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The Economy of Still Life: A Practice-Led Exploration of Still-Life Painting

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Declaration of Originality

I, …………………………………………………………..hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.
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ABSTRACT

The Economy of Still life: A Practice-led Exploration of Still-Life Painting

In this practice-led research project I have explored the genre of still-life painting, with a focus on material culture. I came to the project with a background as a still-life painter and economist. I was curious about the relationship between the two activities, and speculated that an artist’s approach to still-life painting might reflect the overall economic circumstances of the times. If so, how might a disruptive change to those circumstances generate changes in the way paintings were made? And how could material culture – the objects that help define, interpret and understand the world we live in – be used to represent economic conditions? In the light of questions such as these, the objective for my project was to investigate how I could effectively explore and model material culture through my studio-based painting, and do so within the context of current economic conditions and contemporary painting culture.

The accompanying exegesis tracks the project. It began with an exploration of seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting. I drew on historical analysis of the period to explore how the traditions of the still life could be adapted to contemporary painting. An economic model for analysing convention and innovation in the still-life genre was developed using evidence from this period. As the project developed, the limitations of this approach become increasingly apparent. This led to a reassessment of my approach. I reviewed the balance between objective analysis and subjective responses to economic conditions through my painting. Contemporary artistic influences were incorporated, including North American still-life painting from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contemporary painting from Asia and South America, and the work of Australian still-life artists. This led to a re-conception of the ways a still-life painting practice could constitute a distinctive, creative engagement with material culture.
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Introduction

This practice-led research project explores the genre of still-life painting. I came to the project with a background as a still-life painter and economist, and a curiosity about the relationship between the two. I wondered, for example, how an artist’s approach to still-life painting might reflect the overall economic conditions of the times. If so, how could material culture – the objects that help define, interpret and understand the world – be used to represent those conditions? Might a disruptive change to economic conditions generate changes in the way paintings were made? In the light of questions such as these, the objective for this project was to investigate how I could effectively explore and model material culture through my painting and do so within the context of current economic conditions and contemporary painting culture.

I was attracted to still-life painting for several reasons. One was its rich history and traditions. These offered much I could draw upon, develop and adapt to my own needs. It provided a visual language and tools to express what I occasionally found beyond words or usual ways of thinking. I also found painting to be a meditative process. As the art historian Hanneke Grootenboer writes, still-life painting can “encompass … the peacefulness and silence reminiscent of the mood of the artist” lost in the process of observing and reproducing the scrutinised object.1 That description resonated because I saw it offering a way to respond to contemporary economic conditions. The modern economy is complex, fast-paced and occasionally destructive. But complexity often masks underlying simplicity. It can obscure the existence of slower rhythms and patterns – and even occasional stillness.

I was also attracted by the potential for investigating still-life painting through an economic lens, by which I mean using economic concepts as one approach to question, explore and understand how and why artists may have used their painting techniques, styles, symbols and other artistic tools. I was curious about changes in artists’ choices and their depictions of material culture, especially the use of domestic objects and the way the dialectic evident in them could engage with the economic conditions of the times.2 Household objects – as well

2 Emails (A. Richards, personal communications, 12 December 2016 and 7 January 2017) discussed the relevancy of these issues for this project.
as other objects explored in this project – possess material and aesthetic properties that can be reflected in painting. These include shape, mass, volume, weight, colour, light and texture. But objects can also act as signs and symbols, working as visual metaphors to reflect the myriad norms and values that underpin economic behaviour. This includes desire, acquisition, consumption, value, wealth, social status, occupation, labour, mortality, fame and power.\(^3\) Many objects found around homes and workplaces might be commonplace and, as the art historian Norman Bryson suggests, they may appear to lack the pluck and mettle to convey the grandeur of the times.\(^4\) But the elaborate taxonomy of signification associated with these objects, and their rich history in still-life painting, provided numerous examples to investigate and build upon.

Combining art and economics in the project offered potential benefits. But there were also risks. One risk was for a slippage to occur between the objectives of the project and the artistic process of engaging with material thinking. In other words, how could I bridge the gap between observing the abstract “economy” and making concrete representations of that using materials like paint, brushes and canvas? I discuss this further in Chapters Two and Three. A second risk was provoking resistance. The academic and writer on economic philosophy, Noam Yuran, warns that art and economics do not always mix. He says the authenticity of any noble cause, such as art, is endangered if it is suspected of “masking a will to profit or of being motivated by considerations of profit.”\(^5\) The economic sociologist, Victor Velthuis, is more direct. In his view, economic interference in what is seen as “the autonomy of art” is likely to be resisted.\(^6\) My experience of economic analysis and from making presentations on this project as it developed, confirmed this. It suggested that rather than entering into a “truly dialogical conversation”, as Tom Barone puts it in his analysis of multidisciplinary approaches to arts-based research, the approach was just as likely to provoke suspicion and opposition.\(^7\) That prejudice caught my attention, and addressing it was an additional motivation to undertake this research. But while noting it here, I do not discuss the issue further.

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\(^7\) Tom Barone, “How Arts Based Research can Change Minds” in *Arts Based Research in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 44.
My first challenge was to develop a research methodology suited to tackling the question of how still-life painting could reflect economic conditions. I argue that there have been many artists who have responded either directly or indirectly to their economic circumstances, and have done so through a variety of media. I was drawn initially to Dutch still-life painting from the seventeenth century. Nineteenth-century American still-life paintings were also influential, as were more recent still-life paintings from Latin America and Asia. And paintings by Australian artists, such as Jude Rae, Michael Zavros and Fiona Hall, were instructive for investigating aspects of Australia’s contemporary economic conditions. I therefore began this project by searching for a research methodology that would allow me to investigate these artists and their work, to explore my own practice-led research into still-life painting, and to combine that with aspects of traditional economic research and analysis. I hoped that by developing a hybridised approach I could uncover additional meaning, produce insight and generate an understanding of the relationship between still-life painting and economic conditions that went beyond what would be accessible if only one approach had been taken.

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Seventeenth-century Dutch still-life artists, such as Pieter Claesz (1597–1661), Willem Claeszoon Heda (1594–1680) and others, were useful starting points for the project. A feature of their early work was the use of an economical palette. Many exhibit a range of tonal variations built around blacks, whites and greys. Yet their combination ably conveys a rich variety of textual qualities from the gleam of polished metal surface to the shine of coloured glass. The close view and shallow depth of field also offer an intimacy that compels the viewer to look again and find enduring meaning in these timeless objects (Figs. 1 and 2).
An additional reason for reviewing these artists and their work was the intense innovation that occurred during the period from the early 1600s until the mid 1670s. Not only was the still life established as a genre in its own right during this time, but new themes and styles developed rapidly. These ranged from the breakfast paintings of Claesz and Heda through to the elaborate flower and *pronkstilleven* paintings – all of which I discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters.\(^8\) Much of this innovation in painting occurred at the same time as the

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\(^8\) The *pronkstilleven* was a form of *vanitas* painting that featured sumptuous, opulent and lavishly expensive objects, such as lobsters, parrots and gilded cutlery.
Netherlands’ economy was undergoing a period of sweeping innovation. The economy evolved from being principally agrarian at the end of the sixteenth century to being broadly based by the late seventeenth century, with the Netherlands emerging as one of Europe’s most wealthy and powerful trading nations. The economy was so radically transformed that the Netherlands was characterised by the economic historians Jan De Vries and Ad Van Der Woude as being the world’s “first modern economy”.  

I wondered whether there was a causal link between innovation in economic activity and innovation in still-life painting. I wanted to investigate that question. I wanted to explore in particular how still-life artists might have responded to turbulent economic conditions in the past through their engagement with material culture. I also speculated there may be parallels between those developments and Australia’s economic conditions which, as discussed in Chapter Two, were undergoing significant change. I believed such parallels could be drawn upon to represent material culture in my still-life painting practice.

I was aware, however, of the risk of over-drawing such parallels. Unambiguous evidence is hard to find for events that occurred four hundred years ago, and it is unlikely that seventeenth-century Dutch still-life artists set out intentionally to reflect the changes to their economy as the sole subject, theme or driver of their work. It seems more likely that they responded to and interrogated their individual experience of the significant economic changes occurring around them, either consciously or unconsciously. They may have then contextualised these within the prevailing culture. Nevertheless, some Dutch still-life painters appear to be more than passive observers of economic change. Some – such as Claesz and Heda – demonstrated through the innovative nature of their work that they were particularly aware, thoughtful and reactive to what was happening around them, and that they responded deliberately to their economic conditions. As the economic historian Jonathan Israel has observed:

> Life in Dutch society was very different than other parts of seventeenth-century Europe … no one could live without continually sensing the interaction of land and sea, town and country … the exotic with the mundane, and the foreign with the local. Art, by encompassing all of this

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made explicit, and heightened awareness of, what everyone saw and felt.10

I have italicised those last words because they emphasise the concept of awareness.11 Israel’s observation prompted me to speculate about possible linkages between Dutch still-life artists’ awareness of their economic circumstances and their markedly innovative responses through still-life painting.12 I decided to test that speculation by building a phase-cycle model of the process of economic and artistic innovation, examining what prompts it and the sequence of responses that unfold.

The model comprises seven phases. These include an initial state of equilibrium which is shocked by a significant exogenous event. Shock is followed by search and experimentation; competition between emerging concepts and ideas; increasing specialisation; the emergence of dominant ideas; and then the replication and duplication of the most successful idea. The process then returns to a new state of equilibrium. To develop the model, I used data from the seventeenth-century Netherlands’ economy, and examples from Dutch still-life painting over the period from the 1630s through to the early 1700s, as I will explain in detail in Chapter Two.

I used the model to help identify and observe the linkages that existed between economic developments and innovation in Dutch still-life painting. I then speculated about whether the same linkages might also operate at other times and in other geographic locations. I applied the model to the United States, China and to contemporary Australia. It was a promising start. I discovered, however, that as I extended the application of the model to contemporary economic conditions limitations emerged. Unlike Israel’s characterisation of the Dutch economy of the seventeenth century, the modern global economy, of which Australia is an inextricable part, is a globalised, multifaceted and complex system of interconnected

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11 This awareness of prosperity, and its links to art, is also emphasised by Anne Goldgar in Tulipmania: Money, Honor and Knowledge in the Dutch Golden Age (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007).
components. It is also subject to cultural differences and influences that go beyond the parameters of the phase-cycle model.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite these limitations, the process of building the model, examining the evidence and exploring its implications for my research questions proved an integral part of the project. It influenced not only the directions of my research but my painting practice as well. I elaborate on this in Chapter Two.

**Exploring material culture**

A dominant theme of material culture is that objects are powerful and enduring symbols of the economic times in which they are created, purchased, used, kept or discarded. As the archaeologist and specialist in material culture Bjørnar Olsen points out, objects can be sites of inscription, acting as metaphorical stand-ins to represent something else, including “the social, the cultural, political, and so forth …”.\textsuperscript{14} I interpreted the “so forth” to include economic conditions. This is consistent with the views of economic researchers such as Russell Belk, who write that it is not possible to understand economic behaviour such as consumerism without also understanding the meaning that consumers attach to the objects they possess.\textsuperscript{15} I believed my painting practice could use objects as a way to reflect my perceptions of current economic conditions. The timeless qualities of some of these objects could also be used to reveal the deeper rhythms and patterns of economic activity and thinking. I noticed, for example, that the enduring qualities of many of the household objects painted by seventeenth-century Dutch still-life artists transcend the centuries, and can be recognised and understood today.

My painting research therefore started with an exploration of how material culture had been represented by these artists. I was attracted in particular to the material culture of the household, notably utilitarian objects such as kitchen and dining room items, cutlery, containers, vases, jugs and consumables, as well as items that might be found elsewhere around a house. I also explored how still-life artists had used compositional devices to help represent these objects, such as the low-angled view of a horizontal tabletop as the place to contain and contextualise them.

\textsuperscript{13} See for example, Gerte Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980).


Traditional painting was important. But as the project developed, I drew increasingly on contemporary influences. This included the work of the Chilean painter Claudio Bravo (1936–2011), United States’ artists such as Andy Warhol (1928–1987) and Tom Wesselmann (1931–2004), and the Australian artists Fiona Hall (born 1953), Jude Rae (born 1956) and Michael Zavros (born 1974). Many of these artists built on the foundations established by traditional still-life artists. They went on to introduce a range of innovations, such as the repetition of objects, a more direct confrontation of value and consumerism and colourful, higher-toned palettes.

I began the project with a series of experiments to move from my initial curiosity and speculation towards a more informed approach to painting and an engagement with material culture. I adopted characteristics of the traditional still life, such as the table top, and featured objects that came within the context of household material culture. I experimented with ways to inflect the choices I made with contemporary references. I also began to investigate the use of space. I was intrigued in particular by the possibility of space to act as a void – that apparently empty space that appears in some early Dutch still-life paintings behind or surrounding objects. My intention was to use the void to reflect mass consumerism and the paradox, perpetuated by advertising, that the more we acquire to satisfy our wants rather than our needs the less satisfied we become, and the larger the resulting emptiness – the void – becomes. I also used the initial suite of paintings to begin my investigation of methods and techniques of painting that I believed could reinforce concepts like value and wealth. I found, for example, the use of the grisaille and its combination with glazing helped make objects gleam and therefore depict value, preciousness and fragility. These issues are discussed in Chapter One.

As I developed the project, I searched for ways to broaden and deepen my exploration of the research question (Chapter Three). I investigated options that shifted away from the initial influence of the traditional still life and located my work in a more contemporary period, one that engaged with the complexities of the modern, neoliberal economy.

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Being inside is to be immersed in the experience of the process, where the emphasis is on information and understanding that is tacit and intuitive. Being outside is to maintain a more reflective, critical distance that allows the artist to work objectively and analytically, often in the midst of complexity. Gibson notes that ideally there should be an oscillation between the two processes and the best way to investigate complexity is through being attentive to both approaches.\footnote{Ibid.: 7.}

When I began this project, however, I was not aware of Gibson’s observations. As explained in Chapter Two, I began by deciding the best approach to this project was to combine methods that incorporated the expressive qualities of practice-led research with aspects of traditional analysis and modelling. Taking that approach seemed consistent with my background as an economist. It appeared to offer better prospects for keeping the project under control than if I were overly reliant on what I saw as the loose and emotional approach and language that comes from being subjective and experiential. In striking a balance, therefore, between being “outside” or “inside” the process, to use Gibson’s words, I was more out than in.

Reservations about that approach eventually emerged. The paintings described in Chapter Three focus on money and non-money objects and symbols, and address a range of contemporary issues such as production, consumption, and the value of things we store in our homes. I also tapped into traditional still-life tropes to investigate these issues, as well as touch on some of the enduring patterns and rhythms of economic conditions. But the paintings appeared to speak less eloquently, if at all, about other contemporary economic conditions such as equity, sustainability and the effects of the globalised market. I thought the methodology may be contributing to a conflict between my subjective experience of studio-based painting and the objective robustness I expected to come from the traditional research approach. I also questioned whether I had become overly reliant on observing what other artists had done before me, and was using their responses to economic conditions to inform my own. These “others”, however, were responding to the idiosyncratic experiences of specific economic circumstances, times and place. To return to Ross Gibson’s analogy, these artists were “inside” their experience and in effect telling me what it felt like. I, on the other
hand, was distanced from the subjective and emotional experience of responding to my perceptions and responses to contemporary economic circumstances.

**Reassessing, realigning and breaking through**

Based on these observations, I began to review the balance between the objective and the subjective. I adopted a more sympathetic approach to suggestions and ideas I was encountering in both the literature and in visual art, and shifted my painting practice to incorporate new pathways, allowing greater scope for intuition, chance and imagination.

As part of this, I changed the scale of my work. Instead of painting on the small or modest-size canvases I had been using, I now began to use larger canvases. Painting on this scale raised several issues. One was how to shift the weight of my practice away from subject matter, which still occupied an important although less prominent role, and to deal with composition, the gesture of drawing and learning how to use larger tools and to work with larger quantities of paint. A second issue was how I looked at the painting while it was being created. Previously, I had worked close to the canvas, and was therefore focused on small parts of the work at a time. If I wanted to see how that part worked within the whole I stood back, something I did only occasionally. Now I discovered I had to stand back further and more frequently than before. This process of looking and re-looking established a new rhythm to my work and a slower pace. I found it easier to think more intentionally about what I was doing, and to build a more emotionally engaged and productive dialogue in my painting practice. As discussed further in Chapter Four, this contributed to a deepening knowledge of my painting process, of the paintings themselves and an awareness of the relationship between painting and my responses to economic conditions. A third issue was the changing relationship between intimacy and distance. Previously I found that the comparative small scale of many traditional still-life paintings was an appealing characteristic because it enabled me to stand close to a work and observe detail. It felt as though I was in a space in which there was an exclusive dialogue between the artist, the object and the viewer. The larger scale work not only broke with that tradition but it suggested that the intimacy of the scene, while still important, was now competing with a more complex and larger narrative, an economic narrative within which objects were only a part and not the whole.

Changing scale acted as a catalyst to break through the impasse in the project. It occurred largely without a conscious effort to force a linkage between the choice of subject matter, or the painting’s formal elements, and what I was trying to demonstrate concerning material
culture or my perceptions of economic conditions. Yet that is what happened. I was able to make changes to my approach to still-life painting, explore material culture and effectively model my response to contemporary economic conditions. I discovered, moreover, that I was able to express my response to the complexities of the relationships between the economy, material culture and my painting by economising on my choice of concepts, forms and imagery, and by progressively paring down the number of formal elements of my painting such as composition, colour and space. Overall, I made a journey in which there was a transition away from an emphasis on analysis and control to a more intuitive and imaginative approach to painting.

