An Iconography of Doubt: Paintings of Collective and Private Disaster

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A research component submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

2024

Auckland University of Technology

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Abstract

Religion and art are two dominant strands that have echoed throughout my life. This thesis explores their role in my life and their influence on my painting within the context of the Anthropocene and the Christian church in which I was raised.

The spectre of the Anthropocene elicits paralysing fear and melancholy in me, and I paint as a way of responding to and understanding these feelings. I also view them through my experiences of Pentecostalism, and this thesis incorporates imagery and ideas connected to Christian Eschatology and the Apocalypse, delving into these concepts through the work of religious scholars such as Karen Armstrong and John Collins. I have looked to the early paintings of New Zealand artist Michael Stevenson about small-town religious life, and the writing of Anna Parlane in analysing these. I have also explored how Eschatology affects a sense of time, how it corresponds to care for the earth, and the way the psychology of the Apocalypse echoes the effects of trauma, as pointed out by Charles Strozier. This is of particular significance now, when religious fundamentalism is increasingly present in contemporary discourse.

The eschatological experience of earth's body, her systems and sense of history, found eerie parallels in my own encounter with death through a cancer diagnosis in 2022, and this project uses painting to express these parallels. In understanding this experience, I looked to the work of Indigenous scholar Zoe Todd, and also assessed how New Zealand painter Star Gossage has responded to historic tragedies and upheavals. Literature offers another way of understanding tragedy, and this thesis explores Southern Gothic fiction, particularly the work of Flannery O'Connor, as a source of imagery and ideas. I have assessed how Intertextuality has been used in other artists' work, for example the contemporary Romanian painter Victor Man. I describe the ways in which influence between different art forms can unfold, and explore the value of aesthetic experience as a response to disaster, drawing on the critical writing of poets such as James K. Baxter, Wallace Stevens, and Delmore Schwartz.

Another thread of influence that helps to unite these themes is nineteenth-century Symbolism. This movement arose as a response to rapid social and economic change, and focussed on a shared sense of melancholy, nostalgia, an interest in the subconscious, and a reliance of symbols to convey meaning. This exegesis explores the theories of Charles Baudelaire and the work of painters such as Odilon Redon and Fernand Holder as they trace their interior worlds through symbols. I also investigate symbolism in the work of contemporary painters such as Niklas Asker and the sculptor Mariele Neudecker, and assess how historical concerns can be reanimated within contemporary painting. My paintings have developed

through observational painting techniques that my Grandfather, Austen Deans, taught me and I have looked to the work of contemporary Perceptual painters such as Alex Kanevsky and Ann Gale for their use of these techniques. In exploring art and faith, this thesis – the exegesis and its accompanying paintings – offers an iconography of doubt in response to personal and collective disaster.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Chris Braddock and Rachel Carley, for their unfailing support, encouragement, and warmth during what was at times a very difficult four years. I would like to thank Ingrid Boberg for having the foresight to encourage me to undertake a PhD and I am also very grateful to the University for the Vice-Chancellor's Scholarship that made this possible. So much thanks to my dear friends Rose Sneyd, James Saville, and Amy Blinkhorne for all their love and encouragement, as well as many hours of fascinating conversation about art and literature; many of the ideas sparked by those conversations have emerged in here.

Thank you to my parents and wider family whose support has been invaluable, and who have all encouraged me to pursue painting as a career. In particular, I would like to acknowledge my uncle, the painter Lindsay Crooks: he passed away 20 years ago, but his life and art were a huge influence on me. I would like to acknowledge Dr Elles Smallgoer for her careful, thorough and thoughtful work in proofreading this document. And thank you most importantly to my dear husband David, whose own exquisite art is a constant source of inspiration, as is his quiet presence and fortitude. And thank you to my dear Grandpa, Austen Deans, for lighting the way for me.

Research Questions

1. How can a painting practice braid connections between religious Eschatology and climate change in the context of the Anthropocene?

2. How can the practice of Intertextuality (for example, drawing on novels and film) be used to enrich image-making in contemporary figurative practice?

3. Learning from the historical movement of Symbolism, what constitutes a contemporary symbolism in a painting practice?

4. How can quotidian structures (such as road signs and glasshouses) create an iconography in a painting practice as a response to climate disaster?

5. How can Perceptual painting methods evoke temporal rupture and expressions of grief as responses to personal and collective catastrophe?

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Introduction

Religion and art are two dominant strands that have echoed throughout my life: sometimes these have woven together; more often they have tugged in opposite directions. When I think about the Anthropocene and the challenges it presents to us, it is these two strings that vibrate within me, discordantly but somehow reassuringly. They emerged out of my childhood: from my parents, who were Evangelical Christians; and my grandfather, who was an artist. Both art and religion offer different sorts of consolation and require different sorts of faith; each comes with its own particular kind of disappointment. As I reflected on and pulled apart these strands, and their relation to the art I make, I also had to ask myself what the purpose of this writing was.

This exegesis is a memoir of painting, and of my life over the course of four years of painting – a meditation on what I read, thought about, looked at and drew, and a weaving together of the circular ties that recurred in my painting practice. Rather than the development of a single idea, this text is a reflection and recording of my process of creating. It brings together the elements that inform my practice, including perception, time, aesthetics, literature, art history, religion, and nature, and offers explanations about how these themes might relate more generally to art in the 2020s. My artmaking is closely drawn from my life and so the exegesis will trace my personal history through the project, from moving to South Canterbury in 2020 to having a miscarriage and surgical procedure in 2022. This introduction will outline these themes in relation to my grandfather's painting, and two of my own works – *The River* and *Waiting for the Second Coming*.

A Pessimistic Waiting

Figure 1 Austen Deans, 1943, POW in Stalag XXA*, Oil on Cardboard, 592x430mm, Deans Art Trust Collection, New Zealand*

POW in Stalag XXA (Figure 1) above was made by my grandfather Austen Deans, then aged 28, when he was a Prisoner of War (POW) in Poland. He was captured in Crete in 1941 and spent the remainder of the war in German-run camps in Poland and Germany, where he was able to continue painting thanks to materials supplied through the Red Cross. He made a surprising number of works in oil and watercolour, several of which were sent back to New Zealand, though some 200 were lost. In this work, striking in its clarity and use of colour, the slump of the sitter's shoulders, the emphasis on his

listless hands and vacant stare, and the predominance of a steely grey suggests a heaviness and sense of waiting. The figure is closely cropped as if we, the viewer, are looming over him and this composition emphasises his powerlessness; the space is shallow and the screen and wall behind seem to enclose him, giving the whole scene a feeling of claustrophobia. For the POWs there was a constant sense of being trapped and in danger, but also a precarious kind of safety inside the prison walls. For Austen, waiting in the camp for a breakout or rescue, for the war to be over, painting became a form of escape and of survival – a response to the claustrophobia and the uncertainty. In his journals there is a hint of survivor's guilt – a feeling that he was safe but should not be. These POW paintings are experimental and modernist in their use of non-naturalistic colour and simplified form. They also have a kind of psychological darkness and weight that is absent in later works, which tended to be straightforward, naturalistic landscape paintings. It is always surprising to me to see a painting like the one above, as if it were made by someone whose pessimism I do not recognise.

I remember Grandpa as a warm, charming, witty man – he would take me and Granny out painting into the foothills of Canterbury's Southern Alps, each of us working quietly at our own easels until she boiled the kettle on a battered old primus and we had morning tea. At that point in his life, he did talk about the war but generally focussed on the more light-hearted, exciting elements – swapping portraits of guards for cigarettes, helping prisoners escape by forging documents. The early twentieth-century psychologist William James speaks of the religion of the healthy-minded, and Austen was of this brand of faith: generally, the world was good, generally people were good, and the central aim in life was to find this good and cling to it.[1] I often wondered how he could hold such a positive view, given what he had seen of the evil of people. I felt that he must have repressed his experience of the war, and indeed I find his landscapes a form of repression. In them he often removes elements of human intervention, painting the scene as he saw it but removing powerlines, roads, or fences, as I will explore more in Chapter 2. He believed that nature had a curative value, and an inherent worth beyond the human world:[2] he explained 'seeing something in Nature which intensifies my joy in being alive, I want to try to reproduce it in such a form that when I see it again I re-live my joy at that divine moment'.[3] Painting became not so much a response to the evil he had experienced as a negation of it, pretending there could be a world that was pristine and noble, that was untouched by humans. These were paintings of the kind of place that the philosopher Eugene Thacker refers to as the *world-in-itself*; an imagined idea of nature beyond the influence of comprehension of humans, as if my grandfather were barely there except to record it. In understanding different kinds of philosophical pessimism, Thacker refers to the idea of *world-for-us*, a concept of the world as

[1] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (USA: Library of America, 2009 [originally published 1917]).
[2] Nathalie Brown, *Capturing Mountains: The Life and Paintings of Austen Deans* (Christchurch: Wily Publications, 2010).
[3] Austen Deans, *Pictures* (Wellington: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1967). 12

fundamentally human-centric, 'made in our own suffocating image'.[4] He suggests that climate change asks us to think of 'a world that is not just a World, and not just the Earth, but also a Planet (the *world-without-us*).'[5] He sees these concepts as inevitable, because we are humans existing on earth, but it struck me that there might be other ways of considering humans within a natural system, and I began to consider Indigenous views of time and the natural world. These concepts are explored in Chapter 3.

[4] Eugene Thacker, quoted in Thomas Dekeyser, 'Pessimism, Futility and Extinction: An Interview with Eugene Thacker', *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 7/8 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420907127, 368.
[5] Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (Winchester, UK Zero Books, 2011), 7

Waiting for the Second Coming

Figure 2 Esther Deans, 2023, Waiting for the Second Coming*, Oil on Panel in Hand-Gilt Frame, Each panel 375x300mm*

In the early 1980s, both of my parents experienced dramatic conversion experiences and became 'born-again' Christians, part of a movement of Evangelical fundamentalism that swept through New Zealand in the 1970s and 1980s.[6] In contrast to my broad-minded Grandpa, their beliefs were dogmatic and absolute. They believed, and I did too, that the end of the world was imminent and that our primary role was to wait in faith for it. We believed that the Rapture could happen at any moment – carrying the righteous off to heaven before the rest of the world was punished in flames.

The above diptych was painted in 2023, when I was thinking about images of the Rapture in terms of our general solipsism in the face of disaster; the way we often turn inward, toward ourselves and our own small concerns because those larger concerns and disasters feel too massive to face. But within our self-centeredness many people also long for some sort of transcendence, some meaning beyond our immediate physical and virtual realities. Coming from an Evangelical Christian background, I wanted to explore the ways in which I visualised climate change through the lens of Eschatology – through imagery and ideas of a religious Apocalypse. The sense of waiting we felt as

[6] Anna Parlane, 'Postmodern Pentecostalism: Apocalyptic Time in the Paintings of Michael Stevenson', *Burlington Contemporary* June (2020), https://doi.org/10.31452/bcj3.Stevenson.Parlane; Brett Knowles, *Transforming Pentecostalism : The Changing Face of New Zealand Pentecostalism, 1920-2010* (Lexington, KY: Emmeth Press, 2014).

young Christians on the eve of Y2K [7] had a curious parallel to my grandfather's experience, and to my experience now as an adult within the Anthropocene: like him then I feel powerless now, knowing that my art cannot solve anything, but also feeling its necessity as a psychic response to the heaviness of waiting. Painting the two events – a young man taking a photograph, and a huge plume of smoke seen from a distance – at the same small size raises questions of scale, of micro and macro disasters and our perception of them, and scale is another theme that recurs throughout the exegesis.

Both images make use of a 'frame within a frame', a symbol as well as a method of drawing that has developed throughout my work, and which I address in more detail in Chapter 2. This is a compositional device that can be a way of drawing attention to the illusionistic or mimetic qualities of painting, or to suggest the subjective nature of reality, the way we 'frame' our own vision of the world. [8] Frames, mirrors, and glass are recurring motifs in my work and correspond to the cracked and unreliable lenses through which we perceive ourselves and the world. This diptych responds to this idea of subjectivity, and the bespoke, hand-gilded outer frame is intended as an allusion to religious iconography. I transferred these images from found photographs using a measuring technique that my grandfather taught me, holding my pencil at arms' length to judge the relative distances between objects and transferring these distances to the canvas using notational marks. This kind of framing or measuring, as elaborated on in Chapters 1 and 7, is a device employed in observational painting to translate the visible world accurately onto a two-dimensional surface and in this way can also symbolise the act of seeing and recording. The two paintings are restricted in their colour values (there are no bright whites or dark shades), the hues are restricted to yellow ochre and burnt umber, with some hints of a brighter cadmium yellow, and they are both a dull, greyish chroma. Together, these restrictions give the appearance of a kind of haze, as if we might be viewing them through a grimy yellow window or a haze of smoke: a kind of 'glass of unknowing' [9] I often feel exists between what we think we see and what is really there. Ideas of veiling, perception, seeing, and knowing are addressed throughout this project.

Within the traditions of figure painting there is sometimes a tension between the recognisable object being portrayed and the layers of meaning that sit behind it. The objects I paint, while often beginning as observations within the 'real world' of everyday things, are also intended to carry a symbolic weight and meaning. In doing so, I have drawn on the concerns and example of the nineteenth-century Symbolist movement, analysed in Chapter 1, that developed within Europe during a time of social upheaval. Its artists were united in their fascination for the mysterious, sub-conscious,

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[7] *Encyclopedia Britannica,* s.v., 'Y2k Bug', (2024), https://www.britannica.com/technology/Y2K-bug.
The Y2K bug was a problem in coding that was predicted to wreck havoc with computer systems when the dates rolled over from 1999 to 2000. In fact, despite the widespread panic, programme corrections were made, and the start of the millennium saw no significant disasters
[8] Ossian Ward, 'Chapter 2: The Frame – The Window as Optical Device or Trompe L'oeil from Mantegna to Ryan Gander', Window Research Institute, 03 Februrary, 2020, https://madoken.jp/en/series/6103/
[9] This phrase is my own but, as I will explain in Chapter 4, the concept comes from a Bible verse, 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known'.
'1 Corinthians 13:12', (King James Version).

and mystical. Like them, I have collected repeated symbols and motifs our of everyday objects that I tend to think of as a Symbolist iconography – these include glasshouses, smoke, signs, and shrouds. In this exegesis, I use the term *Symbol* and *Symbolism* (rather than more contemporary versions of this idea such as signifiers, sign, or semiotics) because of its link with the art historical movement in the nineteenth-century and its literary connotations. The word *Icon* has strong religious connotations and developed from paintings of Christ or Saints used as objects of devotion from the 7th Century. Its meaning has broadened out within art history, and I use the term *Iconography* to describe 'a particular range or system of types of image used by an artist or artists to convey particular meanings'. [10]

[10] Tate Museum, 'Iconography: The Iconography of an Artwork is the Imagery Within It', n.d. (accessed July 2024), https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/iconography.

The River

The Baptist church that our family attended emphasised baptism by the Holy Spirit, a literal reading of the Bible, and Eschatology – theology about the end of the world. Although I moved away from this faith as an adult, the sense of not being Christian has become a permanent part of my identity, an identity that the American writer Flannery O'Connor describes as 'Christ-haunted'. [11] In the theology of our church, humans were seen as the pinnacle of God's creation; all human suffering and history are part of a broader mysterious plan, to which the 'natural world' is secondary, and which culminates in the Apocalypse. There is no 'world-in-itself', let alone a 'world-without-us' – Thacker's concept of the earth continuing without humans – only the world that was made *for* us. In contrast, the Eschatology of climate change is that we, humans, are responsible for our actions toward the earth and, furthermore, are only one other species upon it. As I will explain in Chapter 3, this Apocalypse is closely contingent on the colonial, industrial enterprise of empire-building and for many Indigenous people, the 'Apocalypse' is something they and their ancestors have already lived through. [12]

My first degree was in English literature, and many of my imagery and ideas come from novels and poetry, and this is another thread that runs through the project. In many ways, it is literature that has helped me understand my early experiences within the church and the way these shape my art, knowledge, and morality now. In this painting, the theme of *The River* was echoed by a short story by O'Connor, 'The River'. [13] O'Connor's work is obsessed with faith and with figures who are driven and isolated by their faith. When I first read this story by her, I was struck by her idea of faith: a religion whose dogma is absolute, emptied of all sentimentality or comfort. In it, a little boy tries to baptise himself but drowns, in a perplexing and shocking ending. Finding out that she was a deeply devout Catholic only made the story stranger – what was it supposed to mean? Were the river and God ultimately sources of good or of tragedy? O'Connor's use of the river as a site of ritual, and a metaphor for a destructive god, feel like they have become layers in my own painting. I will discuss her novels and their links to my work in Chapter 6.

[11] Flannery O'Connor, 'Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction' in *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).
[12] This highlights ground for further research for me, as Tangata Tiriti, and some discussions have begun with local Iwi about how pre-colonial stories and their significance to my landscape might be incorporated into my work.
[13] Flannery O'Connor, 'The River' in *The Complete Stories,* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971 [first published 1946]), 157–174

Figure 3 Esther Deans, 2023, The River*, Oil on Canvas, 510x405mm*

Figure 4 Close-up photograph showing textures within The River

To build up a painting, I often collect images – historical or contemporary paintings, photographs from the internet or images that pop up on social media – to paste into my workbook. These serve as inspiration, ideas for colour palettes or figurative gestures, or may reflect relevant themes. Table 1 includes a selection of those that were used for *The River*, showing both my working method of using photographs, and also introducing several of the artists who will be discussed throughout this exegesis. *The River* is painted over a number of other paintings and this method of layering (as can be seen in Figure 4) – a kind of palimpsest – recurs in many works, corresponding conceptually to layers of identity, the interconnectedness of history, and the re-writing and re-interpretation of scripture.

Table 1 A selection of images used to inform The River

From top left - Alex Kanevsky,2018, J. F. H. with Blue Objects*, Oil on Wood, 1,117x1,219mm;* [14] *two photographs of baptisms in the River Jordan; Thomas Dewing, 1893,* Summer*, (see Figure 20); Victor Man, 2012,* Büdöskú*, [Detail from Installation],Oil on Linen on Board, dimensions of installation variable;* [15] *Alex Kanevsky, 2015,* Fishing in America*, Oil on Linen, 1,117x1,168mm;* [16] *Rembrandt van Rijn, 1653, Woman Bathing in a Stream, , Oil on Panel, 610x470mm.* [17]

[14] In Rochelle Belsito, 'Alex Kanevsky: Ends and Beginnings', *American Art Collector*, December 2018, https://www.americanartcollector.com/issues/158/alex-kanevsky-ends-and-beginnings
[15] From *The White Shadow of His Talent* (Exhibition), Blum & Poe Gallery, https://www.blum-gallery.com/exhibitions/victor_man
[16] From *Unstable Equilibrium* (Exhibition), Dolby Chadwick Gallery, https://dolbychadwickgallery.com/show/dolby-chadwick-gallery-unstable-equilibrium
See also John Seed, 'Alex Kanevsky: "Unstable Equilibrium" at Dolby Chadwick Gallery', (Review) *Huffington Post*, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/alex-kanevsky-unstable-eq_b_8253682
[17] National Gallery London, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rembrandt-a-woman-bathing-in-a-stream-hendrickje-stoffels

Methodology

My methodology is 'artistic research' in which artistic practice and research are inseparable, and the 'research object' is both the artwork and the conceptual ideas derived from it.[18] In this approach, I maintain a distinction between my 'artistic practice,' the making of paintings, which I see as an intuitive and primarily visual way of thinking, and my 'research,' which I see as comprising reading and writing – the 'verbal' forms of thinking. The relationship between these two ways of thinking is fluid: sometimes they bleed into one another subconsciously and sometimes the influence is more direct and purposeful. The 'literature review' component of this exegesis includes the written elements of theorists, art historians, theologians and artists, as well as a broad selection of visual art. These are woven together with my painting methods and discussion of the paintings and exhibitions that resulted from this broad research. Practice-based research formed around my personal experiences necessitates that the research is broad, touching on a range of different concerns that feed into my artwork rather than a close investigation onto a specific topic of interest. I have chosen this approach as a genuine reflection of my art-making process.

[18] Andris Teikmanis, 'Typologies of Research' in *Share Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, ed. Mick Wilson Mick and Schelte van Ruiten (Amsterdam: ELIA Press, 2013), https://cdn.ymaws.com/elia-artschools.org/resource/collection/22A440F4-F60B-43F8-9C8F-EE8AEB3B4972/share-handbook-for-artistic-research-education-high-definition.pdf

Methods

Perceptual and Observational Painting

My painting methods have developed from the techniques my grandfather taught me, based in observational painting. They include measuring techniques when drawing from life, using tonal groupings to block in a composition, and mixing colours from a limited palette. Onto this I have grafted Perceptual painting techniques borrowed from twentieth-century painters such as Euan Uglow. Perceptual painting begins with observation but the emphasis is on the act of perceiving or seeing rather than reproducing objects accurately, incorporating 'subjectivity, shifting focus and temporality'.[19] As Matthew Ballou writes, 'Perceptual painting results in works that are 'artifacts of experience … discursive objects that both reveal and conceal their own making'.[20] I have also moved away from my grandfather's example by using my own photographs and found images (often from internet searches) as source material, rather than drawing directly from life. During this project I joined an online artistic group, #Caneyo, formed to share digital imagery that is predominantly portrait-orientated and used for painting references.[21] The shift towards other people's images can be seen in *Waiting For the Second Coming*, with the selfie image having been drawn from the #Caneyo group, and the plume of smoke from a news story about the war in the Ukraine. In this way, my historically based painting techniques have become strongly influenced by a digitally mediated environment.

Intertextuality

The aesthetic experience I have when reading novels and poetry or looking at visual art, is a vital force in my life and has offered a kind of counterpoint to the more fundamentalist and didactic interpretation of scripture that I was taught as a child. This can be termed *Intertextuality*, and in my practice it has become a method of finding subjects, moods, images, or concerns from which to create paintings. Intertextuality is an academic concept coined in the 1970s through literary theory to analyse 'the (allusive) relationship between (especially) literary texts'.[22] Margaret Landwehr describes Intertextuality as the study of 'structural relations between two or more texts':[23] it is a way of

[19] Matthew Ballou, 'Certain Densities in Perceptual Painting', *Painter's Table Magazine,* 2024, https://www.painters-table.com/article/certain-densities-in-perceptual-painting/
[20] Ibid.
[21] Maria Zemtsova, 'Death of a Coworker: Visual Dialogue through Artistic Collaboration', *Artmaze Magazine,* 2017, https://artmazemag.com/death-of-a-coworker/
[22] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. 'Intertextuality (n.)', June 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1010763774.
[23] Margarete Landwehr, 'Introduction: Literature and the Visual Arts; Questions of Influence and Intertextuality', *College Literature* 29, no. 3 Literature and the Visual Arts (2002). 3. http://www.jstor.com/stable/25112655

understanding the links of inspiration and influence between works, and she uses the term to include the links between written and visual art work. In Chapter 5, I explore Intertextuality, describing how novels by Margaret Atwood and Peter Carey were incorporated into my paintings, and in Chapter 6 I analyse the cross-pollination between two of Flannery O'Connor's novels and my exhibition *Wise Blood.*

Gathering Symbols: Subjects and Painting Methods

Another method is the development of symbols from my artistic research. I often find a visual motif, such as the smoke and shrouds seen in Figure 2, and repeat it using different colours or contexts, often referring back to it over several years and in separate series of works. These have become symbols for something personal and unconscious, as well as suggesting more explicit ideas. Shrouds and drapery, for example, hint at ideas of knowing, of uncovering, as well as of obfuscating. This metaphor can take the form of shrouded objects such as a road sign covered in cloth, or 'shrouding' as a painting method – using a limited tonal or hue range to suggest vision shrouded in mist or in the dim light of dusk. Shrouds to me have links with religious ideas such as draped religious icons or Christ's burial shrouds. They imply the idea of something significant that is hidden because it is a mystery or is in some important sense unknowable, like the origin of the word Apocalypse, which derives from the Greek work Apokalypto meaning 'to unveil or reveal'.[24] In this way, the subject as well as the method of painting combine in their symbolic associations. My motifs of structures, of shrouded objects, of hidden road signs, and religious statuary have become a kind of iconography of disbelief or uncertainty. There is a sign, but it has lost its referent and its meaning is unclear; there is neither a prophet nor a promised land.

Colour-mixing Methods and Terminology

Colour is a central method in the way I approach painting, and I would like to clarify the terms I will be using because there are many, often confusing and contradictory, ways to write about how colour is used in painting. In high school I was taught the colour wheel of red, blue and yellow, three bright primary colours that can be mixed to create the three secondary (or complementary) colours and from there, six intermediaries (Figure 5).[25] This approach was popularised by the art educator Johannes

[24] John Collins, 'Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Ancient World', in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40–55.

[25] Neil Dodgson, 'What Is the "Opposite" of "Blue"? The Language of Colour Wheels'. Journal Of Perceptual Imaging 2, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/https://10.2352/J.Percept.Imaging.2019.2.1.010401.
Dodgson explains that the prevalence of this version of the colour wheel is partly that the language conceptions of 'red', 'blue' and 'yellow' make it simple to explain and understand, even though visual, digital, and pigment mixing is more complex than this in practice.

Itten and is still the theory, as Eric Kirchner points out, predominantly taught in schools and in art and design programs.[26] Itten developed his approach while teaching at the Bauhaus and had his own idiosyncratic and personal reasons for basing it on eighteenth and early nineteenth-century colour theories, but in doing so, he overlooked much of twentieth-century colour science. Its value is in its apparent simplicity but in practice, as the painter and teacher Dr David Briggs points out, it is a difficult way to make sense of colour relationships.[27] In his 2023 study, Kirchner highlighted that this 12-hue diagram neither accurately conveys colour perception, nor does it reflect how colour is mixed in paint.[28]

Figure 5 Johannes Itten, 1961, Colour Wheel, Image courtesy of Bjørn-Ole Schjølberg via the Norwegian Digital Learning Arena, https://ndla.no/en/subject:c345de90-38e7-4cb7-a6c9-a52364ccdc9f/topic:33a9c08a-4fec-4814-b048-5d8232c1f2ee/topic:3bb41186-c441-444b-aa

Instead, I have found Munsell's colour system a more useful framework for mixing paint as well as conceptualising and articulating how colour operates in a painting. Rather than a wheel, it conceives of a three-dimensional system that incorporates colour, the lightness or darkness of that colour, and its greyness and brightness: hue, value, and chroma, respectively. Hue is the 'quality that distinguishes one colour family from another'[29] e.g., red, blue, or orange. Value is how light or dark that colour is, 'the quality by which a light colour is distinguished from a dark one'.[30] And chroma refers to how bright or dull the colour is, its strength or weakness. A neutralised or greyish colour has weak chroma (the colours closest to the central grey scale in Figure 6), while a very bright colour, at the peripheries, has a strong chroma. I have found that these terms provide a reasonably clear way to describe the visual effects of colour and will use them throughout this exegesis.

[26] Eric Kirchner, 'How Itten's Color Diagram Fails to Illustrate Color Mixing of Paints', *Optics Express* 31, no. 15 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1364/OE.492990
[27] David Briggs, '11.3 Traditional and Modern Colour Theory Part 2: Traditional Color Theory Strikes Back!' http://www.huevaluechroma.com/113.php.
[28] Kirchner, 'How Itten's Color Diagram Fails to Illustrate Color Mixing of Paints'.
[29] Jim Long and Joy Luke, *The New Munsell Student Color Set, Second Edition* (New York: Fairchild Publications, Inc, 1996 [First Publish 1946]). 3
[30] Ibid. 4

Exploring Munsell's system by using restricted hue palettes such as ultramarine, burnt umber and cadmium red, trying to make a composition using only two adjacent values, or experimenting with mixing low-chroma colours, was how I had stumbled upon the 'tonal obscurity' that was favoured by the Symbolists. I often paint works in sets of similar hues – groups of pink, blue, or red work are painted together and seem to suggest each other, as can be seen in Figure 7. In Figure 8 this tonal obscurity, or a hazy, dusty atmosphere, is achieved through a limited hue palette of cadmium yellow, yellow ochre, burnt umber, and ultramarine; a restricted range of values; and colours whose chroma is weak. Learning to understand and mix my colours using the Munsell method has helped me develop my own use of colour, and my chilling, muted palettes reflect ideas of immolation and destruction, as will be examined in relation to religion and climate change in Chapters 3 and 4.

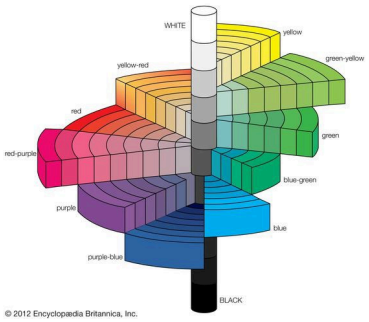

Figure 6 Albert H. Munsell, 1913, Munsell Colour Tree*, Reproduced in the Encyclopedia Brtiannica, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/science/Munsell-color-system*
This diagram shows the interaction between hue (vertical), chroma (horizontal) and value (the central pillar, from white to black) [31]

[31] *Encyclopedia Britannica,* s.v., 'Munsell colour system', 1 Feb. 2018, https://www.britannica.com/science/Munsell-color-system.

Figure 7 Esther Deans, 2023, Studio view of paintings in a similar hue

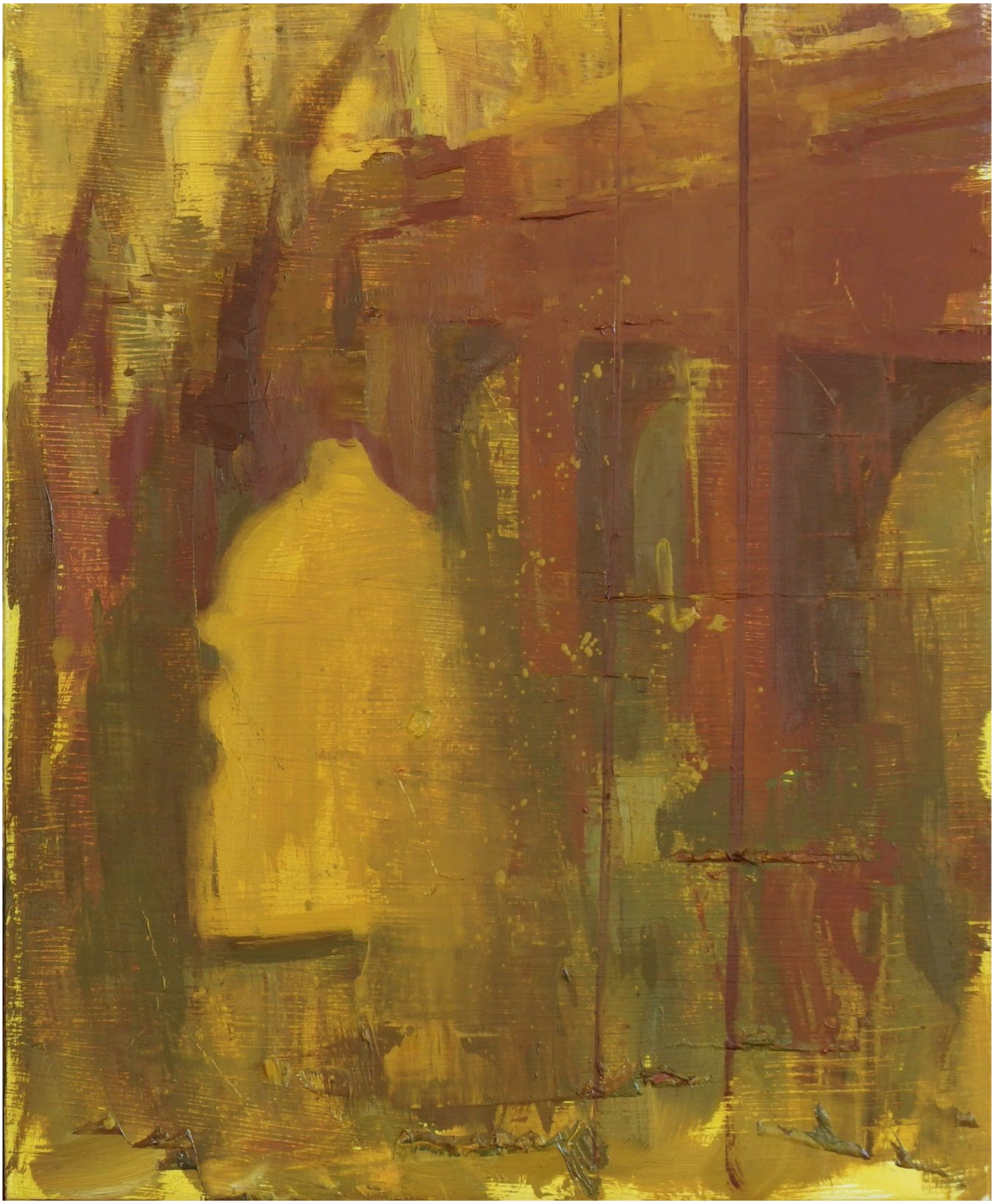

Figure 8 Esther Deans, 2021, I Guess You're Going Home*, Oil on Board, 300x250mm*

Exegesis Structure

I am interested in fragile ecologies: ecosystems within the earth and changing climate; environmental ecologies and our understanding of climate collapse; and the ecosystems of fellowship, of the interactions between individuals in groups of faith or shared concerns. In this sense, it is useful to think of the elements of this exegesis – Symbolism, Intertextuality, environmentalism, and faith – as organisms within an ecosystem: all are dependent upon one another and work together to make up my painting practice. This exegesis will look at events of my life alongside my verbal research and painting practice, and here I outline the contents of each chapter.

The Symbolists, as art historian Petra ten-Doesschate Chu puts it, were a diverse groups of painters who shared two connecting ideas: that the 'material reality of the physical world hid another, more meaningful spiritual reality', and that this reality could be communicated only through art.[32] Chapter 1 will establish the historical connections in my work by addressing the paintings of Odilon Redon, Pierre Puvis des Chavannes, and Ferdinand Hodler, among others. I will investigate the influence of Charles Baudelaire's art criticism on Symbolism, as well as exploring how these painters responded to a time of dramatic political and social change, before examining their echoes within contemporary painting. Researching the Symbolists' philosophies, use of colour, and relationships to nature led into my first body of work, *Glass Houses*, which I will examine in Chapter 2, along with the development of my painting methods and the beginnings of my own body of symbols. These symbols include the use of glass and transparency, shrouds, signs, and abandoned structures, and are conveyed both through the subject matter and my methods of painting. Compositional devices such as a 'frame within a frame' are also employed in a symbolic manner, and the theme of sight, sightlessness and vision is echoed in a variety of ways. This iconography sits alongside examples of contemporary artists working with similar concerns about vision and nature, such as Martin Golland, Angela Lane, Benjamin Moravec, and Jeremy Miranda.

The context of the *Glass Houses* series is our current era of the Anthropocene, and Chapter 3 explores my emotional responses to climate disaster, the relevance of the term Anthropocene, and the ways in which it might challenge ideas of temporality. I had at first been drawn to philosophically pessimistic conceptions of climate disaster, such as Eugene Thacker's world-in-itself and world-without-us – conceptions that analyse human exceptionalism (the sense of humans as 'in control') that my institutionalised religion raised me within. My practice responds to these ideas in different ways, and I am curious about the how Indigenous approaches to time and the earth posited by theorists such as Zoe Todd and Georgina Tuari Stewart might offer counterpoints to human exceptionalism, which I explore in this chapter. I see myself responding to personal fear through aesthetic experiences, so that

[32] Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth-Century European Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), 473.

the climate is woven inextricably into my figurative and landscape painting and Chapter 3 also looks at how contemporary artists might respond to the Anthropocene, using the work of Mariele Neudecker as an example. In Chapter 4 I link the Anthropocene – which I think of as a 'secular Eschatology' – to Evangelical Christianity and the Apocalypse, examining how their eschatological and temporal concerns can be incorporated into my art practice. The idea of hurtling toward a final conclusion is deeply rooted in Christian and monotheistic thinking, and the development of apocalyptic literature will be outlined in this chapter, where I investigate the ramifications of eschatological views of time for myself and for ideas about our responsibility toward the earth.

Chapter 5 discusses how layers of intertextual meaning can add depth to visual arts. I examine the particular potency that aesthetic experiences have, as James K. Baxter describes it, to 'lay bare the destructive and healing realities of our nature'.[33] To assess how literature and visual arts can be interwoven, I discuss the novels of Peter Carey and Margaret Atwood and the photography of Diane Arbus in relation to my work. I then investigate Intertextuality in the practice of contemporary Romanian painter Victor Man, and the glimpses it provides into his own preoccupations. In Chapter 6 I examine Intertextuality in more detail by looking at Southern Gothic literature and the work of Flannery O'Connor, which formed the nexus around which I built the exhibition *Wise Blood* in 2021. In O'Connor's novels there are repeated motifs of sight and perception, and the difficulty of being able to understand the world as someone else sees it, or to see beyond the haze and obstruction of our own perception. These motifs of vision are reflected in my portraits where the person's eyes are looking away, are obscured, or are cropped out of sight. Revelation in the form of fire is also an important motif that repeats through her work, and I have responded to this with images of smoke and disaster, as well as in my method of scrubbing darker layers back to reveal golden underpainting. More than this, there is in her novels a particular atmosphere of violence, a sense of dustiness and faith that I have tried to echo in these paintings.

The final chapter, 'Personal Disaster', describes my own diagnosis of cancer and the ways in which my fears of climate disaster and Apocalypse were turned inward, resulting in a series of work in collaboration with my cousin Julia Deans, who had also experienced cancer diagnosis and treatment. In painting these more interior works, I exposed a new sense I had of myself within a female body, and a new appreciation of the female body in a broader sense as a site of disaster and resistance, as well as a conduit for thinking about the earth as female, linking these back to concerns around climate disaster. In this series, I worked not just with muted tones but played with how the proportions of light and dark affect the emotional reading of a work. These paintings also pushed further into methods of excoriation, re-writing, and re-drawing, looking at the 'disrupted realism' movement in contemporary painting, with its links to historical observational painting.

[33] James K. Baxter, 'The World of the Creative Artist', in *James K. Baxter: Complete Prose*, ed. John Weir (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2015).

My conclusion draws together the ecosystems that, on both macro and micro levels, orbit one another within my practice. It reflects back on how I have built up an iconography as a way of processing or reflecting on collective and private disasters and my own feelings of faith or doubt, discussing the significance of this contemporary symbolism within 21st century painting. The conclusion takes a line from a prose piece by Dylan Thomas – 'What is made of all these tellings?' – to ask what the research has meant for me and what it might bring me to in future paintings and research.

1. Symbolism and Personal Iconography

I have a strong personal intuition about the past: that people do not shift much and that what was true about human interactions in Greek dramas of the 5th-century BC is true in the interpersonal relationships of Southern Gothic fiction and in family relationships now. Likewise, I feel that the history of art does not 'progress' as such; people respond to their contemporary society and learn from the art of the past, but art itself does not 'advance' – I am not a better painter than Rembrandt van Rijn, despite being centuries ahead of him in time. The painter Alex Kanevsky also explains that, for him, painting within history is not a linear progression but rather, 'like a complex fascinating conversation with many people, dead and alive spanning several hundreds of years'.[34]

It is this conversation, back and forth between continents and time periods, that I am interested in, and which has led me to a group of artists in the late nineteenth-century referred to as Symbolists. Symbolism developed throughout Europe during a time of rapid technological change and social upheaval, and many of its artists were preoccupied with traditional religious practice or alternatives to them, and in these aspects it also seemed to echo my own place within a time of social and environmental uncertainty as well as my personal relationship with religious fundamentalism. As the art critic Stephen Preuss argues, 'the period around 1900 vibrated with an energy similar to that of today, with a wild push for progress that would soon be brought up short by the great catastrophe to follow'.[35] This relates to my own feeling about the 2020s; that a European idea of progress is being undermined by a new awareness of ourselves in relation to global time.

This chapter will outline the preoccupations and ideas of Symbolists such as the poet Charles Baudelaire and the painter Odilon Redon, the relationship between the Symbolists and their social and religious world, and Symbolism's relation to twentieth and twenty-first century painting and to my own work. In the following chapter, I will examine more closely the links between Symbolism and my own series of work, *Glass Houses*.

