

Of Swamps and Silhouettes

**Ecosystems of Reclaimed Women's Narratives and
Painted Bodies**

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Abstract

This painting and installation project critically engages with feminist discourse surrounding the representation and reclamation of women's existences through the lens of women's literature. Anchored in cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis' theorisation of *Bodies of Water*, the project employs water and swamps as metaphors for the liminality and permeability of identity and embodiment. By examining posthumanist and feminist thought, the project seeks to destabilise reductive, patriarchal constructs and explore the complexities of gender identity as fluid. As a key motif in the work, the swamp operates as a site of narrative potential. Within these spaces, the painted figures have become autonomous agents in the making process. Narratological processes of unreliable narration and non-linearity underpin the project's multi-faceted narrative, positioning the subject, viewer and painter as contributors. By investigating the material qualities of paint, the project uncovers abundant possibilities for women's existences while destabilising the boundaries between the real and painted environments. This methodological approach resists anatomical essentialism and rigid human/non-human binaries, embracing a "New-Female" identity defined by potentiality, transformation, and transcorporeality.

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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.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emma Beth Richards". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial 'E' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Emma Beth Richards

14th May 2025

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Roots

I present a story where no single narrator exists, where a story unfolds through each crooked branch and outstretched arm, through each ripple and lily pad. A story without a beginning or end. One that can only exist in the interplay between observer and observed. Here, the agents are not just the ones who tell the story but also those who read it. A tale of conflict between whimsical enchantment and stark reality. A story that is both question and answer. I invite you to lose yourself in marshy swamps, where tides fluctuate, and transcorporeal bodies linger in hushed whispers, soft embraces, and an underlying struggle on what it means to simply exist.

This project was seeded with a love for women's literature. An endless list of authors like Toni Morrison, Shirley Jackson, Clarice Lispector, Hilda Hilst, Jacqueline Woodson, Joan Lindsay, Margaret Atwood, and Mary Gaitskill shaped my understanding of the power of storytelling. These novelists transported me into the minds and worlds of their female protagonists, in whom I discovered pieces of my existence as a young woman. I found solace in these tales. If my anxieties, feelings and views on the world were reflected in the words of another woman, I would feel less lost in my existentialism. I could feel the gentle yet resilient sisterhood that underpins our everyday.

If I'm truly honest, this is a protest. You will see a lot of protests throughout this exegesis. I admit I am motivated to an extent by spite. One of these protests came in response to a guest speaker I had in class during my undergraduate degree. A male gallery curator teaching us how to "make it" in the art world proclaimed proudly, "You should all be reading non-fiction books; fiction books are a waste of time." I sat there looking at him in disbelief, my only thought being, "If only you understood how reading fiction books by women has been one of the most beautiful, impactful parts of my life. And if you were open to reading them too, how your life would be incomprehensibly changed."

Writer and scholar Sara Ahmed once wrote, “We write ourselves into existence.”¹ This quote has buried itself deep into my soul. A profound proclamation that we have the power to articulate our own existences. Fiction books achieve precisely that. Sometimes, a metaphor, a made-up character, or a whole world created from the mind can do much more than a memoir or biography can. It is the artistic expression of existing. There is a reason storytelling has been a part of all cultures since the beginning of time. Painter Jaelyn Conley articulates this concept beautifully; “[fiction] allow[s] us to empathise and to see beyond facts and beyond one-dimensional thinking and really see the metaphor, see the relation of things, see the grey.”²

It is a strange, uncanny sensation to look at women painted by men or to read female characters written by male authors. I can only describe it as looking at one’s reflection in a murky puddle. I knew that mid-way through the first year of my master’s project, I would travel to Italy to visit my best friend, who moved there at the end of 2022. The purpose of my trip was to see her, but I knew I would indulge myself in the plethora of art in both Florence and Rome. In preparation for looking at the thousands of paintings of women in gilded frames and extraordinary frescoes, I read art historian Catherine McCormack’s *Women in the Picture*. This book would become the framework for my investigation into the act of looking, specifically at women in art. I found that these paintings of women didn’t reflect the complexities of the relationships we have with other women, especially the relationship that drew me to Italy in the first place.

I’m at a very strange time in my life, starting this thesis at age 22 and finishing it at 23. I experience changes in my body every day. I feel malleable. I feel vulnerable. I sometimes feel I am holding on to my youth too tightly. I don’t quite know who I am. I am young. I’m naïve. My view of the world changes with each waking day. But I’m making this project now to grasp this moment of transformation.

¹ Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (Great Britain: Penguin Random House, 2023), 186.

² *Artist Jaelyn Conley: “Painting Is Not a Loud Voice”* | Louisiana Channel, directed by Marc Christoph Wagner, (Louisiana Chanel), 2024) YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK2p26GDT_s.

Cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis discusses the fluid and permeable nature of our bodies in her book *Bodies of Water*, framing my understanding of watery embodiment and relationality.³ My painting practice reflects this unfixity of self and quest to find out how I might be reflected visually. I would like to shape this exegesis as a story that fluctuates, unfurls and flourishes with my discovery of the watery female-leaning beings and the swamps they reside in.

³ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

Entangled Stories: A Symbiotic Narrative

I needed to create my own story through this painting project. A fictional story where I could process every thought and emotion I had on existence, on womanhood and on my female relationships.⁴ With this, narratology became a significant methodology in my practice. Cultural theorist Mieke Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* introduces key narratological terms that form this chapter's foundation: *Agents*, such as the narrator/author and the actors, are those who perform the actions in a story (not necessarily human). The *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events caused or experienced by the actors. The *elements* of the fabula consist of events, actors, time, and locations. Finally, the *story* is a *fabula* presented in a particular manner.⁵ This story takes the form of a painting project titled *Of Swamps and Silhouettes*.

Creation of a "New-Female"

It is only fitting that I begin this chapter with the agents from whom the story is born. Now, it is natural to think of myself as the sole author of this project. But I argue that this story has no singular agent or narrator. Instead, it is a compilation of many, one of which is you, the viewer/reader.

My characters were always going to be women. After all, this project began with a love of women's literature and a question: how can we reclaim women's narratives through painting? This then sparked the very daunting question: what exactly *is* a woman? There is no clear definition. A woman is an idea, an expression, open to change and transformation, something unique to all.

⁴ The term "female" can be outdated or reductive as a noun used to describe women, as it can imply biological essentialism or detached personhood. I use the term selectively and with critical awareness as sometimes it aligns with the language of my sources or because it is grammatically more appropriate. However, where possible, I try to use more open-ended terms such as "women," "girls," or "female-leaning."

⁵ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed., (University of Toronto Press, 1997).

