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The Anatomy of Disgust and the Sublime in Metamodern Painting

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THE ANATOMY OF DISGUST AND THE SUBLIME IN METAMODERN PAINTING

by

CLAUDIA FURLOW

(Under the Direction of Jessica E. Burke)

ABSTRACT

The works in this series explore the application of Platonic binary oppositions of life/death and attraction/repulsion using Renaissance painting techniques that include the application of solvent and linseed oil glazes, as well as Galkyd Lite and MSA Gel, to assist in the realistic replication of the flesh of animals that meet death at the hand of humans, by attack of other animals, or through mishaps with motor vehicles. Informed by the work of Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger, Jan Fyt, Rembrandt van Rijn, Théodore Géricault, Francis Bacon, Joel-Peter Witkin, Walton Ford, Jenny Saville, and Victoria Reynolds, this study documents the evolution of the series from inspiration drawn from an analogy of human and animal suffering to a mature narrative based on formal aesthetics. Made poignant by the subtext of death, these paintings juxtapose the corrupt and vulnerable material body against the aesthetic rendering of nuanced values, patterns, and textures of viscera. The painting invites appreciation for the architecture of the animal body as well as Renaissance techniques employed in the creation of contemporary paintings.

INDEX WORDS: Renaissance, painting, Plato, binary opposition, death, repulsion, flesh, animals, Jenny Saville, Joel-Peter Witkin, Victoria Reynolds, Francis Bacon, Chaim Soutine, Dutch Golden Age, suffering, empathy, viscera, anatomy
THE ANATOMY OF DISGUST AND THE SUBLIME IN METAMODERN PAINTING

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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GEORGIA
THE ANATOMY OF DISGUST AND THE SUBLIME IN METAMODERN PAINTING

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis and my fine art first to my children Michael Joseph Puglisi, Jr., William Anthony Puglisi, and Margaret Clare Puglisi, to my father, mother, and siblings, living and dead, and last, but most definitely not least, to Miss Abigail, Miss Paddy, Hamish, Duncan, and Puss.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background, Significance and Objectives

When a painter goes about the selection of content for a series of work, it is less of a decision than a response to inspiration. Painting is not only image and technique; it is also genre and narrative. The work develops as each of these elements matures. My narrative is based on my interpretation of binary opposition through the genre of vanitas. The work in this series results from research of the textures of eviscerated tissues of animals. To accomplish this binary interpretation of vanitas, I made the conscious decision to reduce or eliminate the context of the subject matter while using the Renaissance technique I learned as an undergraduate. My work grew as a result of narrative, genre, and technique evolving in a collaborative effect; however, the inspiration for all of these have in common two categories of experiences from my youth—those with animals and those with death.

My interest in animal forms has been perennial from my early memories. At my suburban Falls Church, Virginia, home, my family had dogs and cats and taught me an humanitarian approach to animals. Animal death, too, was a running theme in the form of the Scottish Terrier Jenny found lying in the yard, in the bodies of dead birds and mice for which a friend and I created a cemetery, and in the dead cat run over in the street which my father gently removed and buried in the back garden.

When I moved to rural Shenandoah, Virginia, at the age of 10, experience with animal life increased several fold. Every species of woodland creature was abundant. Just as in the suburbs, animal death accompanied animal life. The ducks my father housed improperly became food for a fox, the only evidence of the struggle a trail of feathers leading
down to the creek. A kitten that had unwisely chosen to perch on top of the car wheel as my father left to get the morning paper gave way to devastation among all of us as he ran for a shovel to put the jerking body out of its misery.

Along with accidental deaths, planned deaths also were a part of my experience. My father and I culled the flock of chickens. Together we would go out on a Saturday morning. I would enter the eerily silent hen house to choose several hens; after my father chopped off their heads and bled them into a barrel, I would happily pluck their feathers and later watch my father gut them on the enclosed porch of the house and watch with interest the removal of various organs, my father identifying them as they spilled onto the newspaper.

Along with the poignant immediacy of seeing animal life and death as it occurred was the discovery of animal remnants in the fields. My bedroom became a museum of bird skeletons, snakeskins, and cattle bones. I was thrilled with these artifacts that I mounted as an exhibition in my bedroom. Neither shielded from death nor trained that it was particularly morbid, I accepted death as a normal part of life.

