Homeopathic Tendencies

Acts of Metaphysical Desire

MA – Project in Fine Art / Theses
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Abstract

Homeopathic Tendencies explores the relationship between creative intuition and the Spiritualist movement. The links between the domestic setting and magical thinking are explored through the invention of ritual in the home, the collecting and animating of objects and the building of domestic shrines. It examines artists that used Spiritualism as a method for making work but also artists that engage with a magical language when describing dealing with uncertainty in their own work.

By using a mystical domestic setting as the basis for her paintings and sculptures Carmel Seymour explores the similarities between the Spiritualist movement and the artist’s experience of intuition. Various figurative painters works and processes have been examined in an attempt to allow more elements of the unknown, more spontaneity into her own work.

The paper examines the use of Spiritualist ideas in contemporary art and refers back to historical aspects of the movement, the works of Hilma af Klint and the movement’s importance to the female voice. A discussion of the Surrealist use of objects, poetry and magic gives some historical basis for artistic engagement with the supernatural. An exploration of the objects we collect in our homes speaks of sentiment, memory and the sacred. The attempts by the artist to recreate these kind of wonder objects are documented here.

The experience of painting is then compared directly the séance. The process of painting and its unknown outcomes are discussed with reference to Peter Doig, Karin Mamma Anderson and Pierre Bonnard. The author’s own attempts at creating new processes to allow more spontaneity into her own work open up spaces for discussion of the role of artistic intuition in (her) artistic practice.

The outcomes of the thesis are presented in a concluding chapter that reflects upon the accompanying exhibition.
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The All Seeing Gaze.

The artist must be a clairvoyant: he must see that which others do not see; he must be a magician.\(^1\)

Peter Ouspensky (1912)

The search for a connection with the other in Spiritualism is an apt metaphor for creativity. The rationalist mind cannot ignore the evidence of charlatanism and theatre present in the psychic community. However, the poetic possibilities and the awareness of our metaphysical longings that these areas reflect are far more interesting to me than the truth of its players. There is a connection between the divining power of the spiritualists and mystics and the unconscious voice the artist must rely on.

The intuition of the artist is a tricky thing to grasp. Decisions about colour, form, process, surface, subject and intention happen at every stage of art creation. Some decisions are conscious others are not. Research is a vital key for supplying the groundwork for a new body of work but there is a leap into the unknown that is equally important.

Imagery of the ‘tools of intuition’ such as the séance, auras, talisman and crystal balls have occurred repeatedly in my work\(^2\). The interest in these images came from a persistent search for mystery in all forms. Scientific historian Lorraine Daston describes this search as the passion of wonder, “the line between the known and the unknown”.\(^3\) The intuitive act of making art is a way to perceive beyond the ordinary. Can the mystical, be a metaphor and a method for the artist to deal with the uncertainty of making?

\(^1\) Rabinovich, Celia, “Surrealism Through the Mirror of Magic.” Surrealism and Magic, 2014. Accessed: 04/12/2015. (Peter Ouspensky was a Russian occultist and author of In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching, 1949, the account of his apprenticeship under esoteric George Gurdjieff.)


This para-normal imagery represents a way to imaginatively explore questions of memory, magic and nature and but also allows me to make art from a feminine place. The magical rites and performances that I have returned to are inspired by the Victorian spiritualists, women who found a way of speaking in the world from the quiet walls of the home. In the colourful abstraction of medium/artist Hilma af Klint it is clear that perhaps painting is the most immediate way of transferring this visual intuition. The Surrealists used magic and mystery as a way to shun the status quo. They directly linked magic and poetry as a way to see the truth of the world.

In my own work ideas of object collection and ritual seemed to split between artefact production and painting. The small sculptures allow me to speak of the fetish object of collecting and collating. Any object can become a tool for poetic, transcendental musing. Future mixed media pieces will try to recreate the intriguing aura associated with wonder objects and shrines. Ceramic will be melded with other household materials to make small sculptures that combine some of the markers of the domestic/mystic experience like bent spoons, crystal balls and pendulums. Artefacts of imagined supernatural happenings.

The paintings will allow the continuing exploration of ritual in the home, figuratively. The home is a sight for the quasi-spiritual. In our homes we partake in the invention of absurd rites, which allow us to cope with the fragility of our existence. Something of our antiquated superstitions and spirituality lingers despite rationalism, despite the elaborate construction of the contemporary domestic environment. The paintings will allow the intuition of the artist to portray hints of the metaphysical through the use of the paint itself. Contemporary painters Peter Doig and Mamma Anderson both convey the subtle hints at the beyond through the juncture of the figurative and the abstracted elements in their paintings. The use of colour and light and examinations of interiors in the works of Pierre Bonnard provide technical inspiration and mark making inspired by the flaws of aura and spirit-photography will help to create an evocation of the invisible. The painted works will be a representation on the in-between place where dream meets reality.
The Creative Séance

The Victorian spiritualists grew out of a time when scientific advancement was rapid and ‘freethinking’ women were flowering into dynamic community forces. Everything was subject to examination and inevitably the questioning that allowed technical and scientific advancement in industry fell upon matters of religion and the human soul. The hopes of a generation that had lost its connection to the pre-industrial world saw new types of science as a way of restoring a “lost mystical solidarity with nature”⁴, a position not different from own today. Experiments with magnetism and electricity promised the key to unlocking the secrets of the physical universe, while the darkened séances and silk scarf wrapped mediums promised to reveal the secrets of our souls.

