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## The Poetic Grotesque

Question:

Does an analysis of the ambiguous content in GL Brierley's paintings within the context of the Grotesque in Western Art and Culture serve to alleviate the negativity associated with the grotesque and instead show its positive contribution as a vehicle for progress and harmony?

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## Introduction -

The Grotesque image has a broad and elusive history; it is not a movement in art, but an image that challenges the established conventions of its time. The perception of what is Grotesque is therefore determined by the set of cultural beliefs that the image is created within, and identifying those qualities that arise in the grotesque image throughout western art reveals what constructs society's normative standards.

My discussion will therefore focus on the recurrent qualities of the grotesque that challenge the boundaries of the 'known' and between the self and other. The grotesque in its fusion of those elements that have been established as oppositional compromises established realities and encourages the recognition of the self as a complex, unified being, composed of both poles of binary opposites, interconnected with the world. (Connelly, 2012) Like a great work of imagination the grotesque brings incongruous elements together and in turn reveals universal truths.

Binary opposites are developed at the core of human psychology from birth, as they structure the foundations of learning and understanding of the world. Good/Bad, Self/Other, Mind/Matter, Male/Female; no one can deny the presence of these binary opposites; they are 'a reality of psychic life' (Washburn, 1994). However the development of western thought has fixed a boundary which separates them, denying their equitable co-existence and which inevitably, according to Derrida, entails the

privileging of one over the other (Hill, 2007), enabling an hegemonic and male dominated age of reason to form an obstacle to development. I will analyse the nature of Grotesque in the way that it challenges these limiting boundaries, in an attempt to demonstrate the importance of its role within society as a catalyst for profound critical enquiry and self-knowledge.

The Western idea of 'self' is formed by a series of detachments which serve to establish a boundary between the self and that considered 'other'. These detachments are part of the ego development that forms the idealised 'I' – 'a simplified bounded version of the self'(Felluga 2012), and that which is distinguished as oppositional to the unruly nature of the body, as established in Classical and later Cartesian Philosophical ideas. This bounded, harmonious and simplified representation of the body, a formula more applicable to mathematics than to reality became the traditional canon of beauty and something which it was asserted fine art should aspire to.

According to Connelly (2012) the Grotesque is a 'boundary creature' that emerges out of an endeavour to destabilise the specifically western sense of self and thereby the Classical conventions of art. I will discuss how the grotesque challenges the impotent manner in which Western Society portrays the body and alienates one's relationship to it. This Cartesian treatment of the body, born out of a dogmatic application of Classicism, has to some extent become a tool of oppression, by conditioning the way that the body has been bound by acceptability in much of what is sterile in conventional European art informed by Aristotle's assertions that truth was linked to that which is pure, and consequently that which is considered beautiful.

In embarking on an analysis of Brierley's work and placing it under the rubric of the Grotesque, it will be necessary to outline its theoretical nature. At the core of the Grotesque is its ability to destabilise the sense of self so I will begin by looking at binary foundations ensconced in western thought. In order to do this I will look at the development of dualistic thought, beginning with Greek Classicism and writers such as Aristotle and Plato, and its greatest advocate Descartes. I will also consider the writings of leading psychologists such as Freud, Lacan, and Jung which attempt to explain the fragmented nature felt by man. I will do this as the Grotesque's nature is rooted in the psychological response it evokes, and these psychologists' notions have informed contemporary theory of the Grotesque. I will also refer to how the body has been conventionally represented in art, referencing ideas stemming from classicism, as from those the basis of the western aesthetic of beauty and goodness has developed and influenced what art was considered it should be.

Having mapped a brief history of that which is considered 'other' to the Western Mind, in order to better understand the grotesque's complex and elusive image tradition, I will look to the theorists who have written most specifically on its nature, such as Bakhtin, Connelly, Kristeva and Ruskin.

The second chapter of my study will focus upon Brierley's work in relation to, and elaborating upon, Grotesque theoretical tropes as elucidated in chapter 1. This section will also introduce the work within the context of the exhibition 'Metamorphosis: The Transformation of Being' in which Brierley's diptych 'Helder-Melder' was shown alongside a vast array of influential artists, all of who's work here falls within the

Grotesque realm and, an analysis of Titian's Flaying of the Marsyas as an indication of why Ovid's Metamorphosis has been such an influence in Grotesque imagery.

Finally the third chapter will examine the imagistic antecedents of the Grotesque in Brierley's painting highlighting the grotesque image as essentially representing the true Real, related to phenomenology and sensually evoked in the work of Francis Bacon.

Primary research was carried out in the form of a number of exhibition visits and keeping a journal in which I recorded my response to what I had seen or read, this included visits to 'Metamorphosis: The Transformation of Being', A solo show of GL Brierley's paintings at the Carslaw St Lukes Gallery, 'Lure' a solo exhibition of Kate MccGwire's work and 'Holy Motors' a film by Leo Carax amongst others. Secondary research was carried out in an extensive range of books and online sources as well as press releases from the shows attended.

## Chapter 1 - The Theoretical Nature of the Grotesque

The essential nature of the grotesque image is illuminated by what it does rather than what it is. The Grotesque is a boundary dweller, always engaged in the world, which through its fearless assemblage of incongruous elements defies classification and thereby has the ability to convey a profound truth about life. (Haraway, 1991) The Grotesque is neither one thing nor the other, but simultaneously 'both-and', reflecting the Lacanian definition of the true Real - where everything is present (Lacan, 1988).