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In Chapter One I introduce my painting practice to situate it within the broader objectives of the research project, to describe how I began to explore material culture through the depiction of household objects as symbols of value and wealth, and to describe my painting technique. Chapter Two discusses the theoretical framework. Approaches to methodology and method are addressed. I outline what I consider to be the economic conditions that I was responding to, and describe historical and contemporary artistic influences. The model of how still-life painting might respond innovatively to economic conditions is also described. In Chapter Three I discuss signs and symbols to reflect responses to economic conditions, notably the use of money, and the paintings that I subsequently developed from these observations. The process of reflection between paintings and methodology is described, and the chapter concludes with the recognition for change to the direction of the project. Chapter Four explores the results of the review, reassessment and realignment of my painting practice. It focuses on assessing the works that emerged and their significance for examining my research question and overall findings.
Chapter One: Beginning the Inquiry into a Practice-Led Exploration of Still-life Painting

Introduction

The objectives of this project were to investigate how my still-life painting practice could reflect current economic conditions and how I could explore and model that through an engagement with material culture. As outlined in the Introduction and explained further in Chapter Two, I began with a methodology that blended practice-led methodology with aspects of traditional research. The focus on material culture was relevant because it emphasised the role that objects, particularly ordinary, day-to-day objects, can play in reflecting current economic conditions. As the anthropological theorist Christopher Tilley points out:

... materiality is an integral dimension of culture, and … there are dimensions of social existence that cannot be fully understood without it … [T]he study of the material dimension is as fundamental to understanding culture as is … a focus on relations of production, exchange and consumption (economics). \(^{18}\) …

I was curious about investigating how I could use material culture to reflect my response to things such as acquisition, possession, value and wealth. I also wanted to investigate Hanneke Grootenboer’s observation that creating the still-life painting encompassed the peacefulness and silence of the artist’s mood as the artist reproduced the scrutinised observation of an object. \(^{19}\) Grootenboer’s remark resonated with the objectives of this project because it presented a counterpoint to the common image of the modern economy as noisy, active and occasionally destructive. I believed that image obscured the equally valid perception of slower rhythms and patterns of economic activity. I describe my perceptions of economic conditions in more detail in Chapter Two, but at this stage of the project I began the exploration of both these aspects of economic conditions by selecting and painting objects


found around the home. Many of these household objects are so commonplace they are, to use Norman Bryson’s term, the overlooked.20

Describing this early body of work provides the opportunity to introduce the methods, techniques and materials I used throughout the project. The objects selected were material substances: metal, glass, clay, paper or cloth. I wanted to explore these properties, and set about trying to create convincing illusions of their three-dimensional forms in my paintings. But I was also interested in the role of these objects as symbols of economic materialism, by which I mean the importance to contemporary society of the acquisition, possession and valuing of objects. As the consumer researcher Russell Belk suggests, many of the concepts that underpin economic behaviour, such as self-identity, worth, accomplishment, happiness or a sense of context in the past or the future, are strongly associated with the objects we choose to possess, or wish to possess.21 I was interested in discovering what use I could make of these associations and of the existing array of signs and icons that had been developed in still-life painting to see whether they could be adapted to reflect perceptions of current economic conditions.

**Household Objects paintings**

My experience as a still-life painter provided a base from which to start, with my earlier work informing the way I adopted, adapted and used many of the formal qualities of the genre. These included the size and shape of a painting and how that might influence the viewers’ gaze, or the intimacy of the exchange between artist, object and viewer. I was also informed by such basic decisions as what supports to paint on, the options for composing objects, how to set up and light the models and whether to paint in oil or acrylic paint. By bringing these building blocks to the outset of the project I was able to make a number of comparatively quick decisions about starting. I had a preference, for example, for painting on comparatively small canvases, painting in oil paint rather than acrylic and for painting objects from life. I found painting from life reinforced the scrutinised observation of the object; looking at it under different lighting conditions, noticing reflections – including reflected colour – and discovering detail. Painting from life also helped overcome what I perceived as my comparative weakness when making decisions about colour. My experience suggested I was better off selecting models that already had the colours I thought would work best, rather than

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20 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*.
attempting to improvise. These preferences, however, were guides, not rules. I departed from
them on a number of occasions, as I will describe in more detail elsewhere in this exegesis.

I was influenced at the outset of the project by the work of traditional still-life artists,
particularly those from seventeenth-century Netherlands. For example, the pictorial structure
perfected by the Haarlem artists Pieter Claesz and Willem Claeszoon Heda presented a useful
set of traditions. That structure incorporated characteristics such as the absence of a vanishing
point, a narrow depth of field, a high viewpoint that gives the viewer access to the array of
composed objects, the use of the table top, shelf or bench to contextualise those objects, using
rounded shapes composed symmetrically around a single object that serves as a centrepiece –
such as a pitcher or a tazza – or objects such as knives that project into the space between the
tabletop and the viewer.

I was also influenced in my approach by more recent works. The Chilean still-life painter
Claudio Bravo, for example, frequently appropriated references from seventeenth-century
Dutch and Spanish still-life paintings into his work to produce hybridised paintings of both
traditional and contemporary imagery. Bravo’s painting *Bodegon con Paquetes, Homenaje a
Sanchez Cotán* (fig. 3) is an example of how he applied compositional elements from
traditional painting, in this case *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* by the Spanish artist
Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627) (fig. 4). The painting refers to trends in modern
consumerism, with the purchased objects wrapped and ready to be taken away. Bravo also
reinterprets the space behind the objects. In Cotán’s painting, the space is a deep void. Bravo,
however, introduces an atmospheric space, tinged with a bluish hue and featuring a cloud in
the location of Cotán’s lettuce.
I thought Bravo’s mixture of traditional and contemporary references as well as his playfulness could be adapted to my purposes and explored further. His adaptation of the void also seemed relevant to the themes I wanted to investigate through the Household Object series. As later chapters reveal in more detail, the investigation of space around objects, including the role of space as a void, became a recurring theme in my work.

I began my exploration of still-life painting by representing the traditional if somewhat clichéd image of the still life with flowers or the bowl of fruit. In Still-life with Chardin’s Stone Flowers (fig. 5), for example, I appropriated an image from the French still-life painter, Jean Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), A Vase of Flowers (fig. 6), and represented the vase of flowers as if manufactured from stone or marble.
I felt there were relevant possibilities offered through an investigation of the traditional *vanitas* painting – a form of still-life painting in which objects are used to symbolise the emptiness that comes from the pursuit of earthly goods and pleasures. There were linkages, for example, between ephemeral objects, such as flowers, and economic materialism with its resulting emptiness. The portrayal of such linkages in *Still-life with Chardin’s Stone Flowers*, or in *Still-life with Concrete Bowl of Fruit II* (fig. 7), however, could not be said to be entirely deliberate.

**Fig. 5.** (Left) *Still-life with Chardin’s Stone Flowers* (2012)

**Fig. 6.** (Right) Jean Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *A Vase of Flowers* (about 1760)

**Fig. 7.** *Still-life with Concrete Bowl of Fruit II* (2012)
Often it was only after these paintings as well as others in this project had been completed, and sometimes well after, that I was able to speculate in a more informed way about what the genesis of a painting might have been, the way it operated and how it might be interpreted. It was also often unclear exactly what artists were influencing my paintings, or what other images and styles were being recalled and accessed. In this respect I was mindful of comments about the dynamics of painting by the art historian and theoretician James Elkins. He argues those dynamics are seldom transparent, and that:

…artists commonly claim to be influenced by other artists even when these influences turn out to be inscrutable, idiosyncratic, or otherwise unavailable to historians or other viewers.\(^{22}\)

As Elkins’ comment suggests, I was unsure prior to beginning these works what the effects of re-presenting traditional images of flowers or fruit in concrete or stone would be. In time, however, I was able to discern more accurately additional meaning and interpretations. For example, I became increasingly intrigued by the possibility that the ephemeral qualities of some objects could be stilled. Among other things, this appeared to be a visual means of representing the quantitative evidence that elite socio-economics cohorts were engaging in behaviour designed to transform the wealth of earthly goods, traditionally considered ephemeral, into permanent wealth.\(^{23}\)

The paintings *Still-life with Chardin’s Stone Flowers* and *Still-life with Concrete Bowl of Fruit II* were based on painting techniques underpinned by a combination of drawing and monochromatic underpainting. I used a variety of drawing techniques throughout the project. The most common was the quick sketch. I used it to capture as quickly as possible the essence of an idea before it was lost in subsequent refinements. Often the quick sketch consisted of a mixture of marks, written annotations and calculations. The annotations referred to aspects of the work that I was not able to develop in a short time, especially tonal values and ideas about colour. The calculations helped position, size and compose the subject within the picture space. These first sketches frequently turned out to be the most valuable part of creating a painting, and I referred to them throughout the course of painting to remind


myself of what my intentions had been. See, for example, figure 8 below and figure 50 in Section One of Chapter Four.

![Figure 8. Patience, annotated sketch (2012)](image)

After the initial sketch was completed, I would make a number of more detailed drawings in which I attempted to solve problems or how to refine the initial idea. In some cases, I discovered that by scaling the drawing to the dimension of the canvas I could minimise compositional errors that would otherwise prove difficult to correct later. However, I used full-scale drawings infrequently, at least at this early stage in the painting project. Instead, I used a grisaille technique to transfer the drawing and its tonal qualities direct to the canvas. I used acrylic paint in this process, usually black, white or a mix of blues and greys. I found the fast-drying qualities of acrylic paint allowed me to work rapidly and make corrections in much the same way as if I were drawing with pencil or charcoal.

By way of reference, a number of seventeenth-century artists, such as Van Dyck (1599–1641) and Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne (1589–1662), employed the grisaille technique, notably for creating studies or occasionally as a final work, as shown in figure 9.24 At this stage of the project, however, I chose not to make grisailles as final works. The concept remained intriguing, however, and I return to the idea of capturing the essence of an idea in an

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underpainting alone later in this exegesis when I discuss the work *Three Paper Bags* (Fig. 67).

![Fig. 9. Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne, A Cavalier at His Dressing Table (1631)](image)

At this stage I confined myself to building up the underpainting to develop detail and tonal values. Once I was satisfied with the underpainting, I discovered I could move on to colour with greater assurance comparatively quickly. Glazing over the underpainting was a useful step in my painting technique because it helped deal with choices about colour. Making decisions about colour, and more particularly about chroma and colour relationships, were a recurring challenge in my painting practice. Unlike my drafting skills, I doubted my ability to make intuitively correct decisions quickly. The grisaille helped deal with these challenges because it provided a technique to address tonal values and approach decisions about colour in a slower and more controlled way. In the paintings of stone flowers and fruit, for example, the choice of colour was determined by the understanding that the objects were made from a largely monochromatic stone. By sidestepping the issue of colour I simplified my choices, limited the risk of error and maintained a high level of control over my painting process.

As I proceeded to paint other household objects, I began introducing additional colours. In these paintings I adopted the low-angled view of the objects, which were typically arranged on a table, although in some cases I also used a shelf or a niche. Norman Bryson refers to “the culture of the table” as a characteristic of still-life painting.\textsuperscript{25} The table itself, he

\textsuperscript{25} Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 13.
suggests, is a vehicle that can be used as a backdrop to the economic circumstances of the prevailing culture as it displays the material objects purchased, valued and used, while remaining a constant, unchanging presence. The constancy of the table can be juxtaposed against the choice of the objects portrayed on it, which can be ephemeral, as in the *vanitas* painting, or inflected with characteristics to suggest they belong to certain times, as Bravo did in a number of his works. I found the symbolism of the table and its moving array of material objects, especially the inflected objects, an inspiring entry point for my exploration of the underlying patterns and rhythms of economic activity.

![Fig. 10. (Left) Still-life with Teacups (2012)](image1)

![Fig. 11. (Right) All You Need (2012)](image2)

The objects I placed on the table included glass containers, kitchen utensils, pantry goods, vases and cotton reels. The objects were chosen to test their ability to act as symbols of economic materialism and the comfort that comes from the possession of things, notably food. The depiction of food, however, was indirect. Rather than paint fruits and vegetables, I selected objects that referred to the things that contain food, such as bowls and eggshells in *Still-life with Teacups* (fig. 10), or packages in *All You Need* (fig. 11). Although I was appropriating many of these objects from traditional still-life painting tropes, I experimented with ways to inflect these objects with contemporary references. Many of the packages of food are contemporary, and their bright, primary colours are reminiscent of contemporary supermarkets. The use of spent light globes was a modern reference to the spent candle, as well as an example of the influence of Bravo (fig. 12 and fig. 13).

26 Ibid.
The *Jugs of War* paintings focus on a variety of jugs and plates (figs. 14, 15, 16 and 17).\(^{27}\) The objects are ordinary household items, but I replaced the traditional and charming blue and white designs commonly associated with porcelain ware with symbols of violence in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where Australia had a comparatively strong military involvement. The symbolism included Middle Eastern palm trees, buildings and weapons. Introducing these elements into the design was an example of my departure from the observed model when I considered the decision to improvise to be justified.

The paintings represented a further step in my investigation of household objects and the use of symbols painted on objects to reflect not only war but also the unnoticed intrusion into Australian households of values intrinsic to major economic choices. Australia’s decision to participate in the intervention and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan beginning in 2003 was economically high, both in direct and opportunity costs.\(^{28}\) Despite this, I thought there was little

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\(^{27}\) The title was adapted from T. Bonyhady, N. Lendon, and J Dhamija, *The Rugs of War* (Canberra: Australian National University) 2003.

\(^{28}\) Opportunity costs are incurred when the potential gains of one option are given up by choosing an alternative. Opportunity costs are usually monetary, but may include the value of any utility foregone, such as better health, education or welfare benefits. http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/opportunity-cost.html (accessed May 2, 2017)
public curiosity about these costs at the time I painted the objects. The symbolism of the unobserved and overlooked household object was therefore well suited to reflecting the way some costs and underlying values can be integrated surreptitiously into contemporary economic conditions.

**Fig. 14.** (Left) *Jugs of War, Number One* (2012)
**Fig. 15.** (Right) *Jugs of War, Number Two* (2012)

**Fig. 16.** (Left) *Jugs of War, Number Four* (2012)
**Fig. 17.** (Right) *Jugs of War, Number Five* (2012)

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I experimented with different viewpoints in several of these paintings. In some I adopted a high viewpoint (figs. 14 and 16), while in others it was lower (fig. 15 and fig. 17). I felt the lower viewpoint appeared closer and more intimate, with a suggestion of greater stability. The higher viewpoint, on the other hand, evoked a sense of precariousness, as if the objects were unbalanced. I thought the impression of precariousness was more sympathetic to the intentions of this series of paintings and its symbolism.

All the paintings in the Jugs of War series are small. Jugs of War Number One (fig. 14), is 50 × 40 cm, while the others are smaller (40 × 30 cm). The scale of the paintings was chosen because it seemed appropriate for a subject matter that dealt with the unobtrusive integration of values into the day-to-day activities of Australian households. The smaller scale of the work also suited the process of experimentation with materials and methods. I wanted a smooth ground in all these paintings so that a fine level of detail could be obtained without excessive interference from the tooth of the canvas. I therefore built up several layers of sanded acrylic-based gesso to create the even surface, a technique I subsequently continued to use through most of the project. I began to experiment in these paintings, however, with alternative materials. In several cases I applied a fine-particle plaster structure, of the type developed for interior plasterboard walls. The ground was opaque and very smooth, and I found I was able to apply an acrylic grisaille using fine brush marks with a high level of control. I had been concerned that the subsequent glazes might not perform well on the experimental surface. However, this did not occur. On the other hand, after I had completed the series I noticed minor deformations in several areas on the surface on two of the paintings. I was unable to determine whether the surface was to blame or whether other factors, such as the way the ground had been applied, were the cause. I decided not to continue experimenting with this ground because of the uncertainties about its properties.

I completed six paintings in the Jugs of War series. I had looked at the “culture of the table” and the way I could use the symbolism of the blue and white porcelain designs on these objects to refer to the consequences of economic choices. As my thinking evolved, I turned to historical references in seventeenth-century Netherlands by the art historian Simon Schama. He makes the observation that as the Netherlands experienced a rapid transformation of its economic circumstances there were unexpected social and cultural
changes. One was the fetish for cleanliness.\textsuperscript{30,31} I had already painted the colourful variety of packages of foodstuffs in \textit{All You Need} (fig. 11), and decided to investigate packages, boxes and containers of cleaning products.

The painting \textit{Still-life with Cleaning Products} (fig. 18) was a comment on the overwhelming variety of objects used to keep our homes clean. I became aware, however, that the products I selected as models were, on reflection, not especially contemporary. Perhaps this was because many of them were the inherited and scarcely used detritus from my childhood home and therefore reminiscent of memories of another time. Objects such as “Brasso” or “Reckitt’s Blue” had once been commonly used by a previous generation to maintain objects and textiles, helping them to endure and be re-used rather than disposed of and replaced by newly acquired products.

\textbf{Fig. 18. Still-life with Cleaning Products} (2012)


\textsuperscript{31} Simon Schama, \textit{The Embarrassment of Riches}, 3.
As I worked on this painting I experimented with the use of primary colours, building on the outcomes of the painting of packaged foodstuffs (fig. 11). In this work, I also wanted to push the collection of objects to the foreground, and I found the use of the high-value reds and the yellows contrasted effectively with the cooler, low-value green–greys of the ground.

