

## BENEATH THE SKIN



BY MARY COLEMAN

# Beneath the Skin

Mary Ellen Coleman  
2015

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Student ID No	1399906	Name	Mary Coleman
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Signed Mary Ellen Coleman

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary Coleman". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

7 October 2015

to my mother

you finally got one

Beneath the Skin explores the possibilities of a figurative painting practice drawn from an archive of disquieting material. The archive is a highly subjective assembly of historical medical material that raises important issues of voyeurism, morbid curiosity, and appropriate use. The project has utilised these issues as the basis of a painterly exploration. Retaining the anonymity and dignity of the subjects of the archival material has been a key consideration of the painterly research.

This thesis is comprised of an exegesis worth 20% and a practice-based project worth 80%.

## I

Collecting, reflecting, archiving: this was his [Gerhard Richter's] *modus operandi*. Embedded in his *Atlas* - a scrapbook or sourcebook of photographs, postcards, drawings, clippings, diagrams and plans from his bottomless drawer - there are two batches of photographs of the Holocaust, some of them blurred.

*Alex Danchev*<sup>1</sup>

And do you see here, some of the massive archive we have of newspaper posters, that we only used so far for the bomb pictures. But we have a section on rape, a section on child sex, robbery, crime... We are very interested in these because they show you something about the media, but they also contain the deep human tragedy as well. It's those two levels we find very fascinating.

*Gilbert Proesch*<sup>2</sup>

I love yesterday's papers. I never want to throw away any papers because apart from the images you see, you see history repeats itself, you see all kinds of things coming back. I also take discarded images from other artists.

*Marlene Dumas*<sup>3</sup>

When I was five, just beginning Kindergarten, I found an issue of *The National Geographic* that grabbed my attention. The cover read "The Black Death", and was set dramatically against *The Triumph of Death* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Inside I found a two page fold out of Bruegel's 16th century painting depicting death, in the form of skeletal ghouls, slaying helpless victims as they fled an apocalyptic landscape. The writing was too advanced for me, but my mother agreed to read it aloud. I

listened to the story of of a pandemic illness sweeping from one continent to another, felling cities and villages as it spread.

*Yersinia pestis*, the bacterial culprit behind The Black Death, causes a painful and deadly infection. It left in its wake mountainous piles of bodies, societal collapse, and psychological trauma that would endure for generations. Spellbound by how an invisible germ could carve history in such a profound way, I sought more information at the library. Medical texts were beyond my level of literacy, so my mother read excerpts to me and I delighted in the pictures.

My interest in medical history stretched throughout childhood and into adolescence when I began to compile an archive on the subject. The earliest material in my archive dates to 1998 and was collected from the Internet. This new source of information allowed me to freely access to any content online so long as a webpage remained active. More importantly, I could store any text or images that I wanted for more permanent use. Each day I compulsively saved any content relevant to my interests. My earliest sources of data were from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) websites. Regular exposure to these organisations added epidemiology to my interests alongside medical history.

As the medical archive expanded, early content needed to be stored externally on CD-ROM discs. The limitation of computer hard drive space meant the older data was moved off the computer in order to

make room for new material. Eventually, I settled on the use of external hard drives (the first being a few gigabytes and the latest, three terabytes). In recent years, the mobility of laptops allowed me access to the archive from my art studio. The ability to work directly from images displayed on a laptop screen has been an important aspect in the development of my practice.

This amassed collection of digital material serves as the core of my painting practice. I largely utilise reputable online sources, favouring websites of medical and academic institutions. The archive consists of four main media types: video, audio, image, and text. Content is vast, including documentaries, archived news coverage of contemporary health crises (such as the 2014 Ebola epidemic or antibiotic drug resistance), articles from academic medical journals, ebooks, digital scans of antique medical texts, pictures from academic image databases, recorded lectures from educational institutions (such as Gresham College), and much more. Some photographic material I generated myself, including documentation of several abandoned hospitals I visited in the early 2000s, but the majority of my archive was drawn from external sources.

The content I use is typically sourced from medical photography, medical illustrations, or press images (historic and current). Image captures from film footage commonly feature in my work as well. I tend to favour pictorial sources from the 19th century reaching into the mid 20th century. Before modern treatments or vaccinations, which made many problematic diseases of the past easily treated or

completely preventable, medical conditions were regularly documented in their final stages. Images of people profoundly sick with illnesses like Smallpox, Leprosy, or Syphilis, display symptoms rarely seen in the modern world. These are of particular interest to me. Doctors often retained graphic imagery of these suffering patients for teaching purposes or for inclusion in publications.

Some archive imagery is of wax anatomical figures once used for instructional purposes, a practice reaching back hundreds of years<sup>4</sup>. Medical institutions worldwide house extensive collections of these morbid curiosities<sup>5</sup>. Figures range from entire bodies complete with removable internal organs, to disembodied sections, such as a hand or a partial face<sup>6</sup>. Often the creators would add a bit of artistic flourish, posing the figures elegantly and adding decorative touches such as jewellery or a styled wig. Wax studies were especially useful for medical schools during periods when cadaver use was illegal or considered morally reprehensible.<sup>7</sup>

Though I favour historic imagery, contemporary photographs are referenced in some of the paintings. I have a sizeable collection of webpage archives that include news coverage of incidents such as the SARS epidemic, repeated outbreaks of emerging diseases like Marburg and Ebola Hemorrhagic Fevers in Africa, and also the ongoing efforts to safely contain spread of avian influenza. The part of me that once dreamed of epidemiology, eagerly scrolling through the WHO outbreak news every morning, still regularly draws my thoughts to dangerous pathogens that still pose a threat to modern society.

Though I draw images from the archive for my paintings, I also utilise medical texts to research the conditions depicted. I archive contemporary and antique texts. Early medical books are freely available online through Project Gutenberg, Google Books, or The Medical Heritage Library. The Medical Heritage Library is particularly good for finding publications dating to or predating the 18th century. Journals are another useful source, especially for information about medical research. These can be accessed through academic databases such as JSTOR, OVID, PubMed, ProQuest, and Medline. Reading about both the research and history surrounding a subject helps engross me in what I am painting.

Occasionally, an online source proves valuable enough that I save the entire website onto my hard drive. Web archives provide an excellent means of making large amounts of data, usually hosted by academic or government institutions, available on my computer. It also ensures a site is intact for me to use in the event it is completely taken offline. For example, I archived the Records of John C. Cutler which were made public on the US Government's National Archives. These records contain 12,000 scanned documents detailing a Syphilis experiment conducted in Guatemala between the years of 1946 and 1955.<sup>8</sup>

Gathering my archive material from academic, government, and medical institutions is important as the Internet grows ever more inundated with unsourced and inaccurate information. Social media, such as Facebook, Tumblr, or Pinterest, has perpetuated the rapid spread of knowledge, real and fabricated, to a

worldwide audience. With no requirement that people to provide legitimate sources for the content of their posts, spurious information goes largely unchecked. It is preferable pulling archive material from reliable and trusted sources. If I am to paint or research using my hard drive, I prefer an know the exact origins of a file and the veracity of its content.