Psychoanalytic theory suggests that the development of the ego is structured upon binary opposites, and that by differentiating what it is from what it is not it arrives at a state of independence. Kristeva (2012) claimed that the primary division of binary opposites within the self occurs in the severing of the symbiotic ties with the mother, thereby establishing the self in opposition to the other. (Washburn 1994) The developing self goes on to establish further boundaries between binary opposites such as male/female, human/animal, alive/dead in an attempt to ensure its own subjectivity. (Ross 2003)

As stated by theorists on dualism, the problem that arises out of this splitting, is that out of binaries a hierarchical order is always subsumed. ‘...one member of the couple is always apparently noble and the other ignoble. One may be deemed the mind and the other the body.’ (Miller, 1996 p. 213) This quote, taken from ‘A discussion on Lacan’s “Kant with Sade” highlights the psychological problem with dualistic splitting which develops ego independence. Kant and his theories associated with the mind (i.e ‘reason’<sup>1</sup>) are regarded as positive and encouraged, whereas De Sade and his work are associated with the body and therefore considered unacceptable and something which should be concealed. This is symptomatic of the psychological ‘splitting’ of the self, as those aspects of our nature that we have been conditioned to see as negative are buried in the subconscious or projected outside ourselves and regarded as ‘other’, and in doing so the complete nature of our being and ‘total personality’<sup>2</sup> of our being is denied, rendering the world chaotic, unstable and at times a threatening place. (Grosz, 2013)

By discussing Kant’s theories ‘with’ De Sade’s Lacan acknowledged that binary opposites are not separate, oppositional elements but inseparable components within the subject and that to separate these poles is to mask man’s true nature and supports a society of inequality, lacking reality, ignorant of the agency of ‘otherness’ and any understanding of the essential mysteries of human behaviour; all the consequences of false ideals that the Grotesque image similarly opposes. (Plumwood, 2005)

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<sup>1</sup> Critique of reason

<sup>2</sup> Jung claimed that the total personality consisted of both consciousness and unconsciousness and that an integration of the two to be seen as a whole was the source of self-knowledge.

Lacan goes on to explore the fabrication of the false ideal occurring during the Mirror Stage<sup>3</sup> which he believed illustrated ‘the conflictual nature of the dual relationship’ (Evans, 1996 p. 118) resulting from the assimilation of one’s specular self-image as the ‘ideal self’. The ‘ideal self’ produces a psychological fragmentation in so far as it portrays the ‘ideal’ as the outer reflection as seen by others, simplified and contained within a bounded body alienated from its interior experience and corporeality.

It is in this way that the following statement can be understood. ‘The psychoanalytic understanding is one in which skin literally shapes our world and gives a sense of our shape in it.’ Shannon (2009) The skin in this sense becomes the boundary of the inner and outer divide and a symbol of the false, detached, and ‘ideal self’.

The parameters of what are considered positive and negative qualities of the self in western art, have been greatly influenced by the aggregation of Classical philosophy out of which it is considered Western Thought has developed.

One of the ideas which has been focused on in a reading of Classical philosophy is that of Aristotle, whose reduction of the body was based on analysis dominated by metaphysical qualities of the mind in isolation and his statement ‘the chief forms of beauty are order, symmetry and definiteness’ has informed the standards laid down for the production of fine arts as well as for the language of aesthetics and art criticism. (Fanning, 2003)

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<sup>3</sup> The Mirror stage was the individual’s development in early infancy

This somewhat biased conception of being, divided the mind from the nature of the body, which was considered to be a distraction from the pursuit of knowledge, logic and reason.

...while we are in the body and while the soul is infected with the evils of the body, our desire will not be satisfied? And our desire is of the truth. For the body is a source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere requirement of food; and is liable also to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after true being: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery, ... [which] take away from us the power of thinking at all... if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body... and then we shall attain the wisdom we desire. (Plato. Phaedo p. 36)

These Classical ideas established a hierarchy within the self, whereby the ‘irrational’, unruly body was considered opposite to the ‘rational’ mind, and deemed an obstacle to progress.

The body itself was not the only element that became subordinate as everything associated with it or considered not normative within society was cast as ‘other’ and the ‘normative’ was defined according to those attributes associated solely with masculine hegemonic qualities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is suggested that the reading of these Classical texts however have been filtered and refracted by the assimilation of only certain translations of the texts that focus upon ideas that supported the regulation and maintenance of society’s conventional standards, and anything challenging these ideas would be deemed negative. (Bolgar, 2010).

In 'Ars poetica' Horace claimed the importance of maintaining a strict division between binary opposites, for he feared that the dissolution of the divide threatened the preservation of his beloved Roman Culture. 'Once there existed men of wisdom with the power and insight to separate public from private things, sacred from profane... to give rights to husbands... to engrave laws in wood.' (Horace, 2005 p. 179.)

Horace further stated that the very existence of these subordinate categories should in fact be denied all together 'Such scenes... I disbelieve and hate' (Horace, 2005 p. 172) A statement which actively encourages psychological 'splitting' in the denial of all other aspects of existence of the psyche.

The continued influence of the Classical mind body divide was central to Descartes' philosophy that until contested only sixty years ago was substantially held to be 'the official doctrine of the mind'. (Ryle, 1951) Descartes considered that existence is divided into the 'mental' and 'the material' and further that the mind and body exist independently of the other. (Descartes, 1984)

Winckelmann transformed the components of classicism into universal principles for the fine arts, where purity and reason were premium. His austere ideas relied upon:

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‘... pure forms... imposed upon unruly, imperfect matter... clearly arranged in a causal and hierarchical relationships... building upon the long-standing conception of vision as the most “mind-like of the senses, closest to the faculties of judgement and reason”... abstracting from actual bodies, materials, and textures.’ (Connelly, 2003 pp. 159-160)

Winckelmann’s aesthetic attempted to control the unruly body by means of logical reason and order, and like Horace he believed that it was essential that these established boundaries of harmony were not to be broken. The Apollo Belvedere was held by Winckelmann as the epitome of the classical aesthetic ideal. This ideal body, and icon of rationalistic ‘Western Thought’ (Winckelmann, 1759), much like the sculpture in to which Lacan stated the ego of man projects itself and thereby confines the self to an alienating, idealised image, discordant with its own reality. (Lacan, 1949)

