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Motion and Spatiality: Material Illusions in Abstract Painting
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Declaration of Originality

I, Gregory Hodge 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.

Signed: Gregory Hodge

Date: 11/09/2018
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Abstract

This practice-led research investigates the continuing role of abstraction within contemporary art through a painting practice that involves collage, works on paper and paintings on canvas. The project is focussed on testing ways in which devices historically associated with illusionistic painting could be applied to an abstract picture space. The painting process and accompanying exegetical reflections together explore the implications of adapting and translating illusionistic techniques, such as those as of the trompe l’œil and Baroque traditions, into a contemporary idiom, and how this affects the ways we view, experience and interpret abstract paintings.

Original material research is central to this project, and is pursued through a sustained technical exploration of the properties and potentials of contemporary acrylic paints and mediums, the development of improvised tools, and the application of a range of supports and modes of presentation. These are tailored to extend the means and visual effects of acrylic painting processes in generating illusions as abstractions. This results in four bodies of work, each exploring the oscillating relations between the eye and the body, illusion and materiality, stasis and motion, flatness and spatiality.

This thesis has been informed by Hanneke Grootenboer’s reflections on trompe l’œil, Angela Ndalianis on the Baroque, Christine Poggi on Cubism, and Barbara Rose and Lucy Lippard’s work on Abstract Illusionism. The project is further contextualised by reference to commentary on recent developments in abstraction and current issues in painting by Arthur C. Danto, David Reed, Bob Nickas, Jan Verwoert, Katy Siegel and Laura Hoptman.
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Introduction

This practice-led research investigates the continuing role of abstraction within contemporary art through a painting practice that involves collage, works on paper and paintings on canvas. The project was motivated by initial questions into how I might apply devices historically associated with illusionistic painting into an abstract picture space. I was interested in the implications of adapting and translating illusionistic techniques such as those as of the trompe l’œil and Baroque traditions into a contemporary idiom, and how this might affect the ways we view, experience and interpret abstract paintings. This early investigation into the illusions and ambiguities of perception led me to question how abstraction can perform, evoke and respond to bodily sensation in new ways.

My studio project oscillates between different approaches to painting, while my exegetical research traverses a broad range of historical precedents. An important condition of contemporary painting is the ability for artists to work with a range of motifs and categories within art history and popular culture that were once considered mutually exclusive.1 Within the context of the hybrid in visual art, writer David Ryan argues that many painters are working with ‘...multiple compounds, and straddling traditions, attitudes, modes of painterly practice mobilised not simply as conflict, but in order to find a new cohesion’.2 In Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting, Bob Nickas categorises hybrid abstraction as paintings that deal with ‘image-as-abstraction’.3 Hybrid painting, Nickas argues, combines the material language of abstraction and the visual associations of representational painting as a filter through which recognisable imagery passes through and transforms.4 While representational imagery activates these works, it morphs and mutates, oscillating back and forth on the surface although never completely disappearing.5 The recognisable remains vague and at a distance, mediated through processes of painting and remaining open to interpretation.

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4 Ibid., 38.
5 Ibid.
My research and studio practice deals directly with these hybrid and pluralistic approaches to painting. The plurality of the medium investigation within my research involves the combination of realist and trompe l’œil techniques with abstraction. I have worked within a broad range of painterly styles and approaches. These include realist techniques that represent collage material such as drafting film, masking tape, ornamental frames, interior space and fabric. Throughout this project, I have developed unique techniques to create illusions of cast shadows as a further investigation of illusion. Together with these realist techniques, I engage fully with processes of abstraction.

**Early Experiments in Illusionistic Painting**

An early question that formed at the beginning of my research was how I could combine the illusionistic and playful trickery of seventeenth century Flemish letter rack painting with the spatial and experiential concerns of abstraction. This question originated from my early experimental collages, which were made of simple arrangements of thin overlaid transparent papers cut into varying shapes and adhered together with masking tape. The collages oscillated between reading as physical, as the shadows cast from one piece of paper to another projected the object forward in space, while also being illusionistic as the transparent coloured paper evoked a deep void-like space. These paper constructions held tentatively together with tape, recalled Flemish letter rack paintings, which depict overlaid papers painted illusionistically as if pinned to a board in slight relief. I was curious about the ways I could use illusionistic painting techniques to replicate the thinly layered transparencies with their shadows, slight folds and relief, while also engaging with painting’s materiality to evoke spatial, atmospheric and poetic experiences beyond the physical reality of the work.

This early engagement with the potentials of illusionistic painting and abstraction was the starting point for the four bodies of work that were made over the course of my PhD. Each series began with the generation of source material by making collages out of transparent papers, masking tape and cut-out abstract gestures. I then made acrylic paintings that mimic these collages, developing a range of innovative painting processes. The result is a body of abstract paintings that explore oscillating relations between the eye and the body, illusion and materiality, stasis and motion, flatness and spatiality.
Development of Processes

The approach that I have taken to this research is very much studio-based. This exegesis provides detailed accounts of my processes and the steps of experimentation, reflection and improvisation undertaken throughout the project. Over the course of this project I found myself moving fluidly between states of experimentation and decision-making as I tested materials and responded to these tests in an analytical manner. Professor Ross Gibson from the University of Canberra has reflected on these dual states of cognition in the creative process.\(^6\) Gibson describes one stage as being immersive during periods of experimentation, and the other stage as analytical as one reflects on these experiments.\(^7\)

Each series of work in my research began with rigorous experimentation, by testing new techniques and supports, and by adapting and re-inventing already acquired skills and processes through a re-engagement with materials.

One significant aspect of my practice-based research has involved exploring the nature and potential of current acrylic painting products and processes, tailored to the objectives of my project. An attention to process not only slows down production, opening a painter up to more intuitive and nuanced material interactions, but it also offers an alternative to the speed in which images are absorbed. In the following chapters I provide a detailed account of the ways in which I have developed my own solutions: developing new applications and effects for painting mediums, adopting new painting supports and designing and constructing my own tools and brushes. In describing my work using collage, complex painting systems and innovative tools and brushes that generate a range of marks and ambiguities, I will demonstrate how my approach to painting contributes original technical and conceptual possibilities to the field of contemporary painting.

My Historical Lineage

My exegesis elaborates on the relevant historical, theoretical and contextual links I made throughout the course of my research. An early question in my research was: how might my research into illusionistic painting and abstraction form new historical links and extend on already existing influences in my work.

As discussed by Bob Nickas in his essay Persistence of Abstraction, today we understand that contemporary artists are able to draw on a vast array of histories, traversing across

\(^6\) Ross Gibson, “The Known World,” TEXT Special Issue 8 (October 2010), 9.
\(^7\) Ibid.
seemingly disparate styles and geographical points in order to find their own links and associations along the way. Laura Hoptman, Curator at the Museum of Modern Art, claims that contemporary painting has less to do with the ‘ladder-like narrative that is so dependent upon the idea of the new superseding the old in a movement simultaneously forward and upward’. Instead Hoptman suggests that artists today approach history as a very broad network of possibilities and move in a horizontal motion across expansive passages of time, picking and choosing elements of the past so as to resolve a problem or task at hand. This freedom enriches the ways in which we begin to understand older works of art, however it also creates some new and daunting challenges. If as a contemporary painter, I am free to work as I choose without feeling obligated to follow any historical imperatives, then what is my history?

Reflecting on my early introduction into abstraction, I have more recently understood the impact that growing up in Canberra has had on the historical lineage of my practice. As an undergraduate student, visits to the National Gallery of Australia gave me access to some of the best post-war American painting in the country. I also came to know the work of a generation of contemporary Australian painters who worked in varying ways through abstraction. Ruth Waller, Peter Maloney, Vivienne Binns, Derek O’Connor and Marie Hagerty are five artists currently living and working in Canberra. The early contact that I had with their work proved hugely influential and has remained important and critical to my development as an artist, and to this doctoral research.

In my Honours year in 2005, I began emptying my paintings out and taking away the literal subject matter of the landscape that had previously informed my work. I adopted new techniques from colour field painting and the further reductive qualities of minimalism to make paintings via large fields of thinly veiled translucent oil and acrylic which created subtly shifting gradients from light to dark.

After a year spent in Europe and the United States, absorbing myself in the historical painting collections of major museums, I then set out to fill my paintings back up: not with literal subject matter, but with all the elements I thought that a painting could be. I layered loosely composed patterns reminiscent of textile designs: I made paper collages and warped grids, and played with positive and negative space. I was driven to develop

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10 Ibid., 14.
a painting practice that reached back, influenced by the rich heritage of technical skill from work of the past, with a desire to explore new possibilities of abstract painting.

Ruth Waller, Head of Painting at the Australian National University has noted the importance for artists to find their own independent historical lineages. Contemporary abstract painter David Reed has also identified what he calls a 'street history' of painting, which refers to a shared dialogue between painters about the more casual interrelationships of art history. This history that is discussed between artists in their studios and around their work is often different from conventional accounts of history. Understanding the validity and potential of forming my own linkages within history has been fundamental to developing investigative channels for this research.

In this exegesis I discuss my studio practice in relation to an art historical lineage beginning with seventeenth century trompe l’œil letter racks, Cubist collage and the teachings of the Bauhaus. I link these earlier concerns with representation and illusion, to abstract painting in New York in the sixties including the work of Mary Heilmann, Elizabeth Murray and Jack Whitten. This trans-historical approach also functions as a way to reconsider moments and periods within modernism that were considered to be on the periphery. Midway through my candidature, I was fascinated to come across the little-known and marginalised Abstract Illusionist movement, which emerged in America in the sixties. Their specific use of illusionistic devices has some apparent parallels with my own and I discuss their work in comparison with other abstract painters of the time and my own approach. I further relate this research to recent trends in contemporary abstraction and artists David Reed and Tauba Auerbach, who work with playful visual trickery, using very direct processes of layering and stacking illusionistic space.

Some important texts and scholarship that has informed this research include Hanneke Grootenboer: *The Rhetoric of Perspective,* Christine Poggi: *In Defiance of Painting,* Arthur C. Danto: *The End of the End of Art* and the Bob Nickas essay: *The Persistence of

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13 Ibid.

My research has been informed by a six-week fieldwork trip to Europe in 2013 followed by a three-month Australia Council Residency at The British School at Rome in 2015. The 2013 fieldwork focused on the collection of Flemish letter rack paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts Ghent as well as the important contemporary abstraction survey *Painting Forever* in Berlin. The purpose of my residency in Rome was to research Baroque illusionistic ceiling painting and develop new working methods and processes. Throughout my exegesis I recall some of my own experiences of looking and engaging with particular works that were relevant during both the fieldwork and residency. I understand making paintings to be inextricably linked to viewing and engaging with other works of art. The deceptive and playful morphing of materiality and illusion in my work shares an affinity with the Baroque engagement with the spectator, as David Carrier notes, ‘...here is an uncanny anticipation of Baroque space...where the spectator is drawn into the work because he is an element in that composition’.\footnote{21} By recalling some of the complex experiential qualities that unravel when viewing illusionistic painting from the trompe l’œil and Baroque traditions, I aim to give further insight into the qualities that are important to and inherent in my paintings.

**Surfing and Abstraction**

In the early development of my painting practice I pursued a form of abstraction as a way to better understand how the sensory experiences in surfing might also manifest both as a viewer and as a maker of abstract painting. The oscillating tensions in my work between the materiality of the paintings which evoke deep illusory space while also appearing to project forward via direct illusionistic painting recalls the sensory and bodily experiences of surfing. Similarly, the twisted and contorted bodies that project...
from a Baroque ceiling, defying gravity in a state of extreme physicality, resonate with the surfer in motion, gliding through water whilst being simultaneously weightless. Through descriptions of surfing, I endeavour to offer alternative insights into some of the perceptual and experiential qualities of my paintings and the Baroque.

Throughout this exegesis I will relate the physical actions of surfing to the gestural and spatial concerns of my work, while also discussing broader relationships between surfing and painting through the lens of critic and cultural theorist Jan Verwoert’s writings on adjacency. Verwoert has proposed that current modes of contemporary painting are not only influenced by the rich and broad history of the medium but are also influenced by adjacent everyday experiences of daily life such as music, fashion, dancing and culture.22 ‘[P]ainting is a medium that has many neighbours,’23 Verwoert claims. Abstract painting that is influenced by things outside the studio doesn't necessarily compromise the seriousness of the inquiry. Rather painting becomes porous, as it absorbs subtle nuances of daily life it gains deeper associations to the world around it.

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In Chapter One, I discuss the large multi-panel work on paper Magazine Mystics. I detail my early experiments with collage and how the processes I developed for this series became fundamental to the entire practice-led project. I contextualise this series of work by discussing seventeenth century Flemish letter rack painting and how the illusionistically painted layered papers of the letter rack informed the trompe l’oeil paintings that I developed in this series. I also link Magazine Mystics to the inventive use of materials in early Cubist collages and the work of Josef Albers at the Bauhaus.

In Chapter Two I outline my series of large paintings on canvas called Veils and Figures, which extend on the discoveries I made in previous work. I will elaborate on the importance of adapting earlier processes and my development of enlarged tools and complex masking systems, which continued throughout the body of work. I discuss these large abstract paintings in relation to surfing and the relationships of the illusionistic gesture to movements of the body through water.

23 Ibid.
In Chapter Three there is a discussion on the body of work Other Relief, a series of collages and paintings inspired by reproductions of sculpture. I outline the problems that arose as I attempted to incorporate photo realist techniques in the work.

Chapter Four establishes further contextual links to the project, focusing on abstraction in the United States in the sixties, and discusses the work of the hitherto generally overlooked ‘Abstract Illusionists’ and the specific ways they incorporated illusionistic painting with abstraction. I also contextualise my research in relation to recent discourses in abstraction.

In Chapter Five I discuss my research into Baroque illusionistic ceiling painting during my three-month residency at the British School at Rome. Finally, I discuss the outcome of this research, which is the body of work A Fabled Gesture, that renegotiates collage in new ways via cut-out irregularly shaped supports hung flat to the wall.
Chapter 1

Magazine Mystics

My first body of work is a large multi-panel work on paper, made in the early stages of my PhD research. Magazine Mystics consists of 60 acrylic paintings on paper with each work being 50cm x 38cm. For this series the source material was generated from collages made of paper, drafting film and masking tape. Each painting then responded to a collage using painting processes that gave the illusory impression of these seemingly simple materials. The process of making collages for source material came from two fundamental research questions that emerged during the early stages of my research:

i) What happens when devices historically associated with illusionistic painting are applied to abstraction? And,

ii) What are the implications and effects of this for the ways we view, experience and interpret abstract paintings?

These questions first arose in response to my early experiments in collage. I had been making compositions from small sheets of cut up transparent papers, compiled loosely on my studio table. These collages presented complex visual ambiguities. The overlaid transparencies implied an evocative and subtle space reminiscent of colour field painting while also being physical and illusionistic.

I began to consider the two different kinds of illusions these collages presented. They oscillated between a deep space caused by colours laid over one another creating a tertiary field, whilst the slight cast shadows of one piece of paper over another projected the shapes forward into space. I was curious about the ways I could utilise illusionistic painting techniques to replicate the thinly layered transparencies with their shadows, slight folds and relief while also engaging with paintings materiality to evoke spatial, atmospheric and poetic experiences beyond the physical reality of the work. This chapter describes the experiments in collage and the studio processes I subsequently developed to translate these collages into paintings.

The illusionistic painting techniques I have used in this series of work on paper share an affinity with seventeenth century Flemish letter rack painting. The process of constructing abstract collages made from paper and tape relates to early Cubist collages.
and the Bauhaus. I will elaborate on these historical and contextual links and how this research was informed by my fieldwork trip to Europe and the United Kingdom in 2013.

**Early Works on Paper**

Prior to beginning my PhD research I was making multi-panelled works on paper alongside larger paintings in the studio. *Universe 2011* (see fig. 1) is an example of these earlier works, consisting of individual works on paper hung tightly in a grid to make a larger whole. This method of making multi-panelled works on paper was initially a way to generate source material for larger works on canvas. Each work that made up a series was used as a way to experiment with formal abstract combinations of colour, pattern and shape and was later used to resolve compositions for larger works. In this early example, I was able to work quickly on a number of panels at a time, repeating certain patterns or motifs across works often with slight variations. When I saw the accumulation of up to twenty of these abstract works on paper hung together in my studio, I understood that while individually these could be conceived as studies for larger resolved paintings, hung as a grid each work became part of a whole and the grid of works started to take on a life and vibrancy of its own.

![Universe 2011](image)

**Figure 1** *Universe 2011* acrylic on 55 sheets of handmade paper 245cm x 400cm
The installation in a grid format became a way to balance and harmonise the relationships of one work with the next, while each held their own complexities. The grid acted as the first entry point for the viewer. Setting up a clear framework in which to experience the work enabled the relationship from one work to the next to unfold in an easily negotiable space. Maintaining a strict and methodical approach to each panel, and a consistency in the size of support and medium, allowed the individual works to exist as a unit within the larger context of the series (see fig. 2).

![Figure 2](image-url) Universe 2011 (detail) acrylic on paper 42cm x 36cm
Early Experimentation

I decided on a strategy that involved making a collage and using this collage as a model for a painting. The paintings were the same scale as the collage and I made one collage for each painting in the series. The collage process enabled me to maintain the intuitive and playful approach that was inherent in the earlier works, while the paintings of these model paper collages became illusionary projections, combining realistic painterly tropes within an abstract picture space.

Transparent Papers

I was drawn to the material properties of the drafting film and transparencies. I enjoyed these early studio experimentations and the immediacy with which I could construct seemingly endless compositions by layering different coloured papers over one another in various directions and order. I spent time experimenting with a variety of combinations that were approximately A3 in size. I then began to cut shapes out and layer them on top of one another (see fig. 3). I quickly discovered that these simple overlays of coloured transparencies made on my studio table created complex tertiary colours. In some instances I contrasted the transparent coloured papers with opaque black shapes cut from thin card.

Figure 3 Example of transparent collage 2011
The Painted Gesture on Drafting Film

During this time of experimentation with transparent papers I also experimented with painting directly onto the drafting film (see fig. 4). I was able to apply paint fluidly and directly onto its surface without the film buckling or absorbing the paint. Importantly it was also a material that was easy to cut with a scalpel or blade.

I discovered that flat head taklon brushes made interesting looping ribbon-like gestures and depending on the thickness and viscosity of the paint, these gestures would be fluid while also maintaining a structure.

Figure 4 Early experiments on drafting film 2012

Experimenting with the fluidity and transparency of acrylic paint led me to create marks using two or more colours. I mixed paint up in containers and added gels to give body and transparency to the paint. Placing small amounts of colour separately along a line on the drafting film that was the same width of a flat head brush, I would then push the brush through this line of paint. The process of working horizontally combined with the smooth finish of the film meant that the gestural mark created would hold form and shape and pick up each of the colours that were applied onto the film. I continued to experiment with a variety of abstract gestures and marks on the drafting film.
I was initially drawn to experiment with these gestural marks in an attempt to bring new spatial and illusionistic qualities to the collages. The range of marks included long drawn-out arching loops, short contracted marks and quick jagged diagonal gestures. These gestural marks became evocative of the motion and actions of my own body (see fig. 5). Combining these gestures with the flat transparent materials gave the collages a new and dynamic sense of movement and rhythm.