Philosopher and linguist Luce Irigaray examines how women might exist independently rather than being defined solely in relation to men. She critiques the masculinised concept of selfhood and subjectivity, which historically excludes women as autonomous beings. I became interested in her questions about whether women are inherently positioned as existing "for/by another" rather than for themselves, highlighting how patriarchal structures deny them full self-realisation, "Woman, for her part, remains in unrealized potentiality – unrealized, for/by herself. Is she, by nature, a being that exists for/by another?"⁶

To create these female figures who were not defined by their failure to exist as men and who had autonomy in their own formations, I needed to experience "death as a creator." I had to allow these figures to form themselves; to invent new ways of existing. Literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* argues that the author's intentions should not limit the interpretation of a text; instead, meaning is created by the reader.⁷ In my practice, I take this one step further by allowing the painted figures to construct their own meanings. A method of achieving this is through the fluidity of paint.

I began this project by painting with watercolour. My aim was to learn from the materiality of paint and to allow the act of painting to assist in my act of constructing figures. I quickly created an index of world inhabitants: hundreds of watercolour paintings of figures and landscapes. The watercolour paint was unpredictable; unexpected forms would emerge on the paper. I began to see figures, relationships, and characters form beyond my conscious act of construction. A symbiotic relationship between the figures and me blossomed. In fact, symbiotic relationships often refer to the mother-child relationship. The child learns how to survive and exist from the mother, but the mother also learns from the child. Every relationship I had, every experience as a young woman navigating the world, every movie I watched and book I had read all manifested in these figures. But I was also learning something invaluable from them as they were "born." They were creating their own relationships and meanings.

⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165.

⁷ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 49, https://www.d.umn.edu/~cstroupe/handouts/8500/barthes_death.pdf.



Figure 1 Emma Beth Richards, *Untitled*, 2024, watercolour on paper, 297mm x 420mm.



Figure 2 Emma Beth Richards, *Untitled*, 2024, watercolour on paper, 297 mm x 420 mm.

In my redefining of “woman,” it was crucial not to generalise the female experience. Social critic and theorist bell hooks critiques the idea of shared victimisation, where feminists try to underpin the movement with oppression rather than fostering solidarity. She argues that feminism must acknowledge both similarities and differences among women rather than reinforcing divisions, as seen in white feminism’s exclusion of black and brown women. Instead, hooks emphasises sisterhood as the foundation of the movement. Listening, learning, and standing in solidarity across race, class, sexuality, and culture is essential. Rather than erasing individual struggles through universal victimhood, women must build connections through their unique experiences.⁸

A fine line was drawn between creating an ambiguous woman who could be defined by her potentiality rather than her lack of masculine characteristics and the generalising of women’s existences by creating undefinable characteristics. So, I created these “New-Female” beings, collaborative authors of this narrative.⁹ As more watercolour paintings covered my studio walls, a commonality of characteristics in the figures began to appear: long hair, curious poses, nurturing relationships, and challenging gazes. I no longer cared for the accuracy of anatomy but focused on a presence within these watery backgrounds. How were these figures manifesting a physical and emotional presence in space? Some took on forms through simple outlines; others were bold and fleshed out. We can tell they are female-leaning through hints in their forms. Although they have nipples, they have no breasts, yet they still have some basic curvature of the female form. Their long hair is also a clue to their gender expression. I must note that these figures don’t have to be ascribed to a gender at all; as I stated before, they create their own existences that go beyond my total dictation. However, to me, they are women because that is what I see them as: women living in solidarity and sisterhood. What makes them New-Female is their collective confidence to exist on their own terms, redefining what it means to be a woman within a painted context.

⁸ bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 25–28.

⁹ The term “New-Female” emerged during a discussion with my supervisor Ingrid Boberg, as we were confronted with the overwhelming sense of presence my figures had.



Figure 3 Emma Beth Richards, detail of studio wall installation, 2024.



Figure 4 Georg Wilson, *The Double*, 2023, oil on a linen blend, Public Service Gallery, Stockholm. Courtesy the artist.

I looked to artist Georg Wilson's paintings in the early stages of creating these New-Female figures. *The Double* (Figure 4) depicts two genderless figures that share human and animal-like qualities. The figures' focal points are their eyes and pubic hair, drawing equal attention to both their souls and anatomy. Their large bodies have a comforting quality, and against the dark forest, they seem to glow from within. The figures dominate their environment as protagonists by taking up the whole canvas. Their strange dynamic and moods are reflected in the blue and yellow colours of their forms. Wilson has managed to confront politics on gender norms and expression in a playful, innocent manner. However, this innocence does not subtract from the politics in the piece. They are clear subversions of gender norms. The figures don't have clear signs of breasts, and their pubic hair covers whatever genitals they may have. Most importantly, although the figures are naked, they are not sexualised.

Wilson's cheeky and mischievous figures bursting with personality were key to my thinking on how to paint female-leaning figures that are not sexualised or objectified. She has been successful in presenting characters that exist in harmony with their environment and are free to express their emotions and feelings beyond their gendered appearances. In their unique expressions and colours, they radiate individuality.

Although my figures possess collective qualities, each maintains a distinct individuality through their colour, form, and personality. Here, I introduce two characters from my world as an example. Their sisterhood is evident in their shared features of bold eyes, outlined forms, and fluid, watery backgrounds, yet their differences are noticeable. *Curious Body* (Figure 5) stands in contrast to her counterpart. With her hands on her hips and a direct, assertive gaze, she exudes confidence and curiosity, fully aware of our presence in her world. In contrast, *Where Lily Pads Listen* (Figure 6) sits immersed in contemplation, seemingly indifferent or oblivious to the viewer. Wallowing in the shallow water, she is engrossed in her environment, lost in quiet introspection.



Figure 5 Emma Beth Richards, *Curious Body*, 2024, oil and acrylic on canvas, 610mm x 914mm.



Figure 6 Emma Beth Richards, *Where Lily Pads Listen*, 2024, oil and acrylic on canvas, 610mm x 914mm.

The Swamp

Marsh is not swamp. Marsh is a space of light, where grass grows in water, and water flows into the sky. Slow-moving creeks wander, carrying the orb of sun with them to the sea, and long-legged birds lift with unexpected grace – as though not built to fly – against the roar of a thousand snow geese.

Then within the marsh, here and there, true swamp crawls into low lying bogs, hidden in clammy forests. Swamp water is still and dark, having swallowed the light in its muddy throat. Even night crawlers are diurnal in this lair. There are sounds, of course, but compared to the marsh, the swamp is quiet because decomposition is cellular work. Life decays and reeks and returns to the rotted duff; a poignant willow of death begetting life.¹⁰

Back in high school, on a muggy summer afternoon, my friends and I decided to take a shortcut through the bamboo and bog behind my friend's house. We had to hold hands as we navigated the steaming mud that had turned very sticky in the hot sun. Using dead branches to build walkways and sticks to push our way through the bamboo thicket, I followed behind my two friends, gleaming at our team efforts. Something about the mud on our shoes, twigs in our hair, and our sweaty fingers intertwined made me feel a great connection to them and the elements.