A typical séance led by someone with ‘special sight’ or a ‘sensitive’ could involve anything from dancing furniture, rapping on doors or walls, apparitions of loved ones or detached limbs hovering around the room. Spiritualism’s beginnings were an important moment in the Women’s movement as it gave an authoritative voice to women. The seat of their power was the home. Their domestic possessions were the conduit of this higher voice. As Jennifer Fischer writes her book Technologies of Intuition “Women’s position as passive and domestic [as seen in Victorian times], in fact was well suited to ‘giving herself over’ to being possessed by spirits.”⁵ Perhaps there is a place for this powerful spirit possession in an art world dominated by male voices and an Artnet top 100 living collectable artists list that only features three women.⁶ In Fischer’s book she examines a number of female artist’s who use the language of the Spiritualist’s to create artwork including Carolee Schneemann and Susan Hiller. She suggests that the use of the symbols of clairvoyance in the work allow a discussion and use of intuition as a creative tool, a discussion that is quickly dismissed by many within contemporary art criticism.⁷ Fischer suggests intuition can be used in many different ways; “…accessing interior perception,

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attuning oneself to one’s surroundings or to other individuals, communing ancestral knowledge, collaborating with trance mediums, informing aesthetic choice, effecting a means of transformation, ‘haunting’ art history or creating alternative networks.”

The perceived mysteries of female intuition have long been ascribed to the magical realm. The same voice women gained through the spiritualist movement was later put down to the ‘hysteric’ female state. The ability to speak quietly through a type of theatrical intuition is the way I think of creating artwork. The séance has been an important motif in my work (Fig.1). The gathering of people, or inanimate objects, in the circular form allows an immediate evocation of the unexpected. All artists rely on an extra-sensory perception, a clairvoyance that does not fit in the rational world. Depictions of protective rituals have allowed me to work through times of extreme uncertainty about my work, almost like I have taken part in some rite myself.

Hilma af Klint’s (1862-1944) paintings and drawings were the result of a more direct communication from spirits. An adopter of mediumistic practices from an early age, she participated in séances with a group of visionary, female artists called ‘The Five’. The group used a psychograph (a Ouija-like drawing tool) to communicate with higher planes of consciousness and attempt to reveal the invisible forces in the world. She created a huge body of work that dealt with abstraction before it was a popular movement in the art world. Her works were created with her as a conduit for the voices of ‘higher beings’. Instructed to “portray the astral plane in colour and form” the higher beings decreed it was her intention that mattered, not the finished work of art. Colour was an important part of her painting. Colours were loaded with meaning and were carefully placed on the canvas for the most potent reading. Blue read as “the colour scale of powerful, real nature, the faithful” Yellow was “the foundations of knowledge” and white “was the holiest of colours”. This way of thinking of colour is a way for me to engage with the spiritual motivation of the groups that inspire me. It is helpful to examine the meaning of

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8 Ibid. 14.
9 Ibid. 29.
different colours that I hold personally, or to recreate certain colours from specific memories or objects, when deciding the palette of a work.

In the series *Paintings for the Temple*, she created one hundred and ninety three works between 1906-1915. The ten biggest works were 328 x 240 cm. In *Childhood, The Ten Biggest, No. 2* (1907) (Fig.2), we see large circular forms and flower motifs that are created in balanced pastel tones and large areas of bright orange and blue. This is a huge size; painting at this scale becomes an expression of the body, not just the wrists and involves an intensity that is both physical and mental. It is additionally important to note that she made these works in a time when female artists were presumed to be only good imitators and not capable of heralding anything new. The power of the séance and her curiosity to find the connections in the worlds physical and ethereal structures gave her the freedom to create something truly unique.

Multi media artist Susan Hiller’s artwork and interviews display an eloquent way of occupying this intuitive territory as a contemporary artist. In discussion about her work *Psi-girls* from 1999 she says:

I think that if one doesn’t have a context in some sort of mystical universe and yet one knows that there are ways of perceiving and ways of behaving and ways of acting and ways of making art that aren’t so readily describable in other terms, there’s an interesting ‘between place.’ I have tried to make work increasingly that puts the viewer where I am, in this situation of ‘undecidableness’...

For me art exists as a speculative tool to ask big questions without having to subscribe to a particular school of thought. It is a place to explore what Hiller calls ‘undecided’. The work *Psi-Girls* comprises five screens with scenes from popular horror films of young girls with telekinetic powers. The scenes are accompanied with a drumming soundtrack that reaches an uncomfortable crescendo when the protagonist’s ‘power’ peaks. She edits clips from *Firestarter* (1984), *Matilda* (1996), *The Craft* (1996), *The Fury* (1978) and *Stalker* (1979) all films, which show the telekinetic power of young girls. There is an

11 Ibid. 37.
archetype of untamed wild femininity that goes all the way back to the witch trials. A women inspired is seen as possessed, a man inspired is doing a courageous service. The trope of the hysterical woman is often linked to the para-normal.

In the final scene from Tarkosky’s Stalker (1979) featured in Psi-Girls, the protagonist’s daughter ‘Monkey’ quietly moves glasses across a table using telekinetic powers (Fig.3). As the scene goes on the rumbling of a train becomes more audible and the vibration from the train passing shakes the glasses more violently. We are left questioning whether Monkey’s power is miraculous or whether she was playing a game. It subtly manages to display a disturbance in the everyday, a private moment of imagination and spirituality. The film also includes references to nature and the divine, faith and rationality but it is this slight aberration of the domestic that is important. It is the in-between moment that Lorraine Daston describes as wonder. The dream sequences in Mirror (1975), his filmic portrayal of the memory of his mother, also reflect this surrealist imagery that has its roots in the paranormal. In Mirror the scenes that portray this domestic disturbance relate primarily to the female amalgam of mother and lover. The scene where his mother floats sleeping six foot above the bed or the dream where she stands with wet hair in a room that is both crumbling from rain and on fire are examples of this. In Tarkovsky’s films the home becomes a site for psychic imagining. Memory and dream collide to create disturbances in the everyday. People, objects and nature run on a set of physics not based in reality.