I also began experimenting in this painting with the void – that apparently empty space in the composition. I believed that both Claesz and Heda had used the void in their paintings to symbolise the loss of traditional values that would have been increasingly evident throughout Dutch society as the economic transformation accelerated. In particular, the decline of employment in the agricultural sector contributed to the consequent decline in the prominence once given to the agrarian way of life, with its culture of self-sufficiency, fellowship of cooperative labour and the rhythm of work tied to nature and the passing of the seasons. As the spiritual qualities of this way of life were lost what remained was more than an empty space; it was a void, a spiritual vacuity.32 In Still-life With Cleaning Products, I massed the objects to form a stepped wedge that falls away steeply when read from left to right, a shape echoed by the shadow in the background. The void created in this composition occupies a large proportion of the space above and to the right of the massed objects and it was my intention to use this space to symbolise the gap between material richness and the emptiness that comes from mass consumerism.

Conclusion

In this chapter I described how I began to unravel my research question. I explored how my still-life painting practice could reflect my perceptions and responses to current economic conditions and, in particular, how I could do that by modelling material culture. I examined the ways objects, including ordinary household objects, could reflect human values and ideals. I began building on a number of traditional still-life tropes, as well the foundations I had already developed as a still-life painter.

I also described my drawing and painting methods, techniques and materials. These underwent a process of adaptation as I delved into the research question and searched for ways to reflect my perceptions and responses to the economy. I was able to make adaptations, for example, to the way I used the grisaille technique, spending more time building a highly modelled monochromatic base before proceeding to deal with more challenging issues such as colour. The quick sketch was also a useful way to capture the essence of an idea and to

compose a visual reaction. I return to the description of the role of the quick sketch in Chapter Four.

I began my studio-based painting by looking at traditional still-life painting tropes, including the choice of subject matter and the use of devices such as “the culture of the table”. I was able to extend that as I moved further into the *Cleaning Products* and the *Jugs of War* paintings. The use of the space and its application as a void offered potential for reflecting my reaction to the vacuity of economic materialism.

As I completed the paintings described in this chapter, a process of reflection between theory and practice also evolved and deepened. That meant I was beginning to think about how qualitative research and practice-led research methodology in particular might be applied to the specific requirements of this project. I was investigating current economic conditions and how art could respond in ways that could reveal understanding or insight not fully realisable through words or through orthodox economic texts alone. I was also building an economic methodology to investigate the influence of economic conditions on innovation in still-life painting. And I was reviewing what other artists had done in this field. Each of these approaches to research is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
Chapter Two: A Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Introduction

In the previous Chapter I described how I began to reflect my perceptions and responses to current economic conditions through still-life painting. I described the foundations of my practice and choice of materials and techniques. I discussed how the process of painting underwent adaptation during the initial phase of the project as I delved deeper into the research question and searched for ways to refine my approach. Adaptations included extending the exploration the grisaille technique to build a more highly modelled monochromatic base before proceeding to deal with challenges such as colour, and I began experimenting with the use of the void as a compositional device. I return to a description of these processes in Chapters Three and Four.

As the initial phase of the project was unfolding, I began a parallel process of developing a conceptual and theoretical framework – a process that continued to evolve throughout the project. This chapter addresses this development in three parts. Part One describes my practice-led research methodology. As this part explains, I wanted a methodology suited to the specific needs of this project, one that would enable me to blend aspects of qualitative, arts-based research with traditional aspects of economic research. Part Two outlines my perceptions of current economic conditions. As part of this, I address the question of how art can be a valid method to respond to economic conditions. I also outline the development of a phase-cycle model of still-life painting. The model was an integral and useful part of my research. It revealed a range of interpretations of the relationship between art and economics, some of which go beyond the scope of this project. In Part Three I describe artistic influences on the project. I begin with examples from Dutch still-life painting during the seventeenth century. I then consider the influence of more contemporary artists, including Australian still-life painters.

Part One – Methodology

This project uses a practice-led research methodology. This is a mode of qualitative research that can disclose knowledge and understanding not able to be revealed through other research
approaches. These ‘other’ research paradigms focus on traditional approaches which assume that a knowable reality exits independently of the research process. It also assumes that this reality can be discovered, measured and controlled via the objective means employed by neutral researchers. Those who have written about arts-based methodologies, such as Elliot Eisner, Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor, Graeme Sullivan and others, stress that while practice-led research has been developed as an alternative to the traditional approach, it is intended to be complementary and not oppositional. Moreover, there are multiple paths to knowing, with no single approach yielding the unmediated, self-evident truth. As Eisner notes, “every way of seeing is a way of not seeing”, meaning that when a researcher chooses one methodology some things will be gained but others will necessarily be lost. For example, introducing subjectivity and emotion into the research process may diminish neutral objectivity, but it may contribute to insight and create outcomes not otherwise obtainable.

The academic writer Tom Barone argues that practice-led research has a potential to reach a broader audience than through traditional means, one that “transcends one consisting only of one’s colleagues.” In the case of the visual arts, the knowledge and outcomes may include an array of “diverse, complex, nuanced images”. Moreover, the individualism, subjectivity and overall ambiguities of such images, as well as the new knowledge and outcomes, may

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34 Julie Robson argues the terms practice-led research and arts-based research are interchangeable, that there is no consensual use of the terms and descriptions that do exist are “contradictory, interchangeable and messy”. J. Robson, “Artists in Australian Academies: Performance in the Labyrinth of Practice-Led Research”, in Robin Nelson, Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances (Chippenham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 131.
39 Eisner, “ Persistent Tensions in Arts-Based Research ”, Section 1, Chapter 2.
40 Leavy, Method Meets Art: Arts Based Research Practice, Chapter One.
42 Ibid.: 35.
address the unconventional and the unorthodox, or illuminate the hidden, the unfamiliar or the overlooked in ways that other research methodologies may not.\textsuperscript{43, 44}

The challenges of developing such a methodology, however, need to be set within the wider context of the still-evolving nature of practice-led research, including its epistemology, methodologies and the ‘persistent tensions’ it may produce.\textsuperscript{45} Among these tensions are the quality of the output, which may arguably be difficult to recognise and understand. As Eisner, Cahnmann-Taylor and others point out, tensions may arise when a focus on the novelty of aesthetic outcomes contributes to perceptions that significance and rigour are diminished.\textsuperscript{46} In such cases, the utility of the research project is also diminished.\textsuperscript{47, 48} Tension may arise when the ambiguity of new knowledge and insight generated through practice-led research is compared with the certainties arrived at under more traditional approaches.\textsuperscript{49} And finally, as Barret and Bolt, Leavy, Sullivan and others point out, in practice-led research the researcher is the instrument in both the qualitative research as well as in the artistic practice.\textsuperscript{50} This may risk conflict between the subjective experience of individual thought and action and the objective robustness expected to come from traditional research approaches.\textsuperscript{51} As this project developed, I encountered several of these tensions, notably the tension between subjectivity and objectivity. I describe this in more detail in Chapter Three, and discuss how this tension emerged as a slippage between anticipated and actual outcomes.

One of the philosophical substructures of practice-led research is that it values not only explicit and exact knowledge, but also tacit knowledge. The scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi makes the distinction between knowledge gained through traditional scientific research, which he describes as explicit knowledge, and knowledge gained and then

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid.: 38.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid.: 39.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Eisner, “\textit{Persistent Tensions in Arts-Based Research}”, (2008), Section 1, Chapter 2.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid.: 24.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{48} The utility of government funding for arts research is challenged. See, for example, R. Roskam, “Taxpayers shouldn’t fund arts degrees”, arthttp://www.afr.com/news/policy/education/taxpayers-shouldnt-fund-arts-degrees-20140605-iwa6i (accessed February 9, 2017). Funding is justified if there is a market failure, and the benefits of intervention outweigh the costs. An advantage of multidisciplinary research, therefore, is its potential to yield higher benefits and utility where outcomes are recognised as applicable to a broad range of interrelated issues.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid.: 22.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Quoted in Leavy, \textit{Method Meets Art: Arts Based Research Practice}, Chapter 1.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Barret and Bolt, \textit{Practice As Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry}, Introduction.
\end{itemize}
built up through practice.⁵² This tacit knowledge, argues Polanyi, cannot adequately be articulated, codified or transferred by verbal means alone.⁵³ Barret and Bolt agree. They say tacit knowledge has “the capacity to bring into view particularities that reflect new social and other realities either marginalised or not yet recognised”.⁵⁴ I discuss the implications of these theories of tacit knowledge in more detail in Chapter Four, where I comment on Polanyi’s views on focal and subsidiary awareness and the implications this has for the proposition that there may be multiple ways of understanding a painting as it is being created. I describe how I conclude from this discussion that the distinction between scientific and tacit knowledge may be transcended as the painting process continues.

A second philosophical substructure of practice-led research is the value it places on the inductive approach to knowledge and understanding.⁵⁵ Leavy argues that the inductive model is extended through artistic inquiry because it requires an openness to the spontaneous and the unknown. In other words, it requires an openness to risk and chance. McNiff puts forward the view that artists do not always fully understand how their art-making process works and therefore cannot fully control it.⁵⁶ As a result, he says, every work of art is a risk.⁵⁷ There is a risk, for example, of failing to be understood, of not achieving objectives or of disclosing the unintended.⁵⁸ But as I found during the course of this project and discuss in detail in Chapter Four, risk can bring reward.

George Ladd notes in *Imagination in Research: An Economist’s View* that preparing for risk and uncertainty, and allowing chance and luck to play their role in research methodology, is a potentially important yet frequently underrated research tool.⁵⁹ Ladd distinguishes several kinds of chance, arguing that to maximise the probability of finding something useful the researcher needs to prioritise specific research behaviours and practices, combining skill, interests and aptitude. In practice-led research, the role of chance can be openly acknowledged and accentuated, and strategies need not necessarily be purposeful or pre-

⁵³ Ibid.
⁵⁴ Barret and Bolt, *Practice As Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* Introduction.
⁵⁷ Ibid.: 70.
⁵⁸ Ibid.
determined. Instead they may “emerge and operate according to specific demands of action and movement in time.” Leavy suggests that the legitimisation of such uncertainty and lack of structure can contribute to the meaning-making process of a project when it allows an ‘incubation phase’ of research to emerge. During this phase, patterns may emerge as ideas, themes interplay and the artist thinks conceptually, symbolically and metaphorically about the work being created. Both McNiff and Ladd make similar points. Ladd comments for example that “Sometimes the best thing to do when...burning for an answer is to quit trying to consciously find one,” a process he describes as ‘flexible persistence’. Again, as discussed in Chapter Four, chance, luck and occasionally giving up became influential parts of this project.

I found these observations on practice-led research methodology relevant to my thinking, and I adapted several of them to how I approached this project. I was looking for a methodology that could combine elements from two disciplines: art and economics. In other words, I was searching for a methodology that could incorporate aspects of an artistic approach that stressed the primacy of the expressive qualities of form to convey meaning and express ideas that would otherwise be inaccessible to language alone, and to combine that with a traditional, positivist approach that drew on objective analysis and modelling. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, Cahnmann-Taylor, Eisner, Barone, as well as others, all argue that one of the strengths of a hybridised approach to practice-led research is the opportunity to draw on interdisciplinary methodologies. Cahnmann-Taylor, for example, highlights the benefits of using the tools and approaches of multiple disciplines to explore complex questions. As she notes, these “blurred genres” of research may be particularly productive where artists began their careers in disciplines other than art because creative connections and new insights may be developed both during the project and beyond it. As someone whose earlier career had been in economic analysis I was encouraged by these observations, and was confident I could develop a hybridised approach that built on my skills and experience.

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60 Barret and Bolt, *Practice As Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* Introduction.
64 Cahnmann-Taylor, *Arts Based Research In Education*, 9.
Part Two – The role of economic conditions and still-life painting

In the second part of this chapter I discuss three questions. First, what were the economic conditions to which I was responding? Second, what was it about those conditions that motivated my response? And third, was still-life painting a valid method to respond to those conditions?

Australia’s economic conditions are inextricably bound to developments in the global economy. The global economy has been undergoing a fundamental transition over several decades. Transition and change in economic conditions, or in underlying ideology are not unusual. In the 1940s, the economist Joseph Schumpeter pointed out there were patterns in economic activity and thinking, with old ideologies constantly giving way to the new in a process of search, adaptation and evolution. Often this process was positive, hence Schumpeter’s metaphor of “creative destruction”.

From the mid-1940s until the late 1970s the prevailing economic ideology in western, industrialised nations was essentially Keynesian. As such, policies emphasised the demand side of the economy, and economic conditions were marked by rising prosperity and a comparatively equitable distribution of income. After the late 1970s the emphasis shifted towards stimulating economic activity through supply-side factors. This was marked by a resurgence of interest in nineteenth-century theories of laissez-faire capitalism, free markets and deregulation. The term economic neoliberalism is used to describe the more extreme application of supply-side economics. It is not a precise term, but a description by the economist Elizabeth Thurbon says:

Neoliberalism is an economic philosophy and associated set of policy practices that reflects a belief in the allocative efficiency of free markets and a commitment to a regulatory as opposed to a strategic role for the

67 Ibid.: 81–86.
68 The term Keynesian economics is derived from the macroeconomic theories of John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946). His most influential works include A Treatise on Money (1930) and The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money (1936).
State across all spheres of governance (economic, social and environmental).\textsuperscript{71}

The evidence for supply side reform was generally positive. In Australia, for example, the economic reforms and restructuring introduced over the period from the early 1980s until the early 1990s avoided serious economic problems.\textsuperscript{72} The benefits of subsequent reforms under economic neoliberalism, however, are contested. Evidence shows the benefits of reform were unevenly distributed, while other claims were exaggerated by those who saw economic neoliberalism as politically expedient.\textsuperscript{73, 74} Increased radicalisation since the 1990s contributed to increasingly problematic outcomes. Prominent economists warned these outcomes imposed growing economic inefficiencies on the community. These included widening inequalities in income and wealth, rising debt, a concentration of political power to protect the status quo, inequitable tax and revenue contributions, weaker government budgets and lower spending on public goods and services, including public health, education and welfare.\textsuperscript{75} Economists also warned these outcomes risked political, social and cultural instability.\textsuperscript{76}

These risks have since been manifested. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 was the biggest and most severe shock to the global economic system since the Great Depression of the 1930s. It was caused in part and then exacerbated significantly by the failures of economic neoliberalism, especially in financial regulation. The consequences of the GFC have been profound and are yet to be fully assessed, either quantitatively or qualitatively. Among other things, however, the scale of the shock and the duration of its consequences suggest that old ideologies, especially those that have failed, should be compelled to give way to the new in a process of search, adaptation and evolution, as Schumpeter predicted.


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.: 69.

\textsuperscript{74} Feldstein, Supply Side Economics, 7.

\textsuperscript{75} Robert Reich, Beyond Outrage (New York: Vintage, 2012), Chapter 1.

Evidence of this Schumpeterian process have emerged. It includes the rise of economic insecurity, populism and the cultural backlash against the status quo in Europe, the United States, Asia and elsewhere, including in Australia.\(^{77}\)

Overall, my perception was that Australia’s current economic conditions were characterised by accelerated change and uncertainty. Conditions were noisy, active and occasionally destructive. As the philosopher, Marshal Berman says:

> To be modern … is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one’s world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air.\(^{78}\)

Berman’s description of a ‘maelstrom’ of economic change and all that is solid melting into thin air is apt and poetic. But it also obscures an equally valid perception that some aspects of the economic condition are not undergoing change. People have engaged for millennia in economic activities such as production, consumption, trade and employment. They have used concepts such as value and money, and have been motivated by basic behavioural characteristics such as greed, selfishness, power, fame, materialism, generosity and charity, among others. The point can also be illustrated by examining material culture. It provides an insight into the way people lived in the past, what they acquired, held and what they valued, just as it can provide an insight into the lives of those in the contemporary, complex, globalised economy. It seemed to me, therefore, that all that is solid does not always melt into thin air.