Very early on in this project, this memory became the basis for many of my paintings. Swamps and marshes were the setting for almost every painting and drawing. Through my research, I would later understand that subconsciously, there was a reason for this locational choice. I was drawn to the symbiotic ecology of swamps and their in-flux nature. As my friends and I were transformed by our mission through the bog, the bog was also transformed by us.

Swamps as liminal spaces exist between land and water, life and decay, clarity and murkiness. Like womanhood, they exist in fluid, ever-changing states,

¹⁰ Delia Owens, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, (London: Hachette UK, 2022), 3.

resisting harsh binaries. The swamp is a mother, too. It nurtures life, offering refuge and concealment, yet it can also be unforgiving and suffocating. I see womanhood reflected in the swamp's unruly waters.

Cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis uses water as a metaphor to explore and articulate posthuman feminist ideologies in her book *Bodies of Water*. Drawing on Neimanis's work, I understand posthumanism as the rethinking of the human body as not separate but interconnected with the more-than-human world. In the context of my work, my creation of the New-Female challenges the binaries that separate body from environment, while also honouring the diverse and multifaceted experiences of women. Neimanis opens the chapter *Embodying Water* with a quote from phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "I have no means of knowing the human body other than that of living in it."¹¹ In the context of Merleau-Ponty, she discusses how our watery embodiment and our transcorporeality situates us, encouraging us to think about the body as an experience in the context of a shared world.¹² We are not fixed or isolated but rather relational, porous, and shaped by our environments, highlighting the symbiotic nature of our bodies and water. The world is an extension of our bodies. The illusion of our bodies being contained by the skin is breached by the saliva, mucus, tears, and blood that exude from us.¹³ With this, our bodies are constantly transforming. As Merleau-Ponty points out, the body is never a static entity.¹⁴

When I am creating a painting, I always think about the body of water and the bodies of water that will coexist in the scene. In *Ophelia's Daughters* (Figure 7), the figures, trees, and pond entwine in quiet harmony, each element reflecting the other. The figures' bodies are not separate from the painted landscape but embedded within it, their forms complemented by the vertical structure of the trees. The trees' solidity suggests weight to the figures, grounding them, whilst the background, exposed through their forms, underscores their coexistence and interconnectedness with the natural world. What emerges is a sense of fluid

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962, quoted in Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 27.

¹² Transcorporeality refers to the theoretical understanding of bodily forms as inherently interconnected with, and continuous through, the environment and other material bodies.

¹³ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 48.



Figure 7 Emma Beth Richards, *Ophelia's Daughters*, 2024, oil and acrylic on linen, 1500mm x 1000mm.

entanglement; the body of murky green water becomes the connective force between them, a liquid embodiment of shared existence. The environment is not just a place to exist but another agent in the story.



Figure 8 John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851–1852, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London.

As a literary reference, this work is also a reclamation of Shakespeare’s character Ophelia from *Hamlet*. It appears to be a common theme in literature that a woman’s fate ends in drowning. Metaphorically, this reflects the drowning of women’s voices and identities within patriarchal society. In Victorian art, the drowned woman is even aestheticised. Take, for example, John Everett Millais’ painting of Ophelia (Figure 8), where her death and suffering are turned into a poetic spectacle: the intricacy of her wet robes, the flowers adorning her surroundings, her eyes open, passive and cold. In *Ophelia’s Daughters*, in contrast, water is not a grave but rather a womb.

In my work, the swamp is not just a setting but another narrator in the story. In this role as narrator, it distorts and obscures. I take on its qualities by surrendering to washy layers and absorbent mediums and surfaces, allowing forms to be altered and submerged in its waters. In this diptych, *Swamp Secrets I & II* (Figure 9), the swamp actively participates in erasing a clear narrative. Like a rising tide, it envelops the figure’s forms, dissolving boundaries between body and landscape. Here, the swamp obscures truth from the viewer, teasing us with reeds and flickering reflections of light.



Figure 9 Emma Beth Richards, *Swamp Secrets I & II*, 2025, diptych, oil and acrylic on canvas, 610mm x 914mm.

Ecological Booming and Unreliable Narration

Referring to Mieke Bal's narratological terms, this narrative lacks a fabula; that is, it does not follow a clear, chronological sequence of events to form a linear storyline. Instead, I am drawn to non-linear plots, unreliable narrators, and the subversion of traditional narrative methods. In this story, events are not causally ordered but emerge from the relationship between all the elements. The narrative unfolds in the spaces between these relations, existing within their interconnected potential rather than a fixed sequence of events.

I come to my studio, where the walls are draped with swampy panoramas, where figures greet me, and I become totally submerged in the lakes of this tale. By painting on a large scale using dropsheet canvases, I have set up an environment for the narrative potential of a story to unfold organically, of relationships between myself, the characters and the viewer. Like in a swamp, I think of it as an *ecological booming*, a slow, unfolding process where characters appear like initial sprigs of growth in the water, extending toward each other and interacting with the environment like roots running through the ground.

I must confess I am an unreliable narrator, and so are the women in my paintings. Their stories shift depending on who is looking, tangled in layers of perception and interpretation. Without a singular voice, no definitive truth exists. The narrative emerges through the relationships between me and the figures within these painted ecologies. Instead of following a preconceived plan, I respond intuitively to the environment that unfolds before me: *She needs a friend. This tree is the perfect hiding place. This puddle begs to be explored.* It is a symbiotic process where the world of the painting and my own instincts shape one another, co-authoring the story as it takes form.

The concept of an unreliable narrator is also exemplified by my installations' "double hangings" and layering.¹⁵ Multiple points of view are presented across

¹⁵ The term "double hanging" refers to hanging canvas works over dropsheet backdrop paintings. This installation method is discussed further in Chapter Two: Broken Mirrors: Returning the Gaze in a Fractured Environment.



Figure 10 Emma Beth Richards, *Untitled*, 2024, double hanging, acrylic on dropsheet, 2600mm x 3500mm, oil on canvas, 610mm x 914mm.

the environment, traces of the story and voices left scattered. Some are louder, presenting boldly in form or colour against washy backdrops, and some are quieter and softer in demeanour, yet no less integral to the narrative. As the viewer surveys the installation, perspectives shift, and fragments are revealed or obscured, leaving them to navigate the blurred line between subjective truths and constructed fiction.