As I matured, life summoned me into more personal experiences with death. Family deaths yielded observations of various funerals, but the two most poignant deaths were that of my sister Cynthia by suicide at the age of 31 when I was 22 and, much later, that of my father, who clung to life long enough for me to make the four-hour trip to be at his bedside. The former was a life-altering, ongoing experience of grief that continues to shadow my family. The latter was a mysterious, beautiful experience that I felt privileged to share. Both left an indelible mark on me—vivid illustrations of the web-fine thread that separates us from life and death.
I witnessed my sister’s passing while pregnant with my first child; my father delayed death just long enough to say good-bye to those who were fully involved in life. The compromise of life in the inevitability of death seeks and finds a balance in Plato’s binary theory where stellar opposites are joined by their dependence upon the other’s definition for clarity. Pondering the unlikely beauty of the repeating cycle of life and death, I considered the existence of beauty in other unlikely constructions.

At first, my painting drew inspiration from an amalgam of recalled memories in the form of animal bodies lying in the random manners in which they fell victim. My objective was to create a subtext for human suffering in the deaths of animals that occur not by their own design but by the design of others. The analogy to be drawn was that humans, not unlike animals, sway in a bid for good and bad luck, affected by the serendipitous or calamitous events of life.

My original interest in the body as a whole evolved soon after into a formal interest in the intricate body tissues I photographed. The focus toward formal concerns was achieved by removing the context of the image, so much so that the paintings present more as abstract images than as the representations they exhibit. The additional binary of attraction and repulsion is operative here—both in the odd attraction people have to viewing the repulsive sights of death as well as discerning the link between attraction and repulsion in painting such subject matter. The use of Renaissance painting technique seemed a likely analogy for binary extremes since its associations conjure images of the sublime.

My paintings’ aesthetics convey the sense of mystery that I feel about the material aspects of death and transcendence to the afterlife. By abstracting the body through the removal of context, I open a palatable dialogue of the gross as a catalyst for aesthetics. This
subtext of spirituality is a likely counterpoint to the body’s and the paint’s materiality, thus bringing the binary opposites to include not only life/death and attraction/repulsion but also body/spirit. In its current form, my painting resides in the continuum between the dark mystery of Joel-Peter Witkin and the charming documentation of Jan Fyt. My desire is to address the dread that most people have of dead flesh and to paint it in a traditional, aesthetically-pleasing manner that makes people forget what originally inspired the work.
CHAPTER 2

CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

The depiction of dead tissue occupies a genre most often referred to as the vanitas or the memento mori, a reminder of death.\(^1\) But within the genre are different narratives and painterly techniques, depending upon the period in which the painter worked. The painters and photographer who have informed my work are Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger, Jan Fyt, Rembrandt van Rijn, Théodore Géricault, Francis Bacon, Joel-Peter Witkin, Walton Ford, Jenny Saville, and Victoria Reynolds. While my intention is close to the Renaissance style, the works of the later painters in this list have influenced my technique to combine the tradition of vanitas with the device of binary opposition to craft paintings rich in contemporary narrative. The evolution of vanitas and its development of emotive content have contributed to my treatment of dead animal tissue in paintings. With its subtext of analogy between human and animal, my work shares Witkin’s and Saville’s vulnerability and objectification of loss.

Jacques Maquet observes that, “Art…is situated among…philosophies, religious beliefs, and political doctrines….”\(^2\) True of art in general, I find this accurate of the genre of vanitas specifically because all three drive its inspiration. As a means of introduction, I pose the question asked of me: Why do artists create images of the dead and the grotesque?

The most reasonable answer to this would be the equitable mortality of all living

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organisms. Each human must assimilate the fact of his or her own mortality and that of loved ones. In direct reaction to those who would like to sweep this reality under the rug, the artist sets this mystery on a pedestal for examination and discussion. Author Eric Wilson addresses the bystander pastime of gawking at accident scenes and suggests that the inherent survival instinct leads one to be attracted to scenes of death in order to categorize the cause and avoid the repetition of a similar event resulting in one’s own demise.\(^3\) Nineteenth-century artist Théodore Géricault used this human response in his painting of *The Raft of the Medusa* (Fig. 2.1) to create a political statement exposing the disregard of the gentry for the untitled masses. The French people, critical of the entitlements of the nobility, could not look away from Géricault’s stunningly realistic depictions of living death.

![Figure 2.1. Théodore Géricault, *Raft of the Medusa*, oil on canvas, 193 x 282 in., 1819, The Louvre, Paris.](image)

Géricault’s visual research for *Raft of the Medusa* was extensive in order that his images of the dead and dying men on the raft be believably depicted. In the two years that Géricault took to research his subject, he became rather enamored of limbs and heads taken

from the morgue, so much so that he brought them to his studio to observe and record their gradual decay.\(^4\) One may pose that his intention was purely academic study; although, of his numerous studies, many were completed and sold as separate works.\(^5\) Among these is his *Dead Cat* (Fig. 2.2), which likewise cannot be dismissed as a study for the raft, as no cats are in the painting. Independent of his political intentions, he seems to have been attracted to the romantic and sublime imagery of death itself.

