

Signs of Still Life

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Signs of Still Life

**Submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Visual Art
Queensland College of Art, Griffith
University**

**By Dr Richard Noel Dunlop
Dip. T, B. Ed, M.Ed, Ph D.
October 2006**

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Signs of Still Life:

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Visual Art, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University

By Dr Richard Dunlop

Dip. T, B.Ed, M.Ed., Ph D.

Abstract

The research question under investigation is:

Working within the genre of still life, how can my current work represent a 'radical revision' of selected aspects of this traditional genre?

The issues and art historical knowledge informing the creation of my contemporary still lifes is the central subject of this project – involving a self-effacing, metacognitive process of 'radical revisionism' (see Butler, 2005), reflecting contemporary practices among artists and art historians alike. The ancient genre of still life, stemming from Pompeian frescoes and mosaics to the current day, will be exposed to an openly subjective historical narrative, compelled in directions associated with the creation of my own artwork.

My own processes of art making will likewise be questioned in terms of the way they might be historically understood against the scholarship of art historians and critics, and where they may find a place within the broad intellectual and academic framework under construction by a range of international artists and art historians.

The contribution to be made to new knowledge will by the nature of the subject under investigation and result in an analysis of the continual interaction of making and theorising about art. New theoretical knowledge linked to the creation of my own artworks will be partially constructed through and by the artwork, so that the completed artworks and their making are theorised themselves (Macleod and Holdridge, 2006: 2) against a backdrop of considerable existing writings on the origins, contexts and meanings of still life.

The contemporary theorising of Rex Butler (2005) on 'radical revisionism' will be important to this endeavour. Butler (2005:9) summarises the difficulties and preferences of the contemporary art historian in bringing to bear present knowledge and values to any study of the past, the subject of an enduring debate in historiography:

It is a history, therefore, that sees the artists of the past speaking across what we might like to call 'time-separated' areas to contemporary issues. In other words – and we should try to remain aware of just what is so extraordinary about this – it is a history that conceives of the artists of the past as though they were already post-modernists, already reacting in their work to the same concerns that artists of today do.

It is a theoretical position which is well-suited to the present study because Butler (2005) seeks to displace a straightforward dichotomy between analysing objects, people or actions on their own past terms and their work and behaviour in relation to contemporary reference points. It is an analytical stance which automatically dismisses claims for an 'impartial', 'objective' or 'singular' history and locates the interpreter as a person who is wilfully intervening in the recasting of the motives and meanings linked to objects, people and actions. The notion of 'radical revisionism' will be applied to an historical account of members of the genre of still life as well as to the developmental processes of my own artworks.

The work of a range of contemporary artists who have sought to rejuvenate the language and conventions of still life will be examined, followed by the discussion of my own work. Any emerging divide in operation between theory and practice will be viewed as mutable.

Central to the written research output was the creation of a major body of works on paper and paintings, and this research includes an analysis of the deliberations involved in the development of my artworks. The works on paper and paintings reveal the application of relatively instinctual artistic decision-making processes in conjunction with more reflective theoretical and art-historical considerations. Other mediums such as video or installation could equally have been used by me (or preferred by other artists) in subsequent related investigations to explore similar concerns. Likewise, genres other than still life could be viewed by others as suitable vehicles for reflecting on the interaction between theorising and art making against the long backdrop of an historical genre.

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1. Introduction

The research question under investigation is:

Working within the genre of still life, how can my current work represent a 'radical revision' of selected aspects of this traditional genre?

The processes involved in the creation of the art objects during the course of this research project are the central subject of the theorising which will be documented. This will necessarily require that a sample of objects which fall into the category of still life from antiquity to the present will be subject to description, analysis, quotation and appropriation in various ways – involving a self-effacing, metacognitive process of 'radical revisionism' (see Butler, 2005) which reflects contemporary practices among artists and art historians alike. The genre of still life will be open to historical and subjective re-investigation in relation to the decision-making processes associated with the creation of my own art works.

My own processes of making art and the works on paper and paintings which result from the research will be questioned in terms of the ways in which they might be historically understood, and where they may settle within a broad intellectual and academic framework. While the research question has been proposed, the contribution to be made to new knowledge will by nature result from the continual interaction of making and theorising. New theory linked to the generation of my own art will be constructed through and by the artwork, so that the artwork is theorised itself (Macleod and Holdridge, 2006: 2) against a backdrop of a considerable body of literature on the origins, contexts and meanings of still life.

The contemporary theorising of Rex Butler (2005) on 'radical revisionism' will be important to this endeavour. Butler (2005:9) summarises the inescapable difficulties of the contemporary art historian in bringing to bear present knowledge and values on any study of the past:

It is a history, therefore, that sees the artists of the past speaking across what we might like to call 'time-separated' areas to contemporary issues. In other words – and we should try to remain aware of just what is so extraordinary about this – it is a history that conceives of the artists of the past as though they were already post-modernists, already reacting in their work to the same concerns that artists of today do.

Butler describes the manner in which art historians assess images of the past and the intentions of their makers through the art historians' experience of the present, in other words, historians inescapably re-write history so that it makes sense as a narrative to a current readership. Although this is a rather hackneyed theme in historiographic circles and among artists (for example, see Biggs, 2006; Biggs, 2001; Rankovic, 2006; Renwick, 2006; Trenton, 2003; Weibel, 1995), it would appear that Butler (2005:9) has only recently arrived at this personal revelation:

We no longer judge [art historians'] histories in terms of the traditional scholarly standards of neutrality, empiricity, truthfulness, but in terms of the newer public virtues of beauty, persuasiveness and social justice.

The concept and practice of radical revisionism involves a theoretical position which is well-suited to my present research because Butler (2005) strives to displace a straightforward dichotomy between purporting to analyse objects, people or actions on their own past terms and their re-location into a current set of references. It is a stance which voluntarily dismisses claims for an impartial or objective history and locates the interpreter of art history as a person who is candidly intervening in the recasting of objects, people and actions. Radical revisionism will be applied to an historical account of the genre of still life.

A number of art-historical critiques have radically revised and resuscitated the

genre of still life in individualistic ways in recent years. Bryson's (1990) *Looking at the Overlooked* was one, followed by Lowenthal's (1996) *The Object as Subject* and Rowell's (2000) survey of twentieth century still life for New York's Museum of Modern Art, *Objects of Desire*.

For this project, it will be necessary to consider the work of selected contemporary artists who have sought to rejuvenate the language and conventions of still life as isolated or recurrent concerns in order to make particular aesthetic, social or political points. Following this, my own works on paper and paintings will be discussed, in relation to the (albeit abbreviated) historical account of the genre of still life.

While artists such as Imants Tillers have explored alienation by intentionally remaining at some steps removed from the 'original' sources of imagery that are 'appropriated' (Butler, 2006:8), my fidelity remained with Julian Schnabel's dictum that artworks "are physical things which need to be seen in person" (Pfeiffer, 2004:156). Accordingly, this study may not have been as comprehensive or convincing without undertaking direct scrutiny and documentation of key works falling within the still life tradition. A visit to Italian museums and churches housing important examples of still life was undertaken by me throughout December and January of 2004/05. Works held in Switzerland and Japan were also examined first hand. Where works could not be analysed directly as a first priority, key images were accessed from journals, gallery catalogues and the internet.