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Danchev, *On Art and War and Terror* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press Limited, 2009), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Proesch and George Proesch, Tate Britain, *Gilbert and George - Film 2*, video, 3:54, February 15, 2007, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/studio-gilbert-george>.

<sup>3</sup> Marlene Dumas, “Marlene Dumas: A lecture with the Artist” (presentation at MoMA, New York, NY, December 8, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Anita Guerrini, “Enlightened Anatomies,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47 (2014): 440, doi:10.1353/ecs.2014.0034.

<sup>5</sup> *History Cold Case*, Episode no. 2, Documentary, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> *History Cold Case*, Episode no. 4, Documentary, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Guerrini, “Enlightened Anatomies”, 440

<sup>8</sup> John C. Cutler, “Records of John C. Cutler,” *The US National Archives and Records Administration*, last modified August 8, 2011, <http://www.archives.gov/research/health/cdc-cutler-records/>.





The 1971 Smallpox Epidemic in Aralsk, Kazakhstan, and the Biological Warfare Program

**NOTICE!**  
**WHEREAS, HYDROPHOBIA**  
Has appeared in this Borough, and Death has re-

**TYPHOID**

Notice is Posted in Co



digital archive  
3TB  
audio - text - image - video  
1998 - 2015

**CARRIER OF**  
**DIPHTHERIA**  
**SMALLPOX**  
**SCARLET FEVER**  
Keep out of this house  
By Order of BOARD OF HEALTH  
HEALTH OFFICER  
Any person removing this card without authority is liable to prosecution.

**PURPURA VARIOLOSA**  
ESTATIONS IN SKIN AND BLOOD\*



## II

We always say that we are here to de-shock rather than to shock. That's the theory, that we can deal with a difficult subject in a humanistic way that doesn't send people running out of the museum or running out of the gallery.

*George Proesch*<sup>1</sup>

For [Gerhard] Richter, the paintable and the unpaintable are shifting sands; not a question of taboos or proscriptions, given or handed down; rather an exercise of individual artistic conscience. Such an exercise might well traverse issues of taste, or discretion, and also issues of scale, but in the end paintability is a matter of judgement.

*Alex Danchev*<sup>2</sup>

The drained, blotchy face has a haunting quality seen in many of [Marlene] Dumas's portraits; it is one of the most intense paintings of decaying flesh in recent memory. Upon noting the title, *Dead Marilyn*, we recognise with some incredulity that the work is a portrait of Marilyn Monroe. (...) Few things elicit a voyeuristic gaze more than a celebrity corpse - it is its own pornography - and in painting such a spectacular image, Dumas risks ceding her own artistic contribution to the subject matter.

*Jordon Kantor*<sup>3</sup>

Disease attacks the body in a brutal manner. The introduction of a single, invisible pathogen can mutilate flesh and destroy bone. The title, *Beneath the Skin*, references the potentially infective microbial world. Prior to 2013, my paintings of archive material tended to elicit disgust and discomfort in viewers. Unintentionally, the subjects I painted were transformed into the freaks of a sideshow attraction. People

were confused by conflicting emotional reactions. Many initially experienced curiosity raised by the macabre images, but also felt a deep revulsion to looking at them. These strong, but largely unsympathetic responses caused me to rethink how I approached the creation of paintings from such disturbing source material.

Since beginning the project in 2013, I have developed new strategies for working from my archive. Though some methods fell to the wayside over time, others have become powerful tools for obscuring graphic content without destroying its sensitive nature. As a result of these new techniques, my paintings evolved drastically from the purely representational approach of past years. The subject matter of medicine is ever fixed, but I no longer seek a close resemblance between a painting and its source image. I seek only to preserve an emotional imprint.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Proesch and George Proesch, Tate Shots, *In the Studio: Gilbert and George*, video, 4:46, February 15, 2008, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/studio-gilbert-george>.

<sup>2</sup> Danchev, *On Art and War and Terror*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Jordan Kantor. "Marlene Dumas," *Artforum International* 47 (2008): 375



**Beneath the Skin**

19.5 x 19.5 cm  
oil on wood  
2009

The title for my current series, *Beneath the Skin*, is drawn from this 2009 work of the same name.



older artwork  
2002 - 2012

### III

You pose a certain set of questions in one group of paintings and you want to answer them in the next. One body of work leads naturally to the next - you sort of feed off yourself. It's a question of accepting the limits of painting and trying to be as imaginative and expansive as possible within those boundaries.

*Cecily Brown*<sup>1</sup>

Art critic Julius Meier Graefe, who had championed Impressionism in Germany in the years before the war, deplored [Otto] Dix's literal treatment of the human body, which he found nauseating. Dix's representation of body parts, he suggested, was calculated to ensure that 'all ones animal reactions are charged with high voltage.'

*Paul Fox*<sup>2</sup>

During the course of my studies I have focused on developing painterly techniques that enable the archival material to be reconstituted in ways that encourage less pejorative viewing. (such as what happened with the paintings of Otto Dix). Layering is critical to the process I have established. My paintings encompass multiple paintings, layered on top of one another in patterns that are intended to be haphazard. Ultimately, these works remain mysterious and unsettling to viewers, who sense troubling content, yet cannot conclusively identify it.

The painting methods I have pursued have their origins in my desire to explore my medical archive more sympathetically. I have engaged with a variety of means of dealing with disturbing material: avoidance of preciousness; strategies of chance; methods of destruction and restoration; and modes of violent fragmentation.

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<sup>1</sup> Perri Lewis, "Cecily Brown: I Take Things Too Far When Painting," *The Guardian*, last modified September 20, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/sep/20/guide-to-painting-cecily-brown>.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Fox, "Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix," *Oxford Art Journal* 29 (2006): 258, doi:10.1086/525508.

#### IV

I do get blocked. And When I am blocked, I start drawing, writing, thinking about different ideas and reading. Sometimes I'll respond to things that I've just made. I think it's part of the process to get frustrated and then get a bunch of new ideas.

*Dana Schutz*<sup>1</sup>

The boundaries of Paintings excite me. You've got the same old materials - just oils and a canvas - and you're trying to do something that's been done for centuries. And yet, within those limits, you have to make something new or exciting for yourself as well as other people.

*Cecily Brown*<sup>2</sup>

Avoidance of preciousness is an aspect of my painting method that originated as an attempt to free myself from an artist's block. In early 2013 I decided to alter my process by casting aside expensive materials. I felt they inhibited any exploration of new ideas, so I committed to solely using art supplies I already owned. The rule was to avoid new purchases, even if a colour ran out, and to favour pre-owned, supplies. Concurrently, I restricted my source material to a handful of still images taken from a 95 year old medical film documenting child patients with Encephalitis lethargica.