\(^4\) Lorenz E. Eitner, *Gericault: His Life and Work*, (London: Orbis Publishing, 1983), p. 183. “The weight of his [endeavor of painting *Raft of the Medusa*] threatened to dampen the emotions needed to drive it forward. To refresh his imagination, perhaps also to find an outlet for observations which he could not incorporate in his picture, he drew and painted many studies that were not meant to be of any practical use, but served him as an emotional stimulus….his pictorial realism alone did not require him to turn his studio into a morgue, as he did for some weeks, much to the discomfort of his friends and models.”

Centuries prior to Géricault’s cautionary tale of the *Raft of the Medusa*, various civilizations used reminders of death for religious purposes in their architecture and decorative arts, from the Aztec who carved exquisite corpses spouting fountains of blood from severed necks (Fig. 2.3), to the Egyptians who monumentalized it with the pyramids and their contents, to the Romans and Greeks who produced frescoes and mosaics illustrated with skulls to remind the viewer, “Omnia mors aequat,” or “Death makes us all equal.” Each of these peoples employed *memento mori* for spiritual purposes to encourage the citizen to seek a means to a good death.

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The religious impetus for the creation of *vanitas* diminished with the humanism of the Quattrocento led by the analytical Leonardo da Vinci. The previous religious significance and attention was instead focused on a secular observance of fading youth and the reality of death. Everyday, practical possessions were paired with symbols that were harbingers of death—a rotting skull, a watch, an hourglass, a burning candle, with the observation, “Tempus fugit” (Fig. 2.4). Paintings of this type were common work of the Flemish Baroque period during which some of the greatest works were painted.⁷

The works of painters such as Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger’s *Dead Frog with Flies* and Jan Fyt’s series of hunting vignettes (Fig. 2.5) were characterized by lush three-dimensional volumes of sensual subjects on glossy surfaces, with the double message of bounty and *vanitas*. Although these works sometimes go unnoticed behind masterpieces of

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⁷ The cessation of hostilities in 1609-1672 between Spanish Hapsburg rulers and S. Netherlands and the Dutch Republic was called the Twelve Years’ Truce and marked a time of prosperity permitting a burgeoning period of creativity.
painters such as Johannes Vermeer, contemporary artists like Rob and Nick Carter have appropriated them into installations like *Transforming Vanitas Painting* (Fig. 2.6). Similarly,
Victoria Reynolds has created her own *vanitas* series of meat and organs rendered in oil on canvas in baroque cascades of fat and striated muscle as seen in *Flight of the Reindeer* (Fig. 2.7). Unlike Reynolds’ elaborately pinned and posed compositions, however, mine rely on the random manner in which I find the animal to determine the natural arrangement of the anatomy.

In the seventeenth century, *vanitas* began its evolution into the contemporary complex narrative. Rembrandt van Rijn contextualized death in *Carcass of Beef (Flayed Ox)* (Fig. 2.8) by using the corpse of a hanging ox with its chest braced open for the air curing of the nutritive meat to represent the rejoicing of the secular with the spiritual. While the light on the subject suggests a heavenly glow, the splayed and bound legs of the ox are suggestive of crucifixion. The impasto of the ox’s body takes on secular concerns in its juxtaposition with the busy woman in the background, implying how the death of one
permits the sustenance of another. The ox of Rembrandt shows a common sight imbued with spiritual overtones that later captured the imaginations of Francisco Goya, Chaim Soutine, and Francis Bacon.⁸

While Rembrandt’s exalted Ox expanded the vanitas theme beyond the mere service of the memento mori, Francis Bacon’s Figure with Meat (Fig. 2.9) tells us that there is more afoot than a commentary on the spirit and where one can get a good steak. Bacon’s synthesization of Diego Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X (oil on canvas, 55 x 47 in.,

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1650, Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome) and Chaim Soutine’s grittily-textured *Carcass of Beef* (oil on canvas, 55 x 42 in., 1924, Minneapolis Institute of Arts) marks the expectation of more intimate narrative to come. The painting is dominated by the overpowering dichotomy of the stern authority of Velazquez’s *Pope Innocent X* painted luridly before the splayed flesh of the ox and accompanied by the unstable triad of both sexual and nutritive consumption adjoined with incest. The *vanitas* becomes an artifact of psychology, a surface upon which duplicitous social institutions, incest, sexuality, and human fragility are mirrored.