However the representation of the fallible materiality of the body in religious and ‘Carnavalesque’ imagery demonstrated how a less classical representation of the body can serve a most positive function as a means to claiming a deeper and more united sense of reality. (Connelly, 2012)

With the aim of democratising Religion, Christian art of the late 13<sup>th</sup> Century began to focus less on representing the bodies of God and the Saints as idealised beings but instead placed Christ within the earthly realm and imbued him with a human quality with which every man could empathise. The body of Christ became increasingly explicit in its suffering, in paintings such as Grunwald’s Crucifixion (Appendix 1),

and Champaigne's *The Dead Christ* (Appendix 2) where the highly rendered wounds are made the focus of the work in their isolated use of deep reds that stand out against the pallid pale body and dark background. Jill Bennett believed Christ's body was made to contort and drip with gore in order to provoke the observer's own bodily memory, evoking feeling and active engagement with the image. '...the operative elements in the medieval devotional image is not the narrative framework but the affective detail (the wound)'. (Bennett, 2005 p. 36)

Thus, paradoxically, the effort to deny the importance of the material body only made it the inescapable focus and it is in this way that Umberto Eco claims 'the image of a suffering Christ was handed down to Renaissance and Baroque culture in a crescendo of the eroticism of suffering, where the insistence on the divine face and body tormented by paint became a play verging on the complacency and ambiguity...'  
(Eco, 2007 p. 49)

Similarly the material body became the focus of the 'Carnavalesque' grotesque, which endeavoured to alleviate the hierarchical constraints and prohibitions of conventional life. The body in all its corporeality became a symbol for something universal that linked all the people and, like the shift in Christian art reunited abstract spiritual ideals with the earth and body. Bakhtin stresses that the Grotesque is deeply positive as it represents the essential nature of being '... not in a private, egotistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal... it is not individualized.' (1984 p.19) He believed that isolating itself from the material body rendered it, as Plato had, merely a deathly obstacle to ideal aspiration and ignored its simultaneous property of regeneration. Instead of fearing and trying to separate oneself from the material body,

the Grotesque image embraces growth and change, and represents the cosmic whole, acknowledging both poles of transformation, death and life, as equally essential, symbiotic components of existence. (Bakhtin, 1984)

Essential to an understanding of the affirmative character of the Grotesque is the manner in which, by suggestion of the gestalt, the Grotesque seeks the restoration of the unified psyche previously splintered by developments in philosophical thought.

The term Grotesque emanated from the 1400s as a result of the discovery of ornamental frescoes in Nero's Domus Aurea (64 AD) which challenged the dogmatic beliefs that then dominated Classical art due to their combinatory nature, which greatly influenced Renaissance Artists. As these paintings were found in rooms below ground level the Italian word for cave 'grottesche' was used to describe them and the word itself carried conflicting connotative meanings as the word grotto was associated with both the grave and the womb, and an open chasm that led to a mysterious, other world.

The Grotesque's negative association resulted from the frescoes ornamental nature which fused elements together to make fanciful hybrid creatures that distracted from utility by appealing to the senses related to the body and the feminine, rather than the masculine of logic and reason.

'The reason that ornament (and the licence that indulged it) was sublimated had to do with its sensuous appeal... They evoked bodied responses that could distract even overpower, the reasoned argument. The contrasts drawn between

ornament and argument followed the well-worn Western oppositions of body and mind, as well as feminine and masculine.’ (Connelly, 2012 p. 30)

Their bodies were not contained, and were miles away from the Classical ideals of beauty in their disproportionate, multiple organs and unbound nature. These images are comparable with the imagery that emerged in the illustrations documenting the Renaissance’s prolific search for knowledge that penetrated the body through dissections and brought the fallibility of the body centre stage, along with discoveries of the unknown which were collected and put on display in cabinets of curiosities. These images were considered grotesque as they exemplified progress that exposed the known world to be in a continual state of flux that simultaneously produced feelings of fear and fascination, each undercutting the other.

Contemporary understanding of the grotesque, as informed by writers such as Bakhtin, and Connelly, explores the positive role of the grotesque that Bataille claimed was the key to understanding the world, as it attacked the presumed stability of definitions and categories (Connelly, 2012). The grotesque provides a space for reflection that questions authoritarian rationalism, finite identification, the fixed orientation of the subject and the relationship to its culture. It also serves to liberate fears from the unconscious, fusing them with our everyday experiences and thereby providing a platform for discussion and provocative thought, provoking the viewer into critical inquiry in a search for a deeper truth, (Massumi, 2002).

...in all ages and among all nations grotesque idealism has been the element through which the most appalling and eventful truth has been wisely

conveyed... No element of imagination has a wider range, a more magnificent use, or so colossal a grasp of sacred truth.' (Ruskin, 1856 p. 100)

Bakhtin believed that the grotesque was '... not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries but 'blended with the world, with animals, with objects.' But in this assertion the traumatic nature of the grotesque arises, the quality that makes it simultaneously intriguing and repellent. Dissolving the boundaries between the self and the objects around it calls our sense of identity in to question, we are at once subject and object, 'I' and 'other' cosmic, dissolved and engulfed by the earth. The Freudian description of the uncanny is explained in much the same way. The uncanny is instigated by intellectual uncertainty upon the encounter with 'everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret' and further as something 'identical with its opposite' (Freud, 1919 p.4) <sup>5</sup>

Ruskin insisted upon the ethical dimension of the Grotesque image. He went so far as to describe the Grotesque image as noble in *The Modern Painter*, as he believed the Grotesque demanded that its observer asked questions of himself and the society in which he lived.