Central to the written research output will be the creation of a substantial body of works on paper and paintings, complementing the investigation of issues in this current paper. Some of the works on paper will involve collage as well as painting. By the nature of the ongoing placement of objects in juxtaposition to one another, collage as a medium would appear to be a suitable choice in its capacity to reveal relatively arbitrary or instinctual art-making processes

occurring in tandem with reflective theoretical deliberations. Collage is associated with modernism, but it is equally a post-modern strategy with Australian artists such as Juan Davila, Gordon Bennett, Imants Tillers, and John Young habitually 'appropriating' elements of the work of established international artists and collaging these by various means to produce new relationships and images (McIntyre, 1990; McLean, 1998).

Butler (2005:7) refers to the "phenomenon of appropriation in Australian art" and its presence as the hallmark of the "post-modern" artist arguing "that [appropriation] is not so much a particular style or even period as a whole new way of making and thinking about art". However, this would appear to strongly contradict the historical record in Australia and elsewhere. For example, the list is near inexhaustible of artists who have produced still lifes by habitually appropriating the work of other artists to establish new relationships, yet have not been categorised as 'post-modernists'. Chardin's still lifes are adaptations of seventeenth century still life conventions from the Netherlands. The still lifes of de Heem and Willem Kalf modify *vanitas* painting, just as Gerhard Richter appropriates the imagery of his European heritage to produce his still lifes featuring candles and skulls. Margaret Preston appropriated Aboriginal designs in her paintings, as did Ian Fairweather. Moreover, Picasso and Matisse refashioned earlier still life paintings for their own purposes, and were subsequently subject to similar treatment by Roy Lichtenstein and others (Alesco, 2000; Auger, 1996; Ebert-Schifferer, 1999; Tate Liverpool, 2001; Varnedoe, Antonelli and Siegel, 2000).

Having noted these oddities and shortcomings in Butler's (2005) logic, his recent insight into the processes of generating art history is nevertheless a useful departure point for this present project exactly because of its inherently flawed logic, its incomplete nature, its emphasis on the abandonment of strictly impartial and objective truths in intervening in the study of the past, and its related abiding interest in the re-writing of history. Rather than asserting an authoritarian grasp

on the historical account, the historical account of still life in this research paper will be presented as tentative and incomplete in nature, with the researcher alert to the inequities and dangers associated with assessing the work of artists from past centuries against the backdrop of particular contemporary concerns. In other words, 'radical revisionism' will be very appropriate because this present research endeavour simultaneously involves confronting the past (the range of historical art which might collectively be described as still life which must be dealt with to some extent as a bank of references) by using the opaque lens of the present, while metacognitively addressing the meaning of new artworks which are created (theorising about, and simultaneously reflecting upon my own making of new art works).

The scope of the genre of still life is vast, and definitions of the genre have by no means remained static or timeless (Bryson, 1990; Sterling, 1985; Rathbone and Shackelford, 2001; Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984). As art history itself has been contingent, flexible and bound by the political and social contexts in which it has been written, still life appears to have had chameleon-like characteristics over various centuries (Radcliff, 1985). The French term for still life, *natura morte*, and the Italian counterpart, *la nature morta*, both refer to the painting or sculpture of inanimate objects such as fruit, flowers or utensils usually on a table. The choice of subjects characteristically involves flowers (often in vases), bowls of fruit, kitchen vessels and utensils, skulls, mirrors, fish and baskets (Art Gallery Board of South Australia, 1997). For this project, a set of criteria will be consistently applied in order to identify works from various historical periods which could be categorised as members of the genre of still life.

Still life has a long tradition in European cultural life, being an important part of ancient Pompeian frescoes and mosaics, created by unknown artists over 2000 years ago (Ward-Perkins and Claridge, 1980; Philips, 1997). Italian artists since this time, ranging from Carravaggio through to Morandi, deChirico, and Paladino have devoted their attentions to still life, drawing fresh attention to the mundane

while simultaneously exploring themes such as vanity, death, transience, opulence, decadence, and hope. As art historians 'appropriate' art history to create new meanings, narratives and relationships (Butler, 2005:9), it should not be surprising that contemporary artists will also mine seams of existing visual images to arrive at solutions to their own visual problems. Artists as diverse as Gerhard Richter, Damien Hirst and Ricky Swallow come immediately to mind.

It is of course feasible that mediums other than those which I have applied in this present research project could have been selected. To explore the same research question, artistic strategies involving video or installation could equally have been employed, realised and viewed by various audiences. Similarly, genres other than still life may have been equally suitable as vehicles to reflect on matters which were regarded as important sub-themes of this research such as the interaction between theorising and making in creative decision-making episodes. Still life was considered the most appropriate for this present project. The other issues mentioned above could be taken up in subsequent research endeavours.

2. Method

One of the main purposes of this project is to 'radically revise' the making of my own paintings and works on paper and how this creative process might be understood within a broader contemporary art theoretical and historical framework, so the method will gear itself towards this end. In terms of making a contribution to a relevant body of literature, this present paper will involve applying the concept and practice of radical revisionism to the genre of still life and examining the ways in which contemporary artists have re-phrased the ancient conventions and language of this genre. As still life has attracted relatively minimal scholarly and curatorial attention in recent decades (Bryson, 1990; Marquardt-Cherry, 1995; Schneider, 1999), it is intended that this paper will make a contribution to enhancing the prevailing scholarly record.

Logically, the full set of outcomes of a research project such as this cannot be determined comprehensively in advance, although some scaffolding aspects can be planned and identified in advance. While it is likely that some meanings will only be discernible when art works are in progress or completed, some activities which inform their development can be anticipated in conventional ways, such as the undertaking of a literature review of the genre of still life, or theorising about the set of characteristics which artworks within that genre may have in common.

The method will involve a 'radical revision' of the origins, nature and scope of the genre of still life. According to Bryson (1990:12-13), the contributions which artists add to the genre of still life must be understood in terms of the continuities of the cultural associations of the objects which are regularly depicted in art works:

When modern viewers accept a continuity between the bodegones of Cotan in Renaissance Spain and the café tables of Juan Gris in Cubist Paris, it is not simply the force of a critical category, naturalised through

repetition, which links these very different types of painting. Behind the images there stands the culture of artefacts, with its own, independent history. The bowls, jugs, pitchers and vases with which the modern viewer is familiar are all direct lineal descendants of series which were already old in Pompeii... the culture of the table displays a rapid, volatile receptivity to its surrounding culture in the mode of inflecting its fundamental forms. At the same time it also displays a high level of resistance to innovation in the forms themselves.

Given the disjuncture between this genre's extensive history dating from Pompeian antiquity and the succinct demands of this present paper, the historical account which can be made in this brief paper will undoubtedly be quite insufficient for some. Or less apologetically, and aligned to the concept of 'radical revisionism', it could equally be asserted that the historical account in this present paper is likely to be just as complete or incomplete as any other equivalent study of the art of the past in terms of its prejudices, blind spots, favouritism and silences (see Butler, 2005).