Thorough research in the past into mediums and magicians lead to the temporary extinguishing of the romantic flame I held for their stories. However, the permission to trust my instincts and retain my own voice owes some part to the passionate women of Spiritualism.
Surrealist Magic

Disenchanted with the world in the aftermath of the extreme violence and destruction of the First World War the Surrealists saw magic as a poetic force to turn the world to a new light. They used the language of magic as a tool to explore dreams, psychology and anthropology. More metaphor than religious mantra, magic became a tool to turn the rational on its head. In August 2014 Cornell University in America opened the exhibition *Surrealism and Magic*. The show is a broad survey of the movement and its occult influences. The whole world appears to be turning its face towards a surrealist way of thinking. In a recent lecture on the trends of contemporary life, world leading trend forecaster Christine Boland placed Surrealism as an antidote to our current technologically fuelled ability to know and see everything.  

13 A large retrospective of the work of Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte featured at Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2013 and more recently cutting edge American fashion label Opening Ceremony featured a whole collection based on his most famous paintings.

Rene Magritte’s imagery twists the everyday through plays of scale, texture and the absurd. He was the first artist I ever investigated. I remember drawing copies of his paintings as a child. His paradoxical plays of dream and reality encouraged my imaginative doodling. Magritte’s photograph *Les Voyantes (The Ones Who See/ Clairvoyants)* (1930) (fig.4) portrays the artist’s wife and a friend looking out over a table of shiny reflective objects. Their gaze is on something we cannot see, they possess some secret knowledge we do not have access to. The items on the table all change the way we see, through reflections or strange transparencies. Magritte placed enormous significance on domestic artefacts stating, “There exists a secret affinity between objects”.

14 He highlights the symbolism that can be found in the most mundane everyday things. Andre Breton decreed in the first Surrealist Manifesto; “We can hope that mysteries which are not really mysteries will give way to the great Mystery. I believe in the future
resolution of these two states - outwardly so contradictory - which are dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, a surreality, so to speak.”

The Surrealist leader was a believer in premonitions, clairvoyance and the power of dream deciphering. He saw magic as the material form of the imagination. Games of chance and automatic writing were ways to directly link the conscious and dream world. Breton was an avid collector. His house read like a cabinet of curiosities filled with odd photographs, primitive artworks next to the work of his contemporaries, natural and manmade objects. It was his ‘magical continent’ a map of all his personal experiences, a shrine to the imagination.

For the Surrealist’s the conception of magic originated in the mind. The Surrealist way of combining unexpected objects creates an immediate entryway into the imagination. This collaging of things has been helpful to create these moments in the domestic scenes I have been making. I have made a ceramic cup that looks like a teacup but when you look inside an opened eye looks back at you. (Fig.5) This work is a reference to the traditions of tea-leave and coffee cup reading that were a part of many households. The everyday cup was transformed into a magical tool and its reader a temporary prophet.

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The Domestic Shrine

In many of the earliest Victorian era homes in Australia, the brick and stone terrace houses, contained front rooms and hallways elegantly decorated with curled cornices and ceiling roses. The rest of the house was for its residents only, there was no need for expensive curls and rosettes back there. Home was once a truly private affair; guests would visit one room only. This relationship to our personal spaces is still present. Gaston Bachelard explores the relationship between the psyche and the architecture of the home in *Poetics of Space*. He says “the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.” This safe haven becomes a stage for small acts that help us to make sense of ourselves and of the world at large.

The relationships with the things that fill our homes become deeply symbolic. These relationships are not based on material worth but are weighted with memories of protection, past loves and journeys of discovery. The arrangement of the house is a necessary ritual for all; the home becomes a shrine to the self. Collections of natural objects from excursions into nature and the ephemera of our personal histories converge to create shrines and altars of the most banal and most precious moments of our lives. Discovering the collection of objects held privately in someone’s home is a revealing moment.

In Mike Nelson’s theatrical interior’s we are invited to be a voyeur. For *Lonely Planet* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in 2006, Nelson turned the entire museum into an abandoned house. Entry into the space was eerie but fascinating. Each run-down room was filled with the objects of another’s life, right down to half-used tubes of toothpaste and a full sized 1950’s Holden car in the garage. Nelson meticulously applied dust to the finished installation as well as footprints and fingermarks to various surfaces of the life-sized structure. His work highlights the display of items in the home. He is interested in shrine building. He is drawn to shrines for the way they “illustrate peoples belief structures”, the structure of the shrines and the way everyday objects are elevated when placed within them. In that way he equates art making to shrine building

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“in terms of taking something that essentially might have no value and mythologising it -
elevating it a new level of meaning and value.”

In Susan Stewart’s book *On Longing* she states, “the experience of the object lies
outside the body’s experience – it is saturated with meanings that will never be revealed
to us”. Personal objects become riddles greater than their physical traits. In her writing
on the souvenir she turns the collected object into a portal of memory, she describes them
as a “memory standing outside the self”. Objects become projections of our inner
selves; the collation of these objects in the home is a shrine of character forming
moments.