These early paintings from 2013 acted as a form of drawing. Each work was quickly completed on A3 cartridge paper and left intentionally raw. I either left my figures entirely faceless, or purposefully

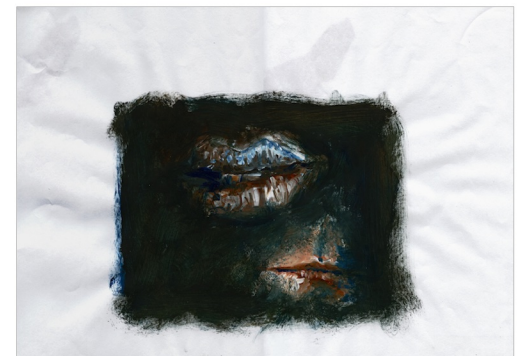
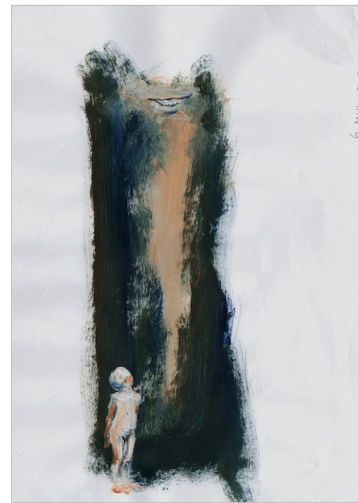
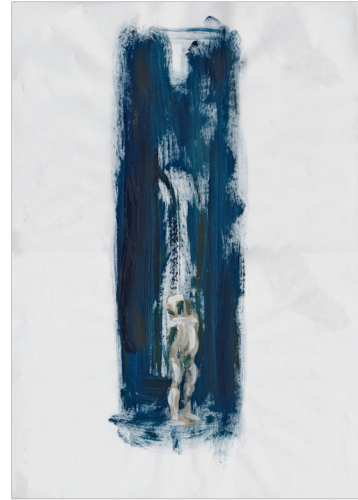
distorted facial features. Bodies were painted in a handful of specific positions drawn from the source footage. Occasionally a separated tooth or grinning mouths floated disembodied on the paper. Some of these paintings show full figures and the disconnected body parts interacting with one another. By the end of 2013 I began to move away from this particular imagery and also from paper.

My process continues to engage with strategies that are related to this initial avoidance of preciousness. Paper has given way to linen and canvas, but instead of using stretchers or frames, I now work on multiple roughly cut fragments loosely arranged on the wall. Edges are visibly frayed, though any further unraveling is prevented by the application of a clear glue along the sides. This jagged presentation contributes to an impression of emotional rawness, while also deviating from more careful and measured approaches usually associated with the framing and installation of paintings. Between 2014 and 2015, avoidance of preciousness transformed into a carefully maintained illusion. The materials I now use are quite valuable and are merely presented as the product of discarded scraps.

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<sup>1</sup> Mei Chin, "Dana Schutz: Me Frank and My Studio," *Flash Art* 38, (2005): 82-85.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, "Cecily Brown: I Take Things Too Far When Painting."



paper works from early 2013  
acrylic on a3 cartridge paper

He [Richter] began over-painting a rejected version of Ensslin, *Hanged*, in white, like a shroud. 'I started to cover it, but against my wish or intention, it worked accidentally, and so I left it that way.' The painting was retitled *Blanket*.

*Alex Danchev*<sup>1</sup>

I make a kind of outline of the position I think I want to make the image. But after that chance, and what I call accident, takes over.

*Francis Bacon*<sup>2</sup>

Chance, originally an unintended element in my work, results from the use of masking tape on multi-layered paintings. The use of tape began as an experiment towards the end of the 2013. I found a strip of masking tape stuck to piece of cartridge paper. Curious as to how its imprint would interact with the rest of the painting, I worked over it as though the tape was not present. After completing the first image, a painting of a hipbone, I added new strips crossing diagonally. Lastly, I shrouded everything in the brushy overlay characteristic of my early cartridge paper paintings.

Accurately planning the outcome of a work containing many pictures stacked on top of one another, and with differing configurations of tape between each layer, is largely impossible. I start a painting by choosing a specific set of images accessed from my medical archive. At first I tried mapping

the placement of each image, and the exact positioning of tape over each layer, even utilising photo-editing programs to simulate the arrangement of several photographs on top of one another. I then virtually ‘cut’ away strips from each image to see how they would interact when over-lapped and broken apart. Afterwards, I attempted to simulate this draft composition in paint. Physical materials, however, introduced the unpredictability of chance.

The discovery of layering, along with the introduction of tape, provided greater possibilities for future development of this series. By partially restricting my control over the end results of a painting, this method introduced an element of chance, something I had little experience with previously. I began to embrace my new approach for the ways it made the paintings more complex. Using tape allowed me to stave off the more stagnant and predictable outcomes of an otherwise purely representational technique.

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<sup>1</sup> Danchev, *On Art and War and Terror*, 24.

