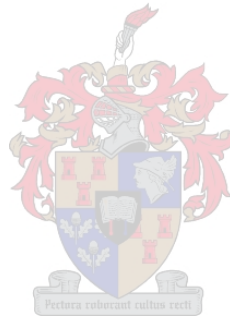


The making of the maker: a practice-based exploration into the process of signification as a mutually constitutive process for artist and artwork

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Visual Arts (Illustration) at Stellenbosch University

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work. It has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

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Abstract

This thesis is a practice-based investigation into the mutual coming into being of artist and artwork within the process of signification as described by Julia Kristeva. The investigation is done from an unstable subjective position and requires innovative research methodologies and a sustained close connection with the practice in order to accommodate the complexity inherent to the process. The exploration involves a closer look at the process of making of the work, the possible meaning embedded in the artworks and the impact on the maker of the work. The situated knowledge acquired through the praxis provides new insight supported by the theories of Julia Kristeva and others.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis is 'n praktykgebaseerde ondersoek na die wedersydse totstandkoming van kunstenaar en kunswerk binne die proses van signifikasie soos beskryf deur Julia Kristeva. Die ondersoek word gedoen vanuit 'n onstabiele subjektiewe posisie en vereis innoverende navorsingsmetodologieë en 'n volgehoue nóú verbintenis met die praktyk om voorsiening te maak vir die kompleksiteit inherent aan die proses. Die ontleding behels 'n verkenning van die werksproses, die moontlike betekenis verskuil binne die kunswerke en die impak op die maker van die werk. Die gesitueerde kennis wat uit die praxis voortspruit verskaf nuwe insigte, gesteun deur die teorieë van Julia Kristeva en ander.

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INTRODUCTION

Background and aims

This thesis serves as the theory component of the MPhil degree in Visual Arts (Illustration) and aims to provide a theoretical basis for my body of practical work, which forms part of the submission for the degree.

In essence, the thesis is an exploration of the relationship between process, artwork and artist. I investigate how these three aspects of the art making process influence and shape one another. In order to engage with this process I turn to my practical work and the experience of creating the work. I aim to establish the complex interrelatedness of the artist and his/her work in the process of signification as described by Julia Kristeva.¹ The research question I attend to is: what informs the contents of the artworks and where is the artist situated in this process.

My research problem centres around perceptions of subjectivity. The question is raised whether it is possible for the artist to make a valid contribution when writing about his/her own work. Even more so, how does the artist write about his/her relationship to the work without indulging in a solipsistic view on creative processes. My central argument is that this problem can be overcome by focusing on what Barbara Bolt and Paul Carter refer to as 'material thinking'. Barbara Bolt (2009:30) describes material thinking as:

Words may allow us to articulate and communicate the realisations that happen through material thinking, but as mode of thought, material thinking involves a particular responsiveness to or conjunction with the intelligence of materials and processes in practice.

¹ Julia Kristeva approaches signification from a post-structuralist position and views the use of language as a dynamic process, which includes participation from both body and mind rather than a fixed, static formal object of study based on semantics and structure (McAfee 2004:14-15).

This requires the artist to be firmly based within the practice and necessitates the investigation of emergent methodologies based within practice-led studies (Barrett 2009:6). Furthermore I argue that by remaining closely invested in the practical process and using established theory to support the experience, it is possible to produce 'situated knowledge',² which offers innovative insight and knowledge without denying the subject's 'compromised' position.

My investigation is therefore primarily practice-based, supported by theory to elucidate the practical process. In order to remain rooted in my practice a flexible research methodology is necessary. I therefore include the process of bricolage as a method of assimilating information for this thesis by collecting what Claude Lévi-Strauss referred to as 'fragments of syntagmatic chains' (Chandler 2003). In *Practice as research*, Robyn Stewart summarises the process of bricolage as a way of incorporating available methods, strategies and materials into an invented or 'pieced together' new tool of engagement with research data (Stewart 2009:127). The theoretical core of my investigation is based on the work of Julia Kristeva and in particular her theory on the process of signification. The focus of my investigation is the relationship between my practical work and aspects of her process of signification, but follow brief diversions in order to enrich the study.

I must stress that what remains central throughout this enquiry is the artistic practice and the relationship between the work process and the artist. It is research based within materiality, in exploring the 'doing'. My subjective position as the maker of the work is precarious and slippery and therefore I relate the process of my work to

² 'Situated knowledge is a concept developed by Donna Haraway which acknowledges that objectivity can only be partial and that 'experience, practice and theory produce situated knowledge' (Barrett 2009:145). This knowledge operates in relation to existing knowledge and has the potential to alter or broaden what is known.

Kristeva's concept of the subject-in-process/subject-on-trial,³ which deals with the subject's constant coming into being through the process of signification.

My body of practical work comprises a large drawing, which serves as a type of mind map that leads to the subsequent works, namely two artist's books and a series of framed illustrations. In all cases I work with marginality or, in Kristeva's terms, the abject. She uses the term abject to refer to the shifting borders of subjectivity. The function of abjection is to exclude, to repulse and to reject that which is not of the subject.⁴ In psychoanalytic theory, abjection appears as an attempt to define the boundaries of what becomes the subject, yet it is a process that can never be complete, as that which is abjected remains a threat to the moving edge (Grosz 1989:71). My interest lies with that which we attempt to discard – troublesome non-object(s) of dismissal and yet inseparable dark presence within the subject itself. In my work I try to capture the struggle of the perpetual attempt to dispose of the unwanted.

To reiterate, my aim is to gain a better insight into the signification process of my work aided primarily by my practical work and the theories of Julia Kristeva. The investigation involves my reflection on the process of creating the work and an analysis of the contents of the work. I also discuss the influence of the process on myself as artist. In order to do so I consult an array of interdisciplinary references.

³ '*Le sujet en procès*', translated variously as the 'subject-in-process' or 'the subject-on-trial'. The French phrase *en procès* has a double allusion to both 'in process' and 'under legal duress' (McAfee 2004:38). For simplicity sake I shall use the term subject-in-process, whilst acknowledging the double meaning throughout this thesis.

⁴ Kristeva explores the concept more widely and applies it to various situations, e.g. the maternal abject; abjection and the self; the female abject; and the role of abjection in anti-Semitism and xenophobia. Abjection is also at work in the taboos and social rules within culture or society at large (Kristeva 1997c:229-247).

Methodology

As I have established, the foundation of my thesis is based on my practical work. In *Practice as research*, Estelle Barrett (2009:2) motivates the case for practice-based research as follows:

The innovative and critical potential of practice-based research lies in its capacity to generate personally situated knowledge and new ways of modeling and externalising such knowledge while at the same time, revealing philosophical, social and cultural contexts for a critical intervention and application of knowledge outcomes.

Estelle Barrett⁵ highlights the problem of where to position creative arts research within 'the broader arena made up of more clearly defined disciplines or domains of knowledge'. She elaborates (2009:7):

[J]ust as the material basis of artistic research results in approaches that are necessarily emergent, the subjective and personally situated aspect of artistic research – its *relationality* [–] results in research that is ultimately interdisciplinary.

In support of this strategy Barrett refers to Roland Barthes' view that interdisciplinary study 'creates a new object that belongs to no one' (2009:7). According to her (2009:7) this position, where neither the researcher nor the researched is fixed or owned, provides grounds for:

[A]knowledging the innovative potential of the fluid location and application of creative arts research approaches and outcomes. The juxtaposing of disparate objects and ideas has, after all, often been viewed as an intrinsic aspect of creativity. The interplay of ideas from disparate areas of knowledge in creative arts research creates conditions for the emergence of new analogies, metaphors and models for understanding objects of enquiry.

⁵ Estelle Barrett is of particular interest to me as her research specifically includes 'subjectivity, psychoanalysis, body/mind relations, and affect and the embodiment in aesthetic experience' (2007:181). Barrett is an artist and visual educator at Deakin University in Australia.

It appears from this that an appropriate way to interact with the essentially non-linear process of practice-based research in art would be to incorporate the strategies of the bricoleur. Joe Kincheloe⁶ writes in *Bricolage and the quest for multiple perspectives* (Kincheloe [Sa].), 'the bricolage exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world'. He adds:

Bricoleurs in their appreciation of the complexities of the research process view research method as involving far more than procedure. In this mode of analysis bricoleurs come to understand research method as also technology of justification, meaning a way of defending what we assert we know and the process by which we know it (Kincheloe [Sa].).

Within this framework of research as bricolage I make use of reflection and reflexive practices in order to explore the tangential relationship between theory and practice as manifested in my work. I intend to capture the tacit knowledge gained from the creative process by carefully documenting the experience and reflecting back on it. In other words, I follow a process of practice-based learning in which I gather information in the manner of a bricoleur whilst acknowledging my unapologetically subjective position.⁷

Theoretical foundation of the study

Julia Kristeva was born in 1941 in Bulgaria. She arrived in Paris in late 1965 on a doctoral fellowship. She studied under Lucien Goldman and Roland Barthes and received her doctorate from the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris.

Together with her compatriot, Tzvetan Todorov, she was instrumental in introducing the West to Mikhail Bakhtin, who was an early influence in her linguistic studies. In

⁶ Joe Kincheloe was a professor and Canada Research Chair at the Faculty of Education, McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada (Willinsky 2008).

⁷ What this research offers beyond the limitations of traditional research methodologies, is the description of an indisputably personal experience, which no other process can fully record (See Barrett 2009:4).

Paris she became part of the Tel Quel group, which was at the forefront of critical thinking and included the intellectual elite of the time (Kristeva 1980:3).

It is with her major work, *La révolution du langage poétique* (1974), that Kristeva consolidated her earlier work and firmly established her theory on semanalysis (1980:5). Kristeva's growing interest in psychoanalysis led to her qualifying as a psychoanalyst and opening a psychoanalytical practice in 1979 (Moi 1986:7).

Kristeva is now Professor Emeritus at the University of Paris VII Diderot (*Kristevacircle* [Sa].)

Kristeva introduced psychoanalytical theory into the deconstruction of signification in order to get a wider, more inclusive position from which she can investigate sign systems (Oliver 1997:xiv,xvi). This blurring between the fields of linguistics and psychoanalysis develops a dialectic between the defining and dissolving of meaning within the signifying process. It allows for an inclusion of the bodily presence, discarded as outside meaning, by closed systems such as linguistics and semantics.

To understand this process of expansion, Julia Kristeva describes the workings of a more complex language, which embraces both psyche and soma. As the political philosopher Noëlle McAfee⁸ (2004:39) explains:

Much of her work targets these distinctions, showing how bodily energies permeate our signifying practices, hence how body and mind can never be separated.

Kristeva describes the process of signification as a twofold expression of what she terms the symbolic and the semiotic. The semiotic is associated with the realm of unconscious drives and therefore the body, while the symbolic is represented as signs (be it language, socio-historical coding, cultural values etc.) and linked with the

⁸ Noëlle McAfee is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Massachusetts Lowell and author of *Habermas, Kristeva, and citizenship* (2000).

social functioning and mind.⁹ This complex relationship can thus also be interpreted as a dialectic between nature and culture (Oliver 1997:24).

It follows that the individual, or rather the subject,¹⁰ transforms the meaning of the symbolic by infusing it with semiotic content, which springs from the unconscious.¹¹ This accepts that the subject is divided between conscious and unconscious, which leads to the logical acceptance that it is not possible to have a fixed, stable identity, as there is a continual challenge to what is perceived in consciousness (Oliver 1997:26). Through the use of language (and here I use the term in its broadest sense, not just literally), both the conscious and unconscious are expressed and thereby the process of signification takes place (which includes both semiotic and symbolic modalities).

⁹ In her introduction to Kristeva's text *Revolution in poetic language*, Kelly Oliver, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas in Austin, states the following:

[T]he semiotic is the element of signification associated with drives and affects, while the symbolic is the element of signification associated with position and judgement. The tension or contradiction between the semiotic and the symbolic elements is what makes language signify and significant (1997:24).

¹⁰ In the introduction to *Desire in language*, the term 'subject' is defined as follows:

Subject (sujet) this word is constantly used with the meaning it has in psychoanalysis, linguistics, and philosophy, i.e., the thinking, speaking, acting, doing or writing agent.

Following this broad definition, I shall use the term 'subject' rather than 'self' or 'individual'. This choice of terminology also intends to differentiate between an essentialist view of a constant, homogenous self and a more complex, fluid construct of a subject in a position relative to the other and its own divide. As McAfee explains:

First, persons are subject to all kinds of phenomena: their culture, history, context, relationships, and language. These phenomena profoundly shape how people come to be. Thus, persons are better understood as subjects not selves. Second, subjects are not fully aware of all the phenomena that shape them. There is even a dimension of their own being that is inaccessible, a dimension that goes by the name, 'the unconscious' (2004:2).