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9 Francis Bacon et al., *Francis Bacon: Important Paintings from the Estate* (New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1998), 24-25. Bacon was obsessed with Velazquez’s *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, replicating it dozens of times. He was attracted to the stern disciplinarian visage of the portrait which reminded him of his father whom he disliked but to whom he was conversely sexually attracted.
Like Bacon, Joel-Peter Witkin generates images arising from darker recesses of the human experience. If Bacon’s *Figure with Meat* arises from a complex interior narrative, Witkin’s stimulus for his extensive oeuvre of the dead and moldering is catharsis for a disquieting event when he was a child. Upon leaving his home to accompany his mother to church, the six year old heard the clamor of an accident involving three vehicles in the street. Separated from his mother in the excitement, he wandered to the edge of the curb where he was greeted by the decapitated head of a little girl rolling to his feet. Not fully assimilating the devastation of the circumstances, he prepares to reach down to touch the face and speak to the disembodied head when someone whisks him away.\(^\text{10}\) Witkin’s “disagreeable

\(^{10}\) Joel-Peter Witkin, *The Bone House* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 1998), n.p. As an adult, Witkin “…grew [his] visual work: [his] use of severed heads and masks; concerns with violence, pain and death; of things extravagant, emotional and deserving
beauty,”11 like Bacon’s, is more than a passing acknowledgment of the life cycle, and, in addition, introduces the binary opposition of repulsion/attraction to the vanitas. His work transcends simple object-for-object symbolism, and the narrative becomes one of intimate adoration” from the dead bodies of animals and humans set in theatrical vignettes of food and sexual depravity. To create a dreamy, aged quality to his images, he modified his photo negatives with scratches and an emulsion of egg whites.


11 Ibid, 177. “…writers attempting to explain the photography of Joel-Peter Witkin…refer to Hieronymous Bosch’s denunciations of sinners in a gothic world turned upside down as a precedent for the artist’s staged nightmares.”
contemplation, joining the realms of stark, unembellished reality (Figs. 2.10 & 2.11). Witkin’s inspiration and mine come from the same reservoir; Witkin’s, from a tragic automobile accident’s dénouement; mine, as catharsis for a beheaded kitten and a sister’s death under chaotic circumstances.

The unembellished reality of vanitas and device of binary opposition is operative in Walton Ford’s watercolors. Novaya Zemlya (Fig. 2.12) shows a bear treading on a human skull, depicting an historic event in 1596 when the Dutch explorer Willem Barents and his crew were stranded on the Russian archipelago by the same name and were forced to contend with a murderous polar bear. Binary opposition is assisted by Ford’s traditional rendering in the manner of John James Audubon, which hypnotizes the viewer to prioritize the painting’s aesthetics over the tragedy it depicts. Likewise, Falling Bough (Fig. 2.13) shows the stunning colors of flocking birds on a magnificent limb concurrent with the collapse of the branch.

![Figure 2.12. Walton Ford, Novaya Zemlya, watercolor, gouache, graphite and ink, 64.5 x 123.75 in., 2006 Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford.](image)

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The theory of binary opposition has its beginnings in the writings of Plato on *metaxis*, the Greek word he used to describe the condition of “in-betweenness[,]…a structural characteristic of the human condition” that forces humans to live their lives in an arc of polarities, such as eternity and time, freedom and fate, instinct and intellect, risk and safety, love and hate, and good and evil.  

To these polarities, Joel-Peter Witkin and Walton Ford might add attraction and repulsion, and life and death. Even though Plato would have

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dismissed Witkin’s surface depravity, his theory of metaxis is helpful in analyzing aesthetic content and establishing that the two extremes of “in-betweens” frequently exist within one work. To further argue the place of diametrically-opposed states in the content of a painting, while Plato deplored repulsive images in art and pronounced them to be of no value to aesthetic study, his student Aristotle disagreed. He advised his students not to avoid what they might find unsightly, for such images can be instructive of life.\textsuperscript{14} Unsightly images are beautiful for the order present in their design, which suits their purpose. St. Augustine agrees with this statement judging that “beauty…involves a grasp of order.”\textsuperscript{15} My initial inspiration led me from the emotional content of accident scenes to a formal assessment of my subject. Consequently, the viscera in my paintings reveal the order of the body systems and the intricate gradations of color from surface to surface.