Figure 5 Gesture experiments 2012: acrylic on drafting film

I discovered that when painted, the surface plasticity and transparent nature of the film created luminous effects. I began to cut out these abstract gestures and incorporate them into the collages made of transparent paper (see fig. 6). The translucency of the paint and the film meant that when the gestures were cut out, I could lay them over one another as well as over and under the coloured papers to achieve complex translucent overlays.
Making Brushes

These experiments of painting onto drafting film lead me to explore building a variety of different tools and brushes to make these marks. I wanted to extend on the marks that I had made by enlarging and altering the scale of the brushes I used.

Initial tests and experiments involved taping brush heads together either in clumps of three or four to create a large single stroke. This eventually led to experiments with flat head varnish brushes fixed on a wooden support one after the other, similar to a small broom head. I made a number of these multi-head brushes ranging in length from 10cm to 25cm (see fig. 7). These new multi-headed flat brushes enabled me to create much broader gestural marks as well as create patterns and large unmodulated colour fields.

The building of these multi-head brushes and tools to create abstract marks was the beginning of an important process that was repeated throughout all of my future bodies of work in this PhD research. Contemporary abstract painters including Jack Whitten, David Reed and Bernard Frize work with a range of tools that bear a resemblance to the multi-headed brushes that I have developed. These artists continue to be important references as I continue to explore variations of these kinds of brushes, refining the type of brush I make to correspond with the type of gesture or mark I need to create.
Making the Collages

I gradually built up a substantial amount of collage material consisting of cut-out painted gestures and patterns on drafting film, coloured transparent papers and thin black card cut into abstract shapes. I arranged this material in order of colour and size on my studio floor.

Figure 8 Collage 2011: acrylic and mixed media on paper
The act of making the collage, as in the earlier experiments, was playful and intuitive. I would arrange and re-arrange the cut-out pieces of paper and film, looking for interesting connections and interactions between one cut-out transparency to the next (see fig. 8). When a single composition was resolved I used masking tape to adhere the pieces of cut up paper together. The use of masking tape meant that an individual collage was never in a permanently fixed state. The collages maintained a provisionality, enabling shapes and motifs from one collage to be moved and reinterpreted into another. I relate this provisional quality of my source material to ‘Provisional Painting’: a term coined by author and art critic Raphael Rubinstein.24 Provisional Painting, Rubinstein argues, looks casual, unfinished or self-cancelling. Provisional painters use material processes that reject a sense of finish and rely on acts of negation.25 I treated these collages with far less care and attention than the resulting paintings. Removing tape, transferring elements from one collage to the next and sticking them haphazardly onto the studio wall caused the collage material to slowly degrade and eventually be discarded (see fig. 9).

Figure 9 Collages 2012: acrylic and mixed media on paper

24 Raphael Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting,” Art in America 97 no. 5 (May 2009), 123.
25 Ibid.
The Painting Process

In setting out to paint the collages, I worked on a large table which enabled me to be working on three paintings simultaneously. The painting process, unlike the collage process, was slow and labour-intensive. For each work, I set out to mimic the collage’s complex colour combinations, slight folds, relief, transparency and opacity. I treated each transparent paper as a single transparent layer of paint. Because the collages were never permanently fixed I was able to take layers off one at a time, which helped to identify how to approach a single transparent colour. Therefore for each coloured transparency I mixed up quantities of fluid acrylic paint that matched its translucency and vibrancy. I added gel medium to the acrylic paint to increase the transparency and maintained a fluid consistency of each colour so as I could control the application. The fluidity of the paint meant that I would have to apply three or sometimes four layers of a single colour to achieve a finish that matched the translucent paper (see fig. 10). I again used flat head varnish brushes that enabled me to brush out any directional brush marks. The seamlessness of the paint finish, as well as a sharp masked edge of each shape, helped heighten the illusion of sheets of translucent paper laid over one another.

Figure 10 Magazine Mystics 2012 (detail) acrylic on handmade paper 50cm x 38cm
I developed complex masking techniques in order to mimic the cut-out sharp edges of the shapes in the paper collages. Placing the piece of transparent paper onto the painting support, with masking tape underneath, I traced its edge in pencil. I then reattached the piece of transparent paper onto the collage and cut out the shape I had masked on the painting using a blade, being careful to only cut into the tape and not into the paper support. Once the shape was masked I applied the paint before removing the masking tape. This technique enabled me to mimic the cut edge of each shape thus intensifying the illusion of the painted surface as a collage.

**Repainting the Gesture**

The abstract gestural marks painted on the drafting film rely on the film’s smooth surface and transparency. In order to replicate these gestures in the paintings, it was important to develop a way to mimic the fine slip-like surface of the drafting film onto the paper support. Even though the paper was relatively smooth it had a tendency to absorb paint and be quite porous if not sufficiently prepared. To combat this I built up a thin surface using gel medium before making the gesture. The gel medium acted as a thin layer and once dried, it had a similar characteristic to the drafting film. The gel medium created a slightly raised surface that intensified the illusion of collaged paper. Once the silhouette had been masked and the gel layer dried, I would take the brush that was used to make the mark on the drafting film and practice the stroke needed to repaint the mark. Standing over the collage on the studio table with the brush in the air I would retrace the actions with my arm and wrist, rehearsing the movements to re-make the gesture. Once I was confident with these movements that I would need to re-make the mark, I applied the paint onto the surface of the masked area and dragged the brush through the paint (see fig. 11). Often it would take me two or three attempts before I was happy with the mark. The gel application enabled me to wipe off a mark with a damp cloth and repaint it. I enjoyed the process of repainting these gestural marks with a re-invigorated precision and focus that was initially executed quickly and intuitively.
I became aware of the consequences that the processes I had created to mimic these gestural marks and thin sheets of paper had to the success of these paintings. The ability for the gel medium to transform the surface of the rough handmade paper would work to draw the viewer in to engage with the paintings peculiar surface. The camouflaging of the materials acts like a puzzle for the viewer who stands in front of the work, deciphering what it is and how it was made.

**Masking Tape**

In some works I painted in the masking tape as it was positioned throughout the collage (see fig. 12). This decision was an intuitive one and was a result of merely responding to the collage as a model for the painting. Toward the completion of *Magazine Mystics* I became aware of the tensions and complexities created by this trompe l’œil effect. The masking tape is the only recognisable object depicted throughout the body of work. While the painted paper cut-out transparencies and the gestural marks are representations of source material, they remain inherently abstract.

When painted, the masking tape acts to amplify the illusion of motifs being adhered haphazardly to each other as if only momentarily in space. The tape also indicates a moment of pressure in the works, as it appears to bind two layers together. Where the cut-out motifs appear to float on top of one another, unbound and never touching, the
painted tape signals a moment in the composition where these layered transparencies are pressed together and held tentatively in place.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 12** *Magazine Mystics* 2012 (detail) acrylic on handmade paper 50cm x 38cm

**Shadows**

While the painted masking tape appears to hold the collage elements in place, the painted shadows appear to raise the paper and transparencies slightly off the picture plane. In most instances within the series, the shadows were the last painted moments in the works. To make the shadows, I mixed up two or three transparent blacks. Using a small flat head brush I would paint one of the transparent blacks onto the work. Once this area was dry I applied the second lighter black over the top and pushing slightly over its parameters resulted in a two-tone transparent painted shadow.

With the collages pinned to the wall and observing the fall of light from my studio onto their surface, I was able to identify where to paint the shadows into the works. Often if a cut-out transparency was taped by its two top edges, its bottom edges would lift slightly
away from the cut-out underneath, casting a subtle shadow onto the collage. To heighten this shadow I often shone a light either from the upper left or right hand side of the collage. Doing this dramatically increased the contrast of the shadow and helped me to identify the shape I would need to paint.

The trompe l’œil shadows heighten the illusion of these thin transparent papers sitting on top of the picture plane like a collage. It also alludes to the painting having been lit from a source outside of the painted space. While I had experimented with this mode of trompe l’œil painting in previous work prior to beginning my PhD research, I engaged with it more fully for the first time in this project. This technique of using shadows to give the illusion of thin material projecting off a support is a strategy that I have continued to deploy to varying degrees of success throughout this PhD research (see fig. 13).

![Figure 13](image)

**Figure 13** Magazine Mystics 2012 (detail) acrylic on handmade paper 50cm x 38cm

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27 Earlier paintings where trompe l’œil was used did not respond to a collage but instead the shadow was invented within the composition of the paintings.
The painted shadows create further disorientations in the viewer looking at the work. While the painted abstract gestures and transparencies compel the viewer to question what these are made from, the painted shadows invite a further question as to where these objects are in space. Are they painted or are they materials that are literally projecting slightly off the surface of the support. This puzzling play of space is another important illusionistic quality within the paintings.

**Colour**

The collage process determines the choice of colour in each of the paintings. Individually the coloured paper transparencies are pure and bright. Layering these transparencies over one another would achieve more subtle complex tertiary colours. In early experimentations with the paper transparencies I realised that the paper and drafting film’s translucency, luminosity and layering capabilities were evocative of qualities that had become important to my painting practice (see fig. 14).

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 14** Magazine Mystics 2012 (detail) acrylic on handmade paper 50cm x 38cm
In previous work, I made abstract paintings by applying thin veils of unmodulated colour on top of one another to achieve complex colour relationships. These large fields of thinly stained canvas achieved deep and resonating effects. Each independent veil would be subtly exposed around the edges of the support, acting as a trace of the process and framing the atmospheric painted space. When making the collages I used the same idea of creating rich and complex colour combinations by overlaying paper transparencies and slightly revealing each layer around the edge. The paintings that make up *Magazine Mystics* continue this exploration into the perceptual and experiential possibilities of colour. I replicated these delicate colour relationships by illusionistically painting each coloured sheet of paper in the same order as they were laid over one another in the collages (see fig. 15).

![Figure 15](image-url) *Magazine Mystics 2012* (detail) acrylic on handmade paper 50cm x 38cm

Replicating what were often unpredictable colour combinations in the gestural marks on drafting film required a set of new processes. Within each of the gestural marks the way that colours reacted to each other differed. If the mark was long and drawn out
without any sudden change of direction the colours would remain mostly pure, unaffected by the colours on either side of it. However if the mark had sudden movements and changes in direction, colours would begin to mix on the surface. I soon realised that mixing colours on the surface created tertiary marks and when placed beside or on top of a vibrantly coloured gesture, these tertiary marks created depth and complexity.

Introducing black cut-out shapes initially into the collages and then into the paintings was a way to break up the pure and more intense colours throughout. Often black cut-out shapes would be placed behind the vivid gestural marks acting like an armature or a frame. In other instances I used black shapes over the top of bright colour as a stronger more graphic element pushing the bright colour back into space.

**Colour of the Drafting Film**

I used the drafting film in the collages and eventually painted it in the paintings to harmonise the intensity of the vivid colour of the gestural marks and coloured paper transparencies. Layering the drafting film over a composition created a transparent veil, softening the intensity of the pure colour to create more atmospheric space. While the drafting film was transparent, when placed over other collage elements it had the tendency to act like a veil or screen, slightly blurring the activity underneath. These effects are reminiscent of an atmospheric landscape painting in which an ominous and vaporous mist softens the sides and corners of objects while the definition of pictorial space becomes vague and ambiguous.

In previous paintings I had been interested in how I could overlay geometric pattern and textile designs within an atmospheric space. I continued to use pattern as a compositional strategy throughout many of the works that make up this series. While much of the painting on the drafting film was gestural, I discovered that repeating a gestural action a number of times would create weave-like patterns. Along with these gestural patterns I also made transparent geometric patterns and striped concertina motifs.

Figure 16 is an example of a single painted panel that is part of the series. The composition is structured around a central radiating motif made up of a number of transparent white bands. These bands overlap one another in the centre of the composition and gradually fan outwards toward the edges of the paper support. They stop overlapping as they fan outwards with only two in the upper centre and two on the
upper right-hand side remaining overlapped from top to bottom. The fanning outward of the bands creates an oval-shaped spiral. At the ends of each of these translucent bands is illusionistically painted masking tape that functions as if to hold this spiral configuration in place.

![Figure 16](image)

**Figure 16** *Magazine Mystics* 2012 (detail) acrylic on handmade paper 50cm x 38cm

All of this takes place on a ground that is built up via a number of differently coloured transparent painted rectangles. Beginning with a black rectangle painted on the lower half of the support this is followed by a transparent blue, which is painted over the black rectangle and the remaining unpainted top half of the paper. This blue rectangle does not cover the entire surface: instead it inserts itself inside the parameters of the paper, slightly exposing the layers underneath. This process of overlaying a transparent layer that slightly reveals the under layers around the edges is repeated with a magenta, an orange and finally a green rectangle. Where these four coloured rectangles overlap creates a tertiary mustard tone. This mustard tone is darkest at the bottom of the painting where the transparencies have been overlaid on top of the black rectangle.
Upon completion of the work I spent a day configuring and re-configuring the sixty works in numerous variations. I came up with a grid that is five works high and twelve works across (see fig. 17). Within this grid I aimed to juxtapose subtle and atmospheric works with the more energised and animated compositions. This considered and deliberate placement of each work attempts to evoke an undulation of sensation and visual rhythm when viewed as a whole. The relationships from one work to the next are important in the configuration and arrangement of the series. I chose a scale of paper 50cm x 38cm as it was similar in size to the collages I had been producing. I decided on an amount of sixty works as I could install this number in variable ways as a grid, 3 by 20, 4 by 15, 5 by 12 or 6 by 10.

Figure 17 Magazine Mystics 2012 acrylic on paper 60 sheets overall 300cm x 600cm

Paper as a Support

The use of paper as a support acts to amplify the spatial illusions in the series. As with most handmade papers, each sheet has a slight variation in dimension. This subtle deviation away from the rectangle calls to mind some of the cut-out shapes within the compositions. The paper support pinned by its top corners results in a very slight raise off the wall at the base of each work. This creates a slight cast shadow between the wall and the work, mirroring and drawing further attention to the illusion within the compositions of thin sheets of paper shifting subtly off the picture plane. There is an interesting juxtaposition between the crisp edge of the drafting film and the deckled edge of the paper. The paper also has a rough uneven surface that I intentionally work
against with gels and mediums to create smooth surfaces in areas of the paintings. I chose the rough surface instead of a hot pressed paper so as to create a contrast between the support and the smooth quality achieved by the gel and masking techniques. This also functions to further distort and disguise the material properties of the works.

Title

The title *Magazine Mystics* is a play on the tensions and oppositions that run through the work. ‘Magazine’ alludes to this everyday graphic experience of imagery. ‘Mystics’ relates to the tensions that exist between abstraction and realism in the work. The atmospheric, ambiguous quality of the drafting film and use of colour that are both given new form in paint alludes to something sensory and unattainable.

My Creative Process

The improvisational and intuitive processes undertaken in *Magazine Mystics* have subsequently been utilised to varying degrees across my entire practice-led project. While *Magazine Mystics* displays the processes that generated it, it is also about the process of creative invention and improvisation that I undertake in the studio. When generating this body of work, I found myself moving fluidly between states of experimentation and decision-making as I tested materials and responded to these tests in an analytical manner.

Ross Gibson reflects on these dual states of cognition in the creative process.28 Gibson argues that one is immersive as an artist experiments, tests and remains open and curious to possibilities available in the studio, while the other is analytical as one reflects critically on these processes.29 Gibson describes how the flow between these cognitive states of ‘action-reaction’ – between improvisation, intuitive, flow states and conscious decision-making – leads to an enhanced understanding of ones overall practice.30

Barbara Bolt also emphasises that creative arts research is realised through a rigorousness of a studio practice as artists discover and stretch materials, develop tools and new ways of production.31 Bolt asserts that ‘...in the work of art we do not

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
consciously seek the new but rather are open to what emerges in the interaction with the materials of practice’.32

The collage stage of my process is intuitive as ideas are formed through experimentation and a playful curiosity. There is a slowing down in the improvisational and ‘all is possible’ qualities of the collages in the early stages of the painting process, which requires a more analytical mode of working. However while the internal structure and composition of each painting is determined by a collage, I find I do not simply copy or mimic these collages in a strict methodical manner, but rather reengage with a state of improvisation via further experimentation with inventive tools and paint applications. When holding up a collage to a finished painting there can often be some notable differences as shapes and forms are painted, then over painted, resulting in new colour and compositional variations. This fluid approach to the painting process reconsiders an open and adaptable position, allowing new possibilities and discoveries to prevail through the act of making.

**Letter Racks, Cubism and the Bauhaus**

The illusionistic techniques in this series of work on paper share an affinity with seventeenth century Flemish letter rack painting, while the process of constructing abstract collages made from paper and tape before painting these collages relates to early Cubist collages and the Bauhaus. In 2013 I spent six weeks on a fieldwork research trip to Europe and the United Kingdom. The focus of my research was mainly on viewing exhibitions of contemporary painting, including the multi-venue survey *Painting Forever* in Berlin, and the *Art Brussels* and *Frieze London* art fairs.33 However I was also interested in directly experiencing the letter rack paintings of seventeenth century artists such as Cornelis Gijsbrechts and Samuel van Hoogstraten and saw them for the first time during a weeklong stay in Belgium.

Modest in scale and painted in excruciating detail, these small-scale paintings utilise trompe l’œil techniques to convey the display and arrangements of letters, papers and writing utensils attached to a board.34 The illusions of stacked and overlaid papers in letter rack painting present a shallow picture space, with depth only evident in the slightly raised edges or corners of one sheet of paper over another. In the Museum of

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32 Ibid.
33 Other significant exhibitions that I visited during my fieldwork included Merlin James at KW Berlin, Paul Klee at Tate Modern and Hilma af Klint at the Hamburger Bahnof Berlin.
Fine Arts Ghent, I had the opportunity to see a number of examples of work from this genre (see fig. 18).

![Image of Cornelis Gijsbrecht's Trompe l'œil 1664](image)

**Figure 18** Cornelis Gijsbrecht's *Trompe l'œil 1664* oil on canvas 101.9cm x 83.4cm

**Looking at Cornelis Gijsbrecht's Trompe l'œil 1664**

Cornelis Gijsbrecht's *Trompe l'œil 1664* is displayed in a small room among other still life paintings (see fig. 18). It is one of a pair of works that hang side by side. What follows is an account of my encounter with this work at the Museum of Fine Arts Ghent for the first time. Recalling the experience of seeing this painting in physical space, taking it in from a distance, then from up close, gives some insight into the way I incorporate trompe l'œil illusions within my own work as well as the sense of Gijsbrecht's playful deception:

Before reflecting on its intention or meaning, I consider its scale in relation to the room and the other works around it. I step closer no longer distracted by the other paintings or any movement inside the gallery space. I acknowledge the painting's organisation of colour,
shape and form while recognising realist depictions of what appear to be letters and papers, some of which are pinned to a board while others are held in place by thin bands of red fabric. This thin red ribbon appears like a grid that weaves its way on top of and behind the thin sheets of paper fixing them in place all the while allowing them to appear to float in space. Hanging loosely over the right-hand side of the composition is green velvet drapery that is bound by rope at its middle and partially concealing this web of paper and red fabric. All of this is enclosed by a modest black frame which rests inside a much more elaborate decorative frame.