¹¹ I build on the Freudian premise that the individual is divided between a conscious and an unconscious. I accept this premise as a given in order to elaborate on the theory. In *Julia Kristeva*, John Lechte states that Kristeva agreed with Jacques Lacan in his interpretation of the pre-eminent position of the unconscious in Freud's theory. Lechte points out:

The decentering of the ego and the dethronement of consciousness are also her points of departure. For Kristeva, this decentering does not only take place in, or through psychoanalysis, but also within the realms of literature, art, and to some extent theology. Kristeva's work can be seen, in fact, as a prolonged meditation on the effect of the unconscious in human life, an effect psychoanalytical discourse is charged with rendering thinkable, symbolisable, and perhaps explicable (1990:33).

What is unconscious is not accessible on demand, but rather is surreptitiously revealed through the process of signification by the inclusion of the destabilising infusions of the semiotic. It is thus through this process that the subject is more fully constituted as a multi-dimensional being, incorporating both body and mind.

The above means that this divided subject is in a continual process of construction and disruption whilst partaking in the process of signification – ‘there is no self-aware self prior to our use of language’ (McAfee 2004:29). It is in this sense that Kristeva refers to the subject as the subject-in-process. The subject-in-process continually comes into being through the participation in the process of signification. It is a dynamic, ongoing process. In *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the double-bind* (1993) Kelly Oliver puts it as follows:

The subject-in-process/on trial is an identity-in-process/on trial. Kristeva proposes a way to conceive of a productive but always only provisional identity whose constant companions are alterity, negation, and difference (1993:14).

Review of literature

In familiarising myself with current research in this field, I have found keen interest in Julia Kristeva, especially applied to literature and feminism. Her work spans across the disciplines of linguistics, feminism, literary criticism, and psychoanalysis. Kristeva is a philosopher whose work falls broadly within the discourse of post-structuralism.

The range of her influences and references are staggering. Amongst others, it includes Hegel and Nietzsche, especially around ideas on the lack of autonomy of the ‘self’ and function of dialectics. Edmund Husserl’s theory of phenomenology is influential in Kristeva’s work on the ‘body’ and Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan were prominent in the shaping of her ideas on psychoanalysis. Both Lucien Goldman and Roland Barthes were influential mentors.

In referring to both the discourses of linguistics and psychoanalysis in her theoretical enquiries, Kristeva opens up new possibilities and ways of engaging with art and makes a marked contribution to literary criticism. In addition, her particular theory on psychoanalysis with her emphasis on the importance of the mother and maternity, as well as her concept of the female abject, is considered to have great impact on feminism albeit somewhat controversial. Kristeva is often mentioned together with Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous as one of the French feminists. There are some similarities between their theories, for instance all three of them reject the construct of the concept of 'woman' and they all highlight the importance and significance of the body (Oliver 1993:179).

In my search for related academic papers, Mathilde De Gabriele's Masters in Visual Art from the University of South Africa¹² (2002), shares common ground with my thesis. We both use Julia Kristeva's theory on signification to discuss art and we both emphasise the role of subjectivity in the process of creating artworks. However, De Gabriele focuses more on gendered subjectivity and the oppression of the female within patriarchal society. The female body as motif throughout the thesis also differentiates her research quite clearly from mine. I concentrate more narrowly on the aspect of poetic language and the concept of the subject-in-process in relation to my art practice. My central investigation is around the mutually constitutive nature of the creative process for both artist and artwork. Amid ever-present phallo-centricity, I acknowledge the role of gender, but my position is one of blind subjectivity and I only obliquely refer to the female body in reference to the female hyena.

The PhD dissertation of Courtney Pedersen, entitled *The indefinite self: subject as process in visual art* (2005), has informed this thesis in that it also stresses the transient nature of the subject. Pederson's dissertation rejects an essentialist view of the individual and proposes a more fluid position expressed through artistic practice,

¹² Title of thesis: *A Semiotic reading of gendered subjectivity in contemporary South African art and feminist writing.*

but the theory is based on the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's ideas on sexed subjectivity. She works within a feminist genealogical methodology and makes no reference to Julia Kristeva.

What sets my thesis apart from existing research papers is the fact that it is not only the discussion of art that is of interest, but also the position of the artist, both in making the work and coming into being through the process. This particular aspect of Kristeva's theory on signification appears in other research papers, but not as the focus in partnership with a practice-led study. My research is based on my practical experience in the first place with the theory fulfilling a supporting role.

I have read widely on aspects of Julia Kristeva's work, using both primary and accredited secondary sources. In this respect I especially refer to the two collections of her writings, *The Kristeva reader* edited by Toril Moi (1986) and *The portable Kristeva* edited by Kelly Oliver (1997), as well as her book *Desire in language* (1980). As secondary sources I found the work of Kelly Oliver (*Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the double-bind* 1993), John Lechte (*Julia Kristeva* 1990), Elizabeth Grosz (*Sexual subversions: Three French feminists* 1989) and Noëlle McAfee (*Julia Kristeva* 2004) most valuable. These authors were particularly helpful in enlightening especially complex ideas in Kristeva's work. Not all the interpretations necessarily corresponded, but in these differences I was able to form my own understanding and opinion. Kristeva's work is controversial and widely debated, especially within feminist discourse.

In order to contextualise her theory historically and intellectually, I informed myself on the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Apart from Sigmund Freud's *Interpreting dreams* (2006), I used mostly respected secondary sources, specifically Sean Homer's book *Jacques Lacan* (2005). My research on Freud includes Janet Sayer's book *Freud's Art* (2007) and Garry Drake's thesis on D.H. Lawrence.¹³ Apart

¹³ Title: D.H.Lawrence's *Last Poems*: 'A dark cloud of sadness' 2005.

from these publications I also accessed numerous articles, dissertations, academic papers and visual references via the Internet, for example Perry Meisel's interview with Kristeva (2010), Daniel Chandler's course notes on rhetorical tropes and intertextuality (2001, 2003), Joe Kincheloe's articles on bricolage (2001) and Donna Haraway's article on situated knowledge (1988). In order to structure my research and define my methodology I used a number of sources on practice-led research where I concentrated on theory and case studies specific to the arts. In this pursuit two publications served as my main references, namely *Practice as research: approaches to creative arts enquiry*, edited by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (2009), and *Practice-led research, research-led practice in creative arts*, edited by Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (2009). In addition to this Graeme Sullivan's *Art practice as research* (2005) and Joe Kincheloe's two articles on bricolage (*Bricolage and the quest for multiple perspectives* and *Describing the bricolage: Conceptualizing a new rigour in qualitative research* 2001) were invaluable. My work on practice-led research also includes the attendance of a seminar on the subject at the University of Stellenbosch, which provided me with a series of academic papers in this field.

My use of the hyena as metaphor necessitated a broad understanding of these animals. I informed myself by reading articles on the Internet as well as scientific publications. These vary from the social behaviour of hyenas to the details of their morphology. Hans Kruuk's *The spotted hyena* (1972) and De Waal and Tyack's *Animal social complexity* (2003) proved informative. In addition, I gathered information on mythology and folktales involving hyenas, mostly from web-based sources and a number of collected folktales such as Jürgen Frembgen's *The magicity of the hyena* (1998), Fritz Metzger's *The laughing hyena* (1995) and Ngangar Mbitu's *Essential African mythology* (1997).

I also referred to a number of publications on art writing. I read many articles in different editions of the journal *Art South Africa* (2002 – 2008). Different perspectives

and interpretations by important twentieth-century philosophers and writers on art further assisted me with tools to discuss my work. In this respect the collection of essays in *Key writers on art: the twentieth century* (2003) proved very insightful. I looked at Roland Barthes, John Berger, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Sigmund Freud and Susan Sontag amongst others.

Finally, I sourced a wide range of visual images from the Internet in my search for works by other illustrators/artists which are related to my study. I limited my references to contemporary South African artists. Here several publishers and gallery sites such as the Goodman Gallery, Bell Roberts Gallery, Fried Contemporary, Brundyn + Gonsalves and David Krut Publishers were useful. I also accessed critiques and information from the sites Artthrob and Art South Africa.

Exposition of the contents of the study

My thesis is divided into three chapters with a conclusion:

1. Process: The meeting of psyche and soma
2. Artwork: The secret coding
3. Artist: Becoming
4. Final conclusion

Chapter One: The meeting of psyche and soma

In Chapter One I concentrate on the process of my work. This chapter introduces an exploration of Kristeva's ideas on semanalysis, poetic language and the subject-in-process and the function of the creative process within this constant 'coming-into-being'. I describe the process involved in creating my body of practical work and look at the pattern that emerges from the similarities in the making of the different artworks.

In order to explore the work I place the personal observations of my process of work against the backdrop of Kristeva's theories. I thereby not only position my experience within a philosophical context, but also embody the theory by means of the recorded practice. Finally, I consider the effect of participating in poetic language on myself as the maker of the artwork.

I conclude Chapter One with the acknowledgement of the importance of the dialectic relationship between the symbolic and the semiotic. The dual function of these two modalities within the process of signification provides a useful model to understand the inclusion of the translingual into communication. The divide between psyche and soma becomes evident in the split between theory and practice. To resolve this problem 'material praxis' offers a position which is seated in the practical experience whilst reflecting on and engaging with ideas in and around the process. The knowledge generated by this process is tacit rather than factual and demands an acceptance of that which falls beyond the measurable.

Chapter Two: The silent code

The second chapter engages with the contents of the artwork and attempts to unravel some of the codes embedded within. I use the hyena as a metaphor and in order to explore this trope, I investigate different aspects of these animals. The physical, as well as mythical characteristics of hyenas contain an extended range of signifiers to provide a rich and complex metaphor for abjection (both in behaviour and appearance). These animals abound with ambiguity and widespread (mostly negative) associations. The fact that they are matriarchal, adds a further dimension of gender abjection to the metaphor. For these reasons hyenas are appropriate examples of the abject, representing that which we despise and project our fears onto.

In my body of work I include one large image, *In search of the female trickster* (fig.1), which in many ways created the break with my normal modus operandi. Not only was

the size on a completely different scale from my commercial work, but also the undirected process and unstructured execution were groundbreaking. The work serves as a kind of mind map of contemplation on the female trickster. It introduces, amongst others, the female hyena as a metaphor for liminality and ambiguity. This introduction of the hyena impacts on all the works that follow.

In my first book, *Lekkerlag*¹⁴ (figs.2-5), I use the hyena as a central image. The 'loaded' metaphor of this animal is embedded in the images and informs the narrative throughout. The narrative of the book deals with crossing of boundaries and trade-offs and ultimately the inevitable blurring of the divide between the two sides. In my theoretical discussion on the contents of the practical work, I unpack these ideas in more detail.

In the second series of illustrations, *Sonsverduistering*¹⁵ (figs. 6 & 7), the narrator of *Lekkerlag* develops into a series of alien(ated) infants gazing at the reader. The absence of the (m)other is hinted at, their position of abjection defined by their otherness and isolation. They are cast out, insubstantial and fragile, yet their gaze engages and disturbs in a strangely threatening manner. In Chapter Two I discuss the theoretical foundation informing these images.

The final work consists of a book with a collection of loose-leaf illustrations dealing with 'the other' (figs. 8 & 9). The visual origin was the hyena, but it morphed to less specific otherworldly shapes. The work is simply titled *Other* and presents different interpretations of that which is perceived to be outside the subject. Theoretically this is a continuation of the exploration of the abject, although an implied progression from abject to other is present.

I conclude Chapter Two by stressing the complexity and polyvocality of meaning, especially within the discourse of poetic language. The inclusion of the

¹⁴ I translate the title *Lekkerlag* as belly laughter in English.

¹⁵ The title *Sonsverduistering* translates as eclipse of the sun.

unrepresentable into representable signifiers challenges the analytical process to uncover hidden meanings. Meaning remains elusive, but by recognising the presence of the semiotic in the text, the association and engagement with the text deepens and opens up greater possibilities.

Chapter Three: Becoming

My thesis deals with the subjective process of art making, the possible meanings hidden within the work and the effect it has on myself. In order to explore my position as 'author', I refer to Roland Barthes' essay *Death of the author* (1999). I look at the parallels and differences between Kristeva's process of signification and his ideas on authorship. As bricoleur I also draw in the author J.M. Coetzee's views on writing. With this in mind I turn to my own experience and consider the effect of the creative process on the subject-in-process and how this particular coming-into-being is influenced by the participation in the signifying process. Finally, I describe the rare joy or *jouissance* when the divide between subject and other is temporarily blurred by the art practice – when the artist becomes one with artwork and the lost imaginary world is briefly recalled.