In following Aristotle’s line of reasoning, then, images judged to be repulsive, and/or treat the subject of death, have a place in aesthetics and can be instructive. As an example, the monumental early work of Jenny Saville runs the gamut of what most persons would consider to be unsightly, from disfigurement to brutalization. \textit{Fulcrum} (Fig. 2.14) conforms to the criteria for \textit{vanitas} as well as to those of Aristotle’s for beauty. The image, based on

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\textsuperscript{14} Monroe C. Beardsley, \textit{Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History} (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 57. The discussion of \textit{Nicomachaeian Ethics}, a ten-volume work by Aristotle in which he continues Socrates’ and Plato’s examination of “how [humans] may best live,” is extensive as well as inclusive of successive philosophers’ responses to Aristotle; however, for the purpose of my thesis, which is to support the value of the production of challenging images, a brief mention will suffice. Aristotle writes: “…and since learning and admiring are pleasant, all things connected with them must also be pleasant; for instance, a work of imitation, such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and all that is well imitated, even if the object of imitation is not pleasant; for it is not this that causes pleasure or the reverse, but the inference that the imitation and the object imitated are identical, so that the result is that we learn something [\textit{Rhetoric I}, xi, 1371b; trans. Freese].”
\end{flushleft}

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\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 95.
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the photograph of a deceased woman who had suffered from elephantitis, projects Saville’s passionate, instructive critique of obsession with body image and the commodification of the female body.

Saville illustrates the thin border between binaries of attraction/repulsion when she models the lips of the face of Red Stare Head IV after Johannes Vermeer’s Girl with the Pearl Earring (Fig. 2.15 & 2.16). Saville also uses the word “in-betweenness” to describe

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the character of her models as suspended between life and death. To this binary opposition and subtext of death, Saville adds the quality of vulnerability, also present in my work that exposes slippery organs from deep beneath the animals’ furry exterior.

The binaries in Witkin’s and Saville’s work are simultaneously captivating, shocking, and excruciating. This unsettling content serves as a critique of cultural affectations; it is a reactive judgment of the repressive wish to cloak uncomfortable subjects until resolute avoidance will no longer work. My interest in dead flesh is similarly reactive to those uncomfortable with the discussion of death and its inevitability. Binary opposition functions as a means for my catharsis but also serves to distract me from my pain by watching the

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19 Ibid, 18.
reaction of others to my work. My content is formed of a desire to look on unembellished truth, without the adulteration of the perceptions of others who fear challenging images.

While early *vanitas* functioned for religious purposes or to remind people of the rapid passage of time, loss of youth, and political movements, the contemporary work beginning with Francis Bacon and following through Joel-Peter Witkin, Walton Ford, and Jenny Saville focuses on psychological and philosophical commentary on vulnerability and loss using traditional painting techniques and devices like binary opposition. I have infused my work using the same traditional and binary devices while relying on a unique methodology of collecting challenging source material for painting.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of my research for this series is as irregular as its content. Working from original source material rather than appropriating others’ images is a guiding criteria for the manner of gathering and generating information for this series. I gathered source material of dead animal tissue as I found it by photographing it on site.

My research resources were in the form of equipment, libraries, and a medical physician. The equipment I used to document the various animal bodies is a FujiFilm FinePix HS30 EXR Camera, a flash drive to store the digital photos, a laptop for viewing and for painting from, and the campus print shop to produce photographs from which to paint. I used the Zach S. Henderson Library resources on the campus of Georgia Southern University, as well as the internet, to familiarize myself with supplemental information about body decay and the life cycle of the fly. I also consulted internist Dr. Wayne C. Reynolds of Marion, Virginia, for identification of some body systems.

Initially, I aspired to paint using a direct, observational method because the observation of a dynamic subject imparts a similar dynamism to the creation. However, while firsthand observation is the preferred method of traditional artists, I decided not to follow in Théodore Géricault’s footsteps by hauling into my studio the rotted bodies of the unfortunates I found. I do collect animal bodies, but these are desiccated and exude little, if any, odor. What helped me with my decision was prior experience with a steer hoof gifted to me by a friend. The fresh and penetrating odor of rotting flesh was more than I wanted to deal with, citing also the hygienic problems this type of direct observation would have afforded in the university’s studios, as well as the constantly changing appearance as the object decayed, making prolonged viewing of a particular pose impossible.
I resolved instead to base my paintings on photographic resources. While my decision to work exclusively from photography represents a sacrifice of my preferred method, it does not compromise my creative process. I am compensated by having unlimited time to view the subject, and I retain full control, for example, of color, saturation, and focus of the subject matter. Having chosen to work from the photographic image, I then ultimately gather my visual source material utilizing one of three sets of circumstances. The first situation is where I randomly come upon a dead animal. The second situation is when I know that a slaughter is scheduled and make an appointment with the farmer. The third situation is instances where I have set up an artificial environment in order to make the circumstances right for photography.

The method I prefer is the first one where I randomly come upon a dead animal. The importance of the random arrangement of body forms originates from my original subtext of human/animal analogy and vulnerability, which occurs under the condition of the lack of control of the circumstances in which I find the animals I paint. I have relied almost entirely on serendipity for the poses of my source material, including animals photographed during their slaughter, in which others have determined the position of the animals I photograph.