I became interested in novelist Clarice Lispector's *Hour of the Star* as a great example of a subverted narrator-character relationship. Narrated through the character of Rodrigo S.M.'s stream-of-consciousness writing, we see his self-conscious voice as he wavers between fascination, frustration, love and disdain for his protagonist, Macabéa. He struggles with the power of narration over Macabéa's unremarkable life, which taunts him in his desperation to impose a purpose on her. There are days when he despises her and others when he confesses his affection towards her. His fragmented, contradictory narration blurs the boundary between author and subject, questioning the ethics of storytelling, representation, and the power dynamics between writer and character. This layer of separation compromises the story as Rodrigo inadvertently projects his personal biases onto Macabéa's life.¹⁶

Hour of the Star has three agents: *Lispector*, who writes about a *writer* writing about a *young woman*. This blurring of authorship fascinates me as it produces a multi-faceted narrative that resists a singular truth. In my own work, I attempt to detach my biases from my created world and characters; yet I recognise that they are never wholly separate from my authorship, and I have come to accept this. At its core, my work is a collaboration between myself, the figures, and the environment, as we write ourselves into existence.

¹⁶ Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1992).

Broken Mirrors: Returning the Gaze in a Fractured Environment

I See You Seeing Me

True liberation lies in the ability to look. My whole life, I have felt a voice shouting to be seen, not for how I looked, but for what was inside my brain. Yet, I have always felt that whatever I said or did, I was always categorised as a woman first. Like, what does this naive 20-year-old girl think she's talking about? I recognise my privilege, too, that as a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman, my voice is far more likely to be heard than those of BIPOC and queer communities, whose perspectives are so often silenced by dominant societal narratives. Even within that privilege, however, there's a sense of frustration.

Researcher, author and professor Dr Cat Bohannon describes a pivotal moment many women encounter in their young lives when they become aware of being perceived differently by others, especially by men and boys: "There is a moment in every young girl's life when she realises that she's being watched. That her body is a thing that's seen, and that men are the ones who are doing the seeing."¹⁷ Although I cannot remember the exact moment when I first realised that I was being looked at differently, I know that at some point during childhood, I did. Maybe it was when the boys in my class began rating all the girls on a scale of prettiness. Or when older men would complement my red hair. Instead of feeling uplifted, I felt a new, unfamiliar sensation of feeling too closely *observed*.

An experience I had recently that jolted forth this unsought feeling was when I was installing my work for a school art prize. In a hall filled with selected students from various other art schools, an older man approached me. We started engaging in conversation about the other students' works and noted how figure painting was

¹⁷ Cat Bohannon, *Eye: How the Female Body Drove 200 Million Years of Human Evolution*, (New York: Random House, 2023), 278.

seemingly making a comeback in the art world, including my work. It was a friendly conversation at first. But suddenly, he looked me and my friend, who is also a young woman, up and down and asked, “Where are your naked self-portraits?” I felt like the clothes on my body had been stripped away, and I was now standing naked in front of the eyes of this man and everyone else in the room. A reminder that, to him, I was an artist second and a female body first. We know from moments like these that looking is gendered. Angered at this encounter, I knew that going into my master’s, I longed to create a world that could emulate this strange feeling. I wanted this man to experience what it was like to be the naked figure in a room full of onlookers.

The following year, I felt this same feeling on my travels to Europe. The walls of these esteemed galleries and museums I visited were all decorated with the naked female figure. I couldn’t help but see myself in each one, trapped in an eternity of being looked at but not *seen*. Catherine McCormack’s *Women in the Picture* explores how power determines who gets to look and create art and, therefore, whose stories are told. This power dynamic reduces women and minorities to mere objects of another’s gaze.¹⁸ I had the privilege to see the widely appreciated Diego Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* (Figure 11) on loan in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. The painting depicts a woman posing with her back to the viewer, while passively gazing into a mirror. Originally commissioned for a wealthy man’s private collection, her purpose is clear: to be consumed.¹⁹



Figure 11 Diego Velázquez, *Rokeby Venus*, 1647–1651, oil on canvas, 22 cm × 177 cm, National Gallery, London.

¹⁸ Catherine McCormack, *Women in the Picture: Women, Art and the Power of Looking*, (London: Icon Books, 2021), 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 30.

McCormack elucidates that this narrow way of seeing is deeply rooted in art history. Centuries of artwork created by men have taught us to view women as objects, shaping how we still see women today. Even as we study and admire art history, we internalise the narratives these works immortalise: the passive, beautiful woman, defined by her ability to be looked at. This legacy remains a powerful force, quietly dictating the standards by which women are judged in the modern world.

Even as we fight for our narratives, a man lingers inside us. Art critic and novelist John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* describes how women are conditioned to view themselves through a male gaze, living as both the surveyed (herself) and the surveyor (the male). This internal split fractures us in two.²⁰ Similarly, feminist Luce Irigaray examines how women are either without a "self" or have multiple "selves" appropriated "by them [men], for them, according to their [men's] needs and desires."²¹

I embody this internal split not as two people but as an entire society of female-leaning beings in my art. I grapple with the weight of art history, navigating what it means to look and to be seen. I was apprehensive about starting this project. Was it even possible to make art about women that defied the male gaze? Or was I just adding to this tiresome narrative? For some time, I even felt sorry for the figures I was painting, destined to spend the rest of their lives consumed by the viewer.

Painter Cecily Brown faced the same internal battle with her painting *All the Nightmares Came Today* (Figure 12). The painting was made in response to a photograph by David Montgomery consisting of 13 naked women created for a Jimi Hendrix album. The picture itself is overtly misogynistic, causing the album to be banned from shelves upon release. However, Brown stated she felt compelled to paint the image, interested in this crowd of women looking out at the viewer in a very passive state, waiting to be devoured.²² I think women experience this need to have control over their image, and the images of all women, to reclaim the narrative. Brown's painting transforms these women, making them fleshy and fluid.

²⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: Penguin UK, 2008), 46.

²¹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Cornell University Press: New York, 1985), 17.

²² Cecily Brown, interviewed by Katy Hessel, "Cecily Brown," *The Great Women Artists* (podcast), October 20, 2020, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/30Hk5sdNtSXzmXWGcLP1Hb?si=e34c58e3fecf48f4>.

Their ambiguity allows for their existence to remain open to interpretation. Like in my paintings, some figures choose to exist boldly while others fade into the background, their selves merging and separating.



Figure 12 Cecily Brown, *All the Nightmares Came Today*, 2012, Oil on linen, 67 × 83 in. © Cecily Brown. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

When looking at Brown's painting, I feel like I can hear it; I can hear the figures talk amongst each other: the image is activated through the merging of bodies and loosely applied paint. Similarly, my painted environments consist of a society of female-leaning beings all activating and interacting with each other. They peek out from the trees, whisper to each other and engage in secret games. As in Brown's painting, the figures refuse to be stagnant. Instead, they breathe, blend, and resist containment, actively participating in their own narratives.