My response to those economic conditions was shaped both by my experience as an economic analyst and as a still-life artist. For some, economics might seem an emotionless theme for visual art, confirming Velthuis’ observation about the need for art and economics to be kept separate. The description of global and Australian economic conditions, however, suggests a different response is justified. My experience of economic analysis revealed emotions that ranged from compassion and equity through to greed and selfishness. It also confirmed my belief that knowledge and understanding of economics, economic conditions

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\(^{77}\) As seen, for example, in Brexit in the United Kingdom, the ascendancy of libertarian, populist and conservative political movements in Europe, Asia, the United States, Australia and elsewhere. These issues are discussed in more detail in R. F. Inglehart and P. Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*, Harvard Faculty Research Working Paper, RWP16-026, August 2016.

and the ethics of economics could be investigated through art. Expressing knowledge and understanding of these conditions might be done typically through words and objective, quantitative data. But such an exclusive focus risks missing other, equally important aspects of what comprises the economic condition. What people think and feel, and how that may be expressed – including through visual modes of expression – are also important. Visual modes of expression are the subject of this project, and they operate in ways that are different to verbal modes, and the two do not easily or neatly overlap.\(^79\) Not all economic change and uncertainty can be analysed objectively nor explained in words. Often responses are too subjective – they are felt rather than understood. These responses might range from optimism through to pessimism, disengagement to anxiety or from despair to anger – all of which may be reflected through a disparate range of idiosyncratic and sometimes ineffable modes. Artistic responses to economic conditions in the early twenty-first century, for example, are being made through printmaking, sculpture, multi-media and video art, in addition to still-life painting.\(^80\) Social media has encouraged the emergence of music and performance art to comment on aspects of the economic condition.\(^81\)

That prompts the third question. Can still-life painting be a valid form of expression of economic conditions? My view was that it not only could be, but should be. The world economy is undergoing an historic transition. The consequences for social, political, cultural and environmental development and organisation are profound. I would reject a suggestion that the relationship between economic activity of this magnitude and art is something that should be confined to those with training or experience in only one discipline. As Velthuis argues, it would be elitist for any discipline to insist on having the monopoly on the production of economic knowledge and insight.\(^82\) Artists may therefore respond validly by investigating their current economic conditions, critiquing them or representing concepts, symbols or meanings of the economy they believe to be relevant and important. In the process, they may usefully add to the overall knowledge and understanding of how the economy functions and affects everyday life.\(^83\)

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81 For example the video artists Titanic Sinclair and Moriah Pereira use the internet to comment on post-materialism (http://www.idolator.com/7641471/that-poppy-money-video-premiere).  
83 Ibid.: 12.
I hoped to represent my responses to current economic conditions – conditions that feature both change and stability – through still-life painting. I intended to do that by experimenting, testing and pushing beyond what I saw as my bounded universe of economic understanding and knowledge, as well as beyond what was capable of being expressed in words and numbers alone. As a first step in this task, I built a model of the relationship between economic conditions and creativity in still-life painting.

**The phase-cycle model of still-life painting**

Cultural historians Jonathan Israel, Roberto Lopez and Vytautus Kavolis investigated the connection between economic activity and creativity. They argue a causal relationship between economic conditions and periods of artistic creativity is probable, with Kavolis suggesting the relationship unfolds in a sequence of events. When I looked at developments in the Netherlands during the period of the “Golden Age” of trade, science, industrialisation and art – including still-life painting – from the early 1600s until around 1670, I saw evidence of a strong correlation, if not a causal relationship. The period was one of dramatic change and disruption to the Dutch economy as it underwent a transition from agrarianism to a broad-based manufacturing, services and trading economy. There was rapid urbanisation and a rise of a wealthy merchant class that espoused Calvinism and rejected Catholicism and its iconography. As Israel says, the result was an economic environment in which “very many artists could have prosperous careers … demand for high-quality pictures was almost insatiable”. I drew on these observations, as well as research by others, to develop a phase-cycle model of how still-life painting might have responded to economic change. The model is shown in figure 19.

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88 I drew much of this evidence from Erik Larsen, and J.P. Davidson, *Calvinistic Economy and Seventeenth Century Dutch Art*.
90 Israel, “Adjusting to Hard Times”: 350.
In building the model I relied on evidence from the Dutch economy and artistic behaviour during the seventeenth century. I was conscious in doing so, however, of how limited this evidence was. Even when available, the evidence was complex and contradictory.\textsuperscript{92} Moreover, as noted by art researchers such as Macleod and Holdridge, there are risks in over-extending the ideas and language from one discipline when applying them to another.\textsuperscript{93} While

\textsuperscript{92}Taylor comments, for example, that evidence about Dutch still-life painters is thin, and primary texts, such as Lairesse’s \textit{Schilderboek}, are contradictory. Paul Taylor, \textit{Dutch Flower Painting} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 52.

looking neat for presentational purposes, the phases described by the model are unlikely to be as discrete as the figure suggests. In the real world the process would be disjunctive, with multiple phases underway, considerable overlapping between each, a gradual merging from one phase into another and the occasional movement forth and back.

In the first phase of the model there is a state of equilibrium; that is, there is little variation in style, ideas and techniques of painting the still life compared with the phases that follow. In the Netherlands, as well as the rest of western Europe, this phase corresponds to the period before the seventeenth century. By the outset of the seventeenth century, however, the still life is emerging as a genre in its own right, and it subsequently evolves rapidly. This evolution coincided with the economic expansion in the Netherlands. The expansion was not smooth but was interrupted by periods of economic volatility.94 The Dutch economy went into recession in 1621, which lasted until around the mid 1640s, a period that also featured further disruption caused by the tulip mania speculative bubble from 1634 to 1637.95 At the same time, the northern Dutch provinces adjusted to an influx of migrants, particularly from Flanders. Many of these migrants were trained, skilled artists and, according to the art historian Michael John Montias, they exerted a profound influence on styles, ideas and techniques across the range of artistic fields, including still-life painting.96 As Montias further observes, Flemish immigration not only increased supply, and therefore competition within the painting market, but it also contributed to growing demand.97

In phases three and four of the model, artists adjust to new economic conditions, with their opportunities and threats, through searching, experimentation and competition between emergent styles. There is, to use Kavolis’ term, an “artistic efflorescence” of ideas and ways to communicate.98 Bryson points out, however, that despite the growth in wealth there was also a deep anxiety in Dutch society during this period, and it was reflected in still-life painting. Objects such as plates, for example, are depicted balanced insecurely on the edge of the tabletop, cups are upended or even broken, and vanitas objects such as the skull or the flickering candle abound. Grootenboer and Bryson both observe that the void also appears at this time – the space Bryson refers to as a “radical emptiness”.99,100 Pieter Claesz’s painting

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94 Taylor, *Dutch Flower Painting*, 3.
96 Montias, *Artists and Artisans in Delft*, 45.
97 Ibid.: 48.
*Still life with Römer, Silver Tazza and Bread* (fig. 20) can be used to exemplify these developments in still-life painting.

![Image of Still life with Römer, Silver Tazza and Bread](image)

**Fig. 20.** Pieter Claesz, *Still life with Römer, Silver Tazza and Bread* (1637)

The objects selected by Claesz include the symbols of the Eucharist such as walnuts, bread, wine and the chalice. The peeled lemon resonates with Calvinistic philosophy and its reference to the choice between the bitter and the sweet.\(^{101}\) But other objects reflect the economic conditions of the early seventeenth-century Netherlands. The tall *römer* is manufactured from *waldglas* – a green-coloured glass developed in Germany.\(^{102}\) The *römer* is half filled with white wine, probably also imported from Germany. The various foods, such as the olives, lemon and nuts are not local, but would have come from warmer Mediterranean regions. The candy dish with its oriental characters is a reference to Dutch trade links with


the Asia and the Far East. In the upper right-hand diagonal of the painting is the void; the emptiness that refers to what is not there. When I look at this painting I see an expression of the conflict between a self-assured economic materialism and a spiritual vacuity associated with doubt and anxiety.

In phases five and six, the process of establishing dominance within the still-life genre intensifies. Artists distinguish themselves and their work from their competitors through techniques such as horizontal and vertical product differentiation. Horizontal product differentiation resulted in still-life painting being divided into specialised categories, such as the breakfast scene or the pronkstilleven style mastered by artists such as Jan Davidsz de Heem. Vertical product differentiation occurred as artists distinguished their work from their competitors by the intensity of their embedded labour, or by the prohibitive costs of the objects they painted. In 1672, however, the golden age of Dutch still-life painting came to an end. But phase seven does not bring a sudden end to the period of creativity and innovation in still-life painting. A remaining burst of innovation occurs as some artists appeal to wealthy buyers’ preferences for conspicuous consumption. In the Netherlands, this emerged as the houding style, a compositional arrangement that references a refined harmony of colours, shapes and forms, making the painted image analogous to a harmony in music. The style can be demonstrated in the flower paintings of Rachel Ruysch and Jan van Huysum (figs. 21 and 22).

105 Paul Taylor, Dutch Flower Painting, 89–90.
Using the phase-cycle model, I interpret the emergence of this style as a response to the luxury and the “morally dubious superfluity” that may arise when an economy peaks and loses its links to its original foundations of effort, investment and thrift. Overall, there is little doubt that the development of the flower painting as a subgenre within still-life painting was strongly influenced by its economic circumstances.

**Part Three – The influence of traditional and contemporary still-life painting**

**Dutch still-life painting**

Dutch still-life painting from the seventeenth century played an important role in instigating my curiosity about the relationship between economic conditions and the artists’ response. I saw evidence in a number of paintings from this period, particularly up until around the 1760s, that suggested some artists were aware of these conditions and interrogated that experience through their still-life painting. As a result, they made choices about what objects to depict, how to represent them, what colours to use, how to contextualise objects and their use of symbolism and signage. *Still life with Römer, Silver Tazza and Bread*, by the Dutch

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106 Ibid.: 1.
still-life artist Pieter Claesz, which I referred to in Part Two of this chapter (fig. 20), can be looked at as an example. In this painting the artist has selected and depicted utilitarian, household objects, and used the near-monochromatic palette. I noticed that the chromatic austerity of the greys in this – as well as in similar paintings – is offset by touches of colour. There is a yellow ochre in the crusty bread and a green-grey in the base of the römer in the background. I was drawn to the effects this created, including the tension between their austere symbolism, colour and their great attention to detail. I wondered why these artists chose the objects depicted and used such a monochromatic palette. I speculated they were making a distinction between the symbolism of these mainly manufactured objects, such as the valuable bowls, cups and plates, and the naturalness and comfort of objects such as the bread. When taken in the broader context of still-life painting in this period, Claesz may also have been commenting on the rise of the Netherlands’ wealth, with its emphasis on mercantilism and material gain, and was contrasting it with Calvinism’s colourless austerity. Bryson comments on this. He notes that the use of the monochromatic technique and the choice of objects reveal an anxiety about material consumption. He suggests that Claesz’s work in particular pioneered an innovative shift in style in which there was the offering of “one solution to the problem of affluence: absolute refusal of material excess”. As discussed in the following two chapters, this was a point I also wanted to investigate through my painting practice.

Israel also comments on the monochromatic style evident in the Dutch still life. He argues that it might not have been an aesthetic choice alone. He notes the style was adopted by many painters at the time because the intense pigments and hues, such as lapis lazuli, azurite, ultramarine, carmine and vermilion, became too expensive as a result of trade wars, while the earth pigments and smalts remained comparatively cheap. This made producing monochromatic paintings a less risky investment in an uncertain and evolving market. Israel’s observations therefore add strength to the argument that artists were influenced by and were responding to their economic circumstances.

108 Ibid.: 115.
110 Ibid.: 463.
The review of relevant seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings put in place a number of foundations for how this project could develop, including the idea that still-life painting may reflect the economic circumstances in which it was created. It shows, moreover, that material culture, such as household and utilitarian objects, could be used to effectively represent those circumstances. I wanted to investigate these findings further by looking at contemporary artists and their responses to economic conditions.

**Contemporary still-life painting**

As I explained in the Introduction, contemporary still-life paintings by artists such as Claudio Bravo, Andy Warhol as well as a number of contemporary Australian artists were important to the development of my practice as the project progressed. As I looked at examples of paintings by these artists I saw a number of possible ways in which the traditions established by Dutch still-life artists remained relevant. I was confident these traditions could be built upon and applied to my interpretation of contemporary economic conditions. These artists advanced still-life painting, rejuvenated the choice of objects being looked at, the way they could be looked at and understood, and introduced new and creative interpretations of historical art. Several opened up additional interpretations of the world and the role of material culture and economic activity.

As discussed in Chapter One, a number of Claudio Bravo’s still-life paintings suggested that imagery from the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries could be appropriated and inflected with modern-day references. In doing this, Bravo applied several compositional elements from traditional painting to refer to trends in modern consumerism and to reinterpret the space behind objects. Inspired by the possibilities of this approach, I experimented with it in the *Household Objects* series through such works as *Still life with Four Jars* (fig. 23). In *Still life with Four Jars* I appropriated and experimented with Bravo’s use of the rug draped and folded over the table top, as shown in his painting *Citara hindu* (fig. 24). I chose, however, to use a more contemporary subject and ground, in this case a group of household glass jars, preserving vessels and the shadow of plastic blinds.

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Like many still-life painters, Bravo frequently places his subject in a shallow pictorial space, and uses a colour field to reinforce the overall effect of his palette. In *Still Life with Persian Carpet* (fig. 25), his use of rich and vibrant yellows and oranges in the fruits finds an echo in the background as well as in the patterning on the traditional Persian carpet and the edges of the modern clay vases. The *Wrapped Package Series* of paintings by Bravo was also influential (fig. 26). I had previously painted wrapped objects, and thought this aspect of Bravo’s imagery could be applied to my exploration of consumerism, as I will discuss further in Chapter Four.
Tom Wesselmann’s still-life paintings and collages also make use of imagery from earlier artists, such as his inclusion of a painting by Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) in *Still life #20* (fig. 27).

I was drawn to Wesselmann’s choice of still-life objects because I considered they also offered an approach to bridging the gap between the traditional and contemporary still-life. At first glance, the objects Wesselmann depicts, such as packaged bread, bottled beer and soft drink, may appear ordinary and unremarkable. But their ordinariness is a comment on western, contemporary consumerism. These food items are produced, advertised and
presented as objects of desire. But, in another sense, they are tasteless. When contrasted with the simpler and wholesome foods in Dutch still-life painting, they appear confected and garish.

I found Wesselmann’s use of the ordinary to express the extraordinary reminiscent of the response by Luc Tuymans (born 1958) to historical events. The painting Still Life (fig. 28) was produced in response to witnessing the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States. Although large, the painting is not a grandiose, history painting of a tragic event. Instead, it depicts a collection of unremarkable objects including a glass jug, half filled with an unidentified liquid, a variety of fruit-like objects, plates and a suggestion of folded cloth. The objects are composed within a large, featureless, light blue void.

The banality of the objects and their ambiguous representation is deliberate and, according to the artist, suggests that occasionally the gap between an image and an historical event is so large that all a painting can do is stand as a comparatively unremarkable monument to the inadequacy of language. I considered Tuymans’ approach to this painting applicable to the approach I was seeking to respond to historically significant economic events. Like Tuymans,

I also wanted to paint plain and unremarkable objects as part of that response. I also felt the way Tuymans used the empty space surrounding the objects functions in ways similar to the void in paintings by Claesz. In Tuymans’ case, the space is particularly expansive. It makes the objects appear detached from any obvious means of support and poses questions about what surface the objects may be sitting on and their possible location. These objects seem to have a vulnerability about them that transcends the precariousness suggested in the traditional still life where objects may be balanced on the edge of a shelf or table top. Overall, I found Tuymans’ *Still Life* expressed through visual form knowledge and understanding of an event that perhaps would not have been revealed as eloquently through other means, including words and statistics.

While undertaking field work in the United States I saw a range of nineteenth-century American still-life paintings. Among them were paintings by John Haberle (1856–1933), William Harnett (1848–1892), John Peto (1854–1907), Alexander Pope (1849–1924), Jefferson David Chalfant (1856–1931) and Victor Dubreuill (c. 1840–after 1908). Many of these works make references to money. For example, Victor Dubreuill’s *Barrels of Money* (fig. 29) presents a prescient image of a future economy in which ordinary people sit by idly while a corrupt financial system transfers their wealth to the rich.  

![Fig. 29. Victor Dubreuill, *Barrels of Money* (c. 1897)](image)

I also viewed Andy Warhol’s silk-screen paintings of money and symbols of money. This included *Dollar Sign* (fig. 30), in which the iconic symbol for currency is repeated within a grid of equal spaces and set against a yellow ground. I reflected on this and other images of

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money and in doing so became increasingly intrigued by the potential for money, notably coins and banknotes, to evoke responses about overall economic conditions. I began searching for ways to incorporate such imagery into my paintings to symbolise aspects of economic activity such as wealth, consumerism or greed. I discuss this search and my exploration of money more fully in the following chapter.

Fig. 30. Andy Warhol, *Dollar Sign* (c. 1987)

Contemporary Australian artists have explored the potential of the still life through a range of artistic media, including the sculptures of traditional still-life themes by Ricky Swallow, the photography of Robyn Stacey and still-life paintings by Sam Leach, Pam Tippett, Thornton Walker, Jude Rae and Michael Zavros, among others.
Fig. 31. Jude Rae, *Still Life 176* (2005) (Detail)

Fig. 32. (Left) Michael Zavros, *Blue Suit* (2002)
Fig. 33. (Right) Michael Zavros, *Chalk Stripes* (2002)

Jude Rae influenced my practice because she is an accomplished Australian still-life painter as well as having been one of my teachers. Many of her paintings feature low key, non-narrative images of household objects. *Still Life 176* (fig. 31), for example, presents a grouping of eclectic objects, including an amber glass bottle, a vase, plastic container, a
gas canister and an electric jug. The composition is traditional, with the objects arranged on the table top and set within light coloured space that echoes some of the colours and tones of the objects. Paintings such as this were a motivating factor in key decisions I made at the outset of the project about what types of objects I could include in my first, exploratory works, as well as about light and space.

Many of Rae’s paintings of household objects go beyond simple representation. As Rae says, they can also evoke a response in the viewer that allows “the attention to dwell on the formal and material aspects of representational painting, encouraging a more reflective and considered approach to the complexities of visual perception”. That observation is similar to comments by Bryson that still-life painting often “unfolds at the interface between … cultural zones.” As Rae suggests, one zone is the technical and material process of creating the still-life painting. Bryson identifies other zones as the household, with its artefacts of everyday domestic life, and the zone of signs and symbolism. I focussed on these zones as part of this project, with each adapted to an exploration and modelling of material culture within the context of current economic conditions and contemporary painting culture.