[34] Alex Kanevsky 'Interview with Alex Kanevsky', Interviewed by Neil Plotkin, January 31, 2012, https://paintingperceptions.com/interview-with-alex-kanevsky/
[35] Sebastian Preuss, 'Between Myth and Reality: Victor Man's Existential Painting', *ArtMag* (2014). https://db-artmag.de/en/80/feature/between-myth-and-reality-victor-mans-existential-painting/.
The 'catastrophe' refers to World War One

Nineteenth-Century Symbolism

Figure 9 Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, 1881, The Poor Fisherman*, Oil on Canvas, 1555x1925mm, Musèe d'Orsay, Paris, https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections*

I have long been fascinated by *The Poor Fisherman* by Pierre Puvis des Chavannes (1824-1898) and *Night* by Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918) for their use of realist, figure painting techniques to create something dream-like and unsettling. In *The Poor Fisherman,* des Chavannes flattens the spatial perspective of the water and tilts the picture plane upwards; dull greens predominate, there is very little modelling in the figures and the water feels abstract and unrealistic, creating an eerie scene which seems to hold its own mystical significance. There are no traditional historical motifs; if it is allegorical the meaning is unclear. For Hodler, the repetition of black shapes in his painting *Night* offer 'low, muffled notes of an austere harmony…a transcription of the effects of night'; the ghostly figure of death hovering over the central figure is also draped in black, showing the harmonious centrality of death within life while also 'hinting at the unknown, the invisible'.[36]

[36] Ferdinand Hodler, 'My Present Tendencies', excerpted in Michelle Facos, *An Introduction to 19th-century Art* (Supporting Website), Taylor and Francis, Accessed July 2021, https://www.19thcenturyart-facos.com/artwork/night

Figure 10 Ferdinand Hodler, 1889-1890, The Night*, Oil on Canvas, 1165x2990mm, Kunstmuseum, Bern. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e4/Ferdinand_Hodler_005.jpg*

Symbolism began as a literary movement and was first articulated by the poet Jean Moréas (1856–1910) in his 1886 manifesto,[37] identifying a tendency in recent poems and paintings to emphasise subconscious and mystical ideas, where images of concrete phenomena, scenes of nature or of human action are 'destined to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial ideas'.[38] As ten-Doesschate Chu explains, the term 'Symbolism' is very flexible and has been applied to a broad range of artists; rather than an artistic style or movement it can be defined 'as a state of mind, marked by a desire to find meaning in the commonplace and to find answers to the great questions of life in the inner recesses of the soul'.[39] I have found there seems to be a lack of women represented in the Symbolist movement: although women were by this time allowed into some training establishments, they still faced many boundaries – such as being able to access life drawing from the male model – that would help make imaginative painting possible.[40] This is in contrast to Impressionism, where women such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot were prominent figures. Nicole Myers suggests that Impressionism was 'accessible to artists of all artistic backgrounds', because it tended to focus on the aspects of contemporary life and everyday domestic settings that were permitted to women.[41] Perhaps due to this lack of female practitioners, women are a recurring subject in Symbolism, often portrayed 'alternately as wistful virgins and menacing femmes fatales'[42].

[37] Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2009).
[38] Jean Morèas 'Symbolism: A Manifesto', translated by Akane Kawakami in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger, ed. *Art in Theory 1815–1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing 1998), 1015
[39] Ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth-century European Art*, 475
[40] Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society,* Fifth edition, London: New York, N.Y., Thames & Hudson, 2012.
Women painters within the Symbolist movement would be a fascinating research topic, but is unfortunately beyond the scope of this project, where I have only been able to access male painters.
[41] Nicole Myers, 'Women Artists in Nineteenth-Century France', In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/19wa/hd_19wa.htm (September 2008)
[42] Nicole Myers, 'Symbolism', In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/symb/hd_symb.htm (August 2007)

The Symbolist artists I have focussed on tended to share a sense of melancholy, a kind of nostalgia, and the use of personal, esoteric symbols.[43] In the nineteenth-century, nostalgia was seen as a mental disorder, with theorists such as Sigmund Freud connecting it to hysteria, seeing the inability to cut oneself off from the past as pathological. For the Symbolists, however, it became an 'acceptable, even enviable state of mind', a natural response to modernity;[44] the art historian Phillipe Jullian sees Symbolism and its melancholy as a necessary revolt against the de-humanising effects of industrialisation and urbanisation.[45]

Although they were united in a disillusionment with contemporary society and a rejection of naturalism, the Symbolists were divided in their responses: the 'Light Symbolism' of Puvis des Chavannes, known as Idealism, as opposed to the 'Dark Symbolism' of Hodler or Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) which revels in the darker sides of the unconscious.[46] These Dark Symbolists, known as the Decadents, responded to rapid changes and social upheavals with cynicism, looking to the poet Charles Baudelaire for his embrace of melancholy and an outlook characterised by 'hopelessness, resignation and despair'.[47] They often drew on the imagery and concerns of Gothic fiction, such as the short stories of Edgar Allen Poe. It is these darker and more pessimistic explorations into the unconscious that temperamentally, I feel most drawn to.

Many paintings can be described as dealing in symbols, and there are few paintings that do not depict objects and images that are also signs for interpreted meaning. What differentiates these painters, argues the art historian Julius Kaplan, is that their symbolism no longer relied on the broadly understood language of allegory to convey wider moral, political or philosophical messages. Rather, as in the paintings above, the symbols turn inward to convey or express a hidden, personal meaning, unable to be read by the viewer, but intended to be perceived indirectly, through a correspondence with the emotion of the viewer.[48] As Maurice Denis (1870–1943) wrote, 'the symbol reaches the soul without having to go through the rational mind. Allegory, on the other hand, requires an intellectual effort, a reading and a translation'.[49] The writer D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) explained that while allegory relies on an image that has a definite and clear meaning attached to it, symbolism 'defies all explanation, so does the true myth … symbol and myth do not affect us only mentally, they move the deep emotional centres every time'.[50] It is my hope to make paintings that reach an 'emotional centre' without relying on a commonly understood allegorical or semiotic meaning.

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[43] Henri Dora, ed. *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Michael Gibson, *Symbolism* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2003).
Symbolist creators included the composer Richard Wagner, poets Charles Baudelaire and Stephane Mallarme.
[44] Sharon Hirsh, *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004): 9
[45] Philippe Jullian, *The Symbolists* (London: Phaidon, 1973).
[46] Ibid.; Facos, *An Introduction to 19th-century Art* (Supporting Website).
[47] Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context*.
[48] Julius Kaplan, 'Symbolism', *Grove Art Online* (2003).
[49] Maurice Denis, quoted in Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *The Symbolist Generation: 1870-1910* (Geneva: Editions d'Art Albert Skira S.A., 1990).
[50] D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [first published 1931]), 142

Nature and the City

Figure 11 Figure 12 Fernand Khnopff, 1904, The Abandoned City*, Pastel and Crayon on Paper, 790x690mm, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Belgium, https://fine-arts-museum.be/nl/de-collectie/fernand-khnopff-een-verlaten-stad?artist=khnopff-fernand-1*

The art historian Michael Gibson explained that rather than drawing on nature, the Symbolists tended to look for uncanny subjects within industrialised cities that would free their imaginations from the physical world and could give form to the anxieties and dreams of the community as a whole.[51] He argues that this return to symbol and myth was an attempt to hold on to the sacred forms and traditions of a religion that were being undermined by modernity, providing a way to mourn the loss of an 'indefinable quality they had found'[52] within the cultural systems, values, and meanings of a predominantly Catholic world view. I find Fernand Khnopff's (1858–1921) eerie visions of Bruges, conjured from imagination and memory, a compelling example of this kind of subject (Figure 11). Although I no longer live in a city, I am also interested in subjects that have some relation to the industrialised world, such as the abandoned road signs and solar panels in Figure 12 and Figure 13 – detritus along the highways that cut through tree-less paddocks along what used to be forest and wetland. In retrospect, these paintings from early on in the thesis project are clumsy and unsuccessful. The value over the whole picture is too similar, there are no interesting light and dark shapes, and the hues of pink and blue, intending to elicit dusk and highlight the artificiality of the structures, do not have the connotations I was looking for. These were subsequently painted over, in another example of palimpsest or layering of images mentioned earlier.

[51] Gibson, *Symbolism*. 17
[52] Ibid, 17

Figure 12 Esther Deans, 2020, Signs IV, *Oil on Canvas, 400x300mm (subsequently painted over)*

Figure 13 Esther Deans, 2020, Signs II, *Oil on Canvas, 400x300mm (subsequently painted over)*

The Symbolists and Religion

Rather than an explicitly religious content, many symbolist painters infused their work with a sense of spirituality or mysticism. In her book on mysticism in late nineteenth to early twentieth-century painting, Katherin Lochnan explains that during this time the authority and strength of institutional religions began to wane; the modern European world seemed to be dominated instead by rationalism and secularism.[53] Political instability was generated as imperial powers vied for position in Europe, and the threat of conflict hovered over many European nations. These changes and insecurities left room for the blossoming of more individual spiritual paths and interest in the occult. In the late 1890s Catholicism enjoyed a revival, and particular interest was paid to its mystical and esoteric traditions. I am interested in these aspects of Symbolism, as a painter within a 'macro' time of wider environmental instability and general mistrust in social institutions to contain it, as well as from a personal 'micro' point of view as someone from a religious faith, emerging into a doubt that is darker and more uncertain. I am curious about the ways in which religious revivals operate in society, and the ways spiritual or religious feeling is often invoked as a reaction to materialism or secularism. I believe these nineteenth-century trends can be seen as echoes in both the revivals that my parents were involved with in the 1970s and my own experience of End Times culture in the 1990s and its evolution into contemporary evangelism (this will be covered in more detail in Chapter 3).

Figure 14 Esther Deans, 2020, Signs and Wonders I and II*, (diptych), Oil on canvas, 350x450mm*

[53] Katherin Lochnan, 'Introduction: "Where the Universe Sings" the Mystical Landscape from the 1880s to the 1930s', in *Mystical Landscapes from Vincent Van Gogh to Emily Carr*, ed. Katharine Jordan Lochnan (Munich: Del Monico Books Presel, 2017).

In a series of lectures about religion given in 1901, not long after Khnopff painted *The Night*, the psychologist William James explained that 'our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different'.[54] I was fascinated in this description of consciousness as a screen, and it corresponded to my idea of glass as something that lies between our experience a and 'reality' beyond. In my work, screens, frames and transparency recur, as do monochromatic palettes that suggest a kind of haze or film through which the viewer peers. The development of recurring symbols acts as a kind of personal iconography, in both the art historical and religious sense, but, like the elements within Symbolism, these objects have a personal significance but not a wider, accepted or historical meaning. The method of painting them as if seen through an uncertain miasma also alludes to the uncertainty and difficulty of 'seeing' within a time of eschatological disaster. In *Signs and Wonders* (Figure 14), the title alludes to various descriptions in the New Testament that Jesus and his disciples showed God's favour through 'signs and wonders' but that also, disconcertingly, false prophets might try to use these to trick the faithful.

Charles Baudelaire

As well as his poetry, Charles Baudelaire's art criticism was a major influence on Symbolist painters.[55] Through conversations with the Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), he developed and articulated several qualities he believed painting should have: the search for an 'other world', either religious or artistic, that might exist beyond the material realm; a shared sense of melancholy; a certain nostalgia; an interest in dreams and the subconscious; the development of personal symbols; and an interest in the threads that run between all of the arts.[56] In effecting these qualities, one important element is a sense of obscurity; Delacroix believed that a tonal obscurity or vagueness could create an important sense of mystery, as can illogical or disturbing associations. One of the strongest examples of this approach to painting (although he did not identify himself with the Symbolists) was Odilon Redon who explained that his intention is to arouse in the spectator 'all the evocative power, all the lure of the uncertain, at the very limits of thought'.[57] We can see this in Figure 15, where a limited and dark tonal range evokes a sense of doubt. This painting also makes use

[54] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 149.
[55] Gibson; Kaplan
[56] Henri Dorra, 'Baudelaire, Delacroix, and the Premises of Symbolist Aesthetics' in Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*.
[57] Redon, 'Suggestive Art' in Harrison, *Art in Theory 1815–1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 1064–1065.

of framing: the ghostly image seems to be seen in a mirror, suggesting is it us, the viewer, looking at some shadow version of ourselves.

Figure 15 Odilon Redon, 1890–1895, Reverie*, Charcoal and Chalk on Paper, 495x351mm*
Kröller Müller Gallery, The Netherlands
https://krollermuller.nl/en/odilon-redon-reverie

Figure 16 Odilon Redon, 1894, Closed Eyes*, Oil on Cardboard, 305x285mm*
Art Net, https://www.artnet.com/artists/odilon-redon/les-yeux-clos-wmxf_7NEK1rbsaOYvokQTg2

Figure 17 Steve Cannon, 2022, A selfie of the artist, shared to the #Caneyo group.

This content has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons

Figure 18 Dean Hurley, c.2016, David Lynch*,*
https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/32415/1/why-do-musicians-keep-going-back-to-david-lynch-s-music

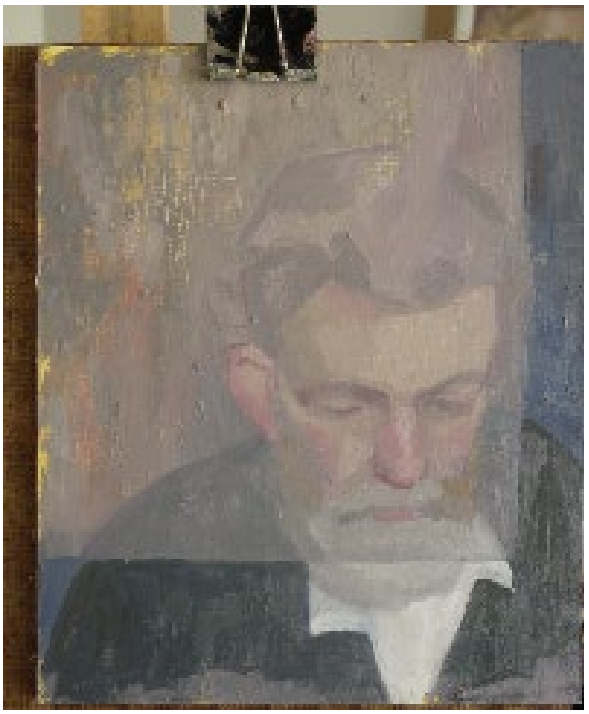
In my work, obscurity is created through limiting value, hue, and chroma. This can be seen in the work below, taken from a selfie posted to the online group #Caneyo (Figure 17; this group will be examined further in Chapter 7), and also influenced by this photograph of the film director David Lynch (Figure 18). Lynch's surreal films with their use of dark hues, velvet fabric, and often inscrutable plots, can be seen as a continuation of the Symbolist tradition, and friends have suggested a correspondence between my paintings and the tone of his works. In the photograph of him, I was drawn to the introspective lowering of his eyes, emphasised by the angle of the image looking down on him, as well as the layers of transparency and reflection that sit between him and the viewer and give an unsettling ambiguity to the image. In *III (The Penitent)t* (Figure 19), initially blocked in using a limited hue palette of ultramarine, burnt umber, cadmium red and yellow ochre, I used a traditional technique for resolving images that are not quite working – after finding myself unhappy with the initial drawing, I scrubbed this back using sandpaper and linseed oil. I then re-drew into this slurry, making use of the softened and dimmed tones (Table 2). The result is a work whose 'obscurity' is effected through a limited tonal and hue range, and which also suggests the idea of framing and reflection picked up in the photograph of Lynch.

Table 2 Iterations of III: The Penitent

First iteration – drawing with basic tonal structure and composition

Second iteration - scrubbing into the first coat with linseed oil and sandpaper

Third iteration - re-drawing into the grey slurry



Fourth iteration - re-painting the face, using the new softened hues

Figure 19 Esther Deans, III (The Penitent)*, 2022, Oil on board, 255x305mm*

Figure 20 Thomas Dewing, 1893, Summer, Oil on canvas, 1283x826mm, Detroit Institute of Arts, USA, https://dia.org/collection/summer-42501

Figure 21 Fernand Khnopff, 1889, Memories (Lawn Tennis), Pastel on Paper, 1270x2000mm (The original title is in English), Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Belgium

In Figure 20 the American painter Thomas Dewing (1851–1938) uses the obscurity of dusk to turn a straightforward painting of women in a landscape into something more dream-like. As we saw in relation to *Night* by Ferdinand Hodler, repetition can also be used to create uncertainty and strangeness. In *Memories (Lawn Tennis)* by Khnopff (Figure 21) the repetition of his sister as separate identities combines with the limited, dusk-like palette to create a sense of unease and mystery. I have come back to this use of repetition and tonal obscurity in works such as *The Green Wallpapered Room*, which I will discuss in Chapter 7. Like the Symbolists, I felt the need to articulate my feelings of doubt in response to the kinds of existential threat aroused by climate disasters and the pandemic but also, as I will investigate in Chapter 3, as a response to the rigid certainty of my upbringing. There is a sense of precariousness I enjoy in a work such as *Just Beyond the Bounds* (Figure 22) where the figurative image has dissolved into doubt, and which has recurred in more recent work (see Chapter 4, p.113), which seems to respond to the idea that history itself is not continuing along any linear path but is making alarming and unpredictable leaps.

Figure 22 Esther Deans, 2021, Just Beyond the Bounds*, Oil on Canvas panel, 250x300mm*

Contemporary and Twentieth-century Symbolists

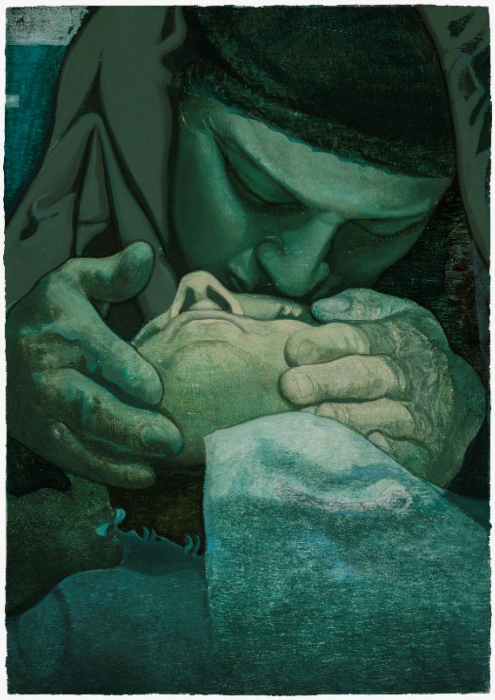


Figure 23 Victor Man, Ombre sul Giallo*, Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 270x190mm © Victor Man, Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone, Photography by Mathias Schormann*

Figure 24 Niklas Asker, 2019, The Shape*, Oil on Board, 400x300mm https://niklasasker.se/artwork-2015-2020.html*

While Symbolism can be seen as a self-described movement at a particular point in time, the aesthetics and concerns raised by these artists continued into the twentieth-century and are still evident in many contemporary paintings now. These artists are linked to Symbolism in their appreciation for nineteenth-century drawing techniques, in their search for the mystical and symbolic, and through figurative paintings that are ambiguous and open to interpretation. This includes the twentieth-century painter Edwin Dickinson (1891–1978),[58] who used a variety of different styles and painting methods to create ambivalent images full of personal symbolism.[59] In a turbulent time many artists, Sebastian Pruess argues, find a kind of solace in the ambiguity and mystery of visual art which

[58] Larry Groff, 'Painting Perceptions: All Things Edwin Dickinson', April 21, 2019, https://paintingperceptions.com/all-things-edwin-dickinson/.
[59] John Yau, 'The Search for Coherence,' *Hyperallergic* 2012, https://hyperallergic.com/46237/the-struggle-for-coherence/

set out ‘at the most to ask questions or evoke moods’.[60] Preuss highlights the contemporary Romanian artist Victor Man (b.1974) and his ‘penchant for the obscure and diffuse, for vague allusions and a detachment from reality’ that connects him to Symbolist painters such as Redon or Eugène Carrière (1849–1906), but which is also found in much contemporary figurative painting.[61] Man often works with restricted palettes in greens and blues, like Thomas Dewing’s painting of dusk, to create these effects.

Figure 25 Andrew McLeod, 2016, Warm Noticing / Contemplating the Cold and Alone*, Oil on Linen, 950x1150mm, Ivan Anthony Gallery*

Figure 26 Edwin Dickinson,1942, Self Portrait in Uniform*, Oil on Canvas, 603x730mm, Babcock Galleries, New York*

Figure 27 Braden Bandel, 2020, Trunkless, Boundless*, Oil on Canvas, 863x609mm https://www.artsy.net/artist/braden-bandel*

Figure 28 Edwin Dickinson, 1945, Self-Portrait in Grey Shirt*, Oil on Canvas, 600x475mm Smithsonian American Art Museum https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/self-portrait-grey-shirt-6809*

[60] Preuss, ‘Between Myth and Reality: Victor Man’s Existential Painting’
[61] Preuss, ‘Between Myth and Reality: Victor Man’s Existential Painting’. This was written in response to Man’s nomination as Deutsch Banks’ Artist of the Year in 2014.

Contemporary Swedish artist Niklas Asker (b. 1979) uses a strong degree of realism in his works but through the subject matter of shrouds or strange, isolated objects evokes a sense of obscurity (Figure 24). The New Zealander Andrew McLeod, 'combines diverse elements' (as Baudelaire suggested) drawn from contemporary life and art history to create symbolic and mysterious composite images (Figure 25). The US artist Braden Bandel (b. 1991) looks at the way nineteenth-century Gothic fiction was used to respond to personal and collective fears during times of rapid change, and how these approaches might be applied to contemporary painting (Figure 27).[62] And the contemporary American painter Mia Bergeron uses moments of luminosity against dark backgrounds to create surreal, mysterious landscapes that link to Symbolism, and to the formal concerns in my *Glass House* paintings in the next chapter.

Figure 29 Mia Bergeron, 2021, Ancestors*, Oil and Wax on Panel, 457x609mm*
Gallery 1261
https://gallery1261.com/art/ancestors-by-mia-bergeron

Figure 30 Mia Bergeron, 2021, Vessel*, Oil on Panel, 1090x1220mm*
Principle gallery
https://principlearttalk.com/2021/08/21/meet-the-artists-of-disrupted-realism-part-1/

[62] Braden Bandel, 'Frankenstein, Ruins and Twilight' (Master's thesis, Rhode Island School of Design, 2020), https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1483&context=masterstheses

Summary

At its worst, Symbolism can be melodramatic and histrionic. The paintings often hover on an uneasy border between something surreal – even absurd – and a genuine reflection of the psyche. Where they might sit on this shaky edge could be up to the perception of the viewer as much as in the individual works themselves. In my own work, I often find myself at this uneasy edge, too. There is also an unsettling vein of misogyny that runs through many of the Symbolists' paintings; women are often depicted as either dangerous sirens or mystical saints and, unlike Impressionism, many of the artists working within Symbolism were male.[63]

Nonetheless, Symbolism has been important in my own paintings: in many ways, it is a feeling or sensibility that unites these artists, rather than the subject or theme of their work, and this can often be seen in my work and in the contemporary artists I am drawn to. The way in which they approached their social world with a sense of melancholy and nostalgia relates to my own paintings, which are often imbued with a gentle melancholia. In their pessimism, too, I relate to the Decadent or Dark Symbolists – I often share their feeling of hopelessness and find in my works some portent of a future disaster. In this, they relate to my spiritual experiences within the church and the vision of Eschatology that I was brought up with. I also relate to their search for meaning beyond organised religion, and the way painting itself, or finding a community of like-minded people can offer a kind of comfort. Many of these aspects, as well as elements of colour palettes, fed into the paintings discussed throughout this exegesis.

[63] Hirsh, *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society*.

2. Glass Houses

> *The Earth has killed itself. It is black, petrified, wizened, poisoned, burst; insanity has blown it rotten; and no creatures at all, joyful, despairing, cruel, kind, dumb, afire, loving, dull, shortly and brutishly hunt their days down like enemies on that corrupted face. And, one by one, those heavenly hedgerow men who were once of the Earth, call to one another, through the long night, Light and His tears falling, what they remember, what they sense in the submerged wilderness and on the exposed hair's breadth of the mind, what they feel trembling on the nerves of a nerve, what they know in their Edenie hearts, of that self-called place. They remember places, fears, loves, exultation, misery, animal joy, ignorance and mysteries, all that we know and do not know.*[64]

In both my practice and my everyday life, I feel the suffocating weight of ecology – the secular Eschatology of climate change – much as I once felt the imminent fear of End Times. In the first year of this thesis, 2021, my ideas about ecosystems and Eschatology merged with the Symbolist painters I was looking at and documentaries I was watching, resulting my *Glass Houses* series. In these paintings, glass is an element that often oscillates between being a literal subject – a mirror or the windowpanes in a glasshouse – and something more metaphorical – a transparency or distortion that sits between the viewer and the natural world,[65] limiting our perception, the 'the filmiest of screens' in James' definition of consciousness above.[66] These paintings draw on the ideas of Symbolism from the previous chapter, as well as ideas of climate change and Apocalypse. The imagery was also embellished through fiction I was reading, and this link will be discussed further in Chapter 5. The following section describes these influences and introduces framing and measurement – two important conceptual and practical methods that have developed throughout the thesis.

[64] Dylan Thomas 'Three Poems' in *Quite Early One Morning: Broadcasts by Dylan Thomas* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1954), 157.
[65] See Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, 'Transparency Literal and Phenomenal', *Perspecta* 8 (1963): 45–54.
[66] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* 149

Preserving Worlds

Many of the paintings in this series were taken either directly or indirectly from ideas and images raised by the documentary *Spaceship Earth*. This tells the story of 'Biosphere 2', a huge series of domes that were built in the mid-1990s in Oracle, Arizona in an attempt to make a completely closed ecosystem as research into both earth systems and with a view to potentially creating ecosystems in space travel.[67] I was intrigued by this project both because of the massive, ambitious scale of it and the nature of the participants: idealistic hippies with backgrounds in theatre, performance, and business along with a handful of scientists, all of whom were backed by the son of a multi-millionaire oil and property magnate. Eight people were closed into the biosphere for two years, surviving interpersonal factions, management changes, and technical issues. Various complications arose within the biodiversity of the domes; there was an infestation of cockroaches, many plant species died, and for a long time the staple diet was bananas. At one point there was a drastic loss of oxygen, causing ideological controversy – should the project go on as intended, risking life and the ecosystem in the interests of science, or should external aid be accepted? In the end, oxygen was pumped in from the outside, saving the health and lives of the inhabitants and their experiment.

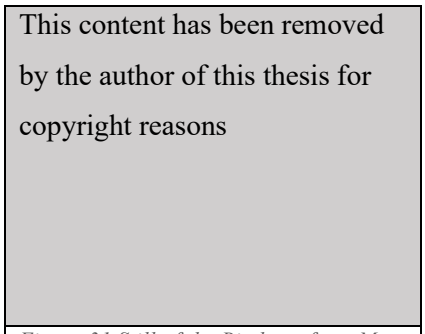


Figure 31 Still of the Biodome from Matt Wolf, Spaceship Earth*, (Impact Partners and Radical Media Production, 2020).*

I thought about the metaphorical qualities of this series of self-enclosed worlds; a dome constructed to protect an artificial world from the reality beyond; the glass as a medium of perception onto an external landscape; a collective vision undermined by bad leadership and technical malfunction; an oasis of exotic plants transported and kept alive in an unsuitable environment; and a scale that seemed large in its scope but also dwarfed by the world it was trying to imitate. On many levels, it represented a fragile ecosystem that recalled both the macro picture of our efforts to fight climate change, and the micro picture of my fragmented and ideologically driven small church.

[67] Matt Wolf, *Spaceship Earth*, Documentary, (Impact Partners and Radical Media Production, 2020).

Figure 32 Jeremy Miranda, 2014, Rose Light Greenhouse*, Acrylic on Wood Panel. 304x406mm, https://thepantechnicon.wordpress.com/2014/06/30/jeremy-miranda/*

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Figure 33 Martin Golland, 2012, Billboard, Oil on Canvas, 1524x1778mm, Private collection, http://www.martingolland.com/photographs

Images of the domes suggested to me other contemporary artists whose work addresses ideas about constraint and the commodification of nature. Benjamin Moravec (b. 1977) is a painter who works within the Romantic landscape tradition and often makes use of a 'frame within a frame' device to explore ideas around our perception of the natural world, our preservation and veneration of it, as well as the way we, as humans, construct it for our own ends: as he says, the 'recurring element is the principle of *mise-en-abyme*' in which 'nothing is real, everything is self-image'.[68] In his works, frames are often used like billboards, offering scenes of one landscape within another. In Figure 35, a frame is draped by dark cloth, connoting a religious shrouding within a dark and obscured landscape. Jeremy Miranda[69] (b. 1980, Figure 32) and Martin Golland[70] (b.1975) also play with the tensions between built structures and an idea of 'nature', often showing glimpses of one world framed and distinct from the world around it (Figure 33). New Zealand artist Angela Lane (b. 1974) draws on Romantic traditions to create landscapes and light effects suggest strange, symbolic portent that have an eerie luminosity, as in *Phenomenon #49*, Figure 34.[71]

[68] Benjamin Moravec, interviewed by Contemporary Art Collectors, n.d., Accessed April 2024, https://www.contemporary-art-collectors.com/artists/benjamin-moravec
Mise-en-abyme, or a picture within a picture, will be discussed further in Chapter 7.
[69] Ekaterina Popova, 'Constructed Environments by Jeremy Miranda', Create Magazine, 2017, https://www.createmagazine.com/blog/jeremy-miranda; Christopher Jobson, 'Artist Jeremy Miranda Explores Memory and Scenes of the Northeast in His Sublime Paintings', Colossal Magazine, 2017, https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2017/05/jeremy-miranda-oil-landscapes/.
[70] Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran, 'Martin Golland: Now, as Before', 2017, https://antoineertaskiran.com/exhibition/2017-martin-golland/?lang=en
[71] Angela Lane, 'Hello Instagram: Angela Lane in Berlin,' Interviewed by Giovanni Garcia, *Two Coats of Paint,* October 22, 2019, https://twocoatsofpaint.com/2019/10/hello-instagram-angela-lane-in-berlin.html

Figure 34 Angela Lane, 2021, Phenomenon #49*, Oil on birch plywood, 145x100mm, http://www.angela-lane.com/*

Figure 35 Benjamin Moravec, 2017, Untitled*, Oil on Board, 1,900x1,500mm https://www.gallerytalk.net/nuernberger-kunstgriff-23-06-29-06-17/*

These parallel the landscape work of Mariele Neudecker whose glass tanks filled with coloured liquid show tiny, preserved landscapes, as in Figure 36. The biosphere experiment and my thoughts around glasshouses also resonated with a recent installation, *AQI2020,* by Alicia Frankovich (Figure 37): this was a large box made of orange-coloured transparent walls in which performers enacted choreographed movements recalling the massive Australian wildfires of 2020.[72] Like Neudecker's tanks, Frankovich's box made me think of something preserved, the remnants of an extinct or dying species displayed behind glass.

[72] Auckland Art Gallery, 'Climate Catastrophe Explored in Performance Art at Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tāmaki', Media Release, 2020, https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/page/climate-catastrophe-explored-in-performance-art-at-auckland-art-gallery-toi-o-tamaki

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Figure 36 Mariele Neudecker, 2019, And Then the World Changed Colour, Breathing Yellow*, Mixed Media Including Glass, Water, Salt, Plastic,685x636x566mm, https://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/2019/february/and-then-the-world-changed-colour-breathing-yellow/*	*Figure 37 Alicia Frankovich 2020,* AQI2020 (2020)*, Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tāmaki (Auckland), https://eyecontactmagazine.com/2020/11/frankovich-performance*

Layered onto these influences were the symbolic elements that the physical construction and function of glass and the biosphere dome suggested. Glass houses can be thought of as metaphors for the ways in which our point of view is constrained; the glass allows us to see but also sets limits on our movement and perception, and it can act as the glass of unknowing that exists between us and others, the veil between what we think we see and what is really there. The industrial struts that hold the glass in place become structures in the painting itself that cut across the design, adding compositional form or contrasting with the organic looseness of the plants. As constructions that preserve artificial ecosystems within a carefully calibrated environment, glasshouses can also be seen as symbolic of fragile institutions and of empire-building, of cults that run out of oxygen. In the works from my *Glass Houses* series, the glass, as in Mariele Neudecker's tanks or Alicia Frankovich's box, takes on an appearance of fog or mist – environmental conditions that change the way we see the world – and there is a tendency toward states where the light is uncertain. This feels like breath on glass, and might suggest, in Baudelaire's phrase, the 'tonal obscurity' of a mystical and symbolic obfuscation. The colour studies in Figure 38 show the development of my colour palette for this series, the interplay between artificial pink wallpaper and 'natural' greens of a forest, and the effect of different value contrasts. Figure 39 shows my working-out of compositions; some of these ideas, such as the two figures in the top left hand corner, were taken directly from the *Spaceship Earth* documentary, while I also tried to come up with shapes and landscapes from my imagination. As in my abandoned road signs, these could be elements left behind in a dystopian wasteland or in abandoned biospheres still full of the life of plants.

Figure 38 Esther Deans 2022, Colour studies

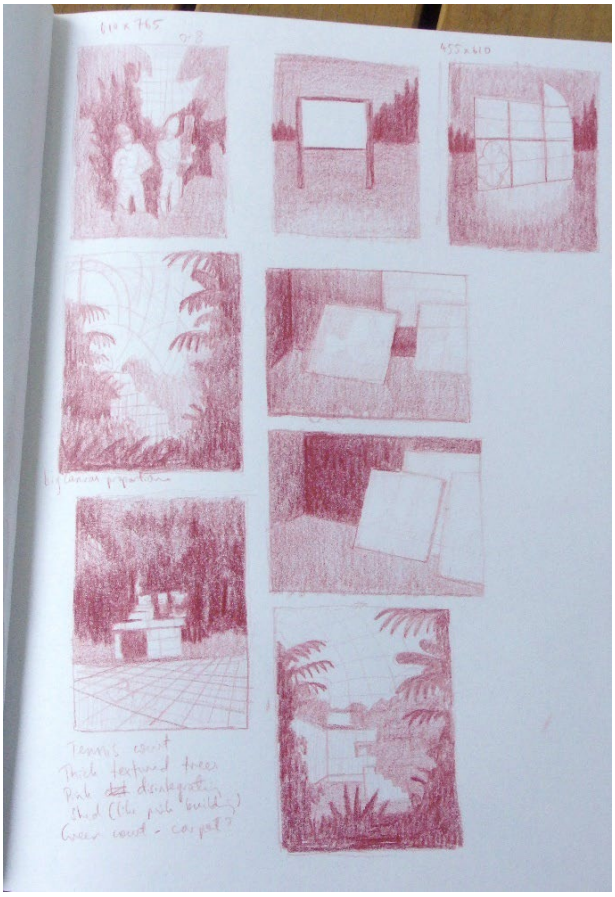

Figure 39 Esther Deans, 2022, Workbook sketches and ideas

The *Glass Houses* Paintings

This series began in the Auckland Domain in 2019, while I was doing my Master's degree. I had gone to the Winter Gardens there several times to make studies and take photographs that I then made into collages to use as compositions for large-scale paintings.[73] Following those paintings, however, was a strange hiatus. My partner and I moved back to my very small rural hometown, where I had not lived for almost twenty years. Bush fires ravaged Australia, the whole world seemed to shut down for the Covid-19 pandemic, and there was the terrible killing of George Floyd that sparked the Black Lives Matter protests in the USA. History, for me, felt upheaved from its predictable flow. Like many during lockdown, I took up running, and ran through Peel Forest every other day, and in a way the forest brought me back to myself. I had grown up on the edges of Mt Huatekerekere, on the property my grandparents had built after the war, in a spacious house nestled in against magnificent old-growth forest and at the foothills of the Southern Alps. I had been longing to return to this forest for years.[74] This series of work came out of these elements: lockdown, my fear of ecological collapse, thoughts about enclosure and the limits of our perception, as well as the force and vitality of plants. In *A Remoter World* (Figure 40), below, the glasshouse is seen from far without. It glows, and we, the viewer, are lost in some kind of half-lit, apocalyptic and barren landscape, as if a tiny figure looking on one of Mariele Neudecker's tanks. Thinking about the landscape around 'Biosphere 2', I hoped for a sense of aridity and barrenness against the complete and secluded world within the glass walls. The title comes from poem 'Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni' by Percy Bysshe Shelley:

> Some say that gleams of a remoter world
> Visit the soul in sleep, that death is slumber,
> And that its shapes the busy thoughts outnumber
> Of those who wake and live.[75]

[73] The Winter gardens comprise two barrel-vaulted, steel, glass and brick Victorian glasshouses that hold a variety of rare and tropical plants. They were built in 1900 and designed by the Auckland architect William Gummer.
Kerryn Pollock, 'City Parks and Green Spaces', *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/city-parks-and-green-spaces ; Margaret McClure, 'Auckland Places: Auckland Central Business District', *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand,* http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/auckland-places/page-10

[74] This Department of Conservation reserve – Peel Forest – is one of the few stands of old-growth podocarp forests left in Canterbury, in the South Island of New Zealand. This small corner was saved by miraculous foresight from being felled in the nineteenth-century and the forest is tangled, dark and ancient. There has always been a thrill for me in thinking that there may still be parts of it where no human has stepped.

[75] Percey Bysshe Shelly, 'Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romanic Period (Volume D),* edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Deidre Shauna Lynch and Jack Stillinger. London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006.

Figure 40 Esther Deans, 2021, A Remoter World*, Oil on Canvas, 300x402mm*

In *Untitled* (Figure 41)*,* I took the abandoned sign from *Signs II* (Figure 13, p.35) and made it into something more like a glowing billboard, set in the barren, maroon landscape from *A Remoter World.* Instead of a more expected lighted advertisement, though, this billboard echoes the jungle ecosystem from *Biosphere II*, or the tropical interior from *World,* Figure 42, below. In these works, I tried something new, which was to have a strong degree of contrast between light and dark tones, with all of the light values and bright hues concentrated within the glass house, wall or billboard. My tendency up until now has been to have muted colours within a limited tonal range. The strong contrasts, as in Mia Bergeron's work in Chapter 1, give a sense of illumination or of artificial light against a dark world.

Figure 41 Esther Deans, 202,1 Untitled*, Oil on Canvas, 400x300mm*

Figure 42 Esther Deans, 2022, World*, Oil on board, 350x300mm*

Framing and Structures

Within a painting, frames can be used as compositional devices to draw the viewer's attention to something, or as echoes of the borders of the canvas, underscoring the illusionistic nature of a representational painting. They can highlight the more philosophical idea of a 'frame': the way we frame, or perceive, particular events and experiences to ourselves and to others.[76] In the painting by Khnopff of his sister (Figure 43), the framing doorway draws our attention to her while also confining the space: the square behind her suggests the door is closed and gives, as in Austen Deans' work in the introduction, a feeling of claustrophobia. The lightened but obscured square behind her head suggests a window that has been covered over, suggesting obscurity but also, in haloing her head, a spiritual enlightenment or awareness. In *Mrs Jeantaud in the Mirror* (Figure 44) by Degas, a mirror is used to open up the space of the picture, and by reflecting the woman's face it adds suggestions of self-perception and knowledge.

Figure 43 Fernand Khnopff, 1887, Portrait of Marguerite Khnopff, *Oil on Canvas Mounted on Wood, 966x745mm https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/portrait-of-marguerite-khnopff/fernand-khnopff/47927*

Figure 44 Edgar Degas, c.1875, Mrs Jeantaud in the Mirror, *Oil on Canvas, 700x840mm, Musee D'Orsay, Paris https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/madame-jeantaud-au-miroir-1146*

[76] Ward, 'The Frame: The Window as Optical Device or Trompe L'oeil'.

In *Window/Wall II* (Figure 46), the frame within the painting gives a surreal kind of window or the fragment of a glasshouse, showing a separate world within it. As the title implies, it is ambiguous whether we are seeing a glowing wall or looking through a window to some other reality. Figure 45 was painted from a still in the film *Persona,* by Ingmar Bergman, and in it the painted frame around the figure acts as a distancing device from the viewer, but also alludes to the mediation of the screen between audience and film.[77] This was painted over the solar panels from Figure 12, p.35 and the pink from that earlier painting can be seen through the woman's face, but here the tonal shapes make a more unified and successful whole, although this painting has also subsequently been painted over. In these paintings, the frame is intended to lock the viewer out of the reality of the image in some way, performing both a compositional function and a symbolic one. *Windows II* (61Figure 47*)* takes this further, and, as in Moravec's work, the 'screen' becomes an idea about how the natural world is imagined and created. Framing and structural devices are also used as a drawing method, and I will examine this in more detail in the next section.

Figure 45 Esther Deans, 2021, Persona (after Igmar Bergman)*, Oil on Canvas, 456x355mm*

[77] *Persona*, directed by Ingmar Bergman (AB Svensk Filmindustri, 1966), Kanopy.