I realised I had the ability to switch the narrative and reverse the power dynamic of the viewer as active and the figure as passive. One method was through a posthumanist lens, creating these New-Female beings, as I discussed in Chapter One in the section, Creation of a "New-Female." Another way was through a returned gaze. I always come back to filmmaker Agnès Varda's assertion:

*The first feminist gesture is to say: "OK, they're looking at me. But I'm looking at them." The act of deciding to look, of deciding that the world is not defined by how people see me, but how I see them.*²³

²³ Agnès Varda, in *Filming Desire: A Journey Through Women's Film*, directed by Marie Mandy, (Wajnbrosse Productions, 2000), Kanopy.



Figure 13 Emma Beth Richards, *Untitled*, 2024, acrylic on dropsheet canvas and oil paint on board leaning.

When I understood it was less about how my characters looked and more about their act of looking, I could move past this anxiety about painting women. In my work, the figures' gaze defies the viewer's presence. A society of female-leaning beings all engage with their environments in ways unique to their individual personalities. Though some figures look outward, they are not necessarily inviting us in. Instead, they say, "I know you're there, but I'm busy."

There is an unsettling feeling that comes from the returned gaze. Model Allison Harvard is known for her big, peculiar eyes, making her the internet personality "Creepy Chan." She is someone I often thought of when painting my figures' eyes. It is like the effect a line of old dolls in the op shop has on giving us what I can only describe as the heebie-jeebies, a feeling that these static images, or lifeless dolls, may have a soul, and they are watching us watch them. Robotics scholar Masahiro Mori coined the term "uncanny valley," an uncomfortable experience humans have when something feels almost but not quite human.²⁴ The lifelike eyes of a doll seem to suggest intent or presence, even though we rationally know it has none. This destabilisation of boundaries between subject and object intensifies the eerie feeling. The doll actively evokes and shapes our discomfort, just as all entities in a network influence one another; returning the viewer's gaze both unsettles and involves them as an active participant in the narrative. While viewing my paintings, the viewer becomes acutely aware of being watched, triggering the same uncanny valley sensation.

The eyes of my figures have become a distinct characteristic of my work, an essential act in their self-formation. I approach this stage with particular intent, as it is through their gaze that they assert their autonomy. I often define the eyes by using opaque white paint as the base so that any paint applied over the top would stand out, evoking this "Creepy Chan" effect. The pupils are applied with a deep, dark shade, marking the moment they fully come into existence. This deliberate emphasis on their gazes is a powerful tool that asserts the figures' presence while resisting passive consumption. Perhaps now, the act of looking is no longer a comfortable one. Perhaps now, that man will feel the same way I did when he made that comment. *I see you seeing me.*

²⁴ Emily Kendall, "Uncanny Valley: Proposed Phenomenon," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Last modified April 2, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/uncanny-valley>.



Figure 14 Emma Beth Richards, *Untitled* (detail), 2024, acrylic on dropsheet canvas.

A Sentence with No Full Stop

When we try to imagine ourselves as women existing outside of the male gaze, we encounter a psychological tension: the struggle between existing for an *Other* and not existing at all.²⁵ This tension is embedded in an inherently gendered act of looking, shaping how women are seen and how we see ourselves. This project engages with the subversive potential of installation to emulate this conflict of reimagining one's existence outside of being “other-to-man,” while also dismantling and fracturing gendered ways of looking.

Film director Vera Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966) is a foundational influence in my approach to *de-* and *re-*constructing women's existence. Through the protagonists, both named Marie, the film exemplifies a rejection of rule and reason to reimagine existence beyond gendered norms as the girls fail to conform to the assigned role of “woman.” Chytilová's deconstruction of narrative and non-linear imagery suspends viewers between fantasy and reality, disrupting the viewer's comfort in looking.²⁶ In one scene, the characters literally cut each other apart as they explore what it means to be whole while simultaneously undoing their sense of self (Figures 15 and 16). Their fragmented bodies divide the frame, disorienting the viewer and challenging their comfort.²⁷ This fracturing destabilises the environment, forcing the viewer to adjust to a way of existing that resists physical norms. In their acts of



Figure 15 Věra Chytilová, *Daisies*, 1966, film still.



Figure 16 Věra Chytilová, *Daisies*, 1966, film still.

²⁵ Alice Wickström, “Girls Gone Bad: An Essay on ‘Existence’ in Chytilová's *Daisies*,” *Gender, Work & Organization* 28, no. 6 (2021): 2058.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Daisies*, directed by Vera Chytilová, (Barrandov Studios, 1966), Kanopy.

de- and *re-*construction, the Maries also challenge the patriarchal order of exchange between subject and spectator, destabilising these power structures.

In my painting installation practice, I similarly fracture environments to disrupt and activate viewership. I install framed canvases against dropsheet paintings as an installation technique of layering and double hangings. There is an interplay between figure and setting, which challenges the boundaries of the frame. These overlapping pictorial frames allow figures to move freely within and beyond the frame, activating their sense of movement. I think of painter Séraphine Pick's *Rider Instinct*, installed at Te Uru Gallery in 2024, where large canvas hangings were fragmented through painted objects and smaller frames. Pick's collaborative work with ceramicist Jaime Jenkins, *Sonic Tapestry* (Figure 17), exemplifies this concept through its stained, kaleidoscopic backdrop that guides the viewer's gaze across the composition. The objects act as visual encounters, activating each other in moments of interaction within a swirling current of paint.

The unstretched canvases in *Sonic Tapestry* suggest an expansion from the frame, a conceptual possibility of extending beyond the confines of the painted surface – a sentence with no full stop. Like in Chytilová's film *Daisies*, the viewer is left to contemplate the possibilities of existing outside of known structures, physical or social. There is psychological freedom in how these visual encounters are situated within the painted canvas, much like the Maries' freedom in exploring new ways of existing.



Figure 17 Séraphine Pick in collaboration with Jaime Jenkins, *Sonic Tapestry*, 2024. Installation view, Te Uru Contemporary Gallery, Auckland.

In my work, layering functions as a push-pull mechanism for the eyes, disrupting traditional viewer-art relationships. In this installation (Figures 18 and 19), our eyes navigate the painted environment, searching for focal points while also engaging in the atmospheric perspective presented in the backdrops. The figures within the framed pieces exist outside of the rules of perspective: the top left piece shifts the horizon line, while the bottom right piece's saturation brings it forward from its immediate environment.

Art historian Erwin Panofsky discusses the hierarchical structuring of viewership implemented in Renaissance art, where the use of a single vanishing point positioned the viewer at the centre of the depicted world. This compositional centring of the viewer reinforced a sense of importance in their gaze.²⁸ In my work, the composition's lack of a single vanishing point or spatial hierarchy instead creates visual instability; the absence of a fixed perspective forces the viewer into an off-balanced state as they negotiate their position within the space.

Additionally, the figure's direct gazes introduce another layer of interaction. Their intense, knowing stares function as focal points within the environment, much like the "visual encounters" within Pick and Jenkin's *Sonic Tapestry*. The returned gaze beguiles the viewer, naturally drawing the eye to the figures who command acknowledgement and resist the passive observation of patriarchal orders of exchange.