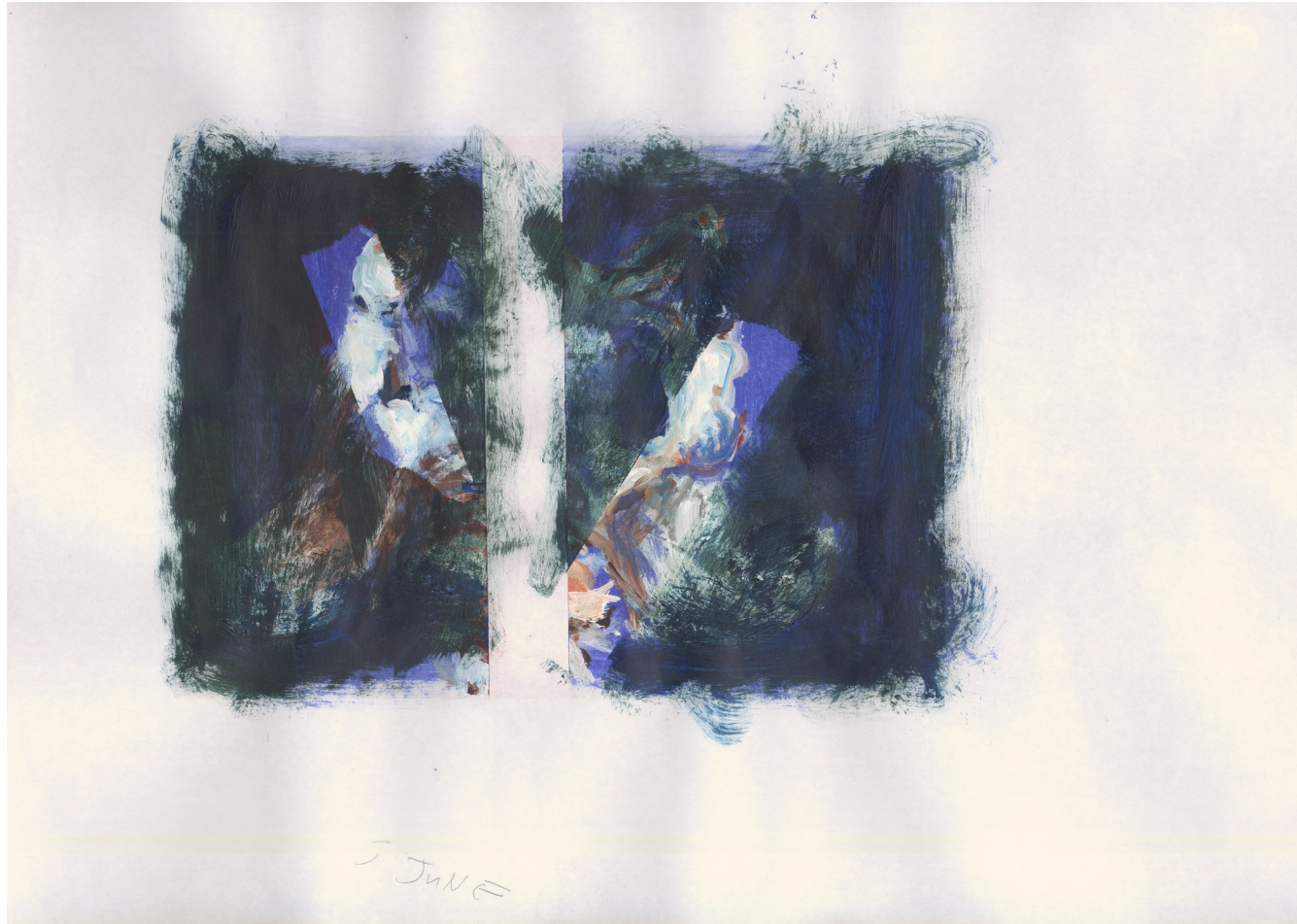
<sup>2</sup> Sylvester, David, “One Continuous Accident Mounting on Top of Another,” *The Guardian*, last modified September 13, 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/sep/13/greatinterviews>.

photo mockups of paintings



flesh and  
fall away  
befo  
their bod





**hipbone**  
acrylic on paper  
29.7 x 42 cm  
June 2013

## VI

Her [Doris Salcedo's] sculptures consist of materials such as metal, wood, concrete, bone and animal membrane. The juxtapositions of these substances in her work are deliberately out of the ordinary and unsettling. In the *Unland* sculptures it is the unexpected combination of wood, thread and hair that achieves this effect. The objects remain recognisable but it is evident that they have undergone a mutation, the result of a violent gesture.

*Tanya Barson*<sup>1</sup>

Dumas's great critical and popular success has arguably been amplified by her engagement with such putatively scandalous subjects - as well as with her own biography. (...) Ultimately, "Measuring Your Own Grave" shows that Dumas is most compelling when her subject matter is read through the form she gives it, rather than for its ostensible topics alone.

*Jordan Kantor*<sup>2</sup>

The act of destruction is a concept I have explored since introducing tape and layering to my process in late 2013. Building up layers, and subsequently obliterating them through the removal of tape, veils the unsettling source material. The paintings, dealing with often brutal imagery, acquire an abstract layer of violence by being physically shattered and re-assembled. The fragmented appearance creates a visual separation from representational painting, but without a sacrifice of representational technique.

These paintings also suggest a disturbing mood without inciting disgust. Viewers are effectively drawn the disquieting visuals and engage with them contemplatively. The obscuring of archive content using tape reduces public spectacle and a potentially voyeuristic perspective. Breaking up graphic pictures and retaining only small hints of their presence steers a painting away from having a direct relation to shock imagery. I use fractured visuals to quietly hint at the distressing content.

The scattering of evidence in this way renders the reference behind a painting largely incomprehensible, preserving only an emotional imprint. Viewers instinctually pick up on the colour of flesh, the glint of a pupil and the gentle arch of an eyelid, the soft curve of a lip... Drawn in by these shards, observers try and assemble what they are seeing. Curiosity naturally engages people with puzzles, even those lacking a solution. With their identity broken apart, the suffering of those I paint is also strewn about, effectively drawing it away from focus. This helps prevent the obvious revulsion I saw in viewers of my earlier work, and maintains a level of respect for the archive imagery.

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<sup>1</sup> Tanya Barson, "Unland: The Place of Testimony," *Tate Papers*, no. 1 (2004): Accessed August 4, 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk.ezproxy.aut.ac.nz/research/publications/tate-papers/01/unland-the-place-of-testimony>.

<sup>2</sup> Kantor, "Marlene Dumas", 374

## VII

Thematically my work remains the same. There are certain topics I like to work with, and from time to time I try to find a new approach to these themes by using other metaphors or experimenting with new associations.

*Michaël Borremans<sup>1</sup>*

In the early 1970s, My mother worked in Chicago for a firm that specialised in retouching photographs for commercial publications. Subsequently, she set up her own retouching studio in Portland Oregon, before computer programs like Photoshop rendered such an occupation redundant. I spent weekdays after school in my mother's studio, observing the intricate processes of photo restoration. My interest in reconstructing the surfaces of paintings and in the translation of photographic and printed source material in painted form, is in many ways indebted to these early experiences.

Masking was an especially common photo restoration technique. Using a clear, adhesive sheet carefully placed over a photograph, she covered everything but the areas she needed to alter (their shape was carefully traced and peeled away). Next, she used her airbrush on the exposed sections, leaving the rest untouched. The material then peeled away easily and she manually softened any sharp edges by airbrushing back into the image. This method could be repeated many times on one job as she repaired multiple problems.

The introduction masking brought back memories of my mother's similar techniques for manipulating pictorial surfaces. Carefully covering certain areas of a layer, while leaving the rest of it exposed to the next coat of gesso, works to preserve and destroy images simultaneously. Once the tape is finally removed and the different layers converge into one, the image is then reassembled as a combination of many. This act of restoration creates a new picture built from the remnants of multiple broken ones.



<sup>1</sup> Michaël Borremans, Peter Doroshenko, Anita Haldemann, and Jeffrey D. Grove, *Michaël Borremans: Drawings* (New York, Distributed Art Publishers, 2005), 95.



Mary Jane Johnson  
hand coloured by Margaret Clark

## VIII

The brutality of such a subject matter demands a valid response yet poses challenges to achieving one: how does an artist make work about violence which is powerful in itself, not because of its content. and yet is somehow as powerful as its content?

*Joshua Mack*<sup>1</sup>

In the same ways Salcedo avoids any elaboration on the testimonies in the work and ultimately denies the viewer access to the specific experiences of the victims. While the life of the victim is present, Salcedo says this presence should be felt rather than learnt like as story. She says she imposes no precise meaning on the work, leaving it open and allowing the viewer to bring to it their own experiences and memories of pain.

