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Oblique Strategies: Queer Opacity in Figurative Painting

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Declaration of Originality

I, Timothy Phillips, 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.

Abstract

This practice-led investigation explores concealment as a queer strategy in figurative painting. The studio research consists of a body of paintings in which discernible pictorial and conceptual veils hide queer desire in plain view. It is underpinned by critical theory that proposes opacity as an alternative to absolute visibility. Cultural theorists Nicholas de Villiers and Clare Birchall are exemplary scholars engaging in the field of opaque politics, which informs my own theoretical framework.

My studio methodology engages modes associated with the still life genre, wherein assemblages of objects and props are staged in cryptic configurations and painted from observation. Motifs such as curtains, cloaks and apertures, containing obscured figures, represent conspicuous visual obstructions. An artist's lay figure is employed in several paintings, and its disguised presence is mined for symbolism. These apparent concealments augment the work's conceptual obfuscations wherein narrative ambiguity, compositional schisms and occult hieroglyphs signify the withholding of salient information and engender layers of visual intrigue. Complementarily, the painted surface, with its slow accumulation of differentiated brushstrokes, enacts a distinct material opacity.

In addition to the genre of still life, the project draws upon a range of historical figurative modes of painting in which symbolic motifs simultaneously evoke and camouflage themes of desire. The work of American artist George Tooker is one key historical precedent for my project, as his latently homoerotic and conceptually ambiguous paintings are viewed as a model for queer opacity. Other notable influences on my practice include the Pittura Metafisica of Greek-born Giorgio de Chirico and the Surrealist provocations of Belgian artist René Magritte. The variety of historical and contemporary forms suffusing this doctoral study contributes to a sense of bricolage that is a key characteristic of the creative work. In this regard, the collision of diverse elements within the studio research engenders a visual multiplicity and staged convolution that produces a queer aesthetic in painting resistant to the totalising effects of a normative visibility politics.

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Introduction

Figure 1: *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 2019, oil on gesso board, 61 x 61 cm

In a painting completed in a later phase of my studio research, a cloaked figure sits at a red table set with a porcelain bowl, an orange, and a snuffed candle in a pewter candlestick (fig. 1). In the brilliant yellow wall at the top half of the painting is carved a small green aperture through which a distant male face can be seen. With arms outstretched mid-incantation, the cloaked figure appears to be enacting an occult ritual, conjuring or invoking the distant figure. The painting's title, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, is taken from Shirley Jackson's 1962 mystery novel about two witchy sisters spurned by a condemning mob of townspeople, and suggests a theme of hiding in plain sight, a historical condition of queer people and occultists alike.

Excepting the green peephole, the work was painted from observation, the scene being staged before my studio easel as an elaborate still life assemblage. The conjurer—the leading actor within this painted theatre—is a life-sized, articulated mannequin made of fibreglass, its plastic artifice furtively concealed by costume. The conjurer's table propping up the objects is a sheet of red cardboard. The miniature portrait in the peephole is of a fashion model from an advertisement in a magazine.

The painting's concealments augment a suspicion that not everything is as it seems. The conjurer's costume of thick blue cloak, shirt and gloves mask its identity as a lifeless prop. The peephole figure's body occluded behind the yellow wall is conspicuous by its absence. At the same time, the incongruous insertion of the peephole into the observed 'still life' space creates an aesthetic schism that draws attention to the nature of the painting as an artificial construct. Such pictorial discordances perform in tandem with the painting's narrative blind spots, as the occultic scenario merely hints at a queer erotic subtext only to stop short at the point of revelation. In this regard, the painting's veils and oblique visual cues evoke desire's metaphorical dimensions and speak of a clandestine history of queer eroticism as a covert operation. Even the paintings' opaque material surface, a result of the slowly cumulative painting process and consisting of layers of differentiated brushstrokes, emphasises a latent sensory delight, or erotic pleasure, in the forms of these objects.

From its cryptic motifs to its conspicuous pictorial withholdings, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* articulates through painting what this doctoral study frames as a queer mode of opacity. Informed by critical theory that proposes tactical ambiguity as a defiant alternative to absolute visibility, my creative research explores the queer poetic potential of opacity via a body of paintings in which pictorial and conceptual veils obscure queer desire in plain view. The project highlights the relationship between concealment and visibility as a key feature of queer historical visual production and identity construction. At the project's core is an admittedly paradoxical aim: to visualise a queer secret. Adopting a mode of representation mediated by its materiality, the project underscores painting's capacity to visualise concealment and to activate structures of desire as a strategy for subversion.

An opaque object, neither transparent nor translucent, is visible but constituently indeterminate, allowing no light to pass through. This doctoral study contributes perspectives to a burgeoning field in art discourse of theorising modes of practice through the lens of opacity. Art projects at the core of this discourse enlist an opaque aesthetics to counter widespread assumptions about the perceived efficacies of openness and are characterised by visual and conceptual forms that outwardly resist total revelation. Observing trends across multiple creative disciplines, media theorist Asbjørn Grønstad explores how practices underscored by occlusion challenge the culturally preconceived authority of transparency, while presenting new modes of symbolic and aesthetic engagement:

> Art that foregrounds a lack of clarity, both in a material and a narrative sense, may make us more aware of the limits of sight, its epistemological limits specifically. Artworks that embrace opacity as a poetic technique also index another way of being in the world, and they engender a different form of affect.[1]

In a queer theoretical context, concealment subverts the normative logic of a dominant queer visibility politics. While increased cultural visibility has undoubtedly had significant positive social impact, this project aligns with scholarship that links visibility to processes of assimilation and depoliticisation, as I explore in Chapter One. In this chapter, theorist Nicholas de Villiers' concept of 'queer opacity', a disruptive refutation to the perceived virtue in total outness, is a key reference point in identifying opacity as a disruptive queer tactic. Édouard Glissant's politics of opacity, viewed as a campaign for the right to illegibility, provides further basis for my interpretation of opacity as a moral proposition. Theorised from an anti-imperial perspective, Glissant's call for an ethical refusal of classification and self-revelation resonates with critical theory that expounds the adverse consequences of a universalising visibility politics. The theoretical framework developed in Chapter One serves as a foundation for my studio research, in which conceptual notions of an anti-normative obliquity assume visual and poetic forms.

Key to my project is the conceptual relation between opacity and secrecy. Indeed, the opaque and the secret have core affinities, sharing the attribute, notes Grønstad, of 'being informationally underwhelming, as well as [producing] the tantalizing sense of containing

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[1] Asbjørn Skarsvåg Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture: The Poetics of Opacity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 13.

something more'.[2] Beleaguered by persecution, queerness has historically confined itself to the realm of secrecy, and thus my project honours secrecy as a historical legacy. In contemporary parlance, the logic of queer secrecy and disclosure is commonly articulated by the metaphor of the closet, which eminent queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests is 'the defining structure for gay oppression' in the twentieth century,[3] and a continuously shaping feature of queer experience conditioned by ceaseless heterosexist presumption in daily life.[4] By contrast, the strategies for secrecy depicted in this study represent not a return to the closet's societally imposed condition of invisibility, but a strategic partial and mutable conspicuousness. While contemplating secrecy in visual terms might appear paradoxical, cultural theorist Clare Birchall suggests that the secret is in fact the ideal visual subject, in that 'being by definition that which is unknown, it resists cognitive judgment…' and thus 'opens the way for a purely aesthetic response'.[5] The latently erotic paintings of my studio research became visual manifestations of secrecy through material and stylistic configurations that conspicuously occlude and obscure, thereby communicating a withholding of key information. These configurations are the 'oblique strategies' that lend the exegesis its title, mischievously borrowed from the name of the 1975 card-based creative method developed by musician Brian Eno and artist Peter Schmidt and repurposed to denote the project's preoccupation with a purposeful obliquity.

My investigation developed from an early interest in the cloaking strategies of several American mid-twentieth-century gay male figurative painters, whose circumstances often conditioned a necessity to express their desires through forms hidden from heteronormative view. This initial focus sprung from an intrigue with the affective qualities of historical queer codes and the potential for their use in contemporary painting as an inherited group language. I am especially fascinated by the painter George Tooker (1920–2011), whose tactile and covertly homoerotic evocations of urban isolation are a long-held interest. Adapting anachronistic techniques from fifteenth-century Italian painting, Tooker developed a method in egg tempera in which slowly accrued layers of small, linear brushstrokes reveal images of

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[2] Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture*, 142.
[3] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Reissue (Berkeley, CA; London, UK: University of California Press, 2008), 71.
[4] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 68.
[5] Clare Birchall, *Radical Secrecy: The Ends of Transparency in Datafied America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 124.

a dense luminosity.[6] While some of Tooker's peers, notably the sexually provocative Paul Cadmus (1904–1999), evoked gay male desire explicitly in their paintings, Tooker mediated his queerness through symbols, remarking, 'my work is only implicitly homosexual, not outwardly so'.[7] Through furtive visual codes, Tooker's paintings communicate an eroticism that is simultaneously open and closed.

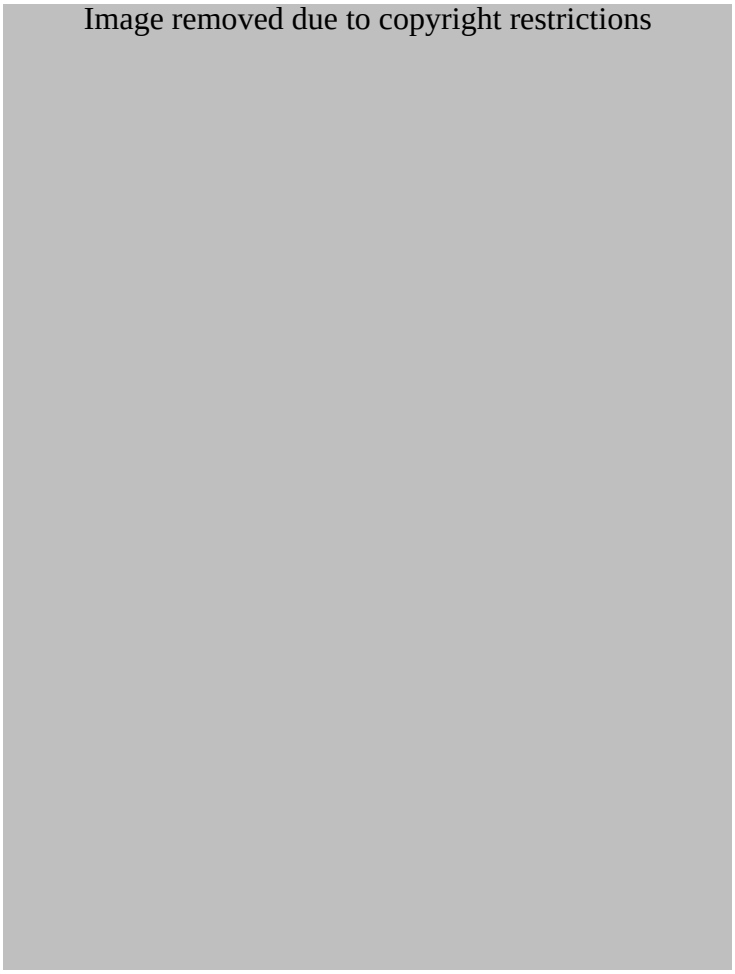

Figure 2: George Tooker, *Window II*, 1956, egg tempera on gesso panel, 60.96 x 45.72 cm

Tooker's *Window II* (fig. 2) is a seminal influence on this doctoral study. In the painting, a muscular male figure in a white, semi-transparent singlet stands at a window clutching an orange with one hand and lifting a curtain with the other, revealing a second figure hiding in shadow. Upon the windowsill is a still life arrangement of flowers, its spatial proximity to the

[6] Thomas H. Garver, *George Tooker* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1992), 8.
[7] George Tooker, 'An Interview with George Tooker', interview with Justin Spring, *American Art* 16, no. 1 (2002): 77.

viewer reflecting the influence of Renaissance pictorial design. While Thomas Garver, author of Tooker's only monograph, identifies the second figure as female, he admits that 'the face beneath the shade suggests something else, both mysterious and ominous… a riveting emotional foil to this otherwise languorous picture'.[8] The androgyny of the cowering figure engenders a sexual ambiguity that aligns with Tooker's devotional treatment of the idealised male, together generating an undeniable yet tempered queer eroticism. The ambiguous narrative suggests a secret operation (perhaps an illicit affair, or hiding), the curtain a literal and metaphorical veil designating an intermediary moment between concealment and revelation. The painting's luminous surface is of key significance to its erotic reading, imbuing the composition with another layer of sensuality via the sense of touch embedded in the mark-making.

Window II evokes secrecy in its depiction of a surreptitious happening. Simultaneously, through the ambiguous bricolage of its arcane motifs that inhibit the narrative's total readability, it enlists secrecy as a modus operandi. This conceptual concealment augments the painting's erotic power by stirring the imagination and reflects the historical context of its production at a time when outward displays of queer desire faced prohibitions. As I describe in Chapter Two, intrigued by these affective and erotic qualities but initially unable to articulate their subversive appeal, in the early stages of my doctoral research I aimed to replicate a similar aesthetic to Tooker's in my practice, integrating pictorial devices from Tooker and his circle as evocations of a subdued queer erotic devotion. In parallel with the intuitive development of my practice as my paintings grew more complex and my approach to symbolism became speculative, I worked to establish the project's conceptual underpinnings more firmly. My initial interests in coded visual language, veiled forms and enigma eventually formed a theoretical framework of queer opacity that fully supported my intentions.

In the art of painting, diametric notions of concealment and revelation are held in constant tension. From the illusory nature of mimesis to material processes predisposed to covering, obscuring, and masking a surface, paintings are illusionistic and indeterminate containers of inexplicit meaning and paradox. They are a nonverbal form of communication irreducible to

[8] Garver, *George Tooker*, 56.

verbal description.[9] Critic John Berger suggests that the power of painting to confound arises through initially convincing us of what is there, followed by a proposition of doubt; every painting 'is also about the absence of the real thing'.[10] Philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman affirms painting's capacity to stir us through withholdings, proposing that painting's affective potency 'is not due solely to the transmission of knowledge—visible, legible, or invisible—… [it] operates constantly in the intertwinings, even the imbroglio, of transmitted and dismantled knowledges, of produced and transformed not-knowledges'.[11] This interpretation of painting as an internally contradictory mode provides a point of departure for my project that seeks to challenge preordained notions of clarity and coherence.

Figure 3: *Untitled*, 2020, oil on linen, 38 x 46 cm

An inherently tactile and semiotically enigmatic mode, still life is the primary methodology of the studio component of this study. My enduring interest in still life and observational painting reflects a perennial fascination with oil paint's capacity to convey the textured

[9] Jason Gaiger, *Aesthetics and Painting* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 2.
[10] John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1991), 173.
[11] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 16.

surfaces of objects, wherein the task of translating the three-dimensional into the two-dimensional remains a source of wonder and intellectual stimulation (e.g., fig. 3). Contemporary painter Jude Rae corroborates the compulsive appeal of this endeavour. She explains, '[t]he interplay between illusion and materiality is simple but endlessly variable and engaging: strong illusion reduces awareness of the paint surface, pronounced materiality disrupts illusion'.[12] My project accords with modernist traditions of transfiguring traditional still life for subversive intent, confounding its commonplace expectations. Throughout the studio research, traditional categories are blurred, and still life's conventions are gradually destabilised with collage techniques, experimental spatial logic, and the introduction of the figure via a mannequin.

This doctoral study engages a queer methodological framework, building upon lineages of practice that highlight the instability of a range of widely held assumptions, not least those regarding the regulating expectations of visibility. Drawing its politics from LGBTQIA+ positionalities, 'queer' in this study frequently transcends a mere identity descriptor, and although the term is well established within many scholarly disciplines, as a verb and adjective, its usage and meaning are frequently contested.[13] In an effort towards consistency, a helpful unifying trait of queer, according to art historian David Getsy, 'is its rejection of attempts to enforce (or value) normalcy', where normalcy (and normativity) can be understood as the social conventions that condition the interpretation of a range of behaviours and identities as inherently natural.[14] Queer critiques deconstruct the institutions that uphold cis/heterosexuality's cultural dominance and challenge the social ordering and binary categories that treat cis/heterosexuality as the default identity and all deviations as aberrations or 'other'.[15]

The project applies queering strategies to playfully unsettle conventions in painting and to challenge the assumed significance of authenticity in visual representations. Opacity can indeed be understood as an inherently queer methodology, as its entailing obscurity refutes

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[12] Jude Rae, 'In Plain Sight', *Jude Rae*, 2017, accessed 24 July 2022, https://www.juderae.com/in-plain-sight
[13] Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash, 'Introduction', in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, eds. Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (Farnham, Surrey, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 4.
[14] David Getsy, ed., *Queer*, Documents of Contemporary Art (London, UK: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016), 12.
[15] Browne and Nash, 'Introduction', 5.

the kinds of universalising representations upon which binary categories and taxonomies depend, enabling an aesthetic and subjective multiplicity. Indeed, a significant characteristic of queerness is its advocacy for heterogeny. As theorist Kath Browne suggests, 'queer is a term that can and should be redeployed, fucked with and used in resistant and transgressive ways, even if those ways are resisting what could, and some would argue already has, become a "queer orthodoxy"'.[16] A sense of multiplicity is key to my opaque aesthetics, perhaps most evident in my project through the pictorial results of bricolage research, wherein disparate motifs, influences, technical approaches and narrative sources collide for the purpose of a deliberate convolution. As Sedgwick affirms, queer is an 'open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.'[17] This doctoral study aligns with the view of queerness as multivalent and mutable, its enigma fostering flexible, poetic readings.

Through its engagement with selected painting traditions, my research takes account of recent queer contemporary painting that appropriates visual languages from modern and pre-modern periods.[18] Curator Donald Ryan attributes the burgeoning interest in traditional painting processes amongst contemporary queer artists to a shared desire to depict quotidian aspects of queer life, resulting from more widespread political and personal freedoms.[19] With less censorship in many societies and a generational distance from the political turns of the initial AIDS crisis, 'queer artists have begun to fill a gap in the conservative history of painting … propos[ing] a prescient romantic vision'.[20] By reconfiguring visual languages of the past for subversion, queer artists insert new narratives into pictorial traditions otherwise conspicuously deficient in queer representations,[21] ostensibly upsetting the heteronormative hegemony of Western painting's conventions. My investigation contributes a comparatively novel perspective to discourses in contemporary queer figuration by offering an alternative to the explicit sexuality and overt visibility politics that characterises much queer practice.

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[16] Browne and Nash, 'Introduction', 9.
[17] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.
[18] Harrison Tenzer, 'The New Canon: 7 Queer Figurative Painters Who are Tapping into the History Books', *Cultured*, accessed August 2021, https://www.culturedmag.com/new-figurative-painting-2019
[19] Donald Ryan, 'Them', Galerie *Perrotin*, 2019, accessed 19 May 22, https://static.perrotin.com/presse_expo/press_release_7415_1.pdf?v=1560451726
[20] Ryan, 'Them'.
[21] Ryan, 'Them'.

Instead, my project assumes a position in which opacity and secrecy are valued for their aesthetic, ethical and erotic capacities.

While my methodologies are broadly queer, this project draws on lineages of gay male practice and communities specifically. The primary artists explored in this doctorate indicate gay male desire and its idiosyncratic historical visual representations as a key focus and subject of an aesthetic case study. This is a strategic limit on the project's scope and is not intended to suggest that such issues and practice have a greater significance than or are wholly interchangeable with those of other queer subjects. Instead, by recognising and acknowledging this limitation outright, I aim to avoid representing gay male experience as indicative of all queer experience, a vital measure given the historical privileging of and bias toward male identity in much queer scholarship. Another acknowledged limitation is the project's Western focus via its predominance of European and US-American artists featured and my own Anglo-Australian positionality. The need to mask non-normative sexual or gender identity is still experienced by much of the global population's sexual minorities due to discriminatory laws and stigmas and is often felt more acutely by queer individuals when intersecting with stigmatised race, ability, and gender identity.[22] This project does not intend to assume the universality of these acknowledged limited perspectives.

Chapter Overview

The exegesis is divided into four chapters, the first of which presents a literature review establishing the theoretical framework and relevant field of practice. The remaining chapters document the studio research and are categorised by the project's key phases. While most of the studio research was completed over a sustained period of two-and-a-half-years, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 brought about unforeseen disruptions, such as the cancellation of field research and limitations on studio access that effectively halted my regular daily painting practice. Consequently, paintings made after this period do not necessarily reflect a neat sense of chronological progress. The thematic phases implied by the chapter structure are intended to demonstrate the key ideas under investigation. In the studio,

[22] John E. Pachankis and Richard Bränström, 'How Many Sexual Minorities Are Hidden? Projecting the Size of the Global Closet with Implications for Policy and Public Health', ed. Cheng-Shi Shiu, *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 6 (13 June 2019): 2.

these ideas would typically unfold in parallel and/or without a strict chronology.

Chapter One contextualises the project through a review of relevant literature and practice. The chapter begins by examining coding strategies amongst historical queer subcultures as precursors to my studio research. Proposing concealment's efficacy, I articulate the aesthetic, ethical and queer intent of opaque strategies in creative practice. The chapter goes on to discuss painting's historical engagement with concealment. In this regard, Jacques Lacan's reflections on the ancient Greek parable of Zeuxis and Parrhasius is a theoretical touchstone, illustrating how painting can trigger desire by paradoxically staging absences. Turning to examples of practice, I examine George Tooker's subversive oeuvre as a seminal influence on my doctorate. The chapter concludes by examining German-born contemporary artist Daniel Sinsel as an exemplar of queer opacity in contemporary painting.

Chapter Two describes the early stages of my studio research and explains how I adapted several still life conventions to engage concealment as a conceptual strategy. The first paintings made during my candidature address initial concerns and introduce to the project recurring motifs, such as the 'peephole', the voyeuristic apertures containing obscured figures, and the stage curtain as a symbolic designation of the theatre. An important development in the early studio research is the adoption of illogical, 'metaphysical' compositional structures to evoke the presence of hidden realities, a pictorial strategy resonant with the work of Giorgio de Chirico. This chapter concludes with a discussion of two paintings that depict single curtains made toward the end of the studio research.

Chapter Three describes the next phase of my studio research, in which I began to integrate iconography from various occult traditions into my visual repertoire. Via references to an open secrecy and hidden collectives, occultism functions as a model for opacity. The chapter draws links between occultism and queerness by citing shared clandestine histories and examines prominent examples of figuration in which queer politics and occultic imagery intersect. The chapter concludes with a reflection on my exhibition *Sleight of Hand* (Wellington St Projects, 2019), installed during the middle period of my studio research. The exhibition provided an opportunity to reflect on and consolidate the main themes of my investigation.

Chapter Four describes how I introduced the figure more prominently into my methodology via a mannequin. Initially adopted as a solution to certain logistical difficulties in painting a live model from observation, the mannequin's uncanny presence yielded intriguing discoveries. Suggestively posed and costumed in cloaks, hoods and wigs, several of the painted figures described in this chapter exhibit a discernible artifice that calls attention to their nature as highly staged presentations. Further, this chapter describes the culmination of my gradual corruption of the still life genre, in both the making and the presentation of which the object (the mannequin) principally mimics the figure rather than a figure transforming into a painted object, thus subverting traditional techniques of figure painting and complicating categories of their final reception.

The exegesis concludes with reflections on the project that underscore my unique contribution to the fields of opaque aesthetics and figurative painting. Pointing towards the potential for future research, I describe how the methodologies established in this study can inform fields of inquiry outside my focus on painting and gay/queer male subjectivity. A key point reinforced here is the significance of bricolage research to the outcome of the paintings. I conclude that the eclecticism of my aesthetics engenders a visual confusion that is essential to its queer opacity because its obstruction to easy readability resists the suppressive forces of normative visibility.

Chapter One: Contextualisation

This chapter contextualises the project by establishing the creative potential of opacity and secrecy in queer figurative painting. Reviewing relevant theory and practice, I articulate how pictorial and conceptual concealments can poetically subvert visibility and simultaneously generate a sense of desire within the visual field. I subsequently identify the historical and contemporary spheres to which the studio research contributes, focussing on a mode of gay male figurative painting characterised by obfuscations and sensory material qualities.

I begin by examining queer historical coding practices as precursors to the opaque strategies employed in the studio research, wherein the covert lexicons and visual cues of past subcultures are viewed as subversive forces existing within a creative lineage of concealment. Turning to the contemporary moment, in which a mainstream queer activism has shifted its focus from the autonomy of privacy to outness, I cite depoliticisation and normalisation as troubling outcomes of a normative, unconditional queer visibility. As a corrective to this suppressive orthodoxy, opacity challenges dominant assumptions regarding the efficacies of total visibility. Supported by theory that proposes ambiguity as a disruptive creative stance, I identify queer opacity as a visual metaphor for my practice.

Establishing opacity as a queering aesthetic strategy, the chapter then explores concealment as an enduring feature of painting's rich history and discourse. Of key interest is the way in which occlusions in painting can trigger a type of unfulfilled desire by exposing the limits of cognition, a capacity exploited throughout the studio research for poetic effect. In this light, Jacques Lacan's reflections on the ancient Greek parable of Zeuxis and Parrhasius is a theoretical touchstone regarding the implications of staged absences in painting. Painting's facility for enigmatic sensuality is then explored through the still life genre, the primary methodology of the studio research.

The final sections of this chapter examine a queer opacity in the figurative paintings of George Tooker and Daniel Sinsel. A historical precursor and significant influence on my project, Tooker's meticulous painting process applied motifs such as closets, windows and curtains to evoke secrecy as a theme and camouflage homoeroticism in plain view.

Contemporary artist Daniel Sinsel's paintings similarly elicit sensory qualities from within their laborious rendering, while their cryptic homoerotic narratives suggest a playful alternative to the explicitness that characterises much queer figuration today.

Concealment to Revelation

While my project reconfigures concealment as a subversive queer tactic in the present, historically, cultural and social hostility have compelled individuals of non-normative sexual and gender expression into necessary states of secrecy.[23] In the West, for example, the late nineteenth century emergence of a public homosexual identity, constructed via medical and social classifications, ushered in new modes of persecution against burgeoning communities of collectivising 'deviants'.[24] Such oppressive states provide fertile conditions for the development of secret communicative practices by underground groups.[25] Clare Birchall notes that secret lexicons can have unique affective qualities constituting 'lineage[s] of praxis as well as aesthetic experimentation'.[26] Amongst historical queer subcultures, creative linguistic registers, such as the 'Polari' of early twentieth-century Britain allowed individuals to make contact under the radar of society at large.[27] A lexicon primarily adopted by gay men that linguist Paul Baker describes as 'a vibrant language born out of prejudice',[28] Polari's amalgamation of subcultural dialects and cockney rhyming slang provided a shielded sphere within which users could freely circulate.[29] Similarly, speakers of 'Kaliarda', a private vocabulary in use in Greece from the 1940s to the late twentieth century, formed a cohesive social group of marginalised queer people frequently targeted by police.[30]

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[23] Gary Smith, Susan Kippax, and Murray Chapple, 'Secrecy, Disclosure, and Closet Dynamics', *Journal of Homosexuality* 35, no. 1 (12 February 1998): 54.
[24] Tom Joudrey, 'The Troubling Resilience of the Queer Closet', *Slate Magazine*, 26 February 2019, accessed 28 August 2021, https://slate.com/human-interest/2019/02/closet-queer-life-homophobia-coming-out.html.
[25] Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1983), 46.
[26] Birchall, *Radical Secrecy*, 152.
[27] Paul Baker, 'Polari, a Vibrant Language Born out of Prejudice', *The Guardian*, 24 May 2010, sec. Opinion, accessed 25 November 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/24/polari-language-origins
[28] Baker, 'Polari'.
[29] Anna T., 'The Opacity of Queer Languages', *e-Flux Journal* 60 (December 2014), accessed 8 January 2022, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/60/61064/the-opacity-of-queer-languages
[30] Nick Nicholas, 'The Speakers of Kaliarda', *Ἑλληνιστεύκοντος* (blog), 15 November 2017, accessed 29 January 2022, https://hellenisteukontos.opoudjis.net/the-speakers-of-kaliarda

Lexicons like Polari and Kaliarda, as well as covert visual cues such as the wearing of a red necktie,[31] are valued here as a part of a creative lineage of opacity. Constituting visible though not readily accessible queer markers, their disruptive potential indicates possibilities for more inconspicuous modes. Furtive codes born from oppression, theorist Anna T. suggests, are assuredly subversive forces of resistance signifying a refusal 'to be assimilated and "normalized", choosing instead to produce an alternative that provides a safer space of expression and which…also has the potential to mock and subvert the norm'.[32] Indeed, in-group phrases could covertly ridicule the very oppressors who necessitated their use and thus undermine hierarchies and afford users 'a moment of pleasure that derives from their deviance itself and their organizing around it'.[33] Audible/visible, yet unintelligible to outsiders, queer codes are opaque forms in which meaning is constructed outside the parameters of a dominant and hostile culture. Despite recent social change wherein the need for such practices has diminished in many circumstances, the clandestine communicative forms of earlier generations are highlighted in the context of my project as useful resistance strategies and as historical precursors to the concealing mechanisms that are the subject of my studio research.

Since the emergence of liberation movements and the repeal of discriminatory laws in many societies, queer activism has shifted emphasis from privacy as autonomy to visibility.[34] To the contemporary queer individual, there remains an unquestioned assumption that 'coming out' in a clear expression of one's gender or sexual identity is universally desirable.[35] The primacy of cultural visibility within queer politics reflects the broader conceptual significance of the visible in Western society.[36] As theorist Linda Schlossberg observes, theories and practices of identity are structured around logics of visibility because '[a]t the most basic level, we are subjects constituted by our visions of ourselves and others, and we trust that our ability to see and read carries with it a certain degree of epistemological certainty'.[37] Judith

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[31] Bryan Martin, 'Paul Cadmus and the Censorship of Queer Art', *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 25 June 2021, accessed 21 December 2021, https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/articles/2021/6/paul-cadmus-the-fleets-in
[32] Anna T., 'The Opacity of Queer Languages'.
[33] Anna T., 'The Opacity of Queer Languages'.
[34] Lisa Duggan, 'The New Homonormativity', in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 181.
[35] Edenbourg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', 349.
[36] Linda Schlossberg, 'Rites of Passing', in *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* eds. Maria C. Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001), 1.
[37] Schlossberg, 'Rites of Passing', 1.