Figure 46 Esther Deans, 2021, Window/Wall II, Oil on canvas, 765x510mm

Figure 47 Esther Deans, 2021, Windows II*, Oil on Canvas, 405x555mm*

Measurement as Observation

In drawing from life or transferring images from photographs, I use a measuring technique that my grandfather taught me. Austen Deans graduated from Ilam School of Art (University of Canterbury) in 1937 and was taught by Colin Lovell-Smith, Evelyn Page, and Archibald Nicoll – just a year or two below Rita Angus. His training was rigorous and emphasised skills in observation, as well as attention to colour mixing, tonal compositions, and drawing. The measuring technique I learned from him involves holding a pencil at arm's length to measure the relative distance between objects and the angles of lines, conceiving of the image as points on a flat plane (rather than conceptualising the figure using perspective), as shown in this illustration (Figure 48) from Dora Norton's instruction book, published in 1910.[78]

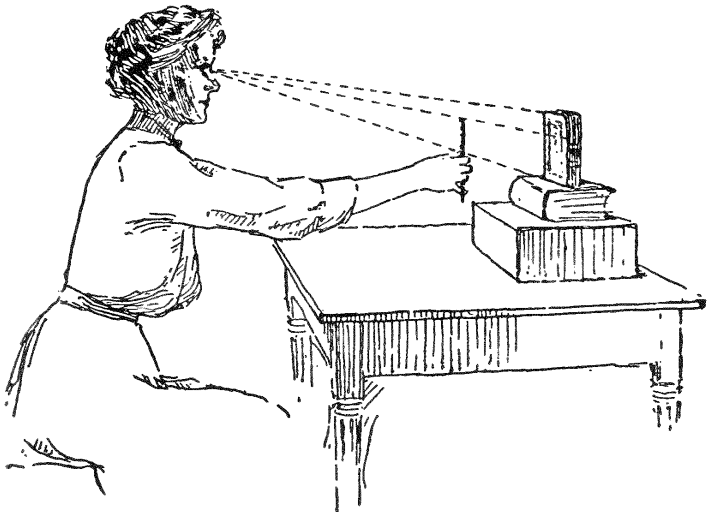

Figure 48 Dora Norton, Illustration showing how to optically measure and object for drawing, in Freehand Perspective and Drawing

In my grandfather's paintings these measurements would be part of the initial observational drawing that would then get painted over. Hodler mentions what could be a similar process of observational drawing in the nineteenth-century, explaining that the painter must divide, 'with all the mathematic accuracy he can muster, the part of the surface he wishes to render into geometric planes'[79] and emphasising the importance of measuring and observation as part of the overall design of an image. There is a strand of twentieth-century observational painting that takes this method further and makes the process of perception a part of the subject of the work: this can be referred to as Perceptual

[78] Dora Norton, *Freehand Perspective and Drawing* (Forgotten Books, 2013 [Originally published 1910]).
[79] Ferdinand Hodler, 'The Painter's Decalogue (1874–1875)', in Peter Selz, *Ferdinand Hodler* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1972), p.111

painting. Perceptual painting entails working directly from observation and nature, paying attention not just to reproducing the object before us, but also to the act of perceiving, observing and drawing.[80] The Perceptual Painters group states: 'Observation is not an end but rather a beginning point for an emotional, formal, or imaginative statement of exploration'.[81] The illusion of things is only partially a goal, and in creating this illusion, 'subjectivity, shifting focus, and temporality are also vital as indicators of life, sensation, and thought in the artwork'.[82] A Perceptual painting approach has echoes in the work of many figure painters today, including those who John Seed has termed 'Disrupted Realists' (this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7). William Coldstream (1908–1987) promoted this method of drawing as a teacher at the Slade School of Art, UK, where he taught from 1949−1975. As he worked, he would hold his brush out to record the space between points on the figure, marking these on the canvas as he went, often colour-coding them and leaving them behind in the final painting, creating a 'complex system of horizontal and vertical marks forming a notational web around and across the subject' (see, for example, the vertical and horizontal marks that make up the portrait in Figure 49).[83]

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Figure 49 William Coldstream, n.d., Self Portrait (close up) (Accessed July 2022) https://alchetron.com/William-Coldstream

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Figure 50 William Coldstream, c.1946, Still Life with Statue, Oil on Board, 584x381mm

[80] Anna Fine Foer, 'Honouring Our Mentors' February 12, 2015, *Bmore Art*, Review of *A Lineage of American Perceptual Painters* Exhibition, The Mitchell Gallery, St John's College, Annapolis, https://bmoreart.com/2015/02/honoring-our-mentors.html
[81] Although this group seems to have been disbanded, they included painters such as David Campbell and Brian Rego. Quoted in Larry Groff, 'Perceptual Painter's Group', Perceptual Painting, July 24, 2009, https://paintingperceptions.com/perceptual-painters-group/
[82] Ballou, 'Certain Densities in Perceptual Painting'
[83] Tim Wilcox, ed. *The Pursuit of the Real: British Figurative Painting from Sickert to Bacon* (Manchester: Lund Humpries, 1990),13; See also: Colin St John Wilson, *The Artist at Work: On the Working Methods of William Coldstream and Michael Andrews*, ed. 2008 (Hampshire, UK: Lund Humphries).

I often use this measuring technique when drawing from life or translating photographic images onto the canvas. In Figure 52 (*A Many Voiced Vale*, whose title was also taken from Shelley's poem) my reference source was a photograph by Diane Arbus, where the aim was not to translate her image directly, but to take the expression from the source material, a feeling of unquiet introspection, and retain a believable sense of solidity in the re-imagined face (the source photograph. The measuring technique was used to create accurate proportions in the face and can be seen in the final painting as I made decisions on the placement of the ear and hairline. There is something curiously satisfying in this way of measuring the relations between things. It is surprising and somehow reassuring to find that, for example, the space from ear to nose is the same as from nose to jaw or that the gap between the eyes and chin is half of the head, of a quarter of the distance between the crown of the head and the chest. This approach gives a visual response to a sense of underlying coherency and correspondence to the world and the relationship between things. The act of perceiving, too, of paying such close attention to these correspondences that all other thoughts disappear, is mediative and consuming. It can be disconcerting, though, to step back and find, after all, the painting still does not look like reality.

Figure 51 Diane Arbus, 1956, Woman with Headless Dummy, Gelatin-Silver Print, 133,208mm
https://www.artsy.net/artwork/diane-arbus-woman-with-a-headless-dummy

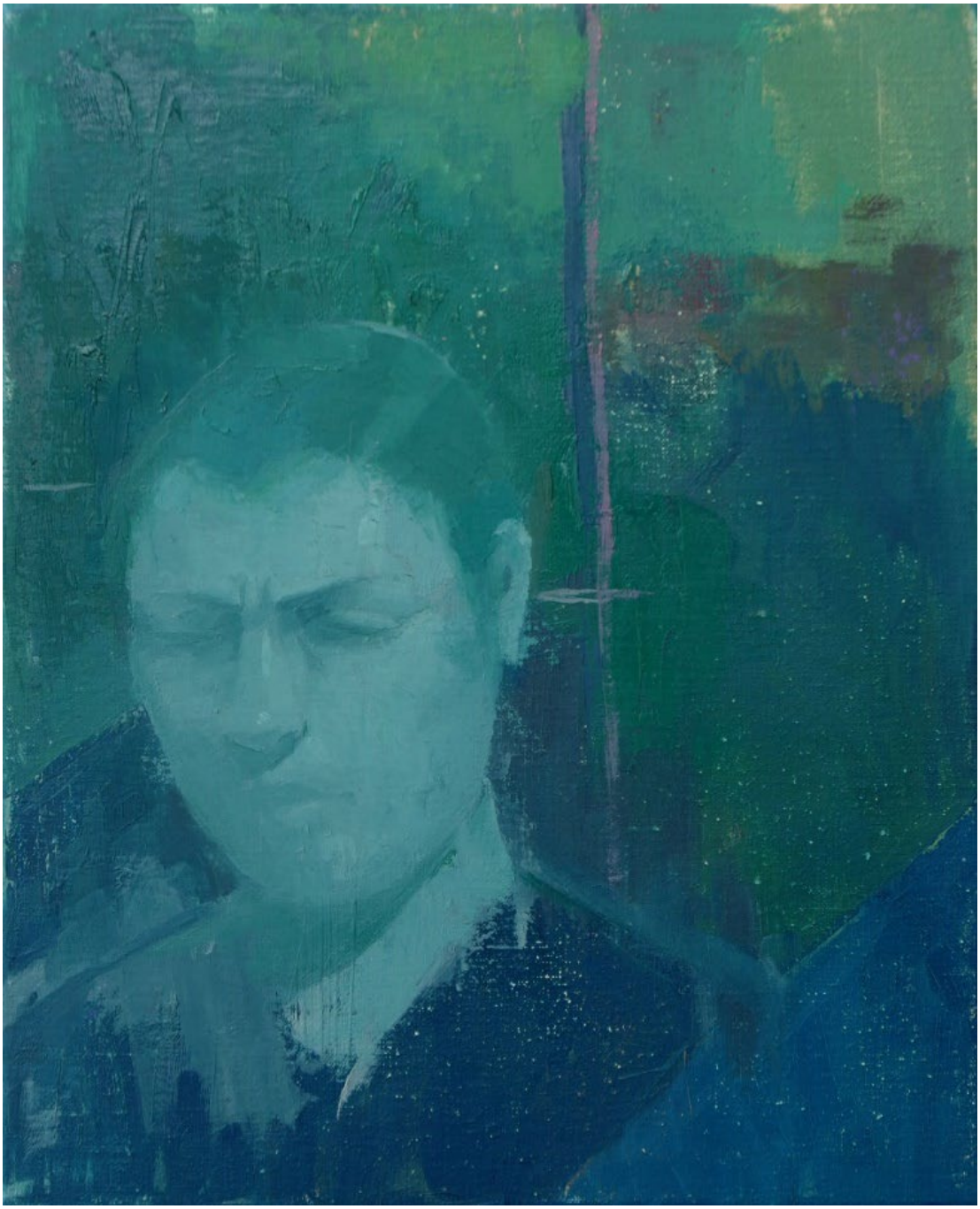

Figure 52 Esther Deans, 2021, The Many-Voiced Vale*, Oil on Canvas, 350x300mm*

Figure 53 Esther Deans, 2021, Garden Folly*, Oil on Canvas, 710x910mm*

Another kind of measuring is the use of lines, made with a ruler, to plot out linear perspective. This is a kind of architectural approach and a way of creating the illusion of a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional space. The room in *Garden Folly* (Figure 53) was constructed in this way, and traces of these lines can be seen in the final canvas where parallel lines recede into vanishing points on the horizon. In other works, however, remnants of these lines are used as indications of decay or disintegration, in a sense subverting their original purpose. In Figure 54 and Figure 55, landscape images of a forest at dusk, a degree of abstraction gives ambiguity to the subject or purpose of the painting, in a way that Baudelaire might have suggested. In these, the horizontal marks were added after the central image was painted, rather than being integral to its structure. They could be seen as the fragments or signifiers of architectural structures, although the tonal contrast also suggests the lines of sights within a gun.

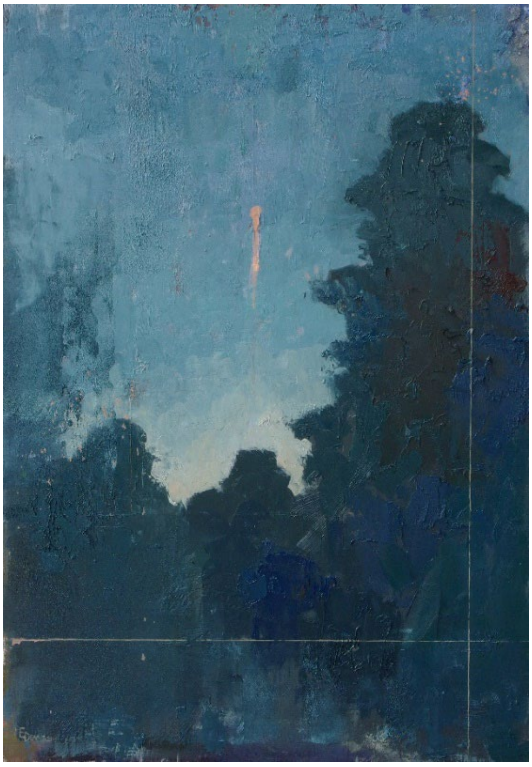

Figure 54 Esther Deans, 2021, Screen II*, Oil on Board, 603x400mm*

Figure 55 Esther Deans, 2021, Screen I*, Oil on Board, 510x405mm*

Summary

In the quotation at the start of this chapter, the poet Dylan Thomas describes his vision for a series of poems. In this imaginative telling of the germination of the poem, deceased souls look down upon a kind of apocalyptic world where 'the earth has killed itself'.[84] They tell themselves about 'what they sense in the submerged wilderness' 'of that self-killed place', remembering their fears, loves, griefs and joys, 'all that we know and do not know'.[85] It was that kind of world that I was thinking of in my glasshouses, and in the next chapter I look at different ways in which we can view the idea of an Apocalypse or a 'self-killed place'.

Many of my paintings are built up from an attachment to history, and I have returned frequently to painting the old family home, Moven, in which my grandfather grew up, that was damaged in the Christchurch earthquakes. I did so again in *Garden Folly*, drawing on Romantic landscape traditions, with their fascination for ruins, to examine the movement between how something *was* and how it *is*. In this work, an imagined or remembered room is depicted as a ruin, disappearing back into nature. Here the soft, blueish landscape that was contained in my images of glasshouses becomes the dominant world and it is the traces of humans that are fragmenting and decaying. The title suggests a kind of garden of Eden, some idea of a world-in-itself that has excluded or overcome the human world. The painted frame is only referred to as a hint at the side, reminding us that this, too, is something 'framed' and contained by our perspective. In this work, the paint itself and the act of painting, re-drawing, re-framing seems to be taking over the explicit subject of the image. This painting is a reminder to myself that nothing is itself; things as they are constantly shift beyond us: history is a series of complex conversations weaving through time and space. The beautiful house is lost in an earthquake; society is brought to a halt by a virus; the forest as we know it is lost to climate change; the small losses scale up to larger ones and the human world is reminded of how small it is within the larger spirals of earth's history.

[84] Thomas, 'Three Poems' in *Quite Early One Morning: Broadcasts by Dylan Thomas*, 156.
[85] Ibid.

3. Making Art in the Anthropocene

Figure 56 Katie Paterson, 2013, Fossil Necklace*, 170 Carved Rounded Fossils, Strung on Silk, Photo © MJC. Exhibition view Kettle's Yard..*

In the sculpture *Fossil Necklace* by Katie Paterson (b. 1981), a long necklace made of 170 beads, 'a string of worlds'[86] is hung in the corner of the exhibition space as if suspended magically and softly illuminated (Figure 56). Looking more closely at it, each bead is carved of fossilised material and seems its own tiny planet. A wall chart informs us that each bead represents a major event in the evolution of life through geologic time, and many are made from the evidence of cataclysms such as volcanoes and meteorites, or from major shifts in life like botanical emergence and continental drift. They are strung together chronologically from the first single cell organisms to the current era. The last era, the Holocene – the period that saw a temperate climate bring about the development of agriculture and human 'recorded history' – is represented by only five beads. Paterson's installation draws our attention to the largeness of earth's time scale and the smallness of human history – something as 'macro' as eons of time is reduced to the 'micro' of beads one could wear around one's neck. It jars us into the uncomfortable realisation that, despite our smallness, we are orchestrating changes within these earth systems equivalent to the asteroid that destroyed the dinosaurs.[87] The mild and amenable Holocene is being overwhelmed by the human-induced disasters of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene – the existential doubt it induces, the uncanny feeling of existing as a small human within a vaster time scale, or as a small human within a voracious species – is the broader context in which I exist as a painter. Like the Symbolists creating art within an environment of political and social uncertainty, my paintings respond to this immediate fear, as well as to the associations it has to my religious upbringing. Over the course of this research, my thinking about the meaning of climate change has broadened out: I began with Eugene Thacker's descriptions of a 'world-in-itself', but by looking at this from the point of view of several Indigenous scholars, I have come to an understanding of the earth's body as intimately interconnected with ours. This chapter will outline first what the Anthropocene is and what its philosophical ramifications might be, including its relation to religious Eschatology and to Indigenous experiences. It will also look at how the Anthropocene might complicate notions of time. I then address how art and aesthetic experience can respond to these overlapping concerns, examining the work of two artists who occupy similar territory to me, Star Gossage and Mariele Neudecker.

[86] Katie Paterson, 'Fossil Necklace', 2013, https://katiepaterson.org/artwork/fossil-necklace/
[87] I saw this installation within the exhibition *All That Was Solid Melts*, curated by Juliana Engberg, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2021, https://rfacdn.nz/artgallery/assets/media/melts-tabloid-design-reference-do-not-print.pdf

Defining the Anthropocene

The term *Anthropocene* was coined by the chemist Paul Crutzen and his collaborator, Eugene Stoermer, a marine scientist, who posited it as a new geologic era (distinct from the period of the Holocene), reflecting the degree of human impact on the geology and ecology of earth.[88] Crutzen elaborated on the term in a *Nature* article in 2002, which gives a litany of the catastrophes that are now common knowledge: an increase in the pace, scope, and severity of environmental degradation, habitat and species, and disastrous changes in climate and sea levels brought about by carbon emission.[89] The Anthropocene Working Group, a multi-disciplinary group who were brought together to assess the validity of the term as a geologic concept, define it as 'a time interval marked by rapid but profound and far-reaching change to the Earth's geology, currently driven by various forms of human impact'.[90] It is a term that has gained wide social, academic, and political traction as an expression of the extent of human impact on biodiversity and natural earth systems.

The Anthropocene Working Group spent nearly 15 years debating the term's meaning and a precise start date, but in fact the term has recently been voted down as a new geologic epoch by the governing committee within the International Union of Geological Sciences. The group had proposed that the epoch be dated from the mid-twentieth-century, when nuclear bomb tests sent fallout around the world [91] but many of its members argued that this did not cover enough of humans' influence on geological time.[92] Other suggested dates include the neolithic agricultural revolution in the fertile crescent, around 11,000 years ago (the second-to-last bead in Paterson's necklace); and the eighteenth-century beginnings of the industrial revolution, all of which have left noticeable traces in the geologic record.[93] Feminist cultural critic Heather Davis and Mètis[94] scholar Zoe Todd wrote a paper for the Working Group arguing for the Anthropocene to be dated from 1610, the beginnings of European colonialism in the Americas. The exchange of plants and animals between Europe and the Americas that began at this point altered the ecosystems so radically that the impact on the biomass is visible in the geologic layer. Moreover, horrifically, the genocide of peoples of the Americas and the subsequent re-growth of forest had a measurable impact on carbon dioxide, as can be seen in the

[88] Paul. J. Crutzen and E. F. Stoermer, 'The "Anthropocene",' *IGPB Global Change Newsletter* Vol 41, May (2000): 17–18.
[89] Paul J. Crutzen, 'Geology of Mankind', *Nature* Vol 415, no. 6867 (2002): 23-23, https://doi.org/10.1038/415023a
[90] C. Soriano, 'On the Anthropocene Formalization and the Proposal by the Anthropocene Working Group'. *Geologica Acta*, 18, no.6, (2020,): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.1344/GeologicaActa2020.18.6;
Jan Zalasiewicz et al., 'The Working Group on the Anthropocene: Summary of Evidence and Interim Recommendations', *Anthropocene* 19 (2017): 55–60. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ancene.2017.09.001.
[91] Raymond Zhong, 'Geologists Make It Official: We're Not in an "Anthropocene" Epoch', *The New York Times,* 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/20/climate/anthropocene-vote-upheld.html#:~:text=Geologists%20Make%20It%20Official%3A%20We,Epoch%20%2D%20The%20New%20York%20Times.
[92] Zhong, 'Are We in the "Anthropocene", the Human Age? Nope, Scientists Say', *New York Times,* 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/05/climate/anthropocene-epoch-vote-rejected.html
[93] Helmuth Trischler, 'The Anthropocene: A Challenge for the History of Science, Technology, and the Environment', *NTM Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine* 24, no. 209–115 (2016), https://doi.org/10.1007/s00048-016-0146-3
[94] *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v., 'Métis', 23 June, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Metis-people
The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines Mètis as an 'indigenous nation of Canada that has combined Native American and European cultural practices since at least the 17th-century,'

geologic layer corresponding with this time period. In 1492 there were around 54–61 million people in the Americas; by 1650 this had dropped to just 6 million.[95] There are also arguments about the term itself; that it places human actors too squarely in the midst of events, only encouraging our hubris as the 'dominant species'.[96] Another concern is that the use of 'Anthropos' implies that the human species as a whole are to blame, whereas the most dramatic increases in greenhouse gases were caused by a relatively small number of wealthy countries and were the direct result of imperialist and capitalist practices.[97]

While the committee has so far been unable to unilaterally agree on the parameter of the term as it currently stands,[98] it is likely to continue being widely used as an 'invaluable descriptor of human impact on the earth system'.[99] For the purposes of this thesis, I use the term as an important way to understand the current climate disaster that humanity, particularly Western capitalism and colonialism, has caused and is grappling to respond to. In trying to understand my own pessimism and doubt, and my relation to the natural world or the physical one I was trying to see, I was at first attracted by Eugene Thacker's concept of the world-without-us.

[95] Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene', *ACME: An international Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4 (2017), https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1539
[96] Trischler, 'The Anthropocene: A Challenge'.
[97] Zoe Todd, 'An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: "Ontology" Is Just Another Word for Colonialism', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016), https://doi-org/10.1111/johs.12124; 'Indigenizing the Anthropocene', *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* 241 (2015). https://prod-content.ocean-archive.org/private/eu-central-1:12102e0b-bb96-42f0-9d3c-1df78ee120b2/418b7876-0b02-4d53-b0c4-38683f95c14b/c1349980-f80b-11ea-be6d-85aa89dfecf3-7-Todd,-Zoe,-Indigenizing-the-Anthropocene.pdf
[98] Zhong, 'Are We in the "Anthropocene", the Human Age? Nope, Scientists Say'.
[99] 'Geologists Make It Official: We're Not in an "Anthropocene" Epoch'.

The World-Without-Us

Thacker explores philosophical pessimism (which many of the Dark Symbolists were also attracted to) as an appropriate response to climate change, and he asks how Western civilization has, in the past, understood itself in relation to the cataclysmic and in relation to the non-human world.[100] He argues that Western thought has had three general approaches to an explanation of the forces beyond the human: mythological, theological, and existential. Whether the causes of chaos were powerful deities, responses to evil, or natural forces explained scientifically, Western thought has tended to incorporate the non-human world into a human-centric interpretation of events. This non-human world seen from an anthropocentric viewpoint, Thacker terms the *world-for-us*. This is the world that is part of, but separate from, the human: the world that we give meaning to, that we might feel alienated from, but that we understand in relation to the human. The world that resists this, that ignores our interpretations, he calls the *world-in-itself*. This was the world that my grandfather often attempted to paint. His paintings were not intended as perceptual works about his experiences in nature – they are paintings of nature itself, as if Austen Deans could be entirely objective, barely there except to record.

Thacker argues that the world-in-itself, built up from knowledge of the world as object gained from sciences such as geology, archaeology, or palaeontology, despite our individual actions, is increasingly a world of natural disasters, pandemics, and changing climates. It has become increasingly unthinkable and incomprehensible to the human world, despite being deeply altered by it. Thacker argues that to confront the idea of our place on this planet is to 'confront an absolute limit in our ability to understand the world at all'[101] Thacker suggests that instead of these we try to think of the world as a planet, in a kind of cosmic pessimism: a world that is neither antagonistic nor neutral towards us but a *world-without-us*, one planet among many others in a vast solar system.

This kind of world, one in which humanity might not exist, is addressed in David Wallace-Wells' article 'The Uninhabitable Earth', which was expanded in 2019 into a book of the same title. In asking why we find climate change so difficult, psychologically, to accept, he writes that what we are experiencing is a kind of mythical view of time, 'a feeling of history happening all at once'.[102] This description echoes some of my own thoughts following the Covid-19 pandemic – an upending of history and my ordinary understanding of time; or the disconcerting feeling of Paterson's fossil necklace – history as huge and small at once.

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[100] Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*
For his discussion of philosophical pessimism, see Thomas Dekeyser, 'Pessimism, Futility and Extinction: An Interview with Eugene Thacker', *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 7/8 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420907127.
[101] Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet,* 1
[102] David Wallace-Wells, 'The Uninhabitable Earth'. *New York Magazine* (July 2017), https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html.

Figure 57 Esther Deans, 2023, Glass House IV*, Oil on Canvas, 300x350mm*

When my grandfather and I went plein-air painting together, he would often remove traces of human intervention in his paintings – recording the landscape faithfully but excluding roads, powerlines, fences, or houses. He often tried to access the 'world-in-itself' as if history had not happened. My landscapes flip his approach over and instead focus on the detritus, the abandoned after-effects of industrial life on barren landscapes, as in the abandoned structure from *A Remoter World* (Figure 40, p.55). In Figure 57, it is as if the glasshouse has been abandoned or is alive with nuclear fall-out, in some post-human landscape such as that depicted strikingly in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, where an unnamed catastrophe has destroyed civilisation and much of the natural world.[103] Ideas about how we think of and 'picture' our ecosystems occur in *Windows I* (Figure 58) and *Windows II* (Figure 47) where signs of nature (the images of forest and fire that I had used elsewhere) become images that lose their meaning on repetition. In many of these paintings,

[103] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

human life is absent, and the objects appear to be traces of human action against a human-less landscape. Through the process of this thesis however, I began to find concepts of world-in-itself and the world-without-us nihilistic and unhelpful; they felt more like ways of avoiding or negating our responsibility, a metaphorical throwing our hands up in the air. I wondered if there were other ways of seeing the earth in relation to the human. As I read more around Indigenous ideas of time and history, and Indigenous responses to the Anthropocene, I felt a corresponding broadening in my own response to as tauiwi, or a non-Indigenous New Zealander working alongside and in acknowledgement of Tangata Whenua, or the Indigenous people of Aotearoa.

Figure 58 Esther Deans, 2021, Windows I*, Oil on Canvas, 460x610mm*

The Anthropocene and Time

In highlighting humans as a species with geological agency, Greg Garrad argues that the Anthropocene 'asks that we think and imagine on a wholly different scale, vastly more global in scope, vastly more historical in extent'.[104] There is a need to see ourselves not just in relation to 'recorded history' (roughly the last 10,000 years) but to 'deep history' – our ancient past as illustrated by the *Fossil Necklace*. Many Indigenous authors argue that not only are many of these concepts about history, time, and ecology that the Anthropocene requires embedded within Indigenous culture, they have been threatened with extinction along with the ecologies and natural systems that we all depend on.[105]

From the seventeenth-century onwards, according to the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, there has been a tendency in Western thinking to see human history as distinct from natural history, and to believe that changes in geography and climate were so slow-moving as to have little impact on society.[106] This concept of temporality, which Strozier terms 'Cartesian time', tends to believe that history is made of gradual shifts in response to events; that time is 'chromatic, evenly spaced, regular and entirely predictable'.[107] In contrast with this, climate change and Eschatology scholars ask for a radical re-evaluation of the interaction between 'human history' and the physical earth, because we now have agency equivalent to the kind of sudden and cataclysmic interventions once belonging to an all-powerful God.[108] This is a sense of time more equivalent to eschatological time, in which a rupture in existence is imminent. Davis and Todd point out that it is exactly this seismic, cataclysmic break that so many Indigenous cultures experienced within colonisation, nearly destroying their own concepts of time while allowing colonial cultures the luxury – or maybe the delusion – of believing time to be an orderly, linear, logical progression.

Siena Stubbs, a Yolnu woman from the Northern Territories in Australia, writes about the concept of time within her language. When the Yolnu sing, they use a tense that does not exist in English – rather than past or future it conveys an action that has happened, that is happening and that will happen, simultaneously. It conveys a sense that the future exists within the past, and the past exists within the present: 'Our ancestors were here, are here and will be here, waiting for the tide to go out so the fish can be caught'.[109] Similarly, Māori educator and academic Georgina Tuari Stewart

[104] Greg Garrard, 'Introduction: Imagining Anew: Challenges of Representing the Anthropocene', *Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2014): 2, https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615451
[105] Davis and Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene'.
[106] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. Winter (2008): 197–222, https://doi.org/10.1086/596640
[107] Charles Strozier, 'The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Fundamentalist Mindset', *New England Journal of Public Policy* 29, no. 1 (2017), https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol29/iss1/7
[108] Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses'.
[109] Siena Stubbs, 'The Past Is in the Present Is in the Future', *National Gallery of Victoria*, no. 11 June (2021). https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/the-past-is-in-the-present-is-in-the-future-the-knowledge-practice-and-tradition-of-the-yambirrpa-fish-traps/

describes Māori sense of time being envisioned as a spiral shape, and intimately connected with whakapapa – a word which describes genealogy but which also refers more broadly to our interconnection with people, places, and objects.[110] This spiral form of an unfurling fern frond (a koru), describes an idea of growth and development occuring over time, 'a notion of time as cyclic and circular'.[111] In Te Reo Māori (the Māori language), the phrase 'i mua' means 'before' as in the past but also 'before us' in the sense of being physically in front of us. 'I muri' means 'after' in time and physically 'behind us'.[112] In this way, Māori visualise the past as in front of them; something that can be seen, while they walk backward into the future, because it cannot be seen: time and space are unified, 'the ancestors can collapse the space-time continuum to be co-present with their descendents'.[113] This approach to time as neither continuous and linear, nor as subject to massive change, offers a gentle alternative to both Cartesian time and eschatological time, wrapping us in the secure spiral of a constant heritage. At the same time, the sense of personal connection to the past and to 'deep history' offers us a way of thinking of our actions in terms of their impact on the planet. These Indigenous conceptions of time, though, are fragile within the era of the Anthropocene.

[110] Georgina Tuari Stewart, '"When the Time Is Right"… In the Māori World', in *Ethics and Time in the Philosophy of History*, ed. Natan Elgabsi and Bennett Gilbert (Bloomsbury Publishing, ProQuest Ebook Central, 2023): 195–209.
[111] Ibid., 198
[112] Ibid., 198.
[113] Ibid., 198

Time and Scale in Figurative Painting

Figure 59 Niklas Asker, Silentium*, 2018, Oil on Board, 990x5,450mm https://niklasasker.se/artwork-2015-2020.html*

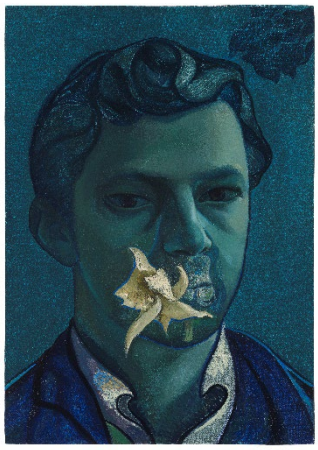

***Figure 60** Victor Man, 2016,* Self Portrait at Father's Death*, Oil on Canvas Mounted on Wood, 270x190mm, © Victor Man, Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone*

As we saw in Chapter 1, the social upheavals and 'progress' of nineteenth-century industrialisation caused a tide of uncertainty and pessimism even within European society, which artists responded to by delving into their own subconsciousness and dreams. The work of Victor Man and Niklas Asker occupy a dark space somewhat removed from their temporal contemporaneity in a way that echoes the sense of the past, and the art of the past, being with us now. In their approach to figurative painting, they seem more closely linked to early renaissance work, viewed in dimly lit churches, than to modernity; as the art critic Alessandro Rabottini explains, Man's paintings show 'a sentiment and desire for distance from our time'.[114] In the painting above, Asker's format of a folding triptych echoes religious icon painting and, like my shrouded signs or the 'unknown and invisible' draped figure in Hodler's *Night,*[115] has religious and mystical overtones.

Climate change forces us into the uncomfortable intellectual position of trying to envision ourselves not just as individual humans, or as collective humans, but as a species among other species on the planet, with questions of scale operating at a personal and emotional level. In my work, I ask questions about time through the use of scale and the way the works are presented in the gallery.

[114] Alessandro Rabottini, 'Icarus with No Sun', in *Artist of the Year 2014: Victor Man, Szindbad*, ed. Deutsche Bank (Hatje Cantz: Deutsche Bank Kunsthalle, 2014), 57.
[115] Ferdinand Hodler, 'My Present Tendencies'.

Large plumes of smoke in a global catastrophe, for example, are painted at the same scale as a portrait or a close-up view of hands. This can be seen when I combine work together in clusters within my studio – examining the links that can be made between them and the effect scale has on the way they are read, as in the picture taken from my studio below (Figure 61). My work is often small in scale even when it is a painting of something physically large, and in this way, I hope to invite questions of the micro and macro elements of climate change, the uncertainty of one's place in the scale of things, and the questions about history, change and progress that the Anthropocene raises.

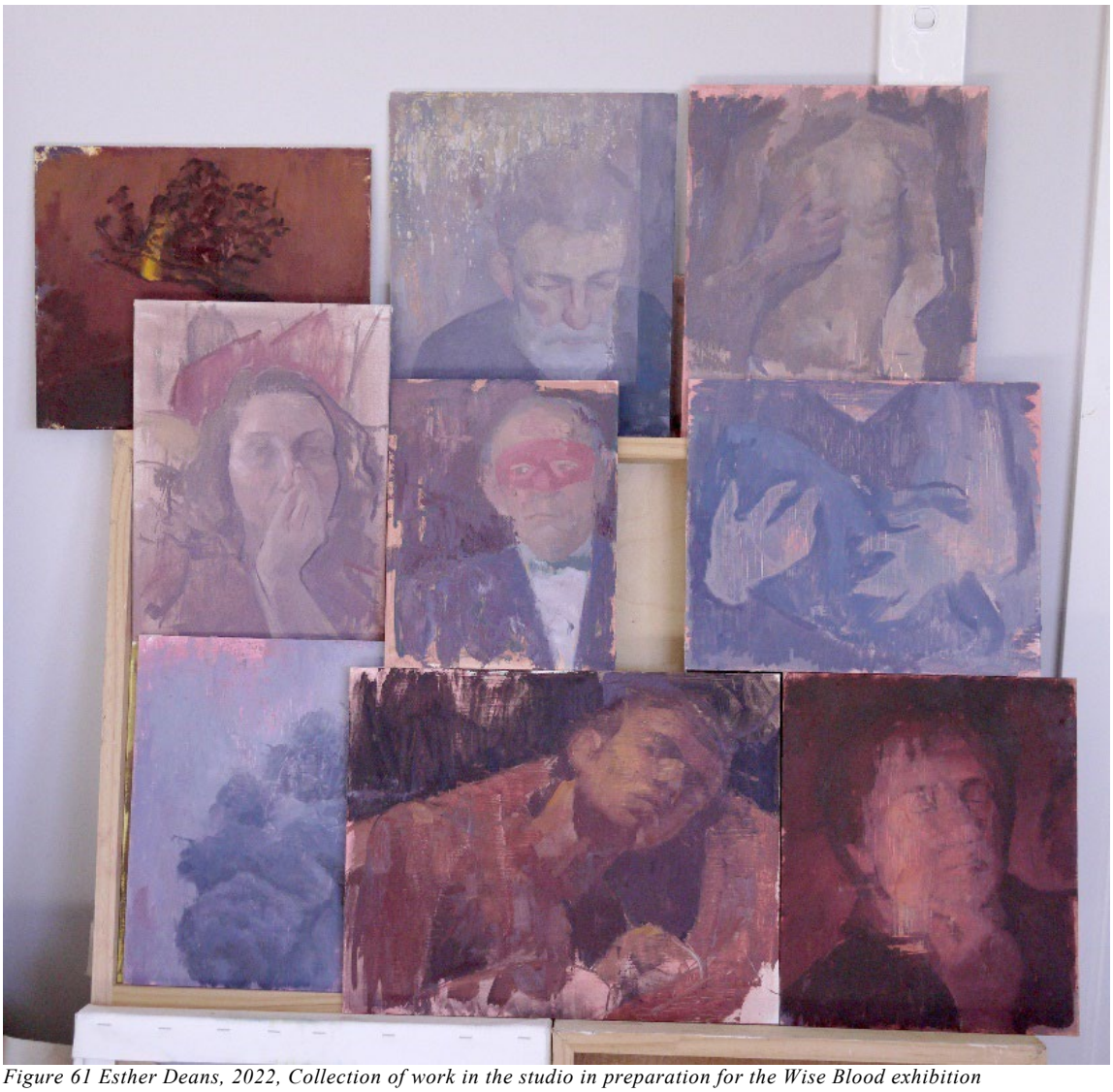

Figure 61 Esther Deans, 2022, Collection of work in the studio in preparation for the Wise Blood exhibition

A Post-Apocalyptic Landscape

Todd and Davis argue that the term Anthropocene is itself an extension of 'colonial logic' – it represents universalist ideas which have been historically imposed through European colonisation. Potawatomi[116] philosopher and scholar Kyle Powys Whyte terms this a *campaign* that is 'sustained, strategic and militaristic',[117] suppressing populations through violence, forced assimilation, and the creation of dependency by removing people from their natural food sources. In what feels like an echo of the Southern Gothic aesthetic (which I will investigate in Chapter 6), Todd and Davis describe that because humans are made from and interconnected to land and soil, 'colonial dispossession haunts through bones, bodies and stories'.[118]

Part of my mourning for the Anthropocene also includes the guilt and shame of being a product of, and benefitting from, this colonial campaign. My grandfather's great, great, grandfather was John Deans, brother of William Deans from Scotland, and they were two of the first European settlers to farm in what is now Ōtautahi Christchurch, at Putaringamotu (now Riccarton). Ngāi Tahu leaders had recently signed the Treaty of Waitangi at Akaroa, but negotiated directly with William (who had learnt Te Reo) to lease him 33,000 acres for £8 a year.[119] However, Ngāi Tahu were under increasing pressure to sell their land to the Crown in order to avoid it being taken from them with underhand deals or confiscations, as had happened in the North Island. They therefore sold 20 million acres around Canterbury for the price of £2,000 to the Crown, along with the agreement that a tenth of this was to remain in possession of Ngāi Tahu for habitation, that they would have access to all their food-gathering areas (mahinga kai), and that the Crown would provide schools and hospitals in each region.[120] The Crown did not, however, honour the terms of this agreement, giving far less of the land to Ngāi Tahu than promised, restricting access to Mahinga Kai, and failing to provide the schools and hospitals it had promised, leaving the tribe 'impoverished and virtually landless'.[121] Meanwhile, John and William sold the land at Riccarton to the Crown in exchange for a far greater run near the Malvern Hills, purchasing around 15,000 acres, now in Crown ownership, and running prosperous farms, many of which continue to this day, and which I and my family have directly benefitted

[116] *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v., 'Potawatomi', 2 Mar. 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Potawatomi.
The Powatomi people are a First Nation tribe who originally resided in what is now the Great Lakes area of the United States of America but were displaced by colonial settlers.
[117] Kyle Powys Whyte, 'Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene', in *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities,* ed. Ursula Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (Routledge, 2017), 3
[118] Davis and Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene', 770
[119] A. H. McLintock, 'Deans, William and John', in *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand (Available through Te Ara)* (1966).; Annette Bulovic, 'William Deans Settles at Putaringamotu (Riccarton) – 21st February 1843', *Peeling Back History* (blog), accessed May 2024, https://www.peelingbackhistory.co.nz/william-deans-settles-at-putaringamotu-21st-february-1843/.
[120] Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, 'Kemp's Deed, 1848', Accessed May 2024, https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/connect-2/connect/news-and-stories/kemps-deed-1848/; John Wilson, 'Christchurch City Contextual Overview', ed. Christchurch City Council (2005), https://ccc.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Culture-Community/Heritage/ChristchurchCityContextualHistoryOverviewTheme1-docs.pdf
[121] John Wilson 'Canterbury Region: Discovery and Settlement', in *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (Published 14 Sep 2006, reviewed and revised 6 Jul 2015), http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/canterbury-region/page-6

from.[122] It was this house at the foothills of the alps, Homebush, which was so dramatically destroyed by the Christchurch earthquakes, and whose remnants were the foundation of my painting of the ruin in Figure 53 (p. 66). My grandfather grew up on another farm within this cluster, Morven. Shut out of their land, Ngāi Tahu fought continuously for the terms of the agreement to be upheld, finally gaining some justice and compensation through the Waitangi Tribunal in 1998, which acknowledged that 'in acquiring from Ngāi Tahu 34.5 million acres, more than half the land mass of New Zealand, for £14,750 pounds, and leaving them with only 35,757 acres, the Crown acted unconscionably', causing Ngāi Tahu 'grave injustices' for over 150 years.[123]

Figure 62 Esther Deans, 2021, Forest IV, Oil on Panel, 250x300mm

Figure 63 Esther Deans, 2021, Forest II, Oil on Board, 350x300mm

Todd and Davis (along with Whyte) argue that the experience of Indigenous peoples throughout the world between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the Americas, Oceania, India, and Africa was no less than an Apocalypse. The dispossession of land and murder of peoples both compacted and sped up time like an earthquake, destroying thousand-year-old cultures, legal systems, languages, and stories within a very short amount of time.[124] In 1769, when James Cook first visited New Zealand, the Māori population was around 100,000; over the next one hundred years of European contact, however, it fell to under half that, to just 42,000 in 1896.[125] This was accompanied by massive deforestation, dispossession of land, and the extinction of many species: this loss of connection to land and place Whyte describes as 'today's dystopia of our ancestors'.[126] Colonialism was a

[122] Christchurch City Libraries, 'The Pioneering Deans Family', accessed May 2024, https://my.christchurchcitylibraries.com/the-pioneering-deans-family/.
[123] Waitangi Tribunal, quoted in Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, 'Claim History', Accessed May 2024, https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz/ngai-tahu/creation-stories/the-settlement/claim-history/.
[124] Davis and Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene'; Whyte, 'Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene'.
[125] Ian Pool, 'Death Rates and Life Expectancy', in *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (2019), http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/death-rates-and-life-expectancy/print
[126] Whyte, 'Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene', 3

transformation of the earth, a project of erasure, a 'severing of relations between … minerals and our bones' [127] re-making New Zealand, as the Americas, into a disconnected vision of Europe, and altering climate and ecosystems in a way that is prescient of conditions globally within the twenty-first-century. It was the literal 'end of the world' for these societies, akin to the collective disaster, the compression of space and time that Evangelical Christians have only imagined in their Eschatology.

