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Abject Negotiations: The Mutability of Identification in Selected Artworks by Berni Searle

BIOGRAPHY

Christy Rennie completed her undergraduate degree in Fine Art at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (formerly the Port Elizabeth Technikon) in 2002 and is currently a Master's student in the Visual Arts Department at the University of Johannesburg. She is finalising her MTech dissertation titled *Privileging Corporeal Identity: An Embodied Approach to Artmaking Practice*. This article is based on research done towards her dissertation.

→ **In this paper** I offer a reading of South African artist, Berni Searle's works *About to forget* (2005) and *On either side* (2005) in relation to French psychoanalyst and theorist, Julia Kristeva's conception of abjection. In examining Searle's use of the formal elements of tactility in representations of her own corporeality, I draw analogies between Searle's work and two Kristevian theories of heterogeneity, namely abjection and the semiotic (see Pollock 1998:9). I analyse a selection of Searle's work, focussing on her references to tactile, semiotically-driven elements in her open-ended negotiations of self-identification. Particular emphasis is placed on how she uses abjection to evoke an ambiguous sense of self-identification within a South African context.

Within this context, Searle suggests the borders of selfhood to be fluid in nature. This correlates with Kristeva's model of selfhood, or the speaking subject, in which identity is never fixed and is seen as being always in continuous negotiation. In this model, the abject threat of dissolution of self may be contextualised within the state of flux inherent in the understanding of the speaking subject. Therefore, the threat towards one's identity is not so much nullified, but is rather no longer 'othered' or separated from the understanding of self. Following Kristeva's (1991:1) thought, one may argue that the foreign 'other' and the self are intimately conjoined.

Searle's subtle working of self-identification through abjection is analogous to Rosemary Betterton's (1996:144) observation that whilst "the vulnerability of the borderline is a threat to the integrity of the 'own and clean self' (Kristeva 1982:53), it can also offer a liminal space where self and 'other' may intermingle". For the purposes of this paper, the pertinent facet

of abjection evident in Searle's work is a slippery, dynamic, open-endedness.

In Searle's work, meaning and identity are presented – formed – as ambiguous and in antithesis to one naturalised truth. Clive Kellner (2006:17) quotes Searle as saying “[t]he self is explored as an ongoing process of construction in time and place. The presence and absence of the body in the work point to the ideal that one's identity is not static, and is constantly in a state of flux”. Searle's work relies on liminality; a sense and a positioning of being both in-between and overlapping the boundaries of naturalised identity. This marginal state of flux and space of ambiguity seems to be what Rory Bester (2003:53) describes as “imagined identities ... [which] allow Searle to float free from the immutable identities so ingrained in her history”. To this end, Searle uses ephemeral and unstable media in conjunction with her body as medium, to explore concepts of identity, desire and memory.

In her work, Searle shows conceptions of race, identity and memory to be dynamic, often contradictory self-negotiations; mutable processes of negotiation rather than naturalised categorisations. Through her reference to multiple racial categories, geographic origins and historic narratives, Searle presents identity as ambiguous and open-ended. This understanding of a negotiable identity is what draws me to Searle's work and forms the focus of this paper.

In this paper, I offer a reading of selected works by South African artist Berni Searle in relation to the post-structural, psychoanalytic theories of Julia Kristeva. In examining Searle's representations of corporeality and use of the formal elements of tactility, I draw tentative analogies between the tactility evident in her work and two Kristevian theories of heterogeneity, namely, the abject¹ and the semiotic (see Pollock 1998:9). Through an analysis of Searle's video work *About to forget* (2005) (Fig. 1) and the photographic stills developed from this work titled *On either side* (2005)

(Figs. 2a & 2b) I focus on what I argue to be tactile, abject and semiotically-driven elements in her open-ended negotiations of self-identity. I propose that Searle's use of tactility disrupts the pervasive naturalisation or the accession into ‘sameness’ characteristic of the symbolic element within signification.

I locate this investigation of tactility within Searle's works with reference to an assertion of a non-gendered form of embodied representation. I share Liese van der

Watt's (2004a:69) view that Searle's work questions more than just racialised or, I would suggest, gendered identity. Rather, as van der Watt (2004a:[sp]) notes, it challenges

the very concept of identity itself, precisely by conceptualising the self in an inter-subjective, contingent way. By insistently visualising the body/self she proposes identity as performative, never inherent.

My attempt at locating a reading of Searle's work outside, but not exclusive of the politics of gender and race, is achieved through a focussed exploration of how a sense of ambiguity may be suggested in visual representation through a mobilisation of the semiotic. Kelly Oliver (1993:156) notes that

Kristeva prefers to discuss difference in general rather than sexual difference ... [her] concern with difference in general underlines her concern to multiply representations of various sexed bodies that do not limit us to just masculine or feminine or male and female.