One of the limitations associated with the method to be employed, indeed to any historical account, is the availability of access to images and other forms of information about still life (Eco, 1990). Both are in abundant quantity but nevertheless finite. While some of the documentation of still life practitioners was able to occur close to the source, many required an examination of reproductions in journals, catalogues and internet sites, and it is acknowledged that these mediums delimit and edit the potential array of relevant practitioners and images related to the topic at hand.

Key considerations in the selection process of practitioners and images – an issue which will be revisited – will involve the exploration of various intersections through the application of criteria which discriminate in favour of a selection of artists from different centuries, artists interested in collage and paint, and towards

those who translate known works from a discernible cultural heritage into their own recognisable visual language.

This selection process strongly foregrounds the subjective nature of the intervention involved in Butler's (2005) 'radical revisionism', whereby the creation of a single narrative from voluminous historical possibilities and tangents admits that erasures, assumptions and gaps will occur in any historical account or selection process.

The works of the artists who will be treated in some detail will be selected on the basis that they satisfy several of the following, that is, that they:

- Strive to perform a symbolic and/or moral function
- Contain common *vanitas* symbols such as a skull, candle, or other symbol of transience or contain floral imagery removed from a naturalistic context
- Exclude living people, or include the presence of people as subordinate, peripheral or incidental to the imagery of inanimate objects
- Involve an arrangement of objects on a flatbed surface such as a tabletop or within a cabinet or niche
- Place the viewer within a fictive space, usually by the employment of illusionistic devices

Artists of different nationalities were selected, including Richter (Germany), Hirst and Cragg (England), Barcelo (Spain) and Risley, Swallow, Hall, and Maguire (Australia). It is patently obvious that more or less or other artists could have been selected, or more females, or less sculptors, or more photographers, or more emerging Australian artists, or more of this or that relatively arbitrary category. In the selection process, there was a further dimension that was openly subjective in operation. I was particularly interested in the nature and extent to which the work of these artists might have the potential to relate to my current interests and artmaking practices.

The same selection criteria will also be applied to my own studio outcomes, involving the creation of paintings and works on paper. This visual output will be informed by, and simultaneously feed the emerging theoretical dimensions of the project in a symbiotic relationship. The relationship between the theory and the practice will be seen as a mutually sustaining one, rather than an antagonistic one in which either the theory or the practice might be accused of being in disaccord (Cazeaux, 2006: 41; Davey, 2006:29). The making of the paintings and works on paper and their placement within a broader theoretical and historical framework will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

3. The Contexts, Meanings and Origins of Still Life

The volume of possible images, movements and artists which could be embraced within the description of the genre of still life and satisfy the selection criteria outlined above is enormous. Given that an essay such as this current one can only realistically highlight certain aspects of the history of still life, the features chosen to emphasise are those aesthetic, technical, social, political or other ones which have some bearing on my own current interests and artwork. In bringing to bear my present interests, knowledge and values to this current study of objects, people and actions of the past, it is acknowledged that the position is one of subjectively and radically revising that past.

The selection of artists was based on a number of explicit criteria, outlined above, but it was also implicitly decided that not all of the selected artists should be male or that they should all be female, or all Australian, or all sculptors, or all photographers, or all this or that. It would be surprising if another researcher did not choose a different set of artists. It is acknowledged that any and all of the selection criteria could be challenged by others, and if different selection criteria were to be used it is a given that some outcomes of the visual and written elements of the research may have differed.

Having established these matters, the attention of this paper will now turn to a radically revised history of the genre of still life. With regard to early recorded art criticism of practitioners of the genre, according to Bryson (1990:175), beginning as early as the 1660's still life "*was systematically downgraded by the defenders of the higher genres who in their theoretical work provided the rationale for the professional hierarchy of the genres, with history painting, the exclusively male genre, at its apex.*" Given that Pompeian frescoes and mosaics fall within the genre of still life, such comments are both apparently misguided and late, but may help to explain the attraction that artists have had in playfully dealing with the conventions of this ancient genre.

Pompeian works, '*xenia*', featured a broad range of subjects, including food (fruit, fish, trussed animals), writing implements, religious objects, masks and other items, and again, according to Bryson (1990:29) they stressed the abundance of nature and the common wealth shared by all.

Ling (1991) identifies four styles of *xenia*. The two best known styles are those of the 'second' and 'fourth' categories. Pompeians of the second style favoured the scattering of objects across a neutral field, using suggestions of pedestals or shelves to indicate different levels while the fourth style emphasised ornamentation and decorative detail (Ling, 1991:154-157). Dead game, fish and bunches of grapes were commonly distributed among the walls and ceilings of Pompeian buildings, featuring a favouring of the power of natural forces and animalistic instincts and "*a forceful negation of systematic economy, of any network of functions and exchanges that might disrupt the absolute proximity of the ecosystem*" (Bryson, 1990: 29).

The eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, burying Pompeii and Herculaneum, has fortuitously enabled access to such Pompeian still lifes, including many relocated to the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples. One Pompeian fresco (illustrated below) in the fourth style features a plate of eggs, dead thrushes, a jug with a spoon balanced atop, a bronze jug, a leaning storage jar and a cloth, in a diagonal composition relished by Ramage and Ramage (1995:161):

The textures here are smooth, but colour distinctions – for example, to show shadows and the edging of the cloth, and the bird's feet – are done with careful brushwork. The artist was a master at relating the shape and volume of one object to another. The curved forms of the vessels and birds contrast with the block-like shelf, and the diagonals of cloth, bottle, birds and spoon play against each other.

Still Life (First century AD) from the Properties of Julia Felix, Pompeii. Fresco (Wall).
Collection: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples

Apart from still lifes in the fourth and other styles, botanical illustrations and floral still lifes were also common in ancient Pompeii, Rome, Florence, Venice and other Italian centres (Spike, 1983). The most prevalent forms across many centuries depicted bouquets bursting forth from vases on pedestals, suggesting an upward movement, often towards higher domed ceilings, and presumably, towards a higher spiritual force. Among the depictions of botany, it was wreaths and garlands which were most common in ancient Italy and possibly favoured for their capacity to carry symbolic weight, whether that mass be religious and/or spiritual, mythological, allegorical, or something else (Segal, 1990:17).

Italian works of later centuries continued to be replete with religious symbolism, such as the inclusion of images of bread and glasses of wine which presumably alluded to the Eucharist. More prevalent, however, were paintings which endeavoured to convey moralistic messages to viewers. According to Millman (1982: 40-41), as early as eleventh century Europe it was widely preached that the danger inherent in painted images was directly proportionate to the number

of senses that they stirred into action. The apparent pervasiveness of such teachings and the guilt with which European church-goers may have linked their possession of excessive material goods ensured that variations of the *vanitas* theme continued to be produced and find a market well into the seventeenth century, and indeed, into our own century.