The Grief of the Anthropocene

Figure 64 Austen Deans, 1982, Stranded Iceberg, Antarctica, *Oil on Canvas, 990x1350mm*

Stef Craps writes of the melancholia associated with ecological collapse and species extinction, arguing that the arts can act as a kind of ritual for this grief. She writes of the importance of mourning natural entities such as glaciers as 'persons', deserving of grief, with whom our lives are intertwined and whose demise 'is the result of long drawn-out processes that transcend the duration of a single human life'. [128] This is more akin to Tuari Stewart's explanation of time as encompassing the natural world beyond an individual life, and it incorporates ideas of the interconnectedness between human and non-human life, so that the loss of natural entities is also the loss of ourselves. Haudenosaunee [129]

[127] Davis and Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene', 770.
[128] Stef Craps, 'Ecological Mourning: Living with Loss in the Anthropocene', in *Critical Memory Studies: New Approaches* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 73, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350233164.ch-5.
[129] Conferderacy Haudenosaunee, 'Haudenosaunee Confederacy: Culture and History', accessed April 2024, https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/historical-life-as-a-haudenosaunee/.
Encylopedia Britannica, s.v., 'Iroquois Confederacy', 27 Feb. 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Iroquois-Confederacy.

author Vanessa Watts argues that many Indigenous societies conceive of humans arriving into an already-functioning natural world that has its own values and ethics and with which humans must make agreements and arrangements: habitats and ecosystems are thus thought of as societies, entities with agency who are worthy of grief and mourning. [130] In the Christian story, Adam and Eve are given dominion over the animals and plants and much Western-European epistemology (or how we think about knowledge) tends to be founded on the assumption that one's perception of the world is *distinct* from it; that humans must be separate from the world in order to be able to perceive it. [131] This worldview (though it is by no means the only interpretation of the Biblical story) not only creates a separation of the human and the non-human but implies a hierarchy that often allows humans to treat the natural world as open to exploitation. I acknowledge that this conception of the world and perception often sits behind my own feeling of lostness or strangeness within the world. My paintings act as responses not just to the grief of the Anthropocene but also to a kind of alienation and doubt that I often feel in the world.

Perhaps subconsciously, my grandfather took steps to rectify our family's place in colonial New Zealand in his own small way, planting exclusively native trees on his property and instilling a love for our New Zealand landscape, birds, and plants within his grandchildren. In *Forest II*, I depict the small planter boxes that have appeared around Peel Forest as a local environmental group re-forests the roadside with native plants, an activity that Grandpa would have been delighted by. Despite incredible loss and grief, the Indigenous peoples who have contended with the end of their worlds have survived the Apocalypse, and they show us how: by fostering and tending to strong relationships with humans, other-than-humans, and land. Todd and Davies point out that this resistance, and the 'renewal and resurgence of Indigenous communities in spite of world-ending violence is something that Euro-Western thinkers should heed'. [132]

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is often considered the oldest participatory democracy on earth and consists of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca nations who united in response to European invasion within the Northeastern Woodlands of what is now New York state in the USA.

[130] Vanessa Watts, 'Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013), https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/19145.

[131] Watts.; Stewart, '"When the Time Is Right..." In the Māori World'.

[132] Davis and Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene', 773.

The Artist in the Anthropocene

Ideas about ecological grief, and the way symbol and ritual can be used to express this grief, bring us to the role of art in the Anthropocene. The twentieth-century American poet Delmore Schwartz describes the destruction in Western literature of a 'world picture' – a circumscribed area of the imagination that had in the past been provided through the Bible. Within European thought from the nineteenth-century onwards, there was increasing conflict between this world picture and the one provided by the natural sciences, resulting in an internal conflict between intellect and sensibility; the 'intellect finds unreasonable what the sensibility and the imagination cannot help but accept because of centuries of imagining images of the world'.[133] This is not necessarily a conflict between religious doctrine and scientific knowledge, but rather between the poet's sensibility and the theoretical knowledge of his time; the 'images through which [the poet] viewed the world, and the evolving blank and empty universe of nineteenth-century science'.[134] This could equally apply to the imaginative stories that explain ecologies and human relationships with them, which Watts calls the *place-thought* of Indigenous worlds, against the cold universe of an imposed colonial worldview. It is my concern to hold on to something of the 'imaginative potential' of those earlier world pictures within my own heritage and artistic sensibility, to attune myself to my own emotional responses to the world, without being drowned in the fatalistic pessimism that an awareness of the Anthropocene, like the wait for the second coming of Christ, can induce.

In response to the urgent political questions and demands the Anthropocene asks of us, my acts of painting can seem at best peripheral, at worst meaningless. I believe it is important to address climate change within our spheres of influence and capacity, and to hold those in power to account. However, I feel that when a painting is dominated by a political idea, this can diminish its aesthetic complexity, thereby reducing its impact. I agree with Schwartz's warning against seeing works of literature or art narrowly in terms of any particular moral or political aim: a political stance may be an element within the artwork but in a complex and interesting work, 'all elements move in the direction of something which transcends all social and political ideals and is relevant to all of them, since the books [or artworks] in question are works of the imagination'.[135] My artistic response to climate change is a kind of panic, felt in the pit of my stomach, the working through of my own doubts, guilts, and sorrow, and an exploration of a feeling of deep philosophical doubt. In expressing this, it is important for me that the aesthetic element of my paintings is paramount and is not subsumed by any one moral or political message.

[133] Delmore Schwartz, 'The Isolation of Modern Poetry', *The Kenyon Review* 3, no. 2 (1941): 211, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4332243
[134] Ibid., 213
[135] 'The Duchess' Red Shoes', in *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz*, ed. Donald A. Dike and David H. Zucker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 [First publisehd 1953]), 213.

Aesthetic Experience

The painter Alex Kanevsky (a very influential figure to many of the painters in *Death of a Co-worker*, which I will discuss in Chapter 7) argues that the meaning of painting is necessarily visual, a language that will be 'foreign to all but himself' and that can say things to an audience viewing the work, even if the 'language' is foreign to them.[136] In this way, as for the Symbolists, the viewing is an act of interpretation, trying to get the gist of a personal and idiosyncratic meaning through the emotive strength of colour, composition, texture, and light. He explains, 'any additional words from me would dilute the impact and confound the meaning. I believe that paintings function where words fail'.[137] The aesthetic experience operates at a visceral and emotional level and in this sense, paintings can exist at an emotional or even 'religious' level, beyond their social or art historical context. This echoes Yau's commentary on Edwin Dickinson, that 'you can't figure out what he is trying to get at, and you suspect that perhaps he didn't either' – that whatever the intention of the artist, the meaning of a visual artwork is inherent in the experience of it, and that this experience is essentially unsayable.[138] In other words, there is something particular about the visual, aesthetic experience that is distinct from our experience of language.

Aesthetic experiences more broadly, whether they are through visual arts or in music, theatre, literature, or film offer some richer element of life that cannot be felt or expressed in any other way. The philosopher Alan Goldman explains how our subconscious base of experience – visual or auditory sensations – are transformed into an aesthetic experience via cognition, emotion and imagination, which are just as vital to the experience as the physiological processes (seeing or hearing) that bring them about.[139] The aesthetic experience involves not just an immediate, pre-conscious movement, but also a reflective, verbal judgement, and an awareness of our own emotional reactions. The complexity of the work, therefore, is vital to this aesthetic experience. For example, a painting which is formally beautiful but lacks intellectual content will seem shallow; likewise, a work that has strong moral, political, or conceptual content, but which is expressively or visually boring will be a lesser aesthetic experience. An artwork may not necessarily embolden us to make political change, but it can enrich our experience of the world: as Harri Mäcklin, explains 'after immersion itself has dissipated, the world appears, at least for a while, richer, deeper, and more enchanting than

[136] Alex Kanevsky, quote in John Seed, *Disrupted Realism: Painting for a Distracted World* (Philadelphia, USA: Schifffer Publishing, Ltd, 2019), 24.
[137] Kanevsky, ibid.
[138] Yau, 'The Search for Coherence'.
[139] As I understand it, this physiological experience includes the notion of 'affect', which is the immediate, physical and emotional experience of a work of art before it registers in our conscious mind. While this experience is relevant, Goldman's conception of the combination of affect and cognition offered what seemed to me a fuller description of aesthetic experience, and one which I felt I could relate to more than Affect theory. Affect theory is also a large scholarly area that it was beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss in detail. See Brian Massumi, 'The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens; a Semblance of a Conversation', *Inflexions* 1, no. 1 (2008), https://www.inflexions.org/n1_The-Thinking-Feeling-of-What-Happens-by-Brian-Massumi.pdf; 'The Autonomy of Affect', *Cultural Critique* Part II (1995), http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354446; Erika Doss, 'Affect', *American Art* 23, no. 1 (Spring) (2009), https://doi.org/10.1086/599051

before'.[140] This 'deeper, richer' world includes feelings of grief and melancholy; aesthetic experiences can add an intensity and depth to life, even to its negative aspects, that is essential to understanding ourselves. To illustrate this, I would like to focus on the work of two contemporary artists whose art suggests ways of being an artist within the Apocalypse that is occurring and that has already occurred.

[140] Harri Mäcklin, 'When Art Transports Us, Where Do We Actually Go?', *Psyche Magazine,* 2022, https://psyche.co/ideas/when-art-transports-us-where-do-we-actually-go

Star Gossage

Star Gossage is a painter whose work embodies Watt's notion of place-thought, responding to personal, political and historic tragedies with moving paintings that offer a rich and complex aesthetic experience. Gossage has Ngāti Wai; Ngāti Ruanui; French; Portuguese and English ancestry, and lives and works at Pakiri, looking across to Hauturu or Great Barrier Island. Her ancestors were forcibly removed from this island in 1894 when it was declared Crown land and made into a nature reserve. The £400 the government offered as compensation for this theft has never been reclaimed, underscoring the injustice of the acquisition.[141] Working with tar, lime, and earth to make paints from her family land, she literally unites earth and aesthetics to create dream-like images that seem to echo the symbolism of Odilon Redon; as Virginia Were writes 'the land of her ancestors is literally embedded in her paintings' (Figure 65).[142] This use of earth pigments mutes the chroma of her colours, giving a unity to the work and a matte quality suggestive of quiet reflection. Her use of colours suggests to me the muted and unified works of twentieth-century painters such as Vanessa Bell (1879–1961) and Gwen John (1876–1939) (who I will mention further in Chapter 7). Rather than containing overtly political messages, Gossage's work responds to these tragedies with an air of quiet melancholy and nostalgia, 'whispering their stories softly', as fellow artist Lisa Reihana puts it.[143] Gossage explains that she avoids politics in her work and yet it is clear that 'she's thinking about past and present alienation from whenua – and relating the broader issues to her own and her family's experiences'.[144]

[141] Lisa Reihana, 'Maps of Memories: The Art of Star Gossage', *Art New Zealand,* Autumn, no. 118 (2006), https://art-newzealand.com/118-star/.
[142] Virginia Were, 'Star Gossage's Psychological and Emotional States', *Art News,* Autumn, (2015), https://artnews.co.nz/star-gossage-autumn-2015/.
[143] Reihana, 'Maps of Memories: The Art of Star Gossage'.
[144] Were, 'Star Gossage's Psychological and Emotional States'.

Figure 65 Star Gossage, 2015, Pah Paintings 1, 2, 3, 4, Oil and Clay Pigments on Linen, 2790 x110mm (each of 4 panels), Collection Waikato Museum, https://www.timmelville.com/exhibition/i-saw-you-in-my-garden/

Mariele Neudecker

The tank sculptures of Mariele Neudecker display small and perfectly formed worlds trapped in glass tanks that glow within dimly lit exhibition spaces. There is a sense of mystery and the sublime in them, and yet their scale and the fact of their imprisonment within the walls of glass implies ideas of human impositions upon nature and of structures that mediate our interactions with the natural world. As miniature vistas, they also draw attention to the questions of scale and scope that Paterson's necklace illustrated, and which are echoed in Indigenous expressions of time.

In the sculptures, a sense of the aesthetic or the dream-like draws viewers in before they begin to question what may be their darker undercurrents – the intimations of the loss of landscapes and of human destructiveness. Within the coloured vitrine liquid, and using lights, each tank takes on a particular hue, often giving a sense of the landscape seen through a haze or fog, which is an effect I am often attempting to find in my painting. These allude to both the wild landscapes that colonialism altered and the practise of capturing, killing, and preserving in vitrine or in museum displays the flora and fauna taken from dispossessed land. Neudecker resists the label of 'climate change artist'. She sees climate change as an integral problem that almost all artists will have to absorb or address in some way, but she does not want her art to be read as didactic.[145] I sympathise with this stance and prefer art that is open-ended and leaves room for the experience and interpretation of the individual viewer, that provides a broader and more complex 'aesthetic experience' rather than trying to convey a definite message or moral imperative.

This content has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons	This content has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons
Figure 66 Mariele Neudecker, 1998, I Don't Know How I Resisted the Urge to Run*, Mixed Media Including Water, Acrylic Medium, Salt, Fibreglass 750x900x610mm https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2014/09/tank-works/*	*Figure 67 Mariele Neudecker, 2019,* And Then the World Changed Colour: Breathing Yellow, *Mixed Media Including Glass, Water, Salt, Plastic, 636x566x1685mm. Commissioned by Dulwich Picture Gallery. Courtesy: Galeria Pedro Cera, Lisbon. Photo: Benjamin Jones https://pedrocera.com/artists/mariele-neudecker*

[145] Mariele Neudecker, interviewed by Emily Spicer 'I Get Labelled as a Climate Change Artist at Times, but I Don't Look at It That Way. Interview with Mariele Neudecker', *Studio International* (2018). https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/mariele-neudecker-interview-climate-change-cern.

Summary

The conception of a world distinct from humans, the world-in-itself and the corresponding fear of a world-without-us, have become to me less practically or emotionally useful than Watt's notion of a thought-place, or ourselves as intrinsically linked to the earth. This concept is embodied in the painting methods of Gossage as she creates paintings from the earth of her ancestors, and in the aesthetics of the works themselves, imbued with a quiet longing. These paintings suggest emotive responses to complex historical tragedies that offer, through their colour, paint application, and languid figures, something for the 'sensibility and the imagination'.[146] I hope my paintings also, rather than relying on a single political reading, will operate by 'whispering their stories softly'.[147]Neudecker also provides aesthetic responses to many of these issues, and I have drawn on her sculptures – the qualities of glass and transparency, and the effects of darkness and luminosity – in many of my work.

Indigenous conceptions of time push back against the colonial project, as in the Yolnu sense of a continuous past and present, or in Māori conceptions of time as a spiral, our ancestors here with us now. These concepts have helped to challenge and re-form my own concepts of history, and offer ways to strengthen my own intuition that history does not really 'progress', that the past is intimately connected with our present. I hope that the installation of my work, like Paterson's necklace, helps to raise considerations of scale – of the importance or smallness of human concerns within a broader history. I also hope that, like Neudecker's tanks, the uncertainty and pessimism in my work reflects my own experiences within the Anthropocene but provides an aesthetically valuable response to them.

In Chapter 1 I quoted Kanevsky describing painting as complex conversations moving between and through time. For me these conversations include acknowledging what I have gained from my ancestors as well as the damage they wrought. I am aware of myself as deeply enmeshed and complicit within European art and culture, and as having benefitted from the violent colonial campaign. This thesis itself is deeply indebted to Western art history and I have been allowed the privilege to pursue it through the channels and structures of a colonial governing power. In many ways, the intense focus with which my Evangelical church scrutinised and waited on End Times served to distract us from the very real Apocalypse that Māori people were suffering within our comfortably materialistic Pākeha society of the 1990s. That Apocalypse and the result of European invasion in New Zealand, though, has now caught up to us. In climate change, we are all suffering the implications that were set in motion in 1610. Like a coiled spiral of time 'this seismic shockwave has rolled through and across space and time and is now hitting those nations, legal systems, and

[146] Schwartz, 'The Isolation of Modern Poetry'. 211
[147] Reihana, 'Maps of Memories: The Art of Star Gossage'.

structures that brought about the rending and disruption' in the first place.[148] The Apocalypse we face now is a shadowy echo of the genocides it is built upon. I feel, like my grandfather, all I can do as a response is to paint – and plant more trees.

The disruption of an 'ordinary' sense of history that climate change presents has an odd parallel with the disruption of time and space that Eschatology presents and the 'otherness' of the physical world posited by Thacker also has parallels with the way we, as Evangelical Christians, were taught to think of the world. Moving back to my hometown brought back these memories of the church, and elements of these tensions started appearing in new work, which I will consider in the next chapter.

[148] Davis and Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene'.774

4. Eschatology and the Apocalypse

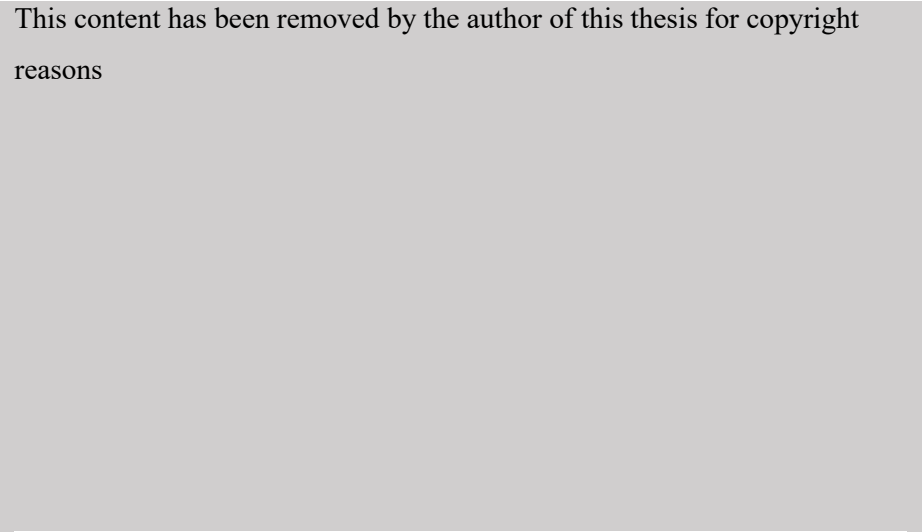

Figure 68 Michael Stevenson, 1990, Pentecostal Church Interior, Oil on Board, 450x600mm, Laverty Collection, Sydney

Our church was a small group of social misfits led by a forestry worker from the West Coast. We met in a town hall, sitting on impersonal hall benches and singing along to folk tunes from the 1970s, projected through an old OHT. Afterwards we ate a shared lunch of cold rice salad and white bread sandwiches or, if we were lucky, cream donuts from the bakery. There were no formally trained Bible scholars or overarching ecclesiastical structure; we were encouraged to read scripture intensely for ourselves and were taught to mistrust most of the other more established interpretations of Christianity. Michael Stevenson's painting *Pentecostal Church Interior* (Figure 68), shows the kind of church I remember; set up ad-hoc in the local hall, there are no paintings on the walls and no adornments besides the remnants of streamers from old Christmas decorations. As in other Protestant denominations, visual elements such as paintings, stained glass windows or statues were seen as idolatrous, and the Pentecostalism I remembered had an austerity that looked down on anything decorative as suspiciously worldly. The lectern stands solidly in the middle – the lines are slightly wobbly but its central placement in the composition gives it a feeling of authority, something unable to be questioned. Like Hodler's painting of his sister, the space is curiously shallow, cropped off at the base so we have no sense of an audience and can imagine ourselves in the front row, waiting for the preacher to arrive. The strange, draped figure to the right and the shuttered window add mystery

and an element of the macabre to the drab scene. The paint is brushed on thinly and there is a flatness to the colour, as you might find under florescent strip lights, giving the whole image a wan appearance that underscores the suggestion of listlessness and incompletion. Michael Stevenson, currently based in Berlin, is now better known for his large-scale installations, but he started out as a realist painter making images of small-town New Zealand, like the one above. His family, like mine, were drawn into the anti-establishment, Pentecostal movement of the 1960s, and his works describe this faith and an eschatological view of time within rural small towns where 'Heaven smells of flower water, leached pine resins and old upholstery'.[149] In his paintings, the dull kitsch of these churches and public halls is infused with a kind of ennui alongside a quiet dread of End Times, in a way that I recognise in my own history.

Parlane argues that Eschatology infuses Pentecostalism with a dead sort of waiting – we were constantly in anticipation of a violent end not just to life as we knew it, but to time itself. Elements of my experiences in the church and its understanding of time have filtered into my life now – my art and the way I conceive of the climate crisis – for better or worse. It was helpful to me, therefore, to investigate the roots of Eschatology and the Apocalypse and to understand how this religious 'world picture' is manifest in more mainstream secular thought today. Through this, I uncovered and reinforced themes that were present in my artwork – the idea of veiling, of obscuring, of sight and perception – as well as concepts relating to time and history. This chapter will first define the terms I will be using, then address the Christian Apocalypse tradition, particularly in relation to these ideas of time and history. I will then focus on the doctrine of the Rapture in relation to my personal experience, and the paintings I have made that relate to these themes.

[149] Stevenson, quoted in Anna Parlane, 'Postmodern Pentecostalism: Apocalyptic Time in the Paintings of Michael Stevenson', *Burlington Contemporary,* June (2020), https://doi.org/10.31452/bcj3.Stevenson.Parlane.

Definitions

As in the older Baptist and Methodist traditions out of which they developed, Pentecostal churches valued conversion, a literal reading of the Bible, and moral rigour. Unlike those earlier denominations, though, twentieth-century Pentecostal groups often favoured small church structures without rigid hierarchies or overarching theological rules led, as ours had been, by a charismatic leader who had converted to Christianity and was therefore 'filled with the Holy Spirit'.[150] Pentecostal churches tend to be Evangelical, and the two words are often used synonymously. 'Evangelical' comes from the Greek word *euangelion* and the Latin *evangelium*, which both mean 'good news;' to evangelise means to spread the 'good news' of Christ and baptism by the Holy Spirit.[151] Proselytising was a major part of the Protestant movement from its inception by Martin Luther in the sixteenth-century, who focussed on the conversion experience, reliance on biblical scripture, and missionary work, rather than the sacraments and rituals of the established Catholic church.[152] Unlike older denominations, Pentecostalism is still a growing movement, and has a great deal of political force in places such as the United States of America. The Pulitzer Centre for Research states that Pentecostalism is the fastest growing religion worldwide, and that 35,000 people experience this Holy Spirit baptism every day.[153]

Pentecostal movements, to which my parents' church belonged, developed in the early twentieth-century throughout the United States, as more charismatic and anti-establishment versions of established churches. Their central belief is that the conversion should be accompanied by 'baptism with the Holy Spirit', which was taken from accounts of the first Christian apostles: in the description of this event in Acts, tongues of flame descended on the apostles and they 'spoke in tongues'.[154] Speaking in tongues is usually considered the sign of being baptised by the Holy Spirit and it takes the form of *glossolalia* (speaking in a foreign language) or *xenoglossy* (speaking in an unknown language).[155] In this way it has a strange parallel with Kanevsky's assertion of visual art being a kind of private language; meanings can be felt by the viewer even if they do not understand the language. Pentecostals believe that this baptism is accompanied by supernatural gifts – visions, the power of healing, prophecy, and the ability to perform miracles and exorcisms. Although I had been baptised in water, I never experienced this baptism by the Holy Spirit as my parents had and this was a source of doubt and shame for me: I longed for a clear vision of the world or the power to see those shimmery dream-portents of the future that prophesy invoked.

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[150] J. Gordon Melton, 'Evangelical Church', *Encyclopedia Britannica,* (20 Feb. 2024), https://www.britannica.com/topic/Evangelical-church-Protestantism.
[151] Ibid
[152] Ibid.
[153] Bregtje van der Haak and Richard Vijgen, 'Atlas of Pentecostalism', n.d., accessed May 2023, http://www.atlasofpentecostalism.net/.
[154] J. Gordon Melton, 'Pentecostalism', *Encyclopedia Britannica* (27 Feb. 2024), https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pentecostalism.
[155] Ibid.

Pentecostalism also embraced Eschatology and the newly developed theology of the 'Rapture'. The term 'Eschatology' was coined by the Lutheran theologian Philipp Henrich Friedleib in 1644: coming from the Greek *eschatos,* meaning 'last', it refers to theological study about the end of the human world and 'the ultimate resolution of the entire creation'.[156] It covers the book of Revelations and the traditions, symbols, and concepts developed through apocalyptic literature, including the Rapture. Like many Pentecostal churches, our Eschatology was 'Millennialist' – a belief that there will be an end time of destruction and then that Christ will reign for a thousand years.[157] As Anna Parlane explains in her article on Michael Stevenson, Millennialism gives rise to a sense of time that is different from the Western secular time – rather than time as a perpetual process, as essentially continuous, millennialist thinking sees time as discontinuous, and the end of time imminent.[158] The conversion experience itself helps to underscore this idea of time as non-continuous: the anthropologist Joel Robbins points out that the ritual of baptism symbolises 'a rupture in the timeline of a person's life that cleaves it into a before and after, between which there is a moment of disconnection'.[159] The psychologist Charles Strozier also points out that this mirrors the sense of time experienced within trauma, in which 'a black hole of misery collapses time and space'; rather than linear time, apocalyptic time, like traumatic memory, 'is experienced unevenly and discordantly'.[160] As mentioned in the previous chapter, this has an ironic and tragic echo in the disruption to time that colonisation has already wreaked on so many Indigenous cultures.

The Rapture was an important aspect of our church's eschatology, and it has become an increasingly prominent idea in popular culture and contemporary Evangelicalism. It was coined in the nineteenth-century by the Anglican priest John Nelson Darby (1800-1882),[161] a millennialist who argued that time is made up of 'dispensations' or eras in which God's relation to humanity shifts.[162] This comes from a literal reading of the Bible, and was a way of explaining why the God of the Old Testament seemed so different to that of the New; God was unchanging, but there was a different *dispensation* or covenant with humanity between the Old and New Testaments. He argued that the final dispensation includes the Rapture, in which the faithful will be bodily removed from the earth while sinners are left to endure seven years of torment before a final battle where Jesus would be triumphant.[163] The idea of dispensations, where successive periods of history end in destruction, like

[156]Jerry L. Walls, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.
[157] Pieter De Villers, 'Millennialism, Rapture and "Left Behind" Literature: Analysing a Major Cultural Phenomenon in Recent Times', *Stellenbosch Techological Journal* 5, no. 1 (2019), https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-1ab995f1ca.
[158] Parlane, 'Postmodern Pentecostalism: Apocalyptic Time in the Paintings of Michael Stevenson'.
[159] Joel Robbins, 'Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity', *Current Anthropology* 48, no. 1 (2007), https://doi.org/10.1086/508690.
[160] Strozier, 'The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Fundamentalist Mindset'.
[161] Elizabeth Phillips, Crawford Gribben, and Nicholas Guyatt, 'The Rapture: Panel Discussion,' interview by Melvyn Bragg, *In Our Time*, Aired 26 September, 2019, on BBC Radio, London. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0008p2k.
[162] Robert G. Clouse, 'Fundamentalist Theology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 263–279.
[163] Roger Robins, 'Caught up to Meet Jesus in the Clouds', *Christian History Institute Magazine* Issue 128 (2018). https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/caught-up-to-meet-jesus-in-the-clouds

the concept of an Apocalypse, in some ways reflected changing nineteenth-century thought and the discovery of geologic epochs which, it was thought, often ended in catastrophe.[164] In Chapter 3, I discussed Greg Garrad's plea to think of time on a 'wholly different scale, vastly more global in scope, vastly more historical in extent', rather than as something orderly, slow-moving, and reliable and this has an uncanny parallel in the way we thought about temporality within my Pentecostal church.

Darby developed this idea from the following verse: 1 Thessalonians, 4:16 (King James Version): 'For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first'. While the idea made little impact in the United Kingdom, where Darby was from, it was picked up by itinerant preachers in the United States and became an important element of twentieth-century Pentecostalism.

[164] Karen Armstrong, *On the Bible* (Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2007);
Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).
In fact, as Ghosh points out, geological shifts can happen *both* gradually and suddenly.

The Baptist Church

Figure 69 Michael Stevenson, 1990, Winter-Out*, Oil on Board, 755x1055mm, Laverty Collection, Sydney*

For my parents, the conversion to Christianity had been like the 'tearing of the veil', a metaphor St Paul uses to describe spiritual revelation.[165] He also describes that before his conversion he had only been able to see reality 'through a glass, darkly', but now could see the light and the complete truth, 'then shall I know even as also I am known'.[166] My parents enlightenment – their conversion experience – gave them a sense of security they had lacked: an assurance that the world *could* be known, that *they* could be known. These metaphors of seeing, of being unable to see, of obscurity and the sense of looking at the world through some sort of veil or dim glass are recurrent motifs in my work and reflect, as I described in Chapter 2 and 3, the sense of the unknowability or doubt about reality. In my portrait *Washington Park* below, taken from a photograph by Diane Arbus, the woman's eyes are turned away from the viewer and seem to look inward or off to the side. The hazy reddish colour relates to the colour of wildfire, as in Frankovich's installation (Figure 37, p.52), and the brightly toned green paint, thickened with wax and scrubbed over the top with a palette knife, suggests some sort of screen or distance between the figure and the viewer, a technique which I stumbled across in this painting, but returned to several times.

[165] See The Bible, '2 Corinthians 3:15-16', (King James Version). 'But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away'.
[166] '1 Corinthians 13:12', (King James Version). 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known'.

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Figure 71 Diane Arbus, 1965, Girl With a Cigar in Washington Square Park, NYC, *Gelatin Silver Print, 378x284mm*
©The Estate of Diane Arbus
https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/284724

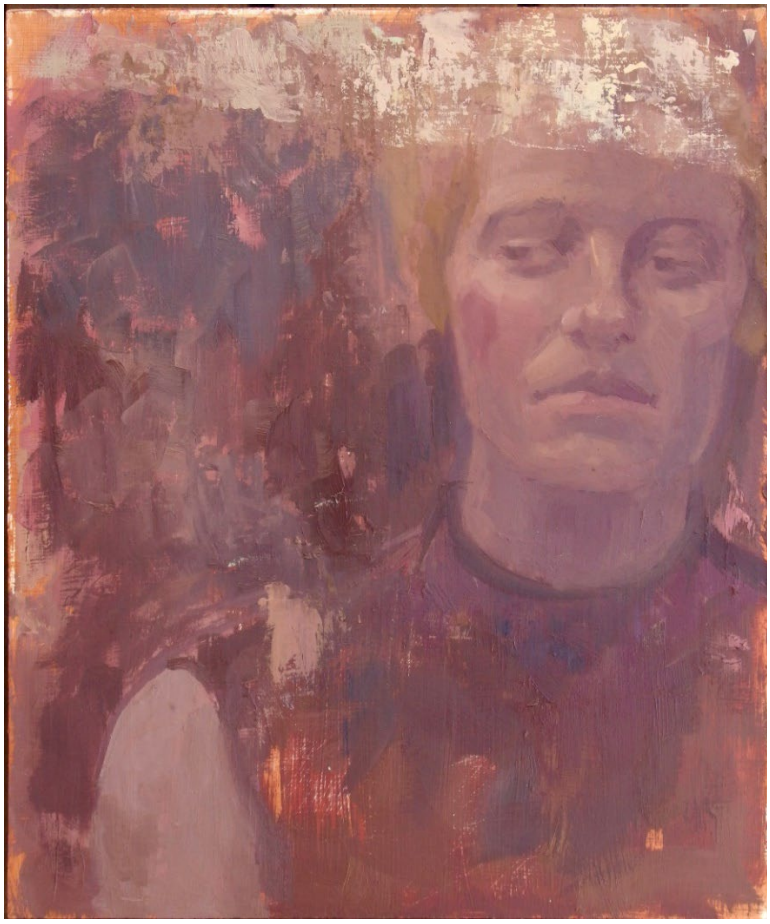

Figure 70 Esther Deans, 2022, Washington Park (After Diane Arbus)*, Oil and Cold Wax on Board, 350x300mm*

Parlane points out that the wave of Evangelicalism, in which my parents and many of their friends converted to Christianity, was part of the anti-establishment values of the counter-cultural years of the 1960s and 1970s. As in Stevenson's painting, my family's church met in an old town hall and I have tried to recreate it from memory in the painting below: the hard wooden benches, the tattered velveteen curtain, and an OHS projector in which the image is blank. The colours are dull but also invented in their monochromatic, yellowish hue, in order to try to find a sense of nostalgia or remembering. Feeling frustrated with it, I blobbed over this a thick, viscous brush stroke and this interruption of paint to the orderliness of the pews reflects the way paint is often used to disturb or obscure visual clarity in my paintings.

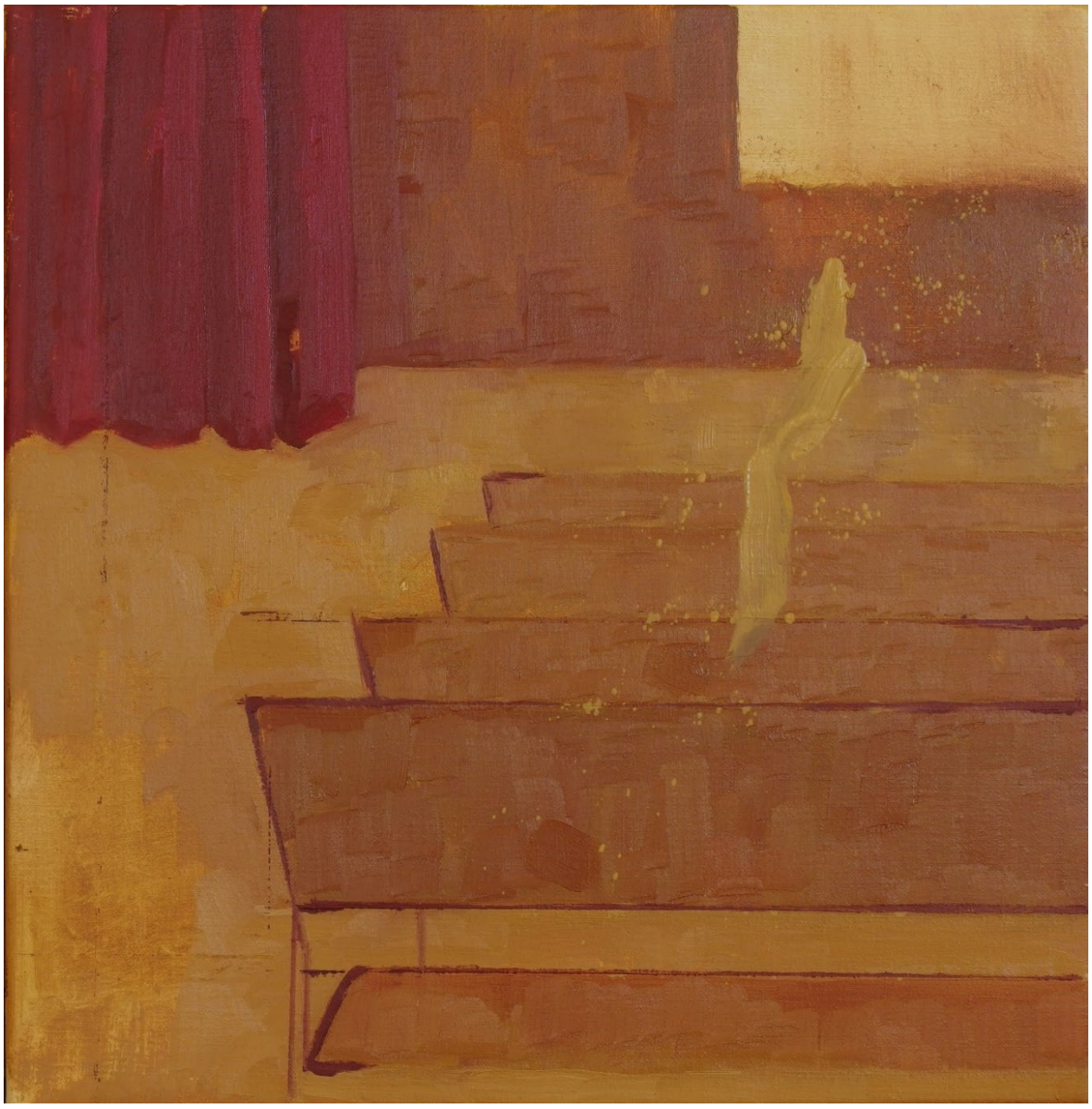

Figure 72 Esther Deans, 2021, Pews*, Oil on Canvas, 350x350mm*

Cults and Certainty

Brett Knowles argues that while this wave of conversions coincided with a general suspicion towards institutions, it did not always equate to a rejection of authority, and many Pentecostal and charismatic religious groups favoured strongly authoritarian leaders.[167] This lack of overarching ecclesiastical structure could lead to a lack of transparency or accountability, and Janja Lalcih points out that many of these breakaway churches were founded by self-appointed leaders, and verged on cults.[168] As Todd and Davis point out, Christian values are often universalising and can be intolerant of other interpretations: this is true even within and between different Christian sects.[169] There were certainly elements of cult-like certainty and rigidity in our church's thinking. We were discouraged from socialising with 'non-believers', we were afraid of 'the world', and warned by the examples of 'back-sliders' who had been seduced by it. As Parlane writes of Stevenson's experiences, we were divided from our neighbours by the expectation of our own 'imminent salvation on Judgment Day, and, more pointedly, by [our] expectation of everyone else's imminent damnation'.[170] For us children, a literal, biblical view of history explained the whole of how the world and time worked: we knew how old the earth was and when it was going to end.

[167] Knowles, *Transforming Pentecostalism : The Changing Face of New Zealand Pentecostalism, 1920–2010*.
[168] Janja Lalich, interview by Kim Hill, 'How Normal People End up in Cults Like NXIVM', (Radio Interview), aired 27 February 2021, *Saturday Morning*, Radio New Zealand, https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/2018785404/janja-lalich-how-normal-people-end-up-in-cults-like-nxivm.
[169] Davis and Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene'.
[170] Parlane, 'Postmodern Pentecostalism: Apocalyptic Time in the Paintings of Michael Stevenson'.

Figure 73 Esther Deans, 2021, The Sound you Hear is the Sea*, Oil on Canvas, 350x400mm*

Figure 74 Edwin Dickinson, 1941, Helen*, Oil on Canvas, 610x737mm, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, https://www.famsf.org/artworks/helen-2*

When I moved to Wellington for university, however, and made friends with non-Christians, one of the things that struck me was that their lives were no morally worse, no more unhappy, than the lives of those in the church. When I met these other interpretations of the universe, I felt the reverse to my parents. *I* felt that the veil had been torn, that I had seen past the dark mirror into the real, messy, confusing reality of things, where there are no reassuring absolutes, where humans were just another species on the planet, and where God, if he existed, must be something totally incomprehensible to us. This 'revelation' corresponds to my paintings in which I am often drawn to paint the things I see and touch and observe, but with an awareness that I do not know the complete truth of them. There are allusions to the history of religious iconography in my work, but often these are disrupted or undermined by the act of painting itself, as in *The Sound you Hear is the Sea*: this draws on more Catholic elements such as the quatrefoil shape and the drapery, which has become distorted and awkward in the act of painting.[171] In fact, the 'drapery' came from a photograph of my studio drop

[171] *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v., 'foil', 20 Jul. 1998, https://www.britannica.com/technology/foil-architecture.

cloth hanging on the clothesline – again finding symbolic elements within the mundane and everyday. It was also influenced by Dickinson's mysterious painting on the right, the quatrefoil shape suggests what it contains is portentous, but the meaning is unclear. Doubt has become a core value for me; a murky grey that acts as a kind of reassuring antithesis to black and white certainties. There is a sense in many of my works of a 'veil' which prevents us from seeing anything certain; a narrow range of tones and monochromatic palettes give the feeling of looking 'through a glass, darkly' – something I now embrace, rather than the clarity which I had hoped to find in the church.

Figure 75 Esther Deans, 2023, The Source*, Oil on Canvas, 360x455mm*

Quatrefoil are a shape I remember from the Anglican church my grandparents attended. The term comes from 'folium', meaning leaf in Latin, and they are associated with windows in Gothic-style church architecture. In this instance, my inspiration was partly drawn from the enigmatic painting by Edwin Dickinson in Figure 79.

Despite, or maybe because of my experiences in leaving the church, I find myself fascinated by images and ideas of cults, and by questions of faith and belief, and how these inform the way we perceive the phenomenological world. Several paintings from 2023 were taken from stills from a documentary *The Source Family* about a cult from California that developed in the 1970s and which, in its aesthetics, its positioning as 'at odds' with mainstream culture, and its charismatic but non-democratic leader, had parallels with my childhood church (Figure 75).[172] The acolytes from The Source cult seemed to project the same kind of lost longing that had brought my parents to their intense version of Christianity, and that may have led many of the Symbolists to their esoteric versions of Catholicism and the occult. In the above painting, metaphoric veils are replaced by literal hands; the repetition of the gesture suggesting some kind of ritual of inwardness. The movement is ambiguous and, without the context of the documentary, it could be read as peaceful reflection or a gesture of horror and overwhelm. The concept of these paintings was influenced by Kaye Donachie, who for several years made washed-out, lyrical paintings based on photographs of hippies and cults. Like me, she tends to mute the chroma of her work and use non-realistic hues – gold, or green, or purple – giving the sense of a suffusion of dream or haze.

Figure 76 Kaye Donachie, 2003, Early Morning Hours of the Night*, Oil on Canvas, 660x870mm, ©Kaye Donachie courtesy Maureen Paley, London*

Figure 77 Kaye Donachie, 2004, Every Mornin' Our Love is Reborn*, Oil on Canvas, 625x900mm, ©Kaye Donachie courtesy Maureen Paley, London*

[172] Jodi Wille and Maria Demopoulos, *The Source Family*, documentary, (USA: Drag City, 2012).