For the M.A. project I intended to make a number of carefully crafted small
objects that are made from, or based on objects found in the home. The objects were to
embody memories but also be potential tools of mysticism. I began to make some bent
spoons and keys out of ceramic (Fig.6). They referenced the supposed telekinetic powers
of Uri Geller and his common display of bending the spoon with his mind. The bent
spoons also alluded to one of my earliest memories of living out of home. I opened a
drawer as a naive eighteen year old to find the dessertspoons all bent backwards. I
remember asking who had been eating all of the hard ice-cream before realising the
spoons had been bent back to turn them into better tools for injecting heroin, tools of
transcendence (of sorts). It was a collapsing of the fantasy house I had hoped to live in
and a realisation of how many questionable things I was overlooking to fulfil this dream
of adulthood. I experimented with painting the ceramic items in the detailed blue
patterning of traditional Victorian willow china, adding another domestic spiritual
reference of tealeaf reading (Fig.7). Crafting the object is an important part of the
process; it creates a relationship that is not there when just displaying found objects.

Another object I intended to make was a crystal ball. The ball was to be a ‘tool of
intuition’ but also referred to the precious collections of untouchable things that are kept
behind glass cabinets in the home. As a child I had a collection of shiny things that
contained crystal pieces from old chandeliers as well as all kinds of glittery plastic junk

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19 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection.* (Durham: Duke
University Press, 1993) 133.
20 Ibid. 172.
that seemed to be part of another world. A world I could be closer too when I took all the elements of the collection out and examined them in sunlight. This crystal ball was to be made from the commonly found crystal pieces in the home, broken and reassembled (Fig. 8 &9).

Roger Caillios’ description of a collection of such ‘treasure’ helps to explain how domestic collecting could become shrine-like:

…treasures do not belong to the social world and have nothing to do with law or custom. They are the fruit of an inexplicable larceny or of a sacrilegious pact. They come from the dark and invest with virtues and hardly facilitate the spirit of docility and resignation. They incite adventure and sanction the ambition to be more than a man.21

He suggests this collecting is like an offering to our own psyches. It could be seen as a remnant of the spiritual lives of our religious forebears or a marker of our dominion over our surroundings or perhaps a reminder of sublime nature’s dominion over us.

The assemblages of the Surrealists are an inspiration for these objects, particularly Meret Oppenheim’s iconic Object (1936). The fur covered cup, saucer and spoon can be seen as an invasion of the animal into the neat and ordered domestic. This object displays the polite female domestic world overcome by hysterical, animal nature. The potency of this object is something my objects possess; the link of personal narrative, the domestic and magical references help to contribute to this. I have tried to create an uncanniness in the object that ties to the same mood in the paintings. Although they are very different modes of making the same ‘spirit’ will carries through both.

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Painting as Clairvoyance

Painting with oils provided me with an intuitive tool. It allowed me to tap into my creative ‘other’ without the hesitations of over-planning. This quality was very much a part of some of the first watercolours I made. They were large scale and had dominant colourful spills of pigment, which created unique and surprising formations upon drying (Fig.10). They allowed the unexpected into the pieces and related to the ambiguous imagery read in the Rorschach test and of tea or coffee stain reading. As I made more and more of these works I learnt the patterns and formulations of the pigments and this randomness gave way to planning and removed the exciting discovery in the process. The paintings became very tight and illustrative.

Questions of where illustration ends and contemporary art begins plagued me to the point of immobility. I tried different ways of approaching watercolour painting. Painting more loosely, tighter, on differing scales but I could not break my familiar patterns. I had lost all joy in the process. I attempted some experiments with a new palette. I tried to use bolder colours, darker and richer but I was disappointed with the way these turned out. They looked muddy and amateurish. That is when I re-visited some earlier oil paintings I was surprised at how much they hinted at the things I was trying to achieve. They had a fluidity and vibrancy that had a psychedelic quality. There was otherworldliness in the work without the imagery having to be too fantastical (fig.11). These paintings were created as experiments, the imagery evolved as part of the process. They were free of the rigidity I had been struggling with in the watercolour. This quality suits very well the psychological space I have been researching; the imaginative/mystical dreaming that happens in the domestic setting.

Canadian painter Peter Doig creates works that are fluid, figurative and melancholy. His techniques of layered paint and glazes create a fantastical space. His works have vibrant colours, not based in reality but reflective of it. It is an admirable language of paint. The figuration in his work is often pushed away by layer of abstract mark making. In Blotter (1993) (Fig.12) we see a man gazing at his own reflection in a frozen pond. The surrounding trees and their reflection in the water dissolve into abstracted marks. The
colours used, particularly in the pond are vibrant and electric, they evoke a dreamy, supernatural feeling in this otherwise common scene. He happily lets the works evolve in the process of painting them rather than having a solid finish point in mind. In a conversation with painter Tomma Abts he said: “I don’t think it would be possible for me to think about how a painting will develop emotionally or mood wise from the outset, as this would defeat the purpose of making it in the first place.” This is exactly the spontaneous creative process I have been seeking. It is something I had lost in the highly detailed and planned drawings and watercolours I had been making before. This intuitive painting process becomes like a game of ‘spirit glass’ or using the Ouija board there is an unknown outcome that cannot be predicted until the work is in motion.

The melancholy of Doig’s figures is something I can relate too in my own work. In an essay on Doig’s work the writer Catherine Grenier says: “the modern experience of melancholy is one of the ultimate mystical experiences left to us.” Is melancholy the motif I have been using to express the mystical? Is the inwards look of my characters a way to imply a certain psychological space?