A fine grotesque is the expression, in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connections, of truth which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for

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<sup>5</sup> The meaning has evolved from the word 'Heimlich' which Grimm's dictionary explains the stem of its ambiguous meaning something 'homelike' and further as 'something withdrawn from the eyes of others, something concealed, secret.' (Freud 1919 p.4)

the beholder to work out for himself; the gaps, left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination, forming the grotesque character. (Ruskin, 1856 p. 99)

Ruskin's ideas were considered revolutionary for his time as that conventionally considered noble within the fine arts was the idealised classical forms which peopled 'history paintings', commissioned by the state and rendered with the aim of inspiring patriotism and an aspiration to qualities which the state deemed virtuous. However Ruskin was critical of this narrow minded and controlling dogma and distrusting of a society where the observer was expected to accept absolutes unquestioningly.

## Chapter 2 - The Grotesque Metamorphosis In GL Brierley's Painting

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was the inspiration for two seminal exhibitions that took place in London in 2012. 'Metamorphosis Titian' at The National Gallery, and 'Metamorphosis: The Transformation of Being' which ran alongside Frieze Art Fair and which included G.L. Brierley's 'Helder Melder' (2012), shown alongside a rich variety of art spanning 400 years.

These exhibitions highlighted Ovid's Cosmo-genic creation as an unremitting source of inspiration in art, whose influence is credited as being due to the ligature that joins its chaotic, often brutal and disparate stories, presenting human nature as the grotesque asserted it to be, in a perpetual state of change. The themes of the *Metamorphoses* are a poignant reflection on the very ephemeral nature of existence, reaching as they do way beyond society's slavish rational explanations to explore the more human senses and potential ambiguity; qualities essentially associated with the

grotesque. 'The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth growth and becoming.' (Bakhtin, 1984)

Titian's 'The Flaying of Marsyas, 1575 (fig. 1) is unquestionably a representation of the body in the state of becoming other. Through frenzied brush marks Titian depicts the moment in which the Marsyas is transformed from 'goat like' man into the clearest of rivers. Elucidating how Titian's painting falls under the grotesque rubric aids an understanding of this elusive term, as it is distinguished from being simply a fanciful hybrid image by the particular ambivalent response it evokes in the viewer.

On first reading the Flaying of the Marsyas is an act of brutal punishment. Skin stripped from flesh, Marsyas' body is painted in its 'crisis of change' (Bakhtin, 1984) as he cries out 'Why do you strip me from my self'. However there is no evidence of suffering in this painting, which suggests that this traumatic experience of becoming other was in fact a representation of the inevitable encounter with the true Real, which Jung believed lead to affirmative 'ego transcendence'.

This interpretation of the story, which Lynn Enterline summarises as Ovid's 'desire to "reactivate" the body's material relation to the world in a way that does not separate words from matter, ideas from the flesh', (2003, p. 248) is suggested firstly by the calm nature with which Titian renders the body of the Marsyas. The tension and contortion of the muscles usually associated with the representation of such a brutal act are absent, instead the casual and relaxed pose of the Marsyas' body is unmistakable.

This calm nature is also reflected in the bodies of the onlookers and the perpetrator of the punishment itself whose body is slight and illuminated. In this way Titian's painting is a Bakhtinian grotesque 'a rejuvenating death', and an encounter with abjection, which Kristeva states as '... a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms the death drive into a start of new life, of new significance.' (1982 p.15) The skin here represents the false ideal, the barrier between the inner and outer experience, which in its removal shows the undifferentiated nature of things and the true self re-united with its collective ancestral being. (Bohde, 2003)

The description of the handling of paint in 'The Flaying of the Marsyas' (fig.1), as a 'coming forth' (Sluijta, 2006), is a perfectly apposite description for a work considered within the Grotesque rubric comparable to the physicality and interconnectivity of Cecily Brown's *Skulldiver*, (Appendix 3). Life rises out of Titian's application of paint, as the materiality of its surface is lavish, constantly fusing and agglomerating, which creates a sensual transmogrification of paint into fleshy matter.

Titian broke with the convention of 'disegno', in which meticulous prepared drawings underpinned a painting's fixed composition and defined its contours of form and which Vasari considered to be 'the foundation of all the visual arts, "the animating principle of all creative processes."' (Sorabella, 2002) Instead Titian employed the method of 'colorito', a handling of paint which used multi layered, open brush marks that conveyed form in a less contained, and according to Lodovico Dolce, a more real manner. (Sluijta, 2006) This technique diffuses the boundaries between the flesh and

clouds, inner and outer being, and legs and trees in a sensual and rhythmic method that fuses the elements within the painting to create a complex but unified whole.

In turn Titian also unites form and formlessness as Marsyas' material body meets Apollo's sculptural knife and dissolves object and subject as the scientific illustrations of the renaissance did (Appendix 4) (Ackerman, 2006 p. 74). These illustrations showed the body as anatomical specimens, but were imbued with human character as bodies stripped of their skin to reveal the internal organs held contemplative, elegant, classical poses 'refusing to ignore that we are both mind and body... to grotesque result' (Connelly, 2012 p.126). Titian's painting can be directly compared to these engravings, as the Marsyas whom, while his skin is peeled away, stares out at the viewer engaging an oscillation between the role of the observer and the observed. This discourse confuses the observer's subjectivity and forces him to acknowledge his own mortality. (Bodhe, 2003) Everything is transforming and connected and it is in the viewer's ambivalent reaction that discomfort occurs, as in feeling that this torture is painless the viewer's instincts are undermined and the painting evokes its ambiguous, uncanny and contradictory effect.

GL Brierley's 'Helder Melder' (2012) was shown alongside a rich variety of art spanning 400 years in the exhibition 'Metamorphosis: The transformation of being' which took place in October 2012.