The Apocalypse

The word *Apocalypse* derives from the Greek word *Apokalypto* meaning 'uncovering' or 'disclosure', and I find it fascinating to think that the Apocalypse might be an uncovering of particular uncomfortable truths about ourselves.[173] In biblical scholarship, Apocalypse refers to a divine revelation given through a dream or vision, or the literature devoted to this revelation, particularly in Jewish and Christian writings about the mysteries of creation, the cosmos, and the 'End of Days'.[174] In English usage 'The Apocalypse' initially referred to the last book of the Bible, which is considered a prophecy about the end of the world.[175] From the nineteenth-century onwards, it was used to refer specifically to the second coming of Christ and the destruction of the world, which became a popular doctrine within Pentecostal movements and was an aspect of my faith that left a huge imprint on my memory. In contemporary usage it refers more generally to a cataclysm, especially on a global scale, and in that way corresponds, as I addressed in the previous chapter, to the way we envisage the Anthropocene.[176] In this sense it implies a total destruction of human and natural life resulting in the re-formation of a new, not necessarily better, world – the 'world-without-us' or landscapes, as Todd and Davis describe, haunted by dispossession.[177] The British painter Justin Mortimer (b. 1970) depicts this kind of cataclysm in nightmare scenes that draw on Gothic tropes to conjure ideas of nuclear disaster or toxic wastelands. Partly because of his experiences going in and out of hospital as a young child, Mortimer explains that he has a 'feeling that everyday life could easily disintegrate, that the mundane and anticipated can be upturned, corrupted, or destroyed'.[178] This corresponds to my feeling of waiting and dread that hovered within Eschatological thought and ideas about an Apocalypse.

[173] John Collins, 'Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Ancient World', in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40–55.
[174] Marina Benjamin, Martin Palmer and Justin Champion, 'The Apocalypse', panel discussion with Melvyn Bragg, *In Our Time*, BBC, 2003, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0054914.
[175] Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*.; Benjamin, Palmer, and Champion, 'The Apocalypse'.
Written around AD 81–96, this book (now known as Revelations) emerged out of this tradition of Jewish and Christian eschatological writings. Containing imagery from pagan sources and ambiguous in meaning, Revelations was initially controversial and was only – and somewhat reluctantly – included as a book in the Bible in AD 400, partly because it was believed to have been written by St John of the Gospels.
[176] Benjamin, Palmer, and Champion, 'The Apocalypse'.
[177] Davis and Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene'.
[178] Julien Delagrange, 'A Conversation with Justin Mortimer: The Artist as a Junkie', *Contemporary Art Issue Magazine,* 2021, https://www.contemporaryartissue.com/an-interview-with-justin-mortimer-the-artist-as-a-junkie/.

Figure 78 Justin Mortimer, 2016, Zona*, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 1830x305omm, Courtesy of the artist*

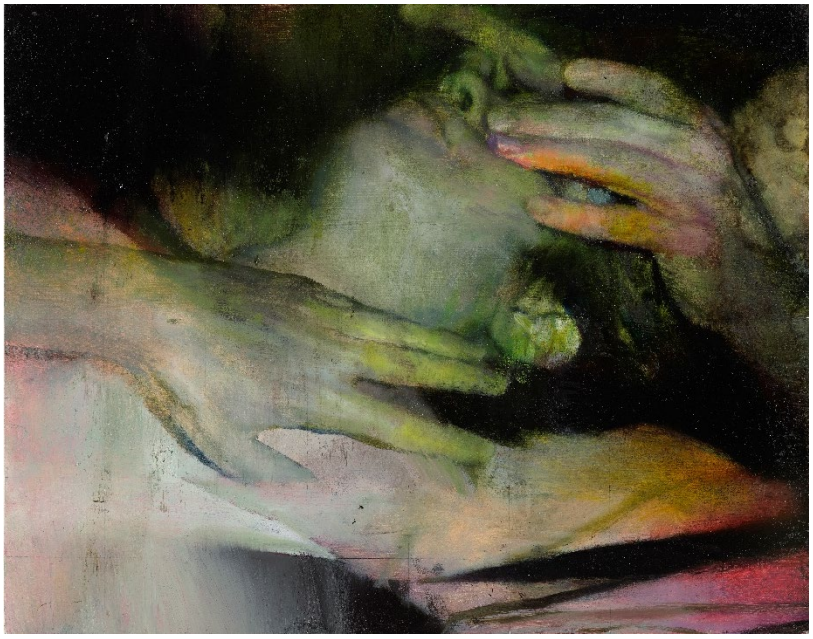

Figure 79 Justin Mortimer, 2020, Untitled (Head 2), Oil on Panel, 280x355mm, Courtesy of the Artist

Apocalyptic Literature: Signs that Recur

The theologian John Collins dates the development of Apocalyptic writing from 250BC–250CE, originating primarily within Jewish and Christian texts and influenced by the surrounding cultures (primarily Greek and Persian). This literary tradition has had important consequences for Christian and Cartesian or secular views of time.[179] Collins defines Apocalyptic stories as those in which in which an otherworldly being discloses 'a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world'.[180] This section will look at elements of Apocalyptic literature and the way these are incorporated into my paintings.

Apocalypse and Time

Apocalyptic depictions of transcendence, a reality that both permeates and transcends our ordinary experiences of time and the material world, seems to relate to Symbolist ideas of otherworldliness and recurs, often unconsciously, in my paintings. My interest in art history also has elements of this – that work from 200 years ago can still speak to my experience within the twenty-first century, reflecting Kanvesky's conception of painting as a 'complex fascinating conversation' beyond ordinary temporality.[181] In my work I allude to the idea of time as cyclical by painting and repainting images such as road signs or glass houses, as Ferdinand Khnopff repeated the figure of his sister in *Memories* in Chapter 1 (Figure 21, p.42). *Julia VII* (Figure 80) was a re-iteration of the covered motorway sign in *Signs and Wonders* painted back in 2020 (Figure 14, p.36), which had taken on new significance in light of the experience of cancer that I will elaborate on in Chapter 7. *Sign II* (Figure 82) repeats the more naturally coloured image from Figure 81: this was an old wooden billboard near Temuka that was mysteriously draped in a green tarpaulin for months, its meaning hidden. In this iteration, it is also obscured through the use of a single dull pink hue (cadmium red, burnt umber, and white), as well as a limited mid-value range, suggesting an object shrouded by atmospheric dust.

[179] John Collins, 'What is Apocalyptic Literature?' in John Collins, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Acpoalcyptic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–18.
[180] Collins, 'Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Ancient World', 46.
[181] Plotkin, "Interview with Alex Kanevsky".

Figure 80 Esther Deans, 2023, Julia VII: Sign*, Oil on Board, 255x300mm*

Figure 81 Esther Deans, 2021, Sign I*, Oil on Panel, 255x200mm*

Figure 82 Esther Deans, 2021, Sign II, *Oil on Panel, 255x200mm*

Early Apocalyptic includes a judgement of the dead, followed by reward and punishment, but this did not always require a cataclysmic end to history.[182] One important development of apocalyptic (and millennialist) thought, Martin Palmer argues, is that it implies the idea that history has a purpose, and is a progression, rather than being a series of cyclical events.[183] The idea of time as a linear progression that can be divided into periods or millennia may have had its roots in the ancient Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, and was developed within Jewish prophetic writing during the time of the Jewish exile to Babylon in around the sixth-century BC.[184] The idea of time as progress – as ontological – can be problematic, as we saw in the last chapter, causing us to believe that somehow we, as social animals, have improved upon humans of the past. John Gray argues that an ontological sense of time has been entrenched in European concepts of history and is still persistent within contemporary secular thought, particularly in the 'liberal humanist' idea that humanity is becoming better, that we learn from the past and in some way progress forward.[185] Unlike this more benign view of history, which sees humanity progressing toward ever greater peace and posterity, millennialism, like pessimistic ideas of climate change, sees us hurtling toward self-destruction.

Pillars of Fire

Parlane explains that Pentecostal waiting is 'perforated by signs and wonders: the opaque and miraculous messages of a deity who reaches in to our world from another dimension to signal that the end is near'.[186] Likewise, in my Evangelical childhood, signs were looked for and found everywhere: in any major decision, we asked the Lord for a sign, and would usually find one. These mystical signs turned out often to be convenient, confirming our own preferences or wants, but there was nonetheless a comfort in them – signs to point you in the right direction, to confirm the decisions you have made, to reassure you of your purpose in life. These 'signs and wonders' are those held as proof of the Holy Spirit's intercession and are echoed in my works through paintings such as the road signs that are blank or covered over: they seem to promise meaning or direction but their message is hidden. When I left home and tried to find signs for my own life, everything seemed incoherent; the signs I thought I found were ambiguous and filled me with unease and self-doubt rather than certainty.

In my work, 'smoke' is seen in both the literal image of smoke from a scrub fire, or as a painting method of obscuring through a limited colour or tonal palette, or of scrubbing over an existing drawing. In the *Pillar of Fire* paintings, re-iterations of a single photograph I had taken myself (Figure 83 and Figure 84), the pillar of smoke suggests an ecological sign: a literal sign

[182] Collins, 'Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Ancient World'.
[183] Martin Palmer, 'The Apocalypse'; John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).
[184] Martin Palmer, 'The Apocalypse'.
[185] Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*.
[186] Parlane, 'Postmodern Pentecostalism: Apocalyptic Time in the Paintings of Michael Stevenson'.

indicating damage to the atmosphere or some kind of catastrophe. While it has the appearance of some sort of detonation – an atomic bomb testing for example – in fact it is the image of smoke from a farm burn-off on the Canterbury plains. The feeling of a blank plain also suggests the Biblical sign God used to guide the Israelites through the wilderness to the promised land, a pillar of fire by night and of cloud by day, as described in Exodus.[187] Fire also alludes to baptism through the Holy Spirit, suggesting some kind of revelation, conversion, or change. The methods of veiling and obfuscation, through the choice of subject matter, the paint application, and a restricted colour palette, as in the pink work on the right, encourage the viewer to question the signification of these images.

Figure 83 Esther Deans, 2021, Pillar of Fire I*, Oil on Board, 255x305mm*

Figure 84 Esther Deans, 2021, Pillar of Fire II*, Oil on Board, 305x255mm*

[187] Exodus 13:21 (King James Version), 'And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night'.

Palimpsest: Literal and Figurative Interpretations

The religious scholars Karen Armstrong and Reza Aslan both argue that the Bible – including its Apocalyptic elements – should be seen primarily as spiritual texts, whose stories were considered symbolic; the tendency to want to read it as literal truth, as our Pentecostal church did, is fairly recent.[188] Reading the Bible as a historically accurate text gained force in the late nineteenth-century, partly as a reaction to those social and intellectual shifts already described[189] – the 'blank and empty universe' of nineteenth-century science as Schwartz put it.[190] Literalism was a direct refutation of the kinds of ideas and feelings that sat behind the work of the Symbolists; rather than turning inward to a more mystical and strange reality, these Pentecostal movements tended to push outward, insisting that *everyone* ought to see the Bible the way they did. By 1881, some theologians, looking for greater certainty, began seeing the Bible as 'absolutely errorless and binding'.[191] It was also inherent in the kind of universalising, proselytising push of Christian missionaries, as Todd and Davis explain, who were unwilling to accept the plurality of Indigenous approaches to the world. This certainty and literalism drew my parents to the church but ultimately repelled me from it. Returning as an adult to a more nuanced view of the text as spiritual and ritualistic, rather than literal, was reassuring.

Armstrong takes pains to point out that, historically, Jewish spiritual texts were often re-written and edited to meet the contemporary needs of their writers and to address the issues of the day. There was an understanding that Biblical exegesis – the art explaining scripture – was open-ended; the meaning of the words was not fixed but was open to interpretation, with divine help and revelation.[192] This idea of an open-ended understanding of a text such as the Bible, and the idea of re-writing, adding layers of interpretation has echoes in my paintings in the layering of new images over old and the building up and scrubbing back of multiple layers of paint until something new emerges, as in, for example *The River* from the introduction, in which the final painting was made over layers of previous works. These paintings, as in a scriptural text, contain their own history within them, and this history is allowed to seep through into the final work.

[188] Armstrong, *On the Bible*; Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2017).
[189] Clouse, 'Fundamentalist Theology'
[190] Delmore Schwartz, 'The Isolation of Modern Poetry', 211
[191] A. Hodge and B. Warfield, 'Inspiration', quoted in Armstrong, *On the Bible,* 199.
[192] Amstrong, *A History of God* (London: Vintage Books, 1999).

Figure 85 Alex Kanevsky, 2019, progress shots of Classic Nude*, 2019, showing three iterations in the development of the final painting, from left to right. https://www.somepaintings.net/classic-nude*

The idea of texts being written over, a kind of palimpsest, relates to painters who 're-write' their work so that this history of the painting is apparent in the final layers. In a series of fascinating videos, Alex Kanevsky shows the process by which his paintings are built up over many layers and iterations (see Figure 85).[193] Describing his work as slow but impatient, he paints a whole scene in one day, drawing as he goes rather than planning it out, and will then re-paint the whole scene the next day, totally altering colours, tones or composition. Often a painting will be developed this way over weeks or months until it reaches a state of resolution, although gaps are left to allow the remnants of previous iterations to show through. He describes his process as 'wandering in the dark with uncertain goals. Not aimless, but not exactly purposeful'.[194] The description of wandering in the dark feels as if it has parallels to the waiting Stevenson and I experienced in the church, a sense of ennui and purposelessness, but in Kanevsky this is transformed finally into an image that has resolved itself. When asked how he determines whether a painting is finished, he explains, 'When all the potential improvements will only do harm. When any roughness and awkwardness left in it ceases being a shortcoming and becomes a vital part of composition'.[195]

[193] See: Alex Kanevsky 'Progress Sequences', n.d., https://www.somepaintings.net/progress-sequences-1.
[194] Alex Kanevsky in conversation with Bjorn C. Andersson [Interview], *Viviante: The Painter's Blog*, accessed June 2022, https://www.vivianite.net/alex-kanevsky.
[195] Alex Kanevsky, *Viviante: The Painter's Blog.*

Shrouds

In my work, shrouds and drapery link to these ideas of knowing, of uncovering, as well as of obfuscating. These motifs can take the form of shrouded objects such as the drapery or the road signs covered in cloth mentioned above, or 'shrouding' as a painting method – using a limited tonal or hue range as in Kaye Donachie's work to suggest a vision shrouded in mist or in the dim light of dusk. Shrouds to me have links with religious ideas such as draped religious icons, Christ's burial shrouds, or the veil that Moses wore over his face after he had received the Ten Commandments.[196] They suggest the idea of something significant that is hidden because it is a mystery or is in some important sense unknowable, like the origin of the word Apocalypse. Growing up in the Evangelical church and then losing my faith as an adult have for me been experiences of questioning what we know and how we know it, what is real, what is only perceived as real, and what is perceived through faith.

[196] In the Biblical story, Moses spends 40 days on Mount Sinai where he receives the Ten Commandments engraved on tablets. When he returns to deliver these to the Israelites, his face shines so brightly that he covers it with a veil.
Exodus 34:33-35, King James Version: 'And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a vail on his face. But when Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he took the vail off, until he came out. And he came out, and spake unto the children of Israel that which he was commanded. And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone: and Moses put the vail upon his face again, until he went in to speak with him'.

The Rapture

Near the end of 1999 when I was 17, I was driving myself to a party in Timaru. For years, the church had been concerned with the 'Y2K bug',[197] and many had become convinced that the year 2000 would usher in the second coming of Christ, and that the faithful would be swept away in the Rapture, just as in the popular novel dramatisation *Left Behind* that we all listened to.[198] As Joshua Rivera explained, growing up in an Evangelical community meant we were instilled with the terror of this event; the Rapture existed as 'a macabre supernatural dream eluding understanding or explanation, looming on the periphery of [our] everyday life'.[199] Suddenly, the dark sky was lit with an eerie dull red glow. My heart started beating wildly and I had to pull off the road, convinced this was the Second Coming – the Rapture had already happened, and I had been left behind! I spent several terrified moments beneath the strange lights before I built up the courage to keep going, only to find later that this had been a rare sighting of the Aurora Australis, the Southern Lights. It only recently occurred to me that the dull red glow which permeates many of my paintings could be a subconscious echo of that aurora and the terror that accompanied it, back in 1999.[200]

As Stevenson described, in waiting for the Rapture 'believers occupy a position that continually trembles on the brink of apocalyptic revelation and the cessation of reality as we know it'.[201] There is a sense of this trembling on the brink of something in two other paintings I made in response to *The Source Family*, in which figures fall or fly through the air, acting out a strange ritual (Figure 86 and Figure 87). These two paintings push the sense of precariousness in figure painting, that I had briefly played with in *Just Beyond the Bounds* in 2021 (Figure 22, p.43), and show a heady disintegration into the chaos of movement and paint. There is an ambiguity about the movement: the figures could be dancing, flailing or falling in their deep green surroundings.

[197] *Encyclopedia Britannica,* s.v., 'Y2k Bug'.
[198] Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *The Left Behind Series Volume 1–16* (USA: Tyndale, 1995-2007).
[199] Joshua Rivera, 'Vanished from the Earth', *Slate Magazine* (2021), https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/05/rapture-fear-evangelical-americans-church-miller.html.
[200] In a striking contrast to this, Māori see the Auora Australis as Tahunui-a-rangi – the campfires reflected in the sky of ancestors who had travelled on in their canoes to settle in a land of ice far to the south.
Duane Hamacher, 'Fire in the Sky: The Southern Lights in Indigenous Oral Traditions', *The Conversation,* 2015. https://theconversation.com/fire-in-the-sky-the-southern-lights-in-indigenous-oral-traditions-39113
[201] Parlane, 'Postmodern Pentecostalism: Apocalyptic Time in the Paintings of Michael Stevenson.'

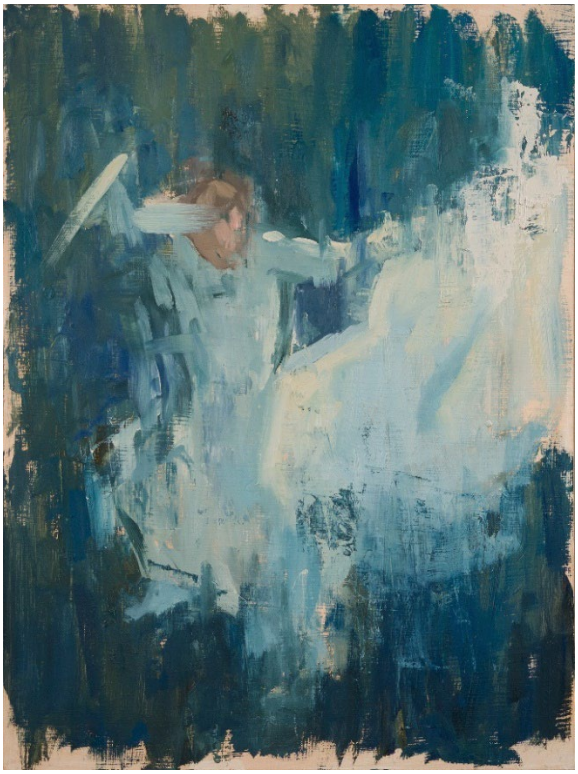

Figure 86 Esther Deans, 2023, Ritual I*, Oil on Board, 375x300mm*

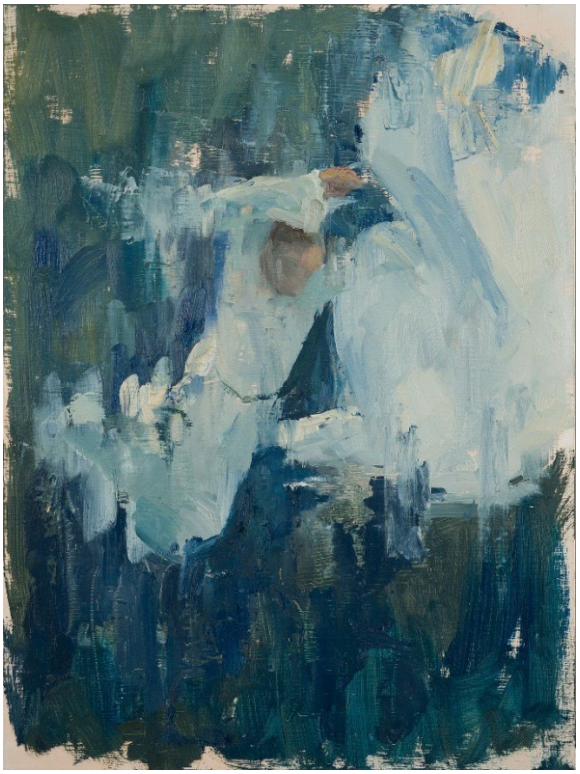

Figure 87 Esther Deans, 2023, Ritual II, *Oil on Board, 375x300mm*

Eschatology and Environmentalism

Elizabeth Phillips notes that as the popularity of the doctrine of the Rapture grew, there was a correlative shrinking in the outward-looking nature of Pentecostal groups. Over the course of the twentieth-century, many Evangelical groups, such as my parents' small church, became less concerned with issues of social justice and more with conserving a moral status quo; after all, if the Apocalypse is inevitable and imminent, questions of social justice or environmentalism are irrelevant.[202] Contemporary theologian Robby Waddell points out that in many conventional Christian interpretations of the Apocalypse there is apathy toward ecological care, 'if the expectation of the total destruction of Earth is coupled with a belief in the imminent end of space-and-time…then all reasonable support for creation-care is lost'.[203] Strozier likewise argues that believers in religious Apocalypse 'are not living within time but rather escape history by destroying time, thereby freeing themselves of responsibility for the world'.[204] I notice old elements of the apathy that Millennialism induces within my life even now: either the faith that technology and politics will somehow resolve the climate crisis, or that destruction is inevitable and not worth fighting against. This is in stark contrast with the 'post-apocalyptic' survivors that Whyte, Davis and Todd describe – trying to re-build and survive through a re-connection with nature, heritage, and community.[205]

The writer D. H. Lawrence was fascinated by the Eschatology presented within the book of Revelations but believed that it represented a darker underbelly of Christianity. In *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*s he argues that while the Christianity of Jesus is based on a gospel of tenderness, gentleness, and unselfishness, Revelations focuses instead on destruction and violence.[206] For Lawrence, there is a deep and worrying craving in this focus for the whole of the universe, the cosmos, to be wiped out. It is also a sad irony that Pentecostalism is often most tightly clung to, as both Rivera and Lawrence noted, in disenfranchised groups such as immigrant communities and the working poor, 'the less power you have, the more you believe, and the more faith you cling to; the more poverty you face, the less room you have in your heart, your mind, to trace the structures of power'.[207] The Rapture is seen as an escape from social and economic conditions, even while Evangelicalism often offers little to alleviate those burdens in the here and now.

[202] Elizabeth Phillips, 'The Rapture: Panel Discussion'.
[203] Robby Waddell, 'A Green Apocalypse: Comparing Secular and Religious Eschatological Visions of Earth', in *Blood Cries Out: Pentecostals, Ecology and the Groans of Creation*, ed. A. Swoboda (Eugene, Oregan: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 3.
[204] Strozier, 'The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Fundamentalist Mindset', 3
[205] Whyte, 'Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene'.; Davis and Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene'.
[206] Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, 65.
[207] Rivera, 'Vanished from the Earth'.

Summary

There are threads of commonality between the Symbolists and the nineteenth and twentieth-century development of Pentecostalism: ideas about the Apocalypse seem to arise from, and are returned to during, times of crisis and uncertainty. Millennialism offers a sense of certainty, and the security of a secret knowledge of the world; the sense of exceptionalism, as in a cult, is self-protective. Within the idea of Apocalypse there is a reassuring clarity: judgement and a battle of good and evil in which good finally triumphs. There is, despite the strangeness of the images and symbols, a sense of certainty that if one is among the righteous, one can be confident about reward and vindication. The secular 'judgement' of climate change is also, in a strange way, moral; it is the judgement of humanity's own hubris, the evils of colonisation alongside our current inattention, greed, inaction, and need for comfort. The idea of the Apocalypse as an unveiling is relevant in that the way we respond to it can unveil something about our own longings and doubts.

Parlane highlights the humour in Stevenson's work, an irony and lightness of touch favoured by post-modernism. In many important ways, my paintings lack this, and their weakness might be, as in much Symbolist work, a heavy-handed sincerity, too much melodrama and too little humour. In my work, images of smoke and fire can be seen as symbolic of Apocalypse or Eschatology as can the blanketing, murky colours – as if things are seen through a film of smoke or under the dull red glow of the Aurora Australis. The old ennui and listlessness I remember as a child, waiting fatalistically for the end to come, is reflected in the solitary objects, devoid of people, or in portraits of people whose eyes do not engage the viewer. However, painting, re-painting, and scrubbing-out helps me to exorcise my rigid Evangelical past to some degree, corresponding to the Symbolists' search for imagery whose meaning was not fixed or moralistic, or to the concept that the meaning of spiritual texts is not fixed, but is open to interpretation.

I am someone, as O'Connor terms it, 'Christ-haunted', and as she writes, 'ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows'.[208] It is the echoes of this 'macabre and supernatural dream',[209] as Rivera described the Rapture, that hover at the periphery of my vision now. Eschatological waiting within the Baptist church carried with it, as in Justin Mortimer's works, the 'feeling that everyday life could easily disintegrate'.[210] This feeling of the mundane as something fragile is echoed both in the threats of collective disaster in the Anthropocene, and in my own experience of personal disaster, which I will examine in Chapter 7. As I mentioned in the Introduction, the twin threads of my life have been art and religion, and in the next section I address

[208] Flannery O'Connor, 'Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,' 45.
[209] Rivera, 'Vanished from the Earth'.
[210] Delagrange, 'A Conversation with Justin Mortimer: The Artist as a Junkie'.

the way in which literature overlaps and links into my artwork, providing a complex kind of solace for my doubt, and helping to navigate the ‘strange shadows’ of my childhood faith.

5. Intertextuality: Relations to a Living Centre

> *Perhaps there's some kind of underground communication between painters and poets and composers and sculptors and novelists, each chipping away like a deaf miner in the dripping dark at his own coalface of human knowledge.*[211]

When I was 17, my English teacher introduced us to Modernist poetry and T. S. Eliot. Reading him, I felt something I had never quite found in Christianity; some idea that pain, loneliness, and human experience could be expressed in a way that felt beautiful; that an aesthetic experience could make me feel seen in a way that Christianity had not. An aesthetic experience allows for complexity and revels in a multiplicity of 'world pictures', while the sense I had from the Pentecostal church was that the most important emotion was joy, which came from God: if you lacked joy, then you lacked faith, and so there is shame associated with darker emotions such as doubt, fear, or frustration. The insights gained from film, literature, and music continue to be a valuable way for me to navigate life, and many of these aesthetic encounters sit within my thinking and making, like beads in Paterson's necklace. In her discussion of Intertextuality, Margarete Landwehr describes threads of inspiration and influence as a back and forth between the past and the present like intersecting points in a cobweb.[212] Although Intertextuality is a term primarily concerned with the links between one literary text and another, it also provides a useful way of thinking about how novels, poems, film, and photography operate within my paintings. It is a broad scholarly field and generally associated with literature studies; I have focussed on Landwehr's article, however, for its exploration of the links between visual and written 'texts'.[213] Her description of the oscillation between past and present corresponds with my feeling of existing simultaneously now and in a past conjured through creative arts. While the links of influence between one image and another, or between one text and an earlier text are often subconscious, Landwehr is interested, as am I, in the act of conscious borrowing, quoting or incorporation. This could be termed 'influence', and although this can have a passive

[211] Baxter, 'The World of the Creative Artist', 251.
[212] Landwehr, 'Introduction: Literature and the Visual Arts; Questions of Influence and Intertextuality'.
[213] In practice, of course, many visual artists draw on literature for ideas, motifs, and moods; in my research I also looked at the work of David Hockney and Balthus for the way literature informed their work. However, further examination of Intertextuality was beyond the scope of this exegesis.

connotation, the use of work by prior artists can be very active – other terms might include approximate, adapt, misunderstand, refer to, engage with, react to, quote, address, and so on.[214]

In an aesthetic experience, often the works we are drawn to often have some resonance with our own experience or our own view of the world: both the photographer Diane Arbus and the writer Flannery O'Connor feel to me like artists working at the same coal face I am chipping away at. They are both interested in outsiders, 'grotesque' figures who live at the margins of acceptable society and thereby tell us something important about it. Both were fruitful sources for my own use of conscious Intertextuality. In this chapter I will assess the ways in which written texts and images from other media are used as a source of ideas, images, and moods or as a way of adding a layer of intertextual meaning to a visual image. I will discuss the literature connected to my paintings, exploring the influence of Diane Arbus and Flannery O'Connor on my work. I will then analyse the work of Victor Man and the Intertextuality that operates in his paintings, and how this relates to my own.

Underground Communication

In his essay 'The World of the Creative Artist', the New Zealand poet James K. Baxter (1926–1972) describes the essential effort of human activity: 'At bottom an artist's job is no different from that of any other [person]: to maintain *a relation to a living centre*, so that he can keep his heart and mind alive as far as the grave' (my emphasis).[215] For Baxter, artmaking has a particular force in this 'job' because it is a process that lays bare the destructive and healing realities of our nature with which 'the systematised thought of our society is unable to cope'.[216] The image of a living centre links to D. H. Lawrence's phrase, 'emotional centre' (see Chapter 1) that can be reached only through symbol and myth, as well to the discussion in Chapter 3 of the role of the artist within the Anthropocene. I am particularly drawn to Baxter's image of a coal miner, solitary and in darkness, as a metaphor for the introspective and self-absorbed act that creating can often be, while the 'coal face' is a bleak, even Sisyphean, community that links them to the other miners, working in their own darkness. Society, he argues (writing in the 1950s), tends to value scientific, rational approaches to life, but these can only go so far, and it is in the further corners and depths, 'the dark, secret chamber of individual being that poetry and the arts finds their purpose'.[217] The poet Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) argues, similarly, that in the Modernist world (writing in 1951) the arts have replaced religious belief, and in this climate, 'poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost'.[218]

[214] Landwehr, 'Introduction: Literature and the Visual Arts; Questions of Influence and Intertextuality'.
[215] Baxter, 'The World of the Creative Artist', 251
[216] Ibid. 257
[217] Ibid. 252
[218] Wallace Stevens, 'The Relation between Poetry and Painting', in *Poets on Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth-Century Poets*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Berkley: University of California Press, 1988). 120

Glass Houses and Literature

Many of the painters working within Symbolism drew on novels and poetry for their imagery, and this is another aspect in which I relate to them. Often, I find that lines of poetry or images from the novels I am reading emerge, sometimes unconsciously and sometimes deliberately, as moods, scenes, colour, or thematic concerns in my painting. The link between past and present, and between one artwork and another, was present in my glasshouse paintings which had their genesis, in part, from two novels – *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Oryx and Crake*. In *Oscar and Lucinda*, the 1988 novel by Australian author Peter Carey set in nineteenth-century England and Australia, the two misfits of the title travel from England to colonial Australia, fall in love, and work together to make an exquisite glass church.[219] This church becomes a promise of love between them, which will be fulfilled when Oscar, a failed Anglican minister and gambling addict, delivers the church safely to a remote community in Bellingen, New South Wales. The majority of the novel is a sort of entertaining Victorian romp, but during Oscar's journey, as the magnificent church with its wrought-iron design is paddled up the Bellingen river, some other feeling creeps in: suddenly the enterprise feels insidious and the hollowness of the church becomes apparent, caught as it is within the wider machinations of history. During the expedition, Oscar witnesses the brutalisation of Aboriginal communities by the leader of the expedition and realises the futility or irrelevance of his task within the broader injustices of colonisation. He murders the expedition leader, and when the glass church finally reaches the community it sinks, taking Oscar and his dreams with it. When Peter Carey explained the origin of the novel, in relation to a church in the valley where he lived, he reflected on the loss of the stories that had once belonged to the land, 'the valley had been a cathedral in another time. For the sake of the Christian stories, these other stories had been poisoned, shot and drowned'.[220] It was this image of a glass church with all its connotations, pushed up the wide and beautiful river that appealed to me. I tried to create images using the little Anglican church in Peel Forest that my grandparents had attended, and thought of this as a glass structure, punted along the wide Rangitata river. I knew our mountain primarily as Big Mount Peel and Little Mount Peel, and our village as Peel Forest, all named after Sir Robert Peel, the Conservative prime minister of England.[221] In Ngāi Tahu history, however, Little Mount Peel is known as Huatekerekere, the wife of Tarahaoa, both of whom were passengers on the Ārai-te-uru waka which capsized on the Otago coastline. Tarahaoa and Huatekerekere remained where they were stranded, forming the Tarahaoa range. Their children became two trees within the forest at Huatekerekere's feet. The local hapū at Arowhenua, the local

[219] Peter Carey, *Oscar and Lucinda* (St Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1988).
[220] Peter Carey, 'Peter Carey on the Origins of Oscar and Lucinda', *The Guardian*, 20 February, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/20/peter-carey-oscar-and-lucinda
[221] Norman Gash, 'Robert Peel', ***Encyclopedia Britannica***, 28 Jun. 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Peel.; Joel Mokyr, 'The Great Famine', ***Encyclopedia Britannica,*** 18 June, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Famine-Irish-history. He was Prime Minister in 1834–1835 and 1841–1846 and some argue, failed to effectively mitigate the Irish famine of 1845–1849.

marae at Temuka strongly identify with the beautiful mountain Tarahaoa as their maunga (principal mountain).[222] I thought about this small church and the deforestation here that had helped to erase these stories from the area, along with the ancient forest that had borne witness to them.

Ecological thought around these paintings was also suggested through another bead in the necklace of influence, Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake*.[223] During lockdown, I took up jogging and I listened to the novel as I ran through a wintery forest, taking in her descriptions of a dystopian world in which nature has been ravaged by mismanagement and climate disasters; society is on the brink of total breakdown, ruled by multi-national corporations whose members live in luxurious compounds; and the poor survive as best they can in a decaying urban landscape. Within this vision of late-stage capitalism and climate failure, a chilling echo of the Indigenous dystopias we have addressed, a science experiment has formed a new species of human who live inside a vast and luscious dome, not unlike the dream ecosystem from the *Spaceship Earth* documentary. This image of a lush, rich haven within a barren landscape fed into the ideas for several of the paintings I mentioned in Chapter 2. The overall tone of it too, I imagined as somehow rich with blues and purples; the atmosphere of the outside world is a dull, polluted maroon, while that within the dome is artificially clear and intense in colour.

Figure 88 Esther Deans, 2021, Glass House II*, Oil on board, 150x200mm*

Figure 89 Esther Deans, 2022, Glass House IV*, Oil on Canvas, 450x350mm*

[222] Kā Huhu Manu: Ngāi Tahu, The Ngāi Tahu Atlas, 2023, https://kahurumanu.co.nz/atlas.
These details come from Ngāi Tahu's fascinating interactive map, which shows significant sites across Te Wai Pounamu, Aotearoa's south Island.
[223] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake, MaddAddam Trilogy, Book 1,* 2003, narrated by John Chancer, Bolinda Publishing Pty Ltd.

Both novels contained imagery that fed into my metaphors of glass houses: domes that maintain life, that separate one reality from another, or glass churches whose ideology can be insidious and dangerous. For Peter Carey, the church is a kind of metaphor the way Christianity has drowned out other stories, just as the church I grew up in was itself part of the broader missionary effort to drown out the stories of Māori, and, in a micro way, refused to acknowledge those injustices. In a similar way, by introducing flora and fauna to new climates, the colonial campaign often forced 'a landscape, climate, flora and fauna to an idealised version of the world modelled on sameness and replication of the homeland'. [224] My glasshouses allude to both tendencies, often echoing the architecture of small colonial churches and I continued to paint them even after the exhibition of 2020 (see figures 94–97, below). In many of these there is a sense they are floating in space – there is a sense that, like my Christianity, or Carey's church, there is nothing tethering them to the earth.

[224] Davis and Todd, 'On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene', 769.

Figure 90 Esther Deans, 2021, Glass House III, *Oil on board, 350x300mm*

Figure 91 Esther Deans, 2021, Glass House*, Oil on Board, 305x255mm*

Diane Arbus

Another ‘deaf miner’ chipping away at her own ‘dark coalmine’ is Diane Arbus. Arbus interests me because of her preoccupation with characters who exist at the edge of ‘acceptable’ society, and, as in Flannery O’Connor’s fictional worlds (which will be discussed in the next section), her images are pervaded with a disquiet that questions the norms of conventional society. Arbus often consciously constructs the scenarios in her photographs in collaboration with her subjects, and writes, ‘these are ... people who appear like metaphors somewhere further out than we do, beckoned, not driven, invented by belief, each the author and hero of a real dream by which our own courage and cunning are tested and tried‘.[225] Similarly, O’Connor writes about ‘the grotesque’ character who ‘can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement’.[226] In our church, we deliberately constructed a sense of otherness, of ourselves as separate from society, and I am curious about the way belief or a lack of it can alienate someone within their community. I am also interested in the idea of portraits as metaphors for something ‘further out’ than we are, or of a person ‘invented by belief’.

[225] San Franscisco Museum of Modern Art, *Diane Arbus: Revelations* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), 50.
[226] O'Connor, ‘Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction’, 41

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Figure 93 Diane Arbus, 1967, Masked Man at a Ball, N.Y.C.*, Gelatin Silver Print, 365x378mm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/285282*

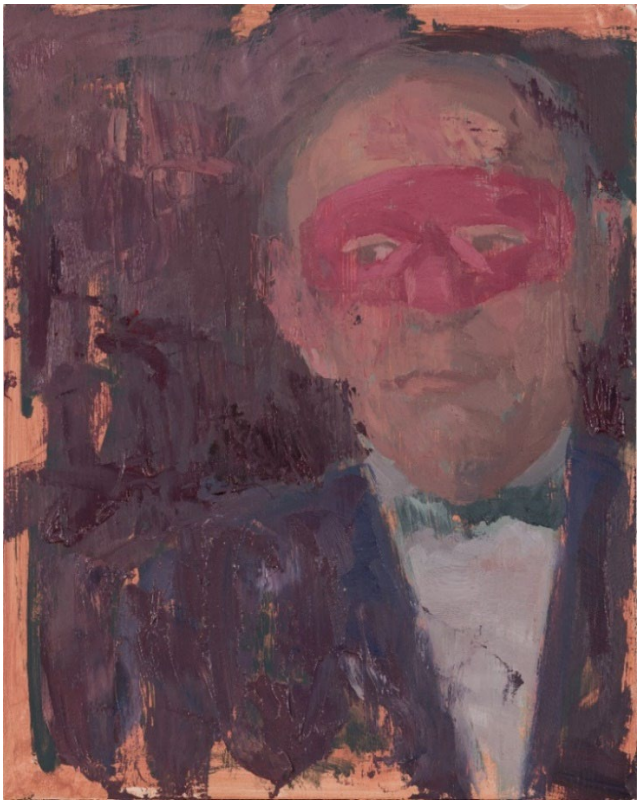

Figure 92 Esther Deans, 2022, IV: Mask*, Oil on Board, 200x150mm*

It is important to note the disquieting element within her desire to find these people 'further out' than 'us', Arbus often ends up othering people with intellectual and physical disabilities, removing their individual identities and autonomy.[227] Arbus's images, like O'Connor's stories, often feel unkind; she is drawn to these characters but at the same time repulsed by them and that cruelty sets up an unease in us, the viewers; as the reviewer Anne Higonnet writes, perhaps 'what is true in Arbus's photographs is less about her subjects, and more about us'.[228] I am also interested in this sense of otherness: a more general statement about our isolation and misunderstanding of one another – that those most obviously at the fringes represent the something in all of us that feels at odds with society,

[227] Donna McDonald, 'We Have to Talk About Diane Arbus: An Art-as-Research Perspective of Visual Arts Representations of Intellectual Disability', *Social Alternatives* 36, no. 4 (2017): 32–37, https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/ielapa.473941014959038
In response to a particular body of photographs of the inmates in a mental asylum, the artist and critic Donna McDonald points out the subjects are nameless, are dressed and posed for the viewer rather than naturally, and the extent to which they collaborate in their portrayal is limited. McDonald argues that in these works they have no real control over their own portraits and in this sense, her work can be seen as coolly, even cruelly, detached. Despite making images after the era of disability rights and activism, she employs the aesthetics of an early time-period of the 'freak' sideshows and circuses, much as O'Connor could also be seen as alienating her characters in their eccentricities.
[228] Anne Higonnet, 'Diane Arbus and the Power of Cruel Art', *Public Books,* 2016. https://www.publicbooks.org/diane-arbus-and-the-power-of-cruel-art/

at times alienated or misunderstood by those closest to us. Some of my portraits based on Arbus' work were shown in a solo exhibition held at the Aigantighe, Timaru's public art gallery in 2022. The curator Petrena Fishburn wrote about the melancholy feeling these portraits provide, such as the portrait above of a man in a mask (Figure 93) their introspection making it feel the viewer has seen a private moment, 'leaving us with an awkward feeling that we have witnessed a secret confusion, concern or doubt',[229] and that, alongside the stages and curtains of *Windows II* (Figure 48 p.53,), *Windows I* (Figure 59, p.67), or *Chandelier* (119), they feel as if they are part of a theatre, performing 'an ambiguous and poetic tragedy'.[230]

[229] Petrena Fishburn, *Windows and Forgetting: Exhibition Catalogue*, (Timaru: Aigantighe Public Gallery, 2022).
[230] Ibid.