My work seeks to disrupt conventional ways of looking and existing within a pictorial space through fragmentation and layering. By disrupting compositional hierarchies and decentering the viewer, I challenge the authority traditionally granted to their gaze. Figures move beyond the frame and disrupt perspectives while their direct gazes confront and activate the viewer. As in *Daisies* and *Sonic Tapestry*, these disruptions force a negotiation between the subject and the viewer, complicating the stability of perspective. Through the methodologies of *de-* and *re-*construction, my practice reimagines the possibilities – fractured, fluid and ever-changing – of existing outside of patriarchal structures.

²⁸ Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 1924, quoted in Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 11.



Figure 18 Emma Beth Richards, *Untitled*, 2024, installation view.



Figure 19 Emma Beth Richards, *Untitled*, 2024, installation view.



Figure 20 Emma Beth Richards, *Mimics*, 2024, oil on unstretched canvas, 1500mm x 1000mm.

Thro' The Mirror Blue

The metaphor of mirrors within my practice is naturally amplified by the watery environments I paint. To be reflected or mirrored is to be validated: a tangible proof of one's existence. In psychology, psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage" describes a crucial period in a child's development when they begin to identify with their own image, forming an early sense of self.²⁹ Similarly, as my figures emerge from the swampy shallows, their reflections in the water affirm their existence and situate them within their environment. They begin to mirror their environments, too, mimicking found shapes and forms in nature.

I am particularly drawn to reflections found in nature, as they encapsulate our interconnectedness within our environments. Painter Peter Doig's pieces *Blotter* (Figure 21), *Reflection (What Does Your Soul Look Like)* (Figure 22), and *Window Pane* all depict puddles as more than mirrored reflections; they possess distinct qualities, colours, and sensibilities that differentiate them from their surroundings. Puddles in Doig's works appear like portals hidden in plain sight, fleeting moments that obscure our perception and encourage a dual way of looking: down to see up. In *Reflection (What Does Your Soul Look Like)*, the puddle is painted bright red, an unnatural reflection that contrasts with the figure's blue and black feet. We know the puddle isn't a direct reflection of the world above. This dissonance disrupts our sense of depth and perception, creating a surreal interplay between the water's surface and the objects it reflects.

An obscuring is happening through the water surface itself as ripples, bubbles and debris disrupt the reflected worlds and our act of looking. Similarly, in *Blotter*, a figure's reflection is distorted by the rippling surface, emphasising that puddles, unlike traditional mirrors, reflect not just physical appearances but also our presence and relationship with nature. As Doig adds in brackets to his title (*What Does Your Soul Look Like*), maybe our puddled reflections reveal a more authentic representation of our selves within the context of our surroundings.

²⁹ David Hawkes, "Jacques Lacan: The Mirror Stage," *Criticallink*, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Department of English, Accessed April 2, 2025, <https://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticallink/lacan/>.



Figure 21 Peter Doig, *Blotter*, 1993, oil on canvas. Courtesy the artist.



Figure 22 Peter Doig, *Reflection (What Does Your Soul Look Like)*, 1996, oil on canvas. Courtesy the artist.

In my work, I place painted objects on the ground to suggest puddles. I call them “visual encounters” because they encourage viewers to look down as they traverse the painted environment. Art historian Claire Bishop discusses how installation art of the 20th century had two purposes: to *activate* and *decentre* the viewer.³⁰ In my installations, the visual encounters require viewers to move around and through the work in order to experience their effects within the environment, activating the viewer’s mode of consumption. The visual encounters’ abstracted paint quality reinforces their role as portals, distinguishing them as liminal spaces. Doig’s *Window Pane* likens puddles to windows, furthering the idea of these surfaces as thresholds to other worlds. I use MDF board with frames to create my painted visual encounters (Figure 24). With a thickly applied absorbent ground medium and watered-down acrylic, they take on a unique sensibility yet maintain a reflective or mirrored quality to the painted scenes around them through colour relations.

The mirror as a disruptive tool in the act of looking is not a new concept. Historically, mirrors have been used to manipulate how women perceive the world, obscuring their vision and agency.³¹ Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem, written in 1832, “The Lady of Shallot,” tells the story of a woman who has been cursed to view the world through a mirror.

³⁰ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (Tate Publishing, 2005), 11.

³¹ McCormack, *Women in the Picture*, 8.



Figure 23 Emma Beth Richards, *Untitled*, 2024, installation view.



Figure 24 Emma Beth Richards, *Visual Encounter*, 2024, acrylic on framed MDF board, 460mm x 610mm.



Figure 25 John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1888, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London.

*She lives with little joy or fear.
Over the water, running near,
The sheepbell tinkles in her ear.
Before her hangs a mirror clear,
Reflecting tower'd Camelot.
And as the mazy web she whirls,
She sees the surly village churls,
And the red cloaks of market girls
Pass onward from Shalott.*

*Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd lad,
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad,
Goes by to tower'd Camelot:
And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
The Lady of Shalott.*

*But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often thro' the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
And music, came from Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead
Came two young lovers lately wed;
"I am half sick of shadows," said
The Lady of Shalott."³²*

³² Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott" [1832], *Poetry Foundation*, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45359/the-lady-of-shalott-1832>.

This mirror distorts and mediates her reality, becoming her sole understanding of the outside world. When she dares to look directly out of her window, she is punished with death, underscoring a patriarchal warning against women who challenge prescribed ways of seeing. John William Waterhouse's painting *The Lady of Shalott* (1888) (Figure 25) depicts her final moments. This story positions the mirror as a symbol of distortion and disempowerment, reflecting a historical view that women see the world inaccurately compared to men.³³

We know that historically, the viewer – the white, heterosexual, upper-class male – held the upper hand when looking at art. Art was created with *his* perspective in mind, ensuring *his* comfort as a spectator. My painting installation interrogates this positioning, proposing an alternative understanding of mirrors and their relationship to perception. In my work, the viewer is now positioned to look through a manipulated, metaphorically mirrored version of the world. Visual encounters obscure and distort, making the viewer unsettled and vulnerable, challenging the traditional comfort historically afforded to them.

I hang dropsheet canvases vertically and place paintings on the ground, which shifts orientation and further reinforces a disruption of visual hierarchy. One would not place the *Mona Lisa* on the floor, yet a dropsheet, typically treated as disposable, would invite the viewer to step over it without hesitation. This contrast unsettles ingrained ways of engaging with painting, shifting the viewer's relationship to the work.

³³ "The Lady of Shalott" is another poetic tale where a young woman's fate ends in water as I discussed in Chapter One's section, The Swamp.