The diverse range of work exhibited in the show is unified, as the stories in Ovid's poem are, by their mutual quality of transformation. The work tears down the boundaries of the empirical world by confronting the viewer with the inseparable

symbiosis between life and death and one's inner and outer existence, things usually regulated by the necessarily routine tasks of everyday, operational existence.

(Wallace, 2003) The exhibition incites a comparison to a cabinet of curiosity from the Enlightenment, although the focus of these works is not empirical knowledge, but precisely those subordinated anxieties, subconscious fears and feelings; not tangible or rational but none the less real, whose essence is conjured so palpably that at every turn one feels that these objects, made from conglomerations of inanimate or dead-matter-now objects, may come to life. These objects are not representations of a logical and compartmentalised existence, but, as in Titian's Flaying of the Marsyas (fig.1) evoke ambivalence by acknowledging the interconnectivity, and at times brutal nature, of all things.

G L Brierley's work is an explicit example of what Ruskin's defined as the character of the grotesque. The works are a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection that in their indefinable nature challenges categorisation, like a specimen found in a cabinet of curiosity.

'Light, lighting, shadows reflection, colour, all the objects of [the artist's] quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence... The painter's gaze asks them what they do to suddenly cause something to be and to be this thing.' (Merleau-Ponty 2004 p. 298)

When looking at Brierley's work categorisations are dissolved. The works are the inverse of Classical universal principals of fine art, they are not pure forms but the

unruly, imperfect matter which logical thought struggles to organise, and in the inability to do so reduces the viewer to a state of intellectual uncertainty.

‘The fact that so many things are only hinted at demands the spectator to actively imagine them and awaken his own bodily sensations to make comparison with that which is represented.’ (Bohde, p.45)

GL Brierley’s *Felt*, 2012 (fig. 2), like Titian’s *Flaying of the Marsyas* represents a phenomenon in transformation. The work is a panoply of symbols which correlate to the world and particularly the world that the grotesque inhabits, grounded in the body, being the site where binary opposites collide. The allusion to the body is created by the use of familiar flesh tones that she employs in her paintings as she explores the quality of oil paint to transmogrify into flesh, which artists such as Rembrandt and Francis Bacon so expertly employed in order to convey and evoke senses and feelings in the viewer. (Cathart, 2011)

The flesh in Brierley’s work is penetrated, fallible and dissolving. The dark chasms that penetrate the flesh evoke associations with stigmata as rendered in religious paintings such as *Christ Suffering* by Albrecht Bouts (Appendix 5). However, as religious narrative is absent, these wounds could be equally interpreted in polarity to purity as the contaminated body in Mason’s photograph ‘*Cutaneous Syphilis Case in Young Child*’, (fig.4).

This allusion also raises the feminine agency of those things seen as monstrous as syphilis is passed on to the child by the mother. Similarly the grotesque illustrations

that accompany Ambroise Pare's encyclopaedia *Monsters and Marvels*, 1572, and Levinus Lemnius's *The Secret Miracles of Nature*, 1658, professed that the birth defect and the monstrous was seen as the isolated agency of the feminine.

This monstrous and ugly conception sometimes occurs without the help of a man and usually occurs in the very libidinous of women whose powerfully active imaginations ensure that they need only stare at a man... and the result is a lump of flesh that looks like a living creature... It had two long pieces of flesh resembling arms and palpitating, it revealed some form of life not unlike the jellyfish. (Eco, 2006)

This passage is a conceivable description of Brierley's *Frillamina*, 2009 (fig.6) where visceral paint palpitates like tentacles in a glutinous mass and could be read as a symbol of Freud's theory on fear and desire in relation to the *vagina dentata* (Creed, 1993). As discussed previously the psychological nature of the feminine as ambivalent other arises in the abjection of the mother and consequently the feminine body has been laden with psychic social and cultural significance as the site of contradictory forces.

Influential proponents of the grotesque such as Baudelaire and Hugo persistently identified the feminine and wounded body with grotesque horror. In 'Les Fleurs du Mal' female sex was unified with putrefaction, revealing the social anxieties of the time regarding prostitution that embodied desire and threat (Baudelaire, 1998), and in 'Toilers of the Sea', Hugo terrifyingly describes the female other embodied by the 'devil-fish' (or octopus). 'No muscular organization... its most horrible

characterisation is its softness... Its folds strangle... It is a monstrous embodiment of disease... The hydra incorporates itself with man... it mingles horribly.' (Hugo, 2012 pp.122-125)

Like an obsessive lover, the work consumes you. It is as if your visceral fluids mix with hers and refuse to be wiped away. Visceral application of the paint creates an impression of soft flesh and fluids that transgress the boundaries of the external internal divide as they drip down and mix with fragile and delicate textures that solicit associations with lace. The body is painted as the site of matter and process and by placing base sexuality and eroticism next to banal beautifications and ornament, Brierley acknowledges the female in her cultural ambivalence. The undefined contours of the forms assert the metaphysical definition of the woman as un-materialised, an uncontrollable body, able to change, give birth, and consume. (Ross, 2003)

The flesh runs and contaminates and becomes symbols for another. No interpretation of the work is absolute which creates the sense that none of the things projected on the work feel stable either.

Brierley incites a conventional reading of her work by employing realistic methods of painting such as those of the Dutch master painters to create the illusion of depth and space, and subject and background, even the positioning of the formal elements in Felt (fig.2) are suggestive of a traditional portrait pose as seen in Rembrandt's Old Man with a Beard, (fig.3) and the textural treatment of the surface is also comparable in its mottled surface. Perhaps even on first glance we may be fooled in to believing

that the subject of this painting is indeed a portrait which highlights the development of portraiture's dual role in conveying both the inner and outer appearance of the subject. (Burger, 2006)

Brierley makes full use of her authoritative position of artist as director as she employs traditional painting techniques to steer the viewer towards expecting certain things, but by not delivering the expected she creates a feeling of intellectual uncertainty; jolting us into a shock to thought. The viewer realises that the subjects of her paintings, which she renders in this traditional style, is in fact immateriality. Instead of delivering a discernable content, Brierley makes the observer's subconscious the subject of the paintings that rely upon the observer thereby imbuing the work with their own psychological projections, which anthropomorphise out of the visceral agglomerations of paint centred in the canvas. Brierley thereby also dissolves the boundary of individuality as she paints a portrait of the human, rather than the solipsistic individual.