For Trumble (1997:10-12), “*a vanitas painting reminded its pious owner, or a bystander, that the sensual beauty of worldly things is fleeting and illusory, that the best and ripest peach is food for worms, that death and final judgement await everybody.*” Stemming from the world of the northern European Protestant Reformation, frequent *vanitas* symbols included skulls, hourglasses and lit candles, which in historical retrospect appear to boldly suggest the passing of time and the certainty of death, and that gluttonous behaviour will have pain and decay soon in attendance (Cathcart, 1983; Cloudman, 1977; Davenport, 1998; Newton, 2001).

While Segal (1990:30) holds that most art historians and critics view *vanitas* paintings as concerning themselves fundamentally with transiency, Segal himself argues that *vanitas* artists sought to draw attention and/or even pontificate about three key themes – vanity, emptiness and transiency:

No clear distinction is made between these three aspects, all of which may be meant in certain cases. A precious object like a Chinese vase was (a) fragile and transitory, (b) expensive and thus a mark of the collector's vanity, and (c) a sign of emptiness, lack of content when great store is set by material things.

Meanwhile in the rest of Europe, curio cabinet paintings (also known by the German term, ‘*kunstkammerschrank*’) were being produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Compared to the pious gravity associated with *vanitas* practitioners, *kunstkammerschrank* could be labelled ‘*anti-vanitas*’ due to their

sheer lack of emphasis on the ephemeral nature of possessions and their apparent interest in depicting the trappings of extraordinary wealth (Araeen, Cubitt and Sardar, 2002). European artists in these centuries were frequently commissioned to paint illusionistic sets of shelves and cabinets which accommodated equally faithful renderings of portions of a patron's prized or coveted possessions (Segal, 1990). It was not unusual for the artist and patron to agree that the objects should be painted as if arranged in museum cabinets (Rijkmuseum Amsterdam, 1999). Illusionistic shadowing, formerly employed in Pompeian fescoes and mosaics, as well as the borders of religious manuscripts, was adopted in *kunstkammerschrank* to offer volume to the arrays of possessions suspended in permanent fictitious life (Landauer, Gerdt and Trenton, 2003; Landauer, 2003).

The practice of illusionistic shadowing possibly reached its heights with the creation of *trompe l'oeil* ceilings in Italian, German and other European palaces (Bartyte, 1991). Their emphasis on deceiving the observer in skilfully creating the illusion of three dimensions has a tenuous relationship with the genre of still life (for example, see Milman, 1982:36), but other than this mention in passing, *trompe l'oeil* painting is not of interest to this present project.

While German artists were crafting *kunstkammerschrank*, Dutch artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were creating botanical paintings involving the depiction of flowers which conveyed particular meanings to an educated audience, schooled on the symbolism of various species of plants since mediaeval days (Chong and Kloek, 1999). For all of these centuries, white lilies held their meaning as a symbol of purity and innocence. For this reason, white lilies were grown (and continue to be grown) in monasteries for the purpose of decorating churches, but also for commemorative religious services (Knap, 2003).

According to Knap (2003), throughout Europe, there was a widespread

awareness that the inclusion of medicinal herbs in European botanical artworks signalled particular states of mind. Likewise, spiny and thorny plants such as thistles and roses were understood to relate to enormous suffering, particularly the suffering of Jesus Christ. Trumpet-shaped blooms in paintings had the habit of replacing the painting of actual trumpets, with both heralding the arrival of a member of the nobility or royalty, with such paintings being widely appealing to aspirants to royalty. The mania which surrounded the purchase of tulip bulbs in Europe in the 1630s meant that particular varieties of tulips depicted in paintings on wood panels or canvas symbolised excessive wealth and signified to the viewer that the owner of the painting was a person of sophisticated taste.

With expansions in commerce in centres like Venice paralleling the production and consumption of artworks, Millman (1982:41) lamented that whereas still lifes were “*originally mystical meditations on the passing of time and on death*” they became mannered to the point where they predominantly “*began to include allusions to the ephemerality of this world’s riches and of the delights afforded by the senses*”. Until the early twentieth century, countless European paintings featured botanical illustrations and botanical images on wood panels and canvases, many gaining their ubiquitous popularity through their ostensible emphasis on God’s omnipotence and the eternal beauty which can be possessed by a wealthy individual (Trumble, 1997).

As imperialistic European powers colonised increasingly large parts of the globe from the sixteenth century, this movement appeared to correspond to a concurrent proliferation in etchings of various species of plants. According to Spike (1983:18), the Florentine school of still life including artists such as Jacopo Chimenti, was wholly indebted to the botanical illustrations of Jacopo Ligozzi (1547-1626) who was commissioned to complete these works by Francesco I de’ Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany and spread widely (Arnold, 2001; Hewson, 1999; Jordan, 1985; Rix, 1981; van Ravenswaay, 1984). Adrian Collaert’s *Florilegium* of 1590 contains an engraving of a vase of flowers which resembles numerous

still lifes which followed. Jacob Hoefnagel's *Archetypa* was published in 1592 and in 1601 Charles de l'Escluse's *Rariorvm Plantarvm Historia* contained 22 woodcuts of tulips which he completed in Spain and which were then subsequently appropriated by countless Dutch artists (Segal, 1990: 41-45; Swan, 1998). The images in such publications found their way to professional and amateur artists alike throughout Europe and elsewhere in the world, who differentially assessed their potential as banks of images to assist in the creation of paintings for specific types of markets (not unlike, incidentally, the practice of contemporary postmodern 'appropriation' artists).

From the array of artists of the past who have challenged the boundaries of the genre of still life, there are many who could be drawn out for particular attention in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries from Italy alone, including deChirico, Morandi and Paladino. Outside Italy, the list could include Cezanne, Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Derain, van Gogh, Gris, Kirchner, Beckmann, Soutine, O'Keefe, Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Wesselmann, Johns, Warhol, Theibaud, Oldenburg, Hockney, Morley, Baselitz, Sultan, Keifer, Steinbach, Koons, Hirst and countless others who regularly chose or continue to breathe new life into the genre of still life (Gilmour, 1997; Guse and Morat, 1999; Hughes, 1990; Walker, 1992).

There are other artists of this and the previous century who have kept their creation of still lifes as a less prominent practice for much of their professional careers, from Piet Mondrian to Elsworth Kelly (Axsom, 1987). Alternately, they may have had it inadvertently erased from art history as a result of curatorial preferences as Schwabsky (2002:7), observed

Mondrian painted flowers alongside his abstractions, but these two strains of his work are not exhibited side by side. (The flowers were excluded, for instance, from the 1995 Mondrian retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York).