*Tanya Barson*<sup>2</sup>

The disjointed restoration of images developed in *Beneath the Skin* is a means of processing the violent content from the archive. Creating mosaics of flesh tones through the process of layering allows my paintings to draw out strong emotional reactions from viewers. Tending towards portraiture is a means of utilising the more recognisable presence of facial features. Fractured eyes and mouths overlap one another, amplifying the disquieting brutality of these works.

The violence of illness and injury innate to the original archive source is replicated and multiplied in acts of destruction and restoration to the painting surface. The images become jagged assemblages, compounds of fragments belonging to different layers.

Though much of the work stays visibly fractured, some semblance of the the source material returns when uncovered from beneath strips of tape. These areas peer out from the surrounding chaos: an eye, a mouth, areas of flesh discoloured by disease. Even bits of scalp and hair may show through. Observers pick up on evidence of a human body and it becomes forensic in nature. Suggestions of people are scattered throughout the painting but their identities stay concealed.

The distance between the disturbing origins of my paintings and their viewers, something maintained by the fragmented and mysterious appearance of the work, allows for a more meaningful connection. An obvious display of my horrific source material could not have achieved the more nuanced and thoughtful encounters that these paintings foster.

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Mack, "Violent Ends," *Modern Painters* 17, (December 2004—January 2005): 54–56.

<sup>2</sup> *Barson*, "Unland: The Place of Testimony."

## IX

Brown is incapable of making a painting that isn't informed by one that has already been made. This is a fortunate haunting. She is saturated by art history and by the history of what she has herself made. She says that when she works in her studio on one painting, she is constantly aware of the other paintings around her. They talk behind her back, even go so far as to whisper in her ear. We are all eyes; she is all ears.

*Robert Enright (on Cecily Brown)*<sup>1</sup>

My mother used to say to me, why don't you paint a flower or something like that before I die? Why do you always have to do naked people? (...) But I can't do that because I don't know what to do with a flower. For starters, you have to be really interested in your subject matter and not in what you are trying to do, otherwise you can't generate the necessary concentration.

*Marlene Dumas*<sup>2</sup>

After creating *Hipbone* in 2013, I engaged with layering images on paper and the possibilities this offered for portraying graphic material from my medical archive respectfully. I began blanketing multiple finished works on top of one another, masking each painting with strips of tape torn apart in differing widths and sizes. When the topmost image was completed, I peeled away any masking. The result was a mosaic of visual fragments drawn from different layers akin to the reflection given by a shattered mirror.

Eventually cartridge paper proved too thin for such a harsh technique. In addition to tearing and warping, tape removal often pulled away the paper's surface, destroying an entire work in a matter of seconds. This challenge necessitated a switch to something thicker and my next choice was watercolour paper. Despite improved thickness, it still proved too fragile.

By the end of 2013 I began working with loose scraps of material. A large bag of canvas and linen samples had been sitting in my studio for several years. The sturdy textiles fit my needs perfectly and also adhered to a increasingly tenuous, but still present interest in the avoidance of preciousness. The fabric was durable enough to endure both layering and tape removal. Although the types of canvas and linen I used were quite costly if purchased, utilising free scraps didn't feel inhibiting. From the start, I chose to paint on the back of the primed samples, leaving the raw surface exposed around a painting's edges. This decision has endured throughout the series.

Expanding source imagery to include both photographic and illustrative material, called for a more diverse palette than the handful of tubes I restricted myself to in early 2013. I began to experiment with an array of colours, observing how they contrasted against one another when used on different layers. Various tape placements also required experimentation and consideration. I spent time testing out differing thicknesses, lengths, and shapes (arranging pieces into spirals, straight lines, and eventually branching patterns).

I also utilise multiple approaches for working back into paintings which seem awkward or unfinished, even after many layers. Narrow lines, created with a makeshift stencil made from tape, can cut across and break up overly large, opaque areas. Careful blending of different layers through the softening of edges draws attention away from smaller trouble spots. Sometimes an entirely new, miniature layer effectively covers a whole section that is problematic. Inevitably, some works still fail despite all efforts to retouch them. When I decide to abandon a work, the linen or canvas is reused for future paintings.

As I refined my new layering method throughout 2014, many techniques were discontinued. Sometimes an approach, which may have been promising at first, failed to evolve alongside newer ideas. Other processes felt distracting from the beginning, gimmicky even. Examples of methods I phased out include applying text and numbers directly onto a painting (both through handwriting and with small stamps), creating entire layers of a solid hue, and using starkly defined gridded, horizontal, or vertical tape configurations.

I implemented both single coloured layers and linear tape placements for quite some time before mostly abandoning both. For the monochromatic layers, I tried bold tints like oranges, yellows, or turquoise. These were sandwiched between pictorial layers. Doing so created a highly contrasted colour scheme and the tape, when laid down in long strips, gave the finished painting a stacked appearance.

Though this worked well in some paintings, I started to shy away from bright colours in favour of a few more subdued shades of blue and green.

In addition to exploring new techniques, 2014 also saw a broadening of the types of imagery drawn from my digital archive. Aside from portraiture and figures, I also painted architecture, scientific diagrams, microscopic images, anatomical illustrations, and even medieval illuminations (usually from ancient medical texts). By 2015, however, this vast assortment of subject reduced to mostly portraiture with an emphasis on flesh. The difficulty with interiors, landscapes, and multiple figures, is that the layering process renders them completely unrecoverable. Finished works of this kind lose their emotional footprint. By contrast, several portraits on top of one another retain enough visual recognition to retain a palpable connection to their sources.

By 2015, after much trial and error, I settled on a more decisive colour palette. The hues I used for making flesh tones remained the same as those used in late 2013, but I moved away from a larger sampling of other colours (mostly those used for backgrounds or for clothing) in favour of a more limited selection. By testing different tints, I noticed that a handful of blues and greens seemed especially striking against skin tones. As I paint people suffering from diseases largely affecting the dermis (Smallpox, Hansen's Disease, and Lupus being a few common choices), pigments that brought out flesh tones proved important. Chromium Oxide Green and Cerulean Blue work very effectively against skin. I also use a

darker shade of blue (specifically a mixture of burnt umber and phthalo blue), several ruddy tones (violet oxide and red iron oxide), and viridian hue for a deeper green.

Along with a more selective palette, I also settled into a more haphazard approach for applying tape. In complete opposition to my previous use of grids, I devised a sort of broken up branching configuration comprised of jagged lines. These stretched inwards towards the centre, creating shattered appearance. I did, however, avoid absolute rigidity in my technique. At times I have revived a grid-like tape application or used an unusually bright colour. My 'formula' remains mutable as the unique progression of each painting can call for a many different approaches, even some I rarely employ on other work.

Throughout 2014 my scrap supply of linen and canvas dwindled until I was forced to purchase a large roll of linen (I prefer its earthy colour to canvas). From that point onward, my carefully crafted 'avoidance of preciousness' largely became an illusion. This illusion is maintained by cutting pieces to resemble scraps and by choosing to work on unprimed, course linen with an uneven weave.