The fact that the work has no fully recognisable elements, yet is rendered in such a realistic manner, means that the observer imagines and reimagines what he is looking at in a continual state of self re-appraisal and a paradigm that essentially categorises a painted grotesque. (Summers, 2003) As the paintings so heavily rely upon the active engagement of the observer, it is as if Brierley has painted an 'Unding', a 'thing' that is no longer an object but an extension of the viewer, as the boundary between painting and observer or, 'I' and Other, is dissolved, and the painting thereby becomes an entrance into the unregulated world, which Lacan conceived as the Real. (Chaouli, 2003)

### Chapter 3 - The Grotesque in the Work of Francis Bacon

The true Real is the repudiated thing that shifts our vision of reality in order to formulate a new one. This true Real is an active agent of change which Kristeva acknowledges as the role of the grotesque in cultural anthropology, as discussed in *Powers of Horror* where she sees the ability of the visual to connect past and present imagery as a means to formulate new ways of understanding. (Kristeva, 1982, Zizek, 2006)

Francis Bacon acknowledged the importance of connecting the past and present to forge new realities. He recognised the essential pursuit of the modern painter was to convey what he felt was the true reality of existence, something the grotesque image does as it mediates a living horror too real to dwell on, connecting our eyes to our mind. Bacon stated ‘Great art...is always a way of concentrating, reinventing what is called fact, what we know of our existence... Ideas always acquire appearance veils, the attitudes people acquire of their time and earlier time. Really good artists tear down those veils.’ (Bennett, 2005) (Davies, Yard, 1986 p. 110)

The subject of Bacon’s paintings violently challenges the stability of the observer by transgressing the boundaries of the body. As in *Felt* (fig. 2) the paint is anthropomorphic (fig.5) and unleashes the portrait from the conventional confines of the figurative. The hierarchy of features collapse and the body is represented in a state of transformation as it dissolves, engulfs and oozes. Nothing can be interpreted in simple terms; shadows metamorphose into bodily fluids, which ooze out from that

which are read as bodily cavities. Like Brierley's work the observer questions whether what they are seeing is something or nothing, or just paint.

The paint, instead of rendering a bounded body conveys it as an amalgamation of its invisible forces and sensations that violate the veneer of the ideal self which the ego projects itself on to. Bacon instead shows the body in a grotesque manner, ambivalent, penetrable and interconnected; in a state of becoming, transgressing and receding. (Russell 1993)

Acknowledging that narrative is absent in Brierley and Bacon's work prompts the interpretation of modern painting as phenomenology. Van Alphen believed that the narrative in Bacon's work was created in the viewer's interpretation of the ambiguous forms and that things come in to meaning by an engagement with the viewer. This is not to agree with existential solipsism but is grounded in the acknowledgement that the internal and external world are contingent upon one another. The fact that the grotesque image is habitually grounded in the body reflects Merleau-Ponty's belief that the body is always present in the experience of seeing, because the body and the things being seen are made of the same matter, which dissolves the boundary between self and other. Merleau-Ponty asserts that modern painting is not grounded in representing an external world, but in the way it attempts to express the visible world's metamorphosis of being, as it opens out indefinitely before our eyes (2004). Just as the grotesque does, it acknowledges the essential nature of being which is eternally changing, becoming, unlimited and incomplete

## Conclusion

By looking at the grotesque as an active agent of change reveals that the grotesque, rather than being bound to its simplified associations with the alien and inhuman, in fact unites the being with the real nature of its existence.

Analysing what has been constructed to be the accepted ideal self within society, formed by philosophical and psychological theories that have dominated western thought demonstrates the role of the grotesque in challenging the normative and how it is a vehicle for progress both ethically and aesthetically. The idea of self has been constructed upon limiting categorisations that deny the essential nature of human existence and the agency of others. The grotesque instead of dividing the self acknowledges it as the site that is comprised of all elements that it recognises as being inseparable and as the body (especially the female body) as a site where the inner and outer world collided, it was a recurrent topic within the grotesque. However the grotesque aims to acknowledge the being as a unified whole in a continual state of flux where nothing is absolute and in turn liberates the human from the imposed simplified ideal self that alienated the being from its essential, unified nature.

Through an analysis of grotesque art its ability to evoke intellectual uncertainty is highlighted as being its essential element, as it provokes the viewer to dissolve the boundaries of the known and evoke the sense of uncertainty that destabilises its

limiting sense of self and provokes questioning. It acknowledges that within the self lie both poles of transformation. Although this can be seen as a traumatic experience as it forces the self to acknowledge its instability and inevitable mortality, it leads to a greater connectivity with the true real and the world around it. The grotesque provokes its observer to ask questions of normative existence, and asserts that fantasy and interior existence are as equally important to the Real as literal ontological order. The grotesque devalues the Classical assertion that truth is associated with beauty and instead encourages a much less oppressive evaluation of the world that is capable of seeing beauty in all aspects of human nature and embraces all people. By bringing to light the more difficult nature of human experience the grotesque as prevalent in the work by Francis Bacon creates a plane for open discussion that essentially provides a vehicle for self-knowledge and change. It recognises that human experience cannot be simply organised by dualistic categorizations and in its ambiguous nature provokes an acknowledgement of deeper truth.