As mentioned earlier, the artists selected for detailed treatment have been selected on the basis that their art works satisfied several of the following, that is, that their art works:

- Strive to perform a symbolic and/or moral function
- Contain common *vanitas* symbols such as a skull, candle, or other symbol of transience or contain floral imagery removed from a naturalistic context
- Exclude living people, or include the presence of people as subordinate, peripheral or incidental to the imagery of inanimate objects
- Involve an arrangement of objects on a flatbed surface such as a tabletop or within a cabinet or niche
- Place the viewer within a fictive space, usually by the employment of illusionistic devices

While it has been acknowledged that other artists could have been selected, the following artists and examples of their still lifes will now be the subject of closer attention:

- Gerhard Richter
- Damien Hirst
- Miquel Barcelo
- Tony Cragg
- Tom Risley
- Tim Maguire
- Ricky Swallow
- Fiona Hall

Embracing the latest technological means such as data projectors to assist in the creation of his paintings with photographic origins, such as *Skull* (1983) and *Two Candles* (1983) reproduced below, Gerhard Richter's figurative works are

marked by their imprecision, ghostliness, and nostalgic weight (Grasskamp, 1986). Richter maintains that his still lifes are without any social relevance, meaning or ideological intention, but are formed by dispassionate processes identical to those which result in blurred abstract paintings (Rainbird, 1991). According to Engblom (2000: 28), Richter makes use of *vanitas* motifs such as a skull and/or burning white candles to symbolise the effects of the passage of time, the loss of purity and the certainty of human mortality. Richter's choice of imagery is not apparently haphazard in his paintings. In the case of his still lifes, they are informed by his knowledge of existing *vanitas* works, as well as his widely-published passion for determining the outer limits of his painterly skills (Rainbird, 1991a). Engblom (2000:27) also asserts that Richter believes that the "*sophisticated discipline*" of painting is under threat of extinction if "*the necessary skills and expertise are no longer cultivated*" and that Richter "*considers it his duty to counteract this development*".

The human presence in Richter's still lifes is absent or downplayed (Hentschel, 2000). Given that still life focuses on the overlooked and the humble (Bryson, 1990), it is possible that Richter wanted his still lifes to be interpreted in the context of a material existence in which nothing exceptional occurs, or is aspired to. With the evenness of the surface of his paintings, Richter ensures that his still lifes are not overcharged with interest and may steer the viewer towards a contemplation of themes such as melancholy, estrangement, alienation, and mortality.

Richter, Gerhard **Skull** (1983) 55 x 50 cm Private Collection, Germany

Richter, Gerhard **Two Candles** (1983) 140 x 110 cm
Private Collection, New York

Whereas Richter implies death by reference to oblique *vanitas* symbols, Damien Hirst offers 360 degree images of the dead, open-crypt gestures which appear to leave little ambiguity about his instructions to the living. With *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), it is possible to walk

within and between the confined space that the dead shark inhabits. Although it is not the routine presentation of a still life, whereby inanimate creatures are revealed in illusionistic three-dimensional cabinets, Hirst has nevertheless ennobled and elevated the death of common animals such as lambs (for example, *Away from the Flock*, 1994, not reproduced here) in an effective re-phrasing of the ancient language of still life.

Hirst, Damien ***The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*** (1991)

Tiger shark, glass, steel, formaldehyde 213 x 518 x 213cm

Likewise, Hirst's 'drug cabinets', such as *The Lovers (Spontaneous, Committed, Detached, Compromising)* (1991) reproduced below, are updated *kunstkammerschrank*, which are themselves close relatives to "the first museums, those cabinets of natural curiosities whose function was to produce knowledge by arraying objects in a taxonomic or diagrammatic space designed to reveal variation against the background of underlying structure and type." (Bryson, 1990: 107)

Hirst, Damien ***The Lovers (Spontaneous, Committed, Detached, Compromising)*** 1991
(Detail) Four cabinets containing assorted jars of internal organs from 8 cows in a formaldehyde solution each cabinet: 152 x 102 x 23cm

Hirst's *The Lovers (Spontaneous, Committed, Detached, Compromising)* (1991) is a series of four cabinets containing assorted jars of internal organs from eight cows in a formaldehyde solution. A related art work, *My Way* (1990-91), not reproduced here, is a collection of superannuated bottles of amphetamines broadly assorted according to height and shape in the convention of a pharmacist's cabinet. Both works provide differing guides to the means by which our lives could be sustained to exercise minimal optimistic control over the inevitability of our deaths.

While Hirst had his studio assistants in England in the late 1980s and 1990's dismembering assorted dead animals to create still lifes, Miquel Barcelo had his assistants in Mali dissecting vegetables directly onto his art works, and embedding their juices into the 'mixed media' of his still life paintings of fruit and

vegetables on white tabletops. As a member of a generation of artists who defied obsolete prophecies about the death of painting, Barcelo's paintings attracted international interest in the late 1980's (della Vucciria, 1998). Barcelo has been historically linked with artists as diverse as Cotan, Chardin and Goya as well as the fresco and mosaic artists of ancient Pompeii:

In his still lifes, wine flows from bottles or from upturned glasses, the squid spits out its ink, the tomatoes express their juice, real seeds are stuck on slices of watermelon. Depending on where he is, he uses various materials from his surroundings... When the earth trembled, he recovered ash from the erupting Vesuvius to load onto his palette and obtain new shades of brown and grey... During the course of his various visits to Africa, he paints with pigments found locally. Some of them are used traditionally, others are river sediments (della Vucciria, 1998:145).

Barcelo, Miquel *Dejeuner sur l'herbe II* (1988) Oil and vegetable juices on canvas 206 x 330cm
Private collection

The 'flatbed' surfaces of Barcelo's still lifes (see Schaviro, 1997) feature small objects dispersed across expansive grounds and painted in oil, vegetable juices and other media. Apart from highlighting his interest in experimenting with non-traditional art materials, they display his knowledge of still life's traditional repertoire of illusory techniques of shadowing and foreshortening.

Barcelo, Miquel **5 Cranis d'Animal I 1 d'Homo** (1998) Terracotta 120 x 50 x 50cm
Private collection

Barcelo, Miquel **Montre Morte** (1998) Terracotta 13 x 31 cm
Private collection

With his ceramic work, Barcelo tends to favour the unprocessed clays and dirt of Mali, Africa where he has one of his studios. In works such as *5 Cranis d'Animal I d'Homo* (1998), *vanitas* symbols are in abundance. Della Vicciria (1998:155) observed:

Since sculpture is produced by accumulation, by adding on pieces in succession, it is mortuary themes that dominate. If classical sculpture aimed at reaching an ideal of serenity through the fullness of forms, Barcelo's hollow volumes speak to us of death.

In the same decades that Damien Hirst was butchering animals and Barcelo was juicing vegetables for his paintings, Tony Cragg, the English sculptor, was using equally unconventional art materials for his still lifes, such as coloured plastic refuse. For Cragg, whether the objects are found or fabricated by him, he has stated but not consistently maintained that the materials he uses have always stood for themselves:

They're there and they want a dialogue on the basis of all the things in the world, and not on the basis of a particular group of objects which one has called in the past 'sculpture'. Observe that this is not the same as saying, as we do of Duchampian readymades, that any object can be made "sculpture" by a shift in context. (Schjeldahl, 1990: 76)

Cragg, Tony ***Green, Yellow, Red, Orange and Blue Bottles II*** (1982) Installed at Metropolitan Museum, Tokyo

Silhouettes of domestic vessels are central to many of Cragg's works of the 1980's, including *Five Bottles on a Shelf* (1982), *Green, Yellow, Red, Orange and Blue Bottles II* (1982) reproduced above, *Birnan Wood* (1985), *Eroded Landscape* (1987) reproduced below, *Mother's Milk II* (1988), and *Three Cast Bottles* (1989). In these still life sculptures, the vessels approximate human scale, and Cragg regards the materials in this case as substitutes for humans rather than as consistent material entities, "*implying that human life is a vessel into which various experiences are poured – as various chemicals are poured*

into a laboratory beaker or an alchemical athanor – to be transformed not into something transcendental but into new material configurations of energy in the stream of life” (McEvelley, 1990: 118).