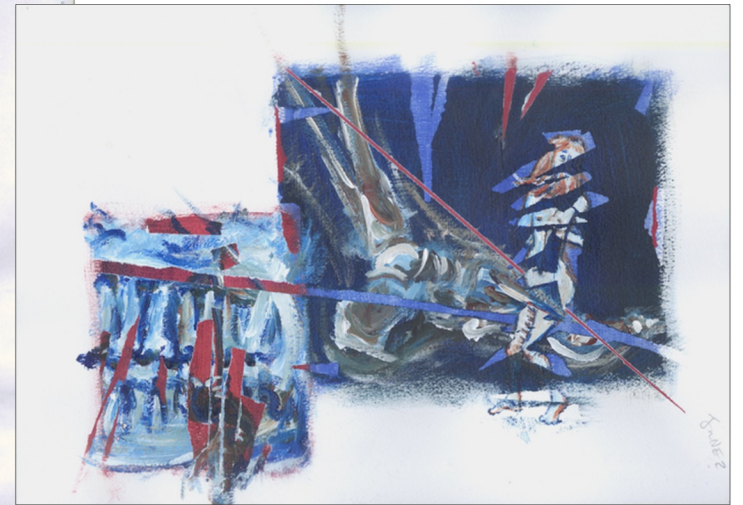
For these new works, I begin by roughly cutting pieces of fabric. Fraying edges are sealed by a light brush of PVA glue. This also preserves the initial loosening of thread that gives the 'scrap' its deceptive roughness. Next, I apply the initial gesso into a rectangular or circular section, leaving some of the surrounding fabric untouched. After pictures are chosen from the archive, the different layers are

painted in progression. Strips of tape are applied to the surface of each one before it is covered by gesso. Once the tape is peeled away, the broken images seem to weave in and out of the different layers, breaking apart the painting surface quite violently.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Enright, "Paint Whisperer: An Interview with Cecily Brown," *Border Crossings* 25, no. 1 (2005): 36-49.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Enright, "The Faceless Body," *Border Crossings* 23, no. 3 (2004): 22-34.



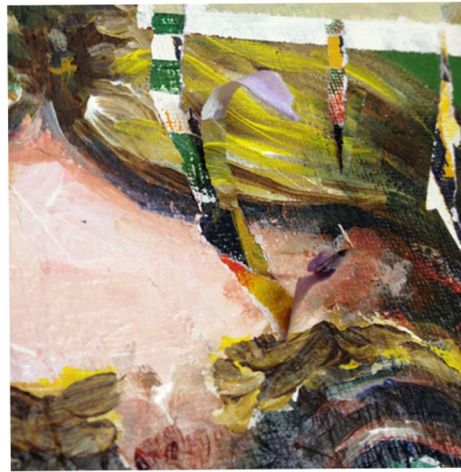
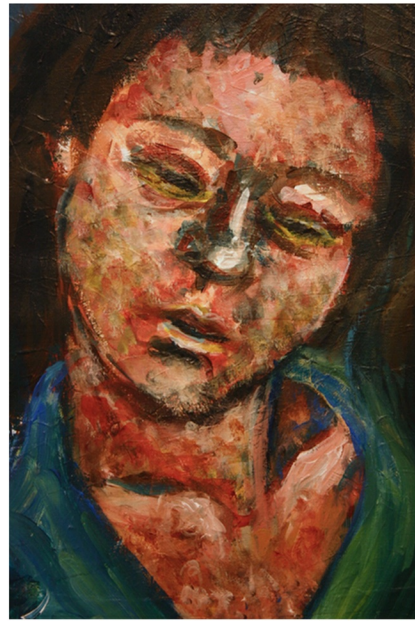
early layered works on paper  
a3 cartridge and watercolour paper  
June 2013



**materials**

painter's tape - raw linen - acrylic - gesso





painting process  
use of tape and layers



1518160  
acrylic on canvas  
52 x 41 cm  
March 2015

## X

*Atrabiliarios* (defiant), 1991-6, consists of a series of cavities made directly into the wall where they are displayed in which worn shoes are placed. (...) The cavities are each sealed with a piece of translucent animal membrane, stretched across the opening and held in place by individually tied sutures of coarse surgical thread.

*Tanya Barson* (on Doris Salcedo)<sup>1</sup>

*The Trench* breached the boundaries of an aesthetically conditioned response, or of more sentiment. As William Miller notes, 'the disgusting can attract as well as repel', and spectators were drawn to the work in large numbers, where they discovered that Hans Secker, the director of art at the Wallraf-Richartz, had placed it behind a screen.

*Paul Fox*<sup>2</sup>

The concepts I explore in the creation of my paintings are echoed in my installation strategy. I use a fairly empty room, mostly dark aside from light given off by two small desk lamps (placed on the floor on either side of the paintings). Each lamp is angled upwards, focusing on the patchwork configuration of linen and canvas pieces rising up the wall. The bulbs I used were traditional 40 watt bulbs that I hoped would be both dimmer and more yellow in tint.

Each piece is suspended from small loops of yarn attached to the back. The loops are hung off flat tacks, essentially floating the paintings against the wall. This method of hanging remains concealed

behind the works. All linen and canvas pieces hang loose at the bottom. They are noticeably wrinkled with jagged edges accentuated by shadows cast against the white walls. The amount of work shown, their combined size, and the disturbing nature create an intense and disquieting presence.

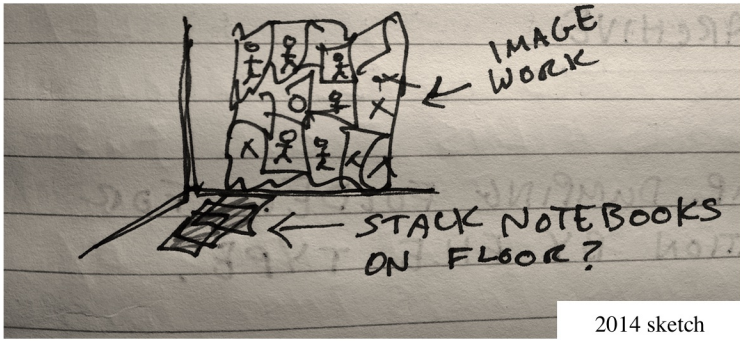
The critique installations were hung towards the corner of the room, and people who viewed it reported a sense of interruption. They felt as though they were intruding on someone's private space or obsession. Darkness seemed to amplify these feelings and the paintings were described by several people as appearing violent, likely due to the harsh shattering of images resulting from my technique. Overall, I felt pleased by the outcome of this trial installation. I loved the jagged shadows cast by the frayed edges and the way light seemed to accentuate the wrinkled surfaces.