My conclusion for Chapter Three points out the awkward position of the artist in trying to remain closely situated within the practice whilst trying to describe this relationship with work and signification. The subjectivity of the position is somewhat relieved by referring to the experience of another author and I suggest that these comparative positions would provide an interesting subject for future research.

Final conclusion

In my final conclusion I mention the challenges encountered in this thesis and point out the unstable nature of knowledge. Within this slippery discourse I nevertheless find new knowledge and understanding in material thinking and the application of Kristeva's theory to my practice. I also suggest possible applications and future investigations related to this thesis.

CHAPTER ONE:

The meeting of psyche and soma

As stated in the introduction of this thesis, my central investigation is based on the process of my practical work and how it impacts on the contents of my illustrations and myself. I explore the theoretical aspects of the work from a fundamentally material position. In *Practice as research*, Barbara Bolt (2009:30) refers to 'material thinking' as a coming together of hand, eye and mind that occurs when artists discuss their work. She stresses that it is 'necessarily in relation to materials and processes of practice, rather than through the "talk" that we can understand the nature of material thinking'. I wish to be situated in the practice and explore the theory from within this position.

Bolt argues the preference of this approach by referring to Heidegger's theory of praxis:

Heidegger argues that we do not come to 'know' the world theoretically through contemplative knowledge in the first instance. Rather, we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling. Thus the new can be seen to emerge in the involvement of materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice. It is not just the representation of an already formed idea nor is it achieved through conscious attempts to be original (2009:30).

With this in mind I consider three elements of the process of signification as described by Julia Kristeva. These three aspects, which I extract from her theory are the process, the artwork and the artist, and the complex interconnectedness that binds them together.

In this chapter I establish my work as a process of poetic expression and in my investigation I reveal the dual workings of the semiotic and symbolic codes and the effect this has on both the work and myself as a subject-in-process.

As background I mention the difference between my commercial work and the more poetic approach I followed for the purposes of this study. I explore the manifestation of the semiotic and the symbolic modalities embedded in the signifying process. I record the basic steps involved in creating my artworks and reflect on the course of action. Finally, I investigate Kristeva's theory of the subject-in-process in relation to the lived experience of creating an artwork and the impact thereof. I complete the chapter with a summary and brief conclusion.

Background

The drawings¹⁶ I produced as part of this study differ markedly from the commissioned illustration work I do professionally.¹⁷ My commercial illustration work tends to be subservient to its context, be it to elucidate, support or merely decorate the text. Normally the brief is detailed with clearly defined requirements, which direct the process. In other words, the desired image, as described at the briefing, is present at both the initiation and the completion of the artwork.¹⁸ The challenge in my commercial work, especially as it often deals with factual educational material, is therefore to communicate specific information as clearly and unambiguously as possible. There is a conscious attempt to control and limit the meaning and to provide a narrowly contained, literal interpretation. In Kristeva's terms, the work is strongly dominated by the symbolic, the assumed position of judgement and seeming stability (McAfee 2004:17).

¹² I refer to my work as images, illustrations, artworks or simply drawings. Not all the work is used in conjunction with text or serves as illustration of, or reference to another source of information. The exact location of the work within illustration, fine art, book art or picture book is not specifically demarcated, as these definitions are not pertinent to my discussion. Where I am positioned within different genres and approaches does not concern me in this investigation.

¹⁷ I have a small studio practice where I work as an illustrator and graphic designer. Most of my work is commissioned by publishers, local government and nongovernment organisations.

¹⁸ In order to conform to these demands, the preparation work tends to be a process of elimination and directed control towards the 'envisaged' end result. Thus the process is tightly contained and managed to produce a preconceived product, rather than a more expansive discovery of possibilities.

In contrast to the above, the work I produced for this study is intuitively generated and the expression of an explicitly subjective position. The tone is poetic and open-ended, purposefully ambiguous, filled with playfulness and trickery. My bodily presence is infused into the creative process and directs it without a preconceived destination in mind. It is receptive to chance and allows for coincidental occurrences to present new opportunities. Even though most of the work originates from an idea or loosely defined narrative, it is predominantly an act of discovery rather than a concept-driven exercise. Here image and text perform a dance devoid of dominance – mutually beneficial and influential. This process generates divergent solutions and is integral to a dynamic interaction between artist and artwork. In many ways the process determines the work. The very obvious difference between my commercial work and the work I produced for this MPhil initiated the question as to what this difference could possibly be based on.

In my experience a certain quality in both the artwork and the process of creating it, is absent in the more controlled, product-orientated approach. The differences are threefold, as it is not just the process and the artwork that differ, but also the experience, the way I respond to the making of the work. When working in a more poetic mode, a sense of awakening, of coming to life is unmistakably present. However, I have to qualify that this quickening is transient and not transformative in a lasting sense. Yet the memory of this flicker of life remains like a small beacon, albeit with a nonspecific location. To attempt to draw this into words is arguably problematic, but there is an implicit knowing, which I wish to attempt to communicate.

In order to explore this knowledge, I pursue the theoretical investigation of semanalysis,¹⁹ as it has offered an innovative model elucidating the nature of my art

¹⁹ This term, from the subtitle of Julia Kristeva's book, *Semiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, mostly fell into disuse, but remains useful as a description of my area of interest, namely semiotics and psychoanalysis. In *The Kristeva Reader*, Kristeva puts it like this: '... semiology, or, as I have suggested calling it, semanalysis, conceives of meaning not as a sign-system but as a signifying process' (Kristeva 1986a:28).

practice and the process of signification. It seems particularly appropriate because of Kristeva's ideas on the role of poetic language²⁰ and the introduction of her dual concepts of the semiotic and the symbolic, which contributes to a better understanding of the process of signification. By describing signification as a double process, Kristeva opens the field of semiotics²¹ to go beyond a restrictive linguistic understanding, where language is subservient to the social order. In *The system and the speaking subject* (1986a), she writes that the inadequacy to accommodate 'anything in language which belongs not to the social contract but with play, pleasure or desire' (1986a:26), demands a more inclusive system that considers the precarious position of the speaking subject. For Kristeva, the semiotic provides this counterpart to the symbolic and is seated in the pre-linguistic structures associated with affect and the unconscious drives (1986a:28-29).²² Furthermore Kristeva distinguishes between different types of discourse (1980:134):

Language as social practice necessarily presupposes these two dispositions [the symbolic and semiotic], though combined in different ways to constitute *types of discourse*, types of signifying practices. Scientific discourse, for example, aspiring to the status of metalanguage, tends to reduce as much as possible the semiotic component. On the contrary, the signifying economy of poetic language is specific in that the semiotic is not only a constraint as is

²⁰ I use the term poetic language to refer to the genotext as explained by Noëlle McAfee:

The distinction between genotext and phenotext could be mapped onto the distinction between semiotic and symbolic – albeit roughly. The genotext is the motility between the words, the potentially disruptive meaning that is not quite below the text. The phenotext is what syntax and semantics of the text is trying to convey, again, in 'plain language' (2004:24).

²¹ In the French language it is possible to change the meaning of the word from an abstract concept to a concrete term by changing the gender. In Kristeva's writing she distinguishes between *la sémiotique* (the study of signs) and *le sémiotique* (the inclusion of instinctual drives within the signifying process) (1980:18).

²² In the *Kristeva critical reader* (2003), Kelly Oliver describes the term 'drives' in the following words: Kristeva takes up Freud's theory of drives as instinctual energies that operate between biology and culture. Drives have their source in organic tissue and aim at psychological satisfaction. Drives are heterogeneous; that is, there are several different drives that can conflict with each other (2003: 39).

the symbolic, but it tends to gain the upper hand at the expense of the thetic²³ and predicative constraints of the ego's judging consciousness.

From this we gather that in poetic language the flow of the semiotic pulses are less restricted by convention and structure and this unnamable language of the semiotic is leaked into the normative language of culture.

It is against this background that I wish to discuss the process involved when working in a non-utilitarian, poetic manner. I intend to explicate the creative process by means of a reflexive investigation into my procedure of work. I also compare and apply the situated knowledge, acquired through the creative process, against Julia Kristeva's theory on signification.

Common ground

In my attempt to transcribe my creative process I initially resisted to capture into words a process which in many ways longs to remain outside language. This reluctance to make visible the intangible appears to correspond to the experience of other artists. In the documentation of their work a number of people problematise the formulation of their work process (Pederson 2005:108, Barrett 2007:135). There appears to be a reluctance on the part of the artists to describe something so subjective and elusive. Apart from the fear of solipsism, it is difficult to capture such a personal process in language, as certain elements appear to come 'out of nowhere'. Much of what occurs during the creative process cannot be foreseen, even in the work of those who operate in a structured and more cerebral manner. Coincidence, generative ideas, unexpected links and associations, even accidents often change

²³ The thetic break is associated with the transition from an undifferentiated world into the social order of signs and language and corresponds with the entrance into the Symbolic Order by the infant. As Kelly Oliver explains (1993:40):

The break into, and boundary of, the Symbolic is what Kristeva calls the 'thetic phase'. The thetic phase in the signifying process operates as a break, a threshold. It is the point at which the subject takes up a position, an identification. The thetic is necessary for any symbolic or social functioning.

the course of action. I do not wish to create the impression of the artist as passive, but amongst all the planning and meticulous work there is something else at play, which is beyond conscious control. In Kristevan terms this would relate to the semiotic, or unconscious drives, leaking into the conscious process. We plan, structure and construct in the Symbolic Order,²⁴ but the flow of the semiotic transforms the work (Kristeva 1997a:30-31). These two modalities – the symbolic and the semiotic – are interwoven, but the strands linked to the unconscious are intangible and evasive. Moreover, much of the intricate patterns of this finely woven cloth fall beyond our awareness. An attempt to concretise this into words appears to smother a part of its life source. I therefore think that, in documenting the creative process, one can track the procedural progression, but can merely hint at the parallel process that winds its way through our doings.

Doing

My approach in the following section is one of material thinking and ‘situated knowledge’ as formulated by Donna Haraway. Estelle Barrett describes Haraway’s concept in *Practice as research* (2009:145):

[Situated knowledge is] a recognition that objectivity can only be partial, calls for re-admitting embodied vision and positioning in research. Embodied vision involves seeing something from somewhere. It links experience, practice and theory to produce situated knowledge, knowledge that operates in relation to established knowledge and thus has the capacity to extend or alter what is known.

Barbara Bolt stresses that the knowledge that emerges from an engagement with ‘material handling’ is capable of shifting existing ideas on research and able to produce generalised knowledge (2009:33). Bolt says: ‘Material thinking is the logic of

²⁴ I use capital letters to differentiate between the symbolic and the Symbolic Order. The symbolic is the ‘element of language associated with syntax’ (Oliver 1997:xv), which is presented within the Symbolic Order, whereas the Symbolic Order is the realm that we enter into after the thetic break. The Symbolic Order contains both the infusions of the semiotic and the symbolic (Oliver 1997:xiv-xv).

practice' (2009:30). Through the intimate handling and interaction with material processes a tacit knowledge is revealed. This knowledge cannot only be shared and applied, but provides for innovative insight and approaches (2009:31).

Before exploring the process, I wish to state very clearly that I do not consider this thesis to be an instructive or preferred model in any way. It is the record of a subjective experience that aims to explore possibilities and obtain insight based on the knowledge gained from the process. Under no circumstances should it be interpreted as a presumptuous directive of how to approach the creative process. The aim of this study is not an attempt at providing a formula, but a practice-based exploration to find links between the subjective experience and existing theory. It is a reflexive comment on the two sets of knowledge.

This exploration starts with the illustration *In search of the female trickster* (fig.1), which set in motion a series of generative images and actions. In preparation for this illustration I read extensively on the trickster²⁵ and collected some visual and other references. These influenced and shaped my conscious ideas and thus informed the symbolic aspect of the process.

I was interested in the marginality of this shape-shifting being and wanted to develop a female counterpart to this mostly male figure. I loosely formulated thoughts around examples of female tricksters, but did not plan the drawing or the contents in any detail.

²⁵The trickster figure appears in cultures all over the world. The work of the anthropologist Paul Radin is seen as seminal in defining and understanding this sign. *The Trickster: A study in American Indian mythology* was first published in 1956 and appears as reference point for others like Carl Jung and Karl Kerényi. Radin's work remains a benchmark on the subject. In *Trickster makes the world* (1998), Lewis Hyde (1998:7) states: 'Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox.' In addition the semiotician C.W. Spinks describes the trickster in the following way: 'Trickster can best be understood as a semiotic creature because Trickster is lord of the boundaries, the hinge, the road, the edge, and most of the other marginalities of culture – the sibling of semioses' (2001:8). It is this position of liminality that, in my opinion, makes the trickster resemble the abject.