I take a few steps closer until I am at a distance of four to five feet from the painting and from here I have been let in on the trick. What at first appeared as a black frame around the composition is in fact a flat painted illusion. My perception of the painting’s composition and subject shifts with the knowledge it now extends beyond this apparent frame. Momentarily enjoying the feeling of being both trumped by the artist’s playful deception and being privy to the trick, I scan contentedly over the rest of the subject matter. I become aware of the delicacy and skill in the realistic depiction of the letters and documents suspended behind the red grid of a letter rack. The painter’s skillful, virtuosic rendering of these different materials contradicts their hurried, untidy and haphazard arrangement. I acknowledge their contours, folds and creases that have the soft touch of light which result in corresponding subtle cast shadows. This light source appears to come from the gallery space in which I am standing, rather than from within the space of the painting. It is as if this external light provokes these once static objects into a momentarily animated state. Lured by this beguiling light, paper and material tentatively curl their edges and corners toward it, slightly rising off the surface of the painting and traversing from one reality into the next.

I walk closer until the painting’s surface occupies my entire field of vision. I am no longer aware of the work’s limits but rather all of its painterly possibilities as I scrutinise its texture, materiality and paint handling. I momentarily shuffle back to a distance where the illusion reappears before advancing back toward the painting.

**Deception and Illusion**

E.H. Gombrich explains that the successful trompe l’œil painting is the height of visual ambiguity as it seeks to first deceive the viewer before they become aware of its illusion.35 Pliny the Elder’s anecdote of the rivalry between Zeuxis and Parrhasius is an early and commonly quoted example of what Gombrich calls the ‘twilight realm of suspended disbelief’.36 Zeuxis had created a still life painting of grapes with such virtuosity that birds descended onto the painting attempting in vain to peck at the fruit.

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36 Ibid.
Parrhasius in reply painted a curtain in trompe l’œil and when Zeuxis attempted to part the curtain as if to discover the actual painting behind it he, to his defeat, realised he had been trumped. The illusion had deceived Zeuxis, not just a flock of birds. Like the curtain or grapes in Pliny’s anecdote, the objects in Gijsbrecht’s painting set out to first deceive the viewer before revealing the illusion. This visual trickery is heightened by the fact that the objects are life sized. Sheets of paper appear of a domestic scale, reminiscent of a letter or pages from a note pad. While the pictorial details of pins, nails or tape are painted in such a way to appear to fix these loose papers inside the painted space while also appearing outside the represented scene thereby projecting into the space of the viewer. This ability for trompe l’œil to deceive and disorientate a viewer relies on the viewer’s participation and willingness to take part. It relies on the viewer first experiencing the work from a distance. From this distance they are held in a moment of ‘suspended disbelief’.

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37 Ibid.
38 Grootenboer, The Rhetoric of Perspective, 41.
39 Gombrich, Art and Illusion, 172.
Figure 19 Wallerant Valliant *Feigned Letter Rack with Writing Implements* 1655 oil on canvas 80.33cm x 67.95cm

The Reversal of Perspective

Hanneke Grootenboer's *The Rhetoric of Perspective* explains how the vanishing point in letter rack painting becomes inverted.40 Grootenboer argues that rather than receding into a picture space via a device of spatial projection within the painting, in letter rack painting the vanishing point projects out into the viewer's space to converge somewhere behind where a viewer stands to look at the work.41 Here depth is inverted. Since the Renaissance the picture space was ordered by a vanishing point that moves into depth, in trompe l'œil the effect of perspective is somehow thrown forward.42 This visual sensation is heightened by the fact the light source in the painting appears to be continuous with the space and surfaces of the room. It is as if the objects are illuminated not from inside the painting but rather from the viewer's space. The cast shadows of these thinly laid-over papers and documents appear to manifest from a light source that sits outside of the painting.43

The paintings in *Magazine Mystics* evoke a similar movement back and forth from the viewer. The illusionistically painted transparent papers appear as if stuck on the surface of a support. However unlike Gijsbrecht's letter rack whose visual trickery is revealed from up-close to be a skillful rendering of paper and tape in oil paint, the material properties of the abstract gestures and transparencies in my work remain elusive even when the viewer is up close. This disguise of the materials holds the viewer in a state of uncertainty; they move toward the painting then back again, fixed on its surface in an attempt to decipher how it was made and what it was made from. This ambiguity and camouflage of materials in *Magazine Mystics* is an important distinction between my work and the seventeenth century letter rack.

Early Cubist Collages

Early Cubist collages of Picasso and Braque questioned the value of trompe l’œil, illusionistic copying in painting (see fig. 20).44 For example instead of painting wood grain effects using illusionistic painting, both artists began experimenting with a ready-

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 58.
made cheap printed wood grain wallpaper and gluing this into their compositions. Picasso then began incorporating other cheap printing papers into his works.\textsuperscript{45} In the 1912 canvas \textit{Still Life with Chair-Caning} Picasso disguises the imitation chair-caning print to appear as illusionistic painting (see fig. 21).\textsuperscript{46} He embeds the print into the work by concealing its cut-out edges with paint and building up the painted composition over the top, so that the pattern at first appears painted. Such tongue-in-cheek examples of disguising materials become ironic parodies of the letter racks. The Cubist collages utilise the same deceptive qualities inherent in illusionistic painting to question its very validity.\textsuperscript{47}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image}
\caption{detail of Picasso's \textit{Still Life with Chair-Caning}, 1912.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 97.
**Figure 20** Georges Braque *Fruit Dish and Glass* 1912, charcoal and cut-and-pasted printed wallpaper with gouache on white laid paper; subsequently mounted on paperboard 62.9 × 45.7 cm

![Image of Georges Braque's Fruit Dish and Glass](image)

**Figure 21** Pablo Picasso *Still Life with Chair-Caning* 1912 oil and oil cloth on canvas with rope frame 29cm x 39cm

Picasso and Braque combined fragments of collage material into painted areas on their canvases confusing the relationship of what was object and what was painted. Picasso and Braque developed a range of painterly techniques, adding substances into their oil paint or modelling surfaces in a way to give the distinct impression of different materials such as wood, glass and fabric. 48 In the essay *The Picasso Papers*, Rosalind Krauss describes the way in which, between 1912 and 1913, both Picasso and Braque began translating collages into oil paintings. 49 During the early stages of Cubism, Picasso and Braque restricted the use of colour to umbers, ochres, olive greens and greys. 50 These muted tones were not the colours of the objects being depicted but instead operated as a form of chiaroscuro, as a ‘...display of light and shadow across the shallow

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48 Ibid., 177.
50 Ibid., 169.
relief of their surfaces'. Krauss argues that it was the process of translating collage into painting that saw observational colour introduced into Cubist painting:

‘Collage put an end to this monochrome laboratory. Coloured papers, wallpapers, product labels, matchboxes, tobacco pouches, calling cards – all bore their own coloration in tones that were decidedly local, in the painter’s sense of the term’. In Picasso’s 1913 canvas Violin Hanging on the Wall, large, flattened, overlapping rectangles collectively approximate a representation of a violin. The colours of each shape bear no resemblance to the colours of an actual violin, but instead respond to the arbitrariness of collage elements and their fragments of colour. Of these flattened overlapping shapes, certain planes are built up in an exaggerated manner. This has been achieved by mixing sand into the oil paint so as shapes swell in relief like a rough stucco surface, which seemingly protrudes beyond the picture plane. These protruding territories have the effect of casting shadows back toward the background of the painting. Picasso would add painterly cast shadows into these paintings, not only to amplify their overall illusionistic qualities, but to also cause trickery or intrigue as to what areas were painted and what areas were collaged material adhered to the picture plane.

**Albers and the Bauhaus**

Josef Albers’ preliminary courses taught at the Bauhaus share characteristics of the illusionistic and visual devices of the seventeenth century letter racks along with the more tongue-in-cheek examples of camouflaging materials of Cubist collages. Albers taught these material studies initially at the Bauhaus before its closure in 1933 when he then took up a position at Black Mountain College in the United States until 1949.

Students constructed models from seemingly disparate materials before copying these models via painting and drawing. Materials such as cardboard, cloth, felt, wire and drawing pins were used to make constructions, together with everyday transparent

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51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 171–172.
53 Ibid., 169.
54 Pablo Picasso, *Violin Hanging on the Wall* 1913. Oil on canvas, spackle with sand 65.0 x 46.0 cm, Kunstmuseum Bern
58 Ibid.
materials such as glass and plastic. Students made observational drawings and paintings of these objects that had distinctive characteristics and textures.

In her text *The Experimenters*, Eva Diaz highlights a distinction between the ‘matière’ and ‘material’ studies that Albers taught at Black Mountain College. As Diaz explains, matière studies encouraged students to work inventively to represent a given material, whereas material studies involved the investigation into materials’ distinct and unique properties.\(^5^9\)

In Albers’ material studies, students developed an understanding of the dimensional, spatial and volumetric qualities of materials via construction exercises that would test and analyse a given materials specific properties and structure.\(^6^0\) Albers encouraged students to focus on the internal organisation of a material and to evaluate its structure through testing its firmness or elasticity and its ability to be shaped and manipulated via folding, compression or bending.\(^6^1\)

On the other hand Albers’ matière studies, Diaz explains, ‘...concerned the appearances of materials, distinguishing among structure, facture, and texture, and sought to characterise materials by their tactile or optical perception’.\(^6^2\) Matière studies required students to go from merely copying a material’s texture to re-creating the character of its surface\(^6^3\) (see fig. 22). Using tricks and deception they would manipulate and camouflage materials to create elaborate illusionistic collages and assemblages. A trompe l’œil representation of wood grain on paper gave the optical appearance of wood but the tactile appearance of paper.\(^6^4\) Albers commented that a successful matière was ‘...more intriguing when you are not sure what materials are in it’.\(^6^5\) He therefore challenged his students to explore the potential of a material by simulating other substances.

*Magazine Mystics* combines the thrill of illusion found in the trompe l’œil letter racks with the material camouflage in the early Cubism and Albers’ matière studies. These three traditions are linked together through the use of paper as both subject and source.


\(^{60}\) Ibid.

\(^{61}\) Ibid.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.

\(^{63}\) Horowitz and Danilowitz, *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes*, 109.

\(^{64}\) Diaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College*, 22.

\(^{65}\) Horowitz and Danilowitz, *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes*, 131.
material. Picasso and Braque’s early Cubist paintings were restricted to still life, interior scenes and portraits, however their source material of collaged fragments of paper arranged on a surface resembled the subject matter of the earlier letter rack paintings. While Cubism did not set out to paint the folds and subtle creases of sheets of paper with the same realistic verisimilitude as in Gijsbrecht’s letter racks, the concerted effort to capture the physical material qualities of paper in paint relates to the later matière studies taught by Albers.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 22** Monica Bella Broner-Ullmann *Material study from Albers’ preliminary course, (trompe l’œil nails) 1929*

Like the seventeenth century letter racks these material studies showed the thrill of illusion found in the two-dimensional rendering of objects using trompe l’œil painting and drawing techniques. At the same time Albers’ focus on illusionistic collages and assemblages that use visual tricks to manipulate and camouflage materials recall the qualities that were inherent in the early Cubist collages of Picasso and Braque.
There is an allure to the refined skills of the letter rack painter whose time in the studio is dedicated to capturing in oil paint, the fall of light over a sheet of paper, mimicking its slight creases, raised edges and wilting corners. The illusionistic quality in *Magazine Mystics* is influenced by this dedication and attention to detail in the Flemish letter racks. I have combined the playful visual trickery of illusionistic painting with further inventive processes to explore new possibilities of abstraction.

Where the letter racks used realist techniques and oil painting to mimic the appearance of sheets of paper, I use contemporary acrylic mediums in inventive ways to re-create the structure and properties of materials. Gel medium is commonly used to thicken the consistency of acrylic paint, giving it body and texture. I have developed processes that manipulate the properties of the gel to create a flattening out and a smooth slip-like surface that mimics the properties of a thin sheet of paper.

The success of the letter racks relies on the viewer uncovering the trick as they move closer to the work, becoming caught up in the artist’s virtuosic techniques. In *Magazine Mystics*, this ambiguity is not meant to be resolved – even when the viewer is standing close to one of the painted panels. Each of the shapes sharp and slightly raised edge resembles a cut piece of paper, adhered to the surface. It looks like collage but has a surface that closely resembles a painting. Like the camouflage of materials in Josef Albers’ assemblages, *Magazine Mystics* places the viewer in a state of uncertainty. In an attempt to decipher how the work is made, and what it is made of, the viewer engages in an extended duration of looking, captivated and intrigued as to what it is they are seeing.
Figure 23 Overleaf (horizontal) *Magazine Mystics* 2012 acrylic on paper 60 sheets overall 300cm x 600cm
Chapter 2

Veils and Figures

In Chapter One, I described the studio processes undertaken in developing the multi-panelled work on paper Magazine Mystics. This chapter focuses on the second series of paintings made during the middle stages of my research. The first is a series of large acrylic paintings on canvas, made between late 2012 and 2013, each 183cm x 152cm in size.

On completing Magazine Mystics I was excited about the new processes that I had established, enabling me to mimic the collages made from drafting film, paper, transparencies and masking tape. With each painting in the series, I gained more insight into the varying consistencies of paint required to make the abstract gestures, colour fields and pattern motifs. I had more control over the elaborate masking techniques and a better understanding of how the different brushes that I made achieved varying marks and effects. The outcome of this multi-panelled work on paper initiated a new question in the studio:

**How could I develop these initially small-scale processes to make large abstract paintings?**

In this chapter I will outline how I continued the process of using collages as models for paintings and how the jump in scale from the small works on paper to these new large paintings on canvas required further experimentation, testing and refinement of recently developed painting processes. The previous paintings responded to collages that were the same in scale and I wanted to continue this process of the source material being a 1:1 ratio to painting. The abstract marks in Magazine Mystics were made with movements of my wrist and elbow. The larger paintings required me to enlarge these gestural marks toward a scale generated by the action of my arm and body.

**Early Experiments**

I dedicated time in the studio to exploring how to make large-scale collages from transparencies, drafting film and paper. I began to experiment by painting larger scale gestures onto drafting film. I made a number of brushes that were larger in scale than the brushes that I worked with in Magazine Mystics. These new brushes ranged from
30cm to 50cm in length and were made by attaching brush heads with their handles cut off along a wooden support (see fig. 24).

![Figure 24 Brushes](image)

At first I found the new large brushes awkward and difficult to use. I made handles for the largest of these brushes, which enabled them to slide over the surface of the drafting film with much more control. I experimented with quantities of paint and the new types of marks I was able to create with a larger and broader stroke. The varying actions of my arm and body became significant when delivering these new gestures. I started with marks that were initially 1.5 meters in length, being the same width as the canvases. I then made attempts at long unbroken gestures that were the full length of both of my outstretched arms. Loading paint onto the film then holding the brush in my right hand with my arm fully outstretched, I pulled the brush toward my body from my right to my left side. Once the brush had reached just past my chest I would switch the brush to my left hand without removing the head from the drafting film, and continue the gesture until my left arm was completely outstretched. This process created long ribbon-like marks.

At such a scale these marks had a strong differentiation between light and dark (see fig. 25). At the beginning of the gesture, as the brush moved through the lined up lumps of coloured acrylic, the marks would be darkest and more defined. Each colour remained relatively pure and unaffected by the colour on either side of it. Continuing the gesture, these colours would begin to mix on the surface before becoming pale and fragmented.
No longer loaded with paint, the gesture would finally dissipate with the brush leaving only a faint residue of the mark behind.

*Figure 25* Large acrylic gesture on drafting film

While I was interested in these contrasts of light and dark, I wanted to prevent these longer gestures from fragmenting and losing momentum. I experimented with reloading the mark at a point where the gesture began to fade. To do this I repeated the process of applying a thin line of paint made up of five to seven different colours to the surface of the film. I made a gesture and then at the point when the paint was no longer being picked up by the brush I stopped and reloaded the paint in the same order and the same width as the brush. I would then continue the mark through this loaded amount of paint. This process enabled a mark to maintain a vibrancy and consistency from start to finish.

At this new larger scale, folds, creases and seams began to emerge in the gestures as they now began to take on appearances of draped fabric and folded cloth. Some of the undulating marks appeared to project as amorphous, while the multi-coloured contours of others were reminiscent of cut stone. I began taping these elements loosely onto my studio wall, playing with motifs in front of and behind one another. At this point it was really exciting to see the collages that were initially only A3 in size now as large compositions.

**First Large Paintings**
The first paintings I made in this series combined abstract gestures and transparent shapes with an atmospheric ground. These grounds consisted of an atmospheric gradient, which was made by applying ten tertiary violet tones with a large brush. Working with the lightest tone at the top of the canvas to darkest tone at the base, I painted wet into wet before feathering out any brushstrokes with a dry brush. I intentionally exposed fragments of the red ground slightly around the edge of the canvas, to give the appearance of the atmosphere floating and suspended in space. At such a large scale, these fields of subtly modulated colour generate pictorial depth without a sense of scale or distance, reminiscent of a landscape shrouded in fog or mist.

In *Big Spill* the composition revolves around a large circular motif, which sits just off centre (see fig. 26). A number of other abstract gestures project from this central motif. Some of these gestures in both the upper and lower parts of the composition extend to the edges of the canvas. These gestures, which are taken to the edge of the support, appear to continue out of the painting, projecting beyond the confines of the stretcher. Behind these abstract gestures is an arrangement of transparent shapes. A series of black shapes appear at times around the perimeter of the central cluster of the composition. While they are mostly concealed by the motifs in the foreground, these black cut-out shapes act as an armature or structure onto which the other motifs are painted.
The Masking Technique

In Magazine Mystics I developed a unique masking technique using gel medium to gradually build up a thin transparent layer on the painting that had similar characteristics to the drafting film. By mimicking the surface quality of the drafting film, the painted gestures embodied the same characteristics as the marks made onto the drafting film in the collages. While this gave me confidence in approaching these new paintings, I then had to adapt this masking process to the new gestures that were significantly larger in scale. It was important that I built up this masked area to a smooth finish that mirrored the surface of the drafting film. Like Magazine Mystics these built up layers of gel mimic the properties of paper, creating a puzzle for the viewer who stands in front of the work, as to the material nature of the painting as surface and illusion.