In other words, through the application of Kristeva's noticeably non-gendered model of embodied subjectivity, namely the speaking subject, I hope to avoid an understanding of the negotiations of self-identification organised primarily around the politics of gender and race² (Lechte & Margaroni 2004:23-24). This model positions subjectivity as "always in process and heterogeneous" (McAfee 2004:41). As I note later in this paper, writers such as Clive Kellner (2006), Rory Bester (2003), Liese van der Watt (2004) and Emma Bedford (2003) as well as Searle (2006) herself, comment that within her work, identity is in a constant state of flux. In my understanding, it is through Searle's privileging of tactility and evocation of the abject that the spacious, open-ended negotiations of the speaking subject's identity is suggested.

I offer that in Searle's work, through the performative use of her body and her reliance on tactile characteristics, she foregrounds a suggestion of corporeality. Leora Farber (1992:3) notes that artworks that favour a tactile approach have one or more of the following characteristics "textural articulation ... fragmentation, indeterminacy and dispersal" as well as a suggestion of open-endedness. In my understanding, the semiotic, bodily drive fuels tactility. Consequently, I propose that Searle's works, which rely on some of these tactile characteristics and that place emphasis on disruptive bodily drives, might be considered as visual representations of the semiotic, and through their disruption of the symbolic element, are evocative of an abject state.

The symbolic element is, according to Noëlle McAfee (2004:17), a "way of signifying that depends on language as a sign system complete with its grammar and syntax"; it is characterised by stability, unity and order (McAfee 2004:22). Kristeva (cited in McAfee 2004:17) suggests that

this unambiguous, rational element may be "destabilized or unsettled by [the] semiotic drives and articulation". This disruption of the element of 'sameness' through the ambiguously bounded semiotic element finds correlation with and results in the disruption of the normative conceptualisation of the self as a static, homogenous bounded unit inherent within Cartesian thought (van der Watt 2004a:68).³

The privileging of the semiotic element within the processes of identification leads to an understanding of the self in which the "self [mind] and the body are chiasmically intertwined ... [T]he self [is] presented as 'an embodied performance'" (Jones cited in van der Watt 2004a:68). As van der Watt notes (2004a:68) this "corporeal turn" challenges the Cartesian understanding of the body being "entirely distinct from the mind". I contend that this blurring of the boundaries between body and mind is, in Searle's work, extended to a suggestion of the blurring between self and 'other'. This is what, in part, evokes a reading of the abject. As Kristeva (1991:1) writes:

[s]trangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time when understanding and affinity flounder. By recognising him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself.

I read *About to forget* (2005) and *On either side* (2005) as examples of how this semiotic disruption has the potential to evoke an experience of abjection through the suggestion of an ambiguous sense of identity. This fluid working of identity finds correlation with Kristeva's understanding of the speaking subject. In the first section of this paper I briefly detail Kristeva's conception of the speaking subject, the semiotic element and the abject. Thereafter, I apply these concepts in a reading of the aforementioned works.

Inherent in Kristeva's model of subjectivity, the speaking subject – which relies on the dialectic between symbolic and semiotic elements – is the suggestion of mutability between similarity and difference; of an intermingling of self and 'other'. Gabeda Baderoon (2006a:17), following cultural theorist Stuart Hall, notes that within post-colonial thought the process of identification is conceived of as a porous, ambiguous negotiation, "a production that is never complete." In support of this understanding is Desiree Lewis's (2001:112) observation that Searle's work bears reference to Hall's privileging of the term 'identification' over 'identity'. Lewis (2001:112) explains this distinction by noting that Searle's work "marks a move away from an essentialist claiming of identity to a more cautious investigation of what identification means". This, Lewis (2001:112) notes, is achieved through an assertion of the understanding "that creativity which resists canons, restriction, official political and aesthetic labels can only be a form of being in process, a ... struggle through the debris of ... cultural legacy". Lewis



Fig 2a: Searle, B.
On either side. 2005.
Archival pigment ink on
cotton rag paper.
100cm x 200cm.
Courtesy of Berni Searle
and Michael Stevenson.





Fig 1: Searle, B.
About to forget, 2005.
Three-channel video
projection shot on 35mm
cinemascope film.
3 min.
Edition of 5 and 1 Artist's
proof.
Courtesy of Berni Searle
and Michael Stevenson.

Fig 2b: Searle, B.
On either side, 2005.
Archival pigment ink on
cotton rag paper.
100cm x 200cm.
Courtesy of Berni Searle
and Michael Stevenson.