Metamorphosis: Absorbed Within the Swamp

Becoming Non-Human

Fluidity as a methodology driving this project has allowed me to bridge the gap between feminist and posthumanist ideas. While navigating these concepts, I was struck by a contradictory tension between not generalising human identities, while also recognising our interconnectedness and fluid relationality with the nonhuman world. Philosopher and feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti makes it clear that feminism is an important aspect to be applied to posthumanist theory because it warns against the erasure of difference, stating that, “it is impossible to speak in one unified voice about women, natives and other marginal subjects. The emphasis falls instead on issues of diversity and differences among them and on the internal fractures of each category.”³⁴ In my work, my referencing of posthumanism invites a reimagining of the human as fluid, relational, and entangled with the nonhuman world rather than generalising all beings into sameness. Engaging with the fluid quality of swamps allowed me to tap into an animalistic nature within my psyche while also rejecting fixed hierarchies and essentialist categories. The porousness and relationality of my figures do not signify a universal subject but rather open ideas towards existing in states of becoming, multiplicity and situated embodiment.

One of the artists I referenced in the early stages of my work was Miriam Cahn. I was particularly drawn to how she uses the visceral qualities of paint to construct figures that feel animated and alive. Her forms bleed and fade into the background, yet they maintain a striking solidity and presence. There is clear intentionality behind their soft outlines and, at times, translucent forms. Cahn describes hard, masculine outlines as a way of separating figures from their surroundings, establishing them as distinct individuals. In contrast, she paints bodies as transitions rather than boundaries.³⁵

³⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Polity Press, 2013), ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=1315633>, 27.

³⁵ Jörg Scheller, “Miriam Cahn’s Fragmented Bodies,” *Frieze*, 9 November 2012, <https://www.frieze.com/article/miriam-cahn-2012-review>.



Figure 26 Miriam Cahn, *HÄNDE HOCH!*, 2012, oil on canvas. Copyright the Artist, Courtesy: Private Collection, Basel, Switzerland.

Thinking of the body as a transition rather than a harsh boundary became significant in my exploration of the feminisation and posthumanisation of the painted figure. I questioned how I could use the fluidity and transparency of paint to embrace the permeability of form and environment, dissolving the rigid hierarchies of human essentialism. I was particularly interested in how outlines could both define presence and allow form and background to merge. So, I developed a series of 610 x 914 mm canvas paintings, which I refer to as “bodies.” In these works (Figures 27 and 28), I treat the entire canvas as a corporeal body that extends right to the canvas edge. In creating these bodies, I could explore how they are no longer defined by contrast or separation but by the context in which they exist.

In the body work, *Stuck in the Mud* (Figure 28), I explore how the transparency of painted layers might expose the textures of the land beneath and within the figure. The muddy green that rises up her legs becomes a way to consider grounding, as though she’s emerging from the same soil she forages in. I let go of my ideas of anatomy, giving her paw-like hands and toeless feet. She has thick, long hair and soft facial features nodding to human characteristics, yet even in her familiar pose and expression, she is not quite human.



Figure 27 Emma Beth Richards, *The Blossoming*, 2024, oil and acrylic on canvas, 610mm x 914mm.



Figure 28 Emma Beth Richards, *Stuck in the Mud*, 2025, oil and acrylic on canvas, 610mm x 914 mm.

New Zealand painter Star Gossage’s figures demonstrate an amalgamation of earth and body. In her work, distinctions between land and body are blurred as an exploration of the interconnectedness between herself, her whanau, wāhinetanga (femininity) and the ancestral lands she inhabits.³⁶ The figures are the land; elements of nature like passing clouds, rustling leaves, and dancing flowers merge with their forms. They transcend these outdated definitions of what it means to be human and individuals, becoming almost non-human. As Tangata Whenua, Gossage also holds deep, embodied knowledge and connection with the land of Aotearoa.



Figure 29 Star Gossage, *My Aroha, Across the Ocean to the First People*, 2015, oil on board. Courtesy the artist and Tim Melville Gallery.



Figure 30 Star Gossage, *On My Land*, 2012, oil on board. Courtesy the artist and Tim Melville Gallery.

Life in the Shallows: The Wetlands of Aotearoa New Zealand by Karen Denyer and Monica Peters includes a chapter on Māori knowledge of wetlands (repo). Here, I found that many of Neimanis’ ideas about posthumanism are principles that have long been embodied and understood by Māori. A phrase that summarises the Māori worldview is “Ko wai ko au, ko au ko wai” (I am water, water is me), an idea central to Neimanis’ work.³⁷ As a Pākehā immigrant, I cannot speak on behalf of Māori knowledge, but I can recognise the depth of their relationship with water and how Western perspectives can learn from their interconnection and knowledge of the environment and how we are situated in it.

³⁶ Pātaka Art Museum, “Star Gossage: Kia Tau Te Rangimarie – Let Peace Be Among Us”. (Survey exhibition, July 24 – October 30, 2022), Accessed 8 April 2025. <https://pataka.org.nz/whats-on/exhibitions/star-gossage-kia-tau-te-rangimarie-let-peace-be-among-us/>.

³⁷ Karen Denyer and Monica Peters, *Life in the Shallows: The Wetlands of Aotearoa New Zealand*, (Massey University, 2022), 27.

Returning to posthumanist thought, this interconnection between land and body allows us to move away from rigid, hierarchical definitions that construct difference as lack or opposition. This allows for the recognition of difference without othering, honouring the distinctiveness of women, Indigenous peoples, and the more-than-human world without reducing them into sameness.³⁸ By surrendering to the visceral nature of paint, I was able to reveal a parallel in my figures, who indulge in the materiality of the earth and their environments. In their indulgence, they break physical boundaries, rupturing the “sacs of skin” that traditionally delineate the human from the nonhuman.³⁹ By becoming absorbed in the swamp, they resist rigid binaries, adopting fluidity and potentiality. This concept describes the New-Female, an existence unbound by static definitions, where womanhood is not confined by what it lacks, but is instead an ongoing process of creation, reimagination, and a merging with the environment.

³⁸ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 27.

³⁹ Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 46.

We All Come from Soup

As I write some of this chapter, I am tending the gallery where my show *Becoming Marsh* (2025) is currently exhibiting. The show explores the fluid, permeable nature of bodies, drawing on posthumanist thought and, as the title implies, becoming one with the nature of swamps.

I exhibited my body works at varying heights in the gallery space with a large dropsheet painting at the end (Figure 31). As you walk into the space, it appears to recede beyond the gallery and into a swampy unknown. The figures pour out of the dropsheet environment, pollinating the white gallery walls. The hanging heights of the canvas works follow the natural curvature of a wave from left to right, a tide of bodies all in affect of each other.

A group of three older women just came through the gallery and told me that my work reminds them of the idea that, to those who believe, we all come from a *primordial soup*: a concept that we, as humankind, were born from an entanglement of organic compounds perfectly poised for the emergence of life. In a way, this is what I have created with my project. I have created my own primordial soup where the perfect conditions set before me allow for the spawning of the figure, of an environment, and of life. Within this soup, we gather, transcending time to four billion years ago, where we, too, were fused as one enigmatic soup.