I began using a GOLDEN regular gel matte medium and would apply this with a squeegee across the surface of the masked shape on the canvas. In the smaller works on paper I could use the squeegee to apply the gel and achieve a thin and smooth finish with just one application. This previously straightforward process became very difficult once I
was working on a much larger scale. The size and width of the cut-out shapes meant that I didn’t have a squeegee that was long enough to apply the gel in one stroke. I tried to apply it in sections, which created large and uneven seams and ridges. The quantities of gel required to cover the larger silhouettes were far greater and applying the gel straight from the tub in this manner became inefficient and wasteful. I began thinning out the gel with a matte medium to a consistency of PVA glue. This meant that I could no longer use the squeegee as an applicator, as the gel was too thin, however I found I was now able to apply the gel with a brush. I needed two or three thin gel applications to build up the surface to a quality that resulted in a smooth finish. While this lengthened the preparation time required for each gesture, it meant that I was able to use this masking technique on much larger areas of a painting (see fig. 27).

![Figure 27 Studio shot: Kite 2013](image)

Inevitably, brushstrokes appeared in the transparent gel layer. To rectify this, once the gel was completely dry, I applied wet and dry polishing sandpaper over the surface. This light sanding removed any ridges or discrepancies that occurred in the application process. By polishing this gel layer its smooth plasticity became reminiscent of the slip-like surface of the drafting film thus allowing paint to slide across its surface.
While this elaborate masking technique allowed me to mimic the surface qualities of the drafting film, the smooth surface juxtaposed with the slight weave and irregularity of the canvas support also heightened the illusion of collage material stuck to the canvas (see fig. 28). In some areas of the paintings, particularly in the atmospheric grounds, the thread of the 12-ounce canvas support is apparent on the surface.

**Figure 28** Studio shot: works in progress 2013

**Repainting the Large Gestures**

Once an area was masked and the surface prepared for painting, I laid the canvas horizontally on trestles to give me more control over the gestural painting process. I placed the abstract gesture on drafting film beside the area that was masked and about to be painted. I took the same brush that made the gesture on the drafting film, stood over the masked area, and repeated the movements that had made the corresponding mark. By practicing this gesture, then re-enacting the movements with my wrist, arm and body, these once intuitive and automatic motions became slow and rehearsed. These choreographed actions that reanimate a gesture (see fig. 29) recall the motions of a dancer whose movements appear automatic and instantaneous but are in fact part of a consciously repeated and performed set of steps and movements of their body.
The next two paintings introduce different spatial complexities to the atmospheric ground used in the three previous larger works. I made a patterned ground that echoed an earlier work on paper, and a ground using transparent concentric rectangles that recalled some of the works on paper in *Magazine Mystics*.

*Performer* consists of an all-over diamond grid pattern, that covers the entire surface of the canvas, suggestive of a textile or weave (see fig. 30). Superimposed and centered is a series of black cut-out shapes, transparent shapes and expanding and contracting abstract gestural marks. A long black shape connects this central configuration with the base of the canvas appearing like a trunk or a pedestal. The painting is called *Performer* because the decorative ground is reminiscent of a painted theatre backdrop, while the central figure appears like a performer in costume on stage.
The all-over diamond grid pattern originated from a loose coloured pencil drawing of the design and colour scheme. I had painted similar pattern designs previously and I was keen to see these on a large scale. Using the coloured pencil drawing as a guide, I enlarged this grid system onto the canvas using a straight-edged piece of timber and a light pencil. Each diamond unit was made up of four triangles. I made a six-headed brush that was the same width as each rectangle. Having the brush the same width as each rectangular unit enabled me to apply six different colors in a single stroke into the rectangles. Each triangle begins with magenta on the outside followed by blue, orange, green, purple and yellow. I repeated this process across the entire surface of the canvas until I had an all-over coloured geometric pattern. Slight jagged deviations of a brush stroke created undulations in the mark, reminiscent of folds in fabric and giving the impression of a patchwork or textile.

Using the same process as in the earlier larger works, I began attaching the cut-out abstract gestures, black painted card and drafting film onto the surface of the painting with masking tape. I started with an arrangement of black cut-out shapes. In the initial
collage process, I played around with large-scale collage elements in my studio. I wove black shapes over and under transparent shapes and placed abstract gestures on top of and underneath these arrangements. Hence the development of this painting’s composition is a result of this play with large-scale collage.

**Figure 31** Pablo Picasso *Guitar and Wineglass* 1912 pasted papers gouache and charcoal on paper 47.7 cm x 37.46 cm

This patterned ground resembles decorative fabric and shares similarities to Picasso’s *Guitar and Wineglass*, an early collage made of cut and painted papers along with found printed paper on top of printed decorative wallpaper (see fig. 31) The wallpaper pattern made up of repeated diamond shapes resembles the gridded patterned ground in *Performer*. The illusionistic plinth in my painting relates to Picasso’s use of newspaper in these early collages. Picasso would often use newspaper either at the base of a composition or inserted in one of the bottom corners to stand in for a table edge.66

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66 Poggi, In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism and the Invention of Collage, 6.
Stacks (fig. 32) has a ground that is made from a series of dark blue concentric rectangles. These rectangles begin with the smallest in the centre and expand outwards, with the final rectangle the same dimensions as the canvas support. They appear darkest in the centre and lightest towards the outer layers, creating a tunnel-like illusion of deep receding space. There is a central cluster of abstract gestural forms and transparent organic shapes. These appear to be sitting on top of a transparent plinth that protrudes from the central base of the canvas.

My idea for the ground developed from layering rectangular transparent layers of paint on top of one another. Layering numerous thin transparencies over one another created a dense opaque centre, while the outward edges of these layers remained light and translucent. I developed a formula for a series of rectangles that all have the same central axis and enlarge incrementally while maintaining the same distance between each perimeter (see fig. 33). I ruled up a grid on the canvas in light pencil and marked in
these repeated rectangles. I used masking tape to delineate each rectangle, to ensure a clean, sharp edge similar to the collages of overlayed transparencies. The canvas was first painted a single unmodulated blue. I then mixed transparent black paint that would be used for all of the concentric rectangles. Beginning in the centre, the smallest rectangle was painted first. Then each subsequent rectangle was painted with a black transparency overlapping the previous ones, developing a sequence of tonal values. The final transparent rectangle, the same dimensions of the canvas, was the lightest and closest to the blue ground.

Figure 33 Work in progress: Stacks 2013

I had been experimenting with ideas of making a painting that used a plinth structure on top of which was a composition of the collage material. Examples of this can be seen in compositions in Magazine Mystics. Implying an object in space that also appears to be made by motifs stuck to the surface of the support introduces further spatial complexities and playful illusions in my work.
For *Stacks* I made a collage of a plinth using two pieces of drafting film attached to the canvas (see fig. 34). I traced the outline and painted in the plinth structure over the top of the blue ground. I then repeated the process of moving collage elements around the surface of the painting in order to resolve the composition. Similarly to the process used in *Performer*, I wove the transparent shapes and the painted gestures on top of and underneath one another. In addition to the transparent drafting film motifs, I made organic cut-out shapes in transparent blue tones reminiscent of cloud formations. These cloud-like forms have delicate and intricate curved and hooped edges that contradict their elemental make up. The cut edge of these shapes refers to the collage and they share similarities to the ragged ends of the painted gestures rather than the feathering out and soft edge of clouds.
*Figure 35* *Emblem Echo* 2013 acrylic on canvas 183cm x 152cm

*Emblem Echo* has a central composition of abstract gestural motifs and transparent blue organic shapes that float over a deep green field (see fig. 35). The gestural motifs and blue cloud motifs are not applied in succession but instead weave in and out of each other. Centered over the top of this arrangement is a floral circular motif. The green field is made of different coloured transparent layers of paint. Each hue is revealed one by one around the edges. The layers exposed around the periphery of the canvas create a frame or a border in which the green field and central compositions appear to be contained. There are moments where the abstract gestures and the blue transparent motifs cross over this border made of coloured bands of orange, red, blue and purple, as if momentarily extending out of the confines of their frame in which the composition is contained. The illusion of abstract motifs moving beyond the frame, recalls Gijsbrecht’s
letter rack painting in which the paper appears to expand out of the frame and into the space of the viewer.67

**Figure 36** Work in progress: *Emblem Echo* 2013

The painting is called *Emblem Echo* because the overall shape of the composition gives the impression of an emblem or family crest. During the week I was making this painting I bought a dark green Toyota Echo. The colour of my new car reminded me of the dense green that makes up the ground of the painting (see fig. 37).

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Previous Research

The atmospheric grounds in this body of work extend on my previous Honours research into the sublime. Robert Rosenblum’s book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* deliberates over how the fields of colour of Rothko and the rhythmic all-over compositions of Pollock attempt to convey with paint on canvas the ungraspable forces of nature.68 Rosenblum identifies Rothko’s luminous fields of colour as metaphorical suggestions of earth and sea, cloud and sky, finding their source in both ‘…[t]urner, who similarly achieved the dissolutions of all matter into a silent, mythical luminosity [and] in Friedrich, who also placed the spectator before an abyss’.69 I sought to make abstract paintings that could convey the elemental compounds and forces of the natural world, such as water, wind, and waves. I began to work with large fields of thinly veiled translucent oil and acrylic to create subtly shifting gradients from light to dark. Traces of these layers were slightly exposed around the edges of the canvas.

I have since extended on this earlier interest into atmospheric painting. In this body of work, the ground becomes a stage for gestures and motifs to be painted into. Layers of

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69 Ibid., 214.
thinly veiled acrylic paint create a deep and luminous central void. This is framed by feathering light, which is generated by the subtle revealing of each layer around the edge of the painting. I then work with illusions that propel abstract gestures toward the viewer from this deep central space.

**Adjacency**

In the symposium *Painting in the Present Tense* at the Walker Art Centre Minneapolis in 2013, critic and writer Jan Verwoert offers an alternative to the heroic model of action that dominated discourse on abstraction in the West. Verwoert suggests that instead of referring to the history of painting as a way to define current modes of contemporary painting, we should also look at the way painting is influenced by activities adjacent to the studio. Verwoert uses the metaphor of the crab walk, describing how painters like the crab, move in a lateral motion, their work influenced by the adjacent everyday experiences of daily life such as music, fashion, dance and culture.

Verwoert proposes that if we look back on the history of abstract painting and discuss artists work in relation to influences adjacent to their practices, we can rediscover an alternative story to modernism. Verwoert’s ideas of adjacency resonate with me as I continue to investigate the relationship between surfing and painting. It has prompted me to think about a painting history in which artists engage physical bodily activities alongside the studio. This has parallels with the gestures of my paintings. Mondrian’s grids were fused with a rigid structure inspired by Manhattan and also recalled the rhythmical rehearsed steps and beats of jazz dancing (see fig. 38). The painter Sean Scully relates his experience of boxing, in which two bodies are engaged in a set of repeated actions in a clearly defined space, as influential to the physicality and composition of his work (see fig. 39).

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71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
Verwoert discusses adjacency in the work of Mary Heilmann, an American abstract painter who has been an important figure in the context of my research. Heilmann works with abstraction's formal devices of colour, shape and composition to make rhythmic, experiential and perceptual paintings. The wild subjective colours in Heilmann's *Surfing on Acid 2005* come from an era of hippy culture and the human consumption of hallucinogens (see fig. 40). Here, the stacking of the loosely painted bars above one another recall breaking waves and the body in motion through water. According to Verwoert, in doing this, ‘...Heilmann admits life into the work, not through rigid heroic gestures but by creating a tension inherent in painterly form that captures precisely what defines certain existential emotional states’.  

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76 Dave Hickey, "Mary Mary Surfing on Acid," in Mary Heilmann To Be Someone, ed. Elizabeth Armstrong (Los Angeles: Orange County Museum of Art, 2007), 43.
77 Ibid.
Verwoert compares the composition of an abstract painting that is made by a pre-set progression of ideas to the chessboard in which the moves a player can make are limited to a certain amount of predefined outcomes. Instead, adjacent activities that find their way into a composition result in a painting that behaves more like a game of dominos, where the structure of that game expands in countless directions during the process of play. This relates to the processes that I work with, my paintings being a result of a series of revised steps and improvisations. Decisions are also made in response to my daily experiences and these experiences find their way into the structure of the painting.

**Surfing and the Gesture**

My studio practice is integrated with the daily ritual of swimming and surfing. I think about the relationship that the bodily actions required to re-perform the intuitive gestural marks in my work has to surfing. These rehearsed movements relate to the coiling and flowing movements of the body in water.

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79 Verwoert, “Opening Day Talk: Painting in the Present Tense Walker Art Centre”.
80 Ibid.

**Figure 40** Mary Heilmann *Surfing on Acid* 2005 oil on canvas 152.4cm x 122cm
You are never still in the sea. Movement can be as subtle and constant as the rhythmic
inhale and exhale of breathing or at more exhilarating speeds. On calm days motion is
slight and you drift with the gentle rise and fall of a small swell. On big days waves surge
toward you with threatening and rhythmic violence as you battle currents and rips with
relentless paddling. Surfing on days like this requires balance, strength and an ability to
hold your breath underwater for long periods.

Your motion is determined by the slight changes in the direction of the wind, and the
size and angle of the swell. Travelling along the face of a wave, your speed is controlled
by how close you are to the pocket, the part of the wave closest to the moment where
the wave is actually breaking. Great surfers appear to have the ability to slow down or
speed up at will in order to position themselves on the best and most critical part of a
wave. Using their hands, arms or torso to dig themselves into the wave, the drag slows
them down enough for the pocket of the wave to catch up with them before releasing
the breaks and speeding up again.

Lines and arcs are scribed into the face of the wave as you skim over the surface, gliding
from the base to the lip and down again in succinct and intentional loops. The residue of
this top to bottom action appears like a meandering and coiled gesture. Its intensity
remains closest to the base of the board while faint traces are left behind to eventually
fade and be subsumed by the wave. All the while your body moves in step with this
drawn out line as you distribute your weight back and forth incrementally throughout
the succession of turns. Your body remains over your board and your weight in your
back legs as you lean into a bottom turn. Ascending back up the face of the wave, you
push off the top twisting your torso, allowing the speed and motion of the wave to bring
your board and the rest of your body around with you.

Watching surfing like this is reminiscent of the choreographed actions of a dancer
whose motion appears automatic and instantaneous but is in fact part of a consciously
repeated and performed set of steps and movements of the body. Like dancing, surfing
requires an acute awareness of the subtle movements of the entire body as you move in
rhythm with the wave. Displaying casualness in a moment of criticality and technical
difficulty, remaining poised and graceful in extreme physical exertion.

When surfing you initiate a set of repeated movements in order to transition across the
face of a wave. Early practice of these actions requires you to focus your attention
acutely on the sensations in your body and to be consciously aware of your shifting
weight, as it is distributed across the board in order to stay balanced. Eventually, with practice and repetition you become more competent and rehearsed in these subtle movements. Soon the choreographed set of movements is performed with muscle memory, as you generate speed and transition through turns with a seemingly casual and effortless rhythm.

The gestures in my paintings require a similar rehearsed action to that of surfing. Practicing this gesture, then re-enacting the movements of my wrist, arm and body, these once intuitive and automatic motions are now slow and rehearsed. The heroic modernist gestures of Abstract Expressionism were defined by the unique and spontaneous action of the painter. Conversely, the large multi-coloured gestures in my paintings are rehearsed mediated recordings of earlier gestures that were initially made during the collage process.

The gestures shapes and the direction of the brush that constitute a mark are like that of the lines scribed into the face of the wave by a surfer. This line of white water that trails a surfer's board is similar to the line of vapor left behind by plane contrails in the atmosphere. In surfing, arcs and turns made on a wave can be short and constricted or more elongated and drawn out. The gestures in my paintings are illustrative of this trail scribed into the water when surfing. While each gesture has subtle nuances that differentiate one from the next, they are all variations of the looping 's' shape or the zigzagging figure-of-eight-style entrails left behind by a board moving across a wave. Some of the gestural abstract forms are reminiscent of waves themselves. Just as waves fold over themselves and break, the gestures are often visual suggestions of this natural phenomenon. The gestures seemingly curl in and over themselves, which is reminiscent not only of folds of fabric, but also of the undulations and movement of waves.

While it is a very physical and strenuous act, surfing also offers extreme sensory and perceptual experiences. Often you are in motion, gliding through the water and simultaneously experiencing a feeling of weightlessness. Whilst in the sea, you can often be reduced to simply sitting in the safety of deep water away from the breaking waves and watching the transformation of water as it is momentarily arrested into a three-dimensional form. As a wave rises and peaks, it transforms into a feathering and translucent fold. Light penetrates and disperses streaks of colour over its surface. Suspended for an instant, it appears like a blown glass sculpture before exploding spectacularly into the shallows and dispersing an infinite arrangement of foaming
marbled white water that interlocks across the surface before dissolving and fading away.

In *What Painting Is*, James Elkins describes how one can discern a painter from an art historian in a museum by the way they respond with their bodies to the paintings in front of them.\(^{81}\) A painter will move to the work, re-performing the actions of the artist’s body while also imaging themselves in the act of painting. These movements of a painter viewing a painting are not always intentional; instead they are intuitive ‘...a kind of automatic response like waving to a friend’.\(^{82}\) Observing a surfer watching surfing is akin to the experience that Elkins has described when observing a painter looking at painting. Surfers watch other surfers with a keen and astute awareness. You can pick a surfer out from a group watching surfing on a headland by the subtle arching of their backs or by the gentle sway and opening up of their shoulders. These movements are never exaggerated; instead they recall the slight unseen shifts of a surfer's body as they distribute weight back and forth. The gestures in my paintings summon up multiple modes of experience for the viewer simultaneously. Their illusionistic and deceptive surfaces hold a viewer as they attempt to decipher the work's materiality. This visual trickery engages the viewer in a dance, between reimagining the body of the painter, to then moving their own bodies to the gestures shape and form.

The use of multiple colours in each gesture has a relationship to the way colour is reflected onto the surface of water. Up close, small rings form on the surface and their edges and rims shimmer reflected light. These concentric hoops morph and double as they move across the surface, appearing like a topographical record of the soft contours of the body of water. The colour of the sea does not belong to the sea: instead it comes from the reflecting silver of cloud formations, of the brilliant hues of yellows, pinks and blues of the sky and from its depths, smudging partial greens and tertiary browns of mossy covered rocks, reef and seaweed. A single colour never defines a shape, or suggests a volume or form. Instead colour appears to bind itself to the surface of the water – without edges – blurring and bleeding, flexing and pulsing with the ebb and flow of the tides.

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\(^{82}\) Ibid.
Figure 41 *Interior Frieze* 2013 acrylic on canvas 183cm x 152cm
Figure 42 *Midnight Plane* 2013 acrylic on canvas 183cm x 152cm
Figure 43 *Kite* 2013 acrylic on canvas 183cm x 152cm
Figure 44 Veil and Figure 2013 acrylic on canvas 183cm x 152cm
Figure 45 Electric 2013 acrylic on canvas 183cm x 152cm
Figure 46 *Arena* 2013 acrylic on canvas 183cm x 152cm
Chapter 3
Other Relief

In Chapter Two, I detailed the new processes and techniques that I developed to make a series of large paintings on canvas. This chapter will focus on the series of collages and paintings called *Other Relief*. At the beginning of producing this body of work I proposed a new question: how might incorporating images of drapery and suggestions of interior space with the already established collage material extend the vocabulary or range of my work?