In an ever increasingly complex and chaotic world there is a superficial security in establishing fixed categorisations that allow the individual to navigate the world and assert its subjectivity, however the grotesque image illuminates the fallibility of this pursuit. By denying the existence of the complexities of existence such as trauma, death and the darker elements of the human psyche denies the total human experience and creates a threatening and fragmented world where the unknown is rendered threatening and an experience with an encounter outside of the realms of the ideal or normative can plunge the self into isolation and chaos.

The ambiguous nature of Brierley's work forces the observer to see the grotesque image as a agent which encourages the being to step out from its incessant drab and operational existence and to think and engage in a more profound way with the things around it, about its environment, its motivations and the agency of the unknown as a doorway to exciting new possibilities.

### Image Source List

1. Titian (c.1576) *The Flaying of the Marsyas*

[Online Image]

Image Source: Available at:

<<http://www.bridgemaneducation.com.arts.idm.oclc.org/ImageView.aspx?result=0&balid=388734>> [Accessed 03 November 2012].

2. G.L Brierley (2012) *Felt*

[Online Image]

Image Source: Available at: <<http://www.glbrierley.com/frames2012/frame7.html>>

[Accessed 07 November 2012]

3. Rembrandt (c.1630) *Old Man With a Beard*

[Online Image]

Image Credit: Delft University of Technology

Image Source: Available at:

<[http://www.rembrandt.ua.ac.be/oldman\\_recentportrait\\_100.jpg](http://www.rembrandt.ua.ac.be/oldman_recentportrait_100.jpg)> [accessed 08 January 2013].

4. Mason. O. G. (c.1881) *Cutaneous syphilis case in young child.*

Fox. G.H. (1881) *Photographic Illustrations of Skin Diseases. WITH: Cutaneous Syphilis.* [Online Image]. Available at:

<<http://www.baumanrarebooks.com/rare-books/fox-george-henry/photographic-illustrations-of-skin-diseases-with-cutaneous-syphilis/75619.aspx>> [Accessed 14 December 2012].

5. Francis Bacon (1972) *Triptych - August 1972*, Oil on canvas. Triptych, 198.1 x 147.3 cm each Zweite, A. (2006) Francis Bacon The Violence of the Real. London: Thames & Hudson. pp. 170 -171

6. GL Brierley (2009) *Frillamina*. Oil on wood. 25.5 x 29 cm. Carlaw St\* Lukes  
[Online Image] Available at:  
<<http://www.carlawstlukes.com/artistpage.php?artistid=5>> [Accessed 07 November 2012]

## Images



Figure 1.

Titian (c.1576) *The Flaying of the Marsyas*

Oil on Canvas

Size: 212 × 207 cm

[Online Image]

Image Source: Available at:

<<http://www.bridgemaneducation.com.arts.idm.oclc.org/ImageView.aspx?result=0&balid=388734>> [Accessed 03 November 2012].



Figure 2.

G.L Brierley (2012) *Felt*

Oil on Wood

Size: 50 x 60 cm

[Online Image]

Image Source: Available at: <<http://www.glbrierley.com/frames2012/frame7.html>>

[Accessed 07 November 2012]