My installation methods seek to engage with this idea of fusion by creating an all-encompassing environment. Viewers wade through panoramic dropsheet environments, encountering figures and objects.⁴⁰ The large scale of the dropsheets means they must be physically navigated to be fully comprehended, while the washy layers of paint evoke a fluid sense of movement. Figures emerge and dissolve within the draped sheets, existing in a liminal space between real and painted environments.

⁴⁰ To understand installation and the collapse of boundaries between art and life, I draw on artist Allan Kaprow's concept of environment as a "process of interaction" and his *Happenings*, in which audiences are active participants rather than passive viewers. Jeff Kelley, introduction to *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, by Allan Kaprow (Oakland: University of California Press, 1993), xi.



Figure 31 Emma Beth Richards, *Becoming Marsh*, 2024, exhibition shot, The Upstairs Gallery, Auckland.

Wangechi Mutu's exhibition *Intertwined* at New Museum in New York, 2023, helped my thinking on the physical and psychological implications of entering a large-scale immersive installation.⁴¹ Mutu has constructed a world that overgrows and engulfs the exhibition space. Like a flourishing ecosystem, her art spreads and grows over multiple floors, no longer a museum but a world of her creation. The multidisciplinary work challenges metaphysical boundaries, fusing binary opposites like male and female, and humanist divisions between humans, animals and plants into female-leaning entities.⁴²

A sense of breaching gallery-viewer hierarchies is implied by a strange mould-like substance that grows up the white walls (Figure 32) or virus particles that go beyond their sculptural forms and spread into the gallery where viewers pass through (Figure 33). Mutu makes the viewer conscious of these viral or bacterial particles that co-host their bodily vessels, interconnecting them with her world on a micro-level. Like Mutu, I aim to construct an immersive swamp environment where the viewer may become physically and psychologically absorbed.

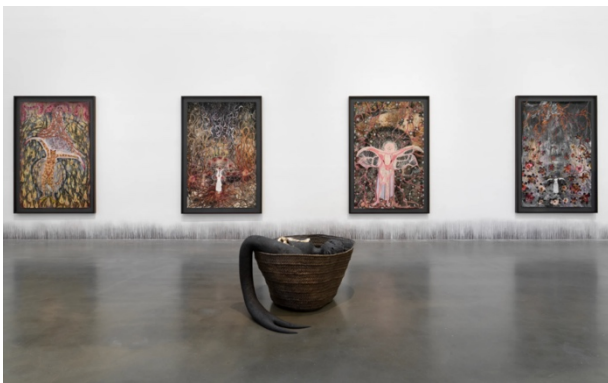


Figure 32 Wangechi Mutu, *Intertwined*, 2023, exhibition view, New Museum, New York. Courtesy New Museum. Photo: Dario Lasagni.



Figure 33 Wangechi Mutu, *Intertwined*, 2023, exhibition view, New Museum, New York. Courtesy New Museum. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

⁴¹ New Museum. "Wangechi Mutu: Intertwined". Accessed 22 November 2024. <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibition/wangechi-mutu-intertwined/>.

⁴² Zoë Hopkins, "Wangechi Mutu's New Museum Show Weaves a Dazzling Web of Interconnectedness", *Artsy*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-wangechi-mutus-new-museum-weaves-dazzling-web-interconnectedness>.

On my desk, where I write, sits a terrarium, a small self-sustaining ecosystem where moisture, heat, and light cycle through in a way that mimics nature. Like the terrarium, I like to think of the project's existence within the gallery space as a *closed ecosystem*. Within this sealed world, everything is implicated: the viewer, the figures, the objects and the air between them, intermingling much like the primordial soup we may have all come from.

Reflections

While the reclamation of women's existences within a painted context has not been a simple task, I also don't believe it is entirely possible for anyone to capture every nuance of womanhood. However, through my own language of paint, I have been able to construct a story that allowed me to confront my own existential thoughts on gender and embodiment. By piecing together all the elements in these swamp environments, I was piecing together my answer on what it means, to me, to be a woman.

I get asked all the time if the figures are me. I smile, sometimes let out a shy giggle and say something like, "kind of." Some people confidently reply that they know the answer or laugh at me and say, "of course they are!" as if I'm trying to humble myself by saying they aren't. But the true answer is *I don't know*. This is not *I don't know* because I haven't thought about it. It is *I don't know* in the way that sometimes I look at a large field and believe myself a flower amongst the grass, rooted into the Earth. Or a tadpole swimming in the warmth of an estuary, or even a large cloud that sits so proudly in the bluest of skies. It's like sometimes I feel so trapped in my corporeal form and think "is this it?" But it's not. And that's what I have discovered: the relationality of all things. I can be in everything and nothing at all. My figures are me because I painted them from the paintbrush in my hand. They're also me because I am a flower amongst the field of these figures. But they are also not me, because some tell me things I would have never known. Or hide secrets from me in hushed whispers.

The answer I'm trying to give is that existence isn't confined to the bodies we are in, but is everything around us. John Berger wrote, "To be born a woman has been to be born within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men."⁴³ Every aspect of this project, whether the construction of story and environment, the fluidity of paint, or immersive installation, aims to break free from this "confined space." It's not about how women are painted but, instead, how we view the world. I believe that if we can change how the viewer looks at art, then we can change how viewers look at women.

⁴³ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.

This is a love letter to art history and painting. It is not a rejection, but a positive revisiting of how we look at women in art. Paintings like Velázquez's *Venus* and Everett's *Opheelia* can still be admired for their timeless splendour, but they now sit in conversation with new portrayals of women. I like to imagine the museums and galleries I visited in my travels populated with an abundant variation of women's existences. Across their walls, the female figures are not there to be consumed by the male gaze, but to stand proud in their unique narratives, a thrilling proposition for new ways of seeing and being.

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Installation View



Figure 34 Emma Beth Richards, Installation in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025. Image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 35 Emma Beth Richards, Installation in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025. Image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 36 Emma Beth Richards, Installation in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025. Image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 37 Emma Beth Richards, Installation in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025. Image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 38 Emma Beth Richards, Installation in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025. Image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 39 Emma Beth Richards, Installation detail in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025. Image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 40 Emma Beth Richards, Installation detail in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025.



Figure 41 Emma Beth Richards, Installation in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025. Image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 42 Emma Beth Richards, Installation detail in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025.



Figure 43 Emma Beth Richards, Installation detail in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025.



Figure 44 Emma Beth Richards, Installation detail in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025. Image taken by Paul Chapman.



Figure 45 Emma Beth Richards, Installation in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 2025. Image taken by Paul Chapman.