(2001:112) understands identification as a process rather than an assertion of a static subjectivity or “monolithic and idealistic celebration of selfhood”. Additionally, within these processes of identification, identity is constituted as a heterogeneous negotiation, rather than as a given, homogenised unity.

Kristeva’s ‘speaking subject’ or ‘subject in process’ is constituted through signification (Kristeva 1984:22). As she suggests, ‘significance’ is the meaning produced through the continuous dialectic negotiation between the seemingly oppositional elements of the semiotic and the symbolic (McAfee 2004:38). For Kristeva (1980:18), the semiotic is the motile, bodily driven element that functions in “heterogeneous articulation” with the symbolic element within the dialectic of signification (McAfee 2004:38). It is this articulation that “enables a text to signify what representation and communicative speech [the symbolic element] does not say” (Kristeva 1980:18). By this I understand that Kristeva views the signifying process of the speaking subject as the manner in which “bodily drives and energy are expressed ... [and] discharged through our use of language” (McAfee 2004:14). As Maria Margaroni (2005:79) notes, Kristeva conceives of the semiotic as “a signifying operation based on traces and marks rather than signs, the marks of the drives on the speaking body, the traces of what Freud calls the primary processes”. I pick up this suggestion of bodily traces or residues in my analysis of Searle’s *About to forget* (2005) and *On either side* (2005).

Within Kristeva’s conception of the speaking subject, the semiotic and symbolic elements are not conceived of as opposition values within a duality. Rather, within her understanding of the ‘subject in process’ the “non-oppositional antagonism” (Lechte & Margaroni 2004:22, 30) of the semiotic and symbolic allows for a process of renewal, of transgression, of construction and deconstruction. Kristeva’s speaking subject is an understanding of self in process, always questioning, testing, challenging. Kristeva (2002:440) refers to this as an “intimate revolt”. The speaking subject through its signification process is “continually forced to test its limits” (Lechte & Margaroni 2004:23). This “form of continual questioning ... enables, renews, and restructures both the individual and community” (Oliver 2004:4) as it suggests a self which is continuously formed “in relation to others rather than complete within itself” (van der Watt 2004a:68). It is this element of inter-subjectivity, “the spilling over of arbitrary boundaries” (van der Watt 2004a:68) of self and ‘other’ which is echoed in the ambiguous boundaries suggested by the formal elements of tactility.

Oliver (1993:12) succinctly writes that the speaking subject “is a reconception of the relationship between identity and

difference”. Oliver (1993:12) notes that Kristeva’s writing is

concerned with various stages of identity and difference. She insists on diagnosing the difference at the heart of identity and the stases operating within difference. The logic of identity and difference is the logic of subject and other. Alterity, otherness, and the stranger are always at the centre of her texts.

For Kristeva (2004:38), the disruptive, liminal influence of the semiotic is a positive provocation, creating the speaking subject’s instability; its ability to change. The significant departure between Kristeva’s “subject in process” (McAfee 2004:30) and Jacques Lacan’s understanding of the speaking subject is Kristeva’s insistence that the traces of the chora, as evidenced by the semiotic drive, are not repressed but rather vitally present in the processes of signification.⁴ This contrasts with Lacan’s theory, as he suggests that upon entry into the Symbolic order,⁵ through which the infant gains language and an identifying understanding of itself as separate from its mother, the pre-linguistic bodily drives and energies of the undifferentiated of the chora are lost (McAfee 2004:35, 38; Lechte & Margaroni 2004:14). It is through the “traces and marks” (Margaroni 2005:79) of the body evoked by the motile semiotic element that Kristeva seeks to bring the body back into language (Lechte & Margaroni 2004:23). Through her understanding of the speaking subject and the incorporation and focus on bodily drives and energy as one half of the signifying process, Kristeva disrupts the Sartrean ideal of the disembodied, pure self (mind) free of the compromising desires and needs of the body. Karsten Harries (1968:85-87) points out that, for Jean-Paul Sartre, man’s [sic] pride and desire to be autonomous and therefore god-like “rules out any possibility of a reconciliation of the spirit and the flesh”. The threat of the body, symbolised by the amorphous, ambiguously bounded “flaccid ooze” (Krauss 2005:397) that Sartre views as contaminatory and abject is, in Kristeva’s speaking subject/subject in process, intricately bound up with the processes of self-identification.

Through this suggestion of ambiguous boundaries, of merging of self and ‘other’, I read the abject as being a vital part of the constant negotiation of self. This dynamic oscillation between order and disorder, and the vital interrelationship of self and ‘other’, locates the speaking subject as operating from a space of ambiguity. In my understanding, artworks that privilege tactile characteristics, and in which defining outer contours are disrupted and in parts dissolved, suggest the element of open-endedness within the abject.