Butler reiterates visibility's appointment as the ultimate marker of truth, as 'the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not'.[38] A relational, embedded and processual concept,[39] visibility remains a core objective within mainstream LGBTQIA+ politics.

Embodied in Pride events, sloganeering activism and pushes for media representation, cultural visibility has had positive social impacts and contributed to the recognition of civil rights.[40] However, it is frequently argued that a centralised focus on a total and unregulated public visibility serves to depoliticise queer concerns and also to privilege specific classes.[41] Theorist Rosemary Hennessey suggests that the expansion of queer representations within the public arena entails an inevitable commodification, as corporations identify a new consumer class and marketing strategies reinforce rigid depictions that uphold structures of race and class dominance.[42] In this regard, corporations' faux attempts to 'rectify' queer invisibility through advertisements of queer people as middle-class, gender-conforming, white consumers adversely 'produce imaginary gay/queer subjects that keep invisible the divisions of wealth and labor that these images and knowledges depend on'.[43] The logic of neoliberalism similarly conditions what Lisa Duggan terms 'homonormativity', a gay politics that sustains heteronormative customs by promising 'the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption'.[44] Homonormativity strives for formal access to conservative institutions through assimilation and submission to hegemonic social codes.[45]

Similarly, demands placed on the queer individual for an unqualified visibility of their non-normative sexuality can be likewise suppressive. For one, to be instantly recognisable within the public sphere is to risk exposure to hostile and potentially phobic observers, as well as to manipulative systems of authority. Once identified and thus classifiable, the queer subject is

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[38] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, UK: Verso, 2004), xx.
[39] Emil Edenbourg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', in *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics*, ed. Michael J. Bosia, Sandra M. McEvoy, and Momin Rahman (Oxford University Press, 2020), 350.
[40] Rosemary Hennessy, 'Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture', *Cultural Critique*, no. 29 (1994), 31.
[41] Edenborg, 'Visibility in Global Queer Politics', 352.
[42] Hennessey, 'Queer Visibility and Commodity Culture', 69.
[43] Hennessey, 'Queer Visibility and Commodity Culture', 69.
[44] Duggan, 'The New Homonormativity', 179.
[45] Duggan, 'The New Homonormativity', 190.

prone to exploitation by and assimilation with various power regimes, be they corporate, governmental or military.[46] Further, cultural critic Tom Joudrey suggests that the burden of outness, which places undue responsibility for clarity of expression upon queer individuals, negates more flexible characterisations. Queerness, he notes, 'should reside in a sea of ambiguity, unstably morphing through androgynous and fluid forms', whereas 'acquiescing to the demand to come out entails a tacit willingness to be pinned down, defined, made intelligible—in effect, to halt and freeze queerness at the very instant of its assertion'.[47] This study aligns with scholarship that portrays queerness as a realm of intermediary states. The agency experienced in existing outside a rigid in/out binary category is suppressed by the normative imposition for total public disclosure.

Queer Opacity and Secrecy

I will now turn to examples of concepts and texts that identify opacity and secrecy as efficacious alternatives to absolute visibility, building a conceptual frame for my art practice. My studio research can be situated within recent discourses in art and theory that promote obscurity as a counter to the suppressive effects of a normative visibility politics.[48] Asbjørn Grønstad's *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture: The Poetics of Opacity* is a significant contribution to this field, exploring how artistic practices characterised by illegibility interrogate the cultural pre-eminence of transparency in relation to social, political and aesthetic enterprises.[49] Predicated on the notion that visual culture is anchored by a set of assumptions—for instance, that 'the image be completely legible, that in principle anything can be visualized … and that vision and light are phenomena that are intrinsically good'[50]—Grønstad's text is useful in understanding the destabilising potential of an aesthetic opacity.

For Grønstad, a key characteristic of an opaque aesthetics is an absence of certainty that enables 'richer opportunities for exercising our ethical sensibilities'.[51] Grønstad's preoccupation with opacity's moral dimensions draws on philosopher Édouard Glissant's

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[46] Magda Szcześniak, 'Blending In and Standing Out – Camouflage and Masking as Queer Tactics of Negotiating Visibility', *Widok. Teorie i Praktyki Kultury Wizualnej*, no. 5 (2014), 2.
[47] Joudrey, 'The Troubling Resilience of the Queer Closet'.
[48] Zach Blas, 'Opacities: An Introduction', *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 2 92 (2016): 149.
[49] Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture*, 4.
[50] Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture*, 2.
[51] Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture*, 14.

politics of opacity, a campaign for the preservation of nuance and difference as resistance strategy. Insisting '[w]e clamor for the right to opacity for everyone',[52] Glissant argues for maintaining degrees of cultural and individual illegibility as protection against oppressive forces seeking to exploit a subject's easy readability, for purposes of dehumanisation and subjugation.[53] Initially theorised from an anti-imperial standpoint, in recent years, Glissant's politics of opacity have seen increasing deployment in the fields of queer theory and art theory. Artist and writer Zach Blas, whose practice is explored in Chapter Four, describes Glissant's opacity as 'an alterity that is unquantifiable, a diversity that exceeds categories of identifiable difference', that 'therefore, exposes the limits of schemas of visibility, representation, and identity that prevent sufficient understanding of multiple perspectives of the world and its peoples'.[54] It is an appeal for an indecipherability as safeguard against malevolent power regimes seeking to abstract and reduce through processes of identification, categorisation, and (mis)representation.[55]

Taking Glissant's philosophy as an initial morality, my project exercises an opacity that celebrates (partial) illegibility as queering methodology. Indeed, opacity accords with queerness, writes Anna T., as it 'exists in a negation; not only of the "we are just like you" dogma of homonormativity, but even more profoundly [it] negates being seen, let alone compared and potentially deemed non-dangerous for the status quo'.[56] In *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol*, theorist Nicholas de Villiers proffers 'queer opacity' as an alternative to the hegemonic closet by examining the personas of three significant postwar queer figures. Proposing a retrospective examination of Michel Foucault's, Roland Barthes' and Andy Warhol's respective critical hesitations in the face of public demands to 'come out', de Villiers describes how in resisting disclosure, each figure became renowned for elusive qualities intimating an underlying defiant queerness. Indeed, Australian art critic Robert Hughes once dismissively observed that Andy Warhol was 'an

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[52] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 194.
[53] Simon Wu, 'On Opacity: How Artists Resist "Representation" and Legibility', *ARTnews*, 11 May 2022, accessed 31 August 2022, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/opacity-sandra-mujinga-simon-liu-kapwani-kiwanga-1234628381
[54] Blas, 'Opacities: An Introduction'.
[55] Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture*, 16.
[56] Anna T., *Opacity—Minority—Improvisation: An Exploration of the Closet through Queer Slangs and Postcolonial Theory* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Publishing, 2020), 78.

abnormal figure (silent, withdrawn, eminently visible but opaque, and a bit malevolent)'.[57] Challenging the view that a refusal of identification represents complicity with homophobia, de Villiers' notion instead represents a mode of existence arising from 'being fed up with confessional discourse, with the epistemological games of the closet in which coming out is a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden'.[58] Queer opacity reconfigures ambiguity as tactical resistance to the homophobic insistence on 'knowing' and negates the confessional discourse of the closet altogether, along with its attendant associations of guilt and shame.[59]

De Villiers' queer opacity is a symbolic reference point for my project, wherein an opacity is emphasised not only through concealments but through the *advertisement* of concealments via calculated visual manoeuvres. Indeed, the opaque object makes visible its obscurity. In this way, the deliberate tease of hidden messages inherent to queer opacity resonates with an aim of my studio research that is the pictorial representation of the secret. This studio aim functions to defy total revelation as a subversive act and to highlight a historical lineage of an aesthetic secrecy within modes of figurative painting. As I establish in the exegesis' introduction, opacity and secrecy have core affinities, sharing the characteristic of the suggestion of obfuscated meaning. Regarding secrecy's visual manifestations, philosopher Sissela Bok describes how keepers of secrets 'invite the clues and the taunts, the half-measures and the mysterious smiles, that may in turn increase the conflict felt by outsiders between wanting to unmask and respect the secret'.[60] Bok's description of such external signals can be viewed in symbolic relation to the conceptual and pictorial veils that manifest in my paintings, advertising occlusion.

Through its dichotomous relationship with the cultural virtue of transparency, secrecy is frequently characterised in terms of unethical behaviour. In *Radical Secrecy: The Ends of Transparency in Datafied America*, Birchall rejects secrecy's inherent immorality, proposing its political potential as shield against unconscionable state and corporate surveillance. In light of its disruptive social utility, Birchall goes on to consider the secret as a potent

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[57] Robert Hughes, 'The Rise of Andy Warhol', in *Art After Modernism*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York, NY: New Museum, 1984), 45.
[58] Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 162.
[59] De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 5.
[60] Sissela Bok, *Secrets*, 36.

aesthetic subject, contemplating the ways in which the withholding of information can facilitate perceptual responses unblemished by certain cognitive acts.[61] She asks rhetorically, '[c]an aesthetic experiences and judgments be brought to bear on that which does not present itself, that which is intended to be neither seen nor heard?'[62] When the delivery of information is obscured or supressed entirely from within a visual representation, a unique affective response manifests, resulting in what Birchall classifies an 'aesthetics of the secret'. Another useful reference for my project, an aesthetics of the secret privileges the affective, noncognitive qualities of obfuscation over hermeneutical unpacking, inviting the viewer to 'experience secrecy's form rather than find meaning or content through total revelation'.[63] Birchall articulates her concept by examining the creative projects of Trevor Paglen (b. 1974) and Jill Magid (b. 1973), multidisciplinary artists engaged in visualising open secrets. Paglen, for example, concerned with systems of secrecy in the context of a 'military-aesthetic complex', creates military patches conspicuously lacking in clear identification, producing visual markers of 'clandestine activity that wants to be commended and commemorated without being known' as a performative gesture that 'announces the secret's form but not content'.[64] Birchall's theory, wherein secrets are portrayed not as problems to be solved but as containers of poetic possibilities, can be aptly administered to the queer theory that frames my methodology, and repurposed to denote my pictorial articulation of an 'eminently visible but opaque' queer erotics.

It is worth noting that *Radical Secrecy*, like Grønstad's text, was published after the completion of much of my studio research, and so its attachment to the ideas explored in my paintings is retrospective. My discovery of Birchall's concept was revelatory in its articulation of several of my preoccupations. The paintings comprising my studio research engage an aesthetics of the secret as a strategy for queer opacity, their visual concealments, enigmatic materiality and cryptic motifs a poetic evocation of secrecy as a historical legacy and subversive queer subjectivity.

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[61] Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture*, 112.
[62] Birchall, *Radical Secrecy*, 123–4.
[63] Birchall, *Radical Secrecy*, 130.
[64] Birchall, *Radical Secrecy*, 131.

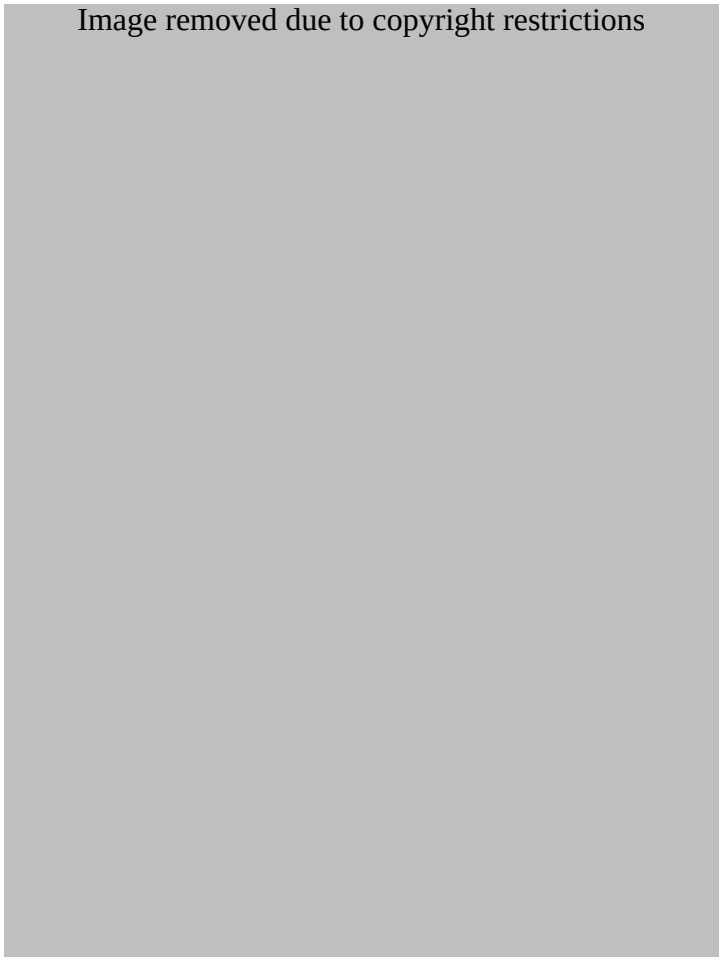

Figure 4: Caravaggio, *The Young Sick Bacchus*, c.1593, oil on canvas, 67 x 53 cm

Within the paintings comprising the studio component of this study, opacity and secrecy are intertwined with and intensifiers of narratives of surreptitious desire. By pictorially assigning to queer desire a complex interplay between concealment and revelation, my paintings evoke a clandestine history. An opaque aesthetics functions to simultaneously distinguish desire as a covert operation and enhance an erotic capability implicit in painting via obstructions in cognition that trigger an unfulfilled yearning for revelation. As Grønstad notes, opaque images, like the suggestion of secrets, 'stimulate our imagination, in that the quality of indistinctness forces us imaginatively to fill in what is indiscernible or missing'.[65] Regarding the power of the indiscernible as desire prompt, theorist Leo Bersani makes reference to the enigmatic sensuality of several paintings by Caravaggio (1571–1610) to articulate how eroticism is generated through simultaneous permission and denial. In *The Young Sick Bacchus* (fig. 4), Bersani interprets the figure's self-withdrawing pose as an erotic invitation characterised by a concealment that 'generates both what we recognize as the erotic invitation

[65] Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture*, 21.

and possibly our own eroticized response to it'.[66] As '[s]exiness advertises an availability that is somewhat opaque', the erotic drive of Caravaggio's Bacchus is attributed to a secretive gesture, or 'noninterpretable address', whose very inexplicit qualities activate the beholder's arousal.[67] By highlighting concealment's sensual potency, my project playfully revels in an erotics of secrecy that is particularly and opaquely queer.

Painting's Opacity

Proceeding from the description of Caravaggio's opaque gestures, this section of the chapter investigates opacity, concealment and revelation as enduring features of painting's historical discourse. Hypothetically, all images have an inherent opacity in their 'constitutive thickness—both material and semiotic—that cancels out any claim to transparency'[68], and an irrefutable material opacity is especially evident in the plastic qualities of the painted object. While conceptual or semiotic opacity can be theorised at length in relation to non-objective artforms, the focus of this section, and of my doctoral study more broadly, is how opacity and the paradoxical visualisation of absence manifest in idiosyncratic ways specific to mimetic modes of figuration. In the following paragraphs, I explore how a pictorial and conceptual opacity in figurative painting can produce a sense of unfulfilled desire in the beholder, citing Jacques Lacan's notion of 'blind spots' and the enigmas of the still life genre as key points of reference.

Painting's capacity to translate the most subtle nuances of optical perception has long provoked speculation amongst theorists and practitioners regarding its predication on concealment—in other words, its status as a deceptive artform. The ancient Greek parable of Zeuxis and Parrhasius perhaps best concretises painting's enduring historical attendance to concealment.[69] In the story, as documented in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, these two rival painters took part in a competition to determine who could conjure the most convincing illusion. While Zeuxis' painting of grapes deceived birds who flew down from above and

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[66] Leo Bersani, *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 8.
[67] Bersani, *Caravaggio's Secrets*, 8.
[68] Grønstad, *Rethinking Art and Visual Culture*, 17.
[69] Emmanuelle Hénin, 'Parrhasius and the Stage Curtain: Theatre, Metapainting and the Idea of Representation in the Seventeenth Century', in *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 49.

pecked them, Parrhasius' painting of a curtain was so convincingly lifelike that it fooled even Zeuxis, who demanded the (illusory) curtain be drawn to reveal the painting he thought hidden behind it. Upon realising his error, Zeuxis conceded 'that he had been surpassed, for that whereas he himself had only deceived the birds, Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist'.[70] This allegory identifies painting as a deceptive operation and serves as an intriguing model for notions of truth and falsity, while shedding light on human perception and preference.

In a 1964 seminar, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan evoked the parable to illustrate a certain peculiarity of human cognition: Parrhasius' victory over Zeuxis suggests that while creatures (in this case, birds) are attracted to external surfaces, humans are preferentially drawn to that which is hidden.[71] The implication of the competition, in which the search for revelation culminates in a failure of perception, can be understood as analogous to a schism between the eye and 'the gaze'.[72] According to Lacan, every act of looking is disrupted by the gaze, a sense of unseen presence and a lure for that which lies behind or beyond the visual.[73] Lacan's gaze demonstrates that human perception exceeds the mere gauging of appearance. Painting can reproduce the visual qualities of an object, such as a curtain or a grape, to a degree of uncanny precision, yet it does not reproduce its physical qualities or make the object entirely available to a spectator. While Parrhasius' painting creates a likeness of a curtain, the potency of the painting is perhaps derived from the lack of a clearly definable and accessible object hidden behind it. The trompe l'oeil curtain motivates Zeuxis to attempt to grasp that which cannot be accounted for in the visual field. Parrhasius' physical painting thus functions as a presence that shrouds a conspicuous absence, which in turn conditions a desire for that which is out of view.

The visual field is understood as constantly deceptive, as optic deficiencies prevent vision from ever encompassing an object fully. Lacan defines these unseen presences that arise from

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[70] Pliny, *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. John Bostock, Henry Thomas Riley (London, UK: H.G. Bohn, 1857), 251
[71] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York, NY: Norton, 1978), 103.
[72] My interpretation of Lacan's gaze is informed by Hanneke Grootenboer's analysis, formulated in the context of trompe l'oeil painting: *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 51.
[73] Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, 51.

each act of looking and its continuous process of deception as 'blind spots'.[74] The concealing curtain engenders a blind spot that conditions Zeuxis' desire to see more, a desire ultimately suppressed by the revelation of Parrhasius' trickery. A key proposition put forth by the parable and Lacan's subsequent musings is that painting as an artform can embody and even draw attention to such blind spots. Lacan cryptically suggests, 'there is something whose absence can always be observed in a picture—which is not the case in perception'.[75] Indeed, when confronted with the painted object, multiple forms of absence are experienced by the observer simultaneously. For example, paintings signify the absence of the artist, whose former presence is felt in the material trace of their painted surface. Additionally, as illustrated in Parrhasius' trompe l'oeil, a sense of absence is produced by the pronounced lack of 'real' objects that is triggered by a convincing facsimile. Further, even the act of looking at a painting, wherein our optical focus becomes momentarily contained within its frame, produces a sense of unseen presence of what is *outside* its frame—of what is, for the duration of our looking, temporarily excluded from our visual field. Lacan's theory is therefore productive for my project, in that his characterisation of painting as a model for visualising absence well serves my investigation of painting's latent capacities.

An intriguing aspect of the Parrhasius and Zeuxis parable is the status of both paintings as still life. Zeuxis' painting is rich in its mimetic translation of the sensory qualities of fruit; Parrhasius' is an even more convincing rendering of a curtain. Thus, I will now turn to discussing the genre of still life—the primary methodology of my studio research—as an apt vehicle for exploring painting's unseen dimensions. Still life's historical tendency toward semiotic ambiguity, owing in part to its diversity of cultural and technical forms, has earned it a reputation amongst writers and scholars as an often inscrutable genre.[76] The first modern still lifes painted as independent pictures date from the early sixteenth century, though it was not until the late eighteenth century that still life was theorised as a legitimate branch of painting in Western art discourse.[77] Initially occupying the lowest rank of importance, beneath portraiture, landscape and history painting, still life has transformed since the beginning of the modern period, paradoxically due to this status as lesser than other painting

[74] Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, 51.
[75] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 108.
[76] Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, 22.
[77] Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 7.

genres, the very perceived banality of still life encouraging radical digressions by artists of the avant-garde.[78] The inanimate and 'commonplace' condition of still life objects encourage experimentation, as historian Margit Rowell explains: 'precisely because of this consistent and presumably unadventurous subject matter, the still life has lent itself to all manner of adventurous visual interpretation'.[79]

Published in 1990, Norman Bryson's *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life* applies critical theory to interpret still life painting throughout European art history, arguing that this realm of painting has been overlooked in art theoretical discourse.[80] According to Bryson, the configuration of objects in a still life painting can be understood as reflective of broader social contexts, as '[t]he culture of the table displays a rapid, volatile receptivity to its surrounding culture in the mode of inflecting its fundamental forms'.[81] Of particular relevance to my project are Bryson's discussions of still life as a 'domain of signs', and his emphasis on the specificities and semiotics of painting, its materials and its processes.[82] Bryson's analyses significantly inform my characterisation of still life as an inherently enigmatic and tactile mode with regard to its dual (sensory/conceptual) capacity to engage concealment and evoke implicit desire.

Bryson notes that 'painting is an art made not only of pigments on a surface, but of signs in semantic space'.[83] Since the proto-still life of Ancient Pompeii's decorative Xenia, depictions of food, vessels and plants have been encoded with cultural signifiers to convey allegories often indecipherable to those outside of a given social context (fig. 5).[84] This proclivity for metaphor ascribes the genre a unique symbolic autonomy, wherein the 'paradoxical estrangement from the real objects it was initially presumed to depict, allow for a radical reformulation of its own systems of meaning'.[85] In this regard, still life's enigmatic

[78] Margit Rowell, *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 122.
[79] Rowell, *Objects of Desire*, 8.
[80] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 8.
[81] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 13.
[82] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 14.
[83] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 10.
[84] Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked, 17–18.
[85] Rowell, *Objects of Desire*, 18.

iconography encourages semiotic experimentation.

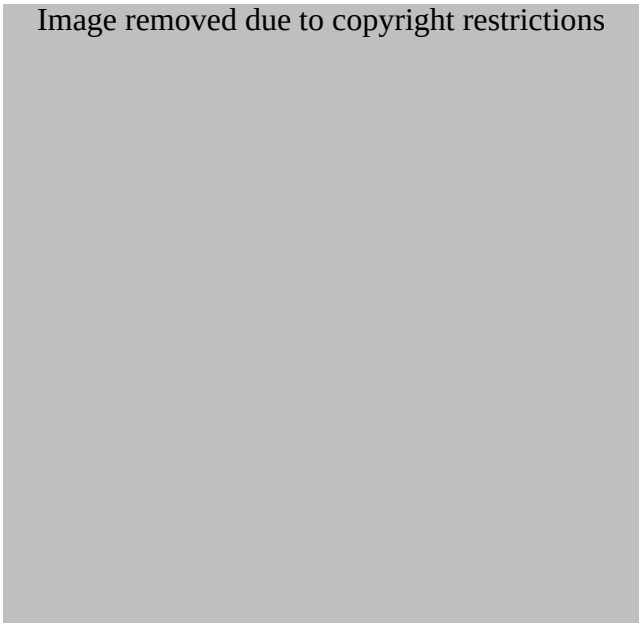

Figure 5: *Peaches and Glass Jar half-filled with Water*, Fourth Style wall painting from Herculaneum, Italy, c. 62-69 C.E., fresco, 35.56 x 34.29 cm

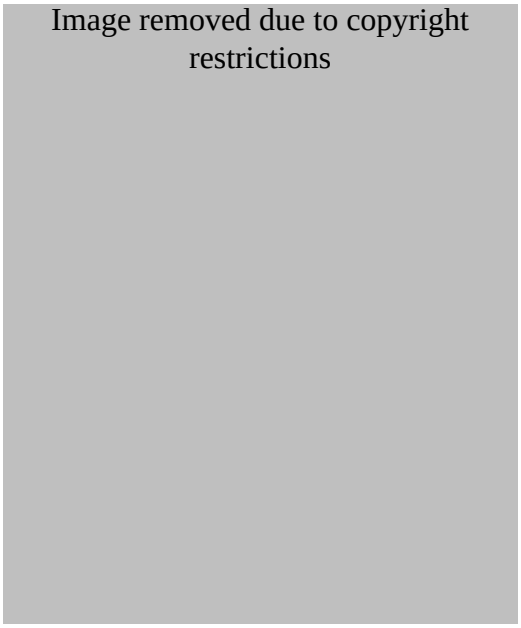

Figure 6: René Magritte, *The Imaginative Faculty*, 1948, gouache on paper, 18 x 15 cm

The object paintings of Belgian Surrealist René Magritte (1898 – 1967) are compelling examples of still life's capacity for ambiguity, their incongruous juxtapositions of commonplace motifs challenging rational thought.[86] Magritte's object paintings appear as distortions of reality via academic techniques applied to dreamlike symbolism and are a key reference in this study due to their erotic dimension, felt firstly through a frequent adoption of euphemistic forms such as the phallic resemblance of a composition of eggs and a candle in the aptly named *The Imaginative Faculty* (fig. 6). Magritte engenders a deeper sense of desire through conceptual withholdings that trigger the imagination. This Surrealist tactic, Rowell explains, seeks 'to sustain the tension of unfulfilled desire through works of art whose apprehension remains tantalizingly out of reach'.[87] Magritte's conceptual opacity entices like an erotic invitation, his narrative blind spots generating tensions through an unaccountability that necessitates an imaginative completion by the beholder.

[86] Rowell, *Objects of Desire*, 138.
[87] Rowell, *Objects of Desire*, 141–2.

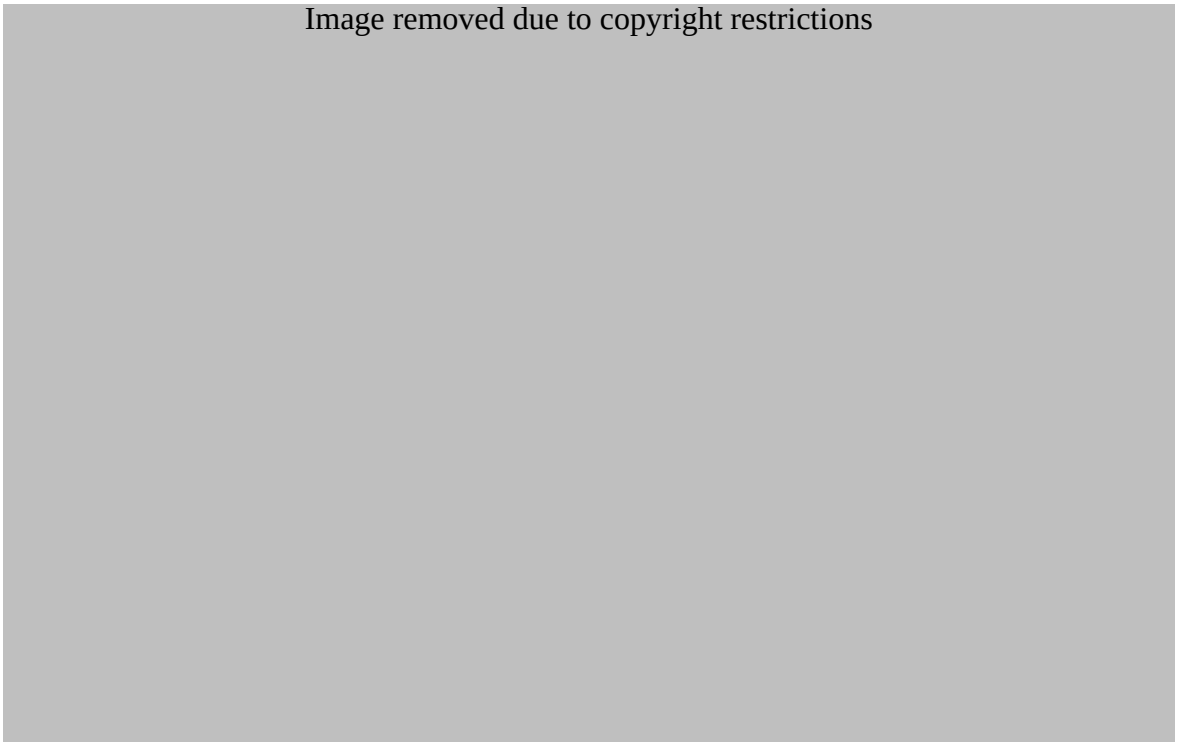

Figure 7: Willem Claesz. Heda, *Still Life with Fruit Pie and Various Objects*, 1634, oil on panel, 43.7 x 68.2 cm

The tactility inherent in still life is another factor influencing my adoption of the genre, as the 'touch' of painting can elicit an indirect sensuality felt latently within its material surface. According to Bryson, still life's concern with tactility involves a spatial proximity centred on the body of the viewer[88] and a sense of phantom touch, 'because it is the hand and not only the eye which organises its spaces'.[89] Dutch still life paintings exemplify the genre's capacity for sensorial response. Willem Claesz. Heda's (1594 – 1680) fastidiously rendered breakfast paintings (e.g., fig. 7), for instance, invite the viewer to imagine the feel of cold metal and soft cloth and even the taste of lemon. They seduce further through an appreciation of the sustained time and skill evident in their rendering by a master painter; we dwell upon them in an exchange with the time invested and the artist's refined touch which, Bryson explains, 'confers on the crafted objects its own greater worth'.[90] Most key to my project, our sensual experience of such paintings is complicated by an inability to physically grasp the depicted objects before us, manifesting in a somatically felt absence. As Rowell suggests,

> [b]ecause the drive or pulsion of desire, in order to be sustained, must be unsatisfied,

[88] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 71.
[89] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 128.
[90] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 124.