Unlike my commercial working process I did not make any preparatory drawings and decided to work on a much larger scale than normal.²⁶ I started drawing randomly without any plan or concept other than the wish to beckon the female trickster into visibility.²⁷ As I worked, several parallel narratives entered into the drawing. Images called up other images in a kind of conversation, which felt undirected by myself. Several stories and images erupted simultaneously. I worked in a very physical manner across the large surface of the paper and an increasingly more complex intertextual dialogue developed.

I wish to clarify this statement based on my interpretation of Kristeva's concept of intertextuality. This concept has received much attention and is widely used, but often not in the way she intended. According to the introduction of *Desire in Language* the editor Leon Roudiez (1980:15) writes:

[I]t has nothing to do with matters of influence by one writer upon another, or with the sources of a literary work: it does, on the one hand, involve the components of a *textual system* such as a novel, for instance. It is defined in *Revolution in poetic language* as the transposition of one or more *systems* of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotive position.

In *Revolution in poetic language*, Kristeva (1986c) refers to Freud's theory of displacement and condensation as the processes of the unconscious and the subsequent application by Roman Jakobson of metaphor and metonymy as primary linguistic structures. She then adds to these two processes a third one, which relates to the 'passage from one sign-system to another' (1986c:111). Kristeva goes on to explain it as follows (1986c:111):

In this connection we examined the formation of a specific signifying system – the novel – as the result of a redistribution of several different sign-systems:

²⁶ The format is more than three metres wide by one metre high, as opposed to my customary size of illustration of around 300 mm by 500 mm.

²⁷ The process became a trickster enactment – by working in an apparently chaotic fashion the artwork came into being.

carnival, courtly poetry, scholastic discourse. The term *intertextuality* denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of 'study of sources', we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic.

Although Kristeva dissociates herself here from the term she established because of its unintended 'banal' usage, it is easy to understand why the term is often used to refer to the relationships between texts. In an earlier article, *Word, dialogue and novel*, the term is established in relation to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Here Kristeva refers to the three dimensions of 'textual space' where 'semic sets and poetic sequences' function. She names them as 'writing subject, addressee and exterior texts' (1986b:36). Kristeva then continues to place the text on two axes: the discourses of the subject and addressee are fused on a horizontal plane, whereas the text-context discourse is placed on a vertical plane. She draws a parallel to the two axes on which Bakhtin's intersection of 'dialogue' and 'ambivalence' operates. Kristeva continues (with reference to Bakhtin) (1986b:37):

[A]ny text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double.

I use the term *intertextuality* to refer to a situated context where both the horizontal and vertical axes are present, but also to the interaction of different devices in operation within the artwork. In my opinion the use of multiple narratives, carnivalesque²⁸ inscriptions and the lack of formal structure in the work creates a web of interrelated references and 'denseness of text'.

²⁸ Carnavalesque is a term coined by the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin. Noëlle McAfee quotes Kristeva: 'Carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest' (2004:6).

The drawing did not follow a consequential order, but rather grew in a seemingly unbidden and arbitrary fashion. The layers were related, but not indicative of any form of chronology or hierarchy. Visual puns, colours and brushstrokes 'presented' themselves – the process appeared to be one of submission rather than control. I worked intensively on this drawing and lost track of time whilst doing so. I was mentally and physically focused and responsive to the process – charged with a presence, but also strangely absent as a self-conscious entity. The materials, artist and subject matter seemed to merge into a singular object. It filled me with pleasure and wonder. I felt acutely alive.

This process served as a gateway of sorts, for while I was immersed in it, the seeds of the narrative of my book *Lekkerlag* were sown. In turn, the series of illustrations for *Sonsverduistering* developed from images from *Lekkerlag*. Yet, I have to add, lest it sounds like a free-flowing creative spring, I created many illustrations that I could not use and it took several attempts to find this convergence of energies again.

The process for *Lekkerlag* (fig. 2-5) contains similarities to the process described above, even though the execution proceeded in a more chronological fashion.

Producing a book, as opposed to a single image, clearly differs in context and nature, but for the purpose of this study I wish to concentrate on the similarities and trends rather than the differences in format and discipline. I started with a very open narrative and sequentially developed the storyline by drawing it into existence. I did not plan the page breakdown beforehand and the text followed after all the images were completed (breaking with convention where the text normally precedes the image). Unlike my work *In search of the female trickster* (fig.1), the book follows a simpler narrative and does not have the obvious simultaneous storylines, but within the individual illustrations the images generated a certain complexity, as well as the lead up to the next page and finally the accompanying text. So whereas it lacks the frenetic pace of *In search of the female trickster*, it still follows a similar progression in terms of openness and responsiveness, albeit in a more ordered and quieter

fashion. The presentation of the illustrations in the contained form of a book focuses mostly on the symbolic disposition of the artwork, but the semiotic modality is never absent from the process, the layout or the production of the book. It remains an influence in the choices such as the texture and colour of the fabric, the rhythm (the open spaces and pauses) of the page layout and the stitching of the pages.

One of the images produced for *Lekkerlag* (fig. 3) developed into a series of drawings that deals with the return of the gaze from a position of vulnerability. The elaboration on the original image adjusted the contents by changing the context. The drawings were unplanned and I steered away from conscious instruction to reach a preconceived ideal (figs. 6 & 7). I worked in watered down acrylic paint with a very wet brush and randomly 'traced' the images from an arbitrary starting position. The form would emerge from the first random brush stroke. Corresponding to the description of the previous projects, I worked in a very responsive manner – receptive to the form revealing itself rather than imposing a prior vision or idea. In this case the images were quiet and ephemeral, reflecting the immediacy of the medium. In order to present the illustrations formally, I isolated and contained the images by framing them. The boundaries of the frames add to the sense of separation and seclusion.

The last series of illustrations (figs. 8-10) was created for a loose-leaf book dealing with the concept of 'the other'. Again, I did not want to preclude the visual exploration and worked with largely unformulated, vague perceptions of the idea. Again the opportunity for the images to emerge themselves and flow in an undirected way was important to me. I worked in acrylic inks and once I completed the washes I engaged with the illustrations by adding some details to some of the works. This engagement

failed in some cases as I lost the integrity of the images to a too self-conscious tampering with the original.²⁹

Reflection

In this reflection I make the case for my work as an example of 'poetic language'. This places the work within a predominantly semiotic disposition. In turn, by allowing the semiotic to dominate, it effects the manifestation of my subjectivity through the representation of processes and affects outside language. By 'formulating' these 'unnameable' aspects of the subject, the slippery position between the conscious and the unconscious is highlighted, disturbing the illusion of a unitary subject within the Symbolic Order. I continue to explain the position of the subject-in-process in more detail in order to make sense of this disruption (McAfee 2004:38). Finally, I expand on the constitutive results of this signifying process.

Let me return to the deliberation on the making of the work. Looking back, a certain pattern emerged in the process. In all the cases I obliquely prepared beforehand – I had a notion of what I wanted to work with, but it was incomplete and unstructured. I purposely steered away from clearly articulating my thoughts in order to avoid getting trapped in the idea.

For all the projects there was a final phase of preparing the illustrations for presentation – 'packaging' the works in and for the symbolic function. However, what strikes me most is to what extent I relied on an intuitive approach to guide and provide me with (mostly unexpected) opportunities. Throughout there was a compliance with the process, which allowed an unhindered flow. In other words, the process was allowed to take its course without me dictating and controlling the text.³⁰

²⁹ It is difficult to describe what exactly went wrong with these unsuccessful interventions, but it appears that if I interfered with what I thought were 'clever' or 'elegant' additions, the artwork lost its presence by becoming contrived and clumsily manipulated. When I added details as they randomly occurred to me in relation to each individual drawing, the implementation was more effective.

³⁰ I use the term 'text' to broadly refer to signs and language, i.e. the territory of the symbolic.

It accommodated the inclusion of the unintended and the unknown. These inclusions allowed the richness of the semiotic to enter the work and supply a drift of meanings beyond the text.

I allowed the body (as associated with unconscious drives of which intuition is one) to enter into the work by an involuntary connection to a pre-linguistic source inaccessible to formal language. This process brought me more fully into being, because by permitting my unconscious drives to be given form, the 'unnameable' becomes present and the 'unknowable' a little more differentiated (Kristeva 1997a:29-31).

This semiotic undermining of the symbolic structure and control clearly belongs within a poetic discourse. This particular discourse impacts on the artist as a subject-in-process. To recap, the subject-in-process refers to the divided nature of the subject and the precarious and unstable construct of a 'self' or ego consciousness in the Symbolic Order (Oliver 1993:93,99).

In order to clarify the above, it is necessary to expand on the psychoanalytic phases of development as described by Jacques Lacan. In the book *Jacques Lacan, Sean Homer* explains that after the mirror phase, which is the initiation of a sense of separateness from the mother and its surroundings, the infant enters the thetic phase and crosses the threshold into the social sphere (the world of language) as a subject. This is the entrance into existence as a separate entity, in other words, the 'birth of the subject'. What was prior to this passage, is forever lost to consciousness and is referred to as the imaginary (Homer 2005:53).

According to Kristeva, the Symbolic Order is the world of language and the other, of subject and object, but the subject cannot fully sever him/herself from that which came before: the unconscious with its semiotic chora.³¹ This duplicity in the subject

³¹Chora is translated as receptacle and is one of Kristeva's most elusive concepts (McAfee 2004:19). It is closely linked to the maternal bond and the instinctual drives and appears to be the source of

opens up the divide between consciousness and unconsciousness and brings about a split. In other words the entrance into the Symbolic is the 'hardening' of subjectivity,³² but also the initiation of the division of the subject into conscious and unconscious. The subject thus becomes a dynamic, but unstable construct through the participation in language (Oliver 1993:99-100). As Kelly Oliver (1997:xviii) writes in her introduction to *The portable Kristeva*:

Like signification, the subject is always in a constant process of oscillation between instability and stability or negativity and stasis. The subject is continually being constituted within this oscillation between conscious and unconscious as an open system, subject to infinite analysis.

With this understanding of the unstable position of the subject in mind we can return to the idea of poetic language. Poetic language as a discourse deals more freely with the semiotic and therefore allows for the semiotic to more readily propel the unconscious drives into the process of signification. This prompts the subject-in-process involuntarily to reveal his/her unreachable side and thereby become challenged by the introduction of an awareness of an ever-present absence within the Symbolic Order. In *Reading Kristeva: unraveling the double-bind*, Kelly Oliver (1993:13) states:

[P]oetic language is another discourse that calls the subject into crisis, puts the subject on trial. Undeniable within poetic language, the semiotic element disrupts the unity of the Symbolic and thereby disrupts the unity of the subject of/in language.

The disruption of the apparent unity of the subject in the Symbolic Order unsettles the illusion of a stable 'self' and awakens an uneasy sense of incompleteness. Thus

expression of the semiotic modality of signification. My understanding is that the chora serves as a permeable 'container' of the residue of affect and instinct prior to subjectivity. Initially it is mediated by the unity with the mother. The term is borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus* (Kristeva 1997:24).

³² For Kristeva the process of subjectivity starts before the acquisition of language, with the first recognition of boundaries between infant and (m)other and with the process of maternal and material abjection. This is also prior to the mirror phase, which Lacan sees as the onset of subjectivity (McAfee 2004:45-46).

poetic language plays a special role in the constitution of the subject-in-process. It shatters the ostensibly secure position of the subject by allowing the 'absent side' into the equation. Even though this seems to destabilise the subject, it paradoxically brings him/her more fully into being. John Lechte³³ (in Fletcher & Benjamin 1990:24) writes:

Kristeva views art less as an object, and more a process, or practice, which 'creates' the subject. In short: art is constitutive of both subject and object, and that is why Kristeva emphasises the notion of 'practice' over 'experience' which presupposes an object (Fletcher & Benjamin 1990:24).

In an interview with Perry Meisel, Kristeva states:³⁴ 'The work of art is a kind of matrix that makes its subject' (Meisel 2010). As such, this process therefore allows the artist to become temporarily more present. In my experience, this poetic expression allows the subject-in-process to momentarily re-connect. Psyche, soma, object and subject merge. It provides just a glimpse of what was a time before separating from the mother³⁵ and entering into the symbolic world. The artwork does not freeze this process, it merely serves as a brief reminder of a moment of connectivity. The subject-in-process remains just that – an ongoing construction; constantly in the making; always shifting and changing shape through the participation in the process of signification. Everything in and around the subject-in-process contributes to the creating of boundaries around the subject and this construct is continually amended, as it is intrinsically unstable. However, it is my opinion that when greater freedom is allowed for the semiotic to unsettle the symbolic in the signifying process, it not only highlights the crisis of the rift within the subject, but also provides a chimera of a

³³ John Lechte is a former student of Julia Kristeva and is a professor in Sociology at Macquarie University in Australia, where he teaches Social Theory (Lechte 2008: title page).