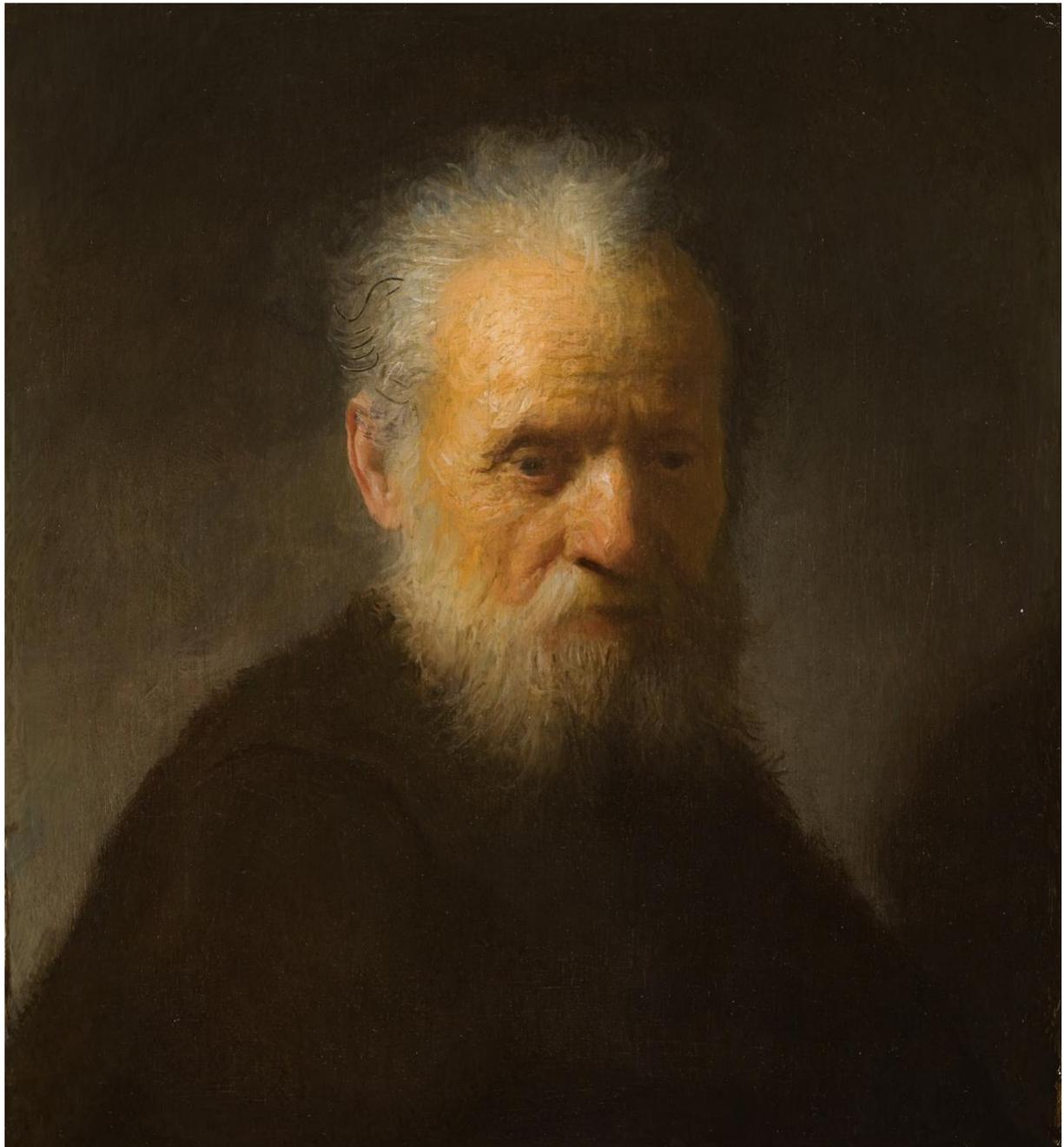


Figure 3.

Rembrandt (c.1630) *Old Man With a Beard*

Oil on Canvas

Size: 18 x 17.5 cm

[Online Image]

Image Credit: Delft University of Technology

Image Source: Available at:

<[http://www.rembrandt.ua.ac.be/oldman\\_recentportrait\\_100.jpg](http://www.rembrandt.ua.ac.be/oldman_recentportrait_100.jpg)> [accessed 08 January 2013].



Figure 4.

Mason, O. G. (c.1881) *Cutaneous syphilis case in young child*

Photograph

Fox, G.H. (1881) *Photographic Illustrations of Skin Diseases. WITH: Cutaneous Syphilis*. [Online Image]. Available at:

< <http://www.baumanrarebooks.com/rare-books/fox-george-henry/photographic-illustrations-of-skin-diseases-with-cutaneous-syphilis/75619.aspx> > [Accessed 14 December 2012].

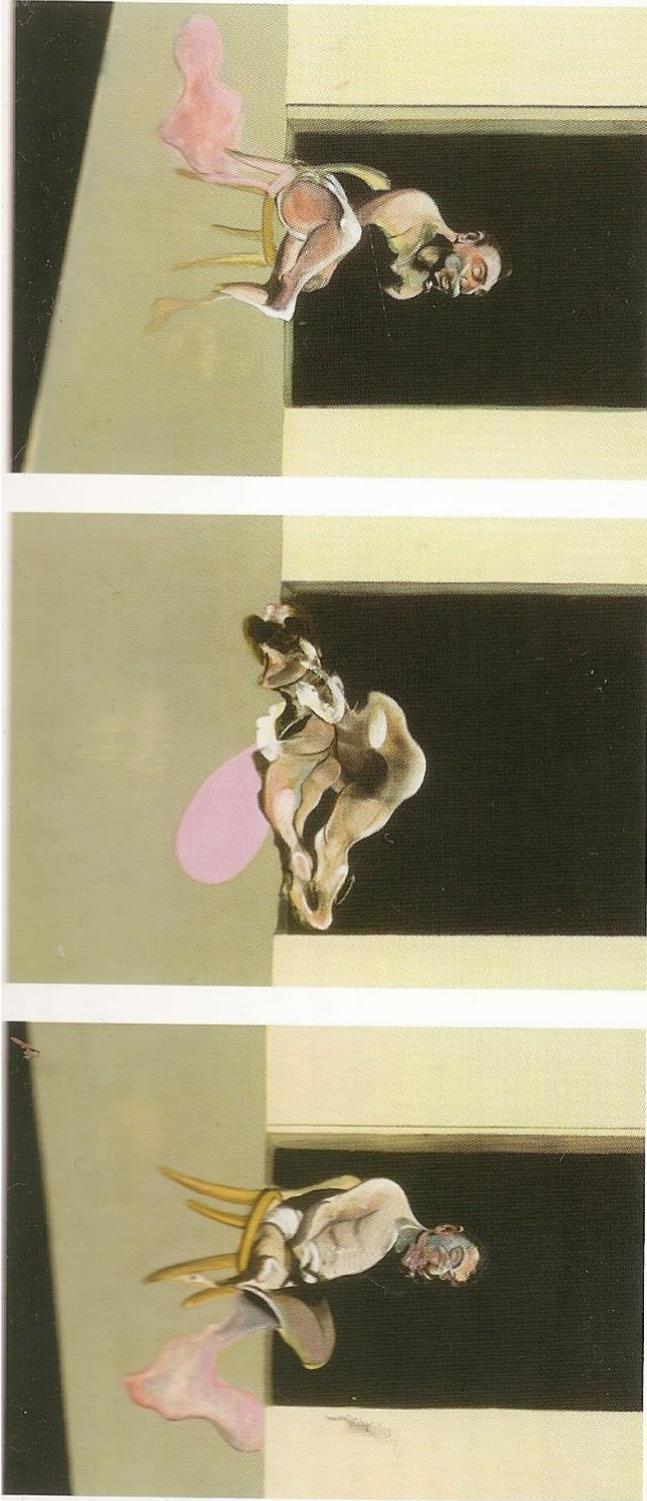


Figure 5.

Francis Bacon (1972) *Triptych - August 1972*

Oil on canvas

Size: Triptych, 198.1 x 147.3 cm each

Zweite, A. (2006) *Francis Bacon The Violence of the Real*. London: Thames & Hudson. pp. 170 -171



Figure 6.

GL Brierley (2009) *Frillamina*

Oil on wood

25.5 x 29 cm

Carslaw St\* Lukes

[Online Image] Available at:

<<http://www.carslawstlukes.com/artistpage.php?artistid=5>> [Accessed 07 November 2012]

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