> the objects desired (or the climax of the story) are ever distant or deferred. Thus the objects of a still life, although they appear accessible, are actually inaccessible, fictional, created; ideal as opposed to real.[91]

As Magritte's object paintings tantalise through their conceptual opacity, Dutch still life entices through withholdings experienced sensorially, activating structures of desire that remain unfulfilled by the refusal of the depicted objects' tangible presence.

George Tooker

This section examines George Tooker, a key influence on my studio research, as a historical model for queer opacity in figurative painting. Discussions of Tooker often highlight his association with a social community of like-minded painters, including Paul Cadmus and Jared French, whose traditional painting processes using egg tempera stood in stark contrast to the abstraction in vogue in mid-twentieth-century American art. For Tooker, Cadmus and French, mimetic processes, notes writer Chloe Wyma, were essential to their homoerotic depictions and 'could mediate queer desire in a way that Cubist-derived abstraction could not; contrary to the modernist imperatives to dematerialize, fragment, or otherwise renounce it, their art still needed the beautiful body'.[92] While their paintings appeared anachronistic to many contemporaneous commentators, a visual language of figuration centred on the male form became a necessary vehicle for their radical evocations.

Constrained by the threat of persecution, queer artists in hostile environments adopt surreptitious modes. Early in Tooker's career, social and legal constraints conditioned a necessity to mediate queer themes. Consequently, he addressed his experience of persecution through symbolism. In an early work titled *Children and Spastics* (fig. 8), Tooker explored the threat of violence through ciphers: a scene of ableist taunting doubles as a depiction of homophobic harassment, the three male figures' exaggerated gestures and attire covert gay signifiers.[93] Another early painting, the autobiographical *The Chess Game* (1947), is a codified visual allegory for his internal struggles in the face of social pressures to conform to

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[91] Rowell, *Objects of Desire*, 8.
[92] Chloe Wyma, 'Minor Variations', *Artforum*, Summer 2019, accessed 28 August 2021, https://www.artforum.com/print/201906/chloe-wyma-on-lincoln-kirstein-and-his-circle-79920.
[93] Garver, *George Tooker*, 15.

a ‘respectable’ lifestyle.[94] Present throughout Tooker’s oeuvre is a view of concealment as an unremitting social affliction.

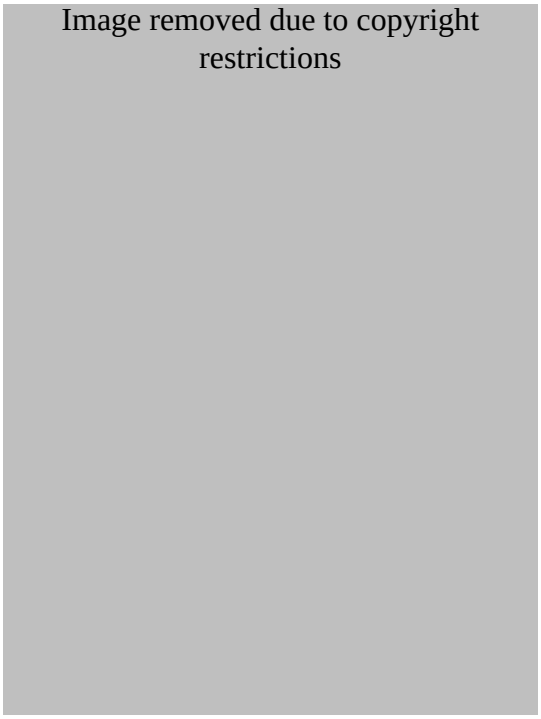

Figure 8: George Tooker, *Children and Spastics*, 1946, egg tempera on gesso panel, 62.2 x 46.9 cm

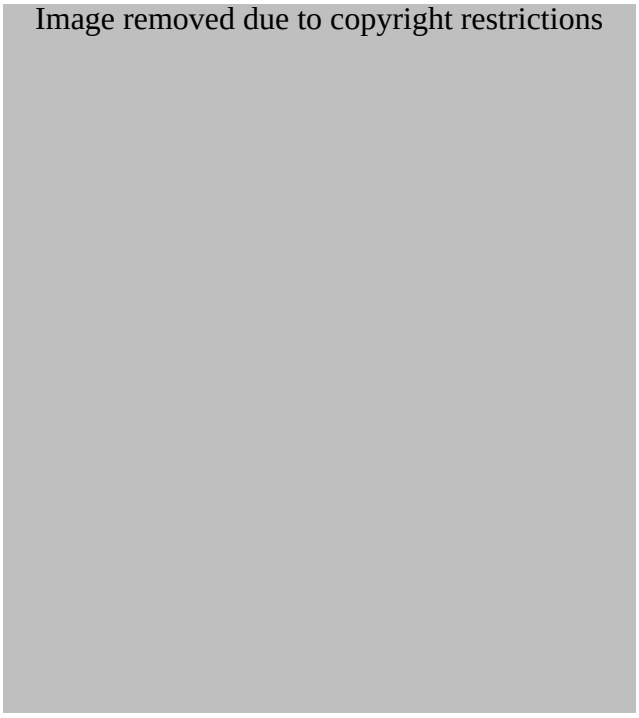

Figure 9: George Tooker, *Voice I*, 1963, egg tempera on gesso panel, 49.5 x 44.4 cm

Despite the intrigue of his early paintings, I am especially interested in Tooker’s compositions wherein his conceptual and pictorial concealments become more evident and probing. From 1962 to 1972, Tooker created a series addressing his belief in the widespread failure of interpersonal communication in American society attributed ‘to self-imposed barriers of which to some extent we are all guilty’.[95] While this pessimistic view of concealment, justified within its social context, contrasts with my preoccupation with secrecy’s utility, it precipitates a visual exploration of the theme that nonetheless informs my practice. In *Voice I* (fig. 9), a composition of two figures separated by a barrier conjures associations of secrecy: in Tooker’s own words, ‘the painting is about non-communication’.[96] Its minimally discernible narrative engenders a conceptual obscurity augmented by pictorial obfuscation, as the dividing barrier or door obscures much of the lefthand figure. The

[94] Garver, *George Tooker*, 16.
[95] Garver, *George Tooker*, 82.
[96] George Tooker in Garver, *George Tooker*, 82.

painting's dense and luminous surface, resulting from the slow layering process, contributes a material opacity that symbolically identifies with its subject. Despite its obscurity, I recall in its imagery the ancient parable of Pyramus and Thisbe, two star-crossed lovers liaising in secret through a wall. However, in that the two figures in *Voice I* are almost identical, the painting might also be interpreted as depicting an internal struggle, a portrait of a psychological closet.

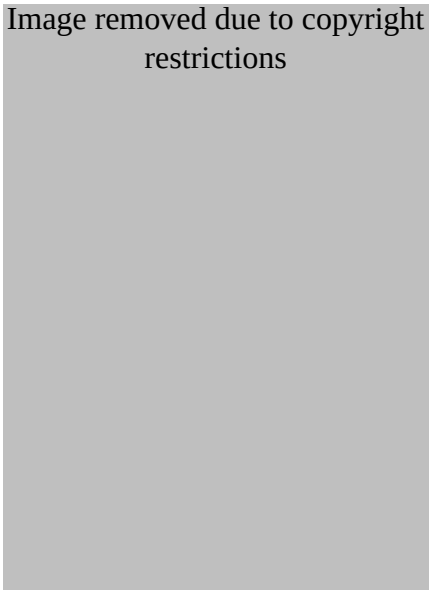

Figure 10: George Tooker, *Window I*, 1955, egg tempera on gesso panel, 60.3 x 41.9 cm

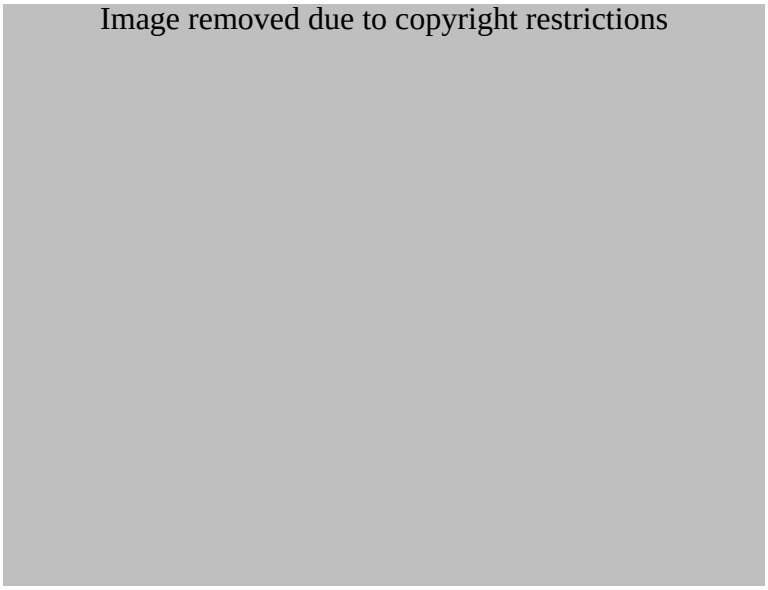

Figure 11: George Tooker, *Still Life with Oranges*, 1979, egg tempera on gesso panel, 38.1 x 50.8 cm

Tooker's window paintings such as *Window II*, discussed in the exegesis' introduction, are also compelling for their ambiguous eroticism and pictorial construction. As Thomas Garver notes, '[t]he great number of window paintings in Tooker's oeuvre attests to his attraction to this thematic concept as a "natural" framing device, which provides containment and compositional order at the edges of the painting while it emphasizes the dense and dramatic arrangement of figures within the frame'.[97] A draped, semi-transparent screen conceals a figure in the sexually charged *Window I* (fig. 10). Evoking a bisexual threesome, the dynamic between the painting's three figures is opaque. The semi-transparent sheet is a focal point and stages a visual and conceptual absence, casting much of the scene into a blur. In Chapter Two, Tooker's use of curtains is cited again in relation to my adoption of the curtain as a

[97] Garver, *George Tooker*, 51.

recurring motif. Tooker's laborious build-up of the painted surface again produces a latent sensuality experienced sensorially. This sensual method of paint application is not reserved just for the figure and can be identified in the delicate *Still Life with Oranges* (fig. 11), its arrangement inside a wooden niche producing a similar sense of compositional containment as his window series. While not depicting an erotic subject, Tooker's assiduous attention to form is felt in the rendering of a ceramic pot and bowl of oranges, reproducing the idiosyncratic physicality of his figure paintings.

Two recent exhibitions reflect renewed public and institutional interest in Tooker's extended arts community. *Lincoln Kirstein's Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2019 unearthed nearly 300 works from the museum's archive showcasing the influence of Lincoln Kirstein, art critic and co-founder of the New York City Ballet, on the museum's early period. Foregrounding Kirstein's preference for figuration over abstraction, the exhibition featured an extensive collection of drawings and paintings alongside costume design illustrations, photography and sculpture. Likewise and also in 2019, for *The Young and Evil* at David Zwirner Gallery in New York curator Jarrett Earnest excavated from public and private collections (including, notably, the Kinsey Institute) photographs, sculptures, drawings, paintings and ephemera celebrating 'an unofficial or alternate, formerly arcane art history rooted in collaborative friendships and shared sensibilities'.[98] Featuring the work of Tooker, Cadmus and French among others, with some items displaying explicit eroticism, the exhibition presented a stirring contrast of public and private realms, much of its content previously hidden in vaults, boxes and storage facilities, unseen for decades.

Daniel Sinsel

The final section of this chapter examines a form of queer opacity in contemporary painting via the work of German-born artist Daniel Sinsel (b. 1976). Enlisting personal codes to explore the elusive nature of signs, Sinsel's paintings invoke a latent eroticism through ciphers that might be viewed as conceptual successors to the furtive lexicons described at the beginning of this chapter. While Sinsel's practice has recently broadened into more abstract

[98] Jarrett Earnest, 'A Brief History of Intimacy' in *The Young and Evil: Queer Modernism in New York, 1930–1955*, ed. Jarrett Earnest and Anne Wehr (New York, NY: David Zwirner Books, 2020), 7.

compositions that probe distinctions between painting and sculpture, my interest lies in a series of early works in which a private semiotics is dispersed amongst references to traditional modes of painting.

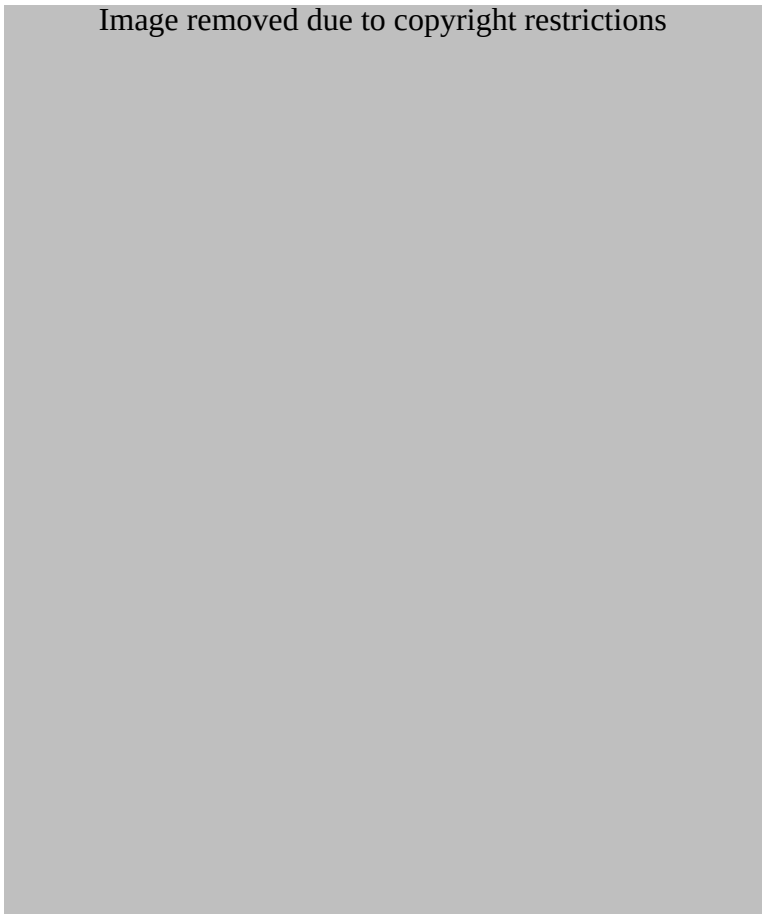

Figure 12: Daniel Sinsel, *Untitled*, 2004, oil on linen, (dimensions unknown)

In a conspicuously untitled exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, London, in 2005, Sinsel exhibited a suite of exquisite small-scale oil paintings depicting eggs, ribbons, knives and vegetables floating alongside disembodied portraits of male figures displaying ambiguously lubricious facial expressions. In one untitled painting (fig. 12), two rosehips and a hazelnut encircle a cameo portrait against a white table linen backdrop, the figure's soliciting gaze encoding the suggestively shaped foodstuffs with double meaning. The painting's delicate rendering suggests a sensuality latent within the objects, as their gleaming surfaces translate to a sense of touch read as near-erotic. The theme of surface pleasures is emphasised in this exhibition and widely throughout Sinsel's oeuvre in the recurring motif of the ribbon (e.g., fig. 13). At once a playful symbol conjuring associations with the decorative and domestic, the ribbon's lustrous, winding form reinforces a narrative concerning the seductive and potentially

deceptive power of glittering exteriors.

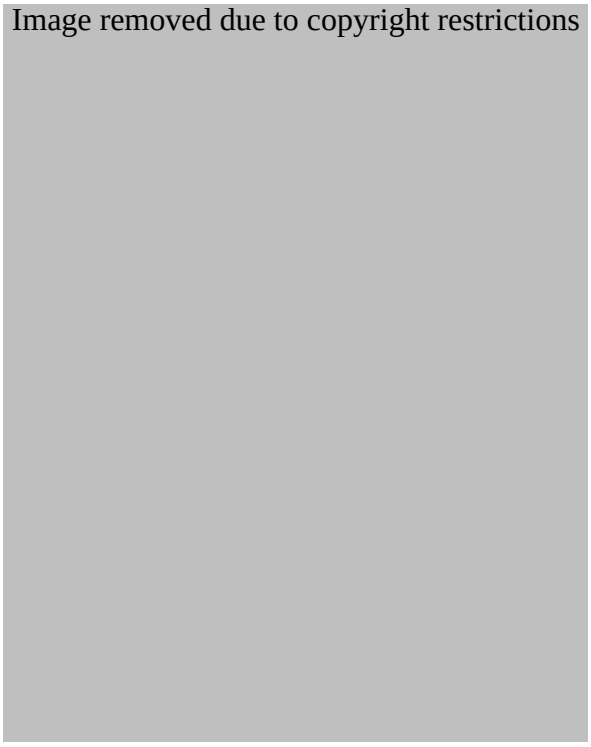

Figure 13: Daniel Sinsel, *Senza Titolo*, 2008, oil on canvas, 33 x 26 cm

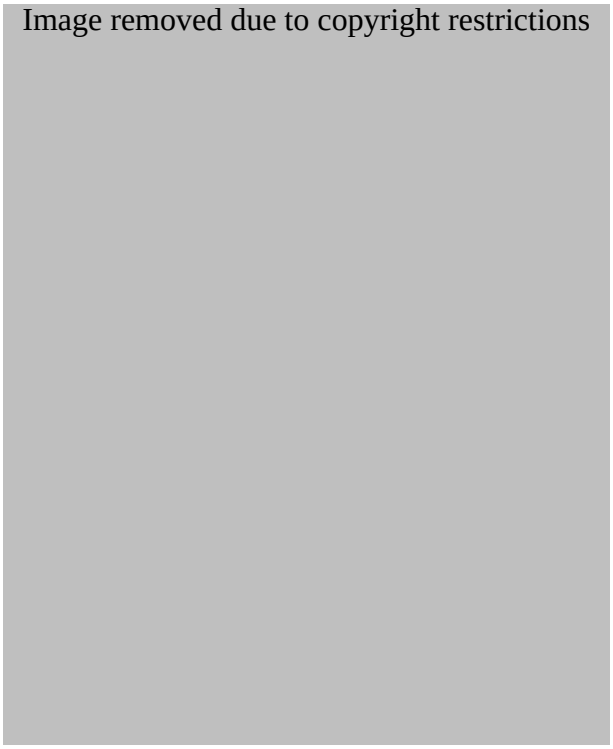

Figure 14: Daniel Sinsel, *Untitled (boy with pearls)*, 2005, oil on linen, 29 x 23.5 x 6 cm

In a 2016 interview, Sinsel assumed a somewhat nostalgic position by lamenting the absence of sexual secrecy in a liberal society in which 'suppressing your desires… is seen as a problem, something that is your own fault'.[99] Questioned about the possible diminishment of erotic potency by an absolute sexual openness, Sinsel replied, 'if there isn't any secrecy, if there isn't a narrative to refer to or a framework to manoeuvre around, everyone just does exactly what they want to do… It feels like the tensions are gone'.[100] This contrarian perspective underpins a practice that reclaims secrecy, an antecedent condition of queer desire, as a subversive tactic. A mischievous delight in the secret manifests in the eroticism of his painted figures which, through their unclear provenance and obliquely solicitous expressions (e.g., fig. 14), are provocative in the latency of their sexuality.

[99] Daniel Sinsel, 'Interview with Daniel Sinsel'. Interview by Rosanna McLaughlin, *The White Review*, 2016, accessed 17 November 2022, https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-daniel-sinsel
[100] Sinsel, 'Interview with Daniel Sinsel'.

Sinsel's practice can also be viewed through the lens of camp because, in accordance with camp sensibilities, it reveals 'a world that is artificial and exaggerated, and that is full of personal codes'.[101] A queer performative style evoking notions of theatricality and artifice, camp shares origins with the covert communicative forms previously described, and in this way it can be theorised as an opaque mode within a historical lineage of queer subterfuge.[102] As artist and academic Gerwyn Davies affirms, in its predication on the audience's literacy of its strategies, camp's functions extend beyond a mere gay theatricality into 'a covert transmission and exchange of queer desire through gesture'.[103] Sinsel's camp affinities were highlighted in 2012 in the group exhibition *Notes on Neo-Camp*, curated by Chris Sharp at Studio Voltaire London, as well as in Sharp's accompanying essay 'Camp + Dandyism = Neo Camp', published in the same year in *Kaleidoscope Magazine*. Sharp's project identified a shared aesthetic amongst a group of contemporary artists engaged in themes of artifice and veiled sexuality. With motifs of domesticity featuring prominently across the exhibition, *Notes on Neo-Camp* communicated camp's capacity for covert eroticism: '[d]espite the sense that palpable integers abound, an air of euphemism lingers over it all, which is perhaps why the serenity found here feels less like the byproduct of wholesome living than a beguiling ruse, a highly stylised wish-fulfilment'.[104] These strategies of deception, evident across Sinsel's work, suggest a mode of being that defies cultural preoccupations with transparency, and simultaneously signal legacies of furtive conveyance as a performative recovery of queer historical practice.

Conclusion of Chapter One

In this chapter I have established the subversive potential of opacity in figurative painting with particular focus on its function in intimating latent queer eroticism. Challenging assumptions about the efficacy of openness, queer opacity is a corrective to the orthodoxy of visibility and becomes, as de Villiers suggests, 'an alternative queer strategy or tactic that is

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[101] Daniel Sinsel, 'Artist Daniel Sinsel on Rethinking Classicism (With Naughty Puns)'. Interview by Alex Greenberger, *Artspace*, August 2013, accessed 30 August 2021, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/meet_the_artist/daniel_sinsel_interview-51518
[102] Gerwyn Davies, 'Dis/Appearing Acts: Camp, Photographic Self-Representation and Ambiguous Queer in/Visibility'. Doctoral thesis. Sydney, NSW: University of New South Wales, 2021,21.
[103] Davies, 'Dis/Appearing Acts', 22.
[104] Chris Sharp, 'Camp + Dandyism = NEO-CAMP', in *Kaleidoscope Magazine*, 14, 2012, 48.

not linked to an interpretation of hidden depths'.[105] Theorised in relation to Birchall's aesthetics of the secret, my interpretation of queer opacity as applicable to this doctoral study is that it navigates states of concealment and revelation in its advertisement of the withholding of salient information. In addition to its defiance against normative demands for outness, this conceptual and visual strategy serves as a framework for picturing secrecy and contributing to an aesthetic lineage of surreptitiousness.

In figurative painting, pictorial concealments entail a visual opacity that tantalise with erotic potential. Through an interplay of sensory and conceptual withholdings, tactile and mimetic qualities can trigger in the beholder unfulfilled desire for what is presented as absent. For Lacan, such painting acts as a model for visualising the presence of the unseen entities that perennially pervade our vision, illustrated here through the parable of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Indeed, through its illusory nature, all figurative painting is experienced on some level as an absence of its sources depicted. A genre dealing in absence as a poetic evocation of desire's metaphorical dimensions, still life is a fitting methodology for my studio research. Hidden clues rendered in the tactile materiality of paint defer the presence of objects depicted, as well as diffract the normalising reign of consolidated signification.

In the work George Tooker, painting's capacities for pictorial blind spots and latent eroticism comprise a queer opacity that reflects the historical circumstances conditioning his secrecy. Tooker's rendered veils and idealised male figures, combined with his sensual painting process, generate an aesthetic sensibility that is a key influence on the studio component of my research. In contemporary painting, Daniel Sinsel's meticulously rendered visual puzzles of cropped figures and still life motifs negate the sexual outness that characterises much contemporary queer figuration.

In the following chapter, I explore the first phase of my studio research, describing how I adapted still life conventions as my primary studio methodology. Charting the development of my early paintings, the chapter describes the integration of devices informed by

[105] De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 6.

homoerotic collage practices, the theatrical arts, and Giorgio de Chirico's Pittura Metafisica.

Chapter Two: Objects of Desire

This chapter describes the early stages of my practice-led project and emphasises how I adapted traditional notions of still life painting to disturb genre expectations in the service of a furtive queer eroticism. A historically enigmatic mode, still life is a fitting genre through which to deploy concealment as a conceptual strategy and to explore painting's latent dimensions. As the paintings described in this chapter progress, still life's conventions are corrupted via implementation of collage processes, theatrical motifs and illogical configurations.

In describing the first painting, titled *December*, I address my early concerns regarding the potential for still life to convey notions of concealment and desire. Influenced by George Tooker's evocations of subdued eroticism, the painting presents a loose narrative of private romantic devotion and enlists conspicuous pictorial and conceptual concealing devices. Notably, *December* introduces the 'peephole' motif—small apertures enclosing semi-concealed figures that are painted directly into the still life space—into my visual repertoire. The next painting described in the chapter, *Otranto*, expands on processes initiated in *December*, its Gothic motifs and supernatural configuration functioning as another strategy by which to visualise the presence of unseen entities. Introducing a stage curtain into the composition, *Otranto* engages the theatre as a metaphor for the staged nature of my studio practice.

The following painting, *The Hell Libertine Theatre*, takes its narrative from another literary work, the Marquis De Sade's incendiary *The 120 Days of Sodom*. Citing Sade's influence on the Belgian Surrealists, the painting's sequence of arcane objects obliquely illustrates a gruesome torture scene. The painting's theatrical and supernatural conception is historically preceded by Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical paintings, which similarly engender ambiguities through experimental spatial systems and dreamlike symbolism.

The final section of the chapter focuses on the pictorial device of the curtain. A designation of the theatre and a concealing mechanism, the curtain is a key feature of several paintings produced for this doctoral study. In describing two paintings completed at a late stage of my

studio research, I identify the painted curtain as a prime symbol of paradoxically staged absence.

December (2018)

Figure 15: *December*, 2018, oil on marine plywood, 68 x 75 cm

My initial approach to the painting *December* (fig. 15) was intuitive and motivated by open speculation rather than concrete questions. Whilst I had preconceived notions about *December*'s finished appearance, its significance in relation to the direction of my overall research was unclear. Underlying this preliminary stage of the project was my interest in the paintings of George Tooker. As previously described, I am especially fascinated by the pictorial and conceptual veils in several of Tooker's paintings that hide homoeroticism in plain view. My aim was to convey a similarly latent sense of desire, and in doing so to begin clarifying my somewhat unaccounted for interests in coded languages and occluded

narratives. By looking to the past for creative strategies, I engage in what David Getsy calls a 'longer running practice in queer culture (stretching back centuries) in which the past has been scoured for evidence of existence and models for futurity'.[106] The unearthing of overlooked histories functions as a performative process of cultural remembering and facilitates the continuation of lineages whereby strategies and iconographies can be valued as an inherited group language.

December depicts a system of interconnected objects conveying an oblique narrative of private devotion. The still life assemblage resembles a secular shrine or altar, perhaps dedicated to a romantic subject. This amorous message is elicited allegorically through the interplay of the objects, and especially reinforced by the loaded connotations of the ribboned mistletoe, the Christmas decoration inspiring the painting's title. Near the centre of the painting is a small portrait in a circular form. This aperture, compositionally framed by the still life motifs, appears as though carved directly into the wall like a peephole, locating the enclosed figure *behind* the still life. Painted in smaller brushstrokes differing from the loosely patchworked application throughout the rest of the composition, the peephole is pictorially incongruous with the still life. The concealed figure, a male fashion model, assumes the narrative role of the 'object' of desire.

In Chapter One, I described how still life's proclivity for semiotic ambiguity can produce conceptual blind spots that engender visual intrigue. In this light, *December* is informed by historical still life modes characterised by obfuscations, most notably the vanitas. Meaning 'vanity' as in 'emptiness' in Latin, vanitas paintings convey allegories of life's transience through motifs such as skulls and snuffed candles.[107] Hendrik Andriessen's (1607–1655) *Vanitas Still Life* (fig. 16) is a prime example of the vanitas' capacity to eschew straightforward interpretation, its inclusion of a crown and sceptre amongst the traditional memento mori conveying additional themes of power and hierarchy. According to Bryson, the vanitas is a category of painting pervaded by paradox and 'permanently undermined by internal contradiction', in that it is an indictment of material indulgences while its historical

[106] Getsy, *Queer*, 20.
[107] National Gallery, 'Vanitas', accessed 23 November 2022, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/vanitas

condition as a valuable commodity simultaneously renders it a material luxury itself.[108] My intention in employing vanitas motifs was not merely to paint a composite of symbols to be uniformly decoded, but to reproduce a sense of the vanitas' conceptual opacity, its evocation of paradox and hidden meanings.

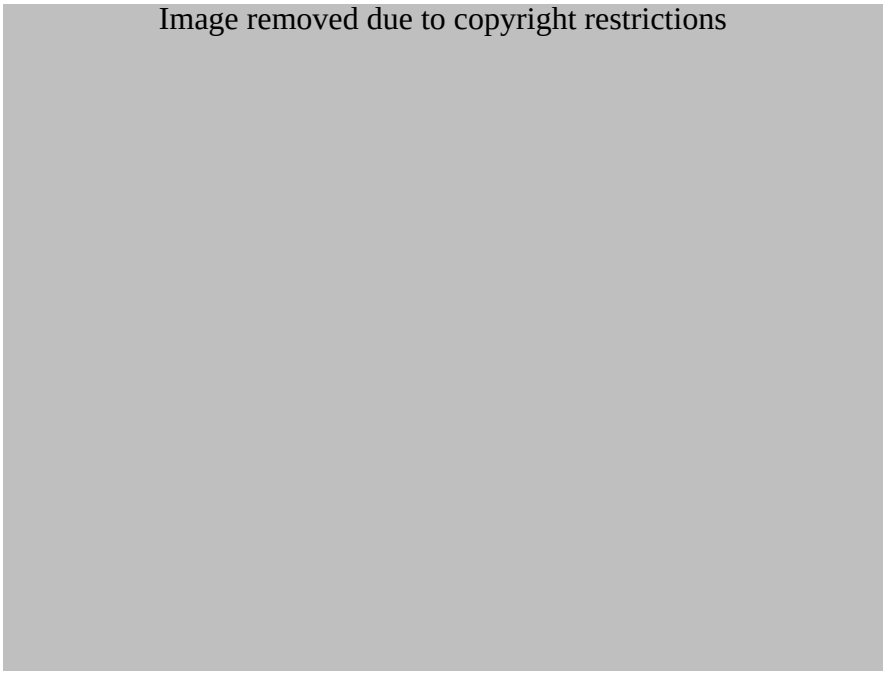

Figure 16: Hendrick Andriessen, *Vanitas Still Life*, c. 1650, oil on canvas, 63.8 cm x 84.1 cm

To create *December*, I selected a series of still life objects for their vanitas associations, symbolic correspondences and formal qualities, and assembled them upon a table positioned directly before my easel. At the base of the composition, the candlestick, metal plate and egg are ordered linearly and spatially separated. This peculiar positioning of objects resembles a rebus, the popular type of puzzle in which illustrations correspond to words or names. While the painting does not technically function as a rebus, this visual association became a pictorial strategy of implying occluded meaning requiring decipherment. The artificial mistletoe, constructed from coloured paper and ribbon, is suspended above the table from a beam. I determined the position of the peephole figure based on the configuration of objects, eventually placing it between the candle and mistletoe as if directly into the wall.