Figure 94 Esther Deans, 2019–2022, Chandelier*, Oil on Board, 305x255mm*

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Figure 95 Diane Arbus, 1956, Woman on the Street with Two Men, N.Y.C., *Silver Gelatin Print, 279x355mm, Rose Gallery, https://rosegallery.net/artworks/12367-diane-arbus-woman-on-the-street-with-two-men-n.y.c.-1956/*

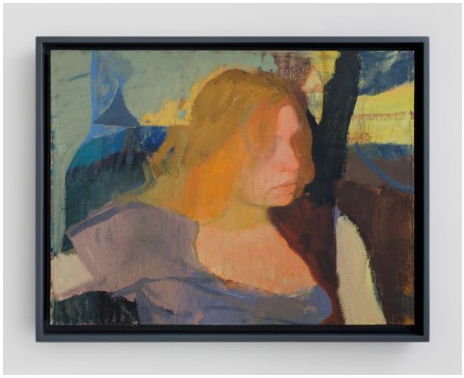

Figure 97 Emil Robinson, 2015, Catherine in the Forest*, Oil on Linen, 914,1193mm*

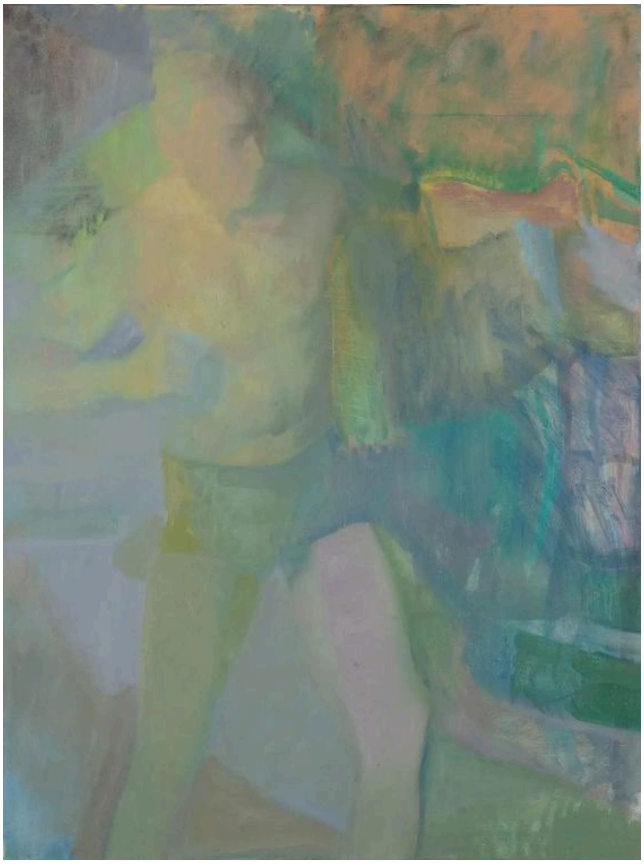

Figure 96 Emil Robinson, 2015, The Boxer*, Oil on Linen, 457x609mm, Image Courtesy of the Artist*

My grandfather used to warn me that the problem with relying on photographs is that the camera has done the work of seeing for you: you have seen nothing yourself. Despite this, I wondered whether I could use photographs, someone else's vision, to access a feeling within myself. Through painting, I hope to recuperate the work of seeing: not reproducing the photograph accurately but rather using my painting methods to question the photographic image or find something in it that is particular to my personal perception, my interior visual world. In the photograph by Diane Arbus below (Figure 95), three figures are grouped together but feel separate and disconnected, each looks away – the two men out of the frame, the woman gazing inwardly. The negative space between them is jagged, highlighting their isolation. In translating this from a photograph, I looked at the work of Emil Robinson (b. 1981), a contemporary figurative and perceptual painter from the USA. Robinson often uses his deft observational skills and handling of exquisitely delicate hues (somewhat akin to Gossage's imaginative colours) to transform found photographs into something strange and mystical (Figure 96 and Figure 97). In my translation of the photograph, multiple hues were used – green, pink and blue – but all within the same muted chroma and within a very restricted, high-value range, the lack of contrast making the figures almost disappear into their surroundings with only the barest hint of smoke and empty branches behind them (Figure 98).

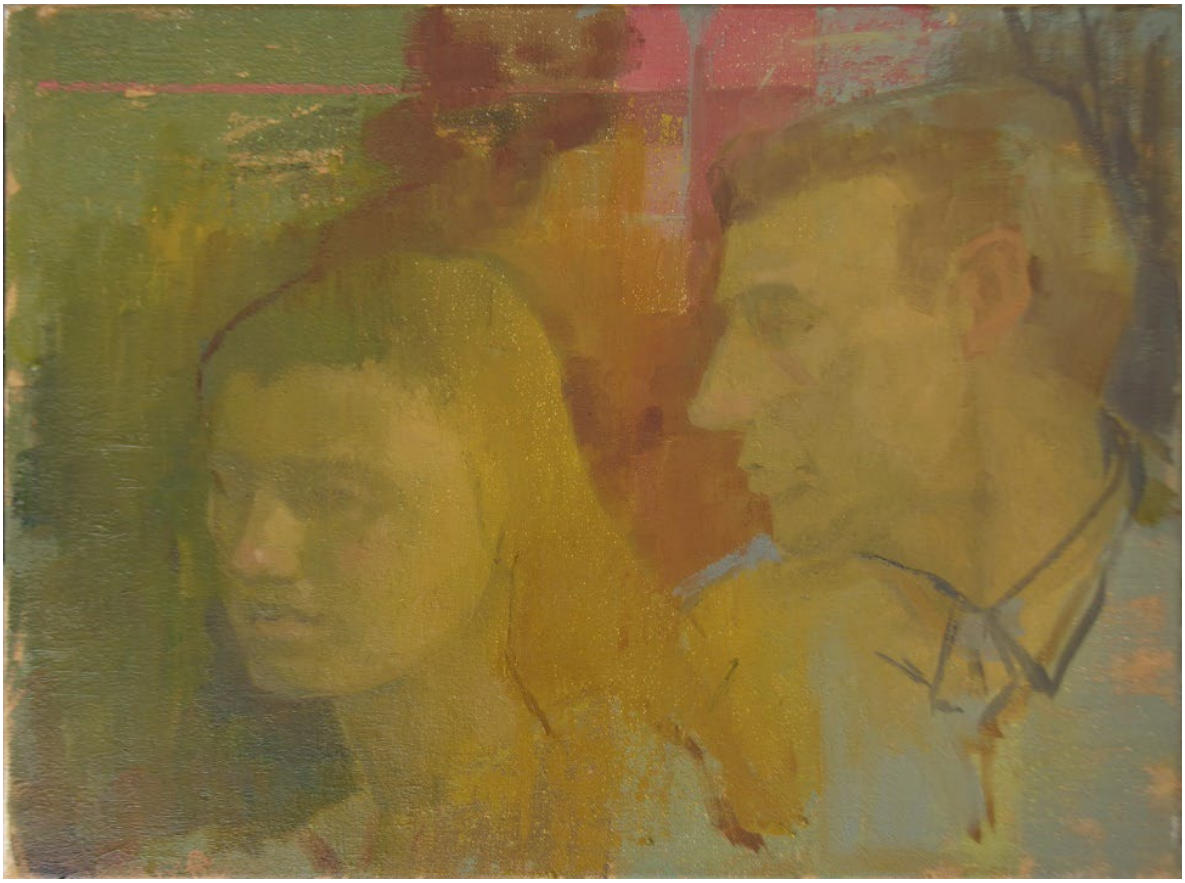

Figure 98 Esther Deans, Couple (After Diane Arbus), 2021, Oil on canvas, 405x303mm

Passageways in from Outside: Victor Man and James Joyce

The work of Victor Man also provides passageways in Baxter's 'dark underground' between visual images and literature. As mentioned earlier, Man's sensibility links back to earlier nineteenth-century painters and whose paintings evoke a kind of timelessness. Like the Symbolists, his paintings are often intertextual, and literature is hinted at through titles and his judicious use of symbols. In the words of his gallery, developing work out of literature allows his paintings and installations 'to be liberated from the present moment, and to have a larger framework for his work to exist within'.[231] In this section, I will focus on the way in which literature emerges from, and adds depth to, his enigmatic paintings, and the influence of his Symbolist sensibility on my own.

The titles of several of Man's paintings include allusions to 'S.D', a reference to Stephen Dedalus, the hero of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and a character appearing in his 1923 *Ulysses*.[232] In these 'portraits' of S.D. (for example, Figure 99 and Figure 100), the figure is androgenous, shifting in different paintings between masculine and feminine qualities; it feels as if, like these novels, they border on self-portrait or autobiography. Man's work, Alessandro Rabottini suggests, is an osmosis between apparent reality and psychic experiences, shifting between autobiography and invention.[233] Rabottini describes James Joyce's writing, likewise, as juxtaposing the everyday with the symbolic, the trivial with the mysterious, the contemporary with the myth, which corresponds to the mysterious and symbolic way Man handles everyday objects.[234]

[231] Gladstone Gallery *Victor Man: Szindbad* (Exhibition Press Release), 2013, https://www.gladstonegallery.com/exhibition/70/szindbad/info.
[232] Preuss, 'Between Myth and Reality: Victor Man's Existential Painting'.
[233] Alessandro Rabottini, 'Icarus with No Sun'.
[234] Ibid.

Figure 99 *Victor Man, 2011,* Untitled, (portrait of S.D.), *Oil on canvas, 500x400mm, © Victor Man Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone, Photography by David Regen*

Figure 100 *Victor Man, 2011, Untitled (S.D. as Judith and Holofernes), Oil on canvas, 1000x670mm, © Victor Man Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone*

Untitled (S.D. as Judith and Holofernes) (Figure 100) presents us with a confusing amalgam of influences. Stephen Dedalus is referred to again, this time in reference to the Biblical story of Judith and Holofernes. S.D. is thus acting a part – as Judith – the mask on her lap standing in for the severed head of Holofernes. This image could parallel a striking passage in *Portrait of the Artist* in which Stephen Dedalus muses that when he thinks of a particular friend, he could never raise before his mind the entire image of his body but only the image of the head and face, 'the face of a severed head or death mask'.[235] Through this image of his curiously disembodied friend, and as he feels the limits of language itself, Dedalus has 'a glimpse of a strange dark cavern of speculation', which he turns away from, finding that 'the nightshade of his friend's listlessness seemed to be diffusing in the air around him a tenuous and deadly exhalation and he found himself glancing from one casual word to another on his right or left in stolid wonder that they had been so silently emptied of instantaneous sense'.[236] The dark, murky tone of many of Man's paintings evokes for me the crepuscular, rainy imagery of Dublin that Joyce evokes in *Portrait* and Joyce's writing also seems to correlate with the dark cavernous space of Man's paintings, and the feeling of a limit to meaning or interpretation. This psychological and chromatic murkiness also comes close to the kinds of ideas I strive for in my own

[235] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Suffolk: The Chaucer Press, 1964), 181.
[236] Ibid., 182

work – the glimpse of Baxter's dark coalmine,[237] or Odilon Redon's images 'at the limit of thought'[238] in which sense and certainty is undermined.

I have also found Man's use of observational painting techniques valuable. The paintings may be based on photographs or painted from life, but have a strong element of invention and stylisation, so that they look neither purely observational nor photographic. In them, both invention and a deep knowledge of figure painting are employed to create invented characters who, nonetheless, carry a sense of solidity and believability. In *Untitled* (Figure 101) the figure feels like a self-portrait – the face takes up the whole pictorial space and gazes directly at the viewer, a composition that leads the viewer to link S.D. with Victor Man himself, or at least with a fictionalised account of himself. The small black skull that rests on his hand could be seen as an allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a key text woven into *Ulysses* – again inviting literary associations without stating them directly.

Figure 101 Victor Man, 2012, Untitled*, Oil on Canvas Mounted on Wood, 270x190mm.*[239]

[237] Baxter, 'The World of the Creative Artist'.
[238] Odilon Redon, 'To Oneself (1898-1909)', in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henri Dora (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
[239] Deutsche Bank, ed., *Victor Man, Szindbad. Artist of the Year*. Berlin: Deutsche Bank Kunsthalle, 2014, 78.

Pavel writes that these paintings treat literature as a craft equal to painting, that they are imbued with 'a certain nostalgia for literature, understood, in an ekphrastic manner, as a "sister art".'[240] I can relate to this feeling of being imbued with nostalgia for something rather than using figure painting to directly illustrate or provide an allegory of an idea. These are 'sister arts' that sit alongside one another, rather than necessarily feeding in a direct manner into each other. Man's paintings, as Pavel puts it, give a promise of 'almost arriving at a meaning [that is] out there'.[241] Famously, he does not elaborate on the meanings of his work and does not give many interviews. When describing the political content of his work during a group exhibition at the Romanian pavilion in the 2005 Prague Biennale, however, he explained that the artists were not trying to create direct connections between works, but allowing connection to be made in a more subliminal way: 'I like the noumenon you might get from the disparate associations, without the loss of meaning'.[242] Man's subtle and oblique allusions to literature invite us to draw our own connections between those works and his own.

Alessandro Rabottini sees Man's work as an attempt to revive the human and religious values of images.[243] Instead of offering windows onto a perceivable world, Man's paintings, like Symbolist paintings, offer 'a passageway in from outside'.[244] This image of a passageway links back to Baxter's idea of artists working on their own coal faces in the dark, each of us trying to find a way toward our own 'living centre'.[245] I was curious to use Flannery's O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* in a similar way – not only as a source of imagery but also to open up and expand the content of my paintings themselves.

[240] Laura Pavel, 'On Diving into Artistic Potentiality: The Infra-Gaze of Interpretation', *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* October, no. 1.1 (2015): 41, https://www.metacriticjournal.com/articles/getfileembed/8/LauraPavel_1_1.pdf.
Gabriele Rippl, 'Ekphrasis', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1057
Ekphrasis is commonly used to refer to vivid descriptions in literature (often in poetry or novels) of a visual work of art. Within post-modern theory it can also refer to interlinking of verbal and visual imagery in the form of constellations or collaborations. Given its complex history and the contentions over its meaning, I have preferred the term 'Intertextuality' to describe the links between my paintings and literature.
[241] Pavel, 'On Diving into Artistic Potentiality: The Infra-Gaze of Interpretation', 6.
[242] In conversation with Yilmaz Dziewior, quoted in Koerner von Gustorf, 'Dark Metamorphoses: Victor Man Is Artist of the Year 2014', https://art.db.com/Artists-of-the-Year/#:~:text=Victor%20Man%202014&text=His%20works%20take%20the%20viewer,alchemistic%20process%2C%20undergoing%20a%20fusion.
[243] Alessandro Rabottini, 'Icarus with No Sun'.
[244] Ibid., 57.
[245] Baxter, 'The World of the Creative Artist', 251.

Summary

This chapter has investigated ways in which art and aesthetic experiences can offer 'relations to a living centre', important ways of accessing something about what it means to be human that is dark and deep and beyond the ordinary surface of everyday life. It also showed how Intertextuality, particularly from literature, can act as a web, an oscillation of ideas between artists, and between the past and present.[246] This image of inspiration as a web connects with the idea of history being circular rather than linear, of our sense of self being a part of our pasts, our own along with our wider social and historic pasts. Both Carey and Atwood's novels raise issues and concerns that intersect with those in my project: the destruction of natural habitat; Christianity and faith; the stories we tell ourselves about our histories and the ways these might negate or override others' stories; and the worries we have about the future. Their vivid imagery fed into my visual ideas and helped me to develop motifs and further the conceptual thinking about transparency, glass buildings, ecology, and human relationships. Along with Arbus, they echo my thoughts about temporality: a wary and resented past and a feared future.

Diane Arbus' images have proved invaluable resources for accessing my own visions and characters and while her use of 'us' and 'them' may be contentious, it does correspond to the way my family saw us as believers in the true faith, the way O'Connor's characters see themselves, or as Steven Dedalus might have, as a community of individuals 'invented by belief' existing somewhere beyond the normal bounds of conventional social expectations or values. Building on these ideas of influence, I decided to use O'Connor's novels to provide imagery and a particular timbre, or a 'way in' to my fears around climate change and my own history. After my greenhouse paintings, which often depicted a world devoid of humans, I wanted to show the emotional effect of disaster and a world that has been altered by our own actions. The following chapter examines the series that resulted from this 'back and forth' of influence.

[246] Landwehr, 'Introduction: Literature and the Visual Arts; Questions of Influence and Intertextuality'.

6. *Wise Blood* Paintings

> *Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown.*[247]

The fiction of Flannery O'Connor, often characterised as 'Southern Gothic' is like the grit of sandpaper: the atmosphere is violent and outraged; the symbols and actions are full of portent; the characters are macabre and grotesque. Despite this, her stories are often blackly funny; the characters are eccentric, never quite falling into caricature but often skirting the edges of it. In O'Connor's depictions of dusty, small-town life and zealous religion I find a correspondence to my own memories of, for example, the genial pastor of our church in handlebar moustache and cowboy boots, or the woman who was possessed by devils every year at church camp. In O'Connor's work religion is not a salve or a source of peace but a necessity; she explains that for some the belief in Christ is a matter of life and death, and that this is a source of confusion to those readers 'who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence'.[248] I felt some shared sensibility between the rigid, vital certainty of faith, the 'bizarre kind of symbolism'[249] that she creates in her short stories and novels, and my own experiences in the church. O'Connor writes that a novelist must dig deep within themselves to reach 'the underground springs that give life to [their] work'. This will be:

> A descent through the darkness of the familiar into a world where, like the blind man cured in the gospels, he sees men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision.[250]

The circling of the themes addressed so far in this exegesis – cataclysm, climate change, Eschatology and intertextuality, as well as the concept of digging into underground springs – led to an exhibition in 2022 at AUT's St Paul Street Gallery Three, which I titled *Wise Blood,* after the novel. I took the scenes, symbols, and atmospheres suggested by O'Connor's work and applied them to my own fears and obsessions and, in the process, I drew on imagery and concerns from Southern Gothic literature more generally. This chapter will look at some of the context in which a gothic sensibility

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[247] Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 13.
[248] Flannery O'Connor, 'Author's Note to the Second Edition', in *Wise Blood,* xiii.
[249] Ibid., ix.
[250] O'Connor, 'Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction', 50.
The allusion is to a story in the gospels where Jesus spits on his hands and then lays them over the eyes of the blind man, 'And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees, walking'. Jesus then repeats the action and the man is able to see clearly.
Mark 8:25, King James Version

developed within the southern states of America, and its links to the Symbolists. I will then discuss her two novels *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear it Away* (1955), their concerns and the ideas they suggested for my work. I will then look at specific symbols that arose in the course of this series, and how the final works were installed in St Paul Street gallery.

Nineteenth-Century Gothic literature

Many novels characterised as Southern Gothic have been instrumental to my imaginative life since I first discovered *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner when I was living in a small apartment in South Korea, with ambitions of being a writer myself. I loved the impressionistic strangeness of the language and the distinct voices of the characters – the way they pieced together the stories of themselves as fragments, sensations, and disjointed memories. I liked the harshness of the landscape too, the sense of a forbidding nature and foreboding God. Since then, I have resonated with many of the works of Southern Gothic writers such as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Tennessee Williams, as well the contemporary writers Cormac McCarthy and Toni Morrison. Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road,* about a dystopian future in which civilisation has collapsed and the remnants of society roam about a blasted landscape, provided some of the scenes or sensibility of wasteland that I have used, as I mentioned in Chapter 4.

Novelists such as Faulkner and O'Connor were tapping into an older tradition of English and European Gothic literature. That tradition dates from a 'medieval revival' in the late eighteenth-century, which saw writers looking to pre-Enlightenment romances to create a new fiction that favoured the macabre, mysterious, terrifying, and supernatural.[251] In contrast with the rationalist ideas of many of their contemporary thinkers, Gothic writers (like the Symbolists they influenced) focussed on the irrational, on repressed desires, and transgressive thoughts; the stories have elements of violence, sex, anxiety, and death. The genre became extraordinarily popular and because of this tended to be criticised from a literary point of view; it was often regarded as kitsch or pulp – relying on cheap tricks and dramatic plots rather than literary sophistication.[252] Despite these criticisms, it became influential with a wide range of Romantic writers and artists who were fascinated by the themes of obsession, the unconscious, and the uncanny.

Southern Gothic Literature

Transplanted into the USA by writers such as Edgar Allen Poe, this genre, with its suspicion of scientific progress and its focus on subconscious fears and haunted pasts, became an important antidote to the idea of the American Dream. As Charles Crow writes, 'if the national story of the United States has been one of faith in progress and success and in opportunity for the individual, then

[251] Jack Stillinger and Deidre Shauna Lynch, 'The Gothic and the Development of a Mass Readership', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romanic Period.*
It is interesting to note the prominence of women in the genre: the best-selling and earliest author was Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley is one of its most influential authors, and Jane Austen was responsible for a beloved send-up of the genre, *Northanger Abbey*. Some of the most prominent authors to transplant the genre into the American South of the twentieth-century were also women: Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers and, later, Toni Morrison.
[252] Ibid.

the Gothic has told … the tale of those who are rejected, oppressed or who have failed'.[253] In particular, Southern Gothic fiction contrasted the idyllic, pastoral landscapes associated with antebellum Southern states with the hauntings of their history of racism, slavery and patriarchy, exposing the extent to which those idyllic images relied on the repression of the past.[254] Gothic writers share what Tennessee Williams called 'a sense, an intuition, of an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience'.[255] In this sense, it corresponds to 'gothic' elements within our current society: that climate disaster is a tragedy for those who have benefitted least from industrialisation; that the idyllic story of technological progress and plenty is haunted by displacement, violence, and environmental degradation.[256]

Like Diane Arbus, Flannery O'Connor focuses on 'grotesque' characters who have physical or moral deformities; people who sit uncomfortably on the borders of conventional society and who often highlight the discrepancy between a perceived normality and the repressed realities that lurk beneath this surface.[257] O'Connor explains that her work is less about the obvious realism of daily, average life, but rather a 'deeper realism' that goes beyond the surface to 'push the limits of mystery' into an 'experience of mystery itself'.[258] This begins in the concrete, with the perception of the senses, but distorts these to reach 'the underground springs that give life to [their] work'.[259]

Religion often looms large in this American tradition, and my experiences in the church are another element of my attraction to it. Our church fostered a sense of outsider-ness: the adults had been hurt in various ways by their experiences in the world, and so retreat into faith and church offered a comforting refuge. For us children this caused an awkward schism in our social worlds; being privy to divinely revealed truth was a dubious privilege when it meant being alienated from the world of pop music, movies, and fashion. In our church there was also an emphasis placed on Jesus' ascetic values, a suspicion of ideas of secular progress or 1990s consumerism as antithetical to the real meaning and purpose of life. This deliberate placing of ourselves as outside conventional norms connects me to the alienation of many of the characters in O'Connor's work, as well as to Delmore Schwartz and James K. Baxter's conception of the artist as someone who often feels themselves at odds with society.[260]

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[253] Crow, C. (1999). Quoted in Richard Gray, 'Inside the Dark House: William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* And Southern Gothic', in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic.* Edited by Susan Castillo Street and Charles Crow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 37

[254] T. Bjerre, 'Southern Gothic Literature', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.304

[255]Tennessee Williams, 'Introduction to Carson Mccullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye*', in *Where I Live: Selected Essays by Tennessee Williams*, ed. C. Day and B. Woods (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1950), 42.

[256] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable.*

[257] Granville Hicks, 'A Writer at Home with Her Heritage', *Saturday Review* 45, no. May (1962).
O'Connor's imaginative grotesquery is part of what draws me to her but is what I have been unable to conjure in my own works. For her, it was an important element of her 'realism' and story-telling: she says that the grotesque is the 'most reliable path to reality'.

[258] O'Connor, 'Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction', 50.

[259] Ibid., 50.

[260] I have come to see, of course, that the sense of alienation cultivated in our church was very much self-imposed; there were many more real injustices and discriminations that we refused to see, such as racism and the long effects of colonialism, or the inability to recognise our own privileges within this system.

Wise Blood

In the novel *Wise Blood* the main character Hazel Motes (nicknamed Haze) attempts to lose the moralistic, proselytising faith of his father and grandfather. In its place, he tries to create the 'Church without Christ', insisting that both sin and redemption are unhelpful illusions, but in the pursuit of this is no less dogged, uncompromising, or driven than his preacher father. Perpetually, as the quote at the beginning of this chapter states, he sees 'Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind'.[261] In the end, he finds it impossible to escape this figure, and blinds himself in an act of penance for his unbelief, or, as V.S. Pritchett argues, 'as a final gesture of self-isolation from the world he has come back to after the war'.[262]

The 'grotesque' characters of *Wise Blood* exist, either because of their dogmas or their strange personalities, on the periphery of the ordinary society of Taulkinham, Tennessee. In the novel, the term 'wise blood' refers to a kind of bodily intuition. The character Enoch Emery has a particular feeling that fizzes through his blood sometimes as a driving force, directing him in what he should do, something that compels him often despite his own volition. The faith in this inexplicable knowing reminded me of my parents' belief; my mother would often sense the Lord was guiding her toward some specific and definite action, and these 'opaque and miraculous messages',[263] as Parlane describes them, came from somewhere divine and was beyond her conscious knowledge. In the novel, though, despite his certainty, and our feeling that this guidance must lead to some resolution, it leads Enoch only to a series of failures and embarrassments. It directs him to steal a mummy from a museum, which he gives to Haze Motes's girlfriend, Sabbath Hawks. Both Sabbath and Enoch treat it with religious reverence, as a 'new Jesus', but when Sabbath passes it to Haze, he destroys it in a fury. Enoch's faith is absolute but the consequences of it are bizarre and only lead him to further isolation. In the story, Sabbath is a kind of Mary figure – an emblem of redemption for Haze if he can accept it – but rather than a precious child, she carries a mummy, a symbol of death. My images of this scene focus on Sabbath holding the bundle, for which I used myself as a reference (Figure 102 and Figure 103). In these, the focus is on the hands, which could be seen as anxious and grasping, while the figure is faceless and personality-less. The bundle is suggestive of something precious, like a baby, but is not explicit. There is an ambiguity, as in the novel, about whether the hands hold hope and joy, or emptiness and violence. As in Victor Man's work, the inclusion of myself as a model, though without a face, gives these paintings a biographic element.

[261] Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 13.
[262] V.S. Pritchett, 'Introduction', *Wise Blood*, ix.
[263] Parlane, 'Postmodern Pentecostalism: Apocalyptic Time in the Paintings of Michael Stevenson'.

Figure 102 Esther Deans, 2022, I (Hands)*, Oil on Board, 300x350mm*

Figure 103 Esther Deans, 2022, XI (Sabbath)*, Oil on Board, 300x350mm*

The Violent Bear It Away

The Violent Bear It Away is the only other novel by O'Connor.[264] Though tighter and more focused, it covers similar theological and spiritual ground to *Wise Blood* and contains similar tensions between love and violence. In it a teenager, Francis Tarwater, is raised by his great-uncle Mason Tarwater in a backwaters cabin to be a prophet like him. This is a driving and consuming force for Francis, which he is fascinated by but also tries to resist. After his great uncle's death, Francis goes into the city to find his uncle Rayber, a secular teacher who sees the faith of Mason as deranged and excessive, and who tries to convince Francis away from Christianity altogether. There is a strong sense that Francis's childhood formation is inescapable, and a friend pointed out to me that this is really the psychological drive of the novel: the feeling that things set in motion in our childhood cannot easily be changed or averted. I am conscious of this myself, of a constant awareness, a positioning of myself as *not Christian*, as 'Christ-haunted;' this sometimes feels like a posturing to hide the apprehension that maybe it *is* real after all and this *is* the biblical Apocalypse. In *The Violent Bear It Away*, as in *Wise Blood*, a secular, irreligious view offers no more comfort than a religious one. Rayber holds himself in so tightly, to avoid being swept away by the irrational force of his uncle's faith, that his life is devoid of its own meaning, connections, or emotions. In his desire to rescue his young nephew, he no longer sees Francis as a person in his own right. In both novels, revelation is granted at the end through some kind of violence; as in Apocalypse doctrine, it is only in penitence and self-destruction that the characters find the truth. I was fascinated by this depiction of spirituality, and the concepts of penitence and destruction are reiterated in my painting methods where surfaces are sanded back, painted over, and scraped off, leaving scars and remnants of past images.

[264] Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007 [1955]).
The title comes from an ambiguous gospel verse, Matthew 11:12, Douay-Rheims translation: 'From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away'.

Sourcing Images

Figure 104 Colleen Barry, 2019, Love and Youth*, Oil on Canvas, 1168x1422mm, https://www.colleenbarryart.com/ride-the-tiger-2022*

Figure Painting

I have always been drawn to portraits and figure painting and the work of painters such as Edgar Degas (1834–1917), Diego Velásquez (1599–1660) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), rather than purely abstract work. This is similar to the appeal of literature: a desire to recognise another person, and to be shown something about them that might not be immediately obvious, some interior fact of their existence beyond a mere appearance. Unlike the previous works, however, I found creating figures from imagination much harder than road signs or glasshouses. In thinking about the Symbolists who employ their knowledge of anatomy and drawing to create multi-figure works from imagination, I have come up against the limit of my own ability to construct or invent visual worlds of figures and had to find ways to circumvent this.

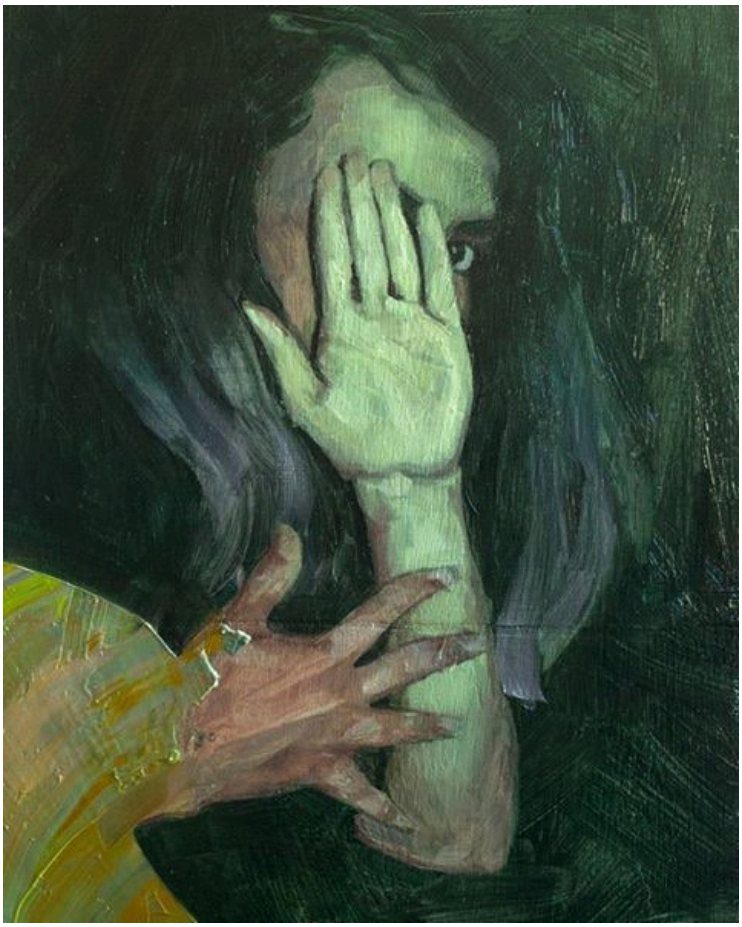

Figure 105 Hélène Delmaire, 2016, Le Grande Vague*, Oil on Board, 300x400mm, https://helenedelmaire.com/albums/recent/content/lagrande/lightbox/*

The ideal set-up of perceptual, observational painting is to work from a model. There is a certain kind of synergy that happens between the sitter and the artist when working from life: the act of observation and of interaction produces something of its own, beyond what the artist could create alone. With enough practice, it is possible to muster that feeling from a photograph, but it is harder. Photographs bring their own difficulties – they tend to flatten tones, to lose details in either the lights or the darks, and the colour is never the same as it is actually perceived by an individual. However, hiring a model poses its own problems; for one, it is expensive. Increasingly, too, I find an awkward social strain in working one-on-one with a model – there is something very constrained about a social interaction which is also a financial transaction, and there is a certain implied pressure to be sociable, to chatter and fill the blanks of silence, that goes against the sort of solitude and quiet introversion I like to work under.[265]

[265] I have wondered whether this is a pressure felt particularly by female artists because a kind of socially sanctioned femininity that expects us to be obliging, to be good company, to not want to 'put anyone out' can be antithetical to making interesting work, such as male artists may have felt they had more licence to do. Colleen Barry (Figure 111) has mentioned this as part of the reason she works from photographs. Colleen Barry, interviewed by Dina Brodsky and Marshall Jones, 'Colleen Barry: Snapping the Rubber Band', *Art Grind* (podcast), February 18, 2021, https://www.artgrindpodcast.com/podcast/ep-54-colleen-barry-snapping-the-rubber-band.

Artists on Instagram

Partly for these reasons, a sub-genre has developed online of figurative artists who work almost exclusively from photographs but are interested in the historical training of figure painting. Artists such as Hélène Delmaire[266] (b. 1987, see Figure 105) and Colleen Barry (b. 1891, see Figure 104) work from digital images and disseminate these through social media. This genre often operates somewhat outside of the critics and galleries but is a flourishing community in its own right. It even has small movements within it – flutters of new ideas and influences that ripple through the ephemeral world of Instagram, leaving traces of themselves in the artworks made by followers and fans. It is strange to me that these are physical pictures that most of us only ever encounter in the boxed hedges of Instagram's grids and via the manipulations of its algorithms. *Death of a Co-worker* was one of these ripples. This was a project begun by figurative painters Benjamin Björklund and Blake Neubert in 2016 and 2017 to paint and exchange portraits of other professional artists from across the world, who had met via Instagram.[267] Neubert and Björklund came up with the idea of the title after a colleague of Neubert's had passed away, which is where the title came from, and it is interesting that many of the resulting portraits seem to consider themes of death and impermanence. Tropes recur in the *Death of a Co-worker* portraits (see Figure 108), and many of these have been assimilated into my own paintings – eyes that are covered or not painted in, dark colours, and a smeary paint application where features are in some way muted or obscured, also suggesting links to Dark Symbolist ways of thinking.

[266] Hélène Delmaire, n.d., https://www.helenedelmaire.com/ (accessed September 2023); Julija Kalvelytė, 'Hélène Delmaire: Femininity, Honesty, Incommunicability,' *Metal Magazine*, n.d., (accessed September, 2023), https://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/helene-delmaire
[267] Maria Zemtsova, 'Death of a Coworker: Visual Dialogue through Artistic Collaboration', *Artmaze Magazine,* 2017, https://artmazemag.com/death-of-a-coworker/
For a gallery of these paintings, see: www.instagram/death_of_a_coworker.

Figure 106 Edwige Fouvry, 2017, Portrait of Felipe Alonso*, from the* Death of a Co-worker Project, *https://www.instagram.com/p/BUPNETTAfpm/*

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Figure 107 Timothy Wilson, 2016, Portrait of Blake Neubert, from the Death of a Co-worker Project, https://www.instagram.com/p/BBV6LszR7Qb/

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Figure 108 Felipe Alonso, 2017, Portrait of Edwige Fouvry, *from the* Death of a Co-worker Project, *https://www.instagram.com/p/BUZkIJ0gdPR/*

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Figure 109 Nicholas Uribe, 2016, Portrait of Timothy Wilson, from the Death of a Co-worker Project, *https://www.instagram.com/p/BCQgF88R7Qz/*

The success of the *Death of a Co-worker* portraits, in part, led to the development of the online group, #Caneyo. #Caneyo is now a collective of almost 2,000 members where budding artists share reference photos taken by themselves, often self-portraits, and use one another's images to make paintings and drawings. I joined the #Caneyo group in 2022 in order to find fresh references and several paintings have come from these images of strangers. Using photographs taken by other people of themselves and their own worlds, people I will probably never meet and have interacted with only briefly, was a strange experience, and has been unexpectedly fruitful. Not only am I letting the camera 'do the seeing' for me (as my grandfather warned me against), it is not even my camera, nor my own location or experiences. These are small glimpses from across the world of people as they might hope others to see them, or as they are happy to share with the group. The images are often flat, under dull lighting and distorted by the mechanics of an iPhone held at arm's length. Any insight into who these characters are beneath an external appearance, needs to be invented. There is no sense of the interaction between the model and painter.

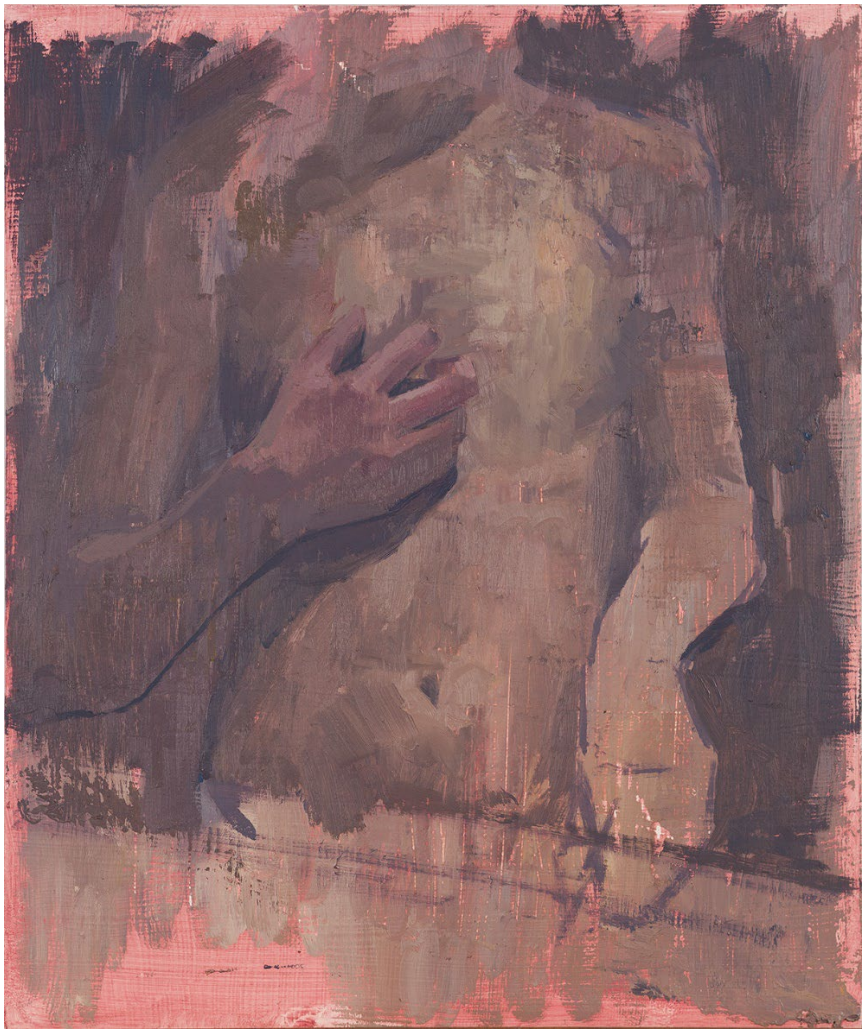

Figure 110 Esther Deans 2022, VI (Rasool Awari)*, Oil on Board, 300x250mm, painted from a photograph by Awari*

Some photographs, however, let you 'in' more than others. In particular, I was drawn to the deeply personal photography of Syrian artist Rasool Awari. The images of Awari in the bath, solitary and exposed, seemed to convey some awareness of that 'underlying dreadfulness' that Tennessee Williams described, a lonely despair but also a kind of self-reliant interiority (Figure 111). This kind of isolation related to the emotional themes of O'Connor's work as well as, I realised, to my own feelings both as a young Christian and as a painter in the Anthropocene. In creating a painting from this photograph, I was drawn to the red candlelight of Georges de La Tour for its allusions to religious revelation and connotations of night and darkness, and his use of red and black to convey form in the simplified foreground figure (Figure 112). In my image of Rasool (Figure 113), the blood red in combination with the rough brushwork suggests flayed skin or burning, and the figure could be reminiscent of Pompeii's casts, caught as they were in acts of living – sleep, love, fear – during a moment of total cataclysm. In this painting, the light was laid on as vibrant cadmium yellow, and then scraped back so that the feeling of light is conveyed partly by the building up, the addition, of contrasting shadow in the rest of the work and a subtraction that emphasises the light elements.

Figure 111 Rasool Awari, 2022, Self-Portrait*, Photograph shared through the #Caneyo group, Courtesy of the Artist.*

Figure 112 Georges de La Tour, 1650, St Sebastien Attended by St Irene*, Oil on Canvas, 1600x1290mm, National Museum of Berlin, https://id.smb.museum/object/864512/die-auffindung-des-heiligen-sebastian*

Figure 113 Esther Deans, 2022, XI: (Rasool)*, Oil on Board, 300x350mm*

Symbols

The symbolism in O'Connor's novels works as a powerful force to unite the stories and to add to their spiritual purpose. In my series of work, I wanted to use symbolic elements in a similar way: some of these were continuations of motifs and methods that had already occurred in my work, and some came directly from the novels, and in many instances I found the concerns of the novel and my own preoccupations dovetailing together.