Likewise, the abject challenges and threatens the defining and ordering borders of selfhood (Patin & McLerran 1997:1). For Kristeva, any phenomenon which disturbs bodily boundaries and consequently disrupts a sense of wholeness and purity may be defined as abject. This threat towards

the identity of one's "own clean and proper self" (McAfee 2004:129) is considered abject and rejected, physically and/or mentally, yet is never completely removed (McAfee 2004:45-49). From the speaking subject's position, and within abjection, identity is never static, nor constituted through the essentialised categorisation of what defines self in antithesis to 'other', since what is viewed as abject and thus 'other' is never successfully removed from self.

Kristeva's conception of the abject underpins this paper. It is this rite of passage that initialises the formation of the speaking subject and that has the potential to disrupt the symbolic drive by asserting the bodily presence of the semiotic drive. Derek Hook (2004:690) notes the intimate link between the semiotic and the abject. In support of this, Hook (2004:690) refers to Elizabeth Grosz (1990:86) who observes that "[a]bjection attests to the perilous and provisional nature of the symbolic control over the dispersing impulses of the semiotic drives, which strive to break down and through identity, order, and stability". In other words, the abject elicits a reaction of horror and disgust from the subject by threatening a return to an undifferentiated, pre-identity, chora-like state. Additionally, through a suggestion of ambiguous boundaries, the semiotic element challenges the ordered, bounded structure of the symbolic element within language.

The dominant mode of signification within Kristeva's model of the speaking subject – the semiotic – challenges and partially disrupts the homogeneity of the symbolic, unsettling neat borders of selfhood. This disruption demonstrates and emphasises "the subject's lack of unity" (McAfee 2004:38-39). According to McAfee (2004:38-43) Kristeva argues that because of these continuous disruptions in signification the speaking being is always "a subject in process"; subjectivity is never 'fixed' or stationary. In my understanding, this disruption is abject in nature as it disturbs the notion of a bounded, unified self. The abject may be observed operating within various discourses. In a psychoanalytic understanding the abject is suggested through an ambiguity between boundaries of self and 'other' (Lloyd-Smith 2005:193-194). From an anthropological standpoint, dirt or its socialised equivalent, defilement, may evoke a state of abjection (Lloyd-Smith 2005:193-194). Regardless of this perspective, the reaction of disgust that is evoked by the abject is valuable to negotiations of self-identification (Meagher 2003). Phrased differently, the destabilisation of boundaries should not be viewed as a solely negative, destructive force. As per Kristeva's suggestion of an intimate revolt, the abject's challenge to boundaries may be a useful tool in the opening up of systems of representation. Oliver (1993:8) echoes this when noting that within Kristeva's understanding "types of language or signifying practices that attend to this semiotic

element" are not only useful as methods of catharsis, but more importantly through their use "our traditional or dominant discourses and representations can be changed". Language and identity are interrelated, and therefore this "revolt against the fixed meaning of symbolic discourse [by] considering the revolutionary potential of semiotically charged language" may be said to positively impact upon the speaking being (McAfee 2004:113).

As noted, in Searle's work, identity is presented – and formed – as ambiguous, as often contradictory (self) negotiations, mutable processes of negotiation that function in contradiction to an adherence of one naturalised truth. In a statement that echoes this dynamic character of the speaking subject, Kellner (2006:17) quotes Searle as saying, "[t]he self is explored as an ongoing process of construction in time and place. The presence and absence of the body in the work point to the ideal that one's identity is not static, and is constantly in a state of flux". I offer that Searle explores this subtle working of (self)identity through the use of the abject, in a manner analogous to Rosemary Betterton's (1996:144) observation that whilst "the vulnerability of the borderline is a threat to the integrity of the 'own and clean self' (Kristeva 1982:53), it can also offer a liminal space where self and 'other' may intermingle". Searle's work relies on liminality; a sense and a positioning of being both in-between and overlapping the boundaries of naturalised identity. Stephen Greenblatt (1995:28) elaborates on this state of liminality, noting that "the limen, [is] the threshold or margin, the place that is no-place, in which the subject is rendered invisible ...". Connecting to this state of 'in-betweenness', van der Watt (2003:24-25) echoes Kristeva's understanding of the alien, the 'other', within the self, observing that "Searle's work is less about the politics of race than about what Jane Blocker has described as 'the lifelong process of coming to terms with the estrangement that is the soul or identity'".