³⁴ Interview with Julia Kristeva by Perry Meisel and originally published in the *Partisan Review* 1984.

³⁵ In psychoanalytical theory the infant experiences a severing from the mother upon entering the social world of signs and language. The seamless bond with the mother and a sense of wholeness is forever lost and subsides into the unconscious of the subject as a feeling of loss and desire. (Needs can no longer be completely satisfied and are therefore suppressed to become desire, a longing which can never be stilled – fully satisfied needs are replaced by unfulfillable desire.) (McAfee 2004:43)

bridge across the divide within the subject. The brief glimmer is simultaneously in the body and the mind, offering a hint of oneness. This perception is fleeting and collapses again into a kind of unknowing when the process is complete, but the moment is nevertheless a transitory memory of fullness.

Conclusion

To summarise: I outline Kristeva's theory of semanalysis in which she posits signification as a process rather than a singular system of signs. Within this process two modalities, the semiotic and the symbolic, are always present. This allows the subject to include both the pre-symbolic and the symbolic into the process of signification. This process contains different discourses of which poetic language is one.

My process of work reveals my participation in the discourse of poetic language. This discourse disturbs the closely guarded guise of unity of the subject in the Symbolic Order and brings the subject-in-process to the fore. It is within this 'unstable framework' that the work of art is created and that the artist gets in touch with the divide within, briefly collapsing the unbridgeable gap.

For me (as the artist) this flicker of what lies beyond the reach of language brings a sense of wonder and joy. It is not concrete factual insight as it is not a purely cognitive process. It is rather a 'knowing', an elusive indication that 'there is more'.

I conclude that Kristeva's two strands of signification, the symbolic and the semiotic, provide a very useful model to allow for and include that which falls outside language, especially in relation to the process of artistic practice (McAfee 2004:13-17). As Kelly Oliver points out in the introduction to *Revolution in poetic language*: 'all signification is possible through the dialectic movement between semiotic and symbolic' (1997:24). Oliver explains this relationship in the overall introduction to *The portable Kristeva* (1997:xv):

The interdependence of the symbolic and semiotic elements of signification guarantees a relationship between language and life, signification and experience; the interdependence between the symbolic and semiotic guarantees a relationship between body (soma) and soul (psyche).

The linking of the material knowledge gained from my art practice and the understanding of the process of signification provides a new way of engaging with 'self' and practice. It creates a deeper awareness of the 'incompleteness' of consciousness and encourages the subject to acknowledge that which lies beyond language and signs.

It is very difficult to bring together the material and conceptual processes under discussion in this chapter, as the very split between psyche and soma is applicable here. For the purpose of this study it is therefore crucial to hold onto the practical process as the primary anchor, which provides a material base as a foundation. In doing so, it is possible to project and reflect from a somewhat more stable, situated position. In this respect Barbara Bolt (2009:31) refers to Don Ihde's ideas where he states: '[P]ractical engagement with tools, materials and ideas become primary over the assumed theoretical-cognitive engagement'. Bolt concludes:

Through such dealings, our apprehension is neither merely perceptual nor rational. Rather, such dealings, or handling reveals its own kind of tacit knowledge.

I transcribe this tacit knowledge as an appeal for openness, for possibility and for not excluding that which resides beyond the limits of the empirical.

CHAPTER TWO:

The silent code

As a continuation of my investigation into the connections between artist, artwork and the process of signification, I take a closer look at how the artwork was constructed in this chapter. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the creation and use of metaphor and Kristeva's idea of the abject. The metaphor of the hyena is central to this body of work and therefore I study it in some detail. As bricoleur I make use of a diversity of interdisciplinary sources and look from different vantage points, but I remain constantly aware of my position as situated within the process.³⁶

Preamble

In this chapter I wish to provide a brief context and background to the preliminary stages of my work. As discussed in the previous chapter, the creation of the images were largely process driven, but prior to the execution I played with several references and half-formulated ideas. Even though these did not dominate the process, it nevertheless influenced the generation of the images and indicated the choice of metaphor.

As I mention in Chapter One, I was interested in the trickster figure and its transgressive role in society and, more personally, the psyche, before embarking on my body of practical work. I had a series of dreams that featured trickster-like images

³⁶ I use the term 'situated' in the way Donna Haraway applies it – as a qualified position of partial objectivity, which acknowledges that the subject is always situated within a particular position, which, in turn, is shaped and located within a larger political sphere.

Andrea Nightingale explains Donna Haraway's idea of situated knowledge in her article in *ACME* as follows:

She used this work to argue for a new understanding of objectivity that takes seriously different kinds of knowledges and explicitly recognizes that academic work is situated, political and partial (Nightingale 2003).

and narratives, which piqued my interest in this topic. The liminality, ambiguity and sneakiness of the trickster attracted me. The dual nature of creator and destroyer intrigued me.

Although I familiarised myself with Jung's archetypal trickster, my interest extended wider into mythology, folklore, anthropology and cultural studies. I consulted many articles on the trickster on the Internet, such as *Transformations of the trickster* by Helen Locke (2002) and *The gender of the trick* by Margaret Mills (2001). I also studied a variety of books, including *Trickster makes this world* by Lewis Hyde (1998), *Mis/takes* by Terrie Waddell (2006), *The female trickster: the mask that reveals* by Ricki Tannen (2007) and *Trickster and ambivalence* by C.W. Spinks (2001). I also read Paul Radin's *The trickster* (1972).

I was fascinated by the absence of examples of female tricksters in both academic discourse and general folklore. This absence is noted and commented on by Ricki Tannen and the American folklorist Marilyn Jurich (Tannen 2007:7).

For me there was no shortage of examples, but they were generally not acknowledged. I found a prominent exception in the hare or rabbit.³⁷ In my work *In search of the female trickster* (fig. 1) I add the hyena, cuckoo³⁸ and myself to the menagerie, but it is above all the hyena that emerged as a metaphor of enormous richness in materiality, myth, as well as my personal perception.³⁹

³⁷ Hares feature as tricksters in a wide range of cultures, but they are also strongly associated with the female (amongst other things they are seen as symbols of fertility) (Winding 2005). In many of the trickster narratives, like the Winnebago hare cycle, they change gender and appear as both sexes (Hyde 1998:336).

³⁸ More specifically the *Cuculus solitarius* or red-breasted cuckoo (Piet-my-vrou in Afrikaans). This bird is a brood parasite and lays her eggs in the nests of other birds, which then raise the chicks, often at the cost of their own offspring.

³⁹ On completion of this drawing I abandoned the conscious search for an embodiment of the trickster figure and worked in a more intuitive fashion, allowing the free expansion of the metaphor. In many ways the mischief and playfulness of the trickster remained present though, albeit in a more internalised form. There are also interesting correlations between the trickster and the abject as shifters of the position of boundaries and the challenge to cultural dictations.

Metaphor

To consider metaphor from a psychoanalytical perspective, Kristeva argues, it is not to see it as another way of naming, that is to say, as a kind of displaced mode of the symbolic. Rather, metaphor is on the side of the semiotic. For the analyst, it is equivalent to a condensation of affect, or psychical energy, in dream work (Lechte 1990:180).

This interpretation corresponds with Freud's concept of condensation (Lechte 1990:180).⁴⁰ In his *Interpreting Dreams*, Freud notes that images turn up from the unconscious as condensation or displacement (2006:295,323-324). Condensation melds together a composite of meanings into a symbol, whereas displacement replaces one symbol for another. Jacques Lacan linked these tropes to the Russian formalist Roman Jakobson's ideas on metaphor and metonymy and ascribes its functioning to the working of the unconscious (McAfee 2004:31).

My understanding of metaphor, as an unconscious composite of meaning expressed in poetic language, obliges me to pause and investigate the application of this poetic device in my work. I consider the three proceeding 'sets of impressions' of the hyena as possible sources (amongst many others unknown to me) that fed into my unconscious to form a condensation of this animal. In turn, the representation(s) of hyenas return to the Symbolic Order as a dense unconscious construct, filled with ambiguity and a variety of meanings. The image as metaphor can thus never have a fixed meaning and remains open to interpretation (Freud 2006:295).

Firstly, I discuss the social and biological aspect of these animals. Secondly, I explore the mythical and cultural associations and, lastly, I reflect briefly on my personal impressions and memories of hyenas.

⁴⁰ In the translation I refer to Freud's term *Verdichtung* is translated as 'compression' in order to be closer to the literal meaning of 'making it denser' (Freud 2006:318). However, I prefer to use the more commonly accepted term 'condensation', as that is how it appears in most of my other references.

Three vantage points

The scientific lense

Naturalists have marveled at the anatomy of the spotted hyena from the time of Aristotle onward; its social and other behavior began to surprise observers some time later (Kruuk 1972:209).

Hyaenidae is a small family comprising four different species: the striped hyena, the brown hyena, the spotted hyena and the aardwolf. Of these four, it is the spotted or laughing hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) that takes prominence in the public eye and which I use as metaphor. *Hyaenidae* is more closely related to felids⁴¹ than to canids even though in their appearance they resemble dogs (Kruuk 1972:6).

According to hyena researcher Hans Kruuk, these animals partake in solitary, as well as highly skilled co-operative hunting – quite contrary to the popular portrayal of hyenas as cowardly scavengers (1972:201). The consumption of scavenged meat takes up significantly less than half of their food intake (Drea & Frank 2003:141). Research done in co-operative problem-solving for food, shows that hyenas display high ‘organisational complexity’ where they appear to out-perform chimpanzees (Drea & Frank 2003:143).⁴²

Spotted hyenas live in elaborate social groups or clans, which are ordered according to a strict matrilineal hierarchy. The lowest ranking female is dominant over the highest ranking male. Males are generally not tolerated in the den and live adjacent to the females (Kruuk 1972:225; Drea & Frank 2003:124).

In the article *The social complexity of spotted hyenas* by Christene Drea and Laurence Frank, it is stated that female hyenas are dedicated mothers that form intimate and life-long bonds with their cubs. They hardly ever give birth to more than two cubs, which are nursed for up to fourteen months. For approximately six months

⁴¹ *Hyaenidae*'s closest relatives are *Viverridae* (mongooses and civet cats).

⁴² Chimpanzees do solve the experimental tasks, but take longer and seem to prefer to work alone.

the cubs are entirely dependent on their mother's milk and do not eat any meat. The milk of the spotted hyena is extremely high in protein and consequently requires high maternal energy output. Cubs spend their first few weeks in a natal den whereafter they are transferred to a central 'crèche' with other nursing cubs (in the communal maternal area). Burrows and tunnels provide protection in the absence of the mother (Drea & Frank 2003:126).

Anne Engh and Kay Holekamp report in their article *Maternal rank 'inheritance' in the spotted hyena*, that female hyena cubs inherit their mother's social ranking. This is facilitated by adult intervention and the formation of coalitions by the cubs (Engh & Holekamp 2003:151).

In the compilation *Animal social complexity: intelligence, culture and individualized societies*, Sofia Wahaj and Kay Holekamp state in their article *Conflict resolution in the spotted hyena* (2003:249) that:

Like certain primates, spotted hyenas also often depend on help from other group members during formation of coalitions that are important in both the acquisition and maintenance of social rank.

The most intriguing aspects of spotted hyenas are found in their sexual morphology.

The male anatomy is not particularly unusual, but the external genitalia of the female are striking in that they exactly resemble those of the male (Kruuk 1972:210).

The female clitoris looks and is positioned like a penis and becomes erect similar to the male. This hypertrophied clitoris is 'traversed by a central canal through which the female urinates, copulates and gives birth'⁴³ (Drea & Frank 2003:124). Her labia evolved into two sacs filled with fibrous tissue and closely mimic the male scrotum. With this in mind, it is not surprising that hyenas were believed to be hermaphrodites (Kruuk 1972:210).

⁴³ This unusual birth canal makes delivery particularly difficult and first-time mothers often lose their cubs during birth.

Female hyenas are also markedly bigger than the males and have higher levels of testosterone, which explains their aggressive behaviour (Drea & Frank 2003:124). The highly evolved social organisation of the hyena clan accommodates this fact with numerous interventions. Examples are their wide range of vocal communications and behavioural displays, which include social interactions that signal dominance, appeasement and submission (Drea & Frank 2003:135-140).