Pierre Bonnard was another artist who delved into the melancholic. His brightly coloured paintings often centred in and around his home. With lone figures dining, bathing or just sitting within richly patterned interiors. His works use colour in an explosive way. His techniques of layering up the oils and then scraping them back are something I experimented with. His complex interiors were based on his own living environment and he claimed he could not paint an object until he had lived with it for a long time. In *The Bowl of Milk* (1919) (fig.13) we can see one of his unusual domestic compositions, inspired by Japanese art and photography. A female figure in a pink dress is half in shadow next to the moonlit items of crockery on the table. Even in this moonlight scene he manages to use bright vibrant colours. His palette, in particular his use of pinks and

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yellows has long been an inspiration for me. His complex application of the paint gives a shimmering liveliness to all the surfaces.

Swedish painter Karin Mamma Anderson is a master of the painted interior, she also notes Bonnard as a major influence. In Gone For Good, 2006 (Fig.14) a couch burns in an old style lounge room. The contrast of the fire dissolves into the other painterly textures in the work. She equates her rooms to theatre sets and has been inspired greatly by the theatre. She often layers images on top of each other to transform the rooms to some other kind of reality. Her imagery of the home has a particularly feminine quality, when asked about her relationship to these issues she responded, “…whether I explore female experience. Answer: yes; I am a romantic who empties herself in order not to be a nervous wreck.” 25 Her faith in the process of painting is something I have been experiencing. It is a way to play and mould all the input, all the references and all the personal moments into something coherent. Like a dream pinned to canvas. The unconscious takes control and you just have to give it a vehicle. It is this loss of control in making that feels most like a spiritual moment. On uncertainty Anderson writes “Sometimes I’m filled with doubt and think that the magic has left me for good. But this is not the first time this has happened. Maybe it’s just the way it is: sometimes it’s easier to come into contact with one’s other ego, or the spirits, or inspiration, or whatever it is.”26

Some of the test works in oil paint I first began with were based on old photographs of my parents from the seventies. I picked images that were vaguely suggestive of a séance in that they showed a gathering of people. In one of these photo-based painting I depicted a group of people gathered around a table. I did not allow myself to use really small brushes enjoyed the entry into a more abstracted imagery this gave me (Fig.15). I worked on top of the initial imagery until a certain mood or suggestion of otherness was achieved.

In my older watercolour works I used a palette of bright colours inspired by botanical illustration and the psychedelic. The imagery was often floating in the blank

26 Ibid.
white of the page and the white space became an important tool to create a dream-space for the work to exist in. I broke free of these two conventions in the new paintings. By situating the works within the confines of the home I found new ways of framing the image. The photographs that others and I posed for to create source material for these images were taken in the evening allowing dramatic use of candle light and artificial light. I will try to convey the shadows and highlights of this lighting in a cinematic way.

The process of working on a painting allows for meditative thinking. It is possible to become lost in a trance like state thinking only of colour and form. Painting allows a truly instinctive experience and trust in one’s own intuition is a vital part of this process.

In the first of the large paintings I depicted a figure seated on the floor surrounded by chairs and houseplants. The scene is candle lit with some other light coming from a hallway in the back of the room. This work came from a rough sketched idea in my sketchbook (Fig.16) and engages with the idea of creating a sacred, imaginative space in the home. I created the scene in my own home and took many photographs in different lighting arrangements (Fig. 17). The resulting painting includes three different images pasted together. The scale was larger than anything I had made in the last few years, 100x120cm. I found the larger scale encouraged me to work more quickly and loosely.

The balance of colour was also something new to deal with. The options in the oil colour are richer. Using white is not traditional in watercolour painting, you let the white paper show through instead. However in the oils white can be added on top of everything to add bright highlights and pastel tones. These balances became easier to manage the more time I spent on the paintings.

The photographic imagery is a starting point for the painting. Then I created new surfaces and textures on top of and around it. This first big painting was a complicated image. The legs of all the chairs intertwined with the limbs of the figure tested my drawing ability. As a result the image looked much tighter than I had hoped (Fig. 18). A way forwards through this though this was to keep reworking this image, adding layers of lights effects and more texture in the surfaces. There are elements in this work that I really enjoyed but it encouraged me to plan the next painting on a larger scale and start with a simpler image, allowing me more play with the paint. It is hard not to paint something accurately when I have the ability to. It always feels disingenuous. I needed to
find my own way to separate the figurative and the viewer, my own way to discover and display the invisible.

One way I thought to combat this is to look at the flaws and effects of photography. After looking at some photos from the seventies of my parents I was taken with the faults I found in some of them, under and over exposed areas of white and dark. This led me to think of over glazing the imagery once it was painted to create this effect.

The other source of a potential abstract mark making is to look at the colours and patterns of aura photography (Fig.19). Aura photography captures the glow of an electric field around the body, with a unique camera system that captures both biological feedback and light. Some believe the colours captured in these images, which are created with elaborate systems, display the aura only usually visible to a psychic. A mostly blue field means the person is probably a dreamer, artist or poet while orange displays the sitter’s excellent sales and entrepreneur skills and so on across the whole spectrum. Most portraits display a range of colours allowing the photographer to give a detailed reading of the individual. A great work of art whether it is a painting or a sculpture, or any object of some kind of significance is often described as possessing an aura. An aura, in the mystical sense, is an emanation visible to those with a unique type of vision. Aura photography presents the longing we have to be more than we are. What comfort in seeing that we are more complex, more beautiful than the image we see in the mirror everyday.

The accidents of photography also created revelations for the Spiritualists. William H. Mumler discovered spirit photography in 1861, when developing a plate he discovered a second spectral figure behind him.27 These images of early photography showed an eerie presence in the background, or an unearthly ectoplasm emanating from the medium. The ghostly figures in the photos were caused by double exposure of the image, but to a society that was new to the wonder of the photograph, these tricks were not evident. The photograph was a record of truth, so proof of spirits of dead seemed evident. The ectoplasm photos seem ridiculously staged yet they certainly had impact on

their audience. The ectoplasm often appeared in the guise of a white gauzy cloth pouring from the mouth or from under a skirt of an enraptured, scantily clad women.