This marginal state of flux and abject space of ambiguity might be what Bester (2003:53) describes as "... imagined identities ... [that] allow Searle to float free from the immutable identities so ingrained in her history". It is through these "imagined identities" that Searle disrupts prescribed meanings and definitions of identity (Bester 2003:53). To this end, Searle employs physically tactile media, for example, non-colourfast crepe paper and water. As mentioned earlier, within visual representation tactile characteristics can suggest the disruptive bodily-driven semiotic element. Tactility foregrounds a sense of bodily materiality as it privileges texture over bounded form and rhythm over the distinctions between figure and ground (Lechte & Margaroni 2004:108). Searle uses these media in conjunction with images of the body to explore concepts of identity, desire and memory. As Bester (2003:53) notes

regarding Searle's choice and use of media "... in the way that they are combined with [the] body, [these materials] offer narratives that implode stereotypes about race and gender and begin to think in terms of the fantasies of imagined identities".

Searle's semiotic, bodily negotiations are enhanced by the incorporation of movement (both actual and metaphorical). An example, as seen in *About to forget*, is the movement of water that mimics the intransitive tides of the sea, evoking a suggestion of fading memory and dissolution of familial and bodily bounds.

The video medium Searle uses emphasises this suggestion of ephemerality. As the work is set to play indefinitely the sequence of images, themselves not literally solid objects, are repeated and thus are continuously erased and re-created. In addition to this, the crepe paper and water evoke a sense of the transient as nothing is permanent; impressions fade, water moves and layers of red dye dissipate. In *About to forget*, silhouettes of Searle's family group (sourced from personal family albums) cut from red crepe paper are immersed in a bath of warm water (Kellner 2006:14-15). Due to the lack of colourfastness of the paper and "the ebb and flow of the water" (Farrell 2006:18), the saturated red dye seeps and dissolves into the water, sullyng it and causing the clean edges of the silhouettes to blur and lose definition (Farrell 2006:18). As the images become leached of their initial saturated colour, the stark contrast between the white background of the bath and the red of the silhouettes is lessened. In this way, Searle plays with the theme of purification: the red silhouettes are cleansed to a residual stain in the pristine white bath, itself a site of cleansing. At the end of this video work, the dye-sullied water has been replaced with clean water.⁶ All that remains are images of the crepe paper leached of most their colour, with only the edges retaining a stain of auburn red (Baderoon 2006a:14). This progression of the definite, clearly demarcated image of a family group to the dissipated, ambiguously defined trace may be offered as a metaphoric representation of difference between the unified symbolic and the fluid semiotic elements.

In figures 2a & 2b, *On either side* (2005), the edition of photographic stills derived from the video work *About to forget* (2005), one notes how the order of clearly bounded silhouettes is challenged as the defining borders of their outlines are disturbed. Lynda Nead (1992:19) suggests that when "the contour, the frame of the body has been sharpened" what results is the "hardening [of] the distinction between inside and outside, between figure and ground, between the subject and the space it is not". Therefore, using the same logic, in *About to forget* (2005)

and *On either side* (2005), where the contours are shifting and dissolving, one may read a blurring of the distinction between self and 'other', or perhaps a suggestion of the fallibility of a homogenous, impermeable, naturalised identity.

In these two works, Searle suggests the accepted authority of naturalised statements to be deeply unstable. Given its fragile nature, the crepe paper betrays the unity of its wholeness, becoming an apt metaphor for the fragility of autonomy. The blurring and dissolution of the edges suggests a disruption to the ideal of a unified self. This inescapable disruption of (naturalised) autonomous identity lies at the core of my understanding of Kristeva's concept of the abject. I suggest that the unstable, disruptive element in *About to forget* (2005) is a subtle, intimate form of the abject. In place of more obvious, heavy-handed attempts at the evocation of the abject, which might involve resorting to shock tactics, Searle evokes the dissolution of self through the gentle eventual translucency of the crepe paper silhouettes.⁷ The transgression in this case, or what Baderoon (2006a:14) calls "the unmaking of the detail" of boundaries of self-identity, is located within the context of the body. In both *About to forget* (2005) and *On either side* (2005), the clear-edged silhouettes seem to dissolve and melt in the water into amorphous red vapours, suggesting a move from substantiality to insubstantiality. As the delicate, thin crepe paper becomes increasingly saturated, it begins to wrinkle in a way that is evocative of aging skin, pointing to eventual death and bodily disintegration. The bleeding of the red dye references the discolouration of bloodstains over the passage of time. Initially the vivid colour of the crepe paper resembles a fresh wound, which then graduates to a brown-auburn colour suggestive of old blood stains (Baderoon 2006a:14). This flesh-like quality and the allusion to bodily fluid combined with the disruption of bodily boundaries renders this work abject.

The swelling clouds of red dye evoke the inherent oscillation between horror and fascination suggested by a state of the abject. At once visually seductive and beautiful in their rich colour and gentle suggestion of movement, the stains of red dye prompt feelings of horror in their evocation of blood and consequently of bodily trauma. Yet the abject is not only suggested in these works through the link to blood, but also through the transgression of boundaries between two substances: crepe paper and water. When this happens the safety of what is considered known is challenged and, in fact, altered.