*Other Relief* comprises ten painted collages and a series of large acrylic paintings on canvas. These were made in 2014. The collages were the starting point of the series and were made in response to images I came across in the catalogue of a 2005 London exhibition of work by the late American sculptor John Chamberlain (see figs. 47 and 48). Beginning by cutting out the sculptures from installation images in the catalogue and replacing them with abstract gestures painted on paper and drafting film, the two-dimensional collages mimic the shadows cast from the sculptures and the space surrounding them. The subsequent large paintings are informed by these collages as well as by other collages that combine gestures with found images of fabric and drapery.

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**Figure 47** John Chamberlain *Lucky Yourmein* 1990 painted steel 155.3cm x 161cm x 135.9cm  **Figure 48** John Chamberlain *Urban Garlic* 1994 painted steel 187.3cm x 227.3cm x 198.8cm

This body of work is a departure from the previous series. In earlier paintings the layered abstract motifs are presented flat and parallel to the picture plane on a vertical axis. While these new works are extensions of this vocabulary, the abstract gestures and motifs embody the form of a sculpture grounded in space.

This chapter examines the development of this new body of work and how it originated from my research trip to Europe and the United Kingdom in 2013. It explains the process of making the ten collages and details new painterly techniques in the subsequent large paintings. I also outline the problems that arose when I introduced pictorial elements into these new large paintings such as the photo-realistic interior floor space and collaged images of fabric and drapery.

**Early Experiments**

I found the exhibition catalogue *Without Fear: John Chamberlain Sculptures* in a bargain bin at an art bookshop not far from Tate Modern. It was October 2013 and I was in London, coming to the end of a six-week research trip. The reproductions in the catalogue were slick and styled in the manner typical of contemporary gallery installation images. I was struck by how the two-dimensional reproductions of these sculptures bore some relation to aspects of my work. The twisted and contorted glossy metal reminded me of my multi-coloured abstract gestures. The heavy metals in Chamberlain’s sculptures appeared as light-weight as crumpled paper, reminiscent of the delicate folds of a Bernini marble sculpture that I had seen in Rome a week earlier. The seamless neutral background onto which the sculpture was centrally positioned resembled the greyscale gradients and veils in my earlier work. What most interested me about these images, however, were the shadows cast by the sculptures. A sculpture casts shadows into the neutral space of the interior, a natural result of the controlled...

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84 Ibid.
85 In Rome, I saw for the first time Bernini’s sculptures in the Museo Borghese. The contorted metal sculptures of John Chamberlain recalled the twisted fabrics that circulate the two figures in Bernini’s Apollo and Daphne.
lighting in the photograph. These shadows intensified the three-dimensionality of the sculpture, signaling the horizontal ground plane onto which the sculpture was set.

Figure 49 Experimental collages 2014: acrylic and mixed media on paper

I experimented with combining these images with off-cuts of abstract gestural marks that I had stored in my studio (see fig. 49). I used a scalpel to cut out all the sculptures in the reproductions, leaving only the photographed interior and a negative silhouette of the central form. I began placing the catalogue pages with their central cut-out silhouettes on top of the painted paper scraps. Although these scraps were merely off-cuts, they quickly began to take the form of an abstract sculpture due to the cast shadows and interior space (see fig. 50).
In Europe I had bought a number of A2 sized plastic sheets that were similar to drafting film, though they were white and opaque. I decided I would make abstract gestures on this new material and use it for the new series of collages. I spent a day making small gestural marks onto this new support. I made a decision not to reference any of the colours, shapes or forms of the John Chamberlain sculptures, but instead rely on the sculpture silhouettes and shadows. The earlier experiments combining the photographic space with the off-cuts of abstract paper indicated that I didn't need the gestural marks to reference the colour or forms in the sculptures, in order for these marks to take on three-dimensional form. Therefore I made a variety of gestures that were small in scale, brightly coloured and could be incorporated into a collage that was slightly larger than A4. The scale of these marks was considerably smaller than the large bodily gestures I was making in the previous series. These gestures were reminiscent of the very first experiments that I made at the beginning of my research. I enjoyed revisiting gestural marks at this scale. They became more sophisticated and varied as a result of the experience I had gained from the previous work.

Once I had accumulated a substantial range of these gestures I cut them up and ordered them in colour and shape on my studio table. I placed the abstract cut-out motifs behind the installation shots. The gestural motifs began to embody the negative contoured silhouette of the removed sculpture. The collages resembled photographs of brightly coloured three-dimensional forms in space casting shadows onto a floor (see fig. 51).
Figure 51 Other Relief 2014 pasted paper and acrylic on paper 28cm x 21cm
Upon completing the series of ten collages, I began the process of working from these collages to make a series of paintings. I chose two of these collages that had an interesting central shape but also had complex shadows in the photographic reproduction. I had become aware of how the atmospheric gradients in earlier paintings resembled the photographic space of the installation shots. I chose collages that had seamless neutral backgrounds, rather than those that gave an indication of the polished concrete floor in the photographs. I was able to replicate this space using the same technique of creating large greyscale fields in earlier work. I painted the two atmospheric gradients simultaneously, mimicking the shift from darkest at the top to lightest at the base, as they appeared in the photographs of the sculptures. Upon completing the series of ten collages, I began the process of working from these collages to make a series of paintings. I chose two of these collages that had an interesting central shape but also had complex shadows in the photographic reproduction.

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In the collages the abstract gestures are placed behind the interior space. Unlike earlier paintings where a gesture would appear in front of an atmospheric ground, these new collages inverted this relationship by superimposing the ground on top of the abstract gestures. It was important to replicate this in the painting process. To do this, I positioned the masking tape around the contours of the initial central shape, which allowed me to paint a gesture all the way to the edge of this masked shape. Repeating this process until all of the abstract motifs were painted, I removed the masking tape from around the edge of the cut-out shape. This gives the appearance of gestures behind the interior space. I also painted some gestures that appear to sit over the cut-out photographic space. This weaving of the figure and ground was exaggerated by adding subtle cast shadows from the cut-out photographic space. These shadows would cast onto the abstract gestures, pushing the photographic space forward and causing the gestures to recede (see figs. 52 and 53).
Figure 52  *Without Fear* 1 2014 acrylic on canvas 122cm x 101cm
I continued to work with a centralised motif form, and I began looking for sources that were different from the John Chamberlain images. I realised that I could use any type of sculptural form or object that was photographed and that cast shadows into a space. I found images of ceramics, antiques, jewellery and furnishings. I used these images as the beginning of collages, which would then go on to inform further paintings.

*Castle* is a central figure that is made up of a single overlayed gesture that is doubled one on top of the other (see fig. 54). This gesture folds back and over itself like an exaggerated ‘S’ shape. The first gesture is painted on the base and appears as if it is contained behind the atmospheric space. The same gesture is then repeated, though it has been flipped vertically on its axis and is painted over the previous gesture as well as the atmospheric space. Both are painted with a repeated winding stroke made of a transparent magenta, turquoise and yellow that mix on the surface to create more complex tertiary colours. At the base of the form, a shadow is cast onto the bottom left hand side of the canvas, pushing this central form back into space.
Figure 54 Castle 2014 acrylic on canvas 122cm x 101cm

Figure 55 Hood 2014 acrylic on canvas 122cm x 101cm
Hood uses a similar totemic central form (see fig. 55). This form is made up of a cluster of darker and muted gestural marks that appear as if behind the gradient surrounding space. At the top of this central motif a black shape with white highlights hovers over both the central cluster and atmospheric space. The base of this central form is a red and blue pattern that is intersected by a shape reminiscent of white drapery. It is titled Hood because the black cut-out shape at the top of the painting has the appearance of a headpiece.

The last works in this series are three large paintings on canvas that measure 228cm x 198cm. These three paintings use the same technique of developing a composition from the silhouette of a sculpture in space that is then superimposed over gestural abstract motifs. In these new works I introduced painted images of fabric and drapery and the depiction of a floor space for the first time. The fabric and drapery sourced from fashion magazines and paintings from art history (see example figs. 56 and 57) are cut out and interwoven with the gestural motifs.

Figure 56 (left) Hans Holbein the Younger Erasmus of Rotterdam 1523 oil on wood 73.6cm x 51.4cm

Figure 57 (right) Francisco de Zurbarán Santa_Casilda 1635 oil on canvas 171cm x 107cm
Painting the floor references the installation images in some of the earlier *Other Relief* collages which depict a concrete floor. I had been reluctant to include the floor space in the previous paintings because it introduced an element of realism that I had reservations about adapting into the paintings. Unlike the seamless neutral grounds that were evocative of an atmospheric space, the floor was in sharp focus, allowing for a clear differentiation between the horizontal plane in the foreground and the vertical plane of the wall in the background. Nonetheless in developing these three large paintings, I decided to incorporate this realist floor space as well as the images of drapery and fabric. This proved to be very complicated both in the execution of these large paintings and the spatial implications that arose by combing the photographic space with the abstract picture space. I will elaborate on one painting from this series *Procession* (see fig. 58) detailing its processes, inherent challenges and eventual failures due to the realist depictions of the interior space and painted drapery. The challenges and failures described in detailing these processes can also be attributed to the other two paintings *New Geology* and *Weather Patterns*. 
Procession comprises a central form consisting of transparent and opaque abstract gestures and shapes that appear located in an interior space. The motifs that make up this central form appear to be layered and stacked on top of one another. The upper left hand side of this form is a white shape that has folds reminiscent of fabric. This is overlayed with a black rectangular shape. This upper section is then overlayed with a number of multi-coloured gestural motifs that span outwards from the centre, weaving their way towards the perimeter of the canvas. The lower half of the form presents as a concertinaed magenta and blue pattern on the left hand side that is laid over yellow drapery. This form is a reference to the painted sleeve in Hans Holbein the Younger
Erasmus of Rotterdam 1523 (see above fig. 56). A black form partially conceals this yellow drapery, followed by a blue gestural mark that continues to the right hand side.

This central cluster of abstract motifs is overlaid with an elongated silver organic shape, as it runs diagonally from the upper left to lower right hand side. This form references the fabric on the dress of Francisco de Zurbarán’s Santa_Casilda 1635 (see above fig. 57). On the upper left hand side a long thin multi-coloured mark loops outwards then back on itself. Both of these shapes appear on top of many of the gestural motifs that make up the sculptural form. Interior space is evoked by the horizontality of a concrete floor plane in the foreground, and the vertical plane of the adjoining wall in the background.

The cluster of abstract motifs and shapes are projected as three-dimensional by the shadows cast onto the floor. Paradoxically both the floor and wall appear in front of some of the painted motifs thus flattening the vertical and horizontal axis of the picture space. Edges and contours of many of the central forms oscillate between belonging to the painted motifs and to the interior space. This creates an alternation between a three-dimensional perspectival space and a shallow collaged space in relief.

Issues with Fabric and Drapery

I began incorporating found images of drapery and fabric into the collage process before I introduced them into the paintings. I was looking for a new painterly space that could be incorporated with the abstract gestures. I cut out images from fashion magazines and books of Flemish and Italian Renaissance painting that I had been slowly collating in my studio. A lot of the gestures in my work are reminiscent of folded coloured fabric and so I looked for instances in the photographs and reproductions that had an affinity with the abstract gestures but would also create interesting contrasts.

I cut out images from magazines of drapery, curtains and patterned textiles. I used reproductions of paintings by Holbein, El Greco and other Old Master paintings, extracting a sleeve or a cuff, a headpiece or draped garment; I cut sections of drapery from Zurbaran’s portraits of Spanish royalty and his series of Franciscan monks. I combined these images with the abstract gestures to create complex and playful relationships between representation and abstraction.

Making collages with this imagery was quick, immediate and experimental. However when I began attempting to incorporate these elements into the large scale paintings I found myself struggling and labouring over a new painterly language that up until this point I had not been interested in pursuing. Rather than re-appropriate the folds,
creases and fall of light in these cut-out images into interesting and new abstract marks, I set out to try and render them in a photorealist way (see fig. 59). The freshness and intent in the collages became bound up and the painting process tightened as I struggled to understand how to paint the folds, drapery and fabric from the photographic cut-outs (see fig. 60).

![Figure 59 Details of painted fabric and drapery](image-url)
Issues with the Floor

Along with the images of drapery, I incorporated a floor space into these three paintings further intensifying the hybridity between realism and abstraction in the picture space. This also proved difficult and would eventually change the dynamic of the paintings entirely. The previous paintings utilised a subtle gradient space as opposed to the differentiation of a floor in the foreground and adjoining wall in the background. The neutral gradient space was more closely aligned to the abstract grounds in my work, as it didn’t have any reference to scale or image. By incorporating the floor, this once ambiguous space would now become a much more photo-realistic space.

My wife Clare Thackway has worked as a scenic painter in both film and theatre productions. Much of her work involves using intricate painting techniques to transform structures made from ply and medium-density fibreboard (MDF) into elaborate sets. Using faux painting tropes and visual trickery, these raw ply constructions can be transformed to appear as grandiose and excessive as a palace exterior or as decrepit as an aged façade of a derelict building. One technique that is particularly useful for a scenic painter is to use acrylic paint to create a surface that has the appearance of concrete. This effect is achieved by first applying thin acrylic to a prepared surface before spraying the still wet acrylic with methylated spirits. The methylated spirits bites into the acrylic paint, creating a dappled textured effect. Using a dry brush and
feathering out any excess fluid on the surface, simultaneously blurs the surface while enhancing the crater-like blotching effect caused by the methylated spirits. By repeating this process numerous times and using subtle differentiations of greys, umbers and whites, the end result is a surface that mimics the appearance of concrete.

I spent a day experimenting with this technique on large off-cuts of canvas. When I was confident with the results I had achieved in the experiments, I then moved on to the large painting. I used the Other Relief collages that depict a concrete floor space within the interior as a point of reference. I mixed up a range of tertiary colours that matched the colours of the concrete floor from these interiors. I was tentative and still unfamiliar with the new paint application and materials. It took me an entire day to paint in the floor on one of the large new paintings. I then used this same technique to paint in the floor space for the remaining two paintings: Weather Patterns and New Geology.

Reflecting on this body of work I am ambivalent as to whether it has been successful. While there were some interesting outcomes during the initial stages of the process, as I experimented with new collage material, the later use of representational imagery and a more recognisable interior space proved to be hugely problematic. The final paintings in the series became overly complicated with too many different painterly approaches on the one surface. The works felt over-painted and burdened by an overuse of technique. The subtle interactions between an abstract space and illusionistic painting were lost in the translation of collage to painting because the paintings relied so heavily on virtuosic photographic painting techniques.

There have also been some positive outcomes. Two of the successful works from this series Window and Veil and Shadow Sanctuary (see figs. 61 and 62) were informed by images of sculptures, however these sculptural forms are layered with a transparent spiral motif. This created further ambiguity and spatial complexities in the works, resulting in less focus on the photographic quality and a heightened engagement with the perceptual and illusionistic capabilities of abstraction.
Figure 61 *Window and Veil* 2014 acrylic on paper 153cm x 112cm
Figure 62 *Shadow Sanctuary* 2014 acrylic on paper 153cm x 112cm
The last paintings in this series *New Geology, Procession* and *Weather Patterns* were perhaps the most challenging and ambitious of the entire project. However, working from photographs in an attempt to paint drapery along with the photographic wall and interior spaces evoked none of the visual and perceptual qualities of my previous work. The abstract gestures and transparent veils in my work rely on astute observation of source material that I initially perceived as being similar to the attention and technical skill required to paint intricate folds and contours of drapery. The gestures and veils require focus and a refined set of steps, whether it be mixing and applying colour that mimics a piece of paper’s exact hue and cut sharp edges, or a set of slow and considered rehearsed actions that repaint an earlier much faster gestural mark. However, while I set out committed to rendering the abstract motifs or coloured transparencies as an exact copy, I had come to re-engage with a more intuitive cognitive state during the painting processes. I understand this intuitive decision-making that occurs in and on the painting to be vital to the success of my work.

The German painter Tomma Abts also makes work via intuitive decision-making processes (see fig. 63). While the scale of her work is smaller than mine, Abts’ centralised compositions are the result of layering and over-painting illusionistic shapes, colours and forms and are important to my research. Jan Verwoert suggests that Abts’ adaptive and intuitive working strategies convey ‘...an awareness of the potentials of latency’.\(^{86}\) Latency reflects a time interval between stimulation and response, suggesting or alluding to something without it being explicitly mentioned. Verwoert argues that via an engagement with the possibilities of latency, Abts’ paintings suspend in the viewer:

‘...the desire for the instant recognition of things in favor of the inconvertible particularly of how they are, and the readiness to interrupt the flow of information and pace of production by instead evoking latent memories, images and thoughts through abstraction.’\(^{87}\)

Like in the work of Tomma Abts, the success of my paintings is not dependent on the easily recognisable depiction of space and objects that occurred in some of the later parts of this series. Instead the success of my work relies on the more subtle interplays between illusionistic painting and the illusory qualities of abstraction.

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\(^{87}\) Ibid.
Figure 63 Tomma Abts *Lübbe* acrylic and oil on canvas 48cm x 38cm

While I am critical of the end result of this series, reflecting on this work has enabled me to understand the important effects and qualities that I want my work to have. My practice is driven by a desire to question modes of looking by engaging with illusions and ambiguities within perception. I do this via a rigorous studio practice, influenced by the rich heritage of technical skill and ‘craft’ of painting. I adapt the knowledge and passion that I have for painting as a means of experimenting with painterly applications, in order to explore new possibilities of abstraction.
Figure 64 New Geology 2014 acrylic on canvas 228cm x 198cm
Figure 65 *Weather Patterns* 2014 acrylic on canvas 228cm x 198cm
Figure 66 Beacon 2014 acrylic on canvas 76cm x 56cm
Figure 67 *Blue Disk* 2014 acrylic on canvas 76cm x 56cm
Figure 68 Side Show 2014 acrylic on canvas 183cm x 154cm
Chapter 4

My Historical Lineage

Arthur C. Danto argued in his 1995 *Mellon Lectures* that we are in a ‘post-historical’ period.88 Released from the shackles of the modernist trajectory that promoted abstraction as the heroic highpoint of the history of Western art, Danto claimed artists were now free to work across genres and mediums, forming their own links within history.89 While I have argued that it is important to identify the different approaches to process and materiality contemporary painters undertake today, it is also important to look at the ways artists are making links within art history.

Ruth Waller, Head of Painting at the Australian National University School of Art (ANU School of Art) testifies to the importance of artists forming their own independent historical lineages and the potential these lineages have to ones practice. In her paper ‘View From the Studio’ which outlines a studio-based course and lecture series *Open to Influence* at the ANU School of Art, Waller explains:

‘...the beauty of the artist’s lineage as opposed to the art historical lineage is that it is in the eye of the beholder; it is a creative process in itself. When you sense instinctive or intuitive links between artists, art forms and periods, you find in them some new sense of your own potential’.90

Waller’s sentiment echoes what David Reed identifies as a ‘street history’ of painting.91 Reed’s term ‘street history’ refers to the dialogue that painters share and discuss freely together about the more casual interrelationships of art history that is often different to, or left out of, the canonical history that is compiled and theorised within the context of museums and institutions.92 Understanding the validity and potential of forming my own linkages within history, as outlined by both Waller and Reed, was fundamental in developing investigative channels for my research.