Spotted hyenas have an elaborate system of communication that combines visual, vocal/auditory, and olfactory modalities (Drea & Frank 2003:135).

The vocal repertoire includes many variations and carries over long distances. There is recognition of individual 'voices' and their vocalization serves partly as a form of identification. The characteristic 'laugh', which often switches to a frenetic 'giggle', is mostly associated with states of high alert and anxiety. Their well-known and rather eerie 'whoop' can travel for kilometres and is believed to be a call for support, display of identity or indication of locality (Drea & Frank 2003:137).

Although hyenas are social animals, they spend a lot of time alone whilst foraging. This transition from solitary to social existence is a possible explanation for their elaborate greeting ceremony.⁴⁴ This appears to build social cohesion within the group (Drea & Frank 2003:134).

In their research, Christine Drea and Laurence Frank found that olfactory communication also plays a prominent role in the social structuring of hyenas. They partake in both pawing and pasting⁴⁵ strategies, which involve leaving scent traces

⁴⁴ Christine Drea and Laurence Frank explain the ritual as follows:

These ceremonies involve animals of either sex standing head to tail, with their legs lifted in reciprocal presentation of the external genitalia and anal scent glands. [...] Virilization of the female genitalia allows both sexes to use the erect phallus in social display. [...] strict rules of etiquette [apply]. Subordinates must lift their legs first, exposing their entire reproductive future to the bone crushing teeth and powerful jaws of a higher-ranking animal (Drea & Frank 2003:134).

⁴⁵ Hyenas leave scent-markings known as pawing through scratching the soil vigorously and mixing odour with the earth through interdigital glands. Pasting involves the depositing of a creamy secretion

as part of an intricate system of messages. These chemical codefications do not, however, explain their notorious reputation for smelling particularly foul. A more likely account for this accusation is that hyenas love to roll in sand, mud and faeces.

Magical beasts and despicable thieves

Spanning over many centuries and across diverse cultures, the general perception of hyenas appears to be exceptionally negative. Stephen Glickman refers to Goodrich and Winchell who, in 1885, wrote the following about hyenas: '[F]ew marked characters in history have suffered more from the malign inventions of prejudice' (Glickman 1995).

Glickman also quotes a particularly vile passage from Ernest Hemingway's 1935 book *The green hills of Africa* (Glickman 1995):

Fisi, the hyena, hermaphroditic self-eating devourer of the dead, trailer of calving cows, hamstringer, potential biter-off of your face at night while you sleep, sad yowler, camp-follower, stinking, fowl [sic], with jaws that crack the bones that the lion leaves, belly dragging, loping away on the brown plain, looking back, mongrel dog-smart in the face.

Some of these prejudices relate to the strange sexual morphology of hyenas.

Throughout the ages they were seen as hermaphrodites or shape-shifters that could change their sex. This was first recorded in the *Physiologus*, a didactic Greek text with description of animals, written by an anonymous author some time between the second and fifth centuries AD. The entries included a moral summary of the beasts and on the hyena it concludes that their sexual alternating was 'unclean because it has two natures'. (Glickman 1995). Because of this supposed sexual ambiguity they were often attributed with perversity and always seen as 'outsiders' – the inexplicable, rejected as threatening and outside the natural order.

from anal glands onto vegetation and is commonly associated with territorial marking (Drea & Frank 2003:138).

The idea of hyenas as shape-shifters also links them to magic and witchcraft. According to Jürgen Frembgen in his article *The magicality of the hyena* (1998), witches are believed to travel on the backs of hyenas at night and in some instances they supposedly fly great distances with their passengers. His sources report this belief to be popular in southern Sudan amongst the Kujamaat Diola and also amongst some people in Tanzania (Frembgen 1998). It is also a common belief that witches, and in some tribal traditions ordinary people, can transform themselves into hyenas. In the transformative rituals of secret societies such as the Korè in Mali people 'become' hyenas by wearing zoomorphic masks and enacting hyena traits relating to their 'dirty habits, trickiness and general nastiness' (Frembgen 1998).

The Gèlèdé cult in Benin and southwest Nigeria uses the hyena mask to signal the end or closure of a ceremony (called *èfè*). Frembgen quotes Babatunda Lawal on the significance of this event (Frembgen 1998):

[T]he hyena is a scavenger that eats up everything ... It always shows up to clear the remnants of what big killer like the leopard has left behind. That is why the animal is associated with the last of anything. The other explanation is that the appearance of the hyena is symbolic of a successful *èfè* concert: the jokes cracked by the *èfè* mask has been such that even the laughing hyena has come out of the forest to join the audience.

The preceding two rituals bear strong traces of the carnivalesque as described by Mikhail Bakhtin. The transgression of humans into animal behaviour and the inducing of laughter is typical of the carnival. John Lechte quotes Bakhtin on the wearing of the mask (2008:13):

[It is] connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity.

Another common myth, which was particularly prominent in the Middle Ages in Europe, is that hyenas are grave robbers and devourers of corpses (Weare [Sa]). Many bestiaries include depictions of hyenas digging up graves and dragging off the

bodies. Sometimes they are even believed to 'dwell in sepulchres' (Glickman 1995). It is possible that this perception was a distortion of the custom of certain African tribes to dispose of their dead by offering them to hyenas, which Hans Kruuk describes in his book *The spotted hyena* (1972:143).

In a wide selection of African folktales the image of the hyena that evolves is one of an animal that is anti-social, tricky, duplicitous, cowardly, stupid and filthy. Virtually all these attributes feature in the portrayal of hyenas in the very popular Walt Disney film *The Lion King* (1994).

A dark and vivid memory

As a child of around six years of age I went on a camping trip with my parents. My recollection of this experience is fragmented and cloudy, but intense. The night was filled with the sounds of hyenas. Some were faraway whoops of individuals, whilst at varying distances there appeared to be groups of laughing animals. I imagined the hyenas closing in on us, calling more and more members of the clan. I was at once petrified⁴⁶ and fascinated.

Abjection

I propose that in addition to the poetic device of metaphor, there is another form of signification at work in the representation of the hyena. Here I wish to explore the image of the hyena as a manifestation of the Kristevan abject. In order to develop this idea, I wish to revisit the concept of the abject as used by Kristeva.

In her theory of the psychoanalytical phases of development Kristeva situates the occurrence of abjection very early in the infant's life. It is the first stirrings of the separation from the mother and the beginning of a sense of a border or limit to the edge of its body. This is prior to the mirror phase, prior to subjectivity and prior to

⁴⁶ Another popular myth around hyenas is that their vocalisations have hypnotic powers and can freeze their prey (Glickmann 1995).

language or any form of naming (Kristeva 1997c:239; McAfee 2004:46). As there is no concept of subject and object yet, there is only an uncertain demarcation of an 'I' and 'not I' with nothing to hold it in place. As Julia Kristeva writes in *Powers of horror* (1997c:230):

The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I.

The unbearable position of the abject is that it is neither subject nor object. It falls outside the safety of the mutually supportive subject and object (in Freud's terms ego and other). It attracts and repels simultaneously. An example would be the mother's body which provides fulfilment, warmth and safety, while at the same time threatens to engulf or swallow the not-yet-subject. The abject is what returns to us as slippery pre-objectal horrors and delights (Oliver 1993:58).

In Sexual subversions (1989), Elizabeth Grosz explains the relationship with the abject in the following excerpt (1989:73):

Abjection is what the symbolic must reject, cover over or contain. The abject is what beckons the subject ever closer to its edge. It insists on the subject's necessary relation to death, corporeality, animality, materiality – those relations which consciousness and reason find intolerable. The abject attests to the impossibility of clear borders, lines of demarcation or divisions between proper and improper, the clean and the unclean, order and disorder as required by the symbolic.

Despite the rules and rituals with which we attempt to sensor or contain it, the abject intrudes our social and psychic space and reminds us of our fragile bodies and mortality. The death drive sneakily enters our consciousness and we recoil in horror, but we can never fully get rid of this threat, it remains right there at the boundary of cognisance (Kristeva 1997c:231).

According to Grosz, Kristeva 'distinguishes three broad forms of abjection, against which social taboos and individual defences are erected'. These are food, waste, and sexual difference (1989:73).

The hyena fits this 'profile' with delightful accuracy. It eats carrion – putrefied flesh; covers itself in excrement; allegedly steals corpses; and has a mystifying sexual identity! Hyena as a 'package' certainly corresponds to all the horrors of the abject. This provides some explanation as to why they cannot be tolerated and are considered to be disgusting.

Given this, I am drawn to the darkness I recall from my childhood encounter with their blood-curdling sounds. Something in me wants to be swallowed by their stinking bodies. This ambivalence informs my choice to work with the hyena.

I step lightly into the horror. Kristeva points out that laughter is a way of placing or displacing the abject (1997c:235). I present my work with some humour and quirkiness; nothing too serious. Through a type of sublimation I control the abject, lift it, allay the fear and make it presentable and amusing.

Artwork

Having looked at what possibly informs my work, I can now return to the practical work itself. In order to discuss my work it is important to note that I have to create 'artificial vantage points' from which to view the work. As a result, the work may appear to be structured in a particular way, while in truth the process was much more organic, even chaotic. What I am emphasising is that the importance of the process described in Chapter One is inherent to the creation of this body of work. I need to stress that generally it was an intuitive development rather than a cerebral proposition. This lavish inclusion of the semiotic makes the work more closely related to the body than the mind. It is difficult to translate that which is not of language into

the symbolic realm of words. This discussion therefore serves as an analysis of possibility rather than conscious intent.

My approach to interpretation is also marked by the fact that I am writing from 'within' the work as the maker, who is intricately connected to it. Clearly, I have to find some distance to look at what I have created, but to imagine that I can completely sever myself from it intellectually would be both dishonest and a pity. My position relates more to that of the analysand in psychoanalysis than an 'objective' viewer or formal critic. Kelly Oliver explains the process of analysis in *Reading Kristeva* (1993:117):

Unlike poetic discourse, analytic interpretation produces what Kristeva calls a 'knowledge effect'. This knowledge effect helps to fasten the analysand to the Symbolic, but in order to allow her to play with it.

It is in this way that I hope to enter into the engagement with my work. I take comfort in the fact that, as Oliver puts it with regard to 'correct' interpretation, 'analytic "truth" is much closer to narrative fiction than philosophical or scientific truth' (1993:117).

The work *In search of the female trickster* (fig.1) is a multi-layered drawing done in mixed media on photographic paper. As I commenced to work, the paper discoloured irregularly forming a shadow of sorts. Eventually the exposed paper uniformly turned a purple grey. I liked the idea that exposure to light turns something dark. I also liked working on the 'spoilt' paper.

The brushstrokes are bold and energetic, contrasting with areas of more subtle detail and hidden layers of information behind transparent areas of colour. The figures are scattered, relating a variety of narratives. The surface pulsates, but there is no dominating narrative. The overall chaotic rhythm and the effect of many stories melded together as one, creates this artwork.

It started as a 'mind map' with female tricksters in mind and is active with many trickster references, male and female. They hide and expose themselves, slyly moving about; remaining somewhat devious. It is playful, but threatening at the same

time. There is something physical, even menacing embedded in the drawing. In my opinion this drawing expresses a carnivalesque quality. Simon Dentith describes Bakhtin's carnivalised writing in *Bakhtinian thought* (1995:65): '[It] reproduces, within its own structures and by its own practice, the characteristic inventions, parodies and discrowning of carnival proper.'

The strong animal presence and the merging of human and animal implies a crossover of sorts, an upside-down chaotic hierarchy which corresponds with carnival. The image exudes a lot of noise, a cacophony of multiple voices vying for attention without any real directional indicators – not sequentially or spatially. It includes several references to the abject: birth, blood, excrement, hyenas and ghostly apparitions. Yet it is not any single item that offends, but rather the total that disturbs. It is possible that it is especially the chaos of it all that is upsetting – the sense that things are out of control. Here is an image filled with reminders of the abject and there is no attempt at 'managing' it; on the contrary, there seems to be an indulgence into a cruel darkness. The drawing forces a crisis of abjection by its lack of order and the many references to the disruption of a sanitised, socially appropriate world. In *Reading Kristeva*, Kelly Oliver explains the position of the abject in relation to the subject and society and the need for boundaries and structure (1993:56):

Although every society is founded on the abject – constructing boundaries and jettisoning the antisocial – every society may have its own abject. In all cases, the abject threatens the unity/identity of both society and the subject. It calls into question the boundaries upon which they are constructed.