In a detail shot from one of my oil studies I came close to this subtle blurring that is present in these types of images (Fig. 20). I created part of this effect by layer a thin white glaze over part of the image and then letting some drops of solvent erase them, creating strange shapes in the paint. These layers and marks become important as they put some distance between the image and the viewer. They also allowed me some escape from the tight detailed painting I am accustomed to and let me experiment with the painting more freely.

I made numerous paintings, they are all narratives based around the home, depictions of moments of imaginative ritual. The works explore figuration/ abstraction, through the textures of the paint and attempt to evoke mood not just through narrative imagery but also the paint surfaces themselves. They are at varying scales, which allowed the exploration of smaller details and larger compositions. The ability to jump between multiple works in progress proved to be a great technique for creating a dynamic energy in the works (Fig. 21).

The ultimate goal of the works I am creating is that they possess the aura of narrative and mystery that draws me to objects in my own world. The long, involved, hypnotic process of completing the larger paintings, and the careful building and combining of the sculptures, will create this. The works will resound with the poetry of the supernatural, emanate wonder and provoke imaginative questions about reality.
Reflection on final works.

The months leading up to the graduate exhibition gave me a chance to really explore some of the themes of my thesis, in a practical sense. I created four new paintings and spent time glazing, varnishing and reworking the ones I had previously written about. I also made a number of ceramic sculptures and spent time thinking about how to install all these elements together in the most dynamic way.

The final work was called *Homeopathic Tendencies* and was installed at the Kópavogur Art Museum, Gerðarsafn as part of the Listaháskóli Masters Graduate exhibition (Fig. 22). The work was installed in a corner position over two adjacent walls. It consisted of twelve paintings ranging in size from 20cm x 20cm to over a metre squared and eight plywood shelves holding a range of small ceramic sculptures. The elements were hung at a range of differing heights. The paintings hint at the supernatural in the domestic setting. They are all differing scales and subjects, like a collection of moments or film stills. The objects are ceramic replicas of natural souvenirs and other natural objects that show the magical thinking we take part in within our homes.

I used photographs as the basis for the paintings. These were continuing explorations of the domestic setting. I staged and photographed images of houseplants and more imagined domestic/mystic rituals. These helped me sketch in the basic forms; I then let the paint dictate the imagery, following unintentional marks to create new areas of colour and light. I tried to allow my intuition to take over. I found working on paintings at a range of scales allowed different ways of painting to happen simultaneously, while I had one colour on a brush I could touch up several paintings at once. In some of the smaller works, especially the small portraits of the house plants I painted with a wet on wet technique that allowed the imagery to appear quickly and gave me time in the weeks to come to reflect and alter the images with layers of glazing (thin application of diluted pigment) and scumbling (creating highlights with dryer paint) (Fig. 23). I spent the last few weeks testing out different glazing techniques. Some of these were not so successful. Some thin layers of pigment mixed with linseed oil stayed too sticky for too long and attracted a huge amount of lint onto the paintings. Later attempts with tinted varnishes gave a better result but further experimentation is needed to get the best result. The depth
and unification these glazing layers achieved was really powerful. It added a certain moodiness to the works.

The larger painting of the couple at the table was inspired by Bonnard’s many paintings of the domestic table (Fig. 24). This was an attempt to work with a bigger figurative scale. It was very hard to get into the work and I almost gave up on it. I tried to paint this one more loosely in the beginning, inspired by Bonnard, but the composition was difficult and I found myself repainting and altering it, the layers of additions and subtractions gave the work a curious depth and textural complexity that would not have occurred without this visual thinking process (Fig. 25). The large abstract rainbow/aura in this work was something I enjoyed painting. The abstraction of it over such a large area gave me a chance to play with the paint in an expressive way. I will include areas like this in future paintings.

Originally I intended to make mixed media pieces but it seemed too complicated to bring in a range of other materials. The bent spoons and keys I had planned felt clumsy and too didactic when placed next to the natural items so I left them out. I made a number of new objects after the initial thesis. A twenty centimetre high rabbit shaped rock, which is a portrait of a 20ft high rock that is on a beach from my home in Melbourne (Fig. 26). It made me think of how we try to animate nature in our homes by collecting things reminiscent of living beings. I made a second large rock that has a number of hidden faces within it. I liked the way an object like this could possess some psychic authority. If you view it one way it frowns at you, another way it smiles, the aim was that it would reflect the mood of the viewer like the common internet puzzles that claim to predict your year ahead based on the first three words you read from their jumble of characters. I had some trouble with the glazing of these two objects and I had to reglaze them again. I think the rock with the faces lost some of its character in this process (Fig. 27). A third object was a large stick. This referenced the wand used by water diviners, a pseudo science that purports to source water on dry land. Again this was to question our relationship to the natural souvenir in the home. This was hung from a shelf with string that further held a small ceramic pinecone. This was reminiscent of voodoo but also of home crafts like macramé (Fig. 28).
The installation of the works became a critical moment. When I reflected on the time I had spent in the M.A. I wanted to make sure I included some of the experiments I had done with ceramic and installation. The creation of the small shelves allowed the sculptures to be part of my collaged installation but also spoke of the domestic setting. Installing the paintings and objects was a balancing act that took many days. Moving things an inch this way or that. The time spent on this felt like drawing itself, arranging elements to create the most powerful narrative.