These accidental circumstances are as random for me as for the animal’s loss of life. I could drive my car on any highway and eventually come upon an animal that has met its death under the wheels of a vehicle; however, the most fruitful times have been when I am driving to my hometown during a school break. I am, therefore, not on a schedule and not hurried to arrive at my destination. This provides me the time to take as many photographs as I wish. This was the manner I gathered information for the armadillo and opossum paintings. Another random circumstance that permitted me photographs of the chest and abdominal
cavity of a cat was when I was on a walk in my neighborhood and found a cat that had been attacked and killed by a coyote. At other times, I have been alerted by colleagues of an opportunity to take photos beneficial to my thesis. In addition, each of my children, knowing my need for source material, has sent me photos of dead animals that they find on their hikes in various nature areas. The manner of death provides a variety of views as well as what happens to the animal between the time of death and my arrival. A case in this instance is when a wake of about 15 vultures surrounded the opossum, thus shredding the tissues as they ate.

The second method, which removes some of the random quality regarding the pose of the animal and is dependent upon the involvement of others’ choices in where and how the animal lies, is when I schedule ahead to witness a slaughter, as for my paintings of hog subject matter. This event was an annual celebratory Thanksgiving slaughter in the Shenandoah Valley and involved several heads of families and their children. I was granted full access to the farmyard as well as to the field next to it where they transported the body lashed to the shovel of an earth mover.

The third method, in which I set up an artificial environment in order to gain the occasion for photography at my own convenience, is when I set up a maggot nursery on my back porch. Maggots are intercessor to the animal’s death journey. They provide green disposal of body tissues and, for their service, receive mutual benefit for their effort in a setting to lay their eggs and supply their offspring with sustenance, so that the life cycle can repeat itself. I bought a beef round steak from the supermarket and placed the open package next to an open porch window. There the flies had free access to the meat. Within five days,
eggs were present and, shortly afterward, tiny larvae. The larvae grew quickly as they converted the red piece of meat to a gray and white, liquefied mass from the digestive juices they secreted. I took photographs and video each day for ten days, using a 10x lens for close-ups. The lens helped me see and appreciate the fine, translucent breathing organs of the maggots.

The equipment and research methods I used were competent methods to gather data. Although I preferred the completely random discovery of an animal that had just experienced an accidental death, the slaughter and the maggot nursery were a positive means of gaining the images I needed for research.
CHAPTER 4

PRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS

My artistic influences—Théodore Géricault, Rembrandt van Rijn, Francis Bacon, Walton Ford, Jenny Saville, Joel-Peter Witkin, and Victoria Reynolds—inform my work in four specific areas: inspiration, narrative, technique, and vanitas. Due to the range of time periods that these influences encompass, as well as their varying content, there is a hierarchy of overlap. All have produced work indicative of vanitas. Géricault and Rembrandt inform my use of traditional technique. Bacon, Ford, and Reynolds influenced the development of my narrative content and validate my painting’s place in the contemporary vernacular. Géricault, Saville, and Witkin proved most inspirational at first, emboldening me to engage my subject matter.

Géricault’s studies for Medusa (Fig. 2.1) showed me that paintings of the dead were viable painting subjects, and I responded to Saville’s and Witkins’ observations that things
are often not what they seem and to their works fueled by binary opposition. A good example of this in Witkin is his *The Kiss* (Fig. 4.1) where one man’s bisected head appears to be two men engaged in a kiss. Saville’s and Witkin’s raw emotion and unapologetic vulnerability inspired me to exhibit the theme of grief in the sentimental manner of literal pictorials of dead animals lying on asphalt with blood dripping from their noses (Fig. 4.2). However, my initial images provoked such powerful emotions in the viewer that they were an obstacle to my artistic intention of the communication of a sublime aesthetic. The development of my research evolved through the benefit of feedback during the progressive critical process. I clarified my visual content to more effectively preserve the focus on the aesthetics of painting.

I addressed my original lack of focus by removing the context of the subject matter, paradoxically reducing the emotive content by using close-up views of bones and bloody tissue. This consequently transformed the images to abstracted color and pattern, which
allows the viewer to regard the images with a more benign perspective of emotional
detachment and permit the aesthetic appraisal I intend (Fig. 4.3). It is at this evolution that
my work progressed from a discourse of vulnerability and loss to that of formal analysis.

My challenge became one of transforming repulsive images into aesthetic portrayals of flesh
and, like Walton Ford, to express binary opposition between repulsion and attraction while
maintaining the discourse with traditional techniques and a refined aesthetic. Assisting this
aesthetic is my use of Renaissance oil technique and traditional preparation methods.