In the book *Lekkerlag* (fig. 2-5), I work with contrast and ambiguity. I limit the palette to two colours in acrylic paint: the blue-black of Payne's Gray and the bright red of Cadmium Red and the full range of mixtures in-between. I chose Payne's Gray because of its versatility, ranging from a dimensional black to a pale greyish blue. It is a colour of depth and melancholia – capable of expressing cold isolation and dark mystery. The Cadmium Red, in contrast, is shocking and violent in its brightness. It

vibrates on the surface; a warm colour without warmth. It is the colour of arterial blood or a harlot's lips. These colours semiotically transform the work, signifying what lies beyond the figurative, altering it, filling it with ulterior meaning, which sometimes contradicts, sometimes supports the symbolic. Within this colour framework the images vary in intensity and approach. In some cases the brushwork is loose and vigorous, in others delicate and contained. In *Revolution in poetic language*, Kristeva describes the interventions of colour and mark making as semiotic inscriptions (1997a:37):

[T]he various material supports [matériaux] susceptible to semiotization: voice, gesture, colors. Phonic (later phonemic), kinetic, or chromatic units and differences are the marks of these stases in the drives. Connections or *functions* are hereby established between these discrete marks, which are based on drives and articulated according to their resemblance or opposition, either by slippage or by condensation.

I contrast light relief with ferocity; hostility with fragility; intimacy with loss; and whimsy with terror. On a certain level it is a playful book, which started as an amusing thought on the laughter of the hyena as a curse.⁴⁷ At the same time the laughter is a means of dispersing the threatening abject at the edge of the narrative. There is a return to the laughter and grotesque of carnival even though it is not always explicit.

This is a story of repeated joining and separation. It starts before being, before existence itself, and yet the presence of the abject is already there. Birth is a violent expulsion. The image in (fig. 2) presents a grainy, visceral newborn on a bloody background and balances a nasty, dead-eyed baby, which stares at the world with antagonism. On the next page (fig. 3) the infant is translucent and insubstantial, hardly present as an entity – not yet a subject. Loss and longing fill the pages that

⁴⁷ Subsequent to the completion of the book I found a Khoisan story about the creation of the first hyena out of a disobedient man. The Creator punishes him for his arrogance and cunning by making him ugly and despicable to all. To top that, he is unable to cry, with only a horrible laugh filled with shame and sorrow to express his regret (Metzger 1995:1-7).

follow. In (fig. 4) the unconscious compensates with hyena visitations in dreams, but the image, despite a measure of sweetness, creates discomfort with a troupe of hyenas invading the sleeping baby's space (like insects crawling into the crevices of the body and bordering the physical boundaries of 'self'). Then there follows a reuniting with the hyena, but the separation has transformed the infant and she recognizes the hyena as other. Laughter is exchanged and shared, the threat of abjection averted or maybe not quite. The two laughing figures in (fig. 5) are ambiguous, the colours and texture are 'rough' with the bodies distorted and floating in space. The book leaves me with ambivalence. It is not tied down. The narrative can be seen as an attempt at purifying the abject through the catharsis of laughter.⁴⁸ Again the presence of the carnivalesque is evident, especially with regard to what John Lechte (2008:12) writes about Bakhtin's concept:

The most important aspect of carnival is laughter. However, carnival laughter cannot be equated with the specific forms it takes in modern consciousness. It is not simply parodic, ironical, or satirical. Carnival laughter has no object. It is ambivalent. Ambivalence is the key to the structure of carnival.

The third artwork consists of a number of images of strange infants (fig. 6 & 7). The drawings are done in very watery acrylic paint. The images are flimsy and frail like the medium. Precariously floating in isolation these figures, as mentioned in Chapter One, are returning the gaze from a position of fragility. I find the images abject in their strangeness – cast out for being too perilously close to harm/death, reminding the viewer of his/her own vulnerability and corporeality. They disrupt with their sometimes accusing stare (fig. 7) and attempt to engage from their untenable position. They are the melancholics, outside the Symbolic Order. Kristeva links melancholia to the absence or severance from the mother before the transition into

⁴⁸ Kristeva equates the artistic experience with a religiosity in its attempt to cleanse the unclean abject and refers to its cathartic role (1997c:243):

The various means of *purifying* the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art.

McAfee puts it like this: '[A]rt takes over the function of purification, often by conjuring up the abject thing it seeks to dispel' (2004:49).

the Symbolic Order, before the acquisition of language (Kristeva 1997b:187). Noëlle McAfee explains the origin of the melancholic position in these terms (2004: 60):

The mother fades away before the child knows that this mother was an other.
The child suffers a loss she cannot articulate.

Their eyes look through us as they have no 'other'. The absence of the mother as the transitional link into the symbolic leaves them drifting, disconnected and locked outside language. I gave the title *Sonsverduistering* to these images after I completed the work. It refers to the darkness of an eclipse, but also to the title of Kristeva's book, *Black sun*, which she took from the poem *The disinherited* by Gérard de Nerval. Here are the two lines from the poem (McAfee 2004: 69,70):

My only star is dead – and my star-studded lute
bears the Black Sun of Melancholia.

The last set of illustrations is presented as a loose-leafed book in a solander box, named *Other*. It is a contemplation on 'otherness' (fig. 8-10). I work in the medium of acrylic inks on watercolour paper. The images were originally based on the shape of the hyena, but in some instances organically developed into a more general 'animality'. Animal and human forms merge to create an inadmissible image (there is a strong need to differentiate between subject and animal). The subject in the Symbolic Order requires an elevation above the beastly, which is too closely related to the body and its functions. As Kristeva says in *Powers of horror* (1997c:239):

The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals and animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.

In *Picturing the beast*, Steve Baker discusses the significance of animals in visual culture and how it affects us (2001:4):

Any understanding of the animal, and of what the animal means to us, will be informed by and inseparable from our knowledge of its cultural representation. Culture shapes our reading of animals just as much as animals shape our reading of culture.

With the above in mind, images or references to the hyena carry a particularly powerful coding, especially if we bear in mind some of the associations that the metaphor contain.

Again ambiguity plays an important role and hints at the presence of the writing of the carnival. This is a liminal other, which resembles more closely the abject, situated at a reluctant border between subject and object. I cannot define what is other if there is no concept of me. The 'I' and 'not I' is blurred, the other is everywhere. The other is within. In *Strangers to ourselves* Kristeva (1997d:264) writes: 'Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden side of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder' [sic].

The illustrations once more take on a lighthearted approach, with a mocking nonsensical tone. Safely stored in a box, it reminds one of Pandora's box, but there is no fear of evil creatures – the images merely leave a trace of uneasiness beyond their amusing forms and, unlike Pandora's box, there is nothing at the bottom of this pile.

Conclusion

In summary: in this chapter I assume the position of bricoleur, which Kincheloe (2001) motivates for in the following passage:

[T]he interaction is not standardized agreement as to some reductionist notion of 'the proper interdisciplinary research method' but awareness of the diverse tools in the researcher's toolbox.

By exploring the metaphor of the hyena and the notion of the abject, I expose an underlying aspect of my work. In all the examples of my drawings there is a darker

underwriting that relates to the ambiguity of the abject. My choice of the hyena, as both horrible and fascinating, provides me with the means to express something beyond the text that introduces ambiguity and unease. My formulation of an associative analysis detects my own attraction and abhorrence of the body even though it is presented with laughter and a lightness of touch.

This chapter has strayed from my central exploration (of the mutual constitution of artist and artwork in the process of signification) into the investigation of the construction of meaning(s) in the artworks and the consideration of the different devices and processes involved. Yet it is an essential detour in finding the significance and bond between artist, artwork and process. In naming these processes, similar to the process of psychoanalysis, meaning is extricated and my subjectivity is described, even though not in any permanent, fixed fashion.

To conclude: Chapter Two attempts to discover some of the very complex and elusive processes involved in the formation of meaning. In this respect it is useful to refer to *Structuralism and semiotics* where Terence Hawkes describes the ideas of Roland Barthes on the complex structure of codes that inform meaning (1977:110):

The codes act as agencies – whether we are conscious of them or not – which *modify, determine* and, most importantly, *generate* meaning in a manner far from innocent, far from untrammelled, and very much closer to the complicated ways in which language itself imposes its own mediating, shaping pattern on what we like to think of as an objective world ‘out there’.

Unlike Kristeva, Barthes does not specifically include the pre-symbolic (or trans-lingual) in this codification, but this passage nevertheless indicates the multiplicitous nature of meaning. Julia Kristeva’s position moves towards the psychoanalytical and extends what feeds into this codification by including the semiotic loading, especially in the discourse of poetic language. This means that, according to Kristeva, over and above the complex web of meaning woven by language, the unrepresentable is also

absorbed into the process of signification and becomes present in language (Oliver 1997:xvi, McAfee 2004:13, Kristeva 1980:133-136).

By means of poetic expression and a subsequent formulation around it, it is possible to touch on the unrepresentable. As Kelly Oliver explains (1993:118):

Kristeva suggests that in meaning just as in metaphor there are two heterogeneous elements condensed into one signifier. Like metaphor, analytic meaning is a condensation of representation and non-representable drives. Analytic interpretation involves reading the non-representable through the representation. [...] [A]nalytic interpretation is a matter of listening to the unrepresentable within signifiers.

This approach to analysis is meaningful for both the 'reading' and 'writing' of a work and provides a useful tool to engage with and analyse that which disrupts the surface. Bearing in mind the generative status of meaning and the shifting position of the subject, it is clear that any attempt at pinning down meaning would be futile, but engaging with the text in a manner that acknowledges both the semiotic and symbolic codes provides the possibility for a more inclusive interpretation and interaction.

CHAPTER THREE:

Becoming

In this last chapter I look at the third part of the three aspects of the signifying process I investigate. It is a precarious and uncomfortable position from which to write and in order to find another point of reference, I explore my position as 'author' by referring to Roland Barthes' essay on the author in relation to Kristeva's theory on the process of signification.

I continue to reflect on the influence the participation in signification has on myself and look specifically at the consequences of the discourse of poetic language and the role it plays in establishing the subject. How am I made by the work I make?

Author, what author?

In order to engage with my slippery position as 'author', I return to the skills of the bricoleur and refer to 'materials at hand'. In exploring my position as author, I refer to the essay *The death of the author* by Roland Barthes.

Barthes rejects the author as an exalted individual, 'where the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author "confiding" in us.' He shifts away from the author to the performative act of writing (Barthes 1999):

Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.

The culture which was 'tyrannically centred on the author' (Barthes 1999) makes way for an author born at the same time as the text, who neither precedes or exceeds the writing. There is no origin other than language itself. Any notion of 'self-expression' is

negated as the writer is trapped within his/her use of the confinements of language and 'ought at least to know that the inner "thing" he thinks to "translate" is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely' (Barthes 1999). The burrowing into the text in search of the author under the surface is pointless, as he does not exist outside the text. The text has been flattened, it can only be 'ranged over, not pierced' (Barthes 1999). The place where the text comes to life is 'not in its origin but in its destination' (Barthes 1999). For Barthes the reader becomes the nodal point of possibility and gives life to the text, whilst dissolving the author (Barthes 1999).

Kristeva's agrees with the assertion that a stable, single authorial voice is an illusion – instead of a master of the text there is a subject-in-process – an unstable, decentred ego (McAfee 2004: 2,29). She also concurs with the shift of status from author to writing, but where Barthes' subject 'slips away' and is swallowed by the text, Kristeva's is incorporated and constituted as part of the process (Oliver 1993:93; Barthes 1999). Where Barthes flattens the text and expels the body, Kristeva transforms the text by including the bodily drives through semiotic infusions. Barthes' text, bounded by language, is cut loose and enters into deferral, while Kristeva's text expands beyond language, accessing the pre-symbolic (Moi 1997:24). Perhaps the most important difference, as far as the author is concerned, lies in the fact that for Barthes the reader constitutes the text, while for Kristeva the process of writing constitutes both the text and the writer (Barthes 1999; Oliver 1993:93).

In order to investigate the position of the author by an author, I chose to briefly look at the views expressed by the author J.M.Coetzee. In an interview with David Attwell, which appears in *Doubling the point*, Coetzee states (1992:17):

All writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write [...] this massive auto-biographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction (shades of Tristram Shandy) – does it yield only fictions?

He continues to talk about the elusive nature of what is 'true' and discusses the process of writing as follows (1992:18):

Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you want or wanted to say. What it reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half thought) you wanted to say in the first place. That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us. Writing shows or creates (and we are not always sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was, a moment ago.

What Coetzee describes strengthens Kristeva's theory on the process of significations and supports my own practical experience. The constitutive nature of art, as described by Coetzee, is echoed by John Lechte in *Julia Kristeva* (1990:52,53):

Kristeva shows that literature and all forms of artistic endeavour fundamentally interpenetrate. Rather than being prior to the work of art (whether literary or not), subjectivity may be seen to be formed in and through art.