Reflecting on my early introduction into abstraction, I have come to appreciate the impact that studying in Canberra has had on the historical lineage of my practice. As an

89 Ibid., 171.
90 Waller, “Open to Influence: Exploring Art History in Practice”.
91 Reed, “Conversation with John Yao”.
92 Ibid.
undergraduate student, frequent visits to the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) exposed me to some of the best post war American painting in the country. I identified in Rothko the ability to convey emotive and highly charged experiences via fields of intense chromatic hues (see fig. 69).\(^93\) Newman and Still showed that areas of unmodulated colour are suggestive of motion in and out of deep atmospheric space.\(^94\) In Pollock and De Kooning (see fig. 70), gestures could become an indexical carrier for the movements and actions of the body.\(^95\)

**Figure 69** (left) Mark Rothko *Deep red and black* 1957 oil on canvas 233cm x 193cm

**Figure 70** (right) Willem De Kooning *Untitled* 1961 203.2cm x 177.8cm

I also came to know the work of a generation of contemporary Australian painters working in varying ways through abstraction. Ruth Waller’s crumpled paper paintings were an important starting point for my research. Recent paintings (see fig. 71) use the perceptual effects of op art while imbuing them with a material quality. Marie Hagerty’s paintings are based on collage constructions (see fig. 72). Hagerty’s work was fundamental to the questions of how I could use painted shadows within abstraction. The trowelled marks of oil paint that often appear like frozen landscapes in Derek O’Connor’s paintings showed me how moving a tool through multi-coloured paint can create a dynamic gesture (see fig. 73). O’Connor’s paintings also have a relationship to

\(^93\) See for example, Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, 195–218.
\(^94\) Ibid.
\(^95\) Ibid.
surfing. Peter Maloney's new works involve screeching colour combinations and are about the space between painting and collage (see fig. 74). Vivienne Binns' work influenced the way in which I worked with abstraction within a series, and reinforced for me, the value of rigorous experimentation of materials (see fig. 75).

**Figure 71** Ruth Waller *Op Phase (Visitation)* 2010 acrylic on cotton duck 130cm x 100cm
Figure 72 Marie Hagerty *UBU 3* 2015 acrylic and oil on canvas 180cm x 200cm

Figure 73 Derek O’Connor *Riptide* 2009 oil on canvas 53cm x 43cm
Figure 74 Peter Maloney *Subiaco* 2015 acrylic on polyester 170cm x 110cm

Figure 75 Vivienne Binns *It Started with Pochoir* 2008 acrylic on canvas 91.5cm x 122cm

I spent a year in Europe and the United States, becoming absorbed in museums and collections of historical painting. While I had gained some knowledge of the canonical
history of painting via reproductions and texts, this trip was my first opportunity to look at the history of painting in depth. I approached these visits to museums with the same diligence and attention that I had given to the abstraction available to me in Canberra. I was aware of how abstract painters wrote about and discussed their own work in relation to the history of painting with cool and authoritative declarations. I was inspired and excited about finding my own influences that I could take back with me into the studio.

Reflecting on this trip abroad, these first interactions I had with painting from history were enriched by my early exposure to the NGA collection and a passion for abstraction. It was as if the role of influence had been reversed. Duccio’s multi-panelled Maesta in the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo in Siena recalled the stripes and colour relationships of Sean Scully.\(^{96}\) Zurbaran’s paintings of cloaked priests centralised amidst a dark ground evoked the stark reduced paintings of Brice Marden, while also calling to mind the black and white abstractions of Marie Hagerty.\(^{97}\) Abstraction gave me new ways of looking at and interpreting these older works.

David Carrier has noted how abstract artists are influenced by art of many different periods ‘...when I speak of such influences I am not thinking of image appropriations. I am interested in how an artist forms a style by learning from earlier art’.\(^{98}\) I also think abstraction has the wonderful ability of instilling an older work with new and exciting possibilities. Abstract painting can reach across time to rejuvenate and offer new interpretations of older work. It does not simply reinterpret paintings from history, but instead enlivens the ways we look, reflect upon and interpret works from the past.

This chapter examines further historical links I have made during this research. In Chapter One, I linked Magazine Mystics to seventeenth century letter racks, Cubist collage and the Josef Albers teachings at the Bauhaus. In this chapter I will discuss my work in relation to American abstraction in the 1960s and 1970s and the relationship that this period has to contemporary abstraction. While painting in the United States after 1960 was seen widely among critics and institutions as being irrelevant, artists including Mary Heilmann, Elizabeth Murray and Jack Whitten were re-engaging with painting’s materiality to evoke spatial, atmospheric and poetic experiences beyond the

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physical reality of the work. Around the same time, a group of painters known as Abstract Illusionists were working with contradictory and paradoxical spatial illusions within abstraction.

I will discuss this period in relation to my work and also how I understand it to be influential to contemporary abstraction. There appears to be a broader dialogue currently underway of artists working with materiality and process-based approaches to abstraction while also drawing on a gamut of formal and visual historical references. This is evident in the work of the seventeen mid-career painters in the exhibition: *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* at the *Museum of Modern Art* New York including Laura Owens, Mark Grotjahn and Charline von Heyl. Curator of this exhibition Laura Hoptman notes in her introductory catalogue essay to this exhibition how the speed and high quantity of imagery that one can gain instantaneously from the internet allows an artist to access disparate historical periods simultaneously, placing them literally side by side on a screen. Hoptman suggests this trend of artists using traditional painting processes with the ability of ‘...picking and choosing from the past to resolve a problem or task at hand,’ is an important quality in the work of the artists in the exhibition and a unique condition of painting today.

In looking at current trends, exhibitions and criticisms, I hope to give some insight into how my practice fits into a wider context of contemporary painting. I will discuss the work of David Reed and Tauba Auerbach both contemporary artists of significant relevance to my research.

**American Abstraction 1960–1970**

number of artists working in a space and time between the previous generation of Greenbergian formalism and minimalism and the later dominant voices of conceptual and performance art, to propose new and exciting avenues for abstraction (see figs. 76 and 77). These abstract painters adopted industrial-quality paints, made interesting tools to deliver marks and used bright colours and wavy irregular lines, which opened the viewer up to perceptual and experiential readings of the works.¹⁰⁷

Figure 76 Kenneth Showel Besped 1967 acrylic on canvas 274.3cm x 228.6cm


¹⁰⁷ Siegel, “Another History is Possible,” 29.
Katy Siegel argues that many painters working in this time did not want to separate painting from the influence of other art forms or popular culture, but instead absorbed these outside influences.\textsuperscript{108}

‘...Many painters felt a lifting of prohibitions in the late 1960s: the freedom of new mediums opened their painting practice allowing performance, video and three-dimensional form to inform their work.’\textsuperscript{109}

Artist and curator Daniel Sturgis noted during a symposium at Tate Modern in 2009, how this exhibition revealed that a lot of the innovative painting made during this period was by women such as Elizabeth Murray and African American artists including Jack Whitten, who were at the time largely missing from the discussion of post war American painting.\textsuperscript{110} The advisor to the exhibition, David Reed also commented at the

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
time that ‘...it’s very strange that the history of painting was thought to end just when women were beginning to make their contribution’.111

Jack Whitten

The paintings of Jack Whitten from the 1970s utilised tools and techniques not traditionally used to make paintings. Much of Whitten’s painting from this period involved the use of a large twelve-foot long brush to make a single all-over gesture.112

I saw Jack Whitten’s work from the 1970s for the first time in a group show in Antwerp during my fieldwork research trip in 2013.113 One of the works in the exhibition in Antwerp was Blue Parrot 1973 (see fig. 78), an acrylic painting on canvas which I have since learnt was part of a larger oeuvre of work from the 1970s in which Whitten developed innovative tools and painting strategies.114 The painting consists of a blue ground with a yellow under layer that appears in horizontal streaks that is the result of dragging the blue acrylic using a large tool across the surface. Superimposed over this ground is an arrangement of dried acrylic paint skins, another experimental process that Whitten had been working with during this period. The dried paint skins act to break up the horizontal autonomous mark.

111 Ibid.
112 Ibid., 68.
114 Siegel, “Another History is Possible,” 68.
Figure 78 Jack Witten *The Blue Parrot* 1973 acrylic on canvas 212.4cm x 182.3cm

Recalling his working methods over this period Whitten compared the mechanics of the tool to processes of photography:

’A large T-square constructed of 12-foot long two-by-fours was my “processor” or “developer”. The idea was to construct a non-relational painting by extending a single gesture to encompass the entire picture plane, the analogy, symbolically, was to photography.’\(^{115}\)

Dragging this invented tool across the surface of a painting through wet acrylic negated the expressive gesture. Raphael Rubinstein points out that Whitten’s processes which link to the concepts and mechanics of photography preceded Gerhard Richter’s early *Abstrakts*.\(^{116}\) I do not consider my gestural marks analogous to the mechanics of photography as Whitten has claimed. However I relate my studio processes of building large brushes to Whitten’s inventive and resourceful use of tools to apply acrylic to a support.


Elizabeth Murray

In the mid 1970s, Elizabeth Murray’s paintings were composed of large divisions of colour such as in the work *Flamingo* (see fig. 79) as well as asymmetrical arches on irregular shaped canvases. These works would go on to inform her later paintings, which have been influential in my PhD research. In works such as *Sun and Moon*, the irregular shaped canvases become more varied and eccentric, recalling cartoons, pop imagery, body parts and internal organs. A number of shaped canvases are compiled to make up a single work and are hung flat on the wall. The works’ irregular shape and shrieking colours offer illusionistic and perceptual experiences. While the works remain two-dimensional, the boundaries are released from the constraints of a rectangular support and the painting appears to expand outwards into the architectural space.

![Flamingo](image)

**Figure 79** Elizabeth Murray *Flamingo* 1974 oil on canvas 196.3cm x 186.7cm

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Abstract Illusionism

Mid-way through my research I came across the Abstract Illusionists who were in some respects significant precursors to my own explorations of ways of incorporating devices of illusionism into abstraction. Abstract illusionism was a brief artistic movement, the name of which was coined by art historian and critic Barbara Rose in a 1967 *Artforum* article.118 Rose identified the work of a number of abstract painters who pursued a form of abstraction that used contradictory and paradoxical spatial illusions within the surface of the painting.119

![Figure 80](image)

**Figure 80** Jack Reilly *Jazz* 1979 acrylic on canvas 182.9cm x 243.85cm

Dr Leda Cempellin’s essay *Abstract Illusionism: A Perspective* gives a detailed account of the history of abstract illusionism by focusing on the work of George Green, a painter who was considered one of the more successful artists of the movement.120 Other Abstract Illusionist painters working over this period include Michael Gallagher, Jack Reilly (see fig. 80) and James Harvard. In her account of abstract illusionism, Cempellin references Edward Lucie-Smith’s book *Art in the Seventies* that dedicates one brief

118 Gallerist Louis K. Meisel along with Barbara Rose was also one of the earliest to use the term ‘abstract illusionism’ to describe artists such as George D. Green, James Havard and Jack Lembeck.
paragraph to the movement.

Lucie-Smith’s account provides three examples of earlier precedents that became influential to the group:

i) The Cubist concept of shallow space,

ii) The abstract expressionist gesture and its parody by pop art especially by Roy Lichtenstein, and

iii) The American trompe l’œil artists of the late nineteenth century.121

Lucie-Smith explains how abstract illusionism aimed to elevate the gesture by casting shadows and detaching the gestures from the picture plane, giving them the appearance of three-dimensional objects and suggesting that they were floating in a three-dimensional space (see fig. 81).122 Lucie-Smith’s description was strikingly resonant with the illusionistic gestures and use of cast shadows in my paintings.

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Figure 81 Jack Lemback *Eagle Valley Music* 1978 acrylic on canvas 274.3cm x 243.85cm

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122 Ibid.
It is interesting to compare the use of illusionistic gesture in my works to that of the early work of George Green. In Green's early work, brightly coloured gestures are given cast shadows and appear to project forward in space. This has a direct link to the illusionistic gestures in my paintings. However Green attempts to amplify these illusions by building up these gestures with heavy body impasto, giving them more thickness and a three-dimensional consistency. While I have not yet seen any of his work in person, from reproductions of paintings by Green these impasto gestures in some instances appear built up to around 4 to 5cm thick. This extreme variation of surface also means that the gestures project their own cast shadows that are different to the painted cast shadow. This differs from my process as I create a flattening of one layer to the next by sanding and smoothing the surface.

Figure 82 George D. Green *High Country* 1978 oil on canvas 167.64cm x 182.88cm

Green’s paintings also refer to masking tape and it is often painted illusionistically as if attached to the surface of the work (see fig. 82). Green’s use of masking tape does not

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124 Ibid.
refer to an earlier process of collage, nor does the tape appear to hold motifs in place as I have done. In the initial painting processes, after tearing tape off from previously masked areas, Green would temporarily stick it back onto the surface to quickly get it out of the way. Green then began painting these pieces of tape, mimicking the paint splatters left over from the previous masking process, as way to introduce new floating colour elements into the works.

![Figure 83](image)

**Figure 83** George D. Green (left) *Drawing for Electric Side Man* 1986 acrylic on paper 99.06cm x 68.58cm (right) *Drawing for Careless Music* 1986 acrylic on paper 86.36cm x 68.58cm

My more recent cut-outs share similarities to the shaped illusionistic canvases that were being made in 1970 by Californian artist Jack Reilly. Interestingly Reilly links the use of irregularly shaped canvases to surfing and his interest in shaping surfboards in the 1970s. Reilly would combine hard-edged shapes with circular and linear forms onto irregularly shaped canvases that appear to protrude off the wall. The depth of the canvases would project cast shadows onto the wall while Reilly would extend these

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126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
shadows into the internal structure of the work, thus heightening the illusion of physically layered space in the works.\textsuperscript{130}

The influence of the experimental abstraction of the sixties and seventies on contemporary painting is becoming more apparent. A more recent exhibition addressing this period was *Reinventing Abstraction: New York Painting in the 1980s* at Cheim & Read Gallery New York in 2013, curated by Raphael Rubinstein.\textsuperscript{131} Rubinstein claims that it was a discussion with David Reed about the street history of painting that prompted him to curate the exhibition.\textsuperscript{132} The exhibition focused on the work of peripheral abstraction in America in the eighties and could be seen as a sequel to *High Times, Hard Times* as it includes a number of artists from the previous exhibition.\textsuperscript{133}

There is, however, little critical discussion of Abstract Illusionism. In my research into the movement, I have become aware of how much of recent Post-Internet Abstraction such as the work of Michael Manning (see fig. 84) which is informed by digital graphics, digital editing processes and touch screen technology, works with the illusionistic devices of Abstract Illusionism (see fig. 85). Post-Internet Abstraction uses handmade processes to make works look digital, or employs techniques to make digital works look as though they are painted.\textsuperscript{134} In Post-Internet Abstraction, artists use techniques that were important to Abstract Illusionism and include the use of acrylic aerosol and spray gun applications with complex illusionistic space and gestures that appear removed from the picture plane via the play of shadows and illusions of three-dimensionality. While I find Post-Internet Abstraction interesting to think about in relation to my practice, it is important to note that Abstract Illusionism is scarcely mentioned in the same context.

\textsuperscript{130} *Reality of Illusion 1979*, Introduction by Donald Brewer, (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 1979), 18.
\textsuperscript{132} Cheim Read, “Reinventing Abstraction curated by Raphael Rubinstein at Cheim and Read.”
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
Figure 84 Michael Manning *Dreaming On A World* 2013 acrylic and digital print on canvas 91.44cm x 60.96cm
**Figure 85** Michael Gallagher *Praylala* 1979 acrylic on canvas 160cm x 193.04cm

**Illusion Versus Illusionism**

While I have separated the Abstract Illusionists from the other experimental painters of this period, all of these artists were interested in the experiential and illusionistic qualities of abstraction.\(^{135}\) However a distinction needs to be made between the ‘illusions’ that are evident in the work of Whitten, Heilmann and Murray which convey depth and rhythm via the interplay of materiality, shape, line and colour, and the Abstract Illusionists’ use of very direct and explicit visual devices in the form of cast shadows and inverted perspectives. Barbara Rose argues that what separated Abstract Illusionism from other modes of abstraction was the use of contradictory and paradoxical spatial illusions within the surface of the painting.\(^{136}\) Rose identifies this paradox as ‘reversible illusion’ to explain a spatial construction that appears at one moment to project outward and at the next to cleave inward.\(^{137}\)

In the essay *Perverse Perspectives*, Lucy Lippard argues that threads of abstract painting at this time were working with contradictory spatial arrangements that ‘...are incorporating the flat surface of a painting and the counterstatement of the inverse perspective that juts out into the spectator’s space’.\(^{138}\) Lippard explains how these new perverse styles of illusion are established ‘...only to be discarded in favor of the painting as painting.’\(^{139}\)

In my paintings, I engage with both of these modes of illusion. My paintings work with painted grounds that evoke a deep space in the activation of its material surface similar to Jane Kaufman’s 6 p.m (see fig. 86). I then work with the spatial projections of direct illusionistic painting, which is evident in the paintings of the Abstract Illusionists such as James Havard (see fig. 87). The oscillation of these modes of illusion takes new forms in the complex perceptual experiences that have unfolded in the course of my research. Like the duck-rabbit,\(^{140}\) illustration used in E. H. Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion*, it is

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\(^{135}\) Siegel, “Another History is Possible,” 29.

\(^{136}\) Rose, “Abstract Illusionism,” 36.

\(^{137}\) Ibid.


\(^{139}\) Ibid.

impossible to hold both perceptions, both meanings, in mind simultaneously, but like the duck-rabbit these perceptions can flip spontaneously.\textsuperscript{141}

\textbf{Figure 86} Jane Kaufman 6 p.m 1971 acrylic on canvas 152.4cm x 152.4cm

\textsuperscript{141}Gombrich, Art and Illusion, 4.
I understand these visual effects to be intrinsically distinct from the illusions of Op Art. The effects of Op Art such as in the work of Bridget Riley (see fig. 88) generally rely on an all-over compositional design, based on a systematised grid or scheme where optical effects are dependent on the repetition of pattern, colour and line. However Op Art's generation of spatial paradoxes where surfaces appear to push forward then pull inward, could perhaps be seen as a precursor to the reversible illusion of Abstract Illusionism.