The composition is painted on a thick marine plywood board primed with several layers of

[108] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 116.

smoothly sanded gesso. The powdery, ceramic-like consistency of this primed surface is intended to eliminate evidence of the wood's grain, facilitating fine details and subtle development of forms during the painting process. After applying a ground of burnt umber to the layered gesso, I sketched with charcoal the arrangement of objects from observation. Once satisfied with the accuracy of the composition, I began an underpainting of loose washes of dark hues, gradually lightening the tones and refining details using smaller brushes in each subsequent painting session. The peephole was rendered after finishing the painting's still life component.

My painting process is slow and cumulative, my gesture comprising a series of staccato marks that amass over time to produce a vibrating edge to an individual object. Tooker's technique of modelling forms in accumulated linear brushstrokes echoes my approach. His painstaking process of building 'layer upon layer of …translucent and opaque colours' was essential in structuring his paintings and bestowing them their dense and sensual physical presence. [109] While Tooker's preferred medium was egg tempera, my paintings are rendered in oil paint. Due to oil paint's material mutability—its capacity to inhabit varied states of liquidity, viscosity and semi-solidity—a multitude of visual effects and textures can be produced from the medium. Its slow drying time further enables a highly mimetic modelling of shapes, wherein successive layers of wet paint can be tactfully blended into underlayers of semi-dried paint to produce forms with a pronounced sense of weight and three-dimensionality. Moreover, this painting procedure, applied to *December*, produces a material opacity embedded within the painting's construction, that symbolically accords with its oblique narrative. The distinctness of individual elements emphasised through the mark-making further enhances the compositional 'rebus' effect, resulting in an evocative still life space wherein the elements maintain a subtle physical separation.

[109] Garver, *George Tooker*, 8.

Peephole

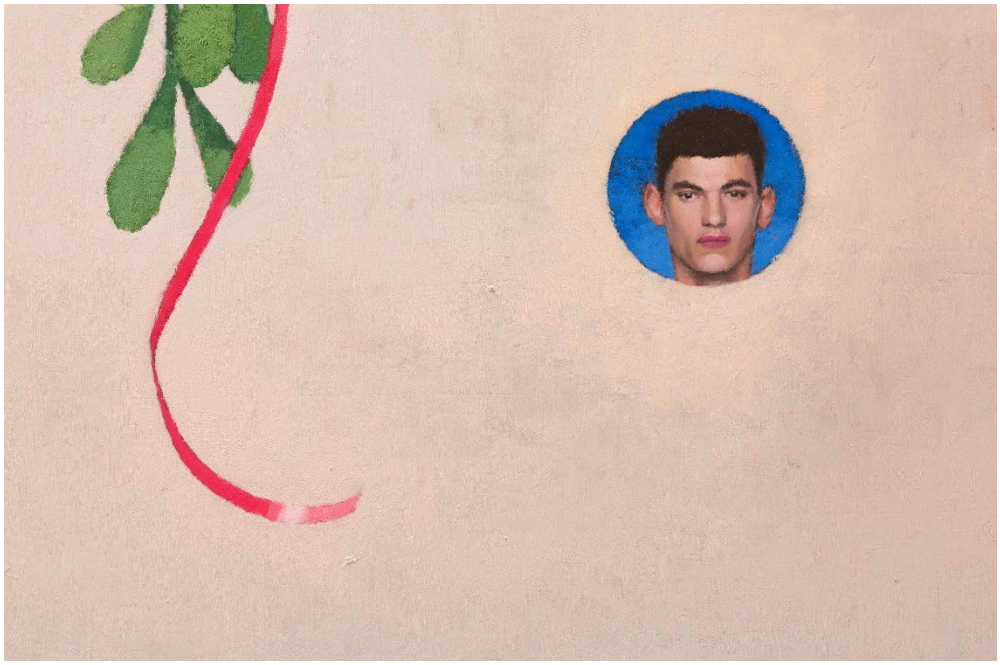

Figure 17: *December* (detail)

Prior to commencing doctoral research, I had experimented with painting collaged elements directly onto the surfaces of otherwise finished still life paintings. These elements frequently took the form of segments of homoerotic material plucked from pornographic sources, often depicting disembodied images of phalluses or faces mid-orgasm. Painted alongside or covering household objects, these provocative intrusions yielded playful juxtapositions and served to disrupt the neutrality of the domestic aesthetic of the still life arrangements. *December* expands on these experiments by enclosing the collaged figure within a circular form (fig. 17). This motif, which I refer to as a 'peephole', resembles a small opening in a wall through which one voyeuristically observes a hidden space. These suggestive devices feature in paintings throughout this project and retain the destabilising function of the pornographic interventions of earlier paintings, their intrusion into the otherwise traditional still life space upsetting genre expectations.

In *December*, the figure within the peephole is a painted collage of a fashion model sourced from an advertisement in *Vogue Homme* magazine. The figure's partial occlusion, most of his body being conspicuously hidden 'behind' the painted wall, is seductive in its withholding. The process of 'collaging' the painted peephole onto the surface of a still life signifies another physical concealment in that all collage can be viewed as having a materially

occluding function. In concealing the under-parts of the surface that they adhere to, collage elements, as art historian George Baker suggests, produce 'a backside that cannot be seen'.[110] In this view, collage becomes an index of an unseen element that is its covered substrate.

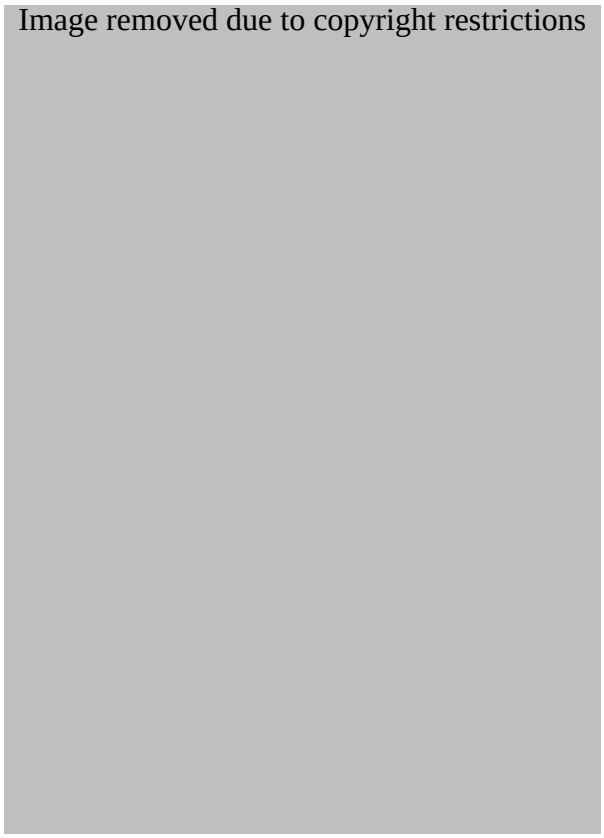

Figure 18: Richard Hawkins. *blue-grey*, 2010, collage, 28.89 x 22.22 cm

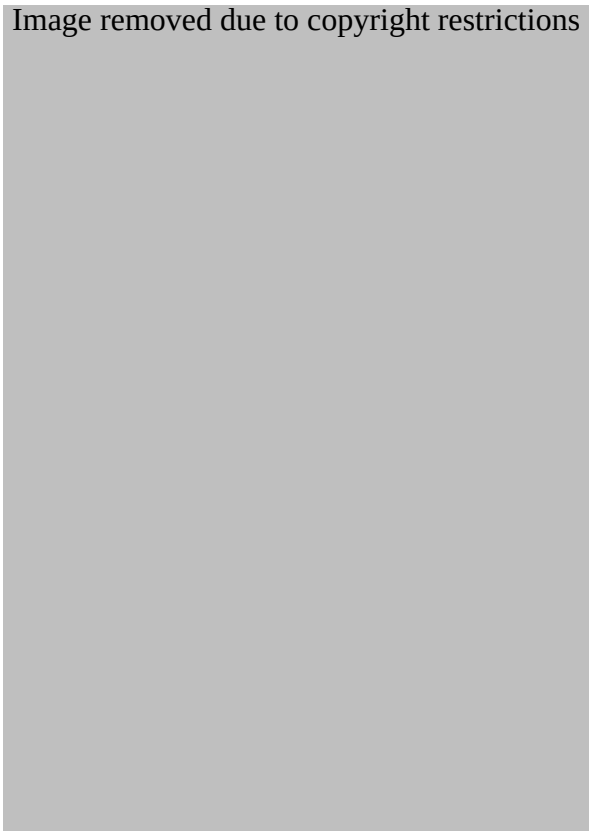

Figure 19: Touko Valio Laaksonen, aka Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, c. 1986, mixed media, 29.7 x 21 cm

Selecting figures to be included within my painted peepholes involves combing through fashion magazines as a desire-driven archaeological enterprise. This process is admittedly voyeuristic and resonates with lineages of queer creative practice that use erotic looking as a subversive and liberatory act. A key influence in this regard is American artist Richard Hawkins (b. 1961), who since the 1980s has foregrounded literal and metaphorical forms of desire in a diverse practice based conceptually and aesthetically in collage methodologies.[111] Moments of personal visual intrigue are clipped, collated and rearranged by Hawkins,

[110] George Baker, 'Viva Hate' in *Richard Hawkins: Third Mind*, edited by Lisa Dorin (Chicago, IL: New Haven, CT: Art Institute of Chicago, 2010), 47.
[111] Consortium Museum, 'Richard Hawkins: Glimmer', *Le Consortium*, October 2013, accessed 2 May 2023, https://www.leconsortium.fr/en/glimmer

poetically revealing the lustful impulses of the artist and of a disordered culture more broadly. This process is typified in the collage *blue-grey* (fig. 18), the result of Hawkins' obsessive perusal and ultimate dismemberment of a fashion magazine.

Hawkins' and my collaged recontextualisations of pop-cultural images of the male form are historically preceded by the radical practice of illustrator Touko Valio Laaksonen (1920–1991), aka Tom of Finland, who maintained resource scrapbooks as archives of photographic references for his drawings (e.g., fig. 19). In 2013, Hawkins assumed the role of co-curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles for the exhibition *Bob Mizer & Tom of Finland*. Showcasing two historically significant producers of homoerotic imagery, the exhibition featured prominent examples of Laaksonen's often overlooked collages. Observing Laaksonen's singular aim to monopolise the 'astounding good looks' of each clipped face, Hawkins discerns in these scrapbook curios a foregrounding of private lust above all else that gives 'great insight into Tom of Finland's revolutionary perspective of privileging hotness over the demands, mandates, and prescriptions of a culture that considered his desires unthinkable—if not also criminal'.[112] Hawkins' suggestion of the liberatory dimensions of Laaksonen's scrapbooks identify them as worthy counterparts to his drawings, and as art objects in their own right.

As a circular optic form offering a voyeuristic view, the peephole also makes visual reference to the seventeenth-century Dutch 'perspective box', a popular mechanism inside which the realistic illusion of an interior space is conjured through complex perspectival construction.[113] Additionally, peepholes' inherent eroticism conjures an association with glory holes, carvings into thin partitions in public spaces to facilitate anonymous fellatio. A mode of clandestine conduct, the glory hole can be viewed in part as emblematic of the historically secretive condition of queer sex. Michel Foucault evinces the sense of liberation facilitated by the similarly anonymous rendezvous of gay beats such as bathhouses, wherein one ceases to be 'imprisoned in your own face, in your own past, in your own identity'.[114] A

[112] Richard Hawkins, 'Paper Tricks: Richard Hawkins on Bob Mizer & Tom of Finland', *Tom of Finland Foundation*, 10 December 2013, accessed 4 May 2023, https://www.tomoffinland.org/paper-tricks-richard-hawkins-on-bob-mizer-tom-of-finland
[113] National Gallery, 'Perspective Box', n.d., accessed 23 November 2022, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/perspective-boxes
[114] Michel Foucault, from 'Le gai savoir', in Jim Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York, NY:

faceless sexual encounter with emancipatory possibilities,[115] the glory hole is a symbolic and erotic conduit for queer opacity, a portal through which nomadic desire can be sated and expressed incognito and thus outside social constructs of identity.[116]

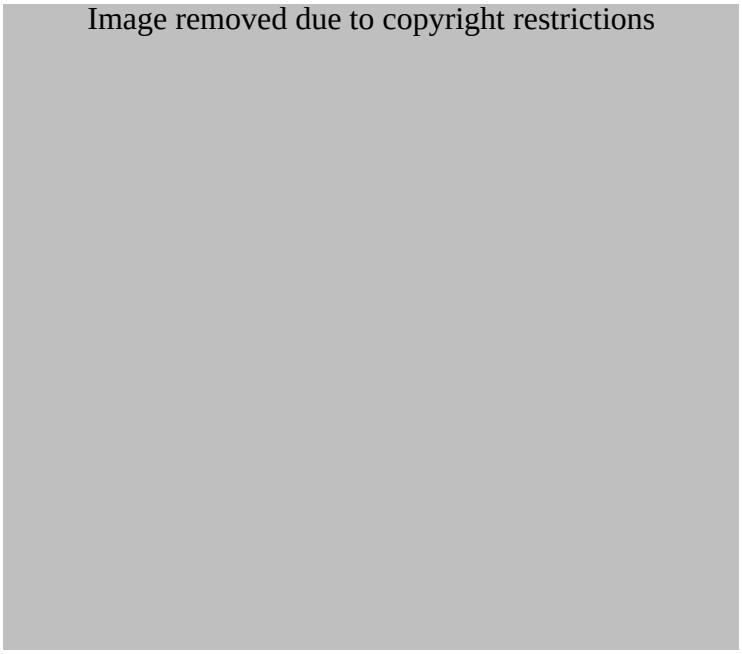

Figure 20: Tony Greene, *Untitled (yellow pour)*, 1990. Mixed media, 39.4 × 41.3 cm

Tony Greene's (1955–1990) multimedia works often invoke reference to glory holes to compelling symbolic effect. Decades after his death in 1991, Greene's oeuvre was brought into contemporary focus when Hawkins and artist Catherine Opie curated a posthumous retrospective of his work for the 2014 Whitney Biennial.[117] In Greene's 'pour' series, his last completed works (e.g., fig. 20), depictions of disembodied lips are enclosed within oval forms resembling, suggests Hawkins, a glory hole 'seen from the top's side'.[118] These isolated body parts, cropped from sports magazines and gay print pornography, are mounted onto board and overlayed with thick pours of semi-gloss enamel. Physically obscured beneath

Simon & Schuster, 1993), 264.
[115] De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 53.
[116] Don Anderson, 'The Force that Through the Wall Drives the Penis: The Becomings and Desiring-Machines of Glory Hole Sex'. *Rhizomes* 11/12 (Autumn 2005/Spring 2006), accessed 10 June 2023, http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/anderson/index.html
[117] Whitney Museum of American Art, 'Tony Greene Curated by Richard Hawkins and Catherine Opie', *Whitney*, n.d., accessed 29 August 2021, https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2014-biennial/tony-greene-curated-by-richard-hawkins-and-catherine-opie
[118] Richard Hawkins, 'Tony Greene. Untitled, 1990', *The Grain of His Skin* (blog), 31 July 2013, accessed 29 August 2021, https://grainofhisskin.tumblr.com/post/56995243393/tony-greene-untitled-1990-mixed-media

layers of varnish, the work's figures can be viewed as objects of desire and as envoys in memorial to early victims of AIDS.[119]

Otranto (2018)

Figure 21: *Otranto*, 2018, oil on marine plywood, 75 x 65 cm

The narrative of the next painting made during my project, *Otranto* (fig. 21), takes inspiration from a literary source, illustrating a scene from Horace Walpole's 1764 Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* wherein a princely protagonist is crushed to death by an enormous floating helmet. This scenario is interpreted through symbolic gestures in an elaborately staged still life system, within which I experiment with the semiotic potential of still life objects to

[119] Whitney Museum of American Art, 'Tony Greene'.

convey narrative. Often regarded as the first English Gothic novel,[120] *The Castle of Otranto* employs several conventions associated with Gothic literature broadly, such as secret passageways, supernatural forces and 'skeletons in closets'.[121] According to writer James Saslow, a theme of concealment in *The Castle of Otranto* reflects the author's queer (in)discretions: 'the dark secrets hidden in [the castle's] ancient bastions served Walpole as a metaphor for the dark secret of homosexual desire, mostly repressed to stave off the snide attacks on his male lovers'.[122] Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick sees the Gothic genre's queer undercurrent as evidence of the burgeoning public discourse surrounding homosexuality in the late eighteenth century, being that 'the Gothic novel crystallized for English audiences the terms of a dialectic between male homosexuality and homophobia'.[123] As a genre characterised by hidden elements, Gothic source material seemed an apt springboard for developing a visual language to consolidate such themes in my paintings.

Otranto distorts still life conventions through its experimental pictorial construction. Arranging the objects to be painted from observation, I envisioned the assemblage as a model of a theatrical stage-set, wherein still life elements correspond to the novel's episode in which a father discovers his son's crushed corpse: '…but what a sight for a father's eyes!—he beheld his child dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being'.[124] I fashioned a makeshift helmet from blue cardboard to represent the fatal object and suspended it above a tabletop from a wire, floating beside a decorative bauble. A melted candle in a candlestick was placed on the table as a vanitas motif and common signifier of the Gothic aesthetic.[125] Suspended from a beam, a large piece of red cloth frames the right-hand side of the composition like a stage curtain. The face of a pornographic model enclosed within a green peephole is the symbolic actor in this painted theatre, performing the role of the doomed prince. The peephole figure's presence encodes the composition with an erotic tension, his mischievously

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[120] George E. Haggerty, 'Literature and Homosexuality in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Studies in the Novel* 18, no. 4, (winter 1986): 344.
[121] James M. Saslow, Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts (New York, NY: Viking, 1999), 165.
[122] Saslow, *Pictures and Passions*, 165.
[123] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), 92.
[124] Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, Oxford World's Classics ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18.
[125] Rebecca F. Stern, 'Gothic Light: Vision and Visibility in the Victorian Novel', *South Central Review* 11, no. 4 (1994): 26

lubricious expression hinting at the sexually explicit nature of the source image's provenance.

During the observational painting process, I deliberately omitted the wires that hung the bauble and helmet in place, giving them the appearance of levitating. In addition to its Surrealist evocation, this resultant 'supernatural' visual effect recalls the illusions of nineteenth-century 'spirit photography', a bogus 'documentary' genre that purported to capture ghostly entities.[126] Édouard Isidore Buguet's (1840–1901) 1875 *Fluidic Effect* (fig. 22) is an intriguing example of the genre's sub-category of recording levitations, his depiction of a hovering chair achieved most likely via hidden fixtures or manipulations during the photograph's chemical development. In *Otranto*, this haunted appearance, achieved through painted subterfuge, functions to evoke the novel's paranormal elements and is simultaneously disorienting in the present, the suggestion of the supernatural intimating the presence of unseen forces. The painting's enigmatic quality is augmented by a repeat of the linear and segregated arrangement of objects introduced in *December*, where a resemblance to a rebus encourages its interpretation as a visual riddle.

Figure 22: Édouard Isidore Buguet, *Fluidic Effect*, 1875, albumen silver print

The use of colour in *Otranto* is experimental, its brilliant primary yellows, reds and blues a

[126] Lyle Rexer, 'The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult', *Aperture*, no. 181 (2005): 18.

departure from the tertiary colour schemes common in traditional still life. The predominance of lurid hues juxtaposed with the Gothic source material becomes another distancing mechanism drawing attention to the artifice within the painting's construction. Regarding its material surface, the mark-making is thicker than in the previous painting, the cadmium yellow background and base applied in heavier variegated patches, resulting in a more pronounced surface texture. By diversifying the paint's consistency throughout the composition, the background becomes just as visually engaging as the objects, avoiding a sense of prioritisation or hierarchy amongst the elements of the painting.[127]

The motif of the stage curtain designates the painting's narrative as occurring within a theatrical space. This sense of 'putting on a show' has a voyeuristic dimension like that of the clandestine peephole. By its ability to be open or closed, the stage curtain signals notions of surreptitious viewing, concealment and revelation. This theatrical conception of a still life reinforces the status of the painting as fictitious, reflecting what Bryson perceives as still life's 'capacity for moving across different levels of reality and artifice'.[128] Augmenting this reading of the painting as a staged construct is the makeshift quality of *Otranto*'s objects that emphasises their artifice, most evident in the carboard helmet. Here, I grew cognisant of my studio practice's symbolic resonances with the theatre in that a painting's finished product can be viewed as a manipulated façade concealing the various 'backstage' processes of its construction. The contrived assembly of objects in a still life painting has a theatricality in its overtly choreographed outcome. In preparing to paint *December* and *Otranto*, elaborate assemblages were constructed and fastidiously manoeuvred, while their finished products present an illusion of scenes ostensibly found 'just as they are'. Conspicuously omitting the wires and beams suspending objects and supporting light fixtures transforms the reality of the studio into an even stranger fiction. A further manipulation is present in the gradual occlusion of preliminary underdrawings beneath layers of paint applied during the material process.

Subterfuge is inherent to the theatre; indeed, the term 'theatricality' has historically loaded connotations of deceit and falsity.[129] In this light, the introduction of theatrical motifs into my

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[127] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 91.
[128] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 83.
[129] Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 'The Visual Arts and the Theatre in Early Modern Europe' in *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 12.

composition becomes a means of intimating a mode of inauthenticity further gesturing a broader theme of veiled desire. As the theatrical elements in the painting engage the narrative of furtive eroticism epitomised by the peephole, a visual metaphor is enacted signalling queer desire as a clandestine theatre. This pictorial teasing of truth and falsity in *Otranto* recalls de Villiers' notion of queer opacity in its resisting 'assumptions of authenticity, disclosure, and transparency'. [130] In highlighting a sense of artifice through symbols of the theatre, the painting generates a poetics of undisclosed meaning.

The Hell Libertine Theatre (2018)

Figure 23: *The Hell Libertine Theatre*, 2018, oil on marine plywood, 68 x 75 cm

Following on from *Otranto*, *The Hell Libertine Theatre* (fig. 23) takes an episode of the Marquis De Sade's incendiary *120 Days of Sodom* as its narrative inspiration. The text's clandestine publication history is fitting for an investigation of themes at the juncture of

[130] De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 116.

concealment and eroticism. As with the Gothic source material of *Otranto,* the literary text provides compositional ideas and an armature within which to develop a speculative system of elusive signs. Sade's profound influence on the Surrealist painters is of interest. Magritte, in particular, felt an almost spiritual connection to the writer, Sade's covert existence chiming with the Belgian Surrealist's secretive nature.[131] Throughout Sade's work, his preoccupation with secrecy is symbolised via settings such as isolated castles, hidden bedrooms and underground chambers.[132]

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Figure 24: Daniel Sinsel, *Untitled*, 2018, oil on canvas, 49.4 x 40.2 cm

Figure 25: *The Hell Libertine Theatre* (detail)

The Hell Libertine Theatre illustrates a gruesome episode from *The 120 Days of Sodom* subtitled 'the hell passion', in which a narrator describes the elaborate torture system of a sadistic nobleman whose victims are coordinated with coloured ribbons to indicate the method of their torture. Selecting a group of objects corresponding to elements in the text, I constructed a tableau before my easel, suspending objects from wires and strings against a deep red background, the colour signifying the demonic nature of this ritual. A blue curtain in the corner frames the composition, casting the scene into a theatrical realm. A twirling yellow

[131] Stacy Fuessle, 'The Belgian Surrealists and Sade: A Criminal Affinity', *Image & Narrative*, n.d., accessed 23 November 2022, http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/surrealism/fussle.htm
[132] Fuessle, 'The Belgian Surrealists and Sade'.

ribbon represents the nobleman's categorical system, while a circular blade designates the method of torture in which an unwitting victim is slowly edged toward 'an outer circle studded with razors which everywhere scratch and tear and slice'.[133] The inclusion of the ribbon echoes Sinsel's adoption of the motif, as I share in his evident enchantment in capturing in paint the visual intrigue of its winding form (e.g., fig. 24). The peephole, situated in dangerous proximity to the blade, shows the actor within my painted theatre: a bare torso cut from a fashion magazine. The suggestively cropped pose of the model viewed through the peephole invokes a sense of scopophilia.

In the bottom right-hand corner, the astrological symbol for the planet Pluto symbolises the 'hell passion' via cryptic reference to Pluto's mythological association with Hades (fig. 25). This hieroglyph is a subtle clue, intimating the presence of an occluded knowledge not readily available. An opaque mythological element, the symbol's inclusion heralds a key development of the studio research that is explored in detail in the following chapter, which discusses the integration of occult iconography into my practice.

In *The Hell Libertine Theatre*, the tabletop is entirely absent, and each object is depicted as floating within the metaphysical still life space. Once again, the objects' distinctness from one another and linearly diagonal order conjure associations with the rebus. Regarding the painting's material surface, there is a more subtle gradation in tone throughout than in previous works, resulting from a thinner application of painted layers. The modulating effect of this slight alteration to the painting process produces a tonality that visually unfolds over time, engaging the viewer in a slower state of a sensory contemplation. Arguably, a greater sense of mimesis is also achieved in *The Hell Libertine Theatre* than in previous paintings, as the depictions of varied surfaces yield a more convincing tactile response. These qualities serve to hold the composition together pictorially and ground its supernatural configuration, or magic realism, in a certain believability.

Regarding *The Hell Libertine Theatre*'s unconventional arrangement schema, Greek-born painter Giorgio de Chirico's (1888–1978) is a key influence. A proponent of the short-lived

[133] Marquis de Sade, 'The 120 Days of Sodom', in *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, eds. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1987), 667–8

Pittura Metafisica ('Metaphysical Painting') movement, de Chirico painted theatrical motifs and disorienting spatial systems to arouse a sense of the latent 'spiritual' dimension beneath physical surfaces. De Chirico himself compared his paintings to 'the flat surface of a perfectly calm ocean [that] disturbs us…by all the unknown that is hidden in the depth'.[134] His work features a sense of schism resulting from discordant relationships as an inducement to the imagination. De Chirico's metaphysical paintings stimulate subconscious fantasies, suggests art historian Adriano Altamira, by 'the sensation of estrangement incurred by incongruous objects and presences, distant and disconnected from each other'.[135] In 1914's *The Song of Love* (fig. 26), for example, the elusive formal and symbolic relationships between the objects prompt the imaginative completion of an albeit illegible narrative. The mismatch of the pink glove, Grecian sculpture and green ball is pictorially incongruous, the juxtaposition of these motifs producing a conceptual blind spot. Its bizarre architectural perspective and visible obstructions further provoke uncertainty, compelling the viewer to consider elements beyond what is represented.[136]

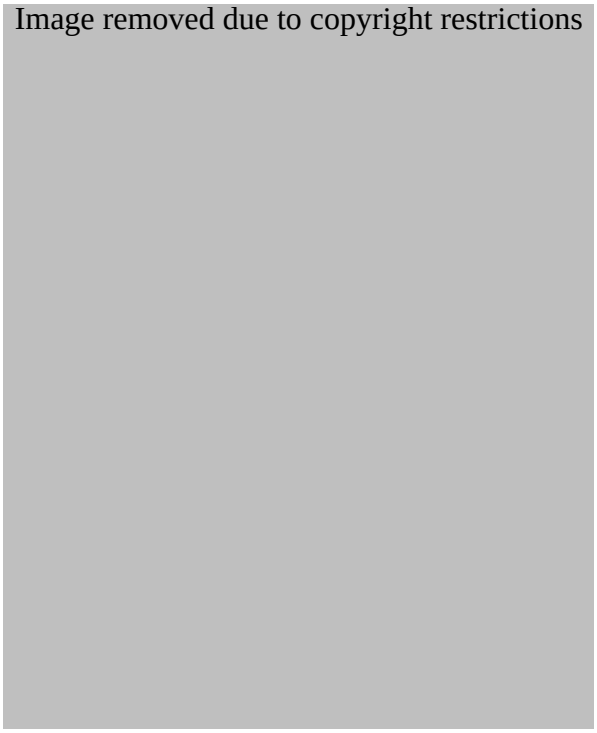

Figure 26: Giorgio de Chirico, *The Song of Love*, 1914, oil on canvas, 73 x 59.1 cm

[134] Giorgio de Chirico, 'On Metaphysical Art', trans. Joshua C. Taylor, in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 451. Originally published as 'Sull'arte metafisica', *Valori Plastici* (Rome) 1, nos. 4–5 (April-May 1919), 15–18.
[135] Adriano Altamira, 'De Chirico, Böcklin and Klinger', *Metafisica*, nos. 5–6 (2006), 54.
[136] Museum of Modern Art, 'Giorgio de Chirico. The Song of Love', *MOMA*, 2019, accessed 28 August 2021, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80419

As in de Chirico's intangible geometries, the elements that disorient within my paintings—their multiplicities and impossible scenarios—generate moments of visual conflict. The collaged peephole figures lifted from magazines are dissonant with the painted still life. Differing in scale and painted with smaller brushstrokes, they generate a visible disparity that pulls the viewer out of the conventional logic of the still life space. Similarly, the curtain, affecting the spatial reading, transports the viewer out of one reality and into a theatrical realm. Moreover, the still life objects themselves have a disorienting effect, their sense of estrangement augmented by their linear and illogical arrangement.