Michael Zavros’ depiction of objects in his still-life paintings are a response to issues such as materialism, mortality, consumption and, in particular, the vanity of the postmodern economy. For example, Blue Suit (fig. 32) and Chalk Stripes (fig. 33) are two of a series of similar paintings completed around 2002 that show highly polished shoes, suits, ties, cufflinks and the clothing typically associated with those focused on material gain and superficial appearance. The paintings show glimpses of the male subject, apparently preening and smug. His use of empty and often colourless space around his objects is, again, a feature I found relevant to my exploration of the void. I thought Zavros’ use of the void appeared to mimic advertising techniques where the object is isolated and the viewers’ gaze focused. I sensed a quality in several of Zavros’ later works, however, that to my mind and for the purposes of this project separated them from the more humble and austere subject matter and themes evident in Rae’s paintings or in earlier Dutch still-life painting. I thought, for example, that Zavros’ still-life paintings, including figures 32 and 33, work in ways similar to a mock encomium. By this I mean the paintings appear to extol the prestige,

117 Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 14.
118 Ibid., 14.
desirability and value of objects such as expensive suits, shoes and luxury cars. At the same time, the intense appeal to material value suggests these objects are fetishised and their meaning has become empty.\footnote{J. Denison, “A Longing for Meaning: Michael Zavros and The Prince”, 8 July 2013, http://panopticpress.org.au/?page_id=104 (accessed May 6, 2017).} I discuss the role of consumerism, advertising and the role of branding as marketing strategies in the contemporary economy in more detail in Chapters Three and Four.

As I reviewed these works, I reflected further on the application of the phase-cycle model. I concluded that the evidence from these contemporary artists revealed the model’s limitations as it was extended beyond the seventeenth century. The modern economy is too different from the one that existed in Europe at that time. It is dramatically larger, more complex and consists of multiple layers of networks of domestic and international connections. Additionally, research into the operation of transnational corporations by the sociologist Geert Hofstede suggests cultural differences are likely to make significant differences to how still-life artists may respond to perceptions of economic conditions and how that might be reflected through their selection of objects and their use of symbolism.\footnote{Geert Hofstede, Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980).} These cultural elements became more persuasive as I broadened the scope of the project to investigate South American and Asian artists, and their response to economic conditions. I discuss this further in Chapters Three and Four.

**Conclusion**

This chapter described the conceptual and theoretical framework within which this project was contextualised. I discussed why I sought a hybridised approach to developing a research methodology, one that could blend elements of qualitative, practice-led research with traditional research approaches. My perceptions and opinions of current economic conditions were also described. They added to the conceptual and theoretical framework by helping to identify relevant aspects of imagery and symbolism that could be explored and developed further through still-life painting.

My studio practice was influenced by the traditions and history of Dutch still-life painting, especially from the period around 1630 through to the mid 1670s. As I reflected on that body of work I found myself increasingly impressed by its understated complexity. The paintings exhibit an economy of style to present images of solemnity and simplicity. The economy of their composition, limited colour and tonal values, and the humble subject matter sit...
paradoxically with the ability of these works to speak eloquently of complex issues such as materialism, consumption and spiritual anxiety. I responded to this economical means of expression more than I did to the elaborate *pronkstilleven* style that followed.

Contemporary art was also influential, including developments in contemporary Australian painting. As discussed in Part Three of this chapter, and again in more detail in Chapter Three, much of this work was conceptually different to Dutch still-life painting and appears to reflect an increasingly broad, nuanced and innovative interpretation of the economic conditions within which it was created.

The phase-cycle model described in Part Two helped to interpret how the development of creativity in still-life painting may be correlated to economic activity. It shed light on how the linkages between the two events – changing economic conditions and creativity – might occur in a sequence of related events. The model appeared limited, however, when extended beyond its initial base. Nevertheless, it served to raise questions about my response to contemporary still life and to broader questions about my thesis. The phase-cycle model reappears in Chapters Three and Four, where it proved to be a useful guide to understanding my response to the disruption that occurred in the project.

As noted at the outset of this chapter, the theoretical and conceptual context continued to evolve and undergo refinement over the course of the project. But even in the initial stages of the project, it prompted questions about methodology and methods. After completing the *Household Objects* series, I decided to review my response to my perceptions and opinions of current economic conditions and how to reflect that through painting. In the following chapter I describe the next stages of my painting practice and how I extended my exploration.
Chapter Three: Extending the Exploration of the Still life

Introduction
In Chapter One I described the body of work that began my exploration of material culture and my reflection of current economic conditions through still-life painting. I began with Household Objects, and broadened my exploration through the Jugs of War and Cleaning Products series. I felt there was an alignment between the style, composition and thematic purpose in these initial works and the traditional tropes in early Dutch still-life painting. However, as noted at the end of Chapter One, maintaining this alignment became more complex as the project assimilated contemporary artistic and economic influences and I began to experiment with a broader range of themes and subject matter. At the same time, the process of reflection between practice and theory was advanced by the parallel development of the theoretical framework and methodology described in Chapter Two. As I extended this development, questions emerged about what icons of material culture to choose, what objects might best represent the abstract concepts of the economy, and what aspects of current economic conditions could be selected and incorporated most effectively into the project.

As discussed in the previous chapter, I looked at still-life paintings while undertaking field work in the United States and became intrigued by images and symbols of money. I describe several of these images in this chapter, inquiring into my response to their evocative qualities. I then investigate the theme of money in more detail through my still-life painting practice, searching for effective ways to respond to contemporary conditions and economic materialism. In the second part of this chapter, I broaden my investigation by examining the potential of valuable objects to symbolise the qualities of money. That interrogation led to the pursuit of several paths, some successful, some divergent and inconsistent, and others that revealed a slippage between intention and outcome. Overall, this chapter is a description of a lengthy, challenging and ultimately unsettling episode in this project.

Paintings of money
Images of money can be found in early still-life painting. The Dutch painting The Money Changer and His Wife by Marinus Claeszoon van Reymerswaele (c. 1490–c.1546), (fig. 34), for example, includes coinage as an important element in its overall composition.
The painting shows two figures at a table. Despite the dominance of the picture by the two characters, they share attention with the piles of silver and copper coins that spill across the centre of the table. A detailed view of the coins shows an assured technical ability to elicit the gleam of different metals, the weight and texture of individual coins and traces of lettering and milling (fig. 34, right). Images of coins and money can be stimulating because they evoke such visceral responses. I have childhood memories, for example, of pocket money made up of small denomination, pre-decimal coins in colours such as tarnished bronze and bright silver. Like the characters in van Reymerswaele’s painting, therefore, I too had once piled up my collection of coins and indulged in the haptic experience of enjoying their qualities. As a child, however, I did not see coins solely as abstract economic instruments of exchange or a store of wealth, but as objects of desire.

Yuran puts forward the proposition that the desire for money may be a more realistic reflection of economic activity than orthodox economics suggests.121 Money consists of tangible objects, and these can be represented realistically to convey perceptions and knowledge of the world.122 But as Yuran adds, some of these qualities that go beyond the obvious physical and symbolic, an observation I found relevant to this arts-based research project. Money also has subtle qualities that include the unconventional, the hidden, the unfamiliar or the overlooked. It can be, for example, a medium or carrier of economic history. And some of these qualities, including my childhood recollections of money, may be

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121 Yuran, What Money Wants, 2.
122 Ibid.: 23.
revealed and understood better through visual art than through words and economic text, as I
discuss with a reference to examples of paintings of money.

In addition to the example from the sixteenth century in figure 34, money features in the
nineteenth-century US still-life rack paintings (figs. 35 and 36) referred to earlier in Chapter
Two.

Fig. 35. John Haberle, *A Bachelor’s Drawer* (1890–94)

Fig. 36. John Haberle, *A Bachelor’s Drawer* (1890–94), detail

During the twentieth century artists such as Andy Warhol also depicted money. In Warhol’s
early work money was represented in a reduced, stylised manner, as in *One Dollar Bill*
(*Silver Certificate*) (fig. 37). In his later work, Warhol returned to the theme of money using
symbols and situated his work within the context of pop art and silk-screen painting (fig.
In these later works, Warhol used overlapping colours to create a vibrancy and depth I thought was absent in the earlier example. At the same time, they have an elegance and power that I found surprisingly effective when contrasted with the detailed work of the earlier nineteenth-century American still-life artists.

![Image of Andy Warhol's One Dollar Bill (Silver Certificate) (1962)](image)

**Fig. 37.** Andy Warhol, *One Dollar Bill (Silver Certificate)* (1962)

![Image of Andy Warhol's Dollar Sign (1981)](image)

**Fig. 38.** Andy Warhol, *Dollar Sign* (1981)

Amongst contemporary Chinese still-life artists, the painter Huang Rui (b. 1952) has painted modern Chinese currency. Huang Rui’s over-sized banknotes and their introduced text

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comment on the commercialisation of modern China and the way the power of money has pervaded all sectors of society from business through to politics (fig. 39).

Fig. 39. Huang Rui, Shadow/Upholding (2009)

In Australia, Fiona Hall investigated the relationship between money, the economy and the environment in her work Leaf Litter (fig. 40). In this series, Hall used banknotes from a variety of countries and overlaid them with images of plants that have become endangered as a result of deforestation programs to produce, among other things, banknotes.

Fig. 40. Fiona Hall, Leaf Litter (2000)

I was intrigued by the possibilities suggested by these paintings of money. In the Money Series I explored how I could represent money as an object, money as a symbol of power, fame, security and wealth, as well as represent the visceral response to the sight of money described earlier. To create the painting The Big Pile of Money (fig. 41) I set up a model of domestic and international banknotes wrapped into a cylindrical shape. The banknotes are

depicted as contained by several red rubber bands and positioned centrally on a patterned cloth.

![The Big Pile of Money (2013)](image)

**Fig. 41. The Big Pile of Money (2013)**

I thought the painting produces a stillness and stability, accentuated by the centrality of the object and the muted green-grey ground against which the pile of banknotes is placed. On the other hand, I found the sense of desire normally found when looking at money to be somewhat muted, as was the visceral response to coinage that had been so apparent when looking at van Reymerswaele’s painting or when I recalled my childhood coin collections. In the work *Coin on Bedspread* (fig. 42), I therefore focused on money as coinage rather than banknotes. The appearance of the hard and shiny metallic surface of the coin is contrasted with the softer texture of the cloth, an effect that I felt was more successful in reminding me of the power of the image of coins to evoke memories, such as the tactile sensation of touching them and feeling their weight.
I found several aspects of these images of money unexpected. There is, for example, a stillness in *The Big Pile of Money* and *Coin on Bedspread* that stands in contrast to the prevalent image of the economy as dynamic. It is, though, an outcome that could be considered consistent with the alternative theme that the economy is not always a ‘maelstrom’. When reviewing these paintings I noticed that the symbolism of money in both these works operates in ways that differ from Warhol’s silkscreen money paintings. I drew on Yuran’s observation that money may have both obvious as well as more subtle symbolic meanings, and speculated that Warhol’s dollar sign represented more than a reference to a medium of exchange. In this case, the dollar symbol offers a rich depth of possible iconic meaning, encompassing economic history, power or the role of key figures in economics, banking and finance. It was therefore unlikely to be interpreted as anything other than a symbol for money, and not as money itself. *The Big Pile of Money* and *Coin on Bedspread*, on the other hand, were literal depictions of money and coins. Additionally, these objects are placed within the historically-loaded context of traditional still-life painting and its tropes, such as the table top, the patterned cloth and the space that surrounds them.

In *Money on the Wall* (fig. 43) and *Twenty Dollar Note* (fig. 44), I edged away from the former literal depiction of coins and banknotes and presented money together with other objects, such as financial documents. In *Money on the Wall* I explored the possibilities offered by Dutch and American rack paintings. In this painting (fig. 43), I depicted a combination of money and a variety of receipts and graphs pinned to a wall and contained within a shallow space. Compositionally, the off-white wall against which the objects are pinned presents a largely undifferentiated space, isolating the group of objects. I activated this space by adding textural detail, such as marks and dripping paint. The decision transformed the ground from its previous appearance as a form of void into a less ambiguous and more literal depiction of a wall.

![Money on the Wall](image.jpg)

**Fig. 43. Money on the Wall** (2013)

In *Twenty Dollar Note* (fig. 44), I investigated Yuran’s theme that money is an object that can also serve as a medium or carrier of economic history. In this case, I painted a ragged and damaged Australian twenty-dollar note overlaying a pattern of electronic circuitry. My intention was to represent my perception of an economy in transition away from conventional money to new methods of financial transaction.
Fig. 44. Twenty Dollar Note (2013)

The investigation of this theme saw money emerge in my paintings as a subject that was both an object and a symbol. As an object, such as a banknote or a coin, money exists as a non-abstract entity, capable of being seen, touched and represented in ways similar to any commodity embedded within a society. As a symbol it can be used to signify the qualities that characterise contemporary economic conditions and material culture. As stated in the Introduction, these qualities include acquisition and consumption, value, wealth, social status, occupation, labour and power as well as the wider norms and values that underpin economic behaviour.

**Paintings of valuable objects and symbols of money**

The rise of the Dutch economy coincided with a rise in popularity and demand for paintings across all genres, not just for the still life. As Montias says:

> Works of art, ranging from simple prints and copies to originals hung in almost all Dutch homes. For example, pictures of some kind or another were found in about two thirds of Delft households.\(^{126}\)

The remarkable rise in the popularity of painting cannot be explained by assumptions about Dutch households suddenly recognising the aesthetic qualities of painting, although that may

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have been a factor. It is more likely that the increased demand for paintings was driven by rising incomes and the need to find ways of preserving wealth at a time when financial markets were comparatively undeveloped. Commodities, including paintings, can act as a store of wealth. In the case of high quality still-life paintings they might do more than serve as a form of saving. They could be enjoyed as well as appreciate in value, and in a well-functioning art market gains could be realised with comparative ease. I argue, therefore, that during the seventeenth century still-life paintings in the Netherlands performed a dual role. They were valued as aesthetic objects as well as a form of commodity money, that is, a form of money that could be distinguished from the fiat money created and backed by the government. I therefore returned to an investigation of material culture and inanimate, household objects, but moved beyond the function of ordinary household objects to consider the role of commodity money.

The postage stamp, for example, can be positioned between a form of money and a commodity, having both a denominated monetary value and an historical value as a collectable object. It also offered a potential to define, reflect and interpret the circumstances of its issue, including prevailing political, cultural and economic aspirations and conditions. I experimented with several approaches, focusing on images of influential economic figures. The theme, however, did not realise its potential. The flatness of the objects restricted their role to convey three dimensional forms in space, the introduction of portraiture was inconsistent with an investigation into still-life painting and, in my view, the stamp lacked the ability to express my response to value the way money or luxurious objects could.

In *Still life with Cut Glass* (fig. 45), I painted a valuable set of glass ware, a set of objects that could represent value and luxury through the embodiment of treasured materials, skilled labour and invested time. The objects also represent the fragility of wealth. In this case, my model for the central glass bowl was a real object, but in other respects I chose to depart from my usual method of painting by not relying completely on the model or its colour. In the case of colour, I experimented with greens, which I used together with pinks, blues and greys in the ground and surrounding objects. My intention was to make the higher-valued green project forward, away from the lower-valued greys and reds of the ground. I also used

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photographs of the glasses as models because I was unable to locate models that had the exact faceting or colour I wanted.

Fig. 45. *Still life with Cut Glass* (2014)

When I reviewed *Still life with Cut Glass*, I saw mixed effects. The depiction of the two glasses, for example, was problematic. The use of photographs limited my ability to adapt and correct elements of their appearance, particularly the ellipses of their rims. These ellipses are transparent, which makes them bi-stable. On one viewing they appear as if viewed from a low angle and are therefore consistent with the curve of the upper edge of the bowl. On another viewing they “flip” and appear as if viewed from a higher viewpoint. I also noticed that the two glasses appear to lean towards the viewer, while the bowl leans the other way. These unexpected optical illusions had the curious effect of transforming what was intended to be a controlled and stable composition into one that was unstable and unsettling.

The paintings *Three Luxury Bags* (fig. 46) and *Eight Pieces of Lipstick* (fig. 47) also focus on the theme of commodity money. In these paintings, however, I was interested in the way value is derived from advertisements and branding, rather than exclusively from the material properties of the goods themselves or their superior craftsmanship. Brand is a potent phenomenon in contemporary imagery. The depiction of an object whose value is derived almost entirely from its brand therefore represents a contemporary approach to commenting
on the changing hierarchy of values within the economy. An object’s brand played little, if any role, in traditional still-life painting although clearly concepts such as exclusivity and superiority were understood, as the discussion of vertical product differentiation shows. There is a dialectical process, moreover, in the depiction of branded objects that embodies consumer beliefs about the status conferred through access to luxury, even though the objects themselves are frequently trivial and have low marginal utility.

Advertisements for such products may be deliberately economical in their use of pictorial concepts. An empty space around an object or a monochromatic backdrop can eliminate distracting detail and increase the propensity of the viewer to focus intensely on the luxurious item as an object of desire. The painting *Three Luxury Bags* depicts several bags representing an iconic brand. The ground was built up with layers of silver acrylic paint, creating a slightly reflective surface. The contrasting materiality of the painted surface delineates the three bags from the ground, and reinforces the impression that the space in this painting is intended to play an active role. The role of space is changed slightly from the advertisement, and is closer to the void I had been experimenting with – a pictorial device that symbolises the vacuity that comes with conspicuous consumption.