The Renaissance qualities I most admire in Géricault’s and Rembrandt’s paintings are
their life-like forms, neutral palette, somber mood, and chiaroscuro in satin gloss. My
undergraduate instruction included transcription of master works, and I prefer painting
images rendered skillfully with an abundance of precise detail. Paintings created with
material applied casually appears to me as lacking both commitment and craft. While I
appreciate other works without the same precision of craft but rendered in a clever turn of
visual phrase, I do not easily abide it in my own work. I continue to seek replication of the forms I see in the natural world. However, my painting differs from Géricault’s and Rembrandt’s work in its colorful palette which negates any somberness or chiaroscuro.

My painting process borrowing on Renaissance methods begins with the construction of canvases and stretching cotton duck or linen over them with the aid of canvas pliers, and fastening the canvas with staples. I reconstitute dried rabbit skin glue in a pot on the stove in proportions of 1-1/2 tablespoons granules to 1 cup of water, let it cool slightly, and then spread it lightly on the stretched canvas to produce a drum-tight substrate. After the rabbit skin glue cools and tightens overnight, I apply two to three coats of white acrylic gesso.

The experiments I conducted between direct paint application (Fig. 4.4) and underpainting followed by successive layers of paint and glazing yielded a decision to adhere to the Renaissance process. After application of a layer of paint, the color dictated by the

Figure 4.4. Claudia Furlow, *Untitled*, oil and MSA Gel on canvas, 24 x 24 in., 2014.
planned palette, I use a subtractive method with a paint cloth and/or a brush, sometimes
dipped in solvent, to establish areas of highlight. The palette might be determined by the
bluish mold of a round steak on which lies an orange pupa (Fig. 4.5.), in which case I apply a
combination of Indanthrone Blue and Burnt Umber, or by the need for Permanent Green

![Figure 4.5. Claudia Furlow, Elbow Room i, oil on canvas, 29.75 x 23.75 in., 2014.](image)

Light, meant to function as a complement to the top layers of Germanium Red flesh (Fig.
4.6). As this subtractive method is worked in increasing detail, I trade the paint cloth for a

![Figure 4.6. Claudia Furlow, Opossum Paw, oil on canvas, 8 x 10 in., 2014.](image)
brush dipped in the hue of the underpainting, removing paint, in order to shape, and applying paint, in order to tightly define the form (Fig. 4.7)

Following the development of shapes and patterns of highlight, the darkest value determines the areas of depth. In the case of the Indanthrone and Burnt Umber underpainting, I mix ratios to achieve a rich black; in the case of a complementary palette, I mix ratios of Germanium, Zinc White, Alizarin Crimson, and Prussian Blue with Permanent Green Light to enhance the neutrals.

Once I define the form of the subject matter, I add Galkyd Lite to increase the paints’ viscosity. The thick dribbles of oil pigment and Galkyd Lite at this point are a departure from Renaissance method and enable quicker, heavier coverage of the canvas, and it unifies the sheen of areas of the composition that will not be worked repeatedly with glazes which project a shiny surface.

Figure 4.7. Underpainting and glaze process as seen in *Opossum Paw*. 
Because of the mirrored surface of the flesh, often characterized by secretions, a series of glazes of various dilutions is necessary. My glaze recipe is two parts solvent, one part linseed oil, and one part stand oil. Historically, glazes are applied from light to dark, but, because of the mirrored surface of the flesh, frequently a very thin top glaze of pigment with chroma slightly reduced with Zinc White is necessary (Fig. 4.8).

![Image](image.png)

Figure 4.8. Claudia Furlow, *Mauve Sheath*, oil on canvas, 9 x 12 in., 2014.

When I first committed to Renaissance process, my goal was to make as complete of a two-dimensional illusion as possible, establishing form with no aid whatsoever of texture; however, observing Rembrandt’s textural enhancements, specifically in this case to the skin

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of the face and to the collar (Fig. 4.9), I recognized surface texture as a means to create variety and establish focal point in the composition (Fig. 4.10 and 4.11).

Bacon’s and Ford’s contributions to my work are chiefly inspirational rather than technical. I do not replicate Bacon’s technique of heavy impasto, and Ford’s use of
watercolor is not applicable. Bacon’s unabashed content gave me confidence, just as Géricault, Saville, and Witkin did. Ford’s work complements my use of binary opposition.

The painter my work most resembles is that of Victoria Reynolds, although paradoxically I did not locate her work until my current work was well under way. As I do, she focuses on the formal elements of the flesh, one major difference being that she carefully poses the flesh in elaborate arrangements (Fig. 4.12) and finishes her work in baroque frames. In comparison with her work, mine has a more contemporary, straight-forward presentation. Both of us more often than not are confined to the red-pink/red-violet palette; both of us amusedly defend our choice of subject matter. While my choice has evolved from emotional material, the origin of her work is satirical based on “a base desire paired with a yearning for beauty.”