If I look around my studio it is full of half finished drawings, colour tests and technique studies (Fig. 29). I had always considered these just tests. They were steps on the way to a grand masterpiece, but often the thought of starting the perfect painting is paralysing. I think I had been missing the importance of these studies. These works often have an energy that is lost when I try to reproduce the final work. The display I used for the M.A. show allowed narratives to occur between these small studies and the bigger paintings. This accumulation of objects is a great way to allow some more spontaneity into the work. It allows the flaws of a single painting, which I would be come obsessed with, to dissolve when they became a part of the bigger work. The installation of the paintings made the connection between the works more obvious, thematically and stylistically. In my studio I had been concerned about the differing subjects and textures of each one but the dialog between them all made the work much more intriguing. I tried to think of including the paintings not as singular images but like sculptural objects that had to relate to the space but also to the other elements of the installation.

I had given up on making the objects described in the thesis, the crystal ball and bent spoons as they seemed too complicated to complete to a good enough standard and I was deeply involved in the creation of the paintings at this time. However, trying out new mediums was a major motivation for my enrolment in the Masters program so I went through the ceramics I had made for previous exhibitions during the MA years. I took the ones that were organic looking and, made a few more natural looking pieces. I was reminded of some earlier research I had made into the way the natural souvenir could represent the sacred in the domestic setting. In imitating the curious treasures we find in nature in ceramic, I celebrated the sacred, superstitious and absurd traits of the domestic
environment. Lucky bamboo, animistic stones, the silent promise of a wishbone or lustrous gem like rocks collected on a foray into the wild are all markers of the subtle magical thinking that most of us engage with unknowingly. These objects reflected a more cynical view of the domestic relationship to Spiritualism and the natural world than the memory related objects I had planned. They allowed some humour into the work while still allowing some conversation about the preciousness of collecting and the building of a domestic shrine.

Crafting the object is an important part of the process; it creates a relationship that is not there when just displaying found objects. The painterly and unpredictable effects of the glazing process allow an element of the unknown into this material. The glazed ceramics possess a fragility and preciousness that is reminiscent of a collection of treasure. I think this adds potency to the subject that would not be there if I presented the real items from nature. There is something very intimate about working with clay. The material has both craft and counter culture associations, which relate to my interests in the domestic and the ‘other’. Artists like Shary Boyle, who represented Canada at the Venice Biennale in 2013, Klara Kristova and Turner Prize winner, Grayson Perry have lifted the use of ceramic from craft to highly sought after art market pieces in recent years.

In the final installation I was pleased with the way the objects came together and complemented the paintings. The conversation between the ceramic objects, the paintings and the objects featured in the paintings created an interesting unity. The painterly effect of the glazing also had a strong dialogue with the paintings themselves. There were some humorous and aesthetically intriguing moments that came from the dynamic between the objects and the paintings. The small arch of rocks that sat on a small shelf underneath the painting with the rainbow shape aura questioned scale and impossibility (Fig. 30). The placement of a ceramic imitation of Chinese lucky bamboo next to a portrait of an Aloe Vera plant created a conversation about superstition and pseudo science (Fig. 31). This larger relationship between the works was one of the most exciting outcomes of the installation for me. It gave me greater encouragement to trust my creative process.
There are a number of exhibitions that are currently on around the world that have related closely to the themes of my thesis. *Believe not Every Spirit but Try the Spirits* is at the Monash Museum of Art in Melbourne, Australia. This exhibition celebrates the life of British Spiritualist and painter Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884). Like Hilma af Klint her abstract imagery was made with the help of spirit guides. Her work is being shown next to contemporary artists who engage with paranormal themes. Lars Bang Jensen, curator of the exhibition states,

“The paranormal has always tapped into our emotions, hopes and fears through its quasi-erotic heightening of the senses. Since the turn of the millennium, artists—such as those in *Believe not every spirit*—have increasingly turned to it to develop a critique of contemporary experience... Such an artistic approach emphasizes Spiritualism’s historical defiance of institutionalized forms of art, religion and politics. Then and now, it is a way of insisting on the necessity to imagine and intuit otherness—other forms of being, aesthetic revolt by fragile means, inhabiting ambiguous states.”

The exhibition features work by Dane Mitchell, Susan Hiller and Matt Mullican (who gave a performance under hypnosis at the opening), among many others. It presents the Spiritualist movement as a way to talk about our longing for the unknown.

*Séance Fiction* at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, Canada revolves around very similar themes also looking at the way artists act as mediums to interpret the past and the future in the present. The exhibition features mediumistic video artist Shauna Moultan and cinema cut up duo Soda_Jerk among others.

The study of the Spiritualist movement has allowed an examination of my own relationship to intuition and the way I function creatively. By exploring the way other artists use the unknown to work through the creative process I feel I have gained a lot of freedom in the way I approach my work.

Although patronage and feedback from the museum was limited I did get the impression that people felt part of a warm and inviting space when viewing my work and that the themes of the work did come through and questions of spirituality in the domestic arose. The pieces that feature in the thesis show feel like an entryway into a new method of art-making. While making the larger works I felt that they were not progressing so I

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painted smaller ones but after the exhibition I see that the larger work holds an exciting new opportunity. I think it could be interesting to see some of the still lives painted on a large scale as well. I think scale could change the experience of viewing the work to be a more overwhelming moment. Scale could have an interesting effect upon the ceramics as well.

As a painter it is very important to maintain working practices that involve others as this often does come so naturally to those behind an easel. It is immensely important to allow different ideas and techniques into my own practice. I have initiated two collaborative projects with other female artists that revolve around the domestic sphere and the role of the artistic intuition that will continue this research into the next year.