Sight and Seeing

Sight, seeing, and eyes are recurring themes in *Wise Blood*, and in many of my portraits the person's eyes are looking away, are obscured, or are cropped out of sight. Many of the figures have downcast or closed eyes; in some (such as Figure 113) it is uncertain whether the figure is day-dreaming, sleeping, or dead. The figures' eyes may be closed in prayer, when shutting out the visual world becomes an important part of accessing some deeper, internal vision or truth beyond the perceptible world. This links to my on-going concern with perception – that things are not seen clearly, and that we are unable to see the world with certainty – and with Baudelaire's ideas about tonal obscurity being a way to effect a sense of uncertainty. The portrait in *III (The Penitent)*, (Chapter 1, Figure 19, p.41) is an example of this, where the figure's eyes look down and away, and this painting was included in this series. Penitence is a concept that has relevance to faith and an idea of the self, and to the great 'sin' against the earth of climate change. These ideas of revelation, penitence, and the secular Apocalypse of climate change are echoed in my images of smoke.

In O'Connor's novels, personal redemption and revelation comes at the cost of the character's ego and self, often only after a process of self-destruction; in *Wise Blood,* Haze Motes literally blinds himself so only a spiritual world will be visible to him. Motes's name itself could be an allusion to Jesus's admonition to remove the beam from one's own eye before criticising the mote in another – offering suggestions of the problems of sight and perception, our tendency to be more eager to judge others than to question our own point of view.[268] A forceful preacher, Asa Hawkes, who apparently blinded himself as proof of his faith, is later shown to be a charlatan who had been too cowardly to rub the lime into his eyes. Instead, he masquerades as a blind preacher behind dark glasses, which show the scars of this event on his cheeks but hide his eyes. I also use film as source imagery, and the painting *X (Blind Preacher)* (Figure 114) is taken from a still from the 1979 adaptation of the novel,

[268] Matthew 7:5, King James version, 'Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast the mote out of thy brother's eye'.
This link was pointed out in a lecture about the novel by Amy Hungerford.
Amy Hungerford, 'Flannery O'Connor*, Wise Blood',* (Lecture from the course, *The American Novel Since 1945,* Yale Courses, 2008), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjplQUPhES4

Wise Blood, by John Huston. This scene shows the moment when Motes holds a match flame up to the sleeping Asa Hawke's face, revealing that he is not, in fact, blind.[269] In this, as in the painting of Rasool in the bath, above, the light is created through excoriation rather than addition – using a palette knife to scrape back the red layer to reveal the bright cadmium yellow beneath it. I have again drawn on the reds of De La Tour and hope that the light suggests ideas of revelation or the flame that descended on the disciples during Pentecost. The images of obscured or hidden eyes, relates to ideas of knowing and perceiving, and links to another symbolic way of working, the use of literal and figurative haze.

Figure 114 Esther Deans, 2022, X (Blind Preacher)*, Oil on Board, 300x350mm*

[269] John Huston, dir., *Wise Blood*, (USA: New Line Cinema, 1979).

Figure 115 Esther Deans, 2021, You can Save Yourself*, Oil on Board, 305x280mm.*

A Haze of Perception

Haze Motes's first name could hint at the haze of perception that separates this character from any true connection with others, and in my own work the use of a haze, something which obscures the subject, is present in the subject matter of drapery and in my colour choice and painting methods. As I have mentioned, this can often take the form of the shroud, as in Figure 116: this image was taken from a photograph of a residential building in Auckland draped in the plastic used by construction workers. The white plastic shroud has obscured all but the basic outline of the building and scaffolding; the cropped composition and low angle, the reduced tonal scale, and the addition of circular steps suggests a crypt or mausoleum. The painting was created by scrubbing out an earlier painting and, in the bottom left corner, piles of aging grey paint were taken from my palette and scraped onto the surface with a palette knife, creating a dense grey impasto. In this way, as in Biblical exegesis, the surface becomes a kind of palimpsest, holding its history within the final layer. A temporary structure set up for practical purposes thus becomes a sort of symbol for empty traces, remnants, things hidden and obscured, and alludes to both death and worship. A sense of veiling and obscuring, as mentioned, can also come through a muted tonal palette, as if we are seeing through a dusty window. This relates back to St Paul's description of how we see the world, 'For now we see in a mirror, darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known'.[270] I am struck in this verse by the yearning to know and also to be fully known. The characters in my paintings also seem to find it hard to see through this haze, and their obscured eyes make it hard for the viewer to see them 'face to face'. In this sequence of work, the exception was *IV (Self-Portrait)* (Figure 117) where the figure's eyes stare straight out into the room, at *something*. Even then, however, there is a sense that the gaze is not fixed on a particular person but could be a moment of internal horror; she looks out at the viewer but appears not to see them, we imagine she is staring vacantly, only aware of some internal vision. She reminds me of a description of Haze Motes, that his eyes 'don't look like they see what they're looking at, but they keep on looking'.[271] The idea that we only know in part, but that we long to know and be known also relates to Enoch's bodily intuition as a way of perceiving the world, of trying to find some internal logic and direction in the world, as well as to my parents' conversion experience, and my mother's insistence on guiding signs.

[270] 1 Corinthians 13:12, New International Version
[271] O'Connor, *Wise Blood*.

Figure 116 Esther Deans, 2022, VII (Shroud)*, Oil on Board, 250x200mm*

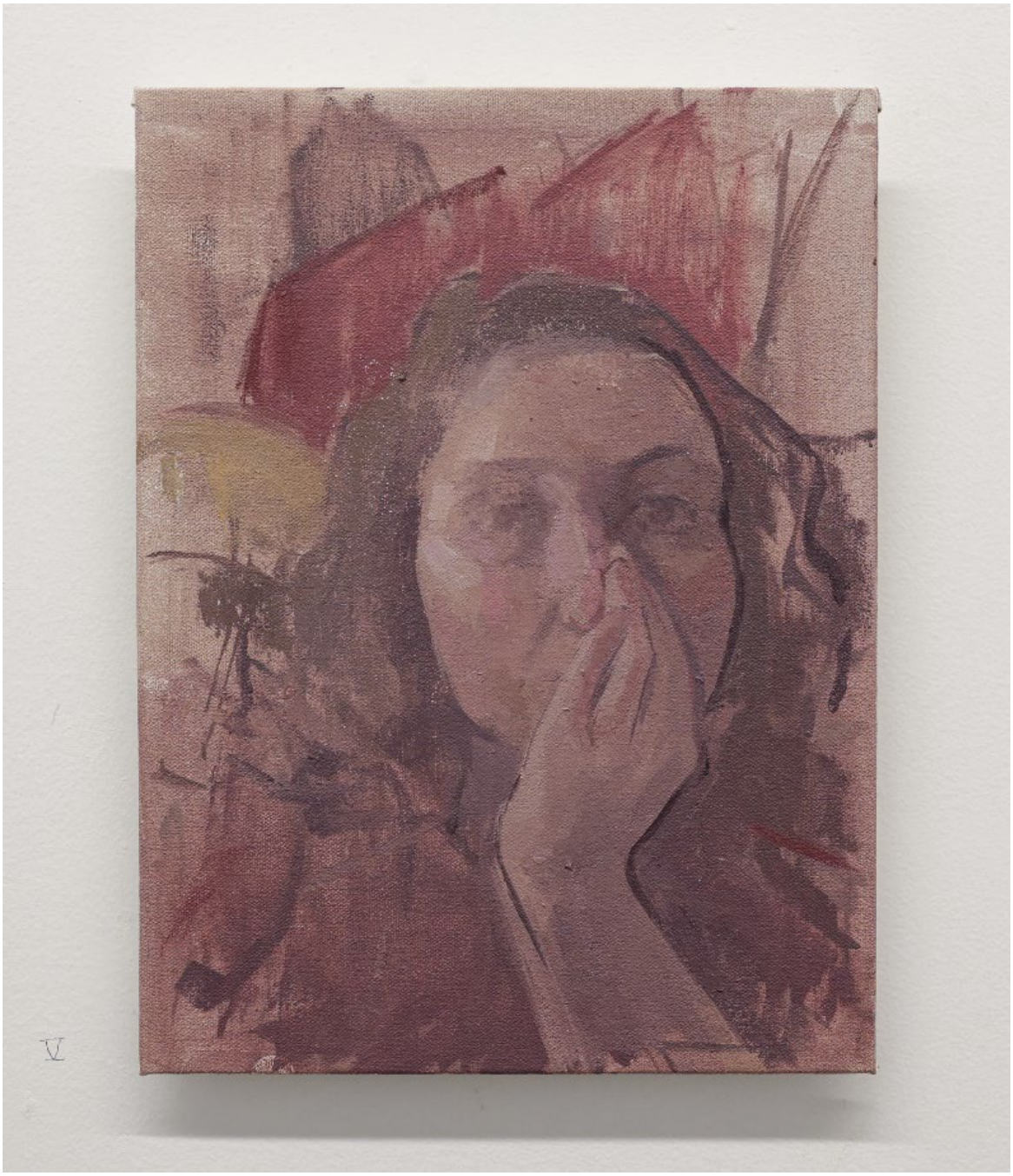

Figure 117 Esther Deans, 2022, IV (Self Portrait)*, Oil on Board, 300x250mm*

Potential Disaster

Another symbol within my work has become the glimpses of potential disaster, often in the form of smoke or fire, and this is also echoed in O'Connor's work. Fire recurs as an important image in *The Violent Bear It Away* and alludes to Moses's burning bush, or God seen through a cloud.[272] In the final scene of the novel, young Tarwater burns down the forest around his childhood home, literally and metaphorically burning away the past: 'there, rising and spreading in the night, a red-gold tree of fire ascended as if it would consume the darkness in one tremendous burst of flame'.[273] He smears ash from the fire across his forehead, symbolising the mark of God or destiny on his new life. Revelation and redemption are again seen as synonymous with destruction, as in the imagery of an Apocalypse where creation is destroyed for the sake of renewal or justice in which 'even the mercy of the Lord burns'.[274] My paintings of fire link back to the ideas and purpose of religious Eschatology outlined in Chapter 2, but also highlight the realities of our contemporary, secular Apocalypse. In 2019 huge bush fires in Australia cast a dim orange shroud over Auckland; the whole city somehow seemed to go quiet and was suffused by an eerie glow. In many ways, the effect of that light, that literal atmospheric haze, has, like the red suffusion from the Aurora Australis in 2000, stayed with me, and many of the paintings are an attempt to find, through colour, a similar monochromatic, dull pall and feeling of horror. In Figure 120 *XIII (Yellow Cloud),* the apparently soft and dreamy cloud might allude to resurrection or some idea of redemption, but was taken from a news story of the 2020 Australian bush fires. The blackened tree in Figure 118 *VIII (Burning Bush)* alludes to Tarwater's fire in which 'the mercy of the Lord burns' and was taken directly from a striking image of a smouldering forest after a wave of fire had decimated it in the 2019 bush fires (Figure 119). These 'landscapes' thus contain elements of contemporary realism, and the portents or effects of climate change and collective disaster, but both can also be read symbolically or as part of a story.

[272] Exodus 3:2, King James Version, 'And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed'.
This image refers to Moses seeing a burning bush whose fire would not go out. Approaching it, he heard the words of God coming from the flames.
[273] O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 242.
[274] Ibid., 20.

Figure 118 Esther Deans, 2022, VIII (Burning Bush), Oil on Board, 255x305mm

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Figure 119 Tracey Nearmy (Reuters) 2020, Burning Gum Tree, New South Wales, Australia*, News photograph, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-bushfires-climatechange/hot-and-dry-australia-could-join-the-ranks-of-climate-refugees-idUSKBN1ZD2RU/*

Figure 120 Esther Deans, 2022, XIII (Yellow Cloud), Oil on Board, 205x255mm

Figure 121 Esther Deans, 2022, II (Cloud)*, Oil on Board, 300x250mm*

Fragmentation

Amy Hungerford pointed out that in *Wise Blood* many of the characters are first described not as whole people but, oddly, as body parts. There is an unusual focus on the corporeal elements – an arm, a torso – rather than the complete person.[275] I was interested in this idea, and have made several paintings where the figures are 'cropped' in some way, for example *La Spinaria* (Figure 123), who is also seen through a window or in a mirror. This scene was taken directly from the novel, in which Haze looks in through a window at a prostitute clipping her nails, where, as Hungerford highlighted, only elements of her body are described in part before he walks in and meets a complete character, although the pose for the figure was taken from the Greco-Roman Hellenistic sculpture *Spinario*, of a boy taking a splinter from his foot (Figure 122). This painting was unusual for me at the time, but in many ways prefigures the work I would make in 2023, looking at female bodies in response to disaster, as I will describe in the next chapter. In the odd cropping and the use of a mirror frame, seen from an angle, it also links to the recurring motifs of frames within frames.

Figure 122 Unknown, 1st century BC, Boy with Thorn, (Spinario)*, Greek marble, 840mm (heigh), Uffizi Gallery, https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/lo-spinario-or-boy-with-thorn*

[275] Hungerford, *Flannery O'connor, Wise Blood.*

Figure 123 Esther Deans, 2022, La Spinaria*, Oil on canvas, 400x400mm*

Installation

In the installation of the work in the *Wise Blood* exhibition, which were all small, unframed paintings on board, this act of cropping had a cinematic effect, where some paintings could be read as ‘close ups’ while others, for example Figure 118 seem like establishing shots. This was reinforced by grouping the work as if into four acts in a play, so that the individual paintings could be read as scenes. The juxtaposition of glimpses of figures, of ‘close-up’ portraits against images of disaster serves to highlight the links between them and draws attention to the idea of scale and ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ contexts. Despite the images showing events that are vastly different in scale and importance – wildfires alongside hands, alongside empty buildings – these were all painted on the same small scale. As in Katie Paterson’s *Fossil Necklace*, large cataclysms are reduced to small, decorative objects, at a scale relevant to human faces and forms.

Figure 124 Esther Deans, 2022, Photograph of a collection of paintings in progress in the studio

I deliberately hung the *Wise Blood* paintings as both a sequence and as four separate groupings, or acts in a play, for several reasons. The number of paintings I had (12) suggested to me the idea of the Stations of the Cross. Within a church, these images were intended to tell a story at a time when the congregation were often illiterate, as so had to provide a clear narrative. For this reason, my works were hung slightly higher than usual, so the viewer had a sense of looking up at something of significance, as they might in a church. In fact, I ended up with 13 paintings, and so the analogy to the Stations of the Cross (which are usually 12 or 14 images) does not quite hold, but perhaps the shift from the 'divine' number 12 to the 'unholy' number 13 is significant.[276] The paintings were also spaced evenly around the room, so there was the sense that each painting had equal priority, allowing the viewer to create their own stories to connect the 'scenes' to one another. I wrote the number of each painting on the wall next to it in pencil, alluding to the idea of chapters, so that the works could be seen as complete in themselves, but also as chapters within a wider narrative. As mentioned in Chapter 1, I often group paintings in the studio, which helps me to see the combinations and links in colour or mood (Figure 124). In these works, the colours suggested seasonal shifts, so I arranged the works as 'seasons' around the room, moving in sequence from dark, wintery paintings (Figure 125), to a kind of dull pink spring (Figure 126), to the burning reds of a summer of wildfires (Figure 127) and finally to a more still, possibly optimistic, autumn (Figure 128). Some groupings, such as summer (Figure 127) were painted with the conscious intention of repeating colours and the theme of fire or flame, which I think gave this wall a particular strength. In others, such as Figure 126, the grouping was made more retrospectively, so they do not unite as closely in concept. Seasons, especially in my part of the world, are an important way of marking time and of centring ourselves within the cycles of nature. However, I hoped that these less obvious groupings of work with their muted, almost chilling, colours would draw attention to the disruption of these patterns; that our increasingly warm winters, unseasonal and extreme floods or droughts are causing vast changes not just to natural cycles but to our sense of ourselves within them and within time. Drawing on Victor Man's use of literature, I wanted to avoid making the link between the novels and the paintings too explicit or illustrative. I titled the show *Wise Blood* after O'Connor's novel and Enoch's experience of divine guidance, but did not add any other explanation to the work, beyond the mention of O'Connor's name in the wall text. As in Man's work, I hoped to allow the 'noumenon' of disparate associations to hum around the room, letting viewers make their own links between paintings.

[276] CBC News, December 12, 2012, 'What's the historical significance of the number 12?' https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/what-s-the-historical-significance-of-the-number-12-1.1249300.

Figure 125 Steven Park, 2022, Winter Installation shot, AUT St Paul St Gallery Three

Figure 126 Steven Park, 2022, Spring Installation shot

Figure 127 Steven Park, 2022, Summer Installation shot

Figure 128 Steven Park, 2022, Autumn Installation shot

Summary

Looking at these works together, I try to pick the emotion that sits between them, or behind them. For me they represent a quiet kind of despair; both in the intimacy of personal crisis and the immensity of the bigger story. Unlike Tarwater or Haze, I do not feel like I am rallying against anything except paralysis, a helplessness in the face of chaos. They are without hope of revelation, and the 'light' is only something scratched back rather than a positive addition. There is a passivity to my characters – despite the signs of catastrophe – and the paintings convey something of an underlying and melancholy fog that the figures move slowly through. I feel like they might have been stronger had I been able to draw in more of the grotesquery or humour of O'Connor's work. Instead, there is a kind of weakness to my figures; they are turned away, absent, sleeping or not alive; I am unsure about whether they are apprehensive or only resigned.

I sometimes feel intensely the problem of never really being able to understand the world as someone else understands it, never really being able to see beyond the motes in our own eyes, or the haze of our own experience. The difficulty of being known, and the fear of being unknowable. There is a terrible isolation in that feeling; being our own bodies, our own set of histories, our own madnesses – that we live in parallel to others but are always really and most intensely on our own. This links to the trepidation that reverberates through me, and through the novels, that things set in motion in our childhood cannot easily be changed or averted. Sometimes, I think for that reason, I find melancholy in art comforting – a feeling that I am not alone in my own emotions but that others have felt this way. As in the communication I feel with Flannery O'Connor through her works, I think there is a kind of beauty in the recognition of another's bared soul, as eccentric and grotesque as it might be.

7. Personal Disaster

The two paintings of Sabbath Hawkes carrying her mummy from the museum as if it were a child became painfully prescient for me and were made at the start of one of the worst years of my life. My partner and I had been trying to have a baby for several years and I painted these in February as a way of responding to the frustration of infertility. The next month, I fell pregnant. Our joy at this news, however, was cut abruptly short when I miscarried just a few weeks later. The sonogram that should have picked up a beating heart found instead a lump on my ovary; we barely had time to understand the weight of this loss before I had to have surgery to remove the cyst, which revealed that it was cancerous. I had to decide then whether to pursue some form of fertility treatment, without ovaries, or to have a full hysterectomy.

There was an eerie sense of déja vu in this event. For our whole lives, my brother and I had heard the story of his miraculous birth. When my mother was pregnant with him, at 32 weeks, they discovered she had cervical cancer. The recommended option was to terminate the pregnancy in order to have the surgery and radiation necessary to combat the cancer. My mother was understandably distraught but through her faith in God decided, against medical advice, to continue with the pregnancy. Incredibly, both she and my brother survived, and she is now cancer-free. Mum had always told this story as evidence of prayer and divine intervention; she highlighted the signs and wonders that signalled my brother's life as blest and that gave the whole terrible situation a significance and purpose. It was her 'wise blood' that saved both of their lives. It was horrifying for her, for all of us, to find a kind of parallel in my situation, in which I also had to choose between prioritising my chances of fertility against my chances of cancer. I sat with my partner under the huge oaks at Hagley Park, wracked with grief as I tried to practise how I would tell the gynae-oncologist that I would not be continuing with fertility treatment.

This chapter will discuss the final series of my thesis, from 2022, which was based on my experiences and the experience of my cousin Julia Deans and the photographs taken of her by Mareea Vegas. After surgery, I took a leave of absence for six months, and this body of work was developed after that time. In the following sections, I will describe how my paintings re-defined somewhat the parameters of this thesis, re-focusing some of its ideas in surprising ways.

Identity

Unlike my mother, for me there was no comforting overarching story to my experience. Rather, I framed it to myself as random terrible luck. There was no good aspect to it; for the first time in my life, really, my plans and hopes for myself had been totally derailed to no good purpose, with no apparent meaning or reason. This was such a strange and private grief, too, not only of our personal hopes but of a certain idea of ourselves and our future. Growing up in a system with traditional gender roles, despite my feminist ideals, it was hard not to grieve some sense of myself or my identity as a woman. It caused a re-thinking of my relationship to my body: when I looked in the mirror after surgery, at times it felt like my body was not my own, that there was some stranger looking back at me. The worst things that happened to her were under anaesthetic and clouded by pain medication and so felt somehow unreal, as if they happened to someone else. I felt a new appreciation of death as if it had gotten inside me, in microscopic cells – I know it somehow, now, in a way that was abstract and distant before.

This is reflected in *The Green Wall-papered Room*, created over several months after the miscarriage and in between hospital visits and bouts of grief. In it, the image of a woman recedes back and back through reflected mirrors in a kind of *misè-en-abyme*, as mentioned by Moravec in Chapter 2.[277] The source photograph for this was another selfie from the #Caneyo group where I was drawn to the repeated image in a mirror. As in Degas's work (Figure 44) the mirror and the repetition of the figure suggests an uncertainty about the self – the idea that identity contains many versions or an unknown number of smaller fragments.

[277] Stuart Whatling, 'Putting Misè-En-Abyme in Its (Medieval) Place', in Medieval 'Misè en Abyme': The Object Depicted Within Itself Conference (The Courtauld Institute of Art: 2009); Marcus Snow, 'Into the Abyss: A Study of the *Misé En Abyme*' (PhD thesis for the London Metropolitan University, 2016). https://repository.londonmet.ac.uk/1106/1/SnowMarcus_IntoTheAbyss.pdf
Misè en abyme is a term originally from medieval heraldry, where it is used to describe the image of a shield set within a larger shield. *Abyme* refers to the exact centre of the emblem, to place something *en abyme* means to put it in the centre, often modifying the meaning of the main shield. This was picked up by Andre Gide in 1893 when he used it as a metaphor to describe the kinds of self-reflexions that occur within visual art and narratives, where a smaller work is set into the larger in such a way that it comments on or alters the main text. This relates to my 'frame within a frame' imagery, although the concept deserves a much broader discussion than I am able to give it here.

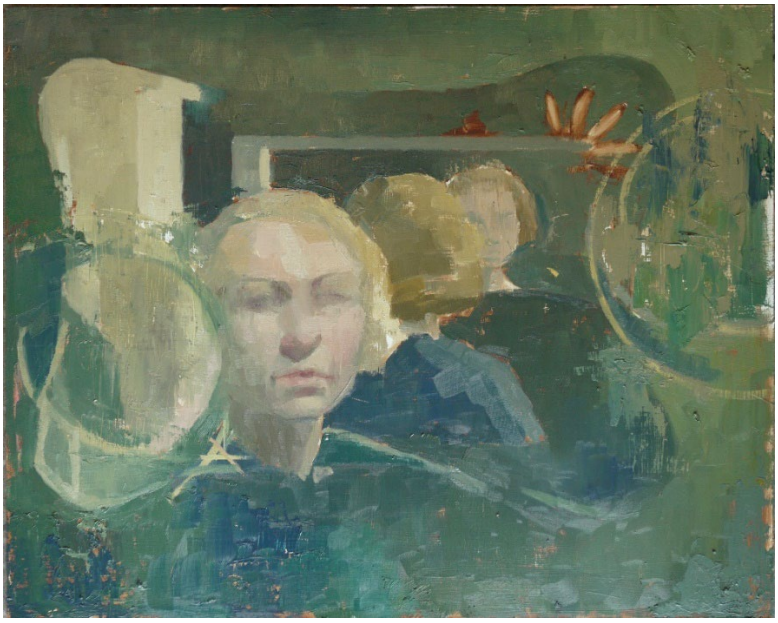

Figure 129 Esther Deans, 2022, Green Wall-papered Room*, first iteration*

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Figure 130 Siri Stig, n.d., Self-Portrait*, shared through the #Caneyo forum*

Figure 131 Esther Deans, 2022, The Green Wallpapered-room, *Oil on Canvas, 410x510mm*

Memory

Things from 2022 seem scrambled in my brain; time seems to have both contracted and expanded and I have difficulty fitting events back into order. The psychologist Bessel van der Kolk explains that while memories of stressful events are usually recalled with reasonably high levels of accuracy, as adrenaline gives extra strength to our attention and powers of noticing, when the event is traumatic, the system of recording events is overwhelmed and shuts down. Those with traumatic experiences often have memory blanks, or remember events in such stark detail that their bodies feel they are still happening, as in flashbacks.[278] This echoes Strozier's correlation of Eschatological thinking with trauma; I did feel, as he described 'a black hole of misery [collapsing] time and space'; and time did seem to be 'experienced unevenly and discordantly'.[279] When I look back on my hospital experiences, although they were so recent, I am surprised at how fractured they are. I seem to have lost the ordinary thread of chronology and instead memories come to me in small flashes of images or feelings, disconnected from what went before or after and hard to place into a coherent story. It was the first time I had really experienced this fracturing of memory in such a pronounced way and for such a recent experience; my ordinary systems of remembering seemed disrupted due to the stress and emotional pressure of the events themselves.

[278] Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transofrmation of Trauma* (USA: Penguin books, 2014).; Bessel van der Kolk, and Rita Fisler, 'Dissociation and the Fragmentary Nature of Traumatic Memories: Overview and Exploratory Study', *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 12, no. 3 (1996), https://10.1002/jts.2490080402.
[279] Strozier, 'The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Fundamentalist Mindset'.

Disrupted Realism

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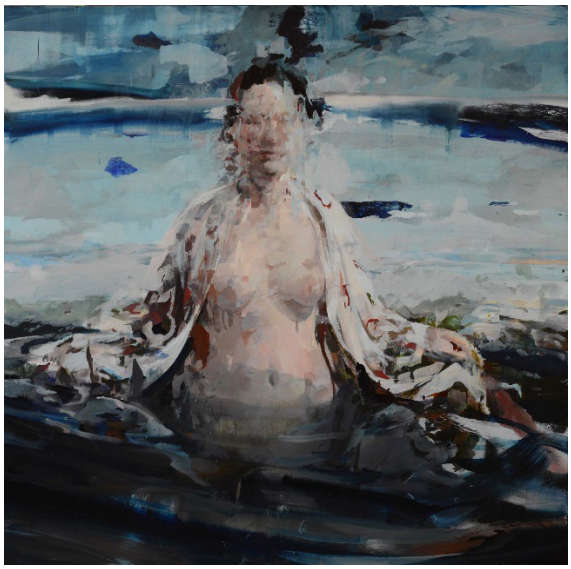


Figure 133 Ann Gale, 2013, Peter Turning, Oil on Masonite, 355x279mm, https://paintingperceptions.com/interview-with-ann-gale/

Figure 132 Alex Kanevsky, 2020, Udine*, Oil on Panel, 914x914mm, Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco https://dolbychadwickgallery.com/artist/alex-kanevsky*

This experience echoes a genre of figure paintings termed 'Disrupted Realism' by the critic John Seed: a painting that is based in an aspect of realism but disintegrates in some way, as in the work of Alex Kanevsky (Figure 133) and Ann Gale (Figure 132), as well as several of the the *Death of a Co-worker* artists mentioned in the previous chapter.[280] These paintings are interrupted in ways that are sometimes 'related to perception – caused by movement, multiple points of view or shifts in light or focus' and sometimes conceptual, 'resulting from self-conscious decisions made by an artist for stylistic reasons'.[281] This approach, which link to Perceptual painting, 'favour perception over seeing', where what the artist feels is as important as what they see, and where the viewer is also invited into this act of perception.[282] Many perceptual painters utilise and distort William Coldstream's technique of including the notations of measurements in the final painting; in Euan Uglow's work it often feels like the process of measuring is more important than the subject itself (Figure 134), and in Gale's paintings the final image is made up almost entirely of her measuring marks (Figure 135). She often works with the same model over months or years – coming back to an image each September, for

[280] John Seed, 'Interrupted Images: Discombobulation in Painting Is Definitely a Thing', *Huffington Post* 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/interrupted-images-discombobulation-in-painting-is_b_57eda196e4b07f20daa105fa
While a useful starting point for thinking about this group of painters and a certain aesthetic approach to figure painting, John Seed's particular analysis seems to me to fall short. To me, it seems he throws his net too widely and not only gathers in the originators of this approach, such as Kanevsky and Gale, but also the many younger artists who are replicating it, often without adding a dimension of their own.
[281] John Seed, *Disrupted Realism: Painting for a Distracted World.*
[282] Ibid. 15.

example, and adding to it, so that her layers of observation also record the passing of time.[283] For her, the slow process of seeing is what is most interesting; the sitter's changing moods or circumstances, and the shifting of light, temperature and time, are really the subject of the painting. To me, this kind of disruption also echoes the fragmentation and glitches that occur in memory, and it therefore seems an appropriate lens through which to see the paintings I made in response to this experience.

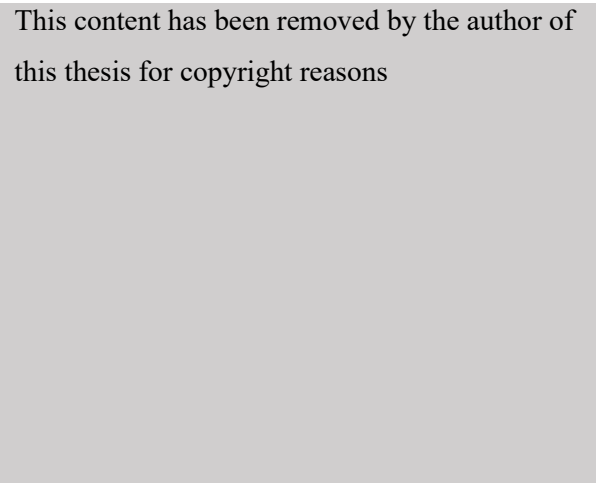


Figure 134 Euan Uglow, 1987–93, Zoë*, Oil on Canvas Laid on Panel, 305x400mm, Browse and Darby Gallery, UK, https://browseanddarby.co.uk/exhibitions/78/works/artworks-6963-euan-uglow-zoe-1987-93/*

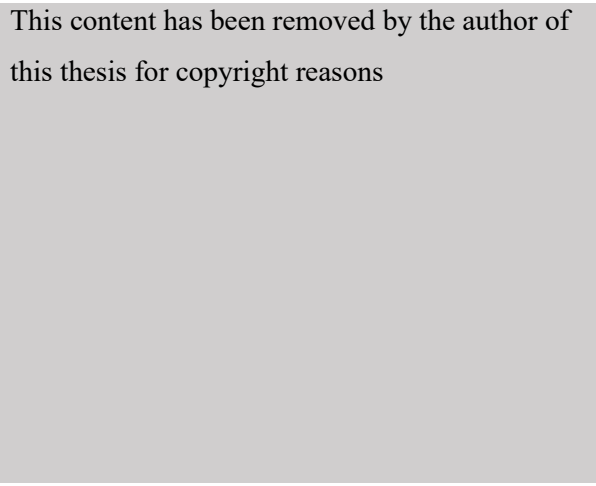


Figure 135 Ann Gale, 2008, Robert*, Oil on Linen on Masonite, 355x279mm, Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco, https://dolbychadwickgallery.com/artist/ann-gale*

[283] Ann Gale,' Interview with Ann Gale,' interviewed by Antrese Wood, Savvy Painter (podcast), June 30, 2016. Accessed January 2023, https://savvypainter.libsyn.com/an-interview-with-ann-gale

The Julia Project

My cousin Julia Deans was diagnosed with oral cancer in 2016.[284] She underwent surgery and radiation treatment, and the experience has had a momentous effect on her. In its threat to her as a singer, cancer came dangerously close to destroying her career and, as it did for me, altered her sense of self and her pictures of her own future. She wrote an album about this experience and asked if I would make four to six paintings in response to it. Her songs reflect a similar sort of knowing that I feel I have gained – a sudden and unexpected reckoning with her own mortality and identity.

Figure 136 Mareea Vegas, Julia, 2016, *digital photograph, courtesy of the artist*

Figure 137 Mareea Vegas, Julia*, 2016, digital photograph, courtesy of the artist*

Julia suggested as a starting point a poignant series of photographs that a friend of hers, the photographer Mareea Vegas, had taken during a session of radiation therapy. This was another shift in my practice of using source images, away from my own direct observations or photographs to this time working from a series by a professional photographer. Mareea Vegas and Julia have been friends since the 90s and Vegas described this project as emotionally conflicting and difficult; requiring her to strike a balance between staying strong as a friend; acknowledge Julia's vulnerability; respecting others in the ward; while also, as an artist, creating visually impactful images.[285] Vegas explained the trust that Julia put in her as both sacred and frightening. Unlike the criticisms levelled against Diane Arbus, the close relationship between the photographer and subject is evident in these works: the composition and lighting are crafted to convey Julia's strength, anxiety, and vulnerability. It is these contrasting feelings of trust, fear, and vulnerability that drew me to Vegas' images and led me to using them to draw on directly for my own paintings. Initially, I had thought to include more of my own images – the scar from my surgery, or an image of the gynaecology waiting room, for example –

[284] I am indebted to Julia for proposing this project, for so generously sharing her notes and memories about this experience, and for allowing me into her song-writing process. I have published her story here with her blessing.
[285] Mareea Vegas, personal correspondence, June 2024

somehow, though, the closeness of that felt too hard to access. Working instead from Vegas' images allowed a kind of distance from my own experience, an almost sideways approach to feelings that would otherwise be overwhelming. I am indebted to Vegas' eye, skill, and sensitivity in capturing this experience, as drawing on it has allowed me to process my own.

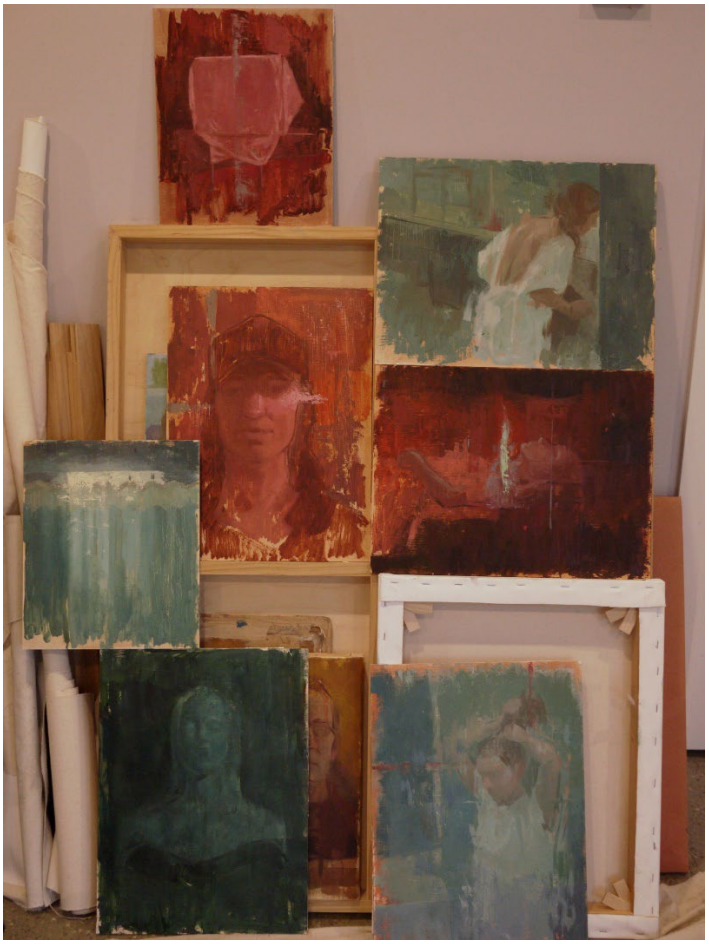


Figure 138 Esther Deans, 2023, The Julia Project in progress - Studio view

Grouped together, my paintings of Julia show the various strands that have woven through this thesis (Figure 137). Painting them, I noticed personal experiences overlapping with preoccupations I already had; the shrouds of previous works are echoed in the loosely draped folds of hospital gowns and the muted despair of hospital curtains. Like the black, shrouded figure of death in Hodler's *Night*, I hope that mine suggest the 'unknown, the invisible',[286] in Figure 138 a medical curtain suggests something both transparent and hidden. Its green echoes the various forest and river greens that have recurred elsewhere and provides a counterpoint to the dull, blood-like red. For *Julia VII: Sign* (Figure 80, p. 107), I re-used an image from 2021 of the covered road sign but the darker colour ties it into the other

[286] Ferdinand Hodler, 'My Present Tendencies', excerpted in Facos, *An Introduction to 19th Century Art* Supporting Website.

Julia paintings, offering it as a symbol of something more personally significant. These paintings also play with ideas of screens and perception in the continued use of monochromatic colour, but I hope are more specific in their attachment to Julia's experiences: the iconography is less dominant, and the focus becomes more about the way the subject is drawn in or left to disintegrate.

Figure 139 Esther Deans, 2023, Julia IV: Curtain*, Oil on Board, 255x200mm*

This series brought into focus the very personal, intimate experience of bodies in disaster, and the female body in particular. In the first painting of the series (Figure 140), I used the figure from Vegas' portrait (Figure 136), drawn to the isolation, fear and strength in that photo. Using layers of paint to disintegrate the medical background and draw in the figure gives a sense of flagellation in the bare woman's back, bringing to mind images of the punishments that have been meted out to women's bodies throughout history. Unlike Impressionism or the Gothic genre, Symbolism seems to have been dominated by men, who, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, often treated their female subjects as symbols of fear and emasculation, or as possessing a dangerous sexuality.[287] Vanessa Watts points out that within colonisation the mistreatment of and disregard for both women and the earth can be seen as intimately tied into imperialist campaigns. In the Christian origin story, Eve and the snake are responsible for the damnation of humankind, severing us from the garden of Eden.[288] Philosophically, this implicates women in a severing between humans and the natural world, and implies that communication with the natural world is dangerous: 'the female becomes responsible for all the pain of childbirth and resentment for being cast out of paradise'.[289]

Figure 140 Esther Deans, 2023, Julia I: Back (After Mareea Vegas)*, Oil on Board, 302x405mm*

[287] Hirsh, *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society*.
[288] Watts, 'Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)', 25.
[289] Ibid., 25.

Figure 141 Star Gossage 2014, Matariki*, Oil on Board, 80 x 120 cm. Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki. Photo: Kallan MacLeod*

This is in contrast with Watts's Haudenosaunee heritage in which, as in Māori conceptions, the land itself is understood to be female, and 'it is the femininity of earth itself that institutes all beings as literal embodiments of localised meanings'.[290] This aligns with Star Gossage's paintings where 'inky blues and earthy browns bleed through [the women's] limbs and faces as if all share the same matter', and in which a Māori worldview underscores 'strong connections between women and the land' (Figure 140).[291] Although I do not have these experiences of bodily destruction of land and culture, I feel that I would like to speak back to my own heritage in a small way, creating symbolist works that speak with a female voice, from a female perspective.[292] My portrait of Julia emerging from a dark background (Figure 141), suggested to me the symbolist portrait of Franz Von Stuck (1863–1928). Rather than his painting, *The Sin* (Figure 142), however, where a *femme fatale* is given misogynist overtones of a dangerous femininity, in Julia's frank expression I hope to locate a source of feminine strength and resilience.

[290] Ibid., 27
[291] Were, 'Star Gossage's Psychological and Emotional States', 82
[292] The topic of the 'male gaze' in art history, while relevant, is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I am interested in communicating my own experience of the world, as a painter in a female body.

Figure 142 Esther Deans, 2023, Julia VI: Portrait*, Oil on Board, 405x302mm*

Figure 143 Franz Von Stuck, 1893, The Sin*, Oil on Canvas, 945x596mm, Neue Pinakothek Munich, https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de /en/artwork/ApL8qN7GN2*

Bodies

In a review of the 1990 exhibition *The Pursuit of the Real: British Figure Painting from Bacon to Sickert,*[293] the critic Martin Golding explains that the human figure continues to be 'a source of imaginative reference' simply because we are humans inhabiting bodies: for the artist, 'our bodies … [are] the means by which the visible universe becomes accessible'.[294] Philip Rawson argues that drawing the figure is the act of showing 'us to ourselves as it were in a mirror at the heart of our own world of truth – truth not of abstract concepts but of visual conviction'.[295] Making my paintings of Julia from Vegas' photographic series was for me a way of zooming in to the personal; an 'imaginative reference' that also coincided with a new awareness of my own body following surgery, and which offered a new experience of the 'visible universe'. No longer looking out at society or history, my gaze had been suddenly directed inward, to a microscopic malfunctioning of cells, and I felt a heightened interest in my body and bodies in general – their vulnerabilities and their resistance. Suddenly the idea of 'inward responses to outward disasters' mentioned in relation to climate change was turned on itself – an inward response to an inward disaster. The ennui of waiting for the Second Coming or for some kind of climate reckoning was replaced by the very private and anxious waiting to hear the results of scans and blood tests. *The Julia Project* was a way for me to focus in on the figure, and the female figure in particular, as a site for both disaster and strength.

Tim Wilcox's monograph about the exhibition was an invaluable source of painting information to me, but it was telling that all of the painters were male, and that many important and influential twentieth-century female painters, such as Gwen John (Figure 143) or Romaine Brookes (1874–1970, Figure 144), had been excluded. John's work in particular has had a strong pull for me: she often uses a muted palette of dull, greyish hues and a limited value range to create her idiosyncratic and sensitive portraits of women, as in this remarkably direct and frank painting below.