Cragg, Tony ***Eroded Landscape*** (1987) Glass, wood, steel 145 x 125 x 60cm Private collection

With changes of styles and formats over more recent years (see Schimmel, 1990), Cragg continues to effectively encourage new relationships among diverse materials in still life formats, raising rather insignificant sculptural materials to new levels of acceptance in art museum contexts, and kick-starting visual responses in Australian artists as diverse as Tom Risley, Janet Laurence and Fiona Hall.

Tom Risley, in relation to Tony Cragg, is perhaps a perfect example of the persistent colonial mimicry of art which peppers Australian art history (see, for

example, Smith, 1960; Beilharz, 1997; Burn, Lendon, Merewether and Stephen, 1988; Butler, 2005a). While some of Tom Risley's sculptural work appears to be the product of his independent artistic inquiries, the sculptural vocabulary he repeatedly uses is significantly derived from the aesthetic and stylistic interest of others, including the early works of Tony Cragg and Anish Kapoor.

Risley's series of still life sculptures of the late 1980's and early 1990's pressed recycled natural and processed materials into the service of art history (Hall, 1992). The disparate materials that Risley juxtaposed simultaneously displayed their unique histories while contributing to the creation of new relationships. In works such as *Still Life with Orange Vase* (1989), and *Still Life with Mauve* (1990) both reproduced below, weathered found materials or objects Risley has fabricated are "used in a strictly formal, intellectual and visual manner, placing the 'ready-made' in its own space" (Hall, 1992: 11).

Risley, Tom ***Still Life with Orange Vase*** (1989) Mixed media Dimensions variable

Risley's still lifes somewhat differentiate themselves from Cragg's when he adds paint and draws attention to theoretical issues about the overlapping of painting and sculpture. As Hall (1992: 13) observes:

Works such as Still Life with Mauve, with their apparent elegance, can be read more as paintings than sculptures. They also contain discrete puns about painting itself, particularly in the way in which that formal elegance is achieved by the creation of non-illusionary three dimensional shapes and subjects using off-cast materials. The placement of carefully and skilfully constructed volumes which are opposed by linearly represented empty vessels creates an interesting visual metaphor of containment and

release.

Risley, Tom ***Still Life with Mauve*** (1990) Mixed media construction Dimensions variable

A contemporary of Risley's, Tim Maguire, also draws heavily from the creations of European artists, but his historical reach is considerably longer than Risley's. Maguire is known for appropriating images from Dutch still lifes of the seventeenth century, magnifying minute features to almost mural size with the assistance of projection and digital printing technologies. According to Annear (1993:13), Maguire is not so much quoting but 'translating' these original sources:

The originals are lush depictions heavy with flower symbolism and contemporary notions to do with vanitas and memento mori. While it is

possible to see these ideas translated straight into the present in Maguire's painting (painting has become a memento mori of itself), there are other factors at work. Untitled stands apart from its source – the images manipulated and abstracted. The heavy bloom to the left alludes to other forms which contain the warmth, beauty, and sentiment of something that is about to fade and die. The shadowy plant forms to the right are expressive of other aspects of lushness, secrecy, and transience. The flying insect can be a fertiliser or a poisoner. The seductions of light and dark are fully evident but so is treachery, impermanence, and the fading in and out of colour and form. The illusions and drama of paint on canvas are clear but they are presented neither academically nor with simple irony. There is a compression and density of both feeling and thought.

Maguire, Tim (1993) **Untitled** Oil on sized paper on canvas (diptych) 152 x 107cm each
Collection: Moët and Chandon Foundation

Maguire's floral paintings frequently include tulips like their Dutch forebears and they also appear to self-consciously inhabit at least three intersecting economic spaces (Annear, 1993). First, like the Dutch paintings which preceded them, Maguire's paintings depict objects of shared value and desire, representations of precious and beautiful specimens. Second, because of their pricing structure, Maguire's paintings can now only be purchased by very wealthy individuals or curators deploying the public funds of the State, with such patronage accompanied by symbolic associations of social prestige and cultural judgement (Carrier, 1985). Third, the creation of paintings on the sheer scale of Maguire's, albeit aided by projectors and inkjet printers of daunting dimensions, may appear to an uneducated audience to involve an inordinate intensity of labour married to exceptional levels of technical prowess.

Maguire, Tim **Untitled** (1993) Oil on sized paper on canvas 196 x 196cm Collection: Hugh Jamieson, Sydney

Ricky Swallow is another Australian artist attracted to the genre of still life, demonstrating a recurring interest in *vanitas* imagery and *memento mori*, in works such as *iMan Prototypes* (2001), reproduced below. Swallow has declared that he is interested in evolution, scientific exploration, consumerism, the passage of time, and the prevailing values of contemporary culture, as he perceives them (VCEART, 2000). His media has included plumbing piping, cardboard, resin, rubber, as well as more mundane sculptural materials such as timber.

Swallow, Ricky *iMan Prototypes* (2001) Injection moulded resin with colour tints 4 units, each 16 x 11.5 x 18.5cm (from an edition of 4) Exhibited: Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney 2002

Swallow's *Killing Time* (2004), reproduced below, refers to the humble possessions of his fisherman father, but its 'return' to its Italian roots by being exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2005 appears to have been particularly appropriate, given its inheritance from Italian *vanitas* paintings (Swallow, 2004). *Killing Time* (2004) mirrors an image of wealth and abundance resident in simple objects. With Swallow's works carved from timber, there is a sense in which the plentiful offerings of nature can be at once wrought from, and returned to, the environments that produced them, and aligned to this, works such as *Killing Time* (2004) are reminiscent of Pompeian *xenia* in which grapes may be depicted as

contained in the basket made by the vine which produced the grapes.

Swallow, Ricky ***Killing Time*** (2004) Wood 190 x 110 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales
Exhibited: Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, 2004

Swallow, Ricky ***Killing Time*** (2004) (Details) Wood 190 x 110 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales

Like Swallow, another Australian artist, Fiona Hall, creates works which appear to highlight the fragility of nature. Unlike Swallow, however, Hall's interest appears to lie in investigating the ways in which natural resources such as plants are exploited to energise global trade rather than perform the role she would prefer them to play, that is as sources of spiritual illumination and/or elements of uninterrupted cycles of growth and decay.

Hall, Fiona From the series, ***Different Forms of Intelligence*** (2005) Plastic beads and wire
22 x 25cm Collection: University of South Australia

Hall's series, *Paradisus Terrestris* 1989-90 involves different plant species adjoined to fragments of nude male and female bodies. These are intricately sculpted out of aluminium (sardine) cans with the rolled-up tin lids exposing a "key-hole" view of the nude within each (Chapman, 1997:41). Insofar as it focuses on mortality and decay, much of Hall's artistic output engages in a dialogue with *vanitas* works.