![Three Luxury Bags](image)

*Fig. 46. Three Luxury Bags, (2015)*
An object’s brand can also convey information about its design, the craft of its manufacture, the means through which it is commissioned, packaged and transferred through a series of market-based purchases from one person to another. As the art historian Jules Prown observes, a branded object can embody a narrative of “beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time …”128 In the light of this, I experimented with several paintings of the opposite, of plain unbranded objects. I chose the teapot as a way to test whether a humble and potentially overlooked object could also encompass the economic circumstances of the time. Among the paintings done as part of this experiment was *Teapot on a Blue Cloth*, (fig. 48).

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I used a pared-back palette of blues and greys with a narrow tonal range. The tonal values of the teapot, particularly on its right side, are closer to the values of the blues in the cloth and the flickering blues in the atmospheric ground. I also mixed a small amount of the same blue into the side of the teapot to further unify the composition. Although the atmospheric ground is playful, and a reference to the influence of artists such as Bravo, I felt it diverged from the void. It was also unclear how it served as a commentary on Australia’s current economic conditions. I also concluded that the symbolism of the teapot was excessively subtle and risked being viewed as offering too many possible readings, such as comfort and domesticity. In the context of the project, the theme appeared to drift away from what I wanted to investigate.

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Overall, this second stage of my research program was challenging, lengthy and marked by search and experimentation, only some of which was successful in meeting my objectives. I was searching for and experimenting with a number of issues. One issue was how to move beyond the results of the Household Objects series. A second was to develop more nuanced and authentic ways to reflect my response to current economic conditions through still-life painting, especially in the light of the knowledge, understanding and insights that emerged from the development of the theoretical framework described in Chapter Two. And third, this
phase of experimental work produced evidence of the ‘persistent tensions’ that can emerge in practice-led research. As described in Chapter Two, Eisner warns that among these tensions is a potential for a slippage to emerge between the subjective experience of the artist’s thoughts and action and the robustness expected to come from viewing results objectively and neutrally.\footnote{Eisner, “Persistent Tensions in Arts-Based Research”, (2008). Section 1, Chapter 2.}

I did not find it easy to define with precision what constituted this slippage in several of the paintings completed during this phase of the project, other than to sense that a gap emerged between what I thought I intended and the actual outcome. The slippage was analogous to assembling a jigsaw puzzle where some pieces fail to “click” into place despite having a promising appearance. *Twenty Dollar Note* (fig. 44), *Still life with Cut Glass* (fig. 45), and *Teapot on a Blue Cloth*, (fig. 48) were exploratory paintings, each probing a means to uncover a sustainable approach to address the issues I was investigating. With no means to objectively and neutrally assess the outcomes of these paintings, I remained reliant on subjective experience and a frustrating process of having to repeat the experiment. While much of this was concerning, there were some positive outcomes. The painting *Teapot Tree* (fig. 49) is an image of teapots, a vase and tree branches relying on an imaginative creation of loose, meandering lines and vague edges.

Fig. 49. *Teapot Tree* (2014)
The painting differs from others in this series because it was unplanned, done as an aside to the project and thematically incongruent. Any slippage between expectations and outcomes was therefore minimal. Despite this, it revealed the potential for rebalancing the weight in my research methodology between the controlled and objective on the one hand and the subjective, emotional and spontaneous on the other. I found a balance in this work between rationality and irrationality, calmness and passion, and between the logical and the intuitive. The painting also posed the question, inherent in art-based research methodology, whether every work had to meet the stated objectives of the project and be fully resolved before being eligible to be included as part of robust research and capable of producing new knowledge and insight. I return to this question in Chapter Four and the discussion of Six Plastic Bottles (fig. 66), Three Paper Bags (fig. 67) and Five Bags in Space (fig. 68). In the interim, Teapot Tree stood as an indication of a possible way forward.

Conclusion

As this chapter explains, the process of building on the initial phase of this project and integrating my studio practice with the theoretical framework continued, but the process of doing so was lengthy and awkward. As described, I experimented with depictions of money and discovered in the process that this aspect of the economy could be represented as both something real and as a symbol of a broad range of economic characteristics. Money is a powerful symbol for discussing economic conditions. As Yuran argues, there is an entanglement between money and the economy.\footnote{Yuran, \textit{What Money Wants}, Chapter 3.} Money is both an object and a symbol of commodities, while commodities, in turn, are symbols of economic conditions.\footnote{Ibid.}

Real coins and banknotes, moreover, have haptic qualities that I was able to describe and tap into. Paintings such as The Big Pile of Money (fig. 41) and Coin on Bedspread (fig. 42) were capable of eliciting a view of money that, for me, went beyond the orthodox understanding of the kind generated through economic texts or analysis alone. I had little doubt that money, both as a real object and as a symbol, was capable of being a useful device to reflect my responses to a broad range of economic activities and outcomes. The series of work in which I experimented with non-money imagery, on the other hand, suggested that while this theme had potential it was less powerful and convincing than the more direct imagery of money.
As this chapter discussed, there was a slippage between expectations and outcomes. I was both the artist, and therefore the author of my experiments, and also the supposedly objective and neutral observer of the outcomes of these experiments. As Eisner and others suggest, this presents a challenge in the on-going process of refining practice-led research. The methodology set me up as both creator and critique, challenger and explainer. In the words of Barone, I was trying to play “two games at once”.\footnote{Barone, \textit{How arts-based research can change minds}, 171.} I had assumed up until this point that erring on the side of traditional research methodology would minimise unacceptable risk and avoid subjective and emotional pathways with their attendant haphazard and unpredictable messiness. As explained in this chapter, doubt about this assumption built up slowly; there was no sudden realisation. Once I realised I was facing a challenge, however, I accepted there was merit in recalibrating my approach to privilege the things I had been trying to minimise: the subjective and emotional. At this point the phase-cycle model of still-life painting outlined in Chapter Two and then put aside as redundant now reappeared as a practical tool to guide my response. As the model suggests, creativity, innovation and breaking through are most likely to occur when the \textit{status quo} is confronted by unanticipated events. That is the time when embracing review, reassessing and accepting change are most likely to occur authentically and contribute to propitious outcomes. In the next chapter I describe how I responded to the need for change.
Chapter Four: Reassessing and Breaking Through

Introduction

In the previous chapter I described how I developed a suite of paintings that expanded my exploration of ways to respond to economic conditions. I applied a hybridised research methodology to the task, incorporating aspects of both arts-based and traditional research. I investigated material culture and focused on images of money to represent economic materialism and its emphasis on objects, including their acquisition, possession, consumption and value. As the project developed, I decided the balance between the two research approaches needed adjustment. In this chapter, I describe how I responded to the need for change and the new responses developed.

In the first section of this chapter, I describe how I rebalanced my approach and the contribution this made to breaking through the impasse in my painting practice. In the second section, I describe how I consolidated on the breakthrough and accelerated the shift away from my earlier approach. I describe the search for new icons and symbols to explore my response to contemporary economic conditions. I maintained a focus on material culture and the void, but also explored ways to deal with the space in which objects were placed, looking at alternatives to Bryson’s “culture of the table”.

Section One

As described in Chapter Two, Shaun McNiff and others argue that to be creative an artist needs to give up ego control and step into the unknown. McNiff says:

… there is an intelligence working in every situation. This force is the primary carrier of creation. If we trust it and follow its natural movement, it will astound us with its ability to find a way through problems – and even make creative use of our mistakes and failures.

I accepted the counsel to relax my grip on the painting process and its focus on the controlled and the preconceived, the objective and the rational. It was time to “let go”. That said, I did not know what letting go meant, nor did I have an alternative strategy. While I thought about

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133 Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 13.
135 Ibid.: 3.
136 Ibid.: Chapter 1.
the challenge and searched for a new strategy, I passed the time by painting, not as part of the project, but for pleasure in much the same way as I had done with *Teapot Tree*. To borrow McNiff’s terminology, it was a step into the unknown without being aware of what I was doing.

I selected objects randomly, including a paper bag and several cloth shopping bags, and arranged them on a shelf. I had only one prepared canvas available. It was substantially larger than anything I had used before (137 × 137 cm). It was unused because it was unsuitable for the intimate and therefore smaller still-life paintings I had been working on so far. The large canvas required several adjustments to the way I approached the painting, notably in the way preparatory drawing was used. As described in Chapter One, using a number of small sketches had helped visualise and balance the composition quickly and develop preliminary ideas about tonal values. In this case, I dispensed with small scale, quick sketches and relied on a single drawing to start the process (fig. 50).

![Fig. 50. Sketch for Still life with Four Shopping Bags (2014)](image)

This initial drawing was used to transfer information about composition, placement and scale to the canvas. Once these broad parameters were in place, I completed the drawing directly on the canvas using charcoal, working up each object to indicate its tonal values. In contrast to the wristy mark-making used in the earlier smaller paintings, I found the large-scale drawing required equally large-scale gestural sweeps to complete. As I worked on the drawing I continued to work from direct observation of the model, making corrections as I went and only referring back to the sketch as a general reference to keep the composition balanced and within its initial spatial parameters.
The process of applying the acrylic underpainting to build up the drawing was also a new experience. As with my earlier paintings, I used a mix of blacks, whites and greys. I worked on the grisaille until I was satisfied the underpainting and its tonal values were an accurate reflection of the model and its lighting. While doing that, I also introduced an additional step of creating several small colour sketches. I decided to use these because the size of the painting meant I would not be able to over-paint or make corrections as easily as I had done in the past. It was also cheaper to experiment with colour and glaze on a small scale at the outset and discover which combinations worked most effectively.

I found the drawing, as well as elements such as composition and space, began to work successfully. That prompted an impulse to tighten control over the next stages of the painting’s development to ensure it continued to conform to what I thought should happen, rather than allow it to emerge in an unstructured way. I resisted that impulse as much as possible. I suspected chance and intuition were playing a prominent role in both the painting’s evolution and my enjoyment of painting, just as McNiff suggested. Missteps did occur. But where this happened I allowed corrections to be made intuitively. For example, I found the size and type of brushes required was different to those I had been using, and I experimented as I went to find the ones that coped best with the task. I also experimented with the quantities of paint required, as well as with the choice of colour. On several occasions I changed my mind about colour and re-painted sections of the canvas in spite of having worked out combinations using the colour sketches. I also began using visual devices, such as including the floral design on the cloth, but decided mid way through to abandon it while leaving traces still visible.

137 McNiff, Trust the Process, Chapter 3, Part 4.
The painting *Still life with Four Shopping Bags* (fig. 51) marked a turning point in my painting practice. The scale of the work presented new challenges, but new opportunities emerged. In particular, it drew my attention to the process of painting as distinct from the outcome. For example, as I made this painting I stood closer to my work than I had in the past, especially as I was in a small studio space where standing back was physically difficult. As a result, I was unable to see the overall effects while concentrating on particular passages of painting. I was forced to trust myself more than I had in the past. The outcome could be seen only when I stood well back and got a broader perspective. I comment more fully on the theoretical possibilities opened up by this method when I discuss another large-scale painting, *Five Pieces of Baggage* (fig. 62), at the end of this section.

I also became aware that I was challenging assumptions about control, and in doing so taking small but important steps away from being situated outside the process of painting. Trusting the process led to the insight that painting has the capacity to evolve towards an outcome that is not preordained but is waiting to be revealed. This painting was not conceptualised in advance, and therefore its creation was subject to the role of chance. One the one hand, the outcomes were not anticipated. On the other, however, it was consistent with Leavy’s suggestion, discussed in Chapter Two, that allowing the introduction of chance to play a
legitimate role in practice-led methodology contributes to the meaning-making process of a project. By the time I completed this painting I was willing to accept that this approach was a constructive way forward, and that perhaps there was more to be discovered through further investigation.

**Bags and baggage**

I extended the exploration by creating further images of bags. I focused on bags and baggage because of the potential of these objects to represent or symbolise aspects of current economic conditions. Bags may be used for a variety of economic activities such as shopping, travelling or storing other objects. They can be represented as objects in their own right, possessing properties such as shape, weight, colour, texture or exhibit wear and tear depending on their age and use. Bags can also be used to symbolise economic activity. Plain paper or cloth bags, for example, might stand for unremarkable shopping, while luxurious baggage may symbolise desire, vanity and conspicuous consumption. Bags and baggage are also containers of space, which can represent the potential for being filled or, alternatively, emptied out.

The painting *Two Bags* (fig. 52) is an experimental work and comparatively small. I painted a paper and a cloth bag with a strong source of light from the left that creates a *chiaroscuro* effect. The bags are contained within a shallow space, and the right side of the space is darker than the left to accentuate the contrast between light and shadow. The bench on which the objects are placed is narrow and thin, as I reinterpreted the traditional still-life motif of the table top as a constant, unchanging presence. Here the instability of the bench and the balance of the objects on it reinforce suggestions of anxiety and unsustainability, rather than solidity and stability. Several additional results became apparent after the painting was completed. Both bags sag slightly and, as they do, they deform. This is more noticeable on the green cloth bag on the right. In the context of material culture, bags are products that are manufactured for the purpose of being filled, but which sag and collapse when emptied out. I thought the collapsing action symbolised what would occur to a modern economy if consumption expenditure were to fall relative to supply.

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When I looked at *Two Bags* and the similar painting *Two Plastic Bags* (fig. 53), I became intrigued by their anthropomorphic characteristics. I noticed, for example, that when more than one object is included in a composition there is a potential for a narrative to emerge. In *Two Bags*, the right cloth bag leans away from the more upright posture of the crisp paper bag on the left in a manner that suggests withdrawal. In *Two Plastic Bags* the dynamic lines of the bags and the space created by their handles combine to suggest two burqa-clad figures engaged in conversation. The shadow on the upper right of the composition suggests a watchfulness and a sense of anxiety.
A different reading of anthropomorphism emerges from *The Shopping Bag* (fig. 54). In this painting there is a single object, a cloth bag hung on a wall by its handles. The conceptual form of this painting and its composition were influenced by images of butchered animals, such as *The Slaughtered Ox* (fig. 55) by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669) as well as similar, more recent paintings by Chaïm Soutine (1893–1943).
The meaning of *The Slaughtered Ox* is open to interpretation, but as a *memento mori* – a type of *vanitas* painting – it displays not only the symbolism of the inevitability of death, but also the underlying commerce associated with the business of creation, death and consumption.\(^{139}\) The ox in figure 55, for example, was no doubt a domesticated beast raised and slaughtered for profit. Wild animals on the other hand were often hunted and consumed for the pleasure of the wealthy. A subgenre of Dutch still-life paintings emerged in the seventeenth century that featured trophies of dead game, such as hares, pheasants and deer.\(^{140}\) To an extent *The Shopping Bag* imitates the characteristics of this subgenre, using the strung-up bag as a symbol of the contemporary hunter and the quarry. Unlike the exotic objects displayed in the Dutch paintings, with their rich textural qualities, the shopping bag’s blandness and its flimsy quality suggest that the object of the contemporary hunt is devoid of the traditional privilege and merriment associated with the hunt. The bag is also devoid of content. I experimented further with the image of the hunt in *A Shopping Bag and a Leg of Lamb* (fig. 56), drawing

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on the painting *A Hare and a Leg of Lamb* (fig. 57) by Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1755). Both bags have a vulnerability about them, again reinforcing the anxieties of accumulation and consumption.

![Fig. 56](image1.jpg) (Left) *A Shopping Bag and a Leg of Lamb* (2015)
![Fig. 57](image2.jpg) (Right) Jean-Baptiste Oudry, *A Hare and a Leg of Lamb* (1742)

I found the exploration the theme of hunting and gathering an interesting experiment. The use of these traditional still-life tropes provided a useful allusion to some of the slower rhythms and patterns of economic consumption. I also found the historical reference a powerful and useful device, as discussed in Chapter One when describing the antecedents to the *Household Object* series. On balance, however, I saw little benefit in pursuing in further detail what I considered to be a theme already well-explored by other still-life artists. I therefore shifted to the theme of repeated imagery of bags and baggage.

**Repeated bags and baggage**

I developed the theme of the repeated bag in *Blue and Green Bags* (fig. 58) and (fig. 59), and in *Seven Shopping Bags* (fig. 60). I wanted to inquire into the possibilities of the repetition of an object, including the emergence of patterns based on the underlying organisation of objects’ placement, together with their shapes, forms and colours. I was also interested in the effects of visual satiation, by which I mean the emergence of new interpretations of once-
familiar objects or the possibility of objects losing their meaning, in ways similar to semantic satiation. The repetition of the bag in a still-life painting could go beyond a representation of an object that was a simple adjunct to shopping. The repeated image could symbolise the role of consumption expenditure under economic liberalism and the extent to which much of that repetitive behaviour had lost its meaning and become irrational, as I will explain.

Fig. 58. (Left) Grisaille for Blue and Green Bags (2015)
Fig. 59. (Right) Blue and Green Bags (2015)

Fig. 60. Seven Shopping Bags (2016)

As outlined in Chapter Two, a feature of the post-GFC economy was the perception that economic neoliberalism had failed to offer sustainable policy solutions to changed economic circumstances. Assumptions underpinning those policies such as maximising “freedom from regulatory interference” or “increases in personal incentives” may have been well-meant.¹⁴² In hindsight, they were also naïve. A cynical interpretation of those assumptions, mainly in the financial sector, contributed to an upsurge in greed and in accumulations of money by a small percentage of individuals.¹⁴³ That outcome sits uncomfortably with the theory of diminishing marginal utility, which states that accumulating more of anything should become increasingly less desirable, and therefore less rational, with each additional acquisition. As Yuran and others observe, there is an inconsistency between arguing that it is rational to accumulate an excess of objects called money while simultaneously arguing it is irrational to accumulate an excess of other objects.¹⁴⁴ My intention was to comment on this inconsistency. It was irrational – and probably pathological – for consumers to acquire ever more bags and baggage to carry home ever more goods than could possibly be needed or used, and which gave increasingly less satisfaction with their accumulation. I felt the paintings of bags and baggage, and the repeated image in particular, offered a more poetic response to this feature of the economy than paintings of money.

