dreams, feelings and ideas around emerging work that was simultaneously germinating, growing, dying and changing again.

As I observed the transformation of the seeds and agar I was reminded of how often I feel that the work knows ‘something’ and if I can just attend to the process, (keep it moist and warm with images and ideas) without trying to control the outcome, that ‘something’ will reveal itself to me.

Marguerite Duras touches on this ‘something’ when she writes:

“Women have been in darkness for centuries. They don’t know themselves. Or only poorly. And when women do write, they translate this darkness. Men don’t translate. They begin from a theoretical platform, already in place, already elaborated. The writing of women is really translating from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language.”

Seeds 2004. Seeds in agar hanging by embedded sisal, 20x9cm

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2 Duras, Marguerite, New French Feminisms an Anthology, Edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, The University Press Amherst, 1980, from an interview with Marguerite Duras by Susan Husserl-Kapit in Signs, Winter 1975
Seeds 2004. Details, dry, dead and growing seeds in agar, varying dimensions
Translating Darkness

To facilitate this ‘something’ finding form agar was poured onto the old, porous wooden floor in the studio. The material was left to absorb the history held within the wood, the pattern of its boards, and to act as a biological culture medium. Once dehydrated the panels were peeled off the floor and hung horizontally by the embedded sisal directly above the imprint they left on the floor. This allowed participants to pass through the space between the surface of the floor and the imprinted material that reflected it from above.

Studio floor 2005. Agar, cheesecloth and sisal, varying dimensions
Details 2005. Moulds growing in agar, varying dimensions
Studio floor 2005. Agar, cheesecloth and sisal multiples 2.5x1metre, process of *Translating Darkness* from floor to hanging
Details 2005. Dry agar, cheesecloth and sisal, varying dimensions
Translating Darkness 2005. Studio, horizontal installation views and details, agar, cheesecloth and sisal, varying dimensions
Translating Darkness 2005. Studio, horizontal installation view, agar, cheesecloth and sisal, varying dimensions
Translating Darkness 2005. Studio, vertical installation views, agar, cheesecloth and sisal, varying dimensions
Translating Darkness 2005. Studio, vertical installation view, agar, cheesecloth and sisal, varying dimensions
Grid

The formal structure of the grid became a useful holding device for the process of refining the ideas and materials as they shifted gradually into fragile, translucent, lightweight agar panels that were installed in a vertical grid enabling the participants to move between them. This process lead to an exhibition at CLUBS where the panels became *Dancers*.

Upper, studio floor 2005, wet agar and sisal panels, multiples 2.5x1 metre, detail, wet agar. Lower, studio, installation views, agar and sisal panels, varying dimensions
Dancers

The *Dancers* were installed into CLUBS an artist run space with a philosophy “Dedicated to the Perpetually Provisional.” With the shift from the institutional space of RMIT into public space the work left the formal device of the grid behind and was released into a rhythmic arrangement to be encountered by the audience as they moved through the space.

*Dancers* 2005, CLUBS. Installation view, agar and sisal, varying dimensions
Dancers 2005, CLUBS. Detail, agar and sisal, multiples 2.5x1 metre
Dancers 2005, CLUBS. Detail, agar and sisal, multiples 2.5x1 metre
Dancers 2005, CLUBS. Detail, agar and sisal, 2.5x1 metre
Drawing from the Imagination


On August 10, 2000 I dreamt:

“There were two things, one looks like two fingers and a scrotum. The other is similar in shape but bigger. They are in fact pastries with a sort of meat inside. I am planning how to cut them so everyone will get an even share. I decided long ways but my friend came up and cut them across so sometimes people wouldn’t get any meat.”

Dreambody 2000. Pencil on paper, 28x25 cm

Dreambody 2005. Clay, 6x4.5 cm
In 2005 Dreambody combined with the shadoof, an ancient and contemporary simple device used in Egypt to irrigate the desert by drawing water up out of the Nile. The image of the shadoof was useful as it acted as an imaginary device to dip down into my imagination and draw up ideas and images to moisten the dry landscape of literality: hence Under the Bitumen the River.

*Shadoof and Dreambody I* 2005. Pen, ink and watercolour on paper, 12x7cm
The *Dreambody* drawings metaphorically carried *Shadoof/Dreambody* as I wrestled with nightly dreams and daily feelings and looked for possibilities of new work.

*Dreambody II Series 2005. Pencil and watercolour on paper 20x13cm*
Dreambody II Series  2005. Pencil and watercolour on paper, varying dimensions
*Dreambody* III 2006, studio. Charcoal on paper, 2x1 metres

*Dreambody* III 2006, studio. Charcoal on paper
Dreambody IV Series 2006, studio. Charcoal and pencil on paper, 2 x 1 metres

Dreambody IV Series 2006, studio. Charcoal and pencil on paper
Trunk as Feeling Organ

The idea of a bodily extension/feeling organ emerged as I drew the large Dreambody images and realized it was not the drawings themselves that I was exploring but the ‘drawing-body’ and somehow I needed to explore/extend my body/arm as a feeling organ.

I remembered the words of Marie-Louise von Franz:

‘If you are trying to draw, the image may start completely in the physical realm and only later be represented on paper. Analysands can sometimes only express a thing by a physical gesture and in performing the gesture realize the psychic content; they don’t know in advance what will be expressed but have to move with the feeling.’\(^3\)

The elephant had been on my mind, particularly the trunk, so research began into the nature of the trunk as a feeling organ.