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The discovery of the experimental abstract painters from this period has been an exciting part of my research. The Abstract Illusionist movement was heavily supported in New York in the late 1960s and 1970s by American art dealer Louis K. Meisel.\textsuperscript{144} Meisel’s New York gallery specialises in photo-realism, however he related Abstract Illusionism to the verisimilitude and technical skill of photo realist painting.\textsuperscript{145} The support of a dealer that shows exclusively photo-realist painting is an interesting precursor to the movement’s demise. Rather than the work being contextualised in relation to the experiential and perceptual qualities of abstraction being made in New York at the same time, Meisel would show it alongside photo realist painting in the context of being part of an American illusionistic tradition.\textsuperscript{146}

This is perhaps an interesting parallel to that moment in my research when I introduced a photo-realistic space into my paintings in the series Other Relief. While I found working with such virtuosic techniques was not a direction I wanted to pursue in my research, I was interested to discover that some of the Abstract Illusionists working today including George Green and Jack Reilly are now making photo-realist paintings in the vein of the nineteenth century American trompe l’œil tradition. Both of these artists’ current work uses a strategy of painting a trompe l’œil decorative gilt or birchwood frame, inside of which sits a photorealistic depiction of a kitsch landscape or seascape.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} Exhibitions of Abstract Illusionist painting at the Louis K. Meisel gallery were often shown alongside photo realist artists such as The Grand Illusion, Realistic and Abstract Illusions in Contemporary Art.
On Contemporary Painting

Provisional Painting, a term coined by Raphael Rubinstein in a 2009 essay in *Art and America*, refers to a recent trend in abstraction which, while influenced by threads of modernist painting history, looks as he puts it:

‘...dashed-off, casual, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling. In different ways, they all deliberately turn away from “strong” painting for something that seems to constantly risk inconsequence or collapse’.147

Provisional painters use material processes that reject a sense of finish and represent acts of negation.148 In a 2011 essay, Sharon Butler identifies what she calls ‘New Casualism’, a thread that is apparent in contemporary painting, which engages not merely with the unfinished or acts of negation, but with broader concerns of imperfection.149 Butler claims that many contemporary painters are reassessing basic elements of colour and composition as promoted by modernist schools such as the Bauhaus, abandoning the rigorously structured strategies of these previous generations in favor of playful, unpredictable encounters.150

Rubinstein claims that the acts of negation in works by Michael Krebber, Sergej Jensen and Raoul De Keyser can be traced back to the celebration of works by Tuttle, Rauschenberg, Polke and Kippenberger, who consciously work against conventional resolution.151 Butler argues that New Casualists are indebted to female artists of the seventies, such as Elizabeth Murray and Mary Kelly who were working against minimalism and making abstraction ‘...from an intimate point of view that embraced messy everyday detail’.152

At the beginning of my research I was interested in Provisional Painting because my initial source material collages that were made from drafting film, transparencies and masking tape, shared provisional qualities that Rubinstein identified with aspects of contemporary painting (see fig. 89).153 However my slow and meticulously crafted paintings that replicate this source material are illusions of provisionality: illusions of cut and taped collage. The gestures in my work, which look as if they were painted with

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147 Rubinstein, *Art in America*, 123.
148 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
151 Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting,” 123.
153 Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting,” 123.
quick and intuitive brushstrokes, are actually the result of a long technical process and a series of rehearsed actions. While my paintings do not share the casual and makeshift approach to materiality as in Rubinstein’s ‘Provisional Painting’, I am interested in his discussion of the ways in which contemporary abstraction is concerned with revisiting various art historical precedents.¹⁵⁴

![Image of artwork](image)

**Figure 89** David Hammons *Untitled* 2010 mixed media 233.68cm x 182.88cm

Provisional Painting and New Casualism were not intended as pejorative terms, however these modes of contemporary abstraction, have attracted much criticism, from Walter Robinson’s 2014 article *Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism*,¹⁵⁵ to Jerry Saltz’s disparaging references to ‘Modest Abstraction’, ‘M.F.A. Abstraction’ and ‘Crapstraction’.¹⁵⁶

**Comparing Michael Krebber and Raoul De Keyser**

¹⁵⁴ See also *Reinventing Abstraction* curated by Raphael Rubinstein Cheim & Reid Gallery New York 2013
Rubinstein's intention in Provisional Painting was to explore new lineages beyond the established art historical narratives. Abstract paintings by two different artists may look in some ways similar, while being the result of very different formal and historical references.\textsuperscript{157} For example, Michael Krebber and Raoul De Keyser's work may share visual similarities, but the works have developed from very different processes and influences of art history.

\textbf{Figure 90} (left) Michael Krebber *Untitled* 2013 acrylic on canvas 100cm x 85cm

\textbf{Figure 91} (right) Raoul De Keyser *Untitled* 2011 oil and gesso on canvas mounted on wooden panel 28cm x 21cm

I first saw the work of Michael Krebber in a solo show in 2013 at Dépendance gallery in Brussels during my fieldwork research.\textsuperscript{158} Krebber’s extreme economy of materials such as in the work *Untitled* 2013 (see fig. 90) offers only a self-reflexive (and self-conscious) abstraction that quotes and critiques the medium through irony and repetition.\textsuperscript{159} Raoul De Keyser's paintings, which I first saw in the Arsenale during the 2007 Venice Biennale, may share the pale restricted palette and air of casualness to Krebber, however De Keyser’s paintings are made over a prolonged period of gestation and contemplation. Rather than having a predetermined composition, the structure of De Keyser’s paintings

\textsuperscript{157} David Geers, “Formal Affairs,” \textit{Frieze} (March 2015), 12.
\textsuperscript{158} Stopice, by Michael Krebber (Brussels: Dépendance, 6 September – 26 October 2013).
emerges out of a long painterly process. These small-scale paintings allude to space and narrative without being descriptive (see fig. 91). Simplified formal arrangements of colour, shape and line are repeated intuitively across works in numerous variations. This repeated use of visual abstract motifs gives De Keyser’s wider painting practice the look of a singular body of work that demonstrates the continuing possibilities and potentials of abstraction. De Keyser’s use of repeated formal arrangements across a number of paintings was important to the development of *Magazine Mystics* wherein I repeated shapes, gestures and patterns across a number of the works in the series.

Looking specifically at the work of Tauba Auerbach and David Reed provides further insight into some of the complex and nuanced studio processes underpinning contemporary abstraction.

**Tauba Auerbach**

Tauba Auerbach's *Fold Paintings* continue her investigation of blurring the boundaries between two and three-dimensionality. Evoking a three-dimensional space on a flat two-dimensional plane, the works present a topographical view of a canvas that the artist has folded and crumpled. Unfolding this form and laying it horizontally onto the studio floor, the artist then uses a spray gun applying the paint mechanically onto this creased folded surface. The work is then ironed flat and the painted canvas stretched over a supporting frame (see figs. 92 and 93).

Auerbach’s *Fold* series has been an important reference for me in identifying some of the ways that contemporary abstraction can incorporate illusionistic painting techniques from earlier precedents. The fold paintings incorporate very direct trompe l’œil painting via the illusion of subtle folds and ripples in the surface of a flat support. The work becomes a two-dimensional record of its prior three-dimensional state. While in the seventeenth century Flemish letter racks, the work’s illusion is revealed to the viewer by moving from a distant view to see it up close, Auerbach’s illusionistic effects are more closely aligned to the indexical mechanics of photography, than the trompe l’œil techniques of painting. The folds are traces of an actual fold: an imprint of the prior physical activated state of the canvas. My paintings use representational techniques with the language of abstraction. Similarly, Auerbach’s *Fold* paintings

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oscillate between reading as a representation of a folded material via their strong illusionistic qualities, and abstraction via their highly saturated surfaces and gradients that evoke colour field painting.

**Figure 92** Tauba Auerbach *Untitled (Fold)* 2009 acrylic on canvas 101.6cm x 76.2cm
David Reed

David Reed's paintings of layered abstract gestures in saturated colour have also been important to my research. In a painting such as #636 (see fig. 94) the use of transparent glazes create effects that are more like ink on a translucent acrylic sheet than oil on canvas. The painting has a strangely flat surface, achieved by the artist working on a single painting over long periods and sanding and repainting layers throughout the duration of the painting process. Where the Abstract Illusionist gesture projected forward into space via illusionistic painting, Reed’s gestures appear embedded into the support as if placed behind a screen. Light, colour and space in Reed’s paintings is influenced by media and screen light that is experienced from cinema, computer and projections. The sweeping gestures in #636 appear as if lit from behind, the undulating forms are emitted with an even light similar to a cinema screen, without strong differentiation of lights and darks, but rather an equal all-over intensity.

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164 Ibid.
165 Ibid.
What links a seventeenth century Cornelis Gijsbrechts painting to the spatial experiential concerns of abstraction? From an outsider’s perspective, an attempt to link these two junctions may seem like an exercise in simply juxtaposing two opposing and contradictory painting strategies. However this historical lineage revealed itself through the course of my research. I consider Reed and Auerbach, whose processes of layering and stacking illusionistic space, as contemporary artists whose work has been instrumental within my research. The links I have made in this chapter between historical periods were not predetermined, but rather were discovered through the work I made and the processes I undertook in the studio as well as my fieldwork research in 2013.
Chapter 5

A Fabled Gesture

This chapter is dedicated to a series of work, *A Fabled Gesture*, made in 2015 that re-engages with collage in new ways. This body of work comprises a series of nine large paper cut-outs mounted on PVC, along with a series of collages composed using cut-out abstract painted paper fragments adhered to aluminum. This work uses new materials and processes translating the immediacy and urgency present in the earlier small maquette-like collages into larger resolved works. Expanding on my working with paper processes, this series renegotiates collage as a critical component of my abstract visual language and an important conceptual framework for my practice-led research. These new processes and techniques that involve gluing thinly painted paper to aluminium and PVC supports were developed during a three month Australia Council residency at The British School at Rome. The residency gave me the time and space to dedicate to experimentation and reflection, enabling me to develop new ideas and conceptual strategies.

**Rome and Baroque Illusionistic Ceilings**

Before undertaking the Australia Council residency I had been to Rome briefly in 2013 as part of my PhD fieldwork. During this time I saw Andrea Pozzo’s fresco *The Glory of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* in the Church of St Ignazio (see fig. 95), and Baciccio’s fresco *Triumph of the Holy Name of Jesus* in the Church of the Gesù (see fig. 96). Seeing these works for the first time sparked an interest in how Baroque illusionistic painting might be important to my studio research. I saw a relationship between the illusionistic and perceptual qualities in my paintings and the complex visual experiences that unfolded in the Baroque ceilings. The use of a central pictorial arrangement of bodies, clouds and drapery that appear to detach themselves from the rest of the composition in a Baroque ceiling, share similarities with my centrally composed gestures and transparent forms that also project forward out of a painted space. The illusionistic and visual devices in these ceilings that camouflage what is paint, what is sculpture and what is architecture, also related to the processes I have developed to make paint appear as paper collage.

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166 While the church of Saint Ignazio contains many examples of illusionistic ceiling painting, for the purpose of this chapter I will be discussing the large central nave: *The Glory of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* painted by Andrea Pozzo between 1691–1694.
167 The illusionistic ceiling in the Church of the Gesù Rome, was painted by Giovanni Battista Gaulli, known as Baciccio 1674–1679. When referring to the Church of the Gesù I will be referring to the large central nave: *Triumph of the Holy Name of Jesus.*
Figure 95 Andrea Pozzo The Glory of Saint Ignazio of Loyola 1691–1694 The Church of St Ignazio Rome

Figure 96 Giovanni Battista Gaulli Triumph of the Holy Name of Jesus 1674–1679 Church of the Gesù Rome
My interest in the paintings in these two Jesuit churches, and indeed the work in many religious spaces in Rome, has not come from any spiritual or religious inclination. However being raised a Catholic, educated at a Catholic school and recently having tutored a course on Renaissance and Baroque painting in the ANU Art Theory department, I was grateful to be able to recall the various and nuanced meanings behind the many signs and symbols within these religious narratives. The appeal of the two Jesuit churches and the many other Baroque paintings I saw in Rome involves the pictorial strategies, compositional devices and illusionistic techniques used by the artists, rather than their narratives. While religiosity drives the visionary quality of the Baroque works, the deviation from gravity, logic and the creation of a space that appears uncontrollable to worldly states, relates to my experience of the conditions of abstract painting as a space where anything can happen.

Over the three months of my Australia Council residency I returned to these two Jesuit churches a number of times. The accessibility and proximity of the churches to the British School meant that I could visit these spaces at varying times throughout the day, often on my way to somewhere else or returning to my studio of an afternoon. Both spaces rely significantly on natural light with only very dim lighting throughout mimicking candlelight. I would observe how the weather conditions outside determined which areas in the churches would be lit enough to view. On overcast days the light would shift around as clouds moved past overhead, while on occasions piercing rays of light would penetrate the space, creating dramatically lit moments in a composition while other sections would remain in shadow.

Andrea Pozzo’s ceiling painting on the nave vault of the Church of St Ignazio, The Glory of Saint Ignazio, was painted between 1685 and 1694 in a typical high Baroque-style of grandiose theatricality.168 Using single point perspective, trompe l’œil and other illusionistic painting tropes the enclosed ceiling of the church appears like and open-air spectacle.169 Baroque illusionistic painting relied on ‘quadro riportati’, the illusion of framed pictures painted on a ceiling and ‘quadratura’, painted perspectival or architectural organisations that appear to extend space.170 Both rely on trompe l’œil effects that simulate three-dimensionality.171 The architecture of the building does not converge to create an enclosed space, but instead the church appears open to the

169 Ibid.
170 Ingrid Sjöström, Quadratura (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell Internat, 1978), 11.
171 Ibid.
elements as blue sky and clouds appear to pass overhead. The flat ceiling of the church appears to ascend into a blue and pink filled atmosphere, while clusters of figures appear suspended and project forward into space. Angela Ndalianis has noted that the effect of quadratura is to ‘...engage the spectator in the illusionistic construction of the experience of an infinite other-worldly space’. This painted space extends ‘both in the material confines of the two-dimensional surface and into the space of the audience’. Centered amongst these descending angels, the Saint Ignazio of Loyola floats on a cloud directly above the congregation. This spectacle is played out on a massive scale with the composition stretching the full seventeen-metre length of the church nave. The entire space appears to expand upward and outwards as clouds, limbs and drapery swell from the confines of the architecture and swirling figures gesture into the space of the viewer.

*Triumph of the Holy Name of Jesus* painted by Baciccio in the Church of the Gesù (see fig. 96) depicts tumbling stucco figures interwoven with clouds and drapery, over decorative gold architectural elements. Much like the ceiling in Saint Ignazio, Baciccio uses cast shadows and painted architectural friezes to give a heightened illusion of the celestial figures tumbling from a hole in the ceiling, knotted together and descending into the space of the viewer below.

173 Ibid., 163.
174 Ibid., 160.
175 Ibid., 160.
Another tongue-in-cheek example of the artist disorienting the viewer through material distortion is in the Palazzo Dora Pamphilj. The Poussin Room is the first room of the private apartments of the Pamphilj family and houses a collection of seventeenth century landscape paintings (see fig. 97). In the centre of the ceiling is the Pamphilj coat of arms. On either side of the coat of arms, an angel is depicted playing a flute. It is painted in such a way that the flute appears to project out of the ceiling. On the symmetrically opposite side of the composition another angel is portrayed in the same action, however it is a mirror image of the other angel’s pose. At first glance they both appear to be examples of trompe l’œil painting. However it soon becomes clear that the flute the angel holds on the right hand side is in fact a three-dimensional sculptural depiction of a flute, the same size and colour as is painted on the left hand side. These two flutes, one a painting of a flute and one a sculpture impersonating a painting, project the same painted shadows that heighten the illusion and confusion.
Viewing the Letter Racks and the Baroque Ceiling

Baroque ceiling painters exploited the distance between the viewer and subject, giving them incredible control into how they engage with their audience. In the ceiling fresco in the Church of Saint Ignatius, Pozzo identified the optimum viewpoint that best illustrates the complex illusions in the work. A marble-plated crest is positioned directly below the navel vault and by directing the viewer to this point, the tromp l’oeil, foreshortening and single point perspective are at their most convincing. Looking at the work from the many other viewpoints along this horizontal axis, there is distortion in the illusion, as fictive architecture that appears three-dimensional from the single vantage point flattens out into painted two-dimensional space. This distortion only strengthens the incredible spatial complexity and deception of space succeeded by the artist from the single vantage point.

The forward and backward movements that a painting so often asks a viewer to perform are negated in the large Baroque ceiling frescoes. It is all but impossible to gain access to the surface of a Baroque ceiling. Rather than a movement toward then back we can only move in a single direction along a horizontal axis. While this enables various readings of the composition, we can never move vertically toward the picture plane. This becomes an important difference between the ways in which a viewer engages in Baroque ceilings compared to the Flemish letter rack paintings I discussed earlier. Gijsbrecht’s letter racks for example do not intend to leave the viewer in a state of uncertainty. Such trompe l’oeil painting can be viewed from varying distances and angles until the tricks eventually unravel in exchange for an admiration for the virtuosic skill of the artist.

The inability to move toward the composition of a Baroque ceiling painting makes it difficult to determine the distance between one’s self and the subject, as well as the scale of the objects in the narrative. Where the Renaissance artist used Albertian perspectival systems to depict a logically defined space that separated the religious narrative and the worshiper, the Baroque merged this division to morph the viewer’s space with the

176 Ndalianis, Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment, 164.
177 Peta Laurisen, Creating Grand Illusions: The Art and Technique of Trompe L’œil (Australia: Craftsman House, 2010), 147.
178 Ibid.
179 Gombrich, Art and Illusion, 233.
In Baroque painting, the depiction of God was no longer contained within notions of a single vanishing point or one point perspective as in Renaissance works. Instead heavens and the figures within it would come to occupy the same space as the viewer. Baroque ceilings respond to the architecture of the interior with an exchange between form, space and light. While these interiors are artificially lit, a composition’s focal point can change depending on the amount of natural light that is cast in the space (see fig. 98).

In both of these ceiling paintings there is an unsettling spatial disorientation, as flat walls appear curved while curved recesses are painted to appear flat. The deception is two-fold. A viewer is led to believe the celestial spiralling figures and dramatic atmospheres have somehow entered into their space, and at the same time we are being continually challenged to identify the materiality and dimensionality of the subject matter.  

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The Counter Reformation engaged with the power of illusionistic painting not only to bring their congregations closer to God, but also to transfer feelings of ecstasy and suffering of the martyrs and saints to the viewer. In his book *After the End of Art*, Arthur C. Danto describes this process:

‘The beholder finds himself in a world which he shares with saints and angels, and he feels magically drawn into the orbit of the work. What is image, what is reality? The very borderline between the one and the other seems to be obliterated.

The spectator is drawn into the work because they become an element within that composition. David Carrier argues, rather than discuss where is the depicted scene that infers to the space of a painting, the merging of viewer and narrative in Baroque painting instead asks us to reflect on when is the depicted image. Where refers to the space of a painting while when gets us to think about not only the distant past of the narrative scene, but also how the illusions in Baroque painting cause the narrative to unfold in the present: ‘...we see it as if it were taking place right before our eyes. Of course this is only an illusion. But so too is seeing the picture as presenting these terrifying scenes’. From a distance architecture morphs into painting that in turn transforms into sculpture. Is that a torso or a cloud formation and how does it interact with the architecture of the space? Architecture can turn into painting while painted figures appear as sculptures. In the Church of the Gesù, figures, clouds and drapery appear to cross over in front of gold gilded decoration and architecture. Shadows painted onto the decorative gilding convey a convincing illusion of the figures, clouds and drapery, not as flat cut-out shapes but rather as three-dimensional forms. These motifs are in fact built up over the architecture with a flat plaster stucco however with the addition of incredible foreshortening, it is as if the cast shadow painted over the architecture gives the flat shapes body and three-dimensionality, projecting them into the viewer’s space.