**Breaking through: Five Pieces of Baggage**

In *Five Pieces of Baggage* (fig. 62) I scaled-up further, to 120 × 180 cm. In setting up the model for this work I arranged a repeated image of suitcases and items of baggage, and then experimented with different ways to represent them. I produced many preparatory drawings, as well as a number of colour sketches, but was unable to settle on a composition that was aesthetically pleasing and at the same time reflected my perceptions of economic conditions. The final choice was made when by chance I saw a bar chart depicting percentage year-on-year average world real GDP growth and noticed that the repeated bars looked similar to a row of suitcases upended and arranged side-on (fig. 61).


¹⁴³ The visual arts reflected this through films such as *Wall Street* (1987) and the quote attributed (inaccurately) to the film that “greed is good”.

I decided to paint the baggage as a geometrically accurate reproduction of this bar chart, with each suitcase or piece of baggage drawn to the same proportions on the canvas as in the bar chart, as shown in figure 62.

Fig. 62. *Five Pieces of Baggage (2015)*

I selected the model for each item of luggage to correspond to the decade being represented. The three suitcases on the left represent the three decades from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s,

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during which Keynesian economic policies prevailed and wealth was distributed comparatively equitably. The two items to the right represent the three decades from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, during which time neoliberal economic policies became ascendant and the distribution of wealth became increasingly inequitable.\textsuperscript{146} I combined the representation of the 1980s and 1990s into one wide piece of baggage as the percentage growth rates for those two decades were identical.

As I painted \textit{Five Pieces of Baggage} I reflected further on a number of its pictorial elements. The ground was initially painted grey, similar to the ground in \textit{Still life with Four Shopping Bags} (fig. 51). On reflection I decided this ground might not be seen as a void, which was my intention. I therefore repainted it in a higher value, green–grey. This helped bring the subjects of the painting forward while drawing attention to the areas of space above and to the right of the luggage and elsewhere in the composition. In this case, the symbolism of the void is not of the emptiness of consumerism, as in \textit{Still life with Four Shopping Bags} (fig. 51) or \textit{Blue and Green Bags} (fig. 59), but of the failure of an economic ideology. The bigger the void, the bigger the symbolic representation of the failure of neoliberal economic policies to provide equitable growth and wealth, and fulfil opportunities for the global community. In that sense, the void in this painting performs a function similar to the void in Dutch still-life painting where it is suggestive of something valuable and once possessed but then given up and lost.

The use of space in this painting also helped me take a further step away from my reliance on seventeenth-century still-life tropes, particularly Bryson’s concept of “the culture of the table” with its table tops, shelves and niches and other contextualising detail such as lining up or overlapping objects. Here the range of bags and luggage was presented in a non-literal space, a space in which there was no vanishing point. The baggage therefore appeared in this painting in much the same way as the bar charts in the graph shown at figure 61.

\textit{Five Pieces of Baggage} also made me conscious of additional theoretical possibilities offered by working on a large scale that I was not fully aware of when painting the larger work \textit{Still life with Four Shopping Bags} (fig. 51). As noted, stepping up to and then away from a painting is a routine part of art making and an activity done without much conscious thought. I noticed that because of the large size of the canvas I was often too close to see the effect of what I was painting, and stepping back from the work in the confined space of the studio could be done only consciously, and then with some difficulty. This process of focusing and

\textsuperscript{146} Stiglitz, \textit{The Price of Inequality}, xii.
unfocusing, and doing so more consciously than before, prompted me to wonder whether there were two painting processes going on here, rather than one. This led to me to look at the writings of Michael Polanyi.

Polanyi suggests there are two ways of looking at a painting while it is being created. One occurs through having a focal awareness of what is being painted and the other occurs through a subsidiary awareness.147 Focal awareness occurs when the artist pays attention to the particulars of a painting. For example, when I placed a brush stroke of burnt sienna on the centre of the first bag in *Five Pieces of Baggage*, I observed closely that the value of the hue on the left side was slightly higher than the value on the right. However, when I stood back from the painting and looked beyond this isolated particular and at the entity to which it was contributing, I noticed it “subsidiarily in terms of its participation in a whole”.148 At this point was I able to understand that the brush stroke, the hues and their values were describing one of the handles of a suitcase and that this had an appropriate place and a specific meaning within the context of a series of suitcases and pieces of baggage within a larger painting.

In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi says that these two ways of looking at the process of creating a painting are mutually exclusive. The artist cannot maintain both kinds of awareness simultaneously without one destroying the other.149 This is similar to the observations made by both McNiff and Gibson when they comment on the ability and willingness of the artist to be responsive to the possibilities that emerge from a painting as it evolves. As Gibson says:

> Although these two modes of cognition are consciously distinct, they need to be occurring almost simultaneously, firing off each other so that you can experience a kind of intelligent shimmer …150

I did not see the process of focusing and unfocusing, however, as one of building up an understanding of the painting as a number of particulars and then later as a comprehensive entity. Instead, the process involved building up information, with each step building on the last, gathering and then transferring information from the unconscious to the conscious in “a hierarchy of operations”.151,152 In my case, I began to notice the accumulation of knowledge

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151 Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, 128.
as I worked through the painting process, first by focusing on particular parts of the painting, and then by focusing on the painting as a whole. As this iterative process continued, my awareness of what was being created increased. I discovered that my understanding of the process of painting and its outcomes was becoming correspondingly deeper and better informed.

**Summary of Section One**

I described in this section how I reached a point in my project where I realised my initial approach had taken me as far as it could. Change was needed, but it had not been clear what that change should be. The breakthrough came when I relaxed the overly-conscious approach, and accepted the exhortation from McNiff and others to “give up and let go”. That decision made me more conscious of the need to adjust the balance in my hybridised research methodology. Ladd states that understanding the role of conscious and unconscious decisions in economic research is an important yet often misunderstood and underrated tool. His comments suggest that rather than having made an error in getting the balance right, it is more likely that I began with a false impression of what the research process was actually like. That process, Ladd says, is not tidy, but messy; many of its elements are private and non-reproducible. He also points out that many key breakthroughs in economic thought came from engaging in both conscious and unconscious processes, allowing a cross fertilisation of imagination and quantitative experimentation to generate speculation and innovative thought. It is particularly important, he says, to allow chance to play a role in research methodology. One of the advantages of tapping into these processes is that they are not bound by codes of what is and is not permitted and are therefore open to a wider range of potential solutions.

In the next section, I describe how I built on these observations and realisations, and continued to shift away from the existing codes and balances that defined my initial approach to hybridised research. I speculated more broadly about how to innovate and improvise in my painting practice.

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153 Ibid.: vi.
154 Ibid.
Section Two

Introduction

My investigation into how to respond to current economic conditions began with an exploration of traditional approaches to still-life painting. Seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting revealed how efficiently and, in many cases, how simply the essence of abstract economic concepts could be portrayed through utilitarian objects and their symbolism, as well as by modest compositional devices, such as the table top and the placement of objects, and the use of a limited palette. Material culture also served as a useful framework for revealing complex economic relationships, and it provided a means for uncovering the enduring, slower rhythms and patterns beneath the turbulence of economic activity. I wanted to build on this investigation. But before going further it was important to clarify the extent to which the traditional approach to still-life painting remained relevant. As argued in Chapter Two, the development of the traditional approach emerged in the context of seventeenth-century history. Those conditions differed significantly to those of the early twenty-first century. I needed to clarify whether those differences had become so fundamental and elaborate that the traditional approach lacked the depth and range of visual vocabulary to offer a contemporary response.

To answer the question, I looked at the findings of business analysts and authors, Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind. They observe that much of the impenetrably complex and sophisticated appearance of contemporary economic conditions may be illusionary. In their analysis of the collapse and bankruptcy of Enron, then one of the world’s largest multinational corporations, they acknowledge that many businesses are capable of dazzling markets with practices that are “fiendishly clever”, such as mark-to-market accounting, structured financing, the securitisation of financial assets and computerised algorithmic trading systems. But they also stress the role of humans, and ordinary human behaviour behind these practices. There is nothing new about human behaviour such as greed, maximising short-term profit, rent-seeking or believing in the entitlement of the few at the expense of the many. These qualities reflect enduring, unchanging patterns of economic behaviour. Dutch “tulipmania” of the mid 1630s, for example, was a speculative bubble.

157 Ibid.: Chapters 17, 19.
158 Ibid.: Chapter 14 and Epilogue.
driven by human behaviour, not market fundamentals or new economic ideology.\textsuperscript{159} In Australia, the early twenty-first century witnessed a series of high-profile collapses and indiscretions. These included HIH Insurance, One.Tel, Storm Financial, Westpoint Group, James Hardie, Opes Prime, CBA, Comminsure, the Australian Wheat Board, to name a few.\textsuperscript{160} Again, these events were not due primarily to economic conditions or to the underlying ideology of free-market overreach. They resulted primarily from greed, corruption, incompetence and stupidity – as inquiries by the Australian Securities and Investments Commission into these events make clear.\textsuperscript{161} In short, the doubt I had about the ability of traditional approaches and tropes to reflect the complexity and sophistication of contemporary economic conditions was overestimated, if not unfounded. The individual instances of contemporary success or failure, and their technical and ideological circumstances, comprised only part of what I was responding to. I was also responding broadly to the enduring economic behaviour that shaped current economic conditions. And I saw no reason why those enduring characteristics could not be reflected by the enduring characteristics of still-life painting.

**Consolidation: new icons and symbols**

I explored the representation of inequality in the distribution of wealth in Australia. In the painting *Distribution of Wealth* (fig. 63), I wanted a composition that used the size of different bags to symbolise the share of wealth held by Australians.

The process of drawing was an important part of this work because I had to experiment with the numerous approaches to depict the bags in ways that were proportional to each quintile of the population. Some drawings resulted in compositions that appeared askew. The biggest bag, representing the wealth held by the top quintile, so overwhelmed the picture space that the others lost their significance. The smallest bag was scarcely visible. I decided I was unable to take the same approach as *Five Pieces of Baggage* (fig. 62) where I created a proportioned reproduction of the bar chart. Instead, I dealt with the compositional challenges of the drawing and the painting by adjusting the scale and colour of the objects. This required scaling down the object representing the first and largest quintile – the violet bag on the left – while the bottom quintile, represented by the blue bag on the far right, was scaled up. I also brightened the hue and raised the tonal value of the blue bag to make it project relative to the two brown bags to its left and to assist offsetting its small size. I also experimented with the colour of the ground. I began with a blue–grey but felt it caused the objects to sink. The red-orange ground, on the other hand, projected the objects and made them stand out as individual items.

Two reactions to this work are worth discussing. First, making the choice to change the representation of data demonstrates again the challenge in balancing traditional and arts-based approaches to research. Unlike the proportions in *Five Pieces of Baggage* which represent actual data points, the data in this painting are represented subjectively. The painting therefore reflects choices based on aesthetic, not analytical factors. My purpose was
to give visual form to a personal response to economic conditions. In short, this is a painting of five bags; it is not a graph. Moreover, as Eisner argues, exaggeration should not be a problem in visual art provided the feature helps the viewer grasp the situation and promotes understanding.\textsuperscript{162} A second reaction was to notice that as part of the broader process of addressing the role of patterning, and repeated shapes and forms in particular, I had consciously introduced the grid into this work. When I began the painting I divided the blank surface of the canvas into a network of squares. I found the resulting grid a useful tool to compose the objects, and I was intrigued by its possibilities. I wondered whether the grid could be explored further to reflect my response to some of the consequences of the neoliberalism, such as stratification and segregation.

As discussed in the preceding section, assemblages of interacting objects may suggest narratives. Introducing the grid presented additional choices such as the variety of shapes and forms, the placement of objects and how many to include. Too many objects risked redundancy. Too few risked an insufficient variety for a viewer to speculate about the painting’s purpose. In the paintings \textit{Six Purses} (fig. 64) and \textit{Nine Assorted Coins} (fig. 65), I arranged a number of money-related objects into grids. The assemblage of these objects into a grid was a shift away from the compositional strategy of the graph, with its suggested $x$ and $y$ axes, as in \textit{Five Pieces of Baggage} (fig. 62) or in \textit{Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber} by Cotán (fig. 4), discussed in Chapter One.

\textsuperscript{162} Eisner, “\textit{Persistent Tensions in Arts-Based Research}”, (2008). Section 1, Chapter 2.
I had already been moving away from the culture of the table, and in both *Six Purses* and *Nine Assorted Coins* I experimented further by paring back non-essential elements. The process of paring down reaffirms that these objects are not contained within a real space. It also reinforces the presentation of the objects as a collection, something that suggests additional narratives. For example, in both paintings the objects have nostalgic qualities, capable of referencing another time in Australia’s economic history. Several of the coins, such as the pennies and halfpennies, have the patina produced through being handled and kept in circulation for many years. The purses, too, reflect a time in Australia’s economic history when coins and a few notes were all that was needed to go shopping. This can be compared with current conditions, where a wallet typically contains little money but many credit, debit, discount, gift and loyalty cards – objects that magnify the shopping experience while diminishing the experiential connection between consumption and indebtedness.

I also noticed the way the shift towards an increasingly abstract ground had changed and accelerated through the project. In a number of early paintings the ground was portrayed as a literal space, a space that had characteristics such as texture, as in *Still life with Concrete Bowl of Fruit II* (fig. 7), *Coin on bedspread* (fig. 42), revealed cast shadows, as in *All You Need* (fig. 11), *Still-life with Cleaning Products* (fig. 18) or *Still-life with Four Jars* (fig. 23), or that used an atmospheric ground, as in *Teapot on a Blue Cloth* (fig. 48). Later paintings depicted the ground less literally, shifting it towards an ambiguous empty space, or a void, as in *Three Luxury Bags* (fig. 46). As explained, the void is not an empty space – a nothing – but...
a space that has symbolic meaning and may “vibrate with its own emptiness”\textsuperscript{163}. I conjectured there was an opportunity to explore the object-ground relationship further using space as an artifice, to use Bryson’s term.\textsuperscript{164} I was interested, for example, in exploring how a non-literal space might project an object, pushing it towards the viewer. I was also curious about the effect of placing a subject against a flat colour-field where perspectival depth was eliminated. With these objectives in mind, I painted \textit{Six Plastic Bottles} (fig. 66), \textit{Three Paper Bags} (fig. 67) and \textit{Five Bags in Space} (fig. 68).

The first of these, \textit{Six Plastic Bottles}, shows a series of mass-produced PVC bottles arranged in a linear composition that suggests their numbers continue beyond the picture plane in both directions. The objects are placed within a non-literal, monochromatic grey space. The austere palette, tightly cropped composition and minimal variation in tonal value throughout the composition were intended to reinforce the impression of uniformity. That impression is reinforced through the adoption of the low viewpoint, a feature that departs from the traditional, higher viewpoint that enables the viewer to see all the objects on the table. Here, the viewer’s gaze is constricted to objects in the foreground. My intention behind this painting was influenced by Wesselmann’s depiction of ordinary and unremarkable objects as a way of commenting on the melancholic march of consumerism. In this painting a diverse range of objects is offered for enjoyment, represented in this case by the shapes and size of the bottles. The experience of their consumption is homogenised and meaningless, represented by the bland, monochromatic colour and the emptiness of the objects.

\textsuperscript{163} Bryson, \textit{Looking at the Overlooked}, 98.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
The triptych *Three Paper Bags* (fig. 67) presented a number of technical challenges. Each panel was a recycled canvas, prepared with an opaque oil-based gesso. Using the oil-based gesso meant that the surface was hydrophobic, and I was not able to build up a grisaille using acrylic paint. I therefore drew directly onto the ground using a mix of raw sienna and lean medium. I indicated the outline of the bags using the same model for each panel, with the first two panels showing one side of the bag and the third showing its reverse. I then moved onto building up shapes with raw sienna, burnt umber and titanium white. All three paintings were completed in one session.

It had been my intention to continue constructing the representation of these bags once the first layer of paint had dried. I decided, however, that the visible brush marks and the loose
use of paint created a variety of marks, textures and evidence of decision making in the painting. I did not want to risk losing these characteristics by overworked the paintings, so I left them at a comparatively early stage. I also decided to leave the colour of the ground in *Three Paper Bags* as titanium white. I found doing so avoided a literal interpretation of the space in which the bags were placed, and invited a closer examination of the objects that now stood alone, like specimens for scrutinisation.

I painted a geometric arrangement of bags to test these observations further, and to investigate in more detail the object-ground relationship and the use of space. In *Five Bags in Space* (fig. 68) a number paper bags are arranged in a pentagon-shaped pattern.