The progression in Searle's use of stains and discolouration in her work reiterates my view that *About to forget* (2005) and *On either side* (2005) should not be read according

to an exclusively racially or gendered slanted position. In earlier work such as *Lifeline* (1999) (Fig. 3), *A Darker Shade of Light* (1999) and *Conversing with Pane* (2000) (Fig. 4) Searle uses stains as indicative of racial difference/s. As Bester (2003:23, 26) observes, “[b]y staining different parts of her body with black Egyptian henna, Searle highlights notions of ‘blackness’”. In *A Darker Shade of Light* (1999) Searle stains and therefore emphasises areas of her body which may be argued to carry signifiers of sexual difference and therefore locate the work within areas of gender politics. These areas, her stomach, lower back, and back of her neck, are “[t]he sites of the body which ... signal a lover’s knowledge and a lover’s touch” (Coombes cited in Bester 2003:26).

I suggest that in *About to forget* and *On either side* Searle’s metonymic use of discolouration embraces issues of difference that exceed, yet are inclusive of, racial and gender politics. In these later works she relies on colours not typically associated with skin colour or gender. The red of the crepe paper figures suggests the flesh which lies beneath the skin, and thus may be argued to refer to all and, in a sense therefore, none of the “racialized classification[s]” (Coombes 2006:246) based on skin colour instituted during the apartheid era, and which formed part of colonial discourses. Additionally all the figures, whether male or female, are coloured red. The white of the bath may reference prejudiced notions of racial purity and ‘whiteness’; however, I foreground a reading of the white bath as suggestive of a westernised view of purity and cleansing sans a predication on racial politics. I offer an interpretation in which the white of the bath may be seen as symbolic of the undifferentiated oneness (sameness) of the chora. Furthermore, whilst using images sourced from old family albums, Searle represents the figures in *About to forget* and *On either side* as unidentified (Baderoon 2006a:14). These figures bear no individualised or identificatory physical characteristics. Therefore, in addition to the symbolic colour usage, these generalised figures may be said to encourage, within these works, a suggestion of the universality of the abject.

In *About to forget* Searle offers a resolution, or conclusion, to the abject elements suggested within the work. To begin with the crisply and neatly edged crepe silhouettes are primarily images of the known, of order and stability. These figures are solid in their recognisability as one easily discerns them as groups of people. Yet through contact with water, which when compared to paper is a far more ephemeral medium, the original safeness is disrupted. I draw on Mary Douglas’s (1966:50) definition of dirt/uncleanness, wherein she suggests that the latter is “matter out of place”. She (1966:50) notes that “dirt

is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained.” When defined from an anthropological point of view, pattern could thus suggest order and cleanliness (Douglas 1966:50). In the progression of *About to forget* the ordering and ordered pattern of the silhouettes is disrupted and sullied through the introduction and total immersion into the contrasting element of water.

Linked to the sully of abject blood is the process of cleansing. Cleansing or purification is viewed as a solution to dirt, a cessation of the state of being sullied. Usually dirt is considered a defiling, abject element and therefore negatively valued. I argue that, in these selected works, this evaluation of transgressed boundaries and matter out of place is inverted. The continuous negotiation of identification does not end in the return to the pristine, undisrupted self of the initial crepe silhouettes, nor with images of formless dyed water. A temporary end point, or resolution, is (however briefly) suggested in the stained traces evocative of the semiotic. As the video projection is looped to play continuously, repeatedly suggesting states of defilement and cleansing, the mixing of self and ‘other’, one may assume that an understanding of the foreigner as part of the self, in which abjection is vital, is the ongoing conclusion in processes of identification.

A similar conclusion is suggested in figures 2a & 2b, *On either side*. In the beginning images the silhouettes are relatively sharp-edged and intact. One seems to focus on the groups of figures without noticing much of the landscape in which they are placed. There is a crisp contrast between the red crepe paper and the white of the bath, which reads as the sky behind the figures. This contrast leads one to focus primarily on the clearly demarcated distinction between the figures and the sky, and suggests the wholeness and purity of the separate elements of crepe paper and water. As the water begins to affect the crepe paper, clouds of dissolved red dye create strange, looming figure-like shapes. What was easily recognisable is now unfamiliar and alien. This ‘uncanniness’ grows into a state of abjection as all familiar details are lost in the growing red mist-like forms that for a time completely obscure the silhouettes. As more water passes over the crepe paper, the once-saturated red of the mist is gradually leached away enough to view the figures. One is then able to note how the paper has wrinkled. Subtle tonal gradations occur as the dye temporarily settles in the grooves created by the raised sections of the wrinkles. As the figures and the landscape on which they stand are cut from crepe paper, this all-over wrinkled texture suggests a lack of distinction between figure and ground. The tactile characteristics suggested through the lack of separating boundaries further evoke abjection. In the later images of