Like the act of breaking apart the paintings during creation, the obscuration of a dim atmosphere prevented unsettling imagery from becoming a spectacle. Furthermore, darkness added the illusion of privacy, allowing for a more sympathetic examination of the works. The anonymity of the archive imagery, largely preserved through my destructive painting process, hangs safely in shadow. Instead of being driven back by disgust, viewers are invited to slowly adjust to the dim environment and engage with what they see. There is definitely a sense of unease, but the outright revulsion caused by my older paintings seemed absent.

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<sup>1</sup> *Barson*, “Unland: The Place of Testimony.”

<sup>2</sup> *Fox*, “Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix.”



2014 sketch

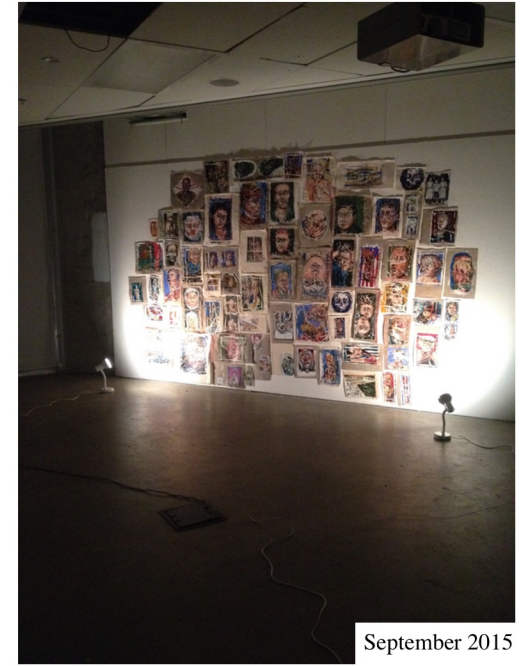
installation development  
2013 - 2015



May 2013



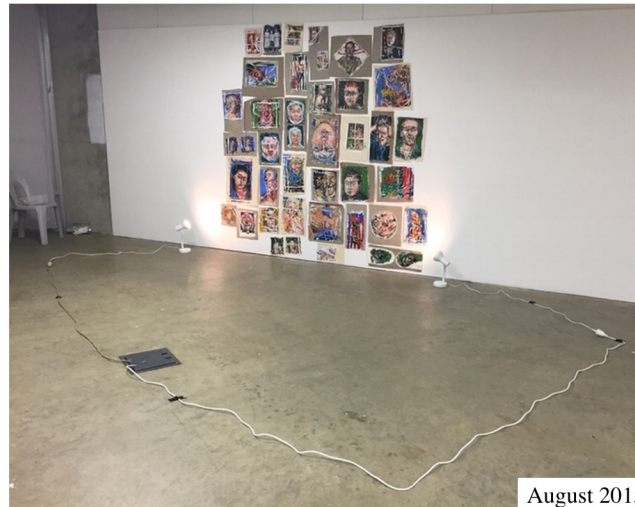
August 2015



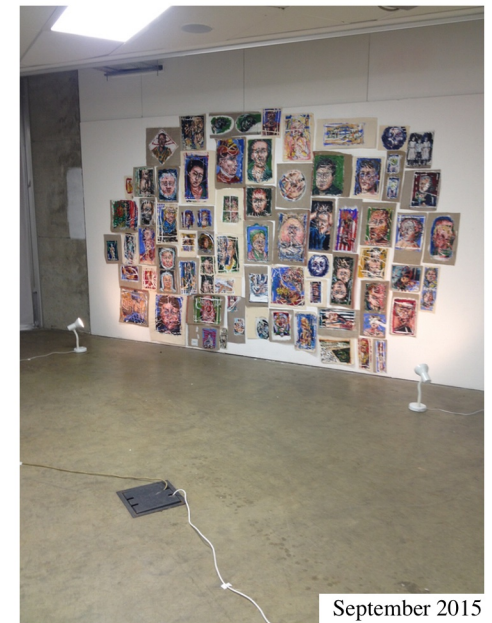
September 2015



September 2015



August 2015



September 2015



method of hanging and attachment of hangers



## XI

### AD15 Graduate Show November 2015

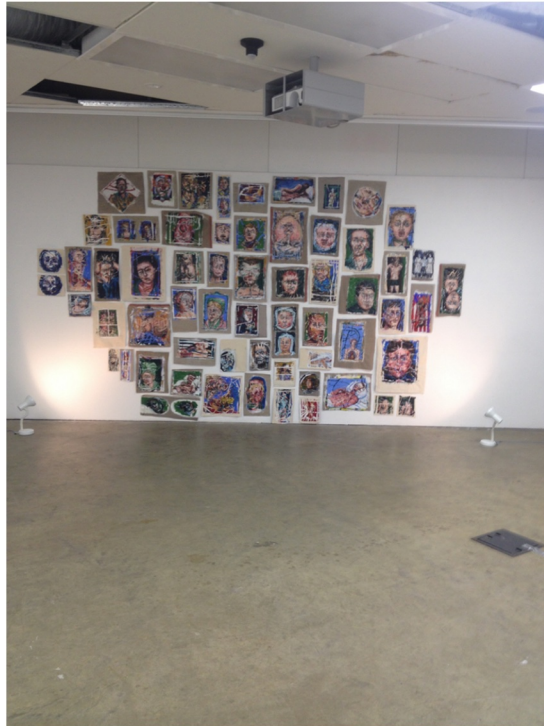
My final presentation at the AD 15 Graduate Exhibition in November 2015 looked similar to the installations for my critiques. I did, however, choose work more thoughtfully and added new pieces. When arranging for critiques I discovered different paintings were suited to different light, so I arranged the final installation accordingly. For example, some works with brighter colours needed to be further away from the light as they distracted from more subtle works with darker tones. Size also came into consideration. Larger paintings were easier to see at a distance and could be displayed in higher or lower positions. Smaller, more intimate works were placed at comfortable heights for close examination. These, along with considerations like colour, subject, style, and material (canvas or linen), contributed to my settling on a final arrangement.

I retained the use of the loosely hung paintings in a haphazard configuration and kept the dramatic lighting scheme (using the two small desk lamps). The location was the same, isolated room as my critiques. This separation from the rest of the graduate installations, along with the darkened atmosphere, temporarily removed visitors from the outside exhibition as a whole. This allowed for a deeper focus on the material.