Having briefly considered the still life works by a variety of artists, it is timely in the following section to examine the transformations which have occurred in the development of my own paintings and works on paper since the outset of this

current research.

Whereas the making and critique of art works are traditionally regarded as separate and distinct activities (the latter following the former), the making of my work and theorising about its making have been regarded in this research project as parallel processes which offer “gaps and saliences in an otherwise uniform flow of experience” (Cazeaux, 2006:49), allowing for a radical revision of works en route (Butler, 2005). While this notion appears relatively new in art criticism, entries from various artists’ journals suggest that it has been a familiar understanding of artists for considerably longer. For O’Riley (2006:94):

the practice of working in parallel activities has meant that the visual has an elliptical relationship to the textual and vice versa; that is, each activity can be seen as completing or contributing to the sense of a particular train of thought, a meaning or argument indicated in the corresponding activity...If perceptual activity involves the constant, perhaps unconscious positing of hypotheses about what is seen, the perception of images and what they represent involves a similar process of decoding the projection: decoding what is apparently represented and projecting an interpretation regarding its significance.

4. Discussion in Relation to Studio Practice

The act of making the paintings and works on paper associated with this present research involved balancing risk-taking with experience, intuition with reasoned theorising, and the adoption of a disposition of radical revisionism. Decisions to scrape off or erase large sections of paintings during various phases of their making, such as that of *Arcadia* (2004) reproduced below, added to the archaeology of the completed works. Objects and marks were overlaid on what was collaged and/or painted previously and translucent glazes were built up over weeks or months on top of the emerging images, which in turn offered newly formed surfaces upon which to continue to paint.

Richard Dunlop 2004 **Arcadia** Oil on Belgian linen 170 x 170cm Artist's Collection

In making the art works, the results of initial decisions were disrupted as dictated by aesthetic and other considerations concerning the direction of the work. Usually decisions were made to allow elements of previous layers to persist with their contributions, so that the accrued information in a painting like *Italian Still Life* (2005) reproduced below had the potential to enrich the final product. Images, including appropriated ones, were selected or developed for their impact in relation to extant elements of the art works in order that new relationships were established and a degree of freshness was maintained in the resulting images. For Butler, (2005:7),

To reproduce one work by means of another is to give it a new meaning and significance. And underlying appropriation is the idea that the meaning of an artwork is always open to these kinds of displacements, that it is to be found not in some original intention by its author but in the way it is received by its spectator. Indeed, appropriation can be seen to imply that – although we might try – we can never possess the original meaning of a work of art, that even its first appearance is only its first copy, its first contextualisation, one particular but by no means definitive interpretation of it.

Richard Dunlop 2005 **Italian Still Life** Oil on Belgian linen 90 x 90cm Private Collection

In the course of the making of my works on paper and paintings, the likelihood of singular interpretations of meanings was deliberately distorted. If the works contained depictions of objects of orthodox appearance, this would tend to be obscured and then sought to be retrieved through applying an internal pictorial logic. In other words, the placement and removal of objects and elements within my paintings could be seen to be cognisant of Newton's (2001:51) notion that "*the introduction of dissonance, or projection of inarticulate unconscious form by the artist initiates the dialectical struggle at the heart of the creative structure and the dynamic tension between articulate and inarticulate, or Apollonian and Dionysian forces*".

Dunlop, Richard (2004) **Japanese Garden** Mixed media 100 x 100cm Private Collection

The mixture of depictions of real and artificial objects in works such as *Japanese Garden* (2004) or *Plants* (2004) reproduced below, was intended to enhance the ambiguous relationships between the 'natural' and the 'artificial' in my paintings and works on paper, so as to encourage a viewer to question the authenticity of what may at first glance appear to be a set of straightforward relationships. In the completed body of art works, abstracted areas jostle for attention with passages of descriptive realism, fragments of larger ambiguous entities. It is by no means

revelatory to observe that the means by which my art works are constructed, are by their very nature artificial even though a final image may contain accurate depictions of 'real' objects.

Rather than reflect an orderly chronological or lineal development, I have steered the making of my artwork towards a more organic model. Individual works of art have not been viewed as sub-projects or minor objectives which must be concluded before others can be initiated but to the contrary all works are seen to require differing levels of individualised attention and may be revisited long after to achieve resolution. Predictably, some works required repeated return efforts after several weeks or months had elapsed, with their resolution benefiting from the research, theorising, deliberation, and practical experimentation on related artworks which had occurred in the interim.

Dunlop, Richard (2004) **Plants** Mixed media 100 x 100cm Collection: Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville

Similarly, while some aspects of the decision-making process were fixed or at least relatively predictable in advance (for example, decisions about the physical dimensions of particular works), many decisions were characteristically more fluid and intuitive, responding to immediate aesthetic challenges against the backdrop of innumerable art historical images. As the paintings and works on paper were not initiated via visual plans or preparatory drawings, they were seen to remain as real and unique objects in themselves rather than a faithful depiction of something already in existence (See Jones, 2006). The physical remnants of the decisions which contributed to their making were sought to be captured within the completed works, although the success of this goal can only be determined by the viewer. Newton (2001:100) refers to the striving of such a goal as equivalent to submitting to the “*language of the unconscious – the drips, smears, scratches, erasures, line variations, remnants of underpainting, and the vagaries of material facture, texture, and impasto such as bumps, fissures, fragmentation and paint skin*” while O’Flaherty (1984:221) sees the preference for showing evidence of ‘struggle’ with the materials of painting as a desire to grasp the “*fragmented, imperfect, tantalizing sense of memory, the complete knowledge that hovers just out of reach of the mind’s eye*”.

As well as revealing signs of changes of mind in works such as *Third World Funeral* (2004), reproduced below, the constant erasure or exposure of images from the surfaces of my art works are intended to reveal evidence of the passage of time. Depictions of fully formed objects occupy the same space that dissolving or past objects once occupied. There is also the elapsed time associated with media such as collage or painting, both of which can involve labour intensive and time-consuming processes. When a work such as *Japanese Garden* (2004) or *Third World Funeral* (2004) is then photographed and re-worked, the resulting works reveals remnants of aspects of their making (such as signs of sticky tape having been used) but it simultaneously removes other information, for example, about the unevenness of the original’s surface, and brings into question the whole question of which work is the original art work.

Dunlop, Richard (2004) **Third World Funeral** Mixed media 100 x 100cm Collection: College of Fine Arts, University of Tasmania

Dunlop, Richard (2004) **Still Life with Baptism Spoon** Oil on Belgian linen 170 x 170cm Artist's Collection

Conventionally, still life compositions invite the eye of a viewer into a picture by establishing predictable paths of entry. Customarily, this means that objects which are meant to be perceived as nearby will be depicted as relatively larger while objects which are intended to be perceived as receding may be scaled down to assist a conventional interpretation of the relationship between various objects in an illusionistic space (the compositional device favoured by the High Renaissance). The compositions of my works on paper and paintings sought to compete with this model and manipulate interpretations of the available space in what might be described as a 'flatbed' picture plane. The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to a surface with which we may be familiar, like a tabletop or a view through a window, on or in which objects may be scattered or arranged in some ambiguous manner, and we may not have access to all of the information we require to determine the full cohort of relationships. The painted surface is no longer an analogue of visible nature but of operational processes which suggest ambiguous relationships among disparate objects and passages of paint.