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182 Danto, *After the End of Art*, 201.
183 Ibid.
185 Ibid., 242.
In engaging with the work in this way there is a disconnection with the narrative, as we attempt to decipher the processes that allow such illusions to take place. This shape shifting performance of materials in Baroque ceiling painting has been important to my thinking about the relationship of the viewer to the stacked illusionistic space and gestural marks of my work. Like the Baroque ceiling, which conjures up the seemingly unimaginable and impossible, the gestures in my paintings offer contradictory modes of experience, simultaneously. They have a strangely flat surface, which others have claimed give these marks the quality of a digital print.\(^\text{186}\) The deceptive and playful morphing of materiality and illusion in my work shares an affinity with the Baroque and its appeal to the presence of a spectator. Like the twisted and contorted bodies that project from a Baroque ceiling, the illusionistic gestures in my paintings propel forward, inviting the viewer to ‘suspend belief’ before motioning them to move in step with its coiled and meandering rhythm.

**Studio and Rome Experiments**

In my studio I have always made works on paper. Painted abstract marks on drafting film and paper are cut-out and stuck to the wall with masking tape. These gestural scraps fill drawers, are piled and draped over tables and litter the floor, becoming an archive of source material for future works. The immediacy and fragility of these clusters is a refreshing reprieve from the laboured processes that go into larger works on canvas.

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\(^{186}\) I refer here to the quality of the gestural marks on the thin paper support. When the cut-outs were first shown in Rome it was remarked on a number of occasions that these gestures appeared printed rather than painted. It was suggested that they had the appearance of being digitally manipulated.
In my previous painting series I used collage as a template for each painting. A collage determined a painting's composition, colour and space. These works replicated every detail of the initial collage's overlaps, transparency, translucency, construction and order. While the gestural marks in the collages were quick and spontaneous, in the painting process these gestures were planned, rehearsed and carefully executed on the canvas. I wanted to use the same process to build up a collage composition freely and intuitively.

Over the three-month residency in Rome I developed new techniques that allowed me to work on a very thin paper usually associated more with digital printing than a painting support. The thinness of the paper allows a flowing painted mark to retain a boldness and vibrancy of colour with a deceptive flatness characteristic of a digital print (see fig. 100 and fig. 101). While this painting process requires speed and fluidity, the preparation of the paper for painting is slow and labour intensive. Priming this thin paper on both sides using a clear acrylic paint gives the surface a plasticity and strength that it did not have previously. This allows me to use large quantities of flowing acrylic paint without the support buckling or creasing. The paper's new plasticity acts as a slip and the paint slides on top of the surface instead of absorbing into the paper, achieving a
very similar finish to the masking technique in the paintings on canvas that use gel medium to create a surface that mimics drafting film.  

The thinness of the paper and its smooth surface is reminiscent of the drafting film. Importantly it can be easily adhered to other surfaces or other pieces of paper. While the use of drafting film was important in earlier collages, it could not easily be permanently glued onto a support and instead my collages remained temporary, the pieces of paper and film held together provisionally with masking tape. This new process would allow me to continue an intuitive collage process and I would now be able to permanently adhere these collages together.

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**Figure 100** Examples of gestures on thin primed paper

The primed paper had a smooth finish like the drafting film in previous preparatory collages. However it remained white and opaque offering a similar result to the masked areas in the previous series of paintings. The clear acrylic paint that I used to prime the paper is used in scenic painting to coat decorative surfaces. I am grateful to my wife Clare Thackway who, working previously as a scenic painter suggested it as a material that could be applied easily to paper and might operate similarly to the gel medium slip that I had created in past work.
In Rome I chose to work on a primed paper up to A1 size. I also experimented with making larger marks by taping four of these primed A1 sheets together. I experimented with ways of applying the paint to the surface of this new paper support. I mixed up fluid paint into squeezable bottles that controlled both the quantity and application of a particular colour. I experimented with a variation of painterly marks which involved either loading a brush with a colour before moving it around on the paper which was laid out horizontally on the floor, or pooling paint on the paper before moving the brush through it. By pouring the paint directly onto the paper, the brush would pick up the paint as it moved across the surface. I took many of the brushes I had made previously to Rome. I also experimented with new tools: large sponges, rags and combining round-headed bristle brushes together in clusters, making new marks that were different to the gestures of previous work. Sponges and rags removed paint from a previously laid down and still wet gesture, creating organic shapes that had an interesting relationship to the figure. When applying flesh tone and tertiary colours to the paper, the sponge would simultaneously pull the paint across the surface and take it away to expose the whiteness of the support, leaving residual marks resembling bodily forms, limbs and torsos (see fig. 102).
Making New Collages in Rome

I cut out these gestures using the same technique as I used in earlier works and ordered them in piles by colour, size and shape. I then selected cut-outs from the piles and combined them. The way in which these cut-out forms began interacting with each other throughout the development of a composition, was both exciting and new. I taped motifs together and played around with the seemingly infinite variations of colour harmonies and formal arrangements (see figs. 103 and 104). If two major gestural marks operated well together, I developed a composition around this combination. Once I had a large amount of material, I needed to resolve how to glue these thin sheets of paper together and what supports I would use.
Figure 103 Studio shot cut-out collage composition experiments: British School at Rome 2015
I researched appropriate adhesives and also experimented with different supports. For the remaining stay in Rome, I experimented with gluing a selection of the paper cut-outs to new supports and making a range of compositions of varying sizes. I also kept a selection of cut-out gestures on paper, loose to bring home to my studio in Australia to resolve compositions for later works. The decision to use a thin 1mm support was the result of a process of much trial, error and experimentation. The thinness of this support plays an important role in the way the viewer experiences these works. Hung flush on the wall using pins and mounting tape, the thinness of the support and the cut-out compositions act to merge the paintings with the walls and architecture of the space in which they are installed. In a hardware store I found Forex, a double-sided PVC panel with an internal foam core. It is mostly used for digital printing and outdoor signage and display. It ranges in thicknesses from 1mm to 30mm. The PVC surface can either be printed onto directly or can have digital prints on paper mounted to its surface. I took a number of small samples of this material back to my studio and began experimenting with the possibility of cutting it out. I found I could use the same scalpels that I used to cut out the paper.
My first attempts to glue the paper to the PVC were with a permanent spray mount adhesive. This proved messy and difficult once the paper got over a certain size. I experimented with other glues such as PVA, rice glue and specialist book binding glue. I eventually developed a formula that combines GOLDEN gel and matte mediums, a strong and archival adhesive, particularly for acrylic paintings on paper. It dries clear, doesn’t leave residue and is preferable to other sprays or paper glues as it is basically a mixture of acrylic polymers without any pigment.

While the painting process requires speed and fluidity, adhering these thin paper cut-outs together requires time and preparation. I apply glue to both the paper and the support and use a hand-held printing roller to apply pressure and ensure the adhesion is level and doesn’t result in air pockets forming beneath the surface. When gluing larger paper to the support, air pockets become unavoidable. To combat this, once the cut-out is in place and I have used the roller, I go over the surface with a plastic scraping tool and a rag to wipe away the excess glue.

At the end of my residency I exhibited two new works in a group show at the British School at Rome in March 2015. Both works are approximately 200cm x 154cm (see fig. 105). The combination of thin paper and the 1mm PVC support, mean these works retain a physical lightness. The cut-out silhouetted forms give the compositions a sense of airiness as space opens up from one gesture to the next. Unbound by the conventional rectangle or the confines of a frame, the gestures appear to float as if protruding off the wall.
Figure 105 Installation image British School at Rome 2015 (left) Untitled 2015 acrylic on paper mounted on PVC 183cm x 147cm(right) Untitled 2015 acrylic on paper mounted on PVC 183cm x 145cm

Returning to my studio in Australia, I extended these new working methods for a solo exhibition A Fabled Gesture at Canberra Contemporary Art Space. The show comprised nine large cut-out collages on PVC (see fig. 106). Having dedicated the three months of my residency to develop and refine these new working methods, I gained a confidence and a better understanding of the nuances involved in preparing the paper, making the gestures and gluing them to the thin support before cutting them out. I was able to work quickly over the nine works that made up the exhibition, using some of the many paper cut-outs that I had made in Rome. I also prepared large sheets of thin paper that were around two metres in length, enabling me to make large unbroken gestures on a single sheet of paper.
Golden Boy

Golden Boy (see fig. 107) was influenced by the large fresco Triumph of the Holy Name of Jesus in the Church of the Gesù (see right fig. 108). In the ceiling fresco, tumbling stucco figures are interwoven with clouds and drapery over decorative gold architectural elements. Cast shadows and painted architectural friezes give a heightened illusion of the celestial figures tumbling out of a hole in the ceiling, knotted together and descending into the space of the viewer below. I was interested in how I could translate the decorative gold architectural details into my palette. The coloured drapery, clouds
and flesh tones in the fresco's composition were all important starting points for the development of the palette.

**Figure 107** (left) *Golden Boy* 2015 acrylic on paper mounted on PVC 198 x 154cm

**Figure 108** (right) Detail of *Triumph of the Holy Name of Jesus* in the Church of the Gesù

The composition relies on a central grouping of gestural forms that consist of pale-coloured motifs. Projecting outwards from behind this central form are yellow and gold abstract gestures. Some of these are circular and medallion-like, directly referencing Baroque architectural filigree, while others are large gestural marks made from the large constructed brushes. In the upper left and lower right corners of the composition is a deep scarlet-coloured gesture, which bends around and back over itself. In the bottom left hand side of the work is a dark Payne's Grey mark that appears furthest away in the composition.

The painting uses trompe l’œil shadows to evoke the illusion of these gestures appearing to project out into space. Again, this work references the spatial complexities of the Church of the Gesù in which the figures, clouds and drapery appear to cross over in front of gold gilded decoration and architecture. Like in the Church of the Gesù fresco where these illusions appear not as flat cut-out shapes but rather three-dimensional
forms, the shadows painted into the abstract composition propel gestures forward while others recede.

Go Behinds

In *Go Behinds* the composition is divided into four distinct quadrants (see fig. 109). The upper left is a blue and red gestural mark that runs vertically down the left hand side of the composition, the upper right is a large circular blue and violet gesture, the lower left is an orange and black mark and the lower right is a swooping-like gesture made up of magenta, indigo, yellow and black. These four quadrants are all intersected by a large looping transparent black mark that is centered, and runs from top to bottom. It functions to partially conceal the gestures while leaving them exposed around the periphery of the composition. The transparent black central motif is projected forward in space via illusionistic shadows. The other motifs appear to be behind this mark, while their shadows that appear to be cast onto the wall imply that they too are projecting out into space.

The term ‘go behinds’ comes from surfing and is a weaving manoeuvre during which two surfers on the same wave, one ahead of the other, exchange positions and continue riding. It alludes to the abstract forms in front and behind of one another in the composition.
Figure 109 Go Behinds 2015 acrylic on paper mounted on PVC 198 x 154cm
Collages on Aluminium

The last series in this body of work comprises ten collages mounted on aluminium. These works involve the same processes as in the large cut-outs although they sit within a more conventional framed rectangular format with paper mounted on an aluminium panel, each 122 cm x 91.5 cm. I chose to work with this more conventional format so as to focus on exploring a variety of finishes and results. I also wanted to juxtapose the framed works on aluminium with the larger cut-outs on PVC (see fig. 110 and 111).

Figure 110 Install of *Collages* Sullivan + Strumpf Sydney 2015
Heinrich Wölfflin outlines in his book *Principles of Art History* the opposing differences in the styles and representations between Baroque and Renaissance painting. Wölfflin describes ‘...the energy of the Baroque handling of the masses’ in which figures are composed within a dynamic conglomerate as being opposite to the poised and often singularised figures of the High Renaissance. While the figures in Baroque ceiling paintings appear to defy gravity, they remain held together in clusters and groupings as if attracted by laws or gravitational forces between one another. The way in which the bodies in these Baroque ceiling paintings fold in and over one another, disengaged with gravity also mirror the actions of surfing. These figures appear in action, flexed and contorted as if dancing through space. Surfing can often be described by tired clichés such as 'only a surfer knows the feeling', thus implying that it is a kind of pseudo religious experience. While I have been conscious in this paper not to reduce my description of surfing to such terms, I see a relationship between the ways spiritual states are conveyed by the tumbling figures of the Baroque and how in experiences like surfing, where the body is engaged in a physical act, one can experience something of a higher consciousness. As Sean Scully articulates:

‘In my kind of art, and in a lot of performance art, where people use their bodies strenuously, there’s a definite relationship between physical exertion and a kind of spirituality, so that you reach an elevated sense through this physical commitment that you make, and the idea of work and craft and commitment and effort all come together in a kind of revelation’.

The figures in Baroque ceilings by Pozzo and Baciccio float freely in space, though a single figure never appears isolated or unbound from a larger group. Bodies appear to be entangled and always touching, either by an outstretched arm, leg or a twisting torso. If a lone figure breaks away from this pack they are never fully unbound; instead they remain attached either by their own trailing drapery, which curls back into and around the woven bodies in space, or they appear caught, as if lassoed and reeled in by the cloth of another figure (see fig. 112).

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189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
This strategy of composing forms overlaid in a central group as outlined by Wölfflin as being important to the Baroque, is a compositional strategy that I have deployed throughout my four bodies of work as part of this research. For example, in *Magazine Mystics* the abstract motifs and forms were often grouped together in central compositions and always touching. If a motif was isolated it was often painted to appear as if held in place by masking tape. Additionally *A Fabled Gesture* extends on these concepts of wrapping and weaving forms together that appear to project forward into space. The gestures in this series of large cut-outs do not appear in a painted space as was the case in earlier paintings, but instead they appear free from space and weave in and out of one another. A single gesture is never isolated; the edges of shapes are always touching, slightly overlapping as if they are holding each other in place.
Figure 113 *Fable* 2015 acrylic on paper mounted on PVC 198 x 154 cm
Figure 114 A Landscape 2015 acrylic on paper mounted on PVC 198 x 154cm
Figure 115 *Grove* 2015 acrylic on paper mounted on PVC 198 x 154cm
Figure 116 *Theatre* 2015 acrylic on paper mounted on PVC 198 x 154 cm
Conclusion

This PhD research originated from my experiments with collage and my exploration of ways to combine the illusionistic devices of seventeenth century Flemish letter rack painting with the spatial and experiential concerns of abstraction. I developed an historical lineage beginning with early Flemish painters, through to American abstract artists of the 1960s and 1970s, Baroque ceiling paintings in Rome and contemporary artists including David Reed, Tomma Abts and Tauba Auerbach, who work with inventive processes and illusionistic painting techniques.

This exegesis has provided an extensive account of the processes undertaken throughout the four series of work that makes up the practice-led component of my research. While these series of work are discussed chronologically to give a clear account of how the project evolved, this is not intended to be indicative of a linear progression between one series of work to the next. At the genesis of each series I set new technical problems and working methodologies by adapting and re-inventing an already established process through a re-engagement with materials. Therefore the four series of work produced throughout this research have become a bank: a vast resource of technical possibilities and painterly strategies that I can draw from and refer to in future works. My extensive research into new processes and approaches to painting is an important outcome of this thesis and offers an innovative contribution to the field of contemporary abstraction.

I have reflected on the influence that surfing has had on my painting practice through the lens of Jan Verwoert’s writings on adjacency in which he defines current modes of contemporary painting that are influenced by activities adjacent to the studio. While the relationship of surfing and abstraction was not the primary focus of my doctoral research, recalling the actions and experiences of surfing has been a useful way to articulate the complex performative and bodily actions of my processes. Discussing the work of Mary Heilmann, Dave Hickey writes: ‘...anyone who grew up in the surf will tell you that it never goes away. It remains a primal metaphor and defines a whole cannon of exquisite connoisseurship’. The parallels I have drawn in this research between

192 Verwoert, “Painting in the Present Tense Walker Art Centre”.
193 Hickey, Mary Heilmann To Be Someone, 43.
surfing and painting offer an alternative insight into the perceptual and experiential qualities of my paintings. It is the simultaneous engagement in acute perceptual sensory experiences, while performing a physical action that links surfing to my work. My paintings will continue to be infused with daily experiences of being in the ocean and I will continue to adapt and develop painting processes in an attempt to translate these physical experiences through abstraction.

My research into the perceptual and experiential possibilities of abstraction finds a precursor in the abstract illusionists of the sixties and seventies. While their work was not considered vital at the time I think there is value and an importance in the way they pursued illusions as abstractions, representing an alternative to the prevailing Greenbergian orthodoxy. They were out of sync with what was considered relevant and critical and this gave them freedom to experiment and seek alternative working strategies. I have offered a renewed insight into the movement by examining this period via the historical lineage of my research and adapting their use of illusions through abstraction in fresh and new ways.

The relationship of vision to the body in the Baroque has played an important role in my work. When viewing a Baroque ceiling, an alternation occurs between the eye and the body as the viewer engages with visionary illusions while also imagining the physicality of the bodies in space. I have identified important distinctions between the illusions that unfold in the Baroque as opposed to the rendering of illusions in the seventeenth century letter racks. I have also drawn significant parallels between the physical and bodily illusions of the Baroque and my abstract paintings. Rather than rendering illusions, as did the seventeenth century letter lack painter, I have worked in inventive ways to make the gestures perform the illusion that engages the viewer in both a bodily and visionary way.

Painter Thomas Nozkowski, has commented on the importance of never being too comfortable with refining a technique or establishing a formulaic approach to painting. He asks, ‘...how do you keep up the energy that you had when you were on a tightrope? How do you make a new tightrope for yourself?’194 Here Nozkowski is referring to the importance of creating for oneself challenging and adaptive methods rather than working with static or predetermined outcomes. The model of working to which he

refers is based on inquisitive experimentation of new materials and frequent revisions of processes, all of which have been vital throughout this project. I have undertaken significant technical research into the properties and potentials of acrylic paints and mediums and the implications of working with a range of improvised tools, various supports and modes of presentation. These explorations and inventions were directed toward my objective of extending the means and material effects of acrylic painting processes for generating illusions as abstractions via motion and spatiality. The result of this intensive studio research is a body of work that contributes original technical and conceptual possibilities to the field of contemporary painting.
Figure 117 Installation image PhD graduating exhibition: *Material Illusions in Abstract Painting.* Australian National University School of Art gallery
Figure 118 Installation image PhD graduating exhibition: *Material Illusions in Abstract Painting*. Australian National University School of Art gallery
Figure 119 Installation image PhD graduating exhibition: Material Illusions in Abstract Painting. Australian National University School of Art gallery
**Figure 120** Installation image PhD graduating exhibition: *Material Illusions in Abstract Painting*. Australian National University School of Art gallery
Figure 121 Installation image PhD graduating exhibition: Material Illusions in Abstract Painting. Australian National University School of Art gallery
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