In view of the visual convolutions occurring in my paintings at this stage of the project, I began to reorganise my research intentions and attach the notion of queer opacity (explored in Chapter One) as a visual metaphor for my practice. From my early aim of invoking pictorial latent eroticism as an homage to historical precursors such as Tooker, I began to view in the deliberate confusions of *The Hell Libertine Theatre* a more complex and speculative interest in a form of pictorial secrecy that could indeed be harnessed as a potentially useful modus operandi for visual production. In reflecting upon my completed paintings thus far regarding their illogical bricolage of motifs obstructing clear interpretation, I identified how their signalling the withholding of salient information was key to their visual and poetic effect. In other words, in line with Birchall's aesthetics of the secret, I was 'addressing the material shifts that occur not through revelation but through concealment'.[137] In their visible refusal of disclosure arrived at from engaging with modes of codified desire, my paintings were developing an opacity that presented new pathways for poetic expression. This clarity of intent is carried through the remainder of the studio research.

Curtains

As an apparatus of the theatre and a concealing mechanism, the curtain serves emblematic functions in several of the project's paintings. On one level, the introduction of a curtain into the pictorial space as a framing device contributes a voyeuristic dimension through the implication of surreptitious observation, as the presence of an open curtain in a painting

[137] Birchall, *Radical Secrecy*, 128.

suggests an exposed view that is precarious, temporary or intended to be hidden. Conversely, the image of a drawn curtain invites the viewer to ponder what might lie behind it. The curtain's occluding function has an undeniably erotic dimension, bringing with it associations of concealed bodies, a reading augmented by the sensual relation to flesh in the corporeal folds of fabric.

Figure 27: *Stage*, 2020, oil on gesso board, 40.5 x 30.5cm

Figure 28: *Curtain*, 2020, oil on gesso board, 40.5 x 30.5cm

During a later stage of my study, I completed two paintings depicting single curtains. While these paintings do not engage a queer narrative specifically, their intrigue as objects contributes to core understandings of the opaque as a theme in painting. Titled *Stage* (fig. 27) and *Curtain* (fig. 28), they are differentiated from other depictions of curtains in the project in that they are isolated and drawn. The two paintings are similarly arranged with some variations between them. In *Stage*, the fabric floats atop a yellow base, generating a stronger association with stage curtains. The interplay of the three primary colours contributes to the painting's visual potency. In *Curtain*, the composition is more ambiguous, the absence of a base and the gradated viridian background comprising an evocative void. In both paintings, the curtain rod is just out of view, producing an impression that the curtains

hang from the top of the substrate.

A significant allurement in the act of painting curtains is the inherent attractiveness in the folds of fabric, an appeal that historian Anne Hollander suggests is as old as cloth itself.[138] Visual pleasure in the surface qualities of cloth has produced consistent idealisations by artists that have 'helped train the eyes of the world to take delight in fabric and helped create a desire to use it far beyond necessity'.[139] The subtle reflection of light within the workings of fabric presents a challenge to the oil painter. To accurately transcribe the almost imperceptible tonal shifts, I adopted an even slower process of accumulating thin layers of paint. In both *Stage* and *Curtain*, a more padded method of application is evident, generating a visual hum as intermediary layers are visible through the surface marks.

My curtain paintings resonate narratively with the storied competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, recounted in Chapter One. Like Parrhasius' painting in the parable, *Stage* and *Curtain* find potency in their production of blind spots. In the lack of a definable object hidden behind the depicted curtains, the paintings produce a conspicuous absence. And in the faithful replication of their alluring folds, the paintings provoke yet another somatic unavailability, as they only mimic the visual qualities of curtains while refusing the curtain's actual presence. In this view, the subject of these paintings is perhaps the intermediate space between concealment and revelation, and the opacity of painting itself.

The curtain paintings' compositions are informed by several other historical references. Raphaelle Peale's (1774–1825) *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception* (fig. 29) demonstrates the potential for painted cloth to address complex notions of truth and representation. At first glance, the painting's white sheet appears to be concealing the view of a nude woman. Closer inspection reveals that the visible elements of the figure are derived not from 'life' but from another painting, a deception that delivers the composition into the realm of the trompe l'oeil.[140] Resonating with the parable of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, Peale's

[138] Anne Hollander, 'The Fabric of Vision: The Role of Drapery in Art', *The Georgia Review* 29, no. 2 (summer 1975), 415.
[139] Hollander, 'The Fabric of Vision', 415.
[140] The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 'Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception', n.d., accessed 29 November 2022, https://art.nelson-atkins.org/objects/30797/venus-rising-from-the-seaa-deception

painting blurs traditional genre categories and simultaneously references the contemporaneous practice of covering painted nudes with draped sheets or curtains for modesty.[141]

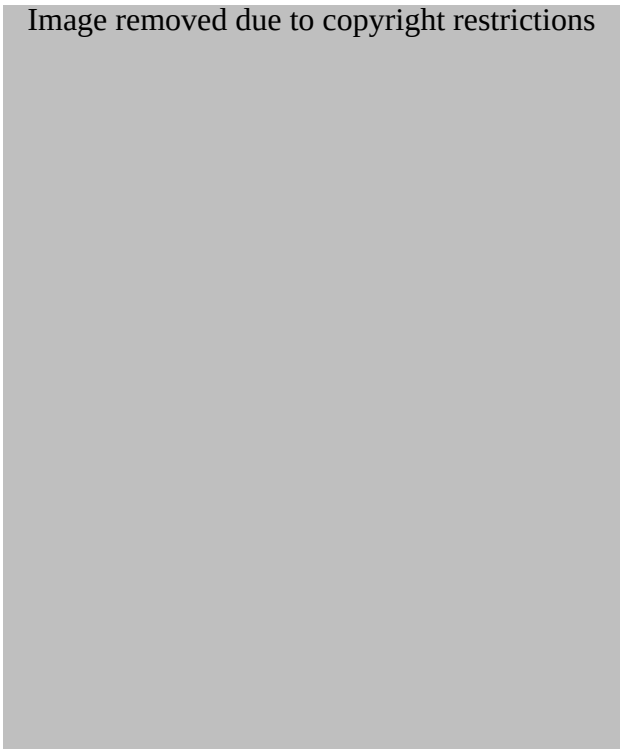

Figure 29: Raphaelle Peale, *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception*, c. 1822, oil on canvas, 73.98 x 61.28 cm

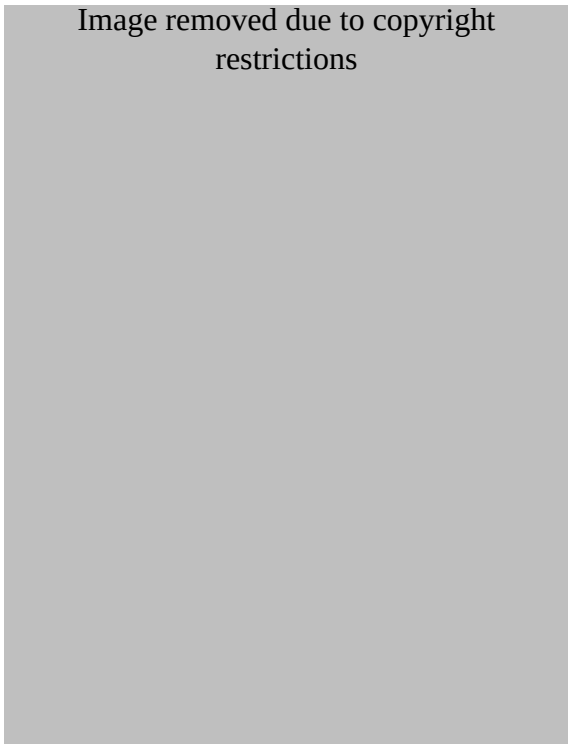

Figure 30: George Tooker, *White Curtain*, 1951, egg tempera on gesso panel, 45.7 x 35 cm

George Tooker's frequent depiction of curtains, such as in his window series previously described, has informed the technical delivery of my paintings. In *White Curtain* (fig. 30), Tooker reduces the curtain motif to a singular still life subject, and the work's surface quality and pictorial design are influenced by Northern Renaissance sources. The curtain conceals what could be either a small window or a niche in the wall; the ambiguity is due to the absence of any other narrative markers. Personally, I identify a corporeal relation, and perhaps a subtle eroticism, in the way the curtain falls into an almost contrapposto curve on its left side.

[141] The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 'Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception'.

Conclusion of Chapter Two

At the beginning of this chapter, I described how my early studio research was centred on eliciting latent queer eroticism as influenced by historical precursors. As the paintings of this preliminary phase progressed, pictorial schisms and ambiguous narratives yielded important discoveries that served to hone the focus of the research. The chapter then charted the development of my investigatory topic from the codification of queer desire to picturing withholding and evoking secrecy.

The painting *December* established the beginnings of a research methodology grounded in studio-based observational painting and exhibits an enigmatic quality in its evocation of queer desire through indirect symbolism and a layered approach to the painted surface. *Otranto* builds upon strategies from *December* and introduces new motifs and an experimental approach to still life, in which objects are depicted in an illogical arrangement. In conceiving of painting as a kind of stilled, metaphysical theatre, I discovered within a theatricality inherent in still life a means to further visual metaphor. Then, in *The Hell Libertine Theatre*, disorienting pictorial distortions presented new fields of inquiry regarding the potential to intimate latent meaning. In Chapter Three, these themes are expanded as I explore the integration of occult imagery and iconography in my paintings to further their opacity.

Chapter Three: Occult

In the previous chapter, I described prefiguring mystical elements such as astrological symbols and supernatural configurations of objects in my paintings as a disorienting evocation of the hidden. This chapter expands on these themes and explores the occult as a conduit for queer opacity, charting the phase of my research in which occultic iconography became a recurring feature of my visual language. Imagery from traditions such as Hermeticism and witchcraft is mined for allegory and becomes a model for an aesthetics of the secret, conjuring associations of underground societies and ineffable mysteries. As cryptic hieroglyphs engage with the eroticised figures, the occult aesthetic frames queer desire as a covert operation.

The first of my paintings discussed in this chapter, *Heaven Seal I*, was conceived during a period of research into Renaissance occult philosophies and draws on talismanic principles. Magically inscribed tokens into which desire is encoded cryptically, talismans resonate with my project's themes and possess intriguing potential for visual allegory. Appropriating an illustration by the occult philosopher Giordano Bruno as a talismanic cipher, *Heaven Seal I* signals the beginning of a more calculated integration of occult iconography into my practice.

The chapter then expands on the metaphorical function of occult imagery within the project as a designation of the opaque and potential queer camouflage. Analysing the concealing function of occultic imagery in George Tooker's homoerotic 1950 tableau *Fountain*, I then explore occultic trends in contemporary queer practice, wherein iconography from occult and 'magical' traditions offer creative strategies by which to disrupt orthodox social and political structures.[142] In the figurative practices of Elijah Burgher and Hernan Bas, an opaque occult imagery in the service of ambiguous eroticism likens gay male desire to clandestine ritual.

Returning to my practice, I discuss *Pisces Theatre*, another painting based on talismanic principles. A sequence of levitating shells, potent symbols of hiddenness, underpins the painting's composition. Then, in the next painting discussed in this chapter, *Heaven Seal II*,

[142] Jamie Sutcliffe, 'What We Do Is Secret', *Frieze*, 15 February 2017, accessed 29 August 2021, https://www.frieze.com/article/what-we-do-secret-0

the circular Hermetic motif used in *Heaven Seal I* is repurposed for the tabletop. The diverse and cumulative arrangement of objects in *Heaven Seal II* signal a mode of bricolage research underlying the project. The chapter concludes with a reflection on my exhibition *Sleight of Hand*, installed during the middle period of my studio research. The exhibition's title evokes theatrical magic, refers to the occult imagery in the paintings, and simultaneously suggests an undercurrent of visual subterfuge.

Heaven Seal I **(2018)**

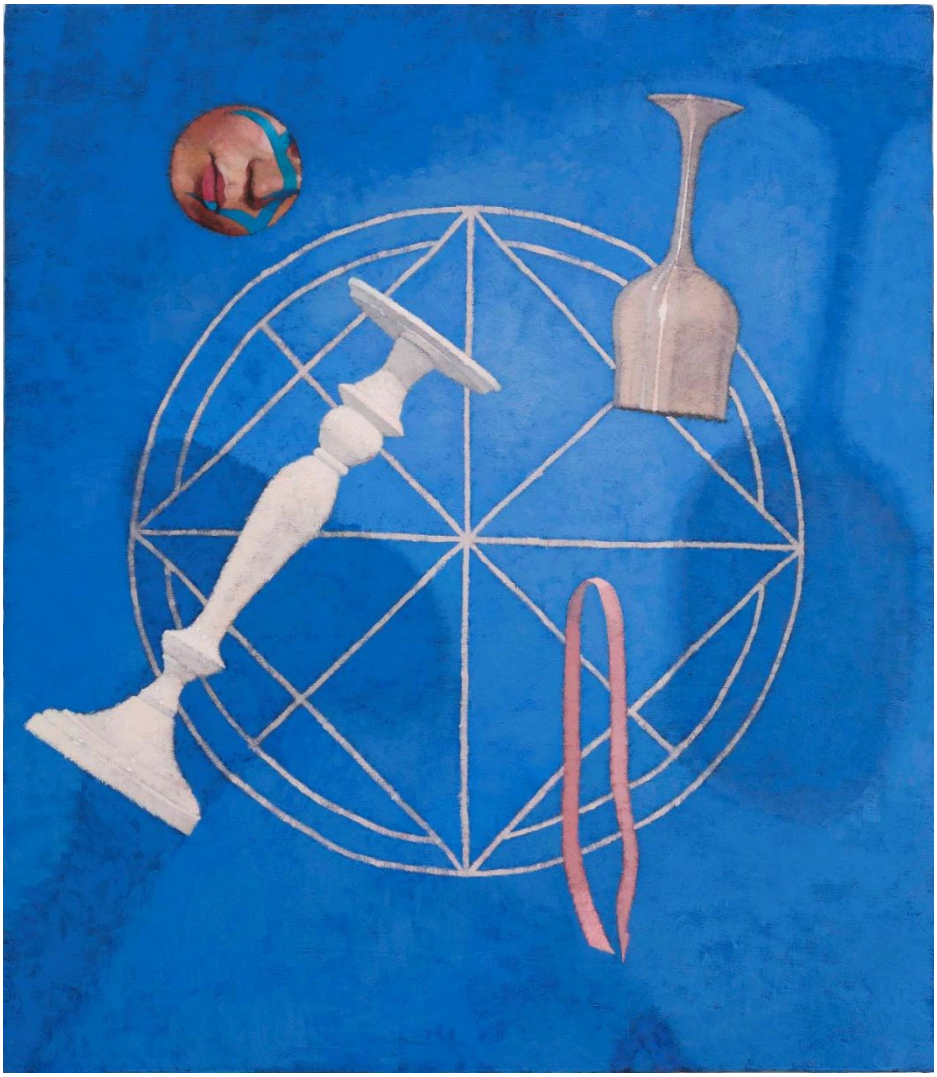

Figure 31: *Heaven Seal I*, 2018, oil on marine plywood, 65 x 56.5 cm

In Chapter Two, I explained how Giorgio de Chirico's conceptually ambiguous paintings of incongruously arranged objects are an intriguing historical precursor to my practice. Sharing de Chirico's paradoxical aim of evoking the 'unseen' dimensions of painting, I described

how I employ similarly ‘metaphysical’ pictorial strategies to construct visual dissonances suggestive of cryptic affinities. While researching the origins of de Chirico’s practice, I became intrigued by the curious esotericism underpinning his work. The configuration of objects according to an intangible pictorial order is intended to evoke what he describes as ‘the ghostly and metaphysical aspect’ of things, the spiritual underside to visible reality experienced only ‘at moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical meditation’.[143] With a mystic disposition,[144] de Chirico manifested his paranormal fixations in his paintings by bestowing them an otherworldly appearance suggestive of mysterious systems operating beneath the surface.

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Figure 32: Illustration of ‘The Heaven’ Seal from Giordano Bruno’s *Triginta Sigilli* etc., 1583, medium and dimensions unknown

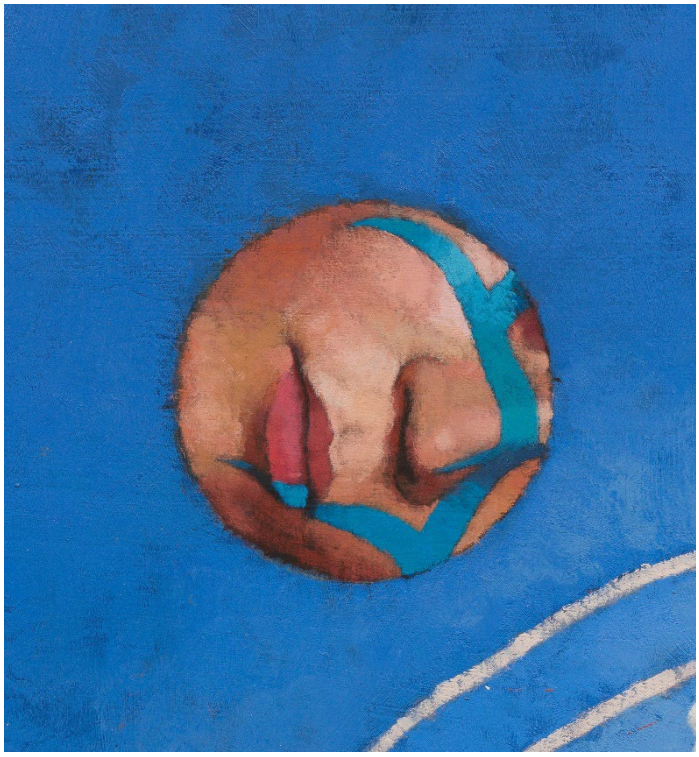

Figure 33: *Heaven Seal I* (detail)

Contemplating the visual qualities of de Chirico’s mysticism and the sense of the spiritually arcane developing in my paintings via his influence, I began researching other historical pictorial forms based on esoteric practices. This new field of inquiry culminated in the

[143] Giorgio de Chirico, ‘Sull’arte metafisica’, in *Valori Plastici* (Rome) 1, nos. 4–5 (April–May 1919), quoted in Aniela Jaffé, ‘Symbolism in the Visual Arts’, in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl Gustav Jung (New York, NY: Dell, 1968), 293.
[144] Aniela Jaffé, ‘Symbolism in the Visual Arts’, 293.

painting *Heaven Seal I* (fig. 31). Moving beyond the literary inspiration used for previous paintings, *Heaven Seal I* is narratively and compositionally informed by historical occult practices and is itself envisioned as a kind of talismanic ritual. Talismans are objects inscribed with symbolic, diagrammatic images representing stars or mythical bodies, made according to specific magical rules, and yielding supposed magical efficacies.[145] In the occult Hermetic tradition, for example, when used in accordance with certain spells and objects, talismans are said to magically produce outcomes for purposes such as the cure of diseases, long life or romantic success.[146] In this way, talismans are visual elicitations of desire encoded into hieroglyphic form.

Informed by my newfound interest in talismanic principles, I conceptualised *Heaven Seal I* as a fictional 'love' spell, a magic ritual performed to obtain the affection of the object of one's desire, enacted as a sequence of arcane objects hovering against a runic symbol inscribed onto a wall replete with peephole. In the previous painting, *The Hell Libertine Theatre*, I experimented with integrating an oblique astrological symbol into the picture plane as a cryptic clue to the painting's narrative riddle. *Heaven Seal I*'s central diagrammatic symbol expands on this experiment and is shaped as a diamond within two concentric circles, divided by intersecting lines in an 'X'. This shape appropriates an illustration of a magical seal by the Renaissance philosopher and cosmological theorist Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), titled 'The Heaven' (fig. 32[147]). While historians have interpreted Bruno's seals as depicting data structures for constructing memory images as part of a complex mnemonic system,[148] much of the specifics of his metaphysical logic remains impenetrable.[149] The image of this seal sparked in me a fascination with its ambiguous shape embodying the opaque potency of a cipher. I find in the evidently ordered geometric design of such occultic diagrams the suggestion of a (partially) occluded systematic or 'scientific' purpose, the very inaccessibility of the illustrated system generating intrigue. As a compositional underpinning, the seal's circular graphic form is at once visually striking and a token of concealed knowledge.

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[145] Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, (London, UK: The Bodley Head, 2014), 441.
[146] Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, (London, UK: Routledge, 2010), 57.
[147] Yates, 'Illustration of "The Heaven" Seal from Giordano Bruno's *Triginta Sigilli* etc., 1583', in *The Art of Memory*, plate 15a.
[148] Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 360.
[149] Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 344.

With the same hanging apparatus from which I suspended the 'levitating' elements in previous paintings, I hung a group of objects in front of a diagrammatic drawing of the seal that I rendered onto a large piece of blue card, and then painted the scenario from observation. I selected the still life objects for their associations and formal qualities. The candlestick and goblet have especially potent connections with occult rituals and cast looming shadows against the hieroglyph. The ribbon motif, introduced in the previous painting, appears again, its lustrous surface softly rendered becoming a visual lure. The peephole, slightly above the seal in the painting's lefthand corner, reveals the cropped image of a magazine photograph of a fashion model's face; its close-up on a nose and pair of lips, as though the face is pressed against the aperture from behind the animated still life, is a more conspicuous evocation of a glory hole (fig. 33). When I came across this image, I was struck by the eccentricity of the geometric design of the blue makeup across the model's face and its evocation of a mystic marking.

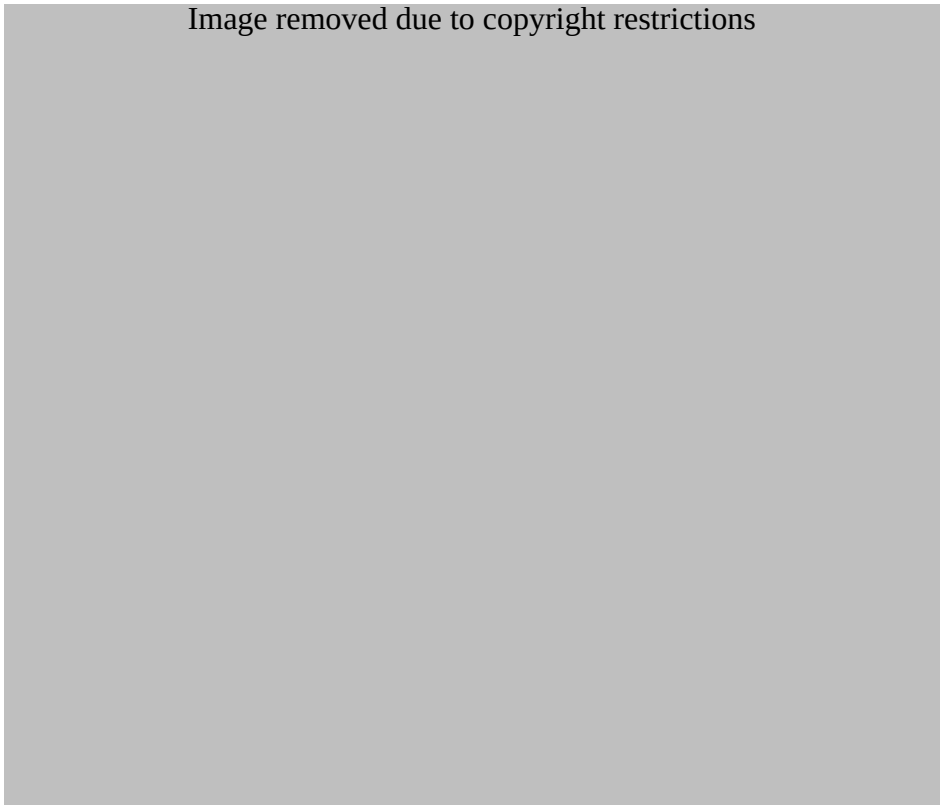

Figure 34: Tony Greene, *Untitled (Ed)*, 1990, mixed media, 49.53 x 55.88 cm

The visual effect of the runic seal viewed alongside the peephole's cropped face resonates with a series of paintings by Tony Greene, whose work is discussed in the previous chapter.

In *Ed* (fig. 34), a partly concealed face is obscured beneath decorative filigree and ciphers inspired by occult Rosicrucian lettering. The opacity of the lettering symbolically identifies with the concealment of the figure, whose occlusion beneath layers of paint and decoration functions in part as a provocative metaphor for the heightened surreptitiousness of gay male desire during the initial AIDS crisis.[150]

Queer Opacity and the Occult

In *Heaven Seal* the still life objects, rendered levitating as if spiritually possessed, are integrated with a cryptic occult symbol inscribed on the picture plane, conjuring notions of clandestine rituals and secret societies. In the following section, I contextualise the function of occult iconography as a strategy for queer opacity and explain how the inclusion of occult symbolism contributes to a visible secrecy and subversive resistance to a neat readability in my painting.

Occult ideograms, such as Bruno's diagrammatic seal and Greene's Rosicrucian-like lettering, are inherently opaque forms, their meaning or intent intentionally occluded. Like words written in a foreign tongue, they are visible but indecipherable to non-speakers and operate similarly to the queer codes described in Chapter One, their opacity a form of insubordination to the dominant culture shut out of their interpretation. Like queerness, occultism has historically subsisted through systems of an open secrecy, wherein external markers of its existence may be observed within the public sphere but—to the uninitiated—only ever opaquely. As Birchall notes, in their movement 'from nonpresentability/perceptibility toward (though stopping way short of full) presence or revelation' by virtue of their tantalising public appearance, markers of an open secrecy paradoxically advertise their own clandestine nature.[151]

Indeed, the word 'occult' derives from the Latin 'occultus', meaning 'hidden' or 'secret'.[152] Within occult groups, secrets are disclosed and shared amongst initiates behind a safety

[150] Whitney Museum of American Art, 'Tony Greene'.
[151] Birchall, *Radical Secrecy*, 129.
[152] 'Occult', Online Etymology Dictionary, 8 December 2020, accessed 28 October 2022, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=occult

barrier of codes, passwords and confidential names that ensure identities are protected from exposure.[153] Such secrecy remains an intrinsic feature of occult roleplay and ritual. In contemporary pagan witchcraft collectives, for example, initiates take oaths, acquire unique names, and learn words and gestures that they are forbidden from revealing to outsiders.[154] Secrecy augments the experience of alternative realities in which occultists symbolically and performatively traverse visible and invisible realms. Moreover, occult traditions and contemporary magic practices are repositories of those mystical 'deep secrets' often described as 'esoteric knowledge', constituting what anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann describes as 'a secretive knowledge of something inherently hidden and thus unknowable by ordinary means'.[155] For practitioners, esoteric knowledge is accessed through certain kinds of intensely secretive ritual, in which deity-like initiators transmit knowledge via mystical processes that bypass rational cognition, and thus can never be expressed openly or in words.[156]

This protective armature of secrecy surrounding occult societies suggests a rationale for the continuing allure of the occult amongst various queer subcultures. Indeed, through shared persecution, queer individuals and occult practitioners have historically developed kinships, mingling in secret safe spaces where their alternative practices are neither pathologised nor condemned.[157] For the spiritually-minded queer individual, the sexual liberalism promoted by much occult practice can suggest a more accommodating metaphysical outlet in contrast to the largely conservative dogma of mainstream religion. In *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*, author and activist Arthur Evans charts a historical trajectory of the intersecting persecution of witchcraft and non-normative sexuality and describes how hidden cooperatives have traditionally provided all marginalised peoples with therapeutic support and occasion for self-care.[158] Describing occult magic as an 'inherently collective activity, depending for its practice on group song, dance, sex and ecstasy', Evans interprets sensual occult ritual as a defiantly liberating expression of nonconformity.[159] Analogous to

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[153] McLaughlin, 'Hidden in Plain Sight', 55.
[154] Tanya Luhrmann, 'The Magic of Secrecy', *Ethos* 17, no. 2 (1989), 136.
[155] Luhrmann, 'The Magic of Secrecy', 145.
[156] Luhrmann, 'The Magic of Secrecy', 147.
[157] Joy Dixon, 'Sexology and the Occult: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Theosophy's New Age', in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 432.
[158] Sutcliffe, 'What We Do Is Secret'.
[159] Arthur Evans, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture* (Boston, MA: FAG RAG Books, 1978), 172.

queerness, the occult exists continuously on society's margins, outside of cultural hegemony. In its orientation towards escape from heteronormative orthodoxy, occultism persists as signifier and facilitator of concealment and potential queer mode.