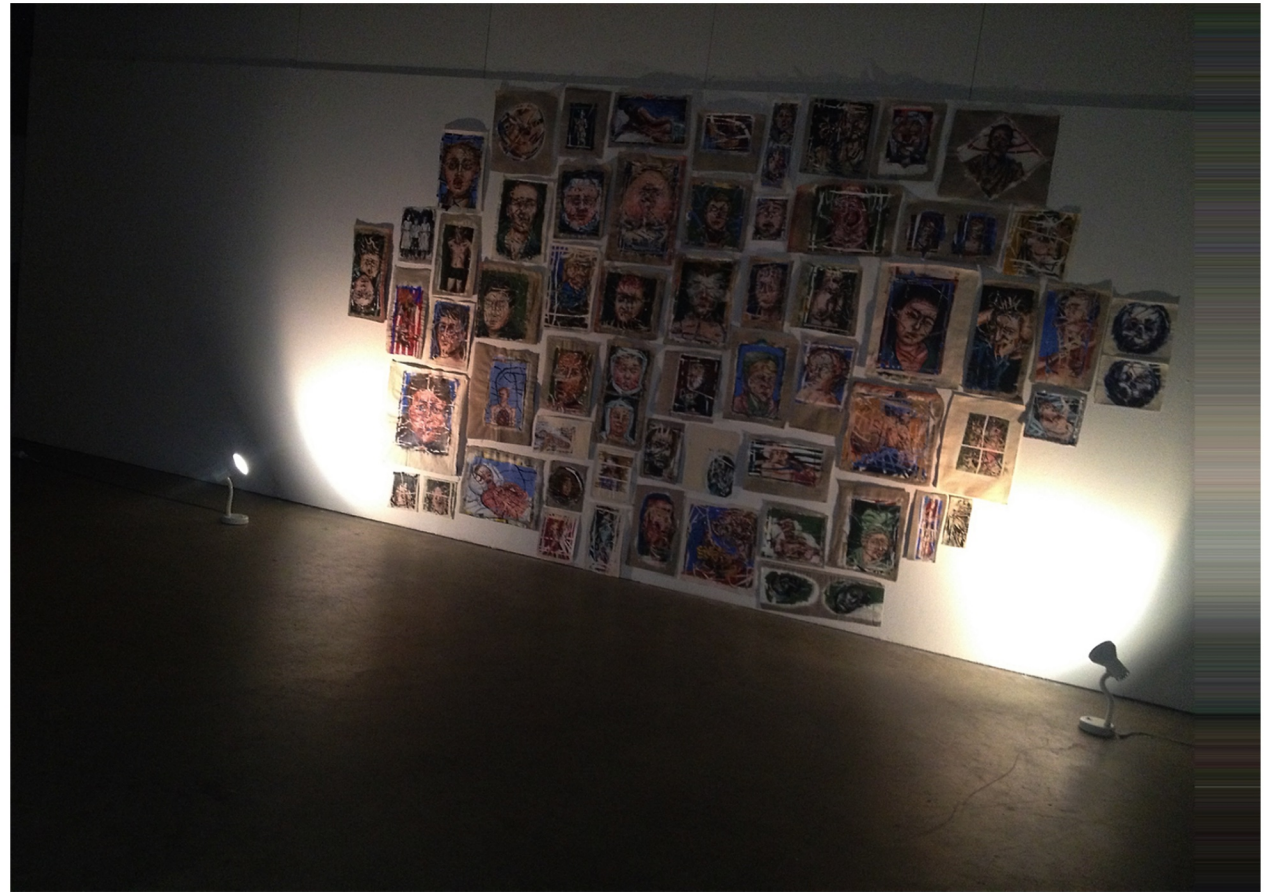
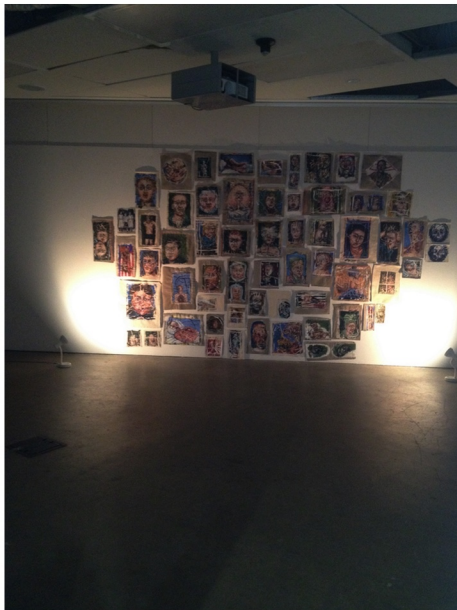
My painting process allowed for a high level of production over a relatively brief period of time. The intimidating size of the hanging configuration, and its raw appearance, helped emphasise the frenzied, obsessive nature of these works. A clean and outwardly meticulous installation would dull the harsh nature of the paintings. In reality I carefully chose the work included before installing, but I did not want it to appear that way to viewers

Perhaps with more time to produce an even larger body of work, the quality of pieces chosen for the installation will become increasingly uniform. As I do plan to continue on with this series, this is one of the many goals I have for its future. Overall, I felt my art and its final presentation came very close to the envisioned appearance I had roughly sketched out in 2013. It was extremely gratifying to sit on the ground looking up at my finished installation and see that something begun as a mere sketch had come to fruition.

Evolving over three years, *Beneath the Skin* is a continuation of a life-long fascination with medicine and its history. Through extensive exploration of painting technique, materials, and source imagery, I have been able to render material from my medical archive so that its disturbing nature is communicated to others, but it is not exploited. When installed, this series sets a disquieting mood, but not an unbearable one. Viewers are invited to ask questions about what they see and are encouraged to search for answers in the broken images.



completed hanging configuration



Final Installation at AD15  
November 2015

selected paintings  
2013 - 2015



2903155  
acrylic on canvas  
43.5 x 31 cm  
January 2015



2603155  
acrylic on linen  
37.5 x 29.5 cm  
February 2015



2603153  
acrylic on linen  
33 x 34 cm  
March 2015



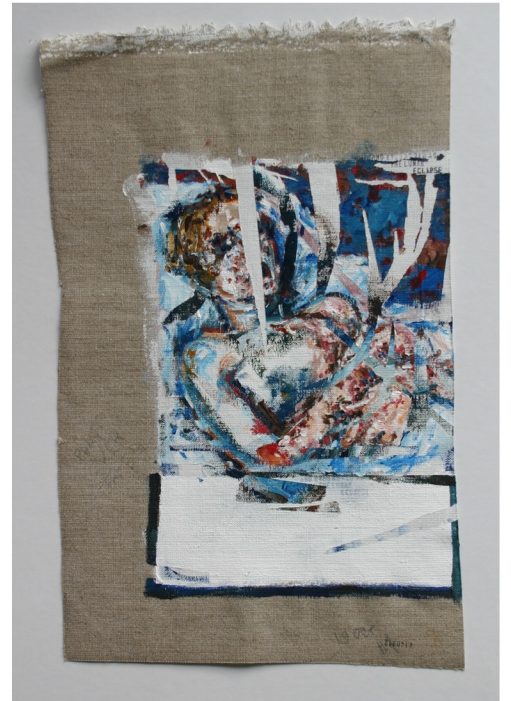
5182803  
acrylic on linen  
43 x 31.5 cm  
September 2015

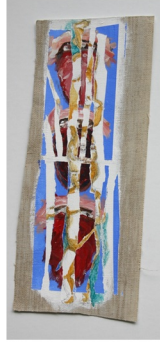


5180301  
acrylic on linen  
43.5 x 33 cm  
August 2015

catalogue of final works  
2013 - 2015

















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