The study of how other artists engage with the unknown and elements of the supernatural has allowed me permission to access an intuitive art practice that was locked behind layers of rigid over-planning and self-consciousness. Creating a display of works made of many elements has introduced a feeling of spontaneity that was lost while looking for the perfect artwork. The expression of the everyday and the home as a sight for imaginative dreaming and private ritual feels like a useful angle to continue exploring metaphysical questions in contemporary life. By continuing to use the symbols of the Spiritualist movement and references to the para-normal I will be able to make work about the experience of the artist but also the communal longing of a post-religious society.
Bibliography


Fig. 1) Carmel Seymour, *Charisma Objects*, Watercolour and pencil on paper, 2012.

Fig. 2) Hilma af Klimt, *Childhood, The Ten biggest, no. 2*, tempura and paper on canvas 328 x 240 cm, 1907.
Fig. 3) Final scene from Andrei Tarkovsky’s, *Stalker*, 1979.

Fig. 4) Rene Magritte, *Les Voyantes (The Ones who see/ Clairvoyants)*, gelatin photograph, 1930.

Fig. 5) Carmel Seymour, Ceramic eye tea cup.
Fig. 6) Carmel Seymour, unfired ceramic pieces, 2014.

Fig. 7) Carmel Seymour, sketch of willow china based patterning to be painted with underglaze, 2014.

Fig. 8) Carmel Seymour, a sketch of how I may have displayed the crystal ball. Potentially internally lit, on a stand I had made myself. 2014

Fig. 9) Some of the crystal pieces I hope to transform into a crystal ball.
Fig. 10) Carmel Seymour, Domestic Mystic, 2009, Watercolour on paper

Fig. 11) Carmel Seymour, 2012 The small oil study that reignited my interest in oil painting.
Fig. 12) Peter Doig, *Blotter*, 2006, oil on canvas

Fig. 13) Pierre Bonnard, The Bowl of Milk, oil on canvas, 1919
Fig. 14) Mamma Anderson, Gone For Good, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2006.

Fig.15) Carmel Seymour, Dinner Party, Oil on paper and board, 2014.
Fig. 16) Carmel Seymour, rough sketch for the first large painting, 2014.

Fig. 17) Carmel Seymour, staged photograph that makes the study for the painting, 2014.

Fig. 18) Carmel Seymour, Untitled, Oil on Canvas, 2014.
Fig. 19) Top left: The glow of aura photography in a portrait from the Aura-imaging website.

Fig. 20) Top right: Carmel Seymour, a close detail of an oil study that contains some of the effects I am aiming for, 2014.

Fig. 21) Carmel Seymour, Some early paintings in progress that were being worked on simultaneously, 2015.
Fig. 22) Carmel Seymour, Homeopathic Tendencies, install shot. Oil on various backings, ceramic, rope, plywood. 2015.

Fig. 23) Carmel Seymour, Hitchcock Fern, oil on canvas, 2015. This painting displays the rich colour and depth made through glazing and scumbling.
Fig. 24) Carmel Seymour, underpainting, oil on canvas, 2014.

Fig. 25) Carmel Seymour, I’m Never as Connected as I Feel at Breakfast, oil on canvas, 2014.
Fig. 26, 27 & 28) Carmel Seymour, Homeopathic Tendencies, ceramic, 2015. The rabbit rock, hanging stick and rock with faces, which were all made after the initial thesis.
Fig. 29) A view of the small sketches, paintings and photos that make up my studio walls.

Fig. 30) Carmel Seymour, Homeopathic Tendencies, 2014.
Fig. 31 & 32) Carmel Seymour, Homeopathic Tendencies (details), 2014.
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Fig. 1) Carmel Seymour, *Charisma Objects*, 2012. Watercolour and graphite on paper. 42 x 27cm.

Fig. 2) Hilma af Klimt, *Childhood, The Ten biggest, no.2* 1907 Tempura and Paper on canvas 328 x 240 cm. Available from: [http://hilmaafklinten.louisiana.dk/](http://hilmaafklinten.louisiana.dk/) Accessed: 15/01/2015


Fig. 5) Carmel Seymour, Ceramic eye tea cup, 2015.

Fig. 6) Carmel Seymour, Work in progress.

Fig. 7) Ibid.

Fig. 8) Ibid.

Fig. 9) Ibid.

Fig. 10) Carmel Seymour, *Domestic Mystic*, 2009, Watercolour on paper. 76 x56cm.

Fig. 11) Carmel Seymour, work in progress.


Fig. 15) Carmel Seymour, *Dinner Party*, Oil on paper and board, 2014.
Fig. 16) Carmel Seymour, work in progress.

Fig. 17) Ibid.

Fig. 18) Carmel Seymour, *Untitled*, Oil on Canvas, 2014.

Fig. 19) Aura imaging. Available from: [http://www.aura-imaging.com/aura-gallery/](http://www.aura-imaging.com/aura-gallery/)
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Fig. 20) Carmel Seymour, work in progress.

Fig. 21) Ibid.

Fig. 22) Carmel Seymour, *Homeopathic Tendencies*, install shot. Oil on various backings, ceramic, rope, plywood. 2015.

Fig. 23) Ibid.

Fig. 24) Carmel Seymour, underpainting, oil on canvas, 2014.

Fig. 25) Carmel Seymour, *I’m Never as Connected as I Feel at Breakfast*, oil on canvas, 2014.

Fig. 26) Carmel Seymour, Homeopathic Tendencies, ceramic, 2015.

Fig. 27) Ibid.

Fig. 28) Ibid.

Fig. 29) Carmel Seymour, work in progress.

Fig. 30) Carmel Seymour, Homeopathic Tendencies, 2015.

Fig. 31) Ibid.

Fig. 32) Ibid.