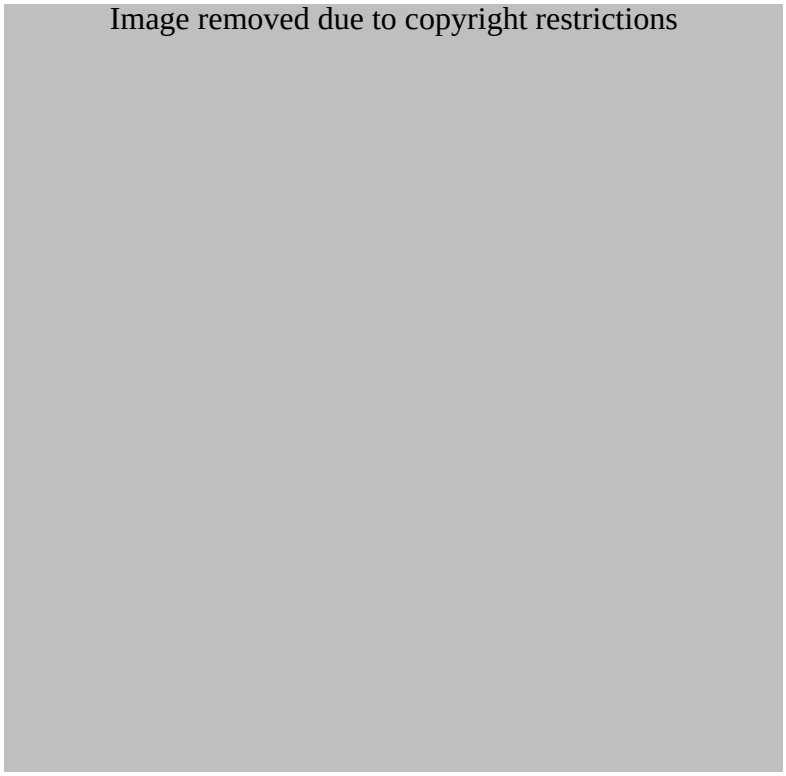

Figure 35: George Tooker, *Fountain*, 1950, egg tempera on gesso panel, 61 x 61 cm

I will now explore relevant instances of occultic imagery in queer art practice, beginning with George Tooker's *Fountain* (fig. 35), a painting depicting a ceremony brimming with eroticism. As described in the exegesis' introduction and Chapter One, my interest in Tooker served as the origin of my project because I identified the queer opacity of his paintings as essential to their personal and emotional resonance. While not explicitly occultic, I suggest that the arcane nature of the gathering in *Fountain* and its ritualistic depiction of 'mythic energy'[160] might denote a clandestine ceremony by a hidden collective, and that its opaque occult reverberance evokes and obscures the painting's erotic subtext simultaneously. In this way, the mystical imagery of this mysterious assembly functions as camouflage, conceptually veiling a celebration of gay male camaraderie and hiding the homoeroticism in plain sight—a necessity for a public painter in 1950s America. Contributing sensuality and intrigue to the

[160] Garver, *George Tooker*, 88.

work, the almost devotional treatment in its rendering, characteristic of Tooker, recalls the meticulous circumscription of forms in much religious painting.

For many contemporary artists, notions of the occult and magic are means to explore gender and sexual identity politics.[161] The appeal of magical imagery as an evocation of queerness is broad. For example, witchcraft, suggests writer Jamie Sutcliffe, 'offers a discreet space where self-care, protection and healing might be sought from the threat of heteronormative hegemony', and provides 'the opportunity to think sensually beyond the rigid diagnostic or social codes of psychiatry or medical science'.[162] In addition to its queer political utility, the occult can function to further art practices predicated on opacity, as occult traditions provide strategies and imagery for suggesting indeterminate states between visibility and invisibility.

Figure 36: Elijah Burgher, *'Six Organs' Ritual*, 2013, coloured pencil on paper, 27.94 x 35.56 cm

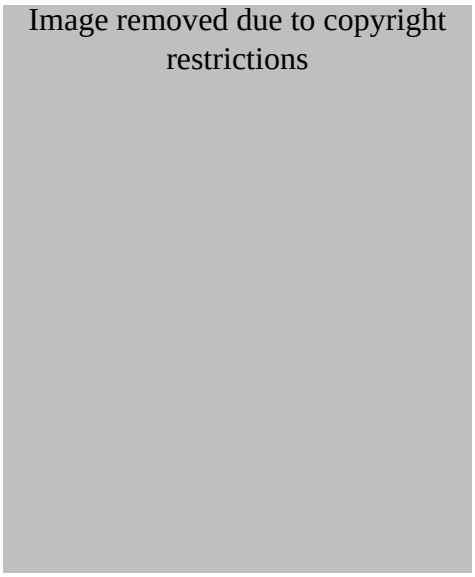

Figure 37: Elijah Burgher, *Youth in a window (prism, mirror, lens)*, 2018, coloured pencil on paper, 69 cm x 57.5 cm

In the works of Berlin-based American artist Elijah Burgher (b. 1978), opaque occult imagery is intertwined with narratives of gay male eroticism and community (e.g., fig. 36). Drawing on mythology, folklore and occult philosophy, Burgher depicts remote collectives where magic, theatrical ritual and queer politics intersect, often enlisting friends to enact occultic

[161] Sutcliffe, 'What We Do Is Secret'.
[162] Sutcliffe, 'What We Do Is Secret'.

scenarios as the basis of drawings.[163] In his painstakingly rendered drawings, Burgher integrates erotic figuration with a private symbology that, to the uninitiated, merely hints at meaning and stops short at revelation.[164] As in Tooker's painting, a material opacity is delivered in the mark-making of the pencil, producing solid, luminous forms. Claire Gilman, curator of the 2018 Drawing Center exhibition *For Opacity: Elijah Burgher, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Nathaniel May Quin*, suggests that Burgher's figures 'register through their profound stillness—a tranquillity, and accompanying emotional neutrality, that grants them protection from the viewer's gaze even as their bodies are unsparingly on display'.[165] Taking Glissant's politics of opacity as its guiding concept, *For Opacity* presented a group of diverse artists located by self and society as Other; in Burgher's drawings, it highlighted a manifestation of opacity as a gay male subject position and creative driver.

In Burgher's *Youth in a window (prism, mirror, lens)* (fig. 37), a system of diagrammatic occult symbols partly occludes a figure, his intricately drawn torso resonating with Tooker's devotional treatment of the male form. The ideogram, resembling a motif of modernist abstraction, is a sigil, a magically imputed occult symbol constructed following principles designed by twentieth-century occultist Austin Osman Spare involving the reconfiguration of letters to spell out wants and wishes.[166] Like talismanic symbols, sigils encode desire into a cryptic form and function as 'visual manifestations of an unwillingness to reveal'.[167] The figure, which Burgher describes as part self-portrait/part unrequited love interest, looks out from behind this sigil, resulting in his being seen both through and against a cryptic ground.[168] In this way, the drawing symbolises the multitudinous power of the hieroglyph as both veil and filter.

Another contemporary artist for whom occultic themes and imagery frequently relay queer ambiguity is Hernan Bas (b. 1978). With visual references to historically hidden collectives, several of Bas' paintings depict occultism in the context of gay youth culture narratives,

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[163] Whitney Museum of American Art, 'Elijah Burgher', *Whitney*, n.d., accessed 28 October 2022, https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2014-biennial/elijah-burgher
[164] Whitney Museum, 'Elijah Burgher'.
[165] Claire Gilman, *For Opacity: Elijah Burgher, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Nathaniel Mary Quinn* (New York, NY: Drawing Center, 2018), 15.
[166] Western Exhibitions, 'Elijah Burgher', *Western Exhibitions*, n.d., accessed 16 September 2021, https://westernexhibitions.com/artist/elijah-burgher
[167] Elijah Burgher, in Claire Gilman, *For Opacity*, 15.
[168] Gilman, *For Opacity*, 16.

wherein supernatural themes are related metaphorically to states of queer confusion. Bas' characteristic male figures—skinny, youthful, effeminate—frequently enact mysterious scenarios in Gothic settings, wherein seances and obscure ceremonies are poetic vehicles evoking 'fag-limbo', a developmental period in queer adolescence that Bas describes as a 'twilight moment between realising that you're different and the point that you tell everybody that you're different'.[169] By commemorating the intermediate phase between the realisation of difference and outness, Bas sidesteps more mainstream clamours for openness and disclosure.

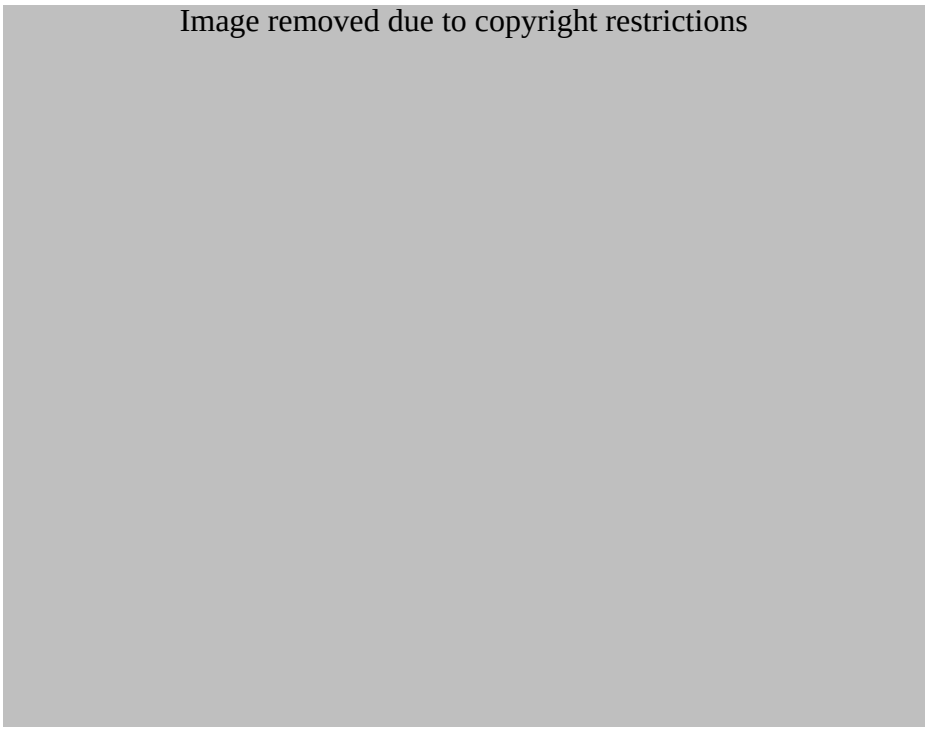

Figure 38: Hernan Bas, *The Occult Enthusiast*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 213.4 × 274.3 cm

In *The Occult Enthusiast* (fig. 38), Bas reconfigures occultism as metaphor and subject of obsession, invoking a sense of the comforting refuge to be found at the occult's esoteric marginalia for disaffected queer people. In a cluttered library or study, an adolescent figure lays his head dreamily upon a desk piled with books, surrounded by satanic and occult

[169] Hernan Bas, 'Hernan Bas', *Artnet TV* 4, vol. 2, video, 7:20, 2009, accessed 30 August 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xlE-pfZf64

paraphernalia. A dense bricolage of objects and periodicals, the room functions as a cabinet of curiosities and broadcasts the devotional intent of the collector.

Pisces Theatre (2018)

Figure 39: *Pisces Theatre*, 2018, oil on marine plywood, 65 x 56.5 cm

In *Heaven Seal*, I constructed a composition according to talismanic principles, wherein objects are placed over a symbolic inscription to produce a magical outcome. These opaque occultic elements strike a visual poetry with the cropped peephole figure, marking queer desire as a secretive act. My next painting, *Pisces Theatre* (fig. 39), follows similar narrative lines and enlists an astrological theme. In the painting's mystical compositional logic, the ideogram is a sequence of white dots arranged to form the Pisces constellation. Like Bruno's

seal, the zodiac constellation has the power of a hieroglyph, a cipher suggestive of latent bodies of knowledge inaccessible to the uninitiated. In front of the constellation are three seashells hovering at different vantages and casting painted shadows onto the blue backdrop. The levitating seashells symbolise the nautical Pisces, suggesting an oblique narrative of an ocean-themed occult ceremony. Beneath the seashells, an oval-shaped peephole gives a surreptitious view of a cropped figure in beach attire, the aperture suggestively centred on his crotch. A white curtain diagonally frames the top lefthand corner of the composition, theatricalising the scenario and highlighting the staged nature of the depicted ceremony. The curtain alters the spatial reading of the painting while indexing a separation of worlds, so that the painting is experienced as a voyeuristic view into a forbidden space.

Figure 40: *Pisces Theatre* (detail)

Seashells are rich symbolic vehicles and have been a source of human fascination since ancient times, their rigid and hollow forms conjuring associations of shelter (fig. 40).[170] To philosopher Gaston Bachelard, shells represent a dialectic of what is hidden and what is manifest: in their presence, he states, '[t]he imagination experiences protection in all its

[170] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 116.

nuances of security, from life in the most material of shells, to more subtle concealment through imitation of surfaces'.[171] Supplementing this allegorical quality is their visually appealing logarithmic geometry and iridescent surface, both features being technical challenges to transcribe in paint. In Tooker's 1947 self-portrait (fig. 41), the shell has the key function within the compositional logic of the painting of emphasising a recurring circularity. The painstaking rendering in egg tempera conveys the shell's iridescent surface quality and natural beauty. The glossy illumination of the shell is echoed in similar highlighting throughout the painting, notably on the artist's forehead, creating a visual unity. Tooker's sensual, eroticised treatment of figures in his homoerotic paintings is applied to the equally loving treatment of the shell in this self-portrait, reinforcing the notion that all painting has the potential for sensuality and that such tactile approaches need not be reserved only for figure painting.

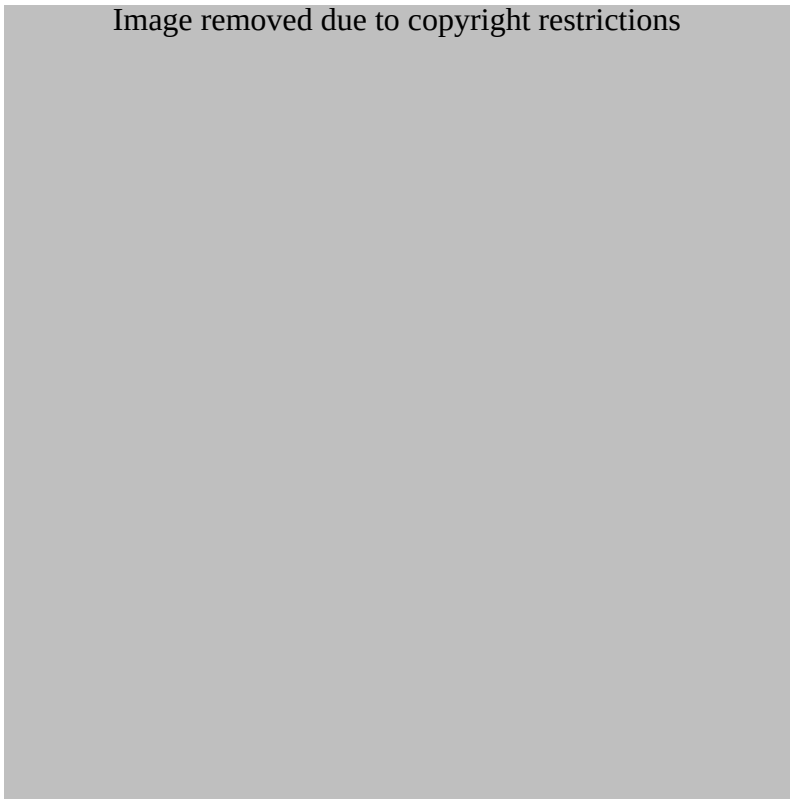

Figure 41: George Tooker, *Self Portrait*, 1947, egg tempera on gesso panel, 41.91 cm diameter

In *Pisces Theatre*, the blue background has a denser surface build-up than previous paintings, resulting in a more pronounced powdery tactility. Here, the incremental mark-making is more

[171] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 132.

opaque, the gesture delivering distinct patches of marks for stronger visual vibration. The tactile surface has an intriguing interplay with the painted shadows, producing a somewhat disorienting sensory experience and conflicted sense of spatial logic that accords with the painting's conceptual obfuscations.

Heaven Seal II (2019–20)

Figure 42: *Heaven Seal II*, 2019–20, oil on gesso board, 61 x 61 cm

I completed *Heaven Seal II* (fig. 42) significantly later than my first pictorial experiments incorporating occult motifs. Consequently, the painting neither advanced nor altered my project's trajectory but instead brought together the various strands of my doctoral study within a single composition. *Heaven Seal II* depicts another occult ritual in the form of an invocation, a ceremonial 'calling in' of a spirit or entity. The composition comprises a sequence of objects on and above a tabletop that encircle a peephole in the wall behind the

table, the peephole figure assuming the role of the 'invocated' spectre. The appropriated Giordano Bruno seal used also in my earlier painting is inscribed in white at the base of the composition (on the tabletop). A gloved hand gestures towards the scene from the top lefthand corner, reaching out from beyond the frame. This mysterious human presence was painted observationally using a retail mannequin repurposed as a lay figure, a studio apparatus explored in depth in the following chapter.

The choice of motifs further establishes a personal iconography via their repetition throughout the project. As in previous paintings, the motifs here connote a subtle eclecticism, the inclusion of a comically twisting candlestick and a kitsch, multicoloured pillar candle contrasting with the traditional forms of the goblet, jug and orange. The diversity within the object selection contributes to a conceptual and aesthetic multiplicity that characterises both this comparatively congested composition and the project as a whole. A subtle heterogeneity is established through an idiosyncratic collision of material and compositional elements contained within a single work. In *Heaven Seal II*, these divergent elements comprise, for instance, the peephole (its paint application differing from the rest of the composition and producing a material disparity), the occult ideogram, and the gloved hand, which, while together hinting at a narrative, maintain a tenuous incongruity.

In this way, the collative nature of *Heaven Seal II*'s construction gestures a mode of bricolage that marks both my studio and research practices. To be clear, in describing my method in terms of bricolage, I am not characterising my process as a haphazard collaging strategy. Instead, bricolage is viewed metaphorically, denoting a purposeful unification of diverse constituents to produce new, though deliberately obscure, meaning. In its cumulation of disparate signs, references and sources, bricolage transforms the meaning of its elements through often surprising and unorthodox relations. Signalling a multi-perspective and multi-theoretical approach, bricolage research, as academic Matt Rogers explains, is characterised by 'notions of eclecticism, emergent design, flexibility and plurality'.[172] In its seemingly ad hoc though frequently strategic weaving of disparate parts, bricolage accords with queer strategies of self-construction/accumulation. Historically barred from society's dominant

[172] Matt Rogers, 'Contextualizing Theories and Practices of Bricolage Research', *The Qualitative Report*, 20 January 2015, 1.

heteronormative structures, queer subjects are frequently compelled to fabricate lifestyles and construct identities from diverse sources.[173] This project celebrates the often-awkward schisms arising from the queer practice of collating the marginal and subcultural.

Indeed, the queering and opaque function of my cumulative research and compositional methods highlighted here speak in part to the significance of bricolage as a common tactic historically in the construction of subcultural style. Minority and socially alternative groups variously shroud themselves in patchworked visual styles with meaning deliberately occluded from the dominant culture. In the influential text *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, which maps the formation of postwar Britain's prominent youth-subcultures, Dick Hebdige suggests that minority classes historically develop style by appropriating commonplace materials and embedding them with new significance through bricolage. In this way, subcultural groups, such as punks with their assemblages of leather jackets, safety pins and plastic clothes pegs, 'appropriate a range of commodities by placing them in a symbolic ensemble which served to erase or subvert their original straight meanings.'[174] In this way, bricolage's process of codifying materials facilitates a kind of secret language amongst members of a subculture represented in their appearance or attire.[175] Indeed, as Hedbige affirms, the word 'subculture' itself is full of enigma, suggesting 'secrecy, masonic oaths, an Underworld'.[176] Here, the collision of repurposed signifiers presents an escape from cultural hegemony through unconventional associations.

In addition to conceptually signalling an established mode of subcultural visual production, the bricolage methodology emphasised in the culminating elements of *Heaven Seal II* and latently present throughout my doctoral study accords with definitions of queerness that emphasise a multiplicity, as highlighted in the exegesis' introduction. In its accommodation of plural interpretation, 'queer' signifies a refusal of monolithic narratives. This heterogeneity is key to my use of conceptual opacity as it engenders a calculated visual confusion that

[173] Peter Savastano, 'Gay Men as Virtuosi of the Holy Art of Bricolage and as Tricksters of the Sacred', *Theology & Sexuality* 14, no. 1 (January 2007), 12.
[174] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London, UK: Routledge, 1979), 104.
[175] Hebdige, *Subculture*, 103.
[176] Hebdige, *Subculture* 4.

resists classification, easy readability, and, ultimately, total disclosure.

Sleight of Hand Exhibition

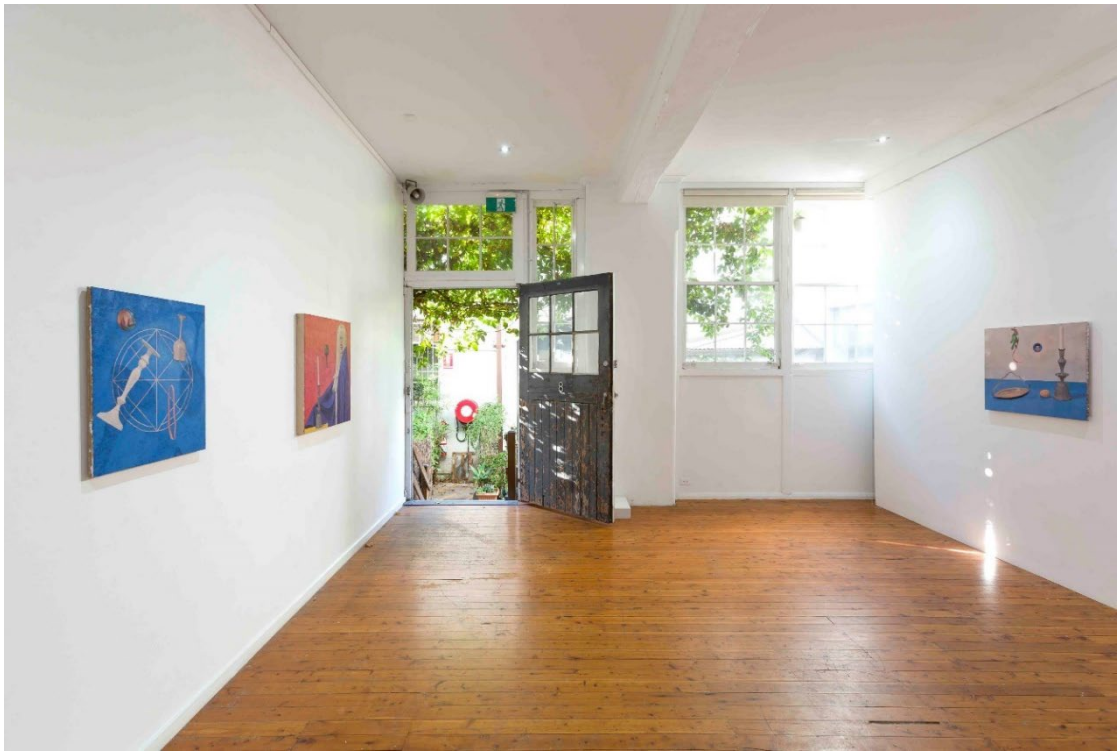

Figure 43: *Sleight of Hand*, 17 April – 28 April 2019, installation view, Wellington St Projects, Sydney. Photograph: Jessica Maurer

In April 2019, I staged a solo exhibition at Wellington St Projects in Sydney of a suite of five paintings, four of which I had completed since the commencement of my PhD candidature (fig. 43). Titled *Sleight of Hand*, the exhibition offered me a moment to reflect on the project's development. An excerpt from the exhibition text summarises its aims:

> An underlying theme of the exhibition is the often surreptitious nature of queer desire. Like a conjurer's 'sleight of hand', homoeroticism is frequently characterised by clandestine manoeuvres. Beleaguered by a long history of persecution, expressions of queer identity necessarily adopt modes hidden from plain view. This exhibition draws analogies between the codification of gay male identity and modes of painting that enlist allegorical and symbolic visual languages.

Viewing the paintings together in the exhibition space, I achieved clarity about the

progression of specific themes and gained new insights into my practice.

Figure 44: *Sleight of Hand*, 17 April – 28 April 2019, installation view, Wellington St Projects, Sydney. Photograph: Jessica Maurer

The exhibition's title evokes theatrical magic, referencing the occult narratives figuring in the paintings while suggesting an undercurrent of subterfuge. In theatrical magic, deception is a means to an end in creating a unique theatrical event, as magicians enact misdirections that cunningly deflect the audience's attention from the mechanics of their trick.[177] The exhibition's curation makes a winking reference to the role of the magician; positioned by the entrance to the gallery (fig. 44), the figure in *Midnight*—a painting discussed in detail in the following chapter—plays the part of magician or master of ceremonies of this occult performance, guiding the viewer through a suggestive theatre of spells and rituals. Thematic and pictorial misdirections underpin the exhibition. On the one hand, my painting's mimetic qualities are likened to the conjuring of illusory tricks: traditional techniques ground supernatural elements in believability. On the other hand, the mystical veils obscuring the

[177] Jason Leddington, 'The Experience of Magic', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 3, 2016, 254.

exhibition's latent erotic subtext is a conceptual misdirection, hoodwinking the audience through surreptitious disguise.

Figure 45: *Vessels*, 2017, oil on marine plywood, 40 x 35 cm

When viewing the works chronologically, the exhibition showed a gradual disruption of still life's conventions. The earliest work in the exhibition, titled *Vessels* (fig. 45), was created before the current study and is a comparatively conventional still life painting, its simple composition consisting of two commonplace objects upon a tabletop. From this starting point, genre conventions are progressively distorted through various unorthodox stylistic and pictorial configurations. In *December*, the peephole collage is an intrusion into the observational picture plane, while the makeshift mistletoe exposes still life as an artificial façade. *Heaven Seal I* and *Pisces Theatre* further distort traditional techniques of still life through the removal of the tabletop, their objects suspended in mid-air. Finally, *Midnight*, painted from observation using a mannequin, signals the juncture at which the still life object mimics the human figure. This concluding phase, in which genre categories are blurred through the studio apparatus of the mannequin, is the subject of the following chapter.

Conclusion of Chapter Three

The visual languages of occult traditions offer queer practices a rich stock of imagery and iconography through which to disrupt conventions and construct visual metaphors predicated on shared histories of otherness and marginalisation. Occultism can be interpreted as an inherently queer domain in its rejection of orthodoxy, its fringe-status and its historical accommodation of non-normative sexual practices and gender identities. In my project, the significance of occult imagery as a queer poetic device lies in its opacity. Occultic hieroglyphs such as the Hermetic ideogram in my paintings *Heaven Seal I* and *Heaven Seal II* as well as the astrological constellation in *Pisces Theatre* are deliberately cryptic forms, their unintelligibility to non-adherents functioning similarly to the coded communicative forms described in Chapter One. Coded lexicons constructed outside the parameters of the dominant culture are quietly subversive forces of resistance as visible, though not readily available, markers of the unorthodox.

At the same time, occult imagery indexes opacity through its metaphorical evocations. In my paintings, as imagery from the occult interacts with a queer erotics and other mechanisms of occlusion, associations of secret societies and esoteric mysteries allegorically liken queer desire to clandestine occult ritual. This metaphor honours a historical legacy of secrecy and simultaneously promotes an alternative queer mode that privileges ambiguity over the mainstream position of total visibility.

Chapter Four: Lay Figure

Since at least the fifteenth century, artists have used articulated human figures as aids in preparing and executing figure paintings.[178] Commonly known as lay figures,[179] the manipulable and silent condition of these studio apparatuses allowed artists to plan compositions, study visual effects such as patterns of light and shade, and record arrangements of draped fabric without the need for a life model.[180] This final chapter of the exegesis describes the phase in my project in which I introduced a lay figure, a repurposed life-sized retail store mannequin, into my methodology as a figurative counterpart to intrude upon and complicate my established aesthetic. While my initial adoption of a lay figure was speculative, its uncanny presence eventually became a compelling addition to my queer opaque visual language. In describing a series of figure paintings made using the lay figure, I chart the evolution of the lay figure's function in my studio from its early use as a narrative vehicle to an eventual tool for conceptual masking.

I begin this chapter by explaining the initial motivations that led me to adopt a mannequin into my process, before providing some historical context to the function of lay figures in the European atelier. The first painting made using my newly acquired mannequin, an allegorical portrait of a character from a sixteenth-century folktale, introduced me to the unique process of using an inanimate human model as the basis of painted portraiture and yielded several discoveries. The next painting described in this chapter, titled *Midnight*, depicts an ambiguous scenario of a conjurer enacting an occult ritual and reflects the influence of nineteenth-century Symbolist painting.

After acquiring a new, more flexible mannequin, I created *Adam*, a painting in which a pictorial focus on costuming foregrounds the concealing function of fabric. Through its side-on, seated pose, *Adam* is the first of my figure paintings to have its face entirely obscured

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[178] Jane Munro, 'The Mannequin as Tool', in *Silent Partners: Artist and Mannequin from Function to Fetish*, ed. Jane Munro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 13.
[179] The term 'manikin' can also be used to denote an artist's lay figure. While both refer to inanimate models of the human body, 'manikin' and 'mannequin' have variations in their definitions, with 'manikin' mostly reserved for artistic and medical fields. For consistency, I use 'mannequin' throughout the exegesis as its usage is broader. 'Mannequin' conveniently denotes the original retail-store function of my models and remains appropriate for their artistic purpose in my studio.
[180] Munro, 'The Mannequin as Tool', 13.

from view, resulting in a more pronounced sense of artifice. In this regard, I associate the mannequin's conspicuously feigned performance of the human body with the queer art of drag, a parodic performance that disturbs the binary between reality and imitation.

In the final painting discussed in this exegesis, titled *Mattachine*, a floating jug obscures a figure's face in an appropriation of a Magritte trope. In this conspicuous obstruction, certain strands of my project come full circle, as a conventional still life motif materialises as a physical concealment. Considering *Mattachine*'s conceptual and pictorial theme, I explore the mask as a prime emblem of queer opacity, citing the Mattachine Society's use of the image of mediaeval masked jesters, as well as the function of masks in the work of artists Zach Blas and Nancy Grossman.

Silent Partner

Before I adopted a mannequin into my studio practice, the human presence in my paintings was limited to partially obscured figures within peepholes, the recurring circular motifs whose symbolic implications I explored in Chapter Two. As rupturing mechanisms at odds with the conventional logic of still life assemblages, the peepholes provide a voyeuristic view into a secret space and bear a resemblance to glory holes via their shape and the conspicuous concealment of eroticised bodies within. In Chapter Three, I described how integrating the peephole with occult iconography augmented an aesthetics of the secret. Satisfied with recent results of my strategies for exploiting opacity but unsure how to expand the paintings further within the methodological framework I had established, I became curious about incorporating a new iteration of the figure into my compositions, where a body might logically occupy the same space as the still life assemblage. My desire for a more prominent figure was driven by speculation regarding a figure's potential for new narratives and forms of concealment.