Elephants 2006. Pencil and watercolour on paper, 15x7cm

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\(^3\) von Franz, Marie-Louise, *The Psychological Meaning of Redemptive Motifs In Fairytales*, Inner City Books Toronto, Canada, 1980, p. 52
The elephant’s trunk operated in a similar fashion to the shadoof as it drew down (*Under the Bitumen*) and brought up images and ideas from the imagination, which fed into the work *Brown Things*.

*Trunk* 2006. Pen, ink and watercolour on paper
Brown Things 2006. Details, studio installations, flywire, latex and pool poles, varying dimensions
Diary sketches musing on the trunk 2006. Pencil on paper, varying dimensions

Drawing for trunk installation 2006. Pencil on paper, 20x15cm
**Fields**

I was pursuing the flexibility, shape and movement of the elephant’s trunk/feeling organ and developed an installation of massed slinkies hanging from ceiling to floor. The colour and movement of the coiled tubes generated a vibrational field of multi coloured light waves.

The trunk/feeling organ had found a mode of expression in the mass of pulsating tubes.

*Field 2006. Detail, studio installation, slinkies, varying dimensions*
Field 2006. Details, studio installations, slinkies, varying dimensions
*Field* 2006. Detail, studio installation, slinky, varying dimensions
Field Videos

The Field Videos explore the mesmerising colour, sound and whirl inside the slinky as it pulsates in and out of itself.

Pink Field 2006. Video still
Green Field 2006. Video still
Metal Field 2006. Video still
Shadow Field

Black and White Field 2007. Video still
**Water Music**

I was interested in the dialogue between the *Black and White Field* video and the drawing of *Skeleton Woman I* (see drawing p. 6) in which the video seemed to have animated the image of *Skeleton Woman I*. I was also interested in bringing the large projected drawing of *Skeleton Woman II* off the studio wall into three dimensional space. The fine pencil lines within the blown up image recalled an earlier exploration *Water Music I*, 2002; so called because tiny glyphs were revealed as the video camera was held to the surface of the water capturing the interplay of sunlight striking the moving water.

I imagined the elephant’s trunk piercing through the bitumen to the river below and bringing up the *Water Music*.

The unyielding literalism of the slinky installations prevented them from penetrating the bitumen to the river below. However the slinkies did offer colour/vibration and a representation of the trunk, aspects I explored in the following work.

By using coloured latex I translated the slinkies into more organic free forms closely related to the glyphs of *Water Music I*.

Details, studio installations 2007, coloured latex hanging on sisal, pool poles, flywire and latex, varying dimensions
The interplay between the dancing panels, hanging latex, *brown things* and the pool poles became the installation *Water Music II*.

*Water Music II* 2007. Detail, studio installation view, coloured latex, sisal, pool poles, flywire and latex, agar and sisal panels, varying dimensions
Water Music II 2007. Studio installation view, coloured latex, sisal, pool poles, flywire and latex, agar and sisal panels, varying dimensions
Water Music II 2007. Studio installation view, coloured latex, sisal, pool poles, flywire and latex, agar and sisal panels, varying dimensions
Water Music II 2007. Studio installation view, coloured latex, sisal, pool poles, flywire and latex, agar and sisal panels, varying dimensions
House Maps

The experience of *Under the Bitumen the River* is also reflected in the making of *House Maps*. As I mapped my inner landscape by recording dreams I was simultaneously mapping the external world through commissions via small watercolour paintings of an interpretation of people’s homes. Each *House Map* evolved from a series of initial sketches, dialogues and stories recorded on site. Sketches from *Vickie’s House* have been included as a representation of this process.

Vickie’s House

Vickie’s House 2006. Pen, ink and watercolour on paper, 30x26cm
Hamilton House

Hamilton House 2006. Pen, ink and watercolour on paper, 28x22cm
Nightingale Street

Nightingale Street 2006. Pen, ink and watercolour on paper, 15x7cm
Roseneath Street 2006. Pen, ink and watercolour on paper, 18x7cm
CLUBS 2005. Pen, ink and watercolour on paper, 24x25cm
Conclusion

The process of mapping this project has culminated in this ADR and has actual form in the installation *Under the Bitumen the River 2007*, School of Art Gallery, RMIT.
Under the Bitumen the River 2007
School of Art Gallery
R.M.I.T.

*Under The Bitumen The River 2007, School of Art Gallery, RMIT.*
Installation view, agar and sisal panels, pool poles and latex, video projection, varying dimensions
Under The Bitumen The River 2007, School of Art Gallery, RMIT. Details, agar and sisal panels, varying dimensions
Under The Bitumen The River 2007, School of Art Gallery, RMIT. Detail, fly wire and latex, varying dimensions
Under The Bitumen The River 2007, School of Art Gallery, RMIT. Detail, fly wire and latex, varying dimensions
**Under The Bitumen The River 2007**, School of Art Gallery, RMIT.
Installation view, latex, coloured dye and sisal, pool poles and latex, fly wire and latex, varying dimensions
Under The Bitumen The River 2007, School of Art Gallery, RMIT. Detail, latex, coloured dye and sisal, varying dimensions
Under The Bitumen The River 2007, School of Art Gallery, RMIT. Details, latex, coloured dye and sisal, varying dimensions
Under The Bitumen The River 2007, School of Art Gallery, RMIT
Details, pool poles and latex, coloured dye and sisal, varying dimensions
Under The Bitumen The River 2007, School of Art Gallery, RMIT
Detail, pool poles and latex, coloured dye and sisal, varying dimensions