[293] Wilcox, *The Pursuit of the Real: British Figurative Painting from Sickert to Bacon*.
[294] Martin Golding, '"Realism" and the Real', *Modern Painters* 3, no. 2 (1990): 82.
[295] Philip Rawson, quoted in Golding.

Figure 144 Gwen John, 1909–1910, Nude Girl, *Oil on Canvas, 455x279mm, Tate Gallery, UK*

Figure 145 Romaine Brookes, c. 1912, Self-portrait: Au Bord De la Mer, *Oil on Canvas, 1050x680mm, Centre Pompidou, Paris*

Alex Kanevsky explains that the human form is made to move, so painting from a model means working with both time and movement.[296] Time and movement are two of the fascinating elements of painting from life: the tilt of their head that changes, the red or blueness of cheeks that alter with the temperature, the small flutters of hands or itches of feet. Because of this temporal element, it was important for me to preserve a sense of movement within the paintings of Julia, even though they were made from still photographs, and so I joined a weekly life drawing class where I completed a painting within two hours every week. At each 20-minute block I record these changes as the model re-settles themselves. This was a shift from the kinds of figure paintings made in the project so far, where I had been using photographs, images shared online, news photos, or film stills. It was a return to my grandfather's way of working – responding to the visual object, to a person existing in space and time in relation to myself. It was a return to that interchange between model and artist that I had tried to avoid in my *Wise Blood* paintings and it brought back a sense of the 'real' rather than the digital. The effect is of a looseness, a necessary brevity and confidence in decision-making, which is sometimes lost in paintings that are laboured over more slowly or built up over several sessions. Like other work, though, the changes made are apparent in fleeting brushstrokes and decisions that have been scraped back (Figure 145 and Figure 146).

[296] Alex Kanevsky, in conversation with Andersson.

Figure 146 Esther Deans, 2023, Figure Painting 07/2023*, Oil on Board, 250x302mm*

Figure 147 Esther Deans, 2023, Figure painting 08/2023*, Oil on Board, 405x302mm*

Measurement and Palimpsest

Figure 148 Walter Sickert, 1906, La Hollandaise*, Oil on Canvas, 511x406mm, The Tate Museum, London, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sickert-la-hollandaise-t03548*

William Coldstream had learnt from Walter Sickert (1860–1942), an influential painter who was also in *The Pursuit of the Real* exhibition. Sickert is another painter who seems interested in a sense of 'the underlying dreadfulness'[297] of society (Figure 147). I am drawn to his grimy interiors and to the feeling of being something of a voyeur looking in at female bodies caught in moments of tiredness or despair, full of the ennui I have mentioned in relation to Michael Stevenson's paintings. Unlike Gwen John, whose figures are often erect and seem on the point of action or in active self-reflection, Sickert's women are full of waiting, maybe not for the end of the world, but for *something* – love, movement, purpose. Sickert preferred to paint from photographs and drawings than from life, relying on his memory to make a painting instead of responding to a scene in front of him. He believed that working from life was too distracting; that those shifts in mood and sensation, the effects of time and movement mentioned above, 'no matter how small, would detract from the vividness of the compressed moment'.[298] Despite this, his paintings seem to capture a feeling of a moving being existing within time, and I tried to retain this sense in my paintings of Julia. Vegas' photographic interpretation of Julia's experience became a layer of female friendship and art making, and I saw my paintings as a translation of the photographs that would also add a layer of my own memories.

[297] Williams, 'Introduction to Carson Mccullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye*', 42.
[298] Wilcox, *The Pursuit of the Real: British Figurative Painting from Sickert to Bacon,* 10.

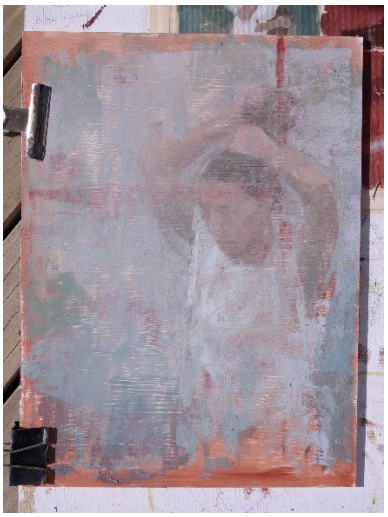
For most of these, I utilised the measuring methods previously discussed to transfer the photographs to the canvas. In some, I also incorporated Kanevsky's approach to building up a painting where iterations of an image are layered over previous ones, as in Karen Armstrong's description of palimpsest – spiritual literature that incorporates layers of historical interpretation and revision. In *Julia II: Hair* (Figure 149), I used this method of building up and destroying until I arrived at something I felt was finished (the process is shown in Table 3). Without a definite plan in mind, I drew the first figure very quickly. On subsequent days I scrubbed each image out, often adding a slurry of oil and wax and then painting back into this, allowing some of the impressions, measuring lines or colours from previous layers to follow through into the final image. In this way the figure is literally subsumed and resuscitated, just at the edge of dying and becoming totally lost. This reflects not only our experience of a disruption of self and identity, but also the disruption to memory that both Julia and I felt – the way our memories and sense of time seemed to disintegrate and become uncertain.

Figure 149 Mareea Vegas, 2016, Julia*, Digital photograph, courtesy of the artist*

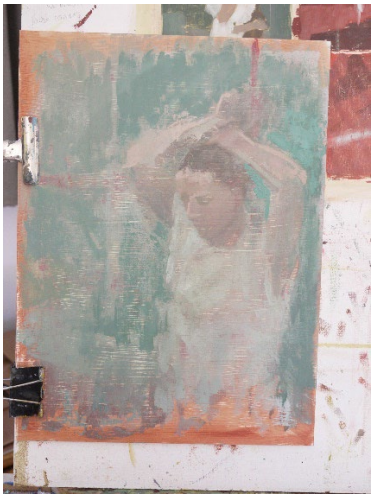
Table 3 Photographs showing the development of Julia II: Hair

An initial drawing-in with thinned oil paint and wax (the wax applied with a palette knife).

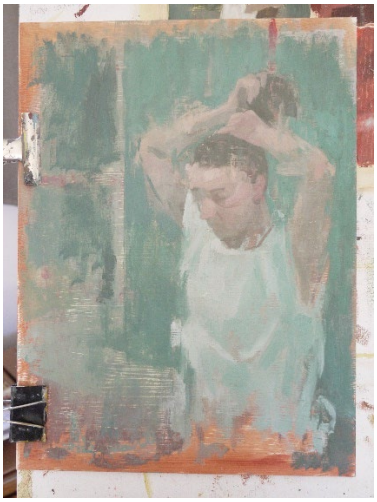
Painting over the initial drawing with a roller, using a cold wax and paint mix.



I then scrubbed this layer out to make a sort of grey fog, which I drew back into



Adjusting the background colour and placement of the figure



Drawing the figure back in, while leaving traces of old drawings behind.

I then sanded the whole thing back again using linseed oil to make a greenish, slurry. I re-drew the figure into this, using mostly short vertical strokes, trying to avoid making anything too definite and allowing previous painting to show through.

Figure 150 Esther Deans, 2023, Julia II: Hair (After Mareea Vegas)*, Oil and Cold Wax on Board, 405x302mm*

Figure 151 Mareea Vegas, 2016, Julia (54), Digital Photograph, courtesy of the artist

Vegas' portrait of Julia is evidence of the trust and safety that exists between them; her gaze is frightened but brave; the radiation scars still red across her cheek, but a sense of warmth and resilience in the slight smile. I wanted to create my own version of this, using the red of radiation, and preserving fidelity to Vegas' photograph. I was interested in Sickert's idea of a 'compressed moment' and in this painting I used measurement as Sickert sometimes did to correct the initial drawing. I used a ruler to draw a grid in white chalk over the painting that corresponded to a grid I had drawn over a printed photograph. Although I do feel the final painting has a static quality, it was important to me to get a likeness, and the grid was a helpful tool to ensure that. These two paintings show the tensions within my practice between a visually 'accurate' drawing and a loose abandonment to the materiality of the paint itself. They are of something that you can hold on to, but within one's grasp there is already the sense of it slipping away. The 'realism', like a faith in progress or gradual time or an organising and benevolent God, is disrupted – an illusion that turns out to be, after all, just marks of wet pigment on a flat surface.

Table 4 Esther Deans, 2023, Progress shots for Julia VI: Portrait

Proportions of Colour and Contrast

The events from 2022 seemed to be broken up as in a shattered mirror or beyond some cloudy glass and only showed themselves briefly, in small moments of intense emotional clarity that would overwhelm me with their force. Some of my strongest memories of my various hospital stays were of the pale green curtains holding patients into their separate spaces. At one point I woke up after surgery in a panic, the green curtains seeming to close in around me. Footsteps rushed past beyond them, something beeped, someone behind the curtain next to me asked for a cheese sandwich. I felt as if I could not get enough air, as if I were sinking and could not fight my way back to the open sky. A nurse came in and held my hand.

I had always thought green was chosen for hospitals because of its association with calm and with nature, but the particular cool, minty green was actually chosen because optically it is opposite on the colour wheel to red, the colour of blood. Surgeons looking down on a wound can rest their eyes by focussing for a moment on the green background, the after-image colour of red.[299] My paintings of Julia play with this jarring contrast – each work is predominantly in either red or green but contains elements of its opposite.

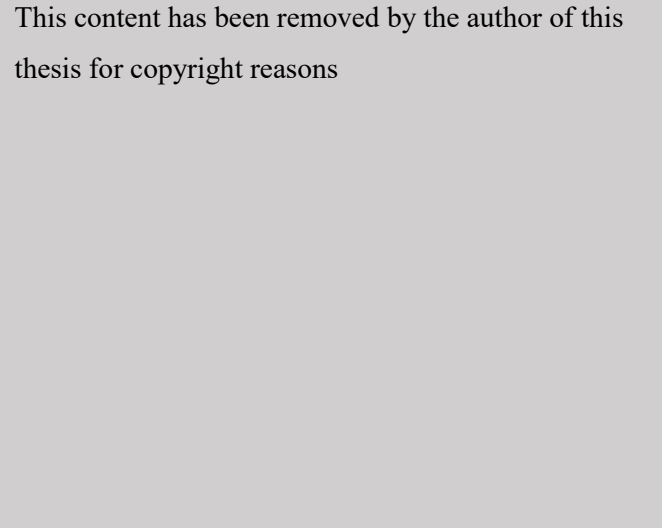


Figure 152 Bill Perkins, Screen Shot from New Master's Academy Course, https://www.nma.art/videolessons/intro-to-major-and-minor-keys/

While making my paintings of Julia, I came across a diagram from illustrator and art educator Bill Perkins (Figure 153). This seemed a helpful description of the emotional effect of value (the light or darkness of a colour) within a painting. I disagree with his terms Major and Minor key, with their connotations of music, as they do not seem to relate to the distinctions he is making here, but the

[299] Hilary Dalke et al., 'Colour and Lighting in Hospital Design', Optics & Laser Technology 38, no. 4–6 (2006), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.optlastec.2005.06.040

diagram seems very useful as a way to think about how values can be organised in a painting – not only the degree of light or dark, but also the proportion and grouping of these in a composition, and the way this contributes to the emotional reading of a work. In the painting of Julia under the radiation machine, and in the painting of the radiation mask, I was interested in creating an ominous atmosphere by having a greater proportion of dark tones but creating a high degree of contrast between them and the small moments of light elements.

Figure 153 Edgar Degas, c. 1856–1858, Study of the Head of a Young Singer, After Della Robbia, Museè D'Orsay, Paris, https://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/oeuvres/etude-dapres-une-tete-de-jeune-garcon-par-della-robbia-69329

In *Julia III: Radiation (After Mareea Vegas)* (Figure 155), which draws directly on the kind of Gothic sensibility described in the previous chapter, the majority of the picture is in a dark red that is cut across by a vivid, high-chroma and high-value green, giving the feeling of an artificial beam of light against something dark and deathly. This is a response to the original photo (see Figure 137) but also relates to those landscapes from Chapter 2 where measuring lines in contrasting hue, chroma and value cut across an image, disrupting or questioning its meaning (*Screen II,* Figure 54, and *Screen*, Figure 55, p.67). In Figure 155, an image of the radiation mask that was formed to Julia's face to keep her head in place during therapy, the green also becomes dark and almost black, an effect created by using a roller with cold wax and ivory black over the initial green drawing, muting details and darkening the whole image. This image of a mask, as in the man in a mask in Chapter 5 (Figure 93, p.125), or Degas's remarkable painting of a classical portrait (Figure 153) suggests a sightlessness but also something totemic – devoid of its medical context it hints at ancient rituals and statuary.

Radiation is a fascinating concept. While it has the power to kill cancerous cells, it has equal power to kill healthy cells and, indeed, in a way it is radiation that is heating the earth beyond habitable levels. In these works small, high chroma patches are intended to suggest a biblical or Evangelical 'light' translated into the light of radiation – the light of God transferred into the light of impending disaster or redeeming fire.

Figure 154 Esther Deans, 2023, Julia III: Radiation (After Mareea Vegas)*, Oil and Cold Wax on Board, 405x302mm*

Figure 155 Esther Deans, 2023, Julia V: Mask (After Mareea Vegas), *Oil and Cold Wax on Board, 405x302mm*

The Body in Ritual

Figure 156 Esther Deans 2023 Waiting for the Second Coming*, Oil on Panel, in Hand-Gilt Frame, Each Panel 375x300mm*

Not long after surgery, I painted the two works *Waiting for the Second Coming* and *The River,* mentioned in the introduction. On the left is a portrait of a selfie from the #Caneyo group, on the right is a plume of smoke. Placed alongside one another within a hand-gilded frame, the young man taking a selfie and the plume of black smoke, these two images suggest symbolic and ritualistic meanings. This plume of smoke, which could also be foliage, had occurred in my *Wise Blood* series (Figure 121, p.159), but in this iteration I gave it a yellow hue, reminiscent of the Australian bush fires of 2020. The image could be of a cloud, a plume of smoke, or trees at dusk; in fact, the source image is from a news story about the war in Ukraine (Figure 160) a tragedy unfolding a world away that I caught glimpses of online while my own life carried on in parallel. In this work the frame repeats, is disrupted, repeats again. There is the literal frame around the painting, the bevelled frame of the mirror, and then the hard edge of the cell-phone, repeated and reinforced by the framing of the smoke cloud – suggesting repetitions and distortions of ideas, perceptions or conversations. In the #Caneyo reference for the figure, I was particularly drawn to the faceting of the mirror and the suffusion of light through the drapery behind him, suggesting some gentler form of reflection or annunciation. To reinforce this idea, I altered the hand gesture of the figure to suggest a priest's blessing, even while the other hand holds a phone, obscuring the face so that, as in the novels of James Joyce, there is a juxtaposition of the banal and the reverent, a preoccupation with the self alongside an image of

outward desolation. Together, the two images may give the sense of two scenes viewed in an apartment window or on two separate screens; the large and the small represented at the same scale reinforces the idea of our smallness and the largeness of our impact on the earth, or even two worlds that exists simultaneously, two personal and irreconcilable worlds of experience.

This content has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons

Figure 157 Sergio Vallès, 2022, Selfie Shared Through the #Caneyo Group (not publicly available)

This content has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons

Figure 158 Sergio Vallès, 2022, Selfie Shared Through the #Caneyo Group (not publicly available)

Figure 159 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), c. 1600, Christ Blessing (The Saviour of the World*), Oil on Canvas, 730x565mm, National Galleries, Scotland, https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/34183*

This content has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons

Figure 160 News footage of a rocket attack in Lviv, Ukraine, Vladyslav Sodel, Reuters, 26 March, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/26/russian-rocket-attacks-hit-ukraines-lviv

The River

In 2010 my parents and I went to Israel for three weeks. It felt like a pilgrimage for all of us, even though by that stage I had lost my faith. I found the country fascinating, infuriating and frightening; it was the most intense travel experience any of us had ever had. The conflict with Palestine was raw and disturbing and it felt strange to be, as travellers, just skimming over the top of it. Every historical place we visited seemed to be made from layers of conflict between religious factions, ideologies, and faiths going back centuries, each new group building on the ruins of the one before. It feels eerie to have returned to this topic in my painting just before the current war broke out, casualties and horror rising as I wrote this section of the exegesis.

In Israel, the factions within Christianity were as divisive and apparent as those between faith groups. Along the shores of lake Galilee, every site that was mentioned in the gospels had a church built by some denomination who insisted on their own interpretation of those stories: Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Coptic, Catholic, Protestant. And at each site, busloads of the faithful from around the world would take photos and pray. The river Jordan struck me particularly. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the first stories I encountered by Flannery O'Connor was 'The River'. It in, a small boy from a secular and rather distant family is taken by his babysitter to be baptised by an itinerant preacher. He is struck as much by this strange and powerful ritual, the promise that the water can take away pain, as by the dark river itself. The next day he returns to the river and tries to baptise himself, but is swept away by the current and drowned. As with many of her stories, I was at first horrified and then compelled: the horror of the story is undercut by the serene, detached narration, making the tragedy all the more shocking. While the colours in the story are different from mine (her river is red, the surrounding foliage purples and golds), the image of a forceful river, divine and deadly, stayed with me. I remember the Jordan river as a deep, profound green, moving slow and wide under the hot sky. It reminded me of an image from T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Dry Salvages':

> I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
> Is a strong brown god – sullen, untamed and intractable,
> Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;
> Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;
> Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
> The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
> By the dwellers in cities – ever, however, implacable.
> Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
> Of what men choose to forget.[300]

[300] 'The Dry Salvages' in T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002 [First Published 1925]), 192.

In Eliot's poem, god (and, it may be implied, the natural world) is something that 'dwellers in cities' have chosen to forget but its destructive power is never far away. John Gray points out that much of Western atheistic, or explicitly anti-religious thought, from political ideologies such as Marxism, Communism, or secular liberal humanism, have taken many of their forms, language, and structures from monotheistic religion.[301] The idea of God seems inescapable.

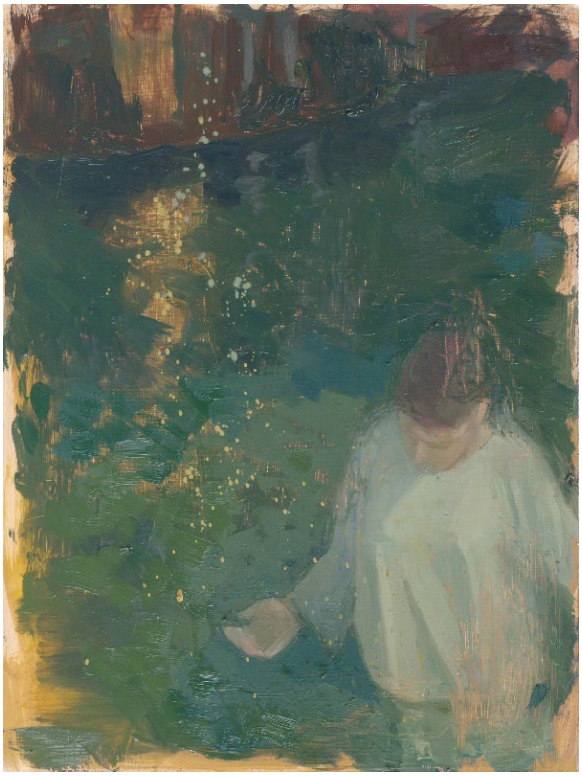


Figure 161 Esther Deans, 2020, Baptism*, Oil on Panel, 255x305*

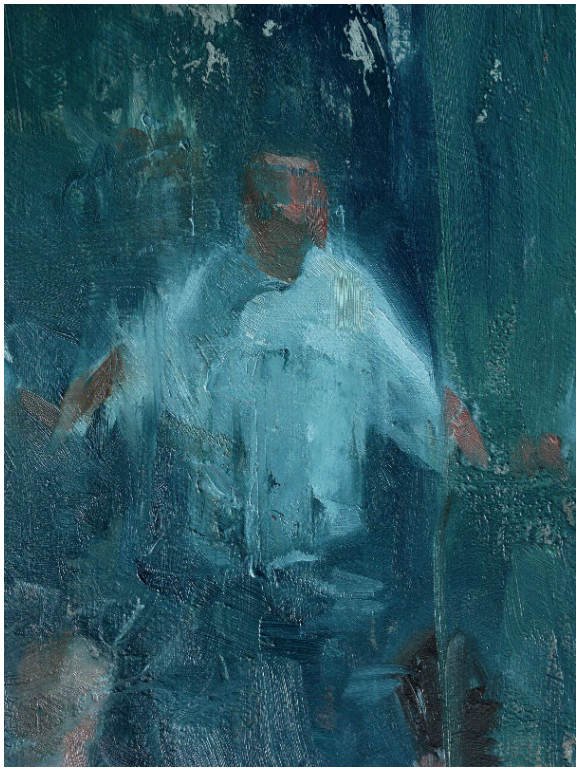


Figure 162 Esther Deans, a close-up of the same figure in The River.

The photograph I had found of a baptism in the river Jordan had been percolating in my mind over four years and I had attempted a figure from the source photograph in 2020 (see Figure 161, in contrast with the same figure painted in 2023, Figure 162). These two images show the development of my painting over the course of this project: by 2023 I felt like my painting was more confident and had developed a lucid brevity which surprised me. The stronger contrast in value between the white robe and the almost black river gives a greater sense of drama, and the loose brushwork developed in my paintings of Julia give a sense of the figure almost disintegrating into the dark river**.** This painting was made of multiple layers – warm golden interior and a black painting of flowers made just before my surgery – and glimpses of these previous paintings can be seen through the thin green wash. Again, a slurry of cold wax, linseed oil, and ivory black was applied over the scrubbed-out image with

[301] Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*.

a roller, adding an inky depth to the layers. On the right-hand side, the image is blurred and again gives the sense that one might be seeing this through a warped glass window. The conscious texture of the work was made primarily for aesthetic reasons – the layers of underpainting and of scrubbed raw canvas contrasted with thick brushwork give a satisfying variety to the final image. Conceptually, though, the layers relate to ideas about the interconnectedness of history, layers of identity, and the re-writing and re-interpretation of scripture.

Figure 163 Esther Deans, 2023, The River*, Oil on Canvas, 510x405mm*

Summary

This exploration of bodies offered surprising links to other subjects in the thesis. My own changed body has become a new sort of mirror, a new distortion that offers me an altered view of the 'world of truth'.[302] In mapping and translating bodies and photographs of bodies into paint, my grandfather's measuring technique, begun as a process of observation and recording, has become an integral part of the subject of the work itself. It signifies a response to moments in time, but also, in its tendency to interrupt and fracture the image, hints at a dislocation of memory and meaning. The final paintings show the history of their making, a process and state of mind that is, as Alex Kanevsky described in Chapter 4, 'not aimless, not exactly purposeful'.[303] The technique is like a rational way of approaching a problem that feels as if it will give coherence and clarity and yet, in practice, often disrupts and disintegrates it. It is like the signs and wonders that turned my mother's experience into a miracle rather than senseless pain but that offered me no comfort. It is a hope for coherence and rigour despite the abstract incoherence of history, both large and small. In this sense, it mirrors a search for meaning in my personal catastrophe, as well as the search for coherence within global disaster that an eschatological approach to history offers.

[302] Rawson, quoted in Golding, *Pursuit of the Real,* 82*,*
[303] Alex Kanevsky, in conversation with Bjorn Andersson

Conclusion: What is Made of All These Tellings?

> *The poem-to-be is made of all these tellings. And the poem becomes, at last, an affirmation of the beautiful and terrible worth of the earth.*
>
> *Dylan Thomas*[304]

This exegesis has explored the various webs of influence that sit within and behind my paintings and the way I perceive the world. In looking at them, I have teased apart the dominant strands of religion and art to into the various threads of Eschatology, Apocalypse, the Anthropocene, aesthetics, time, and Intertextuality.

Like the characters Hazel Motes and Stephen Dedalus, I have tried to escape 'the ragged figure' at the back of my mind – the religious certainty I was raised in. [305] Despite this, elements of my upbringing remain: I am still preoccupied with ideas of faith and vision as well as shadowy and inescapable fears about the end of the world. In Chapter 4, I looked back at the theology of my parent's community, its universalist concepts that came as part of Christian colonisation and were historically imposed onto New Zealand society, and I have scrutinised its role in my art practice. As I painted, I have attempted to negotiate a sense of temporality other than the linear millenarianism of my upbringing, in which time progresses inexorably toward Apocalypse. This has sometimes meant grappling with the loss of meaning and certainty that religion provided and coming to terms with doubt and the difficulties of personal perception. In this way, my paintings attempt to braid connections between religious Eschatology and climate change in the context of the Anthropocene.

This exegesis has traced my personal responses to climate disaster – my fears and preoccupations around the destruction of natural resources and habitats – and the wider role of humanity and the artist in the context of the Anthropocene, as explored in Chapter 3. These emotions were particularly driven home to me by the realisation that the Apocalypse is something which Indigenous cultures throughout the world have already lived through under colonisation and imperialism. Considering this, I have found Thacker's philosophical conceptions of the world-in-itself or the world-without-us – anthropocentric interpretations of humanity's place within the earth – have

[304] Dylan Thomas 'Three Poems' in *Quite Early One Morning: Broadcasts by Dylan Thomas*, 157
[305] O'Connor, *Wise Blood,* 13

become less valuable than broader notions of interconnectedness or the conception of the earth itself as female and precious. In response to my trepidation, guilt, and uncertainty I have tried to use art, as my grandfather did during World War II, to work towards some kind of 'human significance'.[306] I have attempted to create paintings that operate on different levels: rather than offering value-judgements about climate change, I hope my images shift and move, responding to the viewer's own experiences and impressions, aiming 'at the most to ask questions or evoke moods'.[307]

Being products of imagination and offering an aesthetic experience, I hope that each element of my paintings can, as Delmore Scwartz explains, 'move in the direction of something which transcends all social and political ideals and is relevant to all of them'.[308] In Chapter 1 I outlined how, like the Symbolists and other contemporary artists, my intention has been to 'find meaning in the commonplace and to find answers to the great questions of life in the inner recesses of the soul'.[309] I see an almost 'religious' aim for these paintings – something that, like the work of the Symbolists, echoes a mystical experience without offering definite moral answers. I have developed an iconography out of quotidian structures such as veiled road signs, smoke, and glasshouses, as detailed in Chapter 2. This iconography echoes Mortimer's apprehension that 'the mundane and anticipated can be upturned, corrupted, or destroyed'.[310] The mundane as fragile has been underscored by the collective threats of climate disaster, and in my own experience of cancer and surgery.

My practice has tried to resist what John Gray terms the liberal humanist conception of time – time as a linear, orderly progression where change happens slowly but works towards a kind of perfectibility, as if we constantly developed into better humans.[311] In Chapter 3, I looked instead to conceptions of time within Te Ao Māori as circular and interconnected, and I am drawn to Yolnu time as something that exists continuously. I hope my paintings embody my understanding that the work of the past can be equally relevant to our contemporary context. The disruption to linear time was also made visceral for me by my experiences of surgery. During that time of diagnosis and surgery, memories became disconnected from what went before or after and are hard to place into a coherent story, giving new significance to the iconography I had already used, such as shrouds, frames-within-frames, and the texture of palimpsests. My paintings in Chapter 7 use perceptual painting techniques to evoke temporal rupture and expressions of grief as responses to personal disaster.

The framing of moments was also employed within the *Wiseblood* exhibition as elucidated in Chapter 6. This series drew on the idea of Intertextuality that was introduced in Chapter 5. This exegesis has articulated ways in which written text can enrich image-making in contemporary Perceptual and figurative painting. I have looked to the genre of Southern Gothic fiction, particularly

[306] Baxter, 'The World of the Creative Artist', 251.
[307] Preuss, 'Between Myth and Reality: Victor Man's Existential Painting'.
[308] Schwartz, 'The Duchess' Red Shoes', 213.
[309] Ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth-century European Art*, 473
[310] Delagrange, 'A Conversation with Justin Mortimer: The Artist as a Junkie'.
[311] Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*.

in the novels of Flannery O'Connor, to find imagery and timbre. Like Victor Man, I hope that the employment of literary parallels can offer resonances when viewing my own paintings. This exegesis is significant offering insights into the scholarship of Intertextuality from a painter's point of view.

My experiences through the miscarriage, cancer diagnosis, and surgery as described in Chapter 7, highlighted a personal, intimate experience of bodies in disaster, and the female body in particular. This drew attention to ideas of macro and micro events, paralleling the macro time of wider environmental instability and a mistrust in social institutions against my own micro experiences of a religious background from which I emerged into something darker and more uncertain. The experience of these health and fertility-related experiences sharpened my self-identity as a painter in a female body. Over the course of this exegesis, I have examined the work of significant female artists who paint the figure, while mentioning the lack of female voices and the objectification of women within the nineteenth-century Symbolist movement. In doing so, I have helped to highlight under-studied female painters, such as Gwen John, and contemporary painters such as Ann Gale, Colleen Barry, and Mia Bergeron. A focus on the female figure from a female point of view has become incorporated into my concern with climate disaster, with a conflation between the earth's body and the individual female body. The eschatological experience of the earth's body found parallels with my personal encounter with death – death of a hoped-for life through my miscarriage, and my own potential death through the diagnosis of ovarian cancer. For me this has helped to address my third research question: out of the historical moment of Symbolism, I have drawn a personal iconography that relies on my perception and interpretation of the world as a female painter. Creating Symbolist paintings from a more consciously feminist point of view has evolved as a significant contribution of this thesis and points a way forward for future research.

Painting Methods

My grandfather's broadminded belief in nature and art has given me a kind of breathing space within this project, as his presence gave me a space away from Pentecostalism when I was a child; he provided a quietness in the midst of my eschatological fears through the medium of art and the experience of observing the natural world. I have drawn on his example as I explored the relevance of Perceptual painting in response to contemporary disasters. I have examined drawing methods that are invaluable to observational painting, and by personalising the measuring techniques that my grandfather taught me, I have shown that they offer an important way of training the hand and eye to 'see' beyond our immediate preconceptions of the visible world. Measuring techniques also have a

conceptual value as a metaphor for vision: measurement often feels like a rational way of approaching a problem, as if it could give coherence and clarity to perception and yet, in practice, often disrupts and disintegrates it. The unreliability of vision also corresponds to my feelings about the difficulty of being known, and the fear of being unknowable. In leaving behind traces of measuring, and in painting over layers of older images, my paintings show the history of their making, a process and state of mind that Kanevsky described in Chapter 4, 'not aimless, not exactly purposeful'.[312] This approach also echoes the ways in which religious texts can be re-written and re-interpreted across time, as Armstrong explained in reference to the writing of the Bible (explored in Chapter 4).

What is Made of All These Tellings?

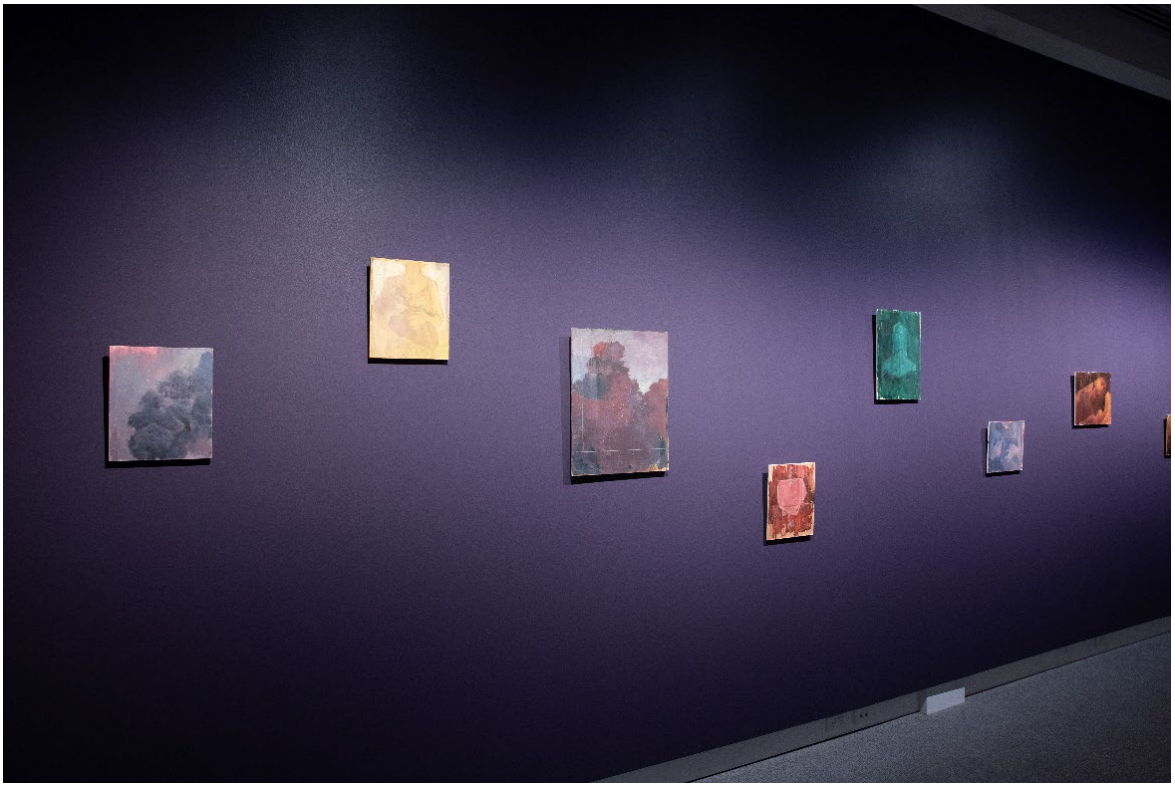
Through this thesis (incorporating the written exegesis and my paintings), past and present come together, as does the Intertextuality of literature, film, and photography, to provide an aesthetic experience within the Anthropocene and in the face of disaster. My personal iconography has been drawn from literary, art historical, and sculptural precedent to weave together the threads of my past – art and religion, faith and doubt. Like my grandfather in the Prisoner of War Camp I feel a frustration that my painting is powerless to solve the disasters we collectively face, even while I know it is essential in surviving my own personal experiences.

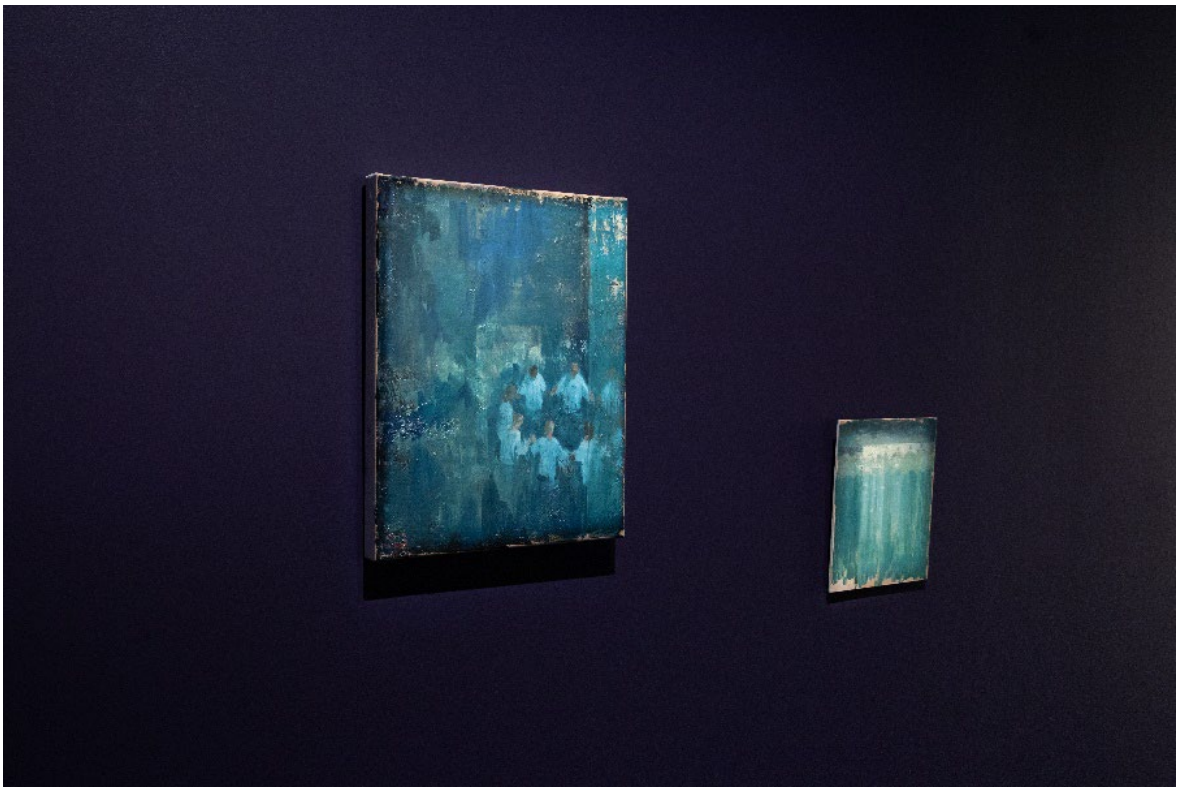
The phrase at the start of the conclusion finishes Dylan Thomas' passage that was quoted in Chapter 2. Those looking on to earth are trying to find meaning in its destruction and in the lives they lived there: they 'remember places, fears, loves, exultation, misery, animal joy, ignorance and mysteries*',*[313] all the complexity and uncertainty of life, the darkened mirror that reveals only glimpses of the self. Thomas declares that it is out of this blackness and chaos, these conflicting and contradictory impulses, the darkness of unknowing and our stories about that unknowing that art emerges. I hope that, as for Thomas, my paintings can be 'made of all these tellings' into 'an affirmation of the beautiful and terrible worth of the earth'.[314]

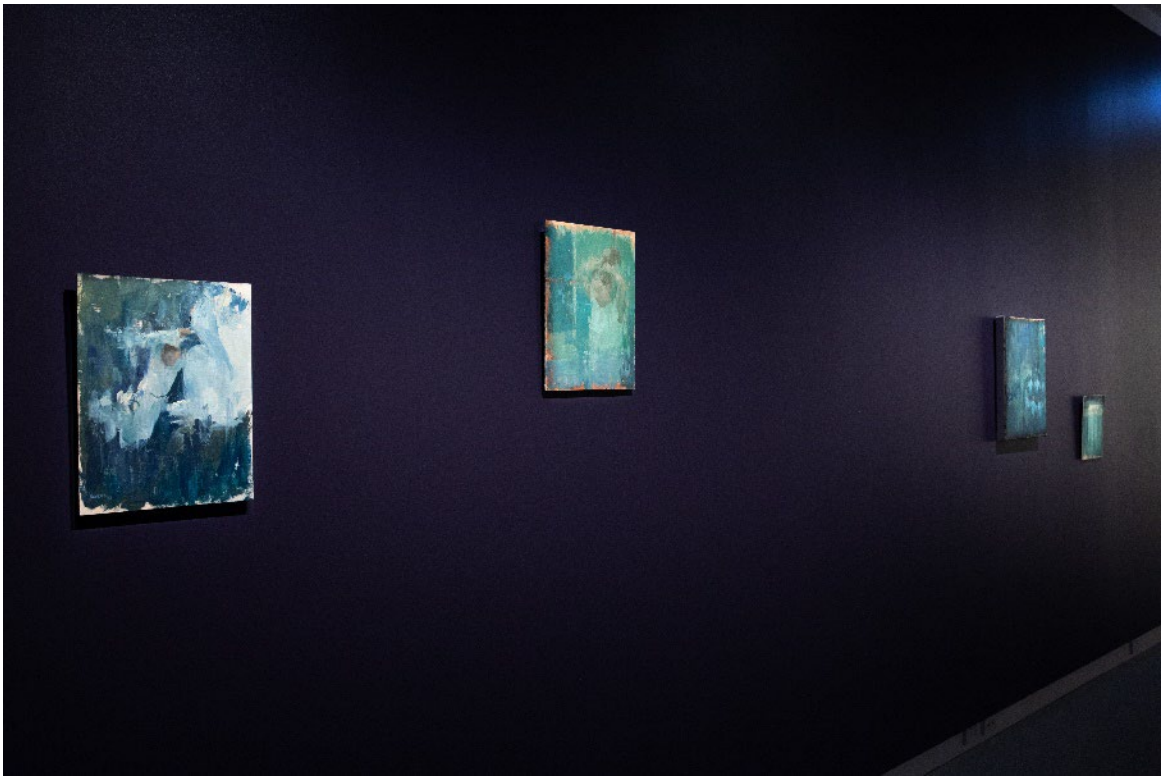
[312] Alex Kanevsky, in conversation with Bjorn Andersson
[313] Thomas, 'Three Poems', 157
[314] Thomas, 'Three Poems' 157.

Appendix

After my thesis show at Te Wai Ngutu Kaka gallery at Auckland University of Technology, I was given the opportunity to exhibit the works at Ashburton Art Gallery, near my home town. For this presentation, I worked with the curator James Hope to create an atmospheric room using dark purple walls and dim lighting, aiming for the effect of perhaps a dimly lit church or spiritual space. A selection of works was chosen from across the four years of the thesis, giving a sense of continuity and repetition. These were laid out as ‘clusters’ with the idea of each work being an element in a complex ecosystem. The following are photographs of that installation, kindly provided by the gallery:.







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