Still life painting, by definition, is characterised by the figure's absence. As Norman Bryson notes, still life not only removes the human presence physically, but 'expels values which human presence imposes on the world'.[181] The figure's removal from still life stems from the

[181] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 60.

genre's origination; it emerged as an independent mode via the deliberate isolation of still life motifs from history paintings (containing figures) in which they first appeared.[182] Contemplating a reversal of this trajectory, I looked to ways I might integrate a figure—separate from the collage-like intrusions of the peephole figures (which, admittedly, already begin to subvert the above traditional notion of still life)—into my studio practice.

As this exegesis illustrates, observational painting is a significant conceptual and material feature of my opaque language, and I recognised the logistical difficulties of having a living model pose for me. My painting process is slow and laborious, and I foresaw significant complications from the demands placed on a life model were one to pose for me in the studio for the lengthy duration of a painting. I predicted problems in the rendering of clothing in particular, as my desire to record the subtleties of folds in fabric upon a body from observation appeared incompatible when accounting for the unavoidable movements of a living, breathing person. Such issues are time-honoured conundrums encountered in the art of painted portraiture. And, while the uncanny visual qualities of an inanimate figure eventually became of key conceptual interest (as I describe later in this chapter), at this stage in my project, my intention was indeed to reproduce the illusion of a living person. This initial aspiration to relocate into a mode of portraiture sprang from my influences and a desire to echo the pictorial narratives and aesthetics of Tooker and his ilk for whom, as Chloe Wyma states, 'needed the body' for their homoerotic evocations.[183]

As a practical solution, I purchased a full-body plastic retail store mannequin with articulated joints at its shoulders, waist and neck, that I could costume, pose and paint from observation as I would a still life object. The adoption of an inanimate, humanoid model as an aid in painting can be contextualised within historical usages of an artist's lay figure (fig. 46). Often made of wax or wood, lay figures were familiar yet frequently concealed articles of the European atelier, and variations are known to have been owned by painters including Michelangelo, Poussin and Cezanne.[184] Despite their widespread use, lay figures were frequently subject to discretion, as painters went to great lengths to avoid detection of their application in finished paintings; Roger de Piles cautioned in his *Principles of Painting* that,

[182] Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, 64.
[183] Wyma, 'Minor Variations', *Artforum*.
[184] Munro, 'The Mannequin as Tool', 13.

despite their convenience, lay figures can be 'falsifying'.[185] An eminent investigation of this 'secret' of the studio, the Fitzwilliam Museum's 2014 exhibition and catalogue *Silent Partners*, curated by Jane Munro, provides a comprehensive survey of the lay figure's adoption by artists since the Renaissance, unearthing its colourful yet overlooked history through displays of paintings, drawings, books, photographs and lay figures themselves.

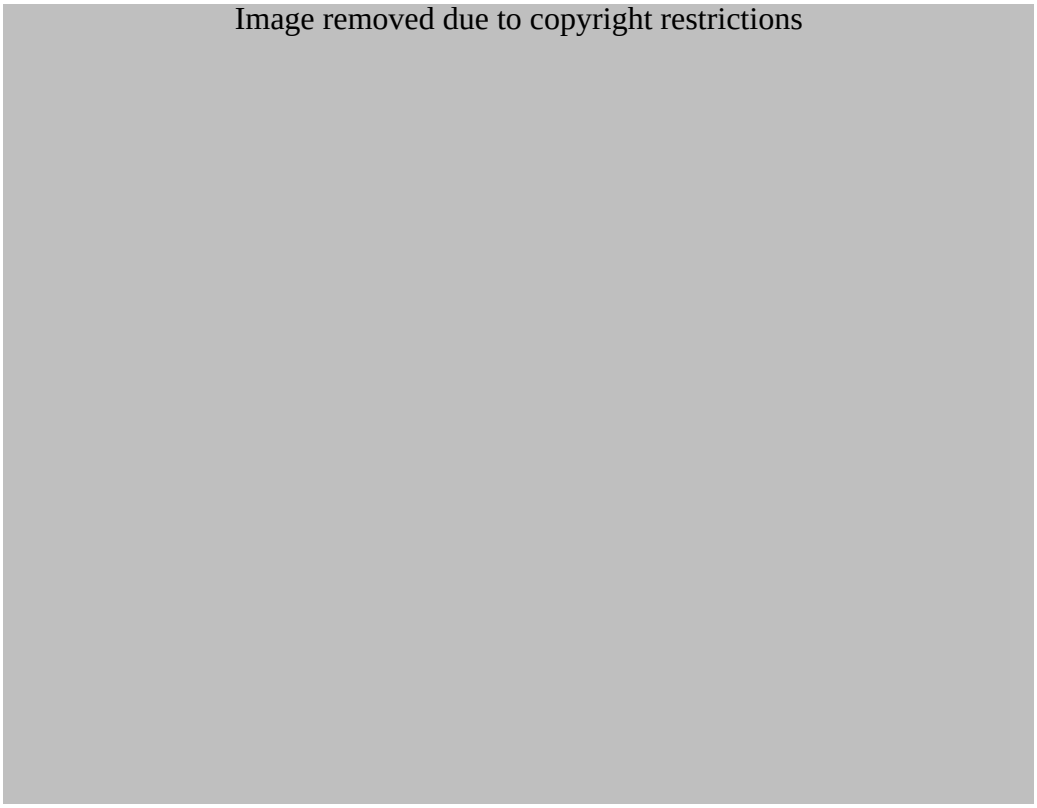

Figure 46: Artist's lay figure, French, c. 1860

Historical lay figures were various in type and technological sophistication. Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), for example, owned two lay figures, one an 'ingeniously constructed' mannequin fitted with brass joints for maximum flexibility, the other a crude, life-sized figure stuffed with straw.[186] Both were used as stand-ins for humans in his portraits, their artifice occasionally identifiable through the rigid appearance of the figures in final compositions (fig. 47).[187] As Munro suggests, Gainsborough's use of lay figures forms a 'figurative counterpart' to his broader practice of constructing dioramas and model

[185] Roger de Piles, *The Principles of Painting* (London, UK: Printed for J. Osborn, 1743), 121.
[186] Munro, 'The Mannequin as Tool', 20.
[187] Munro, 'The Mannequin as Tool', 20.

landscapes from which to paint scenery, consistent with an imaginative pictorial world of artifice and staged assemblages.[188]

Figure 47: Thomas Gainsborough, *Heneage Lloyd and his sister, Lucy*, c. 1750, oil on canvas, 64.1 cm x 81 cm

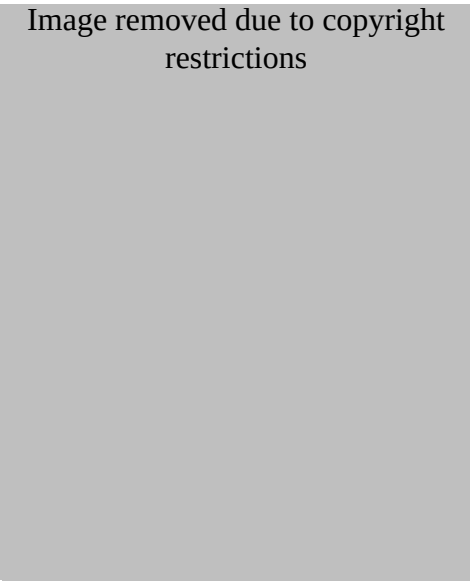

Figure 48: Ford Madox Brown, *Geoffrey Chaucer Reading the 'Legend of Custance' to Edward III and his Court*, 1847–1851, oil on canvas, 372 x 296 cm

The most common and beneficial use of a lay figure was as a support for drapery and clothes. Its inanimate condition allowed artists to slowly observe the intricacies of costume and thereby to convincingly recreate the weight, texture and disposition of fabrics.[189] Pre-Raphaelite Ford Maddox Brown (1821–1893) frequently borrowed or hired mannequins from various sources throughout his career and even made a child-sized mannequin himself to aid in the complex task of painting drapery.[190] Brown was known to spend entire days manipulating fabric on mannequins, from which he would then sketch drafts and create outlines for use in larger compositions.[191] For his monumental tableau *Chaucer at the Court of Edward III* (fig. 48), Brown made detailed studies of costumed lay figures and then collaged them together to construct the dramatic history painting.[192]

[188] Munro, 'The Mannequin as Tool', 20.
[189] Munro, 'The Mannequin as Tool', 26.
[190] Jane Munro, 'Silent Partner', *Silent Partners: Artist and Mannequin from Function to Fetish*, ed. Jane Munro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 86.
[191] Munro, 'Silent Partner', 86.
[192] Munro, 'Silent Partner', 85.

Tam Lin (2019)

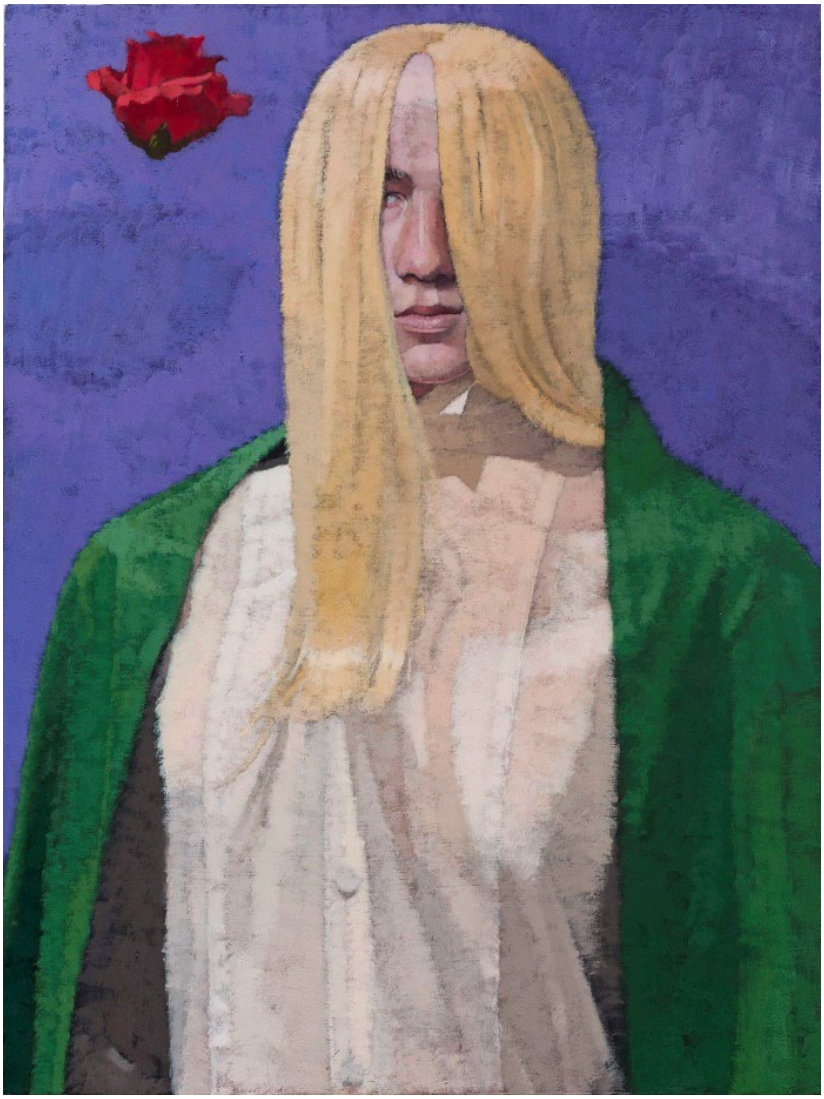

Figure 49: *Tam Lin*, 2019, oil on clay board, 61 x 45.6 cm

When my first mannequin arrived at my studio, I was immediately struck by its enigmatic presence. I began experimenting with poses, costumes and wigs to generate ideas and familiarise myself with my new apparatus. My initial approach to its application was intuitive, and its role within the studio was indeterminate as I could not yet conceive of a finished product. As a narrative point of departure for my first experiment in painted portraiture, I chose the folktale *The Ballad of Tam Lin*, reviving my earlier method of using literary works as compositional inspiration. Originating in the sixteenth century from the Scottish borders,[193] the ballad tells the story of Tam Lin, an elf-like creature imprisoned by

[193] Francis James Child and George Lyman Kittredge, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston, MA Houghton Mifflin, 1882), 336.

the Queen of Faeries and held captive in a realm separate from mortals. To return to human form, Tam Lin recruits Janet, a mortal woman, whom he instructs to hold onto him tightly as he morphs into a succession of dangerous creatures. She does this because she loves him, breaking the Queen's spell. Of conceptual significance is the ballad's plot device that places its characters in a state of constant transference between visible and invisible realms, aligning with my project's thematic preoccupations.

The ballad features a series of recurring visual motifs, and the ambiguous eroticism and protean fluidity embodied by the titular character encourage a playfully queer characterisation. I intended to visually interpret these motifs through a portrait of Tam Lin, anticipating that the ballad's theme of deceptive appearances would translate through the painting process (fig. 49). I dressed the mannequin in a white shirt and viridian cotton cape and fitted a long blond wig to its head. The wig obscures most of the mannequin's plastic face, in a visual effect reminiscent of partly drawn curtains. Beside the mannequin, I hung an artificial rose and erased evidence of its wire in the finished painting to give the appearance of levitation. In the ballad, the flower has a significant narrative function: when Janet plucks a forbidden rose, she initiates communication with Tam Lin and transitions from a world of reality into fantasy.

Once the inanimate figure was costumed and posed frontally in a half-bust length for simplicity, I began painting the scenario from observation as I would a still life, encountering new challenges because of the markedly different surfaces. The rendering of the clothing required closer observation than did my previous attempts at painting draped fabric. The painted execution of the wig presented even more technical complexity and required me to simplify its structure to translate its subtle shifts in tone and hue. To generate the illusion that a life model had posed for me, I used a photograph of a fashion model as a reference for the face of Tam Lin, painting directly from the photograph in substitution of the mannequin's plastic features. This task proved complicated and required constant adjustment of shapes and shadows so that the photographic reference might align with the optical logic of the observed mannequin. In cloaking the mannequin to avoid detection of its plastic artifice in the final image, I became conscious of the significance of this act of concealment embedded in the painting process as though it were a metaphor for my project, the mannequin being a stand-in for the queer body. That is to say, in my attempt at presenting an illusion that a real person

had posed for me rather than an inanimate dummy, I was granting the mannequin a kind of fabricated hyper-visibility while withholding its true identity, namely, its plastic unreality.

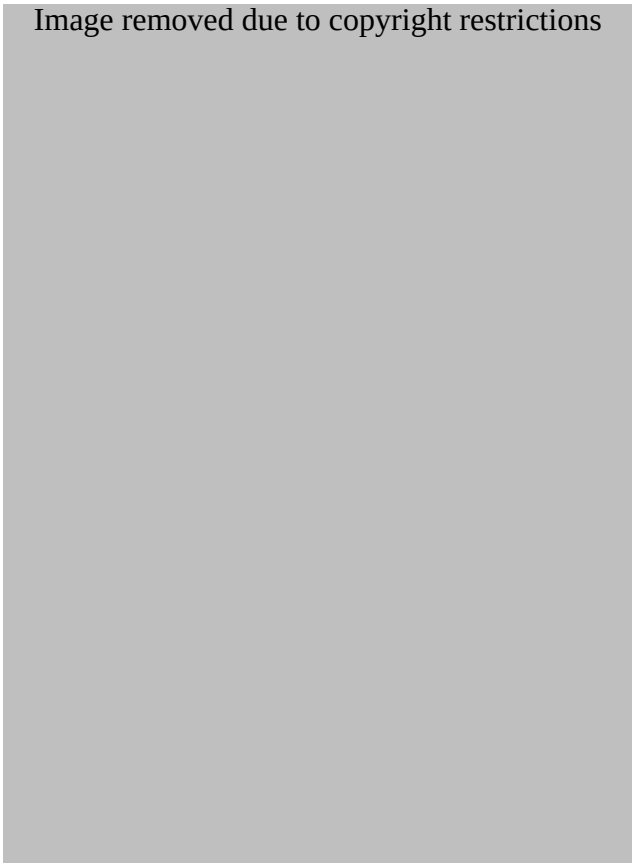

Figure 50: Rembrandt van Rijn, *'Tronie' of a Man with a Feathered Beret*, c. 1635-40, oil on panel, 62.5 x 47 cm

However, despite intentions to present the illusion a real person had posed for me, I was struck by certain oddities in the finished product. The disparate elements in *Tam Lin*—the mannequin, the collaged face, the costume, the levitating rose—collide somewhat incongruously, resulting in a sense of pictorial schism and an appearance underpinned by a conspicuous fictitiousness. Further, the occlusion of discernible facial features engenders a sense of anonymity in the portrait. For its lack of a clearly identifiable persona coupled with an overtly fabricated semblance, I identified a curious historical precedent in the Dutch tronies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rather than being intended as portraits in a traditional sense, tronies (literally 'head' or 'face' in Dutch) are paintings of character types, their anonymity making them desirable free market commodities.[194] As single-figure

[194] Haus der Kunst, 'Tronies — Marlene Dumas Und Die Alten Meister', *Haus der Kunst*, n.d., accessed 5 September 2021, https://hausderkunst.de/en/exhibitions/tronies-marlene-dumas-und-die-alten-meister

paintings of busts or half-length torsos, the tronies' distillation of narrative into an isolated character resonates with my motivations. A subgenre that includes Vermeer's *Girl with the Pearl Earring* and several paintings by Rembrandt (e.g., fig. 50), Rubens and van Dyck, tronies are frequently characterised by unconventional colour schemes and elaborate costuming.[195]

Midnight (2019)

Figure 51: *Midnight*, 2019, oil on clay board, 76.2 x 76.2 cm

Following *Tam Lin*, I experimented with more complicated poses with the mannequin, aiming to engage the figure with the still life elements more seamlessly. After an overly

[195] Fabienne Huguenin, 'Tronies: Das Gesicht Der Frühen Neuzeit', *Renaissance Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2015): 642.

ambitious and ultimately unsuccessful painting abandoned before completion, I created *Midnight* (fig. 51). Previously mentioned in Chapter Three in the context of my exhibition *Sleight of Hand* at Wellington St Projects, the painting depicts a figure conducting an ambiguous occult spell, its title evoking the folkloric witching hour, a time of night said to yield supernatural occurrences.

Midnight's figure is conceived as a fictive nineteenth-century magus inspired by descriptions of occult practitioners in scholar Tobias Churton's study of fin de siècle esotericism *Occult Paris: The Lost Magic of the Belle Epoque*. In *Occult Paris*, Churton describes the influence of traditions such as Hermeticism and Theosophy on the Symbolist artists of the period, who drew on these esoteric belief systems to navigate subjective emotions and spiritual realms. Privileging enigma over objectivity, the Symbolists produced aesthetic systems that are provocative in their opacity; as Churton says, the point of Symbolism is that 'the symbol should never be obvious; if its meaning is exhausted on sight, like an allegory, it has failed'.[196] Significantly, the mystical Symbolist painters were a key influence on de Chirico's Pittura Metafisica, foreshadowing his attempts at evoking otherworldly dimensions lurking beneath surfaces.[197]

Organising the model scenario to be painted from observation, I costumed the mannequin in a white shirt, thick blue cloak and the same long blond wig used for *Tam Lin*. I positioned the mannequin in a theatrical gesture with its right arm raised and outstretched, a pose suggestive of the reception of applause or indicative of an unveiling. In front of the raised arm, a yellow counter made of cardboard supports a crooked candle in a pewter candlestick. Near the centre of the composition, I hung a goblet from a wire as an enchanted focal point, erasing the wire in the final painting, a deception in the painting process that symbolically identifies with the illusory parlour tricks of a prestidigitator.

[196] Tobias Churton, *Occult Paris: The Lost Magic of the Belle Époque* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2016), 7.
[197] Altamira, 'De Chirico, Böcklin and Klinger', 55.

Figure 52: Gustave Moreau, *Jason and Medea*, 1865, oil on canvas, 213 x 126 cm

The superimposed face, again taken from a photographic reference, produces a gender indeterminacy that reflects another influence of Symbolist painting on this work. The Symbolists' frequent fascination with androgyny has often been interpreted as a covert homoerotic or queer strategy; the depiction of androgyny, writes Emmanuel Cooper, 'suggested the possibility of a public identity as a "third sex"'.[198] Through a cisnormative lens, gender ambiguity functions like the opaque surface of a mask, obstructing categorisation. Androgynous representation is key to a queer opaque reading of Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau (1826–1898) in particular, as exemplified in his long-haired Jason in *Jason and Medea* (fig. 52). Moreau's enigmatic depictions of worlds both visible and invisible resist literal interpretation and are full of cryptic symbolism. [199] James Saslow suggests that Moreau's poetic visions contain covert expressions of repressed homoerotic

[198] Emmanuel Cooper, *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West* (London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 6.
[199] Peter Cooke, 'Symbolism, Decadence and Gustave Moreau', The Burlington Magazine 151, no. 1274 (2009): 318.

desire, veiled beneath layers of exoticism and decorative excess.[200] A lifelong recluse renowned for destroying personal papers and refusing biographies, Moreau populated his paintings with sexually ambiguous figures that 'hint at what his carefully covered tracks never quite confirm'.[201] Regardless of the validity of such speculations, his mystical paintings express an undeniably queer eroticism that continues to intrigue.

When executing *Midnight* onto the surface of the board, I deliberately emphasised moments of sheen and shimmer to visually cohere the disparate elements. Compared to my previous attempts at figure painting, *Midnight* displays a tighter integration of its separate parts, the figure existing with greater believability within the space of the still life objects. The collaged face, too, in this instance is more seamlessly superimposed onto the mannequin's. The unity of marks and surface texture also contributes to *Midnight*'s coherence and intrigue, as patches of padded marks, slowly accrued in layers, demarcate the forms with consistently blurred edges.

Midnight has a subtle jocular quality. In its brilliant primary colours and slightly comical depiction, *Midnight*'s sorcery is rather akin to pop-cultural representations of the occult. In this regard, the painting seems almost a parody of an occult ritual, a cartoonish interpretation of its Symbolist source material. The mimicry and critical distance of the parodic add another layer of conceptual mediation,[202] and a recurring visual innuendo augments this painting's comic effect. The contrivance of repeated patterns and shapes in its arrangement, with especial focus on relations between the figure, candlestick and goblet, gives a pronounced sense of upward motion to the composition. The figure's gesturing arm ambiguously obscured beneath the cloak, the candlestick pointing off-centre, and even the figure's shape generates subtle humour and even an erotic charge through their phallic resemblance.

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[200] Saslow, *Pictures and Passions*, 189.
[201] Saslow, *Pictures and Passion*, 189.
[202] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, First Illinois paperback ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 6.

Adam (2019)

Figure 53: *Adam*, 2019, oil on gesso board, 61 x 61 cm

After completing several paintings of the retail store mannequin, I became frustrated with the limitations of its minimal articulation. Thus, to create paintings with more diverse poses, I purchased a second mannequin made of fibreglass with adjustable joints at the knees, elbows and hips. Testing my new lay figure's flexibility, my next painting, *Adam* (fig. 53), employs a seated, side-on pose compositionally inspired by James McNeill Whistler's (1834–1903) 1871 portrait of his mother, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*, a painting whose sense of emotional estrangement manifests in its cold, strictly formal pictorial order (fig. 54). I costumed the mannequin in a shirt, wig and layers of draped fabric, and placed a green apple in its gloved palm.

Initially, I was less concerned with narrative as I viewed *Adam* as a technical experiment. My primary objectives were accustoming myself to the new lay figure and painting the fabric. Painted cloth has been a recurring pictorial element throughout the project. In previous chapters, I described the symbolic potential and visual appeal of fabric in the context of the painted curtain and its capacity to index visual absence through its concealing function. The depiction of draped cloth also has an underlying sensuality in its visual relation to the body, where the folds and crevices of fabric have an allusive relation to flesh.[203] I intended the focus on cloth in *Adam* to conjure similar associations. Recalling Parrhasius' painted curtain, *Adam*'s costume functions for the spectator as a presence that shrouds a visual unavailability. The layered cloth provides the outline of a hidden figure, its indiscernible 'human' features comprising a conspicuous absence.

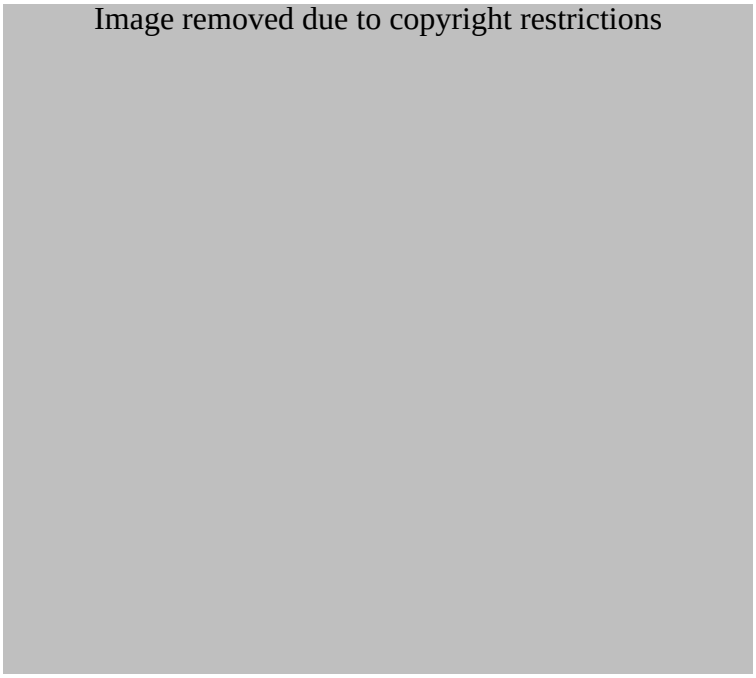

Figure 54: James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*, 1871, oil on canvas, 144.3 × 162.4 cm

Figure 55: *Adam* (detail)

The painting of draped clothing is a key historical function of lay figures. Arranging fabric onto the mannequin requires a distinct set of processes, while its rendering requires intense focus to achieve a sense of its natural fall. As Munro observes, 'the challenges and pitfalls of arranging drapery were not to be underestimated'.[204] Several historical treatises offer advice

[203] Hollander, 'The Fabric of Vision', 48.
[204] Munro, 'The Mannequin as Tool', 27.

for arranging fabric upon a lay figure, such as using wooden rods' tips to manipulate fabric instead of the artist's hands.[205] Draping my lay figure for the painting *Adam*, I manoeuvred the layers of cloth using the rod of a paintbrush, endeavouring to achieve an arrangement of folds and creases that appeared natural and emphasised the quality of light on its surface (fig. 55).

The lack of a superimposed face and an overtly manipulated appearance (especially in the somewhat awkward positioning of its suspended arms) results in a pronounced 'unreality' of the figure, and an uncanny visual effect. In this way, *Adam* can be viewed as a still life in the true sense of the word, a category arguably refuted in the previous paintings' attempts at the illusion of life through their integration of (albeit partly concealed) observable facial features. Intrigued by this aesthetic departure, I began speculating whether painting objects that mimic the figure might occupy a classification in-between still life and portraiture. However, *Adam* still exhibits no visible markers of its sitter's underlying plasticity, except perhaps the slight protrusion of its fibreglass nose, and so remains an opaque object. By acknowledging the artifice of the mannequin through these subtle pictorial configurations within the painting process, *Adam* visibly draws attention to the absence of an actual human. Here, I became more cognisant of the mannequin not just as a studio aid in creating an illusion but also as a device for conceptual opacity. The paradoxical 'outing' of the mannequin by way of its total secretion beneath a costume serves to advertise its ultimate unidentifiability.

Across their varied and broad historical usage, mannequin's uncanny performance of the human body has provoked speculation amongst theorists and artists. Mannequins are frequently evoked in terms of the uncanny as they produce an uncomfortable confusion between living things and objects. In this light, I began to consider the disorienting effect of the conspicuous mimicry of the human body in my figure paintings as resonant with the uncanny queer art of drag. An act of gender or heterosexual parody that disturbs the binary between reality and imitation, drag challenges heterosexuality's 'claim to originality' by drawing attention to the performative nature of gender.[206] Just as drag's aberrations destabilise binary categories of sex and gender by exposing their performativity, the visual

[205] Munro, 'The Mannequin as Tool', 28.
[206] Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, David M. Halperin (New York, NY: Routledge), 314.

incongruity of the costumed lay figure emphasises the nature of my studio practice as staged and highly manipulated.