The deliberate disruption of the picture plane and straightforward relationships among objects in works like *Still Life with Baptism Spoon* (2004) and *Still Life with ceramics (Vertical Chinese Landscape)* (2004) reproduced below, was intended to ensure that the realisation of the final works would retain considerable evidence of the struggle of their making, and that the 'faithful' depiction of real objects was accepted as "a contingent fiction, one among multiple 'realities' that are devoid of ontological foundation" (Ross, 2005:284). As random acts of violence or disruption occur in any 'natural' or human settings, and energy and opportunities are suddenly re-distributed, there were seen to be benefits in deliberately introducing disruption into the creation of my artworks by the use of particular painting processes. This meant that the relationships among depicted objects and elements of the painting were disturbed and required re-negotiation to achieve a sense of completion. Although fixed by the physical limits of the paper or fabric on which my artworks appear, I also attempted in

many works to suggest a space which continued beyond and/or behind the individual works.

Dunlop, Richard (2004) **Still Life with Ceramics (Vertical Chinese Landscape)** Oil on Belgian linen 170 x 170cm Private Collection

Following the application of such thinking, the works of mine which were determined as satisfactorily completed were far less than the number initiated. The crucial consideration in the end was that each finished image was sufficiently engaging because of its mix of the depictions of real objects and episodes of ambiguity, and also refreshed a relationship with the traditional language and conventions of still life. Like the art and artists I admire most, I sought to maintain figuration and abstraction in an uneasy tension and to strive to balance intuitive

mark-making with reflective deliberation. When particular forms in art works were left to remain in a state whereby they appear to verge on dissolution, or when particular pigments were used to create jarring relationships rather than ones which suggested a greater equilibrium among forms, or when works that I've made share a resonance with those created by other artists in the long tradition of still life, such decisions were viewed as the outcome of consciously and radically revising the progress of my own art works.

Dunlop, Richard (2006) **Botanical Collection 1** Pencil, gouache, and ink on paper 100 x 100cm
Artist's Collection

The present emphasis on the notion of disruption and of intuitive mark-making, however, needs to be tempered because the decisions about when a work is finished are invariably reliant on judgements which are anything but intuitive. Rather, such judgements benefit from the maintenance of theoretical and reflective distance. It could be compared to effectively playing chess, which requires differing and simultaneous strategies for attack and defence. There is nothing that survives to be exhibited that was not in some way intended as a finished work, even the obvious erasures in works like *Botanical Collection 1* (2006) reproduced above, and *Botanical Collection 2* (2006), a detail of which is reproduced below. If processes of disruption or erasure occur in a work in order to prompt a visual reaction to restore order, than this is nevertheless a purposeful intervention, which is informed by experience of dealing with the materials at hand, professional deliberation, awareness of art history, and a repertoire of technical skills.

Dunlop, Richard (2006) **Botanical Collection 2 (detail)** Pencil, gouache, and ink on paper 100 x 100cm Artist's Collection

Some of my paintings during the course of this research have explored the still life tradition of presenting niches and cabinets holding objects within their depths. These were created in the tradition of artists such as Vittore Carpaccio (1465 – 1526), Wallerant Vaillant (1623-1677), Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678) and John Frederick Peto (1854-1907), however the lines of the cabinets additionally mimic modernist grids and establish a shallow depth appropriate for housing the trappings of collectors, such as myself. Each collection of objects in these works are intended to offer indirect messages about taxonomic relationships, arbitrary matrixes imposed upon unruly natural phenomena, the transience of the certainties of science, and the ideologies which may support particular views posing as natural orders.

Although museum cabinets can give the impression that the world of objects could be classified neatly and comprehensively if only there were enough cabinets (and up to point, with a robust and sophisticated classification system, this could be possible), there always appears to remain manifestations of the unclassifiable, unknowable or indecipherable which will frustrate closure (Ross, 2005:289). As nature itself does not appear to be endowed with a sole fixed order, orthodox systems of perspective involving the organisation of space into clear sequences of receding pictorial planes do not feature in my art works, nor do these art works intend to convey a singular social and/or political message, which is not to say that the works do not house such messages.

If in conventional vehicles of representation, the objects in an image are intended to stand for their actual counterparts (or even be mistaken for their counterparts) I was more interested in mixing 'unrepresentative' images with representational ones in an equally fictive space. The works on paper and paintings then commit themselves to being fictions posing as something else, revealing evidence of the the decision-making processes which brought them to completion as images. The artificiality of the works on paper, involving elements of collage with deliberate discontinuities of scale and logic, were intended to visually parallel the

construction and reinvestigation of history from particular viewpoints. They are as much a re-writing of nature as history. When nature or art history is radically revised and translated into a narrative or picture, elements that may have suggested ambiguities, discontinuities or contradictions are erased, and in the case of my artworks, their visual resolution requires a physical obscuring of some elements in submission to a chosen internal and/or aesthetic logic that I prefer.

5. Conclusion

To establish one's imprint on the traditional genre of still life and to transform the conventions of that genre has been a driving ambition of countless artists over several centuries. Whether this involved an artist pitting his or her skills against recognised masters or adopting playful/ ironic stances to investigate particular contemporary social, political or other themes, the interest in rephrasing the traditional language of still life have been relentless in the hands of artists as diverse as Gerhard Richter and Damien Hirst. While contemporary still lifes have mutated the genre to the extent that art works may not always resemble original *natura morte* or *vanitas*, the criteria developed for this current research nevertheless demonstrates the resilience of key characteristics across centuries. The capacity to 'radically revise' a genre while remaining recognisably responsive to its conventions has long been a feature of artistic explorations by important artists, with the still life being as central, for example, to cubist collagists and painters, as to twenty-first century sculptors such as Ricky Swallow.

In the course of the making of my own works for this research project, the likelihood of straightforward readings of still life and interpretations were deliberately distorted. If the works contained depictions of objects of orthodox appearance, this was usually obscured and then retrieved through applying an internal pictorial logic. In other words, the placement and removal of objects and elements within my paintings was seen to observe Newton's (2001:51) notion that "*the introduction of dissonance, or projection of inarticulate unconscious form by the artist initiates the dialectical struggle at the heart of the creative structure and the dynamic tension between articulate and inarticulate, or Apollonian and Dionysian forces*".

The contemporary theorising of Butler (2005:9) on 'radical revisionism' was

important to this research project, and in particular, the intrinsic difficulties of the contemporary art historian striving to understand the past on its own terms:

It is a history, therefore, that sees the artists of the past speaking across what we might like to call 'time-separated' areas to contemporary issues. In other words – and we should try to remain aware of just what is so extraordinary about this – it is a history that conceives of the artists of the past as though they were already post-modernists, already reacting in their work to the same concerns that artists of today do.

While artists over many centuries, whether labelled post-modernist or otherwise, have tested their skills against those of their peers and forebears, the radical revision of the genre of still life and other genres will undoubtedly be an ongoing and cyclical investigation.

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