Where am I?

The discourse of art (also referred to as poetic language) is a privileged form of signification in the sense that it is not dominated by the symbolic and therefore allows both psyche and soma to be more fully expressed. It is filled with ambiguity and a diversity of meanings. John Lechte describes as follows (1990:35):

Poetic meaning escapes the speaking subject by being a condensation of meaning – that is, a potential plurality of meanings. Poetic language, then, is *full* of meaning.

In the creation of art the artist engages in the process of signification on multiple levels, including the unconscious – the artist participates on material, affective and cognitive levels. So while poetic language shatters the illusion of a unitary subject and draws attention to the subject-in-process, it attends to the subject more fully. It

highlights my unstable position as subject-in-process and at the same time provides a means to engage with the unsteadiness of this place. Through the process of signification the subject-in-process is more present through the embodiment of the unconscious (Kristeva 1997:26).

I realise that in the articulation of the artwork, together with the analysis of the contents thereof, my subjectivity is constructed. I am embedded in the work through mind and body and the work gives expression to that which is normally excluded from language. By making visible the invisible I am fleetingly connected to that which I cannot reach, which lies beyond my consciousness. For a moment I become more 'whole' because an inaccessible part of me makes itself known through extra-linguistic signification. Thus it is in the particular signifying practice of art that I am briefly more clearly delineated as subject. It is a dual process of creation for both artist and artwork (Lechte 2008:410). As Julia Kristeva says in an interview with Perry Meisel in 1984 (Meisel 2010):

[T]he work of art, the production, the practice in which they are implicated extends beyond and reshapes subjectivity. There is, on the one hand, a kind of psychological ego, and on the other, there's the subject of a signifying practice.

In order to apply these ideas more tangibly, I wish to return to my practice. In the preceding chapters I discussed the manifestation of poetic devices in my practical work. I pointed out my surrender to an intuitive working process, the use of humour, nonsense and metaphor. I also uncovered the inclusion of underlying abjection in the work. Elizabeth Grosz explains the importance of this; '[B]y naming it they establish a distance, a space to keep at bay the dangers of absorption it poses. To speak (of) [author's brackets] the object is to ensure one's distance and difference from it' (1989:78).

Through my participation in the process of signification I am constituted in my choice of colour; the variety of my mark making; the intensity of brushstrokes; the rhythm

and texture in the images; the recurring metaphor of the hyena; the playfulness of the narratives and the ever present abject. Through this process I draw myself into being. I give shape to unrepresentable drives and affects and in doing so, I tentatively trace the boundaries of my subjectivity. As a subject-in-process I partake in an activity that for the moment makes me more distinct, more meaningful, more present (Oliver 1993:93).

Ironically, this presence requires an absence of ego consciousness, for in the collapse of the 'symbolic self' the exiled fragments of a 'pre-self' can emerge. (In a sense this concurs with Barthes' death of the author.) It is my opinion that when 'speaking poetic language' the borders of the divide in the subject become unguarded. For a short period of time a more representative subject merges with the process and the work. This coming together evokes an immense sense of being alive. On the basis of John Lechte's description of *jouissance*, I would dare to call it that:

Joy [in the preceding text he uses the word *jouissance*] is but another form of the 'unnameable' – the other side of reality as such – which together with Being and death, drives thought beyond itself, beyond its own limits, putting it in touch with infinity, particularly in the sense that the part becomes equal to the whole (1990:22).

As I mention at the end of Chapter One, this exceptional 'fusion' remains with me as a mirage of 'the other side'. Yet it is not something I can see or describe. It is merely there – ephemeral and elusive, but there. In this 'knowledge' I am reminded of moments of greater connectedness and presence. I am made into a more fully signifying being. I am in and of the process of signification.

Conclusion

In summary: In this chapter I explored the position of the author in relation to the text by referring to Roland Barthes and J.M. Coetzee. I find my own position to

correspond with Coetzee's in the sense of being 'written by the text'. The privilege of poetic language brings about a shuddering of the ego, but in turn offers the reward of a whisper from the 'other side'. The sense of 'coming together' in the making of the work brings great joy and creates an experience the artist wishes to return to.

Elizabeth Grosz quotes Kristeva in *Sexual subversions* (1989:56):

Art – the semiotization of the symbolic – [...] represents the flow of jouissance into language.

To conclude I need to emphasise the precarious and challenging location of the writer in this chapter – the need to discuss my authorship and embeddedness within the process of signification is a very intimate and shifting position. At the same time, I need to gain some distance in order to formulate the lived experience. It is important to maintain the intimacy, to share the 'secret' of my making, as it is situated in the practice, in the handling (writing) of the work. The reference to another artist is therefore of importance here, not so much in relation to the specifics of their work, but in revealing their equally vulnerable position as artist/writer and their involvement in the creative process. This reference can serve as a way of corroborating the subjective experience. I think that an extended corroboration of this kind would provide an interesting subject for future research.

As a final statement on the position of the artist in relation to the process of signification I would like to quote from Kristeva's 1984 interview with Perry Meisel (Meisel 2010):

It is, very simply, through the work and the play of signs, a crisis of subjectivity which is the basis for all creation, one which takes as its very precondition the possibility of survival. I would even say that signs are what produce a body, that – and the artist knows this well – if he doesn't work, if he doesn't produce his music or his page or his sculpture, he would be, quite simply, ill or not alive.

FINAL CONCLUSION

In my final conclusion I have to acknowledge the challenge in writing from a subjective position without indulging in the personal. To inform my practice with theory – which in itself is founded in slipperiness – in a meaningful way required me to be inventive and unconventional. I needed to turn to the tinkering of the bricoleur to ‘gain the unique insight of multiple perspectives’ (Kincheloe 2001). I had to write about psychic inscriptions, without psychologising; to ground my thinking in the material, whilst discussing the ethereal; to brave subjectivity in my work and reference to ‘self’ and simultaneously introduce some critical distance; to engage with ideas and processes of great complexity while I remain lucid; and finally, I had to find appropriate meaning and application for a field which is virtually boundless and changeable. In order to grapple with these problems it was essential to establish a position situated in praxis. From this material perspective it was possible to engage with the complexity of poetic language and the multiplicitous meanings that springs from it.

Regardless of these problems I think it is important to engage beyond the verifiable and known. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean discuss the conundrum of knowledge and research within the discourse of practice-based learning (2009:3):

[W]e believe that any definition of knowledge needs to acknowledge these non-verbal forms of transmission. It also must include the idea that knowledge is itself often unstable, ambiguous and multidimensional, can be emotionally or affectively charged, and cannot necessarily be conveyed with the precision of mathematical proof. This concept of knowledge as unstable is fundamental to a postmodernist view of the world.

Having said that, I nevertheless think that it is possible to gain some knowledge from the process I analyse and describe. I think what emerges is the interconnectedness of process, art and artist and the impact the process has on both the work and the artist. I find the application of Kristeva’s concepts of the symbolic and the semiotic

particularly useful both in thinking about my work and understanding the workings of the process of signification. My participation in poetic language transforms both the artwork and myself by including and articulating the unnamed unconscious in my work.

The 'knowing through doing' as well as the subsequent linking with existing theory enriches both theory and practice. I propose that my thesis can serve as a case study for a practice-based engagement with the relationship between the artist's work and the constitution of his/her subjectivity. This exposition also has useful applications in approaches to therapeutic art practices and education.

In my research I explored case studies of other arts practitioners – dancers, musicians, writers and actors – and found that although there are many publications that include the different art disciplines separately, there are very few interdisciplinary studies (Barrett & Bolt 2009; Smith & Dean 2009; Sullivan 2005). I think there is an opportunity to look for commonality in arts practices. I suggest that an investigation into the process of signification and the effects thereof across multi-disciplinary art practices would make a meaningful contribution to all art practitioners.

Finally, I conclude that the writing of this thesis in itself has been a process of signification, which in its formulation brought unspoken aspects of my artworks and 'self' into being.

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Fig 1. Dorét Ferreira, *In search of the female trickster* (2009). Mixed media on photographic paper, 97 x 320 cm.

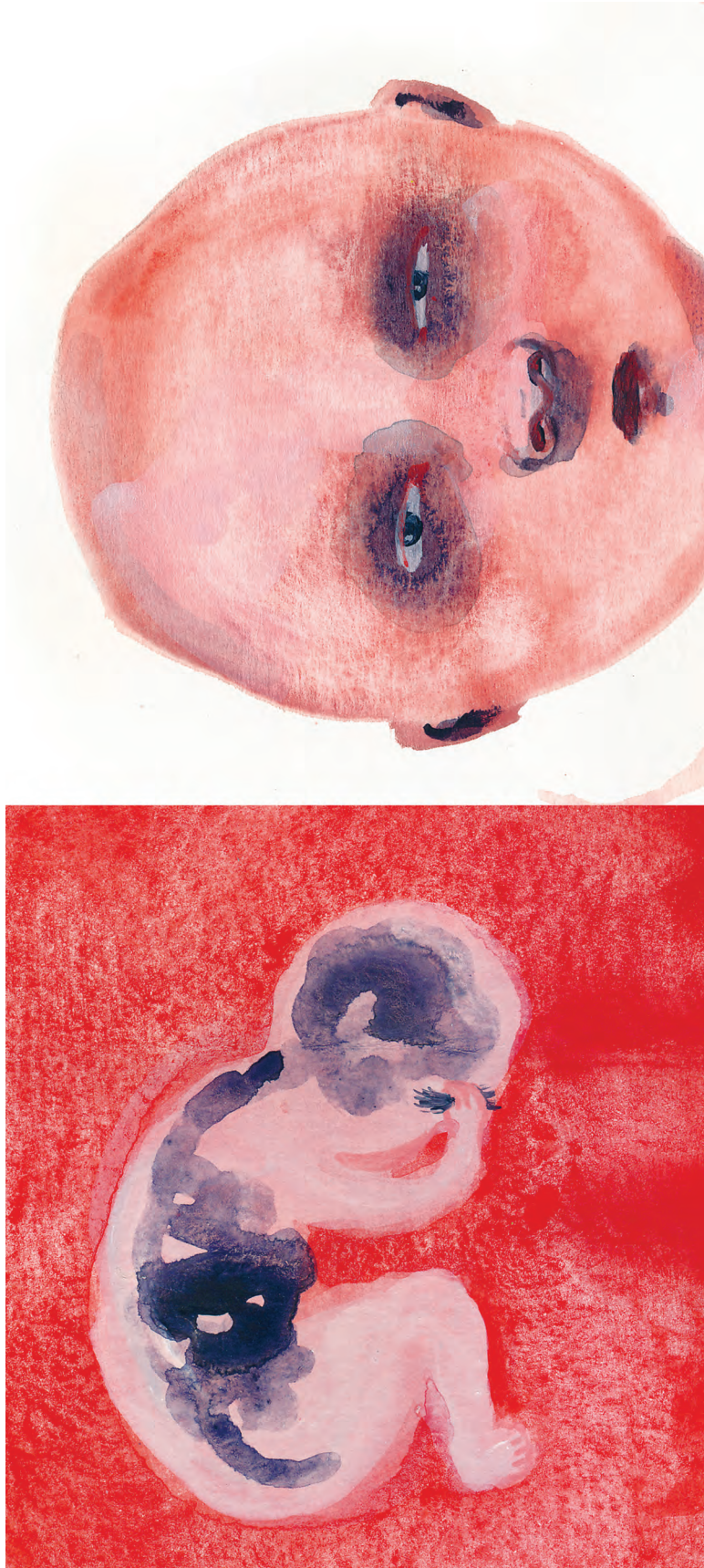


Fig 2. Dorét Ferreira, *Lekkerlag* (2010). Acrylic paint on paper, 19 x 46 cm.



Fig 3. Dorét Ferreira, *Lekkerlag* (2010). Acrylic paint on paper, 19 x 46 cm.



Fig 4. Dorét Ferreira. *Lekkerlag* (2010). Acrylic paint on paper, 19 x 46 cm.



Fig 5. Dorét Ferreira, *Lekkerlag* (2010). Acrylic paint on paper, 19 x 46 cm.



Fig 6. Dorét Ferreira, *Sonsverduistering* (2010). Acrylic paint on paper, 49 x 65 cm.



Fig 7. Dorét Ferreira, *Sonsverduistering* (2010). Acrylic paint on paper, 28 x 38 cm.



Fig 8. Dorét Ferreira, *Other* (2011). Acrylic ink on paper, 25 x 35 cm.



Fig 9. Dorét Ferreira, *Other* (2011). Acrylic ink on paper, 25 x 35 cm.



Fig 10. Dorét Ferreira, *Other* (2011). Acrylic ink on paper, 25 x 35 cm.