![Figure 4.12. Victoria Reynolds, Uteral Bonnet, oil on canvas, 26 x 26 in., 2008.](image)

Although my work with Renaissance technique is inspired by Ambrosius Bosschaert, Jan Fyt, Rembrandt van Rijn, and Théodore Géricault, I use mediums and techniques that

21 Victoria Reynolds, “Artist Talk: Victoria Reynolds, Hammer Museum,” www.youtube.com, March 17, 2009, accessed April 16, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFnPilfYn0w. Reynolds says that her paintings prior to the “flesh” paintings were of food, such as melting ice cream cones.
benefit from the centuries of their development. Creating a truly authentic Renaissance work would be interesting and challenging, but I am most interested in producing work using the best-evolved processes of oil paint and mediums available today.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The current series of work documents realistic, formal depictions of animal flesh with context removed to modulate the emotional reaction of the viewer to assimilate the aesthetics of the binary oppositions of life/death and repulsion/attraction. Although informed by Ambrosius Bosschaert the Younger, Jan Fyt, Rembrandt van Rijn, Théodore Géricault, Francis Bacon, Joel-Peter Witkin, Walton Ford, Jenny Saville, and Victoria Reynolds, the work is executed in oils and mediums in the local color of the flesh as it appears in photography and enjoys its own originality in technique and aesthetic message.

The source material is vast and is not exhausted. Although I could continue to produce similar work indefinitely, I would like to 1) investigate painting images of tissue enlargement as viewed under an electron microscope, and 2) challenge myself to pursue a wider variable of emotional response in binary opposites. For example, my series operates on a spectrum from life to death and from repulsion to attraction. I would like to use the same type of photography to manipulate feelings of happiness and playfulness in the viewer. This plan would superimpose playful graphic images over the tissue and thus bring the next series of work further into the field of abstraction.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

WORKS OF THE EXHIBIT: *INTIMATE SUMMATION*

*Armadillo Tail*, oil on canvas, 8 x 10 in., 2014

*Manee Sheath*, oil on canvas, 12 x 9 in., 2014

*Baby Blue Bruise*, oil on canvas, 12 x 9 in., 2014

*Vulture Ribbons*, oil on canvas, 12 x 9 in., 2014
Opossum Paw, oil on canvas, 8 x 10 in., 2014

Thoracic Triad, oil on canvas, 12 x 9 in., 2014

Omentum Lace, oil on canvas, 10 x 8 in., 2014

Cat Back Fat, oil on canvas, 12 x 9 in., 2014
Elbow Room i, oil on canvas, 29.75 x 23.75 in., 2014

Quiver, oil on canvas, 26 x 36 in., 2014

Elbow Room ii, oil on canvas, 29.75 x 23.75 in., 2014

Battenburg Nursery, oil on canvas, 42 x 32 in., 2015
Porcine Crinoline, oil on canvas,
36 x 26”, 2014

Mold Fat Burl, oil on canvas,
40 x 30 in., 2015
APPENDIX B

Thanatopsis

by William Cullen Bryant

To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And gentle sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thought
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart; —
Go forth under the open sky, and list
To Nature’s teachings, while from all around—
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air,—
Comes a still voice—Yet a few days, and thee
The all-beholding sun shall see no more
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of ocean shall exist
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolv’d to earth again;
And lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix forever with the elements,
To be a brother to th’ insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.
Yet not to thy eternal resting place
Shalt thou retire alone—nor couldst thou wish
Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings
The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulcher.—The hills
Rock-ribb’d and ancient as the sun,—the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The vernal woods—rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and pour’d round all,
Old ocean’s grey and melancholy waste, —
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,
Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings
Of morning—and the Barcan desert pierce,
Or lost thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregan, and hears no sound,
Save his own dashings—yet—the dead are there,
And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flight of years began, had laid them down
In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.—
So shalt thou rest—and what if thou shalt fall
Unnoticed by the living—and no friend
Take note of thy departure? All that breathe
Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh,
When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
Plot on, and each one as before will chase
His favourite phantom; yet all these shall leave
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come,
And make their bed with thee. As the long train
Of ages glide away, the sons of men,
The youth in life’s green spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron, and maid,
The bow’d with age, the infant in the smiles
And beauty of its innocent age cut off, —
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
By those who in their turn shall follow them.
So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, that moves
To the pale realms of shade, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustain’d and sooth’d
By an unfa ltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

(1814/1821)