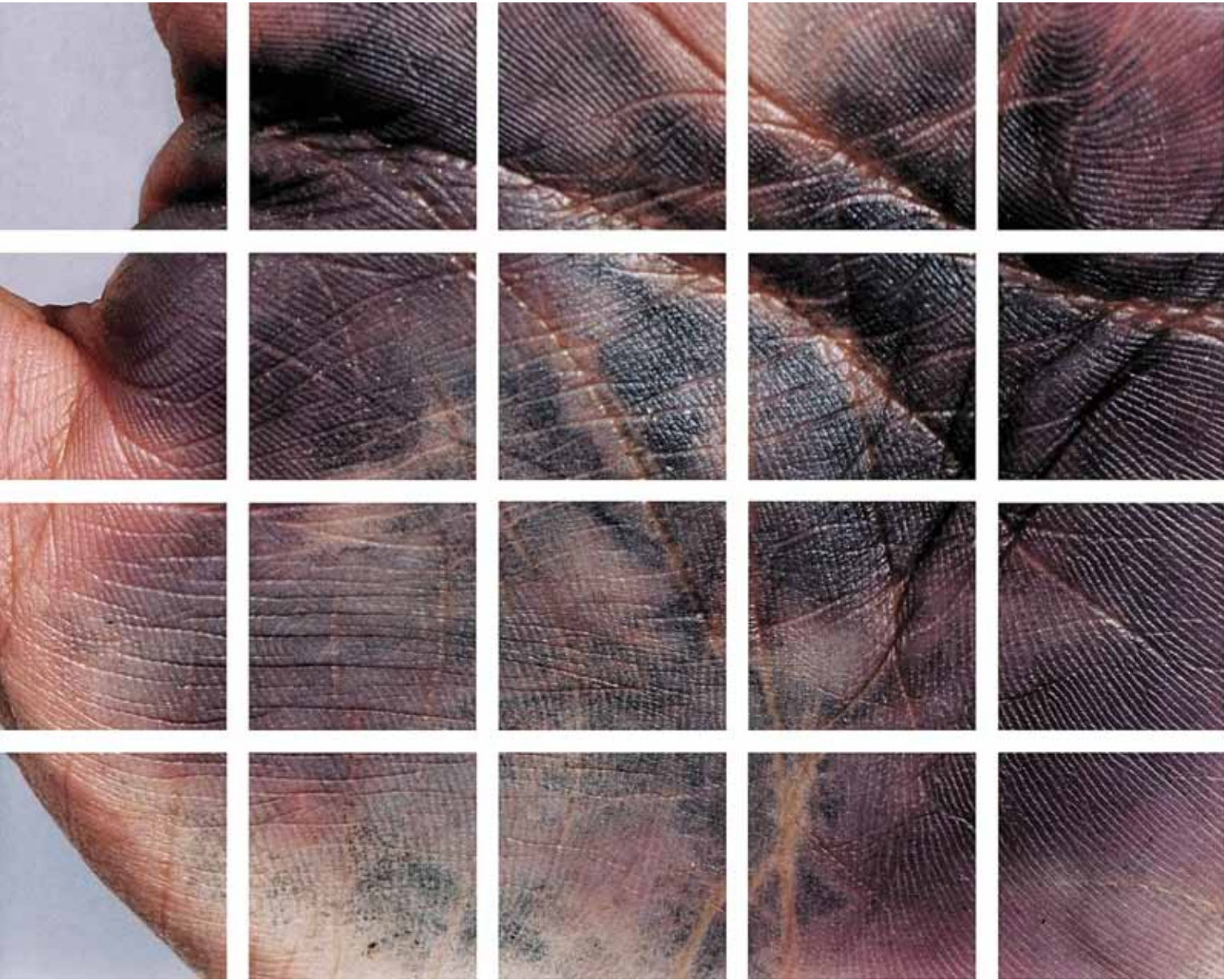




Fig 3: Searle, B. *Lifeline* from the *Discoloured* series. 1999. Digital print, archival pigment ink on Arches watercolour paper. 24 prints. Paper size 42cm x 50cm each Image size 30cm x 30cm each Edition of 10 and 1 Artist's proof. Courtesy of Berni Searle and Michael Stevenson.