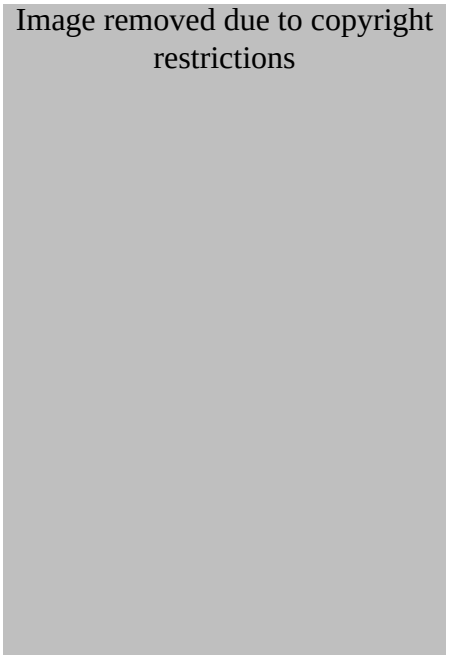

Figure 56: Edgar Degas, *Portrait of Henri Michel-Lévy*, c. 1878, oil on canvas, 40 x 28 cm

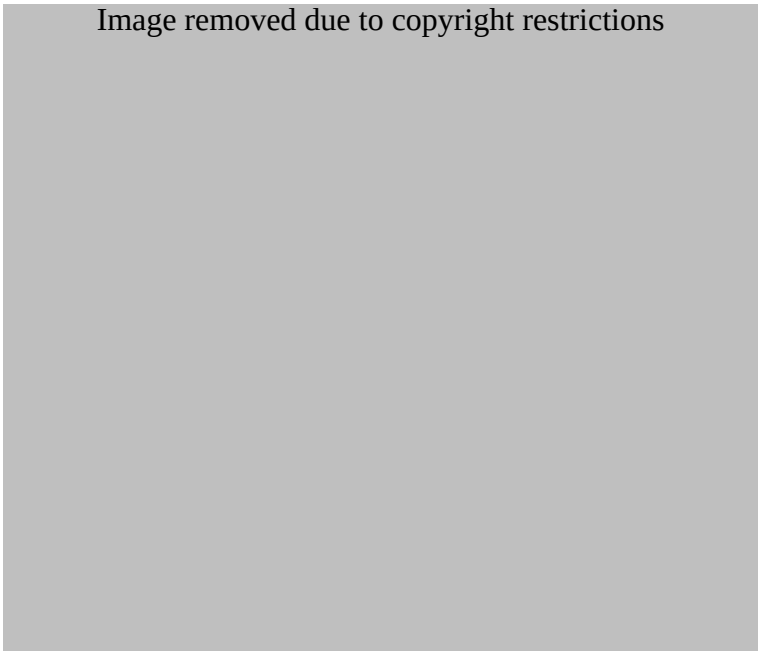

Figure 57: Alan Beeton, *Decomposing*, c. 1929, oil on canvas, 34.3 × 39.4 cm

Exposing the artifice of the lay figure has historical precedents in painting. While in its early history the lay figure was most often concealed, a true 'silent partner' in the studio, its artificiality was on rare occasions 'outed', and in the nineteenth century the artist's mannequin as a subject in and of itself began to assume an active role in pictorial narratives.[207] In most cases, the lay figure was depicted in the context of the studio, represented as a still life object albeit one with an enigmatic aura. For example, Edgar Degas' (1834–1917) *Portrait of Henri Michel-Levy* depicts artist Michel-Levy in his atelier replete with unfinished paintings, a palette, brushes and a clothed female lay figure slumped on the floor (fig. 56).[208] In the modern period, the uncanny quality of the lay figure was often exploited for metaphor or socio-political commentary.[209] British artist Alan Beeton (1880–

[207] Munro, 'Wooden Narratives: The Mannequin in the Picture', in *Silent Partners: Artist and Mannequin from Function to Fetish*, ed. Jane Munro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 95.
[208] Munro, 'Flesh and Bloodlessness', 136.
[209] Alyce Mahon, 'The Assembly Line Goddess: Modern Art and the Mannequin', in *Silent Partners: Artist and Mannequin from Function to Fetish*, ed. Jane Munro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 195.

1942) created a series of paintings of his lay figure in the early twentieth century for humorous effect (fig. 57).[210] Despite being categorically still life, Beeton's inanimate lay figures arguably display humanity through their dynamic poses and engagement with props.[211]

Figure 58: Digital photograph of the author's studio in Sydney, 2019

The painting *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is previously discussed in the exegesis' introduction, so I will give only a brief description of it here to locate it within the trajectory of the project (fig. 1). Following on from *Adam*, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* was rendered from perhaps the most elaborate studio assemblage constructed during the project (fig. 58). In addition to the lay figure's more prominent engagement with the still life

[210] Munro, 'Wooden Narratives', 103.
[211] Munro, 'Wooden Narratives', 103.

elements, the painting is significant for integrating several of the project's key pictorial devices, being the only lay figure painting to include the peephole motif. Within the staged scenario, the peephole, the still life arrangement and the costumed lay figure each assume vital but oblique positions in the occult narrative.

Mattachine (2019)

Figure 59: *Mattachine*, 2019, oil on clay board, 50.8 x 40.8 cm

The final painting discussed in this exegesis, titled *Mattachine*, depicts a standing figure at three-quarter length (fig. 59). Costumed in white gloves and a long-sleeved yellow shirt tucked awkwardly into tight-fitting brown pants, the figure raises its hand, gesturing a fluted

ceramic jug that hovers in front of its face, obscuring its reality as an inanimate prop. The painting's depicted occultic incantation—or illusory magic trick—finds this doctoral study at a poetic full-circle juncture. No longer just as a source of conceptual obfuscation, the still life object is now a literal mask, a physical veil rendering the lay figure unidentifiable and consequently opaque.

Mattachine's composition takes significant inspiration from Magritte, who frequently depicted commonplace items in unfamiliar places as a strategy to invoke the uncanny. For Magritte, such pictorial devices were disruptive implements designed to subvert conventions and shake the viewer out of complacency by making 'the most everyday objects shriek aloud'.[212] In *Son of Man* (fig. 60), a floating apple's uncanny presence has an additional symbolic function as a concealing mechanism, obscuring the identity of a protagonist, begetting visual confusion and a visible absence. Describing the painting, Magritte explains,

> …so you have the apparent face, the apple, hiding the visible but hidden, the face of the person. It's something that happens constantly. Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.[213]

Son of Man attains its capacity for arousal through withholdings and paradoxes. Like Parrhasius' curtain, Magritte's occluding fruit constructs a visual and conceptual blind spot that stirs the imagination and enacts a desire—for revelation, identification and solution—in the beholder.

To execute my homage to Magritte, I staged a scenario resembling *Son of Man* in front of my easel, enlisting the lay figure as the protagonist and suspending a jug from a wire to obscure its plastic face. Satisfied with the arrangement of figure and object in my studio, I rendered the scene onto a smooth clay board. This surface offers little resistance compared to the

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[212] René Magritte, 'La Ligne de vie' (1938), reprinted in *René Magritte*, 1898–1967, ed. Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque and Frederik Leen (Ghent: Ludion, 2005), 46.
[213] René Magritte in a radio interview with Jean Neyens (1965), cited in Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, trans. Richard Millen (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), 172.

gessoed boards used for the previous paintings, allowing for finer details and more seamless tonal shifts. The evenness of the surface is especially evident in the rendering of the figure's shirt, which was executed through several thin layers that eventually accumulated into variegated patches of opaque yellow (fig. 61). The figure's rigid pose is significant to its overall aesthetic outcome. Coupled with the accentuation of the perhaps awkwardly manipulated folds of fabric in the lay figure's costume, the painting achieves a decidedly uncanny effect.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 60: René Magritte, *Son of Man*, 1964, oil on canvas, 116 cm x 89 cm

Figure 61: *Mattachine* (detail)

Mattachine foregrounds the mask as an emblem of and tool for opacity. As a veil or substitution for the human face, masks obstruct the neat process of identification by providing anonymity and confidentiality. As visual mechanisms, writes cultural theorist Magda Szcześniak, masks 'question the undisputed emancipatory potential of visibility while simultaneously offering new, tactical, and conditional modes of existing in the public visual sphere'.[214] In this regard, my adoption of the mask as a poetic device can be viewed in

[214] Magda Szcześniak, 'Blending In and Standing Out – Camouflage and Masking as Queer Tactics of Negotiating Visibility', *Widok. Teorie i Praktyki Kultury Wizualnej*, no. 5 (2014), 3.

relation to historical creative lineages of queer concealment. The title of the painting *Mattachine* honours this lineage in its reference to the Mattachine Society, the first major gay rights group formed in the United States, who adopted the image of a masked jester to symbolise their clandestine operation. [215] Established upon an ethos of secrecy in 1951, the Mattachine Society derived its name from a category of travelling performers in medieval Europe who satirised the ruling classes behind the relatively safe anonymity of masks (fig. 62).[216] The jester image evoked for the gay rights group a metaphorical camouflage; as historian Martin Meeker attests, 'by wearing the Janus-faced mask of respectability, the Mattachine Society perfected the politics of irony and even the practice of camp'.[217] Their tactical appropriation of the image of the disguised performer exemplifies the creative potential and even humour in the historical codes implemented out of necessity.

Figure 62: Mattachine Society poster, printed in San Francisco, 1956

Figure 63: Zach Blas, *Fag Face Mask*, 2012, vacuum formed painted plastic mask

[215] Roy Cain, 'Disclosure and Secrecy among Gay Men in the United States and Canada: A Shift in Views', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2, no 1 (1991), 29.
[216] Martin Meeker, 'Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (2001): 83.
[217] Meeker, 'Behind the Mask of Respectability', 81.

As described in Chapter One, a consequence of visibility is its rendering of the individual vulnerable to potentially manipulative observers. In this regard, systems of authority, from the governmental to the corporate, may exploit a subject's easy identification or classification for control.[218] As corrective, masks, whether physical or conceptual, suggest a mode of distorted public visibility predicated on concealment. A contemporary artist who engages the mask as a political and poetic tool for queer opacity is Zach Blas (b. 1981). Blas' practice exemplifies recent artistic trends wherein opacity is engaged as a conceptual motivator and activist tactic. For Blas, practices predicated on opacity display 'an aesthetics that demands a different approach to looking, recognizing, and identifying, that confounds a standardized visibility structured by quantification, measurement, and reduction'.[219] Drawing on Glissant's politics of opacity as 'an ethical mandate to maintain obscurity',[220] Blas' masks interrogate institutional surveillance and identification technologies, exploiting their methods for visual metaphor.

For *Facial Weaponisation Suite*, a project spanning 2011 to 2014, Blas used 3D scanning software to collect facial data from participants to construct a series of single-coloured digital masks, designed to protect the user from facial recognition technology. The first mask of the series, titled 'Fag Face Mask' (fig. 63), was conceived as a response to sociological studies claiming that, due to external signifiers such as piercings, observers can recognise male sexual orientation instantly through mere appearance.[221] Combining the biometric facial data of several gay male participants, Blas computer-generated a pink 3D mask, distorting and jumbling the amalgamated data in the process so that the final product is abstracted and unrecognisable as a human face. In this way, Blas exploits the very technology of surveillance to disrupt its operation, simultaneously highlighting the non-neutrality of such tools in the identification and ultimate reduction of minority groups. 'Fag Face Mask' suggests a new, manufactured queer visibility for the digital surveillance era that plays on the oppressive trope of 'gay face'—by which all gay men are perceived to look alike—to resist

[218] Szcześniak, 'Blending In and Standing Out', 3.
[219] Zach Blas, 'Informatic Opacity | Biononymous.Me', *Bionomymous*, n.d., accessed 30 September 2022, https://biononymous.me/informatic-opacity/
[220] Blas, 'Informatic Opacity'.
[221] Szcześniak, 'Blending In and Standing Out', 17.

recognition by potentially malicious parties.[222]

Regarding the emblematic power of masks to convey notions of obstruction, I conclude this section by mentioning Nancy Grossman's (b. 1940) 'heads' as an intriguing footnote regarding their queering function in problematising identification. Grossman's masked sculptures, created recurringly since the 1960s, consist of heads carved out of wood covered tautly in articles of leather and zippers (fig. 64). In her own words, this material process represents 'the idea of making something, then hiding it again'.[223] For much of her career, observers have gendered the sculptures as male, while their confronting appearance—reminiscent of gimp masks—has attracted affiliations with s/m sexual practices. Indeed, the image of the gimp mask, like that of the glory hole described in Chapter Two, conjures associations of the liberatory and anti-assimilationist dimensions to 'faceless' sexual practices. Further, their prominent use of leather, which in the 1970s became a loaded signifier of gay male subculture, has further contributed their reading as representing underground groups.

However, these associations remain, in part, a misrecognition.[224] Remaining consistent in the claim not to have been familiar with the specifics of such s/m practices at the time of their initial conception, Grossman further attests that her masked sculptures are indeed a mode of self-portraiture.[225] In this regard, the artist's declarations and their persistent misreading challenge assumptions about external indicators and suggest new, non-binary modes of interpretation separate from the body and surface appearances. Neither intended as male nor necessarily representing sadomasochistic inclinations, the sculptures can alternatively be viewed as representative of the pitfalls of hasty recognition. This reading accords with Grossman's resolve to make something only to 'hid[e] it again'. The objects' physical concealments, manifested in their material coverings, supplement a conceptual obfuscation by which gender and identity remain opaque.

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[222] Szcześniak, 'Blending In and Standing Out', 19.
[223] Nancy Grossman quoted in Grace Glueck, 'A "New Realism" in Sculpture?', Art in America 59, no. 6 (November–December 1971): 152.
[224] David Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 179.
[225] Getsy, *Abstract Bodies*, 179.

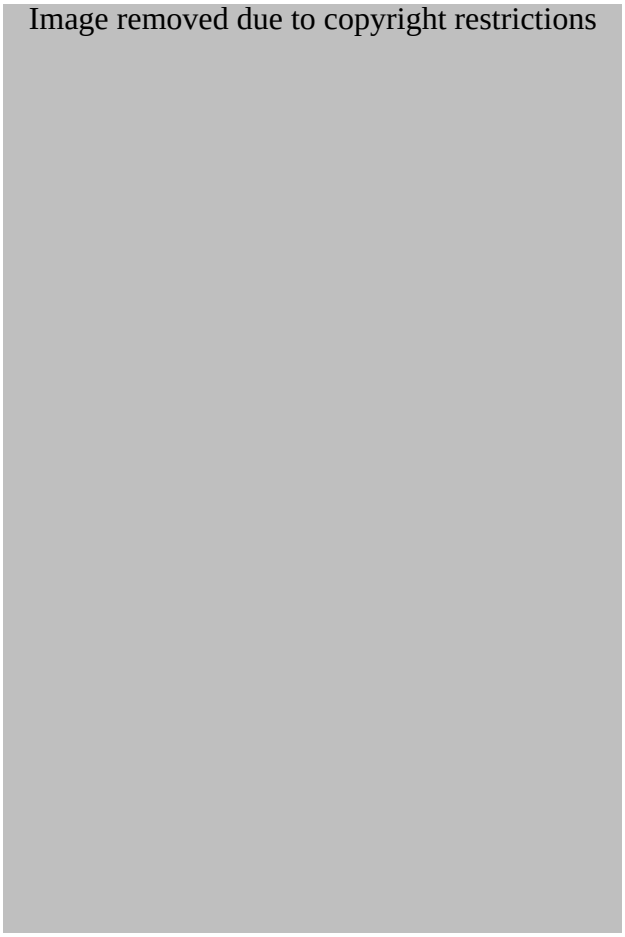

Figure 64. Nancy Grossman, *Blunt*, 1968, leather, wood, porcelain and hardware, 43.5 x 43.7 x 21 cm

Conclusion of Chapter Four

This chapter described a sequence of figure paintings that enlisted a lay figure as a studio apparatus to further my exploration of pictorial opacity. While my initial adoption of a lay figure was driven by a desire to generate the illusion of a human presence, the function of this historical 'secret of the studio' became more complex as its uncanny presence suggested the potential for a more poetic engagement. Contradictorily, it was on acquiring a more articulated and 'lifelike' second mannequin that I began to emphasise its artificial nature as a strategy for opacity. By drawing attention to the figure's manipulated presence through incongruous compositional and narrative configurations, I subverted the conventions of painted portraiture by paradoxically staging the absence of a living human presence.

Regarding the lay figure as a concealed entity, masking is a major theme of this chapter. Masks are mechanisms for disrupting visibility as they 'stop the eye of the observer on their opaque surfaces'.[226] In my first paintings using a lay figure, in the period when it served the purpose of imitating a living model, the act of concealing its artifice through costume and superimposed 'collage' faces rehearsed a symbolic masking operation in my painting process. As my figure paintings developed, I became self-conscious of this manoeuvre and addressed these distancing mechanisms more directly. As a source of technological mediation and a proxy for the queer body, the lay figure in my studio came to evoke intermediary states between concealment and revelation.

A question raised in this chapter is whether inanimate objects that mimic the figure might occupy an in-between classification of the traditional genres of still life and portraiture. This question energises a key aspect of my paintings made using a lay figure: their immanent subversion of genre codes by blurring conventional categories, ultimately rendering the categories themselves more opaque. The ambiguity in my figure paintings, regarding how they approach core understandings of still life and portraiture while perhaps ceasing to be either fully, undermines the processes of classification that underpin traditional notions of figuration, and highlights the instability of such categories. The queer utility of these paintings is further evident in the indirect eroticism and often androgynous presentation of the figure, dismantling binary categories of male/female and even of human/inhuman. In foregrounding masking strategies, this chapter demonstrates how queer opacity as an aesthetic principle has facilitated this destabilisation and contributed novel methods for making and interpreting figurative painting.

[226] Szcześniak, 'Blending In and Standing Out', 15.

Conclusion

Through practice-led inquiry, this doctoral study contributes new perspectives to two recently burgeoning fields of contemporary art discourse. The first of these fields is theorised as an opaque aesthetics, wherein deliberate obscurity is viewed as a provocation to culturally assumed virtues such as clarity and transparency. In a queer political context, opacity is 'a crucial activist, aesthetic, and theoretical tactic of queer subjectivity in the 21st century',[227] a mode of resistance to the suppressive outcomes of a normative visibility politics. The second key field addressed by this study relates to the application of traditional pictorial processes by recent communities of queer figurative painters to explore issues of identity and desire. Practices exemplifying this trend insert explicit queer representations into figurative traditions in which they have been previously disguised or absent, and are often characterised by lucid expressions of queer sexuality, romance and political activism. By re-examining historical painting conventions through the lens of queer opacity, this project makes space for an alternative mode of queer figuration energised by the subversive power of secrecy, concealment and enigma. In contrast to the hyper-visibility of much recent queer figuration, the paintings created for the studio research recognise the destabilising potential of veiling tactics and honour overlooked histories in modernist figuration wherein queer themes were camouflaged out of necessity. In this regard, my paintings have a latently contrarian politics in that their advocacy for concealment contrasts with the normative insistence on total outness.

A key strategy for opacity to this practice-led doctorate can be interpreted as the pictorial representation of secrecy. To engage this admittedly paradoxical enterprise, I developed a series of stylistic configurations and conceptual tactics to intimate the withholding of knowledge. In this way, the project reclaims secrecy as a historical legacy and a subversive aesthetic strategy. This conceptual focus in secrecy was present at the onset of my candidature, where the project developed from my interest in the affective qualities of the visual codes employed by various queer historical figures to convey their secret desires under the radar of heteronormative view. These research origins indicate another central theme of the project: desire. As my project illustrates, still life painting is an apt mode for investigating

[227] Zach Blas, 'Darkness in the Archives: Queer Opacity as Resistance', *Zach Blas*, March 2017, accessed 30 November 2022, https://zachblas.info/events/darkness-archives-queer-opacity-resistance/

a poetics of desire because of its proclivity for producing absences that trigger an urge or longing for what is hidden from view. Throughout my paintings, pictorial withholdings contribute to the narrative thread of secretive queer desire, conferring a poetics to queer sexuality that transcends a mere erotic representation.

Withholdings in my paintings assume multiple forms. In several paintings, rendered curtains, cloaks and wigs become visual mechanisms of occlusion. Simultaneously, occult hieroglyphs and illogical, rebus-like object arrangements suggest arcane meanings requiring decipherment. A further refusal is present in the figure paintings via the lay figure itself as it becomes an unexpected source of the uncanny in its conspicuous staging of the absence of the real. Such pictorial concealments occur within obscure narratives, often based on external literary source material, wherein hidden clues and cryptic motifs prevent the process of total revelation. Though these concealments were arrived at to evoke histories of subdued gay/queer male desire and visual production specifically, my configuring of queer opacity as a visual metaphor with regard to an obscure erotics in painting has broader implications outside these specified limitations. I propose that the methodology established by the project, regarding its pictorial strategies for concealment, can be of use to artists and researchers of similarly diverse positionalities engaged in a queer opaque aesthetics.

The cumulative nature of my project, reflected in the diverse influences informing the paintings, produces a sense of aesthetic schism across the studio research that is a salient feature of its queering methodology. Throughout the investigation, references to various artistic movements, artists, pictorial techniques and narrative sources, ranging from the literary to the folkloric, drift in and out of focus as I extract elements from disparate practices to further my artistic agenda. Historical forms featured in the project include the following: the still life genre and its various sub-modes such as the vanitas; the Surrealist movement, specifically the paintings of René Magritte; Giorgio de Chirico's Pittura Metafisica; twentieth-century American 'symbolic realist' painting, notably that of George Tooker; the homoerotic scrapbook; and the Symbolists of the fin de siècle. Likewise, the contemporary field to which the research is indebted and contributes comprise, among others, the practices of Daniel Sinsel, Elijah Burgher, Hernan Bas and Zach Blas. Combining historical and contemporary forms, this bricolage research is responsible for a visual language characterised by deliberate confusion and fluid interpretation, which is inherently queer in its resistance to

the totalising effects of singular representation. This heterogeny, embodied in the scheme of disparate elements permeating the study, is therefore an aesthetics, ethics and poetics of opacity in itself, signalling a right to difference and celebrating a multiplicity of subjectivities.

Finally, I suggest that the various historical pictorial forms influencing the project, despite their apparent conceptual divergence, have a fundamental correlation in a shared, albeit paradoxical, aim—that of picturing the unseen elements that haunt the visible realm. Each artistic precedent represented within the exegesis is responsible for an oeuvre that challenges the widespread assumption that virtue is tied to the visible. Motivated at different turns by occult philosophy, psychoanalytic concepts and, in the case of the contemporary practitioners, strategic queer opacity, this artistic aim is evident not least in my queer modern forebears such as Tooker, who subverted visibility as a political and erotic act within a prohibitive society. In establishing a genealogy of seemingly disconnected forms of figurative painting, my research contends that historical pictorial strategies designed to subvert visibility can be reconfigured in contemporary practice as a quietly radical form of queer ambiguity.

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Appendix: Documentation of PhD Exhibition

Oblique Objects
17 August – 15 September 2023, ANU School of Art & Design Gallery, Canberra.

Oblique Objects explores concealment as a visual and poetic strategy in figurative painting. Drawing on subcultural aesthetic lineages of secrecy and highlighting painting's capacity for latency, the exhibition enlists a queer opacity as its conceptual modus operandi and consists of a body of paintings in which discernible pictorial and conceptual veils hide a furtive erotics in plain view.

The works exhibited feature assemblages of objects and props staged in mysterious configurations and painted largely from observation. Motifs such as curtains, cloaks and surreptitious peepholes represent conspicuous visual obstructions. An artist's lay figure is employed in several paintings, and its disguised presence is mined for symbolism. These apparent concealments augment the work's conceptual obfuscations wherein narrative ambiguity, compositional schisms and occult hieroglyphs signify the withholding of salient information and engender layers of visual intrigue. Complementarily, the painted surface, with its slow accumulation of differentiated brushstrokes, enacts a distinct material opacity.

In addition to the still life genre, the paintings in *Oblique Objects* draw upon a range of historical figurative modes in which symbolic motifs simultaneously evoke and obscure themes of desire. The artist cites the latent eroticism and conceptual opacity in the paintings of American artist George Tooker as one key historical precedent. Other notable influences on the work include the Pittura Metafisica of Greek-born Giorgio de Chirico and the Surrealist provocations of Belgian artist René Magritte. The variety of historical and contemporary references throughout this exhibition contributes to a sense of bricolage that is a key characteristic of the work. In this regard, the collision of diverse elements within the paintings engenders a visual multiplicity, producing an aesthetic of obliquity that resists the totalising effects of a mainstream visibility politics.

Figure 65: *Oblique Objects*, 17 August – 15 September 2023, installation view, ANU School of Art & Design Gallery, Canberra. Photograph: David Paterson

Figure 66: *Oblique Objects*, 17 August – 15 September 2023, installation view, ANU School of Art & Design Gallery, Canberra. Photograph: David Paterson

Figure 67: *Oblique Objects*, 17 August – 15 September 2023, installation view, ANU School of Art & Design Gallery, Canberra. Photograph: David Paterson

Figure 68: *Oblique Objects*, 17 August – 15 September 2023, installation view, ANU School of Art & Design Gallery, Canberra. Photograph: David Paterson

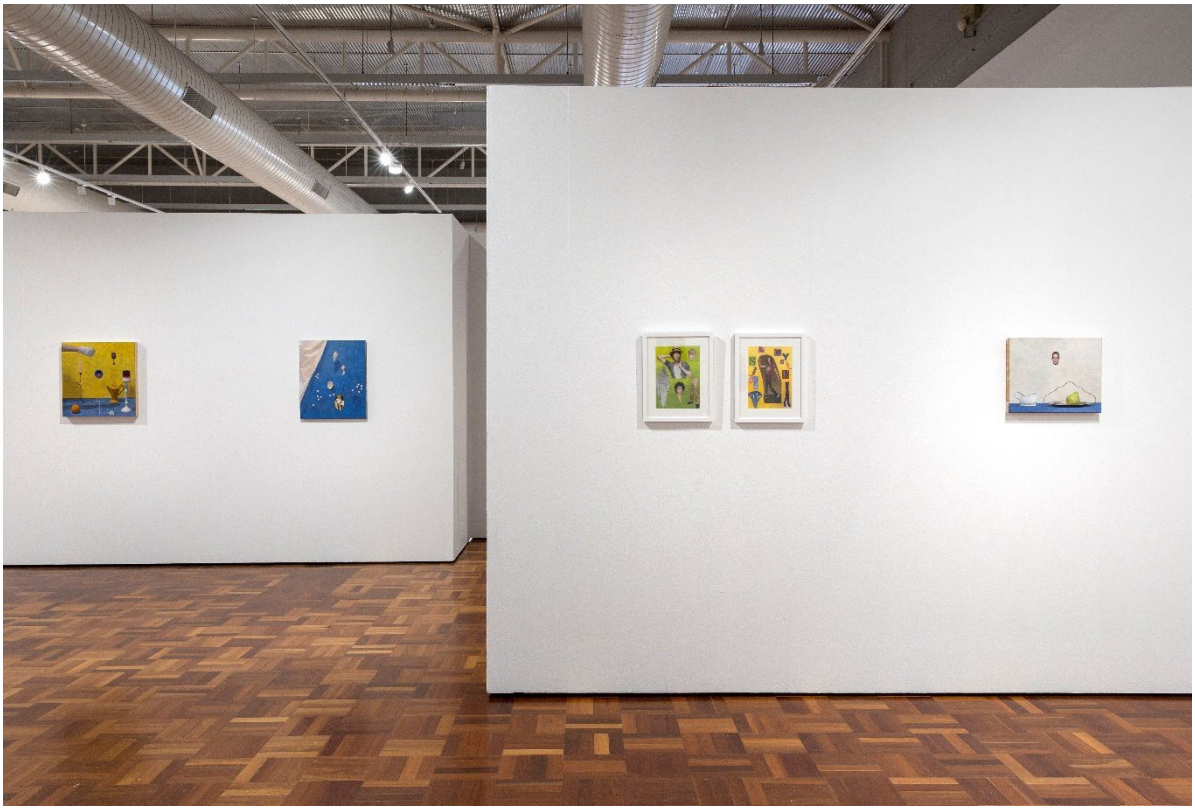

Figure 69: *Oblique Objects*, 17 August – 15 September 2023, installation view, ANU School of Art & Design Gallery, Canberra. Photograph: David Paterson

Figure 70: *Oblique Objects*, 17 August – 15 September 2023, installation view, ANU School of Art & Design Gallery, Canberra. Photograph: David Paterson

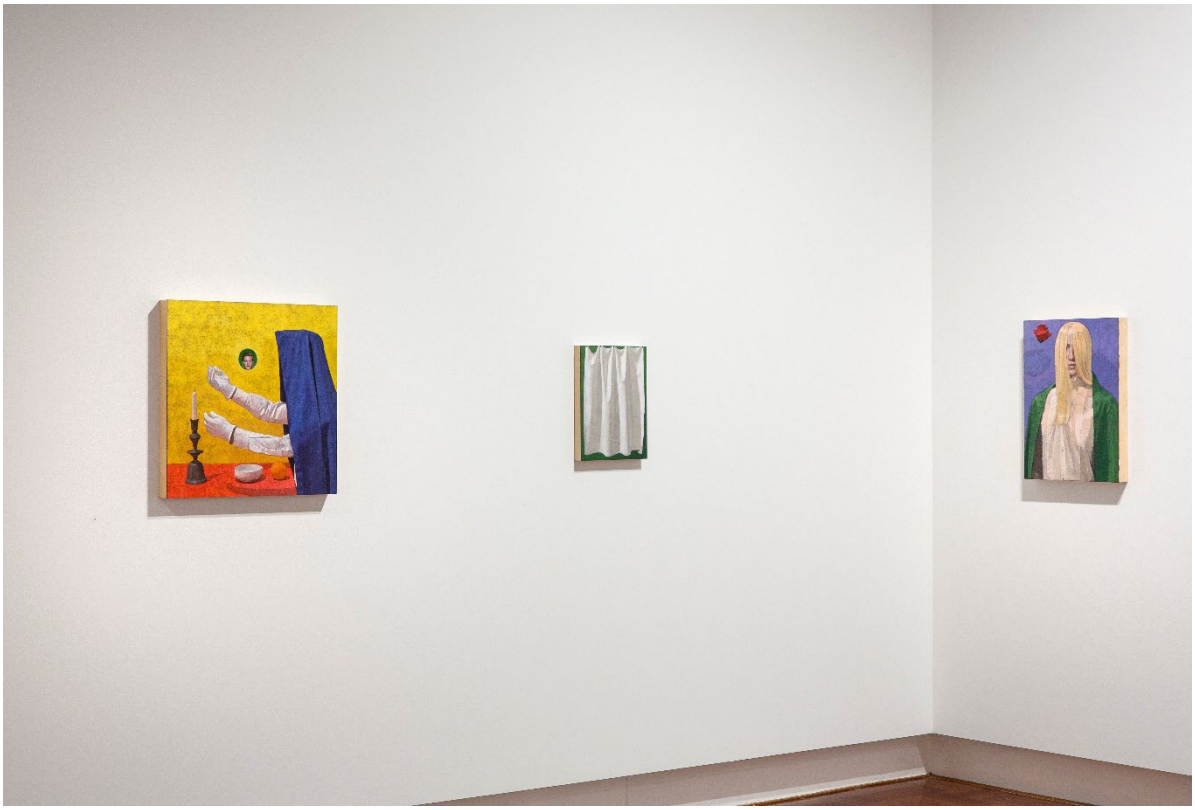

Figure 71: *Oblique Objects*, 17 August – 15 September 2023, installation view, ANU School of Art & Design Gallery, Canberra. Photograph: David Paterson

Figure 72: *Oblique Objects*, 17 August – 15 September 2023, installation view, ANU School of Art & Design Gallery, Canberra. Photograph: David Paterson