![Image](image)

**Fig. 68. Five Bags in Space** (2016)

In this painting, the ground is painted in cerulean blues and white-greys to suggest the bags are floating in a literal space, in this case sky and clouds. The introduction of the atmospheric space reminded me initially of Bravo’s *Bodegón con Paquetes, Homenaje a Sanchez Cotán* (fig. 4), described in Chapter Two and *Teapot on a Blue Cloth* (fig. 48), described in Chapter Three. Unlike those grounds, however, the use of space in this painting operates in a different way. Rather than representing a ground that sits behind the object, with a standard horizontal
viewpoint, the reading of the ground as sky and clouds in this composition persuades the viewer that the objects are being observed from below, looking straight up. Moreover, this perspective works no matter which way the composition is viewed. There is no right or wrong way up.

These paintings were experimental. In the case of Six Plastic Bottles and Three Paper Bags they were not fully resolved. I was aware, for example, that a number of their pictorial qualities including drafting, composition and the use of tone and colour could have been finessed. That, however, would have risked losing sight of what I was attempting to discover in this part of my practice-led research, which was to explore the object-ground relationship, the use of space, to explore how different grounds could project objects towards the viewer, as well as a more general exploration of the balance between control and letting go. The decision to leave these works less resolved was also a reminder of the question raised in the preceding chapter whether every work in art-based research had to be fully resolved before being included as part of research and contributing towards understanding and insight.

Conclusion

In this chapter I described how I reassessed my painting processes. I investigated the level of control and continued to re-examine the balance between being objective and subjective as the best way to reflect my responses to current economic conditions. As described in Section One, this led to a breakthrough in my painting practice, beginning with Still life with Four Shopping Bags (fig. 51). I approached this and subsequent paintings by allowing chance and intuition to play a greater role. I explored the potential this offered, developing the symbolism of bags and baggage. The theme provided new possibilities to focus on contemporary aspects of economic conditions. I found, for example, that exploring the possibilities of the graph led to new ways to choose and compose objects and to a shift away from traditional features such as the ‘culture of the table’.

I confronted the question of whether contemporary, neoliberal economic conditions were qualitatively different to those that existed during other periods, such as in the seventeenth-century Netherlands and, if so, was their depiction beyond the scope of traditional still-life painting tropes? Prior to this point, I had been following pathways laid by others, using established signs, symbols, allegories and icons to reflect responses to current economic
circumstances. I began to question this in Section Two. I concluded that traditional themes and symbols remained relevant to my investigation of contemporary economic conditions. The sophistication and technical complexities of the modern economy were undoubtedly real, but that reality masked human behavioural patterns that remain essentially unchanged. That observation was consistent with the belief that I could reflect the slower rhythms and patterns, as well as the stillness of economic conditions through still-life painting.

In paintings such as *Five Pieces of Baggage* (fig. 62) I developed the use of the grid and began paring back contextualising details such as the bench, the table top, shelf or walls. I extended that exploration in paintings such as *Distribution of Wealth* (fig. 63), *Six Purses* (fig. 64) and *Nine Assorted Coins* (fig. 65). I found the grid a useful compositional device, one that helped make aspects of economic activity that were active appear stable, or stilled. For example, objects arranged in rows and series, such as in *Six Purses*, are ordered and contained as if in a scientific collection.

By confronting the less obvious characteristics of the contemporary economy, I was also tackling the question of how to move more assuredly beyond traditional pathways. The recognition that I needed to make this shift was consistent with observations by Ladd and Polanyi that knowledge and understanding are built up gradually, often from unconscious, tacit foundations, before emerging in more conscious and realised forms. I found the phase-cycle model useful at this time. The model enabled me to reflect objectively on the questions I was confronting and reminded me that amidst challenge there is opportunity for creativity and innovation. Overall, I found the process of creating these visual works became a means to reveal and extend my knowledge and understanding of current economic conditions, and to give a more fulsome expression to what had been previously inaccessible through words and numbers alone.
Conclusion

In this practice-led research project I have investigated the genre of still-life painting, exploring and modelling material culture within the context of current global economic conditions. I blended practice-led and traditional research methodologies to investigate the relationship between art and economics. The initial balance between the two approaches favoured objectivity and analysis rather than subjectivity and emotion. The choice appeared consistent with my background as an economist. I was able to draw on my existing skills and experience to describe economic conditions and the role of material culture, and produce what I considered to be a relatively dispassionate response through still-life painting. I calculated that the balance offered the best prospects for understanding the development of my painting practice as it proceeded in a structured way. It also avoided the loose and emotional methodologies and language that might have come from being overly subjective.

The project began with the *Household Objects* series. I looked at seventeenth-century Dutch still-life artists and paintings to identify the traditions of the still life as well as evidence of linkages between economic conditions and painting. I was able to identify a number of economic conditions that may have exerted a strong influence on the style of paintings produced during this period. This included the rapid expansion in the Netherlands’ trade, a broadening in the country’s industrial structure – including the emergence of a comparatively sophisticated financial sector – rising wages and incomes for many participants, including artists, and the rapid development of a market for paintings.

I explored possible links between these conditions and innovation in still-life painting. As part of that exploration, I developed a phase-cycle model of still-life painting. The model proved useful in interpreting the economic transformation that occurred in the Netherlands during the period from the late sixteenth century through to the mid 1670s, and the significant innovation that took place in many spheres of activity, including in painting. Several still-life painters appeared to have been particularly aware of their economic circumstances. Paintings by the seventeenth-century Dutch artists Pieter Claesz and Willem Heda for example revealed evidence that these artists may have been responding to their economic circumstances through the depiction of objects to reflect material culture, choices about colour, symbolism and the use of the void. The model also highlighted the number of similarities between the Dutch experience and developments in other periods, such as the modernisation period in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, the economic revolution in China that
began at the end of the twentieth century and, to an extent, contemporary global economic conditions. These periods appear to be correlated with interest and innovation in still-life painting, such as the rack paintings of William Harnett, John Haberle and others in the United States, the money paintings of Huang Rui in China and the contemporary still-life paintings of Australian artists such as Fiona Hall and Michael Zavros.

The hybridised research methodology I adopted provided a context for considering the role of material culture and using the dialectic in domestic objects as a way to approach the connections and contradictions between art and economics. As highlighted by Velthuis, Yuran and others, the relationship between art, commodities, money and the broader economy is complex. As the project progressed and these complexities became increasingly apparent, I began to reflect on the balance struck in developing my research methodology. The process of reflection accelerated as the project entered its mid-stages and the focus moved from household objects to the theme of money. As discussed in Chapter Three, money is both an object and a symbol that has been used in still-life painting since at least the sixteenth-century in European genre painting. It was used extensively in the United States during the nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, as well as in more recent still-life paintings in Asia. I investigated my own relationship and response to money during the project. It was explored, for example, in Nine Assorted Coins (fig. 65) where I investigated assemblages of coins and the role of the grid. Some outcomes of this investigation were positive. Others, however, proved more variable when considered against the objectives of the project. That became increasingly so as I shifted the emphasis from money to commodity money, that is, to objects capable of standing in for money or that could act as a store of wealth. As I reviewed these outcomes I also found that extending the application of the phase-cycle model to current economic conditions became increasingly limited. The model was less useful, for example, when used to engage with the complex, nuanced and interconnected nature of the modern global economy and its underpinning ideologies.

I found the process of reflection, review and reassessment was neither linear nor straightforward. As observed by philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, understanding is not an isolated act of cognition. Instead, it emerges from our unfolding experience of the world as well as, among other things, our engagement with the material culture of the world. This

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166 Quoted in Anne D’Alleva, Methods & Theories of Art History (London: Laurence King, 2005), 123.
includes the broader economic circumstances, assumptions and opinions that shape our relationship with material culture and its objects. My understanding and awareness of Australia’s economic conditions may have been based largely on objective observation. But it was also embedded in my subjective experience of living with those conditions. I was, in other words, experiencing living in the real world and responding at many levels to the effects that policies were having on aspects of the economy and life around me. As Gibson says, sometimes it is necessary
to generate an involved set of narratives that account for the changes and encourage speculations about the endless dynamics of the system. Infiltrating the experience in this way you become … a witnessing participant … 167

Until I became that “witnessing participant” I was not able to engage fully with the responses I was seeking, and go beyond the logocentric and dispassionate vocabulary of being an analyst situated “outside” my painting practice. 168

I realised that to respond more fully and authentically to economic conditions the research approach needed to be recalibrated to permit a greater role for the subjectivity and emotional richness of practice-led research. This was a realisation, however; not a revelation. The realisation that a break in the process was needed was slow in coming because it emerged through doubt and reflection. In hindsight, allowing that to happen was welcome. As Leavy points out, doubt, legitimising uncertainty and allowing a lack of structure to emerge in a research project can contribute to meaning-making. 169 I also discovered that allowing space for an ‘incubation phase’ of research to emerge in the project facilitated the transition from one stage to the next.

I spent a lengthy period of time during the mid-stages of this project searching for ways through the impasse and reflecting on the outcomes of experiments. As theorists such as McNiff and Ladd argue, however, there comes a time when the best course may be to quit trying consciously to find the logical solution and defer to the unconscious – to give up ego control and step into the unknown. 170, 171 I was initially unsure what that meant, or what the implications of doing so might be. Stepping away from my “known world” was to abandon

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168 Ibid.: 11.
169 Leavy, Method Meets Art: Arts Based Research Practice, Chapter 1.
171 Ladd, Imagination in Research, 77.
an approach that was not only familiar but, I believed, one that conformed to the demands of transparency and the logic that had led to predictable outcomes in the past.

I reasoned, however, that this was not a case of having to abandon entirely the approach I had taken, but one of adopting a more balanced approach. There was a place for being objective and distanced. But there was also a place for being more immersive and open to the subjective and intuitive aspects of practice-led research. Additionally, I had reached a point in the project where I had little choice. Despite the challenge of defining what giving up and letting go meant, I “gave up”. In other words, I immersed myself into a more unconscious and subjective process of painting and allowed greater elements of chance, imagination and intuition to influence my work. To use Gibson’s term, I shifted from being “outside” my practice to being “inside”.

The review and incubation phase led to a transition in my practice-led research to a new stage and the investigation of a third theme. I had explored household objects, then money and I now shifted to bags and baggage. The transition was characterised by changes that included relinquishing control. The selection of objects was left increasingly to chance, as was the arrangement and representation of objects within the composition. The introduction of bags and baggage resulted from allowing chance to play a more influential part in the creative process. It was a result that presented a number of beneficial applications to the themes being investigated. Bags and baggage, for example, were capable of representing a variety of responses to economic conditions. As I discovered, this included mass production, acquisition, consumption, waste and material culture in general. In addition, I recognised a potential in them to represent other, less tangible economic conditions, such as the social status of their owners, or as signifiers of travel, flight and refuge. Within the context of material culture, their symbolism could be used to draw connections between objects and broader economic, social, political and personal contexts. Each bag, for instance, had been designed, manufactured, distributed, purchased, valued and used, all of which had the potential to reveal a rich backstory of the economy. Many of the bags were also my own. As such, they were connected to memories of why I had acquired them, where I had used them and what objects I had once packed inside them. Like the dining utensils painted by Pieter Claesz, the phenomenological experience of their creation was capable of being reconstructed through the still life. And finally, following the suggestions made by Yuran and others, I was also able to explore the imagery of bags, baggage and containers to explore the complex
entanglement of commodities and money, as well as the status of orthodox economics as a response to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and its consequences.

The earlier suites of paintings had built on each other, but progress had been incremental rather than innovative. The nature of that progress changed during this latter stage of painting. As the economist Charles Lindblom argues, there is a distinction between incremental and innovative decision-making.\footnote{Charles Lindblom, “The Science of ‘Muddling Through’” \textit{Public Administration Review} 19 (1959): 79–88.} When Lindblom looked at decision-making behaviour he noticed a discrepancy between what was hypothesised by theoretical models and what was observed actually taking place, especially as decisions became more complex.\footnote{Ibid.: 81.} As a way to minimise risk, decision-makers make incremental choices. Each choice builds on what had been learned to that point. Lindblom’s description is similar to the messy and unbound economic research processes described by Ladd in Section One of Chapter Four.\footnote{Lindblom, “The Science of ‘Muddling Through’”, 87.} Lindblom’s observation suggests that while the need to make a radical or innovative decision should be infrequent, sooner or later it becomes inevitable.

In the case of my painting practice, the exploration of themes around household objects and money can be categorised as comprising incremental steps. As I continued to develop my painting practice, the understanding, knowledge and experience of my practice developed and deepened. Sometimes I discovered useful outcomes. Sometimes I chose to eliminate what was not useful. According to Lindblom’s analysis, the longer this process continued the more inevitable it became that these incremental processes would break down. Eventually they did. My initial assumptions and the approach I had chosen to pursue were then shocked, to use the terminology of the phase-cycle model.

The \textit{Bags and Baggage} series of paintings progressed after this break. The new path I found myself following was not one discovered by chance alone. It also arose from the gradual accumulation of information about and understanding of my painting practice, as well as from being positioned to take advantage of whatever chance happened to present. As new lines of inquiry opened up I was able to reflect further on the role of chance and intuition. The choice of bags and baggage may have seemed random. But as Ladd and Bjørnar Olsen observe in their discussions of economic research and material culture and the interpretation

\footnote{Ladd, \textit{Imagination in Research}, vi.}
of objects, what might look initially like random choice was more likely to have been driven by unconscious thoughts and knowledge.\textsuperscript{176} That observation is consistent with Gibson’s suggestion that once I became a “witnessing participant” in my project then new opportunities were likely to arise from the knowledge and experience built up to that point.

I was also able to apply the symbolism of bags and luggage to reveal the slower patterns and rhythms of current economic activity. This included the familiar patterns and rhythms of possession, accumulation, value and exchange, as well as newer ones such as globalisation, digitisation and the rhythmic swing between economic ideologies. The grid and the use of the void in paintings such as \textit{Distribution of Wealth} (fig. 63), \textit{Six Purses} (fig. 64) and \textit{Nine Assorted Coins} (fig. 65) explored my response to the fragmentation and stratification that characterise the neoliberal economic environment. I came to the view that much of the apparent complexity of contemporary economic conditions, and the language used to describe them, frequently concealed simpler rhythms and patterns of economic behaviour. Some of these rhythms and patterns endure and remain essentially unchanged. By exploring how I could engage with material culture through my painting practice I discovered I was able to gain a deeper and more experiential understanding of the way other still-life painters may have sought to reflect similar responses to their economic circumstances through their work.

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As stated in the Introduction, writers on practice-led research methodology stress that there are multiple paths to knowing.\textsuperscript{177} According to Cahnmann-Taylor and others, one path is the hybridised approach to inquiry. It is well suited to the exploration of complex questions where drawing on an artist’s multiplicity of experience and skills can be an important element of the inquiry.\textsuperscript{178} In this project I drew on my experience and skills in the disciplines of art and economics. I was able to identify outcomes, express ideas and elicit meaning that I believe would not have been accessible had I relied exclusively on either the logocentric language of economics or the more “emotionally penetrating” language of visual art.\textsuperscript{179} That said, I found my understanding of these paintings often emerged only after their completion, and in some cases, well after. By this, I mean the distinction between visual art and words to express outcomes, ideas and meanings was a blurred one, and words sometimes came readily

\textsuperscript{176} Olsen, \textit{In Defence of Things}, Chapter 1, Introduction.
\textsuperscript{177} Elliot Eisner, “\textit{Persistent Tensions in Arts-Based Research},” 2005, 13.
\textsuperscript{178} Cahnmann-Taylor, \textit{Arts Based Research In Education}, 9.
\textsuperscript{179} Leavy, \textit{Method Meets Art: Arts Based Research Practice}, Chapter One.
only after an idea or notion had been explored first through painting. Even then, I suspected many works were likely to remain subject to ongoing interpretation because they reflected personal and therefore idiosyncratic combinations of conscious and unconscious responses to economic conditions.

As I investigated traditional still-life painting’s signs and symbols, I extended the exploration to contemporary symbols, including luxury objects and brands. I also extended a number of traditional visual and pictorial characteristics, such as the use of scale, space and the grid to express my response to perceptions of current economic conditions. Through this I discovered that there was more to “the economy” as defined in conventional terms such as production and consumption, distribution or the supply of money. There was also an economy of a different kind, one analogous to applying and adapting the characteristics of austerity and minimalism exhibited in some early still-life paintings and their “refusal of material excess”, to use Bryson’s terminology.180 As stated in the Introduction, complexity can mask underlying simplicity. Through the course of this project I was able to expand on that observation and conclude that simplicity, or an underlying economy of means, could be used to create and express complex ideas, responses and visual outcomes.

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Some of the outcomes of arts-based research go beyond those anticipated by the original scope and design of the project. Although not discussed in detail, outcomes from this project also include the potential application of the phase-cycle model to interpreting connections between changes in economic conditions and the processes of innovation in art and in the creative industries more broadly. The model has implications for how and when the state allocates funding to the arts, and how the role of orthodox economics to justify investment may be suboptimal in terms of the programming of competing expenditure priorities and in facilitating innovation. I also found my experience of developing and applying a hybridised methodology to this project was consistent with the views put forward by Eisner and others that persistent tensions may arise in arts-based research. These tensions present challenges although, as Eisner adds, they may also generate awareness, or a sense of being more “wide awake” to the possibilities of visual art.181 In my case, these persistent tensions included the imbalance between methodologies, the sense of recurring uncertainty and the challenge of

180 Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 114.
reconciling the discordant values arising from the amalgamation of the “theoretically cogent with the practically useful”.\textsuperscript{182} All of these may be issues for further research.

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.: 2.
Bibliography

Works cited


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**Additional reading**