Fig. 4: Searle, B. *Conversing with Pane* from the *Discoloured* series. 2000. Digital print, archival pigment ink on watercolour paper. 2 prints, 70cm x 230cm each Edition of 3 and 1 Artist's proof. Courtesy of Berni Searle and Michael Stevenson.



this sequence the haze of red dye has further faded, enough so as to be read as the atmospheric haze of aerial perspective. The figures now read as set in the middle ground, with the white bath as the sky and far ground and the mist as in the foreground. In the last sequence the figures are, in parts, faded to insubstantiality, the colour – in comparison to the initial saturated red – now reads as soon to dissipate stains, or faint, diminishing bruises.

The positive element of abjection is further demonstrated through the stains created by the dissolution of the red dye in water. These abject, tactile, bodily stains feature repeatedly in Searle's work. In my understanding a stain, mark or blemish is a semiotic (bodily) emblem indicative of a fluid transgression between skin surface and the flesh beneath. Not only is this applicable in the physical sense of the blood of a bruise lying beneath the skin, but a bruise or stain is also indicative of a narrative, a history. Bruises, scars and stains disturb the surface of the skin and introduce a disruption to one's reading of the body through the suggestion of past bodily engagement/involvement. Thus, these marks may be identificatory and due to their non-verbal visuality function in a manner akin to semiotic element of signification. These staining bodily marks, which, as Kathryn Smith (cited in Adendorff 2005:37) notes, may penetrate the surface of the skin (and therefore metaphorically suggest a challenge to surface readings) reference the notion of permanence,

which conversely implies a continuous cyclic move towards impermanence. It is through this notion of a fading scar or stain that – within *About to forget* and *On either side* – stains may be seen as further indications of an inherent fluidity within the processes of self-identification.

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva (1982:2) writes that the “abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture”. In this paper I attempted to draw on this statement, emphasising the necessity of the abject within the continual formation and renewal of the (non-gendered) speaking subject within processes of identification and signification. Searle suggests liminal, in-between spaces in which distinctions of self and ‘other’ are rendered porous. In *About to forget* and *On either side* the leached, faintly stained, tactile figures suggest, through their composite nature, an open-endedness. These ambiguously bounded figures, symbolic of the speaking subject, deny a return to a dualistic understanding of the mind and body, self and ‘other’ as “distinct, mutually exclusive” (Grosz 1994:6) categories. Through the use of tactile characteristics Searle demonstrates the disruptive, and therefore abject, semiotic element operating within the dialectical antagonism of signification. I offer that within visual representation tactile characteristics may be seen as crucial elements of renewal in the production of imagined, ambiguous and mutable identities.

Endnotes

1. Derek Hook (2003:48) usefully points out the distinction between the terms ‘the abject’ and ‘abjection’, noting that abjection is “a powerful and irrational reaction of dread, horror and/or repulsion”, whilst the abject is “the anomalous, indefinable thing, which induces fear ... and is known by the visceral responses that accompany extreme forms of fear or disgust: gagging, vomiting, spasms, retching”.
2. This purposeful assertion of a non-gendered corporeal identity marks this paper as different from many other existing writings on Searle's work.
3. Cartesian thought advocates the notion of a “self-contained subject” in which “the human being is composed of a body, which obeys the laws of nature, and a mind lodged within the body yet somehow distinct” (Thomas 1998:46). Elizabeth Grosz (1994:5-7) observes that this mind/body dualism, in which the body is “regarded as a source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason ...” sets up “an unbridgeable gulf between mind and matter”.
4. In Kristevian thought, the chora is the pre-linguistic stage in an infant's psycho-sexual development. It is “that undifferentiated space that plays home to the not-as-yet ego, that amorphous collection of unformulated bodily sensations and drives” (Hook cited in Herbst 2003:51). Linked to the chora is the notion of the semiotic drive/element. Hook (cited in Herbst 2003:51) notes that this “mode of subjectivity ... ‘has the capacity to irrupt into consciousness at any point in the subject's life”.
5. Use of an uppercase ‘S’ denotes the Symbolic order (the order of representation within which the semiotic/symbolic dialectic function), whilst a lowercase ‘s’ indicates the symbolic element (Oliver 1993: 10).
6. These colours are themselves symbolic, red being suggestive of blood and white a historically laden signifier of racial purity. Bester (cited in Adendorff 2005:34) notes Searle's symbolic use of colour when he writes about her *Colour Me* (1998-2000) series: “Brown cloves and off-white pea-flour approximate the colour of flesh”.
7. Following this suggestion of a dissolution of self, it is interesting to note Gabea Baderoon's (2006b: 111) observation that in *About to forget* (2005) and *On either side* (2005) Searle's customary use of her body in her works has been replaced with the crepe silhouettes, which form “bodies that recede and recur only in image”.

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